

Mrs. Dawson was in the front kitchen busy making preserves, and I sat alone under the apple-tree trying to read; but read I did not; for, alas! the temptation was too strong to be resisted any longer. The window was invitingly open: how simple and easy to climb the knotted trunk of the apple-tree, and to gain the broad window-sill! One peep was all I wanted; just one peep, to see if there really was a skeleton there. This was all wrong, and showed great weakness, and I turned away once or twice. Honour forbade the gratification of my curiosity, but the excitement was delightful: the idea of a climb—the peep—the descent—the secret gained, and none the wiser! I resisted no longer; but in a few minutes sat exultingly amid the high branches, and crept with ease and safety to the casement.

Once there, I was not satisfied with peeping; but ducking in, I alighted in the midst of the mysterious chamber, looked round, and what do you think I saw? You would never, never guess were you to puzzle your brains for twelve months.

The room was bare, utterly devoid of furniture of any description, and the only thing in that Blue Beard's den was a slab of pure white marble, leaning against the wall, and fashioned as monuments erected to the memory of the dead usually are. There were cherubs at the corners, with wings outstretched and smiling faces, and there was an inscription, legible from a distance, signifying that 'Near this place repose the mortal remains of Sebastian Moss, Esquire, a blank being left for the date of month and year of deceased; beneath were several lines of versification, the composition of my uncle, and his sole literary production. The tablet was evidently designed for the inside of a church; and I may here mention that Mr. Moss had bequeathed £50 to the clergyman in his will, to see that his wishes were carried into effect, and the tablet well placed.

How long I gazed in blank amazement at the unexpected sight before me! It was difficult for me to realise the morbid craving which had led to such strange results—this wish of an obscure, unknown, lonely old man to have his name remembered apart from his deeds.

After the first astonishment subsided, I indulged in a hearty laugh. I had a pencil in my pocket, and a sudden impulse of mischief prompted me to fill up the blank spaces in minute fairy-like text, that day fortnight being the date I chose to insert. This done, I cautiously descended, leaving the window as I found it, and not so much as disturbing a leaf out of its place, by which I might be discovered as the daring perpetrator of the outrage. My dress, indeed, was torn, and my hand was hurt; but I perfectly succeeded in concealing both these disasters; and I was in bed long ere I heard my uncle return. He went to the empty apartment, but quickly returned, having only remained to close and secure the open window. After breakfast next morning I heard him softly enter again. A considerable time longer than usual he remained; and when he came out, locking the door carefully as usual, he went straight to his own room, and did not make his appearance below until dinner was announced. I felt very sorry to see him looking paler than ever, and with a disturbed air, as if some weighty misfortune impended. My heart began to quake, for conscience whispered he must suspect my impudent

trick, and every moment I expected to be taxed with it, and to receive a serious chiding. But no: dinner passed away, he ate little; and no allusion was made. Could he have discovered the pencil-marks? When a week went by, and day after day he gradually pined away, and lost all appetite, still making no comment whatever; I became dreadfully alarmed; this silence was an awful punishment; and I asked myself, could it be possible that my uncle attached importance to the minute writing? On the eighth day from my ascent of the apple-tree Uncle Moss became too much worse, that Mrs. Dawson wished to call in medical advice; but he would not hear of it. That morning he had received a letter from my mother, requesting him to stand godfather to Ruth's little son, who was to be named Sebastian Moss. At any other time the compliment would have delighted him extremely; now he merely adverted to it by saying, 'Well, I am glad the name will be perpetuated: as the old Sebastian departs, the young one comes.' The stroke cannot be averted; concealment is useless; I have received my call, and I hope I am prepared to obey it.'

When I heard him speak thus, I was almost distracted; and without another moment's hesitation I should have thrown myself on my knees beside him, and confessed my foolish trick. But he stopped my precipitancy by kindly saying, 'Berry, I wish to say a few words to you, my dear. I do not think that I shall be much longer in this world—in fact my time is very limited—and I desire you to pay particular attention to what I am going to say. Should any sudden change take place whilst you are here, which is more than probable, you will send to Hospital Street for my solicitor: he has my will, and will attend duly to its fulfilment. Out of my income I have saved upwards of a thousand pounds: £500 I mean for Ruth, and £500 for you, my dear. Nay, do not weep; you must be prepared; for I have received a mysterious and extremely solemn warning. A few days more, and all will be over, Berry; but worthy Mrs. Dawson will take care you are properly conveyed back to your estimable mother, to whom present my parting affectionate remembrance.'

Poor dear Uncle Moss! Need I say what I did!—need I repeat my confession, delivered amid tears, remorse, and terrors unspeakable, for he disbelieved me at first. It was impossible I could have gained admittance to that room, for the lock was one that could not be tampered with; and as to a young lady climbing a high tree, that was out of the question. Nor until I convinced him of the possibility, by repeating the experiment in his presence next morning, did he signify his belief of my assertion by an outburst of wrath which did more towards facilitating his recovery than my confession itself. He, Mr. Sebastian Moss, churchwarden, &c. &c. of Bransholm, had been duped and laughed at by a little saucy girl! She had witnessed his exhibition of superstitious weakness; she had also discovered his treasured secret; and would he not be held up as an object of ridicule and contempt for the residue of his life? I guessed what thoughts were passing in my uncle's mind, as I innocently said, 'Indeed, indeed, dear Uncle Sebastian, I am so ashamed of myself, that I will never repeat the circumstance even to my own mother; say you forgive me—pray forgive me, and forget it.'

'I do forgive you, Berenice Moss,' he solemnly answered; 'but I cannot forget, neither shall I suffer you to do so.'