

## CHAPTER XXI

The moment ceased to be so fanciful and curiously exalted when his hand was grasped and a big, kind palm laid on his shoulder, though Tom's face was full of emotion.

"I think I should have known it," he said. "Welcome to you. Yes," looking at him with an affection touched with something like reverence. "Yes, indeed--Delia Vanuxem!"

"I've come to you," the young fellow said, with fine simplicity, "because I am the only De Willoughby left except yourself. I am young and I'm lonely--and my mother always said you had the kindest heart she ever knew. I want you to advise me."

"Come in to the porch," said Tom, "and let us sit down and talk it over."

He put his arm about Sheba and kept his hand on Rupert's shoulder, and walked so, with one on either side, to the house. Between their youthful slimmness he moved like a protecting giant.

"Where did you come from?" he asked when they sat down.

"From Delisville," Rupert answered. "I did not think of coming here so late to-night, but it seems I must have missed my road. I was going to

ask for lodgings at a place called Willet's Farm. I suppose I took the wrong turning; and when I saw this house before me, I knew it must be yours from what I had heard of it. It seemed as if Fate had brought me here. And when I came up the path I saw Sheba. She was standing on the little verandah in the moonlight with the roses all around her; and she looked so white that I stopped to look up at her."

"Uncle Tom," said Sheba, "we--we knew each other."

"Did you?" said Tom. "That's right."

His middle-aged heart surprised him by giving one quick, soft beat. He smiled to himself after he had felt it.

"The first moment or so I only stood and looked," Rupert said; "I was startled."

"And so was I," said Sheba.

"But when she leaned forward and looked down on me," he went on, "I remembered something----"

"So did I," said Sheba. "I leaned forward like that and looked down at you from the porch at the tavern--all those years ago, when I was a little child."

"And I looked up at you--and afterwards I asked about you," said Rupert.

"It all came back when you spoke to-night, and I knew you must be Sheba."

"You knew my name, but I did not know yours," said Sheba. "But, after all," rather as if consoling herself, "Sheba is not my real name. I have another one."

"What is it?" asked the young fellow, quite eagerly. His eyes had scarcely left her face an instant. She was standing by Tom's chair and her hands were on his shoulders.

"It is Felicia," she said. "Uncle Tom gave it to me--because he wanted me to be happy." And she curved a slim arm round Tom's neck and kissed him.

It was the simplest, prettiest thing a man could have seen. Her life had left her nature as pure and translucent as the clearest brook. She had had no one to compare herself with or to be made ashamed or timid by. She knew only her own heart and Tom's love, and she smiled as radiantly into the lighting face before her as she would have smiled at a rose, or at a young deer she had met in the woods. No one had ever looked at her in this way before, but being herself a thing which had grown like a flower, she felt no shyness, and was only glad. Eve might have smiled at Adam so in their first hours.

Big Tom, sitting between them, saw it all. A man cannot live a score of years and more, utterly cut off from the life of the world, without

having many a long hour for thought in which he will inevitably find himself turning over the problems which fill the life he has missed. Tom De Willoughby had had many of them. He had had no one to talk to whose mind could have worked with his own. On winter nights, when Sheba had been asleep, he had found himself gazing into the red embers of his wood fire and pondering on the existence he might have led if fate had been good to him.

"There must be happiness on the earth somewhere," he would say.

"Somewhere there ought to have been a woman I belonged to, and who belonged to me. It ought all to have been as much nature as the rain falling and the corn ripening in the sun. If we had met when we were young things--on the very brink of it all--and smiled into each other's eyes and taken each other's hands, and kissed each other's lips, we might have ripened together like the corn. What is it that's gone wrong?" All the warm normal affections of manhood, which might have remained undeveloped and been cast away, had been lavished on the child Sheba. She had represented his domestic circle.

"You mayn't know it, Sheba," he had said once to her, "but you're a pretty numerous young person. You're a man's wife and family, and mother and sisters, and at least half a dozen boys and girls."

All his thoughts had concentrated themselves upon her--all his psychological problems had held her as their centre, all his ethical reasonings had applied themselves to her.

"She's got to be happy," he said to himself, "and she's got to be strong enough to stand up under unhappiness, if--if I should be taken away from her. When the great thing that's--that's the meaning of it all--and the reason of it--comes into her life, it ought to come as naturally as summer does. If her poor child of a mother--Good Lord! Good Lord!"

And here he sat in the moonlight, and Delia Vanuxem's son was looking at her with ardent, awakened young eyes.

How she listened as Rupert told his story, and how sweetly she was moved by the pathos of it. Once or twice she made an involuntary movement forward, as if she was drawn towards him, and uttered a lovely low exclamation which was a little like the broken coo of a dove. Rupert did not know that there was pathos in his relation. He made only a simple picture of things, but as he went on Tom saw all the effect of the hot little town left ruined and apathetic after the struggle of war, the desolateness of the big house empty but for its three rooms, its bare floors echoing to the sound of the lonely pair of feet, the garden grown into a neglected jungle, the slatternly negro girl in the kitchen singing wild camp-meeting hymns as she went about her careless work.

"It sounds so lonely," Sheba said, with tender mournfulness.

"That was what it was--lonely," Rupert answered. "It's been a different place since Matt came, but it has always been lonely. Uncle Tom," putting

his hand on the big knee near him, as impulsively as a child, "I love that old Matt--I love him!"

"Ah, so do I!" burst forth Sheba. "Don't you, Uncle Tom?" And she put her hand on the other knee.

Rupert looked down at the hand. It was so fair and soft and full of the expression of sympathy--such an adorably womanly little hand, that one's first impulse was to lay one's own upon it. He made a movement and then remembered, and looked up, and their eyes met and rested on each other gently.

When the subject of the claim was broached, Sheba thought it like a fairy tale. She listened almost with bated breath. As Rupert had not realised that he was pathetic in the relation of the first part of his story, so he did not know that he was picturesque in this. But his material had strong colour. The old man on the brink of splendid fortune, the strange, unforeseen national disaster sweeping all before it and leaving only poverty and ruin, the untouched wealth of the mines lying beneath the earth on which battles had been fought--all the possibilities the future might hold for one penniless boy--these things were full of suggestion and excitement.

"You would be rich," said Sheba.

"So would Uncle Tom," Rupert answered, smiling; "and you, too."

Tom had been listening with a reflective look on his face. He tilted his chair back and ran his hand through his hair.

"At all events, we couldn't lose money if we didn't gain any," he said.

"That's where we're safe. When a man's got to the place where he hasn't anything to lose, he can afford to take chances. Perhaps it's worth thinking over. Let's go to bed, children. It's midnight."

When they said good-night to each other, the two young hands clung together kindly and Sheba looked up with sympathetic eyes.

"Would you like to be very rich?" she asked.

"To-night I am rich," he answered. "That is because you and Uncle Tom have made me feel as if I belonged to someone. It is so long since I have seemed to belong to anyone."

"But now you belong to us," said Sheba.

He stood silently looking down at her a moment.

"Your eyes look just as they did when you were a little child," he said.

He lifted her hand and pressed his warm young lips to it.