

CHAPTER XXVI

Naturally Judge Rutherford gravitated towards the little house near Dupont Circle. The first night he mounted the stairs and found himself in the small room confronting the primitive supper he had been invited to share with big Tom and his family, his honest countenance assumed a cheerfulness long a stranger to it.

The room looked such a simple, homely place, with its Virginia made carpet, its neat, scant furnishing, and its table set with the plain little meal. The Judge's homesick heart expanded within him.

He shook hands with Tom with fervour. Rupert he greeted with friendly affection. Sheba--on her entering the room with a plate of hot biscuits which she had been baking in Miss Burford's stove--he almost kissed.

"Now this is something like," he said. "I didn't know there was anything so like Barnesville in all Washington city. And there wasn't till you people brought it. I don't know what it is, but, by thunder, it does a man's heart good."

He sat down with the unconventional air of ease he wore in Barnesville when he established himself in one of Jenny's parlour chairs for the evening.

"Lord, Lord!" he said; "you're home folks, and you've got home ways, that's what it is. A month in one of these fashionable hotels would just about kill me. Having to order things written out on a card and eat 'em with a hundred folks looking on--there's no comfort in it. Give me a place where you can all sit up together round the table and smell the good hot coffee and biscuit cooking and the ham and chicken being fried in the kitchen."

Sheba had cooked the supper in Miss Burford's kitchen. Her hot biscuits and coffee were made after Mornin's most respected recipes, and her housewifely air was tenderly anxious.

"If it is not very good, Judge Rutherford," she said, standing shyly at the head of the table before she took her place, "it is because I am only learning."

"You have learned, Sheba," said the Judge, looking at the plate of light golden brown and cream white biscuit with the sensitive eye of a connoisseur. "That plate of biscuit is Barnesville and Sophrony all over."

Sheba blushed with joy.

"Oh, Uncle Tom," she said; "do you think it is? I should so like to remind him of Barnesville."

"Good Lord!" said the Judge. "Fact is, you've made me feel already as if Tom Scott might break out yelling in the back yard any minute."

After the supper was over and the table clear the party of four sat down to talk business and make plans. The entire inexperience of the claimants was an obstacle in their path, but Judge Rutherford, though not greatly wiser than themselves, had means of gaining information which would be of value. As he looked over the papers and learned the details of the story, the good fellow's interest mounted to excitement. He rubbed his head and grew flushed and bright of eye.

"By Jupiter, Tom!" he exclaimed, "I believe I can be of some use to you--I swear I believe I can. I haven't had much experience, but I've seen something of this claim business, and if I set my wits to work I can find out from other fellows who know more. I'll--" After a moment's reflection. "I'll have a talk with Farquhar to-morrow. That's what I'll do. Great Scott!" in a beaming outburst, "if I could push it through for you, how pleased Jenny would be."

When he went away Tom accompanied him downstairs. Sheba and Rupert followed them, and all three found themselves lured out into the moonlit night to saunter with him a few yards down the light avenue, talking still about their fairy story. The Judge himself was as fascinated by it as if he had been a child.

"Why, it's such a good story to tell," he expatiated; "and there must be

a great deal in that. I never heard a better story for gaining sympathy--that fine old Southern aristocrat standing by the Union in a red-hot secessionist town--actually persecuted on account of it. He was persecuted, wasn't he?" he enquired of Rupert.

"Well," Rupert answered, "everybody was furious at him, of course--all his friends. People who had known him all his life passed him in the street without speaking. He'd been very popular, and he felt it terribly. He never was the same man after it began. He was old, and his spirit gave way."

"Just so!" exclaimed the Judge, stopping upon the pavement, elated even to oratory by the picture presented. "Fine old Southern aristocrat--on the brink of magnificent fortune--property turned into money that he may realise it--war breaks out, ruins him--Spartan patriotism--one patriot in a town of rebels hated and condemned by everybody--but faithful to his country. Friends--old friends--refuse to recognise him. Fortune gone--friends lost--heart broken." He snatched Tom's big hand and shook it enthusiastically. "Tom!" he said; "I'd like to make a speech to the House about it myself. I believe they would listen to me. How set up Jenny would be--how set up she'd be."

He left them all in a glow of enthusiasm; they could see him gesticulating a little to himself as he walked down the avenue in the moonlight.

"That's just like him," said Tom; "he'd rather please Jenny than set the House of Representatives on fire. And he'd undertake the whole thing--work to give a man a fortune for mere neighbourliness. We were a neighbourly lot in Hamlin, after all."

The Judge went home to his boarding-house and sat late in his shabby armchair, his legs stretched out, his hands clasped on the top of his rough head. He was thinking the thing out, and as he thought it out his excitement grew. Sometimes he unclasped his hands and rubbed his hair with restless sigh; more than once he unconsciously sprang to his feet, walked across the floor two or three times, and then sat down again. He was not a sharp schemer, he had not even reached the stage of sophistication which would have suggested to him that sharp scheming might be a necessary adjunct in the engineering of such matters as Government claims. From any power or tendency to diplomatise he was as free as the illustrative bull in a china shop. His bucolic trust in the simple justice and honest disinterestedness of the political representatives of his native land (it being granted they were of the Republican party) might have appeared a touching thing to a more astute and experienced person who had realised it to its limits. When he rubbed his hair excitedly or sprang up to walk about, these manifestations were indications, not of doubt or distrust, but of elated motion. It was the emotional aspect of the situation which delighted and disturbed him, the dramatic picturesqueness of it. Here was Tom--good old Tom--all Hamlin knew Tom and his virtues and witticisms--Lord! there wasn't a man in the county who didn't love him--yes, love him. And here was Sheba that Tom

had been a father to. And what a handsome little creature she'd grown into--and, but for Tom, the Lord knew what would have become of her. And there was that story of the De Willoughbys of Delisleville--handsome, aristocratic lot, among the biggest bugs in the State--the fine old Judge with his thousands of acres lying uncultivated, and he paying his taxes on them through sheer patriarchal pleasure in being a big landowner. For years the Government had benefited by his tax-paying, while he had gained nothing. And then there was the accidental discovery of the splendid wealth hidden in the bowels of the earth--and the old aristocrat's energy and enterprise. Why, if the war had not brought ruin to him and he had carried out his plans, the whole State would have been the richer for his mines. Capital would have been drawn in, labour would have been in demand--things would have developed--outsiders would have bought land--new discoveries would have been made--the wealth of the country's resources would have opened up--the Government itself would have benefited by the thing. And then the war had ruined all. And yet the old Judge, overwhelmed with disaster as he was, had stood by the Government and had been scorned and deserted, and had died broken-hearted at the end, and here were his sole descendants--good old Tom and his little beauty of a protégée--(no, Sheba wasn't a descendant, but somehow she counted), and this fine young De Willoughby--all of them penniless. Why, the justice of the thing stared a man in the face; a claim like that must go through.

At this juncture of his thought Judge Rutherford was standing upright in the middle of his room. His hair was in high disorder and his countenance

flushed. He struck his right fist hard against the palm of his left hand.

"Why, the whole thing's as straight as a string," he said. "It's got to go through. I'll go and see Farquhar to-morrow."

* * * * *

Farquhar was a cleverer man than the representative from Hamlin County. He had been returned several times by his constituents, and his life had been spent in localities more allied to effete civilization than was Barnesville. He knew his Washington and had an astute interest in the methods and characteristics of new members of Congress, particularly perhaps such as the rural districts loomed up behind as a background. Judge Rutherford he had observed at the outset of his brief career, in the days when he had first appeared in the House of Representatives in his new broadcloth with its new creases, and with the uneasy but conscientious expression in his eye.

"There's a good fellow, I should say," he had remarked to the member at the desk next to him. "Doesn't know what to do, exactly--isn't quite sure what he has come for--but means to accomplish it, whatsoever it may turn out to be, to the best of his ability. He'd be glad to make friends. He's used to neighbours and unceremonious intimacies."

He made friends with him himself and found the acquaintance of interest at times. The faithfully reproduced atmosphere of Barnesville had almost

a literary colour. Occasionally, though not frequently, he encouraged delineation of Jenny and Tom Scott and Thacker and "the boys." He had even inhaled at a distance vague whiffs of Sophronia's waffles.

On the morning after the evening spent at Dupont Circle Judge Rutherford frankly buttonholed him in the lobby.

"Farquhar," he said, "I'm chock full of a story. It kept me awake half the night. I want to ask your advice about it. It's about a claim."

"You shouldn't have let it keep you awake," replied Farquhar. "Claims are not novel enough. It's my opinion that Washington is more than half populated just now with people who have come to present claims."

Judge Rutherford's countenance fell a little as the countenance of an enthusiast readily falls beneath the breath of non-enthusiasm.

"Well," he said, "I guess there are plenty of them--but there are not many like this. You never heard such a story. It would be worth listening to, even if you were in the humour to walk ten miles to kick a claim."

Farquhar laughed.

"I have been in them, Guv'nor," he said. "The atmosphere is heavy with carpet-baggers who all have a reason for being paid for something by the Government. There's one of them now--that little Hoosier hanging about

the doorway. He's from North Carolina, and wants pay for a herd of cattle."

In the hall outside the lobby a little man stood gazing with pale small eyes intent upon the enchanted space within. He wore a suit of blue jeans evidently made in the domestic circle. He scanned each member of Congress who went in or out, and his expression was a combination of furtive eagerness and tentative appeal.

"I believe I've seen him before," remarked Judge Rutherford, "but I don't know him."

"He's been hanging about the place for weeks," said Farquhar. "He's always in the strangers' gallery when claims come up for discussion. He looks as if he'd be likely to get what he has come for, Hoosier as he is."

"I want to talk to you about the De Willoughbys," said Rutherford. "I can't rest until I've told someone about it. I want you to advise me what to do."

Farquhar allowed himself to be led away into a more secluded spot. He was not, it must be confessed, greatly interested, but he was well disposed towards the member from Hamlin and would listen. They sat down together in one of the rooms where such talk might be carried on, and the Judge forthwith plunged into his story.

It was, as his own instincts had told him, a good story. He was at once simple and ornate in the telling--simple in his broad directness, and ornate in his dramatic and emotional touches. He began with the picture of the De Willoughbys of Delisleville--the autocratic and aristocratic Judge, the two picturesque sons, and the big, unpicturesque one who disappeared from his native town to reappear in the mountains of North Carolina and live his primitive life there as the object of general adulation. He unconsciously made Big Tom the most picturesque figure of the lot. Long before he had finished sketching him, Farquhar--who had been looking out of the window--turned his face towards him. He began to feel himself repaid for his amiable if somewhat casual attention. He did not look out of the window again. The history of big Tom De Willoughby alone was worth hearing. Farquhar did not find it necessary to call Judge Rutherford's attention to the fact that Sheba and the mystery of Blair's Hollow were not to be regarded as evidence. He realised that they adorned the situation and seemed to prove things whether it was strictly true that they did so or not. The discovery of the coal, the fortunes and disasters of Judge de Willoughby, the obstinate loyalty abhorred and condemned of his neighbours, his loneliness and poverty and death--his wasted estates, the big, bare, empty house in which his sole known heir lived alone, were material to hold any man's attention, and, enlarged upon by the member from Hamlin, were effective indeed.

"Now," said the Judge, wiping his forehead when he had finished, "what do you think of that? Don't you think these people have a pretty strong

claim?"

"That story sounds as if they had," answered Farquhar; "but the Government isn't eager to settle claims--and you never know what will be unearthed. If Judge De Willoughby had not been such a blatantly open old opposer of his neighbour's political opinions these people wouldn't have a shadow of a chance."

"By Jupiter!" exclaimed Rutherford, delightedly; "he was persecuted--persecuted."

"It was a good thing for his relatives," said Farquhar. "Did you say the people had come to Washington?"

"All three of them," answered the Judge, and this time his tone was exultant; "Tom, and Sheba, and Rupert. They've rented some little rooms out near Dupont Circle."

"I should like to be taken to see them," said Farquhar, reflectively. "I should like to have a look at Big Tom De Willoughby."

"Would you?" cried the Judge. "Why, nothing would suit me better--or them either, for that matter. I'll take you any day you say--any day."

"It ain't the easiest thing in the world to put a claim through," said Farquhar. "It means plenty of hard knocks and hard work and anxiety. Do

you know that?"

"I don't know anything about it," answered the Judge. "But I'm going to get this one through if there's a way of doing it."

"You'll be misunderstood and called names and slandered," said Farquhar, regarding his rugged, ingenuous face with some curiosity. "There may be people--even in Hamlin County--who won't believe you are not up to some big deal. What are you doing it for?"

"Why, for Tom and Sheba and Rupert," said the Judge, in an outburst of neighbourliness. "That's folks enough to do it for, ain't it? There's three of 'em--and I'd do it for any one--as we say in Barnesville," in discreet correction of the colloquialism.

Farquhar laughed a little, and put a hand on his shoulder as they moved away together. "I believe you would," he said; "perhaps that sort of thing is commoner in Barnesville than in Washington. I believe you would. Take me to see the claimants to-morrow."