1

It was a cold grey day in late November. The weather had changed overnight, when a backing wind brought a granite sky and a mizzling rain with it, and although it was now only a little after two o'clock in the afternoon the pallor of a winter evening seemed to have closed upon the hills, cloaking them in mist. It would be dark by four. The air was clammy cold, and for all the tightly closed windows it penetrated the interior of the coach. The leather seats felt damp to the hands, and there must have been a small crack in the roof, because now and again little drips of rain fell softly through, smudging the leather and leaving a dark-blue stain like a splodge of ink. The wind came in gusts, at time shaking the coach as it travelled round the bend of the road, and in the exposed places on the high ground it blew with such force that the whole body of the coach trembled and swayed, rocking between the high wheels like a drunken man.

The driver, muffled in a greatcoat to his ears, bent almost double in his seat in a faint endeavour to gain shelter from his own shoulders, while the dispirited horses plodded sullenly to his command, too broken by the wind and the rain to feel the whip that now and again cracked above their heads, while it swung between the numb fingers of the driver.

The wheels of the coach creaked and groaned as they sank into the ruts on the road, and sometimes they flung up the soft spattered mud against the windows, where it mingled with the constant driving rain, and whatever view there might have been of the countryside was hopelessly obscured.

The few passengers huddled together for warmth, exclaiming in unison when the coach sank into a heavier rut than usual, and one old fellow, who had kept up a constant complaint ever since he had joined the coach at Truro, rose from his seat in a fury; and, fumbling with the window-sash, let the window down with a crash, bringing a shower of rain in upon himself and his fellow-passengers. He thrust his head out and shouted up to the driver, cursing him in a high petulant voice for a rogue and a murderer; that they would all be dead before they reached Bodmin if he persisted in driving at breakneck speed; they had no breath left in their bodies as it was, and he for one would never travel by coach again.

Whether the driver heard him or not was uncertain; it seemed more likely that the stream of reproaches was carried away in the wind, for the old fellow, after waiting a moment, put up the window again, having thoroughly chilled the interior of the coach, and, settling himself once more in his corner, wrapped his blanket about his knees and muttered in his beard.

His nearest neighbour, a jovial red-faced woman in a blue cloak, sighed heavily in sympathy, and, with a wink to anyone who might be looking and a jerk of her head towards the old man, she remarked for at least the twentieth time that it was the dirtiest night she ever remembered, and she had known some; that it was proper old weather and no mistaking it for summer this time; and, burrowing into the depths of a large basket, she brought out a great hunk of cake and plunged into it with strong white teeth.

Mary Yellan sat in the opposite corner, where the trickle of rain oozed through the crack in the roof. Sometimes a cold drip of moisture fell upon her shoulder, which she brushed away with impatient fingers.

She sat with her chin cupped in her hands, her eyes fixed on the window splashed with mud and rain, hoping with a sort of desperate interest that some ray of light would break the heavy blanket of sky, and but a momentary trace of that lost blue heaven that had mantled Helford yesterday shine for an instant as a forerunner of fortune.

Already, though barely forty miles by road from what had been her home for three and twenty years, the hope within her heart had tired, and that rather gallant courage which was so large a part of her, and had stood her in such stead during the long agony of her mother's illness and death, was now shaken by this first fall of rain and the nagging wind.

The country was alien to her, which was defeat in itself. As she peered through the misty window of the coach she looked out upon a different world from the one she had known only a day's journey back. How remote now and hidden perhaps for ever were the shining waters of Helford, the green hills and the sloping valleys, the white cluster of cottages at the water's edge. It was a gentle rain that fell at Helford, a rain that pattered in the many trees and lost itself in the lush grass, formed into brooks and rivulets that emptied into the broad river, sank into the grateful soil which gave back flowers in payment.

This was a lashing, pitiless rain that stung the windows of the coach, and it soaked into a hard and barren soil. No trees here, save one or two that stretched bare branches to the four winds, bent and twisted from centuries of storm, and so black were they by time and tempest that, even if spring did breathe on such a place, no buds would dare to come to leaf for fear the late frost should kill them. It was a scrubby land, without hedgerow or meadow; a country of stones, black heather, and stunted broom.

There would never be a gentle season here, thought Mary; either grim winter as it was today, or else the dry and parching heat of midsummer, with never a valley to give shade or shelter, but grass that turned yellow-brown before May was passed. The country had gone grey with the weather. Even the people on the road and in the villages changed in harmony with their background. At Helston, where she had taken the first coach, she had trodden familiar ground. So many childish memories clung about Helston. The weekly drive to market with her father in the vanished days, and, when he was taken from them, the fortitude with which her mother held his place, driving backwards and forwards, winter and summer, as he had done, with her hens and her eggs and her butter at the back of the cart, while Mary sat at her side, clutching a basket as big as herself, her small chin resting on the handle. Folk were friendly in Helston; the name of Yellan was known and respected in the town, for the widow had had a hard fight against life when her husband died, and there were not many women who would have lived alone as she did with one child and a farm to tend, with never a thought of taking another man. There was a farmer at Manaccan who would have asked her had he dared, and another up the river at Gweek, but they could tell from her eyes she would have neither of them, but belonged in body and mind to the man who had gone. It was the hard work of the farm that told upon her in the end, for she would not spare herself, and, though she had driven and flogged her energy for the seventeen years of her widowhood, she could not stand up to the strain when the last test came, and her heart went from her.

Little by little her stock had decreased, and with times being bad – so she was told in Helston – and prices fallen to nothing, there was no money anywhere. Up-country it was the same. There would be starvation in the farms before long. Then a sickness attacked the ground and killed the livestock in the villages round Helford. There was no name to it, and no cure could be discovered. It was a sickness that came over everything and destroyed, much as a late frost will out of season, coming with the new moon and then departing, leaving no trace of its passage save the little trail of dead things in its path. It was an anxious, weary time for Mary Yellan and her mother. One by one they saw the chickens and the ducklings they had reared sicken and die, and the young calf fell in the meadow where he stood. The most pitiful was the old mare who had served them twenty years, and upon whose broad and sturdy back Mary had first straddled her young legs. She died in the stall one morning, her faithful head in Mary's lap; and when a pit was dug for her under the apple-tree in the orchard, and she was buried, and they knew she would no longer carry them to Helston market-day, Mary's mother turned to her and said, 'There's something of me gone in the grave with poor Nell, Mary. I don't know whether it's my faith or what it is, but my heart feels tired and I can't go on any more.'

She went into the house and sat down in the kitchen, pale as a sheet, and ten years beyond her age. She shrugged her shoulders when Mary said she would fetch the doctor. 'It's too late, child,' she said, 'seventeen years too late.' And she began to cry softly, who had never cried before.

Mary fetched the old doctor who lived in Mawgan and who had brought her into the world, and as he drove her back in his trap he shook his head at her. 'I tell you what it is, Mary,' he said; 'your mother has spared neither her mind nor her body since your father died, and she has broken down at last. I don't like it. It's come at a bad time.'

They drove along the twisting lane to the farmhouse at the top of the village. A neighbour met them at the gate, her face eager to impart bad news. 'Your mother's worse,' she cried. 'She came out of the door just now, staring like a ghost, and she trembled all over, and fell down in the path. Mrs Hoblyn has gone to her, and Will Searle; they've lifted her inside, poor soul. They say her eyes are shut.'

Firmly the doctor pushed the little gaping crowd away from the door. Together he and the man Searle lifted the still figure from the floor and carried her upstairs to the bedroom.

'It's a stroke,' said the doctor, 'but she's breathing; her pulse is steady. This is what I've been afraid of – that she'd snap suddenly, like this. Why it's come just now, after all these years, is known only to the Lord and herself. You must prove yourself your parents' child now, Mary, and help her through this. You are the only one who can.'

For six long months or more Mary nursed her mother in this her first and last illness, but with all the care she and the doctor gave her it was not the widow's will to recover. She had no wish to fight for her life.

It was as though she longed for release, and prayed silently that it would come quickly. She said to Mary, 'I don't want you to struggle as I have done. It's a breaking of the body and of the spirit. There's no call for you to stay on at Helford after I am gone. It's best for you to go to your Aunt Patience up to Bodmin.'

There was no use in Mary telling her mother that she would not die. It was fixed there in her mind and there was no fighting it.

'I haven't any wish to leave the farm, mother,' she said. 'I was born here and my father before me, and you were a Helford woman. This is where the Yellans belong to be. I'm not afraid of being poor, and the farm falling away. You worked here for seventeen years alone, so why shouldn't I do the same? I'm strong; I can do the work of a man; you know that.'

'It's no life for a girl,' said her mother. 'I did it all these years because of your father, and because of you. Working for someone keeps a woman calm and contented, but it's another thing when you work for yourself. There's no heart in it then.'

'I'd be no use in a town,' said Mary. 'I've never known anything but this life by the river, and I don't want to. Going into Helston is town enough for me. I'm best here, with the few chickens that's left to us, and the green stuff in the garden, and the old pig, and a bit of a boat on the river. What would I do up to Bodmin with my Aunt Patience?'

'A girl can't live alone, Mary, without she goes queer in the head, or comes to evil. It's either one or the other. Have you forgotten poor Sue, who walked the churchyard at midnight with the full moon, and called upon the lover she had never had? And there was one maid, before you were born, left an orphan at sixteen. She ran away to Falmouth and went with the sailors.

'I'd not rest in my grave, nor your father neither, if we didn't leave you safe. You'll like your Aunt Patience; she was always a great one for games and laughing, with a heart as large as life. You remember when she came here, twelve years back? She had ribbons in her bonnet and a silk petticoat. There was a fellow working at Trelowarren had an eye to her, but she thought herself too good for him.'

Yes, Mary remembered Aunt Patience, with her curled fringe and large blue eyes, and how she laughed and chatted, and how she picked up her skirts and tiptoed through the mud in the yard. She was as pretty as a fairy.

'What sort of a man your Uncle Joshua is I cannot say,' said her mother, 'for I've never set eyes on him nor known anyone what has. But when your aunt married him ten years ago last Michaelmas she wrote a pack of giddy nonsense you'd expect a girl to write, and not a woman over thirty.'

'They'd think me rough,' said Mary slowly. 'I haven't the pretty manners they'd expect. We wouldn't have much to say to one another.'

'They'll love you for yourself and not for any airs and graces. I want you to promise me this, child, that when I'm gone you'll write to your Aunt Patience and tell her that it was my last and dearest wish that you should go to her.'

'I promise,' said Mary, but her heart was heavy and distressed at the thought of a future so insecure and changed, with all that she had known and loved gone from her, and not even the comfort of familiar trodden ground to help her through the bad days when they came.

Daily her mother weakened; daily the life ebbed from her. She lingered through harvest-time, and through the fruit-picking, and through the first falling of the leaves. But when the mists came in the morning, and the frosts settled on the ground, and the swollen river ran in flood to meet the boisterous sea, and the waves thundered and broke on the little beaches of Helford, the widow turned restlessly in her bed, plucking at the sheets. She called Mary by her dead husband's name, and spoke of things that were gone, and of people Mary had never known. For three days she lived in a little world of her own, and on the fourth day she died.

One by one Mary saw the things she had loved and understood pass into other hands. The livestock went at Helston market. The furniture was bought by neighbours, stick by stick. A man from Coverack took a fancy to the house and purchased it; with pipe in mouth he straddled the yard and pointed out the changes he would make, the trees he would cut down to clear his view; while Mary watched him in dumb loathing from her window as she packed her small belongings in her father's trunk.

This stranger from Coverack made her an interloper in her own home; she could see from his eye he wanted her to be gone, and she had no other thought now but to be away and out of it all, and her back turned for ever. Once more she read the letter from her aunt, written in a cramped hand, on plain paper. The writer said she was shocked at the blow that had befallen her niece; that she had no idea her sister was ill, it was so many years now since she had been to Helford. And she went on: 'There have been changes with us you would not know. I no longer live in Bodmin, but nearly twelve miles outside, on the road to Launceston. It's a wild and lonely spot, and if you were to come to us I should be glad of your company, winter-time. I have asked your uncle, and he does not object, he says, if you are quiet-spoken and not a talker, and will give help when needed. He cannot give you money, or feed you for nothing, as you will understand. He will expect your help in the bar, in return for your board and lodging. You see, your uncle is the landlord of Jamaica Inn.'

Mary folded the letter and put it in her trunk. It was a strange message of welcome from the smiling Aunt Patience she remembered.

A cold, empty letter, giving no word of comfort, and admitting nothing, except that her niece must not ask for money. Aunt Patience, with her silk petticoat and delicate ways, the wife of an innkeeper! Mary decided that this was something her mother had not known. The letter was very different from the one penned by a happy bride ten years ago.

However, Mary had promised, and there was no returning on her word. Her home was sold; there was no place for her here. Whatever her welcome should be, her aunt was her own mother's sister, and that was the one thing to remember. The old life lay behind – the dear familiar farm and the shining Helford waters. Before her lay the future – and Jamaica Inn.

And so it was that Mary Yellan found herself northward bound from Helston in the creaking, swaying coach, through Truro town, at the head of the Fal, with its many roofs and spires, its broad cobbled streets, the blue sky overhead still speaking of the south, the people at the doors smiling and waving as the coach rattled past. But when Truro lay behind in the valley, the sky came overcast, and the country on either side of the high road grew rough and untilled. Villages were scattered now, and there were few smiling faces at the cottage doors. Trees were sparse; hedges there were none. Then the wind blew, and the rain came with the wind. And so the coach rumbled into Bodmin, grey and forbidding like the hills that cradled it, and one by one the passengers gathered up their things in preparation for departure – all save Mary, who sat still in her corner. The driver, his face a stream of rain, looked in at the window.

'Are you going on to Launceston?' he said. 'It'll be a wild drive tonight across the moors. You can stay in Bodmin, you know, and go on by coach in the morning. There'll be none in this coach going on but you.'

'My friends will be expecting me,' said Mary. 'I'm not afraid of the drive. And I don't want to go as far as Launceston; will you please put me down at Jamaica Inn?'

The man looked at her curiously. 'Jamaica Inn?' he said. 'What would you be doing at Jamaica Inn? That's no place for a girl. You must have made a mistake, surely.' He stared at her hard, not believing her.

'Oh, I've heard it's lonely enough,' said Mary, 'but I don't belong to a town anyway. It's quiet on Helford river, winter and summer, where I come from, and I never felt lonely there.'

'I never said nothing about loneliness,' answered the man. 'Maybe you don't understand, being a stranger up here. It's not the twenty-odd mile of moor I'm thinking of, though that'd scare most women. Here, wait a minute.' He called over his shoulder to a woman who stood in the doorway of the Royal, lighting the lamp above the porch, for it was already dusk.

'Missus,' he said, 'come here an' reason with this young girl. I was told she was for Launceston, but she's asked me to put her down at Jamaica.'

The woman came down the steps and peered into the coach.

'It's a wild, rough place up there,' she said, 'and if it's work you are looking for, you won't find it on the farms. They don't like strangers on the moors. You'd do better down here in Bodmin.'

Mary smiled at her. 'I shall be all right,' she said. 'I'm going to relatives. My uncle is landlord of Jamaica Inn.'

There was a long silence. In the grey light of the coach Mary could see that the woman and the man were staring at her. She felt chilled suddenly, anxious; she wanted some word of reassurance from the woman, but it did not come. Then the woman drew back from the window. 'I'm sorry,' she said slowly. 'It's none of my business, of course. Good night.'

The driver began to whistle, rather red in the face, as one who wishes to rid himself of an awkward situation. Mary leant forward impulsively and touched his arm. 'Would you tell me?' she said. 'I shan't mind what you say. Is my uncle not liked? Is something the matter?'

The man looked very uncomfortable. He spoke gruffly, and avoided her eyes. 'Jamaica's got a bad name,' he said; 'queer tales get about; you know how it is. But I don't want to make any trouble. Maybe they're not true.'

'What sort of tales?' asked Mary. 'Do you mean there's much drunkenness there? Does my uncle encourage bad company?'

The man would not commit himself. 'I don't want to make trouble,' he repeated, 'and I don't know anything. It's only what people say. Respectable folk don't go to Jamaica any more. That's all I know. In the old days we used to water the horses there, and feed them, and go in for a bit of a bite and drink. But we don't stop there any more. We whip the horses past and wait for nothing, not till we get to Five Lanes, and then we don't bide long.'

'Why don't folk go there? What is their reason?' Mary persisted.

The man hesitated; it was as though he were searching for words.

'They're afraid,' he said at last; and then he shook his head; he would say no more. Perhaps he felt he had been churlish, and was sorry for her, for a moment later he looked in at the window again and spoke to her.

'Will you not take a cup of tea here before we go?' he said. 'It's a long drive before you, and it's cold on the moors.'

Mary shook her head. Desire for food had left her, and, though the tea would have warmed her, she did not wish to descend from the coach and walk into the Royal, where the woman would have stared at her, and people would murmur. Besides, there was a little nagging coward in her that whispered, 'Stay in Bodmin, stay in Bodmin,' and for all she knew she might have given way to it in the shelter of the Royal. She had promised her mother to go to Aunt Patience, and there must be no going back on her given word.

'We'd best be going then,' said the driver. 'You are the only traveller on the road tonight. Here's another rug for your knees. I'll whip the horses on when we've climbed the hill out of

Bodmin, for it's no night for the road. I shan't be easy in my mind until I reach my bed in Launceston. There's not many of us likes to cross the moors in winter-time, not when the weather's dirty.' He slammed the door and climbed to his seat.

The coach rumbled away down the street, past the safe and solid houses, the busy winking lights, the scattered people hurrying home for supper, their figures bowed against the wind and rain. Through the shuttered windows Mary could see chinks of friendly candlelight; there would be a fire within the grate, and a cloth spread on the table, a woman and children sitting down to their meal, while the man warmed his hands before the cheerful blaze. She thought of the smiling countrywoman who had been her fellow-passenger; she wondered if she was now sitting at her own table, with her children by her side. How comfortable she had been, with her apple cheeks, her rough, worn hands! What a world of security in her deep voice! And Mary made a little story to herself of how she might have followed her from the coach, and prayed her company, and asked her for a home. Nor would she have been refused, she was certain of that. There would have been a smile for her, and a friendly hand, and a bed for her. She would have served the woman, and grown to love her, shared something of her life, become acquainted with her people.

Now the horses were climbing the steep hill out of the town, and, looking through the window at the back of the coach, Mary could see the lights of Bodmin fast disappearing, one by one, until the last glimmer winked, and flickered, and was gone. She was alone now with the wind and the rain, and twelve long miles of barren moor between her and her destination.

She wondered if this was how a ship felt when the security of harbour was left behind. No vessel could feel more desolate than she did, not even if the wind thundered in the rigging and the sea licked her decks.

It was dark in the coach now, for the torch gave forth a sickly yellow glare, and the draught from the crack in the roof sent the flame wandering hither and thither, to the danger of the leather, and Mary thought it best to extinguish it. She sat huddled in her corner, swaying from side to side as the coach was shaken, and it seemed to her that never before had she known there was malevolence in solitude. The very coach, which all the day had rocked her like a cradle, now held a note of menace in its creaks and groans. The wind tore at the roof, and the showers of rain, increasing in violence now there was no shelter from the hills, spat against the windows with new venom. On either side of the road the country stretched interminably into space. No trees, no lanes, no cluster of cottages or hamlet, but mile upon mile of bleak moorland, dark and untraversed, rolling like a desert land to some unseen horizon. No human being could live in this wasted country, thought Mary, and remain like other people; the very children would be born twisted, like the blackened shrubs of broom, bent by the force of a wind that never ceased, blow as it would from east and west, from north and south. Their minds would be twisted, too, their thoughts evil, dwelling as they must amidst marshland and granite, harsh heather and crumbling stone.

They would be born of strange stock who slept with this earth as a pillow, beneath this black sky. They would have something of the Devil left in them still. On wound the road across the dark and silent land, with never a light to waver for an instant as a message of hope to the traveller within the coach. Perhaps there was no habitation in all the long one-and-twenty miles that stretched between the two towns of Bodmin and Lauceston; perhaps there was not even a poor shepherd's hut on the desolate highway: nothing but the one grim landmark that was Jamaica Inn.

Mary lost count of time and space; the miles might have been a hundred and the hour midnight, for ail she knew. She began to cling to the safety of the coach; at least it had some remnant of familiarity. She had known it since the early morning, and that was long ago. However great a nightmare was this eternal drive, there were at least the four close walls to protect her, the shabby leaking roof, and, within calling distance, the comfortable presence of the driver. At last it seemed to her that he was driving his horses to an even greater speed; she heard him shout to them, the cry of his voice blown past her window on the wind.

She lifted the sash and looked out. She was met with a blast of wind and rain that blinded her for the moment, and then, shaking clear her hair and pushing it from her eyes, she saw that the coach was topping the breast of a hill at a furious gallop, while on either side of the road was rough moorland, looming ink-black in the mist and rain.

Ahead of her, on the crest, and to the left, was some sort of a building, standing back from the road. She could see tall chimneys, murky dim in the darkness. There was no other house, no other cottage. If this was Jamaica, it stood alone in glory, foursquare to the winds. Mary gathered her cloak around her and fastened the clasp. The horses had been pulled to a standstill and stood sweating under the rain, the steam coming from them in a cloud.

The driver climbed down from his seat, pulling her box down with him. He seemed hurried, and he kept glancing over his shoulder towards the house.

'Here you are,' he said; 'across the yard there yonder. If you hammer on the door they'll let you in. I must be getting on or I'll not reach Launceston tonight.' In a moment he was up on his seat again, and picking up the reins. He shouted at his horses, whipping them in a fever of anxiety. The coach rumbled and shook, and in a moment it was away and down the road, disappearing as though it had never been, lost and swallowed up in the darkness.

Mary stood alone, with the trunk at her feet. She heard a sound of bolts being drawn in the dark house behind her, and the door was flung open. A great figure strode into the yard, swinging a lantern from side to side.

'Who is it?' came the shout. 'What do you want here?'

Mary stepped forward and peered up into the man's face.

The light shone in her eyes, and she could see nothing. He swung the lantern to and fro before her, and suddenly he laughed and took hold of her arm, pulling her roughly inside the porch.

'Oh, it's you, is it?' he said. 'So you've come to us after all? I'm your uncle, Joss Merlyn, and I bid you welcome to Jamaica Inn.' He drew her into the shelter of the house, laughing again, and shut the door, and stood the lantern upon a table in the passage. And they looked upon each other face to face.