

## CHAPTER XXVIII

To Tom himself it seemed that it was the old, easy-going mountain life which had receded. The days when he had sat upon the stone porch and watched the sun rise from behind one mountain and set behind another seemed to belong to a life lived centuries ago. But that he knew little of occult beliefs and mysteries, he would have said to himself that all these things must have happened in a long past incarnation.

The matter of the De Willoughby claim was brought before the House. Judge Rutherford opened the subject one day with a good deal of nervous excitement. He had supplied himself with many notes, and found some little difficulty in managing them, being new to the work, and he grew hot and uncertain because he could not secure an audience. Claims had already become old and tiresome stories, and members who were unoccupied pursued their conversation unmovedly, giving the speaker only an occasional detached glance. The two representatives of their country sitting nearest to him were, not at all furtively, eating apples and casting their cores and parings into their particular waste-paper baskets. This was discouraging and baffling. To quote the Judge himself, no one knew anything about Hamlin County, and certainly no one was disturbed by any desire to be told about it.

That night Rutherford went to the house near Dupont Circle. Big Tom was

sitting in the porch with Rupert and Sheba. Uncle Matt was digging about the roots of a rose-bush, and the Judge caught a glimpse of Miss Burford looking out from behind the parlour curtains.

The Judge wore a wearied and vaguely bewildered look as he sat down and wiped his forehead with a large, clean white handkerchief.

"It's all different from what I thought--it's all different," he said.

"Things often are," remarked Tom, "oftener than not."

Rupert and Sheba glanced at each other questioningly and listened with anxious eyes.

"And it's different in a different way from what I expected," the Judge went on. "They might have said and done a dozen things I should have been sort of ready for, but they didn't. Somehow it seemed as if--as if the whole thing didn't matter."

Tom got up and began to walk about.

"That's not the way things begin that are going to rush through," he said.

Sheba followed him and slipped her hand through his arm.

"Do you think," she faltered, "that perhaps we shall not get the money at all, Uncle Tom?"

Tom folded her hand in his--which was easily done.

"I'm afraid that if we do get it," he answered, "it will not come to us before we want it pretty badly--the Lord knows how badly."

For every day counts in the expenditure of a limited sum, and on days of discouragement Tom's calculation of their resources left him a troubled man.

When Judge Rutherford had gone Rupert sat with Sheba in the scented summer darkness. He drew his chair opposite to hers and took one of her hands in both of his own.

"Suppose I have done a wrong thing," he said. "Suppose I have dragged you and Uncle Tom into trouble?"

"I am glad you came," in a quick, soft voice. "I am glad you came." And the slight, warm fingers closed round his.

He lifted them to his lips and kissed them over and over again. "Are you glad I came?" he murmured. "Oh, Sheba! Sheba!"

"Why do you say 'Oh, Sheba'?" she asked.

"Because I love you so--and I am so young--and I don't know what to do. You know I love you, don't you?"

She leaned forward so that he saw her lovely gazelle eyes lifted and most innocently tender. "I want you to love me," she said; "I could not bear you not to love me."

He hesitated a second, and then suddenly pressed his glowing face upon her palm.

"But I don't love you as Uncle Tom loves you, Sheba," he said. "I love you--young as I am--I love you--differently."

Her swaying nearer to him was a sweetly unconscious and involuntary thing. Their young eyes drowned themselves in each other.

"I want you," she said, the note of a young ring-dove answering her mate murmuring in her voice, "I want you to love me--as you love me. I love your way of loving me."

"Darling!" broke from him, his boy's heart beating fast and high. And their soft young lips were, through some mystery of power, drawn so near to each other that they met like flowers moved to touching by the summer wind.

Later Rupert went to Tom, who sat by an open window in his room and looked out on the moonlit stretch of avenue. The boy's heart was still beating fast, and, as the white light struck his face, it showed his eyes more like Delia Vanuxem's than they had ever been. Their darkness held just the look Tom remembered, but could never have described or explained to himself.

"Uncle Tom," he began, in an unsteady voice, "I couldn't go to bed without telling you."

Tom glanced up at him and learned a great deal. He put a big hand on his shoulder.

"Sit down, boy," he said, his kind eyes warming. Rupert sat down.

"Perhaps I ought not to have done it," he broke forth. "I did not know I was going to do it. I suppose I am too young. I did not mean to--but I could not help it."

"Sheba?" Tom inquired, simply.

"Her eyes were so lovely," poured forth the boy. "She looked at me so like an angel. Whenever she is near me, it seems as if something were drawing us together."

"Yes," was Tom's quiet answer.

"I want to tell you all about it," impetuously. "I have been so lonely, Uncle Tom, since my mother died. You don't know how I loved her--how close we were to each other. She was so sweet and wonderful--and I had nothing else."

Tom nodded gently.

"I remember," he said. "I never forgot."

He put the big hand on the boy's knee this time. "I loved her too," he said, "and I had nothing else."

"Then you know--you know!" cried Rupert. "You remember what it was to sit quite near her and see her look at you in that innocent way--how you longed to cry out and take her in your arms."

Tom stirred in his seat. Time rolled back twenty-five years.

"Oh, my God, yes--I remember!" he answered.

"It was like that to-night," the young lover went on. "And I could not stop myself. I told her I loved her--and she said she wanted me to love her--and we kissed each other."

Big Tom got up and stood before the open window. His hands were thrust

deep into his pockets and he stared out at the beauty of the night.

"Good Lord!" he said. "That's what ought to come to every man that lives--but it doesn't."

Rupert poured forth his confession, restrained no more.

"From that first night when I rode through the mountains over the white road and stopped at your gate--since I looked up and saw her standing on the balcony with the narcissus in her hair it has always been the same thing. It began that very moment--it was there when she leaned forward and spoke to me. I had never thought of a woman before--I was too poor and sad and lonely and young. And there she was--all white--and it seemed as if she was mine."

Tom nodded his head as if to a white rose-bush in the small garden.

"I am as poor as ever I was," said Rupert. "I am a beggar if we lose our claim; but I am not sad, and I am not lonely--I can't be--I can't be! I am happy--everything's happy--because she knows--and I have kissed her."

"What did you think I would say when you told me?" Tom asked.

"I don't know," impetuously; "but I knew I must come to you. It seems a million years ago since that hot morning in the old garden at Delisleville--when I had never seen her."

"One of the things I have thought about a good deal," said Tom, with quite a practical manner, "has been love. I had lots of time to think over things at the Cross-roads, and I used to work them out as far as my mind would carry me. Love's as much an element as the rest of them. There's earth, air, fire, water--and love. It has to be calculated for. What I've reasoned out is that it has not been calculated for enough. It's going to come to all of us--and it will either come and stay, and make the old earth bloom with flowers--or it will come and go, and leave it like a plain swept by fire. It's not a trivial thing that only boys and girls play with; it's better--and worse. It ought to be prepared for and treated well. It's not often treated well. People have got into the way of expecting trouble and tragedy to come out of it. We are always hearing of its unhappiness in books. Poets write about it that way."

"I suppose it is often unhappy," said Rupert; "but just now it seems as if it could not be."

"What I've been wanting to see," said Tom, "is young love come up like a flower and be given its dew and sun and rain--and bloom and bloom its best."

He drew a big sigh.

"That poor child who lies on the hillside under the pines," he went on, "Sheba's mother--hers was young love--and it brought tragedy and death."



Delia," his voice was unsteady, "your mother's was young love, and her heart was broken. No, it's not often well treated. And when you and Sheba came to me that night with your boy and girl eyes shining with gladness just because you had met each other, I said to myself, 'By the Lord, here is what it springs from. Perhaps it may come to them; I wonder if it will?'"

"You thought it might, even then," Rupert cried.

"Yes, I did," was Tom's answer. "You were young--you were drawn together--it seemed natural. I used to watch you, and think it over, making a kind of picture to myself of how it would be if two young things could meet each other and join hands and wander on among roses until they reached the gate of life--and it swung open for them and they passed through and found another paradise."

He stopped a second and turned to look at Rupert's dreamy face with a smile not all humorous. "I'm a sentimental chap for my size," he added. "That's what I wanted for Sheba and you--that's what I want. That sort of thing was left out of my life; but I should like to see it before I'm done with. Good God! why can't people be happy? I want people to be happy."

The boy was trembling.

"Uncle Tom," he said, "Sheba and I are happy to-night."

"Then God have mercy on the soul of the man who would spoil it for you," said Big Tom, with actual solemnity. "I'm not that man. You two just go on being happy; try and make up for what your two mothers had to bear."

Rupert got up from his chair and caught the big hand in his. It was a boy's action, and he looked particularly like a boy as he did it. "It is just like you," he broke forth. "I did not know what you would say when I told you--but I ought to have known you would say something like this. It's--it's as big as you are, Uncle Tom," ingenuously.

That was his good-night. When he went away Big Tom settled into his chair again and looked out for some time longer at the bright night. He was going back to two other nights which lay in the years behind. One was the night he turned his back on Delisville and rode towards the mountain with a weight on his kindly heart which he had grimly told himself seemed to weigh a ton; the other was the night he had been wakened from his sleep by the knock on the door of the bedroom behind the Cross-roads Post-office and had ridden out under the whiteness of the moon to find in the bare cabin at Blair's Hollow the little fair girl who had sobbed and died as she clung to his warm hand.