

CHAPTER XV

MRS. DARK'S DAIRY

"COME in," cried Dairyman. "Now do step in to dairy and see Mrs. Dark."

We were on the north side of Dairyman's homestead, where the roof slopes down from the main ridge, bringing the eaves within easy reach of hand. Beyond the narrow shadow of the house a June sun shone its warmest on the paved yard, the low wall, the kitchen garden beyond, where potatoes neatly hoed, and ranks of peas in white flower and young flat pod, and sweet-smelling broad beans with blotches on their petals lay east and west along a sunny slope. By the wicket gate, where the milkers' waggon comes morning and night, is the branching trunk on which the silvery milk-pails hang and glisten throughout the day between milking hours.

Spreading over the wall and almost overhanging the pump is an ancient barberry bush. Its boughs were sprinkled with clusters of yellow blossom.

At the sound of voices the door was opened.

"Sure then, here is Mrs. Dark," said Dairyman.

The respectful and subdued manner in which Dairyman whispers the name of his better half is a tribute to her great talents as a cheese-maker. All the success of a dairyman depends upon the skill of his wife. He, with the aid of the cows, may provide the milk, but she produces "the goods." The price depends on the quality. The quality seems to result from certain innate virtues—cleanliness, industry, and a conscientious sense of duty to the curd. The curd is more susceptible to neglect than an elderly maiden aunt of moderate fortune, surrounded by a large family circle.

Framed in the doorway Mrs. Dark was a picture of simple respectability. Her print frock was covered in front from neck to skirt with a blue pinafore now faded and pale after

many visits to the wash-tub. Both summer and winter when engaged in her cheese-making Mrs. Dark assumes an old-fashioned sun-bonnet with a deep curtain reaching below the "top-strings o' the pinny." She is the most contented-looking person alive—such a "wonderful fresh complexion," although the mother of such a family of maidens. No lines, no wrinkles, and never so much as a crease if it were not for the duplication, ay, the triplication of her chin. Mrs. Dark is tall and stout—yet not too stout. Mrs. Josiah Heppell hit the nail on the head to a T when she once described her to me as "a terr'ble portly lady."

"Look here, then, Mrs. Dark. Here's a visitor, Mrs. Dark. He do want to larn to make cheeses, Mrs. Dark."

Mrs. Dark's portliness displayed no terrors that June morning. Her black brows, now slightly grizzled, lifted into broad-span arches, and her mouth assumed the shape of a butter boat that has lost its handle, as, with hands crossed on her maternal bosom, and her head on one side, she simpered—

"Master must have his joke, to be sure. One o' they gentlemen, maybe, what do come around to larn we."

Over each shoulder, but dim in the background, I could see the rosy face of one of Dairyman's maidens peering to discover who the visitor might be.

I disclaimed official rank.

"Do ee please to step in."

One of the maidens had vanished. The other, standing by the great tin cheese-tub, evenly stirred with a sort of open-work shovel called "a breaker" the fragments of curd that floated in the whey. Mrs. Dark pinched the curd between her finger and thumb. "Let be, Tilly," said she with decision. The maiden ceased to stir and the curd was left to settle upon the bottom of the tub.

"That's the heater an' that's the cooler, an' there's the vats wi' yesterday's cheese and the day's afore to be pressed. But la! I ben't no talker. I be a doer. If you do want to hear about the cheese-maken you should talk to our Ursie up to Squire's new

dairy. She do know the rights o' it an' the why an' the why not. I can't larn no new-fangled ways. I've a-got nothen agen 'em, but I can't. I do say 'tis all experience. I've a-got my own ways, to be sure—that is, part my mother taught an' part my own. I do go by the feel, an' the taste, an' the smell o' it—all by experience. These new things do but puzzle an' dather a body. When I've a-got the last night's milk and to-day marnen's milk in tub, an' have a-put in the rennet, an' have a-stirred it about, I do put the bowl dish afloat, an' so soon as he'll lift out clean the curd is proper a-set. Then we do cut the curd and break it, and treat it gentle, mind, an' let it rest for the whey to rise—all experience, you see—an' lift some whey into the heater to get ready for the scald. Now we *do* use a what-ee-call—what is it, Tilly?"

"A thermometer, mother."

"To be sure, a therboliter, there, I never could mind the word—poor mother, to tell the heat, she did just dip in the crook of her elbow, all experience, you know;

but we, well, late years we *do* use a therboliter, yes, we *do*. Our Ursie could tell ee the why, though she hain't got no experience, mind, an' take away her therboliter, her elbow isn't one mossel o' good to her. Well, then, to draw off the whey I do go by the touch, an' the feel—all experience—an' squeeze out a bit o' curd to lay to a bit o' hot iron, only the iron mustn't be too hot neet too cold, but just right—all by experience like—an' if 'tis right the curd do come away stringy. But la, there! I ben't no talker like. If 'twere our Ursie, now, her tongue 'ud run on like a house afire, for she must tell ee all she do know. But when I've a-heaped up the curd in tub, and drawed the whey, well, by that time the curd do cling together and I do cut it into squares, say up a foot four-square, an' cover it wi' a cloth. Well, then, I do do as I do think—all experience, you see—and put it away into the cooler, an' there I do put it under a pan wi' a half-hundredweight 'pon top, an' turn it, an' break it, an' put it again till do come to grind. Now there I do go by

taste, all experience, you see. An' when 'tis fit I do grind it in the mill there, an' spread it, an' cover it with clothes, an' come back an' salt it. An' if 'tis too soft, let it bide a quarter of an hour or so, all experience, mind; an' if 'tis hard, vat it to once, all experience, and not put on the weight just at first going off, but what your experience do tell ee. Now, our Ursie, now, she don't know so wonderful much of her own self like, for, you see, she didn' bide home so wonderful much, an' I never larned her. She do go by a what-ee-call—what do she call it, Tilly?"

"An acidimeter, mother."

"That's right, a scimitar; an' she've a-got a thingumbob—what's the name o' it, Tilly?"

"A pipette, mother."

"That's it, a pipe it, to suck it up like, an' mix stuff up to make a whity-pink mixture, much like the physic the old Dr. Thwaite did send for spasms years ago, an' hundreds o' bottles I've a-tookt, wi' such a pressure here to the heart o' me for up two year, but better now, for it left quite sudden, an' let's hope not

to return. Now that's all I can say. To be sure, if I could talk I could tell ee. Now, our Ursie, now, she'll talk. You go up an' see she. But this I must say, our Ursie is so good a maid as ever wore shoe-leather, an' a maid o' high principle too, an' a goodish-looking maid for all that, but experience she can't have, an' what's more haint a-got, for she is but in her one-an'-twenty, so how can she? An' if she should chance to break the what-ee-call, or to let fall the thingumbob an' can't pipe it, what is she to do? But I must get on. There, I be no talker. Now, our Ursie have a-got a little red rag—that is to say her tongue, you understand me—is never at rest. Where she got it from is a wonder an' a mystery to all o' us, for master here, though merry enough in his heart like, 'ull often bide a hour at a stretch so silent as a mute. An' now master 'ull show ee the cheese-room, for I mus' go on to draw the whey."

Dairyman showed me the cheese-room with "the goods" arranged all round to ripen. He explained how they must be turned daily,

and he estimated the weight of some of the largest.

“Mrs. Dark is a wonderful cheese-maker,” said he with some solemnity. “I’ve a-been blessed in a wife, sure ’nough—though I do say it my own self!”