

## CHAPTER XXXVII

During this week Judge Rutherford's every hour was filled with action and excitement. He had not a friend or acquaintance in either House whom he did not seek out and labour with. He was to be seen in the lobby, in the corridors, in committee-rooms, arguing and explaining, with sheafs of papers in his hands and bundles of documents bulging out of his pockets. He walked down the avenue holding the arm of his latest capture, his trustworthy countenance heated by his interest and anxiety, his hat thrust on the back of his head. "There's got to be justice done," he would protest. "You see, justice has got to be done. There's no other way out of it. And I'd swear there ain't a man among you who doesn't own up that it is justice, now all this evidence has been brought together. The country couldn't be responsible for throwing the thing over--even till another session. Everything's in black and white and sworn to and proved--and the papers Baird has sent in clinch the whole thing. Now just look here--" And he would repeat his story and refer to his documents, until even the indifferent succumbed through exhaustion, if not conviction.

He appeared at Dupont Circle two or three times a day, always fevered with delighted hope, always with some anecdote to relate which prognosticated ultimate triumph. If he could not find anyone else to talk to he seized upon Miss Burford or Uncle Matt and poured forth his news to them. He wrote exultant letters to Jenny, the contents of which, being

given to Barnesville, travelled at once to Talbot's Cross-roads and wakened it to exhilarated joyfulness, drawing crowds to the Post-office and perceptibly increasing the traffic on the roads from the mountains to that centre of civilised social intercourse.

"Tom's a-gwine to win his claim," it was said. "Judge Rutherford's walkin' it right through for him. Tom'll be way ahead of the richest man in Hamlin. Sheby'll be a hairest. Lordy! what a sight it'll be to see 'em come back. Wonder whar they'll build!"

In Washington it had begun to be admitted even by the reluctant that the fortunes of the De Willoughby claim seemed to have taken a turn. Members of substantial position discussed it among themselves. It was a large claim, and therefore a serious one, but it had finally presented itself upon an apparently solid foundation.

"And it is the member from the mountain districts, and the old negro, and the popular minister who will have carried it through if it passes," said Senator Milner to his daughter. "It is a monumental thing at this crisis of affairs--a huge, unpopular claim on a resenting government carried through by persons impelled solely by the most purely primitive and disinterested of motives. An ingenuous county politician, fresh from his native wilds, works for it through sheer prehistoric affection and neighbourliness; an old black man--out of a story-book--forges a powerful link of evidence for mere faithful love's sake; a man who is a minister of the gospel, a gentleman and above reproach, gives to its service all

his interest, solely because he cherishes an affectionate admiration for the claimants. Nobody has laboured with any desire for return. Nobody has bargained for anything. Nobody would accept anything if it was offered to them. The whole affair has been Arcadian."

"Will it be decided for the De Willoughbys--will it?" said Mrs. Meredith.

"Yes," answered the Senator; "I think it will. And I confess I shall not advance any objections."

Meeting big Tom on the avenue, Ezra Stamps stopped him.

"Tom," he wheezed, hoarsely, "I heern tell you was likely ter git yer claim through."

"There are times when you can hear that about almost any claim," answered Tom. "What I'm waiting for is to hear that I've got it through."

Stamps gnawed his finger-nails restlessly.

"Ye're lucky," he said; "ye allus was lucky."

"How about the herds?" said Tom.

Stamps gave him an agonised look.

"Hev ye ever said anything agen me, Tom--to any man with infloence? Hev ye, now? 'Twouldn't be neighbourly of ye if ye hed--an' we both come from the Cross-roads--an' I allus give ye my custom. Ye won't never go agen me, will ye, Tom?"

"I've never been asked any questions about you," Tom said. "Look here, you had better go to some hospital and ask to be taken in. What are you walking about the street for in that fix? You can scarcely breathe."

"I'm a-gwine to walk about until Saturday," answered Stamps, with a grin. "I'm lookin' arter my own claim--an' Abner Linthicum. Arter Saturday I'll lie up for a spell."

"You'd better do it before Saturday," Tom remarked as he left him.

Stamps stood and watched him walk away, and then turned into a drug-store

and bought a cheap bottle of cough mixture. He was passing through the early stages of pneumonia, and was almost too weak to walk, but he had gone from place to place that morning like a machine. Linthicum had driven him. So long as he was employed in badgering other men he was not hanging about the agent's office. Linthicum was not anxious that he should be seen there too frequently. After the payment of the five hundred dollars there would be no more to be wrung from him, and he could

be dropped. He could be told that it was useless to push the claim further. Until the five hundred was secured, however, he must be kept

busy. Consequently, he went from one man to the other until he could walk no more. Then he crawled back to his room and sent a note to Latimer.

"I cayn't git the papers tel Saturday afternoon. Ef ye bring the money about seven ye ken hev them. 'Tain't no use comin' no earlier."

Latimer found the communication when he returned to his rooms in the evening. He had been out on business connected with Baird's final lecture. It was to be a special event, and was delivered in response to a general request. A building of larger dimensions than the hall previously used had been engaged. The demand for seats had been continuously increasing. The newspaper and social discussion of the prospects of the De Willoughby claim had added to the interest in Baird. This brilliant and popular man, this charming and gifted fellow, had felt such a generous desire to assist the claimants that he had gone South in the interest of their fortunes. He had been detained in Delisleville and could barely return in time to appear before his audience.

The enthusiasm and eagerness were immense. Every man who had not heard him felt he must hear him now; everyone who had heard him was moved by the wish to be of his audience again. Latimer had been besieged on all sides, and, after a hard day, had come home fagged and worn. But he was not worn only by business interviews, newspaper people, and applicants for seats which could not be obtained. He was worn by his thoughts of the past days, by his lack of Baird's presence and his desire for his return.

His influence was always a controlling and supporting one. Latimer felt less morbid and more sane when they were together.

This same night Senator Milner and Judge Rutherford called in company at the house near the Circle. When Uncle Matt opened the door for them Judge Rutherford seized his hand and shook it vigorously. The Judge was in the mood to shake hands with everybody.

"Uncle Matt," he said, "we're going to get it through, and in a week's time you'll be a rich man's servant."

Matt fled back to Miss Burford trembling with joy and excitement.

"Do ye think we is gwine t'rough, ma'am?" he said. "D'ye think we is? Seems like we was the Isrilites a-crossin' the Red Sea, an' the fust of us is jest steppin' on de sho'. Lordy, Miss Burford, ma'am, I don't know how I'se gwine to stan' dat great day when we is th'ough, shore enuff. Wash'n'ton city ain't gwine be big enuff to hol' me."

"It will be a great day, Uncle Matthew," replied Miss Burford, with elated decorum of manner. "The De Willoughby mansion restored to its former elegance. Mr. Thomas De Willoughby the possessor of wealth, and the two young people--" She bridled a little, gently, and touched her eyes with her handkerchief with a slight cough.

"When Marse De Courcy an' Miss Delia Vanuxem was married, dar was people from fo' counties at de infar," said Matt. "De fust woman what I was married to, she done de cookin'."

Senator Milner was shaking hands with big Tom upstairs. He regarded him with interest, remembering the morning he had evaded an interview with him. The little room was interesting; the two beautiful young people suggested the atmosphere of a fairy story.

"You are on the verge of huge good fortune, I think, Mr. De Willoughby," he said. "I felt that I should like to come with Rutherford to tell you that all is going very well with your claim. Members favour it whose expression of opinion is an enormous weight in the balance. Judge Rutherford is going to speak for you--and so am I."

Judge Rutherford shook Tom's hand rather more vigorously than he had shaken Matt's. "I wish to the Lord I was an orator, Tom," he said. "If I can't make them listen to me this time I believe I shall blow my brains out. But, what with Williams, Atkinson, and Baird, we've got things that are pretty convincing, and somehow I swear the claim has begun to be popular."

When the two men had gone the little room was for a few moments very still. Each person in it was under the influence of curiously strong emotion. Anxious waiting cannot find itself upon the brink of great

fortune and remain unmoved. Some papers with calculations worked out in them lay upon the table, and big Tom sat looking at them silently. Sheba stood a few feet away from him, her cheeks flushed, light breaths coming quickly through her parted lips. Rupert looked at her as youth and love must look at love and youth.

"Uncle Tom," he said, at last, "are you thinking of what we shall do if we find ourselves millionaires?"

"No," answered Tom.

His eyes rested on the boy in thoughtful questioning.

"No; I'll own I'm not thinking of that."

"Neither am I," said Rupert. He drew nearer to Sheba. "It would be a strange thing to waken and find ourselves owners of a fortune," he said.

"We may waken to find it so--in a few days. But there is always a chance that things may fail one. I was thinking of what we should do if--we lose everything."

Sheba put out her slim hand. She smiled with trembling lips.

"We have been across the mountain," she said. "We came together--and we will go back together. Will you go back with us, Rupert?"



He took her in his strong young arms and kissed her, while Tom looked on.

"That is what I was thinking," he cried; "that it does not matter whether we win the claim or lose it. The house is gone and the store is gone, but we can add a room to the cabin in Blair's Hollow--we can do it ourselves--and I will learn to plough."

He dropped on one knee like a young knight and kissed her little, warm, soft palm.

"If I can take care of you and Uncle Tom, Sheba," he said, "will you marry me?"

"Yes, I will marry you," she answered. "We three can be happy together--and there will always be the spring and the summer and the winter."

"May she marry me, Uncle Tom," Rupert asked, "even though we begin life like Adam and Eve?"

"She shall marry you the day we go back to the mountains," said Tom. "I always thought Adam and Eve would have had a pretty fair show--if they had not left the Garden of Eden behind them when they began the world for themselves. You won't have left it behind you. You'll find it in the immediate vicinity of Talbot's Cross-roads."