

CHAPTER XIX

Rupert De Willoughby was lying upon the grass in the garden under the shade of a tree. The "office" had been stifling hot, and there had been even less to suggest any hope of possible professional business than the blankness of most days held. There never was any business, but at rare intervals someone dropped in and asked him a question or so, his answers to which, by the exercise of imagination, might be regarded as coming under the head of "advice." His clients had no money, however--nobody had any money; and his affairs were assuming a rather desperate aspect.

He had come home through the hot streets with his straw hat pushed back, the moist rings of his black hair lying on a forehead lined with a rather dark frown. He went into the garden and threw himself on the grass in the shade. He could be physically at ease there, at least. The old garden had always been a pleasure to him, and on a hot summer day it was full of sweet scents and sounds he was fond of. At this time there were tangles of honeysuckle and bushes heavy with mock-orange; an arbour near him was

covered by a multiflora rose, weighted with masses of its small, delicate blossoms; within a few feet of it a bed of mignonette grew, and the sun-warmed breathing of all these fragrant things was a luxurious accompaniment to the booming of the bees, blundering and buzzing in and out of their flowers, and the summer languid notes of the stray birds which lit on the branches and called to each other among the thick

leaves.

At twenty-three a man may be very young. Rupert was both young and old. His silent resentment of the shadow which he felt had always rested upon him, had become a morbid thing. It had led him to seclude himself from the gay little Delisville world and cut himself off from young friendships. After his mother--who had understood his temperament and his resentment--had died, nobody cared very much for him. The youth of Delisville was picturesque, pleasure-loving, and inconsequent. It had little parties at which it danced; it had little clubs which were vaguely musical or literary; and it had an ingenuous belief in the talents and graces displayed at these gatherings. The feminine members of these societies were sometimes wonderfully lovely. They were very young, and had soft eyes and soft Southern voices, and were the owners of the tiniest arched feet and the slenderest little, supple waists in the world. Until they were married--which usually happened very early--they were always being made love to and knew that this was what God had made them for--that they should dance a great deal, that they should have many flowers and bonbons laid at their small feet, that beautiful youths with sentimental tenor voices should serenade them with guitars on moonlight nights, which last charming thing led them to congratulate themselves on having been born in the South, as such romantic incidents were not a feature of life in New York and Boston. The masculine members were usually lithe and slim, and often of graceful height; they frequently possessed their share of good looks, danced and rode well, and could sing love songs. As it was the portion of their fair companions to be made

love to, it was theirs to make love. They often wrote verses, and they also were given to arched insteps and eyes with very perceptible fringes. For some singular reason, it seems that Southern blood tends to express itself in fine eyes and lashes.

But with this simply emotional and happy youth young De Willoughby had not amalgamated. Once he had gone to a dance, and his father the Colonel had appeared upon the scene as a spectator in a state of exaggeratedly graceful intoxication. He was in the condition when he was extremely gallant and paid flowery compliments to each pair of bright eyes he chanced to find himself near.

When he first caught sight of him, Rupert was waltzing with a lovely little creature who was a Vanuxem and was not unlike the Delia Tom De Willoughby had fallen hopelessly in love with. When he saw his father a flash of scarlet shot over the boy's face, and, passing, left him looking very black and white. His brow drew down into its frown, and he began to dance with less spirit. When the waltz was at an end, he led his partner to her seat and stood a moment silently before her, glancing under his black lashes at the Colonel, who had begun to quote Thomas Moore and was declaiming "The Young May Moon" to a pretty creature with a rather alarmed look in her uplifted eyes. It was the first dance at which she had appeared since she had left school.

Suddenly Rupert turned to his partner. He made her a bow; he was a graceful young fellow.

"Thank you, Miss Vanuxem. Thank you for the dance. Good-night. I am going home."

"Are you?" exclaimed little Miss Vanuxem. "But it is so early, Mr. De Willoughby."

"I have stayed just ten minutes too long now," said Rupert. "Thank you again, Miss Vanuxem. Good-night."

He walked across the room to Colonel De Willoughby.

"I am going home," he said, in a low, fierce voice; "you had better come with me."

"No sush thing," answered the Colonel, gaily. "On'y just come. Don't go to roosh with shickens. Just quoting Tom Moore to Miss Baxter.

Bes' of all ways to lengthen our days

Is to steal a few hours from the night, my dear."

The little beauty, who had turned with relieved delight to take the arm of a new partner, looked at her poetic admirer apologetically.

"Mr. Gaines has come for me, Colonel De Willoughby," she said; "I am

engaged to him for this dance." And she slipped away clinging almost tenderly to the arm of her enraptured escort, who felt himself suddenly transformed into something like a hero.

"Colonel De Willoughby is so flattering," she said; "and he has such a queer way of paying compliments. I'm almost frightened of him."

"I will see that he does not speak to you again," said her partner, with an air of magnificent courage. "He should not have been allowed to come in. You, of course, could not understand, but--the men who are here will protect the ladies who are their guests."

Rupert gave his father a long look and turned on his heel. He went home, and the next time the Terpsichorean Society invited him to a dance he declined to go.

"Nice fellow I am to go to such places," he said to himself. "Liable to bring a drunken lunatic down upon them at any minute. No, the devil take it all, I'm going to stay at home!"

He stayed at home, and gradually dropped out of the young, glowing, innocently frivolous and happy world altogether, and it carried on its festivities perfectly well without him. The selfishness of lovely youth is a guileless, joyous thing, and pathetic inasmuch as maturity realises the undue retribution which befalls it as it learns of life.

When poverty and loneliness fell upon him, the boy had no youthful ameliorations, even though he was so touchingly young. Occasionally some old friend of his grandfather's encountered him somewhere and gave him rather florid good advice; some kindly matron, perhaps, asked him to come and see her; but there was no one in the place who could do anything practical. Delisleville had never been a practical place, and now its day seemed utterly over. Its gentlemanly pretence at business had received blows too heavy to recover from until times had lapsed; in some of the streets tiny tufts of grass began to show themselves between the stones.

As he had walked back in the heat, Rupert had observed these tiny tufts of green with a new sense of their meaning. He was thinking of them as he lay upon the grass, the warm scent of the mock-orange blossoms and roses, mingled with honeysuckle in the air, the booming of the bees among the multiflora blooms was in his ears.

"What can I do?" he said to himself. "There is nothing to be done here. There never was much, and now there is nothing. I can't loaf about and starve. I won't beg from people, and if I would, I haven't a relation left who isn't a beggar himself--and there are few enough of them left."

He put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a well-worn greenback. He straightened out its creases cautiously and looked at it.

"I've got two dollars," he said, "and no prospect of getting any more. Even Matt can't make two dollars last long."

The latch of the side gate clicked and the gate opened. Presently Uncle Matt appeared round the rose-bushes. He had his market basket on his arm and wore a thoughtful countenance.

"Uncle Matt!" Rupert called out to him. "I wish you would come here."

Notwithstanding his darkling moods, he was in a subtle way singularly like Delia Vanuxem. He needed love and tenderness, and he was boy enough yet to be unhappy and desolate through lack of them, though without quite knowing why. He knew Uncle Matt loved him, and the affectionate care the old man surrounded him with was like a warm robe wrapped about a creature

suffering from chill. He had not analyzed his feeling himself; he only knew that he liked to hear his footsteps as he pattered about the house, and when he was at his dreariest, he was glad to see him come in, and to talk a little to him.

Uncle Matt came towards him briskly. He set his basket down and took off his hat.

"Marse Rupert," he said, "dis hyer's a pow'fle scorcher of a mawnin'. Dem young lawyers as shets up dey office an' comes home to lie in de grass in de shade, dey is follerin' up dey perfession in de profitablest way--what'll be likely to bring 'em de mos' clients, 'cause, sho's yo' bawn, dere's sunstroke an' 'cussion or de brain just lopin' roun' dis

town--en a little hot brick office ain't no place for a young man what got any dispect fur his next birfday. Dat's so."

"I haven't much respect for mine," said Rupert; "I've had twenty-two too many--just twenty-two."

"'Scusin' me sayin' it, sah, but dat ain't no way ter talk. A man boun' to have some dispect for his birfday--he boun' to! Birfdays gotter be took keer on. Whar's a man when he runs out of 'em?"

"He'd better run out of them before he runs out of everything else," said Rupert. "Matt, I've just made two dollars this month."

He looked at the old man with a restless appeal in his big, deer-like eyes.

"I'm very sorry, Matt," he said, "I'm terribly sorry, but you know--we can't go on."

Uncle Matthew looked down at the grass with a reflective air.

"Marse Rupert, did you never heah nothin' 'bout your Uncle Marse Thomas De Willoughby?"

Rupert was silent a moment before he answered, but it was not because he required time to search his memory.

"Yes," he said, and then was silent again. He had heard of poor Tom of the big heart from his mother, and there had been that in her soft speech of him which had made the great, tender creature very real. Even in his childhood his mother had been his passion, as he had been hers. Neither of them had had others to share their affection, and they were by nature creatures born to love. His first memory had been of looking up into the soft darkness of the tender eyes which were always brooding over him. He had been little more than a baby when he had somehow known that they were

very sorrowful, and had realised that he loved them more because of their sorrow. He had been little older when he found out the reason of their sadness, and from that time he had fallen into the habit of watching them, and knowing their every look. He always remembered the look they wore when she spoke of Tom De Willoughby, and it had been a very touching one.

"Yes," he said to Uncle Matt, "I have heard of him."

"Dar was a time, a long way back, Marse Rupert--'fore you was borned--when I seemed to year a good deal 'bout Marse Thomas. Dat was when he went away in dat curi's fashion. Nobody knowed whar he went, an' nobody knowed quite why. It wus jes' afore ye' maw an' paw wus married. Some said him an' de Jedge qua'lled 'cause Marse Thomas he said he warn't gwine ter be no medical student, an' some said he was in love with some young lady dat wouldn't 'cept of him."

"Did they?" said Rupert.

"Dat dey did," Matt said; "an' a lot moah. But ev'rybody think it mighty strange him a-gwine, an' no one never huntin' him up afterwards. Seemed most like dey didn't keer nothin' 'bout him."

"They didn't, damn them!" said Rupert, with sudden passion. "And he was worth the whole lot."

"Dat what make I say what I gwine ter," said Matt, with some eagerness.

"What I heerd about Marse Thomas make me think he must be er mighty fine

gen'leman, an' one what'd be a good fren' to anyone. An' dishyer ve'y mawnin' I heerd sump'n mo' about him."

Rupert raised himself upon his elbow.

"About Uncle Tom!" he exclaimed. "You have heard something about Uncle Tom to-day?"

"I foun' out whar he went, Marse Rupert," said Matt, much roused. "I foun' out whar he is dishyer ve'y instep. He's in Hamlin County, keepin' sto' an' post-office at Talbot's Cross-roads; an', frum what I heah, Marse Tom De Willoughby de mos' pop'larist gen'leman an' mos' looked up ter in de county."

"Who--who did you hear it from?" demanded Rupert.

Uncle Matt put his foot upon a rustic seat near and leaned forward, resting his elbow on his knee and making impressive gestures with his yellow-palmed old hand.

"It was dishyer claimin' dat brung it about," he said; "dishyer claimin' an' 'demnification what's been a-settin' pow'fle heavy on my min' fur long 'nuff. Soon's I yeerd tell on it, Marse Rupert, it set me ter steddysin'. I been a-watchin' out an' axin' questions fur weeks, an' when I fin' out----"

"But what has that to do with Uncle Tom?" cried Rupert.

"A heap, Marse Rupert. Him an' you de onliest heirs to de De Willoughby estate; an' ef a little hoosier what's los' a yoke er oxen kin come down on de Guv'ment for 'demnification, why can't de heirs of a gen'leman dat los' what wus gwine ter be de biggest fortune in de South'n States. What's come er dem gold mines, Marse Rupert, dat wus gwine ter make yo' grandpa a millionaire--whar is dey? What de Yankees done with dem gol' mines?"

"They weren't gold mines, Uncle Matt," said Rupert; "they were coal mines; and the Yankees didn't carry them away. They only smashed up the machinery and ruined things generally."

But he laid back upon the grass again with his hands clasped behind his head and his brow drawn down thoughtfully.

"Coal mines er gol' mines," said Uncle Matt. "Guv'ment gotter 'demnify ef things er managed right; en dat what make me think er Marse Thomas De Willoughby when dat little Stamps feller said somep'n dat soun' like his name. 'Now dar's D'Willerby,' he ses, 'big Tom D'Willerby,' en I jest jumped on him. 'Did you say De Willoughby, sah?' I ses, an' from dat I foun' out de rest."

"I should like to see him," said Rupert; "I always thought I should like to know where he was--if he was alive."

"Why doan' you go an' see him, den?" said Matt. "Jest take yo' foot in yo' han' an' start out. Hamlin County ain't fur, Marse Rupert, an' de Cross-roads Pos'-office mighty easy to fin'; and when you fin' it an' yo' uncle settin' in de do', you jest talk ter him 'bout dem gol' mines an' dat claimin' business an' ax his devise 'bout 'em. An' ef yer doan' fin' yo'se'f marchin' on ter Wash'n'ton city an' a-talkin' to de Pres'dent an' de Senators, de whole kit an' bilin' of 'em, Marse Thomas ain't de buz'nness gen'l'man what I believe he is."

Rupert lay still and looked straight before him, apparently at a bluebird balanced on a twig, but it was not the bird he was thinking of.

"You'se young, Marse Rupert, an' it 'ud be purty dang'rous for a onexperienced young gen'l'man ter lan' down in de midst er all dem onprinciple' Yankees with a claim to hundreds of thousan's of dollars. Marse Thomas, he's a settled, stiddy gen'l'man, en, frum what I hears, I guess he's got a mighty 'stablished-lookin' 'pearance."

"I should like to see him," Rupert reflected aloud. "I should like to see him."