

yet the sweet star of home still shone before me, and I was sure there was a way to it, had I but the sense to find it out. Utterly weary, I fell asleep, and I think my latest idea was that we should charter a roomy van, and wander over the country sketching and scribbling, with no rent to pay and nothing to bother us! Then the thought occurred, 'What would the girls do when I was on a Gamping engagement, and could not be there to protect them?' I believe I was establishing a lovely and lovable bulldog, of angelic temper, unequalled ferocity, and preternatural ugliness, as your guardian, and having you instructed in the use of an equally trustworthy six-shooter, when I fell into a sound sleep, which lasted till morning.

"Has it ever happened to you that, when you are on the point of waking, an idea enters your head, just as if something external to yourself had put it there? It has happened to me more than once in an emergency, and has always suggested a course of action which I had not thought of previously. But never had the impression been so powerful as on this particular morning. I awoke to the full consciousness that I am the possessor of a landed estate! You need not laugh. It is quite true. My mother's grand-uncle, an eccentric old gentleman, left his ruinous house, situated on the coast of Cornwall, to my mother and her descendants.

"At the time of our great troubles, after dear father's death, I tried to sell it, but found that it was so left that it could not be sold, even if a purchaser could be found. Once the thought arose that we might live there, and I wrote to old Pengelley, the caretaker, to inquire if the house was habitable. Such an account of it as I received in return! The notion of living in such a place would have sent me into fits of laughter, had laughter been possible in those sad times. The letter was written by the school-master, but dictated by Pengelley. There was not a room fit to live in but the stone-flagged kitchen, and that was damp and draughty, and gave him and the old woman the 'rheumatics.' There were two tumble-down bedrooms where he and his missis and their son and his wife slept, but they were hardly fit for Christians, let alone ladies; and there was nothing else that had a sound roof on it, except the barn. The notion of taking your delicately-nurtured little mother to such a place was simply preposterous. There was also the necessity of educating you two girls and fitting you, while your mother lived, to earn your own bread, for her income ceased at her death, and she was so crushed by her troubles that I feared she would not last long.

"I was at my wits' end to know what to do, when I had the first of those half-waking inspirations that I alluded to. The result was that you and Sylvia went to that excellent school at Hastings, where your mother was received as a lady boarder and spent the last eight years of her life peacefully. I meanwhile entered as a probationer at Guy's, where I found my vocation, though it is only now that I am beginning to reap the harvest that I have been sowing all these years; it is only now that I see my way to making a home for my sisters and myself. You, you dear sensible girl, have stuck like a brick—excuse slang; I pick it up among medical students—yes, like a brick, to your uncongenial work during the four years since your mother died. I can praise you for your steadiness without casting any dispraise upon dear little Sylvia. Indeed, it was no wonder that she should fly from the wretched position of an under-teacher in a second-rate school, when she saw a possibility of earning ever so poor a living by the practice of her adored art. I only blame her for not having demanded help from me.

"Without a word to Sylvia about my landed property, I set off on my travels. I left my child with everything to make her happy, namely, plenty of books, sufficient money, and a lovely Persian cat. What more can she want? She does not care for Prince Charming, and I don't think she knows the address of that dangerous old doctor, so my mind is at ease on that score.

"Well, down here I came, and you have already had a description of the old ruin as

seen with my eyes, in contrast with those of David Pengelley.

"You will naturally ask how it was that David P. did not mention this noble old hall as one of the habitable parts of the house. I had already seen the kitchen, and sundry reflections had crossed my mind. 'Umph! Not so very bad. Rather dark, but with good fires—yes—it might do. Cold stone floor; well, thick cocoanut-matting, comfortable chairs, a large screen—yes, young folk rather like roughing it sometimes. But how when the novelty is worn off?'

"I own that my heart felt rather heavy as I turned to Pengelley and requested him to show me the bedrooms. In order to reach these rooms we had to pass through the hall. I gazed in astonishment and admiration around the beautiful old room, so magnificent even in all its dirt and squalor. 'Why, Pengelley, what do you call this?' I demanded indignantly, for I could not but suspect him of wilful deception. 'This here be the barn, mum,' he replied, with such utter simplicity that my suspicions vanished at once. 'Eh, but it be a whist gousty old place!' 'I think it a very beautiful old place,' I observed. 'Well, now, do 'ee, though? That do sim rummish to I. Them bits of colored glass be pretty, I dare say; but the pillum—dust—layeth so thick upon 'em you can't hardly see 'em.'

"Enough of Pengelley. Perhaps you will make his acquaintance by-and-by, and you will study him for yourself and put him in a book.

"With renewed hope I returned to the village inn.

"I have been here for a week. I have sent for an architect, who is also a surveyor and builder, and he has given me an estimate of the cost of all needful repairs, which he is ready to undertake at a day's notice.

"I have taken counsel with an upholsterer, who is also a cabinet-maker, and, luckily for me, has æsthetic views. We have rummaged all over the dismantled rooms, and have sat in judgment on every fragment of antique furniture that we could unearth, and I have in black and white the probable cost, within a few pounds, of repairing the solid and ancient wood-work, and of finding for the moth-eaten tapestry a very fair substitute from the many imitations with which the æsthetic craze has supplied us.

"The house is built on a cliff, within a few hundred yards of its precipitous edge, from which you look down upon the storm-tossed waves of the Atlantic. Landward there is a wide view over desolate but picturesque moorland, and a small tract of ancient forest, where-in we have the right to cut wood, as we also have—by virtue of being possessors of Tregarth Hall—sundry rights of pasturage and turbarry—which means liberty to cut turf or peat—upon the moor. "For the rest, there are a wilderness that was once a garden, an orchard full of gnarled old trees, and a small meadow. The ruinous house and this small modicum of land are all that we possess. The village, inhabited chiefly by fisher-folk, lies snugly in a wooded combe about half a mile from the house.

"In the neat little parlor of the village inn, looking out upon a garden filled with sweet-scented flowers, I have spent my evenings in calculating the thousand and one items that will be required to make us comfortable in the old house. I believe I have included everything, even to the purchase of a cow, which will be real economy, as we have the pasture-ge. I find I can do it all, and still have enough to keep us afloat till March.

"By that time I shall be free to return to work. The days will be longer, and you two dear children will have become accustomed to the solitude. You will have had time to send some stories to the magazines, and Sylvia may have disposed of some pot-boilers. I don't like the notion of pot-boilers for her, poor darling, but they will at least be better than Christmas cards.

"You must not suppose that I am clever enough to do all this out of the Earl's cheque, though without that I could not have attempted it. The truth is that I have been saving money ever since I began to earn any. My first de-

posit was one pound in the savings-bank, and I was as proud of it as a hen that has laid an egg; only I did not cackle about it. I have gone on adding to it, year by year, and, thank Heaven, my little hoard has never been disturbed.

"I have not written the whole of this letter in the hall at one sitting; it has been continued, day by day, or rather night by night, here in the parlor of the inn.

"It will be despatched by the next post, and to-morrow I shall leave. I hope to receive your ultimatum within a week. Consider all the pros and cons carefully, and do nothing rash. There's one thing I forgot to mention—we shall not be able to keep a servant, but must do all our domestic work ourselves.

"That will not hurt us, and you and Sylvia will learn the mysteries of housekeeping all the more quickly for taking an active part in household duties. I am a good cook, having studied cookery as a necessary part of my profession, and I hope you will be apt pupils.

"Now, I have said my say, and a precious long say it has been. I give you two days to read it, two days to consider it, and two days to write your answer, which I shall expect in a week.

"Ever, dearest Isabel, your loving sister,
CONSTANCE CONROY."

Miss Conroy found a telegram awaiting her in London. It contained these words—

"Yes—a thousand times yes! Don't lose a moment. Glorious emancipation!"

CHAPTER II.

All this occurred at the latter end of September, and on Christmas Day the three sisters were in the full enjoyment of their picturesque old home. Isabel had arrived only two days previously, but the others had been lodging in the village while the repairs were going on, the elder superintending the work, the younger wandering about at her own sweet will, recovering her strength and the bloom of her fair young cheeks, and painting a really lovely picture of rocks and sandy shore, "with a quaint little fisher-boy "looking out for father's boat," which she duly sent to the friendly doctor, and received so warm a letter of thanks and praise that it almost made her feel conceited.

On this eventful Christmas morning, everything within and without seemed to enhance the enjoyment of the sisters so happily re-united.

Such a storm was raging as had not been known for many years, even on that tempest-beaten shore. It had been precluded by a succession of those awful rolling waves which, appearing without warning, render the western coast so dangerous. But the hurricane made no more impression on the massive walls and solid roof of the old mansion than upon the firm rock on which it was built. The snow was dashed in drifts against the windows and lay heaped up on the broad sills, obscuring the light, but only making the bright flames from a glorious wood fire gleam with increased cheerfulness upon all within its influence. And indeed it would be difficult to find a more thoroughly comfortable room than that old hall, notwithstanding its barn-like dimensions and the scantiness of its furniture. With a few exceptions, the latter all belonged to the renovated antique; but Miss Conroy had done her spiriting judiciously, and everything was toned down to the sombre gray of age. Only one spot of brighter color was visible, and that was the old screen with many leaves, which had been repaired and covered with red baize. Spread out in front of the fire-place, but far enough to enclose the space of a moderate-sized room, it concentrated the warmth and light, and formed a perfect oasis of comfort.

Within the charmed circle stood a substantial square table; the old sofa frame, looking grim with age, yet made luxurious by means of springs and all the arts of modern upholstery, extended itself invitingly on the side nearest to the windows, basking in the warmth and partially sheltered by the screen.

The sound of the waves as they broke in fury upon the base of the rock, mingled with the howling of the wind, only made the interior seem more peaceful. The firelight danced