

CHAPTER XXXI

Frequenters of the Capitol--whether loungers or politicians--had soon become familiar with the figure of one of the De Willoughby claimants. It was too large a figure not to be quickly marked and unavoidably remembered. Big Tom slowly mounting the marble steps or standing on the corridors was an object to attract attention, and inquiries being answered by the information that he was a party to one of the largest claims yet made, he not unnaturally was discussed with interest.

"He's from the depths of the mountains of North Carolina," it was explained; "he keeps a cross-roads store and post-office, but he has some of the best blood of the South in his veins, and his claim is enormous."

"Will he gain it?"

"Who knows? He has mortgaged all he owns to make the effort. The claim is inherited from his father, Judge De Willoughby, who died at the close of the war. As he lived and died within the Confederacy, the Government holds that he was disloyal and means to make the most of it. The claimants hold that they can prove him loyal. They'll have to prove it thoroughly. The Government is growing restive over the claims of Southerners, and there is bitter opposition to be overcome."

"Yes. Lyman nearly lost his last election because he had favoured a

Southern claim in his previous term. His constituents are country patriots, and they said they weren't sending a man to Congress to vote for Rebs."

"That's the trouble. When men's votes are endangered by a course of action they grow ultra-conservative. A vote's a vote."

That was the difficulty, as Tom found. A vote was a vote. The bitterness of war had not yet receded far enough into the past to allow of unprejudiced judgment. Members of political parties were still enemies, wrongs still rankled, graves were yet new, wounds still ached and burned. Men who had found it to their interest to keep at fever heat the fierce spirit of the past four years of struggle and bloodshed, were not willing to relinquish the tactics which had brought fortunes to them. The higher-minded were determined that where justice was done it should be done where it was justice alone, clearly proved to be so. There had been too many false and idle claims brought forward to admit of the true ones being accepted without investigation and delay. In the days when old Judge De Willoughby had walked through the streets of Delisleville, ostracized and almost hooted as he passed among those who had once been his friends, it would not have been difficult to prove that he was loyal to the detested Government, but in these later times, when the old man lay quiet in what his few remaining contemporaries still chose to consider a dishonoured grave, undeniable proof of a loyalty which now would tend to the honour and advantage of those who were of his blood was not easy to produce.

"The man lived and died in the Confederacy," was said by those who were in power in Washington.

"He was constructively a rebel. We want proof--proof."

Most of those who might have furnished it if they would, were either scattered as to the four winds of the earth, or were determined to give no aid in the matter.

"A Southerner who deserted the South in its desperate struggle for life need not come to Southern gentlemen to ask them to help him to claim the price of his infamy." That was the Delisleville point of view, and it was difficult to cope with. If Tom had been a rich man and could have journeyed between Delisleville and the Capital, or wheresoever the demands of his case called him, to see and argue with this man or that, the situation would have simplified itself somewhat, though there would still have remained obstacles to be overcome.

"But a man who has hard work to look his room rent in the face, and knows he can't do that for more than a few months, is in a tight place," said Tom. "Evidence that will satisfy the Government isn't easily collected in Dupont Circle. These fellows have heard men talk before. They've heard too many men talk. There's Stamps, now--they've heard Stamps talk. Stamps

is way ahead of me where lobbying is concerned. He knows the law, and he

doesn't mind having doors shut in his face or being kicked into the street, so long as he sees a chance of getting indemnified for his 'herds of cattle.' I'm not a business man, and I mind a lot of things that don't trouble him. I'm not a good hand at asking favours and sitting down to talk steadily for a solid hour to a man who doesn't want to hear me and hasn't five minutes to spare." But for Rupert and Sheba he would have given up the claim in a week and gone back to Talbot's Cross-roads content to end his days as he began them when he opened the store--living in the little back rooms on beans and bacon and fried chicken and hominy.

"That suited me well enough," he used to say to himself, when he thought the thing over. "There were times when I found it a bit lonely--but, good Lord! loneliness is a small thing for a man to complain of in a world like this. It isn't fits or starvation. When a man's outlived the habit of expecting happiness, it doesn't take much to keep him going."

But at his side was eager youth which had outlived nothing, which believed in a future full of satisfied yearnings and radiant joys.

"I am not alone now," said Rupert; "I must make a place and a home for Sheba. I must not be only a boy in love with her; I must be a man who can protect her from everything--from everything. She is so sweet--she is so sweet. She makes me feel that I am a man."

She was sweet. To big Tom they were both sweet in their youth and radiant

faith and capabilities for happiness. They seemed like children, and the tender bud of their lovely young passion was a thing to be cherished. He had seen such buds before, but he had never seen the flower.

"I'd like to see the flower," he used to say to himself. "To see it would pay a man for a good deal he'd missed himself. The pair of them could set up a pretty fair garden of Eden--serpents and apple-trees being excluded."

They were happy. Even when disappointments befell them and prospects were unpromising they were happy. They could look into each other's eyes and take comfort. Rupert's dark moods had melted away. He sometimes forgot they had ever ruled him. His old boyish craving for love and home was fed. The bare little rooms in the poor little house were home. Sheba and Tom were love and affection. When they sat at the table and calculated how much longer their diminishing store would last, even as it grew smaller and smaller, they could laugh over the sums they worked out on slips of paper. So long as the weather was warm enough they strolled about together in the fragrant darkness or sat in the creeper-hung porch, in the light of summer moons; when the cold nights came they sat about the stove or the table and talked, while Sheba sewed buttons on or worked assiduously at the repairing of her small wardrobe. Whatsoever she did, the two men sat and admired, and there was love and laughter.

The strenuous life which went on in the busier part of the town--the

politics, the struggles, the plots and schemes, the worldly pleasures--seemed entirely apart from them.

Sometimes, after a day in which Judge Rutherford had been encouraged or Tom had had a talk with a friendly member who had listened to the story of the claim with signs of interest, they felt their star of hope rising; it never sinks far below the horizon when one's teens are scarcely of the past--and Sheba and Rupert spent a wonderful evening making plans for a future of ease and fortune.

At Judge Rutherford's suggestion, Tom had long sought an interview with a certain member of the Senate whose good word would be a carrying weight in any question under debate. He was a shrewd, honest, business-like man, and a personal friend of the President's. He was much pursued by honest and dishonest alike, and, as a result of experience, had become difficult to reach. On the day Tom was admitted to see him, he had been more than usually badgered. Just as Tom approached his door a little man opened it cautiously and slid out, with the air of one leaving within the apartment things not exhilarating on retrospect. He was an undersized country man, the cut of whose jeans wore a familiar air to Tom's eye even at a distance and before he lifted the countenance which revealed him as Mr. Stamps.

"We ain't a-gwine to do your job no good to-day, Tom," he said, benignly. "He'd 'a' kicked me out ef I hadn't 'a' bin small--jest same es you was gwine ter that time I come to talk to ye about Sheby. He's a smarter man

than you be, an' he seed the argyment I hed to p'int out to you. Ye won't help your job none to-day!"

"I haven't got a 'job' in hand," Tom answered; "your herds of stock and the Judge's coal mines and cotton fields are different matters."

He passed on and saw that when his name was announced the Senator looked

up from his work with a fretted movement of the head.

"Mr. De Willoughby of Talbot's Cross-roads?" he said. Tom bowed. He became conscious of appearing to occupy too much space in the room of a busy man who had plainly been irritated.

"I was told by Judge Rutherford that you had kindly consented to see me," he said.

The Senator tapped the table nervously with his pencil and pushed some papers aside.

"Well, I find I have no time to spare this morning," was his brutally frank response. "I have just been forced to give the time which might have been yours to a little hoosier who made his way in, heaven knows how, and refused to be ordered out. He had a claim, too, and came from your county and said he was an old friend of yours."

"He is not an old enemy," answered Tom. "There is that much foundation in the statement."

"Well, he has occupied the time I had meant to give you," said the Senator, "and I was not prepossessed either by himself or his claim."

"I think he's a man to gain a claim," said Tom; "I'm afraid I'm not."

"It is fair to warn you that I am not friendly to claims made by the families of men who lived in a hot-bed of secession," said the Senator. He had been badgered too much this morning, and this big, rather convincing looking applicant worried him. "I have an appointment at the White House in ten minutes."

"Then this is no place for me," said Tom. "No man is likely to be friendly to a thing he has no time to talk of. I will bid you good-morning."

"Good-morning," returned the Senator, brusquely.

Tom went away feeling that he was a blunderer. The fact was that he was a neophyte and, it was true, did not possess the qualities which make a successful lobbyist. Mr. Stamps had wheedled or forced his way into the great man's apartment and had persisted in remaining to press his claim until he was figuratively turned out by the shoulders. Big Tom had used only such means to obtain the interview as a gentleman might; he had

waited until he was called to take his turn, and so had lost his chance. When he had found the Senator hurried and unwilling to spend time on him he had withdrawn at once, not feeling Mr. Stamps's method to be possible.

"I suppose I ought to have stayed and buttonholed him in spite of himself," he thought, ruefully. "I'm a greenhorn; I suppose a man in my place ought to stand his ground whether it's decent or indecent, and make people listen to what he has to say, and be quite willing to be kicked downstairs after he has said it. I'm a disgrace to my species--and I don't think much of the species."

As he was walking through one of the corridors he saw before him two men who were evidently visitors to the place. He gathered this from their leisurely movements and the interest with which they regarded the objects about them. They looked at pictures and remarked upon decorations. One was a man who was unusually well-built. He was tall and moved well and had lightly silvered hair; his companion was tall also, but badly hung together, and walked with a stoop of the shoulders.

Tom walked behind them for some yards before his attention was really arrested, but suddenly a movement of one man's head seemed to recall some memory of the past. He did not know what the memory was, but he knew vaguely that it was a memory. He followed a few yards further, wondering idly what had been recalled and why he should be reminded of the mountains and the pine-trees. Yes, it was the mountains and pine-trees--Hamlin

County, but not the Hamlin County of to-day. Why not the Hamlin County of to-day? why something which seemed more remote? Confound the fellow; he had made that movement again. Tom wished he would turn his face that he might see it, and he hurried his footsteps somewhat that he might come within nearer range. The two men paused with their backs towards him, and Tom paused also. They were looking at a picture, and the taller of the two made a gesture with his hand. It was a long, bony hand, and as he extended it Tom slightly started. It all came back to him--the memory which had been recalled. He smelt the scent of the pines on the hillside; he saw the little crowd of mourners about the cabin door; inside, women sat with bent heads, upon two wooden chairs rested the ends of a slender coffin, and by it stood a man who lifted his hand and said to those about him: "Let us pray."

The years swept back as he stood there. He was face to face again with the tragic mystery which had seemed to end in utter silence. The man turned his face so that it was plainly to be seen--sallow, rugged, harsh in line. The same face, though older, and perhaps less tragic--the face of the man he had left alone in the awful, desolate stillness of the empty room.

The next moment he turned away again. He and his companion passed round a corner and were gone. Tom made no attempt to follow them.

"There is no reason why I should," was his thought, "either for Sheba's

sake or his own. She is happy, and he feels his secret safe--whatsoever it may have been. Perhaps he has had time to outlive the misery of it, and it would all be brought to life again."

But the incident had been a shock. There was nothing to fear from it, he knew; but it had been a shock nevertheless. He did not know the man's name; he had never asked it. He was plainly one of the many strangers who, in passing through the Capital, went to visit the public buildings. The merest chance might have brought him to the place; the most ordinary course of events might take him away. Tom went back to Dupont Circle in a thoughtful mood. He forgot the claim and the Senator who had had no leisure to hear the statement of his case.

Rupert and Sheba were waiting for his return. Rupert had spent the afternoon searching for employment. He had spent many a long day in the same way and with the same result.

"They don't want me," he had said when he came home. "They don't want me anywhere, it seems--either in lawyers' offices or dry-goods stores. I have not been particular."

They had sat down and gazed at each other.

"I sometimes wonder," said Sheba, "what we shall do when all our money is gone--every penny of it. It cannot last long now. We cannot stay here and

we cannot pay our way back to the mountains. What shall we do?"

"I shall go out every day till I find something to do," said Rupert, with the undiscouraged fervour of youth. "I am not looking for employment for a gentleman, in these days; I am looking for work--just as Uncle Matt is."

"He chopped some wood yesterday and brought home two dollars," Sheba said. "He made me take it. He said he wanted to pay his 'bode.'"

She laughed a little, but her eyes were wet and shining.

Rupert took her face between his hands and looked into it adoringly.

"Don't be frightened, Sheba," he said; "don't be unhappy. Lovely darling, I will take care of you."

She pressed her soft cheek against his hand.

"I know you will," she said, "and of Uncle Tom, too. I couldn't be unhappy--we all three love each other so. I do not believe we shall be unhappy, even if we are poor enough to be hungry."

So their moment of dismay ended in smiles. They were passing through a phase of life in which it is not easy to be unhappy. Somehow things always brightened when they drew near each other. His observation of this

truth was one of Tom's pleasures. He knew the year of waiting had managed to fill itself with sweetness for them. Their hopes had been alternately raised and dashed to earth; one day it seemed not improbable that they were to be millionaires, the next that beggary awaited them after the dwindling of their small stock of money; but they had shared their emotions and borne their vicissitudes together.

When Tom entered the room they rose and met him with questioning faces.

"Was it good fortune?" they cried. "Did you see him, Uncle Tom? What did he say?"

He told his story as lightly as possible, but it could not be transformed, by any lightness of touch, into an encouraging episode. He made a picture of Stamps sidling through the barely opened door, and was terse and witty at the expense of his own discomfiture and consciousness of incompetence. He laughed at himself and made them laugh, but when he sat down in his accustomed seat there was a shade upon his face.

The children exchanged glances, the eyes of each prompting the other. They must be at their brightest. They knew the sight of their happiness warmed and lightened his heart always.

"He is tired and hungry," Sheba said. "We must give him a beautiful hot supper. Rupert, we must set the table."

They had grown used to waiting upon themselves, and their domestic services wore more or less the air of festivities. Sheba ran downstairs to Miss Burford's kitchen, where Uncle Matt had prepared the evening meal in his best manner. As the repasts grew more and more simple, Matt seemed to display greater accomplishments.

"It's all very well, Miss Sheba," he had said once, when she praised the skill with which he employed his scant resources. "It's mighty easy to be a good cook when you'se got everythin' right to han'. The giftness is to git up a fine table when you ain't got nuffin'. Dat's whar dish yer niggah likes to show out. De Lard knows I'se got too much yere dis ve'y minnit--to be a-doin' credit to my 'sperience--too much, Miss Sheba."

He was frying hoe-cake and talking to Miss Burford when Sheba came into the kitchen. He was a great comfort and aid to Miss Burford, and in a genteel way the old lady found him a resource in the matters of companionship and conversation. Her life was too pinched and narrow to allow her even the simpler pleasure of social intercourse, and Matt's journeys into the world, and his small adventures, and his comments upon politics and social events were a solace and a source of entertainment to her.

Just now he was describing to her the stories he had heard of a celebrated lecturer who had just arrived in the city.

"Whether he's a 'vivalist or jes' a plain preacher what folks is runnin'

after, I cayn't quite make out, ma'am," he was saying. "I ain't quite thinkin' he's a 'vivalist, but de peoples is a-runnin' after him shore--an' seems like dey doin' it in ev'y city he goes to. Ev'ybody want to heah him--ev'ybody--rich en pore--young en ole. De Rev'end John Baird's his name, an' he's got a fren' travellin' with him as they say is like Jonathan was to David in dese yere ole Bible times. An' I heern tell ev when he rise in de pulpit de people's jest gets so worked up at what he preach to 'em--dey jest cries an' rocks de benches. Dat's what make me think he might be a 'vivalist--cos we all knows dat cryin' an' rockin' an' clappin' hands is what makes a 'vival." He was full of anecdotes concerning the new arrival whose reputation had plainly preceded him.

"He gwine ter preach nex' Sat'day on "Pentance,"" he said to Sheba, with a chuckle. "Dat's his big lecture ev'ybody want to hear. De hall shore to be pack full. What I'm a-hopin' is dat it'll be pack full er Senators an' members er Congrest, an' he'll set some of 'em a-'pentin', dey ain't 'tend to dere business an' git people's claims through. Ef I know'd de gen'leman, I'd ax him to menshun dat special an' pertickler."

As they sat at supper, Sheba repeated his stories and comments. All the comments were worthy of repetition, and most of the anecdotes were suggestively interesting, illustrating, as they did, the power of a single man over many.

"I should like to go and hear him myself," she said. "Uncle Tom, have you anything to repent? Rupert, have you? Uncle Tom, you have not forgotten

the Senator. You look at me as if you were thinking of something that was not happy."

"The Senator was not particularly happy," remarked Tom. "He had just had an interview with Stamps, and he certainly was not happy at the sight of me. He thought he had another on his hands. He's in better spirits by this time."

Sheba got up and went to his side of the table. She put her arms round his neck and pressed her cheek against his.

"Forget about him," she said.

"I am not remembering him particularly," said Tom, the shade passing from his eyes; "I am remembering you--as you were nineteen years ago."

"Nineteen years ago!" said Sheba. "I was a baby!"

"Yes," answered Tom, folding a big arm round her, and speaking slowly. "I saw a man to-day who reminded me of the day you were born. Are you glad you were born, Sheba? that's what I want to be sure of."

The two pairs of young eyes met glowing. Tom knew they had met, by the warmth of the soft cheek touching him.

"Yes, I am glad--I am glad--I am glad!" with grateful sweetness.

"And I--and I," cried Rupert. He sprung up and held out an impetuous boyish hand to Tom. "You know how glad, Uncle Tom--look at her--look at me--see how glad we both are; and it is you--you who have made it so."

"It's a pretty big thing," said Tom, "that two people should be glad they are alive." And he grasped the ardent hand as affectionately as it was offered.