

CHAPTER XXXVI

As he entered his rooms, Latimer glanced round at Baird's empty chair and wished he had found him sitting in it. He walked over to it and sat down himself--simply because it was Baird's chair and suggested his presence. Latimer knew how he would have turned to look at him as he came in, and that he would at once have known by instinct that the old abyss had been re-opened.

"If he were here," he thought, "he would tell me what to do."

But he knew what he was going to do. He must buy the little hoosier's silence if it was to be bought. He should see the letters. Through all those months she had hidden them. He could imagine with what terror. She could not bear to destroy them, and yet he knew there must have been weeks she did not dare to go near their hiding-place. They must have been concealed in some cranny of the cabin. How she must have shuddered with dread when he had accidentally approached the spot where they lay concealed. He recalled now that several times he had been wakened from his sleep in the middle of the night by hearing her moving about her room and sobbing. She had perhaps crept out of her bed in the darkness to find these scraps of paper, to hold them in her hands, to crush them against her heart, to cover them with piteous kisses, salt with scalding tears.

On one such night he had risen, and, going to the closed door, had spoken

to her through it, asking her if she was ill.

"No, no, Lucien," she had cried out, "but--but I am so lonely--so lonely."

She had told him the next day that the sound of the wind soughing in the pines had kept her from sleep, and she had got up because she could not bear to be still and listen.

He had known well what she meant by her desolate little answer to him. She had been a beloved thing always. As a child her playmates had loved her, as a school-girl she had won the hearts of companions and teachers alike. Nature had endowed her with the brightness and sweetness which win affection. The smile in her eyes wakened an answer even in the look of passing strangers. Suddenly all had changed. She was hidden in the darkness, crushed and shamed, an outcast and a pariah--a thing only to be kept out of sight. Sometimes, after she had been sitting lost in thought, Latimer had seen her look up bewildered, glance at her little, deformed body, and sit white and trembling.

"Everything is different," she panted out once. "It is as if all the world was black. It is--because--because I am black!"

Latimer had made no effort to wring from her the name she had prayed to be allowed to hide; yet he had often wondered that in some hysteric moment it had not escaped her--that mere helpless anguish did not betray

her into uttering some word or phrase which might have served as a clue. But this she had never done, and between them there had been built a stone wall of silence. Yet, in spite of it, he had known that her young heart was broken with love for this nameless traitor--a love which would not die. He had seen it in the woe of her eyes, in the childlike longing of her look when she sat and gazed out over the wild beauty of the land, thinking she was unobserved. In his own soul there had been black, bitter hate, but in hers only loneliness and pain.

There came back to him--and he sprang up and ground his teeth, pacing the floor as he remembered it--a night when she had wandered out alone in the starlight, and at last he had followed her and found her--though she did not know he was near--standing where the roof of pine-trees made a darkness, and as he stood within four feet of her he had heard her cry to the desolate stillness:

"If I could see you once! If I could see you once--if I could touch you--if I could hear you speak--just once--just once!"

And she had wailed it low--but as a starving child might cry for bread. And he had turned and gone away, sick of soul, leaving her.

He had told this to Baird, and had seen the muscles of his face twitch and his eyes suddenly fill with tears. He had left his seat and crossed the room to conceal his emotion, and Latimer had known that he did not speak because he could not.

The letters were written with caution, Stamps had said, and the mention of names had been avoided in them; and, though he ground his teeth again as he thought of this, he realised that the knowledge brought by a name would be of no value to him. Long ago he had said to big Tom in the cabin on the hillside: "If ever we meet face to face knowing each other, I swear I will not spare him." Spare him? Spare him what? What vengeance could he work which would wipe out one hour of that past woe? None. He had grown sick to death in dwelling with the memories he could not bury. He had been born cursed by the temperament which cannot outlive. There are such. And it was the temperament to which vengeance brings no relief. No; if they two met face to face, what words could be said--what deeds could be done? His forehead and hands grew damp with cold sweat as he confronted the despair of it.

"Better that I should not know his name," he cried. "Better that we should never meet. Pray God that he is dead; pray God the earth does not hold him."

The man who had followed him had plainly but one purpose, which was the obtaining of money. He looked as if he needed it directly. He would go to him and pay him what he asked and get the papers. They must be in no other hands than his own. When he had them, Baird and himself would destroy them together, and that would be the end.

He encountered no difficulties when he went in search of the address

Stamps had given him. The room he had directed him to was over a small store on the south side of Pennsylvania Avenue. When he entered it he saw at once that the man whose circumstances reduced him to living in it must be one whose need of money was great indeed. It was entirely unfurnished, except for a mattress lying on the floor, and Stamps was stretched upon it, coughing and feverish.

"Come in," he said. "I knowed ye'd be here purty soon. Thar ain't no chair to ax ye to set down in."

"I do not want to sit," said Latimer. "You are ill. You caught cold last night."

"I s'pose I did, durn it," answered Stamps. "I got drenched to the skin, an' I hadn't nothin' dry to put on when I got home. But I'd seen ye--an' told ye what I'd 'lowed to tell ye."

"Where are the papers you spoke of?" Latimer asked.

Stamps's feverish lips stretched themselves in an agreeable smile.

"They ain't yere," he answered; "an' they won't be yere till I've got the pay fur 'em. Ef thar was names in 'em they'd cost ye a heap more than five hundred dollars--an' they'd cost ye more anyhow ef I hadn't a use for that five hundred jest this particular time."

"Where are they?" enquired Latimer. He meant to waste no words.

"They're in North Ca'lliny," answered the little mountaineer, cheerfully.

"An' I've got a woman thar es'll send 'em when I want 'em."

"She may send them when you wish."

Stamps fell into a paroxysm of coughing, clutching his side.

"Will ye give five hundred?" he panted when it was over.

"Yes."

"Ye want 'em pretty bad, do ye?" said Stamps, looking at him with a curiosity not untinged with dubiousness. He was sharp enough to realise that, upon the whole, his case was not a strong one.

"I don't want them for the reason you think I want them for," Latimer replied; his voice was cold and hard, and his manner unpromisingly free from emotion or eagerness. "I want them for a reason of my own. As for your pretence of recognising me as a man you have seen before, go out into the street corners and say what you choose. My friends know how and where my life has been spent, and you are shrewd enough to know how far your word will stand against mine. If you need the money now, you had better produce what you have to sell."

"I could get ye mightily talked about," said Stamps, restlessly.

"Try it," answered Latimer, and turned as if to walk out of the room. He knew what he was dealing with, and saw the fevered cupidity and fear in the little, shifting eyes.

Stamps struggled up into a sitting posture on his mattress and broke forth into coughs again.

"Come back yere," he cried between gasps; "ye needn't ter go."

Latimer paused where he stood and waited until the fit of coughing was over; and Stamps threw himself back exhausted. His shifty eyes burned uncannily, his physical and mental fever were too much for him. Linthicum had just left him before Latimer arrived, and upon the production of five hundred dollars rested the fate of the claim for the herds.

"Ef ye'll bring the money--cash down--next Saturday," he said, "I'll give ye the papers. I'll hev 'em yere by then. When ye've got 'em," with the agreeable grin again, "ye kin go to yer friend's far'well lecture easy in ye mind. Ye wouldn't be likely to go to many of 'em ef he knowed what I could tell him. He's powerful thick with Tom D'Willerby and Sheby. They think a heap of him. Tom must hev guessed what I've guessed, but he don't want no talk on accounts o' Sheby. Tom knows which side his bread's buttered--he ain't nigh as big a fool as he looks."

Latimer stood still.

"Next Saturday?" was his sole response. "In the meantime, I should advise you to send for the doctor."

He left him coughing and catching at his side.