CHAPTER XLII

The springtime sunshine had been smiling upon Talbot's Cross-roads all the day. It was not hot, but warm, and its beauty was added to by the little soft winds which passed through the branches of the blossoming apple and pear trees and shook the fragrance from them. The brown earth was sweet and odorous, as it had been on the Sunday morning Sheba had knelt and kissed it, and the garden had covered itself, as then, with hyacinths and daffodils and white narcissus.

During the last weeks the Cross-roads had existed in something like a state of delirium. People rode in from the mountains and returned to their homes after hours of conversation, semi-stupefied with enjoyment. Tom D'Willerby had won his claims. After months of mystified discouragement, in which the Cross-roads seemed to have lost him in a vague and distant darkness, life had seemed to begin again. Nobody was sufficiently analytical of mind to realise in what measure big Tom D'Willerby had been the centre of the community, which was scattered over miles of mountain road and wood and clearing. But when he had disappeared
many things seemed to melt away with him. In fact, a large, shrewd humanity was missing.

"I'll be doggered," had been a remark of Mr. Doty's in the autumn, "ef crops hes done es well sence he went."

There had been endless talk of the villanous tendencies of Government officials, and of the tricks played whose end was to defraud honest and long-suffering claimants of their rights. There had even been dark hours when it had seemed possible that the vitiating effect of Washington life might cause deterioration in the character of even the most upright. Could Tom himself stand it, and what would be its effect on Sheba?

But when the outlook was the most inauspicious, Fortune's wheel had swept round once and all was changed.

A letter brought the news--a simple enough letter from Tom himself. The claim was won. They were coming back to Hamlin County, he and Sheba and Rupert De Willoughby. Sheba and Rupert were to be married and spend the first weeks of their honeymoon on the side of the mountain which had enclosed the world the child Sheba had first known.

On this particular day every man and woman who had known and played with her appeared at the Cross-roads. There had not been a large number of them perhaps, but gathered together at and about the Post-office and about the house and garden, they formed a crowd, as crowds are counted in scattered communities. They embodied excitement enough to have exhilarated a much larger body of people. Half a dozen women had been helping Aunt Mornin for days. The house wore a gala air, and the cellar

was stored with offerings of cake and home-made luxuries. The garden was a mass of radiant scented bloom of spring. Mis' Doty sat at the open window of the kitchen and, looking out on nodding daffodils, apple-blossom, and pink peach-flower warmed in the sun, actually chuckled as she joyfully sniffled the air.

"The way them things smells," she said, "an' the hummin' o' them bees goin' about as ef the world hadn't nothin' but flowers an' honey in it, seems like it was all jest got up for them two young uns. Lordy, I do declar', it's a plum sight."

"That bin a heap got up for 'em, seems like," said Molly Hollister, smiling at the nearest apple-tree as if it were a particular friend. "Fust off, they're dead in love with each other, an' we uns all knows how that makes people feel--even in the dead o' winter, an' when they ain't a penny in their pockets; they're as good-hearted as they kin be--an' es hansum'--an' they're rich, an' they was married this mornin', an' they're comin' home with Tom D'Willerby to a place an' folks that loves 'em--an' the very country an' the things that grows seems as if they was dressed out for a weddin'. An' it's Sheba as Tom took me to look at lyin' in her little old wooden cradle in the room behind the store."

She laughed, as she said it, a little hysteric laugh, with suddenly moist eyes. She was an emotional creature.

The road had been watched steadily for many hours before any arrival could

have been legitimately expected. It gave restless interest--something to do. At noon one of Molly Hollister's boys came running breathlessly up the road, waving his hat.

"They're a-comin'!" he shouted. "They're a-comin'! They're in a fine carriage."

"Let Tom D'Willerby alone for havin' the finest team in Hamlin," said Mr. Doty, with a neighbourly grin.

Almost immediately the carriage was to be seen. The horses lifted their feet high, and stepped at a pace which was felt worthy of the occasion. Uncle Matt drove. Rupert and Sheba sat side by side. They looked very young and beautiful, and rather shy. They had only been married a few hours, and were bewildered by the new radiance of things. Big Tom humanely endeavoured not to look at them, but found it difficult to avert his eyes for any length of time. There was that about them which drew his gaze back in spite of himself.

"That's old Tom!" he heard familiar voices proclaim, as they drew near the Post-office. "Howdy, Tom! Howdy, Sheby! Wish ye much joy! Wish ye much joy!"

Then the horses stopped, and the crowd of long-known faces surged near and were all about the carriage. The clamour of the greeting voices, the grasping of one hand after another seemed to Sheba and Rupert like

something happening in a dream. They were too far away from earth to feel it real just now, though it was part of the happiness of things--like the sunshine and the soft wind and the look in Tom's eyes, when, amid hand-shakes and congratulations, and welcoming laughter, he himself laughed back in his old way.

"Ye look jest like ye used ter, Tom--jest like ye used ter," cried Jake Doty. "Ye hain't changed a durned bit!"

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How did the day pass? Who knows? What does it matter? It was full of strange beauty, and strange happiness, and strange life for two young souls at least. People came and went, congratulating, wondering, rejoicing. Talbot's Cross-roads felt that it had vicariously come into the possession of wealth and dignity of position. Among the many visitors, Mrs. Stamps rode up on a clay-bank mare. She was attired in the black calico riding-skirt and sunbonnet which represented the mourning garb of the mountain relict.

"I'm a widder," she said to big Tom, in a tone not unresigned. "Ye got yer claim through, but Stamps hadn't no influence, an' he was took off by pneumony. Ketched cold runnin' to Linthicum, I guess. His landlady was a honest enough critter. She found a roll o' five hundred dollars hid in his bed when she went to lay him out, an' she sent it back to me. Lord knows whar he got it from--I don't. But it come in mighty handy."

By sunset the welcoming crowd had broken up and melted away into the mountains. Horses and ox-waggons had been mounted and ridden or driven homeward. The Post-office was closed; no one was to be seen in the porch. No one was to be seen anywhere except in the garden among the blossoms where Rupert and Sheba walked under the fragrance of the trees, talking to each other in low, softly broken words.

Tom sat in the porch and watched the moon rise in a sea of silver. The scents the wind wafted to him, the occasional sound of a far-off night-bird, the rustle of the leaves brought things back to him--things he had felt in his youth. There had been nights like this in the days when he had been a big, clumsy young fellow, wild with hopeless love for Delia Vanuxem. On such nights the air had been full of this night breath of flowers, the birds had stirred in their nests with just such sounds, the moon had mounted, as it did to-night, higher and higher in a sky it thrilled a man's soul to lift his face to.

"Yes, it was all like this," he said, leaning back and clasping his big hands behind his head. "Just like this! And those two out there are living it over again, only they've been fairly treated, and they are trembling with the joy of it. They're pretty safe," he ended. "They're pretty safe. They've had a fair show."

Rupert and Sheba walked slowly side by side. They saw and felt everything. If a bird stirred with a sleepy sound, they stopped to listen

and smiled tremulously at each other. More than once Sheba knelt down and
hid her face among the flowers, kissing them. Her arms were full of white blossoms. She and Rupert had made white garlands for her hair and waist, such as she had worn the night he had first seen her standing on her little balcony. When Rupert held her to his side, the scent from their crushed petals filled the air they breathed. The early night was at its stillest and fairest, and the moonlight seemed to flood all the world, when Sheba stopped and looked up, speaking softly:

"Shall we go now?" she said. "The moon will be shining down between the pines. It will be so quiet."

"Yes," he answered. "Let us go now."

They had planned weeks ago the things they were going to do. They were going to say good-night to the small mound at Blair's Hollow.

When they left their horses at the foot of the hill even the pines could not look darkly under the fair light. The balmy air passing through their branches made a sound as if it was hushing a child to sleep.

The little mound lay in the soft brightness of clear moonbeams. Sheba knelt beside it and began to lay her bridal blossoms on the grass-covered earth. Rupert stood and watched her. His heart beat with a reverent, rapturous tremor. She looked like a young angel.

She bent down and laid her cheek upon the grass; her arm was thrown out as if she clasped something to her girl's breast. She spoke in a whisper--thrilled with love. "I am happy," she said. "I am happy. Oh, do you hear? Do you hear?"