

CHAPTER XXIII

It was doubtless Stamps who explained the value of the De Willoughby claim to the Cross-roads. Excited interest in it mounted to fever heat in a few days. The hitching rail was put to such active use that the horses shouldered each other and occasionally bit and kicked and enlivened the air with squeals. No one who had an opportunity neglected to appear at the post-office, that he or she might hear the news. Judge De Willoughby's wealth and possessions increased each time they were mentioned. The old De Willoughby place became a sort of princely domain, the good looks of the Judge's sons and daughters and the splendour of their gifts were spoken of almost with bated breath. The coal mines became gold mines, the money invested in them something scarcely to be calculated. The Government at Washington, it was even inferred, had not money enough in its treasury to refund what had been lost and indemnify for the injury done.

"And to think o' Tom settin' gassin' yere with us fellers," they said, admiringly, "jest same es if he warn't nothin'. A-settin' in his shirt sleeves an' tradin' fer eggs an' butter. Why, ef he puts thet thar claim through, he kin buy up Hamlin."

"I'd like ter see the way he'd fix up Sheby," said Mis' Doty. "He'd hev her dressed in silks an' satins--an' diamond earrings soon as look."

"Ye'll hev to go ter Washin'ton City sure enough, Tom," was the remark made oftenest. "When do ye 'low to start?"

But Tom was not as intoxicated by the prospect as the rest of them. His demeanour was thoughtful and unexhilarated.

"Whar do ye 'low to build yer house when ye come into yer money, Tom?" he was asked, gravely. "Shall ye hev a cupoly? Whar'll ye buy yer land?"

The instinct of Hamlin County tended towards expressing any sense of opulence by increasing the size of the house it lived in, or by building a new one, and invariably by purchasing land. Nobody had ever become rich in the neighbourhood, but no imagination would have found it possible to extend its efforts beyond a certain distance from the Cross-roads. The point of view was wholly primitive and patriarchal.

Big Tom was conscious that he had become primitive and patriarchal also, though the truth was that he had always been primitive.

As he sat on the embowered porch of his house in the evening and thought things over, while the two young voices murmured near him, his reflections were not greatly joyful. The years he had spent closed in by the mountains and surrounded by his simple neighbours had been full of peace. Since Sheba had belonged to him they had even held more than peace. The end had been that the lonely unhappiness of his youth had seemed a thing so far away that it was rather like a dream. Only Delia

Vanuxem was not quite like a dream. Her pitying girlish face and the liquid darkness of her uplifted eyes always came back to him clearly when he called them up in thought. He called them up often during these days in which he was pondering as to what it was best to decide to do.

"It's the boy who brings her back so," he told himself. "Good Lord, how near she seems! The grass has been growing over her for many a year, and I'm an old fellow, but she looks just as she did then."

The world beyond the mountains did not allure him. It was easier to sit and see the sun rise and set within the purple boundary than to face life where it was less simple, and perhaps less kindly. It was from a much less advanced and concentrated civilisation he had fled in his youth, and the years which had passed had not made him more fitted to combat with what was more complex.

"Trading for butter and eggs over the counter of a country store, and discussing Doty's corn crop and Hayworth's pigs hasn't done anything particular towards fitting me to shine in society," he said. "It suits me well enough, but it's not what's wanted at a ball or a cabinet minister's reception." And he shook his head. "I'd rather stay where I am--a darned sight."

But the murmuring voices went on near him, and little bursts of laughter rang out, or two figures wandered about the garden, and his thoughts always came back to one point--a point where the sun seemed to shine on

things and surround them with a dazzling radiance.

"Yes, it's all very well for me," he concluded more than once. "It's well enough for me to sit down and spend the rest of my life looking at the mountains and watching summer change into winter; but they are only beginning it all--just beginning."

So one night he left his chair and went out and walked between them in the moonlight, a hand resting on a shoulder of each.

"See," he said, "I want you two to help me to make up my mind."

"About going away?" asked Rupert, looking round at him quickly.

"Yes. Do you know we may have a pretty hard time? We've no money. We should have to live scant enough, and, unless we had luck, we might come back here worse off than we left."

"But we should have tried, and we should have been on the other side of the mountains," said Sheba.

"So we should," said Tom, reflectively. "And there's a good deal in seeing the other side of the mountains when people are young."

Sheba put her hand on his and looked at him with a glowing face.

"Uncle Tom," she said, "oh, let us go!"

"Uncle Tom," said Rupert, "I must go!"

The line showed itself between his black brows again, though it was not a frown. He put his hand in his pocket and held it out, open, with a solitary twenty-dollar bill lying in it.

"That's all I've got," he said, "and that's borrowed. If the claim is worth nothing, I must earn enough to pay it back. All right. We'll all three go," said Tom.

The next day he began to develop the plans he had been allowing to form vaguely as a background to his thoughts. They were not easy to carry out in the existing condition of general poverty. But at Lucasville, some forty miles distant, he was able to raise a mortgage on his land.

"If the worst comes to the worst," he said to Sheba, "after we have seen the other side of the mountains, do you think you could stand it to come back and live with me in the rooms behind the store?"

Sheba sat down upon his knee and put her arms round his neck, as she had

done when she was ten years old.

"I could live with you anywhere," she said. "The only thing I couldn't

stand would be to have to live away from you."

Tom laughed and kissed her. He laughed that he might smother a sigh.
Rupert was standing near and looking at her with the eyes that were so
like Delia Vanuxem's.