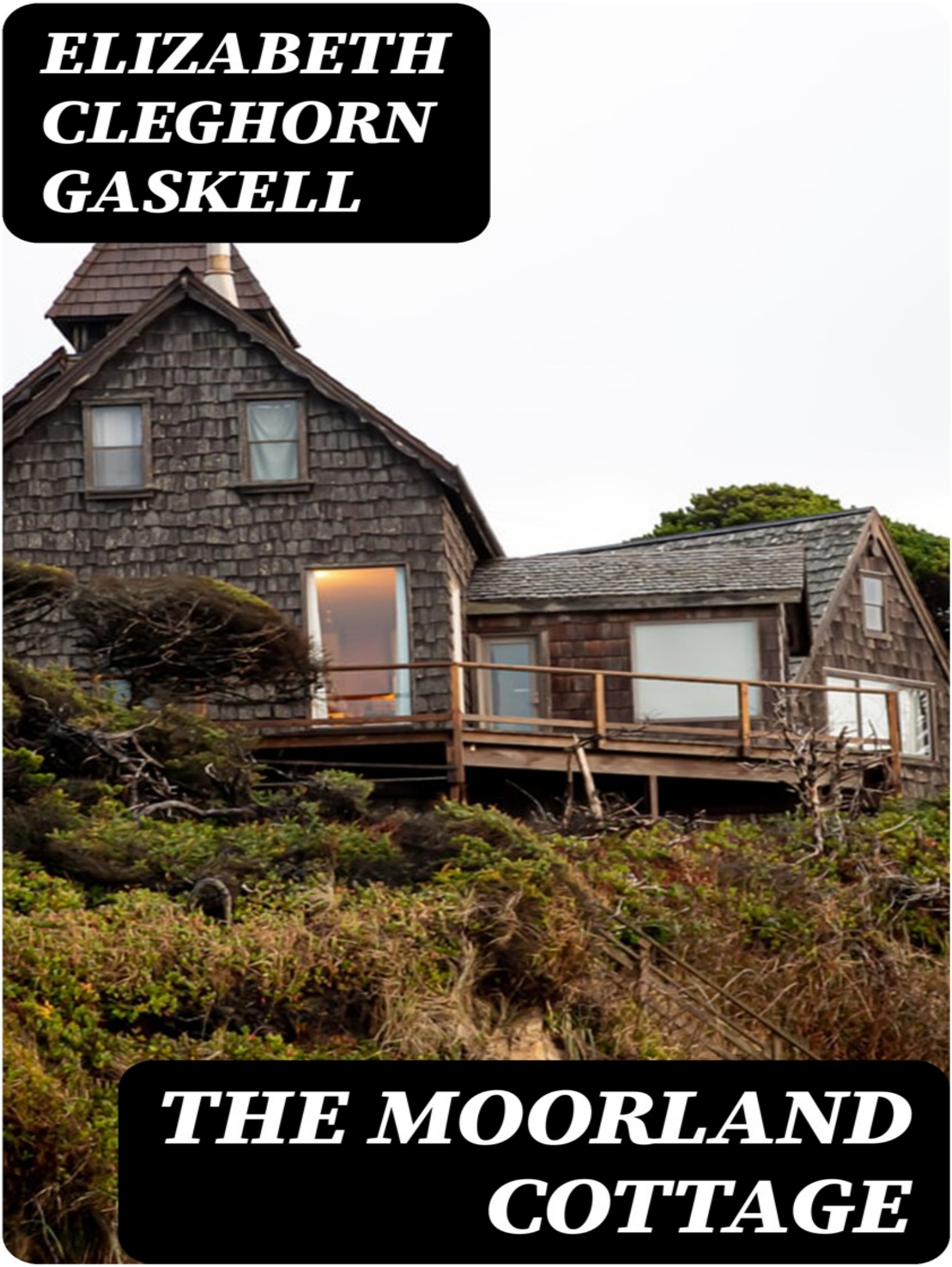
ELIZABETH CLEGHORN GASKELL



THE MOORLAND COTTAGE

Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell

The Moorland Cottage

EAN 8596547374060

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

Table of Contents

By the author of MARY BARTON.

NEW YORK: 1851.

* * * * *

CHAPTER I.

Table of Contents

If you take the turn to the left, after you pass the lyke-gate at

Combehurst Church, you will come to the wooden bridge over the brook; keep

along the field-path which mounts higher and higher, and, in half a mile or

so, you will be in a breezy upland field, almost large enough to be called

a down, where sheep pasture on the short, fine, elastic turf. You look down

on Combehurst and its beautiful church-spire. After the field is crossed,

you come to a common, richly colored with the golden gorse and the purple

heather, which in summer-time send out their warm scents into the quiet

air. The swelling waves of the upland make a near horizon against the sky;

the line is only broken in one place by a small grove of Scotch firs, which

always look black and shadowed even at mid-day, when all the rest of the

landscape seems bathed in sunlight. The lark quivers and sings high up in

the air; too high--in too dazzling a region for you to see her. Look! she

drops into sight; but, as if loth to leave the heavenly radiance, she

balances herself and floats in the ether. Now she falls suddenly right into

her nest, hidden among the ling, unseen except by the eyes of Heaven,

and the small bright insects that run hither and thither on the elastic

flower-stalks. With something like the sudden drop of the lark, the path

goes down a green abrupt descent; and in a basin, surrounded by the grassy

hills, there stands a dwelling, which is neither cottage nor house, but

something between the two in size. Nor yet is it a farm, though surrounded

by living things. It is, or rather it was, at the time of which I speak,

the dwelling of Mrs. Browne, the widow of the late curate of Combehurst.

There she lived with her faithful old servant and her only children, a boy

and girl. They were as secluded in their green hollow as the households in

the German forest-tales. Once a week they emerged and crossed the common,

catching on its summit the first sounds of the sweet-toned bells, calling

them to church. Mrs. Browne walked first, holding Edward's hand. Old Nancy

followed with Maggie; but they were all one party, and all talked together

in a subdued and quiet tone, as beseemed the day. They had not much to say,

their lives were too unbroken; for, excepting on Sundays, the widow and

her children never went to Combehurst. Most people would have thought the

little town a quiet, dreamy place; but to those two children if seemed

the world; and after they had crossed the bridge, they each clasped more

tightly the hands which they held, and looked shyly up from beneath their

drooped eyelids when spoken to by any of their mother's friends. Mrs.

Browne was regularly asked by some one to stay to dinner after morning

church, and as regularly declined, rather to the timid children's relief;

although in the week-days they sometimes spoke together in a low voice

of the pleasure it would be to them if mamma would go and dine at Mr.

Buxton's, where the little girl in white and that great tall boy lived.

Instead of staying there, or anywhere else, on Sundays, Mrs. Browne thought

it her duty to go and cry over her husband's grave. The custom had arisen

out of true sorrow for his loss, for a kinder husband, and more worthy man,

had never lived; but the simplicity of her sorrow had been destroyed by the

observation of others on the mode of its manifestation. They made way for

her to cross the grass toward his grave; and she, fancying that it was

expected of her, fell into the habit I have mentioned. Her children,

holding each a hand, felt awed and uncomfortable, and were sensitively

conscious how often they were pointed out, as a mourning group, to

observation.

"I wish it would always rain on Sundays," said Edward one day to Maggie, in

a garden conference.

"Why?" asked she.

"Because then we bustle out of church, and get home as fast as we can, to

save mamma's crape; and we have not to go and cry over papa."

"I don't cry," said Maggie. "Do you?"

Edward looked round before he answered, to see if they were quite alone,

and then said:

"No; I was sorry a long time about papa, but one can't go on being sorry

forever. Perhaps grown-up people can."

"Mamma can," said little Maggie. "Sometimes I am very sorry too; when I am

by myself or playing with you, or when I am wakened up by the moonlight

in our room. Do you ever waken and fancy you heard papa calling you? I

do sometimes; and then I am very sorry to think we shall never hear him

calling us again."

"Ah, it's different with me, you know. He used to call me to lessons."

"Sometimes he called me when he was displeased with me. But I always dream

that he was calling us in his own kind voice, as he used to do when he

wanted us to walk with him, or to show us something pretty."

Edward was silent, playing with something on the ground. At last he

looked round again, and, having convinced himself that they could not be

overheard, he whispered:

"Maggie--sometimes I don't think I'm sorry that papa is dead--when I'm

naughty, you know; he would have been so angry with me if he had been here;

and I think--only sometimes, you know, I'm rather glad he is not."

"Oh, Edward! you don't mean to say so, I know. Don't let us talk about him.

We can't talk rightly, we're such little children. Don't, Edward, please."

Poor little Maggie's eyes filled with tears; and she never spoke again to

Edward, or indeed to any one, about her dead father. As she grew older, her

life became more actively busy. The cottage and small outbuildings, and the

garden and field, were their own; and on the produce they depended for much

of their support. The cow, the pig, and the poultry took up much of Nancy's

time. Mrs. Browne and Maggie had to do a great deal of the house-work; and

when the beds were made, and the rooms swept and dusted, and the

preparations for dinner ready, then, if there was any time, Maggie sat down

to her lessons. Ned, who prided himself considerably on his sex, had been

sitting all the morning, in his father's arm-chair, in the little

book-room, "studying," as he chose to call it. Sometimes Maggie would pop

her head in, with a request that he would help her to carry the great

pitcher of water up-stairs, or do some other little household service;

with which request he occasionally complied, but with so many complaints

about the interruption, that at last she told him she would never ask

him again. Gently as this was said, he yet felt it as a reproach, and

tried to excuse himself.

"You see, Maggie, a man must be educated to be a gentleman. Now, if a woman

knows how to keep a house, that's all that is wanted from her. So my time

is of more consequence than yours. Mamma says I'm to go to college, and be

a clergyman; so I must get on with my Latin."

Maggie submitted in silence; and almost felt it as an act of gracious

condescension when, a morning or two afterwards, he came to meet her as

she was toiling in from the well, carrying the great brown jug full of

spring-water ready for dinner. "Here," said he, "let us put it in the shade

behind the horse-mount. Oh, Maggie! look what you've done! Spilt it all,

with not turning quickly enough when I told you. Now you may fetch it again

for yourself, for I'll have nothing to do with it."

"I did not understand you in time," said she, softly. But he had turned

away, and gone back in offended dignity to the house. Maggie had nothing to

do but return to the well, and fill it again. The spring was some distance

off, in a little rocky dell. It was so cool after her hot walk, that she

sat down in the shadow of the gray limestone rock, and looked at the ferns,

wet with the dripping water. She felt sad, she knew not why. "I think

Ned is sometimes very cross," thought she. "I did not understand he was

carrying it there. Perhaps I am clumsy. Mamma says I am; and Ned says I

am. Nancy never says so and papa never said so. I wish I could help being

clumsy and stupid. Ned says all women are so. I wish I was not a woman. It

must be a fine thing to be a man. Oh dear! I must go up the field again

with this heavy pitcher, and my arms do so ache!" She rose and climbed the

steep brae. As she went she heard her mother's voice.

"Maggie! Maggie! there's no water for dinner, and the potatoes are quite

boiled. Where *is* that child?"

They had begun dinner, before she came down from brushing her hair and

washing her hands. She was hurried and tired.

"Mother," said Ned, "mayn't I have some butter to these potatoes, as there

is cold meat? They are so dry."

"Certainly, my dear. Maggie, go and fetch a pat of butter out of the
dairy."

Maggie went from her untouched dinner without speaking.

"Here, stop, you child!" said Nancy, turning her back in the passage. "You
go to your dinner, I'll fetch the butter. You've been running about enough
to-day."

Maggie durst not go back without it, but she stood in the passage till
Nancy returned; and then she put up her mouth to be kissed by the kind
rough old servant.

"Thou'rt a sweet one," said Nancy to herself, as she turned into the
kitchen; and Maggie went back to her dinner with a soothed and lightened
heart.

When the meal was ended, she helped her mother to wash up the old-fashioned
glasses and spoons, which were treated with tender care and exquisite
cleanliness in that house of decent frugality; and then, exchanging her
pinafore for a black silk apron, the little maiden was wont to sit down to
some useful piece of needlework, in doing which her mother enforced the

most dainty neatness of stitches. Thus every hour in its circle brought a

duty to be fulfilled; but duties fulfilled are as pleasures to the memory,

and little Maggie always thought those early childish days most happy, and

remembered them only as filled with careless contentment.

Yet, at the time they had their cares.

In fine summer days Maggie sat out of doors at her work. Just beyond the

court lay the rocky moorland, almost as gay as that with its profusion of

flowers. If the court had its clustering noisettes, and fraxinellas, and

sweetbriar, and great tall white lilies, the moorland had its little

creeping scented rose, its straggling honeysuckle, and an abundance of

yellow cistus; and here and there a gray rock cropped out of the ground,

and over it the yellow stone-crop and scarlet-leaved crane's-bill grew

luxuriantly. Such a rock was Maggie's seat. I believe she considered it her

own, and loved it accordingly; although its real owner was a great lord,

who lived far away, and had never seen the moor, much less the piece of

gray rock, in his life.

The afternoon of the day which I have begun to tell you about, she was

sitting there, and singing to herself as she worked: she was within call of

home, and could hear all home sounds, with their shrillness softened down.

Between her and it, Edward was amusing himself; he often called upon her

for sympathy, which she as readily gave.

"I wonder how men make their boats steady; I have taken mine to the pond,

and she has toppled over every time I sent her in."

"Has it?--that's very tiresome! Would if do to put a little weight in it,

to keep it down?"

"How often must I tell you to call a ship 'her;' and there you will go on

saying--it--it!"

After this correction of his sister, Master Edward did not like the

condescension of acknowledging her suggestion to be a good one; so he went

silently to the house in search of the requisite ballast; but not being

able to find anything suitable, he came back to his turfy hillock, littered

round with chips of wood, and tried to insert some pebbles into his vessel;

but they stuck fast, and he was obliged to ask again.

"Supposing it was a good thing to weight her, what could I put in?"

Maggie thought a moment.

"Would shot do?" asked she.

"It would be the very thing; but where can I get any?"

"There is some that was left of papa's. It is in the right-hand corner of

the second drawer of the bureau, wrapped up in a newspaper."

"What a plague! I can't remember your 'seconds,' and 'right-hands,' and

fiddle-faddles." He worked on at his pebbles. They would hot do.

"I think if you were good-natured, Maggie, you might go for me."

"Oh, Ned! I've all this long seam to do. Mamma said I must finish it before

tea; and that I might play a little if I had done if first," said Maggie,

rather plaintively; for it was a real pain to her to refuse a request.

"It would not take you five minutes."

Maggie thought a little. The time would only be taken out of her playing,

which, after all, did not signify; while Edward was really busy about his

ship. She rose, and clambered up the steep grassy slope, slippery with the

heat.

Before she had found the paper of shot, she heard her mother's voice

calling, in a sort of hushed hurried loudness, as if anxious to be heard by

one person yet not by another--"Edward, Edward, come home quickly. Here's

Mr. Buxton coming along the Fell-Lane;--he's coming here, as sure as

sixpence; come, Edward, come."

Maggie saw Edward put down his ship and come. At his mother's bidding it

certainly was; but he strove to make this as little apparent as he could,

by sauntering up the slope, with his hands in his pockets, in a very

independent and *négligé* style. Maggie had no time to watch longer; for

now she was called too, and down stairs she ran.

"Here, Maggie," said her mother, in a nervous hurry;--"help Nancy to get a

tray ready all in a minute. I do believe here's Mr. Buxton coming to call.

Oh, Edward! go and brush your hair, and put on your Sunday jacket; here's

Mr. Buxton just coming round. I'll only run up and change my cap; and you

say you'll come up and tell me, Nancy; all proper, you know."

"To be sure, ma'am. I've lived in families afore now," said Nancy, gruffly.

"Oh, yes, I know you have. Be sure you bring in the cowslip wine. I wish I

could have stayed to decant some port."

Nancy and Maggie bustled about, in and out of the kitchen and dairy; and

were so deep in their preparations for Mr. Buxton's reception that they

were not aware of the very presence of that gentleman himself on the scene.

He had found the front door open, as is the wont in country places, and had

walked in; first stopping at the empty parlor, and then finding his way to

the place where voices and sounds proclaimed that there were inhabitants.

So he stood there, stooping a little under the low-browed lintels of the

kitchen door, and looking large, and red, and warm, but with a pleased and

almost amused expression of face.

"Lord bless me, sir! what a start you gave me!" said Nancy, as she suddenly

caught sight of him. "I'll go and tell my missus in a minute that you're

come."

Off she went, leaving Maggie alone with the great, tall, broad gentleman,

smiling at her from his frame in the door-way, but never speaking. She went

on dusting a wine-glass most assiduously.

"Well done, little girl," came out a fine strong voice at last. "Now I

think that will do. Come and show me the parlor where I may sit down, for

I've had a long walk, and am very tired."

Maggie took him into the parlor, which was always cool and fresh in the

hottest weather. It was scented by a great beau-pot filled with roses; and,

besides, the casement was open to the fragrant court. Mr. Buxton was so

large, and the parlor so small, that when he was once in, Maggie thought

when he went away, he could carry the room on his back, as a snail does its

house.

"And so, you are a notable little woman, are you?" said he, after he had

stretched himself (a very unnecessary proceeding), and unbuttoned his

waistcoat, Maggie stood near the door, uncertain whether to go or to stay.

"How bright and clean you were making that glass! Do you think you could

get me some water to fill it? Mind, it must be that very glass I saw you

polishing. I shall know it again."

Maggie was thankful to escape out of the room; and in the passage she met

her mother, who had made time to change her gown as well as her cap. Before

Nancy would allow the little girl to return with the glass of water she

smoothed her short-cut glossy hair; it was all that was needed to make her

look delicately neat. Maggie was conscientious in trying to find out

the identical glass; but I am afraid Nancy was not quite so truthful in

avouching that one of the six, exactly similar, which were now placed on

the tray, was the same she had found on the dresser, when she came back

from telling her mistress of Mr. Buxton's arrival.

Maggie carried in the water, with a shy pride in the clearness of the

glass. Her mother was sitting on the edge of her chair, speaking in

unusually fine language, and with a higher pitched voice than common.

Edward, in all his Sunday glory, was standing by Mr. Buxton, looking happy

and conscious. But when Maggie came in, Mr. Buxton made room for her

between Edward and himself, and, while she went on talking, lifted her on

to his knee. She sat there as on a pinnacle of honor; but as she durst not

nestle up to him, a chair would have been the more comfortable seat.

"As founder's line, I have a right of presentation; and for my dear old

friend's sake" (here Mrs. Browne wiped her eyes), "I am truly glad of it;

my young friend will have a little form of examination to go through; and

then we shall see him carrying every prize before him, I have no doubt.

Thank you, just a little of your sparkling cowslip wine. Ah! this

gingerbread is like the gingerbread I had when I was a boy. My little lady

here must learn the receipt, and make me some. Will she?"

"Speak to Mr. Buxton, child, who is kind to your brother. You will make him

some gingerbread, I am sure."

"If I may," said Maggie, hanging down her head.

"Or, I'll tell you what. Suppose you come to my house, and teach us how to

make it there; and then, you know, we could always be making gingerbread

when we were not eating it. That would be best, I think. Must I ask mamma

to bring you down to Combehurst, and let us all get acquainted together? I

have a great boy and a little girl at home, who will like to see you, I'm

sure. And we have got a pony for you to ride on, and a peacock and guinea

fowls, and I don't know what all. Come, madam, let me persuade you. School

begins in three weeks. Let us fix a day before then."

"Do mamma," said Edward.

"I am not in spirits for visiting," Mrs. Browne answered. But the quick

children detected a hesitation in her manner of saying the oft spoken

words, and had hopes, if only Mr. Buxton would persevere in his invitation.

"Your not visiting is the very reason why you are not in spirits. A little

change, and a few neighborly faces, would do you good, I'll be bound.

Besides, for the children's sake you should not live too secluded a life.

Young people should see a little of the world."

Mrs. Browne was much obliged to Mr. Buxton for giving her so decent an

excuse for following her inclination, which, it must be owned, tended

to the acceptance of the invitation. So, "for the children's sake," she

consented. But she sighed, as if making a sacrifice.

"That's right," said Mr. Buxton. "Now for the day."

It was fixed that they should go on that day week; and after some further