CHAPTER XI

It was upon the evening after this interview with Mr. Stamps that Tom broached to his young companion a plan which had lain half developed in his mind for some time.

They had gone into the back room and eaten together the supper Mornin had prepared with some extra elaboration to do honour to the day, and then Sheba had played with her doll Lucinda while Tom looked on, somewhat neglecting his newspaper and pipe in his interest in her small pretence of maternity.

At last, when she had put Lucinda to sleep in the wooden cradle which had been her own, he called her to him.

"Come here," he said, "I want to ask you a question."

She came readily and stood at his knee, laying her hands upon it and looking up at him, as she had had a habit of doing ever since she first stood alone.

"How would you like some new rooms?" he said, suggestively.

"Like these?" she answered, a pretty wonder in her eyes.

"No," said Tom, "not like these--bigger and brighter and prettier. With flowers on the walls and flowers on the carpets, and all the rest to match."

He had mentioned this bold idea to Molly Hollister the day before, and she had shown such pleasure in it, that he had been quite elated.

"It's not that I need anything different," he had said, "but the roughness and bareness don't seem to suit her. I've thought it often when I've seen her running about."

"Seems like thar ain't nothin' you don't think of, Tom," said Molly, admiringly.

"Well," he admitted, "I think about her a good deal, that's a fact. She seems to have given me a kind of imagination. I used to think I hadn't any."

He had imagination enough to recognise at the present moment in the child's uplifted face some wistful thought she did not know how to express, and he responded to it by speaking again.

"They'll be prettier rooms than these," he said. "What do you say?"

Her glance wandered across the hearth to where the cradle stood in the corner with Lucinda in it. Then she looked up at him again.

"Prettier than this," she repeated, "with flowers. But don't take this away." The feeling which stirred her flushed her childish cheek and made her breath come and go faster. She drew still nearer to him.

"Don't take this away," she repeated, and laid her hand on his.

"Why?" asked Tom, giving her a curious look.

She met the look helplessly. She could not have put her vague thought into words.

"Don't--don't take it away," she said again, and suddenly laid her face upon his great open palm.

For a minute or two there was silence. Tom sat very still and looked at the fire.

"No," he said at length, "we won't take it away."

In a few days, however, it was well known for at least fifteen miles around the Cross-roads that Tom D'Willerby was going to build a new house, and that it was going to be fitted up with great splendour with furniture purchased at Brownsboro.

"Store carpetin' on every floor an' paper on every wall," said Dave Hollister to Molly when he went home after hearing the news. "An' Sheby's a-goin' with him to choose 'em. He says he'll bet fifty dollars she has her notions about things, an' he's a-goin to hev 'em carried out, fer it's all fer her, an' she's the one to be pleased."

It was not many weeks before the rooms were so near completion that the journey to Brownsboro was made, and it was upon this day of her first journeying out into the world that Sheba met with her first adventure. She remembered long afterwards the fresh brightness of the early morning when she was lifted into the buggy which stood before the door, while Mornin ran to and fro in the agreeable bustle attendant upon forgetting important articles and being reminded of them by shocks. When Tom climbed into his seat and they drove away, the store-porch seemed quite crowded with those who watched their triumphant departure. Sheba looked back and saw Mornin showing her teeth and panting for breath, while Molly Hollister waved the last baby's sunbonnet, holding its denuded owner in her arms. The drive was a long one, but the travellers enjoyed it from first to last. Tom found his companion's conversation quite sufficient entertainment to while away the time, and when at intervals she refreshed herself from Mornin's basket and fell asleep, he enjoyed driving along quietly while he held her small, peacefully relaxed body on his knee, quite as much as another man might have enjoyed a much more exciting occupation.

"There's an amount of comfort in it," he said, reflectively, as the horse plodded along on the shady side of the road, "an amount of comfort that's astonishing. I don't know, but I'd like to have her come to a standstill just about now and never grow any older or bigger. But I thought the same thing three years ago, that's a fact. And when she gets to blooming out and enjoying her bits of girl finery there'll be pleasure in that too, plenty of it."

She awakened from one of these light sleeps just as they were entering Brownsboro, and her delight and awe at the dimensions and business aspect of the place pleased Tom greatly, and was the cause of his appearing a perfect mine of reliable information on the subject of large towns and the habits of persons residing in them.

Brownsboro contained at least six or seven hundred inhabitants, and, as Court was being held, there were a good many horses to be seen tied to the hitching-posts; groups of men were sitting before the stores and on the sidewalks, while something which might almost have been called a crowd was gathered before the Court-house itself.

Sheba turned her attention to the tavern they were approaching with a view to spending the night, and her first glance alighted upon an object of interest.

"There's a big boy," she said. "He looks tired."

He was not such a very big boy, though he was perhaps fourteen years old and tall of his age. He stood upon the plank-walk which ran at the front of the house, and leaned against the porch with his hands in his pockets. He was a slender, lithe boy, well dressed in a suit of fine white linen. He had a dark, spirited face, and long-lashed dark eyes, but, notwithstanding these advantages, he looked far from amiable as he stood lounging discontentedly and knitting his brows in the sun.

But Sheba admired him greatly and bent forward that she might see him better, regarding him with deep interest.

"He's a pretty boy," she said, softly, "I--I like him."

Tom scarcely heard her. He was looking at the boy himself, and his face wore a troubled and bewildered expression. His gaze was so steady that at length the object of it felt its magnetic influence and lifted his eyes. That his general air of discontent did not belie him, and that he was by no means an amiable boy, was at once proved. He did not bear the scrutiny patiently, his face darkened still more, and he scowled without any pretence of concealing the fact.

Tom turned away uneasily.

"He'd be a handsome fellow if he hadn't such an evil look," he said. "I

must have seen him before; I wonder who he is?"

There were many strangers in the house, principally attenders upon the Court being held. Court week was a busy time for Brownsboro, which upon such occasions assumed a bustling and festive air, securing its friends from less important quarters, engaging in animated discussions of the cases in hand, and exhibiting an astonishing amount of legal knowledge, using the most mystical terms in ordinary conversation, and secretly feeling its importance a good deal.

"Sparkses" was the name of the establishment at which the travellers put up, and, being the better of the two taverns in which the town rejoiced, Sparkses presented indeed an enlivening spectacle. It was a large frame house with the usual long verandah at the front, upon which verandah there were always to be seen customers in rocking-chairs, their boots upon the balustrade, their hands clasped easily on the tops of their heads. During Court week these customers with their rocking-chairs and boots seemed to multiply themselves indefinitely, and, becoming exhilarated by the legal business transacted around them, bestirred themselves to jocularity and argument, thus adding to the liveliness of the occasion.

At such periods Mr. Sparkes was a prominent feature. Attired in an easy costume seemingly composed principally of suspenders, and bearing a pipe in his hand, he permeated the atmosphere with a business-like air which had long stamped him in the minds of his rural guests as a person of

administrative abilities rarely equalled and not at all to be surpassed.

"He's everywhar on the place, is Sparkes," had been said of him. "He's at dinner, 'n supper, 'n breakfast, 'n out on the porch, 'n in the bar, an' kinder sashiatin' through the whole thing. Thet thar tavern wouldn't be nothin' ef he wasn't thar."

It was not to be disputed that he appeared at dinner and breakfast and supper, and that on each appearance he disposed of a meal of such proportions as caused his countenance to deepen in colour and assume a swelled aspect, which was, no doubt, extremely desirable under the circumstances, and very good for the business, though it could scarcely be said to lighten the labour of Mrs. Sparkes and her daughters, who apparently existed without any more substantial sustenance than the pleasure of pouring out cups of coffee and tea and glasses of milk, and cutting slices of pie, of which they possibly partook through some process of absorption.

To the care of Mrs. Sparkes Tom confided his charge when, a short time after their arrival, he made his first pilgrimage for business purposes.

"She's been on the road all day," he said, "and I won't take her out till to-morrow; so if you don't mind, I'll leave her with you until I come back. She'll be all right and happy, won't you, Sheba?"

Secretly Sheba felt some slight doubt of this; but in her desire to do

him credit, she summed up all her courage and heroically answered that she would, and so was borne off to the dining-room, where two girls were cutting bread and slicing ham for supper. They were Mrs. Sparkes's daughters, and when they saw the child, dropped their knives and made a good-natured rush at her, for which she was not at all prepared.

"Now, mother," they cried, "whar's she from, 'n who does she b'long to?"

Mrs. Sparkes cast a glance at her charge, which Sheba caught and was puzzled by. It was a mysterious glance, with something of cautious pity in it.

"Set her up in a cheer, Luce," she said, "'n give her a piece of cake. Don't ye want some, honey?"

Sheba regarded her with uplifted eyes as she replied. The glance had suggested to her mind that Mrs. Sparkes was sorry for her, and she was anxious to know why.

"No," she answered, "no, thank you, I don't want any."

She sat quite still when they put her into a chair, but she did not remove her eyes from Mrs. Sparkes.

"Who does she b'long to, anyhow?" asked Luce.

Mrs. Sparkes lowered her voice as she answered:

"She don't b'long to nobody, gals," she said. "It's thet little critter big Tom D'Willerby from Talbot's Cross-roads took to raise."

"Ye don't say. Pore little thing," exclaimed the girls. And while one of them stooped to kiss her cheek, the other hurriedly produced a large red apple, which she laid on the long table before her.

But Sheba did not touch it. To hear that she belonged to nobody was a mysterious shock to her. There had never seemed any doubt before that she belonged to her Uncle Tom, but Mrs. Sparkes had quite separated her from him in her statement. Suddenly she began to feel a little tired, and not quite so happy as she had been. But she sat still and listened, rendered rather tremulous by the fact that the speakers seemed so sure they had reason to pity her.

"Ef ever thar was a mystery," Mrs. Sparkes proceeded, "thet thar was one; though Molly Hollister says D'Willerby don't like it talked over. Nobody knowed 'em, not even their names, an' nobody knowed whar they come from.
She died, 'n he went away--nobody knowed whar; 'n the child wasn't two days old when he done it. Ye cayn't tell me thar ain't a heap at the back o' that. They say D'Willerby's jest give himself up to her ever since, an' 'tain't no wonder, nuther, for she's a' out 'n out beauty, ain't she, now? Just look at her eyes. Why don't ye eat yer apple, honey?"

Sheba turned towards the window and looked out on the porch. A bewildering sense of desolation had fallen upon her.

"I don't want it," she said; and her small voice had a strange sound even in her own ears. "I want Uncle Tom. Let me go out on the porch and see if he's coming."

She saw them exchange rapid glances and was troubled afresh by it.

"D'ye reckin she understands?" the younger daughter said, cautiously.

"Lordy, no!" answered the mother; "we ain't said nothin'. Ye kin go ef ye want to, Sheba," she added, cheerfully. "Thar's a little rocking-cheer that ye kin set in. Help her down, Luce."

But she had already slipped down and found her way to the door opening out on to the street. The porch was deserted for a wonder, the reason being that an unusually interesting case was being argued in the Court-house across the street, where groups of men were hanging about the doors. The rocking-chair stood in a corner, but Sheba did not sit down in it. She went to the steps and stood there, looking out with a sense of pain and loneliness still hanging over her; and at last, without knowing why, only feeling that they had a dreary sound and contained a mystery which somehow troubled her, she began to say over softly the words the woman had used.

"She died and he went away, nobody knows where. She died and he went away, nobody knows where."

Why those words should have clung to her and made her feel for the moment desolate and helpless, it would be difficult to say, but as she repeated them half unconsciously, the figures of the woman who had died and the man who had wandered so far away alone, that he seemed to have wandered out of life itself, cast heavy shadows on her childish heart.

"I am glad," she whispered, "that it was not Uncle Tom that went away." And she looked up the street with an anxious sigh.

Just at this moment she became conscious that she was not alone. In bending forward that she might see the better, she caught sight of someone leaning against the balustrades which had before concealed him--the boy, in short, who was standing just as he had stood when they drove up, and who looked as handsome in a darkling way as human boy could look.

For a few seconds the child regarded him with bated breath. The boys she had been accustomed to seeing were not of this type, and were more remarkable for gifts less ornamental than beauty. This boy with his graceful limbs and haughtily carried head, filled her with awe and admiration. She admired him so much, that, though her first impulse was

to run away, she did not obey it, and almost immediately he glanced up and saw her. When this occurred, she was greatly relieved to find that his gloom did not lead him to treat her unkindly, indeed, he was amiable enough to address her with an air of one relenting and condescending somewhat to her youth.

"Didn't you know I was here?" he asked.

"No," Sheba answered, timidly.

"Whom are you looking for?"

"For my Uncle Tom."

He glanced across the street, still keeping his hands in his pockets and preserving his easy attitude.

"Perhaps he is over there," he suggested.

"Perhaps he is," she replied, and added, shyly, "Are you waiting for anyone?"

He frowned so darkly at first, that she was quite alarmed and wished that she had run away as she had at first intended; but he answered, after a pause:

"No--yes;" he said, "yes--I'm waiting for my father."

He did not even speak as the boys at the Cross-roads spoke. His voice had a clear, soft ring, and his mode of pronunciation was one Tom had spent much time in endeavouring to impress upon herself as being more desirable than that she had heard most commonly used around her. Up to this time she had frequently wondered why she must speak differently from Mornin and Molly Hollister, but now she suddenly began to appreciate the wisdom of his course. It was very much nicer to speak as the boy spoke.

"I haven't any father," she ventured, "or any mother. That's queer, isn't it?" And as she said it, Mrs. Sparkes's words rushed into her mind again, and she looked up the street towards the sunset and fell into a momentary reverie, whispering them to herself.

"What's that you are saying?" asked the boy.

She looked at him with a rather uncertain and troubled expression.

"It was only what they said in there," she replied, pointing towards the dining-room.

"What did they say?"

She repeated the words slowly, regarding him fixedly, because she wondered if they would have any effect upon him.

"She died and he went away, nobody knows where. What does it mean?"

"I don't know," he admitted, staring at her with his handsome, long-lashed eyes. "Lots of people die and go away." Then, after a pause, in which he dropped his eyes, he added:

"My mother died two years ago."

"Did she?" answered Sheba, wondering why he looked so gloomy again all at once. "I don't think I ever had any mother, but I have Uncle Tom."

He stared at her again, and there was silence for a few minutes. This he broke by asking a question.

"What is your name?" he demanded.

"De Willoughby," she replied, "but I'm called Sheba."

"Why, that's my name," he said, surprisedly. "My name is De Willoughby. I--Hallo, Neb----"

This last in a tone of proprietorship to a negro servant, who was advancing towards them from a side-door and who hurried up with rather a frightened manner.

"Ye'd best get ready ter start right away, Mars Ralph," he said. "He's wake at las', an' der's de debbil to pay, a-cussin' an' roarin' an' wantin' opium; an' he wants to know whar ye bin an' what ye mean, an' ses de hosses mus' be at de do' in ten minits. Oh, de cunnel he's in de wustest kin' o' humour, dar's no doin' nuffin right fer him."

"Tell him to go to h----" burst forth the lad, flying into a rage and looking so wickedly passionate in a boyish way that Sheba was frightened again. "Tell him I won't go until I'm ready; I've been dragged round till I'm sick of it, and----"

In the midst of his tempest he checked himself, turned about and walked suddenly into the house, the negro following him in evident trepidation.

His departure was so sudden that Sheba fancied he would return and say something more to her. Angry as he looked, she wished very much that he would, and so stood waiting wistfully.

But she was doomed to disappointment. In a few minutes the negro brought to the front three horses, and almost immediately there appeared at the door a tall, handsome man, who made his way to the finest horse and mounted it with a dashing vault into the saddle.

He had a dark aquiline face like the boy's, and wore a great sweeping mustache which hid his mouth. The boy followed, looking wonderfully like him, as he sprang into his own saddle with the same dare-devil vault.

No one spoke a word, and he did not even look at Sheba, though she watched him with admiring and longing eyes. As soon as they were fairly in their seats the horses, which were fine creatures, needing neither whip nor spur, sprang forward with a light, easy movement, and so cantered down the street towards the high road which stretched itself over a low hill about a quarter of a mile away.

Sheba laid her cheek against the wooden pillar and looked after them with a return of the sense of loneliness she had felt before.

"He went away," she whispered, "nobody knows where--nobody knows where."

She felt Tom's hand laid on her shoulder as she said the words, and turned her face upward with a consciousness of relief, knowing she would not be lonely any longer.

"Have I been gone long?" he asked. "Where's Mrs. Sparkes?"

"She's in there," Sheba answered, eagerly, "and I've been talking to the boy."

"To the boy?" he repeated. "What boy?"

"To the one we saw," she replied, holding his hand and feeling her cheeks

flush with the excitement of relating her adventure. "The nice boy. His name is like mine--and his mother died. He said it was De Willoughby, and it is like mine. He has gone away with his father. See them riding."

He dropped her hand and, taking a step forward, stood watching the receding travellers. He watched them until they reached the rising ground. The boy had fallen a few yards behind. Presently the others passed the top of the hill, and, as they did so, he turned in his saddle as if he had suddenly remembered something, and glanced back at the tavern porch.

"He is looking for me," cried Sheba, and ran out into the brightness of the setting sun, happy because he had not quite forgotten her.

He saw her, waved his hand with a careless, boyish gesture and disappeared over the brow of the hill.

Tom sat down suddenly on the porch-step. When Sheba turned to him he was
pale and his forehead was damp with sweat. He spoke aloud, but to himself, not to her.

"Good Lord," he said, "it's De Courcy and--and the boy. That was why I knew his face."

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When they went in to supper later on, there was a great deal of laughing and talking going on down the long table. Mr. Sparkes was finishing a story as they entered, and he was finishing it in a loud voice.

"They're pretty well known," he said; "an' the Colonel's the worst o' the lot. The nigger told me thar'd been a reg'lar flare-up at the Springs. Thar was a ball an' he got on a tear an' got away from 'em an' bust right into the ballroom an' played Hail Columby. He's a pop'lar man among the ladies, is the Colonel, but a mixtry of whiskey an' opium is apt to spile his manners. Nigger says he's the drunkest man when he is drunk that the Lord ever let live. Ye cayn't do nothin' with him. The boy was thar, an' they say 'twas a sight ter see him. He's his daddy's son, an' a bigger young devil never lived, they tell me. He's not got to the whiskey an' opium yet, an' he jes' takes his'n out in pride an' temper. Nigger said he jest raved an' tore that night--went into the Colonel's room an' cussed an' dashed round like he was gone mad. Kinder shamed, I reckin. But Lord, he'll be at it himself in ten years from now. It's in the blood."

"Who's that you're talking of?" asked Tom from his end of the table. He had not recovered his colour yet and looked pale as he put the question.

"Colonel De Willoughby of Delisleville," answered Mr. Sparkes. "Any kin o' your'n? Name's sorter like. He jest left here this evenin' with his boy an' nigger. They've ben to Whitebriar, an' they're on their way

home."

"I saw them ride over the hill," said Tom. "I thought I wasn't mistaken in the man. I've seen him before."

But he made a very poor supper, and a shadow seemed to have fallen upon his cheery mood of the morning. Sheba recognised this and knew, too, that her new friend and his father were in some vague way responsible for it, and the knowledge oppressed her so that when they sat out upon the porch together after the meal was over, she in her accustomed place on his knee, she grew sad under it herself and, instead of talking as usual, leaned her small head against his coat and watched the few stars whose brightness the moon had not shut out.

She went to bed early, but did not sleep well, dreaming dreary dreams of watching the travellers riding away towards the sunset, and of hearing the woman talk again. One of the talkers seemed at last to waken her with her voice, and she sat up in bed suddenly and found that it was Tom, who had roused her by speaking to himself in a low tone as he stood in a flood of moonlight before the window.

"She died," he was saying; "she died."

Sheba burst into a little sob, stretching out her hands to him without comprehending her own emotion.

"And he went away," she cried, "nobody knows where--nobody knows where--"

And even when he came to her hurriedly and sat down on the bedside, soothing her and taking her in his arms to sink back into slumber, she sobbed drearily two or three times, though, once in his clasp, she felt, as she had always done, the full sense of comfort, safety, and rest.