

## CHAPTER X

As the Cross-roads had regarded Tom as a piece of personal property to be proud of, so it fell into the habit of regarding his protégée. The romance of her history was considered to confer distinction upon the vicinity, and Tom's affection for her was approved of as a sentiment worthy of the largeness of the Cross-roads nature.

"They kinder set one anuther off," it was frequently remarked, "her a-bein' so little and him so big, an' both of 'em stickin' to each other so clost. Lordy! 'tain't no use a-tryin' to part 'em. Sheby, she ain't a-goin' nowhar 'thout Tom, an' Tom, he h'aint a-goin' nowhars 'thout Sheby!"

When the child was five years old the changes which had taken place in the store were followed by still greater changes in the house. Up to her fifth birthday the experiences had balanced themselves between the store and the three back rooms with their bare floors and rough walls. She had had her corner, her small chair behind the counter or near the stove, and there she had amused herself with her playthings through long or short days, and in the evening Tom had taken her upon his shoulder and carried her back to the house, as it was called, leaving his careless, roystering gaiety behind him locked up in the store, ready to be resumed for the edification of his customers the next morning.

"He don't hev no pore folkses ways wid dat chile," said Mornin once to Mrs. Doty; "he don't never speak to her no other then gen'leman way. He's a-raisin' her to be fitten fur de highes'. He's mighty keerful ob her way ob speakin' an' settin' to de table. Mornin's got to stand 'hind her cheer an' wait on her hersel'; an' sence she was big 'nuff to set dar, she's had a silver fork an' spoon an' napkin-ring same's de President himself. Ah; he's a-raisin' her keerful, is Mars D'Willerby."

"Waal," said Mrs. Doty, "ef 'twarn't Tom D'Willerby, I shed say it was a puttin' on airs; but thar ain't no airs 'bout Tom D'Willerby."

From the first Mr. Stamps's interest in Tom's protégée had been unfailing though quiet. When he came into the store, which he did some three times a week, it was his habit to fix his small, pale eyes upon her and follow her movements stealthily but with unflagging watchfulness. Occasionally this occupation so absorbed him that when she moved to her small corner behind the counter, vaguely oppressed by his surveillance, he sauntered across the room and took his seat upon the counter itself, persisting in his mild, furtive gaze, until it became too much for her and she sought refuge at Tom's knee.

"He looks at me," she burst out distressedly on one such day. "Don't let him look at me."

Tom gave a start and turned round, and Mr. Stamps gave a start also, at once mildly recovering himself.

"Leave her alone," said Tom, "what are you lookin' at her for?"

Mr. Stamps smiled.

"Thar's no law agin it, Tom," he replied. "An' she's wuth a lookin' at. She's that kind, an' it'll grow on her. Ten year from now thar ain't no law es 'ed keep 'em from lookin' at her, 'thout it was made an' passed in Congrist. She'll hev to git reckoniled to a-bein' looked at."

"Leave her alone," repeated Tom, quite fiercely. "I'll not have her troubled."

"I didn't go to trouble her, Tom," said Mr. Stamps, softly; and he slipped down from the counter and sidled out of the store and went home.

With Mr. Stamps Sheba always connected her first knowledge of the fact that her protector's temper could be disturbed. She had never seen him angry until she saw Mr. Stamps rouse him to wrath on the eventful fifth birthday, from which the first exciting events of her life dated themselves. Up to that time she had seen only in his great strength and broad build a power to protect and shield her own fragility and smallness from harm or fear. When he took her in his huge arms and held her at what seemed to be an incredible height from the ordinary platform of existence, she had only felt the cautious tenderness of his touch and recognised her own safety, and it had never occurred to her that his

tremendous voice, which was so strong and deep by nature, that it might have been a terrible one if he had chosen to make it so, could express any other feeling than kindness in its cheery roar.

But on this fifth birthday Tom presented himself to her childish mind in a new light.

She had awakened early to find him standing at her small bedside and a new doll lying in her arms. It was a bigger doll than she had ever owned before, and so gaily dressed, that in her first rapture her breath quite forsook her. When she recovered it, she scrambled up, holding her new possession in one arm and clung with the other around Tom's neck.

"Oh, the lovely, lovely doll!" she cried, and then hid her face on his shoulder.

"Hallo," said Tom, hugging her, "what is she hiding her eyes for?"

She nestled closer to him with a little sob of loving delight.

"Because--because of the doll," she answered, bewildered by her own little demonstration and yet perfect in her confidence that he would understand her.

"Well," said Tom, cheerfully, "that's a queer thing, ain't it? Look here, did you know it was your birthday? Five years old to-day--think of that."

He sat down and settled her in her usual place on his knee, her doll in her arms.

"To think," he said, "of her setting up a birthday on purpose to be five years old and have a doll given her. That's a nice business, ain't it?"

After they had breakfasted together in state, the doll was carried into the store to be played with there. It was a wet day, and, the air being chilled by a heavy mountain rain, a small fire was burning in the stove, and by this fire the two settled themselves to enjoy the morning together, the weather precluding the possibility of their being disturbed by many customers. But in the height of their quiet enjoyment they were broken in upon by the sound of horse's hoofs splashing in the mud outside and Mr. Stamps's hat appeared above the window-sill.

It was Sheba who saw it first, and in the strength of her desire to avoid the wearer, she formed a desperate plan. She rose so quietly that Tom, who was reading a paper, did not hear her, and, having risen, drew her small chair behind the counter in the hope that, finding her place vacant, the visitor would not suspect her presence.

In this she was not disappointed. Having brushed the mud from his feet on the porch, Mr. Stamps appeared at the doorway, and, after his usual precautionary glance about him, made his way to the stove. His manner was at once propitiatory and friendly. He drew up a chair and put his wet

feet on the stove, where they kept up a comfortable hissing sound as they dried.

"Howdy, Tom," he said, "howdy?" And from her hiding-place Sheba saw him rubbing his legs from the knee downwards as he said it, with an air of solid enjoyment which suggested that he was congratulating himself upon something he had in his mind.

"Morning," responded Tom.

Mr. Stamps rubbed his legs again quite luxuriously.

"You're a lookin' well, Tom," he remarked. "Lord, yes, ye're a lookin' powerful well."

Tom laid his paper down and folded it on his knee.

"Lookin' well, am I?" he answered. "Well, I'm a delicate weakly sort of fellow in general, I am, and it's encouraging to hear that I'm looking well."

Mr. Stamps laughed rather spasmodically.

"I wouldn't be agin bein' the same kind o' weakly myself," he said, "nor the same kind o' delycate. You're a powerfle hansum man, Tom."

"Yes," replied Tom, drily, "I'm a handsome man. That's what carried me along this far. It's what I've always had to rely on--that and a knock-down intellect."

Mr. Stamps rubbed his legs with his air of luxury again.

"Folks is fond o' sayin' beauty ain't but skin deep," he said; "but I wouldn't hev it no deeper myself--bein' so that it kivers. An', talkin' o' beauty, she's one--Lord, yes. She's one."

"Look here," said Tom, "leave her alone."

"'Tain't a gwine to harm her, Tom," replied Mr. Stamps, "'tain't a gwine to harm her none. What made me think of it was it a bein' jest five years since she was born--a makin' it her birthday an' her jest five years old."

"What," cried Tom, "you've been counting it up, have you?"

"No," replied Mr. Stamps, with true modesty of demeanour, "I ain't ben a countin' of it up, Tom." And he drew a dirty memorandum book softly from his pocket. "I set it down at the time es it happened."

He laid the dirty book on his knee and turned over its pages carefully as if looking for some note.

"I ain't much on readin' an' writin'," he said, "an' 'rithmetick it goes kinder hard with me now an' agin, but a man's got to know suthin' on 'em if he 'lows to keep anyways even. I 'low to keep even, sorter, an' I've give a good deal o' time to steddin' of 'em. I never went to no school, but I've sot things down es I want to remember, an' I kin count out money. I never was imposed on none I rekin, an' I never lost nothin'. Yere's whar I sot it down about her a-bein' born an' the woman a-dyin' an' him a-gwine away. Ye cayn't read it, mebbe." He bent forward, pointing to the open page and looking up at Tom as if he expected him to be interested. "Thar it is," he added in his thin, piping, little voice, "even to the time o' day. Mornin, she told me that. 'Bout three o'clock in the mornin' in thet thar little front room. Ef anyone shed ever want to know particular, thar it is."

The look in Tom's face was far from being a calm one. He fidgetted in his chair and finally rolled his paper into a hard wad and threw it at the counter as if it had been a missile.

"See here," he exclaimed, "take my advice and let that alone."

Mr. Stamps regarded his dirty book affectionately.

"'Tain't a-gwine to hurt nothin' to hev it down," he replied, with an air of simplicity.

He shut it up, returned it to his pocket, and clasped his hands about his



knees, while he fixed his eyes on the glimmer of red showing itself through a crack in a stove-plate.

"It's kinder curi's I should hev happened along by thar this mornin'," he remarked, reflectively.

"By where?" demanded Tom.

Mr. Stamps hugged his knees as if he enjoyed their companionship.

"By thar," he responded, cheerfully, "the Holler, Tom. An' it 'peared to me it 'ed be kinder int'restin' to take a look through, bein' as this was the day as the thing kinder started. So I hitched my mule an' went in." He paused a moment as if to enjoy his knees again.

"Well," said Tom.

Mr. Stamps looked up at him harmlessly. "Eh?" he enquired.

"I said 'well,'" answered Tom, "that's what I said."

"Oh," replied Mr. Stamps. "Waal, thar wasn't nothin' thar, Tom."

For the moment Tom's expression was one of relief. But he said nothing.

"Thar wasn't nothin' thar," Mr. Stamps continued. Then occurred another

pause. "Nothin'," he added after it, "nothin' particular."

The tenderness with which he embraced his knees at this juncture had something like fascination in it.

Tom found himself fixing a serious gaze upon his clasping arms.

"I kinder looked round," he proceeded, "an' if there'd ben anythin' thar I 'low I'd hev seed it. But thar wasn't nothin', nothin' but the empty rooms an' a dead leaf or so es hed blowed in through a broken winder, an' the pile o' ashes in the fireplace beat down with the rain as hed fell down the chimney. Mighty lonesome an' still them ashes looked; an' thar wasn't nothin' but them an' the leaves,----an' a bit of a' envelope."

Tom moved his chair back. Sheba thought he was going to get up suddenly. But he remained seated, perhaps because Mr. Stamps began again.

"Thar wasn't nothin' but them an' the bit of a' envelope," he remarked.

"It was a-sticken in a crack o' the house, low down, like it hed ben swep' or blowed thar an' overlooked. I shouldn't hev seed it"--modestly--"ef I hedn't ben a-goin' round on my hands an' knees."

Then Tom rose very suddenly indeed, so suddenly that he knocked his chair over and amazed Sheba by kicking it violently across the store. For the moment he so far forgot himself as to be possessed with some idea of falling upon Mr. Stamps with the intent to do him bodily injury. He

seized him by the shoulders and turned him about so that he had an excellent view of his unprepossessing back. What Mr. Stamps thought it would have been difficult to discover. Sheba fancied that when he opened his mouth he was going to utter a cry of terror. But he did not. He turned his neck about as well as he could under the circumstances, and looking up into Tom's face meekly smiled.

"Tom," he said, "ye ain't a-gwine ter do a thing to me, not a dern thing."

"Yes, I am," cried Tom, furiously, "I'm goin' to kick----"

"Ef ye was jest haaf to let drive at me, ye'd break my neck," said Mr. Stamps, "an ye ain't a-gwine ter do it. Ef ye was, Tom, ye'd be a bigger fool than I took ye fer. Lemme go."

He looked so diminutive and weak-eyed, as he made these remarks, that it was no wonder Tom released him helplessly, though he was obliged to thrust his hands deep into his pockets and keep them under control.

"I thought I'd given you one lesson," he burst forth; "I thought----"

Mr. Stamps interrupted him, continuing to argue his side of the question, evidently feeling it well worth his while to dispose of it on the spot.

"Ye weigh three hundred, Tom," he said, "ef ye weigh a pound, an' I don't

weigh but ninety, 'n ye couldn't handle me keerful enuf not to leave me in a fix as wouldn't be no credit to ye when ye was done; 'n it 'ed look kinder bad for ye to meddle with me, anyhow. An' the madder ye get, the more particular ye'll be not to. Thar's whar ye are, Tom; an' I ain't sich a fool as not to know it."

His perfect confidence in the strength of his position, and in Tom's helplessness against it, was a thing to be remembered. Tom remembered it long afterwards, though at the moment it only roused him to greater heat.

"Now then," he demanded, "let's hear what you're driving at. What I want to know is what you're driving at. Let's hear."

Mr. Stamps's pale eyes fixed themselves with interest on his angry face. He had seated himself in his chair again, and he watched Tom closely as he rambled on in his simple, uncomplaining way.

"Ye're fond o' laughin' at me round yere at the store, Tom," he remarked, "an' I ain't agin it. A man don't make nothin' much by bein' laughed at, I rekin, but he don't lose nothin' nuther, an' that's what I am agin. I rekin ye laugh 'cos I kinder look like a fool--an' I hain't nothin' agin thet, nuther, Lord! not by a heap. A man ain't a-gwine to lose nothin' by lookin' like a fool. I hain't never, not a cent, Tom. But I ain't es big a fool es I look, an' I don't 'low ye air, uther. Thar's whar I argy from. Ye ain't es big a fool as ye look, an' ye'd be in a bad fix ef ye was."

"Go on," ordered Tom, "and leave me out."

"I cayn't leave ye out, Tom," said Mr. Stamps, "fer ye're in. Ye'd be as big a fool as ye look ef ye was doin' all this yere fer nothin'."

"All what?" demanded Tom.

"Gals," suggested Mr. Stamps, "is plenty. An' ef ye take to raisin' 'em as this un's ben raised, ye ain't makin' much; an' ef thar ain't nothin' to be made, Tom, what's yer aim?"

He put it as if it was a conundrum without an answer.

"What's yer aim, Tom?" he repeated, pleasantly, "ef thar ain't nothin' to be made?"

Tom's honest face flamed into red which was almost purple, the veins swelled on his forehead, his indignation almost deprived him of his breath. He fell into a chair with a concussion which shook the building.

"Good--good Lord!" he exclaimed; "how I wish you weighed five hundred pounds."

It is quite certain that if Stamps had, he would have demolished him utterly upon the spot, leaving him in such a condition that his remains

would hardly have been a source of consolation to his friends. He pointed to the door.

"If you want to get out," he said, "start. This is getting the better of me--and if it does----"

Mr. Stamps rose.

"Ye wouldn't do a dern thing, Tom," he said, peaceably, "not a dern thing."

He sidled towards the door, and reaching it, paused to reflect, shaking his head.

"Ef thar ain't nothin' to be made," he said, "ye've got ter hev a aim, an' what is it?"

Observing that Tom made a move in his chair, he slipped through the doorway

rather hurriedly. Sheba thought he was gone, but a moment later the door re-opened and he thrust his head in and spoke, not intrusively--simply as if offering a suggestion which might prove of interest.

"It begun with a 'L,'" he said; "thar was a name on it, and it begun with a 'L'."