CHAPTER XXXV

"There is a man who seems to have begun to haunt my pathway," Baird said to Tom; "or perhaps it is Latimer's pathway, for it is when Latimer is with me that I meet him. He is small and sharp-featured and unwholesome."

"It sounds like Stamps," laughed big Tom.

He related the story of Stamps and his herds. The herds had not gained the congressional ear as Mr. Stamps had hoped. He had described their value and the gravity of his loss to everyone who would listen to his eloquence, but the result had been painfully discouraging. His boarding-house had become a cheaper one week by week, and his blue jeans had grown shabbier. He had fallen into the habit of hanging about the entrances of public buildings and the street corners in the hope of finding hearers and sympathisers. His sharp little face had become haggard and more weasel-like than before. Baird recognised big Tom's description of him at once.

"Yes, it must be Stamps," he said. "What is the meaning of his interest in us? Does he think we can provide evidence to prove the value of the herds? What are you thinking of, De Willoughby?"

In fact, there had suddenly recurred to Tom's mind a recollection of

Sheba's fifth birthday and the visit Mr. Stamps had made him. With something of a shock he recalled the shrewd meekness of his voice as he made his exit.

"It begins with a 'L,' Tom; it begins with a 'L.'"

The need of money was merely the natural expression of Mr. Stamps's nature. He had needed money when he was born, and had laid infant schemes
to secure cents from his relatives and their neighbours before he was four years old. But he had never needed it as he did now. The claim for governmental restitution of the value of the daily increasing herds had become the centre of his being. His belief in their existence and destruction was in these days profound; his belief that he should finally be remunerated in the name and by the hand of national justice was the breath of life to him. He had at last found a claim agent whose characteristics were similar to his own, and, so long as he was able to supply small sums with regularity, this gentleman was willing to encourage him and direct him to fresh effort. Mr. Abner Linthicum, of Vermont, had enjoyed several successes in connection with two or three singular claims which he had "put through" with the aid of genius combined with a peculiar order of executive ability. They had not been large claims, but he had "put them through" when other agents had declined to touch them. In fact, each one had been a claim which had been fought shy of, and one whose final settlement had been commented upon with open derision or raised eyebrows.

"Yours is the kind of claim I like to take up," he had said to his client in their first interview; "but it's the kind that's got to be engineered carefully, and money is needed to grease the wheels. But it'll pay to grease them."

It had needed money. Stamps had no large sums to give, but he could be bled by drops. He had changed his cheap boarding-place for a cheaper one, that he might be able to save a few dollars a week; he had left the cheaper one for one cheaper still for the same reason, and had at last camped in a bare room over a store, and lived on shreds of food costing a few cents a day, that he might still grease the wheels. Abner Linthicum was hard upon him, and was not in the least touched by seeing his meagre little face grow sharper and his garments hang looser upon his small frame.

"You'll fat on the herds," he would say, with practical jocularity, and Mr. Stamps grinned feebly, his thin lips stretching themselves over hungry teeth.

The little man burned with the fever of his chase. He sat in his bare room on the edge of his mattress--having neither bedstead nor chairs nor tables--and his fingers clutched each other as he worked out plans and invented arguments likely to be convincing to an ungrateful Government. He used to grow hot and cold over them.

"Ef Tom 'd hev gone in with me an' helped me to work out that thar thing about Sheby, we mought hev made suthin' as would hev carried me through this," he said to himself more than once. He owed Tom a bitter grudge in a mild way. His bitterness was the bitterness of a little rat baulked of cheese.

He had kept safely what he had found in the deserted cabin, but, as the years passed, he lost something of the hopes he had at first cherished. When he had seen Sheba growing into a tall beauty he had calculated that her market value was increasing. A handsome young woman who might marry
well, might be willing to pay something to keep a secret quiet--if any practical person knew the secret and it was unpleasant. Well-to-do husbands did not want to hear their wives talked about. When Rupert De Willoughby had arrived, Mr. Stamps had had a moment of discouragement.

"He's gwine to fall in love with her," he said, "but he'd oughter bin wealthier. Ef the De Willoughbys was what they'd usedter be he'd be the very feller as 'ud pay for things to be kept quiet. The De Willoughbys was allers proud an' 'ristycratic, an' mighty high-falutin' 'bout their women folk."

When the subject of the De Willoughby claim was broached he fell into feverish excitement. The De Willoughbys had a chance in a hundred of becoming richer than they had ever been. He took his treasure from its hiding-place--sat turning it over, gnawing his finger-nails and breathing

fast. But treasure though he counted it, he gained no clue from it but the one he had spoken of to Tom when he had cast his farewell remark to him as he closed the door.

"Ef there'd hev been more," he said. "A name ain't much when there ain't nothin' to tack on to it. It was curi's enough, but it'd hev to be follered up an' found out. Ef he was only what he 'lowed to be--'tain't nothin' to hide that a man's wife dies an' leaves a child. I don't b'lieve thar wasn't nothin' to hide--but it'd hev to be proved--an' proved plain. It's mighty aggravatin'."

One night, seeing a crowd pouring into a hall where a lecture was to be delivered, he had lingered about the entrance until the carriage containing the lecturer drove up. Here was something to be had for nothing, at all events--he could have a look at the man who was making such a name for himself. There must be something in a man who could demand so much a night for talking to people. He managed to get a place well to the front of the loitering crowd on the pavement.

The carriage-door was opened and a man got out.

"That ain't him," said a bystander. "That's Latimer. He's always with him."

The lecturer descended immediately after his companion, but Stamps, who was pushing past a man who had got in front of him, was displaying this

eagerness, not that he might see the hero of the hour, but that he might look squarely at the friend who had slightly turned his face.

"Gosh!" ejaculated the little hoosier, a minute later. "I'd most swear to him."

He was exasperatedly conscious that he could not quite have sworn to him. The man he had seen nineteen years before had been dressed in clumsily made homespun; he had worn his black hair long and his beard had been unshaven. Nineteen years were nineteen years, and the garb and bearing of civilisation would make a baffling change in any man previously seen attired in homespun, and carrying himself as an unsociable hoosier.

"But I'd most sw'ar to him--most." Stamps went through the streets muttering, "I'd most swar!"

It was but a few days later that Latimer saw him standing on a street corner staring at him as he himself approached. It was his curious intentness which attracted Latimer. He did not recognise his face. He had not seen him more than once in the days so long gone by, and had then cast a mere abstracted glance at him. He did not know him again--though his garments vaguely recalled months when he had only seen men clothed in

jeans of blue, or copperas brown. He saw him again the next day, and again the next, and after that he seemed to chance upon him so often that he could not help observing and reflecting upon the eager scrutiny in his

wrinkled countenance.

"Do you see that man?" he remarked to Baird. "I come upon him everywhere. Do you know him?"

"No. I thought it possible you did--or that he recognised one of us--or wanted to ask some question."

After his conversation with big Tom De Willoughby, Latimer heard from Baird the story of the herds and their indefatigable claimant.

"He comes from the Cross-roads?" said Latimer. "I don't remember his face."

"Do you think," said Baird, rather slowly, "that he thinks he remembers yours?"

A week passed before Latimer encountered him again. On this occasion he was alone. Baird had gone South to Delisleville in the interests of the claim. He had unexpectedly heard rumours of some valuable evidence which might be gathered in a special quarter at this particular moment, and had set out upon the journey at a few hours' notice.

Stamps had passed two days and nights in torment. He had learned from Mr.
Linthicum that his claim had reached one of the critical points all

claims must pass. More money was needed to grease the wheels that they might carry it past the crisis safely. Stamps had been starving himself for days and had gone without fire for weeks, but the wheels had refused to budge for the sum he managed to produce. He was weak, and so feverish with anxiety and hunger that his lips were cracked and his tongue dry to rasping.

"It's all I kin scrape, Linthicum," he said to that gentleman. "I kin get a few dollars more if Minty kin sell her crop o' corn an' send me the money--but this is every cent I kin give ye now. Won't it do nothin'?"

"No, it won't," answered the claim agent, with a final sort of shrug. "We're dealing with a business that's got to be handled well or it'll all end in smoke. I can't work on the driblets you've been bringing me--and, what's more, I should be a fool to try."

"But ye wouldn't give it up!" cried Stamps, in a panic. "Ye couldn't throw me over, Linthicum!"

"There's no throwing over about it," Linthicum said. "I shall have to give the thing up if I can't keep it going. Money's got to be used over a claim like this. I have had to ask men for a thousand dollars at a time--and the thing they were working was easier to be done than this is."

"A thousand dollars!" cried Stamps. He grew livid and a lump worked in

his throat, as if he was going to cry. "A thousand dollars 'ud buy me and sell me twice over, Mr. Linthicum."

"I'm not asking you for a thousand dollars yet," said Linthicum. "I may have to ask you for five hundred before long--but I'm not doing it now."

"Five hundred!" gasped Stamps, and he sat down in a heap and dropped his damp forehead on his hands.

That night, as Latimer entered the house of an acquaintance with whom he was going to spend the evening, he caught sight of the, by this time, familiar figure on the opposite side of the street.

The night was cold and damp, and rain was falling when the door closed behind him. He heard it descending steadily throughout the evening, and more than once the continuance of the downpour was commented upon by some
member of the company. When the guests separated for the night and Latimer turned into the street again, he had scarcely walked five yards before hearing a cough; he cast a glance over his shoulder and saw the small man in blue jeans. The jeans were wet and water was dropping from the brim of the old felt hat. The idea which at once possessed his mind was that for some mysterious reason best known to himself the wearer had been waiting for and was following him. What was it for? He turned about suddenly and faced the person who seemed so unduly interested in his actions.

"Do you want to speak to me?" he demanded.

This movement, being abrupt, rather upset Mr. Stamps's calculations. He came to a standstill, looking surprised and nervous.

"Thar ain't no harm done," he said. "I aimed to find out whar ye lived."

"Have you been waiting for me to come out of the house?" asked Latimer, feeling some curiosity.

Stamps admitted that he had, the admission being somewhat reluctant, as if he felt it might commit him to something. Having so far betrayed himself, however, he drew something nearer, with a suggestion of stealthiness.

"Ye're mighty like a man I once knowed," he said. "Yer powerful like him. I never seed two men more liker each other."

"Where did he live when you knew him?" Latimer enquired, the wretched, dank little figure suddenly assuming the haunting air of something his eye must have rested on before.

"I seen him in North Ca'llina. He did not live thar--in the way other folks did. He was jest stayin'. I won't keep ye standin' in the rain," insinuatingly. "I'll jest walk along by ye."

Latimer walked on. This dragged him back again, as other things had done once or twice. He did not speak, but strode on almost too rapidly for Stamps's short legs. The short legs began to trot, and their owner to continue his explanations rather breathlessly.

"He warn't livin' thar same as other folks," he said. "Thar was suthin' curi's about him. Nobody knowed nothin' about him, an' nobody knew nothin' about his wife. Now I come to think of it, nobody ever knowed his name--but me."

"Did he tell it to you?" said Latimer, rigidly.

"No," with something verging on a chuckle, discreetly strangled at its birth. "Neither him nor his wife was tellin' things just then. They was layin' mighty low. She died when her child was borned, an' he lit out right away an' ain't never been heern tell of since."

Latimer said nothing. The rain began to fall more heavily, and Mr. Stamps trotted on.

"'Lowin' for store clothes an' agein'," he continued, "I never seen two fellers favour each other as you two do. An' his name bein' the same as yourn, makes it curi'ser still."

"You are getting very wet," was Latimer's sole comment.

"I got wet to the skin long afore you come out that house where ye was," said Mr. Stamps; "but I 'low to find out whar ye live."

"I live about a quarter of a mile from here," said Latimer. "The brick house with the bay windows, opposite the square. Number 89."

"I'd rather see ye in," replied Stamps, cautiously.

"I might go into a house I do not live in," returned Latimer.

"Ye won't. It's too late. Ain't ye gwine to say nothin', Mr. Latimer?"

"What do you want me to say?"

"Sheby's good-lookin' gal," Stamps said. "Tom's done well by her. Ef they get their claim through they'll be powerful rich. Young D'Willerby he's mightily in love with her--an' he wouldn't want no talk."

"There is the house I live in at present," said Latimer, pointing with his umbrella. "We shall be there directly."

"Ministers don't want no talk neither," proceeded Stamps. "Ef a minister had made a slip an' tried hard to hide it an' then hed it proved on him he wouldn't like it--an' his church members wouldn't like it--an' his high class friends. There'd be a heap er trouble."

"Number 89," said Latimer. "You see I was speaking the truth. This is the gate; I am going in."

His tone and method were so unsatisfactory and unmoved that--remembering
Abner Linthicum--Stamps became desperate. He clutched Latimer's arm and held it.

"It'd be worth money fur him to git safe hold of them letters. Thar was two on 'em. I didn't let on to Tom. I wasn't gwine to let on to him till I found out he'd go in with me. Them as knowed the man they was writ by 'ud be able to see a heap in 'em. They'd give him away. Ye'd better get hold of 'em. They're worth five hundred. They're yourn--ye wrote 'em yourself. Ye ain't jest like him--ye're him--I'll sw'ar to ye!"

Latimer suddenly saw his mother's mild New England countenance, with its faded blue eyes. He remembered the hours he had spent telling her the details of the sunny days in Italy, where Margery had lain smiling in the sunset. He looked down the long wet street, the lamps gleaming on its shining surface. He thought of Baird, who would not return until the day on which he was to deliver a farewell lecture before leaving Washington. He recalled his promptness of resource and readiness for action. If Baird were but in the room above in which the light burned he would tell him! His mind seemed to vault over all else at this instant--to realise the thing which it had not reached at the first shock. He turned on Stamps.

"You say there were letters?" he exclaimed, forgetting his previous unresponsiveness.

"Two. Not long 'uns, an' wrote keerful--without no name. But they say a heap. They was wrote when he had to leave her."

Latimer's heart seemed physically to turn over in his side. He had never known she had had a line of handwriting in her possession. This must be some scrap of paper, some last, last words she clung to with such anguish of desperation that she could not tear herself from them, and so had died leaving them in their secret hiding-place. The thought was a shock. The effort it cost him to regain his self-control was gigantic. But he recovered his outward calm.

"You had better go home and change your clothing," he said, as coldly as he had spoken before. "You are not a young man or a strong one, and you may kill yourself. You are making a mistake about me; but if you will give me your address I will see you again."

"I thort ye would--mebbe," said Stamps. "I thort mebbe ye would. They're worth it."

And he scribbled a few words on a scrap of paper with a stump of a pencil--producing both rapidly from his pocket--and thrusting it into Latimer's hand, trotted away contentedly down the long wet street.