

CHAPTER XXVII

When Judge Rutherford piloted him up the broad, unpaved avenue towards the small house near Dupont Circle, the first objects which caught Farquhar's gaze were two young people standing among the unkempt rose and syringa bushes in the little front garden. The slim grace and bloom of their youth would have caught any eye. They were laughing happily, and the girl held a branch of rosy blossoms in her hand.

"Are they the claimants?" Farquhar enquired.

"One of them is," answered Rutherford. "But Sheba--Sheba counts somehow."

Sheba looked at the stranger with the soft gaze of deer-like eyes when he was presented to her. There was no shyness in her woodland smile.

"Judge Rutherford," she said, "Uncle Matt has come--Rupert's Matt, you know. We can't help laughing about it, but we can't help being happy."

The boyish Southern face at her side laughed and glowed. Matt represented to Rupert the Lares and Penates his emotional nature required and had been denied.

"If he were not such a practical creature," he said, "I might not know

what to do with him. But he worked his way here by engaging himself for the journey as a sort of nurse to an invalid young man who wanted to join his family in Washington and was too weak to travel alone."

The further from romance the world drifts, the fairer it becomes in its fagged eyes. So few stories unfold themselves sweetly from beginning to end that a first chapter is always more or less alluring, and as he marked the youth and beauty of those two and saw how their young eyes and smiles met in question and response at every thought, to Farquhar, who still retained the fragments of an imagination not wholly blighted by the House of Representatives, it seemed rather as if he had wandered into a world where young Cupid and Psyche still moved and breathed in human guise. As central figures of a government claim, the pair were exquisitely incongruous. Their youth was so radiant and untried, their bright good looks so bloomed, that the man looking at them felt--with a realising sense of humour as well as fanciful sentiment--as if a spring wind wafted through a wood close grown with wild daffodils had swept into a heated manufactory where machinery whirred and ill-clad workers bent over their toil.

"Uncle Tom will be very glad to see you," said Sheba, as they went into the house. "Judge Rutherford says you will tell us what to do."

An interesting feature of the situation to Farquhar was the entire frankness and simplicity of those concerned in it. It was so clear that they knew nothing of the complications they might be called upon to face,

that their ignorance was of the order of charm. If he had been some sharper claimant come to fleece them, their visitor knew this young dryad's eyes would have smiled at him just as gratefully.

As they mounted the stairs, a huge laugh broke forth above, and when they entered the small sitting-room Uncle Matt stood before Big Tom, holding forth gravely, his gray wool bared, his decently shabby hat in his hand.

"I'd er come as lady's maid, Marse Thomas De Willoughby," he was saying, "ef I couldn't er got here no other way. Seemed like I jest got to honin' atter Marse Rupert, an' I couldn't er stayed nohow. I gotter be whar dat boy is--I jest gotter."

Big Tom, rising to his full height to shake hands with his visitor, appeared physically to cast such disparagement on the size of the room as was almost embarrassing. Farquhar saw all his values as he met his honest, humourous eye.

"I've been talking to my nephew's body-guard," he said. "All right, Uncle Matt. You just go to Miss Burford and ask her to find you a shake-down. There's always a place to be found for a fellow like you."

"Marse Thomas De Willoughby," said Matt, "dish yer niggah man's not gwine to be in no one's way. I come yere to work--dat's what I come yere for. An' work's a thing dat kin be hunted down--en a man ain't needin' no gun to hunt it neder--an' he needn't be no mighty Nimrod." And he made his

best bow to both men and shuffled out of the room.

To Farquhar his visit was an interesting experience and a novel one. For months he had been feeling that he lived in the whirl of a maelstrom of schemes and jobberies, the inevitable result of the policy of a Government which had promised to recoup those it had involuntarily wronged during a national convulsion. Upon every side there had sprung up claimants--many an honest one, and hordes of those not honest. There were obvious thieves and specious ones, brilliant tricksters and dull ones. Newspaper literature had been incited by the number and variety of claims, and claims--to a jocularity which spread over all the land. Farquhar had seen most of the types--the greenhorn, the astute planner, the man who had a wrong burning in his breast, the man who knew how to approach his subject and the man who did not, the man who buttonholed everybody and was diffuse and hopeful, and the man who was helpless before the task he had undertaken. He had never, however, seen anything like the De Willoughby claimants--big Tom telling his straightforward story with his unsanguine air, the attractive youngster adding detail with simple directness, and the girl, Sheba, her roe's eyes dilated with eager interest hanging upon their every word.

"It is one of the best stories I've heard," he said to Rutherford, on their way back. "But it's a big claim--it's a huge claim, and the Government is beginning to get restive."

"But don't you think they'll get it through?" exclaimed Judge Rutherford.

"Ain't they bound to get it? It's the Lord's truth--every word they speak--the Lord's truth!"

"Yes," answered Farquhar, "that's how it struck me; but, as a rule, it isn't the Lord's truth that carries a big claim through."

He broke into a short laugh, as if at an inward realisation of the aspect of the situation.

"They are as straightforward as a lot of children," he said. "They have nothing to hide, and they wouldn't know how to hide it if they had. It would be rather a joke if----" And he laughed again.

"If what?" asked Rutherford.

"Ah, well! if that very fact was the thing which carried them through," his laugh ending in a shrewd smile.

This carried the ingenuous mind of his companion beyond its depth.

"I don't see where the joke would come in," he said, rather ruefully. "I should have thought nothing else would do it for them."

Farquhar slapped him on the shoulder.

"So you would," he said. "That's why you are the best advocate they could

have. You are all woven out of the same cloth. You stand by them--and so will I."

Judge Rutherford seized his hand and shook it with affectionately ardent pumpings.

"That's what I wanted to make sure of," he said. "I'm going to work at this thing, and I want a man to help me who knows the ropes. Lord, how I should like to go back to Hamlin and tell Jenny and the boys that I'd put Tom through."

And as they walked up the enclosed road to the Capitol he devoted himself to describing anew Big Tom's virtue, popularity, and witticisms.

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For weeks Talbot's Cross-roads found itself provided with a conversational topic of absorbing interest. Ethan Cronan, who had temporarily "taken on" the post-office and store, had no cause to fear that the old headquarters was in danger of losing popularity. The truth was that big Tom had so long presided over the daily gatherings that the new occupant of the premises was regarded merely as a sort of friendly representative. Being an amiable and unambitious soul, Ethan in fact regarded himself in the same light, and felt supported and indeed elevated by the fact that he stood in the shoes of a public character so universally popular and admired.

"I ain't Tom, an' I cayn't never come a-nigh him," he said; "but I kin do my best not to cast no disgrace on his place, an' allus tradin' as fair as I know how. It's a kinder honor to set in his chairs an' weigh sugar out in the scales he used--an' it drors trade too."

During the passage of the first few weeks, horses, waggons, and ox-teams crowded about the hitching-posts, while excitement ran high at mail-time. The general opinion was that any post might bring the news that Congress was "sitting on" the great De Willoughby claim, and that Washington waited breathless for its decision. That all other national business should be suspended seemed inevitable. That any mail should come and go without bringing some news was not contemplated. The riders of the horses and owners of the waggons sat upon the stone porch and discussed probabilities. They told each other stories they had gathered of the bygone glories of the De Willoughbys, of the obstinate loyalty of the old Judge and the bitter indignation of his neighbours, and enlarged upon the strength of the claim this gave him to the consideration of the Government.

"Tom won't have no trouble with his claim," was the general opinion.

"He'll just waltz it through. Thar won't be a hitch."

But after the first letter in which he announced his safe arrival in the Capital City, Tom wrote no more for a week or so, which caused a disappointment only ameliorated by the belief that he was engaged in "waltzing" the claim through. Each man felt it necessary to visit the

Cross-roads every day to talk over the possible methods employed, and to make valuable suggestions. Interest never flagged, but it was greatly added to when it was known that Judge Rutherford had ranged himself on Tom's side.

"He's the pop-larest man in Hamlin County," it was said, "an' he's bound to be a pop'lar man in Congress, an' have a pull."

But when the summer had passed, and a touch of frost in the night air loosened the chestnuts in their burrs, and a stray morning breeze shook them in showers down upon the carpet of rustling yellowed leaves, Tom's letters had become few and far between, and none of them had contained any account of the intentions of the legislative body with regard to the claim.

"There's nothing to tell, boys," he wrote. "As far as I've gone, it seems a man gets a claim through Congress by waiting about Washington and telling his story to different people until he wears them out--or they wear him out."

For some time after this they did not hear from him at all. The winter set in, and the habitués of the Cross-roads Post-office gathered about the glowing stove. Under the influence of cold gray skies, biting air, leafless trees, and bare land, the claim seemed somehow to have receded into the distance. The sanguine confidence of the community had not subsided into doubt so much as into helpless mystification. Months had

passed and nothing whatsoever had happened.

"Seems somehow," said Jabe Doty one night, as he tilted his chair forward and stared at the fire in the stove, "seems somehow as if Tom was a right smart ways off--es ef he got further as the winter closed in--a'most like Washin'ton city hed moved a thousand miles or so out West somewhars, an' took him with it."