

Miss Otis Finds a New Home

Kitty had never shown any talent or inclination for patience. Most particularly now.

After weeks of fretful suspense, Kitty spied Uncle Tinsley's coach through the parlour window and threw open the door for him. He was a tall, slim, handsome, impeccably groomed man. His black hair had dimmed to grey, but he still possessed the penetrating dark eyes and black brows of his youth. His parents had named him Pericles, which suited his appearance perfectly. She greeted him warmly with a peck on the cheek after he put off his hat and gloves.

Once they were seated in the parlour, Uncle Tinsley began with, "I have received an encouraging reply from an agent regarding Dixon Cottage. It is only sixteen miles to the west of here, situated between Threlkeld and Keswick. They offer it for sale complete with furnishings for seven hundred pounds. That is a bit dear for its size, but gives me hope that it is well fitted up. I have set an appointment for three days hence."

"I have long dreamt of the day when I would manage my own household. But now that the necessity is thrust upon me, I find I don't want it at all! I am grateful to be your ward, but I find it impossible to be happy about leaving the rectory," Kitty replied.

Uncle Tinsley gently patted her hand, "It is far easier to be brave from the shelter of your parents' loving guidance and much more difficult without it, eh? Do not be anxious, my dear. *I* do not fear for you, for you are a remarkably clever young woman and you still have me and Aunt Eliza for help."

At the appointed hour, a sedate entourage of Kitty, Uncle Tinsley, and their servants, set out early on a bright, cold spring morning. Kitty and Uncle Tinsley isolated themselves in Papa's conservative black coach drawn by Castor and Pollux teamed under Pike's expert driving. The servants trailed behind in Uncle Tinsley's equally conservative coach.

Kitty twisted the ends of her bonnet ribbons. "Well, Uncle, let us hope that Dixon Cottage suits. For if it does not, I do not know what is to become of Father and me. Although it will only be for three days, I am uneasy leaving him."

Uncle Tinsley laced his hands together in his lap. "Biddle will take good care of Merit, so, I rate that as the least of my cares. I am more anxious about so great a burden being thrust onto your slender shoulders."

Uncle Tinsley's speech only served to remind Kitty of every painful feeling. She still needed considerable time alone to heal, preferably on her favourite mouny, Othello. So, she avoided thinking about her situation unless she was alone and could give full vent to her feelings.

She attempted a light-hearted response. "Now, Uncle, you know I believe that with thrift, I shall be able to keep Othello and my wheelers, Pollux and Castor; which is the crux of the matter for me."

Her uncle frowned, "My dear girl, even if you keep your horses, I worry for you. Oh, not the immediate housing problem, we shall solve that easily enough. But, I find it difficult to believe that you will achieve a respectable marriage, much less a brilliant

match, without your mother sponsoring you for a London season. Do not give up hope ...”

“Give up hope?” Kitty interrupted, “Certainly not! I will not be in danger of spinsterhood for another *five* years, at least. Surely, in all of that time we can contrive *something*.”

Their interest was then engaged by the wild beauties of the landscape. As they made their way west, the ground rose up from hills to high mountainous fells. The carriage rumbled across uncounted ancient stone bridges. The giant broad-shouldered peaks were spectacular - almost level at the top, with steep cliffs plunging into narrow valleys. Dark swaths of still-bare trees marched along the valleys and gave way to gorse and heather on the wind-swept tops. The sky was the deep blue only achieved at the roof of the world. Innumerable little streams wound their way through the valleys, some still frozen to glittering immobility.

The villages they passed through were laid out along the road. Squat buildings with bright painted trim, hard by the cobbles, with steep thatched roofs designed to defeat the snow. Kitty, enchanted, exclaimed, “How charming!” or “How quaint!” Soon they arrived at the *Horse and Farrier* in Threlkeld, where they were to lodge for two nights before retracing their steps.

The innkeeper and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Brown, unused to trade from the Quality at that season, greeted them with enthusiasm. Mrs. Brown ushered Kitty and her abigail, Betsy Taylor, to their room. Kitty endeared herself by announcing, “Oh, how lovely. Taylor, you may have a bit of luncheon before unpacking my things.”

Taylor, who had been Kitty's abigail for nearly eight years, said, "Aye, Miss. Jest let me shake out yer pink muslin, afore I go to kitchen."

Mrs. Brown then ushered Kitty to the private dining room Mr. Tinsley had reserved. Mrs. Brown was well familiar with Dixon Cottage.

"Oh, aye, Miss, I know it well. Mr. Dixon built it when, Lord! I was but a wee lass. Mah sister kept house there for years. It has a fine prospect, but the lane to the property is sometimes impassable in winter. It was well-built, but Mr. Dixon let it decay as he got older, more's the pity. His heirs have their own estates and no-one wants the place. Ah, here you are."

Kitty said eagerly, "I should like to learn of the house from your sister. Is she near? Would you introduce her?"

Mrs. Brown chuckled, "Near? I should say so. She's come to help me in kitchen since Mr. Dixon passed and is in this house now."

Kitty's stomach gave an audible growl, much to her chagrin.

Mrs. Brown smiled indulgently, "Tea and bread and butter's out, and the rest'll be along shortly. I'll send mah widowed sister up, Mrs. Abernathy she is, when you're done."

As Mrs. Brown curtsied herself out of the room, Uncle arrived.

Kitty began, "Uncle, I made several important discoveries."

Uncle Perry smiled and shook his head, "You are so like your mother."

A servant entered with ham, pickles, boiled eggs, and dried fruit tarts. Once the girl had departed, they resumed their conversation.

“How so, sir? Everyone says I resemble my father.”

“With your brunette curls and hazel eyes, you are assuredly your father’s daughter. But in mind and spirit, I hold you most resemble your mama. God pity the tradesman who tried to overcharge Mrs. Otis! Your father was a brilliant man, but not at all practical. It was your *mother* who managed the rectory with economy.”

Kitty’s eyes filled with tears, “Oh! Uncle, you cannot imagine what comfort these simple reminiscences afford me. No one – almost no one – I know wishes to speak of her for fear of giving me pain, or because they have no idea what to say. But these little stories of her are what I most particularly wish to hear.”

Mrs. Abernathy arrived shortly thereafter. She was tall, raw boned, and ruddy, with the first strands of silver showing in her brown hair. After a very productive half-hour interview, Kitty rented two hacks from the inn so she could explore the surrounding town. Kitty exchanged her pelisse for a more practical riding coat, Pike was mounted, and off they set.

Kitty discovered a tolerable milliner, implying there was enough trade from the Quality to warrant such a shop. She found a lovely ancient church and the road to the property. She also stopped downstairs at the pub where she discovered that Mr. Peale, the agent for Dixon Cottage, was known as a “sharp ‘un.” Three people advised her to get a good solicitor to examine any papers drawn up by Mr. Peale. Meanwhile, Mr. Tinsley also made pertinent inquiries about Threlkeld. They spent all of evening tea exchanging their respective discoveries.