

CHAPTER XVI

HOME AGAIN

I

I OPENED the gate, and looked down the path at the old cottage in the evening sun. The tulips were out in their beds, the hawthorn hedge surrounding my domain was in fresh leaf. Up on the hills the beechwoods were breaking into their green spring haze. My four tall poplars were still skeletons, but the rambler rose across the face of the cottage had budded, and my borders were brightly blue with grape hyacinths.

I hurried across the green lawn, round the black-and-white timbered side of the house, and found, as I anticipated, the forsythia a cascade of golden flower, the vine a fan of gnarled sticks with blood-tinged buds revealing life in the dry wood. The buds on the chestnut tree were sticky; a few had burst into green folded fingers. How springy and luminous was the turf underfoot! This was England's green, as nowhere else. Along the edge of the flower beds, patches of primroses shone with intense yellow in the evening light. I looked at the old roof sloping to the ground, detected the movement of spring in the lightening shade of the larchwood along the rise, and, coming to the porch, paused to savour my home-coming, on the threshold of this three-hundred-year-old cottage nestling in its fold of the Chiltern Hills.

Then I entered, and it was as if I had never deserted the familiar things, unchanged for my return.

II

Miss Whissitt was away visiting, but she returned early in May, and one sunny spring day, when she came to lunch, I risked having the table laid in the garden.

It was a day when the beauty of things was intoxicating. The apple trees were in full blossom, the clematis over the porch had broken into flower, the tulips had fully extended themselves and marched like a regiment along the borders. There was a scent of lilac in the air, and in one corner of the garden there fell a golden rain of blossom from the graceful laburnum tree.

I gave Miss Whissitt my news and told her of the visit to Alcantara Heights. Of course she was not surprised.

"How stupid I was. *C'est une chose incroyable!* Well, one has to pay for one's lesson, *n'est-ce pas?*" she said, philosophically.

I opened a tin and poured its contents into a jug. Then I filled her glass.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Tinned Florida sunshine," I answered. "From my friends' orange groves."

Miss Whissitt sipped, cautiously.

"But it's delightful! I can smell the orange blossom! *Vraiment!*" she exclaimed.

I heard the telephone ringing in the house. My house-keeper appeared. There was a cablegram for me from America; would I take the message?

"How exciting!" said Miss Whissitt as I excused myself and went indoors.

The message was from Coconut Grove. The operator repeated it for me. Was it clear? Quite clear, I answered.

I put down the receiver and went to the door. Outside, the garden lay in sunshine, lovely with the spring flowers, and the resurrection of beauty. I paused in the porch. A bird sang gaily in a tree. I listened and wondered at life. The eyes and ears of one very dear to me had closed for ever on this earthly scene. I was not surprised. I had foreseen it in that last smile at our parting.

For a moment I halted there. Then I rejoined my guest.

THE END