

CHAPTER XVIII

Just before the breaking out of the Civil War, Delisville had been provided with a sensation in a piece of singularly unexpected good fortune which befell one of its most prominent citizens. It was indeed good fortune, wearing somewhat the proportions of a fairy tale, and that such things could happen in Delisville and to a citizen who possessed its entire approval was considered vaguely to the credit of the town.

One of the facts which had always been counted as an added dignity to the De Willoughbys had been their well-known possession of property in land. "Land" was always felt to be dignified, and somehow it seemed additionally so when it gained a luxuriously superfluous character by merely lying in huge, uncultivated tracts, and representing nothing but wide areas and taxes.

"Them big D'Willerbys of D'lisleville owns thousands of acres as never brings 'em a cent," Mr. Stamps had said to his friends at the Cross-roads at the time Big Tom had first appeared among them. It was Mr. Stamps who had astutely suggested that the stranger was possibly "kin" to the Delisville family, and in his discreet pursuit of knowledge he had made divers discoveries.

"'Twarn't Jedge D'Willerby bought the land," he went on to explain, "'n' it seems like he would hev bin a fool to hev done it, bein' as 'tain't

worked an' brings in nothin'. But ye never know how things may turn out. 'Twas the Jedge's gran'father, old Isham D'Willerby bought it fer a kinder joke. Some said he was blind drunk when he done it, but he warn't so drunk but what he got a cl'ar title, an' he got it mighty cheap too. Folks ses as he use ter laugh an' say he war goin' to find gold on it, but he never dug fer none--nor fer crops nuther, an' thar it lies to-day in the mountains, an' no one goin' nigh it."

In truth, Judge De Willoughby merely paid his taxes upon it from a sense of patriarchal pride.

"My ancestor bought it," he would say. "I will hand it to my sons. In England it would be an estate for an earldom, here it means merely tax-paying. Still, I shall not sell it."

Nobody, in fact, would have been inclined to buy it in those days. But there came a time when its value increased hour by hour in the public mind, until it was almost beyond computation.

A chance visitor from the outside world made an interesting discovery. On this wild tract of hill and forest was a vein of coal so valuable that, to the practical mind of the discoverer, the Judge's unconsciousness of its existence was amazing. He himself was a practical, driving, business schemer from New York. He knew the value of what he saw, and the availability of the material in consequence of a certain position in which the mines lay. Before he left Delisville he had explained this

with such a presenting of facts that the Judge had awakened to an enthusiasm as Southern as his previous indifference had been. He had no knowledge of business methods; he had practised his profession in a magnificent dilettante sort of way which had worn an imposing air and impressed his clients, and, as he was by inheritance a comparatively rich man, he had not been driven by necessity to alter his methods. The sudden prospect of becoming a multimillionaire excited him. He made Napoleonic plans, and was dignified and eloquent.

"Why should I form a company?" he said. "If I am willing to make the first ventures myself, the inevitable returns of profit will do the rest, and there will be no complications. The De Willoughby Mine will be the De Willoughby Mine alone. I prefer that it should be so."

The idea of being sole ruler in the scheme made him feel rather like a king, and he privately enjoyed the sensation. He turned into money all the property he could avail himself of; his library table was loaded with books on mining; he invested in tons of machinery, which were continually arriving from the North, or stopping on the way when it should have been arriving. He sent for engineers from various parts of the country and amazed them with the unprofessional boldness of his methods. He really indulged in a few months of dignified riot, of what he imagined to be a splendidly executive nature. The plans were completed, the machinery placed, the engineers and cohorts of workmen engaged in tremendous efforts, the Judge was beginning to reflect on the management of his future millions, when--the first gun was fired on Fort Sumter.

That was the beginning, and apparently the end. Suddenly the storm of war broke forth, and its tempest, surging through the land, swept all before it. The country was inundated with catastrophes, capitalists foundered, schemes were swamped, the armies surged to and fro. The De Willoughby land was marched and fought over; scores of hasty, shallow graves were dug in it and filled; buildings and machinery were destroyed as if a tornado had passed by. The Judge was a ruined man; his realisable property he had allowed to pass from his hands, his coal remained in the bowels of the earth, the huge income he was to have drawn from it had melted into nothingness.

Nothing could have altered the aspect of this tragedy; but there was a singular fact which added to its intensity and bitterness. In such a hot-bed of secession as was Delisville, the fact in question was indeed not easily explainable, except upon the grounds either of a Quixotic patriotism or upon those of a general disposition to contradictoriness. A Southern man, the head of a Southern family, the Judge opposed the rebellion and openly sided with the Government. That he had been a man given to argument and contradiction, and always priding himself upon refusing to be led by the majority was not to be denied.

"He is fancying himself a Spartan hero, and looking forward to laurels and history," one of his neighbours remarked. "It is like De Willoughby after all. He would have been a Secessionist if he had lived in Boston."

"The Union General George Washington fought for and handed down to us I will protect," the Judge said loftily himself.

But there was no modifying the outburst of wonder and condemnation which overwhelmed him. To side with the Union--in an aristocratic Southern town--was to lose social caste and friends, to be held a renegade and an open, degraded traitor to home and country. At that period, to the Southerner the only country was the South--in the North reigned outer darkness. Had the Judge been a poor white, there would have been talk of tar and feathers. As a man who had been a leader among the aristocratic classes, he was ostracized. In the midst of his financial disasters he was treated as an outlaw. He had been left a widower a few years before, during the war his son De Courcy died of fever, Romaine fell in battle, and his sole surviving daughter lost her life through diphtheria contracted in a soldiers' hospital. The family had sunk into actual poverty; the shock of sorrows and disappointment broke the old man's spirit. On the day that peace was finally declared he died in his room in the old house which had once been so full of young life and laughter and spirit.

The only creature with him at the time was his grandson, young Rupert De Willoughby, who was De Courcy's son. The sun was rising, and its first beams shone in at the open window rosily. The old Judge lay rubbing his hands slowly together, perhaps because they were cold.

"Only you left, Rupert," he said, "and there were so many of us. If Tom--if Tom had not been such a failure--don't know whether he's alive--or dead. If Tom----"

His hands slowly ceased moving and his voice trailed off into silence. Ten minutes later all was over, and Rupert stood in the world entirely alone.

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For the next two years the life the last De Willoughby lived in the old house, though distinctly unique, was not favourable to the development of youth. Having been prepared for the practice of the law, after the time-honoured De Willoughby custom, and having also for some months occupied a corner in the small, unbusiness-like, tree-shaded, brick building known as the Judge's "office," Rupert sat now at his grandfather's desk and earned a scant living by endeavouring to hold together the old man's long-diminished practice. The profession at the time offered nothing in such places as Delisleville, even to older and more experienced men. No one had any money to go to law with, few had any property worth going to law about.

Both armies having swept through it, Delisleville wore in those days an aspect differing greatly from its old air of hospitable well-being and inconsequent good spirits and good cheer. Its broad verandahed houses had

seen hard usage, its pavements were worn and broken, and in many streets tufted with weeds; its fences were dilapidated, its rich families had lost their possessions, and those who had not been driven away by their necessities were gazing aghast at a future to which it seemed impossible to adjust their ease-loving, slave-attended, luxurious habits of the past. Houses built of wood, after the Southern fashion, do not well withstand neglect and ill-fortune. Porticos and pillars and trellis-work which had been picturesque and imposing when they had been well cared for, and gleamed white among creepers and trees, lost their charm drearily when paint peeled off, trees were cut down, and vines were dragged away and died. Over the whole of the once gay little place there had fallen an air of discouragement, desolation, and decay. Financial disaster had crippled the boldest even in centres much more energetic than small, unbusiness-like Southern towns; the country lay, as it were, prostrate to recover strength, and all was at a standstill.

Finding himself penniless, Rupert De Willoughby lived in a corner of the house he had been brought up in. Such furniture as had survived the havoc of war and the entire dilapidation of old age, he had gathered together in three or four rooms, which he occupied with the one servant good fortune brought to his door at a time when the forlornness of his changed position was continually accentuated by the untidy irregularity of his life and surroundings. He was only able to afford to engage the shiftless services of a slatternly negro girl, rendered insubordinate by her newly acquired freedom, and he had begun to feel that he should never again find himself encompassed by the decorous system of a well-managed

household.

It was at this juncture that Uncle Matthew arrived and presented his curious petition, which was that he should be accepted as general servant, with wages or without them.

He had not belonged to Judge De Willoughby, but to a distant relative, and, as he was an obstinate and conservative old person, he actually felt that to be "a free nigger" was rather to drop in the social scale.

"Whar's a man stand, sah, if he ain't got no fambly?" he said to Rupert when he came to offer his services to him. "He stan' nowhar, that's war he stan'; I've got to own up to it, Marse Rupert, I'se a 'ristycrat bawn an' bred, an' I 'low to stay one, long's my head's hot. Ef my old mars's fambly hadn't er gone fo'th en' bin scattered to de fo' win's of de university, I'd a helt on, but when de las' of 'um went to dat Europe, dey couldn't 'ford to take me, an' I had ter stay. An' when I heerd as all yo' kin was gone an' you was gwine to live erlone like dis yere, I come to ax yer to take me to wait on yer--as a favier, Marse Rupert--as a favier. 'Tain't pay I wants, sah; it's a fambly name an' a fambly circle."

"It's not much of a circle, Uncle Matt," said Rupert, looking round at the bareness of the big room he sat in.

"'Tain't much fer you, suh," answered Uncle Matthew, "but it's a pow'fle

deal fer me in dese yere days. Ef yer don't take me, fust thing I knows I'll be drivin' or waitin' on some Mr. Nobody from New York or Boston, an' seems like I shouldn't know how to stand it. 'Scuse me a-recommendin' myself, sah--I look ole, but I ain't as ole as I look; I'se l'arnt to cook, sah, from three womens what I was married to, an' I knows my place an' how to keep house like it orter be kep'. Will you try me a mont', Marse De Willoughby--will you try me a week?"

Rupert tried him and never regretted the venture. In fact, Uncle Matt's accomplishments were varied for practical reasons. He had been in his time first house servant, then coachman; he had married at twenty a woman of forty, who had been a sort of female mulatto Vatel. When she had died, having overheated herself and caught cold on the occasion of a series of great dinners given at a triumphant political crisis, he had taken for his second wife the woman whose ambition it had been to rival her in her culinary arts. His third marriage had been even more distinguished. His wife had been owned by some extravagantly rich Creoles in New Orleans, and had even lived with them during a year spent in France, thereby gaining unheard-of culinary accomplishments. Matthew had always declared

that he loved her the best of the three. Those matrimonial ventures had been a liberal education to him. He had learned to cook almost as well as his first, and from his second and third he had inherited methods and recipes which were invaluable. He seemed to have learned to do everything. He dismissed the slatternly negro girl and took upon himself the duties of both man and woman servant. The house gradually wore a new

aspect--dust disappeared, windows were bright, the scant furniture was arranged to the best possible advantage, the scant meals were marvels of perfect cookery and neat serving. Having prepared a repast, Uncle Matt donned an ancient but respectable coat and stood behind his young master's chair with dignity. The dramatic nature of his race was strongly appealed to by the situation in which he found himself. A negro of his kind is perfectly capable of building a romance out of much smaller materials. The amiable vanity which gave such exalted value to all the belongings of their masters in their days of slavery, and which so delighted in all picturesqueness of surrounding, is the best of foundations for romances. From generation to generation certain circumstances and qualities had conferred a sort of distinction upon their humbleness; to be owned by an aristocrat, to live in a great house, to wait upon young masters who were handsome and accomplished and young mistresses who were beautiful and surrounded by worshippers, to be indispensable to "de Jedge" or "de Cun'l," or to travel as attendant because some brilliant young son or lovely young daughter could find no one who would wait on them as "Uncle Matt" or "Aunt Prissy" could--these things made life to be desired and filled it with excitement and importance.

To the halcyon days in which such delights were possible Uncle Matt belonged. He was too old to look forward; he wanted his past again; and to find himself the sole faithful retainer in a once brilliant household, with the chance of making himself indispensable to the one remaining

scion of an old name, assisted him to feel that he was a relic of departed grandeur.

His contrivances were numberless. In a corner of what he called the "back garden" he constructed an enclosure for chickens. He bought two or three young fowls, and by marvels of management founded a family with them. The

family once founded, he made exchanges with friendly coloured matrons of the vicinity, with such results in breeding that "Uncle Matt's" chickens became celebrated fowls. He displayed the same gifts in the management of the garden. In a few months after his arrival, Rupert began to find himself sitting down before the kind of meal he had not expected to contemplate again.

"Uncle Matt," he said, "where do I get fried chicken and vegetables like these--and honey and fresh butter and cream? I don't pay for them."

"Yes, you do, sah. Yo' property pays for 'em. Dat 'ar gyarden, sah, is black with richness--jest black. It's a forchen for a pusson what kin contrive an' make fren's, an' trade, an' kin flourish a spade. Dar's fruit-trees an' grape-vines dar--an' room enuf to plant anything--an' richness enuf to make peas an' taters an' beets an' cabbages jest jump out o' de yarth. I've took de liberty of makin' a truck patch, an' I've got me a chicken coop, an' I've had mighty good luck with my aigs an' my truck--an' I've got things to trade with the women folks for what I ain't got. De ladies likes tradin', an' dey's mighty neighbourly about

yeah, 'memberin' yo' fambly, sah."

Rupert leaned back in his chair and broke into a hearty, boyish laugh, which it was very good both to see and hear. He very seldom laughed.

"I wish I was a genius like you, Matt," he said. "What luck I'm in to have you. Raising chickens and vegetables, and negotiating with your lady friends for me! I feel like a caliph with a grand vizier. I never tasted such chicken or such waffles in my life!"

"I'm settin' some tukkey-eggs now--under de yaller hen," said Matt, with a slyly exultant grin. "She's a good mother, the yaller hen; an' de way dem fruit-trees is gwine ter be loaded is a sight. Aunt Mary Field, she's tradin' with me a'ready agin fruit puttin'-up time."

Rupert got up from his chair. He caught old Matt's dusky, yellow-palmed paw in his hand and shook it hard. His gloomy young face had changed its aspect, his eyes suddenly looked like his mother's--and Delia Vanuxem had been said to have the loveliest soft eyes in all the South.

"Matt," he said, "I couldn't do without you. It isn't only that," with a gesture towards the table, "you--it's almost as if you had come to save me."

"Ole nigger man like me, Marse Rupert," said Uncle Matt, "savin' of a fine young gentleman like what you is! How's I gwine ter do it?" But his

wrinkled face looked tremulous with emotion. "Times is gwine ter change for you, they is, an' Matt's gwine ter stay by yer till dat come to pass. Marse Rupert," looking at him curiously, "I 'clar to Gawd you look like yo' young mammy did. Yo' ain't always, but jes' dish yer minnit yo' does--an' yer did jes' now when yer laf."

"Do I look like her?" said Rupert. "I'm glad of it. I want to be like her. Say, Uncle Matt, whenever I look or speak or act like her, you tell me."

When in the course of neighbourly conversation Matt mentioned this to his friend Aunt Mary Fields, she put a new colour upon it.

"He worshipped his maw, an' she jest 'dored down on him," she said; "but 'tain't only he want look like her, he doan' want look like his paw. Ev'one know what Cun'l de Courcy was--an' dat chile jest 'spise him. He was allus a mons'ous proud chile, and when de Cun'l broke loose an' went on one o' his t'ars, it mos' 'stroyed dat boy wid de disgracefulness. Dar's chil'en as doan' keer or notice--but dat boy, it 'most 'stroyed him."

The big, empty-sounding house was kept orderly and spotless, the back garden exhibited such vegetables as no one else owned, the fruit-trees and grape-vines throve, in time the flower-beds began to bloom brilliantly, the rose-bushes and shrubs were trimmed, the paths swept, and people began to apply to Uncle Matt for slips and seeds. He himself

became quite young again, so inspired was he by his importance and popularity. When he went into the town upon errands, people stopped to talk to him; the young business or professional men called him into their offices to have a chat with him. He was such a respectable relic of the times which had been "better days" to all of them, that there were those who were almost confidential with him. Uncle Matt would always understand their sentiments and doctrines, and he was always to be relied on for any small service. Such a cocktail or julep no one else could prepare, and there were numerous subtle accomplishments in the matter of mixing liquid refreshments which would have earned a reputation for any man.

There was no more familiar figure than his in the market or business streets of the hot, sunshine-flooded little town, which the passing armies had left so battered and deserted.

Uncle Matt knew all the stories in Delisleville. He knew how one house was falling to pieces for lack of repairs; he heard of the horses that had been sold or had died of old age and left their owners without a beast to draw their rickety buggies or carriages; he was deeply interested in the failing fortunes of what had once been the most important "store" in the town, and whose owner had been an aristocratic magnate, having no more undignified connection with the place than that of provider of capital.

As he walked up Main Street on his way to market, with his basket on his

arm, he saw who had been able to "lay in new stock" and who had not. He saw the new sign-boards hung outside small houses which had been turned into offices. He knew what young scion of a respectable family had begun "doctoring" or "set up as a lawyer." Sometimes he even dropped in and made brief visits of respectful congratulation.

"But," he said privately to his young master, "de air ob de atmosphere, it's jest full of dem young lawyers an' doctors. Dar don't seem to be nothin' else for a gen'leman's sons to do but to kyore people or go to law for 'em. Of cose dey oughtn't ter hab ter work, gen'lemen oughtn'ter. Dey didn't usen to heb ter, but now dey is gotter. Lawdy, Marse Rupert, you'll hatter 'scuse me, but de young lawyers, an' de young doctors, dey is scattered about dish yer D'lisleville!"

There were certain new sign-boards which excited him to great interest. There was one he never passed without pausing to examine and reflect upon it.

When he came within range of it on his way up the street, his pace would slacken, and when he reached it he would stop at the edge of the pavement and stand with his basket on his arm, gazing at the lettering with an absorbed air of interest and curiosity. It read, "Milton January, Claim Agent." He could not read, but he had heard comments made upon the profession of the owner of this sign-board which had filled him with speculative thought. He shared the jealousy of strangers who came from "the North" to Delisleville and set up offices, which much more

intelligent persons than himself burned with. He resented them as intruders, and felt that their well-dressed air and alert, business-like manner was an insult to departed fortunes.

"What they come fer?" he used to grumble. "Takin' away trade an' business when they ain't none left for de proper people nohow. How's we gwine ter live if all New York City an' Bos'n an' Philadelphly pours in?"

"They are not pouring in very fast, Uncle Matt," Rupert answered him once. "Perhaps it would be better for us if they did. They bring some money, at any rate. There are only one or two of them, and one is a claim agent."

"Dat's jest what I wants ter know," said Matt. "What's dey layin' claim to? What right dey got ter claim anythin'? Gawd knows dar ain't much ter claim."

Rupert laughed and gave him a friendly, boyish slap on the back.

"They are not claiming things from people, but for them. They look up claims against the Government and try to get indemnity for them. They prove claims to back pay, and for damages and losses, and try to make the Government refund."

Uncle Matt rubbed his head a minute, then he looked up eagerly.

"Cun'l De Willoughby, now," he said; "doan' you s'pose dar's some back pay owin' to him for de damage dat yaller fever done him wot he done cotch from de army?"

Rupert laughed a little bitterly.

"No," he said, "I'm afraid not."

"What dey gwine to refun', den?" said Matt. "Dat's what I'd like ter fin' out. Dis hyer idee of refun'in' please me mightily. I'd be pow'fle glad to come bang up agin' some refun'in' myself."

From that time his interest in Milton January, Claim Agent, increased week by week. He used to loiter about talking groups if he caught the sound of his name, in the hope of gathering information. He was quite shrewd enough to realise his own entire ignorance of many subjects, and he had the pride which prevented his being willing to commit himself.

"I ain't nothin' but a ole nigger," he used to say. "I ain't had no eddication like some er dese yere smarties what kin read an' ciper an' do de double shuffle in de copy-book. Matt ain't never rub his back 'gin no college wall. Bes' thing he knows is dat he doan' know nothin'. Dat's a pow'fle useful piece o' l'arnin' to help a man, black or white, from makin' a fool er hesself bigger dan what de good Lawd 'tended him fer ter be. Matt he graduated in dat 'ar knowledge an' got he stiffikit. When de good Lawd turn a man out a fool, he got ter be a fool, but he needn'

ter be a bigger fool den what he gotter."

So he listened in the market, where he went every morning to bargain for his bit of beefsteak, or fish, or butter, and where the men and women who kept the stalls knew him as well as they knew each other. They all liked him and welcomed him as he approached in his clean old clothes, his market basket on his arm, his hat set rather knowingly upon his grizzled wool. He was, in fact, rather a flirtatious old party, and was counted a great wit, and was full of a shrewd humour as well as of grandiloquent compliment.

"I has a jocalder way er talkin', I ain't gwine ter deny," he would say when complimented upon his popularity with the fair sex, "an' dey ain't nothin' de ladies likes mo' dan a man what's jocalder. Dey loves jokin' an' dey loves to laff. It's de way er de sect. A man what cayn't be jocalder with 'em, he hain't no show."

"What dis hyer claim agentin' I's hearin' so much talk about?" he enquired of a group one morning. "What I wants is ter get inter de innards of de t'ing, an' den I'se gwine to claim sump'n fer myse'f. If dar's claimin' gwine on, I'se a gen'leman what's gwine to be on de camp-meetin' groun', an' fo'most 'mong de shouters."

"What did ye lose by the war, Uncle Matt?" said a countryman, who was leaning against his market waggon of "produce" and chewing tobacco. "If ye kin hunt up suthin' ye lost, ye kin put in a claim fer the vally of

it, an' mebbe get Government to give ye indemnity. Mebbe ye kin an' mebbe ye cayn't. They ain't keen to do it, but mebbe ye could work it through a smart agent like January. They say he's as smart as they make 'em."

It was a broiling July morning; only the people who were obliged to leave their houses for some special reason were to be seen in the streets; the market waggons which had come in from the country laden with vegetables and chickens and butter were drawn up under the shadow of the market house, that their forlorn horses or mules might escape the glaring hot sun. The liveliest business hour had passed, and about the waggons a group of market men and women and two or three loiterers were idling in the shade, waiting for chance-belated customers. There was a general drawing near when Uncle Matt began his conversation. They always wanted to hear what he had to say, and always responded with loud, sympathetic guffaws to his "jocalder" remarks.

"He's sech a case, Uncle Matt is," the women would say, "I never seen sich a case."

When the countryman spoke, Uncle Matt put on an expression of dignified thoughtfulness. It was an expression his audience were entirely familiar with and invariably greeted with delight.

"Endurin' of de war," he said, "I los' severial things. Fust thing I memberize of losin' was a pa'r of boots. Dar was a riggiment passin' at de time, an' de members of dat riggiment had been footin' it long enough

to have wo' out a good deal er shoe-leather. They was thusty an' hungry, an' come to de halt near my cabin to require if dar warn't no vittles lyin' roun' loose for de good er de country. When dey was gone, my new boots was gone, what I'd jest brung home from de cobbler."

His audience broke into a shout of enjoyment.

"Dat 'ar incerdent stirred up my paketriotit feelin's consider'ble at de moment. I couldn't seem to see it in de light what p'raps I oughter seen it in. I rared roun' a good deal, an' fer a moment er two, I didn't seem tar mind which side beat de oder. Jest dat 'casion. I doan' say de sentiment continnered on, but jest dat 'casion seemed ter me like dar was a Yank somewhars es I wouldn't hev ben agin seein' takin' a whuppin' from some'un, Secesh or no Secesh."

"What else did ye lose, Unc' Matt?" someone said when the laugh died down.

"Well, I lose a wife--kinder cook dat dar ain't no 'demnity kin make up fer when de Lawd's removed 'em. An' 'pears to me right dar, dat if I wusn't a chu'ch member, I shed be led on ter say dat, considerin' what a skaseness er good cooks dar is, seems like de good Lawd's almost wasteful an' stravagant, de way he lets 'em die off. Three uv 'em he 'moved from me to a better worl'. Not as I'm a man what'd wanter be sackerligious; but 'pears to me dar was mo' wuk fur 'em to do in dis hyer dark worl' er sin dan in de realms er glory. I may be wrong, but dat's how it seem to a

pore nigger like me."

"The Government won't pay for yer wife, Matt," said the owner of the market waggon.

"Dat dey won't, en dat dey cayn't," said Matt. "Dat las' woman's gumbo soup warn't a thing to be 'demnified fer, dat it warn't. But what I'm a aimin' at is to fin' out what dey will pay fer, en how much. Dar was one mawnin' I sot at my do' reflectin' on de Gawsp'l, an' de Yanks come jest a tarin' down de road, licketty switch, licketty switch, yellin' like de debil let loose, en firin' of dere pistols, an' I gotter 'fess I los' a heap a courage dat time--an' I los' a heap o' breath runnin' 'way from 'em en outer sight. Now I know de Gov'ment not gwine ter pay me fer losin' dem things, but what is dey gwine pay for losin'?"

"Property, they say--crops 'n' houses, 'n' barns, 'n' truck wuth money."

Uncle Matt removed his hat, and looked into the crown of it as if for instruction before he wiped his forehead and put it on again.

"Aye-yi! Dey is, is dey?" he said. "Property--en houses, en barns, en truck wuth money? Dey'll hev a plenty to pay, ef dey begins dat game, won't dey? Dey'll hev ter dig down inter de Gov'ment breeches pocket pretty deep, dat dey will. Doan' see how de Pres'dent gwine ter do it out'n what dey 'lows him, less'n dey 'lows him mighty big pocket money."

"'Tain't the President, Matt," said one of the crowd. "It's the Nation."

"Oh, it's de Nation!" said Matt. "De Nation. Well, Mr. Nation gwine fin' he got plenty ter do--early en late."

This was not the last time he led the talk in the direction of Government claims, and in the course of his marketings and droppings into various stores and young lawyers' offices, he gathered a good deal of information. Claims upon the Government had not been so far exploited in those days as they were a little later, and knowledge of such business and its processes was not as easily obtainable by unbusiness-like persons.

One morning, as he stood at the street corner nearest the Claim Agent's office, a little man came out of the place, and by chance stopped to cool himself for a few moments under the shade of the very maple tree Uncle Matt had chosen.

He was a very small man, wearing very large pantaloons, and he had a little countenance whose expression was a curious combination of rustic vacancy and incongruous slyness. He was evidently from the country, and Uncle Matt's respectable, in fact, rather aristocratic air, apparently attracted his attention.

"'Scuse me, sah," said Matt, "'scuse me addressin' of you, but dem ar Claim Agents----?"

"Hev ye got a claim?" said the little man in words that were slow, but with an air that was sharp. "I mean, has anyone ye work fur got one?"

"Well, sah," answered Matt, "I ain't sartain, but----"

"Ye'd better make sartain," said the little man. "Bein' es the thing's started the way it hes, anyone es might hev a claim an' lets it lie, is a derved fool. I come from over the mountain. My name's Stamps, and I've got one."

Uncle Matt regarded him with interest--not exactly with respect, but with interest.

Stamps took off his battered broad-brimmed hat, wiped his moist forehead and expectorated, leaning against the tree.

"Thar's people in this town as is derved fools," he remarked, sententiously. "Thar's people in most every town in the Union as is derved fools. Most everybody's got a claim to suthin', if they'd only got the common horse sense ter look it up. Why, look at that yoke o' oxen o' mine--the finest yoke o' steers in Hamlin County. Would hev took fust ticket at any Agricultural Fair in the United States. I ain't goin' to sacceryfist them steers to no Stars an' Stripes as ever floated. The Guv'ment's got to pay me the wuth of 'em down to the last cent."

He gave Matt a sharp look with a hint of inquiry in it, as if he was asking either his hearer or himself a question, and was not entirely certain of the answer.

"Now thar's D'Willerby," he went on. "Big Tom--Tom D'Willerby lost enough, the Lord knows. Fust one army, 'n' then another layin' holt on his stock as it come over the road from one place an' another, a-eatin' of it up 'n' a-wearin' his goods made up into shirts 'n' the like-'n' him left a'most cleaned out o' everythin'. Why, Tom D'Willerby----"

"Scuse me, sah," interrupted Matt, "but did you say De Willoughby?"

"I said D'Willerby," answered Mr. Stamps. "That's what he's called at the Cross-roads."

There he stopped and stared at Matt a moment.

"My young master's name's De Willoughby, sah," Matt said; "'n' de names soun's mighty simulous when dey's spoke quick. My young Marse, Rupert De Willoughby, he de gran'son er Jedge De Willoughby, an' de son an' heir er Cun'l De Courcy De Willoughby what died er yaller fever at Nashville."

"Well, I'm doggoned," the little man remarked, "I'd orter thought er thet. This yere's Delisleville, 'n' I reckerlect hearin' when fust he come to Hamlin thet he was some kin to some big bugs down ter

D'lisleville, 'n' his father was a Jedge--doggoned ef I didn't!"