

Marx Hardy Machiavelli Joyce Austen
Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm
Garnett Engels Byron Schiller
Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka
Cotton Fitzgerald Dostoyevsky Hall
Baum Henry Kipling Doyle Willis
Leslie Dumas Flaubert Nietzsche Turgenev Balzac
Stockton Vatsyayana Crane
Burroughs Verne
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch
Homer Tolstoy Whitman
Darwin Thoreau Twain
Potter Zola Lawrence Dickens Plato Scott
Kant Freud Jowett Stevenson Andersen Burton Harte
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Poe Aristotle Wells Bunner Shakespeare Cooke
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The Queen of Hearts

Wilkie Collins

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THE QUEEN OF HEARTS

By Wilkie Collins

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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 him 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 then 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 gaiety. 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 laid 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