

CHAPTER XXIII

THE COTTAGE

A GOLDEN year ran by. Queenie was busy with her dairy—two of the finest Alderney cows, with two little Devonshire lassies to help her with everything. And Jack was so happy that he used to awake of a morning and wonder if he was still dreaming. The world was a bubble, and he was in the glowing centre of it, and life was a song, and his Queenie was at his side. He could not bear to have her out of his sight for more than an hour at a time. “Don’t be foolish,” Queenie would say when he importuned her to remain away only the briefest hour. And he would retort, “Don’t *you* be foolish by leaving me!” And then they would kiss and laugh.

And Old Oliver looked on, delighted that two people of their years could keep their dream of youth unbroken.

And it was just the place for an old pair of lovers and a friend. Their cottage was, as the

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song says, a thatched one. The walls were of white painted stone, and it was surrounded by some of the loveliest trees in all Devon. You reached it by a very steep and narrow road, and you turned in by a funny little twisting drive, and there before you was The Cottage, as they called it, simply, covered with clamatis and wistaria and honeysuckle and ivy and passion-flowers and roses.

It was Old Silver who made it his special business to look after the garden. All his life he had read himself to sleep o' nights with gardening books, as that old priest had said; and so, when he came to settle down in The Cottage in his sunset years, he knew as much as most gardeners, and certainly as much as old Albert, who came three days a week to help with the rougher work.

The little smooth lawn was a dream of delight—that was Jack's special care, and divil a worm or a mole or a weed of any kind dare show its face there.

And now Barrōw had arrived to make their board complete. No inside work for him, cooped up so many years in the Splendide! He craved for the open air, as a mariner, inland, yearns for the wide expanses of ocean. And so he cultivated the vegetable garden that first Spring

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of his arrival. Secretly he had kept in touch with farmers on Long Island, and had come to know a great deal about planting. Therefore he surprised them all with his knowledge, and, later, with the peas and beans and other vegetables which seemed to come miraculously from the earth, as a magician causes flowers to appear.

They were the happiest quartette imaginable. And there was so much room in The Cottage—no less than three good-sized sitting-rooms. The drawing-room was all white, with pale yellow curtains and a lovely cherry-coloured carpet and a white fluffy hearth-rug. There were a few pretty water-colours on the walls, and a bookcase in satinwood contained several presentation copies of books from friendly authors—inscribed to all of them. And the cat which used to purr on Long Island—it purrs here now; but it is rather sulky in its old age, for it has never quite forgiven Queenie for bringing it to England, forcing it to meet a lot of low cats with whom it has nothing in common at all.

The dining-room was all crimson hangings, with panelled walls of dark oak, the linen pattern still there, and how pretty it was at night, with the candles lit, the table gleaming with the old silver which each in turn had picked up in travelling. And the ancient glassware, and the decanters,

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filled with old wine! They would go to the dearest little smoking-room after dinner—a very low room with great wide beams overhead, all painted a sunny yellow, with old prints hung round the walls, and pewter mugs.

They had three guests' bedrooms, very sweet and lavender, and they had what Queenie had insisted upon—a real American bathroom, all in blue-and-white Dutch tiles. And you may be sure that Queenie had looked well after her two little maids, Jolly and Jane, who adored her, and the two masters also, with their funny ways of bursting into poetry and things sometimes. Their room was just as clean and sweet and pretty as any in the house.

Then there was the kitchen, Queenie's pride. She used to love to tell the story of how it came to be so wonderful.

“A friend of Oliver's—an American young lady of course—who has made a wonderful name for herself over in the States because of her gift for decoration—she makes the dearest cradles, queer and fanciful, and if she just touches a table with a paintbrush it seems to take on something magical—I can't guess how she does all these things. Well, last year she happened to be in England, and she came to The Cottage one day, and loved it all, though I noticed (maybe I didn't

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think of it then) that she seemed just a bit disappointed in the kitchen. It was just a bare, white-washed room then. She took out a notebook, and began doing some sketching. Next day she insisted that all three of us needed a change—we must run up to London and ‘do’ the plays—it would never do for us to lose our interest in the theatre. And the King was to be in town, and I don’t know what else was to happen. At any rate, there was her flat, and we must do as she wished, because she’d like to stop in this quiet country and finish her book, which she was working so hard on, with nothing accomplished amid the roar of the city. Well, we did it, though we couldn’t quite see why we should be pushed out of our happy home for the mere whim of one of Oliver’s old friends! And a fortnight we were gone.

“And when we returned—what do you think? She took us triumphantly into the kitchen; and it was not until then that we realized what the pretty little rascal had been up to. She had actually panelled it, and had it all painted white, with a frieze of cooks carrying dishes containing peacocks in full plumage, and boars’ heads and great sirloins of beef and plum puddings, and you can see what else. She had painted the frieze herself; and at the end of the long line

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of cooks she had painted Oliver and Jack and me, all smiles, and looking very ready for dinner! There we are—don't you see us? And behind us there is a perfect little portrait of herself, secretly eating a beautiful jam tart. But that wasn't all. She had brought in wonderful bits of brass; she had hung bunches of herbs from the ceiling, and the fireplace itself had become an altar to the Culinary Art, fitted out with the loveliest old tiles which our friend had picked up in Totnes. She had even decorated the little maids, putting them into the prettiest white dresses, with large monograms—J and J on their aprons.

“We all kissed her, and hugged her—her name is Tara Lomas—and she didn't seem to mind in the least! We made her stop over with us; and on a certain day, I said that I myself would prepare the dinner. So I made it of all-American dishes—things I knew she loved; and afterwards she said it was the finest cooking she had ever tasted on a Fourth of July!”