A WIDOW, INDEED!

BY MARY SPEAR TIERNAN.

We were nothing but girls, Lottie Linley and I, and up to all sorts of mischief. Lottie was nineteen and I a year younger, but she was smaller and not so sensible as I thought at that time. We had come to spend the summer in the country in Virginia with an aunt of mine, Mrs. Page Brinton. Lottie was not related to my aunt, but had been invited as my friend. So I played hostess, as well as superior intelligence.

"Aunt," I said, almost as soon as we arrived, for I thought I saw signs of previous occupation." "Who is here, besides Lottie and me?"

My aunt laughed at my precipitancy.

"Nobody but our old friend, Mr. Power, and a new one, Mrs. Mossom."

"Mrs. Mossom? Who is she?"

"A young widow we met traveling in Florida last winter."

Lottie and I exchanged glances.

We did not like young widows. St. Paul declared that young widows should stay at home; and even if he had not done so, our unassisted wisdom would have arrived at the same conclusion. On more than one occasion we had found them dangerous.

"A young widow! How old is she?"

"Thirty, or thereabout."

"Thirty!" I exclaimed, looking down from the proud eminence of eighteen, "Why, I consider that quite aged; and what a horrid name—Mossom!"

"I don't think so," said Lottie, decidedly. "It is such a nice rhyme for blossom."

Lottie wrote things she called poetry, and was on the lookout for nice rhymes.

"Why not 'possum?'" I snapped.

"You will find Mrs. Mossom a very nice person," said my aunt, leaving us to do our unpacking.

"I don't think we need bother our heads about the widow if she is thirty," I said, unlocking my trunk and taking out one of my second-best gowns for Mrs. Mossom's benefit. Our most becoming things we kept for especial favorites. Lottie and I had spent the previous summer in this same house, and, among the young men in the neighborhood, we each had a particular—well, we called him friend, as covering the ground, present or prospective. Lottie's admirer was a Mr. Archer Cullen, and mine a Mr. John Bryan, commonly called Jack.

Mr. Power did not count for much, being a confirmed bachelor of about forty, good-looking, well-to-do, but exceedingly shy and a little eccentric.

"I hardly think Mrs. Mossom will be dangerous if she is thirty, eh, Lottie?" I repeated, brushing out my frizzes at one glass, while my friend brushed out hers at another.

"We shall see," said Lotttie, oracularly.

"I wonder now Mr. Power gets on with her?" I said, after awhile.

"The same way he gets on with me, I suppose—by letting her alone."

"But widows don't put up with that kind of thing," I suggested.

"Nobody can make anything of Mr. Power."

"How do you know?"

"I have tried it," said my friend, frankly.

At dinner Mrs. Mossom was the last to make her appearance. I was a little taken aback when she came into the room, she was so different from what I had imagined. Without being exactly pretty, she was very elegant, her greatest charm being a sweet gravity of countenance, indicating a character the very opposite of that with which I had endowed her. She was a person whose entrance into a room made itself distinctly felt. My uncle's face brightened; Mr. Power turned a shade redder than usual, and my aunt pointed with a caressing gesture to the chair nearest herself, saying, "Here is your seat, dear."

The widow's dress was black and sombre, but a gleam of transparent white frills around her throat and wrists reminded me of "the cloud's silver-lining."

Upstairs, brushing out my bang at the glass, I had thought I was not a bad-looking girl; but Mrs. Mossom's finished elegance, some how, made me feel as raw and green as a cabbage beside a delicate garden-flower.

Lottie's wishful eyes showed that she, too, was impressed by the stranger.

We looked at each other again, and in that silent interchange of glances we concluded a defensive alliance.

Mrs. Mossom greeted us politely when we were introduced, and I fancied her eyes rested kindly for a moment on Lottie's pretty face, most person's did; but she did not seem interested in us, beyond what courtesy required.

She and my aunt soon fell to discussing plans for relieving a destitute family in the neighborhood, while my uncle and Mr. Power talked politics, as usual. Lottie and I, finding it impossible to confine our gay, young thoughts to either poverty or politics, talked of the pleasures we were anticipating—a repetition of the drives, rides and parties we had found so delightful the summer before.

"By the by, girls," said my uncle, catching the drift of our conversation. "There is to be a party in the neighborhood next week, to which we are all invited; and as it is given to the bride, Mrs. Sherwood, I think everybody ought to go. You, too, Mrs. Mossom."

My aunt gave him a deprecating glance in vain. Uncle Brinton was one of those healthy, jovial natures, whose wounds, physical and spiritual, lose no time in getting healed.

Devoted as he was to my aunt, I am sure that, once she was fairly dead and buried, he would have considered it a christian duty to get comforted as soon as possible and to look out for somebody to take her place. As to Mrs. Mossom not going to a party on account of mourning, when her husband had been dead two full years, he never could have been made to understand such nonsense.

Mrs. Mossom was too well bred to appear scandalized by his kindly-meant proposition. She did not seem half as much disturbed as my aunt.

She answered pleasantly, although her face flushed a little and her eyes were bent on her plate as she said, "I do not go to parties, Mr. Brinton."

My uncle could not, for the life of him, understand the full significance of her manner, but I noticed he never asked her to go to a party again.

After dinner Lottie and I, walking up and down the front portico, our heads full of the Sherwood party, did not see—at least, I did not—Mrs. Mossom, partly shaded by curtains, sitting at one of the windows that we passed and repassed in our promenade.

"Did you notice how uncle put his foot into it? '*I do not go to parties, Mr. Brinton,*'" I said, mimicking the widow's voice and caricaturing her manner by lowering my eyes and drawing up the corners of my mouth. To my surprise, Lottie did not laugh at my fine powers of mimicry as usual, but turned furiously red and pinched my arm. Following the direction of her eyes, I perceived Mrs. Mossom, who had both seen and heard me.

My cheeks turned redder than my companions, as I caught the lady's glance. I ought to have made an apology, but I was too much embarrassed to do the proper thing.

Instead of being sorry for my incivility, I was unreasonably angry that my attempt at ridicule had recoiled on myself. I quickened my steps, dragging Lottie with me. When we reached the end of the portico I did not turn and resume my walk with her, but jumped into the garden below, landing, with my best slippers, in the middle of a damp bed of scarlet geraniums. I hurried on in no dignified way, for I was obliged to skip over flower-beds and tall box borders until I reached the main walk, which, fortunately, was shaded with trees and screened from the house. The remembrance of Mrs. Mossom's amused glance piqued me.

Instead of being glad that she was good-natured enough to smile at all, I fancied her look expressed an intention to take up the gauntlet. I worked myself into a state indignation, like the wolf who complained of the lamb muddying the stream.

As I walked along the dim, cool avenue, my vexation changed suddenly to gladness. My heart throbbed with delight as I recognized a well-remembered form leaning over the gate at the end of the walk, and a pair of dark eyes, that danced with pleasure at my approach. It was Jack Bryan, who had heard of my arrival and had lost no time in assuring himself of the fact.

"What a fine color and what muddy

shoes somebody has! Have you been running a hurdle race?" he asked, letting himself in the gate and warmly shaking my outstretched hand.

"Something very like it," I said, with quickened breath, from my late exercise over the box-borders.

When we had expressed our mutual satisfaction at seeing each other again, Jack and I resumed our acquaintance where we had left off the previous summer, and began walking up and down the avenue just as if a whole year had not elapsed since our last meeting there.

Jack liked me and he was my beau-ideal of a man.

People said he would never set the river on fire, but that did not trouble me. When a man is handsome, good-tempered and brave there is no need for him to set the river on fire. Besides, if the necessity for such a conflagration should ever arise, I felt that I was quite equal to the task; and, in the wise economy of nature, it would not have done for both to possess the capability.

I do not know if Jack would have appeared so handsome in a city. His great, strong figure, his ruddy complexion and simple, unstudied ways seemed suited to the country. I am inclined to think that nature, with the background of the everlasting hills, was the proper setting for his manly beauty.

How glad I was to see him again! My feet seemed scarcely to touch the ground; my light dress, fluttering in the breeze, made me feel like a winged creature, and my heart, with its weight of eighteen summers, was like thistle down.

"You have not told me yet what all this excitement is about," he said, looking on my still glowing cheeks with frankly approving eyes.

"Oh! my tongue, of course. It is always getting me into mischief."

"But it is a clever, little tongue; could it not get you out again?"

"Yes, it might, but there is my temper, you see."

"Tongue and temper, both?"

"Yes. They are like the Siamese twins—they always go together. I am afraid you will think I am a dreadful girl."

"I would not have you changed," he said, in a low voice.

Oh! my friend, you could not set the river on fire, but—you knew how to kindle a flame in my poor heart.

"It will not be as pleasant here this summer as last," I said, after a pause.

"Why such gloomy forebodings?" smiling at my serious face.

"There is a young widow staying here."

"A widow!" he exclaimed in his deep, tender voice. "Poor thing, what harm can she do us?"

I was silenced with compunction. If I thought the late Mr. Mossom was anything like Jack, his widow might well be called "poor thing."

I hastened to change the subject.

"Are you going to the Sherwood's?" I asked.

"If you will go with me. That is why I came so soon. I wanted to get ahead of the other fellows."

Some time was required—or we imagined so—to talk over the party, and we lingered in the shade of the lindens until the sun went down behind the mountains.

When I returned, alone, to the house, the family were on the portico taking tea, and watching the golden sunset.

I, with all my nerves atremble, too happy to take tea, or talk about clouds, seated myself on the steps below the rest of the company, and, clasping my knees with my hands, looked up into the sky and dreamed of—the Sherwood party.

II.

Our little company soon ranged themselves. Lottie and I, with our young visitors formed the gay portion of the household. My uncle and aunt with Mr. Power and Mrs. Mossom were more quiet in their enjoyments.

Mr. Power, indeed, usually kept company with himself. He seemed to have plenty to say to my uncle, but when the ladies made their appearance, he had always an excuse for leaving. He would either go and smoke a solitary cigar on the back portico or bury his nose in a newspaper. Mrs. Mossom had the most remarkable effect on his nerves. He had become, in a measure, accustomed to Lottie and me the summer before, and bore our entrance into a room where he was with tolerable equanimity; but at the sight of Mrs. Mossom, he would turn red, stammer and look uncomfortable until he made his

escape. The lady, herself, seemed not to notice his painful shyness, but it was great fun to us girls. Mrs. Mossom had a fine talent for not seeing what she did not wish to see, or she could scarcely have so completely ignored our ill-concealed amusement whenever she and Mr. Power were in the same room. We watched them narrowly, exchanged glances, turned red with suppressed laughter, in fact behaved in a very school-girlish way, but she seemed severely unconscious of our bad manners.

One of Mr. Power's habits we found particularly amusing. He and the widow were great pedestrians, taking their five miles constitutional every day in the cool of the evening; but he was so fearful lest they should meet in their rambles, that he never set out until he had ascertained what road she had taken, and then he turned his steps in the opposite direction so that there would be no possibility of meeting, unless, indeed, they each walked half round the world and met on the other side of the globe.

The evening after our walk in the linden avenue Jack Bryan came again accompanied by Archie Cullen. They were great friends, these two, although utterly unlike. Indeed their points of difference seemed their strongest bond of union. Archie was small and not handsome; but he had plenty of brains. In a fight Jack could have knocked the breath out of his body in five minutes; in an argument he tripped Jack up in less time than that. But there was never any rivalry between the two, although Lottie and I sometimes squabbled over their respective merits. She affected intellect; I admired form, grace, color and had a profound respect for muscle.

When we got down stairs the gentlemen, who had been waiting a few minutes while we added some touches to our toilet, were discussing a lady who was in the parlor when they arrived but soon after left the room.

As soon as the first greetings were over Archie asked Lottie, "who is the lady in the black dress with beautiful white hands? Such hands! On her bombazine lap they looked like a flower-de-luce on a field sable."

Lottie, who was poetically inclined, admired Archie's flights of fancy when addressed to herself; inspired by another they were not so effective. She answered without enthusiasm.

"Mrs. Mossom, I suppose."

"What did *you* think of her?" I asked, turning eagerly to Jack.

"The same as Cullen," he said with delightful indifference to the widow.

"Oh! that is impossible," said Lottie.

"How so?" he asked.

"I don't believe you know what a flower-de-luce and a field-sable are."

The dimples in Lottie's face gave her an immunity for saying what she pleased.

"That is so. I haven't an idea," said Jack laughing. "But there goes the lady now."

Following the direction of his eyes we saw through the open window Mrs. Mossom, with parasol and shade hat starting off on her afternoon walk. This time, her elegant figure and graceful movements came in for Archie's commendation.

"She walks like Juno! Doesn't she Jack?"

"Yes, she walks like—like everything." Jack was not fluent.

We looked after her retreating figure with its undulating flow of black drapery, until she was lost to sight on the road that, a few miles south of my uncle's house, ended in a bosky dell, one of the most beautiful and romantic spots in the neighborhood.

When she had been gone quite long enough for us to have forgotten the incident, we were reminded of it by seeing Mr. Power, armed with a stout walking stick, come out of the house to take his constitutional, and as Mrs. Mossom had gone south he turned his face due north.

As this oft repeated little comedy was re-enacted under our eyes, Lottie burst into a tinkle of laughter that excited Archie's curiosity.

She explained to him that Mr. Power, being dreadfully shy, was always running away from Mrs. Mossom; and then went on, in a grandmotherly kind of way, to express her interest in the two and how nice it would be for them to make a match. When upon Archie intimated that, as the lady had already made one match for herself, she might be trusted to manage her own affairs in regard to a second, and that Lottie had better be looking after her own admirers. Lottie admitted that there was

sense in what he said, and took occasion to carry out his suggestion by going off with him to the summer house.

III.

The Sheorwood entertainment came off and Lottie and I enjoyed it as much as we had anticipated, which is saying a great deal. Jack was very attentive to me, so devoted indeed as to excite comment. I thought, myself, that he was on the point of saying something very particular, under the stairs after supper; but another couple in search of a retired spot found us there, and the words I was expecting were not spoken.

The next morning Lottie and I, with my aunt and Mrs. Mossom, were talking over the party in the dining-room after breakfast. We were all engaged in some flimsy summer work. Mrs. Mossom was knitting a cloud in pink wool for Lottie. It is true that Lottie amused herself making impossible matches for the widow behind her back, but she was very sweet and friendly when they were together and Mrs. Mossom liked her.

Mr. Power, who had come in to read the morning news, finding such a feminine array, had gathered up the papers and hurried out again. When he was gone he fell, naturally, under discussion.

"I do wish Mr. Power was not so shy," said my aunt, "he has so much sense and is so thoroughly good, it is a pity for him to hide his light under a bushel of modesty."

"He ought to get married," said Lottie gravely.

"I quite agree with you," said my aunt, "But how is it to be done? How could he ever screw up his courage to make a proposal when he is afraid to look at a woman?"

"He might do as the children do when they take medicine; shut his eyes and open his mouth," I suggested.

"Yes," said Lottie, seconding my motion with animation, "that would do. I have noticed that when he does open his mouth he speaks to the purpose. Couldn't somebody blindfold him?"

Mrs. Mossom who had been counting stitches, looked up and gave Lottie one of the rare, bright smiles with which she sometimes rewarded friend's light-hearted nonsense. It inspired Lottie to speak more freely.

"I have a match in my mind for him," she said earnestly.

Everybody laughed. The absurdity of a little creature like Lottie mapping out a man's destiny was irresistible.

She was not disconcerted.

"I wish he would let me do his courting for him," she continued. "He would be married before the year is out."

"Why don't you make a match for your friend, Mr. Cullen?" said Mrs. Mossom, without a shadow of a smile that Lottie or I could detect. My friend, cogitating as to whether the widow meant more than met the ear, was silent for a longer time than usual.

"If you were thirty," said my aunt; addresssing me. "I should advise you to set your cap for Mr. Power. He *does* say a word to you now and then."

I bridled, although I knew the words he said to me were, for the most part, about the weather. Perhaps this conversation or the natural depravity of youth, prompted Lottie and me to try and bring about meetings with a view to making a match between Mr. Power and Mrs. Mossom.

I remember well our first experiment and its result.

One morning I had purposely left the newspapers in the parlor with the understanding that Lottie was to decoy Mrs. Mossom thither on the pretext of arranging flowers and then leave her.

I stationed myself in the dining-room, knowing that Mr. Power would be along presently to look over the papers as was his habit every morning when he thought the coast was clear of ladies. He was not long in making his appearance.

"I beg pardon, but do you know where the papers are?" he stammered after an ineffectual search.

"Yes, I was so thoughtless as to leave them in the parlor, wait a moment and I will get them for you, I said, making a motion to go.

"By no means, I will get them myself," he said energetically, moving off at the door he turned back, looking a little flurried. "Is anybody in the parlor?" he asked."

"Nobody was there when I left," I

answered, turning to the window to hide my guilty face. He went off nothing doubting.

Lottie and I, like boys who wait round the corner to see the effect of their firecrackers, waited in the hall to see the result of the meeting he had brought about. Never were conpirators more completly foiled.

Mr. Power, having reached the middle of the room, before he perceived Mrs. Mossom, whose back was turned, halted with an exclamation of dismay. The lady, busy with her flowers, glanced hastily over her shoulder, startled by the sound. At this moment, Lottie and I, on tiptoe, of expectation for the next move, were brought to confusion by the entrance, through another door, of my aunt, whom we had imagined safe for an hour with her housekeeper.

"My! my! who has been littering up the room with newspapers?" she exclaimed.

The spell was broken, Mr. Power recovered himself and escaped. Lottie and I were slinking away, when Mrs. Mossom with heightened color and impatient step came out of the room.

She gave Lottie and me, huddled together near the door, a searching glance, and I knew by the reflection of my feelings in my friend's face that we were a miserably guilty-looking pair.

IV.

The very day of our discomfiture an incident occured which convinced me how desirable it was that Mrs. Mossom should become interested in Mr. Power, or some other suitable person.

That evening Lottie and I, with several visitors, among whome were our friends Mr. Bryan and Mr. Cullen, were sitting together at one end of the portico. Quite at the other end, forty or fifty feet away, Mrs. Mossom, in a low rocking-chair, was swaying gently back and forth, knitting on Lottie's pink cloud. Her pale, high-bred face and the rythmic motion of her graceful figure in widow's weeds were very pleasant to look upon, and attracted the attention of more than one pair of eyes in our party.

I was feeling very happy with Jack on the steps at my feet although, in the general conversation going on, we had not much to say to each other. He never remained long when I had other company, so I was not surprised when he rose to go. He had lifted his hat in bidding us good-bye and in another moment would have been gone, but just then a ball of pink worsted fell from Mrs. Mossom's lap and, rolling the length of the portico, came to a stop not far from where he stood.

He darted forward to pick it up and I watched him as he returned it to the owner with the deferential inclination which made a bow from Jack such a compliment. The lady's beautiful smile of thanks was more than a reward for his slight service. He paused a moment to say a few words before leaving, but the few words grew presently to be many. Finally he took his seat beside her and as he leaned forward, watching the movement of her knitting-needles, I could hear their pleasant voices in an uninterrupted flow of conversation. I am afraid I appeared *distraite* to the man who was trying to entertain me. I know my eyes often wandered to where those two were sitting, their figures outlined in beautiful relief against the glowing western sky.

"Had it not been for that odious, little pink ball," I mused, "he would have been half way home by this time."

His horse stood impatiently stamping and champing at the gate, but still he lingered. He seemed so much interested that he might have remained there until now, but presently she dismissed him by rising, "I must go in now, it is getting chilly," she said, wrapping the pink cloud around her head and shoulders in a wonderful becoming way.

I suspect that Lottie was secretly amused at my gravity that evening. I know that when our company was gone, she made herself very merry over Jack and Mrs. Mossom.

"I have heard of 'beauty drawing with a single red hair,' but never with a strand of pink worsted," she said, laughing.

Her cheerfulness annoyed me. She could afford to be cheerful, Archie Cullen had eyes and ears for nobody but herself.

After tea I was standing alone on the portico, troubled with vague discontent, gazing sadly at the stars, when a most unusual thing occurred. I heard the crunching of a heavy step on the gravel walk.

My heart beat quick with expectation as a figure emerged from leafy shadows into the light, that streamed softly from the hall lamp. My excitement subsided when I found that it was Mr. Power. I remember being half amused to see that he carried a bunch of roses, for I had never seen him with a flower before. He smiled when he saw me star-gazing alone in the dusk, and coming up the steps, to where I stood, gave me his roses. Had the stars above fallen at my feet I could not have been more astonished.

"I gathered these for you," he said, in his grave, shy way, and passed into the house before I had sufficiently recovered from my surprise to thank him.

What was the meaning of this? Did Mr. Power feel more than a friendly interest in me? The rememberance of Aunt Brinton's playful words flashed over me. The idea was absurd, and yet there came, quick as thought, the desire to to make Jack feel the twinge of jealousy I was suffering. I returned to the house, my nose buried in the roses, my head full of dreams and fancies.

My forebodings with regard to Jack proved correct. The acquaintance with Mrs. Mossom ripened, on his part, into undisguised admiration. He became as attentive to the lady as she would permit him to be. It was impossible not to see that my empire was divided. Day by day I felt my happiness slipping away from me. This state of things became apparent to those who looked on. One afternoon, Mop, the colored girl supposed to perform the duties of lady's maid to Lottie and me, was pretending to brush one of my dresses but, in fact, was amusing herself looking out of the window. Suddenly she exclaimed, "La! miss, dar go Mr. Bryan a-walkin wid Miss Mossom. He ain't yo bo, no mo, is he?"

My cup of humiliation was full.

My attempt to play off Mr Power succeeded indifferently. His attentions were sporadic and not to be relied on, and Jack did not seem a bit jealous.

Lottie was a trial to me in those days. She was so light-hearted and secure in Archie Cullen's loyalty. But her bad quarter of an hour came. One day Mrs. Mossom returned from her woodland rambles, her hands so full of ferns, mosses and vines, that two young men she picked up on her way, insisted on helping to bring them home. She would not trust her treasures to their masculine hands, but graciously permitted them to hold up the vines that on either side trailed on the ground. Lottie and I were in the avenue when the party entered the gate; Mrs. Mossom, with her stately tread, coming up the walk looked like a conqueror bringing captives in her train. That is, it required no great stretch of the imagination for Lottie and me to regard it in that light, for the young men she held in chains were Jack Bryan and Archie Cullen.

Mrs. Mossom, her face glowing with exercise, her garments fragrant with the breath of the woods, paused when she reached Lottie and me and generously offered us some of her prettiest ferns.

"No, I thank you, I hate ferns," said Lottie with unusual asperity.

"That is because you are young," said Mrs. Mossom with an indulgent smile. "Young people like flowers better, they are so much gayer than ferns."

"I am sorry you hate them Miss Linley," said Archie, "I was about to propose that you and I would go fern-hunting some day in the woods."

Lottie looked like a blank at having thrown away such an opportunity, and her countenance indicated a willigness to be converted to ferns.

"It seems a charming, *companionable* occupation, eh Jack?" continued Archie, his face beaming with a hidden meaning that roused my suspicions.

Could he have found Mrs. Mossom and Jack fern-hunting together?

I glanced from the lady, who colored slightly, to Jack who laughed uneasily as he replied, "I am sure I don't know, I never have tried it.

I wondered, with a pain at my heart, if he was getting to be deceitful.

Mrs. Mossom and her attendants passed on to the house where she dismissed them.

"Much obliged," we heard her say, "I am going in now. You will find it pleasant in the avenue with the young ladies."

She was actually turning them over to us.

V.

Mrs. Mossom was one of those women to whom—without effort, apparently without a wish on her part—all men pay homage of some kind. Even shy Mr. Power paid her the tribute of being shyer than ever in her presence, while Archie Cullen yielded to the charm of her personal influence as readily as Jack Bryan. Lottie was destined to go through the discomfort I was suffering, but she bore it more patiently. I was very proud and scornful, although on one occasion my curiosity got the better of my pride. Jack and I were on horseback, walking our horses through a green lane after a brisk gallop on the road. Some ferns growing in a shaded hollow reminded me of Archie's inuendo.

"Will you tell me something?" I asked inconsequently in the middle of a discussion on the relative constancy of men and women. Jack, who had removed his hat the better to enjoy the breeze that ruffled the leaves overhead, answered gravely:

"Anything in my power."

"Oh, don't be so serious about it. It is a very small matter, only that I should like to know what Mr. Cullen meant by saying that fern-hunting was a *companionable* occupation."

"Because he thought so, I dare say."

"One would have imagined from the way he appealed to you that he had seen you fern-hunting with some one," I said, whipping the leaves from low, overhanging boughs."

"But I said I never had been," answered Jack warmly, turning his honest eyes on my averted face.

"So you did; I beg your pardon," I said, ashamed of having suspected him of an untruth. "But," I continued, whipping the boughs more vigorously, "didn't Mr. Cullen mean something more than he said?"

"Well, yes," returned Jack, evidently surprised at my interest in the matter.

"Then tell me, please," I asked, blushing at my own pertinacity.

Jack looked at me for a moment, then reining in his horse, pointed with his whip to a domestic fowl that ran cackling across the road.

"Do you know what that is?" he asked gravely.

"That?" I repeated, puzzled to see the connection, "why, yes; that is a goose."

"And so are you," he replied, in a tone that made me happier to be called a goose by him than a wit by another.

That was all the information I got.

Not long after this Aunt Brinton decided to give us a party. It was to be a large affair. Everybody was to be invited. The lawn and gardens were to be illuminated; we were to have music and dancing, and everything that could make a country party delightful. The house was turned upside down, for the dining-room was to be the dancing room, and the supper was to be upstairs.

Mrs. Mossom was helpful about everything. I don't know what my aunt would have done without her. It is true that she had an able and intelligent co-worker in Archie Cullen, who had only to hear a suggestion to understand and obey. What prodigies of work he and Mrs. Mossom performed for that ball. Lottie did not enjoy these preparations as much as I did. Archie followed Mrs. Mossom like her shadow. Under her supervision he devoted himself to house decoration with an ardor of which, I am sure, he had never until now believed himself capable.

I was enchanted that Jack was a clumsy fellow about some things. He could manage a horse, an oar or a bat, but tacks and tack-hammers, paste-pot and scissors were as impossible to his hands as a needle and thread. Archie had it all his own way in the decoration business.

One rainy day in the middle of our preparations, when there was not a place to sit down, I found Mr. Power in the dining-room, the picture of discomfort, but with an unusually cheerful countenance, mounted on top of a step-ladder, smoking a pipe.

"What are you doing, perched up there?" I asked, gathering my skirts around me, and picking my way through rubbish and litter, in search of a book I had left somewhere.

"Where else can a fellow sit? I am like Noah on Ararat; this is the only dry spot to be found."

Mr. Power must have felt very safe, out

of harm's way in his elevated position. I had never known him to be facetious before.

"You are not a bit like Noah," I replied; "he took the whole family with him, and you have your Ararat all to yourself."

"Glad to share my seat with you, if you don't mind smoke," he said, making a place for me with an airiness of which I had not believed him capable.

"You should always sit on a step-ladder, Mr. Power, the situation seems to agree with you; I never knew you to speak so much to the point. Thank you, no. I do not wish to sit down."

"While I was speaking, Lottie, looking heated and vexed, came in, fanning herself vigorously with a newspaper.

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" she was saying, "I wonder why some things were ever made except to bother other things?"

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Flies," she said, slapping at one ineffectually, "and," setting her teeth, "widows!" bringing out the last word so vehemently that Mr. Power nearly toppled from his seat.

"How do you like widows, Mr. Power?" I asked maliciously.

"Widows! widows!" he repeated, stammering and reddening, "If I had my way there would not be one in the house." A remark which, from any one else, would have sounded ambiguous.

Lottie and I had one consolation. We were at least to be queens of our own ball.

Mrs. Mossom declined to be present on account of her black dress, and made arrangements to spend the night at the house of a friend in the neighborhood. Mr. Power, too, backed out on the plea of not having brought a dress-coat to the country.

I think I never looked so well as on the night of our party. My dress was so great a success that, when I entered the dancing-room, I wondered who the tall, handsome girl opposite to me could be, and blushed to find that it was myself reflected in a mirror. Partners for the dance crowded me, and repeated in many a word and glance what the mirror had already told me. I began the evening in the gayest spirits, but Jack, who had driven Mrs. Mossom to the house where she was to spend the night, did not come early, and my eyes often wandered anxiously toward the door. I saved several dances for him, but he did not come to claim them. Could Mrs. Mossom have kept him? I tried not to be uncharitable to her. I wished her no worse harm than that the late Mr. Mossom had not died and left her a widow.

The music and dancing went on, but they began to lose their charms for me. The tender speeches, which at first seemed such fun, grew painfully insipid as I waited and watched for Jack. When at last he came, just before supper, I would not look at him. As soon as he arrived he crossed the room to speak to me, but I pretended to be too deeply interested in my companion to see him. He turned on his heel and went away. I rejoiced in the belief that he was hurt. When the party was over I went to bed and cried myself to sleep.

The next day was as bright as though there were no aching hearts in the world. It was the day on which Mrs. Mossom was to leave for her home in the South. Our company was breaking up. The day following, Mr. Power was going back to his home in the North; he and the widow, to the last, going to opposite points of the compass.

When Mrs. Mossom, equipped for traveling, went round, bidding everybody good-bye, I was disposed to hold back resentfully, I don't know for what, unless for her fascinations, which I dare say she could not help, but she seemed not to notice my childishness.

"Good-bye, girls," she said to Lottie and me very affectionately and with so sweet a smile that the impulsive Lottie threw her arms around her and kissed her, a proceeding I thought entirely unnecessary.

Mine were probably the only dry eyes in the group that waved her adieu as my uncle drove her to the station.

The morning after Mr. Power's departure Lottie and I came down late to breakfast. We had scarcely taken our places, when my aunt began, "Girls," she said, breaking an egg with the deftness of daily practice, "I have something to tell you."

We were all attention. She looked as if her news might be interesting.

"A lady has asked me to tell you of her engagement."

"An engagement! Any of those spooney couples who were at the party the other night?" asked Lottie.

"No, this couple were not at the party, but you know the lady very well, Mrs. Mossom."

Lottie and I looked at each other, this time in speechless amazement.

"Mrs. Mossom?" I gasped, "to whom?"

"Mr. Power."

"How? When? Where?" asked Lottie in a breath.

I think from the way my uncle laughed that he never enjoyed a comedy as much as the expression of our faces at this announcement.

My aunt, with laudable effort to tell what she had to tell with becoming dignity, was shaken by his uproarious merriment. It was sometime before she could answer Lottie's comprehensive question.

As to *how* the engagement took place, I don't know; the usual way, I suppose. But I do know *when* it occurred, for the lady told me; it was the very day before our party."

"And that is the reason he looked such a smiling idiot on top of the step-ladder that day!" I exclaimed.

"Possibly. *Where* it all happened, I can only conjecture, was among the ferns."

"And his running away from Mrs. Mossom was all bosh?" said Lottie.

"All bosh," said my aunt, wiping her eyes.

"To deceive us, I suppose?" said I.

"Well, to turn your attention from her affairs. You know you two were disposed to make fun of Mr. Power and the widow when you first came."

"So she turned the tables and made fun of us," I said bitterly, seeing with a flash of enlightenment how she had used Jack and Archie as a blind, and had probably put Mr. Power up to giving me a rose.

"And the courting and the engagement," laughed Lottie, whose temper was more facile than mine, "took place under our very noses, and we did not suspect!"

"Just so," said my uncle.

I began to understand why Jack would not tell me about the fern hunting. He and Archie had probably seen this engaged couple so employed, and felt it a point of honor not to tell.

"We will not tilt against a young widow again, will we?" said Lottie, who had entirely recovered her good humor.

"No," said I savagely, "for in 'the ways that are dark' they are worse than the heathen Chinee."

"Come, now; you know she let us off very easily, considering how impertinent we were."

There was no gainsaying this, but I never quite forgave the widow until I had entirely made up with Jack.

As to Archie Cullen, I do not know what explanation he made to my friend of his temporary defection, but I do know that she took him back and seemed very glad to get him.