

## The Sisters of Tregarthen.

By the Author of "THE LADY OF THE FELL HOUSE,"  
"ELLEN MAYNARD; OR, THE DEATH-WAIL OF THE  
HAWKSHAWES," "EFFIE: A STRANGE STORY," ETC.

### CHAPTER I.

"Dearest Isabel—I am about to write to you on an affair of importance; but, before commencing the business part, a spirit of mischief prompts me to give you a puzzle to solve. I trust to your honor to record your honest guess in the space I shall leave for that purpose. The riddle is to find out where I am at the present time.

"The apartment in which I find myself is a large and lofty hall, with a vaulted roof, every beam and rafter of which is also of black oak, richly carved. The walls are panelled with oak, black with age; and, to save constant repetitions, I may say at once that, wherever there is space for a bit of carving, there it is to be found. All this gives an indescribable tone of richness and beauty to the whole place, in spite of the dust and dirt accumulated during years of neglect. The windows are filled with stained glass, which would be beautiful if the thick coating of dust was removed. The walls must be quite six feet thick, and the wide low window-seats would afford delightful reading snuggeries, if they were clean and the windows glazed. Once more I must mention the carving, but it is only to allude to the exquisite beauty of the mantel-piece. I cannot attempt to describe it. It must be seen to be comprehended in its marvellous details. Beneath it yawns a noble old fireplace, twelve feet wide, with a cosy oak settle on each side. Opposite to the windows a wide flight of shallow stairs, with massive balusters, ends in a platform, beyond which is a recess, filled with a sweet-toned but sadly dilapidated organ. From this platform the stairs branch off to right and left, leading to the east and west wings. The rooms in the east wing are wholly abandoned to the bats and owls and the 'abomination of desolation.' On the west side there are two spacious bed-chambers, still habitable, and furnished with ponderous chests of drawers, wardrobes, and heavy high-backed chairs. Here, as below, everything is disfigured by the dust and dirt of a hundred years. The remains of furniture in this beautiful old hall consist of the fragments of what was once a large table, some frames of ancient chairs—I am sitting on the only one that has a seat—the frame of a wonderful old sofa, and the remains of a large many-leaved screen, which I have not ventured to disturb lest I should be smothered by clouds of dust, for this glorious old place has been used as a barn for thirty years. And now, my dear Isabel, tell me candidly where you think I am."

In the blank space which was left at the bottom of this page the writer of the above subsequently read these words, written in her correspondent's bold and legible characters:—

"My blessed Sairey Gamp! You are evidently paying a visit to your friend, Mrs. Harris, which it's well beknown to you that I don't believe there's no sich a pusson. Seriously, my dearest sister, I think you are going to write a novel, and this is the commencement. Am I right?"

"And now for serious business. You are aware that my last engagement was both tedious and extremely arduous. When at length my dear young patient was pronounced convalescent, and was ordered to the Riviera to complete her cure, the three great doctors who went to the North to give that favorable verdict sat upon poor me, gratis, and unanimously decided that I must take a complete rest for at least three months, under penalty of falling a victim to a nervous complaint from which I might never wholly recover. They said I had overtaxed my strength by unceasing devotion to my duty, and that nothing but absolute rest would restore tone to my nerves. 'Go to Brighton,' said one, 'and amuse yourself with its gaieties.' I told him that if there was one place I detested more than another, it was London-by-Mare, with its crowds of trippers.

'Then find a quiet place by the sea-side,' he said, 'and read novels.' 'Yes,' said another, 'take a strong dose of Rider Haggard to begin with.' I owned that that was a remedy which it was impossible to refuse. What was more to the purpose, they one and all promised that, as soon as I was fit to resume work, they would recommend me, adding many complimentary flourishes about the favorable result of the present case being as much due to my care as to their own prescriptions. I received their praises with all due humility, though quite convinced 'in my ain mind' that they were deserved, only it would not have been politic to let them into the secret.

"They must have told all this to the Earl, for his lordship did me the honor of handing me into the carriage, and, after an elaborate speech about the gratitude which he and the Countess must always feel towards me, he laid an envelope in my lap, saying it contained a slight token of their esteem, which he hoped might be of use during the enforced period of rest which my devotion to their daughter had rendered necessary. Ali this was very pleasant; but I had already been handsomely paid. The Countess had made me a present of a beautiful watch and chain, and my sweet patient had given me several articles of jewelry. You may be sure I was not out of the gates before I opened the envelope, which, to my delight and astonishment, I found to contain a cheque for three hundred pounds. This was indeed princely treatment. I wrote a short note of grateful thanks and sent it back by the coachman. Then off with all speed to London, for Sylvia's last letter had made me anxious about the child's health. I would not even break my journey to pay you a visit in your out-of-the-way corner among the wilds of Northumberland, for that would mean two or three days' delay.

"I was very glad I had lost no time, for I found the poor little darling had been working herself to a shadow for a bare pittance, painting Christmas and birthday cards—really lovely little things—for such miserable terms that she could only pay the rent of her single room and buy tea and bread, not always butter. I had more than once offered to send her money, but the poor dear child wished to be independent!

"It was a modest request for a sovereign, because she did not feel quite well or strong, that had roused my fears that there was something amiss with her. Besides, I could read between the lines. As I received her letter early on the morning of my departure, I was able to answer it in person. The darling was delighted to see me, and I was delighted that I had not wasted a single hour on the road. Imagine our joyous little Sylvia thin and pale, and with drooping mouth! I hope I may never again have cause to feel such bitter self-reproach as I endured when I saw her. I ought to have foreseen and prevented it. And she had a nasty teasing cough, and might be already far gone in consumption! It was some consolation to see her eat a hearty breakfast, and then I carried her off to consult my friend, Doctor Richards. He examined her thoroughly, and was kind enough to give me a lecture on the use of the stethoscope with practical illustrations of the most satisfactory nature, for they all went to support his opinion that my darling has not the faintest trace of disease about her. I had, of course, given him the entire history of the case, without any reserve, so he knew that she had been starving herself. 'Cod-liver oil?' he repeated derisively, when I suggested the dainty as being probably useful. 'Not a bit of it! New milk; plenty of it. Devonshire cream, if you like. No drugs wanted. Find a nice sandy shore, where she can hunt for sea-anemones all day long. Plenty of good food will do the rest. No more work for a time, or only such a small amount of sketching as she may have an absolute wish for. The same kind of place will suit you, madam; and the care of your sister will be a pleasant occupation, without overtaxing your strength. Fee! From you, Miss Conroy. Certainly not!' Then up and spoke our Sylvia, just like the saucy Sylvia of old days, and, said she, 'If I can make a really nice little water-color drawing of some pretty view, will you do me the favor to

accept it, sir?' 'With infinite gratitude, my dear child; and I will treasure it to the end of my life. There, take her away, Miss Conroy—take her away! I must not forget that I am a married man, and I shall be falling in love with her if she stays here much longer. Good-bye; Heaven bless you both! Report progress from time to time.'

"The dear good man! He can't be far from sixty, and he is fat and bald. But I believe that dainty little Sylvia, who considers every man under five-and-twenty a 'mere boy,' would have been quite willing, had there been no Mrs. Richards in existence, to reciprocate his attachment. Girls are such queer creatures. I knew a young lady once who was in love with Count Fosco!

"When we left Dr. Richards' house I felt so light-hearted that I could have floated over the top of St. Paul's. Luckily I had duties to bind me to earth, so I folded my wings and settled down to an earnest consideration of ways and means. We spent that afternoon in searching the papers for advertisements and answering a few, and also in removing Sylvia's belongings to two comfortable rooms on the first floor, which I took for a week, for I wanted a little time to complete my plans. I had an object in view, but could not see exactly how to attain it. On one point only was I fully determined, and that was that Sylvia should never again be left to her own devices. This might be secured by finding some agreeable family with whom to board, where she could be looked after during my professional absences. But the child yearns for family love, which cannot be bought and paid for. Besides, there would be a constant outlay, without anything being secured towards my main object, which is nothing more or less than the formation of a home. Very humble it must of necessity be at first; but it would not deserve the name, or be really a home, unless we were all three in it. I don't doubt your readiness to adopt any plan that would free you from your present house of bondage, where I know you are underpaid, and where I suspect you are also underfed and overworked. Yet you have too much good sense to drop even a small substance to snatch at a shadow. Therefore, when I have laid my project before you, should you think it too shadowy to be relied on, you can but reject it.

"I turned over a variety of projects, all aiming at the central idea of a home. For myself, I must of necessity keep a free hand to take the lucrative engagements of which I feel secure now that I have the confidence of those London big-wigs. But how delightful it would be to know that there was one spot on earth to which I could fly for an interval of rest, and find the little nest kept warm by the presence of my dear sisters! It was not however wholly of myself that I was thinking. I want you to have leisure for writing, for which you have an undoubted talent, and Sylvia to have the opportunity of studying art to some better purpose than painting Christmas cards. The problem to be solved is how to accomplish this with the means at my command, and to keep the mill at work till you and Sylvia begin to bring in a little grist. Alas that I was doomed to three months of inaction.

"Among the ideas that occurred to me was of course that invariable refuge for destitute females, a school—a small school by the sea-side for delicate children. Out of the question! You would be chained to the oar again like a galley-slave, and have no time for writing. Sylvia is utterly unfitted to be a teacher, and, as neither of you have the slightest idea of house-keeping, everything would go to ruin as soon as my back was turned.

"A sanitarium for a few invalid ladies and children? That would tie me to the spot, whether we had inmates enough to pay for my time or not; and, even if we had all we could accommodate in a small house, 'taking one consideration with another,' it would not pay me as well as a good engagement, while you two would be debarrd from your cherished pursuits, and the place after all would not be like home. 'Home, sweet home!' How my soul craved for it! And how it seemed to elude me the more I strove to grasp it! I was in a complete fog,