

THE LITTLE HOUSE

IF I had known that it was going to prove such a tyrant I should never have taken it, as I did, for better or worse. It looked so gentle and confiding in its setting of green grass and apple trees the morning when I first saw it, that I could not resist the spell. The old-fashioned windows gave it an expression of which one reads in impassioned novels, making me feel as if the house and I had met and become one in the infinite earlier than time. It coaxed me with that feminine appeal almost impossible to withstand. The closed door and locked sashes, the grass in the walk, hinted at loneliness, suggested that I could understand; and so, because of its quaintness, and the pathos of the worn doorstep, I took it for my own.

Doubtless the strong hold upon me was partly due to helplessness, for it was constantly appealing, in new kinds of need, as a child would. I had no idea that it would mean so much trouble; so small and sturdy and independent a thing would, I thought, more than half take care of itself. Oh, the work and the worry that have been expended on this diminutive house! The tasks it has thought up, the sudden needs where-with it has confronted me! It has invention infinite in keeping itself before my mind. Chief among its devices is an air of suffering from neglect if I but venture out of its sight. Never have I failed to turn the last corner leading homeward with a leaping of the heart in fear of what may have happened. Suppose that it were gone, by fire or by flood; suppose it had never really been there, being but a dream, a figment of the imagination wherein my spirit has been resting, as at an inn, before the long journey begins again. The corner turned, there is always something reassuring in the touch of my finger on the latch, telling me that the

little house is still there, really there. When I grow angry at the tyrant for the homely tasks it suggests, the constant watchfulness it demands, it looks upon me with a mild expression of ancient wisdom about the roof, as one who, from old time, has known and pitied all fluctuations of human mood. There is something of eternal wisdom about a roof-line; when did man first learn to lift roofs against the stars?

I have fallen into the habit, as one always does with feminine creatures, of taking home things to please it, and I marvel at the personality which dominates its caprice. Now and then it disdains an offering for this or that corner, scorning a long-meditated gift; again it will seize upon some insignificant thing, for wise, inscrutable purposes, making it beautiful as part of itself, so that one could almost swear that the little house has organic life. Lately it has refused to shelter perfectly reputable reproductions of the old masters; Madonnas heretofore tolerated it will no longer live with. On the other hand, the long strip of ecclesiastical embroidery, harmoniously faded, purchased, after much haggling, at the Rag Market at Rome, it has graciously accepted, as it did the antique lamp of bronze. Books it indulgently allows in any numbers, — all but elaborate gift books, — as who should say, 'All people must have their vices, and yours is fairly innocent.' Such charity becomes it well, for itself hath vice, a ruinous, consuming thirst for old mahogany, a passion that may yet lead me to the debtor's prison, or its modern substitute, whatever that may be.

The measure of its hold upon me is the depth of its understanding; at first glance I knew that it was *simpatica*, as the Italians say. In those tired moments when one shrinks from human beings, the companionship of the quiet corner is all in all, and there is no such

rest elsewhere as comes from watching the shadows of the woodbine flicker in the moonlight upon the old-fashioned mirror by the window. In times of grief it knows that nothing else can comfort; one learns in its wise silences. How many births and deaths it has lived through I do not know, but lately I have seen how wide its narrow door may swing upon eternity. Living through many lives, gleaning long experience, the little house seems — as one who has known it all before — to fold one's mere individual sorrow in the long sorrow of the race.

In such manifold ways of giving and demanding it has so tightened its hold upon me that I wear its bonds on hand and foot. The moment of strongest contest of will between us came with my need of going far away. The little house put its foot down, insisting that I should go nowhere that it could not go. It dominated, coaxed, said that it needed care, was sorrowful, and sometimes merely silent, suggesting that it knew perfectly well I could not get away from it if I tried. As usual, it was right. What messengers it sends! Now subtle ones: quivering aspen twig or blown leaf of autumn suddenly reminds me that I cannot go beyond its creeping shadow. Though I fare over leagues of sea, I get no farther than its chimney; great Jupiter swings across the eastern sky to lead me to the elm tree by the back door. In Grasmere's lovely green and gray of storied mountain pasture, which almost persuade me that I have wandered into another world of too delicate beauty to be called part of earth, the sudden howl of a street musician, —

There's a hold fashioned cottage, with hivy
round the door, —

going on to certain statements about
a sanded floor, and the assertion, —

Where'er I roam I will always think of home, —
compels me back.

When I waken, watching the sunlight flood Pentelicon, dim blue against the clear gold of a Grecian dawn, I feel the little house tugging softly at my heartstrings, just a slight tug, to say, 'You may have your fling, but you cannot escape me; sooner or later you will come back.' At Agamemnon's awful threshold I think upon my own, and Argive Hera's ruined doorway fills me with longing for humbler portals not yet battered down. It is hard to tread always another's stairs, even though they be the exquisite carven marble stairways of the *château-land*; and the sheepfolds of Scotch hills or wide French plains bring a sudden sinking of the heart to one who wanders far, unfolded yet. Ah, yes, however far I stray into the storied past; the little house puts its finger on me and I come.

It makes me no reproaches for my having gone, but it does not quite admit me to its old confidence, or as yet go back to its old ways. Watchful, seemingly indifferent, it waits aloof, yet still it stands, as heretofore, with that look of immemorial wisdom, making the old demands. Soon will come the old concessions, and the earlier understanding.

What will be the end I do not know, but this spot of earth seems to have laid its spell upon me for life, and yet beyond. Long ago, one summer night of opened windows, with cool leaves just beyond, silent as the stars, I dreamed of lying under the turf of the dooryard, and of being taken back, in wholly pleasant fashion, into the elements, immeasurably rested from myself by being absorbed into green living grass.

THE CALL-DRUM

EVERY one of the Bulu tribe among whom I live has a drum-name, and so, I suppose, has every member of all the interior tribes of this West African for-