

CHAPTER XXIV

SECRETS COME OUT

OLIVER noticed, as the days passed, that something was on Queenie's mind.

"It's that terrible secret between Jack and me," she explained to him once when he questioned her about her worried look. "I do wish I hadn't kept it from him. It's spoiling my old age a bit—oh, just a bit—nothing serious. Yet I wake at night sometimes, and hear him breathing peacefully beside me, and I wonder if I shouldn't wake him and 'tell him all,' as the flashy novelists say."

"Nonsense!" Old Silver told her. "Don't be a goosey. What difference does it make?"

Over in Torquay one day, Queenie, in her ramble, came upon an ancient church which lies on the outskirts of the quiet town, dreaming of the past. It looked so cool and peaceful that she thought she would go within and rest awhile, and pray a little prayer that Jack might love her always, to the very end, even if he ever discovered

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her carefully guarded secret. Simple little Queenie, who had kept her sweet girlhood like a flower through all the storms of a life on the stage!

Having offered up her prayer, she found herself wandering in the quaint old churchyard, where gravestones leaned, and moss all but hid some of the antiquated inscriptions. Here people had slept for centuries, and others but a little while; and here she, too, would one day rest, she pondered. But she was not ready for her last slumber yet—oh, no! Life was too sweet and filled with sunlight.

Suddenly she was amazed to come upon an old tablet, inscribed to the memory of Jack himself, by his sorrowing widow, Grace! It was dated about thirty years before, and there was no doubt that it was meant for her Jack, as his second and even his third name were upon the plate. But Jack had never been married before—she was sure of that. What could this mean? Perhaps he had had a cousin who bore the same name. Was she dreaming? Long and long she studied the inscription, until sunset came, and her old eyes could read it no more.

She returned to The Cottage in a dreadful state of mind. She must find Jack and ask him about that distant cousin.

“Jack,” she said, as she met him coming down

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the little drive to meet her—he had been frantic at her long absence—“did you know you had a cousin who has a tablet in his memory in the old churchyard at Torquay? At least I suppose he must have been a cousin who died about three decades ago.”

She tried to smile as she said it; but there was a strange feeling in her heart, and she felt it pounding so hard that the thin little smile soon died away.

“And is there any other inscription on the plate? Who put it there? How amazing!” said he, though in a calm voice.

“His sorrowing widow, Grace,” faltered Queenie, who began to wonder why Jack now turned a ghastly white, complained of feeling giddy, and wanted to “lie down.”

Jack said no more about the tablet that evening. Just before dinner Queenie told Oliver Silver of Jack’s sudden faintness. “Oh,” said the old boy, very concerned, “do let me give you one of my tablets to-night.”

Jack heard the words and, to Queenie’s amazement, he turned paler still, and said he must certainly go to his bed.

They had reached the well-laden table. “Just one minute,” Old Silver said. “Wait till I’ve said *grace*, old boy.”

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Whereupon Jack jumped up and left the room in fright.

Queenie followed him, and found him in a most perturbed state. "I must undress and get into bed," he told her. "Do leave me alone, dear."

It was not until the next morning—and oh, what a bitter night it was for poor Queenie!—that he asked her to go for a little walk with him. "I'm all right now," he told her. When they had reached a secluded spot in the woods, he unburdened his guilty conscience. He told her of his unhappy marriage years ago, and of how he had been compelled to divorce his wretched wife. How, about ten years afterwards, he had heard by chance of his wife's re-marriage to a terrible old psalm-singing fellow. He had, he said, been thinking of it all night, and he had come to the conclusion that his former wife, fearing that her husband of the religious turn of mind would strongly object if he knew she had ever been divorced, had determined to put up a tablet to his memory, and then take her husband, apparently by chance, to the churchyard, to see for himself the stone she had placed there. "She would have been capable of that," said Jack bitterly.

"Oh, my dear, thank God I saw it, too!" exclaimed Queenie.

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"What do you mean?" said Jack.

"Why, I was—divorced—also," his wife answered. "Years and years ago. And that beastly psalm-singing man was *my* first husband!" And then, in a rush, she told him all—everything—and how it had preyed upon her mind, until she was close to despair, and the secret seemed likely to wreck her quiet old age. She told of the visit to the Splendide that day when, quite by accident, she had discovered the couple's presence in the hotel; and she told him how she had unburdened her soul to Old Oliver. And Jack laughed. Life was too funny, he said. And when they both came back to the garden, Oliver Silver was surprised to find them, as he expressed it, "behaving like a newly married couple." And he told them that if they continued to act like that, he would simply have to re-marry in his old age.

Queenie told them all what had happened. And what a relief it was to let Barrow, as well as Silver, in on the strange secret of their past!

Next day, after luncheon, Silver brought in a wonderful wreath of roses, which he insisted on taking with them in the little Ford to the church near Torquay. "We will hang it at the foot of the table," he chuckled. And there were tears of laughter in the eyes of them all.

“And to think,” said Jack, as they left the graveyard, “that if you hadn’t said that about *grace* before meals, both Queenie and I might still have gone on living our wicked but delightful little ‘lies !”

“What do you mean ?” said Oliver.

“Why, it was before meals that Grace was always most trying,” returned Jack with a twinkle.

Next day, who should pay them a visit but little Mary—with her lordly husband. And there was another little Mary now—a child so beautiful that she seemed more like a flower, or a dream, than a wisp of childhood. They lived in the next county. “Oh, we shall often run over,” Clieveden said. “You can’t escape us now !”

And that night, in the little smoking-room, while Barrow and Oliver played chess, suddenly the latter rose, and called to Queenie and Jack and Mary and Clieveden to come and join them.

“I have something I want you all to hear,” he said. “I’ve had a secret, too, for a couple of years.”

“And he brought forth that mysterious box which Peter used to put in the wings every night during the run of ‘*She Stoops*.’”

“Listen !” he said, as he wound it up.

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And they heard that sound so dear to the heart of any actor—thundering applause—American applause. The avalanche of sound which had made possible this quiet dream-spot in dear old England.

“We never weary of it, do we? What an age, when it can be captured and held, and turned on at will, and given to us like manna from heaven when we long sometimes for the dear dead days in the theatre!” said old Oliver Silver.

THE END