

CHAPTER XIII. THE HOUSE ON THE HILL

There was a little unfailing spring, always icy cold and crystal pure, in a certain birch-screened hollow of Rainbow Valley in the lower corner near the marsh. Not a great many people knew of its existence. The manse and Ingleside children knew, of course, as they knew everything else about the magic valley. Occasionally they went there to get a drink, and it figured in many of their plays as a fountain of old romance. Anne knew of it and loved it because it somehow reminded her of the beloved Dryad's Bubble at Green Gables. Rosemary West knew of it; it was her fountain of romance, too. Eighteen years ago she had sat behind it one spring twilight and heard young Martin Crawford stammer out a confession of fervent, boyish love. She had whispered her own secret in return, and they had kissed and promised by the wild wood spring. They had never stood together by it again--Martin had sailed on his fatal voyage soon after; but to Rosemary West it was always a sacred spot, hallowed by that immortal hour of youth and love. Whenever she passed near it she turned aside to hold a secret tryst with an old dream--a dream from which the pain had long gone, leaving only its unforgettable sweetness.

The spring was a hidden thing. You might have passed within ten feet of it and never have suspected its existence. Two generations past a huge old pine had fallen almost across it.

Nothing was left of the tree but its crumbling trunk out of which the ferns grew thickly, making a green roof and a lacy screen for the water. A maple-tree grew beside it with a curiously gnarled and twisted trunk, creeping along the ground for a little way before shooting up into the air, and so forming a quaint seat; and September had flung a scarf of pale smoke-blue asters around the hollow.

John Meredith, taking the cross-lots road through Rainbow Valley on his way home from some pastoral visitations around the Harbour head one evening, turned aside to drink of the little spring.

Walter Blythe had shown it to him one afternoon only a few days before, and they had had a long talk together on the maple seat. John Meredith, under all his shyness and aloofness, had the heart of a boy. He had been called Jack in his youth, though nobody in Glen St. Mary would ever have believed it. Walter and he had taken to each other and had talked unreservedly. Mr. Meredith found his way into some sealed and sacred chambers of the lad's soul wherein not even Di had ever looked. They were to be chums from that friendly hour and Walter knew that he would never be frightened of the minister again.

"I never believed before that it was possible to get really acquainted with a minister," he told his mother that night.

John Meredith drank from his slender white hand, whose grip of

steel always surprised people who were unacquainted with it, and then sat down on the maple seat. He was in no hurry to go home; this was a beautiful spot and he was mentally weary after a round of rather uninspiring conversations with many good and stupid people. The moon was rising. Rainbow Valley was wind-haunted and star-sentinelled only where he was, but afar from the upper end came the gay notes of children's laughter and voices.

The ethereal beauty of the asters in the moonlight, the glimmer of the little spring, the soft croon of the brook, the wavering grace of the brackens all wove a white magic round John Meredith. He forgot congregational worries and spiritual problems; the years slipped away from him; he was a young divinity student again and the roses of June were blooming red and fragrant on the dark, queenly head of his Cecilia. He sat there and dreamed like any boy. And it was at this propitious moment that Rosemary West stepped aside from the by-path and stood beside him in that dangerous, spell-weaving place. John Meredith stood up as she came in and saw her--REALLY saw her--for the first time.

He had met her in his church once or twice and shaken hands with her abstractedly as he did with anyone he happened to encounter on his way down the aisle. He had never met her elsewhere, for the Wests were Episcopalians, with church affinities in Lowbridge, and no occasion for calling upon them had ever arisen. Before to-night, if anyone had asked John Meredith what Rosemary

West looked like he would not have had the slightest notion. But he was never to forget her, as she appeared to him in the glamour of kind moonlight by the spring.

She was certainly not in the least like Cecilia, who had always been his ideal of womanly beauty. Cecilia had been small and dark and vivacious--Rosemary West was tall and fair and placid, yet John Meredith thought he had never seen so beautiful a woman.

She was bareheaded and her golden hair--hair of a warm gold, "molasses taffy" colour as Di Blythe had said--was pinned in sleek, close coils over her head; she had large, tranquil, blue eyes that always seemed full of friendliness, a high white forehead and a finely shaped face.

Rosemary West was always called a "sweet woman." She was so sweet that even her high-bred, stately air had never gained for her the reputation of being "stuck-up," which it would inevitably have done in the case of anyone else in Glen St. Mary. Life had taught her to be brave, to be patient, to love, to forgive. She had watched the ship on which her lover went sailing out of Four Winds Harbour into the sunset. But, though she watched long, she had never seen it coming sailing back. That vigil had taken girlhood from her eyes, yet she kept her youth to a marvellous degree. Perhaps this was because she always seemed to preserve that attitude of delighted surprise towards life which most of us

leave behind in childhood--an attitude which not only made Rosemary herself seem young, but flung a pleasing illusion of youth over the consciousness of every one who talked to her.

John Meredith was startled by her loveliness and Rosemary was startled by his presence. She had never thought she would find anyone by that remote spring, least of all the recluse of Glen St. Mary manse. She almost dropped the heavy armful of books she was carrying home from the Glen lending library, and then, to cover her confusion, she told one of those small fibs which even the best of women do tell at times.

"I--I came for a drink," she said, stammering a little, in answer to Mr. Meredith's grave "good evening, Miss West." She felt that she was an unpardonable goose and she longed to shake herself. But John Meredith was not a vain man and he knew she would likely have been as much startled had she met old Elder Clow in that unexpected fashion. Her confusion put him at ease and he forgot to be shy; besides, even the shyest of men can sometimes be quite audacious in moonlight.

"Let me get you a cup," he said smiling. There was a cup near by, if he had only known it, a cracked, handleless blue cup secreted under the maple by the Rainbow Valley children; but he did not know it, so he stepped out to one of the birch-trees and stripped a bit of its white skin away. Deftly he fashioned this

into a three-cornered cup, filled it from the spring, and handed it to Rosemary.

Rosemary took it and drank every drop to punish herself for her fib, for she was not in the least thirsty, and to drink a fairly large cupful of water when you are not thirsty is somewhat of an ordeal. Yet the memory of that draught was to be very pleasant to Rosemary. In after years it seemed to her that there was something sacramental about it. Perhaps this was because of what the minister did when she handed him back the cup. He stooped again and filled it and drank of it himself. It was only by accident that he put his lips just where Rosemary had put hers, and Rosemary knew it. Nevertheless, it had a curious significance for her. They two had drunk of the same cup. She remembered idly that an old aunt of hers used to say that when two people did this their after-lives would be linked in some fashion, whether for good or ill.

John Meredith held the cup uncertainly. He did not know what to do with it. The logical thing would have been to toss it away, but somehow he was disinclined to do this. Rosemary held out her hand for it.

"Will you let me have it?" she said. "You made it so knackily. I never saw anyone make a birch cup so since my little brother used to make them long ago--before he died."

"I learned how to make them when I was a boy, camping out one summer. An old hunter taught me," said Mr. Meredith. "Let me carry your books, Miss West."

Rosemary was startled into another fib and said oh, they were not heavy. But the minister took them from her with quite a masterful air and they walked away together. It was the first time Rosemary had stood by the valley spring without thinking of Martin Crawford. The mystic tryst had been broken.

The little by-path wound around the marsh and then struck up the long wooded hill on the top of which Rosemary lived. Beyond, through the trees, they could see the moonlight shining across the level summer fields. But the little path was shadowy and narrow. Trees crowded over it, and trees are never quite as friendly to human beings after nightfall as they are in daylight. They wrap themselves away from us. They whisper and plot furtively. If they reach out a hand to us it has a hostile, tentative touch. People walking amid trees after night always draw closer together instinctively and involuntarily, making an alliance, physical and mental, against certain alien powers around them. Rosemary's dress brushed against John Meredith as they walked. Not even an absent-minded minister, who was after all a young man still, though he firmly believed he had outlived romance, could be insensible to the charm of the night and the

path and the companion.

It is never quite safe to think we have done with life. When we imagine we have finished our story fate has a trick of turning the page and showing us yet another chapter. These two people each thought their hearts belonged irrevocably to the past; but they both found their walk up that hill very pleasant. Rosemary thought the Glen minister was by no means as shy and tongue-tied as he had been represented. He seemed to find no difficulty in talking easily and freely. Glen housewives would have been amazed had they heard him. But then so many Glen housewives talked only gossip and the price of eggs, and John Meredith was not interested in either. He talked to Rosemary of books and music and wide-world doings and something of his own history, and found that she could understand and respond. Rosemary, it appeared, possessed a book which Mr. Meredith had not read and wished to read. She offered to lend it to him and when they reached the old homestead on the hill he went in to get it.

The house itself was an old-fashioned gray one, hung with vines, through which the light in the sitting-room winked in friendly fashion. It looked down the Glen, over the harbour, silvered in the moonlight, to the sand-dunes and the moaning ocean. They walked in through a garden that always seemed to smell of roses, even when no roses were in bloom. There was a sisterhood of lilies at the gate and a ribbon of asters on either side of the

broad walk, and a lacery of fir trees on the hill's edge beyond the house.

"You have the whole world at your doorstep here," said John Meredith, with a long breath. "What a view--what an outlook! At times I feel stifled down there in the Glen. You can breathe up here."

"It is calm to-night," said Rosemary laughing. "If there were a wind it would blow your breath away. We get 'a' the airts the wind can blow' up here. This place should be called Four Winds instead of the Harbour."

"I like wind," he said. "A day when there is no wind seems to me DEAD. A windy day wakes me up." He gave a conscious laugh. "On a calm day I fall into day dreams. No doubt you know my reputation, Miss West. If I cut you dead the next time we meet don't put it down to bad manners. Please understand that it is only abstraction and forgive me--and speak to me."

They found Ellen West in the sitting room when they went in. She laid her glasses down on the book she had been reading and looked at them in amazement tintured with something else. But she shook hands amiably with Mr. Meredith and he sat down and talked to her, while Rosemary hunted out his book.

Ellen West was ten years older than Rosemary, and so different from her that it was hard to believe they were sisters. She was dark and massive, with black hair, thick, black eyebrows and eyes of the clear, slaty blue of the gulf water in a north wind. She had a rather stern, forbidding look, but she was in reality very jolly, with a hearty, gurgling laugh and a deep, mellow, pleasant voice with a suggestion of masculinity about it. She had once remarked to Rosemary that she would really like to have a talk with that Presbyterian minister at the Glen, to see if he could find a word to say to a woman when he was cornered. She had her chance now and she tackled him on world politics. Miss Ellen, who was a great reader, had been devouring a book on the Kaiser of Germany, and she demanded Mr. Meredith's opinion of him.

"A dangerous man," was his answer.

"I believe you!" Miss Ellen nodded. "Mark my words, Mr. Meredith, that man is going to fight somebody yet. He's ACHING to. He is going to set the world on fire."

"If you mean that he will wantonly precipitate a great war I hardly think so," said Mr. Meredith. "The day has gone by for that sort of thing."

"Bless you, it hasn't," rumbled Ellen. "The day never goes by for men and nations to make asses of themselves and take to the

fists. The millennium isn't THAT near, Mr. Meredith, and YOU don't think it is any more than I do. As for this Kaiser, mark my words, he is going to make a heap of trouble"--and Miss Ellen prodded her book emphatically with her long finger. "Yes, if he isn't nipped in the bud he's going to make trouble. WE'LL live to see it--you and I will live to see it, Mr. Meredith. And who is going to nip him? England should, but she won't. WHO is going to nip him? Tell me that, Mr. Meredith."

Mr. Meredith couldn't tell her, but they plunged into a discussion of German militarism that lasted long after Rosemary had found the book. Rosemary said nothing, but sat in a little rocker behind Ellen and stroked an important black cat meditatively. John Meredith hunted big game in Europe with Ellen, but he looked oftener at Rosemary than at Ellen, and Ellen noticed it. After Rosemary had gone to the door with him and come back Ellen rose and looked at her accusingly.

"Rosemary West, that man has a notion of courting you."

Rosemary quivered. Ellen's speech was like a blow to her. It rubbed all the bloom off the pleasant evening. But she would not let Ellen see how it hurt her.

"Nonsense," she said, and laughed, a little too carelessly. "You see a beau for me in every bush, Ellen. Why he told me all about

his wife to-night--how much she was to him--how empty her death had left the world."

"Well, that may be HIS way of courting," retorted Ellen. "Men have all kinds of ways, I understand. But don't forget your promise, Rosemary."

"There is no need of my either forgetting or remembering it," said Rosemary, a little wearily. "YOU forget that I'm an old maid, Ellen. It is only your sisterly delusion that I am still young and blooming and dangerous. Mr. Meredith merely wants to be a friend--if he wants that much itself. He'll forget us both long before he gets back to the manse."

"I've no objection to your being friends with him," conceded Ellen, "but it musn't go beyond friendship, remember. I'm always suspicious of widowers. They are not given to romantic ideas about friendship. They're apt to mean business. As for this Presbyterian man, what do they call him shy for? He's not a bit shy, though he may be absent-minded--so absent-minded that he forgot to say goodnight to ME when you started to go to the door with him. He's got brains, too. There's so few men round here that can talk sense to a body. I've enjoyed the evening. I wouldn't mind seeing more of him. But no philandering, Rosemary, mind you--no philandering."

Rosemary was quite used to being warned by Ellen from philandering if she so much as talked five minutes to any marriageable man under eighty or over eighteen. She had always laughed at the warning with unfeigned amusement. This time it did not amuse her--it irritated her a little. Who wanted to philander?

"Don't be such a goose, Ellen," she said with unaccustomed shortness as she took her lamp. She went upstairs without saying goodnight.

Ellen shook her head dubiously and looked at the black cat.

"What is she so cross about, St. George?" she asked. "When you howl you're hit, I've always heard, George. But she promised, Saint--she promised, and we Wests always keep our word. So it won't matter if he does want to philander, George. She promised. I won't worry."

Upstairs, in her room, Rosemary sat for a long while looking out of the window across the moonlit garden to the distant, shining harbour. She felt vaguely upset and unsettled. She was suddenly tired of outworn dreams. And in the garden the petals of the last red rose were scattered by a sudden little wind. Summer was over--it was autumn.