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THOMAS WREN WARD

Treasurer of Harvard College
1830–1842

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"He rode on alone through the furze and fern of his wild and sombre park."—Page 136.

Frontispiece.

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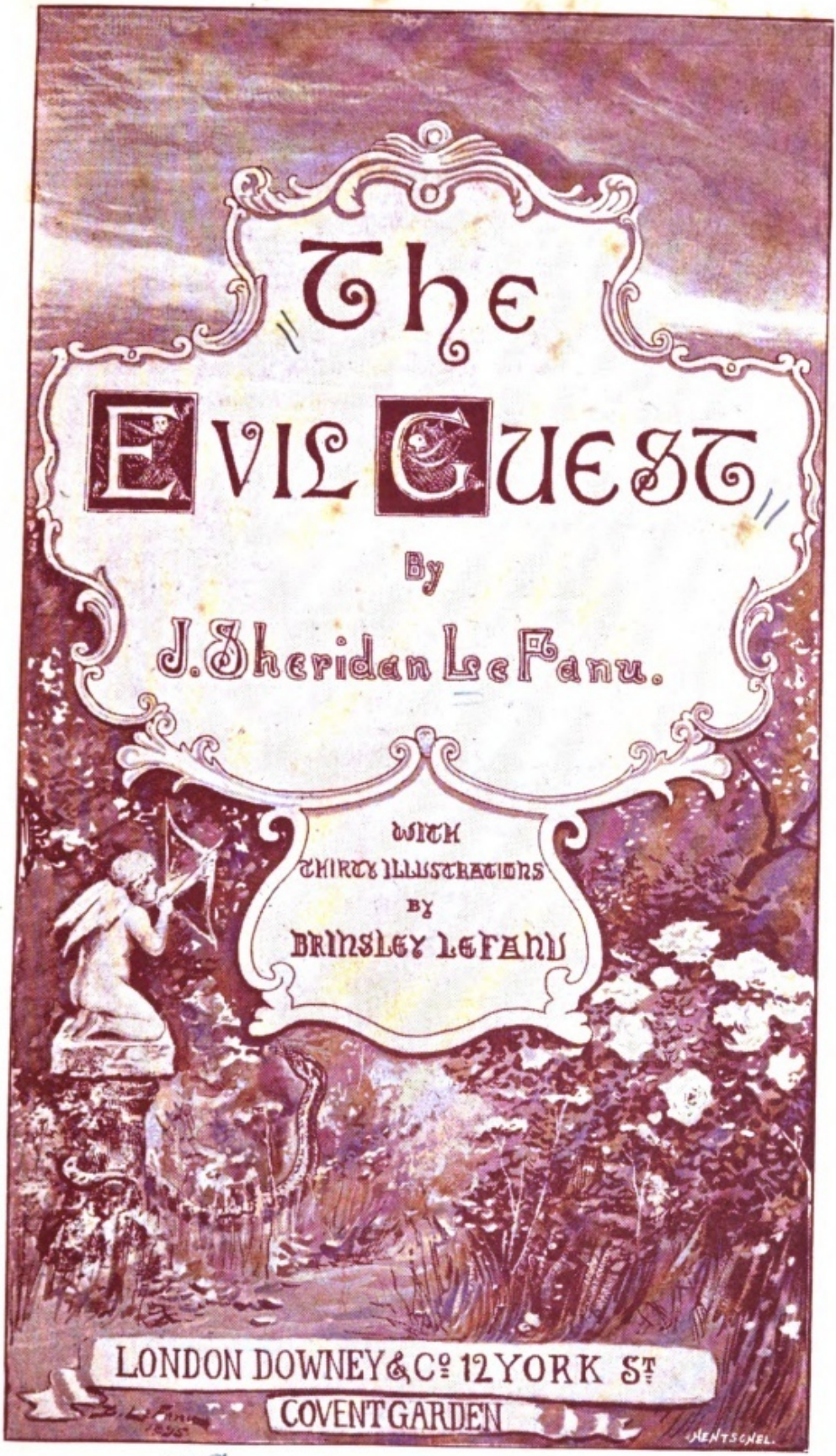

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The Evil Guest.

CHAPTER I.

ABOUT twenty miles from the ancient town of Chester, in a southward direction, there stood, towards the close of the last century, a large, and, even then, an old-fashioned mansion. It lay in the midst of a demesne of considerable extent, richly wooded with venerable timber; but, apart from the sombre majesty of these giant groups, and the varieties of the undulating ground on which they stood, there was little that could be deemed attractive in the place. A certain air of neglect and decay, and an indescribable gloom and melancholy, hung over it. When the moonlight fell upon its glades and hollows, they looked spectral and awful, with a sort of churchyard loneliness; and even when the blush of the morning kissed its broad woodlands, there was a melancholy in the salute which saddened rather than cheered the heart of the beholder.

This antique, melancholy, and neglected place was called Gray Forest. It was then the property of the younger son of a nobleman, once celebrated for his

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ability and his daring, who had long since passed to that land where human wisdom and human courage are of no avail. The representative of this noble house resided at the family mansion in Sussex, and the cadet, with whose fortunes we are concerned, lived upon the narrow margin of an encumbered income, in a reserved and unsocial discontent, deep among the solemn shadows of the old woods of Gray Forest.

The Hon. Richard Marston was somewhere between forty and fifty years of age—perhaps nearer the latter. He still retained, in an eminent degree, the traits of a manly comeliness, not the less remarkable for its unquestionably haughty and passionate character. He had married a beautiful girl, of good family, but without much money, somewhere about eighteen years before; and two children, a son and a daughter, had been the fruit of this union. The boy, Harry Marston, was at this time at Cambridge; and his sister Rhoda, scarcely fifteen, was at home with her parents, and under the training of an accomplished governess, who had been recommended to them by a noble relative of Mrs. Marston. The governess, though a native of France, was thoroughly mistress of the English language, and except for a foreign accent, which gave a certain prettiness to all she said, she spoke it as perfectly as any native Englishwomen. This young Frenchwoman was

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Gray Forest.

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eminently handsome and attractive. Expressive dark eyes, a clear olive complexion, small even teeth, and a beautiful dimpling smile, more perhaps than a strictly classic regularity of features, were the secrets of her unquestionable influence, at first sight, upon the fancy of every man of taste who beheld her.

Marston's fortune, never very large, had been shattered by early dissipation. Naturally of a proud and somewhat exacting temperament, he felt acutely the mortifying consequences of his poverty. The want of what he felt ought to have been his position and influence in the county in which he resided, fretted and galled him; and he cherished a resentful and bitter sense of every slight, imaginary or real, to which the same fruitful source of annoyance and humiliation had exposed him. He held, therefore, but little intercourse with the surrounding gentry, and that little not of the pleasantest possible kind; for, not being himself in a condition to entertain in that style which accorded with his own ideas of his station, he declined, as far as was compatible with good breeding, all the proffered hospitalities of the neighbourhood; and, from his wild and neglected park, looked out upon the surrounding world in a spirit of moroseness and defiance, very unlike, indeed, to that of neighbourly good-will.

In the midst of many of the annoyances attendant upon crippled means, he enjoyed a few of those

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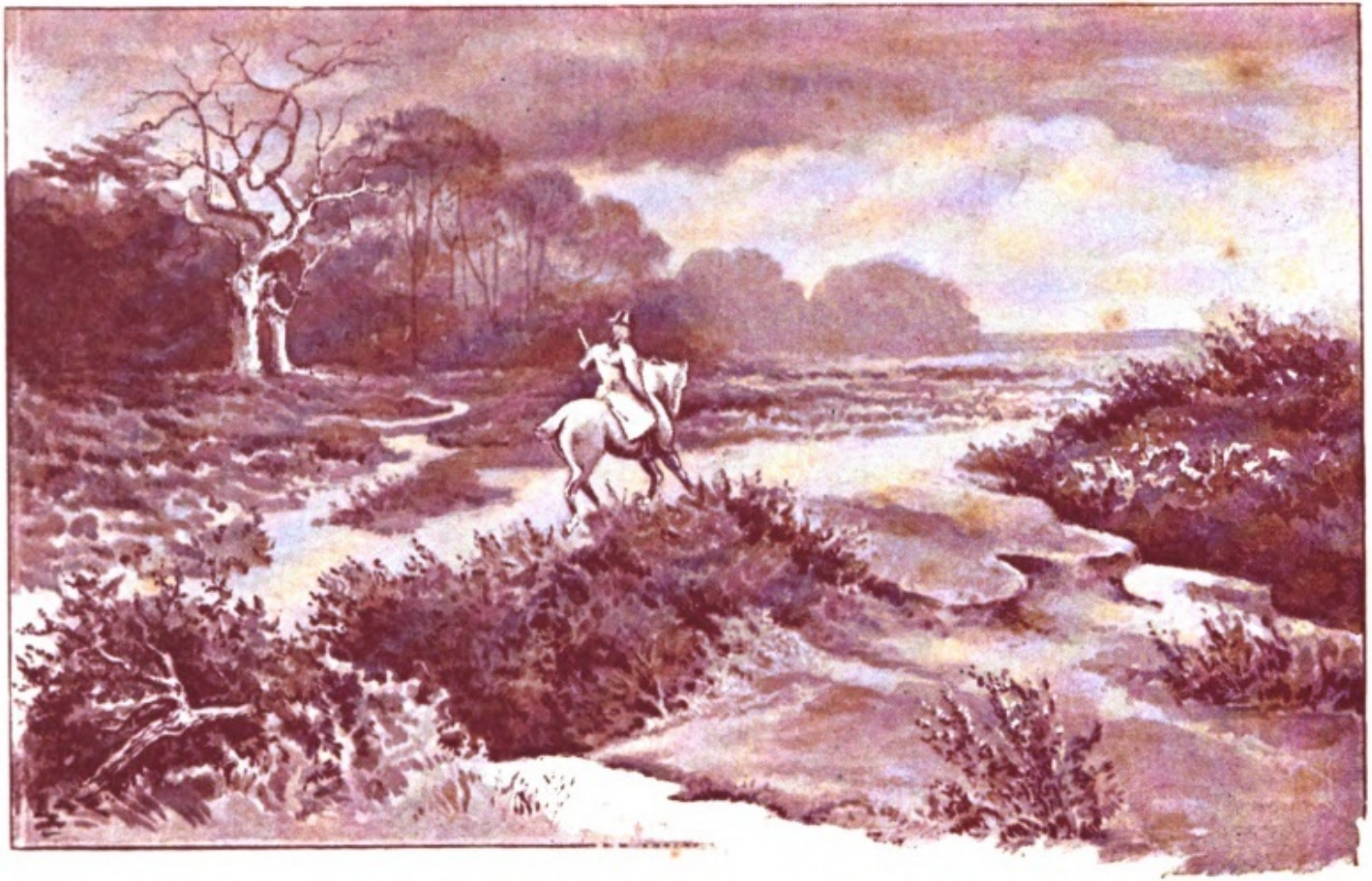

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