CHAPTER XXXVIII

The facts in detail which the Reverend John Baird had journeyed to Delisle County in the hope of being able to gather, he had been successful in gaining practical possession of. Having personal charm, grace in stating a case, and many resources both of ability and manner, he had the power to attract even the prejudiced, and finally to win their interest and sympathies. He had seen and conversed with people who could have been reached in no ordinary way, and having met them had been capable of managing even their prejudices and bitterness of spirit. The result had been the accumulation of useful and convincing evidence in favour of the De Willoughbys, though he had in more than one instance gained it from persons who had been firm in their intention to give no evidence at all. This evidence had been forwarded to Washington as it had been collected, and when Baird returned to the Capital it was with the knowledge that his efforts had more than probably put the final touches to the work which would gain the day for the claimants.

His train was rather late, and as it drew up before the platform he glanced at his watch in some anxiety. His audience for the lecture must already have begun to turn their faces toward the hall in which the evening's entertainment was to be held. He had hoped to reach his journey's end half an hour earlier. He had wanted a few minutes with Latimer, whose presence near him had become so much a part of his existence, that after an absence he felt he had lacked him. He took a

carriage at the depot and drove quickly to their rooms. They were to leave them in a day or two and return to Willowfield. Already some of their possessions had been packed up. The sitting-room struck him as looking a little bare as he entered it.

"Is Mr. Latimer out," he asked the mulatto who brought up his valise.

"Yes, sir. He was called out by a message. He left a note for you on the desk."

Baird went to the desk and found it. It contained only a few lines.

"Everything is prepared for you. The audience will be the best you have had at any time. I have been sent for by the man Stamps. He is ill of pneumonia and wishes to deliver some letters to me. I will be with you before you go on the platform."

Since he had left Washington, Baird had heard from Latimer but once and then but briefly. He had felt that his dark mood was upon him, and this reference to letters recalled the fact.

"Stamps is the little man with the cattle claim," he commented to himself. "He comes from the neighbourhood of the Cross-roads. What letters could he have to hand over?"

And he began to dress, wondering vaguely.

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Stamps had spent a sleepless night. He could not sleep because his last interview with Linthicum had driven him hard, even though he had been able to promise him the required five hundred dollars; he also could not sleep because the air of the city had been full of talk about the promising outlook of the De Willoughby claim. Over the reports he had heard, he had raged almost with tears.

"The Dwillerbys is ristycrats," he had said. "They're ristycrats, an' it gives 'em a pull even if they was rebels an' Southerners. A pore man ez works hard an' ain't nothin' but a honest farmer, an' a sound Union man ain't got no show. Ef I'd been a ristycrat I could hev got inflooence ez hed hev pulled wires fur me. But I hain't nothin' but my loyal Union principles. I ain't no ristycrat, an' I never aimed to be none."

The bitterness of his nervous envy would have kept him awake if he had had no other reason for being disturbed, but most of all he was sleepless, because he was desperately ill and in danger he knew nothing of. Cold and weeks of semi-starvation, anxiety, excitement, and drenched garments had done the little man to death, and he lay raging with fever and stabbed with pain at each indrawn breath, tossing and gasping and burning, but thinking only of Linthicum and the herds and the scraps of paper which were to bring him five hundred dollars. He was physically wretched, but even while he was racked with agonised fits of coughing and

prostrated with pain it did not occur to him to think that he was in danger. He was too wholly absorbed in other thoughts. The only danger he recognised was the danger that there might be some failure in his plans--that Linthicum might give him up--that the parson might back out of his bargain, realising that after all letters unsigned save by a man's Christian name were not substantial evidence. Perhaps he would not come at all; perhaps he would leave the city; perhaps if he came he would refuse to give more than half or quarter the sum asked. Then Linthicum would throw him over--he knew Linthicum would throw him over. He uttered
a small cry like a tortured cat.

"I know he'll do it," he said. "I seen it in his eye yesterday, when he let out on me an' said he was a-gettin' sick of the business. I shed hev kept my mouth shut. I'd said too much an' it made him mad. He'll throw me over Monday mornin' ef I don't take him the money on Sunday."

He ate nothing all through the day but lay waiting for the passing of the hours. He had calculated as to which post would bring the letter from Minty. He had written to tell her of the hiding-place in which he had kept the bits of paper safe and dry through all the years. She was to enclose them in a stout envelope and send them to him.

Through the long, dragging day he lay alone burning, gasping, fighting for his breath in the attacks of coughing which seemed to tear his lungs asunder. There was a clock in a room below whose striking he could hear

each hour. Between each time it struck he felt as if weeks elapsed. Sometimes it was months. He had begun to be light-headed and to think queer things. Once or twice he heard a man talking in a croaking wail, and after a few minutes realised that it was himself, and that he did not know what he had said, though he knew he had been arguing with Linthicum,
who was proving to him that his claim was too rotten to have a ghost of a chance. By the time the afternoon post arrived he was semi-delirious and did not know how it happened that he at last found himself holding Minty's letter in his hand. He laughed hysterically when he opened it. It was all right. There were the two yellowed sheets of paper--small sheets, written close, and in a peculiar hand. He had often studied the handwriting, and believed if he had seen it again he should know it. It was small but strong and characteristic, though that was not what he had called it.

"Ef I'd hed more time an' could hev worked it out more--an' got him to write suthin' down--I could hev hed more of a hold," he said, plaintively, "but Linthicum wouldn't give me no time."

The post arrived earlier than he had expected it, and this gave him time to lie and fret and listen again for the striking of the clock in the room downstairs. The waiting became too long, and as his fever increased he became insanely impatient and could not restrain himself. To lie and listen for his visitor's footsteps upon the stairs--to lie until seven o'clock--if he did not come till then, would be more than he could

endure. That would give him too long to think over what Linthicum would do if the whole sum were not forthcoming--to think of the reasons why the parson might make up his mind to treat the letters as if they were worthless. He lay and gnawed his finger-nails anew.

"I wouldn't give nothin' for 'em ef I was in his place," he muttered. "Ef thar'd been anythin' in 'em that proved anythin' I should hev used 'em long sence. But then I'm a business man an' he's a parson, an' doesn't know nothin' about the laws. But he might go to some man--say a man like Linthicum--who could put him up to things. Good Lord!" in a new panic, "he mayn't come at all. He might jest stay away."

He became so overwrought by this agonising possibility that instead of listening for the striking of the clock, he began to listen for the sound of some passing footstep--the footstep of someone passing by chance who might be sent to the parson with a note. With intolerable effort and suffering he managed to drag himself up and get hold of a piece of paper and a pencil to write the following lines:

"The letters hes come. You'd as well come an' get 'em. Others will pay for 'em ef ye don't want 'em yerself."

His writing of the last sentence cheered his spirits. It was a support to his small, ignorant cunning. "He'll think someone else is biddin' agen him," he said. "Ef there was two of 'em biddin', I could get most anythin' I axed."

After he had put the communication in an envelope he dragged himself to the door almost bent double by the stabbing pain in his side. Once there he sat down on the floor to listen for footsteps.

"It's hard work this yere," he panted, shivering with cold in spite of his fever, "but it's better than a-lyin' thar doin' nothin'."

At length he heard steps. They were the running, stamping feet of a boy who whistled as he came.

Stamps opened the door and whistled himself--a whistle of summons and appeal. The boy, who was on his way with a message to another room, hesitated a minute and then came forward, staring at the sight of the little, undressed, shivering man with his head thrust into the passage.

"Hallo!" he said, "what d'yer want?"

"Want ye to carry this yere letter to a man," Stamps got out hoarsely. "I'll give ye a quarter. Will ye do it?"

"Yes." And he took both note and money, still staring at the abnormal object before him.

When the messenger arrived Latimer was reading the letters which had arrived by the last delivery. One of them was from Baird, announcing the

hour of his return to the city. Latimer held it in his hand when Stamps's communication was brought to him.

"Tell the messenger that I will come," he said.

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It was not long before Stamps heard his slow approach sounding upon the bare wooden stairs. He mounted the steps deliberately because he was thinking. He was thinking as he had thought on his way through the streets. In a few minutes he should be holding in his hand letters written by the man who had been Margery's murderer--the letters she had hidden and clung to and sobbed over in the blackness of her nights. And they had been written twenty years ago, and Margery had changed to dust on the hillside under the pines. And nothing could be undone and nothing softened. But for the sake of the little old woman ending her days quietly in Willowfield--and for the sake of Margery's memory--yes, he wanted to save the child's memory--but for these things there would be no use in making any effort to secure the papers. Yet he was conscious of a dread of the moment when he should take them into his hand.

Stamps turned eager, miserable eyes upon him as he came in.

"I thought mebbe ye'd made up yer mind to let the other feller hev them," he said. "Hev ye brought the money in bills?"

Latimer stood and looked down at him. "Do you know how ill you are?" he said.

"Wal, I guess I kin feel a right smart--but I don't keer so's things comes my way. Hev ye got the money with ye?"

"Yes. Where are the papers?"

"Whar's the money?"

Latimer took out a pocket-book and opened it that he might see.

Stamps's countenance relaxed. The tension was relieved.

"Thet's far an' squar," he said. "D'ye wanter know whar I found 'em? Tom Dwillerby never knowed I hed more than a envelope--an' I tuk care not to tell him the name that was writ on it. Ye was mighty smart never to let no one know yer name; I don't know how you done it, 'ceptin' that ye kept so much to yerselves."

Latimer remained silent, merely standing and letting him talk, as he seemed to have a feverish, half-delirious tendency to do. He lay plucking at the scanty bed-covering and chuckling.

"'Twas five years arter the child was born," he went on. "I was ridin' through Blair's Holler an' it come to me sudden to go in an' hev a look

round keerful. I looked keerful--mighty keerful--an' at last I went on my hands an' knees an' crawled round, an' there was a hole between the logs, an' I seen a bit of white--I couldn't hev seen it ef I hadn't been crawlin' an' looked up. An' I dug it out. It hed been hid mighty secret." He put his hand under his wretched pillow. "Give me the money," he wheezed. "When ye lay it in my hand I'll pass the envelope over to ye. Count it out first."

Latimer counted the bills. This was the moment. Twenty years gone by--and nothing could be changed. He put the money on the bed.

Stamps withdrew his hand from under the pillow. A stout, ill-directed envelope was in its grasp and he passed it over to Latimer. He was shivering and beginning to choke a little, but he grinned.

"I reckin' it's all right," he said. "D'ye want to read 'em now?"

"No," Latimer answered, and putting them in his breast-pocket walked out of the room.

He passed down the stairs and into the avenue where the lamps were lighted and which wore its usual somewhat deserted evening air. He walked along quietly for some minutes. He did not quite know where he was going. Having left a line for Baird explaining his absence, he had time to spare. If he wished to be alone, he could be so until the hour of the beginning of the lecture. For certain reasons it would be necessary that

he should see Baird before he went upon the platform. Yes, he must be alone. His mood required it. He would go somewhere and look at the two yellowed letters written twenty years ago. He did not know why it was that he felt he must look at them, but he knew he must. They would satisfy no curiosity if he felt it, and he had none. Perhaps it was the old tragic tender feeling for Margery which impelled him. Perhaps he unconsciously longed to read that this man had loved her--that she had not given her life for nothing--that the story had not been one of common caprice and common treachery. As he walked his varied thoughts surged through his brain disconnectedly. Every now and then he involuntarily put his hand to his breast-pocket to feel the envelope. Once there crossed his mind a memory of the woman whose boy had died and who dare not let herself recall him, and so be swept back into the black maelstrom of woe. To-night, with these things on his breast, it was not twenty years since he had heard Margery's dying cries--it was last night--last night--and the odour of the pine-trees was in his nostrils--the sough of their boughs in his ears.

He stopped near the entrance to the grounds of the Smithsonian Institute. They were as secluded as a private park at this time, but here and there was a seat and a light. He turned in and found his way to the most retired part where he could find these things--a bench to sit down on, a light to aid him to read. He heard his own breathing as he sat down; he felt the heavy, rapid pulsations of his heart, as he took the papers from his breast his hand was shaking, he could not hold it still. He took out more papers than the envelope Stamps had given him. He drew forth with

this the letter which had arrived from Baird, and which he had been reading when the messenger arrived. He had abstractedly put it in his pocket. It fell from his shaking hand upon the ground at his feet, and he let it lie there, forgetful of its existence.

Then he withdrew the two letters from the large envelope and opened one of them.

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He read them through once--twice--three times--four. Then he began again. He had read them a dozen times before he closed them. He had read them word by word, poring over each character, each turn of phrase, as a man might pore over an enigma or a document written in a foreign language of which he only knew stray words. If his hands had shaken at first, he had not turned a page before his whole body was shaking and his palms, his forehead, his hair were damp with cold dew. He had uttered one sharp, convulsed exclamation like a suffocated cry--then he went on reading--reading--reading--and shuddering as he read. They were not long letters, but after he had read them once he understood them, and each time he read them again he understood them better. Yes, he could translate them. They were the farewells of a man tossed by a whirlwind of passionate remorseful grief. The child had been loved--her very purity had been loved while she had been destroyed and deceived. The writer poured forth heart-sick longing and heart-sick remorse. He had not at first meant to conceal from her that he was not a free man--then he had

lost control over his very being--and he had lost his soul. When she had discovered the truth and had not even reproached him but had stood silent--without a word--and gazed at him with her childish, agonised, blue-flower eyes--he had known that if men had souls his was damned. There was no pardon--he could ask none--pardon would not undo--death itself would not undo what he had done. "Margery! Margery! Oh! child--God hear me if there is God to hear--I loved you--I love you--Death will not undo that either."

He was going abroad to join his wife. He spoke of the ship he sailed on. Latimer knew its name and who had sailed in it. In the second letter he besought her to let him see and speak one word to her--but knew she would not grant his prayer. He had seen her in the street, and had not dared to approach. "I did not fear what a man might fear from other women," he wrote. "I felt that it might kill you, suddenly to see me near when you could not escape."

And after he had read it a third time Latimer realised a ghastly truth. The man who wrote had gone away unknowing of the blackness of the tragedy
he had left behind. He plainly had not known the secret Death itself had helped to hide. Perhaps when he had gone Margery herself had not known the worst.

Latimer, having finished his reading, rested his head on his hand for a dull moment and stared down at the letter lying upon the ground at his

feet--the letter he had dropped as he took out the others. He felt as if he had not strength or inclination to pick it up--he had passed through a black storm which had swept away from him the power to feel more than a dull, heavy, physical prostration.

But after a few minutes he stooped and picked the letter up. He laid it on his knee by the other two and sat gazing again.

"He did not know," he said, in a colourless voice. "I told him. He heard it first from me when I told him how she died."

The handwriting of the letters was Baird's--every character and word and phrase were his--Baird was the man who had written them.