

CHAPTER XXXII

The Reverend John Baird and his friend the Reverend Lucien Latimer were lodged in a quiet house in a quiet street. The lecturing tour had been fatiguing, and Baird was glad of such repose as he could secure. In truth, the excitement and strain of his work, the journeying from place to place, the hospitalities from which he could not escape, had worn upon him. He had grown thinner, and often did not sleep well at night. He used to find himself lying awake repeating to himself mechanically words from his own lecture. "Repentance is too late," his voice would whisper to the darkness. "Repentance cannot undo."

His audiences found him an irresistible force. He had become more than the fashion of the hour; he was its passion. People liked to look at as well as to hear him. He was besieged by lion-hunters, overwhelmed with attentions in each town or city he visited. Reporters followed him, interviewers besought appointments, agreeable people invited him to their houses, intrusive people dogged him. Latimer stood between him and as many fatigues as he could. He transacted business for him, and interviewed interviewers; and he went to tiring functions.

"When I enter a room without you, and make your excuses, they must make the most of my black face; and they make the most of it, but they don't love me," he said. "Still it is a thing to be borne if it saves you when you need all your forces. What does it matter? I have never expected to

be smiled at for my own sake as they smile at me for yours."

In these days of close companionship each found in each new qualities increasing the tie between them. Latimer felt himself fed by the public affection surrounding the man who was his friend. He was thrilled by the applause which thundered forth at his words; he was moved by the mere sense of his success, and the power he saw him unknowingly exercise through mere physical charm.

"I am nearer being a happy, or at least a peaceful, man than I had ever thought to be," he said to Baird; "your life seems to fill mine, and I am less lonely." Which was indeed a truth.

On the evening of the day on which big Tom had caught his glimpse of the two strangers in the corridor of the Capitol, Baird dined at the house of the Senator, whose adverse mood had promised such small encouragement to the De Willoughby claim. And in the course of the meal the host spoke of both claim and claimants.

"The man is a sort of Colossus," he said, "and he looked all the heavier and bigger because my last visitor had been the smallest and most insignificant of the hoosier type."

"Is this man a hoosier?" was asked.

"No. He has lived among the most primitive, and Rutherford tells me is a sort of county institution; but he is not a hoosier. He has a large, humane, humorous face, and a big, humorous, mellow voice. I should rather have liked the fellow, confound him, if I hadn't lost my patience before he came into the room."

"Did he tell you the story of the claim?" enquired his married daughter.

"No, I didn't let him. I was feeling pretty sick of claims, and I had no time."

"Oh, father, I wish you had let him tell it," exclaimed the pretty young woman. "The truth is, I am beginning to be interested in that claim myself. I am in love with Judge Rutherford and his stories of Jenny and Tom Scott. His whole soul is bound up in 'pushing this thing through'--that's what he calls it. He is the most delightful lobbyist I ever met. He is like a bull in a china shop--though I don't believe anyone ever saw a bull in a china shop."

"He does not know enough to give his friends a rest," said the Senator.

"If he was not such a good fellow he would bore a man to death. He bores many a man as it is, and people in office won't stand being bored. He's too ingenuous. The shrewd ones say his ingenuousness is too good to be true. He can't keep De Willoughby's virtues out of his stories of him--and a man's virtues have nothing much to do with his claim."

"I met him in one of the squares yesterday," said Mrs. Meredith, "and he almost cried when he spoke of the claim. He told me that everything was going wrong--that it was being pushed aside by all sorts of things, and he had lost heart. His eyes and nose got quite red, and he had to wink hard to keep back the tears."

"The fellow believes in it, at any rate," said the Senator; "he has that to support him."

"He believes in everything," said Mrs. Meredith, "and it would have touched your heart to hear him talk about the claimants. There is a young nephew and a beautiful girl creature, who is big Mr. De Willoughby's adopted daughter. She is not a claimant, it is true, but they all adore each other, and the nephew is in love with her; and if the claim goes through they will be happy forever afterwards. I saw the nephew once, and he was a beautiful boy with Southern eyes and a charming expression. Upon the whole, I think I am in love with the young couple, too. Their story sounded like a pastoral poem when Judge Rutherford told it."

"Suppose you tell it to us, Marion," said the Senator, with a laugh, and a glance round the table. "It may appeal to our feelings and advance the interests of the claim."

"Pray, tell it, Mrs. Meredith," Baird put in; "the mere mention of it has appealed to my emotions. Perhaps Senator Harburton and Mr. Lewis will be moved also, and that will be two votes to the good--perhaps more."

"The charm of it is that it is a story without a plot," Mrs. Meredith said. "There is nothing in it but youth and love and innocence and beauty. It is Romeo and Juliet without the tragedy. Romeo appeared on a moonlight night in a garden, and Juliet stood upon a balcony among roses--and their young souls cried out to each other. It is all so young and innocent--they only want to spend their lives together, like flowers growing side by side. They want nothing but each other."

"And the claim," added the Senator.

"They cannot have each other if the claim fails. They will have to starve to death in each other's arms like the 'Babes in the Wood'; I am sure the robins will come and cover them with leaves."

"But the big uncle," her father asked.

"Poor fellow," Mrs. Meredith said. "Judge Rutherford is finest when he enlarges on him. He says, over and over again, as if it were a kind of argument, 'Tom, now--Tom, he wants those two young ones to be happy. He says nature fixed it all for them, so that they could be happy--and he doesn't want to see it spoiled. He says love ain't treated fair, as a rule, and he wants to see it given a show--a real show.'"

At least one pair of deeply interested listener's eyes were fixed upon her. They were the Reverend John Baird's.

"It might be a beautiful thing to see," he said. "One does not see it. There seems a fate against it. The wrong people meet, or the right ones do not until it is too late."

"I should like to see it myself," said the host, "but I am afraid that the argument--as an argument--would not support a claim on the Government."

"I am going to see the claimants and hear all the arguments they can bring forward," was Mrs. Meredith's conclusion. "I want to see Romeo and Juliet together."

"May I go with you?" asked Baird.

Latimer had not come in when he returned to their lodgings. He also had been out to spend the evening. But it was not many minutes before Baird heard his latch-key and the opening of the front door. He came upstairs rather slowly.

"You are either ill," Baird said, when he entered, "or you have met with some shock."

"Yes; it was a shock," was the answer. "I have been dragged back into the black pit of twenty years ago."

"Twenty years?" said Baird.

"I have seen the man who--was with us in the hillside cabin, through that night she died. He passed me in the street."

Baird stood still and looked at him without speaking. What was there to be said?

"He is such a noticeable looking fellow," Latimer went on, "that I felt sure I could find out who he was. In the mountains they called him 'Big Tom D'Willerby.' His real name is De Willoughby, and he has been here for some months in pursuit of a claim, which is a great deal talked about."

"The great De Willoughby claim?" said Baird. "They talked of it to-night at dinner."

Latimer tapped the table nervously with the fingers of an unsteady hand.

"He may be living within a hundred yards of us--within a hundred yards," he said. "We may cross each other's path at any moment. I can at least know--since fate has brought us together again--I should never have sought him out--but one can know whether--whether it lived or died."

"He has with him," said Baird, "a girl of nineteen who is his adopted daughter. I heard it to-night. She is said to be a lovely girl who is in love with a lovely boy who is De Willoughby's nephew. She is happy."

"She is happy," murmured Latimer, biting his livid lips. He could not bring himself back to the hour he was living in. He could only see again the bare little room--he could hear the cries of terrified anguish. "It seems strange," he murmured, "that Margery's child should be happy."