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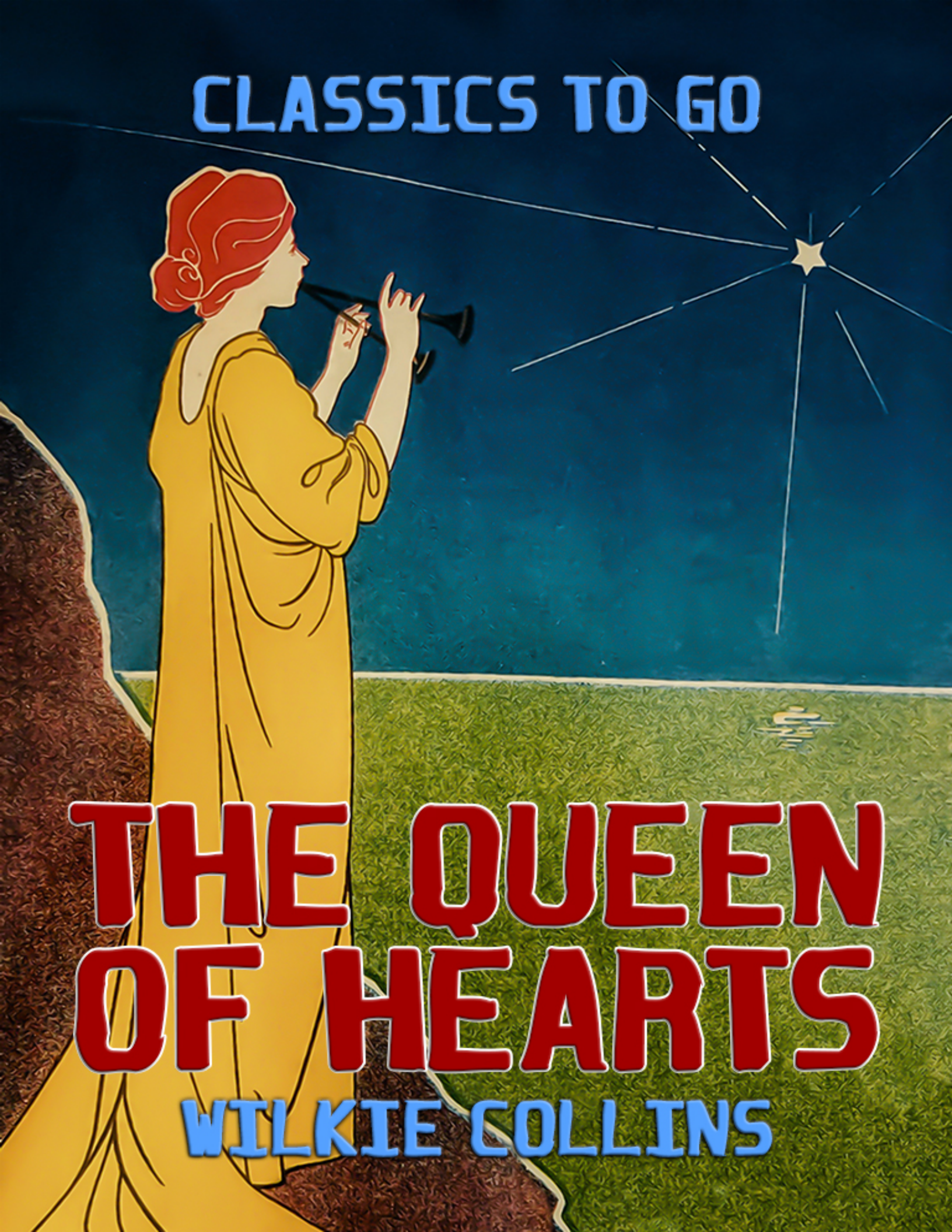

THE QUEEN OF HEARTS

WILKIE COLLINS

THE QUEEN OF HEARTS

Wilkie Collins

LETTER OF DEDICATION.

TO

EMILE FORGUES.

AT a time when French readers were altogether unaware of the existence of any books of my writing, a critical examination of my novels appeared under your signature in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*. I read that article, at the time of its appearance, with sincere pleasure and sincere gratitude to the writer, and I have honestly done my best to profit by it ever since.

At a later period, when arrangements were made for the publication of my novels in Paris, you kindly undertook, at some sacrifice of your own convenience, to give the first of the series—“The Dead Secret”—the great advantage of being rendered into French by your pen. Your excellent translation of “The Lighthouse” had already taught me how to appreciate the value of your assistance; and when “The Dead Secret” appeared in its French form, although I was sensibly gratified, I was by no means surprised to find my fortunate work of fiction, not translated, in the mechanical sense of the word, but transformed from a novel that I had written in my language to a novel that you might have written in yours.

I am now about to ask you to confer one more literary obligation on me by accepting the dedication of this book, as the earliest acknowledgment which it has been in my power to make of the debt I owe to my critic, to my translator, and to my friend.

The stories which form the principal contents of the following pages are all, more or less, exercises in that art which I have now studied anxiously for some years, and which I still hope to cultivate, to better and better purpose, for many more. Allow me, by inscribing the collection to you, to secure one reader for it at the outset of its progress through the world of letters whose capacity for seeing all a writer’s defects may be matched by many other critics, but whose rarer faculty of seeing all a writer’s merits is equaled by very few.

WILKIE COLLINS.

CHAPTER I.

OURSELVES.

WE were three quiet, lonely old men, and SHE was a lively, handsome young woman, and we were at our wits' end what to do with her.

A word about ourselves, first of all—a necessary word, to explain the singular situation of our fair young guest.

We are three brothers; and we live in a barbarous, dismal old house called The Glen Tower. Our place of abode stands in a hilly, lonesome district of South Wales. No such thing as a line of railway runs anywhere near us. No gentleman's seat is within an easy drive of us. We are at an unspeakably inconvenient distance from a town, and the village to which we send for our letters is three miles off.

My eldest brother, Owen, was brought up to the Church. All the prime of his life was passed in a populous London parish. For more years than I now like to reckon up, he worked unremittingly, in defiance of failing health and adverse fortune, amid the multitudinous misery of the London poor; and he would, in all probability, have sacrificed his life to his duty long before the present time if The Glen Tower had not come into his possession through two unexpected deaths in the elder and richer branch of our family. This opening to him of a place of rest and refuge saved his life. No man ever drew breath who better deserved the gifts of fortune; for no man, I sincerely believe, more tender of others, more diffident of himself, more

gentle, more generous, and more simple-hearted than Owen, ever walked this earth.

My second brother, Morgan, started in life as a doctor, and learned all that his profession could teach him at home and abroad. He realized a moderate independence by his practice, beginning in one of our large northern towns and ending as a physician in London; but, although he was well known and appreciated among his brethren, he failed to gain that sort of reputation with the public which elevates a man into the position of a great doctor. The ladies never liked him. In the first place, he was ugly (Morgan will excuse me for mentioning this); in the second place, he was an inveterate smoker, and he smelled of tobacco when he felt languid pulses in elegant bedrooms; in the third place, he was the most formidably outspoken teller of the truth as regarded himself, his profession, and his patients, that ever imperiled the social standing of the science of medicine. For these reasons, and for others which it is not necessary to mention, he never pushed his way, as a doctor, into the front ranks, and he never cared to do so. About a year after Owen came into possession of The Glen Tower, Morgan discovered that he had saved as much money for his old age as a sensible man could want; that he was tired of the active pursuit—or, as he termed it, of the dignified quackery of his profession; and that it was only common charity to give his invalid brother a companion who could physic him for nothing, and so prevent him from getting rid of his money in the worst of all possible ways, by wasting it on doctors' bills. In a week after Morgan had arrived at these conclusions, he was settled at The Glen Tower; and from that time, opposite as their characters were, my two elder brothers lived together in their lonely retreat, thoroughly understanding, and, in their very different ways, heartily loving one another.

Many years passed before I, the youngest of the three—christened by the unmelodious name of Griffith—found my way, in my turn, to the dreary old house, and the sheltering quiet of the Welsh hills. My career in life had led me away from my brothers; and even now, when we are all united, I have still ties and interests to connect me with the outer world which neither Owen nor Morgan possess.

I was brought up to the Bar. After my first year's study of the law, I wearied of it, and strayed aside idly into the brighter and more attractive paths of literature. My occasional occupation with my pen was varied by long traveling excursions in all parts of the Continent; year by year my circle of gay friends and acquaintances increased, and I bade fair to sink into the condition of a wandering desultory man, without a fixed purpose in life of any sort, when I was saved by what has saved many another in my situation—an attachment to a good and a sensible woman. By the time I had reached the age of thirty-five, I had done what neither of my brothers had done before me—I had married.

As a single man, my own small independence, aided by what little additions to it I could pick up with my pen, had been sufficient for my wants; but with marriage and its responsibilities came the necessity for serious exertion. I returned to my neglected studies, and grappled resolutely, this time, with the intricate difficulties of the law. I was called to the Bar. My wife's father aided me with his interest, and I started into practice without difficulty and without delay.

For the next twenty years my married life was a scene of happiness and prosperity, on which I now look back with a grateful tenderness that no words of mine can express. The memory of my wife is busy at my heart while I think of those past times. The forgotten tears rise in my eyes again, and

trouble the course of my pen while it traces these simple lines.

Let me pass rapidly over the one unspeakable misery of my life; let me try to remember now, as I tried to remember then, that she lived to see our only child—our son, who was so good to her, who is still so good to me—grow up to manhood; that her head lay on my bosom when she died; and that the last frail movement of her hand in this world was the movement that brought it closer to her boy’s lips.

I bore the blow—with God’s help I bore it, and bear it still. But it struck me away forever from my hold on social life; from the purposes and pursuits, the companions and the pleasures of twenty years, which her presence had sanctioned and made dear to me. If my son George had desired to follow my profession, I should still have struggled against myself, and have kept my place in the world until I had seen h im prosperous and settled. But his choice led him to the army; and before his mother’s death he had obtained his commission, and had entered on his path in life. No other responsibility remained to claim from me the sacrifice of myself; my brothers had made my place ready for me by their fireside; my heart yearned, in its desolation, for the friends and companions of the old boyish days; my good, brave son promised that no year should pass, as long as he was in England, without his coming to cheer me; and so it happened that I, in my turn, withdrew from the world, which had once been a bright and a happy world to me, and retired to end my days, peacefully, contentedly, and gratefully, as my brothers are ending theirs, in the solitude of The Glen Tower.

How many years have passed since we have all three been united it is not necessary to relate. It will be more to the purpose if I briefly record that we have never been

separated since the day which first saw us assembled together in our hillside retreat; that we have never yet wearied of the time, of the place, or of ourselves; and that the influence of solitude on our hearts and minds has not altered them for the worse, for it has not embittered us toward our fellow-creatures, and it has not dried up in us the sources from which harmless occupations and innocent pleasures may flow refreshingly to the last over the waste places of human life. Thus much for our own story, and for the circumstances which have withdrawn us from the world for the rest of our days.

And now imagine us three lonely old men, tall and lean, and white-headed; dressed, more from past habit than from present association, in customary suits of solemn black: Brother Owen, yielding, gentle, and affectionate in look, voice, and manner; brother Morgan, with a quaint, surface-sourness of address, and a tone of dry sarcasm in his talk, which single him out, on all occasions, as a character in our little circle; brother Griffith forming the link between his two elder companions, capable, at one time, of sympathizing with the quiet, thoughtful tone of Owen’s conversation, and ready, at another, to exchange brisk severities on life and manners with Morgan—in short, a pliable, double-sided old lawyer, who stands between the clergyman-brother and the physician-brother with an ear ready for each, and with a heart open to both, share and share together.

Imagine the strange old building in which we live to be really what its name implies—a tower standing in a glen; in past times the fortress of a fighting Welsh chieftain; in present times a dreary land-lighthouse, built up in many stories of two rooms each, with a little modern lean-to of cottage form tacked on quaintly to one of its sides; the great hill, on whose lowest slope it stands, rising precipitously behind it; a dark, swift-flowing stream in the valley below;

hills on hills all round, and no way of approach but by one of the loneliest and wildest crossroads in all South Wales.

Imagine such a place of abode as this, and such inhabitants of it as ourselves, and them picture the descent among us—as of a goddess dropping from the clouds—of a lively, handsome, fashionable young lady—a bright, gay, butterfly creature, used to flutter away its existence in the broad sunshine of perpetual gayety—a child of the new generation, with all the modern ideas whirling together in her pretty head, and all the modern accomplishments at the tips of her delicate fingers. Imagine such a light-hearted daughter of Eve as this, the spoiled darling of society, the charming spendthrift of Nature’s choicest treasures of beauty and youth, suddenly flashing into the dim life of three weary old men—suddenly dropped into the place, of all others, which is least fit for her—suddenly shut out from the world in the lonely quiet of the loneliest home in England. Realize, if it be possible, all that is most whimsical and most anomalous in such a situation as this, and the startling confession contained in the opening sentence of these pages will no longer excite the faintest emotion of surprise. Who can wonder now, when our bright young goddess really descended on us, that I and my brothers were all three at our wits’ end what to do with her!

CHAPTER II.

OUR DILEMMA.

WHO is the young lady? And how did she find her way into The Glen Tower?

Her name (in relation to which I shall have something more to say a little further on) is Jessie Yelverton. She is an orphan and an only child. Her mother died while she was an infant; her father was my dear and valued friend, Major Yelverton. He lived long enough to celebrate his darling's seventh birthday. When he died he intrusted his authority over her and his responsibility toward her to his brother and to me.

When I was summoned to the reading of the major's will, I knew perfectly well that I should hear myself appointed guardian and executor with his brother; and I had been also made acquainted with my lost friend's wishes as to his daughter's education, and with his intentions as to the disposal of all his property in her favor. My own idea, therefore, was, that the reading of the will would inform me of nothing which I had not known in the testator's lifetime. When the day came for hearing it, however, I found that I had been over hasty in arriving at this conclusion. Toward the end of the document there was a clause inserted which took me entirely by surprise.

After providing for the education of Miss Yelverton under the direction of her guardians, and for her residence, under ordinary circumstances, with the major's sister, Lady

Westwick, the clause concluded by saddling the child's future inheritance with this curious condition:

From the period of her leaving school to the period of her reaching the age of twenty-one years, Miss Yelverton was to pass not less than six consecutive weeks out of every year under the roof of one of her two guardians. During the lives of both of them, it was left to her own choice to say which of the two she would prefer to live with. In all other respects the condition was imperative. If she forfeited it, excepting, of course, the case of the deaths of both her guardians, she was only to have a life-interest in the property; if she obeyed it, the money itself was to become her own possession on the day when she completed her twenty-first year.

This clause in the will, as I have said, took me at first by surprise. I remembered how devotedly Lady Westwick had soothed her sister-in-law's death-bed sufferings, and how tenderly she had afterward watched over the welfare of the little motherless child—I remembered the innumerable claims she had established in this way on her brother's confidence in her affection for his orphan daughter, and I was, therefore, naturally amazed at the appearance of a condition in his will which seemed to show a positive distrust of Lady Westwick's undivided influence over the character and conduct of her niece.

A few words from my fellow-guardian, Mr. Richard Yelverton, and a little after-consideration of some of my deceased friend's peculiarities of disposition and feeling, to which I had not hitherto attached sufficient importance, were enough to make me understand the motives by which he had been influenced in providing for the future of his child.

Major Yelverton had raised himself to a position of affluence and eminence from a very humble origin. He was the son of a small farmer, and it was his pride never to forget this circumstance, never to be ashamed of it, and never to allow the prejudices of society to influence his own settled opinions on social questions in general.

Acting, in all that related to his intercourse with the world, on such principles as these, the major, it is hardly necessary to say, held some strangely heterodox opinions on the modern education of girls, and on the evil influence of society over the characters of women in general. Out of the strength of those opinions, and out of the certainty of his conviction that his sister did not share them, had grown that condition in his will which removed his daughter from the influence of her aunt for six consecutive weeks in every year. Lady Westwick was the most light-hearted, the most generous, the most impulsive of women; capable, when any serious occasion called it forth, of all that was devoted and self-sacrificing, but, at other and ordinary times, constitutionally restless, frivolous, and eager for perpetual gayety. Distrusting the sort of life which he knew his daughter would lead under her aunt’s roof, and at the same time gratefully remembering his sister’s affectionate devotion toward his dying wife and her helpless infant, Major Yelverton had attempted to make a compromise, which, while it allowed Lady Westwick the close domestic intercourse with her niece that she had earned by innumerable kind offices, should, at the same time, place the young girl for a fixed period of every year of her minority under the corrective care of two such quiet old-fashioned guardians as his brother and myself. Such is the history of the clause in the will. My friend little thought, when he dictated it, of the extraordinary result to which it was one day to lead.

For some years, however, events ran on smoothly enough. Little Jessie was sent to an excellent school, with strict instructions to the mistress to make a good girl of her, and not a fashionable young lady. Although she was reported to be anything but a pattern pupil in respect of attention to her lessons, she became from the first the chosen favorite of every one about her. The very offenses which she committed against the discipline of the school were of the sort which provoke a smile even on the stern countenance of authority itself. One of these quaint freaks of mischief may not inappropriately be mentioned here, inasmuch as it gained her the pretty nickname under which she will be found to appear occasionally in these pages.

On a certain autumn night shortly after the Midsummer vacation, the mistress of the school fancied she saw a light under the door of the bedroom occupied by Jessie and three other girls. It was then close on midnight; and, fearing that some case of sudden illness might have happened, she hastened into the room. On opening the door, she discovered, to her horror and amazement, that all four girls were out of bed—were dressed in brilliantly-fantastic costumes, representing the four grotesque “Queens” of Hearts, Diamonds, Spades, and Clubs, familiar to us all on the pack of cards—and were dancing a quadrille, in which Jessie sustained the character of The Queen of Hearts. The next morning’s investigation disclosed that Miss Yelverton had smuggled the dresses into the school, and had amused herself by giving an impromptu fancy ball to her companions, in imitation of an entertainment of the same kind at which she had figured in a “court-card” quadrille at her aunt’s country house.

The dresses were instantly confiscated and the necessary punishment promptly administered; but the remembrance of Jessie’s extraordinary outrage on bedroom discipline

lasted long enough to become one of the traditions of the school, and she and her sister-culprits were thenceforth hailed as the “queens” of the four “suites” by their class-companions whenever the mistress’s back was turned, Whatever might have become of the nicknames thus employed in relation to the other three girls, such a mock title as The Queen of Hearts was too appropriately descriptive of the natural charm of Jessie’s character, as well as of the adventure in which she had taken the lead, not to rise naturally to the lips of every one who knew her. It followed her to her aunt’s house—it came to be as habitually and familiarly connected with her, among her friends of all ages, as if it had been formally inscribed on her baptismal register; and it has stolen its way into these pages because it falls from my pen naturally and inevitably, exactly as it often falls from my lips in real life.

When Jessie left school the first difficulty presented itself—in other words, the necessity arose of fulfilling the conditions of the will. At that time I was already settled at The Glen Tower, and her living six weeks in our dismal solitude and our humdrum society was, as she herself frankly wrote me word, quite out of the question. Fortunately, she had always got on well with her uncle and his family; so she exerted her liberty of choice, and, much to her own relief and to mine also, passed her regular six weeks of probation, year after year, under Mr. Richard Yelverton’s roof.

During this period I heard of her regularly, sometimes from my fellow-guardian, sometimes from my son George, who, whenever his military duties allowed him the opportunity, contrived to see her, now at her aunt’s house, and now at Mr. Yelverton’s. The particulars of her character and conduct, which I gleaned in this way, more than sufficed to convince me that the poor major’s plan for the careful training of his daughter’s disposition, though plausible

enough in theory, was little better than a total failure in practice. Miss Jessie, to use the expressive common phrase, took after her aunt. She was as generous, as impulsive, as light-hearted, as fond of change, and gayety, and fine clothes—in short, as complete and genuine a woman as Lady Westwick herself. It was impossible to reform the “Queen of Hearts,” and equally impossible not to love her. Such, in few words, was my fellow-guardian’s report of his experience of our handsome young ward.

So the time passed till the year came of which I am now writing—the ever-memorable year, to England, of the Russian war. It happened that I had heard less than usual at this period, and indeed for many months before it, of Jessie and her proceedings. My son had been ordered out with his regiment to the Crimea in 1854, and had other work in hand now than recording the sayings and doings of a young lady. Mr. Richard Yelverton, who had been hitherto used to write to me with tolerable regularity, seemed now, for some reason that I could not conjecture, to have forgotten my existence. Ultimately I was reminded of my ward by one of George’s own letters, in which he asked for news of her; and I wrote at once to Mr. Yelverton. The answer that reached me was written by his wife: he was dangerously ill. The next letter that came informed me of his death. This happened early in the spring of the year 1855.

I am ashamed to confess it, but the change in my own position was the first idea that crossed my mind when I read the news of Mr. Yelverton’s death. I was now left sole guardian, and Jessie Yelverton wanted a year still of coming of age.

By the next day’s post I wrote to her about the altered state of the relations between us. She was then on the Continent with her aunt, having gone abroad at the very beginning of

the year. Consequently, so far as eighteen hundred and fifty-five was concerned, the condition exacted by the will yet remained to be performed. She had still six weeks to pass—her last six weeks, seeing that she was now twenty years old—under the roof of one of her guardians, and I was now the only guardian left.

In due course of time I received my answer, written on rose-colored paper, and expressed throughout in a tone of light, easy, feminine banter, which amused me in spite of myself. Miss Jessie, according to her own account, was hesitating, on receipt of my letter, between two alternatives—the one, of allowing herself to be buried six weeks in The Glen Tower; the other, of breaking the condition, giving up the money, and remaining magnanimously contented with nothing but a life-interest in her father's property. At present she inclined decidedly toward giving up the money and escaping the clutches of "the three horrid old men;" but she would let me know again if she happened to change her mind. And so, with best love, she would beg to remain always affectionately mine, as long as she was well out of my reach.

The summer passed, the autumn came, and I never heard from her again. Under ordinary circumstances, this long silence might have made me feel a little uneasy. But news reached me about this time from the Crimea that my son was wounded—not dangerously, thank God, but still severely enough to be la id up—and all my anxieties were now centered in that direction. By the beginning of September, however, I got better accounts of him, and my mind was made easy enough to let me think of Jessie again. Just as I was considering the necessity of writing once more to my refractory ward, a second letter arrived from her. She had returned at last from abroad, had suddenly changed her mind, suddenly grown sick of society, suddenly become

enamored of the pleasures of retirement, and suddenly found out that the three horrid old men were three dear old men, and that six weeks' solitude at The Glen Tower was the luxury, of all others, that she languished for most. As a necessary result of this altered state of things, she would therefore now propose to spend her allotted six weeks with her guardian. We might certainly expect her on the twentieth of September, and she would take the greatest care to fit herself for our society by arriving in the lowest possible spirits, and bringing her own sackcloth and ashes along with her.

The first ordeal to which this alarming letter forced me to submit was the breaking of the news it contained to my two brothers. The disclosure affected them very differently. Poor dear Owen merely turned pale, lifted his weak, thin hands in a panic-stricken manner, and then sat staring at me in speechless and motionless bewilderment. Morgan stood up straight before me, plunged both his hands into his pockets, burst suddenly into the harshest laugh I ever heard from his lips, and told me, with an air of triumph, that it was exactly what he expected.

"What you expected?" I repeated, in astonishment.

"Yes," returned Morgan, with his bitterest emphasis. "It doesn't surprise me in the least. It's the way things go in this world—it's the regular moral see-saw of good and evil—the old story with the old end to it. They were too happy in the garden of Eden—down comes the serpent and turns them out. Solomon was too wise—down comes the Queen of Sheba, and makes a fool of him. We've been too comfortable at The Glen Tower—down comes a woman, and sets us all three by the ears together. All I wonder at is that it hasn't happened before." With those words Morgan

resignedly took out his pipe, put on his old felt hat and turned to the door.

“You’re not going away before she comes?” exclaimed Owen, piteously. “Don’t leave us—please don’t leave us!”

“Going!” cried Morgan, with great contempt. “What should I gain by that? When destiny has found a man out, and heated his gridiron for him, he has nothing left to do, that I know of, but to get up and sit on it.”

I opened my lips to protest against the implied comparison between a young lady and a hot gridiron, but, before I could speak, Morgan was gone.

“Well,” I said to Owen, “we must make the best of it. We must brush up our manners, and set the house tidy, and amuse her as well as we can. The difficulty is where to put her; and, when that is settled, the next puzzle will be, what to order in to make her comfortable. It’s a hard thing, brother, to say what will or what will not please a young lady’s taste.”

Owen looked absently at me, in greater bewilderment than ever—opened his eyes in perplexed consideration—repeated to himself slowly the word “tastes”—and then helped me with this suggestion:

“Hadn’t we better begin, Griffith, by getting her a plum-cake?”

“My dear Owen,” I remonstrated, “it is a grown young woman who is coming to see us, not a little girl from school.”

“Oh!” said Owen, more confused than before. “Yes—I see; we couldn’t do wrong, I suppose—could we?—if we got her a

little dog, and a lot of new gowns."

There was, evidently, no more help in the way of advice to be expected from Owen than from Morgan himself. As I came to that conclusion, I saw through the window our old housekeeper on her way, with her basket, to the kitchen-garden, and left the room to ascertain if she could assist us.

To my great dismay, the housekeeper took even a more gloomy view than Morgan of the approaching event. When I had explained all the circumstances to her, she carefully put down her basket, crossed her arms, and said to me in slow, deliberate, mysterious tones:

"You want my advice about what's to be done with this young woman? Well, sir, here's my advice: Don't you trouble your head about her. It won't be no use. Mind, I tell you, it won't be no use."

"What do you mean?"

"You look at this place, sir—it's more like a prison than a house, isn't it? You, look at us as lives in it. We've got (saving your presence) a foot apiece in our graves, haven't we? When you was young yourself, sir, what would you have done if they had shut you up for six weeks in such a place as this, among your grandfathers and grandmothers, with their feet in the grave?"

"I really can't say."

"I can, sir. You'd have run away. *She'll* run away. Don't you worry your head about her—she'll save you the trouble. I tell you again, she'll run away."

With those ominous words the housekeeper took up her basket, sighed heavily, and left me.

I sat down under a tree quite helpless. Here was the whole responsibility shifted upon my miserable shoulders. Not a lady in the neighborhood to whom I could apply for assistance, and the nearest shop eight miles distant from us. The toughest case I ever had to conduct, when I was at the Bar, was plain sailing compared with the difficulty of receiving our fair guest.

It was absolutely necessary, however, to decide at once where she was to sleep. All the rooms in the tower were of stone—dark, gloomy, and cold even in the summer-time. Impossible to put her in any one of them. The only other alternative was to lodge her in the little modern lean-to, which I have already described as being tacked on to the side of the old building. It contained three cottage-rooms, and they might be made barely habitable for a young lady. But then those rooms were occupied by Morgan. His books were in one, his bed was in another, his pipes and general lumber were in the third. Could I expect him, after the sour similitudes he had used in reference to our expected visitor, to turn out of his habitation and disarrange all his habits for her convenience? The bare idea of proposing the thing to him seemed ridiculous; and yet inexorable necessity left me no choice but to make the hopeless experiment. I walked back to the tower hastily and desperately, to face the worst that might happen before my courage cooled altogether.

On crossing the threshold of the hall door I was stopped, to my great amazement, by a procession of three of the farm-servants, followed by Morgan, all walking after each other, in Indian file, toward the spiral staircase that led to the top of the tower. The first of the servants carried the materials for making a fire; the second bore an inverted arm-chair on his head; the third tottered under a heavy load of books; while Morgan came last, with his canister of tobacco in his hand, his dressing-gown over his shoulders, and his whole

collection of pipes hugged up together in a bundle under his arm.

“What on earth does this mean?” I inquired.

“It means taking Time by the forelock,” answered Morgan, looking at me with a smile of sour satisfaction. “I’ve got the start of your young woman, Griffith, and I’m making the most of it.”

“But where, in Heaven’s name, are you going?” I asked, as the head man of the procession disappeared with his firing up the staircase.

“How high is this tower?” retorted Morgan.

“Seven stories, to be sure,” I replied.

“Very good,” said my eccentric brother, setting his foot on the first stair, “I’m going up to the seventh.”

“You can’t,” I shouted.

“*She* can’t, you mean,” said Morgan, “and that’s exactly why I’m going there.”

“But the room is not furnished.”

“It’s out of her reach.”

“One of the windows has fallen to pieces.”

“It’s out of her reach.”

“There’s a crow’s nest in the corner.”

“It’s out of her reach.”

By the time this unanswerable argument had attained its third repetition, Morgan, in his turn, had disappeared up the winding stairs. I knew him too well to attempt any further protest.

Here was my first difficulty smoothed away most unexpectedly; for here were the rooms in the lean-to placed by their owner's free act and deed at my disposal. I wrote on the spot to the one upholsterer of our distant county town to come immediately and survey the premises, and sent off a mounted messenger with the letter. This done, and the necessary order also dispatched to the carpenter and glazier to set them at work on Morgan's sky-parlor in the seventh story, I began to feel, for the first time, as if my scattered wits were coming back to me. By the time the evening had closed in I had hit on no less than three excellent ideas, all providing for the future comfort and amusement of our fair guest. The first idea was to get her a Welsh pony; the second was to hire a piano from the county town; the third was to send for a boxful of novels from London. I must confess I thought these projects for pleasing her very happily conceived, and Owen agreed with me. Morgan, as usual, took the opposite view. He said she would yawn over the novels, turn up her nose at the piano, and fracture her skull with the pony. As for the housekeeper, she stuck to her text as stoutly in the evening as she had stuck to it in the morning. "Pianner or no pianner, story-book or no story-book, pony or no pony, you mark my words, sir—that young woman will run away."

Such were the housekeeper's parting words when she wished me good-night.

When the next morning came, and brought with it that terrible waking time which sets a man's hopes and projects before him, the great as well as the small, stripped bare of

every illusion, it is not to be concealed that I felt less sanguine of our success in entertaining the coming guest. So far as external preparations were concerned, there seemed, indeed, but little to improve; but apart from these, what had we to offer, in ourselves and our society, to attract her? There lay the knotty point of the question, and there the grand difficulty of finding an answer.

I fall into serious reflection while I am dressing on the pursuits and occupations with which we three brothers have been accustomed, for years past, to beguile the time. Are they at all likely, in the case of any one of us, to interest or amuse her?

My chief occupation, to begin with the youngest, consists, in acting as steward on Owen’s property. The routine of my duties has never lost its sober attraction to my tastes, for it has always employed me in watching the best interests of my brother, and of my son also, who is one day to be his heir. But can I expect our fair guest to sympathize with such family concerns as these? Clearly not.

Morgan’s pursuit comes next in order of review—a pursuit of a far more ambitious nature than mine. It was always part of my second brother’s whimsical, self-contradictory character to view with the profoundest contempt the learned profession by which he gained his livelihood, and he is now occupying the long leisure hours of his old age in composing a voluminous treatise, intended, one of these days, to eject the whole body corporate of doctors from the position which they have usurped in the estimation of their fellow-creatures. This daring work is entitled “An Examination of the Claims of Medicine on the Gratitude of Mankind. Decided in the Negative by a Retired Physician.” So far as I can tell, the book is likely to extend to the dimensions of an Encyclopedia; for it is Morgan’s plan to treat his

comprehensive subject principally from the historical point of view, and to run down all the doctors of antiquity, one after another, in regular succession, from the first of the tribe. When I last heard of his progress he was hard on the heels of Hippocrates, but had no immediate prospect of tripping up his successor, Is this the sort of occupation (I ask myself) in which a modern young lady is likely to feel the slightest interest? Once again, clearly not.

Owen’s favorite employment is, in its way, quite as characteristic as Morgan’s, and it has the great additional advantage of appealing to a much larger variety of tastes. My eldest brother—great at drawing and painting when he was a lad, always interested in artists and their works in after life—has resumed, in his declining years, the holiday occupation of his schoolboy days. As an amateur landscape-painter, he works with more satisfaction to himself, uses more color, wears out more brushes, and makes a greater smell of paint in his studio than any artist by profession, native or foreign, whom I ever met with. In look, in manner, and in disposition, the gentlest of mankind, Owen, by some singular anomaly in his character, which he seems to have caught from Morgan, glories placidly in the wildest and most frightful range of subjects which his art is capable of representing. Immeasurable ruins, in howling wildernesses, with blood-red sunsets gleaming over them; thunder-clouds rent with lightning, hovering over splitting trees on the verges of awful precipices; hurricanes, shipwrecks, waves, and whirlpools follow each other on his canvas, without an intervening glimpse of quiet everyday nature to relieve the succession of pictorial horrors. When I see him at his easel, so neat and quiet, so unpretending and modest in himself, with such a composed expression on his attentive face, with such a weak white hand to guide such bold, big brushes, and when I look at the frightful canvasful of terrors which he is serenely aggravating in fierceness and intensity with

every successive touch, I find it difficult to realize the connection between my brother and his work, though I see them before me not six inches apart. Will this quaint spectacle possess any humorous attractions for Miss Jessie? Perhaps it may. There is some slight chance that Owen's employment will be lucky enough to interest her.

Thus far my morning cogitations advance doubtfully enough, but they altogether fail in carrying me beyond the narrow circle of The Glen Tower. I try hard, in our visitor's interest, to look into the resources of the little world around us, and I find my efforts rewarded by the prospect of a total blank.

Is there any presentable living soul in the neighborhood whom we can invite to meet her? Not one. There are, as I have already said, no country seats near us; and society in the county town has long since learned to regard us as three misanthropes, strongly suspected, from our monastic way of life and our dismal black costume, of being popish priests in disguise. In other parts of England the clergyman of the parish might help us out of our difficulty; but here in South Wales, and in this latter half of the nineteenth century, we have the old type parson of the days of Fielding still in a state of perfect preservation. Our local clergyman receives a stipend which is too paltry to bear comparison with the wages of an ordinary mechanic. In dress, manners, and tastes he is about on a level with the upper class of agricultural laborer. When attempts have been made by well-meaning gentlefolks to recognize the claims of his profession by asking him to their houses, he has been known, on more than one occasion, to leave his plowman's pair of shoes in the hall, and enter the drawing-room respectfully in his stockings. Where he preaches, miles and miles away from us and from the poor cottage in which he lives, if he sees any of the company in the squire's pew

yawn or fidget in their places, he takes it as a hint that they are tired of listening, and closes his sermon instantly at the end of the sentence. Can we ask this most irreverend and unclerical of men to meet a young lady? I doubt, even if we made the attempt, whether we should succeed, by fair means, in getting him beyond the servants' hall.

Dismissing, therefore, all idea of inviting visitors to entertain our guest, and feeling, at the same time, more than doubtful of her chance of discovering any attraction in the sober society of the inmates of the house, I finish my dressing and go down to breakfast, secretly veering round to the housekeeper's opinion that Miss Jessie will really bring matters to an abrupt conclusion by running away. I find Morgan as bitterly resigned to his destiny as ever, and Owen so affectionately anxious to make himself of some use, and so lamentably ignorant of how to begin, that I am driven to disembarrass myself of him at the outset by a stratagem.

I suggest to him that our visitor is sure to be interested in pictures, and that it would be a pretty attention, on his part, to paint her a landscape to hang up in her room. Owen brightens directly, informs me in his softest tones that he is then at work on the Earthquake at Lisbon, and inquires whether I think she would like that subject. I preserve my gravity sufficiently to answer in the affirmative, and my brother retires meekly to his studio, to depict the engulfing of a city and the destruction of a population. Morgan withdraws in his turn to the top of the tower, threatening, when our guest comes, to draw all his meals up to his new residence by means of a basket and string. I am left alone for an hour, and then the upholsterer arrives from the county town.

This worthy man, on being informed of our emergency, sees his way, apparently, to a good stroke of business, and thereupon wins my lasting gratitude by taking, in opposition to every one else, a bright and hopeful view of existing circumstances.

“You’ll excuse me, sir,” he says, confidentially, when I show him the rooms in the lean-to, “but this is a matter of experience. I’m a family man myself, with grown-up daughters of my own, and the natures of young women are well known to me. Make their rooms comfortable, and you make ‘em happy. Surround their lives, sir, with a suitable atmosphere of furniture, and you never hear a word of complaint drop from their lips. Now, with regard to these rooms, for example, sir—you put a neat French bedstead in that corner, with curtains conformable—say a tasty chintz; you put on that bedstead what I will term a sufficiency of bedding; and you top up with a sweet little eider-down quilt, as light as roses, and similar the same in color. You do that, and what follows? You please her eye when she lies down at night, and you please her eye when she gets up in the morning—and you’re all right so far, and so is she. I will not dwell, sir, on the toilet-table, nor will I seek to detain you about the glass to show her figure, and the other glass to show her face, because I have the articles in stock, and will be myself answerable for their effect on a lady’s mind and person.”

He led the way into the next room as he spoke, and arranged its future fittings, and decorations, as he had already planned out the bedroom, with the strictest reference to the connection which experience had shown him to exist between comfortable furniture and female happiness.

Thus far, in my helpless state of mind, the man’s confidence had impressed me in spite of myself, and I had listened to him in superstitious silence. But as he continued to rise, by regular gradations, from one climax of upholstery to another, warning visions of his bill disclosed themselves in the remote background of the scene of luxury and magnificence which my friend was conjuring up. Certain sharp professional instincts of bygone times resumed their influence over me; I began to start doubts and ask questions; and as a necessary consequence the interview between us soon assumed something like a practical form.

Having ascertained what the probable expense of furnishing would amount to and having discovered that the process of transforming the lean-to (allowing for the time required to procure certain articles of rarity from Bristol) would occupy nearly a fortnight, I dismissed the upholsterer with the understanding that I should take a day or two for consideration, and let him know the result. It was then the fifth of September, and our Queen of Hearts was to arrive on the twentieth. The work, therefore, if it was begun on the seventh or eighth, would be begun in time.

In making all my calculations with a reference to the twentieth of September, I relied implicitly, it will be observed, on a young lady’s punctuality in keeping an appointment which she had herself made. I can only account for such extraordinary simplicity on my part on the supposition that my wits had become sadly rusted by long seclusion from society. Whether it was referable to this cause or not, my innocent trustfulness was at any rate destined to be practically rebuked before long in the most surprising manner. Little did I suspect, when I parted from the upholsterer on the fifth of the month, what the tenth of the month had in store for me.

On the seventh I made up my mind to have the bedroom furnished at once, and to postpone the question of the sitting-room for a few days longer. Having dispatched the necessary order to that effect, I next wrote to hire the piano and to order the box of novels. This done, I congratulated myself on the forward state of the preparations, and sat down to repose in the atmosphere of my own happy delusions.

On the ninth the wagon arrived with the furniture, and the men set to work on the bedroom. From this moment Morgan retired definitely to the top of the tower, and Owen became too nervous to lay the necessary amount of paint on the Earthquake at Lisbon.

On the tenth the work was proceeding bravely. Toward noon Owen and I strolled to the door to enjoy the fine autumn sunshine. We were sitting lazily on our favorite bench in front of the tower when we were startled by a shout from above us. Looking up directly, we saw Morgan half in and half out of his narrow window. In the seventh story, gesticulating violently with the stem of his long meerschaum pipe in the direction of the road below us.

We gazed eagerly in the quarter thus indicated, but our low position prevented us for some time from seeing anything. At last we both discerned an old yellow post-chaise distinctly and indisputably approaching us.

Owen and I looked at one another in panic-stricken silence. It was coming to us—and what did it contain? Do pianos travel in chaises? Are boxes of novels conveyed to their destination by a postilion? We expected the piano and expected the novels, but nothing else—unquestionably nothing else.