CHAPTER XX

The years had passed for the child Sheba so sweetly, and had been so full of simple joys and pleasures, that they seemed a panorama of lovely changing seasons, each a thing of delight. There was the spring, when she trotted by Tom's side into the garden and he showed her the little, pale-green points of the crocuses, hyacinths, and tulips pushing their way up through the moist brown earth, and when he carried her in his big arms into the woods on the hillsides, and they saw the dogwood covered with big white flowers and the wild plum-trees snowed over with delicate blooms, and found the blue violets thick among the wet grass and leaves, and the frail white wind-flowers quivering on their stems. As they went about in this new fairyland, which came every year, and which still seemed always a surprise, it was their habit to talk to each other a great deal. The confidences they had exchanged when the child had not been able to speak, and which Tom had nevertheless understood, were enchanting things when she became older and they strayed about together or sat by the fire. Her child thoughts and fancies might have been those of some little faun or dryad She grew up among green things, with leaves waving above and around her, the sun shining upon her, and the mountains seeming to stand on guard, looking down at her from day to day, from year to year. From behind one mountain the sun rose every morning, and she always saw it; and behind another it sank at night. After the spring came the summer, when the days were golden and drowsy and hot, and there were

roses and other flowers everywhere; wild roses in the woods and by the waysides, heavy-headed beauties in their own garden, and all the beds and vines a fine riot of colour. After these there were blackberries thick on their long brambles, and wild grapes in the woods, and presently a delicious snap of cold in the clear air night and morning, and the trees were dropping golden, amber, and scarlet leaves, while under the pale yellow ones which rustled beneath the chestnut-trees, there were brown, glossy nuts, which fell one by one with a delightful suddenness of sound at irregular intervals. There were big chestnut-trees in the woods near their house, and Tom and Sheba used to go before breakfast to look for the nuts which had fallen in the night. Hamlin County always rose at sunrise, or before it, and to go out in the heavenly fresh morning air and walk through the rustling, thickly fallen yellow leaves under the trees, making little darts of joy at the brown, glossy things bursting through their big burrs, was a delicious, exciting thing. Mornin's hot breakfast held keen delights when they returned to it.

When the big wood-fires were lighted and there was snow and rain outside, and yams and chestnuts to roast in the ashes, and stories to be told and talked over in the glow of the red birch-log and snapping, flaming hickory sticks, the child used to feel as if she and Uncle Tom were even nearer together and more comfortable than at any other time.

"Uncle Tom," she said to him, as she was standing in the circle of his arm on one such night, when she was about ten years old. "Uncle Tom, we do love each other in the winter, don't we?"

"Yes, we do, Sheba," answered Tom. "And we're pretty partial to each other even in the summer."

"We love each other at all the times," she said. "And every morning that I get up I love you more than I did when I went to bed--every morning, Uncle Tom."

Tom kissed her. He remembered what he had said one morning in the cabin in Blair's Hollow ten years before.

"Perhaps, if there's no one to come between us, she may be fond of me."

She was fond of him. He was her very little life itself. No one had ever come between--nothing ever could.

She had by that time shot up into a tall, slender slip of a girl-child. She was passing, even with a kind of distinction, through the stage of being all long, slim legs and big eyes. The slim legs were delicately modelled and the big eyes were like pools of gold-brown water, fringed with rushes.

"I never seen a young 'un at thet thar young colty age es was es han'some es thet child o' Big Tom's," Mis' Doty often remarked.

By the frequenters of the Cross-roads Post-office she was considered, as

was her protector, a county institution. When she had reached three years old, she had been measured against the wall, and each year her increase of inches was recorded amid lively demonstrations of interest. The smallness of her feet had also been registered, and the thickness and growth of her curling hair ranked as a subject of discussion only second in interest to the development of crops.

But this affection notwithstanding, a curious respect for her existed. She had played among them in the store in her little dusty pinafore; one and all of them had given her rustic offerings, bringing her special gifts of yellow popcorn ears, or abnormal yams unexpectedly developed in their own gardens, or bags of hickory nuts; but somehow they did not think or speak of her as they did of each other's children.

Tom had built a comfortable white house, over whose verandah honeysuckles and roses soon clambered and hung. In time the ground enclosed about it had a curious likeness to the bowery unrestraint of the garden he had played in during his childhood. It was a pleasure to him to lay it out on the old plan and to plant japonicas, flowering almonds, and syringa bushes, as they had grown in the days when he had played under them as a child, or lounged on the grass near them as a boy. He and Sheba planted everything themselves--or, rather, Sheba walked about with him or stood by his side and talked while he worked. In time she knew almost as well as he did the far-away garden he took as his model. She learned to know the place by heart.

"Were you a little boy then, Uncle Tom?" she would say, "when there was a mock-orange and a crape myrtle next to the big yellow rose-bush?"

There were even times when he found her memory was better than his own, and she could correct him.

"Ah! no, Uncle Tom," she would say; "the pansies were not in the little heart-shaped bed; they were all round the one with the pink harp-flower in the middle."

When she was six years old he sent for some books and began seriously to work with a view to refreshing his memory on subjects almost forgotten.

"I'm preparing myself for a nursery governess, Sheba," he said. "What we want is a nursery governess, and I don't know where to find one. I shouldn't know how to manage her if I did find her, so I've got to post up for the position myself."

The child was so happy with him in all circumstances, that it was easy to teach her anything. She had learned to read and write before she discovered that the process she went through to acquire these accomplishments was not an agreeable pastime specially invented by Tom for her amusement. At eleven years old she had become so interested in her work that she was quite an excited little student. By the time she was twelve Tom began to shake his head at her.

"If you go on like this," he said, "I sha'n't be able to keep up with you, and what I've got to do is to keep ahead. If I can't, I shall have to send you to the Academy at Ralston; and how should we stand that?"

She came and sat upon his big knee--a slim little thing, as light as a bird.

"We couldn't stand it, Uncle Tom," she said. "We have to be together. We always have been, haven't we?" And she rubbed her ruffled head against his huge breast.

"Yes, we always have been," answered Tom; "and it would go pretty hard with us to make a change, Sheba."

She was not sent to Ralston. The war broke out and altered the aspect of things even at the Cross-roads. The bank in which Tom's modest savings were deposited was swept away by misfortune; the primitive resources of Hamlin County were depleted, as the resources of all the land were. But for the existence of the white, vine-embowered house and the garden full of scents and bloom, Tom's position at the close of the rebellion was far less fortunate than it had been at the time the mystery of Blair's Hollow had occurred. In those old, happy-go-lucky days the three rooms behind the store and the three meals Mornin cooked for him had been quite sufficient for free and easy peace. He had been able to ensure himself these primitive comforts with so little expenditure that money had

scarcely seemed an object. He had taken eggs in exchange for sugar, bacon in exchange for tea, and butter in exchange for everything. Now he had no means of resource but the store, and the people were poorer than they had been. Farms had gone to temporary ruin through unavoidable neglect during
the absence of their masters. More than one honest fellow had marched away and never returned, and their widows were left to struggle with the land and their children. The Cross-roads store, which had thriven so wonderfully for a year or two before the breaking out of the war, began to wear a less cheerful aspect. As far as he himself was concerned, Tom knew that life was a simple enough thing, but by his side there was growing up a young goddess. She was not aware that she was a young goddess. There was no one in the vicinity of the Cross-roads who could have informed her that she presented somewhat of that aspect, and that she was youth and happiness and Nature's self at once.

Tom continually indulged in deep reflection on his charge after she was twelve years old. She shot up into the tall suppleness of a lovely young birch, and she was a sweetly glowing thing. A baby had been a different matter; the baby had not been so difficult to manage; but when he found himself day by day confronting the sweetness of child-womanhood in the eyes that were gold-brown pools, and the softening grace of the fair young body, he began to be conscious of something like alarm. He was not at all sure what he ought to do at this crisis, and whether life confining its experiences entirely to Talbot's Cross-roads was all that was required.

"I don't know whether it's right, by thunder," he said. "I don't know whether it's right; and that's what a man who's taken the place of a young mother ought to know."

There came a Sunday when one of the occasional "preachings" was to be held at the log-cabin church a few miles distant, and they were going together, as they always did.

It was a heavenly, warm spring morning, and Sheba, having made herself ready, wandered into the garden to wait among the flowers. The rapturous first scents of the year were there, drawn by the sun and blown by vagrant puffs of wind from hyacinths and jonquils, white narcissus and blue violets. Sheba walked among the beds, every few minutes kneeling down upon the grass to bury her face in pink and yellow and white clusters, inhaling the breath of flowers and the pungent freshness of the sweet brown earth at the same time. She had lived among leaves and growing things until she felt herself in some unexplainable way a part of the world they belonged to. The world beyond the mountains she knew nothing of; but this world, which was the brown earth springing forth into green blades and leaves and little streaked buds, warming into bloom and sun-drenched fragrance, setting the birds singing and nest-building, giving fruits and grain, and yellow and scarlet leaves, and folding itself later in snow and winter sleep--this world she knew as well as she knew herself. The birds were singing and nest-building this morning, and, as she hung over a bed of purple and white hyacinths, kneeling on the

grass and getting as close to them as she could, their perfume mounted to
her brain and she began to kiss them.

"I love you," she said, dwelling on their sweet coolness with her lips;
"I love and love you!" And suddenly she made a little swoop and kissed
the brown earth itself. "And, oh! I love you, too!" she said. "I love
you, too!"

She looked like young spring's self when she stood up as Tom came towards
her. Her smile was so radiant a thing that he felt his heart quake with
no other reason than this sight of her happy youth.

"What are you thinking of, Sheba?" he asked.

"I am thinking," she said, as she glanced all about her, the smile
growing more entrancing, "I am thinking how happy I am, and how happy the
world is, and how I love you, and," with a pretty laugh, "the flowers,
and the sun, and the earth--and everything in the world!"

"Yes," said Tom, looking at her tenderly. "It's the spring, Sheba."

She caught his arm and clung to it, laughing again.

"Yes," she answered; "and when it isn't the spring, it is the summer; and
when it isn't the summer, it is the autumn; and when it isn't the autumn,

it is the winter; and we sit by the fire and know the spring is making its way back every day. Everything is beautiful--everything is happy, Uncle Tom."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Tom.

"Why do you say that?" Sheba asked. "Why do you look so--so puzzled, Uncle Tom?"

"Well," said Tom, holding her out at arm's length before him, "the truth is, I've suddenly realised something. I'd like to know what I'm to do with this!"

"This?" laughed Sheba. "Am I 'this'? You look at me as if I was 'this'."

"You are," Tom answered, ruefully. "Here you suddenly change to a young woman on a man's hands. Now, what am I to do with a grown-up young woman?
I'm used to babies, and teething, and swallowing kangaroos out of Noah's arks--and I know something of measles and letting tucks out of frocks; but when it comes to a beautiful young woman, there you have me!"

He shook his head as he ended, and, though his face wore the affectionate, humorous smile which had never failed her, there was a new element in its kindness which, it must be confessed, bordered on bewilderment.

"A beautiful, grown-up young woman," he said, glancing reflectively over her soft, swaying slimness, her white frock with its purple ribbon and golden jonquils, and up to her tender cheek.

Sheba blushed with sweet delight.

"Am I beautiful, Uncle Tom?" she inquired, with a lovely anxiousness in her eyes.

"Yes, you are," admitted Tom; "and it isn't a drawback to you, Sheba, but it's likely to make trouble for me."

"But why?" she said.

"In novels, and poetry, and sometimes in real life, beautiful young women are fallen in love with, and then trouble is liable to begin," explained Tom with amiable gravity.

"There is no one to fall in love with me at the Cross-roads," said Sheba, sweetly. "I wish there was."

"Good Lord," exclaimed Tom, devoutly. "Come along to church, Sheba, and let's go in for fasting and prayer."

He took her to the "preaching" in the log cabin and noticed the effect of

her entry on the congregation as they went in. There were a number of more or less awkward and raw-boned young male creatures whose lives were spent chiefly in cornfields and potato patches. They were uncomely hewers of wood and drawers of water, but they turned their heads to look at her, and their eyes followed her as she went to her seat. When she had sat down, those who could catch glimpses of her involuntarily craned their necks and sat in discomfort until the sermon was over. Tom recognised this fact, and in secret reflected upon it in all its bearings.

"Yes," he found himself saying, mentally; "I'd like to know how I'm going to do my duty by this. I don't believe there's a derned thing about it in 'Advice to Young Mothers.'"

The day wore on to its lovely end, and lost itself in one of the sunsets which seem to flood the sky with a tide of ripples of melted gold, here and there tipped with flame. When this was over, a clear, fair moon hung lighted in the heavens, and, flooding with silver what had been flooded with gold, changed the flame-tips to pearl.

Sheba strayed in the garden among the flowers. Tom, sitting under the vines of the porch, watched her white figure straying in and out among the shrubbery. At last he saw her standing on the grass in the full radiance of the moonlight, her hands hanging clasped behind her and her face turned upward to the sky. As she had wandered about, she had done a fanciful thing. She had made a wreath of white narcissus and laid it on

her hair, and she had twisted together a sort of long garland of the same blossoms and cast it loosely round her waist.

"She never did that before," Tom said, as he watched her. "Good Lord! what a picture she is, standing there with her face lifted. I wonder what she's thinking of."

"Uncle Tom," she said, when she sauntered back to him, "does the moonlight make you feel sad without being unhappy at all? That is what it does to me."

"It's the spring, Sheba," he said, as he had said it in the morning; "it's the spring."

She saw that he was looking at her flower garlands, and she broke into a shy little laugh.

"You see what you have done to me, Uncle Tom," she said; "now you have told me I am a beautiful young woman, I shall always be doing things to--to make myself look prettier."

She came on to the verandah to him, and he held out his hand to her.

"That's the spring, too, Sheba," he said.

She yielded as happily and naturally to the enfolding of his big arm in

these days as she had done when she was a baby. No one but themselves knew what they were to each other.

They had always talked things over together--their affection, their pleasures, their simple anxieties and responsibilities. They had discussed her playthings in the first years of their friendship and her lessons when she had been a little girl. To-night the subject which began to occupy them had some seriousness of aspect. The changes time and the tide of war had made were bringing Tom face to face with a difficulty his hopeful, easy-going nature had never contemplated with any realising sense--the want of money, even the moderate amount the requirements of their simple lives made necessary.

"It's the taxes that a man can't stand up against," Tom said. "You may cut off all you like, and wear your old clothes, but there's a liveliness about taxes that takes the sand out of you. Talk about the green bay-tree flourishing and increasing, all a tax wants is to be let alone a few years. It'll come to its full growth without any sunning or watering. Mine have had to be left alone for a while, and--well, here we are--another year, and----"

"Will the house be taken?" Sheba asked.

"If I can't pay up, it'll all go--house and store and all," Tom answered. "Then we shall have to go too."

He turned and looked ruefully at the face beneath the wreath of white narcissus.

"I wish it hadn't come on us just now," he said. "There's no particular season that trouble adds a charm to; but it seems to me that it's not entitled to the spring."

When she went upstairs she did not go to bed. The moonlight lured her out into the night again. Outside her window there was a little balcony. It was only of painted wood, as the rest of the house was, but a multiflora rose had climbed over it and hung it with a wonderful drapery, and, as she stood upon it, she unconsciously made herself part of a picture almost strange in its dramatic quality.

She looked out over the sleeping land to the mountains standing guard.

"Where should we go?" she said. "The world is on the other side."

She was not in the mood to observe sound, or she would have heard the clear stroke of a horse's hoofs on the road. She did not even hear the opening of the garden gate. She was lost in the silver beauty of the night, and a vague dreaming which had fallen upon her. On the other side of the purple of the mountains was the world. It had always been there and she had always been here. Presently she found herself sighing aloud, though she could not have told why.

"Ah!" she said as softly as young Juliet. "Ah, me!"

As she could not have told why she sighed, so there was no explanation of the fact that, having done so, she looked downward to the garden path, as if something had drawn her eyes there. It is possible that some attraction had so drawn them, for she found herself looking into a young, upturned face--the dark, rather beautiful face of a youth who stood and looked upward as if he had stopped involuntarily at sight of her.

She drew back with a little start and then bent her Narcissus-crowned head forward.

"Who--who is it?" she exclaimed.

He started himself at the sound of her voice. She had indeed looked scarcely a real creature a few moments ago. He took off his hat and answered:

"I am Rupert De Willoughby," he said. "I beg pardon for disturbing you. It startled me to see you standing there. I came to see Mr. Thomas De Willoughby."

It was a singular situation. Perhaps the moonlight had something to do with it; perhaps the spring. They stood and looked at each other quite simply, as if they did not know that they were strangers. A young dryad and faun meeting on a hilltop or in a forest's depths by moonlight might

have looked at each other with just such clear, unstartled eyes, and with just such pleasure in each other's beauty. For, of a truth, each one was thinking the same thing, innocently and with a sudden gladness.

As he had come up the garden-path, Rupert had seen a vision and had stopped unconsciously that instant. And Sheba, looking down, had seen a vision too--a beautiful face as young as her own, and with eyes that glowed.

"You don't know what you looked like standing there," said Rupert, as simply as the young faun might have spoken. "It was as if you were a spirit. The flowers in your hair looked like great white stars."

"Did they?" she said, and stood and softly gazed at him.

How the boy looked up at her young loveliness! He had never so looked at any woman before. And then a thought detached itself from the mists of memory and he seemed to remember.

"Are you Sheba?" he asked.

"Yes, I am Sheba," she answered, rather slowly. "And I remember you, too. You are the boy."

He drew nearer to the balcony, laying his hand upon the multiflora rose creeper.

"Yes, yes," he said, almost tremulous with eagerness. "You bring it all back. You were a little child, and I----"

"You rode away," she said, "over the hill."

"Will you come down to me?" he said.

"Yes," she answered, and that moment disappeared.

He stood in the moonlight, his head bared, his straw hat in his hand. He felt as if he was in a dream. His face had lost its gloom and yearning, and his eyes looked like his mother's.

When he heard a light foot nearing him, he went forward, and they met with strange young smiles and took each other's hands. Nearer than the balcony, she was even a sweeter thing, and the scent of her white flowers floated about her.

As they stood so, smiling, Tom came and joined them. Sheba had called him as she passed his door.

Rupert turned round and spoke, vaguely conscious, as he did so, that his words sounded somewhat like words uttered in a dream and were not such as

he had planned.

"Uncle Tom," he said, "I--Delia Vanuxem was my mother."