

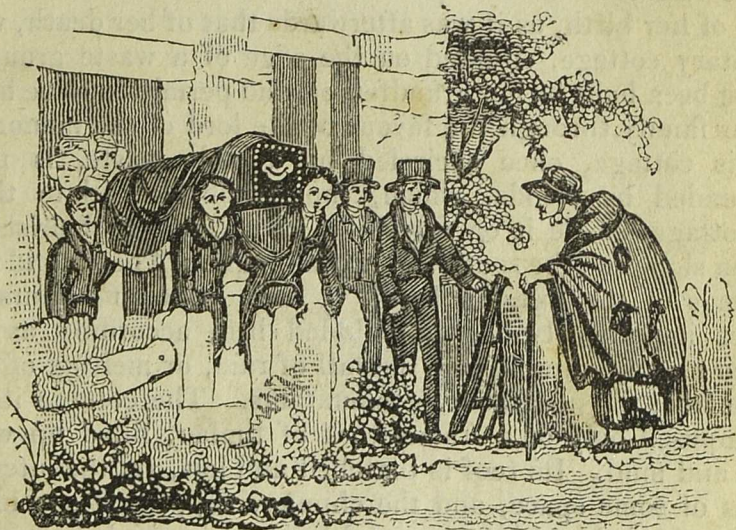
No. 41
OF
HOULSTON'S SERIES
OF
TRACTS.

[Entered at Stationers' Hall.]

THE
Cottage in the Wood.
PART I.

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LONDON:

PRINTED FOR HOULSTON AND CO.
65, Paternoster-Row.

Price 1*d.* or 7*s.* per 100.

[Tract Societies supplied with large quantities at a lower rate.]

THE
COTTAGE IN THE WOOD.

PART I.

A VERY old cottager, who died during the last year in an obscure parish on the borders of Wales, gave the following account of herself to a lady who visited her, from time to time, for some months before her death. The lady committed the little narrative to paper as she received it, and now offers it to the public, hoping that it may prove a means, under God, of convincing some, into whose hands it may fall, of the power of religion in restoring health to the soul, peace to the mind, and order and comfort to the most hopeless estate.

Margaret Collins, the subject of this memoir, was eighty-four years of age at the time when she communicated the history of her life; and though her body was pressed down with many infirmities, the faculties of her mind were unimpaired, and her memory was perfectly clear; and her mode of expressing herself evidenced that sort of intellectual refinement which is frequently imparted, through the influences of the Holy Spirit, by the habitual study of the Word of God.

The residence of this poor woman, which had been the place of her birth, as it was afterwards that of her death, was a solitary cottage, situated on the edge of a waste ground, having been built by her grandfather, and permitted to be held by her family through the favour of the lord of the manor.

This cottage, once encircled by a wide waste, is now surrounded by woods, which, though of later date than the cottage, shade it on all sides, save where a flourishing garden slopes on the south towards a dingle. There amid the openings of the trees, a brook is seen, which murmurs or dashes impetuously over a pebbled bed, according as its stream may be supplied by the fall of rain, or melting of the snows from the neighbouring mountains. The cottage itself is composed only of a frame-work of timber, filled up with laths and mud. Its roof is thatched and low, yet the interior boasts of some space, and the chimney supplies a specimen of that old-fashioned ornamental brickwork which every one must have observed in the rural edifices of elder times.

Such was the dwelling of the old woman; neither did it want any of those additional charms which are ever attributed to a cottage in a wood, in such a climate as that in which our lovely island is situated, such as the murmur of bees, the song of birds, the odour of flowers, the rush of waters, and the rustling of leaves, all of which combine, in the finer seasons of the year, to render this place such a one as a lover of natural beauties

would choose for his favourite abode, and a lover of the God of nature, for the scene of his most pure and fervent devotions.

At the period in which the lady visited the old woman, all seemed neat, orderly, and comfortable, in and about the cottage, and every thing was provided, though in a frugal manner, for the convenience of the old woman; and how things had been with her in the earlier part of her life did not appear till she related the history which is to form the subject of the residue of our story.

“My name,” said the old woman, “is Margaret Collins. My father was a cottager, and possessed the house in which I now am. It was built by my grandfather, who, in his younger days, had been a soldier in the parliament army, under the Lord Protector of England, and was a man of somewhat more consequence in the world than any of his family have been either before or after his time.

“My father had a large family; and though compelled to work as a day-labourer, yet failed not, when he returned home in the evening, to give us some instruction on religious subjects. He also taught us to reverence the Sabbath; and it is to his paternal lectures on this day, that, under God, I owe that marvellous recovery from the depths of wickedness which I experienced at a certain period of my life. Although, for many years, all the affectionate instructions and pious lessons of my father seemed to have passed away from my mind, yet, when the time for thought came, and I was as it were brought to a stand in the midst of my wicked course, and made to look back on the past, and forward to the future, then the likeness of my father rose before me, and I fancied I saw him here, and there, and every where—about the cottage, in the garden, in the dingle, on the side of the brook. I saw, too, in my mind’s eye, his children around him, the little ones on his knees, and the elder ones seated at his feet; and I fancied that I even heard his voice, that voice of love and solemn expostulation, uttering the words of truth, and laying before us those divine promises which were the support of his life, as they had been the consolations of his parents, and of the generations of the blessed, now no more.

“I had four brothers,” continued the old woman, “and two sisters, one some years older than myself, and one who was the youngest of the family. We used always to go together to church every Sunday throughout the year, and my father always carried his youngest child in his arms, as soon as it had been weaned from its mother. I have often thought on the goodness of the Almighty in bestowing one day in seven on the poor men of Israel: it is, and ought to be, a day of delight to the people of God, and methinks I hardly like any of those plans which separate the fathers from the children in this day

of holy joy. Yet, if parents will not now, as in times past, use the day of rest for teaching their little ones, taking them to church, and winning their love and their respect, they must even take the consequence of their sinful negligence; they must be content without the veneration of their children, and they must be accountable to the Lord for all the days of holy rest which they have mispent, and all the seasons of improvement which they have cast away. Nevertheless, ye parents, listen to what I say. My preservation from ruin in this world, and my hope of glory in the next, are both owing, under divine favour, to two things: the first of which is the instruction given me by my father when I was a child; and the second, the having been first carried, and then led, by this same parent to the house of prayer, whenever it was possible so to be. I say, taught by my father, and carried and led by my father, to the house of worship: not by another, not by a stranger; but by my father. We have reason to hope, that the same blessings as those which are especially vouchsafed on parental instruction may descend, through the medium of strangers, on the head of the orphan, according to that sweet hymn—

'ALONG life's road no parent's hand
My homeless footsteps led;
No mother's arm in sickness sooth'd,
And rais'd my drooping head.

'But other hearts, Lord, thou hast warm'd
With tenderness benign,

And in the stranger's eyes I mark
The tear of pity shine.

'The stranger's hand by thee is mov'd,
To be the orphan's stay;
And, better far, the stranger's voice
Hath taught us how to pray.'

But though this we trust to be the case of the orphan, yet, where parents are preserved to their children, they possess an influence which no stranger can enjoy in an equal degree. O that they would but use that influence for the benefit of their young ones, and not, as is too often the case, for their destruction! But in this respect my father was an example to be imitated by the greatest and wisest of the earth. I remember little of what passed on working-days while I was in my father's house; but I remember, even now, with much exactness, many and many Lord's-days—many walks through the wood and over the heath to and from church, down by the brook and up among the hills—many Sunday evenings spent in the porch—and one season especially, when a good lady at the farm above, seeing us all walking together on a Sunday evening, made us sit down on the hay, (for it was hay-time,) and feasted us with bread-and-butter and milk, coming herself among us, and examining the little ones in their Catechism and Bible.

“But the happy days in which our parents were spared to us suddenly came to an end. When I was in my thirteenth year, the small-pox visited our house, and carried away both our parents and the two youngest children. It was sad to see little Susan laid in the same coffin with her father, and Benjamin stretched on the same bed with his mother; sad indeed to the

eye of man, but not so, surely, to that of God. Happy little Susan! she was never separated from those arms which had sheltered and protected her from early infancy; and I have often thought (and surely there is no harm in the thought) that it was a special reward to my father to be permitted to enter into the immediate presence of his Redeemer, with that very baby in his arms whom he had ever carried with him into the house of prayer from the time that she had been weaned from her mother's breast.

“When our parents were no more, we were left to take care of ourselves. My eldest sister was then twenty years of age, and my eldest brother a year or more older; the other two boys were between me and the two eldest; and we might have done well could we have guided ourselves, or suffered ourselves to be guided by others. But my sister's face had been cruelly marked by the small-pox; and, on the other hand, when the redness had left my features, it was seen that my good looks were unimpaired. This presently became a subject of discontent on her side, and triumph on mine, in consequence of which we lived very unhappily; and the end was, that, before four years had passed, I became so impatient to leave home, that I formed an intimacy with a young man, a cousin of my own, and of the same name, who had enlisted for a soldier, and went off with him into Scotland, where his regiment then lay. When arrived there, it was no difficult matter for us to get married. I do not mean to say much about the life I led while a married woman. I lived with my husband fifteen years altogether, from first to last, during which time we never saw England. From Scotland we went over to Ireland, and then to America. My husband was made a sergeant, and I was often employed as an attendant on the officers' ladies, and might have done very well, had I not, soon after my marriage, acquired a shocking habit too common with women of the same condition, and that was dram-drinking.

“While I was abroad I had several letters from home. The first, which I got in Ireland, brought me information that my brother Edward was gone off as a sailor. Poor boy! he never returned; neither did we ever learn the manner of his death, though I once met with a seafaring man at York who had seen him, and who said there was not a more deserving young man in the whole navy,—one who never drank or swore, and who read his Bible every Sunday. I did not much care for this information at that time, for my heart was hardened through sin; but I have fed on it since, and it has provided me with many sweet morsels of consolation.

“The second letter brought me an account of the death of my brother Roger; and the third, and last, of that of my

eldest brother. By the time, then, that I was thirty years of age, there remained of my father's large and once flourishing scions only myself and my sister. A melancholy thought! and not then sweetened to me, as it has since been, by the various assurances I have had, that the prayers of my pious parents for their children had not risen unheeded to the throne of mercy: for had I then been told of the happy states in which my two brothers in England had departed this life, I doubt whether I should have felt any thing but self-reproach and bitterness of spirit.

"In the mean time I brought my husband several children; but the habit of dram-drinking, which I had acquired, rendered me so unfit to nourish these little ones, that not one of them outlived the first year; and I only added to my misery, under these afflictions, by endeavouring to drown my feelings in more violent excesses. We remained abroad till my husband died; and, embarking soon afterwards, I arrived in England with another widow, who was a native of a town not far from hence.

"I had some kindly feelings on occasion of the loss of my husband, who was undoubtedly a better Christian than I was, notwithstanding the good education I had received: but these gentler feelings were soon lost in my anxiety to discover if there was no part of my father's property which I might not compel my sister to share with me, as I had little left from my husband. With this view I hastened to this place, where I found my sister reduced, from mismanagement, to such poverty, that little remained to her but the bare walls of this cottage, which I had no mind to share with her. I therefore hastened to join my old companion, and, with what money we could muster, we hired a house, and fitted up a huxter's shop. From that time my descent into the depths of misery and poverty was rapid. We might have made out a decent living with our shop, had not every earning been expended in dram-drinking; we were, therefore, soon compelled to give up our house.

"We next took a single room, and tried to make out a living by washing; but, having made some petty pilferings in the houses where we were employed, and having quarrelled with each other, I engaged myself to sell pottery about the country, which was carried from house to house on the back of asses, sometimes being alone, but commonly accompanied by a boy or girl, who were generally picked out from the very worst and lowest of the people. Degraded as this line of life was, I had much relish for it; and I carried it on for many years, lying by for only a few weeks in the dead of the winter, for which period of idleness I was generally pretty well supplied by the profits of my journeys in finer weather, having

many means of winning money which had nothing to do with the sale of my pots, for which I was accountable to my masters. Among these was fortune-telling, buying hares' skins and rabbits' skins, purchasing kitchen-stuff, stealing apples and other fruit, receiving and carrying away stolen goods, getting places for servants, making matches, and other matters of the same description; while, in the mean time, I sunk lower and lower in my language and ideas, and was at length become as vile and depraved a creature as ever tramped the road or trod the country on any errand whatever.

“At the time of my husband's death I had at least some pretensions to smartness, however coarse. But then, in these, my very worst days, I was covered with rags; wore a man's hat, and a man's coat over my patched and tattered petticoat; and I seldom spoke without using some oath, or some vulgar expression, not fit to be heard by decent persons, the few recollections which then remained to me, of my early life, having no other effect but to embitter my mind, and render me more hard and more desperately wicked; insomuch so, that, according to man's judgment, there was no hope remaining of my ever becoming a subject of the divine mercy.

“I carried on this manner of life till I was more than fifty years of age, at which time I was seized with an acute rheumatic pain in my limbs, which so disabled me that it was impossible for me to follow my old employment; or, indeed, to do any thing by which I might gain my bread. I applied for charity, and got some help: but when I would obtain relief from the parish, I was told I had no settlement there, and must go to my own place. I begged to be forwarded to my own parish, which was about thirty miles distant from the town in which I had so long lived, and the favour was granted me. A few shillings were given me, and I was put into a waggon which was going about ten miles on the way, being furnished with a pass, whereby my further progress was insured.

“It was a rainy morning, in the month of August, when I crawled from a miserable lodging which I had inhabited some weeks, to get into the waggon which was to take me the first part of my journey. I was covered with rags only, and my limbs were aching with an acute rheumatism. I had no possessions of any kind, not even a change of linen, (to such poverty had I reduced myself by my evil life,) and a little basket containing a small quantity of food was all that I carried with me. When I arrived at the waggon I was saluted with many oaths by the brutish driver, and could hardly obtain a little straw whereon to repose my aching limbs. At length, however, being seated in one corner of the waggon, we began our journey; and it would pass the power of words to describe the

agonies which I endured from the jolting of the carriage, as we went slowly over the rough streets and stony roads. Terrible, however, as my sufferings were, I do not recollect that they brought any humbling or penitent thoughts to my mind, though I groaned so loudly that the waggoner at length called to me, bidding me hold my tongue or he would put me out on the road side, using at the same time several bitter and profane expressions. Full of pain as I then was, I failed not to answer him in his own language; on which he called me a witch, and other foul names, telling me that he knew me well, and that my name was up for every thing that was vile and dishonest; 'but you are going to Bramblefield,' he added, meaning this parish, 'and there you will be presently clapped into the workhouse and taught to sing to a new tune.'

"'No,' I replied, proudly, 'you are mistaken there, I shall go to a house built by my great grandfather, and still belonging to the family.'

"The man cracked his long whip, whistled a few notes, and then, with a loud laugh, exclaimed, 'As I am alive! who would have thought it?—family pride on straw in the corner of an old coal-waggon!' so saying, he went forward to the head of the team, and left me to myself during the remainder of my journey.

"I was so ill when I got to the end of this first stage that it was impossible for me to be sent any further at that time, and I was put into a miserable lodging, and attended by a parish-doctor, till, feeling myself a little better, I was again, by my own desire, put into a waggon on some straw, and forwarded the two remaining stages.

"I should have mentioned before this, that several years had passed since I had heard from home, or learned any thing respecting my sister. When I arrived at the alehouse at the edge of the common, not far from this place, I, however, got out of the waggon while the waggoner was taking a dram; and, being able to use my limbs, though with much pain and difficulty, went off in the direction of my father's house, and was out of sight before the waggoner had left the ale-bench.

"I had soon crossed that part of the common which was altogether bare about thirty years since, and, advancing forwards in a hobbling manner, presently entered the shade of the wood, and ere long distinguished the grey walls of the cottage among the shafts of the taller trees.

"Whoever sees the place of his childhood after many long years of absence, must needs experience many strange feelings. It is well if those feelings are of a gracious kind, and incline the heart to wisdom. Mine at that period were not so. The only idea which I can remember as having then presented itself

to my mind, was a sort of sense of the injustice both of God and man, in having reduced the child of such a man as my father to a state of such misery and degradation. Not one thought of self-reproach, as I well remember, in all this time ever presented itself to my mind.

“There was once a door of the house opening to the wood; but it had been fastened up many a day; and knowing this, when come close up to it, I was preparing to walk round, through the garden, to the other side of the house, when my attention was excited by the sound of several voices from within, speaking in a solemn under tone; and at the same time I heard a lumbering sound as of a great weight raised and set down again. While marvelling at this I walked round the house, passed through the garden wicket, (which I found broken down and set against the wall, being covered with creeping weeds,) and turning the corner at the front of the cottage, came in full view of a funeral procession of the meanest description, issuing from the door-way into the garden.

“I stood quite still, and for an instant could not speak a word. I was, however, in the way of those who were bearing the coffin; and when asked to stand aside I found my tongue, and exclaimed, ‘What is all this? whose body are you carrying there to its last home?’

“‘The body of Elizabeth Collins,’ replied one of the bearers.

“‘What! my sister!’ I said, ‘the last remaining child, excepting myself, of the family of James and Esther Collins, once so large and blooming. In the name of pity set down the coffin and let me take one last look at poor Elizabeth!’

“This ill-timed request met with the reception which might be expected. They that carried the corpse brushed forward, pushing me on one side; and, ere I knew what I was about, I saw the coffin pass away round the house, and found myself standing in the garden with two elderly men, one of whom I afterwards learned was a parish-officer.

“‘And is my sister really dead, Sir?’ said I. ‘It would but have been kind if she had sent for me when she found herself going. Though she has never been over kind to me, (for even at this moment I could not forbear from complaint,) for she must have known that this house and garden come to me as the last of the family: and I cannot say that I take it kind of her, (though I ought not to mention it as she is now no more,) to have had so little regard for her own flesh and blood; though I must say that she has only died as she has lived, and that I have none to thank but herself for all my misery.’

“‘Hold, hold, there!’ said the parish-officer, ‘don’t complain before you are hurt. In the first place, (if you are the identical Margaret Collins,) your sister, when dying, did cause

a letter to be forwarded to you at the town in which you lived; in the second place, there is no intention to take any of your sister's property from you; for, poor as she was, she always paid her way; and, in the third place, if report speaks truth, you owe your misery to your own misconduct, and not to that of any of your fellow-creatures.'

" 'I should like to know,' I answered, 'the names of those who have ever dared to take away my character!'

" 'It would take much less time to tell the names of those who ever spoke well of you,' replied the old gentleman; for he was a sort of uppermost person in the parish; 'but all this is nothing to the purpose. If you can prove yourself to be Margaret Collins, I will give you immediate possession of this house; for it is the orders of the lord of the manor that the family of the Collins's should never be disturbed. And all that is within the house is yours, of course, whether much or little; for your sister left no debts; but how will you prove yourself to be the person in question?'

" 'The second man, an old cottager of the parish, here interposed, and said that, though sorely changed, he did not doubt but that I was the person I professed to be: on which I produced the pass which had been given me at the town I had left; and the matter being then put beyond doubt, the key of the house was given to me; and, on my pleading immediate necessity, the parish-officer gave me a shilling from his own private pocket, and I was left, without further question, to take possession of my desolate habitation.

" 'Well may the unregenerate heart be compared in Scripture to stone; for what stone, what iron, what adamant, can be harder than the heart which has been withered and blasted by a long course of actual sin? My heart was at that time capable of misery, but not of tenderness: it was like a stone heated in a furnace, but which cannot melt. Lady, can you conceive a situation more truly desolate, more truly miserable, more solitary, or more sad, than that in which I remained when the two old men, passing away from the cottage, left me standing at the door, holding the key in my hand, and looking round at the scenes where I had passed the years of an innocent and happy childhood. There were the plots of ground once cultivated by my father and brothers, where the gillyflower, the rosemary, the pinks, and southernwood, had furnished posies for our Sunday garniture, now choked with weeds, and dank with rotting rubbish. There the birch, with its silver trunk and pendant branches, hung over the dark nook where we had made a rude bower, in which my mother used to sit and work for us. There, beyond the garden hedge, was the shrubby and brambly patch where we

used to play at hide and seek, and where I had been often employed to collect the little tufts of wool which the thorns had torn from the backs of the sheep. There, too, was the brook in which my brothers used to launch their small boats; and the waterfall from which we filled our mother's tea-kettle when she proposed the rare regale of a dish of tea. All these things, without the fence, looked as they had done more than forty years since; although within the garden hedge there was an air of neglect and ruin, waste and wildness, which, contrasted with what I could remember of the days that were gone, might, it would be thought, have brought tears to the eyes which never wept before. And where, asked memory, are all those who formerly inhabited this once fair abode? Where was the father's hope, the mother's joy; the many blossoms which once enriched the cottage garden? all, all were gone, and I alone remained! And what was I? how lost! how sunk! how degraded! for I indeed knew and felt that I was miserably fallen, I could not but feel it in this place especially: but I was still without the smallest sense of my own bad conduct; and, wanting humility and conviction of sin, my sorrow was at that time no other than a selfish, sullen, haughty, and revengeful feeling, one which, had I been possessed of power, would have excited me to cruelty towards man, and rebellion towards the Most High!

“How long I stood without the door of the house I know not; but the long shadows of the trees, and the dipping of the sun under the earth, reminded me that I must prepare for my night's rest. I was anxious, also, to see what was in the cottage, though half unwilling to enter a house which had been so lately the abode of death, and otherwise filled with so many sad remembrances for me. As I turned the key in the lock, a hollow sound was returned from within—a sound which spoke of emptiness and desertion. I pushed open the door after a moment's pause, and, stepping over the sill, passed into the kitchen. The rooms of the cottage are large for such a house, as you well know, Lady; and they looked the larger from their emptiness. On the hearth were the remains of a fire burnt to ashes, and then as cold and dead as her who had so often kindled the flame in that place. An old table, a settle, and one or two stools, with a kettle, a pot, a few cups and platters, an iron candlestick, and a pair of tongs, were the only pieces of furniture visible in the room. The wall, too, was smoked and dirty, and in several places the light appeared through the cracks in the plaster. I passed through the kitchen into an inner room beyond, where I saw only a heap of rubbish, a broken chair, and an empty barrel lying in one corner. Returning from thence I passed into a pantry, which, in my

mother's time, had often been well supplied; but the shelves were dusty and empty, and the walls marked with the track of snails. I again returned to the kitchen, and opened the well-known door in the corner which led to the stairs: it was a dusky corner, and the shades of evening were approaching, yet I could see that several of the boards which composed the stairs were broken. I, however, made shift to climb them; and, coming to the chambers above, was made sensible of a deathlike smell, which filled my mind with horror.

"There are three apartments, as you know, Lady, above: two of these were quite empty; in the corner of the third I saw a bed. The curtains, of ragged check, were drawn aside; but the bedding, which was coarse, lay on it in some order. Weary as I was, I, however, felt an excessive horror at the idea of laying myself down upon this bed, from which I knew that my sister had been carried to her grave; and the air of the room was so oppressive that I could hardly breathe till I had forced open the rusty casement.

"Night was now approaching fast. The owls were hooting from the trees; the evening breeze was whistling in the woods. In this situation my thoughts began to be excessively troublesome. I hardly dared to take my eye from the bed, or to look at it again when once removed. The disorder which afterwards reduced me to the gate of death was probably then beginning: for I fancied I saw indistinct objects in the dusky corners of the room, which, the longer I looked, took plainer and more consistent forms; but all these forms were terrible. The idea of self-destruction then came to my mind; and had I had a knife I know not what I might have done. At length I uttered a wild shriek, and threw myself on the bed; but started up again, my attention being drawn by a sound below, and presently by a light step in the room.

"I cannot describe the feelings,—the awful feelings of the next moment; but the next brought me a gleam of comfort. A large tabby cat, the constant companion of my sister, came purring and rubbing herself against my feet.

"The presence of this poor animal proved so consolatory, that I at length ventured, being quite worn out with fatigue, to stretch myself on the bed, having first torn down one of the dusty curtains, and spread it over the whole of the bedding. I had shut and bolted the door to keep the cat in the room, and she presently settled herself by me on the bed; and, being overcome with weariness, I fell asleep.