CHAPTER XXII

He awoke the next morning with a glow in his heart which should not be new to youth, but was new to him. He remembered feeling something rather like it years before when he had been a little boy and had wakened on the morning of his birthday and found his mother kissing him and his bed strewn with gifts.

He went downstairs and, strolling on to the porch, saw Sheba in the garden. As he went to join her, he found himself in the midst of familiar paths and growths.

"Why," he exclaimed, stopping before her, "it is the old garden!"

"Yes," Sheba answered; "Uncle Tom made it like this because he loved the other one. You and I have played in the same garden. Good-morning," laughing.

"Good-morning," he said. "It is a good-morning. I--somehow I have been thinking that when I woke I felt as I used to do when I was a child and woke on my birthday."

That morning she showed him her domain. To the imaginative boy she led with her, she seemed like a strange young princess, to whom all the land belonged. She loved it so and knew so well all it yielded. She showed him

the cool woods where she always found the first spring flowers, the chestnut and walnut trees where she and Tom gathered their winter supply of nuts, the places where the wild grapes grew thickest, and those where the ground was purple-carpeted with violets.

They wandered on together until they reached a hollow in the road, on one side of which a pine wood sloped up a hillside, looking dark and cool.

"I come here very often," she said, quite simply. "My mother is here."

Then he saw that a little distance above the road a deserted log cabin stood, and not far from it two or three pine trees had been cut down so that the sun could shine on a mound over and about which flowers grew. It was like a little garden in the midst of the silent wildness.

He followed her to the pretty spot, and she knelt down by it and removed a leaf or a dead flower here and there. The little mound was a snowy mass of white blossoms standing thick together, and for a yard or so about the earth was starred with the same flowers.

"You see," she said, "Uncle Tom and I plant new flowers for every month. Everything is always white. Sometimes it is all lilies of the valley or white hyacinths, and then it is white roses, and in the autumn white chrysanthemums. Uncle Tom thought of it when I was a little child, and we have done it together ever since. We think she knows."

She stopped, and, still kneeling, looked at him as if suddenly remembering something.

"You have not heard," she said; "she died when I was born, and we do not even know her name."

"Not her name!" Rupert said; but the truth was that he had heard more of the story than she had.

"My father was so stunned with grief, that Uncle Tom said he seemed to think of nothing but that he could not bear to stay. He went away the very night they laid her here. I suppose," she said slowly, and looking at the mass of white narcissus instead of at him, "I suppose when people love each other, and one dies, the other cannot--cannot----"

Rupert saw that she was unconsciously trying to explain something to herself, and he interposed between her and her thoughts with a hurried effort.

"Yes, yes," he said; "it must be so. When they love each other and one is taken, how can the other bear it?"

Then she lifted her eyes from the flowers to his again, and they looked very large and bright.

"You see," she said, in an unsteady little voice, "I had only been alive

a few hours when he went away."

Suddenly the brightness in her eyes welled up and fell in two large crystal drops, though a smile quivered on her lips.

"Don't tell Uncle Tom," she said; "I never let him know that it--it hurts my feelings when I think I had only been alive such a few hours--and there was nobody to care. I must have been so little. If--if there had been no Uncle Tom----"

He knelt down by her side and took her hand in his.

"But there was," he said; "there was!"

"Yes," she answered, her sweet face trembling with emotion; "and, oh! I love him so! I love him so!"

She put her free hand on the earth among the white flowers on the mound.

"And I love her, too," she said; "somehow I know she would not have forgotten me."

"No, no, she would not!" Rupert cried; and they knelt together, hand in hand, looking into each other's eyes as tenderly as children.

"I have been lonelier than you," he said; "I have had nobody."

"Your mother died, too, when you were very young?"

"Yes, Sheba," hesitating a moment. "I will tell you something."

"Yes?"

"Uncle Tom loved her. He left his home partly because he could not stay and see her marry a man who--did not deserve her."

"Did she marry someone like that?" she asked.

His forehead flushed.

"She married my father," he said, "and he was a drunken maniac and broke her heart. I saw it break. When I first remember her, she was a lovely young girl with eyes like a gazelle's--and she cried all their beauty away, and grew tired and old and haggard before I was twelve. He is dead, but I hate him!"

"Oh!" she said; "you have been lonely!"

"I have been something worse than that!" he answered, and the gloom came back to his face. "I have been afraid."

"Afraid!" said Sheba. "Of what?"

"That I might end like him. How do I know? It is in my blood."

"Oh, no!" she cried.

"We have nearly all been like that," he said. "He was the maddest of them all, but he was only like many of the others. We grow tall, we De Willoughbys, we have black eyes, we drink and we make ourselves insane with morphine. It's a ghastly thing to think of," he shuddered. "When I am lonely, I think of it night and day."

"You must not," she said. "I--I will help you to forget it."

"I have often wondered if there was anyone who could," he answered. "I think perhaps you might."

When they returned to the Cross-roads there were several customers loitering on the post-office porch, awaiting their arrival, and endeavouring to wear an air of concealing no object whatever. The uneventful lives they led year after year made men and women alike avid for anything of the nature of news or incident. In some mysterious way the air itself seemed to communicate to them anything of interest which might be impending. Big Tom had not felt inclined to be diffuse on the subject of the arrival of his nephew, but each customer who brought in a pail of butter or eggs, a roll of jeans or a pair of chickens, seemed to become enlightened at once as to the position of affairs.

"Ye see," Tom heard Doty confiding to a friend as they sat together outside a window of the store; "ye see, it's this way--the D'Willerbys was born 'ristycrats. I dunno as ye'd think it to look at Tom. Thar's a heap to Tom, but he ain't my idee of a 'ristycrat. My idee is thet mebbe he let out from D'lisleville kase he warn't 'ristycratic enough fur 'em. Thar wus a heap of property in the family, 'pears like. An' now the hull lot of 'em's dead 'cept this yere boy that come last night. Stamps hes seen him in D'lisleville, an' he says he's a-stavin' lookin' young feller, an' thet thar's somethin' about a claim on the Guv'ment thet ef Tom an' him don't foller up, they're blamed fools. Now Tom, he ain't no blamed fool. Fur not bein' a blamed fool, I'll back Tom agin any man in Hamlin."

So, when the two young figures were seen sauntering along the road towards the store, there were lookers-on enough to regard them with interest.

"Now he's my idee of a 'ristycrat," remarked Mr. Doty, with the manner of a connoisseur. "Kinder tall an' slim, an' high-sperrity lookin'; Sheby's a gal, but she's got it too--thet thar sorter racehorse look. Now, hain't she?"

"I want you to see the store and the people in it," Sheba was saying. "It's my home, you know. Uncle Tom took me there the day after I was born. I used to play on the floor behind the counter and near the stove,

and all those men are my friends."

Rupert had never before liked anything so much as he liked the simple lovingness of this life of hers. As she knew the mountains, the flowers, and the trees, she knew and seemed known by the very cows and horses and people she saw.

"That's John Hutton's old gray horse," she had said as she caught sight of one rider in the distance. "That is Billy Neil's yoke of oxen," at another time. "Good-morning, Mrs. Stebbins," she called out, with the prettiest possible cheer, to a woman in an orange cotton skirt as she passed on the road. "It seems to me sometimes," she said to Rupert, "as if I belonged to a family that was scattered over miles and lived in scores of houses. They all used to tell Uncle Tom what would disagree with me when I was cutting my teeth."

They mounted the steps of the porch, laughing the light, easy laugh of youth, and the loiterers regarded them with undisguised interest and admiration. In her pink cotton frock, and blooming like a rose in the shade of her frilled pink sunbonnet, Sheba was fair to see. Rupert presented an aspect which was admirably contrasting. His cool pallor and dense darkness of eyes and hair seemed a delightful background to her young tints of bloom.

"Thet thar white linen suit o' his'n," Mr. Doty said, "might hev been put

on a-purpose to kinder set off her looks as well as his'n."

It was to Mr. Doty Sheba went first.

"Jake," she said, "this is my cousin Mr. Rupert De Willoughby from Delisleville."

"Mighty glad to be made 'quainted, sir," said Jake. "Tom's mightily sot up at yer comin'."

They all crowded about him and went through the same ceremony. It could scarcely be called a ceremony, it was such a simple and actually affectionate performance. It was so plain that his young good looks and friendly grace of manner reached their hearts at once, and that they were glad that he had come.

"They are glad you have come," Sheba said afterwards. "You are from the world over there, you know," waving her hand towards the blue of the mountains. "We are all glad when we see anything from the outside."

"Would you like to go there?" Rupert asked.

"Yes," she answered, with a little nod of her head. "If Uncle Tom will go--and you."

They spent almost an hour in the store holding a sort of levée. Every

newcomer bade the young fellow welcome and seemed to accept him as a sort

of boon.

"He's a mighty good-lookin' young feller," they all said, and the women added: "Them black eyes o' his'n an' the way his hair kinks is mighty purty."

"Their feelings will be hurt if you don't stay a little," said Sheba. "They want to look at you. You don't mind it, do you?"

"No," he answered, laughing; "it delights me. No one ever wanted to look at me before. But I should hardly think they would want to look at me when they might look at you instead."

"They have looked at me for eighteen years," she answered. "They looked at me when I had the measles, and saw me turn purple when I had the whooping-cough."

As they were going away, they passed a little man who had just arrived and was hitching to the horse-rail a raw-boned "clay-bank" mare. He looked up as they neared him and smiled peacefully.

"Howdy?" he said to Rupert. "Ye hain't seen me afore, but I seen you when I was to Delisleville. It wuz me as told yer nigger ye'd be a fool if ye didn't get Tom ter help yer to look up thet thar claim. Ye showed horse

sense by comin'. Wish ye luck."

"Uncle Tom," said Sheba, as they sat at their dinner and Mornin walked backwards and forwards from the kitchen stove to the dining-room with chicken fried in cream, hot biscuits, and baked yams, "we saw Mr. Stamps and he wished us luck."

"He has a claim himself, hasn't he?" said Rupert. "He told Matt it was for a yoke of oxen."

Tom broke into a melodious roar of laughter.

"Well," he said, "if we can do as well by ours as Stamps will do by his, we shall be in luck. That yoke of oxen has grown from a small beginning. If it thrives as it goes on, the Government's in for a big thing."

"It has grown from a calf," said Sheba, "and it wasn't six weeks old."

"A Government mule kicked it and broke its leg," said Tom. "Stamps made veal of it, and in two months it was 'Thet heifer o' mine'--in six months it was a young steer----"

"Now it's a yoke of oxen," said Rupert; "and they were the pride of the county."

"Lord! Lord!" said Tom, "the United States has got something to

engineer."