

CHAPTER XXXIV

"It's a curious job, that De Willoughby claim," was said in a committee-room of the House, one day. "It's beginning to attract attention because it has such an innocent air. The sharp ones say that may be the worst feature of it, because ingenuousness is more dangerous than anything else if a job is thoroughly rotten. The claimants are the most straightforward pair the place has ever seen--a big, humourous, well-mannered country man, and a boy of twenty-three. Rutherford, of Hamlin County, who is a monument of simplicity in himself, is heart and soul in the thing--and Farquhar feels convinced by it. Farquhar is one of the men who are not mixed up with jobs. Milner himself is beginning to give the matter a glance now and then, though he has not committed himself; and now the Reverend John Baird, the hero of the platform, is taking it up."

Baird had proved his incidental offer of aid to have been by no means an idle one. He had been obliged to absent himself from Washington for a period, but he had returned when his lecture tour had ended, and had shown himself able in a new way. He was the kind of man whose conversation people wish to hear. He chose the right people and talked to them about the De Willoughby claim. He was interesting and picturesque in connection with it, and lent the topic attractions. Tom had been shrewdly right in saying that his talk of it would give it a chance.

He went often to the house near the Circle. Latimer did not go with him, and had himself explained his reasons to big Tom.

"I have seen her," he said. "It is better that I should not see her often. She is too much like her mother."

But Baird seemed to become by degrees one of the household. Gradually--and

it did not take long--Tom and he were familiar friends. They had long talks together, they walked side by side through the streets, they went in company to see the men it was necessary to hold interviews with. Their acquaintance became an intimacy which established itself with curious naturalness. It was as if they had been men of the same blood, who, having spent their lives apart, on meeting, found pleasure in the discovery of their relationship. The truth was that for the first time in his life big Tom enjoyed a friendship with a man who was educated and, in a measure, of

the world into which he himself had been born. Baird's world had been that of New England, his own, the world of the South; but they could comprehend

each other's parallels and precedents, and argue from somewhat similar planes. In the Delisville days Tom had formed no intimacies, and had been a sort of Colossus set apart; in the mountains of North Carolina he had consorted with the primitive and uneducated in good-humoured, even grateful, friendliness; but he had mentally lived like a hermit. To have talked to Jabe Doty or Nath Hayes on any other subjects than those of crops and mountain politics or sermons would have been to bewilder them

hopelessly. To find himself in mental contact with a man who had lived and thought through all the years during which he himself had vegetated at the Cross-roads, was a wonderful thing to him. He realised that he had long ago given up expecting anything approaching such companionship, and that to indulge in it was to live in a new world. Baird's voice, his choice of words, his readiness and tact, the very carriage of his fine, silvering head, produced on him the effect of belonging to a new species of human being.

"You are all the things I have been missing for half a lifetime," he said. "I didn't know what it was I was making up my mind to going without--but it was such men as you."

On his own part, Baird felt he had made a rich discovery also. The large humour and sweetness, the straightforward unworldliness which was still level-headed and observing, the broad kindness and belief in humanity which were so far from unintelligent or injudicious, were more attractive to him than any collected characteristics he had met before. They seemed to meet some strained needs in him. To leave his own rooms, and find his way to the house whose atmosphere was of such curious, homely brightness,

to be greeted by Sheba's welcoming eyes, to sit and chat with Tom in the twilight or to saunter out with him with an arm through his, were things he soon began to look forward to. He began also to realise that this life of home and the affections was a thing he had lived without. During his brief and wholly unemotional married life he had known nothing like it.

His years of widowerhood had been presided over by Mrs. Stornaway, who had assumed the supervision of his child as a duty. Annie had been a properly behaved, rather uninteresting and unresponsive little person. She had neat features and a realisation of the importance of respectability and the proprieties which was a credit to Willowfield and her training. She was never gay or inconsequent or young. She had gone to school, she had had her frocks lengthened and been introduced at tea-parties, exactly as had been planned for her. She never committed a breach of discretion and she never formed in any degree an element of special interest. She greatly respected her father's position as a successful man, and left it to be vaguely due to the approbation of Willowfield.

Big Tom De Willoughby, in two wooden rooms behind a cross-roads store, in a small frame house kept in order by a negro woman, and in the genteel poverty of Miss Burford's second floor, had surrounded himself with the comforts and pleasures of the affections. It was not possible to enter the place without feeling their warmth, and Baird found himself nourished by it. He saw that Rupert, too, was nourished by it. His young good looks and manhood were developing under its influence day by day. He seemed to grow taller and stronger. Baird had made friends with him, too, and was with them the night he came in to announce that at last he had got work to do.

"It is to sell things from behind a counter," he said, and he went to Sheba and lifted her hand to his lips, kissing it before them all. "We

know a better man who has done it."

"You know a bigger man who has done it," said Tom. "He did it because he was cut out for a failure. You are doing it because you are cut out for a success. It will be a good story for the reporters when the claim goes through, my boy."

Baird perceived at once that it was a good story, even at this particular period--a story which might be likely to arouse curiosity and interest at a time when the awakening of such emotions was of the greatest value. He told it at the house of a magnate of the Supreme Court, the next night. He had a varied and useful audience of important politicians and their wives and daughters, the latter specially fitted to act as mediums of transmission to other audiences. He told the anecdote well. It was a good picture, that of the room on Miss Burford's upper floor, the large claimant smiling like a benign Jove, and the handsome youngster bending his head to kiss the girlish hand as if he were doing homage to a queen.

"I think his feeling was that his failure to get a better thing was a kind of indignity done her," Baird explained. "He comes of a race of men who have worshipped women and beauty in a romantic, troubadour fashion; only the higher professions, and those treated in a patrician, amateur style, were possible to them as work. And yet, as he said, a better man than himself had done this same thing. What moves one is that he has gone out to find work as if he had been born a bricklayer. He tells me they are reaching the end of all they depend on."

"I'll tell you what it is," said Senator Milner to his daughter, a few days afterwards; "this is going to be a feminine claim. There was a time when I swore I wouldn't touch it, but I foresee what is going to happen. I'm going to give in, and the other opposers are going to give in, and in the end the Government will give in. And it will be principally because a force of wives and daughters has marshalled itself to march to the rescue. No one ever realises what a power the American woman is, and how much she is equal to accomplishing. If she took as much interest in politics as English women do, she would elect every president and control every party. We are a good-natured lot, and we are fond of our womenkind and believe in them much more than other nations do. They're pretty clever and straight, you know, as well as being attractive, and we can't help realising that they are often worth listening to. So we listen, and when they drive a truth home we are willing to believe in it. If the feminine halves of the two Houses decide that the De Willoughby claim is all right, they'll prove it to us, and there you are."

"I believe we can prove it to you," answered Mrs. Meredith. "I went to see the people, and you could prove anything straightforward by merely showing them to the Houses in session. They could not conceal a disingenuous thought among them--the delightful giant, the boy with the eyelashes, the radiant girl, and the old black man put together."

In the meantime Judge Rutherford did his honest best. He had been too sanguine not to do it with some ruefulness after the first few months.

During the passage of these few months many of his ingenuous ideals had been overthrown. It had been borne in upon him that honest virtue was not so powerful a factor as he had believed. The obstacles continually arising in his pathway were not such as honest virtue could remove. The facts that the claim was "as straight as a string," and that big Tom De Willoughby was the best fellow in Hamlin were bewilderingly ineffective. When prospects seemed to shine they might be suddenly overshadowed by the fact that a man whose influence was needed, required it to use for himself in other quarters; when all promised well some apparently unexplainable obstacle brought things to a standstill.

"Now you see it and now you don't," said Tom, resignedly. "That's the position. This sort of thing might go on for twenty years."

He was not aware that he spoke prophetically; yet claims resting on as solid a basis as his own passed through the same dragging processes for thirty years before they were finally settled. But such did not possess the elements of unprofessional picturesqueness this particular one presented told to its upholders and opposers.

Uncle Matt himself was to be counted among these elements. He had made himself as familiar and popular a figure in the public places of the Capital as he had been in Delisleville. He made friends in the market-house and on the steps of the Capitol and the Treasury and the Pension Office; he hung about official buildings and obtained odd jobs of

work, his grey wool, his polished air of respectfulness, his readiness and amiability attracted attention and pleased those who came in contact with him. People talked to him and asked him friendly questions, and when they did so the reason for his presence in Washington and the importance of the matter which had brought his young master to the seat of government were fully explained.

"I belongs to de gen'elmen dat's here tendin' to de De Willoughby claim, sah," he would say. "Co'se, sah, you've heern 'bout it up to de Capitol. I'se yere waitin' on Marse Rupert De Willoughby, but co'se he don' live yere--till ye gets his claim through--like he do in de ole family mansh'n at Delisleville--an' my time hangs heavy on my han's, cos I got so much ledger--so I comes out like dish yer--an' takes a odd job now an' agen."

It was not long before he was known as the De Willoughby claimant, and loiterers were fond of drawing him out on the subject of the "gol' mines." He gathered a large amount of information on the subjects of claims and the rapid methods of working them. He used to come to Tom sometimes, hot and excited with his struggles to comprehend detail. "What all dish yer 'bout Marse Rupert's granpa'n' bein' destructively disloyal? Dar warn't no disloyal 'bout it. Ef dar was a fault to be foun' with the old Judge it was dat he was mos' too loyal. He couldn' hol' in, an' he qu'ol with mos' ev'y gen'elman he talk to. He pass shots with one or two he had a disagreement with. He pass shots with 'em. How's de Guv'ment gwine call a gen'elman 'destructively disloyal' when he ready any minit to pass shots with his bes' fren's, ef dey don' 'gree with his

pol'tics--an' his pol'tics is on de side er Marse Ab'am Lincoln an' de Yankees?"

The phrase "constructively disloyal" rankled in his soul. He argued about it upon every possible occasion, and felt that if the accusation could be disproved the De Willoughby case would be triumphantly concluded, which was in a large measure true.

"I steddies 'bout dat thing day an' night," he said to Sheba. "Seems like dar oughter be someone to tes'ify. Ef I had de money to travel back to Delisleville, I'd go an' try to hunt someone up."

He was seated upon the steps of a Government building one afternoon, discussing his favourite subject with some of his coloured friends. He had been unusually eloquent, and had worked himself up to a peroration, when he suddenly ceased speaking and stared straight across the street to the opposite side of the pavement, in such absorption that he forgot to close his mouth.

He was gazing at an elderly gentleman with a hook nose and the dashing hat of the broad brim, which was regarded as being almost as much an insignia of the South as the bonnie blue flag itself.

Uncle Matt got up and shuffled across the street. He had become unconsciously apish with excitement. His old black face worked and his hands twitched.

He was so far out of breath when he reached the stranger's side that he could scarcely make himself heard, as, pulling his hat off, he cried, agitatedly:

"Doctah! Doctah Atkinson, sah! Doctah Williams Atkinson!"

The stranger did not hear him distinctly, and waved him off, evidently taking him for a beggar.

"I've nothing for you, uncle," he said, with condescending good-nature.

Uncle Matt found some of his breath, though not enough to steady his voice. But his strenuousness was almost passionate. "Doctah Williams Atkinson," he said, "I ain't beggin', Doctah Atkinson, sah; on'y axin' if I might speak a few words to you, sah!" His shrewd insistence on the name was effective.

The elderly gentleman turned and looked at him in surprised questioning.

"How do you know me?" he said. "This is the first time I have been in Washington--and I've not been here an hour."

"I knowed you, Doctah Atkinson, sah, in Delisleville, Delisle County. Ev'ybody knowed you, Doctah! I was dar endurin' er de war. I was dar de time you--you an' Judge De Willoughby passed shots 'bout dat Confed'ate

flag."

"What do you want?" said Dr. Atkinson, somewhat unsmilingly. These were days when stories of the Confederate flag were generally avoided. Northerners called it the rebel flag.

Matt had had the discretion to avoid this mistake. He was wild with anxious excitement. Suddenly here had appeared a man who could give all the evidence desired, if he would do so. He had left Delisleville immediately on the close of the war and had not been heard of. He might, like so many, be passing on to some unknown point, and remain in the city only between trains. There was no time to find any better qualified person than himself to attend to this matter. It must be attended to upon the spot and at this moment. Uncle Matt knew all the incongruities of the situation. No one could have known them better. But a sort of hysteric courage grew out of his desperation.

"Doctah Williams Atkinson, sah!" he said. "May I take de liberty of walking jes' behin' you an' axin' you a question. I mustn't keep you standin'. I beg you to 'scuse me, sah. I kin talk an' walk at de same time."

Dr. Williams Atkinson was an amenable person, and Matt's imploring old darky countenance was not without its pathos. He was so evidently racked by his emotions.

"What is it all about?" he enquired.

Matt stood uncovered and spoke fast. The hand holding his hat was shaking, as also was his voice.

"I'm nothin' but a ole niggah man, Doctah Atkinson, sah," he said. "It ain't for myself I'se intrudin' on ye; it's cos dar wasn't time to go fer Marse De Willoughby that could talk it like it oughter be. I jes' had to push my ole niggah self in, fear you'd be gone an' we'd nevah set eyes on you agin."

"Walk along by me," said the Doctor. "What about the De Willoughbys; I thought they were all dead."

"All but Marse Thomas and Marse Rupert. Dey's yere 'tendin' to de claim. Has you done heern 'bout de claim, Doctah Atkinson?"

"No," the Doctor answered. "I have been in too far out West."

Whereupon Matt plunged into the story of the "gol' mines," and the difficulties which had presented themselves in the pathway of the claimant, and the necessity for the production of testimony which would disprove the charge of disloyalty. The detail was not very clear, but it had the effect of carrying Dr. Williams Atkinson back to certain good old days in Delisleville, before his beloved South had been laid low and he had been driven far afield to live among strangers, an alien. For that

reason he found himself moved by the recital and listened to it to its end.

"But what has this to do with me?" he asked. "What do you want of me?"

"When I seed you, sah," Uncle Matt explained, "it all come back to me in a minnit, how you an' de Judge pass shots 'bout dat flag; how you axed him to a dinner-party, an' dar was a Confed'ate officer dar--an' a Confed'ate flag hung up over de table, an' de Judge when he seed it he 'fused p'int blank to set down to de table, an' it ended in you goin' out in de gyardin' an' changin' shots."

"Yes, damn it all," cried Dr. Atkinson, but melted the next moment. "The poor old fellow is dead," he said, "an' he died in disgrace and without friends."

"Yes," Uncle Matt protested, eagerly; "without a single friend, an' all 'lone 'ceptin' of Marse Rupert--all 'lone. An' it was 'cos he was so strong for de Union--an' now de Guv'ment won't let his fambly have his money 'cos dey's tryin' to prove him destructively disloyal--when he changed shots with his bes' friend 'cos he wouldn't set under de Confed'ate flag."

A grim smile wakened in Dr. Atkinson's face.

"What!" he said; "do you want me to explain to the Government that the

old scamp would have blown my brains out if he could?"

"Doctah Atkinson, sah," said Uncle Matt, with shrewd gravity, "things is diffrent dese days, an' de Guv'ment don't call dem gen'elmen scamps as was called dat in de Souf."

He looked up under the broad brim of his companion's hat with impassioned appealing.

"I jes' 'member one thing, sah," he said; "dat you was a Southern gen'elman, and when a enemy's dead a Southern gen'elman don't cherish no harm agin him, an' you straight from Delisleville, an' you deed an' heerd it all, an' de Guv'ment ken see plain enough you's no carpet-bag jobber, an' ef a gen'elman like you tes'ify, an' say you was enemies--an' you did pass shots count er dat flag, how's dey gwine talk any more about dis destructive disloyal business? How dey gwine ter do it?"

"And I am to be the means of enriching his family--the family of an obstinate old fool, who abused me like a pickpocket and spoiled a dress-coat for me when dress-coats were scarce."

"He's dead, Doctah Williams Atkinson, sah, he's dead," said Matt. "It was mighty lonesome the way he died, too, in dat big house, dat was stripped by de soldiers, an' ev'ybody dead belonging to him--Miss De Willoughby, an' de young ladies, an' Marse Romaine, an' Marse De Courcy--no one lef

but dat boy. It was mighty lonesome, sah."

"Yes, that's so," said Dr. Atkinson, reflectively. After a few moments' silence, he added, "Whom do you want me to tell this to? It may be very little use, but it may serve as evidence."

Uncle Matt stopped upon the pavement.

"Would you let me 'scort you to Senator Milner, sah?" he said, in absolute terror at his own daring. "Would you 'low me to 'tend you to Senator Grove? I knows what a favior I'se axin'. I knows it doun to de groun'. I scarcely dars't to ax it, but if I loses you, sah, Marse Thomas De Willoughby an' Marse Rupert may lose de claim. Ef I lose you, sah, seems mos' like I gwine to lose my mind."

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There were a thousand chances to one that Senator Milner might not be where Uncle Matt hoped to find him; there were ten thousand chances to one that he might be absorbingly engaged; there were uncountable chances against them obtaining an interview with either man, and yet it so happened they had the curious good luck to come upon Senator Milner absolutely without searching for him. It was rather he who came upon them at one of the entrances of the Capitol itself, before which stood his daughter's carriage. Mrs. Meredith had spent the morning in the Senate, being interested in the subject under debate. She was going to take her

father home to lunch, and as she was about to enter her carriage her glance fell upon the approaching figures of Uncle Matt and his companion.

"Father," she said, "there is the faithful retainer of the De Willoughby claimants, and there is not a shadow of a doubt that he is in search of you. I am convinced that he wishes to present that tall Southerner under the big hat."

In a moment's space Uncle Matt was before them. The deprecatory respect implied by his genuflections could scarcely be computed.

"Senator Milner, sah," he said, "Doctah Williams Atkinson of Delisleville has had de kindness to say he do me de favior to come yeah, sah, to tes'ify, sah----"

The large hat was removed by its owner with a fine sweep. "The old fellow thinks I can do his people a service, Senator," explained Dr. Atkinson.

"He is the servant of the De Willoughby claimants, and it seems there has been some question of Judge De Willoughby's loyalty. During the war, sir, he was called disloyal by his neighbours, and was a much hated man."

Uncle Matt's lips were trembling. He broke forth, forgetting the careful training of his youth.

"Dar wasn't a gen'elman in de county," he cried, "dar wasn't a gen'elman in de State, mo' hated an' 'spised an' mo' looked down on."

The lean Southerner nodded acquiescently. "That's true," he said. "It's quite true. He was a copperhead and a firebrand. We detested him. He insulted me at my own table by refusing to sit down under the Southern flag, and the matter ended with pistols."

"This is interesting, by Jove," said the Senator, and he looked from Uncle Matt to his capture. "I should like to hear more of it."

"Will you confer a pleasure on me by coming home to lunch with us?" said Mrs. Meredith, who had begun to look radiant. "I am interested in the De Willoughby claim; I would give a great deal to see my father entirely convinced. He has been on the verge of conviction for some time. I want him to hear the story with all the details. I beg you will let us take you home with us, Dr. Atkinson."

"Madame," replied Dr. Williams Atkinson, with an eighteenth century obeisance, "Judge De Willoughby and I lived in open feud, but I am becoming interested in the De Willoughby claim also. I accept your invitation with pleasure." And they drove away together.