

fortunate in having you so near me, Ruth, perhaps I had better let her go; her uncle seems to wish it very much; and Berry is a spirited girl, and can take care of herself.' And so, after much deliberation, it was finally arranged that I was to pay Uncle Moss a visit of three months; my mother could not spare me longer. To Branhholm, therefore, I went by the mail-coach; and never having been far from home before, every object charmed me by its novelty, and I made the best use of my eyes and ears, drinking in with avidity the changing scene, and endeavouring to catch information from the conversation of my fellow-passengers.

I had always heard so much about Uncle Moss's riches, that I naturally expected to see a fine house and many servants; so that I was much surprised to find his domicile a small common-looking cottage enough, on the outskirts of the quiet gray town of Branhholm.

He was a tall and thin elderly gentleman, with a long pale visage, and a flaxen wig beautifully curled; a continual nervous twitching about the mouth, and blinking of the eyes, made me feel quite nervous and uncomfortable till I got used to it; he had a peculiarly low sweet voice, and he looked refined and delicate, took extreme care of his health, and was terribly afraid of getting cold. He had suffered a good deal from low spirits or melancholy of late; and his medical man advised change of air and scene; but as the patient refused to quit his beloved Branhholm, the next best thing, if not *the best*, said the accommodating practitioner, was to have a cheerful young companion for a while! The cottage consisted of eight apartments: a breakfast-room at one side of the door as you entered; behind that my uncle's library; opposite were the kitchens; up stairs was my uncle's bedroom over the breakfast-room; opposite, the spare chamber, now mine; behind these were two more rooms corresponding with those below, and looking into the garden—one the housekeeper slept in; the other was shut up. That other!—it was the mystic chamber of Blue Beard.

The housekeeper, Mrs. Dawson, a middle-aged decent female, had resided with Mr. Moss for nearly five years; and during that period she had not seen the interior of that mysterious chamber. I never knew any individual so utterly devoid of curiosity as she was; she did not think about it till I spoke to her. There she was, night after night, in this small house, sleeping opposite to this closed room, and never wishing to know its contents, or caring anything at all about them. She had once asked her master if he would like to have it cleaned; but he simply replied, 'No, thank you, Mrs. Dawson; it is an empty uncarpeted room, and I never require it.' From the garden I looked up at the single window, and that was often open to admit the air, for Uncle Sebastian Moss went into it once every day. I found that out very soon. Did I not long to climb up to that window, and just take one peep? This did not appear to be utterly impossible of accomplishment; for there was a fine spreading apple-tree below, whose branches reached to the casement, and as I was an expert climber—accomplishment my worthy uncle little suspected—it would be an easy feat to swing myself from the said branches into the Blue Beard's chamber. But honour forbade me doing this, until at least I had tried fairer means; for my curiosity was really painfully aroused, and I became quite feverish and fidgetty. Mrs. Dawson had a boy to assist her, but he did not sleep in the house; and although my uncle's

establishment was so humble, and his table perfect plain, though excellent and abundant, I was not a inmate many weeks ere I became aware that he needed all his income, however plentiful that might be, to meet the expenses incurred by his liberal, nay lavish outlay of sums for beautifying and repairing the parish church and erecting almshouses—to say nothing of a magnificent pump in the middle of the market-place, bearing an inscription signifying its erection by 'Sebastian Moss, Esq. churchwarden.' &c. &c. In short, my uncle was a second 'Man of Ross, as regarded Branhholm; but here the comparison between the individuals ceased for Uncle Moss's liberality did not arise from either philanthropic or ostentatious motives, but simply from a singular craving to hand his name down to posterity. I found this out afterwards, though at the time I was ignorant of it. He was much respected and considered in Branhholm, and his existence was as unvaried in its monotonous routine as it is possible to conceive a human existence to be. He was a nervous, timid being, but inoffensive; fond of reading memoirs, pleasant travels and such-like; while his game at backgammon and weekly club were the amount of recreation he indulged in. 'Then what can he have in that chamber?' solicited I. Often I listened at the door, and peeped through the keyhole; and at last I made up my mind to the bold step of plainly asking him for an explanation.

'Dear Uncle Sebastian,' I commenced one morning at breakfast-time, 'I hope you will not think me impatient, but I am very desirous of knowing if I can do nothing for you. I fear I am a poor companion and that you are disappointed in me.'

'Not at all, Berry—not at all,' he answered shortly. 'I have not been very well of late, and I wanted to see a young blooming face near me. I should like to have had Ruth too; but you do very well, and I am not disappointed.'

'Then, Uncle Sebastian, let me be of use to you. Let me go in and dust the spare room, and open the window each day as you do.'

He looked sharply at me, and became so nervous twitching his mouth, and winking his eyes, that I feared having gone too far; but the scrutinizing of my countenance seemed to content him, and he said, 'dare say you mean well: you are a good notable girl, Berry; but that chamber is sacred to myself. Take my advice, and never pry into secrets; there is a skeleton in every house.' did we but know it.'

'A skeleton,' thought I: 'how horrible! What can he mean?' I did not know that it was a mere conventional expression.

I fancied he became more particular than ever in locking and double-locking the door; and I daily became more fidgetty and feverish with the uncontrollable desire to explore the forbidden precincts.

I had been my uncle's guest for six weeks, half my time was expired, and I already looked forward with joy to returning home; for though I was most kindly treated, yet the wearisome sameness of the life I led—companionless, and far more confined than I was used to be—preyed on my spirits. I longed for the woods and streams, for a made-up race, and for a hearty laugh again; for I had not heard my own laugh since I had been at Branhholm.

It was on a beautiful summer evening, my uncle was at his club, and would not be home till late