THE QUEEN OF HEARTS.

CHAPTER I. OURSELVES.

WE were three quiet, lonely old men, and SHE was a lively, handsome young woman, and we were at our wits' end what to do with her.

A word about ourselves, first of all--a necessary word, to explain the singular situation of our fair young guest.

We are three brothers; and we live in a barbarous, dismal old house called The Glen Tower. Our place of abode stands in a hilly, lonesome district of South Wales. No such thing as a line of railway runs anywhere near us. No gentleman's seat is within an easy drive of us. We are at an unspeakably inconvenient distance from a town, and the village to which we send for our letters is three miles off.

My eldest brother, Owen, was brought up to the Church. All the prime of his life was passed in a populous London parish. For more years than I now like to reckon up, he worked unremittingly, in defiance of failing health and adverse fortune, amid the multitudinous misery of the London poor; and he would, in all probability, have sacrificed his life to his duty long before the present time if The Glen Tower had not come into his possession through two unexpected deaths in the elder and richer branch of our family. This opening to him of a place of rest and refuge saved his life. No man ever drew breath who better deserved the gifts of fortune; for no man, I sincerely believe, more tender of others, more diffident of himself, more gentle, more generous, and more simple-hearted than Owen, ever walked this earth.

My second brother, Morgan, started in life as a doctor, and learned all that his profession could teach him at home and abroad. He realized a moderate independence by his practice, beginning in one of our large northern towns and ending as a physician in London; but, although he was well known and appreciated among his brethren, he failed to gain that sort of reputation with the public which elevates a man into the position of a great doctor. The ladies never liked him. In the first place, he was ugly (Morgan will excuse me for mentioning this); in the second place, he was an inveterate smoker, and he smelled of tobacco when he felt languid pulses in elegant bedrooms; in

the third place, he was the most formidably outspoken teller of the truth as regarded himself, his profession, and his patients, that ever imperiled the social standing of the science of medicine. For these reasons, and for others which it is not necessary to mention, he never pushed his way, as a doctor, into the front ranks, and he never cared to do so. About a year after Owen came into possession of The Glen Tower, Morgan discovered that he had saved as much money for his old age as a sensible man could want; that he was tired of the active pursuit--or, as he termed it, of the dignified quackery of his profession; and that it was only common charity to give his invalid brother a companion who could physic him for nothing, and so prevent him from getting rid of his money in the worst of all possible ways, by wasting it on doctors' bills. In a week after Morgan had arrived at these conclusions, he was settled at The Glen Tower; and from that time, opposite as their characters were, my two elder brothers lived together in their lonely retreat, thoroughly understanding, and, in their very different ways, heartily loving one another.

Many years passed before I, the youngest of the three--christened by the unmelodious name of Griffith--found my way, in my turn, to the dreary old house, and the sheltering quiet of the Welsh hills. My career in life had led me away from my brothers; and even now, when we are all united, I have still ties and interests to connect me with the outer world which neither Owen nor Morgan possess.

I was brought up to the Bar. After my first year's study of the law, I wearied of it, and strayed aside idly into the brighter and more attractive paths of literature. My occasional occupation with my pen was varied by long traveling excursions in all parts of the Continent; year by year my circle of gay friends and acquaintances increased, and I bade fair to sink into the condition of a wandering desultory man, without a fixed purpose in life of any sort, when I was saved by what has saved many another in my situation--an attachment to a good and a sensible woman. By the time I had reached the age of thirty-five, I had done what neither of my brothers had done before me--I had married.

As a single man, my own small independence, aided by what little additions to it I could pick up with my pen, had been sufficient for my wants; but with marriage and its responsibilities came the necessity for serious exertion. I returned to my neglected studies, and grappled resolutely, this time, with the intricate difficulties of the law. I was called to the Bar. My wife's father aided me with his interest, and I started into practice without difficulty and without delay.

For the next twenty years my married life was a scene of happiness and prosperity, on which I now look back with a grateful tenderness that no words of mine can express. The memory of my wife is busy at my heart while I think of those past times. The forgotten tears rise in my eyes again, and trouble the course of my pen while it traces these simple lines.

Let me pass rapidly over the one unspeakable misery of my life; let me try to remember now, as I tried to remember then, that she lived to see our only child--our son, who was so good to her, who is still so good to me--grow up to manhood; that her head lay on my bosom when she died; and that the last frail movement of her hand in this world was the movement that brought it closer to her boy's lips.

I bore the blow--with God's help I bore it, and bear it still. But it struck me away forever from my hold on social life; from the purposes and pursuits, the companions and the pleasures of twenty years, which her presence had sanctioned and made dear to me. If my son George had desired to follow my profession, I should still have struggled against myself, and have kept my place in the world until I had seen h im prosperous and settled. But his choice led him to the army; and before his mother's death he had obtained his commission, and had entered on his path in life. No other responsibility remained to claim from me the sacrifice of myself; my brothers had made my place ready for me by their fireside; my heart yearned, in its desolation, for the friends and companions of the old boyish days; my good, brave son promised that no year should pass, as long as he was in England, without his coming to cheer me; and so it happened that I, in my turn, withdrew from the world, which had once been a bright and a happy world to me, and retired to end my days, peacefully, contentedly, and gratefully, as my brothers are ending theirs, in the solitude of The Glen Tower.

How many years have passed since we have all three been united it is not necessary to relate. It will be more to the purpose if I briefly record that we have never been separated since the day which first saw us assembled together in our hillside retreat; that we have never yet wearied of the time, of the place, or of ourselves; and that the influence of solitude on our hearts and minds has not altered them for the worse, for it has not embittered us toward our fellow-creatures, and it has not dried up in us the sources from which harmless occupations and innocent pleasures may flow refreshingly to the last over the waste places of human life. Thus much for our own story, and for the circumstances which have withdrawn us from the world for the rest of our days.

And now imagine us three lonely old men, tall and lean, and white-headed;

dressed, more from past habit than from present association, in customary suits of solemn black: Brother Owen, yielding, gentle, and affectionate in look, voice, and manner; brother Morgan, with a quaint, surface-sourness of address, and a tone of dry sarcasm in his talk, which single him out, on all occasions, as a character in our little circle; brother Griffith forming the link between his two elder companions, capable, at one time, of sympathizing with the quiet, thoughtful tone of Owen's conversation, and ready, at another, to exchange brisk severities on life and manners with Morgan--in short, a pliable, double-sided old lawyer, who stands between the clergyman-brother and the physician-brother with an ear ready for each, and with a heart open to both, share and share together.

Imagine the strange old building in which we live to be really what its name implies--a tower standing in a glen; in past times the fortress of a fighting Welsh chieftain; in present times a dreary land-lighthouse, built up in many stories of two rooms each, with a little modern lean-to of cottage form tacked on quaintly to one of its sides; the great hill, on whose lowest slope it stands, rising precipitously behind it; a dark, swift-flowing stream in the valley below; hills on hills all round, and no way of approach but by one of the loneliest and wildest crossroads in all South Wales.

Imagine such a place of abode as this, and such inhabitants of it as ourselves, and them picture the descent among us--as of a goddess dropping from the clouds--of a lively, handsome, fashionable young lady--a bright, gay, butterfly creature, used to flutter away its existence in the broad sunshine of perpetual gayety--a child of the new generation, with all the modern ideas whirling together in her pretty head, and all the modern accomplishments at the tips of her delicate fingers. Imagine such a light-hearted daughter of Eve as this, the spoiled darling of society, the charming spendthrift of Nature's choicest treasures of beauty and youth, suddenly flashing into the dim life of three weary old men--suddenly dropped into the place, of all others, which is least fit for her--suddenly shut out from the world in the lonely quiet of the loneliest home in England. Realize, if it be possible, all that is most whimsical and most anomalous in such a situation as this, and the startling confession contained in the opening sentence of these pages will no longer excite the faintest emotion of surprise. Who can wonder now, when our bright young goddess really descended on us, that I and my brothers were all three at our wits' end what to do with her!

CHAPTER II. OUR DILEMMA.

WHO is the young lady? And how did she find her way into The Glen Tower?

Her name (in relation to which I shall have something more to say a little further on) is Jessie Yelverton. She is an orphan and an only child. Her mother died while she was an infant; her father was my dear and valued friend, Major Yelverton. He lived long enough to celebrate his darling's seventh birthday. When he died he intrusted his authority over her and his responsibility toward her to his brother and to me.

When I was summoned to the reading of the major's will, I knew perfectly well that I should hear myself appointed guardian and executor with his brother; and I had been also made acquainted with my lost friend's wishes as to his daughter's education, and with his intentions as to the disposal of all his property in her favor. My own idea, therefore, was, that the reading of the will would inform me of nothing which I had not known in the testator's lifetime. When the day came for hearing it, however, I found that I had been over hasty in arriving at this conclusion. Toward the end of the document there was a clause inserted which took me entirely by surprise.

After providing for the education of Miss Yelverton under the direction of her guardians, and for her residence, under ordinary circumstances, with the major's sister, Lady Westwick, the clause concluded by saddling the child's future inheritance with this curious condition:

From the period of her leaving school to the period of her reaching the age of twenty-one years, Miss Yelverton was to pass not less than six consecutive weeks out of every year under the roof of one of her two guardians. During the lives of both of them, it was left to her own choice to say which of the two she would prefer to live with. In all other respects the condition was imperative. If she forfeited it, excepting, of course, the case of the deaths of both her guardians, she was only to have a life-interest in the property; if she obeyed it, the money itself was to become her own possession on the day when she completed her twenty-first year.

This clause in the will, as I have said, took me at first by surprise. I remembered how devotedly Lady Westwick had soothed her sister-in-law's death-bed sufferings, and how tenderly she had afterward watched over the welfare of the little motherless child--I remembered the innumerable claims she had established in this way on her brother's confidence in her affection

for his orphan daughter, and I was, therefore, naturally amazed at the appearance of a condition in his will which seemed to show a positive distrust of Lady Westwick's undivided influence over the character and conduct of her niece.

A few words from my fellow-guardian, Mr. Richard Yelverton, and a little after-consideration of some of my deceased friend's peculiarities of disposition and feeling, to which I had not hitherto attached sufficient importance, were enough to make me understand the motives by which he had been influenced in providing for the future of his child.

Major Yelverton had raised himself to a position of affluence and eminence from a very humble origin. He was the son of a small farmer, and it was his pride never to forget this circumstance, never to be ashamed of it, and never to allow the prejudices of society to influence his own settled opinions on social questions in general.

Acting, in all that related to his intercourse with the world, on such principles as these, the major, it is hardly necessary to say, held some strangely heterodox opinions on the modern education of girls, and on the evil influence of society over the characters of women in general. Out of the strength of those opinions, and out of the certainty of his conviction that his sister did not share them, had grown that condition in his will which removed his daughter from the influence of her aunt for six consecutive weeks in every year. Lady Westwick was the most light-hearted, the most generous, the most impulsive of women; capable, when any serious occasion called it forth, of all that was devoted and self-sacrificing, but, at other and ordinary times, constitutionally restless, frivolous, and eager for perpetual gayety. Distrusting the sort of life which he knew his daughter would lead under her aunt's roof, and at the same time gratefully remembering his sister's affectionate devotion toward his dying wife and her helpless infant, Major Yelverton had attempted to make a compromise, which, while it allowed Lady Westwick the close domestic intercourse with her niece that she had earned by innumerable kind offices, should, at the same time, place the young girl for a fixed period of every year of her minority under the corrective care of two such quiet old-fashioned guardians as his brother and myself. Such is the history of the clause in the will. My friend little thought, when he dictated it, of the extraordinary result to which it was one day to lead.

For some years, however, events ran on smoothly enough. Little Jessie was sent to an excellent school, with strict instructions to the mistress to make a good girl of her, and not a fashionable young lady. Although she was

reported to be anything but a pattern pupil in respect of attention to her lessons, she became from the first the chosen favorite of every one about her. The very offenses which she committed against the discipline of the school were of the sort which provoke a smile even on the stern countenance of authority itself. One of these quaint freaks of mischief may not inappropriately be mentioned here, inasmuch as it gained her the pretty nickname under which she will be found to appear occasionally in these pages.

On a certain autumn night shortly after the Midsummer vacation, the mistress of the school fancied she saw a light under the door of the bedroom occupied by Jessie and three other girls. It was then close on midnight; and, fearing that some case of sudden illness might have happened, she hastened into the room. On opening the door, she discovered, to her horror and amazement, that all four girls were out of bed--were dressed in brilliantly-fantastic costumes, representing the four grotesque "Queens" of Hearts, Diamonds, Spades, and Clubs, familiar to us all on the pack of cards--and were dancing a quadrille, in which Jessie sustained the character of The Queen of Hearts. The next morning's investigation disclosed that Miss Yelverton had smuggled the dresses into the school, and had amused herself by giving an impromptu fancy ball to her companions, in imitation of an entertainment of the same kind at which she had figured in a "court-card" quadrille at her aunt's country house.

The dresses were instantly confiscated and the necessary punishment promptly administered; but the remembrance of Jessie's extraordinary outrage on bedroom discipline lasted long enough to become one of the traditions of the school, and she and her sister-culprits were thenceforth hailed as the "queens" of the four "suites" by their class-companions whenever the mistress's back was turned, Whatever might have become of the nicknames thus employed in relation to the other three girls, such a mock title as The Queen of Hearts was too appropriately descriptive of the natural charm of Jessie's character, as well as of the adventure in which she had taken the lead, not to rise naturally to the lips of every one who knew her. It followed her to her aunt's house--it came to be as habitually and familiarly connected with her, among her friends of all ages, as if it had been formally inscribed on her baptismal register; and it has stolen its way into these pages because it falls from my pen naturally and inevitably, exactly as it often falls from my lips in real life.

When Jessie left school the first difficulty presented itself--in other words, the necessity arose of fulfilling the conditions of the will. At that time I was already settled at The Glen Tower, and her living six weeks in our dismal

solitude and our humdrum society was, as she herself frankly wrote me word, quite out of the question. Fortunately, she had always got on well with her uncle and his family; so she exerted her liberty of choice, and, much to her own relief and to mine also, passed her regular six weeks of probation, year after year, under Mr. Richard Yelverton's roof.

During this period I heard of her regularly, sometimes from my fellow-guardian, sometimes from my son George, who, whenever his military duties allowed him the opportunity, contrived to see her, now at her aunt's house, and now at Mr. Yelverton's. The particulars of her character and conduct, which I gleaned in this way, more than sufficed to convince me that the poor major's plan for the careful training of his daughter's disposition, though plausible enough in theory, was little better than a total failure in practice. Miss Jessie, to use the expressive common phrase, took after her aunt. She was as generous, as impulsive, as light-hearted, as fond of change, and gayety, and fine clothes--in short, as complete and genuine a woman as Lady Westwick herself. It was impossible to reform the "Queen of Hearts," and equally impossible not to love her. Such, in few words, was my fellow-guardian's report of his experience of our handsome young ward.

So the time passed till the year came of which I am now writing--the ever-memorable year, to England, of the Russian war. It happened that I had heard less than usual at this period, and indeed for many months before it, of Jessie and her proceedings. My son had been ordered out with his regiment to the Crimea in 1854, and had other work in hand now than recording the sayings and doings of a young lady. Mr. Richard Yelverton, who had been hitherto used to write to me with tolerable regularity, seemed now, for some reason that I could not conjecture, to have forgotten my existence. Ultimately I was reminded of my ward by one of George's own letters, in which he asked for news of her; and I wrote at once to Mr. Yelverton. The answer that reached me was written by his wife: he was dangerously ill. The next letter that came informed me of his death. This happened early in the spring of the year 1855.

I am ashamed to confess it, but the change in my own position was the first idea that crossed my mind when I read the news of Mr. Yelverton's death. I was now left sole guardian, and Jessie Yelverton wanted a year still of coming of age.

By the next day's post I wrote to her about the altered state of the relations between us. She was then on the Continent with her aunt, having gone abroad at the very beginning of the year. Consequently, so far as eighteen hundred and fifty-five was concerned, the condition exacted by the will yet

remained to be performed. She had still six weeks to pass--her last six weeks, seeing that she was now twenty years old--under the roof of one of her guardians, and I was now the only guardian left.

In due course of time I received my answer, written on rose-colored paper, and expressed throughout in a tone of light, easy, feminine banter, which amused me in spite of myself. Miss Jessie, according to her own account, was hesitating, on receipt of my letter, between two alternatives--the one, of allowing herself to be buried six weeks in The Glen Tower; the other, of breaking the condition, giving up the money, and remaining magnanimously contented with nothing but a life-interest in her father's property. At present she inclined decidedly toward giving up the money and escaping the clutches of "the three horrid old men;" but she would let me know again if she happened to change her mind. And so, with best love, she would beg to remain always affectionately mine, as long as she was well out of my reach.

The summer passed, the autumn came, and I never heard from her again. Under ordinary circumstances, this long silence might have made me feel a little uneasy. But news reached me about this time from the Crimea that my son was wounded--not dangerously, thank God, but still severely enough to be la id up--and all my anxieties were now centered in that direction. By the beginning of September, however, I got better accounts of him, and my mind was made easy enough to let me think of Jessie again. Just as I was considering the necessity of writing once more to my refractory ward, a second letter arrived from her. She had returned at last from abroad, had suddenly changed her mind, suddenly grown sick of society, suddenly become enamored of the pleasures of retirement, and suddenly found out that the three horrid old men were three dear old men, and that six weeks' solitude at The Glen Tower was the luxury, of all others, that she languished for most. As a necessary result of this altered state of things, she would therefore now propose to spend her allotted six weeks with her guardian. We might certainly expect her on the twentieth of September, and she would take the greatest care to fit herself for our society by arriving in the lowest possible spirits, and bringing her own sackcloth and ashes along with her.

The first ordeal to which this alarming letter forced me to submit was the breaking of the news it contained to my two brothers. The disclosure affected them very differently. Poor dear Owen merely turned pale, lifted his weak, thin hands in a panic-stricken manner, and then sat staring at me in speechless and motionless bewilderment. Morgan stood up straight before me, plunged both his hands into his pockets, burst suddenly into the harshest laugh I ever heard from his lips, and told me, with an air of triumph, that it was exactly what he expected.

"What you expected?" I repeated, in astonishment.

"Yes," returned Morgan, with his bitterest emphasis. "It doesn't surprise me in the least. It's the way things go in this world--it's the regular moral see-saw of good and evil--the old story with the old end to it. They were too happy in the garden of Eden--down comes the serpent and turns them out. Solomon was too wise--down comes the Queen of Sheba, and makes a fool of him. We've been too comfortable at The Glen Tower--down comes a woman, and sets us all three by the ears together. All I wonder at is that it hasn't happened before." With those words Morgan resignedly took out his pipe, put on his old felt hat and turned to the door.

"You're not going away before she comes?" exclaimed Owen, piteously. "Don't leave us--please don't leave us!"

"Going!" cried Morgan, with great contempt. "What should I gain by that? When destiny has found a man out, and heated his gridiron for him, he has nothing left to do, that I know of, but to get up and sit on it."

I opened my lips to protest against the implied comparison between a young lady and a hot gridiron, but, before I could speak, Morgan was gone.

"Well," I said to Owen, "we must make the best of it. We must brush up our manners, and set the house tidy, and amuse her as well as we can. The difficulty is where to put her; and, when that is settled, the next puzzle will be, what to order in to make her comfortable. It's a hard thing, brother, to say what will or what will not please a young lady's taste."

Owen looked absently at me, in greater bewilderment than ever--opened his eyes in perplexed consideration--repeated to himself slowly the word "tastes"--and then helped me with this suggestion:

"Hadn't we better begin, Griffith, by getting her a plum-cake?"

"My dear Owen," I remonstrated, "it is a grown young woman who is coming to see us, not a little girl from school."

"Oh!" said Owen, more confused than before. "Yes--I see; we couldn't do wrong, I suppose--could we?--if we got her a little dog, and a lot of new gowns."

There was, evidently, no more help in the way of advice to be expected from

Owen than from Morgan himself. As I came to that conclusion, I saw through the window our old housekeeper on her way, with her basket, to the kitchen-garden, and left the room to ascertain if she could assist us.

To my great dismay, the housekeeper took even a more gloomy view than Morgan of the approaching event. When I had explained all the circumstances to her, she carefully put down her basket, crossed her arms, and said to me in slow, deliberate, mysterious tones:

"You want my advice about what's to be done with this young woman? Well, sir, here's my advice: Don't you trouble your head about her. It won't be no use. Mind, I tell you, it won't be no use."

"What do you mean?"

"You look at this place, sir--it's more like a prison than a house, isn't it? You, look at us as lives in it. We've got (saving your presence) a foot apiece in our graves, haven't we? When you was young yourself, sir, what would you have done if they had shut you up for six weeks in such a place as this, among your grandfathers and grandmothers, with their feet in the grave?"

"I really can't say."

"I can, sir. You'd have run away. She'll run away. Don't you worry your head about her--she'll save you the trouble. I tell you again, she'll run away."

With those ominous words the housekeeper took up her basket, sighed heavily, and left me.

I sat down under a tree quite helpless. Here was the whole responsibility shifted upon my miserable shoulders. Not a lady in the neighborhood to whom I could apply for assistance, and the nearest shop eight miles distant from us. The toughest case I ever had to conduct, when I was at the Bar, was plain sailing compared with the difficulty of receiving our fair guest.

It was absolutely necessary, however, to decide at once where she was to sleep. All the rooms in the tower were of stone--dark, gloomy, and cold even in the summer-time. Impossible to put her in any one of them. The only other alternative was to lodge her in the little modern lean-to, which I have already described as being tacked on to the side of the old building. It contained three cottage-rooms, and they might be made barely habitable for a young lady. But then those rooms were occupied by Morgan. His books were in one, his bed was in another, his pipes and general lumber were in

the third. Could I expect him, after the sour similitudes he had used in reference to our expected visitor, to turn out of his habitation and disarrange all his habits for her convenience? The bare idea of proposing the thing to him seemed ridiculous; and yet inexorable necessity left me no choice but to make the hopeless experiment. I walked back to the tower hastily and desperately, to face the worst that might happen before my courage cooled altogether.

On crossing the threshold of the hall door I was stopped, to my great amazement, by a procession of three of the farm-servants, followed by Morgan, all walking after each other, in Indian file, toward the spiral staircase that led to the top of the tower. The first of the servants carried the materials for making a fire; the second bore an inverted arm-chair on his head; the third tottered under a heavy load of books; while Morgan came last, with his canister of tobacco in his hand, his dressing-gown over his shoulders, and his whole collection of pipes hugged up together in a bundle under his arm.

"What on earth does this mean?" I inquired.

"It means taking Time by the forelock," answered Morgan, looking at me with a smile of sour satisfaction. "I've got the start of your young woman, Griffith, and I'm making the most of it."

"But where, in Heaven's name, are you going?" I asked, as the head man of the procession disappeared with his firing up the staircase.

"How high is this tower?" retorted Morgan.

"Seven stories, to be sure," I replied.

"Very good," said my eccentric brother, setting his foot on the first stair, "I'm going up to the seventh."

"You can't," I shouted.

"She can't, you mean," said Morgan, "and that's exactly why I'm going there."

"But the room is not furnished."

"It's out of her reach."

"One of the windows has fallen to pieces."

"It's out of her reach."

"There's a crow's nest in the corner."

"It's out of her reach."

By the time this unanswerable argument had attained its third repetition, Morgan, in his turn, had disappeared up the winding stairs. I knew him too well to attempt any further protest.

Here was my first difficulty smoothed away most unexpectedly; for here were the rooms in the lean-to placed by their owner's free act and deed at my disposal. I wrote on the spot to the one upholsterer of our distant county town to come immediately and survey the premises, and sent off a mounted messenger with the letter. This done, and the necessary order also dispatched to the carpenter and glazier to set them at work on Morgan's sky-parlor in the seventh story, I began to feel, for the first time, as if my scattered wits were coming back to me. By the time the evening had closed in I had hit on no less than three excellent ideas, all providing for the future comfort and amusement of our fair guest. The first idea was to get her a Welsh pony; the second was to hire a piano from the county town; the third was to send for a boxful of novels from London. I must confess I thought these projects for pleasing her very happily conceived, and Owen agreed with me. Morgan, as usual, took the opposite view. He said she would yawn over the novels, turn up her nose at the piano, and fracture her skull with the pony. As for the housekeeper, she stuck to her text as stoutly in the evening as she had stuck to it in the morning. "Pianner or no pianner, story-book or no story-book, pony or no pony, you mark my words, sir--that young woman will run away."

Such were the housekeeper's parting words when she wished me good-night.

When the next morning came, and brought with it that terrible waking time which sets a man's hopes and projects before him, the great as well as the small, stripped bare of every illusion, it is not to be concealed that I felt less sanguine of our success in entertaining the coming guest. So far as external preparations were concerned, there seemed, indeed, but little to improve; but apart from these, what had we to offer, in ourselves and our society, to attract her? There lay the knotty point of the question, and there the grand difficulty of finding an answer.

I fall into serious reflection while I am dressing on the pursuits and occupations with which we three brothers have been accustomed, for years past, to beguile the time. Are they at all likely, in the case of any one of us, to interest or amuse her?

My chief occupation, to begin with the youngest, consists, in acting as steward on Owen's property. The routine of my duties has never lost its sober attraction to my tastes, for it has always employed me in watching the best interests of my brother, and of my son also, who is one day to be his heir. But can I expect our fair guest to sympathize with such family concerns as these? Clearly not.

Morgan's pursuit comes next in order of review--a pursuit of a far more ambitious nature than mine. It was always part of my second brother's whimsical, self-contradictory character to view with the profoundest contempt the learned profession by which he gained his livelihood, and he is now occupying the long leisure hours of his old age in composing a voluminous treatise, intended, one of these days, to eject the whole body corporate of doctors from the position which they have usurped in the estimation of their fellow-creatures. This daring work is entitled "An Examination of the Claims of Medicine on the Gratitude of Mankind. Decided in the Negative by a Retired Physician." So far as I can tell, the book is likely to extend to the dimensions of an Encyclopedia; for it is Morgan's plan to treat his comprehensive subject principally from the historical point of view, and to run down all the doctors of antiquity, one after another, in regular succession, from the first of the tribe. When I last heard of his progress he was hard on the heels of Hippocrates, but had no immediate prospect of tripping up his successor, Is this the sort of occupation (I ask myself) in which a modern young lady is likely to feel the slightest interest? Once again, clearly not.

Owen's favorite employment is, in its way, quite as characteristic as Morgan's, and it has the great additional advantage of appealing to a much larger variety of tastes. My eldest brother--great at drawing and painting when he was a lad, always interested in artists and their works in after life--has resumed, in his declining years, the holiday occupation of his schoolboy days. As an amateur landscape-painter, he works with more satisfaction to himself, uses more color, wears out more brushes, and makes a greater smell of paint in his studio than any artist by profession, native or foreign, whom I ever met with. In look, in manner, and in disposition, the gentlest of mankind, Owen, by some singular anomaly in his character, which he seems to have caught from Morgan, glories placidly in the wildest and most

frightful range of subjects which his art is capable of representing. Immeasurable ruins, in howling wildernesses, with blood-red sunsets gleaming over them; thunder-clouds rent with lightning, hovering over splitting trees on the verges of awful precipices; hurricanes, shipwrecks, waves, and whirlpools follow each other on his canvas, without an intervening glimpse of quiet everyday nature to relieve the succession of pictorial horrors. When I see him at his easel, so neat and quiet, so unpretending and modest in himself, with such a composed expression on his attentive face, with such a weak white hand to guide such bold, big brushes, and when I look at the frightful canvasful of terrors which he is serenely aggravating in fierceness and intensity with every successive touch, I find it difficult to realize the connection between my brother and his work, though I see them before me not six inches apart. Will this quaint spectacle possess any humorous attractions for Miss Jessie? Perhaps it may. There is some slight chance that Owen's employment will be lucky enough to interest her.

Thus far my morning cogitations advance doubtfully enough, but they altogether fail in carrying me beyond the narrow circle of The Glen Tower. I try hard, in our visitor's interest, to look into the resources of the little world around us, and I find my efforts rewarded by the prospect of a total blank.

Is there any presentable living soul in the neighborhood whom we can invite to meet her? Not one. There are, as I have already said, no country seats near us; and society in the county town has long since learned to regard us as three misanthropes, strongly suspected, from our monastic way of life and our dismal black costume, of being popish priests in disguise. In other parts of England the clergyman of the parish might help us out of our difficulty; but here in South Wales, and in this latter half of the nineteenth century, we have the old type parson of the days of Fielding still in a state of perfect preservation. Our local clergyman receives a stipend which is too paltry to bear comparison with the wages of an ordinary mechanic. In dress, manners, and tastes he is about on a level with the upper class of agricultural laborer. When attempts have been made by well-meaning gentlefolks to recognize the claims of his profession by asking him to their houses, he has been known, on more than one occasion, to leave his plowman's pair of shoes in the hall, and enter the drawing-room respectfully in his stockings. Where he preaches, miles and miles away from us and from the poor cottage in which he lives, if he sees any of the company in the squire's pew yawn or fidget in their places, he takes it as a hint that they are tired of listening, and closes his sermon instantly at the end of the sentence. Can we ask this most irreverend and unclerical of men to meet a young lady? I doubt, even if we made the attempt, whether we should succeed, by

fair means, in getting him beyond the servants' hall.

Dismissing, therefore, all idea of inviting visitors to entertain our guest, and feeling, at the same time, more than doubtful of her chance of discovering any attraction in the sober society of the inmates of the house, I finish my dressing and go down to breakfast, secretly veering round to the housekeeper's opinion that Miss Jessie will really bring matters to an abrupt conclusion by running away. I find Morgan as bitterly resigned to his destiny as ever, and Owen so affectionately anxious to make himself of some use, and so lamentably ignorant of how to begin, that I am driven to disembarrass myself of him at the outset by a stratagem.

I suggest to him that our visitor is sure to be interested in pictures, and that it would be a pretty attention, on his part, to paint her a landscape to hang up in her room. Owen brightens directly, informs me in his softest tones that he is then at work on the Earthquake at Lisbon, and inquires whether I think she would like that subject. I preserve my gravity sufficiently to answer in the affirmative, and my brother retires meekly to his studio, to depict the engulfing of a city and the destruction of a population. Morgan withdraws in his turn to the top of the tower, threatening, when our guest comes, to draw all his meals up to his new residence by means of a basket and string. I am left alone for an hour, and then the upholsterer arrives from the county town.

This worthy man, on being informed of our emergency, sees his way, apparently, to a good stroke of business, and thereupon wins my lasting gratitude by taking, in opposition to every one else, a bright and hopeful view of existing circumstances.

"You'll excuse me, sir," he says, confidentially, when I show him the rooms in the lean-to, "but this is a matter of experience. I'm a family man myself, with grown-up daughters of my own, and the natures of young women are well known to me. Make their rooms comfortable, and you make 'em happy. Surround their lives, sir, with a suitable atmosphere of furniture, and you never hear a word of complaint drop from their lips. Now, with regard to these rooms, for example, sir--you put a neat French bedstead in that corner, with curtains conformable--say a tasty chintz; you put on that bedstead what I will term a sufficiency of bedding; and you top up with a sweet little eider-down quilt, as light as roses, and similar the same in color. You do that, and what follows? You please her eye when she lies down at night, and you please her eye when she gets up in the morning--and you're all right so far, and so is she. I will not dwell, sir, on the toilet-table, nor will I seek to detain you about the glass to show her figure, and the other glass

to show her face, because I have the articles in stock, and will be myself answerable for their effect on a lady's mind and person."

He led the way into the next room as he spoke, and arranged its future fittings, and decorations, as he had already planned out the bedroom, with the strictest reference to the connection which experience had shown him to exist between comfortable furniture and female happiness.

Thus far, in my helpless state of mind, the man's confidence had impressed me in spite of myself, and I had listened to him in superstitious silence. But as he continued to rise, by regular gradations, from one climax of upholstery to another, warning visions of his bill disclosed themselves in the remote background of the scene of luxury and magnificence which my friend was conjuring up. Certain sharp professional instincts of bygone times resumed their influence over me; I began to start doubts and ask questions; and as a necessary consequence the interview between us soon assumed something like a practical form.

Having ascertained what the probable expense of furnishing would amount to and having discovered that the process of transforming the lean-to (allowing for the time required to procure certain articles of rarity from Bristol) would occupy nearly a fortnight, I dismissed the upholsterer with the understanding that I should take a day or two for consideration, and let him know the result. It was then the fifth of September, and our Queen of Hearts was to arrive on the twentieth. The work, therefore, if it was begun on the seventh or eighth, would be begun in time.

In making all my calculations with a reference to the twentieth of September, I relied implicitly, it will be observed, on a young lady's punctuality in keeping an appointment which she had herself made. I can only account for such extraordinary simplicity on my part on the supposition that my wits had become sadly rusted by long seclusion from society. Whether it was referable to this cause or not, my innocent trustfulness was at any rate destined to be practically rebuked before long in the most surprising manner. Little did I suspect, when I parted from the upholsterer on the fifth of the month, what the tenth of the month had in store for me.

On the seventh I made up my mind to have the bedroom furnished at once, and to postpone the question of the sitting-room for a few days longer. Having dispatched the necessary order to that effect, I next wrote to hire the piano and to order the box of novels. This done, I congratulated myself on the forward state of the preparations, and sat down to repose in the

atmosphere of my own happy delusions.

On the ninth the wagon arrived with the furniture, and the men set to work on the bedroom. From this moment Morgan retired definitely to the top of the tower, and Owen became too nervous to lay the necessary amount of paint on the Earthquake at Lisbon.

On the tenth the work was proceeding bravely. Toward noon Owen and I strolled to the door to enjoy the fine autumn sunshine. We were sitting lazily on our favorite bench in front of the tower when we were startled by a shout from above us. Looking up directly, we saw Morgan half in and half out of his narrow window In the seventh story, gesticulating violently with the stem of his long meerschaum pipe in the direction of the road below us.

We gazed eagerly in the quarter thus indicated, but our low position prevented us for some time from seeing anything. At last we both discerned an old yellow post-chaise distinctly and indisputably approaching us.

Owen and I looked at one another in panic-stricken silence. It was coming to us--and what did it contain? Do pianos travel in chaises? Are boxes of novels conveyed to their destination by a postilion? We expected the piano and expected the novels, but nothing else--unquestionably nothing else.

The chaise took the turn in the road, passed through the gateless gap in our rough inclosure-wall of loose stone, and rapidly approached us. A bonnet appeared at the window and a hand gayly waved a white handkerchief.

Powers of caprice, confusion, and dismay! It was Jessie Yelverton herself--arriving, without a word of warning, exactly ten days before her time.

CHAPTER III. OUR QUEEN OF' HEARTS.

THE chaise stopped in front of us, and before we had recovered from our bewilderment the gardener had opened the door and let down the steps.

A bright, laughing face, prettily framed round by a black veil passed over the head and tied under the chin--a traveling-dress of a nankeen color, studded with blue buttons and trimmed with white braid--a light brown cloak over it--little neatly-gloved hands, which seized in an instant on one of mine and on one of Owen's--two dark blue eyes, which seemed to look us both through and through in a moment--a clear, full, merrily confident voice--a look and manner gayly and gracefully self-possessed--such were the characteristics of our fair guest which first struck me at the moment when she left the postchaise and possessed herself of my hand.

"Don't begin by scolding me," she said, before I could utter a word of welcome. "There will be time enough for that in the course of the next six weeks. I beg pardon, with all possible humility, for the offense of coming ten days before my time. Don't ask me to account for it, please; if you do, I shall be obliged to confess the truth. My dear sir, the fact is, this is an act of impulse."

She paused, and looked us both in the face with a bright confidence in her own flow of nonsense that was perfectly irresistible.

"I must tell you all about it," she ran on, leading the way to the bench, and inviting us, by a little mock gesture of supplication, to seat ourselves on either side of her. "I feel so guilty till I've told you. Dear me! how nice this is! Here I am quite at home already. Isn't it odd? Well, and how do you think it happened? The morning before yesterday Matilda--there is Matilda, picking up my bonnet from the bottom of that remarkably musty carriage--Matilda came and woke me as usual, and I hadn't an idea in my head, I assure you, till she began to brush my hair. Can you account for it?--I can't--but she seemed, somehow, to brush a sudden fancy for coming here into my head. When I went down to breakfast, I said to my aunt, 'Darling, I have an irresistible impulse to go to Wales at once, instead of waiting till the twentieth.' She made all the necessary objections, poor dear, and my impulse got stronger and stronger with every one of them. 'I'm quite certain,' I said, 'I shall never go at all if I don't go now.' 'In that case,' says my aunt, 'ring the bell, and have your trunks packed. Your whole future depends on your going; and you terrify me so inexpressibly that I shall be glad to get rid

of you.' You may not think it, to look at her--but Matilda is a treasure; and in three hours more I was on the Great Western Railway. I have not the least idea how I got here--except that the men helped me everywhere. They are always such delightful creatures! I have been casting myself, and my maid, and my trunks on their tender mercies at every point in the journey, and their polite attentions exceed all belief. I slept at your horrid little county town last night; and the night before I missed a steamer or a train, I forget which, and slept at Bristol; and that's how I got here. And, now I am here, I ought to give my guardian a kiss--oughtn't I? Shall I call you papa? I think I will. And shall I call you uncle, sir, and give you a kiss too? We shall come to it sooner or later--shan't we?--and we may as well begin at once, I suppose."

Her fresh young lips touched my old withered cheek first, and then Owen's; a soft, momentary shadow of tenderness, that was very pretty and becoming, passing quickly over the sunshine and gayety of her face as she saluted us. The next moment she was on her feet again, inquiring "who the wonderful man was who built The Glen Tower," and wanting to go all over it immediately from top to bottom.

As we took her into the house, I made the necessary apologies for the miserable condition of the lean-to, and assured her that, ten days later, she would have found it perfectly ready to receive her. She whisked into the rooms--looked all round them--whisked out again--declared she had come to live in the old Tower, and not in any modern addition to it, and flatly declined to inhabit the lean-to on any terms whatever. I opened my lips to state certain objections, but she slipped away in an instant and made straight for the Tower staircase.

"Who lives here?" she asked, calling down to us, eagerly, from the first-floor landing.

"I do," said Owen; "but, if you would like me to move out--"

She was away up the second flight before he could say any more. The next sound we heard, as we slowly followed her, was a peremptory drumming against the room door of the second story.

"Anybody here?" we heard her ask through the door.

I called up to her that, under ordinary circumstances, I was there; but that, like Owen, I should be happy to move out--

My polite offer was cut short as my brother's had been. We heard more

drumming at the door of the third story. There were two rooms here also--one perfectly empty, the other stocked with odds and ends of dismal, old-fashioned furniture for which we had no use, and grimly ornamented by a life-size basket figure supporting a complete suit of armor in a sadly rusty condition. When Owen and I got to the third-floor landing, the door was open; Miss Jessie had taken possession of the rooms; and we found her on a chair, dusting the man in armor with her cambric pocket-handkerchief.

"I shall live here," she said, looking round at us briskly over her shoulder.

We both remonstrated, but it was quite in vain. She told us that she had an impulse to live with the man in armor, and that she would have her way, or go back immediately in the post-chaise, which we pleased. Finding it impossible to move her, we bargained that she should, at least, allow the new bed and the rest of the comfortable furniture in the lean-to to be moved up into the empty room for her sleeping accommodation. She consented to this condition, protesting, however, to the last against being compelled to sleep in a bed, because it was a modern conventionality, out of all harmony with her place of residence and her friend in armor.

Fortunately for the repose of Morgan, who, under other circumstances, would have discovered on the very first day that his airy retreat was by no means high enough to place him out of Jessie's reach, the idea of settling herself instantly in her new habitation excluded every other idea from the mind of our fair guest. She pinned up the nankeen-colored traveling dress in festoons all round her on the spot; informed us that we were now about to make acquaintance with her in the new character of a woman of business; and darted downstairs in mad high spirits, screaming for Matilda and the trunks like a child for a set of new toys. The wholesome protest of Nature against the artificial restraints of modern life expressed itself in all that she said and in all that she did. She had never known what it was to be happy before, because she had never been allowed, until now, to do anything for herself. She was down on her knees at one moment, blowing the fire, and telling us that she felt like Cinderella; she was up on a table the next, attacking the cobwebs with a long broom, and wishing she had been born a housemaid. As for my unfortunate friend, the upholsterer, he was leveled to the ranks at the first effort he made to assume the command of the domestic forces in the furniture department. She laughed at him, pushed him about, disputed all his conclusions, altered all his arrangements, and ended by ordering half his bedroom furniture to be taken back again, for the one unanswerable reason that she meant to do without it.

As evening approached, the scene presented by the two rooms became

eccentric to a pitch of absurdity which is quite indescribable. The grim, ancient walls of the bedroom had the liveliest modern dressing-gowns and morning-wrappers hanging all about them. The man in armor had a collection of smart little boots and shoes dangling by laces and ribbons round his iron legs. A worm-eaten, steel-clasped casket, dragged out of a corner, frowned on the upholsterer's brand-new toilet-table, and held a miscellaneous assortment of combs, hairpins, and brushes. Here stood a gloomy antique chair, the patriarch of its tribe, whose arms of blackened oak embraced a pair of pert, new deal bonnet-boxes not a fortnight old. There, thrown down lightly on a rugged tapestry table-cover, the long labor of centuries past, lay the brief, delicate work of a week ago in the shape of silk and muslin dresses turned inside out. In the midst of all these confusions and contradictions, Miss Jessie ranged to and fro, the active center of the whole scene of disorder, now singing at the top of her voice, and now declaring in her lighthearted way that one of us must make up his mind to marry her immediately, as she was determined to settle for the rest of her life at The Glen Tower.

She followed up that announcement, when we met at dinner, by inquiring if we quite understood by this time that she had left her "company manners" in London, and that she meant to govern us all at her absolute will and pleasure, throughout the whole period of her stay. Having thus provided at the outset for the due recognition of her authority by the household generally and individually having briskly planned out all her own forthcoming occupations and amusements over the wine and fruit at dessert, and having positively settled, between her first and second cups of tea, where our connection with them was to begin and where it was to end, she had actually succeeded, when the time came to separate for the night, in setting us as much at our ease, and in making herself as completely a necessary part of our household as if she had lived among us for years and years past.

Such was our first day's experience of the formidable guest whose anticipated visit had so sorely and so absurdly discomposed us all. I could hardly believe that I had actually wasted hours of precious time in worrying myself and everybody else in the house about the best means of laboriously entertaining a lively, high-spirited girl, who was perfectly capable, without an effort on her own part or on ours, of entertaining herself.

Having upset every one of our calculations on the first day of her arrival, she next falsified all our predictions before she had been with us a week. Instead of fracturing her skull with the pony, as Morgan had prophesied, she sat the sturdy, sure-footed, mischievous little brute as if she were part and parcel of

himself. With an old water-proof cloak of mine on her shoulders, with a broad-flapped Spanish hat of Owen's on her head, with a wild imp of a Welsh boy following her as guide and groom on a bare-backed pony, and with one of the largest and ugliest cur-dogs in England (which she had picked up, lost and starved by the wayside) barking at her heels, she scoured the country in all directions, and came back to dinner, as she herself expressed it, "with the manners of an Amazon, the complexion of a dairy-maid, and the appetite of a wolf."

On days when incessant rain kept her indoors, she amused herself with a new freak. Making friends everywhere, as became The Queen of Hearts, she even ingratiated herself with the sour old housekeeper, who had predicted so obstinately that she was certain to run away. To the amazement of everybody in the house, she spent hours in the kitchen, learning to make puddings and pies, and trying all sorts of recipes with very varying success, from an antiquated cookery book which she had discovered at the back of my bookshelves. At other times, when I expected her to be upstairs, languidly examining her finery, and idly polishing her trinkets, I heard of her in the stables, feeding the rabbits, and talking to the raven, or found her in the conservatory, fumigating the plants, and half suffocating the gardener, who was trying to moderate her enthusiasm in the production of smoke.

Instead of finding amusement, as we had expected, in Owen's studio, she puckered up her pretty face in grimaces of disgust at the smell of paint in the room, and declared that the horrors of the Earthquake at Lisbon made her feel hysterical. Instead of showing a total want of interest in my business occupations on the estate, she destroyed my dignity as steward by joining me in my rounds on her pony, with her vagabond retinue at her heels. Instead of devouring the novels I had ordered for her, she left them in the box, and put her feet on it when she felt sleepy after a hard day's riding. Instead of practicing for hours every evening at the piano, which I had hired with such a firm conviction of her using it, she showed us tricks on the cards, taught us new games, initiated us into the mystics of dominoes, challenged us with riddles, an even attempted to stimulate us into acting charades--in short, tried every evening amusement in the whole category except the amusement of music. Every new aspect of her character was a new surprise to us, and every fresh occupation that she chose was a fresh contradiction to our previous expectations. The value of experience as a guide is unquestionable in many of the most important affairs of life; but, speaking for myself personally, I never understood the utter futility of it, where a woman is concerned, until I was brought into habits of daily communication with our fair guest.

In her domestic relations with ourselves she showed that exquisite nicety of discrimination in studying our characters, habits and tastes which comes by instinct with women, and which even the longest practice rarely teaches in similar perfection to men. She saw at a glance all the underlying tenderness and generosity concealed beneath Owen's external shyness, irresolution, and occasional reserve; and, from first to last, even in her gayest moments, there was always a certain quietly-implied consideration--an easy, graceful, delicate deference--in her manner toward my eldest brother, which won upon me and upon him every hour in the day.

With me she was freer in her talk, quicker in her actions, readier and bolder in all the thousand little familiarities of our daily intercourse. When we met in the morning she always took Owen's hand, and waited till he kissed her on the forehead. In my case she put both her hands on my shoulders, raised herself on tiptoe, and saluted me briskly on both checks in the foreign way. She never differed in opinion with Owen without propitiating him first by some little artful compliment in the way of excuse. She argued boldly with me on every subject under the sun, law and politics included; and, when I got the better of her, never hesitated to stop me by putting her hand on my lips, or by dragging me out into the garden in the middle of a sentence.

As for Morgan, she abandoned all restraint in his case on the second day of her sojourn among us. She had asked after him as soon as she was settled in her two rooms on the third story; had insisted on knowing why he lived at the top of the tower, and why he had not appeared to welcome her at the door; had entrapped us into all sorts of damaging admissions, and had thereupon discovered the true state of the case in less than five minutes.

From that time my unfortunate second brother became the victim of all that was mischievous and reckless in her disposition. She forced him downstairs by a series of maneuvers which rendered his refuge uninhabitable, and then pretended to fall violently in love with him. She slipped little pink three-cornered notes under his door, entreating him to make appointments with her, or tenderly inquiring how he would like to see her hair dressed at dinner on that day. She followed him into the garden, sometimes to ask for the privilege of smelling his tobacco-smoke, sometimes to beg for a lock of his hair, or a fragment of his ragged old dressing-gown, to put among her keepsakes. She sighed at him when he was in a passion, and put her handkerchief to her eyes when he was sulky. In short, she tormented Morgan, whenever she could catch him, with such ingenious and such relentless malice, that he actually threatened to go back to London, and prey once more, in the unscrupulous character of a doctor, on the credulity

of mankind.

Thus situated in her relations toward ourselves, and thus occupied by country diversions of her own choosing, Miss Jessie passed her time at The Glen Tower, excepting now and then a dull hour in the long evenings, to her guardian's satisfaction--and, all things considered, not without pleasure to herself. Day followed day in calm and smooth succession, and five quiet weeks had elapsed out of the six during which her stay was to last without any remarkable occurrence to distinguish them, when an event happened which personally affected me in a very serious manner, and which suddenly caused our handsome Queen of Hearts to become the object of my deepest anxiety in the present, and of my dearest hopes for the future.

CHAPTER IV. OUR GRAND PROJECT.

AT the end of the fifth week of our guest's stay, among the letters which the morning's post brought to The Glen Tower there was one for me, from my son George, in the Crimea.

The effect which this letter produced in our little circle renders it necessary that I should present it here, to speak for itself.

This is what I read alone in my own room:

"MY DEAREST FATHER--After the great public news of the fall of Sebastopol, have you any ears left for small items of private intelligence from insignificant subaltern officers? Prepare, if you have, for a sudden and a startling announcement. How shall I write the words? How shall I tell you that I am really coming home?

"I have a private opportunity of sending this letter, and only a short time to write it in; so I must put many things, if I can, into few words. The doctor has reported me fit to travel at last, and I leave, thanks to the privilege of a wounded man, by the next ship. The name of the vessel and the time of starting are on the list which I inclose. I have made all my calculations, and, allowing for every possible delay, I find that I shall be with you, at the latest, on the first of November--perhaps some days earlier.

"I am far too full of my return, and of something else connected with it which is equally dear to me, to say anything about public affairs, more especially as I know that the newspapers must, by this time, have given you plenty of information. Let me fill the rest of this paper with a subject which is very near to my heart--nearer, I am almost ashamed to say, than the great triumph of my countrymen, in which my disabled condition has prevented me from taking any share.

"I gathered from your last letter that Miss Yelverton was to pay you a visit this autumn, in your capacity of her guardian. If she is already with you, pray move heaven and earth to keep her at The Glen Tower till I come back. Do you anticipate my confession from this entreaty? My dear, dear father, all my hopes rest on that one darling treasure which you are guarding perhaps, at this moment, under your own roof--all my happiness depends on making Jessie Yelverton my wife.

"If I did not sincerely believe that you will heartily approve of my choice, I should hardly have ventured on this abrupt confession. Now that I have made it, let me go on and tell you why I have kept my attachment up to this time a secret from every one--even from Jessie herself. (You see I call her by her Christian name already!)

"I should have risked everything, father, and have laid my whole heart open before her more than a year ago, but for the order which sent our regiment out to take its share in this great struggle of the Russian war. No ordinary change in my life would have silenced me on the subject of all others of which I was most anxious to speak; but this change made me think seriously of the future; and out of those thoughts came the resolution which I have kept until this time. For her sake, and for her sake only, I constrained myself to leave the words unspoken which might have made her my promised wife. I resolved to spare her the dreadful suspense of waiting for her betrothed husband till the perils of war might, or might not, give him back to her. I resolved to save her from the bitter grief of my death if a bullet laid me low. I resolved to preserve her from the wretched sacrifice of herself if I came back, as many a brave man will come back from this war, invalided for life. Leaving her untrammeled by any engagement, unsuspicious perhaps of my real feelings toward her, I might die, and know that, by keeping silence, I had spared a pang to the heart that was dearest to me. This was the thought that stayed the words on my lips when I left England, uncertain whether I should ever come back. If I had loved her less dearly, if her happiness had been less precious to me, I might have given way under the hard restraint I imposed on myself, and might have spoken selfishly at the last moment.

"And now the time of trial is past; the war is over; and, although I still walk a little lame, I am, thank God, in as good health and in much better spirits than when I left home. Oh, father, if I should lose her now--if I should get no reward for sparing her but the bitterest of all disappointments! Sometimes I am vain enough to think that I made some little impression on her; sometimes I doubt if she has a suspicion of my love. She lives in a gay world--she is the center of perpetual admiration--men with all the qualities to win a woman's heart are perpetually about her--can I, dare I hope? Yes, I must! Only keep her, I entreat you, at The Glen Tower. In that quiet world, in that freedom from frivolities and temptations, she will listen to me as she might listen nowhere else. Keep her, my dearest, kindest father--and, above all things, breathe not a word to her of this letter. I have surely earned the privilege of being the first to open her eyes to the truth. She must know nothing, now that I am coming home, till she knows all from my own lips."

Here the writing hurriedly broke off. I am only giving myself credit for common feeling, I trust, when I confess that what I read deeply affected me. I think I never felt so fond of my boy, and so proud of him, as at the moment when I laid down his letter.

As soon as I could control my spirits, I began to calculate the question of time with a trembling eagerness, which brought back to my mind my own young days of love and hope. My son was to come back, at the latest, on the first of November, and Jessie's allotted six weeks would expire on the twenty-second of October. Ten days too soon! But for the caprice which had brought her to us exactly that number of days before her time she would have been in the house, as a matter of necessity, on George's return.

I searched back in my memory for a conversation that I had held with her a week since on her future plans. Toward the middle of November, her aunt, Lady Westwick, had arranged to go to her house in Paris, and Jessie was, of course, to accompany her--to accompany her into that very circle of the best English and the best French society which contained in it the elements most adverse to George's hopes. Between this time and that she had no special engagement, and she had only settled to write and warn her aunt of her return to London a day or two before she left The Glen Tower.

Under these circumstances, the first, the all-important necessity was to prevail on her to prolong her stay beyond the allotted six weeks by ten days. After the caution to be silent impressed on me (and most naturally, poor boy) in George's letter, I felt that I could only appeal to her on the ordinary ground of hospitality. Would this be sufficient to effect the object?

I was sure that the hours of the morning and the afternoon had, thus far, been fully and happily occupied by her various amusements indoors and out. She was no more weary of her days now than she had been when she first came among us. But I was by no means so certain that she was not tired of her evenings. I had latterly noticed symptoms of weariness after the lamps were lit, and a suspicious regularity in retiring to bed the moment the clock struck ten. If I could provide her with a new amusement for the long evenings, I might leave the days to take care of themselves, and might then make sure (seeing that she had no special engagement in London until the middle of November) of her being sincerely thankful and ready to prolong her stay.

How was this to be done? The piano and the novels had both failed to attract her. What other amusement was there to offer?

It was useless, at present, to ask myself such questions as these. I was too much agitated to think collectedly on the most trifling subjects. I was even too restless to stay in my own room. My son's letter had given me so fresh an interest in Jessie that I was now as impatient to see her as if we were about to meet for the first time. I wanted to look at her with my new eyes, to listen to her with my new ears, to study her secretly with my new purposes, and my new hopes and fears. To my dismay (for I wanted the very weather itself to favor George's interests), it was raining heavily that morning. I knew, therefore, that I should probably find her in her own sitting-room. When I knocked at her door, with George's letter crumpled up in my hand, with George's hopes in full possession of my heart, it is no exaggeration to say that my nerves were almost as much fluttered, and my ideas almost as much confused, as they were on a certain memorable day in the far past, when I rose, in brand-new wig and gown, to set my future prospects at the bar on the hazard of my first speech.

When I entered the room I found Jessie leaning back languidly in her largest arm-chair, watching the raindrops dripping down the window-pane. The unfortunate box of novels was open by her side, and the books were lying, for the most part, strewed about on the ground at her feet. One volume lay open, back upward, on her lap, and her hands were crossed over it listlessly. To my great dismay, she was yawning--palpably and widely yawning--when I came in.

No sooner did I find myself in her presence than an irresistible anxiety to make some secret discovery of the real state of her feelings toward George took possession of me. After the customary condolences on the imprisonment to which she was subjected by the weather, I said, in as careless a manner as it was possible to assume:

"I have heard from my son this morning. He talks of being ordered home, and tells me I may expect to see him before the end of the year."

I was too cautious to mention the exact date of his return, for in that case she might have detected my motive for asking her to prolong her visit.

"Oh, indeed?" she said. "How very nice. How glad you must be."

I watched her narrowly. The clear, dark blue eyes met mine as openly as ever. The smooth, round cheeks kept their fresh color quite unchanged. The full, good-humored, smiling lips never trembled or altered their expression in the slightest degree. Her light checked silk dress, with its pretty trimming of cherry-colored ribbon, lay quite still over the bosom beneath it. For all the

information I could get from her look and manner, we might as well have been a hundred miles apart from each other. Is the best woman in the world little better than a fathomless abyss of duplicity on certain occasions, and where certain feelings of her own are concerned? I would rather not think that; and yet I don't know how to account otherwise for the masterly manner in which Miss Jessie contrived to baffle me.

I was afraid--literally afraid--to broach the subject of prolonging her sojourn with us on a rainy day, so I changed the topic, in despair, to the novels that were scattered about her.

"Can you find nothing there," I asked, "to amuse you this wet morning?"

"There are two or three good novels," she said, carelessly, "but I read them before I left London."

"And the others won't even do for a dull day in the country?" I went on.

"They might do for some people," she answered, "but not for me. I'm rather peculiar, perhaps, in my tastes. I'm sick to death of novels with an earnest purpose. I'm sick to death of outbursts of eloquence, and large-minded philanthropy, and graphic descriptions, and unsparing anatomy of the human heart, and all that sort of thing. Good gracious me! isn't it the original intention or purpose, or whatever you call it, of a work of fiction, to set out distinctly by telling a story? And how many of these books, I should like to know, do that? Why, so far as telling a story is concerned, the greater part of them might as well be sermons as novels. Oh, dear me! what I want is something that seizes hold of my interest, and makes me forget when it is time to dress for dinner--something that keeps me reading, reading, reading, in a breathless state to find out the end. You know what I mean--at least you ought. Why, there was that little chance story you told me yesterday in the garden--don't you remember?--about your strange client, whom you never saw again: I declare it was much more interesting than half these novels, because it was a story. Tell me another about your young days, when you were seeing the world, and meeting with all sorts of remarkable people. Or, no--don't tell it now--keep it till the evening, when we all want something to stir us up. You old people might amuse us young ones out of your own resources oftener than you do. It was very kind of you to get me these books; but, with all respect to them, I would rather have the rummaging of your memory than the rummaging of this box. What's the matter? Are you afraid I have found out the window in your bosom already?"

I had half risen from my chair at her last words, and I felt that my face must

have flushed at the same moment. She had started an idea in my mind--the very idea of which I had been in search when I was pondering over the best means of amusing her in the long autumn evenings.

I parried her questions by the best excuses I could offer; changed the conversation for the next five minutes, and then, making a sudden remembrance of business my apology for leaving her, hastily withdrew to devote myself to the new idea in the solitude of my own room.

A little quiet thinking convinced me that I had discovered a means not only of occupying her idle time, but of decoying her into staying on with us, evening by evening, until my son's return. The new project which she had herself unconsciously suggested involved nothing less than acting forthwith on her own chance hint, and appealing to her interest and curiosity by the recital of incidents and adventures drawn from my own personal experience and (if I could get them to help me) from the experience of my brothers as well. Strange people and startling events had connected themselves with Owen's past life as a clergyman, with Morgan's past life as a doctor, and with my past life as a lawyer, which offered elements of interest of a strong and striking kind ready to our hands. If these narratives were written plainly and unpretendingly; if one of them was read every evening, under circumstances that should pique the curiosity and impress the imagination of our young guest, the very occupation was found for her weary hours which would gratify her tastes, appeal to her natural interest in the early lives of my brothers and myself, and lure her insensibly into prolonging her visit by ten days without exciting a suspicion of our real motive for detaining her.

I sat down at my desk; I hid my face in my hands to keep out all impressions of external and present things; and I searched back through the mysterious labyrinth of the Past, through the dun, ever-deepening twilight of the years that were gone.

Slowly, out of the awful shadows, the Ghosts of Memory rose about me. The dead population of a vanished world came back to life round me, a living man. Men and women whose earthly pilgrimage had ended long since, returned upon me from the unknown spheres, and fond, familiar voices burst their way back to my ears through the heavy silence of the grave. Moving by me in the nameless inner light, which no eye saw but mine, the dead procession of immaterial scenes and beings unrolled its silent length. I saw once more the pleading face of a friend of early days, with the haunting vision that had tortured him through life by his side again--with the long-forgotten despair in his eyes which had once touched my heart, and bound

me to him, till I had tracked his destiny through its darkest windings to the end. I saw the figure of an innocent woman passing to and fro in an ancient country house, with the shadow of a strange suspicion stealing after her wherever she went. I saw a man worn by hardship and old age, stretched dreaming on the straw of a stable, and muttering in his dream the terrible secret of his life.

Other scenes and persons followed these, less vivid in their revival, but still always recognizable and distinct; a young girl alone by night, and in peril of her life, in a cottage on a dreary moor--an upper chamber of an inn, with two beds in it; the curtains of one bed closed, and a man standing by them, waiting, yet dreading to draw them back--a husband secretly following the first traces of a mystery which his wife's anxious love had fatally hidden from him since the day when they first met; these, and other visions like them, shadowy reflections of the living beings and the real events that had been once, peopled the solitude and the emptiness around me. They haunted me still when I tried to break the chain of thought which my own efforts had wound about my mind; they followed me to and fro in the room; and they came out with me when I left it. I had lifted the veil from the Past for myself, and I was now to rest no more till I had lifted it for others.

I went at once to my eldest brother and showed him my son's letter, and told him all that I have written here. His kind heart was touched as mine had been. He felt for my suspense; he shared my anxiety; he laid aside his own occupation on the spot.

"Only tell me," he said, "how I can help, and I will give every h our in the day to you and to George."

I had come to him with my mind almost as full of his past life as of my own; I recalled to his memory events in his experience as a working clergyman in London; I set him looking among papers which he had preserved for half his lifetime, and the very existence of which he had forgotten long since; I recalled to him the names of persons to whose necessities he had ministered in his sacred office, and whose stories he had heard from their own lips or received under their own handwriting. When we parted he was certain of what he was wanted to do, and was resolute on that very day to begin the work.

I went to Morgan next, and appealed to him as I had already appealed to Owen. It was only part of his odd character to start all sorts of eccentric objections in reply; to affect a cynical indifference, which he was far from really and truly feeling; and to indulge in plenty of quaint sarcasm on the

subject of Jessie and his nephew George. I waited till these little surface-ebullitions had all expended themselves, and then pressed my point again with the earnestness and anxiety that I really felt.

Evidently touched by the manner of my appeal to him even more than by the language in which it was expressed, Morgan took refuge in his customary abruptness, spread out his paper violently on the table, seized his pen and ink, and told me quite fiercely to give him his work and let him tackle it at once.

I set myself to recall to his memory some very remarkable experiences of his own in his professional days, but he stopped me before I had half done.

"I understand," he said, taking a savage dip at the ink, "I'm to make her flesh creep, and to frighten her out of her wits. I'll do it with a vengeance!"

Reserving to myself privately an editorial right of supervision over Morgan's contributions, I returned to my own room to begin my share--by far the largest one--of the task before us. The stimulus applied to my mind by my son's letter must have been a strong one indeed, for I had hardly been more than an hour at my desk before I found the old literary facility of my youthful days, when I was a writer for the magazines, returning to me as if by magic. I worked on unremittingly till dinner-time, and then resumed the pen after we had all separated for the night. At two o'clock the next morning I found myself--God help me!--masquerading, as it were, in my own long-lost character of a hard-writing young man, with the old familiar cup of strong tea by my side, and the old familiar wet towel tied round my head.

My review of the progress I had made, when I looked back at my pages of manuscript, yielded all the encouragement I wanted to drive me on. It is only just, however, to add to the record of this first day's attempt, that the literary labor which it involved was by no means of the most trying kind. The great strain on the intellect--the strain of invention--was spared me by my having real characters and events ready to my hand. If I had been called on to create, I should, in all probability, have suffered severely by contrast with the very worst of those unfortunate novelists whom Jessie had so rashly and so thoughtlessly condemned. It is not wonderful that the public should rarely know how to estimate the vast service which is done to them by the production of a good book, seeing that they are, for the most part, utterly ignorant of the immense difficulty of writing even a bad one.

The next day was fine, to my great relief; and our visitor, while we were at work, enjoyed her customary scamper on the pony, and her customary

rambles afterward in the neighborhood of the house. Although I had interruptions to contend with on the part of Owen and Morgan, neither of whom possessed my experience in the production of what heavy people call "light literature," and both of whom consequently wanted assistance, still I made great progress, and earned my hours of repose on the evening of the second day.

On that evening I risked the worst, and opened my negotiations for the future with "The Queen of Hearts."

About an hour after the tea had been removed, and when I happened to be left alone in the room with her, I noticed that she rose suddenly and went to the writing-table. My suspicions were aroused directly, and I entered on the dangerous subject by inquiring if she intended to write to her aunt.

"Yes," she said. "I promised to write when the last week came. If you had paid me the compliment of asking me to stay a little longer, I should have returned it by telling you I was sorry to go. As it is, I mean to be sulky and say nothing."

With those words she took up her pen to begin the letter.

"Wait a minute," I remonstrated. "I was just on the point of begging you to stay when I spoke."

"Were you, indeed?" she returned. "I never believed in coincidences of that sort before, but now, of course, I put the most unlimited faith in them!"

"Will you believe in plain proofs?" I asked, adopting her humor. "How do you think I and my brothers have been employing ourselves all day to-day and all day yesterday? Guess what we have been about."

"Congratulating yourselves in secret on my approaching departure," she answered, tapping her chin saucily with the feather-end of her pen.

I seized the opportunity of astonishing her, and forthwith told her the truth. She started up from the table, and approached me with the eagerness of a child, her eyes sparkling, and her cheeks flushed.

"Do you really mean it?" she said.

I assured her that I was in earnest. She thereupon not only expressed an interest in our undertaking, which was evidently sincere, but, with

characteristic impatience, wanted to begin the first evening's reading on that very night. I disappointed her sadly by explaining that we required time to prepare ourselves, and by assuring her that we should not be ready for the next five days. On the sixth day, I added, we should be able to begin, and to go on, without missing an evening, for probably ten days more.

"The next five days?" she replied. "Why, that will just bring us to the end of my six weeks' visit. I suppose you are not setting a trap to catch me? This is not a trick of you three cunning old gentlemen to make me stay on, is it?"

I quailed inwardly as that dangerously close guess at the truth passed her lips.

"You forget," I said, "that the idea only occurred to me after what you said yesterday. If it had struck me earlier, we should have been ready earlier, and then where would your suspicions have been?"

"I am ashamed of having felt them," she said, in her frank, hearty way. "I retract the word 'trap,' and I beg pardon for calling you 'three cunning old gentlemen.' But what am I to say to my aunt?"

She moved back to the writing-table as she spoke.

"Say nothing," I replied, "till you have heard the first story. Shut up the paper-case till that time, and then decide when you will open it again to write to your aunt."

She hesitated and smiled. That terribly close guess of hers was not out of her mind yet.

"I rather fancy," she said, slyly, "that the story will turn out to be the best of the whole series."

"Wrong again," I retorted. "I have a plan for letting chance decide which of the stories the first one shall be. They shall be all numbered as they are done; corresponding numbers shall be written inside folded pieces of card and well mixed together; you shall pick out any one card you like; you shall declare the number written within; and, good or bad, the story that answers to that number shall be the story that is read. Is that fair?"

"Fair!" she exclaimed; "it's better than fair; it makes me of some importance; and I must be more or less than woman not to appreciate that."

"Then you consent to wait patiently for the next five days?"

"As patiently as I can."

"And you engage to decide nothing about writing to your aunt until you have heard the first story?"

"I do," she said, returning to the writing-table. "Behold the proof of it." She raised her hand with theatrical solemnity, and closed the paper-case with an impressive bang.

I leaned back in my chair with my mind at ease for the first time since the receipt of my son's letter.

"Only let George return by the first of November," I thought to myself, "and all the aunts in Christendom shall not prevent Jessie Yelverton from being here to meet him."

THE TEN DAYS.

THE FIRST DAY.

SHOWERY and unsettled. In spite of the weather, Jessie put on my Mackintosh cloak and rode off over the hills to one of Owen's outlying farms. She was already too impatient to wait quietly for the evening's reading in the house, or to enjoy any amusement less exhilarating than a gallop in the open air.

I was, on my side, as anxious and as uneasy as our guest. Now that the six weeks of her stay had expired--now that the day had really arrived, on the evening of which the first story was to be read, I began to calculate the chances of failure as well as the chances of success. What if my own estimate of the interest of the stories turned out to be a false one? What if some unforeseen accident occurred to delay my son's return beyond ten days?

The arrival of the newspaper had already become an event of the deepest importance to me. Unreasonable as it was to expect any tidings of George at so early a date, I began, nevertheless, on this first of our days of suspense, to look for the name of his ship in the columns of telegraphic news. The mere mechanical act of looking was some relief to my overstrained feelings, although I might have known, and did know, that the search, for the present, could lead to no satisfactory result.

Toward noon I shut myself up with my collection of manuscripts to revise them for the last time. Our exertions had thus far produced but six of the necessary ten stories. As they were only, however, to be read, one by one, on six successive evenings, and as we could therefore count on plenty of leisure in the daytime, I was in no fear of our failing to finish the little series.

Of the six completed stories I had written two, and had found a third in the form of a collection of letters among my papers. Morgan had only written one, and this solitary contribution of his had given me more trouble than both my own put together, in consequence of the perpetual intrusion of my brother's eccentricities in every part of his narrative. The process of removing these quaint turns and frisks of Morgan's humor--which, however amusing they might have been in an essay, were utterly out of place in a story appealing to suspended interest for its effect--certainly tried my patience and my critical faculty (such as it is) more severely than any other part of our literary enterprise which had fallen my share.

Owen's investigations among his papers had supplied us with the two remaining narratives. One was contained in a letter, and the other in the form of a diary, and both had been received by him directly from the writers. Besides these contributions, he had undertaken to help us by some work of his own, and had been engaged for the last four days in molding certain events which had happened within his personal knowledge into the form of a story. His extreme fastidiousness as a writer interfered, however, so seriously with his progress that he was still sadly behindhand, and was likely, though less heavily burdened than Morgan or myself, to be the last to complete his allotted task.

Such was our position, and such the resources at our command, when the first of the Ten Days dawned upon us. Shortly after four in the afternoon I completed my work of revision, numbered the manuscripts from one to six exactly as they happened to lie under my hand, and inclosed them all in a portfolio, covered with purple morocco, which became known from that time by the imposing title of The Purple Volume.

Miss Jessie returned from her expedition just as I was tying the strings of the portfolio, and, womanlike, instantly asked leave to peep inside, which favor I, manlike, positively declined to grant.

As soon as dinner was over our guest retired to array herself in magnificent evening costume. It had been arranged that the readings were to take place in her own sitting-room; and she was so enthusiastically desirous to do

honor to the occasion, that she regretted not having brought with her from London the dress in which she had been presented at court the year before, and not having borrowed certain materials for additional splendor which she briefly described as "aunt's diamonds."

Toward eight o'clock we assembled in the sitting-room, and a strangely assorted company we were. At the head of the table, radiant in silk and jewelry, flowers and furbelows, sat The Queen of Hearts, looking so handsome and so happy that I secretly congratulated my absent son on the excellent taste he had shown in falling in love with her. Round this bright young creature (Owen, at the foot of the table, and Morgan and I on either side) sat her three wrinkled, gray-headed, dingily-attired hosts, and just behind her, in still more inappropriate companionship, towered the spectral figure of the man in armor, which had so unaccountably attracted her on her arrival. This strange scene was lighted up by candles in high and heavy brass sconces. Before Jessie stood a mighty china punch-bowl of the olden time, containing the folded pieces of card, inside which were written the numbers to be drawn, and before Owen reposed the Purple Volume from which one of us was to read. The walls of the room were hung all round with faded tapestry; the clumsy furniture was black with age; and, in spite of the light from the sconces, the lofty ceiling was almost lost in gloom. If Rembrandt could have painted our background, Reynolds our guest, and Hogarth ourselves, the picture of the scene would have been complete.

When the old clock over the tower gateway had chimed eight, I rose to inaugurate the proceedings by requesting Jessie to take one of the pieces of card out of the punch-bowl, and to declare the number.

She laughed; then suddenly became frightened and serious; then looked at me, and said, "It was dreadfully like business;" and then entreated Morgan not to stare at her, or, in the present state of her nerves, she should upset the punch-bowl. At last she summoned resolution enough to take out one of the pieces of card and to unfold it.

"Declare the number, my dear," said Owen.

"Number Four," answered Jessie, making a magnificent courtesy, and beginning to look like herself again.

Owen opened the Purple Volume, searched through the manuscripts, and suddenly changed color. The cause of his discomposure was soon explained. Malicious fate had assigned to the most diffident individual in the company the trying responsibility of leading the way. Number Four was one of the two

narratives which Owen had found among his own papers.

"I am almost sorry," began my eldest brother, confusedly, "that it has fallen to my turn to read first. I hardly know which I distrust most, myself or my story."

"Try and fancy you are in the pulpit again," said Morgan, sarcastically. "Gentlemen of your cloth, Owen, seldom seem to distrust themselves or their manuscripts when they get into that position."

"The fact is," continued Owen, mildly impenetrable to his brother's cynical remark, "that the little thing I am going to try and read is hardly a story at all. I am afraid it is only an anecdote. I became possessed of the letter which contains my narrative under these circumstances. At the time when I was a clergyman in London, my church was attended for some months by a lady who was the wife of a large farmer in the country. She had been obliged to come to town, and to remain there for the sake of one of her children, a little boy, who required the best medical advice."

At the words "medical advice" Morgan shook his head and growled to himself contemptuously. Owen went on:

"While she was attending in this way to one child, his share in her love was unexpectedly disputed by another, who came into the world rather before his time. I baptized the baby, and was asked to the little christening party afterward. This was my first introduction to the lady, and I was very favorably impressed by her; not so much on account of her personal appearance, for she was but a little wo man and had no pretensions to beauty, as on account of a certain simplicity, and hearty, downright kindness in her manner, as well as of an excellent frankness and good sense in her conversation. One of the guests present, who saw how she had interested me, and who spoke of her in the highest terms, surprised me by inquiring if I should ever have supposed that quiet, good-humored little woman to be capable of performing an act of courage which would have tried the nerves of the boldest man in England? I naturally enough begged for an explanation; but my neighbor at the table only smiled and said, 'If you can find an opportunity, ask her what happened at The Black Cottage, and you will hear something that will astonish you.' I acted on the hint as soon as I had an opportunity of speaking to her privately. The lady answered that it was too long a story to tell then, and explained, on my suggesting that she should relate it on some future day, that she was about to start for her country home the next morning. 'But,' she was good enough to add, 'as I have been under great obligations to you for many Sundays past, and as

you seem interested in this matter, I will employ my first leisure time after my return in telling you by writing, instead of by word of mouth, what really happened to me on one memorable night of my life in The Black Cottage.'

"She faithfully performed her promise. In a fortnight afterward I received from her the narrative which I am now about to read."

BROTHER OWEN'S STORY

OF

THE SIEGE OF THE BLACK COTTAGE.

To begin at the beginning, I must take you back to the time after my mother's death, when my only brother had gone to sea, when my sister was out at service, and when I lived alone with my father in the midst of a moor in the west of England.

The moor was covered with great limestone rocks, and intersected here and there by streamlets. The nearest habitation to ours was situated about a mile and a half off, where a strip of the fertile land stretched out into the waste like a tongue. Here the outbuildings of the great Moor Farm, then in the possession of my husband's father, began. The farm-lands stretched down gently into a beautiful rich valley, lying nicely sheltered by the high platform of the moor. When the ground began to rise again, miles and miles away, it led up to a country house called Holme Manor, belonging to a gentleman named Knifton. Mr. Knifton had lately married a young lady whom my mother had nursed, and whose kindness and friendship for me, her foster-sister, I shall remember gratefully to the last day of my life. These and other slight particulars it is necessary to my story that I should tell you, and it is also necessary that you should be especially careful to bear them well in mind.

My father was by trade a stone-mason. His cottage stood a mile and a half from the nearest habitation. In all other directions we were four or five times that distance from neighbors. Being very poor people, this lonely situation had one great attraction for us--we lived rent free on it. In addition to that advantage, the stones, by shaping which my father gained his livelihood, lay all about him at his very door, so that he thought his position, solitary as it was, quite an enviable one. I can hardly say that I agreed with him, though I never complained. I was very fond of my father, and managed to make the best of my loneliness with the thought of being useful to him. Mrs. Knifton wished to take me into her service when she married, but I declined,

unwillingly enough, for my father's sake. If I had gone away, he would have had nobody to live with him; and my mother made me promise on her death-bed that he should never be left to pine away alone in the midst of the bleak moor.

Our cottage, small as it was, was stoutly and snugly built, with stone from the moor as a matter of course. The walls were lined inside and fenced outside with wood, the gift of Mr. Knifton's father to my father. This double covering of cracks and crevices, which would have been superfluous in a sheltered position, was absolutely necessary, in our exposed situation, to keep out the cold winds which, excepting just the summer months, swept over us continually all the year round. The outside boards, covering our roughly-built stone walls, my father protected against the wet with pitch and tar. This gave to our little abode a curiously dark, dingy look, especially when it was seen from a distance; and so it had come to be called in the neighborhood, even before I was born, The Black Cottage.

I have now related the preliminary particulars which it is desirable that you should know, and may proceed at once to the pleasanter task of telling you my story.

One cloudy autumn day, when I was rather more than eighteen years old, a herdsman walked over from Moor Farm with a letter which had been left there for my father. It came from a builder living at our county town, half a day's journey off, and it invited my father to come to him and give his judgment about an estimate for some stonework on a very large scale. My father's expenses for loss of time were to be paid, and he was to have his share of employment afterwards in preparing the stone. He was only too glad, therefore, to obey the directions which the letter contained, and to prepare at once for his long walk to the county town.

Considering the time at which he received the letter, and the necessity of resting before he attempted to return, it was impossible for him to avoid being away from home for one night, at least. He proposed to me, in case I disliked being left alone in the Black Cottage, to lock the door and to take me to Moor Farm to sleep with any one of the milkmaids who would give me a share of her bed. I by no means liked the notion of sleeping with a girl whom I did not know, and I saw no reason to feel afraid of being left alone for only one night; so I declined. No thieves had ever come near us; our poverty was sufficient protection against them; and of other dangers there were none that even the most timid person could apprehend. Accordingly, I got my father's dinner, laughing at the notion of my taking refuge under the protection of a milkmaid at Moor Farm. He started for his walk as soon as

he had done, saying he should try and be back by dinner-time the next day, and leaving me and my cat Polly to take care of the house.

I had cleared the table and brightened up the fire, and had sat down to my work with the cat dozing at my feet, when I heard the trampling of horses, and, running to the door, saw Mr. and Mrs. Knifton, with their groom behind them, riding up to the Black Cottage. It was part of the young lady's kindness never to neglect an opportunity of coming to pay me a friendly visit, and her husband was generally willing to accompany her for his wife's sake. I made my best courtesy, therefore, with a great deal of pleasure, but with no particular surprise at seeing them. They dismounted and entered the cottage, laughing and talking in great spirits. I soon heard that they were riding to the same county town for which my father was bound and that they intended to stay with some friends there for a few days, and to return home on horseback, as they went out.

I heard this, and I also discovered that they had been having an argument, in jest, about money-matters, as they rode along to our cottage. Mrs. Knifton had accused her husband of inveterate extravagance, and of never being able to go out with money in his pocket without spending it all, if he possibly could, before he got home again. Mr. Knifton had laughingly defended himself by declaring that all his pocket-money went in presents for his wife, and that, if he spent it lavishly, it was under her sole influence and superintendence.

"We are going to Cliverton now," he said to Mrs. Knifton, naming the county town, and warming himself at our poor fire just as pleasantly as if he had been standing on his own grand hearth. "You will stop to admire every pretty thing in every one of the Cliverton shop-windows; I shall hand you the purse, and you will go in and buy. When we have reached home again, and you have h ad time to get tired of your purchases, you will clasp your hands in amazement, and declare that you are quite shocked at my habits of inveterate extravagance. I am only the banker who keeps the money; you, my love, are the spendthrift who throws it all away!"

"Am I, sir?" said Mrs. Knifton, with a look of mock indignation. "We will see if I am to be misrepresented in this way with impunity. Bessie, my dear" (turning to me), "you shall judge how far I deserve the character which that unscrupulous man has just given to me. I am the spendthrift, am I? And you are only the banker? Very well. Banker, give me my money at once, if you please!"

Mr. Knifton laughed, and took some gold and silver from his waistcoat

pocket.

"No, no," said Mrs. Knifton, "you may want what you have got there for necessary expenses. Is that all the money you have about you? What do I feel here?" and she tapped her husband on the chest, just over the breast-pocket of his coat.

Mr. Knifton laughed again, and produced his pocketbook. His wife snatched it out of his hand, opened it, and drew out some bank-notes, put them back again immediately, and, closing the pocketbook, stepped across the room to my poor mother's little walnut-wood book-case, the only bit of valuable furniture we had in the house.

"What are you going to do there?" asked Mr. Knifton, following his wife.

Mrs. Knifton opened the glass door of the book-case, put the pocketbook in a vacant place on one of the lower shelves, closed and locked the door again, and gave me the key.

"You called me a spendthrift just now," she said. "There is my answer. Not one farthing of that money shall you spend at Cliverton on me. Keep the key in your pocket, Bessie, and, whatever Mr. Knifton may say, on no account let him have it until we call again on our way back. No, sir, I won't trust you with that money in your pocket in the town of Cliverton. I will make sure of your taking it all home again, by leaving it here in more trustworthy hands than yours until we ride back. Bessie, my dear, what do you say to that as a lesson in economy inflicted on a prudent husband by a spendthrift wife?"

She took Mr. Knifton's arm while she spoke, and drew him away to the door. He protested and made some resistance, but she easily carried her point, for he was far too fond of her to have a will of his own in any trifling matter between them. Whatever the men might say, Mr. Knifton was a model husband in the estimation of all the women who knew him.

"You will see us as we come back, Bessie. Till then, you are our banker, and the pocketbook is yours," cried Mrs. Knifton, gayly, at the door. Her husband lifted her into the saddle, mounted himself, and away they both galloped over the moor as wild and happy as a couple of children.

Although my being trusted with money by Mrs. Knifton was no novelty (in her maiden days she always employed me to pay her dress-maker's bills), I did not feel quite easy at having a pocketbook full of bank-notes left by her in my charge. I had no positive apprehensions about the safety of the

deposit placed in my hands, but it was one of the odd points in my character then (and I think it is still) to feel an unreasonably strong objection to charging myself with money responsibilities of any kind, even to suit the convenience of my dearest friends. As soon as I was left alone, the very sight of the pocketbook behind the glass door of the book-case began to worry me, and instead of returning to my work, I puzzled my brains about finding a place to lock it up in, where it would not be exposed to the view of any chance passers-by who might stray into the Black Cottage.

This was not an easy matter to compass in a poor house like ours, where we had nothing valuable to put under lock and key. After running over various hiding-places in my mind, I thought of my tea-caddy, a present from Mrs. Knifton, which I always kept out of harm's way in my own bedroom. Most unluckily--as it afterward turned out--instead of taking the pocketbook to the tea-caddy, I went into my room first to take the tea-caddy to the pocketbook. I only acted in this roundabout way from sheer thoughtlessness, and severely enough I was punished for it, as you will acknowledge yourself when you have read a page or two more of my story.

I was just getting the unlucky tea-caddy out of my cupboard, when I heard footsteps in the passage, and, running out immediately, saw two men walk into the kitchen--the room in which I had received Mr. and Mrs. Knifton. I inquired what they wanted sharply enough, and one of them answered immediately that they wanted my father. He turned toward me, of course, as he spoke, and I recognized him as a stone-mason, going among his comrades by the name of Shifty Dick. He bore a very bad character for everything but wrestling, a sport for which the working men of our parts were famous all through the county. Shifty Dick was champion, and he had got his name from some tricks of wrestling, for which he was celebrated. He was a tall, heavy man, with a lowering, scarred face, and huge hairy hands--the last visitor in the whole world that I should have been glad to see under any circumstances. His companion was a stranger, whom he addressed by the name of Jerry--a quick, dapper, wicked-looking man, who took off his cap to me with mock politeness, and showed, in so doing, a very bald head, with some very ugly-looking knobs on it. I distrusted him worse than I did Shifty Dick, and managed to get between his leering eyes and the book-case, as I told the two that my father was gone out, and that I did not expect him back till the next day.

The words were hardly out of my mouth before I repented that my anxiety to get rid of my unwelcome visitors had made me incautious enough to acknowledge that my father would be away from home for the whole night.

Shifty Dick and his companion looked at each other when I unwisely let out the truth, but made no remark except to ask me if I would give them a drop of cider. I answered sharply that I had no cider in the house, having no fear of the consequences of refusing them drink, because I knew that plenty of men were at work within hail, in a neighboring quarry. The two looked at each other again when I denied having any cider to give them; and Jerry (as I am obliged to call him, knowing no other name by which to distinguish the fellow) took off his cap to me once more, and, with a kind of blackguard gentility upon him, said they would have the pleasure of calling the next day, when my father was at home. I said good-afternoon as ungraciously as possible, and, to my great relief, they both left the cottage immediately afterward.

As soon as they were well away, I watched them from the door. They trudged off in the direction of Moor Farm; and, as it was beginning to get dusk, I soon lost sight of them.

Half an hour afterward I looked out again.

The wind had lulled with the sunset, but the mist was rising, and a heavy rain was beginning to fall. Never did the lonely prospect of the moor look so dreary as it looked to my eyes that evening. Never did I regret any slight thing more sincerely than I then regretted the leaving of Mr. Knifton's pocketbook in my charge. I cannot say that I suffered under any actual alarm, for I felt next to certain that neither Shifty Dick nor Jerry had got a chance of setting eyes on so small a thing as the pocketbook while they were in the kitchen; but there was a kind of vague distrust troubling me--a suspicion of the night--a dislike of being left by myself, which I never remember having experienced before. This feeling so increased after I had closed the door and gone back to the kitchen, that, when I heard the voices of the quarrymen as they passed our cottage on their way home to the village in the valley below Moor Farm, I stepped out into the passage with a momentary notion of telling them how I was situated, and asking them for advice and protection.

I had hardly formed this idea, however, before I dismissed it. None of the quarrymen were intimate friends of mine. I had a nodding acquaintance with them, and believed them to be honest men, as times went. But my own common sense told me that what little knowledge of their characters I had was by no means sufficient to warrant me in admitting them into my confidence in the matter of the pocketbook. I had seen enough of poverty and poor men to know what a terrible temptation a large sum of money is to those whose whole lives are passed in scraping up sixpences by weary hard

work. It is one thing to write fine sentiments in books about incorruptible honesty, and another thing to put those sentiments in practice when one day's work is all that a man has to set up in the way of an obstacle between starvation and his own fireside.

The only resource that remained was to carry the pocketbook with me to Moor Farm, and ask permission to pass the night there. But I could not persuade myself that there was any real necessity for taking such a course as this; and, if the truth must be told, my pride revolted at the idea of presenting myself in the character of a coward before the people at the farm. Timidity is thought rather a graceful attraction among ladies, but among poor women it is something to be laughed at. A woman with less spirit of her own than I had, and always shall have, would have considered twice in my situation before she made up her mind to encounter the jokes of plowmen and the jeers of milkmaids. As for me, I had hardly considered about going to the farm before I despised myself for entertaining any such notion. "No, no," thought I, "I am not the woman to walk a mile and a half through rain, and mist, and darkness to tell a whole kitchenful of people that I am afraid. Come what may, here I stop till father gets back."

Having arrived at that valiant resolution, the first thing I did was to lock and bolt the back and front doors, and see to the security of every shutter in the house.

That duty performed, I made a blazing fire, lighted my candle, and sat down to tea, as snug and comfortable as possible. I could hardly believe now, with the light in the room, and the sense of security inspired by the closed doors and shutters, that I had ever felt even the slightest apprehension earlier in the day. I sang as I washed up the tea-things; and even the cat seemed to catch the infection of my good spirits. I never knew the pretty creature so playful as she was that evening.

The tea-things put by, I took up my knitting, and worked away at it so long that I began at last to get drowsy. The fire was so bright and comforting that I could not muster resolution enough to leave it and go to bed. I sat staring lazily into the blaze, with my knitting on my lap--sat till the splashing of the rain outside and the fitful, sullen sobbing of the wind grew fainter and fainter on my ear. The last sounds I heard before I fairly dozed off to sleep were the cheerful crackling of the fire and the steady purring of the cat, as she basked luxuriously in the warm light on the hearth. Those were the last sounds before I fell asleep. The sound that woke me was one loud bang at the front door.

I started up, with my heart (as the saying is) in my mouth, with a frightful momentary shuddering at the roots of my hair--I started up breathless, cold and motionless, waiting in the silence I hardly knew for what, doubtful at first whether I had dreamed about the bang at the door, or whether the blow had really been struck on it.

In a minute or less there came a second bang, louder than the first. I ran out into the passage.

"Who's there?"

"Let us in," answered a voice, which I recognised immediately as the voice of Shifty Dick.

"Wait a bit, my dear, and let me explain," said a second voice, in the low, oily, jeering tones of Dick's companion--the wickedly clever little man whom he called Jerry. "You are alone in the house, my pretty little dear. You may crack your sweet voice with screeching, and there's nobody near to hear you. Listen to reason, my love, and let us in. We don't want cider this time--we only want a very neat-looking pocketbook which you happen to have, and your late excellent mother's four silver teaspoons, which you keep so nice and clean on the chimney-piece. If you let us in we won't hurt a hair of your head, my cherub, and we promise to go away the moment we have got what we want, unless you particularly wish us to stop to tea. If you keep us out, we shall be obliged to break into the house and then--"

"And then," burst in Shifty Dick, "we'll mash you!"

"Yes," said Jerry, "we'll mash you, my beauty. But you won't drive us to doing that, will you? You will let us in?"

This long parley gave me time to recover from the effect which the first bang at the door had produced on my nerves. The threats of the two villains would have terrified some women out of their senses, but the only result they produced on me was violent indignation. I had, thank God, a strong spirit of my own, and the cool, contemptuous insolence of the man Jerry effectually roused it.

"You cowardly villains!" I screamed at them through the door. "You think you can frighten me because I am only a poor girl left alone in the house. You ragamuffin thieves, I defy you both! Our bolts are strong, our shutters are thick. I am here to keep my father's house safe, and keep it I will against an army of you!"

You may imagine what a passion I was in when I vapored and blustered in that way. I heard Jerry laugh and Shifty Dick swear a whole mouthful of oaths. Then there was a dead silence for a minute or two, and then the two ruffians attacked the door.

I rushed into the kitchen and seized the poker, and then heaped wood on the fire, and lighted all the candles I could find; for I felt as though I could keep up my courage better if I had plenty of light. Strange and improbable as it may appear, the next thing that attracted my attention was my poor pussy, crouched up, panic-stricken, in a corner. I was so fond of the little creature that I took her up in my arms and carried her into my bedroom and put her inside my bed. A comical thing to do in a situation of deadly peril, was it not? But it seemed quite natural and proper at the time.

All this while the blows were falling faster and faster on the door. They were dealt, as I conjectured, with heavy stones picked up from the ground outside. Jerry sang at his wicked work, and Shifty Dick swore. As I left the bedroom after putting the cat under cover, I heard the lower panel of the door begin to crack.

I ran into the kitchen and huddled our four silver spoons into my pocket; then took the unlucky book with the bank-notes and put it in the bosom of my dress. I was determined to defend the property confided to my care with my life. Just as I had secured the pocketbook I heard the door splintering, and rushed into the passage again with my heavy kitchen poker lifted in both hands.

I was in time to see the bald head of Jerry, with the ugly-looking knobs on it, pushed into the passage through a great rent in one of the lower panels of the door.

"Get out, you villain, or I'll brain you on the spot!" I screeched, threatening him with the poker.

Mr. Jerry took his head out again much faster than he put it in.

The next thing that came through the rent was a long pitchfork, which they darted at me from the outside, to move me from the door. I struck at it with all my might, and the blow must have jarred the hand of Shifty Dick up to his very shoulder, for I heard him give a roar of rage and pain. Before he could catch at the fork with his other hand I had drawn it inside. By this time even Jerry lost his temper and swore more awfully than Dick himself.

Then there came another minute of respite. I suspected they had gone to get bigger stones, and I dreaded the giving way of the whole door.

Running into the bedroom as this fear beset me, I laid hold of my chest of drawers, dragged it into the passage, and threw it down against the door. On the top of that I heaped my father's big tool chest, three chairs, and a scuttleful of coals; and last, I dragged out the kitchen table and rammed it as hard as I could against the whole barricade. They heard me as they were coming up to the door with fresh stones. Jerry said: "Stop a bit!" and t hen the two consulted together in whispers. I listened eagerly, and just caught these words:

"Let's try it the other way."

Nothing more was said, but I heard their footsteps retreating from the door.

Were they going to besiege the back door now?

I had hardly asked myself that question when I heard their voices at the other side of the house. The back door was smaller than the front, but it had this advantage in the way of strength--it was made of two solid oak boards joined lengthwise, and strengthened inside by heavy cross pieces. It had no bolts like the front door, but was fastened by a bar of iron running across it in a slanting direction, and fitting at either end into the wall.

"They must have the whole cottage down before they can break in at that door!" I thought to myself. And they soon found out as much for themselves. After five minutes of banging at the back door they gave up any further attack in that direction and cast their heavy stones down with curses of fury awful to hear.

I went into the kitchen and dropped on the window-seat to rest for a moment. Suspense and excitement together were beginning to tell upon me. The perspiration broke out thick on my forehead, and I began to feel the bruises I had inflicted on my hands in making the barricade against the front door. I had not lost a particle of my resolution, but I was beginning to lose strength. There was a bottle of rum in the cupboard, which my brother the sailor had left with us the last time he was ashore. I drank a drop of it. Never before or since have I put anything down my throat that did me half so much good as that precious mouthful of rum!

I was still sitting in the window-seat drying my face, when I suddenly heard

their voices close behind me.

They were feeling the outside of the window against which I was sitting. It was protected, like all the other windows in the cottage, by iron bars. I listened in dreadful suspense for the sound of filing, but nothing of the sort was audible. They had evidently reckoned on frightening me easily into letting them in, and had come unprovided with house-breaking tools of any kind. A fresh burst of oaths informed me that they had recognized the obstacle of the iron bars. I listened breathlessly for some warning of what they were going to do next, but their voices seemed to die away in the distance. They were retreating from the window. Were they also retreating from the house altogether? Had they given up the idea of effecting an entrance in despair?

A long silence followed--a silence which tried my courage even more severely than the tumult of their first attack on the cottage.

Dreadful suspicions now beset me of their being able to accomplish by treachery what they had failed to effect by force. Well as I knew the cottage, I began to doubt whether there might not be ways of cunningly and silently entering it against which I was not provided. The ticking of the clock annoyed me; the crackling of the fire startled me. I looked out twenty times in a minute into the dark corners of the passage, straining my eyes, holding my breath, anticipating the most unlikely events, the most impossible dangers. Had they really gone, or were they still prowling about the house? Oh, what a sum of money I would have given only to have known what they were about in that interval of silence!

I was startled at last out of my suspense in the most awful manner. A shout from one of them reached my ears on a sudden down the kitchen chimney. It was so unexpected and so horrible in the stillness that I screamed for the first time since the attack on the house. My worst forebodings had never suggested to me that the two villains might mount upon the roof.

"Let us in, you she-devil!" roared a voice down the chimney.

There was another pause. The smoke from the wood fire, thin and light as it was in the red state of the embers at that moment, had evidently obliged the man to take his face from the mouth of the chimney. I counted the seconds while he was, as I conjectured, getting his breath again. In less than half a minute there came another shout:

"Let us in, or we'll burn the place down over your head!"

Burn it? Burn what? There was nothing easily combustible but the thatch on the roof; and that had been well soaked by the heavy rain which had now fallen incessantly for more than six hours. Burn the place over my head? How?

While I was still casting about wildly in my mind to discover what possible danger there could be of fire, one of the heavy stones placed on the thatch to keep it from being torn up by high winds came thundering down the chimney. It scattered the live embers on the hearth all over the room. A richly-furnished place, with knickknacks and fine muslin about it, would have been set on fire immediately. Even our bare floor and rough furniture gave out a smell of burning at the first shower of embers which the first stone scattered.

For an instant I stood quite horror-struck before this new proof of the devilish ingenuity of the villains outside. But the dreadful danger I was now in recalled me to my senses immediately. There was a large canful of water in my bedroom, and I ran in at once to fetch it. Before I could get back to the kitchen a second stone had been thrown down the chimney, and the floor was smoldering in several places.

I had wit enough to let the smoldering go on for a moment or two more, and to pour the whole of my canful of water over the fire before the third stone came down the chimney. The live embers on the floor I easily disposed of after that. The man on the roof must have heard the hissing of the fire as I put it out, and have felt the change produced in the air at the mouth of the chimney, for after the third stone had descended no more followed it. As for either of the ruffians themselves dropping down by the same road along which the stones had come, that was not to be dreaded. The chimney, as I well knew by our experience in cleaning it, was too narrow to give passage to any one above the size of a small boy.

I looked upward as that comforting reflection crossed my mind--I looked up, and saw, as plainly as I see the paper I am now writing on, the point of a knife coming through the inside of the roof just over my head. Our cottage had no upper story, and our rooms had no ceilings. Slowly and wickedly the knife wriggled its way through the dry inside thatch between the rafters. It stopped for a while, and there came a sound of tearing. That, in its turn, stopped too; there was a great fall of dry thatch on the floor; and I saw the heavy, hairy hand of Shifty Dick, armed with the knife, come through after the fallen fragments. He tapped at the rafters with the back of the knife, as if to test their strength. Thank God, they were substantial and close together!

Nothing lighter than a hatchet would have sufficed to remove any part of them.

The murderous hand was still tapping with the knife when I heard a shout from the man Jerry, coming from the neighborhood of my father's stone-shed in the back yard. The hand and knife disappeared instantly. I went to the back door and put my ear to it, and listened.

Both men were now in the shed. I made the most desperate efforts to call to mind what tools and other things were left in it which might be used against me. But my agitation confused me. I could remember nothing except my father's big stone-saw, which was far too heavy and unwieldy to be used on the roof of the cottage. I was still puzzling my brains, and making my head swim to no purpose, when I heard the men dragging something out of the shed. At the same instant that the noise caught my ear, the remembrance flashed across me like lightning of some beams of wood which had lain in the shed for years past. I had hardly time to feel certain that they were removing one of these beams before I heard Shifty Dick say to Jerry.

"Which door?"

"The front," was the answer. "We've cracked it already; we'll have it down now in no time."

Senses less sharpened by danger than mine would have understood but too easily, from these words, that they were about to use the beam as a battering-ram against the door. When that conviction overcame me, I lost courage at last. I felt that the door must come down. No such barricade as I had constructed could support it for more than a few minutes against such shocks as it was now to receive.

"I can do no more to keep the house against them," I said to myself, with my knees knocking together, and the tears at last beginning to wet my cheeks. "I must trust to the night and the thick darkness, and save my life by running for it while there is yet time."

I huddled on my cloak and hood, and had my hand on the bar of the back door, when a piteous mew from the bedroom reminded me of the existence of poor Pussy. I ran in, and huddled the creature up in my apron. Before I was out in the passage again, the first shock from the beam fell on the door.

The upper hinge gave way. The chairs and coal-scuttle, forming the top of my barricade, were hurled, rattling, on to the floor, but the lower hinge of

the door, and the chest of drawers and the tool-chest still kept their places.

"One more!" I heard the villains cry--"one more run with the beam, and down it comes!"

Just as they must have been starting for that "one more run," I opened the back door and fled into the night, with the bookful of banknotes in my bosom, the silver spoons in my pocket, and the cat in my arms. I threaded my way easily enough through the familiar obstacles in the backyard, and was out in the pitch darkness of the moor before I heard the second shock, and the crash which told me that the whole door had given way.

In a few minutes they must have discovered the fact of my flight with the pocketbook, for I heard shouts in the distance as if they were running out to pursue me. I kept on at the top of my speed, and the noise soon died away. It was so dark that twenty thieves instead of two would have found it useless to follow me.

How long it was before I reached the farmhouse--the nearest place to which I could fly for refuge--I cannot tell you. I remember that I had just sense enough to keep the wind at my back (having observed in the beginning of the evening that it blew toward Moor Farm), and to go on resolutely through the darkness. In all other respects I was by this time half crazed by what I had gone through. If it had so happened that the wind had changed after I had observed its direction early in the evening, I should have gone astray, and have probably perished of fatigue and exposure on the moor. Providentially, it still blew steadily as it had blown for hours past, and I reached the farmhouse with my clothes wet through, and my brain in a high fever. When I made my alarm at the door, they had all gone to bed but the farmer's eldest son, who was sitting up late over his pipe and newspaper. I just mustered strength enough to gasp out a few words, telling him what was the matter, and then fell down at his feet, for the first time in my life in a dead swoon.

That swoon was followed by a severe illness. When I got strong enough to look about me again, I found myself in one of the farmhouse beds--my father, Mrs. Knifton, and the doctor were all in the room--my cat was asleep at my feet, and the pocketbook that I had saved lay on the table by my side.

There was plenty of news for me to hear as soon as I was fit to listen to it. Shifty Dick and the other rascal had been caught, and were in prison, waiting their trial at the next assizes. Mr. and Mrs. Knifton had been so shocked at the danger I had run--for which they blamed their own want of

thoughtfulness in leaving the pocketbook in my care--that they had insisted on my father's removing from our lonely home to a cottage on their land, which we were to inhabit rent free. The bank-notes that I had saved were given to me to buy furniture with, in place of the things that the thieves had broken. These pleasant tidings assisted so greatly in promoting my recovery, that I was soon able to relate to my friends at the farmhouse the particulars that I have written here. They were all surprised and interested, but no one, as I thought, listened to me with such breathless attention as the farmer's eldest son. Mrs. Knifton noticed this too, and began to make jokes about it, in her light-hearted way, as soon as we were alone. I thought little of her jesting at the time; but when I got well, and we went to live at our new home, "the young farmer," as he was called in our parts, constantly came to see us, and constantly managed to meet me out of doors. I had my share of vanity, like other young women, and I began to think of Mrs. Knifton's jokes with some attention. To be brief, the young farmer managed one Sunday--I never could tell how--to lose his way with me in returning from church, and before we found out the right road home again he had asked me to be his wife.

His relations did all they could to keep us asunder and break off the match, thinking a poor stonemason's daughter no fit wife for a prosperous yeoman. But the farmer was too obstinate for them. He had one form of answer to all their objections. "A man, if he is worth the name, marries according to his own notions, and to please himself," he used to say. "My notion is, that when I take a wife I am placing my character and my happiness--the most precious things I have to trust--in one woman's care. The woman I mean to marry had a small charge confided to her care, and showed herself worthy of it at the risk of her life. That is proof enough for me that she is worthy of the greatest charge I can put into her hands. Rank and riches are fine things, but the certainty of getting a good wife is something better still. I'm of age, I know my own mind, and I mean to marry the stone-mason's daughter."

And he did marry me. Whether I proved myself worthy or not of his good opinion is a question which I must leave you to ask my husband. All that I had to relate about myself and my doings is now told. Whatever interest my perilous adventure may excite, ends, I am well aware, with my escape to the farmhouse. I have only ventured on writing these few additional sentences because my marriage is the moral of my story. It has brought me the choicest blessings of happiness and prosperity, and I owe them all to my night-adventure in The Black Cottage.

THE SECOND DAY.

A CLEAR, cloudless, bracing autumn morning. I rose gayly, with the pleasant conviction on my mind that our experiment had thus far been successful beyond our hopes.

Short and slight as the first story had been, the result of it on Jessie's mind had proved conclusive. Before I could put the question to her, she declared of her own accord, and with her customary exaggeration, that she had definitely abandoned all idea of writing to her aunt until our collection of narratives was exhausted.

"I am in a fever of curiosity about what is to come," she said, when we all parted for the night; "and, even if I wanted to leave you, I could not possibly go away now, without hearing the stories to the end."

So far, so good. All my anxieties from this time were for George's return. Again to-day I searched the newspapers, and again there were no tidings of the ship.

Miss Jessie occupied the second day by a drive to our county town to make some little purchases. Owen, and Morgan, and I were all hard at work, during her absence, on the stories that still remained to be completed. Owen desponded about ever getting done; Morgan grumbled at what he called the absurd difficulty of writing nonsense. I worked on smoothly and contentedly, stimulated by the success of the first night.

We assembled as before in our guest's sitting-room. As the clock struck eight she drew out the second card. It was Number Two. The lot had fallen on me to read next.

"Although my story is told in the first person," I said, addressing Jessie, "you must not suppose that the events related in this particular case happened to me. They happened to a friend of mine, who naturally described them to me from his own personal point of view. In producing my narrative from the recollection of what he told me some years since, I have supposed myself to be listening to him again, and have therefore written in his character, and, w henever my memory would help me, as nearly as possible in his language also. By this means I hope I have succeeded in giving an air of reality to a story which has truth, at any rate, to recommend it. I must ask you to excuse me if I enter into no details in offering this short explanation. Although the persons concerned in my narrative have ceased to exist, it is necessary to observe all due delicacy toward their memories. Who they were, and how I became acquainted with them, are matters of no moment. The interest of the story, such as it is, stands in no need, in this instance, of any

assistance from personal explanations."

With those words I addressed myself to my task, and read as follows: