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CHAPTER I

High noon at Talbot's Cross-roads, with the mercury standing at ninety-eight in the shade-though there was not much shade worth mentioning in the immediate vicinity of the Cross-roads post-office, about which, upon the occasion referred to, the few human beings within sight and sound were congregated. There were trees enough a few hundred yards away, but the post-office stood boldly and unflinchingly in the blazing sun. The roads crossing each other stretched themselves as far as the eye could follow them, the red clay transformed into red dust which even an ordinarily lively imagination might have fancied was red hot. The shrill, rattling cry of the grasshoppers, hidden in the long yellow sedge-grass and drouth-smitten corn, pierced the stillness now and then with a suddenness startling each time it broke forth, because the interval between each of the pipings was given by the hearers to drowsiness or heated unconscious naps.

In such napping and drowsiness the present occupants of the post-office were indulging. Upon two empty goods boxes two men in copperas-coloured jean garments reclined in easy attitudes, their hats tilted over their eyes, while several others balanced their split-seated chairs against the house or the post-porch and dozed.

Inside the store the postmaster and proprietor tilted his chair against the counter and dozed also, though fitfully, and with occasional restless changes of position and smothered maledictions against the heat. He was scarcely the build of man to sleep comfortably at high noon in midsummer. His huge, heavy body was rather too much for him at any time, but during the hot weather he succumbed

beneath the weight of his own flesh. Hamlin County knew him as "Big Tom D'Willerby," and, indeed, rather prided itself upon him as a creditable possession. It noted any increase in his weight, repeated his jokes, and bore itself patiently under his satire. His indolence it regarded with leniency not entirely untinged with secret exultation.

"*The* derndest, laziest critter," his acquaintances would remark to each other; "the *derndest* I do reckon that ever the Lord made. Nigh unto three hundred he weighs, and never done a lick o' work in his life. Not one! Lord, no! Tom D'Willerby work? I guess not. He gits on fine without any o' that in his'n. Work ain't his kind. It's a pleasin' sight to see him lyin' round thar to the post-office an' the boys a-waitin' on to him, doin' his tradin' for him, an' sortin' the mail when it comes in. They're ready enough to do it jest to hear him gas."

And so they were. About eight years before the time the present story commences, he had appeared upon the scene apparently having no object in view but to make himself as comfortable as possible. He took up his quarters at one of the farm-houses among the mountains, paid his hostess regularly for the simple accommodations she could afford him, and, before three months passed, had established his reputation and, without making the slightest apparent effort, had gathered about him a large circle of friends and admirers.

"His name's D'Willerby," Mrs. Pike would drawl when questioned about him, "an' he's kin to them D'Willerbys that's sich big bugs down to D'Lileville. I guess they ain't much friendly, though. He don't seem to like to have nothin' much to say about 'em. Seems like he has money a-plenty to carry him along, an' he talks some o' settin' up a store somewhars."

In the course of a month or so he carried out the plan, selecting Talbot's Cross-roads as the site for the store in question. He engaged hands to erect a frame building,

collected by the assistance of some mysterious agency a heterogeneous stock consisting of calicoes, tinware, coffee, sugar, tobacco, and various waif and stray commodities, and, having done so, took his seat on the porch one morning and announced the establishment open.

Upon the whole, the enterprise was a success. Barnesville was fifteen miles distant, and the farmers, their wives and daughters, were glad enough to stop at the Cross-roads for their calico dresses and store-coffee. By doing so they were saved a long ride and gained superior conversational advantages. "D'Willerby's mighty easy to trade with," it was said.

There was always a goodly number of "critters" tied to the fence-corners, and consequently to business was added the zest of society and the interchanging of gossip. "D'Willerby's" became a centre of interest and attraction, and D'Willerby himself a county institution.

Big Tom, however, studiously avoided taking a too active part in the duties of the establishment. Having with great forethought provided himself with a stout chair which could be moved from behind the counter to the door, and from the door to the store as the weather demanded, he devoted himself almost exclusively to sitting in it and encouraging a friendly and accommodating spirit in his visitors and admirers. The more youthful of those admirers he found useful in the extreme.

"Boys," he would say, "a man can't do more than a thousand things at once. A man can't talk a steady stream and do himself justice, and settle the heftiest kind of questions, and say the kind of things these ladies ought to have said to 'em, and then measure out molasses and weigh coffee and slash off calico dresses and trade for eggs. Some of you've got to roust out and do some clerking, or I've got to quit. I've not got the constitution to stand it. Jim, you 'tend to Mis' Pike, and Bill, you wait on Mis' Jones. Lord! Lord! half a dozen of you here, and not one doing a thing-

not a derned thing! Do you want me to get up and leave Miss Mirandy and do things myself? We've got to settle about the colour of this gown. How'd you feel now, if it wasn't becoming to her complexion? Just help yourself to that plug of tobacco, Hance, and lay your ten cents in the cash drawer, and then you can weigh out that butter of Mis' Simpson's."

When there was a prospect of a post-office at the Cross-roads, there was only one opinion as to who was the man best calculated to adorn the position of postmaster.

"The store's right yere, Tom," said his patrons, "an' you're right yere. Ye can write and spell off things 'thout any trouble, an' I reckon ye wouldn't mind the extry two dollars comin' in ev'ry month."

"Lord! Lord!" groaned Tom, who was stretched full length on the floor of the porch when the subject was first broached. "Do you want a man to kill himself out an' out, boys? Work himself into eternal kingdom come? Who'd do the extra work, I'd like to know-empty out the mail-bag and hand out the mail, and do the extra cussin'? That would be worth ten dollars a month. And, like as not, the money would be paid in cheques, and who's goin' to sign 'em? Lord! I believe you think a man's immortal soul could be bought for fifty cents a day. You don't allow for the wear and tear on a fellow's constitution, boys."

But he allowed himself to be placed in receipt of the official salary in question, and the matter of extra labour settled itself. Twice a week a boy on horseback brought the mail-bag from Barnesville, and when this youth drew rein before the porch Big Tom greeted him from indoors with his habitual cordiality.

"'Light, sonny, 'light!" he would call out in languidly sonorous tones; "come in and let these fellows hear the news. Just throw that mail-bag on the counter and let's hear from you. Plenty of good water down at the spring. Might as well take that bucket and fill it if you want a

drink. I've been waiting for just such a man as you to do it. These fellows would sit here all day and let a man die. I can't get anything out of 'em. I've about half a mind to quit sometimes and leave them to engineer the thing themselves. Look here now, is any fellow going to attend to that mail, or is it going to lie there till I have to get up and attend to it myself? I reckon that's what you want. I reckon that'd just suit you. Jehoshaphat! I guess you'd like me to take charge of the eternal universe."

It was for the mail he waited with his usual complement of friends and assistants on the afternoon referred to at the opening of this chapter. The boy was behind time, and, under the influence of the heat, conversation had at first flagged and then subsided. Big Tom himself had taken the initiative of dropping into a doze, and his companions had one by one followed his example, or at least made an effort at doing so. The only one of the number who remained unmistakably awake was a little man who sat on the floor of the end of the porch, his small legs, encased in large blue jean pantaloons, dangling over the side. This little man, who was gently and continuously ruminating, with brief "asides" of expectoration, kept his eyes fixed watchfully upon the Barnesville Road, and he it was who at last roused the dozers.

"Thar's some un a-comin'," he announced in a meek voice. "'Tain't him."

Big Tom opened his eyes, stretched himself, and gradually rose in his might, proving a very tight fit for the establishment, especially the doorway, towards which he lounged, supporting himself against its side.

"Who is it, Ezra?" he asked, almost extinguishing the latter cognomen with a yawn.

"It's thet thar feller!"

All the other men awakened in a body. Whomsoever the individual might be, he had the power to rouse them to a lively exhibition of interest. One and all braced themselves

to look at the horseman approaching along the Barnesville Road.

"He's a kinder curi's-lookin' feller," observed one philosopher.

"Well, at a distance of half a mile, perhaps he is," said Tom. "In a cloud of dust and the sun blazin' down on him like thunderation, I don't know but you're right, Nath."

"Git out!" replied Nath, placidly. "He's a curi's-actin' feller, anyway. Don't go nowhar nor hev nothin' to say to nobody. Jest sets right down in that thar holler with his wife, as if b'ars an' painters wus all a man or woman wanted round 'em."

"She's a doggoned purty critter," said the little man in large trousers, placidly. He had not appeared to listen to the conversation, but, as this pertinent remark proved, it had not been lost on him.

His observation was greeted with a general laugh, which seemed to imply that the speaker had a character which his speech sustained.

"Whar did ye see her, Stamps?" was asked.

The little man remained unmoved, still dangling his legs over the porch side, still ruminating, still gazing with pale, blinking eyes up the road.

"Went over the mountain to 'tend court to Bakersville, an' took it on my road to go by thar. She was settin' in the door, an' I see her afore she seen me. When she hearn the sound of my mule's feet, she got up an' went into the house. It was a powerful hot mornin', 'n' I wus mighty dry, 'n' I stopped fur a cool drink. She didn't come out when fust I hollered, 'n' when she did come, she looked kinder skeered 'n' wouldn't talk none. Kep' her sunbonnet over her face, like she didn't want to be seen overmuch."

"What does she look like, Ezry?" asked one of the younger men.

Mr. Stamps meditated a few seconds.

"Don't look like none o' the women folk about yere," he replied, finally. "She ain't their kind."

"What d'ye mean by that?"

"Dunno eggsactly. She's mighty white 'n' young-lookin' 'n' delicate-but that ain't all."

Tom made a restless movement.

"Look here, boys," he broke in, suddenly, "here's a nice business-a lot of fellows asking questions about a woman an' gossiping as if there wasn't a thing better to do. Leave 'em alone, if they want to be left alone-leave 'em alone."

Mr. Stamps expectorated in an entirely unbiased manner. He seemed as willing to leave his story alone as he had been to begin it.

"He's comin' yere," he said, softly, after a pause. "Thet's whar he's comin'."

The rest of the company straightened themselves in their seats and made an effort to assume the appearance of slightly interested spectators. It became evident that Mr. Stamps was right, and that the rider was about to dismount.

He was a man about thirty years of age, thin, narrow-chested, and stooping. His coarse clothes seemed specially ill-suited to his slender figure, his black hair was long, and his beard neglected; his broad hat was pulled low over his eyes and partially concealed his face.

"He don't look none too sociable when he's nigher than half a mile," remarked Nath in an undertone.

He glanced neither to the right nor to the left as he strode past the group into the store. Strange to relate, Tom had lounged behind the counter and stood ready to attend him. He asked for a few necessary household trifles in a low tone, and, as Tom collected and made them into a clumsy package, he stood and looked on with his back turned towards the door.

Those gathered upon the porch listened eagerly for the sound of conversation, but none reached their ears. Tom

moved heavily to and fro for a few minutes, and then the parcel was handed across the counter.

"Hot weather," said the stranger, without raising his eyes.

"Yes," said Tom, "hot weather, sir."

"Good-day," said the stranger.

"Good-day," answered Tom.

And his customer took his departure. He passed out as he had passed in; but while he was indoors little Mr. Stamps had changed his position. He now sat near the wooden steps, his legs dangling as before, his small countenance as noncommittal as ever. As the stranger neared him, he raised his pale little eyes, blinked them, indulged in a slight jerk of the head, and uttered a single word of greeting.

"Howdy?"

The stranger started, glanced down at him, and walked on. He made no answer, untied his horse, mounted it, and rode back over the Barnesville Road towards the mountain.

Mr. Stamps remained seated near the steps and blinked after him silently until he was out of sight.

"Ye didn't seem to talk none, D'Willerby," said one of the outsiders when Tom reappeared.

Tom sank into his chair, thrust his hands into his pockets, and stretched his limbs out to their fullest capacity.

"Let a man rest, boys," he said, "let a man rest!"

He was silent for some time afterwards, and even on the arrival of the mail was less discursive than usual. It was Mr. Stamps who finally aroused him from his reverie.

Having obtained his mail-one letter in a legal-looking envelope-and made all other preparations to return to the bosom of his family, Stamps sidled up to the counter, and, leaning over it, spoke in an insinuatingly low tone:

"She was bar'foot," he said, mildly, "'n' she hadn't been raised to it-that was one thing. Her feet wus as soft 'n' tender as a baby's; 'n' fur another thing, her hands wus as white as her face, 'n' whiter. Thet ain't the way we raise 'em in Hamlin County-that's all."

And, having said it, he slipped out of the store, mounted his mule, and jogged homeward on the Barnesville Road also.

CHAPTER II

Before the war there were no people better known or more prominent in their portion of the State than the De Willoughbys of Delisle County, Tennessee. To have been born a De Willoughby was, in general opinion, to have been born with a silver spoon in one's mouth. It was indeed to have been born to social dignity, fortune, courage, and more than the usual allowance of good looks. And though the fortune was lavishly spent, the courage sometimes betrayed into a rather theatrical dare-deviltry, and the good looks prone to deteriorate in style, there was always the social position left, and this was a matter of the deepest importance in Delisleville. The sentiments of Delisleville were purely patrician. It was the county town, and contained six thousand inhabitants, two hotels, and a court-house. It had also two or three business streets and half a dozen churches, all very much at odds with each other and each seriously inclined to disbelieve in the probable salvation of the rest. The "first families" (of which there were eight or ten, with numerous branches) attended the Episcopal Church, the second best the Presbyterian, while the inferior classes, who could scarcely be counted at all, since they had not been born in Delisleville, drifted to the Methodists.

The De Willoughbys attended the Episcopal Church, and, being generally endowed with voices, two or three of them sang in the choir, which was composed entirely of members of the attending families and executed most difficult music in a manner which was the cause after each service of much divided opinion. Opinion was divided because the choir was divided-separated, in fact, into several small,

select cliques, each engaged in deadly and bitter feud with the rest. When the moon-eyed soprano arose, with a gentle flutter, and opened her charming mouth in solo, her friends settled themselves in their pews with a general rustle of satisfaction, while the friends of the contralto exchanged civilly significant glances; and on the way home the solo in question was disposed of in a manner at once thorough and final. The same thing occurred when the contralto was prominent, or the tenor, or the baritone, or the basso, each of whom it was confidently asserted by competent Delisleville judges might have rendered him or herself and Delisleville immortal upon the lyric stage if social position had not placed the following of such a profession entirely out of the question. There had indeed been some slight trouble in one or two of the best families, occasioned by the musical fervour of youthful scions who were in danger of being led into indiscretions by their enthusiasm.

The De Willoughbys occupied one of the most prominent pews in the sacred edifice referred to. Judge De Willoughby, a large, commanding figure, with a fine sweep of long hair, mustache and aquiline profile; Mrs. De Willoughby (who had been a Miss Vanuxem of South Carolina), slender, willowy, with faded brunette complexion and still handsome brunette eyes, and three or four little De Willoughbys, all more or less pretty and picturesque. These nearly filled the pew. The grown-up Misses De Willoughby sang with two of their brothers in the choir. There were three sons, Romaine, De Courcy, and Thomas. But Thomas did not sing in the choir. Thomas, alas! did not sing at all. Thomas, it was universally conceded by every De Willoughby of the clan, was a dismal failure. Even from his earliest boyhood, when he had been a huge, overgrown fellow, whose only redeeming qualities were his imperturbable good-humor and his ponderous wit, his family had regarded him with a sense of despair. In the first place, he was too big. His brothers were tall, lithe-limbed

youths, who were graceful, dark-eyed, dark-haired, and had a general air of brilliancy. They figured well at college and in their world; they sang and danced in a manner which, combining itself with the name of De Willoughby, gave them quite an ennobled sort of distinction, a touch of patrician bravado added to their picturesqueness in the eyes of the admiring; and their little indiscretions were of a nature to be ignored or treated with gentle consideration as the natural result of their youth, spirit, and Southern blood. But at nineteen Thomas had attained a height of six feet five, with a proportionate breadth and ponderousness. His hands and feet were a disgrace to a De Willoughby, and his voice was a roar when he was influenced by anything like emotion. Displays of emotion, however, were but rare occurrences with him. He was too lazy to be roused to anger or any other violent feeling. He spent his leisure hours in lying upon sofas or chairs and getting very much in everybody's way. He lounged through school and college without the slightest *éclat* attending his progress.

It became the pastime of the household to make rather a butt of him, and for the most part he bore himself under the difficulties of his position peaceably enough, though there had been times when his weighty retorts had caused some sharp wincing.

"You're an ill-natured devil, Tom," his brother De Courcy said to him, as he stood fingering the ornaments on the mantel after one such encounter. "You're an ill-natured devil."

Tom was stretched on a sofa, with his big hands under his head, and did not condescend to look around.

"I'm not such a thundering fool as you take me for, that's all," he answered. "I've got my eyes open. Keep to your side of the street, and I will keep to mine."

It was true that he had his eyes open and had more wit and feeling than they gave him credit for. No one understood him, not even his mother, who had deplored

him from the first hour of his overweighted babyhood, when she had given him over to the care of his negro nurse in despair.

In the midst of a large family occupied with all the small gaieties attendant upon popularity and social distinction in a provincial town, he lived a lonely life, and one not without its pathetic side if it had been so looked upon. But even he himself had never regarded the matter from a sentimental point of view. He endeavoured to resign himself to his fate and meet it philosophically.

"I wasn't cut out for this sort of thing, boys," he had said to his friends at college, where he had been rather popular. "I wasn't cut out for it. Go ahead and leave me behind. I'm not a bad sort of fellow, but there is too much of me in one way and too little in another. What the Lord made such a man as me for after six thousand years' experience, I haven't found out yet. A man may as well make up his mind about himself first as last. I've made up mine and nobody differs from me so far as I've gone."

When he left college his brothers had already chosen their vocations. Delisle County knew them as promising young lawyers, each having distinguished himself with much fiery eloquence in an occasional case. The cases had not always been gained, but the fervour and poetry of the appeals to the rather muddled and startled agriculturists who formed the juries were remembered with admiration and as being worthy of Delisleville, and were commented upon in the Delisleville *Oriflamme* as the "fit echoings of an eloquence long known in our midst as the birthright of those bearing one of our proudest names, an eloquence spurred to its eagle flights by the warm, chivalric blood of a noble race."

But the "warm, chivalric blood" of the race in question seemed to move but slowly in veins of its most substantial representative. The inertness of his youngest son roused that fine old Southern gentleman and well-known legal

dignitary, Judge De Willoughby, to occasional outbursts of the fiery eloquence before referred to which might well have been productive of remarkable results.

"Good God, sir!" he would trumpet forth, "good God, sir! have we led the State for generation after generation to be disgraced and degraded and dragged in the dust by one of our own stock at last? The De Willoughbys have been gentlemen, sir, distinguished at the bar, in politics, and in the highest social circles of the South; and here we have a De Willoughby whose tastes would be no credit to-to his overseer, a De Willoughby who has apparently neither the ambition nor the qualification to shine in the sphere in which he was born! Blow your damned brains out, if you have any; blow your damned brains out, and let's have an end of the whole disgraceful business."

This referred specially to Tom's unwillingness to enter upon the study of medicine, which had been chosen for him.

"I should make a better farmer," he said, bitterly, after a prolonged discussion. "I'm not the build for women's bedrooms and children's bedsides. De Courcy would have suited you better."

"De Courcy is a gentleman-a gentleman, sir! He was born one and would shine in any profession a gentleman may adorn. As for you, this is the only thing left for you, and you shall try it, by G--!"

"Oh," said Tom, "I'll try it. I can only fail, and I've done that before."

He did try it forthwith, applying himself to his studies with a persistence quite creditable. He read lying upon sofas and lounging in the piazzas, and in course of time was sent to attend lectures in Philadelphia.

Whether he could have gained his diploma or not was never decided. Those of the professors who commented on him at all, spoke of him as slow but persevering, and regarded him rather as a huge receiving machine of orderly

habits. The Judge began to congratulate himself upon his determination, and his mother thought it "a good thing poor Tom was disposed of."

But one terrible morning just before the first course of lectures was completed, he suddenly returned, walking into the Judge's office without any previous intimation of his intention.

When he turned in his seat and confronted him, the Judge lost his breath.

"You!" he cried; "you!"

"Yes," said Tom, "I've come back." He was rather pale and nervous, but there was a dogged, resigned look in his eyes. "I've made up my mind," he added, "that I cannot stand it. Turn me loose on one of your plantations to-to boss niggers. You said once I was fit for an overseer. Perhaps you weren't wrong. Say the word and I'll start to-morrow."

The Judge's aquiline countenance turned gray with fury. His fine mustache seemed to curl itself anew.

"You-you accursed scoundrel!" he gasped. "You accursed, underbred hound! Tell me what this means, or I'll strangle you."

"You'll say I'm a fool," said Tom, "and I suppose it's true, and-and--" with a tremour in his voice, "I've no need to be particular about the names you call me. I ought to be used to them by this time."

"Speak out," thundered the Judge, "and tell me the whole disgraceful truth!"

"It won't take long," said Tom; "I told it when I said I'd made up my mind I couldn't stand it. I've been walking the hospitals and attending the clinics for the last three months, and I've had a chance to see what my life would be if I went through. I've seen things to make a man tremble when they came back to him in the dead of night-agony and horror-women and children! Good Lord! I can't tell you. De Courcy could, but I can't. I'd rather be in hell than live such a life day after day. I tried to stand up against it at first. I

thought I might get used to it, but I haven't the nerve-or something was wrong. It got worse and worse, until I used to start up out of my sleep in a cold sweat, hearing screams and groans and prayers. That was the worst of all-their prayers to us to help them and not to hurt them. Four days ago a child was brought in-a child four or five years old. There was an operation to be performed, and I was the man chosen to hold it still. Its mother was sent out of the room. My God! how it screamed when it saw her go and knew it was to be left to us. They told me to hold it because I was the strongest, and-and I put my hands on it. I'm a big fellow to look at, and I suppose it knew there was no help for it when I came near. It turned as white as death and looked up at me with the tears streaming down its face. Before the operation was half over it hadn't the strength left to scream or struggle, and it lay and looked at me and moaned. I should have given up the job, but somehow I couldn't make up my mind to-to leave it. When it was all done, I gave it back to its mother and went to my rooms. I turned sick on the way and had to sit down to rest. I swore then I'd let the thing drop, and I bought my ticket and came back. I'm not the man for the work. Better men may do it-perhaps it takes better men. I'm not up to it." And his shaken voice broke as he hung his great head.

A deadly calm settled upon the Judge. He pointed to the door.

"Go home to your mother, sir," he said, "I've done with you. Go and stay with the women. That's the place for you."

"He's a coward as well as a fool," he said afterwards in the bosom of his family; "a white-livered fool who hasn't the nerve to look at a sick child."

It was a terrible day for the household, but at last it was over. Tom went to his room in an apathy. He had been buffeted and scorned and held up to bitter derision until he had ceased to feel anything but a negative, helpless misery.

About a week later Delia Vanuxem appeared upon the scene. Delia Vanuxem was a young cousin of Mrs. De Willoughby's, and had come to pay her relatives a visit. It was the hospitable custom of Delisleville to cultivate its kinsfolk-more especially its kinswomen. There were always in two or three of the principal families young lady guests who were during their stay in the town the sensation of the hour. Novelty established them as temporary belles; they were petted by their hostesses, attended by small cohorts of admirers, and formed the centre for a round of festivities specially arranged to enliven their visits.

Delia Vanuxem bore away the palm from all such visitors past or to come. She was a true Southern beauty, with the largest dark eyes, the prettiest yielding manner, and the very smallest foot Delisleville had ever fallen prostrate before, it being well known among her admirers that one of her numerous male cousins had once measured her little slipper with a cigar-a story in which Delisleville delighted. And she was not only a pretty, but also a lovable and tender-hearted young creature. Her soft eyes end soft voice did not belie her. She was gentle and kindly to all around her. Mrs. De Willoughby and the two older girls fell in love with her at once, and the Judge himself was aroused to an eloquence of compliment and a courtly grandeur of demeanour which rose even beyond his usual efforts in a line in which he had always shone. The very negroes adored her and vied with each other to do her service.

It was quite natural that a nature so sweet and sympathetic should be awakened to pity for the one member of the gay household who seemed cut off from the rest, and who certainly at the time existed under a darker cloud than usual.

From the first she was more considerate of poor Tom than anyone who had ever been before, and more than once, as he sat silent and gloomy at the table, he looked up

to find her lovely eyes resting upon his big frame with a questioning, pitying glance.

"He is so much too big, Aunt Jule," she wrote home once. "And he seems somehow to feel as if he was always in the way, and, indeed, he is a little sometimes, poor fellow! and everyone appears to think he is only a joke or a mistake; but I have made up my mind never to laugh at him at all as the other girls do. It seems so unkind, and surely he must feel it."

She never did laugh at him, and sometimes even tried to talk to him, and once drew him out so far in an artful, innocent way, that he told her something of his medical failure and the reasons for it, manifestly ashamed of the story as he related it, and yet telling it so well in a few clumsy, rather disconnected sentences, that when he had finished her eyelashes were wet and she broke into a little shuddering sigh.

"Oh!" she said, "I don't think you are to blame, really. I have often thought that I could never, never bear to do such things, though, of course, if there was no one to do them it would be dreadful; but--"

"Yes," said Tom, "there it is. Someone must do it, and I know I'm a confounded coward and ninny, but-but I couldn't." And he looked overwhelmed with humiliation.

"But after all," she said, in the soft voice which had always the sound of appeal in it, "after all, I'm sure it was because you have a kind heart, and a kind heart is worth a great deal. You will do something else."

"There is nothing else for me to do," he said, mournfully; "nothing that won't disgrace the rest, they tell me."

It was small wonder that this was his final undoing, though neither was to blame. Certainly no fault could be attached to the young creature who meant to be kind to him, as it was her nature to be to all surrounding her; and surely Tom's great and final blunder arose from no presumption on his part. He had never thought of aspiring

to the proud position with regard to her which Romaine and De Courcy seemed to occupy by natural right. It was only now and then, when they were unavoidably engaged, that he had the courage to offer his services as messenger or escort, but even those rare pleasures were a little too much for him. He was so unused to such privileges that they intoxicated him and set his mind in a whirl which prevented his thinking clearly, or, indeed, ever thinking at all sometimes.

Even when it was all over, he scarcely knew how he had been betrayed into the weakness he was guilty of. It was not like him to lose sight of his manifold imperfections; but for once they were swept out of his mind by a momentary madness.

It was on the occasion of a ball at the Delisle House. The Delisle House was the principal hotel, and all important festivities were held in its long dining-hall disguised as a ballroom. The ball was given by a gallant Delisleville Club in honour of Miss Delia Vanuxem, and it was a very magnificent affair indeed. The disguise of the dining-room was complete. It was draped with flags and decorated with wreaths of cedar and paper roses. A band of coloured gentlemen, whose ardour concealed any slight musical discrepancies, assisted the festivities, which-to quote the *Oriflamme* of the next morning-"the wealth, beauty, and chivalry of Delisleville combined to render unequalled in their gaiety and elegance, making the evening one of the most successful of the piquant occasions

When youth and pleasure meet To chase

the glowing hours with flying feet."

Usually Tom's part in such festivities was to sit uncomfortably in dull corners, taking up as little room as possible, or piloting his way carefully through the crowd to the supper-table with an elderly lady or a wall-flower clinging timidly to his huge arm. But during this one evening he lost his equilibrium. Delia had been more than

usually kind to him, perhaps because she saw his unhappy awkwardness as he towered above everyone else and tried to avoid treading upon his neighbours. She gave him such a pretty smile across the room that he obeyed the impulse to go to her and stand at her side; then, when she left him to dance with De Courcy, she gave him her fan and bouquet and fleecy white wrap to hold, and somehow it seemed not unnatural that De Courcy should bring her back to him as to a sentinel when the dance was over. Thus it was as she sat, flushed a little and smiling, her face uplifted to his, while she thanked him for taking care of her possessions, that the wild thought which so betrayed him rushed into his brain.

"Delia," he faltered, "will you dance once with me?"

It was so startling a request, that, though she was quick enough to conceal her surprise, she hesitated a second before recovering her breath to give him her answer.

"Yes, Tom, if you like," she said, and glanced down at her programme. "The next is a waltz, and I can let you have it because Dr. Ballentine has been called away. Do you waltz?"

"I have learned," he answered, rather huskily and tremulously. "I do it badly, of course, but I know the steps well enough."

He was so helpless with nervousness that he could scarcely speak, and his hands trembled when they stood up together and he laid his arm reverently about her waist.

She saw his timidity and looked up at him with a kind smile.

"I must be very little," she said, "I never knew before that I was so little."

He had thought he should recover himself when the music and motion began, but he did not. He looked down at the delicate head which reached barely to his beating heart, and a blur came before his sight; the light and the crowd of dancers dazzled and confused him. The whirling

movement made him dizzy, and he had not expected to be dizzy. He began suddenly to be conscious of his own immensity, the unusualness of his position, and of the fact that here and there he saw a meaning smile; his heart beat faster still, and he knew he had been led into a mistake. He swung round and round too quickly for the music, missed a step, tried to recover himself, became entangled in his partner's dress, trod on her poor little feet, and fell headlong on the floor, dragging her with him and striking against a passing couple.

It was his brother De Courcy with whom he had come in such violent contact, and it was De Courcy who sprang to Delia's rescue, assisting her to her feet with all possible grace, and covering her innocent confusion with a brilliant speech, but not, however, before he had directed a terrible scowl at the prostrate culprit and sworn furiously at him under his breath. But Delia was very good to him and did not desert him in the hour of his need, giving him only kind looks and managing to arrange that he should lead her to her seat as if he had not been in disgrace at all.

But the shame and pain of his downfall were sharper pangs than he had ever borne, and before the night was half over he slipped away from the dangers and rushed home to his own room, where he lay awake through the long hours, cursing himself for his folly, and tossing in a fever of humiliation and grief.

In the morning when he came down to the breakfast table, the family were already assembled, and the Judge had heard the story from De Courcy, who told it all the more forcibly in the absence of Miss Vanuxem, who had spent the night at the house of another relative.

When Tom entered, his paternal parent was ready to receive him.

"Trod on Miss Vanuxem's dress and tore it off her back in the ballroom, did you?" he burst forth. "Made a fool of yourself and a bear-garden of the Delisle House ballroom!

What were you trying to dance for? Leave that to men who can manage their limbs, and don't inflict yourself on women who are too high-bred to refuse to dance with a man who ought to be a gentleman. Stay at home, sir! Stay at home, and don't make a disgraceful spectacle of yourself in public, particularly when there are lovely women present to witness your humiliation."

It was the figurative last straw. Tom's mind had been dark and gloomy enough to begin with, but when during his father's harangue he glanced up and saw De Courcy bending his aquiline face over his paper with a slightly sardonic smile, he could stand no more.

To the utter dumfounding of his mother and sisters, and even the irate Judge himself, he pushed his chair back and sprang to his feet with an actual roar of rage and pain. His great body seemed to swell until its size overwhelmed them; his eyes blazed, he shook his tremendous fist.

"Leave me alone!" he shouted, "leave me alone! Yes, I did make a fool of myself! Yes, I did knock a woman down and tear her dress and look like an ass and set the whole room laughing at me, women and all-the best-bred and sweetest of them! It's all true, every word of it, and more too-more too! And that's not enough, but my own father serves it up again, and you fellows sit there and grin over it to make it worse. That's right, pitch in, all of you, and drive me mad and put an end to it."

He upset his chair and a small negro boy with a plate of waffles, and, striding over the scattered ruins, dashed out of the room with tears of fury in his eyes.

It was the turning-point of his existence. He made his bitter resolve as he walked out of the house down the street. Early as it was, he went straight to Delia, and when he found himself alone with her, poured forth all the misery of his sore heart.

"If I had been born a clod-hopper it would have been better for me," he said. "I have no place here among men

with decently shaped bodies and clear heads. I'm a great clumsy fool, and there's no help for it. If I'd had more brain, I might have managed the rest; but I'm a dullard too. They may well sneer at me. I think I will go away and bury myself somewhere among the people I ought to have lived among by rights. In some simple country place I might find those who know less than I do, and forget the rest; and perhaps be content enough in time. I shall never marry. I-I suppose you know that, Delia." And he took her little hand and laid it on his own open palm and sat silent a moment looking at it, and at last suddenly a great drop fell upon it which made them both start. He did not look up at her, but took out his big white handkerchief and wiped the drop gently away and then stooped and kissed the spot where it had fallen. Her own lashes were wet when their eyes met afterwards, and she spoke in a subdued voice.

"I have always liked you very much, Cousin Tom," she said; "you mustn't talk of going away. We should miss you much more than you think. I know I should be very sorry."

"You won't be here to miss me, Delia," he answered, sadly.

The hand on his palm trembled slightly and her eyes faltered under his gaze.

"I-think it-is possible I shall live in Delisleville," she whispered.

His heart bounded as if it would burst his side. He knew what she meant in an instant, though he had never suspected it before.

"Oh! Oh!" he groaned. "Oh, Delia! which-which of them is it? It's De Courcy, I could swear. It's De Courcy!"

"Yes," she faltered, "it is De Courcy."

He drew his hand away and covered his face with it.

"I knew it was De Courcy," he cried. "He was always the kind of fellow to win. I suppose he deserves it. The Lord knows I hope he does, for your sake. Of course it's De Courcy. Who else?"

He did not stay long after this, and when he went away he wrung her hand in his in a desperate farewell.

"This is another reason for my going now," he said; "I couldn't stay. This-is-good-bye, Delia."

He went home and had a prolonged interview with his father. It was not an agreeable interview to recur to mentally in after time, but in the end Tom gained his point, and a portion of his future patrimony was handed over to him.

"I shall be no further trouble to you," he said. "You mayn't ever hear of me again. This is the end of me as far as you are concerned."

That night, with a valise in his hand, he took his place in the stage running towards the mountain regions of North Carolina, and from that day forward the place knew him no more. It was as he had known it would be: no one was very sorry to be rid of him, and even Delia's sadness was at length toned down by the excitement of preparation for and the festivities attendant upon her triumphant union with the most dashing De Willoughby of the flock.

When this event occurred, Tom's wanderings had ended temporarily in the farm-house referred to in the first chapter, and his appearance in this remote and usually undisturbed portion of his country had created some sensation. The news of the arrival of a stranger had spread itself abroad and aroused a slow-growing excitement.

They were a kindly, simple people who surrounded him-hospitable, ignorant, and curious beyond measure concerning the ways of the outside world of which they knew so little.

In the course of time, as the first keenness of his misery wore away, Tom began to discover the advantages of the change he had made. He no longer need contrast himself unfavourably with his neighbours. He knew more than they, and they found nothing in him to condemn or jeer at. To them he was a mine of worldly knowledge. He amused

them and won their hearts. His natural indolence and lack of active ambition helped the healing of his wounds, perhaps; and then he began to appreciate the humourous side of his position and his old tendency to ponderous joking came back, and assisted him to win a greater popularity than any mere practical quality could have done.

The novelty of his *rôle* was its chief attraction. He began to enjoy and give himself up to it, and make the most of his few gifts. Life was no longer without zest. His natural indolence increased with the size of his great body as the years passed, and his slow whimsical humour became his strongest characteristic. He felt it a fine point in the sarcasm of his destiny that he should at last have become a hero and be regarded with admiration for his conversational abilities, but he bore his honours discreetly, and found both moral and physical comfort in them.

He insensibly adopted the habits of his neighbours; he dressed with their primitive regard for ease; he dropped now and then into their slurring speech, and adopted one by one their arcadian customs.

Whether the change was the better or the worse for him might easily be a matter of opinion, and depend entirely on the standpoint from which it was viewed. At least he lived harmlessly and had no enemy.

And so existence stood with him when the second great change in his life took place.