

CHAPTER X

Mrs. Bennett's cottage on the edge of Mersham Wood seemed to Robin when she first saw it to be only a part of a fairy tale. It is true that only in certain bits of England and in pictures in books of fairy tales did one see cottages of its kind, and in them always lived with their grandmothers--in the fairy stories as Robin remembered--girls who would in good time be discovered by wandering youngest sons of fairy story kings. The wood of great oaks and beeches spread behind and at each side of it and seemed to have no end in any land on earth. It nestled against its primæval looking background in a nook of its own. Under the broad branches of the oaks and beeches tall ferns grew so thick that they formed a forest of their own--a lower, lighter, lacy forest where foxglove spires pierced here and there, and rabbits burrowed and sniffed and nibbled, and pheasants hid nests and sometimes sprang up rocketting startlingly. Birds were thick in the wood and trilled love songs, or twittered and sang low in the hour before their bedtime, filling the twilight with clear adorable sounds. The fairy-tale cottage was whitewashed and its broad eaved roof was thatched. Hollyhocks stood in haughty splendour against its walls and on either side its path. The latticed windows were diamond-paned and their inside ledges filled with flourishing fuchsias and trailing white campanula, and mignonette. The same flowers grew thick in the crowded blooming garden. And there were nests in the hawthorn hedge. And there was a small wicket gate.

When Robin caught sight of it she wondered--for a moment--if she were going to cry. Only because it was part of the dream and could be nothing else--unless one wakened.

On the tiny porch covered with honeysuckle in bloom, a little, old fairy woman was sitting knitting a khaki sock very fast. She wore a clean print gown and a white apron and a white cap with a frilled border. She had a stick and a nutcracker face and a pair of large iron bowed spectacles. She was so busy that she did not seem to hear Robin as she walked up the path between the borders of pinks and snapdragons, but when she was quite close to her she glanced up.

Robin thought she looked almost frightened when she saw her. She got up and made an apologetic curtsy.

"Eh!" she ejaculated, "to think of me not hearing you. I do beg your pardon, Miss, I do that. I was really waiting here to be ready for you."

"Thank you. Thank you, Mrs. Bennett," Robin answered in a sweet hurry to reassure her. "I hope you are very well." And she held out her hand.

Mrs. Bennett had only been shocked at her own apparent inattention to duty. She was not really frightened and her nutcracker face illuminated itself with delighted smiles.

"I don't hear very well at the best of times," she said. "And I've got a

bit of a cold. Just worry, Miss, just worry it is--along of this 'ere war and my grandsons going marching off every few days seems like. Dick, that's the youngest as was always my pet, he's the last and he'll be off any minute--and these is his socks."

Robin actually picked up a sock and patted it softly--with a childish quiver of her chin. It seemed alive.

"Yes, yes!" she said. "Oh! dear! Oh! dear!"

Mrs. Bennett winked tears out of her eyes hastily.

"Me being hard of hearing is no excuse for me talking about myself first thing. Dick, he's an Englishman--and they're all Englishmen--and it's Englishmen that's got to stand up and do their duty--same as they did at Waterloo." She swallowed valiantly the lump in her throat. "Her grace wrote to me about you, Miss, with her own kind hand. She said the cottage was so quiet and pretty you wouldn't mind it being little--and me being a bit deaf."

"I shall mind nothing," said Robin. She raised her voice and tried to speak very distinctly so as to make sure that the old fairy woman would hear her. "It is the most beautiful cottage I ever saw in my life. It is like a cottage in a fairy story."

"That's what the vicar says, Miss, my dear," was Mrs. Bennett's cheerful

reply. "He says it ought to be hid some way because if the cheap trippers found it out they'd wear the life out of me with pestering me to give 'em six-penny teas. They'd get none from me!" quite fiercely. "Her grace give it to me her own self and it's on Mersham land and not a lawyer on earth could put me out."

She became quite active and bustling--picking a spray of honeysuckle and a few sprigs of mignonette from near the doorway and handing them to Robin.

"Your room's full of 'em," she said, "them and musk and roses. You'll sleep and wake in the midst of flowers and birds singing and bees humming. And I can give you rich milk and home-baked bread, God bless you! You are welcome. Come in, my pretty dear--Miss."

The girl came down from London to the cottage on the wood's edge several times during the weeks that followed. It was easy to reach and too beautiful and lone and strange to stay away from. The War ceased where the wood began. Mrs. Bennett delighted in her and, regarding the Duchess as a sort of adored deity, would have served her lodger on bended knee if custom had permitted. Robin could always make her hear, and she sat and listened so tenderly to her stories of her grandsons that there grew up between them an absolute affection.

"And yet we don't see each other often," the old fairy woman had said.

"You flit in like, and flit away again as if you was a butterfly, I

think sometimes when I'm sitting here alone. When you come to stay you're mostly flitting about the wood and I only see you bit by bit. But I couldn't tell you, Miss, my dear, what it's like to me. You do love the wood, don't you? It's a fairy place too--same as this is."

"It's all fairy, Mrs. Bennett," Robin said. "Perhaps I am a fairy too when I am here. Nothing seems quite earthly."

She bent forward suddenly and took the old face in her hands and kissed it.

"Eh! I shouldn't wonder," the old fairy woman chuckled sweetly. "I used to hear tales of fairies in Devonshire in my young days. And you do look like something witched--but you've been witched for happiness. Babies look that way for a bit sometimes--as if they brought something with them when they come to earth."

"Yes," answered Robin. "Yes."

It was true that she only flitted in and out, and that she spent hours in the depths of the wood, and always came back as if from fairy land.

Once she had a holiday of nearly a week. She came down from town one afternoon in a pretty white frock and hat and white shoes and with an air of such delicate radiance about her that Mrs. Bennett would have clutched her to her breast, but for long-ago gained knowledge of the

respect due to those connected with great duchesses.

"Like a new young bride you look, my pretty dear--Miss," she cried out when she first saw her as she came up the path between the hollyhocks in the garden. "God's surely been good to you this day. There's something like heaven in your face." Robin stood still a moment looking like the light at dawn and breathing with soft quickness as if she had come in haste.

"God has been good to me for a long time," she said.

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In the deep wood she walked with Donal night after night when the stillness was like heaven itself. Now and then a faint rustle among the ferns or the half awakened movement and sleepy note of a bird in the leaves slightly stirred the silence, but that was all. Lances of moonlight pierced through the branches and their slow feet made no sound upon the thick moss. Here and there pale foxglove spires held up their late blossoms like flower spirits in the dim light.

Donal thought--the first night she came to him softly through the ferns--that her coming was like that of some fair thing not of earth--a vision out of some old legend or ancient poem of faëry. But he marched towards her, soldierly--like a young Lohengrin whose silver mail had changed to khaki. There was no longer war in the world--there never had

been.

"I brought it with me," he said and took her close in his arms. For a few minutes the wood seemed more still than before.

"Do you hear my heart beat?" he said at last.

"I feel it. Do you hear mine?" she whispered.

"We love each other so!" he breathed. "We love each other so!"

"Yes," she answered. "Yes."

Did every one who saw him know how beautiful he was? Oh his smile that loved her so and made her feel there was no fear or loneliness left on earth! He was so tall and straight and strong--a young soldier statue! When he laughed her heart always gave a strange little leap. It was such a lovely sound. His very hands were beautiful--with long, strong smooth fingers and smooth firm palms. Oh! Donal! Donal! And while she smiled as a little angel might smile, small sobs of joy filled her throat.

They sat together among the ferns, close side by side. He showed her the thing he had brought with him. It was a very slender chain of gold with a plain gold ring hung on it. He put the chain around her neck but slipped the ring on her finger and kissed it again and again.

"Wear it when we are together," he whispered. "I want to see it. It makes you mine as much as if I had put it on in a church with a huge organ playing."

"I should be yours without it," answered Robin. "I am yours."

"Yes," he whispered again. "You are mine. And I am yours. It always was so--since the morning stars sang together."