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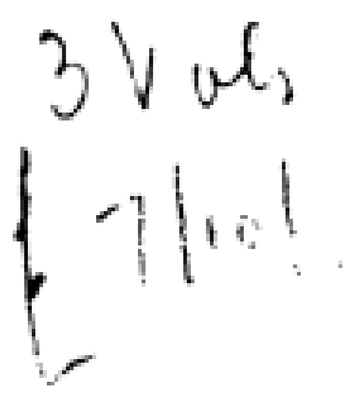

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THE WYVERN MYSTERY.

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THE WYVERN MYSTERY.

A Novel.

By J. S. LE FANU,

AUTHOR OF "UNCLE SILAS," "GUY DEVERELL," ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:

TINSLEY BROTHERS, 18, CATHERINE ST., STRAND.

1869.

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Dedication.

MY DEAR JUDGE KEOGH,

You, who take an interest in all Literature, will not disdain the dedication of these trifling Volumes, in testimony of an early friendship, never interrupted, and of an admiration everywhere inspired by your brilliant talents.

Ever yours most faithfully,

J. S. LE FANU.

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THE WYVERN MYSTERY.

CHAPTER I.

ALICE MAYBELL.

In the small breakfast parlour of Oulton, a pretty girl, Miss Alice Maybell, with her furs and wrappers about her, and a journey of forty miles before her—not by rail—to Wyvern, had stood up to hug and kiss her old aunt, and bid her good-bye.

"Now, do sit down again; you need not be in such a hurry—you're not to go for ten minutes or more," said the old lady; "do, there's a darling."

"If I'm not home before the sun goes down, aunt, Mr. Fairfield will be so angry,"

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said the girl, laying a hand on each shoulder of kind old Lady Wyndale, and looking fondly, but also sadly, into her face.

"Which Mr. Fairfield, dear—the old or the young one?"

"Old Mr. Fairfield, the Squire, as we call him at Wyvern. He'll really be angry, and I'm a little bit afraid of him, and I would not vex him for the world—he has always been so kind."

As she answered, the young lady blushed a beautiful crimson, and the old lady, not observing it, said—

"Indeed, I don't know why I said young—young Mr. Fairfield is old enough, I think, to be your father; but I want to know how you liked Lord Tremaine. I told you how much he liked you. I'm a great believer in first impressions. He was so charmed with you, when he saw you in Wyvern Church. Of course he ought to have been thinking of something better; but no matter—the fact was so, and now he is, I really think, in love

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—very much—and who knows? He's such a charming person, and there is everything to make it—I don't know what word to use—but you know Tremaine is quite a beautiful place, and he does not owe a guinea."

"You dear old auntie," said the girl, kissing her again on the cheek, "wicked old darling—always making great matches for me. If you had remained in India, you'd have married me, I'm sure, to a native prince."

"Native fiddlestick; of course I could if I had liked, but you never should have married a Mahomedan with my consent. Never mind though; you're sure to do well; marriages are made in heaven, and I really believe there is no use in plotting and planning. There was your darling mamma, when we were both girls together, I said I should never consent to marry a soldier or live out of England, and I did marry a soldier, and lived twelve years of my life in India; and she, poor darling, said again and again, she did not care who her husband might be, pro-

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vided he was not a clergyman, nor a person living all the year round in the country—*that* no power could induce her to consent to, and yet she did consent, and to both one and the other, and married a clergyman, and a poor one, and lived and died in the country. So, after all, there's not much use in planning beforehand."

"Very true, auntie; none in the world, I believe."

The girl was looking partly over her shoulder, out of the window, upward towards the clouds, and she sighed heavily; and recollecting herself, looked again in her aunt's face and smiled.

"I wish you could have stayed a little longer here," said her aunt.

"I wish I could," she answered slowly, "I was thinking of talking over a great many things with you—that is, of telling you all my long stories; but while those people were staying here I could not, and now there is not time."

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"What long stories, my dear?"

"Stupid stories, I should have said," answered Alice.

"Well come, is there anything to tell?" demanded the old lady, looking in her large, dark eyes.

"Nothing worth telling — nothing that is—" and she paused for the continuation of her sentence.

"That is what?" asked her aunt.

"I was going to talk to you, darling," answered the girl, "but I could not in so short a time—so short a time as remains now," and she looked at her watch—a gift of old Squire Fairfield's. "I should not know how to make myself understood, I have so many hundred things, and all jumbled up in my head, and should not know how to begin."

"Well, I'll begin for you. Come—have any visitors looked in at Wyvern lately?" said her aunt.

"Not one," she answered.

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"No new faces?"

"No, indeed."

"Are there any new neighbours?" persisted the old lady.

"Not one. No, aunt, it isn't that."

"And where are these elderly young gentlemen, the two Mr. Fairfields?" asked the old lady.

The girl laughed, and shook her head.

"Wandering at present. Captain Fairfield is in London."

"And his charming younger brother—where is he?" asked Lady Wyndale.

"At some fair, I suppose, or horse-race; or, goodness knows where," answered the girl.

"I was going to ask you whether there was an affair of the heart," said her aunt. "But there does not seem much material; and what was the subject? Though I can't hear it all, you may tell me what it was to be about."

"About fifty things, or nothings. There's

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no one on earth, auntie, darling, but you I can talk anything over with ; and I'll write, or, if you let me, come again for a day or two, very soon—may I ?"

"Of course, *no*," said her aunt gaily. "But we are not to be quite alone, all the time, mind. There are people who would not forgive me if I were to do anything so selfish, but I promise you ample time to talk—you and I to ourselves ; and now that I think, I should like to hear by the post, if you will write and say anything you like. You may be quite sure nobody shall hear a word about it."

By this time they had got to the hall-door.

"I'm sure of that, darling," and she kissed the kind old lady.

"And are you *quite* sure you would not like a servant to travel with you ; he could sit beside the driver ?"

"No, dear auntie, my trusty old Dulcibella sits inside to take care of me."

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"Well, dear, are you quite sure? I should not miss him the least."

"Quite, dear aunt, I assure you."

"And you know you told me you were quite happy at Wyvern," said Lady Wyndale, returning her farewell caress, and speaking low, for a servant stood at the chaise-door.

"Did I? Well, I shouldn't have said that, for—I'm *not* happy," whispered Alice Maybell, and the tears sprang to her eyes as she kissed her old kinswoman; and then, with her arms still about her neck, there was a brief look from her large, brimming eyes, while her lip trembled; and suddenly she turned, and before Lady Wyndale had recovered from that little shock, her pretty guest was seated in the chaise, the door shut, and she drove away.

"What can it be, poor little thing?" thought Lady Wyndale, as her eyes anxiously followed the carriage in its flight down the avenue.

"They have shot her pet-pigeon, or the

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dog has killed her guinea-pig, or old Fairfield won't allow her to sit up till twelve o'clock at night, reading her novel. Some childish misery, I dare say, poor little soul!"

But for all that she was not satisfied, and her poor, pale, troubled look haunted her.

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CHAPTER II.

THE VALE OF CARWELL.

In about an hour and a half this chaise reached the Pied Horse, on Elverstone Moor. Having changed horses at this inn, they resumed their journey, and Miss Alice Maybell, who had been sad and abstracted, now lowered the window beside her, and looked out upon the broad, shaggy heath, rising in low hillocks, and breaking here and there into pools—a wild, and on the whole a monotonous and rather dismal expanse.

"How fresh and pleasant the air is here, and how beautiful the purple of the heath!" exclaimed the young lady with animation.

"There now—that's right—beautiful it is, my darling; that's how I like to see my child—pleasant-like and 'appy, and not mopin' and

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dull, like a sick bird. Be that way always; *do*, dear."

"You're a kind old thing," said the young lady, placing her slender hand fondly on her old nurse's arm, "good old Dulcibella: you're always to come with me wherever I go."

"That's just what Dulcibella'd like," answered the old woman, who was fat, and liked her comforts, and loved Miss Alice more than many mothers love their own children, and had answered the same reminders, in the same terms, a good many thousand times in her life.

Again the young lady was looking out of the window—not like one enjoying a landscape as it comes, but with something of anxiety in her countenance, with her head through the open window, and gazing forward as if in search of some expected object.

"Do you remember some old trees standing together at the end of this moor, and a ruined windmill, on a hillock?" she asked suddenly.

"Well," answered Dulcibella, who was not

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of an observant turn, "I suppose I do, Miss Alice; perhaps there is."

"I remember it very well, but not *where* it is; and when last we passed, it was dark," murmured the young lady to herself, rather than to Dulcibella, whom upon such points she did not much mind. "Suppose we ask the driver?"

She tapped at the window behind the box, and signed to the man, who looked over his shoulder. When he had pulled up she opened the front window and said—

"There's a village a little way on—isn't there?"

"Shuldon—yes'm, two mile and a bit," he answered.

"Well, before we come to it, on the left there is a grove of tall trees and an old windmill," continued the pretty young lady, looking pale.

"Gryce's mill we call it, but it don't go this many a day."

"Yes, I dare say; and there is a road

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that turns off to the left, just under that old mill?"

"That'll be the road to Church Carwell."

"You must drive about three miles along that road."

"That'll be out o' the way, ma'am—three, and three back—six miles—I don't know about the hosses."

"You must try, I'll pay you—listen," and she lowered her voice. "There's one house—an old house—on the way, in the Vale of Carwell; it is called Carwell Grange—do you know it?"

"Yes'm; but there's no one livin' there."

"No matter—there is; there is an old woman whom I want to see; that's where I want to go, and you must manage it, I shan't delay you many minutes, and you're to tell no one, either on the way or when you get home, and I'll give you two pounds for yourself."

"All right," he answered, looking hard in the pale face and large dark eyes that

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gazed on him eagerly from the window. "Thank'ye, Miss, all right, we'll wet their mouths at the Grange, or you wouldn't mind waiting till they get a mouthful of oats, I dessay?"

"No, certainly; anything that is necessary, only I have a good way still to go before evening, and you won't delay more than you can help?"

"Get along, then," said the man, briskly to his horses, and forthwith they were again in motion.

The young lady pulled up the window, and leaned back for some minutes in her place.

"And where are we going to, dear Miss Alice?" inquired Dulcibella, who dimly apprehended that they were about to deviate from the straight way home, and feared the old Squire, as other Wyvern folk did.

"A very little way, nothing of any consequence; and Dulcibella, if you really love me as you say, one word about it, to living being

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at Wyvern or anywhere else, you'll never say —you promise?"

"You know me well, Miss Alice—I don't talk to no one; but I'm sorry-like to hear there's anything like a secret. I dread secrets."

"You need not fear this—it is nothing, no secret, if people were not unreasonable, and it shan't be a secret long, perhaps, only be true to me."

"True to you! Well, who should I be true to if not to you, darling, and never a word about it will pass old Dulcibella's lips, talk who will; and are we pretty near it?"

"Very near, I think; it's only to see an old woman, and get some information from her, nothing, only I don't wish it to be talked about, and I know you won't."

"Not a word, dear. I never talk to any one, not I, for all the world."

In a few minutes more they crossed a little bridge spanning a brawling stream, and the chaise turned the corner of a by-road to the

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left, under the shadow of a group of tall and sombre elms, overtopped by the roofless tower of the old windmill. Utterly lonely was the road, but at first with only a solitariness that partook of the wildness and melancholy of the moor which they had been traversing. Soon, however, the uplands at either side drew nearer, grew steeper, and the scattered bushes gathered into groups, and rose into trees, thickening as the road proceeded. Steeper grew the banks, higher and gloomier. Precipitous rocks showed their fronts, overtopped by trees and copse. The hollow which they had entered by the old windmill had deepened into a valley and was now contracted to a dark glen, overgrown by forest, and relieved from utter silence only by the moan and tinkle of the brook that wound its way through stones and brambles, in its unseen depths. Along the side of this melancholy glen about half way down, ran the narrow road, near the point where they now were, it makes an ascent, and as they

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were slowly mounting this an open carriage —a shabby, hired, nondescript vehicle—appeared in the deep shadow, at some distance, descending towards them. The road is so narrow that two carriages could not pass one another without risk. Here and there the inconvenience is provided against by a recess in the bank, and into one of these the distant carriage drew aside. A tall female figure, with feet extended on the opposite cushion, sat or rather reclined in the back seat. There was no one else in the carriage. She was wrapped in gray tweed, and the driver had now turned his face towards her, and was plainly receiving some orders.

Miss Maybell, as the carriage entered this melancholy pass, had grown more and more anxious; and pale and silent, was looking forward through the window, as they advanced. At sight of this vehicle, drawn up before them, a sudden fear chilled the young lady with, perhaps, a remote prescience.

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CHAPTER III.

THE GRANGE.

THE excited nerves of children people the darkness of the nursery with phantoms. The moral and mental darkness of suspense provokes, after its sort, a similar phantasmagoria. Alice Maybell's heart grew still, and her cheeks paled as she looked with most unreasonable alarm upon the carriage, which had come to a standstill.

There was, however, the sense of a great stake, of great helplessness, of great but undefined possible mischiefs, such as to the "look-out" of a rich galleon in the old piratical days, would have made a strange sail, on the high seas, always an anxious object on the horizon.

And now Miss Alice Maybell was not re-

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assured by observing the enemy's driver get down, and taking the horses by the head, back the carriage far enough across the road, to obstruct their passage, and this had clearly been done by the direction of the lady in the carriage.

They had now reached the point of obstruction, the driver pulled up, Miss Maybell had lowered the chaise window and was peeping. She saw a tall woman, wrapped up and reclining, as I have said. Her face she could not see, for it was thickly veiled, but she held her hand, from which she had pulled her glove, to her ear, and it was not a young hand nor very refined,—lean and masculine, on the contrary, and its veins and sinews rather strongly marked. The woman was listening, evidently, with attention, and her face, veiled as it was, was turned away so as to bring her ear towards the speakers in the expected colloquy.

Miss Alice Maybell saw the driver ex-

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change a look with hers that seemed to betoken old acquaintance.

"I say, give us room to pass, will ye?" said Miss Maybell's man,

"Where will you be going to?" inquired the other, and followed the question with a jerk of his thumb over his shoulder, toward the lady in the tweed wrappers, putting out his tongue and winking at the same time.

"To Church Carwell," answered the man.

"To Church Carwell, ma'am," repeated the driver over his shoulder to the reclining figure.

"What to do there?" said she, in a sharp, under tone, and with a decided foreign accent.

"What to do there?" repeated the man.

"Change hosses, and go on."

"On *where?*" repeated the lady to her driver.

"On where?" repeated he.

"Doughton," fibbed Miss Maybell's man, and the same repetition ensued.

"Not going to the Grange?" prompted

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the lady, in the same under-tone and foreign accent, and the question was transmitted as before—

"What Grange?" demanded the driver.

"Carwell Grange."

"No."

Miss Alice Maybell was very much frightened as she heard this home-question put, and, relieved by the audacity of her friend on the box, who continued—

"Now then, you move out of that."

The tall woman in the wrappers nodded, and her driver accordingly pulled the horses aside, with another grin and a wink to his friend, and Miss Maybell drove by to her own great relief.

The reclining figure did not care to turn her face enough to catch a passing sight of the people whom she had thus arbitrarily detained.

She went her way toward Gryce's mill, and Miss Maybell pursuing hers toward Carwell Grange, was quickly out of sight.

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A few minutes more and the glen expanded gently, so as to leave a long oval pasture of two or three acres visible beneath, with the little stream winding its way through the soft sward among scattered trees. Two or three cows were peacefully grazing there, and at the same point a converging hollow made its way into the glen at their right, and through this also spread the forest, under whose shadow they had already been driving for more than two miles.

Into this, from the main road, diverged a ruder track, with a rather steep ascent. This by-road leads up to the Grange, rather a stiff pull. The driver had to dismount and lead his horses, and once or twice expressed doubts as to whether they could pull their burden up the hill.

Alice Maybell, however, offered not to get out. She was nervous, and like a frightened child who gets its bed-clothes about its head, the instinct of concealment prevailed, and she trembled lest some other inquirer should

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cross her way less easily satisfied than the first.

They soon reached a level platform, under the deep shadow of huge old trees, nearly meeting over head. The hoarse cawing of a rookery came mellowed by short distance on the air. For all else, the place was silence itself.

The man came to the door of the carriage to tell his "fare" that they had reached the Grange.

"Stay where you are, Dulcibella, I shan't be away many minutes," said the young lady, looking pale, as if she was going to execution.

"I will, Miss Alice; but you must get a bit to eat, dear, you're hungry, I know by your looks; get a bit of bread and butter."

"Yes, yes, Dulcie," said the young lady, not having heard a syllable of this little speech, as looking curiously at the old place, under whose walls they had arrived, she descended from the chaise.

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Under the leafy darkness stood two time-stained piers of stone, with a wicket open in the gate. Through this she peeped into a paved yard, all grass-grown, and surrounded by a high wall, with a fine mantle of ivy, through which showed dimly the neglected doors and windows of out-offices and stables. At the right rose, three stories high, with melancholy gables and tall chimneys, the old stone house.

So this was Carwell Grange. Nettles grew in the corners of the yard, and tufts of grass in the chinks of the stone steps, and the worn masonry was tinted with moss and lichens, and all around rose the solemn melancholy screen of darksome foliage, high over the surrounding walls, and outtopping the gray roof of the house.

She hesitated at the door, and then raised the latch; but a bolt secured it. Another hesitation, and she ventured to knock with a stone, that was probably placed there for the purpose.

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A lean old woman, whose countenance did not indicate a pleasant temper, put out her head from a window, and asked:

"Well, an' what brings *you* here?"

"I expected—to see a friend here," she answered timidly; "and—and you are Mrs. Tarnley—I *think?*"

"I'm the person," answered the woman.

"And I was told to show you this—and that you would admit me."

And she handed her, through the iron bars of the window, a little oval picture in a shagreen case, hardly bigger than a penny-piece.

The old lady turned it to the light and looked hard at it, saying, "Ay—ay—my old eyes—they won't see as they used to—but it is so—the old missus—yes—it's all right, Miss," and she viewed the young lady with some curiosity, but her tones were much more respectful as she handed her back the miniature.

"I'll open the door, please 'm."

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And almost instantly Miss Maybell heard the bolts withdrawn.

"Would you please to walk in—my lady? I can only bring ye into the kitchen. The apples is in the parlour, and the big room's full o' straw—and the rest o' them is locked up. It'll be Master I know who ye'll be looking arter?"

The young lady blushed deeply—the question was hardly shaped in the most delicate way.

"There was a woman in a *barooche*, I think they call it, asking was any one here, and asking very sharp after Master, and I told her he wasn't here this many a day, nor like to be—and 'twas that made me a bit shy o' you; you'll understand, just for a bit."

"And is he—is your master?"—and she looked round the interior of the house.

"No, he b'aint come; but here's a letter—what's your name?" she added abruptly, with a sudden access of suspicion.

"Miss Maybell," answered she.

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"Yes—well—you'll excuse me, Miss, but I was told to be sharp, and wide-awake, you see. Will you come into the kitchen?"

And without awaiting her answer the old woman led the way into the kitchen—a melancholy chamber, with two narrow windows, darkened by the trees not far off, that overshadowed the house.

A crooked little cur dog, with protruding ribs, and an air of starvation, flew furiously at Miss Maybell, as she entered, and was rolled over on his back by a lusty kick from the old woman's shoe; and a cat sitting before the fire, bounced under the table to escape the chances of battle.

A little bit of fire smouldered in a corner of the grate. An oak stool, a deal chair, and a battered balloon-backed one, imported from better company, in a crazed and faded state, had grown weaker in the joints, and more ragged and dirty in its antique finery in its present fallen fortunes. There was some cracked delf on the dresser, and some-

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thing was stewing in a tall saucepan, covered with a broken plate, and to this the old woman directed her attention first, stirring its contents, and peering into it for a while; and when she had replaced it carefully, she took the letter from her pocket, and gave it to Miss Maybell, who read it standing near the window.

As she read this letter, which was a short one, the young lady looked angry, with bright eyes and a brilliant flush, then pale, and then the tears started to her eyes, and turning quite away from the old woman, and still holding up the letter as if reading it, she wept in silence.

The old woman, if she saw this, evinced no sympathy, but continued to fidget about, muttering to herself, shoving her miserable furniture this way or that, arranging her crockery on the dresser, visiting the saucepan that sat patiently on the embers, and sometimes kicking the dog, with an unwomanly curse, when he growled. Drying her eyes,

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the young lady took her departure, and with a heavy heart left this dismal abode; but with the instinct of propitiation, strong in the unhappy, and with the melancholy hope of even buying a momentary sympathy, she placed some money in the dark hard hand of the crone, who made her a courtesy and a thankless "thankee, Miss," on the step, as her eye counted over the silver with a greedy ogle, that lay on her lean palm.

"Nothing for nothing." On the whole a somewhat mercenary type of creation is the human. The post-boy reminded the young lady, as she came to the chaise-door, that she might as well gratify him, there and then, with the two pounds which she had promised. And this done, she took her place beside old Dulcibella, who had dropped into a reverie near akin to a doze, and so, without adventure they retraced their way, and once more passing under the shadow of Gryce's mill, entered on their direct journey to Wyvern.

The sun was near the western horizon, and

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threw the melancholy tints of sunset over a landscape, undulating and wooded, that spread before them, as they entered the short, broad avenue that leads through two files of noble old trees, to the gray front of many-chimneyed Wyvern.

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CHAPTER IV.

THE OLD SQUIRE AND ALICE MAYBELL.

WYVERN is a very pretty old house. It is built of a light gray stone, in the later Tudor style. A portion of it is overgrown with thick ivy. It stands not far away from the high road, among grand old trees, and is one of the most interesting features in a richly wooded landscape, that rises into little hills, and, breaking into rocky and forest-darkened glens, and sometimes into dimpling hollows, where the cattle pasture beside pleasant brooks, presents one of the prettiest countries to be found in England.

The old squire, Henry Fairfield, has seen his summer and his autumn days out. It is winter with him now.

He is not a pleasant picture of an English

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