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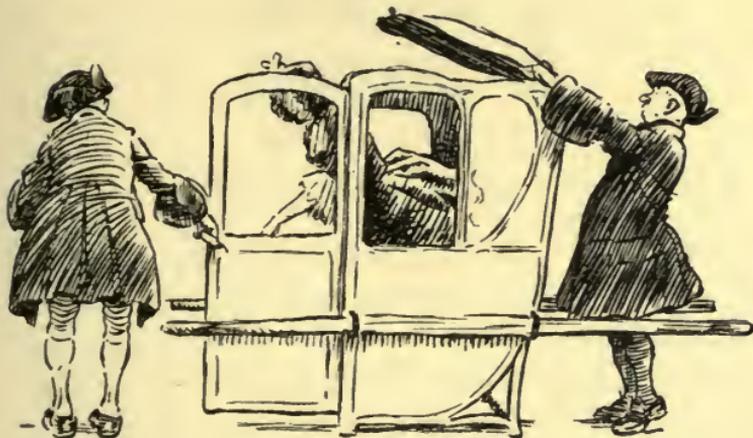
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THE PERVERSE WIDOW BY
SIR RICHARD STEELE & THE
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THE PERVERSE WIDOW



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"Hærent infixi pectore vultus."—VIRG.

IN my first Description of the Company in which I pass most of my Time, it may be remembered that I mentioned a great Affliction which my Friend Sir ROGER had met with in his Youth ; which was no less than a Disappointment in Love. It happened this Evening, that we fell into a very pleasing Walk at a Distance from his House : As soon as we came into it, "It is, quoth the good Old Man, looking round him with a Smile, very hard, that 'any Part of my Land should be settled

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upon one who has used me so ill as the perverse Widow did ; and yet I am sure I could not see a Sprig of any Bough of this whole Walk of



Trees, but I should reflect upon her and her Severity. She has certainly the finest Hand of any Woman in the World. You are to know this was the Place wherein I used to muse upon her ; and by that Custom I can never come into it, but the same tender Sentiments revive in my Mind, as if I had

actually walked with that Beautiful Creature under these Shades. I have been Fool enough to carve her Name on the Bark of several of these Trees ; so unhappy is the Condition of

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Men in Love, to attempt the removing of their Passion by the Methods which serve only



to imprint it deeper. She has certainly the finest Hand of any Woman in the World.”

Here followed a profound Silence ; and I was not displeas'd to observe my Friend falling so naturally into a Discourse, which I had ever before taken Notice he industriously avoided. After a very long Pause he enter'd upon an Account of this great Circumstance in

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his Life, with an Air which I thought raised my Idea of him above what I had ever had before ; and gave me the Picture of that chearful Mind of his, before it received that Stroke which has ever since affected his Words and Actions. But he went on as follows.

“ I came to my Estate in my Twenty Second Year, and resolved to follow the Steps of the Most Worthy of my Ancestors who have inhabited this Spot of Earth before me, in all the Methods of Hospitality and good Neighbourhood, for the sake of my Fame ; and in Country Sports and Recreations, for the sake of my Health. In my Twenty Third Year I was obliged to serve as Sheriff of the County ; and in my Servants, Officers and whole Equipage indulged the Pleasure of a young Man (who did not think ill of his own Person) in taking that publick Occasion of showing my Figure and Behaviour to Advantage. You may easily imagine to yourself what Appearance I made, who am pretty tall, rid well, and was very



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well dressed, at the Head of a whole County, with Musick before me, a Feather in my Hat, and my Horse well Bitted. I can assure you I was not a little pleased with the kind Looks and Glances I had from all the Balconies and Windows as I rode to the Hall where the Assizes were held. But when I came there, a Beautiful Creature in a Widow's Habit sat in Court to hear the Event of a Cause concerning her Dower. This commanding Creature (who was born for Destruction of all who behold her) put on such a Resignation in her Countenance, and bore the Whispers of all around the Court with such a pretty Uneasiness, I warrant you, and then recovered her self from one Eye to another, 'till she was perfectly confused by meeting something so wistful in all she encountered, that at last, with a Murrain to her, she cast her bewitching Eye upon me. I no sooner met it, but I bowed like a great surprized Booby; and knowing her Cause to be the first which came on, I cried, like a Captivated

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Calf as I was, Make way for the Defendant's Witnesses. This sudden Partiality made all the County immediately see the Sheriff also



was become a Slave to the fine Widow. During the Time her Cause was upon Tryal, she behaved herself, I warrant you, with such a deep Attention to her Business, took Opportunities to have little Billets handed to her Council, then would be in such a pretty Confusion, occasioned, you must know, by acting

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before so much Company, that not only I but the whole Court was prejudiced in her Favour ; and all that the next Heir to her Husband had



to urge, was thought so groundless and frivolous, that when it came to her Council to reply, there was not half so much said as every one besides in the Court thought he could have urged to her Advantage. You must understand, Sir, this perverse Woman is one of those

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unaccountable Creatures, that secretly rejoice in the Admiration of Men, but indulge themselves in no further Consequences. Hence it is that she has ever had a Train of Admirers, and she removes from her Slaves in Town to those in the Country, according to the Seasons of the Year. She is a reading Lady, and far gone in the Pleasures of Friendship; She is always accompanied by a Confident, who is Witness to her daily Protestations against our Sex, and consequently a Bar to her first Steps towards Love, upon the Strength of her own Maxims and Declarations.

“However, I must needs say this accomplished Mistress of mine has distinguished me above the rest, and has been known to declare Sir ROGER DE COVERLEY was the Tamest and most Human of all the Brutes in the Country. I was told she said so, by one who thought he rallied me; but upon the Strength of this slender Encouragement, of being thought least detestable, I made new Liveries, new paired

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my Coach-Horses, sent them all to Town to be bitted, and taught to throw their Legs well, and move all together, before I pretended to



cross the Country and wait upon her. As soon as I thought my Retinue suitable to the Character of my Fortune and Youth, I set out from hence to make my Addresses. The particular Skill of this Lady has ever been to inflame your Wishes, and yet command Respect. To make her Mistress of this Art, she has a

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greater Share of Knowledge, Wit, and good Sense, than is usual even among Men of Merit. Then she is beautiful beyond the Race of Women. If you won't let her go on with a certain Artifice with her Eyes, and the skill of Beauty, she will arm her self with her real Charms, and strike you with Admiration instead of Desire. It is certain that if you were to behold the whole Woman, there is that Dignity in her Aspect, that Composure in her Motion, that Complacency in her Manner, that if her Form makes you hope, her Merit makes you fear. But then again, she is such a desperate Scholar, that no Country-Gentleman can approach her without being a Jest. As I was going to tell you, when I came to her House I was admitted to her Presence with great Civility; at the same time she placed her self to be first seen by me in such an Attitude, as I think you call the Posture of a Picture, that she discovered new Charms, and I at last came towards her with such an Awe as made me

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Speechless. This she no sooner observed but she made her Advantage of it, and began a Discourse to me concerning Love and Honour, as they both are followed by Pretenders, and the real Votaries to them. When she had discussed these Points in a Discourse, which I verily believe was as learned as the best Philosopher in *Europe* could possibly make, she asked me whether she was so happy as to fall in with my Sentiments on these important Particulars. Her Confident sat by her, and upon my being in the last Confusion and Silence, this malicious Aid of hers, turning to her, says, I am very glad to observe Sir ROGER pauses upon this Subject, and seems resolved to deliver all his Sentiments

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upon the matter when he pleases to speak. They both kept their Countenances, and after I had sat half an Hour meditating how to behave before such profound Casuists, I rose up and took my Leave. Chance has since that time thrown me very often in her Way, and she as often has directed a Discourse to me which I do not understand. This Barbarity has kept me ever at a Distance from the most beautiful Object my eyes ever beheld. It is thus also she deals with all Mankind, and you must make Love to her, as you would conquer the Sphinx, by posing her. But were she like other Women, and that there were any talking to her, how constant must the Pleasure of that Man be, who could converse with a Creature— But, after all, you may be sure her Heart is fixed on some one or other; and yet I have been credibly inform'd; but who can believe half what is said! After she had done speaking to me, she put her Hand to her Bosom, and adjusted her Tucker. Then she cast her eyes a



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little down, upon my beholding her too earnestly. They say she sings excellently : her Voice in her ordinary Speech has something in it inexpressibly sweet. You must know I dined with her at a Publick Table the Day after I first saw her, and she helped me to some Tansy in the Eye of all the Gentlemen in the Country : She has certainly the finest Hand of any Woman in the World. I can assure you, Sir, were you to behold her, you would be in the same Condition ; for as her Speech is Musick, her Form is Angelick. But I find I grow irregular while I am talking of her : but indeed it would be Stupidity to be unconcerned at such Perfection. Oh the excellent Creature, she is as inimitable to all Women, as she is inaccessible to all Men.”

I found my Friend begin to rave, and insensibly led him towards the House, that we might be joined by some other Company ; and am convinced that the Widow is the secret Cause of all that Inconsistency which appears

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in some Parts of my Friend's Discourse ; tho' he has so much Command of himself as not directly to mention her, yet according to that of *Martial*, which one knows not how to render in *English*, *Dum tacet hanc loquitur*. I shall end this Paper with that whole Epigram, which represents with much Humour my honest Friend's Condition.

“ *Quicquid agit Rufus, nihil est nisi Nævia Rufo :*
Si gaudet, si flet, si tacet, hanc loquitur :
Cænat, propinat, poscit, negat, annuit, una est
Nævia : si non sit Nævia, mutus erit.
Scriberet hesterna patri cum luce salutem,
Nævia lux, inquit, Nævia numen, ave.”

“ Let *Rufus* weep, rejoice, stand, sit, or walk,
Still he can nothing but of *Nævia* talk ;
Let him eat, drink, ask Questions, or dispute,
Still he must speak of *Nævia*, or be mute.
He writ to his Father, ending with this Line,
I am, my Lovely *Nævia*, ever thine. R.”





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*“She was so charitable and pitious
She would weep if that she saw a mous
Caught in a trap, if it were dead or bled :
Of small hounds had she, that she fed
With rost flesh, milke, and wastel bread,
But sore wept she if any of them were dead,
Or if man smote them with a yard smart.”*

CHAUCER.

NOTWITHSTANDING the whimsical parade made by Lady Lillycraft on her arrival, she has none of the petty stateliness that I had imagined ; but, on the contrary, she has a degree of nature and simple-heartedness, if I may use the phrase, that mingles well with her old-fashioned manners and harmless ostentation. She dresses in rich silks, with long waist ; she rouges considerably, and her hair, which is nearly white, is frizzled out, and put

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up with pins. Her face is pitted with the small-pox, but the delicacy of her features shows that she may once have been beautiful ; and she has a very fair and well-shaped hand and arm, of which, if I mistake not, the good lady is still a little vain.

I have had the curiosity to gather a few particulars concerning her. She was a great belle in town between thirty and forty years since, and reigned for two seasons with all the insolence of beauty, refusing several excellent offers ; when, unfortunately, she was robbed of her charms and her lovers by an attack of the small-pox. She retired immediately into the country, where she some time afterwards inherited an estate, and married a baronet, a former admirer, whose passion had suddenly revived ; “ having,” as he said, “ always loved her mind rather than her person.”

The baronet did not enjoy her mind and fortune above six months, and had scarcely grown very tired of her, when he broke his



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neck in a fox-chase and left her free, rich, and disconsolate. She has remained on her estate in the country ever since, and has never shown any desire to return to town and revisit the scene of her early triumphs and fatal malady. All her favourite recollections, however, revert to that short period of her youthful beauty. She has no idea of town but as it was at that time, and continually forgets that the place and people must have changed materially in the course of nearly half a century. She will often speak of the toasts of those days as if still reigning; and, until very recently, used to talk with delight of the royal family and the beauty of the young princes and princesses. She cannot be brought to think of the present



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king otherwise than as an elegant young man, rather wild, but who danced a minuet divinely ; and before he came to the crown, would often mention him as the “sweet young prince.”

She talks also of the walks in Kensington Gardens, where the gentlemen appeared in gold-laced coats and cocked hats, and the ladies in hoops, and swept so proudly along the grassy avenues ; and she thinks the ladies let themselves sadly down in their dignity when they gave up cushioned head-dresses and high-heeled shoes. She has much to say, too, of the officers who were in the train of her admirers ; and speaks familiarly of many wild young blades that are now perhaps hobbling about watering-places with crutches and gouty shoes.

Whether the taste the good lady had of matrimony discouraged her or not, I cannot say ; but though her merits and her riches have attracted many suitors, she has never been tempted to venture again into the happy

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state. This is singular, too, for she seems of a most soft and susceptible heart ; is always talking of love and connubial felicity ; and is a great stickler for old-fashioned gallantry, devoted attentions, and eternal constancy on the part of the gentlemen. She lives, however, after her own taste. Her house I am told, must have been built and furnished about the time of Sir Charles Grandison : everything about it is somewhat formal and stately, but has been softened down into a degree of voluptuousness characteristic of an old lady very tender-hearted and romantic, and that loves her ease. The cushions of the great arm-chairs and wide sofas almost bury you when you sit down on them. Flowers of the most rare and delicate kind are placed about the rooms and on little japanned stands ; and sweet-bags lie about the tables and mantel-pieces. The house is full of pet dogs, Angola cats, and singing birds, who are as carefully waited upon as she is herself.

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She is dainty in her living, and a little of an epicure, living on white meats and little lady-like dishes, though her servants have substantial old English fare, as their looks bear witness. Indeed they are so indulged that they are all spoiled, and when they lose their present place they will be fit for no other. Her ladyship is one of those easy-tempered beings that are always doomed to be much liked, but ill-served by their domestics, and cheated by all the world.

Much of her time is passed in reading novels, of which she has a most extensive library, and has a constant supply from the publishers in town. Her erudition in this line of literature is immense; she has kept pace with the press for half a century. Her mind is stuffed with love-tales of all kinds, from the stately amours of the old books of chivalry down to the last blue-covered romance reeking from the press; though she evidently gives the preference to those that came out in the days of her youth,

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and when she was first in love. She maintains that there are no novels written nowadays equal to "Pamela" and "Sir Charles Grandison"; and she places the "Castle of Otranto" at the head of all romances.

She does a vast deal of good in her neighbourhood, and is imposed upon by every beggar in the county. She is the benefactress of a village adjoining to her estate, and takes a special interest in all its love affairs. She knows of every courtship that is going on; every love-lorn damsel is sure to find a patient listener and a sage adviser in her ladyship. She takes great pains to reconcile all love quarrels, and should any faithless swain persist in his inconstancy, he is sure to draw on himself the good lady's violent indignation.

I have learned these particulars partly from Frank Bracebridge and partly from Master Simon. I am now able to account for the assiduous attention of the latter to her ladyship. Her house is one of his favourite resorts,

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where he is a very important personage. He makes her a visit of business once a year, when he looks into all her affairs ; which, as



she is no manager, are apt to get into confusion. He examines the books of the overseer, and shoots about the estate, which, he says, is well stocked with game, notwithstanding that it is poached by all the vagabonds in the neighbourhood.

It is thought, as I before hinted, that the captain will inherit the greater part of her

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property, having always been her chief favourite, for, in fact, she is partial to a red coat. She has now come to the Hall to be present at his nuptials, having a great disposition to interest herself in all matters of love and matrimony.



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