

CHAPTER XL

Tom walked up the staircase pondering deeply. The De Willoughby claim was

before the House. Judge Rutherford was making his great speech, and the chief claimant might have been expected to be sitting breathless in one of the galleries. But he was not. He was going to Baird, who had sent for him, and Baird was sitting in the room in which Latimer lay dead with a bullet in his heart. He had been sitting there for hours, and when Tom had arrived at the house he had been told that Baird had asked that he should be taken to him in the death-chamber. He was sitting on a chair by the bed on which Latimer was stretched, rigid with a still face, which looked like a mask of yellow wax, appearing above the exceeding freshness of the turned-down linen sheet. Baird did not move as Tom entered, but continued to gaze at the dread thing with dull, drooping eyes. Tom went to him and laid his hand on his shoulder. He saw the man was stupefied.

"There's nothing to say, Baird," he said after a silence, "when it comes to this."

"There is something for me to say," Baird answered, very quietly. "I want to say it before him, while he lies there. I wonder if he will hear?"

"He may."

"It would not do any good to anyone if he did," Baird said. "The blackness of it all lies in that--that he would not be helped, she would not be helped--I should not."

"She?" said Tom.

Baird got up at once, stiffly and unsteadily. He stood upright, the lithe-limbed slender form, which was so much admired upon the platform, held rigidly. His face looked lined and haggard.

"No other man shall feel an affection for me--I think you are beginning to feel an affection for me--under a false impression. That man loved me for long years, and I loved him. I think I helped him to something that was as near happiness as his nature would allow him to feel. God knows I owed it to him. I was one of those who repented too late. That is why I have preached of repentance. I have done it with a secret, frenzied hope."

"Did he know your reason?" asked Tom.

"Not until last night. When he knew it, he killed himself."

"Because--?" began Tom.

"Because he had loved and trusted me for half a lifetime--because I was the one human creature to whom he had confided the tragedy of his

life--knowing he would be sure of comprehension and sympathy. It was to me he poured forth the story of that poor child. You saw her die. She was his sister. And I----"

Tom turned and looked at the face of the dead man and then, slowly, to the face of the living one, who stood before him.

"You--were the man?" he said.

"Yes."

Tom turned to the dead man again. He put his big, warm hand with a curiously suggestive movement--a movement somehow suggesting protection--upon the stiff, clasped fingers.

"No, poor fellow!" he said, as if speaking to him. "You--no, no, there was nothing but this--for you. God have mercy on us."

"No," said Baird, "there was nothing else for him. I know that.

Everything was whirled away. I had hours last night thinking there is nothing else for me. Perhaps there is not. But first I shall take his body back to his mother. I must tell her lies. This is the result of an accident. That is what I shall tell her. She is a little old woman who will not live long. I must take care of her--and let her talk to me about her son who loved me--and her daughter."

He began to walk up and down the room.

"A man does not live--for fifteen years--side by side with another--that other loving him wholly--and see the blackness of his own deed laid bare--and hear again and again of the woe he has wrought--he does not live so in peace."

"No," answered Tom.

"I tell you--" wildly--"I tell you there have been hours--as he has talked to me of her--when the cold sweat has stood upon my flesh."

He came back to Tom. He was frantic with agonised restlessness.

"In all the cruelty of it," he cried, "there seems to have been one human pitying soul. It was yours. You were tender to her in those last hours. You were merciful--you held her hand when she died."

"Yes," said Tom, in a somewhat husky voice, since he remembered it so well, "she was frightened. Her little hand was cold. I took it in mine and told her not to be afraid."

Baird flung out his own hand with a movement of passionate feeling--then let it fall at his side.

"We shall not meet again," he said, "you will not want to see me."

Big Tom gave him a long, steady look.

"Good Lord, man!" he said, after it, "am I the man to judge another? I've made nothing of life."

"You have done no creature a wrong," Baird said. "And you have helped some to happiness."

"Well," admitted Big Tom, "perhaps that's true. But I've been a lumbering failure myself. I've just judgment enough now to know that there's nothing a man can say about a thing like this--nothing--and just sense enough not to try to say it."

"If you go back to North Carolina," asked Baird, "may I come to see you--and to see her? She need never know."

"I shouldn't want her to know," Tom answered, "but you may come. We shall go back, and I intend to let those two young ones set up a Garden of Eden of their own. It will be a good thing to look on at. Yes, you may come."

"That is mercifulness," said Baird, and this time when he put out his hand he did not withdraw it, and Tom gave it a strong, sober clasp which expressed more than one emotion.

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When Tom returned to the little house near Dupont Circle, Uncle Matt wore a rigidly repressed air as he opened the door, and Miss Burford stood in the hall as if waiting for something. Her ringlets were shaken by a light tremor.

"We have either won the claim this afternoon or lost it," Tom said to himself, having glanced at both of them and exchanged the usual greeting.

They had won it.

Judge Rutherford was striding up and down the sitting-room, but it was Sheba who was deputed to tell the news.

She did it in a little scene which reminded him of her childhood. She drew him to a chair and sat down on his knee, clasping both slim, tender arms round his neck, tears suddenly rushing into her eyes.

"You and Rupert are rich men, Uncle Tom, darling," she said. "The claim has passed. You are rich. You need never be troubled about mortgages again."

He was conscious of a tremendous shock of relief. He folded her in his arms as if she had been a baby.

"Thank the Lord!" he said. "I didn't know I should be so glad of it."