

CHAPTER XXXIII

It was not difficult to discover the abiding place of the De Willoughby claimants. The time had come when there were few who did not know who occupied the upper floor of Miss Burford's house near the Circle. Miss Burford herself had gradually become rather proud of her boarders, and, as the interest in the case increased, felt herself becoming a prominent person.

"If the claim goes through, the De Willoughby family will be very wealthy," she said, genteelly. "They will return to their Southern home, no doubt, and restore it to its fawmah magnificence. Mr. Rupert De Willoughby will be lawd of the mannah."

She spent many hours--which she felt to be very aristocratic--in listening to Uncle Matt's stories of the "old De Willoughby place," the rice-fields in "South Ca'llina," and the "thousands of acres of gol' mines" in the mountains. There was a rich consolation in mere conversation on the subject of glories which had once had veritable substance, and whose magnitude might absolutely increase if fortune was kind. But it was not through inquiry that Latimer discovered the whereabouts of the man who shared his secret. In two days' time they met face to face on the steps of the Capitol.

Latimer was going down them; big Tom was coming up. The latter was lost

in thought on his affairs, and was not looking at such of his fellow-men as passed him. Suddenly he found himself one or two steps below someone who held out a hand and spoke in a low voice.

"De Willoughby!" the stranger exclaimed, and Tom lifted his eyes and looked straight into those of the man he had seen last nineteen years before in the cabin at Blair's Hollow.

"Do you know me again?" the man asked. "It's a good many years since we met, and I am not as easy to recognise as you."

"Yes, I know you," answered big Tom, grasping the outstretched hand kindly. "I saw you a few days ago and knew you."

"I did not see you," said Latimer. "And you did not speak to me?"

"No," answered Tom, slowly; "I thought it over while I walked behind you, and I made up my mind that it might do you no good--and to hold back would do none of us any harm."

"None of us?" questioned Latimer.

Big Tom put a hand on his shoulder.

"Since you spoke to me of your own free will," he said, "let's go and have a talk. There are plenty of quiet corners in this place."

There were seats which were secluded enough, though people passed and repassed within sight of them. People often chose such spots to sit and talk together. One saw pairs of lovers, pairs of politicians, couples of sightseers.

They found such a seat and sat down. Latimer could not well control the expression his face wore.

"None of us?" he said again.

Tom still kept a friendly hand on his shoulder.

"She is a beautiful young woman, though she will always seem more or less of a child to me," he said. "I have kept her safe and I've made her happy. That was what I meant to do. I don't believe she has had a sad hour in her life. What I'm sick of is seeing people unhappy. I've kept unhappiness from her. We've loved each other--that's what we've done. She's known nothing but having people about who were fond of her. They were a simple, ignorant lot of mountain hoosiers, but, Lord! they loved her and she loved them. She's enjoyed the spring, and she's enjoyed the summer, and she's enjoyed the autumn and the winter. The rainy days haven't made her feel dull, and the cold ones haven't made her shiver. That's the way she has grown up--just like a pretty fawn or a forest tree. Now her young mate has come, and the pair of them fell deep in love at sight. They met at the right time and they were the right pair. It was

all so natural that she didn't know she was in love at first. She only knew she was happier every day. I knew what was the matter, and it made me happy just to look on. Good lord! how they love each other--those children. How they look at each other every minute without knowing they are doing it; and how they smile when their eyes meet--without knowing why. I know why. It's because they are in paradise--and God knows if it's to be done I'm going to keep them there."

"My God!" broke from Latimer. "What a heart you have, man!" He turned his face to look at him almost as if in reverent awe. "Margery's child! Margery's child!" he repeated to himself. "Is she like her mother?" he asked.

"I never saw her mother--when she was happy," Tom answered. "She is taller than her mother and has eyes like a summer morning sky. It's a wonderful face. I sometimes think she must be like--the other."

"I want to see her," said Latimer. "She need know nothing about me. I want to see her. May I?"

"Yes. We are staying here to push our claim, and we are living near Dupont Circle, and doing it as cheaply as we can. We haven't a cent to spare, but that hasn't hurt us so far. If we win our claim we shall be bloated bondholders; if we lose it, we shall have to tramp back to the mountains and build a log hut, and live on nuts and berries until we can raise a crop. The two young ones will set up a nest of their own and live

like Adam and Eve--and I swear they won't mind it. They'd be happy rich, but they'll be happy poor. When would you like to come and see her?"

"May I come to-morrow?" asked Latimer. "And may I bring a friend with me? He is the human being who is nearest to me on earth. He is the only living soul who knows--what we know. He is the Reverend John Baird."

"What!" said Tom. "The man who is setting the world on fire with his lectures--the 'Repentance' man?"

"Yes."

"She'll like to see him. No one better. We shall all like to see him. We have heard a great deal of him."

They did not part for half an hour. When they did Latimer knew a great deal of the past. He knew the story of the child's up-growing, with the sun rising from behind one mountain and setting behind another; he seemed

to know the people who had loved and been familiar with her throughout her childish and girlish years; he knew of the fanciful name given her in infancy, and of the more fanciful one her primitive friends and playmates had adopted. He knew the story of Rupert, and guessed vaguely at the far past in which Delia Vanuxem had lived and died.

"Thank God I saw you that day!" he said. "Thank God I went to you that

night!" And they grasped hands again and went their separate ways.

* * * * *

Latimer went home and told Baird of the meeting and of the appointment for the following day.

"I felt that you would like to see the man," he said. "He is the finest, simple being in the world. Soul and body are on a like scale."

"You were right in thinking I should like to see him," answered Baird. "I have thought of him often." He regarded his friend with some anxiety.

"To meet her face to face will be a strange thing," he added. "Do you think you can hide what you must feel? It will not be easy--even for me."

"It will not be easy for either of us--if she looks at us with Margery's eyes. You will know them. Margery was happy, too, when the picture you have seen was made."

That--to see her stand before them in her youth and beauty, all unknowing--would be a strange thing, was the thought in the mind of each as they walked through the streets together, the next evening. The flare of an occasional street-lamp falling on Latimer's face revealed all its story to his companion, though it might not have so revealed itself to

another. Baird himself was wondering how they should each bear themselves

throughout the meeting. She would be so wholly unconscious--this girl who had always been happy and knew nothing of the past. To her they would be but a middle-aged popular lecturer and his unattractive-looking friend--while each to himself was a man concealing from her a secret. They must eliminate it from their looks, their voices, their air. They must be frank and courteous and conventional. Baird turned it all over in his mind. When they reached the house the second-story windows were lighted as if to welcome them. Matt opened the door for them, attired in his best and bowing low. To receive such guests he felt to be an important social event, which seemed to increase the chances of the claim and point to a future when distinguished visitors would throng to a much more imposing front door. He announced, with an air of state, that his master and young mistress were "receivin'," and took ceremonious charge of the callers. He had brushed his threadbare coat and polished each brass button singly until it shone. An African imagination aided him to feel the dignity of hospitality.

The sound of a girl's voice reached them as they went upstairs. They glanced at each other involuntarily, and Latimer's breath was sharply drawn. It was not the best preparation for calmness.

A glowing small fire was burning in the stove, and, plain and bare as the room was, it was filled with the effect of brightness. Two beautiful young people were laughing together over a book, and both rose and turned

eager faces towards the door. Big Tom rose, too, and, advancing to meet the visitors, brought the girl with him.

She was built on long and supple lines, and had happy eyes and lovely bloom. The happy eyes were Margery's, though they were brown instead of harebell blue, and looked out from a face which was not quite Margery's, though its smile was hers. Latimer asked himself if it was possible that his manner wore the aspect of ordinary calm as he stood before her.

Sheba wondered at the coldness of his hand as she took it. She was not attracted by his anxious face, and it must be confessed that his personality produced on her the effect it frequently produced on those meeting him for the first time. It was not he who was the great man, but she felt timid before him when he spoke to her.

No one was shy of Baird. He produced his inevitable effect also. In a few minutes he had become the centre of the small company. He had made friends with Rupert, and launched Tom in conversation. Sheba was listening to him with a brightness of look charming to behold.

They sat about the table and talked, and he led them all back to the mountains which had been seeming so far away. He wanted to hear of the atmosphere, the life, the people; and yet, as they answered his queries and related anecdotes, he was learning from each one something bearing on the story of the claim. When Tom spoke of Barnesville and Judge Rutherford, or Rupert of Delisleville and Matt, their conversation was

guided in such manner that business details of the claim were part of what was said. It was Tom who realised this first and spoke of it.

"We are talking of our own business as if it was the one subject on earth," he said. "That's the worst of people with a claim. I've seen a good many of them since I've been in Washington--and we are all alike."

"I have been asking questions because the subject interests me, too," said Baird. "More people than yourselves discuss it. It formed a chief topic of conversation when I dined with Senator Milner, two nights ago."

"Milner!" said Tom. "He was the man who had not time to hear me in the morning."

"His daughter, Mrs. Meredith, was inquiring about you. She wanted to hear the story. I shall tell it to her."

"Ah!" exclaimed Tom; "if you tell it, it will have a chance."

"Perhaps," Baird laughed. "I may be able to help you. A man who is used to audiences might be of some practical value."

He met Sheba's eyes by accident. A warm light leaped into them.

"They care a great deal more than they will admit to me," she said to him, when chance left them together a few minutes later, as Tom and

Rupert were showing Latimer some books. "They are afraid of making me unhappy by letting me know how serious it will be if everything is lost. They care too much for me--but I care for them, and if I could do anything--or go to anyone----"

He looked into her eyes through a curious moment of silence.

"It was not all jest," he said after it, "what I said just now. I am a man who has words, and words sometimes are of use. I am going to give you my words--for what they are worth."

"We shall feel very rich," she answered, and her simple directness might have been addressed to a friend of years' standing. It was a great charm, this sweet acceptance of any kindness. "But I thought you were going away in a few days?"

"Yes. But I shall come back, and I shall try to set the ball rolling before I go."

She glanced at Latimer across the room.

"Mr. Latimer--" she hesitated; "do you think he does not mind that--that the claim means so much for us? I was afraid. He looked at me so seriously----"

"He looked at you a great deal," interposed Baird, quickly. "He could not

help it. I am glad to have this opportunity to tell you--something. You are very like--very like--someone he loved deeply--someone who died years ago. You must forgive him. It was almost a shock to him to come face to face with you."

"Ah!" softly. "Someone who died years ago!" She lifted Margery's eyes and let them rest upon Baird's face. "It must be very strange--it must be almost awful--to find yourself near a person very like someone you have loved--who died years ago."

"Yes," he answered. "Yes--awful. That is the word."

When the two men walked home together through the streets, the same thought was expressed again, and it was Latimer who expressed it.

"And when she looked at me," he said, "I almost cried out to her, 'Margery, Margery!' The cry leaped up from the depths of me. I don't know how I stopped it. Margery was smaller and more childlike--her eyes are darker, her face is her own, not Margery's--but she looks at one as Margery did. It is the simple clearness of her look, the sweet belief, which does not know life holds a creature who could betray it."

"Yes, yes," broke from Baird. The exclamation seemed involuntary.

"Yet there was one who could betray it," Latimer said.

"You cannot forget," said Baird. "No wonder."

Latimer shook his head.

"The passing of years," he said, "almost inevitably wipes out or dims all things; but sometimes--not often, thank Fate--there comes a phase of suffering in some man or woman's life which will not go. I once knew a woman--she was the kind of woman people envy, and whose life seems brilliant and full; it was full of the things most people want, but the things she wanted were not for her, and there was a black wound in her soul. She had had a child who had come near to healing her, and suddenly he was torn out of her being by death. She said afterwards that she knew she had been mad for months after it happened, though no one suspected her. In the years that followed she dared not allow herself to speak or think of that time of death. 'I must not let myself--I must not.' She said this to me, and shuddered, clenching her hands when she spoke. 'Never, never, never, will it be better. If a thousand years had passed it would always be the same. One thought or word of it drags me back--and plunges me deep into the old, awful woe. Old--it is not old--it never can be old. It is as if it had happened yesterday--as if it were happening to-day.' I know this is not often so. But it is so with me when a thing drags Margery back to me--drags me back to Margery. To-night, Baird; think what it is to-night!"

He put a shaking hand on Baird's hand, hurrying him by the unconscious rapidity of his own pace.

"Think what it is to-night," he repeated. "She seems part of my being. I cannot free myself. I can see her as she was when she last looked at me, as her child looked at me to-night--with joyful bright eyes and lips. It was one day when I went to see her at Boston. She was doing a little picture, and it had been praised at the studio. She was so happy--so happy. That was the last time."

"Don't, don't," cried Baird; "you must not call it back."

"I am not calling it back. It comes, it comes! You must let me go on. You can't stop me. That was the last time. The next time I saw her she had changed. I scarcely knew how--it was so little. The brightness was blurred. Then--then comes all the rest. Her growing illness--the anxiousness--the long days--the girl at the mills--the talk of those women--the first ghastly, damnable fear--the nights--the lying awake!" His breath came short and fast. He could not stop himself, it was plain. His words tumbled over each other as if he were a man telling a story in delirium.

"I can see her," he said. "I can see her--as I went into her room. I can see her shaking hands and lips and childish, terrified eyes. I can feel her convulsive little fingers clutching my feet, and her face--her face--lying upon them when she fell down."

"I cannot bear it," cried Baird; "I cannot bear it." He had uttered the

same cry once before. He had received the same answer.

"She bore it," said Latimer, fiercely. "That last night--in the cabin on the hillside--her cries--they were not human--no, they did not sound human----"

He was checked. It was Baird's hand which clutched his arm now--it seemed as if for support. The man was swaying a little, and in the light of a street-lamp near them he looked up in a ghastly appeal.

"Latimer," he said. "Don't go on; you see I can't bear it. I am not so strong as I was--before I began this work. I have lost my nerve. You bring it before me as it is brought before yourself. I am living the thing. I can't bear it."

Latimer came back from the past. He made an effort to understand and control himself.

"Yes," he said, quite dull; "that was what the woman I spoke of told me--that she lived the thing again. It is not sane to let one's self go back. I beg your pardon, Baird."