

Ghostly Hands: A Critical Edition of Henry James's "The Romance of Certain Old Clothes"

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This edition critically analyzes "The Romance of Certain Old Clothes" by Henry James. It is put in context with three other Victorian ghost stories that use the similar trope of ghostly hands. The theme of these ghostly hands is used to explore Victorian era issues concerning class, property exchange, and the roles of women.

General Introduction

There are many well-known authors, like Poe and Dickens, who contributed to the wide array of ghost stories that emerged from the Victorian era. One intriguing motif used by a diverse body of authors involved representing ghosts as hands. Henry James's "The Romance of Certain Old Clothes," the story in focus within this edition, is a prime example of a famous author who utilized ghostly hands within his stories. Also included are collected excerpts from other short stories employing the ghostly hand motif by the Victorian-era authors A. T. Quiller-Couch, Mary E. Braddon, and Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu. In each of these tales the ghosts are portrayed as hands without bodies, and most of them are violent except for the complacent hands in Quiller-Couch's story. When looking at the way the hands are represented throughout the narratives and what drives them to haunt and act, we can see how ghostly hands are used to represent social issues and limitations within the Victorian era.

In her article about W.E. Gladstone and spiritualism, Ruth Clayton Windscheffel mentions how spiritualism, the "belief centered on the possibility of contact between the living and the dead," rose in popularity in all classes during this era while strong religious beliefs waned (3). New attitudes about the dead began to emerge, such as the idea that those who are dead are not controlled by the rules of the living. In Victorian literature, death became a way for authors to imagine freedom from

societal constraints, and the trope of the ghostly hand allowed for exploration of a more potent, compelling ghost. Jennifer Bann elaborates on this notion in her article about the change in the portrayal of ghosts in the nineteenth century, explaining that the power given to the dead through spiritualism influenced the authors within literature to give ghosts more "controlling, guiding, or demonstrative" behaviors, which surfaced in part through the ghostly hand motif (664). Instead of a ghost, Bann continues, that was impotent in compliance with the "tradition of the limited dead," stories began to feature one who had more power, exercised through the use of its hands within the stories (663). Tales with ghostly hands that took property and subverted economic and gender roles became popular as authors critiqued the society around them.

The Victorian era was a time in which capitalism was truly flourishing. This expansion, in turn, caused many to begin questioning and fearing the capitalist system (Nunokawa 3-4). Katherine Rowe explains that many stories that included the motif of a ghostly hand were seen as Marxist critiques in that they looked at the "presence of labor behind the 'invisible hand' of the market ... in order to probe the uncanny, alienating conditions of labor at home and in the factory" (112). This trope was tied up in class struggles as the Victorian era economic system relied on a clear division between the lower, laboring classes and the upper class. Another scholar, Arlene Young, builds on this idea and elaborates that what began to change during this time was the

prevalence of the middle class and its attempts to counter the dominance of the upper class (2). Indeed, in her book *Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction*, Jenni Calder states that authors during this time “were both critical of those institutions and, in varying ways and degrees, trapped in them” (9). Bound within these institutions was an anxiety towards property. The products the upper classes consumed were created by the hands of the lower classes. This added a ghostly aspect to class relations and property as the items the upper classes consumed were put together by hands that were not visible, being far removed from the consumer. With the development of a voice for the lower-middle and laboring classes, many upper-class people feared the overthrowing of their power. This anxiety could be seen in some of the stories of the day that related all these ideas together. Citing George Eliot, Katherine Rowe explains that servants, as low-class citizens, were seen as unintelligent and difficult to hold a rational conversation with as they were prone to flights of imagination and paranoia (147). This classism within the domestic sphere was probably related to a fear of the lower classes reversing or perverting the order of property distribution.

As demonstrated by Calder, the class separation allowed for authors of the time to examine marriage and domestic relationships within their work (9). According to Ellen Plante in her book *Women at Home in Victorian America: A Social History*, in Victorian society there were strict roles that each gender was to perform. A woman was not allowed to express her feelings towards a potential suitor until the man professed his own sentiments and proposed, putting her in a distinctly passive position. The man would give her an engagement ring, which was a newly popular gift in this era, then seek family approval, and quickly the couple would become betrothed (21-23). Married life became a world divided into two separate spheres of the home and the world outside of it. Plante describes guidebooks that advised women that it was their duty to provide a safe, comfortable home for their husbands to retreat to upon leaving the stressful business world in fear of him becoming a “barbarian if left to himself without woman’s influence” (32). Apart from the pressure of maintaining a safe haven for their families, women were expected to adhere to a set of behaviors that left them subverted by the authoritative male figure. In other words, a woman was supposed to be the epitome of good

grace and dignity as well as to avoid any disagreements (Plante 29). Acting like a lady entailed, in part, not discussing topics that meddled in the man’s public sphere, but occupying conversation with subjects that had to do with their own roles in the private sphere like crafts and fashion (Plante 110). As we examine these stringent aspects of a woman’s life in the Victorian era, the inclusion of the subject within literary texts of the period is understandable.

With the Industrial Revolution came a way for power to be obtained by earning money through the capitalist system, which threatened the situation among classes. Upper-class people were threatened by the ability of middle-class members to encroach upon their power. They also feared the power the new economic system gave lower-class citizens, who provided goods and services the upper classes used or took for granted. This economic world was seen as harsh and for men only, at least for the middle and upper classes (working-class women often had no choice but to work outside the home). Victorian ideology dictated that it was the woman’s role to create a peaceful haven at home for her husband. But, according to Young, this establishment was being questioned as lower-middle-class men built alliances with women in order to try and advance themselves (2-3).

Victorian literature provided a way for some authors to show how skewed the dynamics were between men and women, and among socioeconomic classes. Calder explains, “The egocentric, authoritarian male point of view dominated Victorian life[;] what Victorian literature demonstrates is both its power and its destructiveness, and the fascinating process of reaction against it” (210). This understanding of how gender relations operated explains why authors often depicted families as perfect on the outside, but full of corrupt members and situations within (Calder 95). When put into a spectral context, authors can represent these reactions by giving females more power through their hands, which tie them to the social constructs they belong in. Their hands perform domestic work, complete crafts like sewing, and wear the rings that bind them to the husbands who expect those activities from them. The hands are a synecdoche for the women themselves, representing the necessity for women to know the correct role of their hands in the domestic sphere. While their hands directly tie women to the uncompromising private sphere, their hands often

exert more control in death as represented in the popular ghostly hand motif of the time.

The Victorian era was full of rules and traditions, but it was also a time of change and questioning, especially when it came to the belief in ghosts. Spiritualism allowed people to envision a relationship with the dead as they contemplated how to communicate with them. Ghosts were often represented as more powerful beings with human thoughts upon which they acted. This representation in turn created a movement towards more powerful, expressive ghosts in literary texts. Ghosts and ghost stories were a means of escaping from the shackles of the Victorian era, and the ghostly hands motif was a common theme of the day, representing all of these anxieties and giving power to ghosts who reacted against societal constraints.

Introduction to Henry James’s “The Romance of Certain Old Clothes”

Known for another ghost story—his novel *The Turn of the Screw* (1898)—Henry James was the second son born to a family of Irish Americans. Born on April 15, 1843, James published his first work, “A Tragedy of Error,” in 1864 (Beidler 5). “The Romance of Certain Old Clothes,” published four years later, was Henry James’s first work of supernatural fiction. According to T.J. Lustig, seeing the critiques of other ghost stories of his day, James wished to write something that connected ghosts with the everyday and ordinary objects (52). John Carlos Rowe believes most of what James wrote represented the struggles facing “intelligent young women in predominantly patriarchal societies on both sides of the Atlantic...” (11). However, it could be argued that his work, including “The Romance of Certain Old Clothes,” reveals James’s conservative views about women, portraying them as not quite so intelligent after all. This story reflects social issues in the Victorian era both by describing hands in scenes between the living, and by ending with ghostly hands killing the main female character. A close analysis of the scenes where hands are involved reveals the themes represented that were present in many texts of the time period: commentary on Victorian-era gender roles, rules of engagement and marriage, anxiety over the acquisition of property and social classes, and the jealousy and greed each of these evokes.

The story begins with a focus on social and class struggles as we are introduced to an eligible, wealthy bachelor, Mr. Lloyd, who must choose to marry one of a pair of sisters, Perdita and Rosalind. Having come back from Europe with their brother, Bernard, Mr. Lloyd tells him “that his sisters were fully a match for the most genteel young women in the old country.” This relieves the women, especially their mother, who is very eager to keep up connections with the English class system. Mrs. Wingrave is also eager to get them married off. The sisters then begin a competition for Mr. Lloyd’s affections. This competition is hardly mentioned directly between the sisters and is really rather passive as women were not allowed to show their affections or encourage the opposite sex. However, the women fight over possession of traditional gender roles and belongings throughout the entire story, suggesting that the women channel their aggression through materialistic, familial, and intra-gender competition.

The actions of the men and women in the story provide an interesting commentary on the expectations of each sex during this time. Mr. Lloyd appears to be the model gentleman following decorum by asking for Perdita’s hand in marriage. However, he later errs in his propriety when he spends excess time with Rosalind as his wife is dying. In fact, he ends up marrying Rosalind after Perdita’s death. Although the marriages between Mr. Lloyd and Perdita and then Mr. Lloyd and Rosalind seem to be proper, they are based upon an odd web of love, in which two sisters fall in love with the same man and each have a turn as his object of affection, suggesting the status of “marriage” matters more than the identity of the groom. Furthermore, this story includes a less than traditional process of engagement and marriage, especially when one sister marries the widower of her sister in a swift and covert manner. In response to Rosalind’s manipulation of Mr. Lloyd in her attempt to win him over, the narrator slyly states, “It is enough to say that she found means to appear to the very best advantage.” The sisters show the proper restraint of ladies during the time, but we see how this restraint builds up a deadly jealousy between them.

Additionally, how the sisters fit within the expected female roles of the time period are referenced at the beginning of the story. According to John Carlos Rowe, James was an author “concerned with the problems facing modern women,” and he chose to write about the

issues surrounding women’s lives such as the necessity to obtain a prestigious marriage to ensure their own security (10). James’s portrayal of the women in this story is fairly old-fashioned, however, as he shows them fighting each other over who will fulfill their gendered role as Mr. Lloyd’s wife and caretaker. This competition is apparent as the narrator references Rosalind’s superior domestic skills and modest, subdued personality, her masterful sewing abilities, and demureness in conversation. Therefore, she seems to be the superior choice since she exhibits superior femininity. In contrast, Perdita is described as a less serious young woman who is not as concerned with domestic duties and who “gave you your choice of a dozen answers before you had uttered half your thought.” Their fighting seems to revolve around which sister would be better suited to meet Mr. Lloyd’s domestic needs in the private sphere as well as more worthy of the possession of clothes and other petty things associated with women gaining property through marriage.

Rosalind’s desire for the property acquired by becoming a wife plays a huge part in motivating her actions. As Perdita is dying from the stress of childbirth, we see hands representing the jealousy between the sisters in the scene where “she lowered her eyes on her white hands, which her husband’s liberality had covered with rings” and holds her husband’s hands tightly within her own. On her deathbed, Perdita decides her sister’s intentions are not based on love, and she says, “He’ll [Mr. Lloyd] never forget me. Nor does Rosalind truly care for him; she cares only for vanities and finery and jewels.” After Perdita dies, Rosalind manipulatively works her way into her sister’s old family unit, proving that Perdita’s suspicions were correct. At first it seems Rosalind is jealous of Mr. Lloyd’s affection for her sister, but it later seems to be that she was jealous of all Perdita possessed through her marriage. This tension shows that the women—especially Rosalind—were really more concerned about possessions than love, characterizing the women as superficial and within gender stereotypes. The fact that James portrays women who attack each other over clothes and belongings brings to light his conservative beliefs and shows he was not as forward-thinking as some might claim.

The first time Rosalind finds out about Perdita and Mr.

Lloyd’s relationship is by seeing that Perdita has a ring. Jealousy between the sisters, then, becomes immediately intertwined with hands, a connection sustained throughout the narrative. When Rosalind initially notices the ring, she stares hard at Perdita’s hands, grasps the one with the ring, and demands to know who gave her such a nice gift. Her jealousy surfaces as she questions Perdita’s position as a proper Victorian lady upon accepting Mr. Lloyd’s gift: “‘It means that you are not a modest girl!’ cried Rosalind. ‘Pray, does your mother know of your intrigue? does Bernard?’” Later, when she is watching Perdita prepare her new bridal wardrobe, James focuses on how Rosalind takes the perfectly blue silk in her hands and then, “her fancy [being] stirred,” sets to working on helping Perdita sew. Instead of Rosalind being saddened by not being Mr. Lloyd’s choice, she focuses on what Perdita is gaining through her marriage and seems to mourn what she cannot have: silk clothing.

When Rosalind and Mr. Lloyd marry, she is plagued by a yearning to open a chest full of clothes and other nice things Perdita had saved for her daughter. Mr. Lloyd had promised Perdita on her deathbed that he would never let anybody open the chest, but after Rosalind constantly pressures him to allow her to open it, she gets her way and he gives her the key. However, Perdita’s ghost was waiting for Rosalind to acquire access to the chest full of possessions she had been jealous of since Perdita gained Mr. Lloyd’s hand in marriage. It is in the story’s final scene that we see the work of the envious hands one last time as Rosalind’s “lips were parted in entreaty, in dismay, in agony; and on her blanched brow and cheeks there glowed the marks of ten hideous wounds from two vengeful ghostly hands.” These were Perdita’s vengeful hands, seeking to protect her precious clothing from entering the hands of her jealous sister.

“The Romance of Certain Old Clothes” By Henry James, 1885¹

Part I

Towards the middle of the eighteenth century there lived in the Province of Massachusetts a widowed gentlewoman, the mother of three children, by name

Notes

1. This edition was originally printed in 1868 and comes from an anthology of Victorian ghost stories, *Victorian Ghost Stories: An Oxford Anthology*, which was published in 1991.

Mrs Veronica Wingrave. She had lost her husband early in life, and had devoted herself to the care of her progeny. These young persons grew up in a manner to reward her tenderness and to gratify her highest hopes. The first-born was a son, whom she had called Bernard, in remembrance of his father. The others were daughters—born at an interval of three years apart. Good looks were traditional in the family, and this youthful trio were not likely to allow the tradition to perish. The boy was of that fair and ruddy complexion and that athletic structure which in those days (as in these) were the sign of good English descent—a frank, affectionate young fellow, a deferential son, a patronising brother, a steadfast friend. Clever, however, he was not; the wit of the family had been apportioned chiefly to his sisters. The late Mr William Wingrave had been a great reader of Shakespeare, at a time when this pursuit implied more freedom of thought than at the present day, and in a community where it required much courage to patronise the drama even in the closet; and he had wished to call attention to his admiration of the great poet by calling his daughters out of his favourite plays. Upon the elder he had bestowed the romantic name of Rosalind, and the younger he had called Perdita, in memory of a little girl born between them, who had lived but a few weeks.

When Bernard Wingrave came to his sixteenth year his mother put a brave face upon it and prepared to execute her husband’s last injunction. This had been a formal command that, at the proper age, his son should be sent out to England, to complete his education at the university of Oxford, where he himself had acquired his taste for elegant literature. It was Mrs Wingrave’s belief that the lad’s equal was not to be found in the two hemispheres, but she had the old traditions of literal obedience. She swallowed her sobs, and made up her boy’s trunk and his simple provincial outfit, and sent him on his way across the seas. Bernard presented himself at his father’s college, and spent five years in England, without great honour, indeed, but with a vast deal of pleasure and no discredit. On leaving the university he made the journey to France. In his twenty-fourth year he took ship for home, prepared to find poor little New England (New England was very small in those days) a very dull, unfashionable residence. But there had been

changes at home, as well as in Mr Bernard’s opinions. He found his mother’s house quite habitable, and his sisters grown into two very charming young ladies, with all the accomplishments and graces of the young women of Britain, and a certain native-grown originality and wildness, which, if it was not an accomplishment, was certainly a grace the more. Bernard privately assured his mother that his sisters were fully a match for the most genteel young women in the old country; whereupon poor Mrs Wingrave, you may be sure, bade them hold up their heads. Such was Bernard’s opinion, and such, in a tenfold higher degree, was the opinion of Mr Arthur Lloyd. This gentleman was a college-mate of Mr Bernard, a young man of reputable family, of a good person and a handsome inheritance; which latter appurtenance he proposed to invest in trade in the flourishing colony. He and Bernard were sworn friends; they had crossed the ocean together, and the young American had lost no time in presenting him at his mother’s house, where he had made quite as good an impression as that which he had received and of which I have just given a hint.

The two sisters were at this time in all the freshness of their youthful bloom; each wearing, of course, this natural brilliancy in the manner that became her best. They were equally dissimilar in appearance and character. Rosalind, the elder—now in her twenty-second year—was tall and white, with calm gray eyes and auburn tresses; a very faint likeness to the Rosalind² of Shakespeare’s comedy, whom I imagine a brunette (if you will), but a slender, airy creature, full of the softest, quickest impulses. Miss Wingrave, with her slightly lymphatic fairness, her fine arms, her majestic height, her slow utterance, was not cut out for adventures. She would never have put on a man’s jacket and hose; and, indeed, being a very plump beauty, she may have had reasons apart from her natural dignity. Perdita, too, might very well have exchanged the sweet melancholy of her name against something more in consonance with her aspect and disposition. She had the cheek of a gipsy³ and the eye of an eager child, as well as the smallest waist and lightest foot in all the country of the Puritans. When you spoke to her she never made you wait, as her handsome sister was wont to do (while she looked at

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2. Rosalind is the main character within Shakespeare’s play *As You Like It*. She is banished from her father’s court and lives in the Forest of Arden, disguised as a shepherd named Ganymede.
3. Since gipsies were known to be wanderers, James could be juxtaposing this comparison with Rosalind being “not cut out for adventures” in the same paragraph.

you with a cold fine eye), but gave you your choice of a dozen answers before you had uttered half your thought.

The young girls were very glad to see their brother once more; but they found themselves quite able to spare part of their attention for their brother’s friend. Among the young men their friends and neighbours, the *belle jeunesse*⁴ of the Colony, there were many excellent fellows, several devoted swains, and some two or three who enjoyed the reputation of universal charmers and conquerors. But the homebred arts and somewhat boisterous gallantry of these honest colonists were completely eclipsed by the good looks, the fine clothes, the punctilious courtesy, the perfect elegance, the immense information, of Mr Arthur Lloyd. He was in reality no paragon; he was a capable, honourable, civil youth, rich in pounds sterling, in his health and complacency and his little capital of uninvested affections. But he was a gentleman; he had a handsome person; he had studied and travelled; he spoke French, he played on the flute, and he read verses aloud with very great taste. There were a dozen reasons why Miss Wingrave and her sister should have thought their other male acquaintance made but a poor figure before such a perfect man of the world. Mr Lloyd’s anecdotes told our little New England maidens a great deal more of the ways and means of people of fashion in European capitals than he had any idea of doing. It was delightful to sit by and hear him and Bernard talk about the fine people and fine things they had seen. They would all gather round the fire after tea, in the little wainscoted⁵ parlour, and the two young men would remind each other, across the rug, of this, that and the other adventure. Rosalind and Perdita would often have given their ears to know exactly what adventure it was, and where it happened, and who was there, and what the ladies had on; but in those days a well-bred young woman was not expected to break into the conversation of her elders, or to ask too many questions; and the poor girls used therefore to sit fluttering behind the more languid—or more discreet—curiosity of their mother.

Part II

That they were both very fine girls Arthur Lloyd was not slow to discover; but it took him some time to make

up his mind whether he liked the big sister or the little sister best. He had a strong presentiment—an emotion of a nature entirely too cheerful to be called a foreboding—that he was destined to stand up before the parson with one of them; yet he was unable to arrive at a preference, and for such a consummation a preference was certainly necessary, for Lloyd had too much young blood in his veins to make a choice by lot and be cheated of the satisfaction of falling in love. He resolved to take things as they came—to let his heart speak. Meanwhile he was on a very pleasant footing. Mrs Wingrave showed a dignified indifference to his ‘intentions’, equally remote from a carelessness of her daughter’s honour and from that sharp alacrity to make him come to the point, which, in his quality of a young man of property, he had too often encountered in the worldly matrons of his native islands. As for Bernard, all that he asked was that his friend should treat his sisters as his own; and as for the poor girls themselves, however each may have secretly longed that their visitor should do or say something ‘marked,’ they kept a very modest and contented demeanour.

Towards each other, however, they were somewhat more on the offensive. They were good friends enough, and accommodating bedfellows (they shared the same four-poster), betwixt whom it would take more than a day for the seeds of jealousy to sprout and bear fruit; but they felt that the seeds had been sown on the day that Mr Lloyd came into the house. Each made up her mind that, if she should be slighted, she would bear her grief in silence, and that no one should be any the wiser; for if they had a great deal of ambition, they had also a large share of pride. But each prayed in secret, nevertheless, that upon her the selection, the distinction, might fall. They had need of a vast deal of patience, of self-control, of dissimulation. In those days a young girl of decent breeding could make no advances whatever, and barely respond, indeed, to those that were made. She was expected to sit still in her chair, with her eyes on the carpet, watching the spot where the mystic handkerchief should fall. Poor Arthur Lloyd was obliged to carry on his wooing in the little wainscoted parlour, before the eyes of Mrs Wingrave, her son, and his prospective sister-in-law. But youth and love are so cunning that a hundred signs and tokens might travel to and fro, and

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4. This phrase translates to “beautiful youth” in French.

5. Wainscoted here refers to wood paneling lining the lower half of the walls.

not one of these three pairs of eyes detect them in their passage. The two maidens were almost always together, and had plenty of chances to betray themselves. That each knew she was being watched, however, made not a grain of difference in the little offices they mutually rendered, or in the various household tasks they performed in common. Neither flinched nor fluttered beneath the silent battery of her sister’s eyes. The only apparent change in their habits was that they had less to say to each other. It was impossible to talk about Mr Lloyd, and it was ridiculous to talk about anything else. By tacit agreement they began to wear all their choice finery, and to devise such little implements of conquest, in the way of ribbons and top-knots and kerchiefs, as were sanctioned by indubitable modesty. They executed in the same inarticulate fashion a contract of fair play in this exciting game. “Is it better so?” Rosalind would ask, tying a bunch of ribbons on her bosom, and turning about from her glass to her sister. Perdita would look up gravely from her work and examine the decoration. “I think you had better give it another loop,” she would say, with great solemnity, looking hard at her sister with eyes that added, ‘upon my honour!’ So they were for ever stitching and trimming their petticoats, and pressing out their muslins, and contriving washes and ointments and cosmetics, like the ladies in the household of the vicar of Wakefield.⁶ Some three or four months went by; it grew to be midwinter, and as yet Rosalind knew that if Perdita had nothing more to boast of than she, there was not much to be feared from her rivalry. But Perdita by this time—the charming Perdita—felt that her secret had grown to be tenfold more precious than her sister’s.

One afternoon Miss Wingrave sat alone—that was a rare accident—before her toilet-glass, combing out her long hair. It was getting too dark to see; she lit the two candles in their sockets, on the frame of her mirror, and then went to the window to draw her curtains. It was a gray December evening; the landscape was bare and bleak, and the sky heavy with snow-clouds. At the end of the large garden into which her window looked was a wall with a little postern door, opening into a lane. The door stood ajar, as she could vaguely see in the gathering darkness, and moved slowly to and fro, as if someone were swaying it from the lane without. It was doubtless a servant-maid who had been having a tryst with her sweetheart. But as she was about to drop her curtain

Rosalind saw her sister step into the garden and hurry along the path which led to the house. She dropped the curtain, all save a little crevice for her eyes. As Perdita came up the path she seemed to be examining something in her hand, holding it close to her eyes. When she reached the house she stopped a moment, looked intently at the object, and pressed it to her lips.

Poor Rosalind slowly came back to her chair and sat down before her glass, where, if she had looked at it less abstractedly, she would have seen her handsome features sadly disfigured by jealousy. A moment afterwards the door opened behind her and her sister came into the room, out of breath, and her cheeks aglow with the chilly air.

Perdita started. “Ah,” said she, “I thought you were with our mother.” The ladies were to go to a tea-party, and on such occasions it was the habit of one of the young girls to help their mother to dress. Instead of coming in, Perdita lingered at the door.

“Come in, come in,” said Rosalind. “We have more than an hour yet. I should like you very much to give a few strokes to my hair.” She knew that her sister wished to retreat, and that she could see in the glass all her movements in the room. “Nay, just help me with my hair,” she said, “and I will go to mamma.”

Perdita came reluctantly, and took the brush. She saw her sister’s eyes, in the glass, fastened hard upon her hands. She had not made three passes when Rosalind clapped her own right hand upon her sister’s left, and started out of her chair. “Whose ring is that?” she cried, passionately, drawing her towards the light.

On the young girl’s third finger glistened a little gold ring, adorned with a very small sapphire. Perdita felt that she need no longer keep her secret, yet that she must put a bold face on her avowal. “It’s mine,” she said proudly.

“Who gave it to you?” cried the other.

Perdita hesitated a moment. “Mr Lloyd.”

“Mr Lloyd is generous, all of a sudden.”

“Ah no,” cried Perdita, with spirit, “not all of a sudden! He offered it to me a month ago.”

“And you needed a month’s begging to take it?” said Rosalind, looking at the little trinket, which indeed was not especially elegant, although it was the best that the jeweller of the Province could furnish. “I wouldn’t have taken it in less than two.”

“It isn’t the ring,” Perdita answered, “it’s what it means!”

“It means that you are not a modest girl!” cried

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6. “Wakefield” is a character in the 18th-century novel by Oliver Goldsmith, *The Vicar of Wakefield*.

Rosalind. “Pray, does your mother know of your intrigue? does Bernard?”

“My mother has approved my ‘intrigue’, as you call it. Mr Lloyd has asked for my hand, and mamma has given it. Would you have had him apply to you, dearest sister?”

Rosalind gave her companion a long look, full of passionate envy and sorrow. Then she dropped her lashes on her pale cheeks and turned away. Perdita felt that it had not been a pretty scene; but it was her sister’s fault. However, the elder girl rapidly called back her pride, and turned herself about again. “You have my very best wishes,” she said, with a low curtsy. “I wish you every happiness, and a very long life.”

Perdita gave a bitter laugh. “Don’t speak in that tone!” she cried. “I would rather you should curse me outright. Come, Rosy,” she added, “he couldn’t marry both of us.”

“I wish you very great joy,” Rosalind repeated, mechanically, sitting down to her glass again, “and a very long life, and plenty of children.”

There was something in the sound of these words not at all to Perdita’s taste. “Will you give me a year to live at least?” she said. “In a year I can have one little boy—or one little girl at least. If you will give me your brush again I will do your hair.”

“Thank you,” said Rosalind. “You had better go to mamma. It isn’t becoming that a young lady with a promised husband should wait on a girl with none.”

“Nay,” said Perdita, good-humouredly, “I have Arthur to wait upon me. You need my service more than I need yours.”

But her sister motioned her away, and she left the room. When she had gone poor Rosalind fell on her knees before her dressing-table, buried her head in her arms, and poured out a flood of tears and sobs. She felt very much the better for this effusion of sorrow. When her sister came back she insisted upon helping her to dress—on her wearing her prettiest things. She forced upon her acceptance a bit of lace of her own, and declared that now that she was to be married she should do her best to appear worthy of her lover’s choice. She discharged these offices in stern silence; but, such as they were, they had to do duty as an apology and an atonement; she never made any other.

Now that Lloyd was received by the family as an accepted suitor nothing remained but to fix the wedding-day. It was appointed for the following April,

and in the interval preparations were diligently made for the marriage. Lloyd, on his side, was busy with his commercial arrangements, and with establishing a correspondence with the great mercantile house to which he had attached himself in England. He was therefore not so frequent a visitor at Mrs Wingrave’s as during the months of his diffidence and irresolution, and poor Rosalind had less to suffer than she had feared from the sight of the mutual endearments of the young lovers. Touching his future sister-in-law Lloyd had a perfectly clear conscience. There had not been a particle of love-making between them, and he had not the slightest suspicion that he had dealt her a terrible blow. He was quite at his ease; life promised so well, both domestically and financially. The great revolt of the Colonies was not yet in the air, and that his connubial felicity should take a tragic turn it was absurd, it was blasphemous, to apprehend. Meanwhile, at Mrs Wingrave’s, there was a greater rustling of silks, a more rapid clicking of scissors and flying of needles, than ever. The good lady had determined that her daughter should carry from home the genteelest outfit that her money could buy or that the country could furnish. All the sage women in the Province were convened, and their united taste was brought to bear on Perdita’s wardrobe. Rosalind’s situation, at this moment, was assuredly not to be envied. The poor girl had an inordinate love of dress, and the very best taste in the world, as her sister perfectly well knew. Rosalind was tall, she was stately and sweeping, she was made to carry stiff brocade and masses of heavy lace, such as belong to the toilet of a rich man’s wife. But Rosalind sat aloof, with her beautiful arms folded and her head averted, while her mother and sister and the venerable women aforesaid worried and wondered over their materials, oppressed by the multitude of their resources. One day there came in a beautiful piece of white silk, brocaded with heavenly blue and silver, sent by the bridegroom himself—it not being thought amiss in those days that the husband-elect should contribute to the bride’s trousseau.⁷ Perdita could think of no form or fashion which would do sufficient honour to the splendour of the material.

“Blue’s your colour, sister, more than mine,” she said, with appealing eyes. “It’s a pity it’s not for you. You would know what to do with it.”

Notes

7. A trousseau was the collection of clothing and other household items that a soon-to-be-bride would prepare to take with her to her new home upon marriage.

Rosalind got up from her place and looked at the great shining fabric, as it lay spread over the back of a chair. Then she took it up in her hands and felt it—lovingly, as Perdita could see—and turned about toward the mirror with it. She let it roll down to her feet, and flung the other end over her shoulder, gathering it in about her waist with her white arm, which was bare to the elbow. She threw back her head, and looked at her image, and a hanging tress of her auburn hair fell upon the gorgeous surface of the silk. It made a dazzling picture. The women standing about uttered a little “Look, look!” of admiration. “Yes, indeed,” said Rosalind, quietly, “blue is my colour.” But Perdita could see that her fancy had been stirred, and that she would now fall to work and solve all their silken riddles. And indeed she behaved very well, as Perdita, knowing her insatiable love of millinery,⁸ was quite ready to declare. Innumerable yards of lustrous silk and satin, of muslin, velvet and lace, passed through her cunning hands, without a jealous word coming from her lips. Thanks to her industry, when the wedding-day came Perdita was prepared to espouse more of the vanities of life than any fluttering young bride who had yet received the sacramental blessing of a New England divine.

It had been arranged that the young couple should go out and spend the first days of their wedded life at the country-house of an English gentleman—a man of rank and a very kind friend to Arthur Lloyd. He was a bachelor; he declared he should be delighted to give up the place to the influence of Hymen.⁹ After the ceremony at church—it had been performed by an English clergyman—young Mrs Lloyd hastened back to her mother’s house to change her nuptial robes for a riding-dress.¹⁰ Rosalind helped her to effect the change, in the little homely room in which they had spent their undivided younger years. Perdita then hurried off to bid farewell to her mother, leaving Rosalind to follow. The parting was short; the horses were at the door, and Arthur was impatient to start. But Rosalind had not followed, and Perdita hastened back to her room, opening the door abruptly. Rosalind, as usual, was before the glass, but in a position which caused the other to stand still, amazed. She had dressed herself in Perdita’s cast-off wedding veil and wreath, and on her neck she had hung the full

string of pearls which the young girl had received from her husband as a wedding-gift. These things had been hastily laid aside, to await their possessor’s disposal on her return from the country. Bedizened in this unnatural garb Rosalind stood before the mirror, plunging a long look into its depths and reading heaven knows what audacious visions. Perdita was horrified. It was a hideous image of their old rivalry come to life again. She made a step toward her sister, as if to pull off the veil and the flowers. But catching her eyes in the glass, she stopped.

“Farewell, sweetheart,” she said. “You might at least have waited till I had got out of the house!” And she hurried away from the room.

Mr Lloyd had purchased in Boston a house which to the taste of those days appeared as elegant as it was commodious; and here he very soon established himself with his young wife. He was thus separated by a distance of twenty miles from the residence of his mother-in-law. Twenty miles, in that primitive era of roads and conveyances, were as serious a matter as a hundred at the present day, and Mrs Wingrave saw but little of her daughter during the first twelvemonth of her marriage. She suffered in no small degree from Perdita’s absence; and her affliction was not diminished by the fact that Rosalind had fallen into terribly low spirits and was not to be roused or cheered but by change of air and company. The real cause of the young lady’s dejection the reader will not be slow to suspect. Mrs Wingrave and her gossips, however, deemed her complaint a mere bodily ill, and doubted not that she would obtain relief from the remedy just mentioned. Her mother accordingly proposed, on her behalf, a visit to certain relatives on the paternal side, established in New York, who had long complained that they were able to see so little of their New England cousins. Rosalind was despatched to these good people, under a suitable escort, and remained with them for several months. In the interval her brother Bernard, who had begun the practice of the law, made up his mind to take a wife. Rosalind came home to the wedding, apparently cured of her heartache, with bright roses and lilies in her face and a proud smile on her lips. Arthur Lloyd came over from Boston to see his brother-in-law married, but without his wife, who was expecting very soon to present him with an heir. It was

Notes

8. Millinery refers to the design and decoration of women’s hats.

9. Hymen is the Greek god of marriage ceremonies.

10. The appropriate outfit for women to wear when riding horses; also known as riding habits.

nearly a year since Rosalind had seen him. She was glad—she hardly knew why—that Perdita had stayed at home. Arthur looked happy, but he was more grave and important than before his marriage. She thought he looked ‘interesting’—for although the word, in its modern sense, was not then invented, we may be sure that the idea was. The truth is, he was simply anxious about his wife and her coming ordeal. Nevertheless, he by no means failed to observe Rosalind’s beauty and splendour, and to note how she effaced the poor little bride. The allowance that Perdita had enjoyed for her dress had now been transferred to her sister, who turned it to wonderful account. On the morning after the wedding he had a lady’s saddle put on the horse of the servant who had come with him from town, and went out with the young girl for a ride. It was a keen, clear morning in January; the ground was bare and hard, and the horses in good condition—to say nothing of Rosalind, who was charming in her hat and plume, and her dark blue riding coat, trimmed with fur. They rode all the morning, they lost their way, and were obliged to stop for dinner at a farm-house. The early winter dusk had fallen when they got home. Mrs Wingrave met them with a long face. A messenger had arrived at noon from Mrs Lloyd; she was beginning to be ill, she desired her husband’s immediate return. The young man, at the thought that he had lost several hours, and that by hard riding he might already have been with his wife, uttered a passionate oath. He barely consented to stop for a mouthful of supper, but mounted the messenger’s horse and started off at a gallop.

He reached home at midnight. His wife had been delivered of a little girl. “Ah, why weren’t you with me?” she said, as he came to her bedside.

“I was out of the house when the man came. I was with Rosalind,” said Lloyd, innocently.

Mrs Lloyd made a little moan, and turned away. But she continued to do very well, and for a week her improvement was uninterrupted. Finally, however, through some indiscretion in the way of diet or exposure, it was checked, and the poor lady grew rapidly worse. Lloyd was in despair. It very soon became evident that she was breathing her last. Mrs Lloyd came to a sense of her approaching end, and declared that she was reconciled with death. On the third evening after the change took place she told her husband that she felt she should not get through the night. She dismissed her

servants, and also requested her mother to withdraw—Mrs Wingrave having arrived on the preceding day. She had had her infant placed on the bed beside her, and she lay on her side, with the child against her breast, holding her husband’s hands. The night-lamp was hidden behind the heavy curtains of the bed, but the room was illumined with a red glow from the immense fire of logs on the hearth.

“It seems strange not to be warmed into life by such a fire as that,” the young woman said, feebly trying to smile. “If I had but a little of it in my veins! But I have given all my fire to this little spark of mortality.” And she dropped her eyes on her child. Then raising them she looked at her husband with a long, penetrating gaze. The last feeling which lingered in her heart was one of suspicion. She had not recovered from the shock which Arthur had given her by telling her that in the hour of her agony he had been with Rosalind. She trusted her husband very nearly as well as she loved him; but now that she was called away for ever she felt a cold horror of her sister. She felt in her soul that Rosalind had never ceased to be jealous of her good fortune; and a year of happy security had not effaced the young girl’s image, dressed in her wedding-garments, and smiling with simulated triumph. Now that Arthur was to be alone, what might not Rosalind attempt? She was beautiful, she was engaging; what arts might she not use, what impression might she not make upon the young man’s saddened heart? Mrs Lloyd looked at her husband in silence. It seemed hard, after all, to doubt of his constancy. His fine eyes were filled with tears; his face was convulsed with weeping; the clasp of his hands was warm and passionate. How noble he looked, how tender, how faithful and devoted! ‘Nay,’ thought Perdita, ‘he’s not for such a one as Rosalind. He’ll never forget me. Nor does Rosalind truly care for him; she cares only for vanities and finery and jewels.’ And she lowered her eyes on her white hands, which her husband’s liberality had covered with rings, and on the lace ruffles which trimmed the edge of her night-dress. ‘She covets my rings and my laces more than she covets my husband.’

At this moment the thought of her sister’s rapacity seemed to cast a dark shadow between her and the helpless figure of her little girl. “Arthur,” she said, “you must take off my rings. I shall not be buried in them. One of these days my daughter shall wear them—my rings and my laces and silks. I had them all brought out

and shown me to-day. It’s a great wardrobe—there’s not such another in the Province; I can say it without vanity, now that I have done with it. It will be a great inheritance for my daughter when she grows into a young woman. There are things there that a man never buys twice, and if they are lost you will never again see the like. So you will watch them well. Some dozen things I have left to Rosalind; I have named them to my mother. I have given her that blue and silver; it was meant for her; I wore it only once, I looked ill in it. But the rest are to be sacredly kept for this little innocent. It’s such a providence that she should be my colour; she can wear my gowns; she has her mother’s eyes. You know the same fashions come back every twenty years. She can wear my gowns as they are. They will lie there quietly waiting till she grows into them—wrapped in camphor¹¹ and rose-leaves, and keeping their colours in the sweet-scented darkness. She shall have black hair, she shall wear my carnation satin.¹² Do you promise me, Arthur?”

“Promise you what, dearest?”

“Promise me to keep your poor little wife’s old gowns.”

“Are you afraid I shall sell them?”

“No, but that they may get scattered. My mother will have them properly wrapped up, and you shall lay them away under a double-lock. Do you know the great chest in the attic, with the iron bands? There is no end to what it will hold. You can put them all there. My mother and the housekeeper will do it, and give you the key. And you will keep the key in your secretary, and never give it to anyone but your child. Do you promise me?”

“Ah, yes, I promise you,” said Lloyd, puzzled at the intensity with which his wife appeared to cling to this idea.

“Will you swear?” repeated Perdita.

“Yes, I swear.”

“Well—I trust you—I trust you,” said the poor lady, looking into his eyes with eyes in which, if he had suspected her vague apprehensions, he might have read an appeal quite as much as an assurance.

Lloyd bore his bereavement rationally and manfully. A month after his wife’s death, in the course of business, circumstances arose which offered him an opportunity of going to England. He took advantage of it, to change the current of his thoughts. He was absent nearly a year, during which his little girl was tenderly nursed and

guarded by her grandmother. On his return he had his house again thrown open, and announced his intention of keeping the same state as during his wife’s lifetime. It very soon came to be predicted that he would marry again, and there were at least a dozen young women of whom one may say that it was by no fault of theirs that, for six months after his return, the prediction did not come true. During this interval he still left his little daughter in Mrs Wingrave’s hands, the latter assuring him that a change of residence at so tender an age would be full of danger for her health. Finally, however, he declared that his heart longed for his daughter’s presence and that she must be brought up to town. He sent his coach and his housekeeper to fetch her home. Mrs Wingrave was in terror lest something should befall her on the road; and, in accordance with this feeling, Rosalind offered to accompany her. She could return the next day. So she went up to town with her little niece, and Mr Lloyd met her on the threshold of his house, overcome with her kindness and with paternal joy. Instead of returning the next day Rosalind stayed out the week; and when at last she reappeared, she had only come for her clothes. Arthur would not hear of her coming home, nor would the baby. That little person cried and choked if Rosalind left her; and at the sight of her grief Arthur lost his wits, and swore that she was going to die. In fine, nothing would suit them but that the aunt should remain until the little niece had grown used to strange faces.

It took two months to bring this consummation about; for it was not until this period had elapsed that Rosalind took leave of her brother-in-law. Mrs Wingrave had shaken her head over her daughter’s absence; she had declared that it was not becoming, that it was the talk of the whole country. She had reconciled herself to it only because, during the girl’s visit, the household enjoyed an unwonted term of peace. Bernard Wingrave had brought his wife home to live, between whom and her sister-in-law there was as little love as you please. Rosalind was perhaps no angel; but in the daily practice of life she was a sufficiently good-natured girl, and if she quarrelled with Mrs Bernard, it was not without provocation. Quarrel, however, she did, to the great annoyance not only of her antagonist, but of the two

Notes

11. Camphor is a white, volatile, crystalline substance with an aromatic smell and bitter taste, occurring in certain essential oils; it is used to repel moths, silverfish, and other insects.

12. Refers to the color of the satin resembling a carnation, a flower most commonly of a pinkish color.

spectators of these constant altercations. Her stay in the household of her brother-in-law, therefore, would have been delightful, if only because it removed her from contact with the object of her antipathy at home. It was doubly—it was ten times—delightful, in that it kept her near the object of her early passion. Mrs Lloyd’s sharp suspicions had fallen very far short of the truth. Rosalind’s sentiment had been a passion at first, and a passion it remained—a passion of whose radiant heat, tempered to the delicate state of his feelings, Mr Lloyd very soon felt the influence. Lloyd, as I have hinted, was not a modern Petrarch;¹³ it was not in his nature to practise an ideal constancy. He had not been many days in the house with his sister-in-law before he began to assure himself that she was, in the language of that day, a devilish fine woman. Whether Rosalind really practised those insidious arts that her sister had been tempted to impute to her it is needless to inquire. It is enough to say that she found means to appear to the very best advantage. She used to seat herself every morning before the big fireplace in the dining-room, at work upon a piece of tapestry, with her little niece disporting herself on the carpet at her feet, or on the train of her dress, and playing with her woollen balls. Lloyd would have been a very stupid fellow if he had remained insensible to the rich suggestions of this charming picture. He was exceedingly fond of his little girl, and was never weary of taking her in his arms and tossing her up and down, and making her crow with delight. Very often, however, he would venture upon greater liberties than the young lady was yet prepared to allow, and then she would suddenly vociferate her displeasure. Rosalind, at this, would drop her tapestry, and put out her handsome hands with the serious smile of the young girl whose virgin fancy has revealed to her all a mother’s healing arts. Lloyd would give up the child, their eyes would meet, their hands would touch, and Rosalind would extinguish the little girl’s sobs upon the snowy folds of the kerchief that crossed her bosom. Her dignity was perfect, and nothing could be more discreet than the manner in which she accepted her brother-in-law’s hospitality. It may almost be said, perhaps, that there was something harsh in her reserve. Lloyd had a provoking feeling that she was in the house and yet was unapproachable. Half-an-hour after supper, at the very outset of the long winter

evenings, she would light her candle, make the young man a most respectful curtsey, and march off to bed. If these were arts, Rosalind was a great artist. But their effect was so gentle, so gradual, they were calculated to work upon the young widower’s fancy with a crescendo so finely shaded, that, as the reader has seen, several weeks elapsed before Rosalind began to feel sure that her returns would cover her outlay. When this became morally certain she packed up her trunk and returned to her mother’s house. For three days she waited; on the fourth Mr Lloyd made his appearance—a respectful but pressing suitor. Rosalind heard him to the end, with great humility, and accepted him with infinite modesty. It is hard to imagine that Mrs Lloyd would have forgiven her husband; but if anything might have disarmed her resentment it would have been the ceremonious continence of this interview. Rosalind imposed upon her lover but a short probation. They were married, as was becoming, with great privacy—almost with secrecy—in the hope perhaps, as was waggishly remarked at the time, that the late Mrs Lloyd wouldn’t hear of it.

The marriage was to all appearance a happy one, and each party obtained what each had desired—Lloyd ‘a devilish fine woman’, and Rosalind—but Rosalind’s desires, as the reader will have observed, had remained a good deal of a mystery. There were, indeed, two blots upon their felicity, but time would perhaps efface them. During the first three years of her marriage Mrs Lloyd failed to become a mother, and her husband on his side suffered heavy losses of money. This latter circumstance compelled a material retrenchment in his expenditure, and Rosalind was perforce less of a fine lady than her sister had been. She contrived, however, to carry it like a woman of considerable fashion. She had long since ascertained that her sister’s copious wardrobe had been sequestered for the benefit of her daughter, and that it lay languishing in thankless gloom in the dusty attic. It was a revolting thought that these exquisite fabrics should await the good pleasure of a little girl who sat in a high chair and ate bread-and-milk with a wooden spoon. Rosalind had the good taste, however, to say nothing about the matter until several months had expired. Then, at last, she timidly broached it to her husband. Was it not a pity that so much finery should be lost?—for lost it would be, what with colours fading, and moths

Notes

13. Petrarch, an Italian poet and predecessor of Shakespeare, was known for his use of the courtly love trope as well as for being a humanist, which James is claiming Mr. Lloyd was not.

eating it up, and the change of fashions. But Lloyd gave her so abrupt and peremptory a refusal, that she saw, for the present, her attempt was vain. Six months went by, however, and brought with them new needs and new visions. Rosalind’s thoughts hovered lovingly about her sister’s relics. She went up and looked at the chest in which they lay imprisoned. There was a sullen defiance in its three great padlocks and its iron bands which only quickened her cupidity. There was something exasperating in its incorruptible immobility. It was like a grim and grizzled old household servant, who locks his jaws over a family secret. And then there was a look of capacity in its vast extent, and a sound as of dense fulness, when Rosalind knocked its side with the toe of her little shoe, which caused her to flush with baffled longing. “It’s absurd,” she cried; “it’s improper, it’s wicked”; and she forthwith resolved upon another attack upon her husband. On the following day, after dinner, when he had had his wine, she boldly began it. But he cut her short with great sternness.

“Once for all, Rosalind,” said he, “it’s out of the question. I shall be gravely displeased if you return to the matter.”

“Very good,” said Rosalind. “I am glad to learn the esteem in which I am held. Gracious heaven,” she cried, “I am a very happy woman! It’s an agreeable thing to feel one’s self sacrificed to a caprice!” And her eyes filled with tears of anger and disappointment.

Lloyd had a good-natured man’s horror of a woman’s sobs, and he attempted—I may say he condescended—to explain. “It’s not a caprice, dear, it’s a promise,” he said—“an oath.”

“An oath? It’s a pretty matter for oaths! and to whom, pray?”

“To Perdita,” said the young man, raising his eyes for an instant, but immediately dropping them.

“Perdita—ah, Perdita!” and Rosalind’s tears broke forth. Her bosom heaved with stormy sobs—sobs which were the long-deferred sequel of the violent fit of weeping in which she had indulged herself on the night when she discovered her sister’s betrothal. She had hoped, in her better moments, that she had done with her jealousy; but her temper, on that occasion, had taken an ineffaceable fold. “And pray, what right had Perdita to dispose of my future?” she cried. “What right had she to bind you to meanness and cruelty? Ah, I occupy a dignified place, and I make a very fine figure! I am welcome to what Perdita has left! And what has she left? I never knew till

now how little! Nothing, nothing, nothing.”

This was very poor logic, but it was very good as a ‘scene.’ Lloyd put his arm around his wife’s waist and tried to kiss her, but she shook him off with magnificent scorn. Poor fellow! he had coveted a ‘devilish fine woman.’ and he had got one. Her scorn was intolerable. He walked away with his ears tingling—irresolute, distracted. Before him was his secretary, and in it the sacred key which with his own hand he had turned in the triple lock. He marched up and opened it, and took the key from a secret drawer, wrapped in a little packet which he had sealed with his own honest bit of blazonry. *Je garde*, said the motto—‘I keep.’ But he was ashamed to put it back. He flung it upon the table beside his wife.

“Put it back!” she cried. “I want it not. I hate it!”

“I wash my hands of it,” cried her husband. “God forgive me!”

Mrs Lloyd gave an indignant shrug of her shoulders, and swept out of the room, while the young man retreated by another door. Ten minutes later Mrs Lloyd returned, and found the room occupied by her little step-daughter and the nursery-maid. The key was not on the table. She glanced at the child. Her little niece was perched on a chair, with the packet in her hands. She had broken the seal with her own small fingers. Mrs Lloyd hastily took possession of the key.

At the habitual supper-hour Arthur Lloyd came back from his counting-room. It was the month of June, and supper was served by daylight. The meal was placed on the table, but Mrs Lloyd failed to make her appearance. The servant whom his master sent to call her came back with the assurance that her room was empty, and that the women informed him that she had not been seen since dinner. They had, in truth, observed her to have been in tears, and, supposing her to be shut up in her chamber, had not disturbed her. Her husband called her name in various parts of the house, but without response. At last it occurred to him that he might find her by taking the way to the attic. The thought gave him a strange feeling of discomfort, and he bade his servants remain behind, wishing no witness in his quest. He reached the foot of the staircase leading to the topmost flat, and stood with his hand on the banisters, pronouncing his wife’s name. His voice trembled. He called again louder and more firmly. The only sound which disturbed the absolute silence was a faint echo of his own tones, repeating his question under the great eaves. He nevertheless felt

irresistibly moved to ascend the staircase. It opened upon a wide hall, lined with wooden closets, and terminating in a window which looked westward, and admitted the last rays of the sun. Before the window stood the great chest. Before the chest, on her knees, the young man saw with amazement and horror the figure of his wife. In an instant he crossed the interval between them, bereft of utterance. The lid of the chest stood open, exposing, amid their perfumed napkins, its treasure of stuffs and jewels. Rosalind had fallen backward from a kneeling posture, with one hand supporting her on the floor and the other pressed to her heart. On her limbs was the stiffness of death, and on her face, in the fading light of the sun, the terror of something more than death. Her lips were parted in entreaty, in dismay, in agony; and on her blanched brow and cheeks there glowed the marks of ten hideous wounds from two vengeful ghostly hands.

Contextual Documents

Excerpts from “A Pair of Hands” by A. T. Quiller-Couch¹⁴

“A Pair of Hands,” published within a collection of short stories in 1900 by Arthur Thomas Quiller-Couch, is another story about ghostly hands. Although these hands are not malevolent like the hands that kill Rosalind in “The Romance of Certain Old Clothes,” they are similarly related to the Victorian-era gender roles hinted at in the first half of James’s story. The hands in Quiller-Couch’s story are helping hands that happen to belong to the ghost of a little girl named Margaret. The story begins with an older Miss Le Petyt knitting and lamenting about a time when she lived in a house with a friendly female ghost:

“Well, my dears, I am not quite the coward you take me for. And, as it happens, mine was the most harmless ghost in the world. In fact”—and here she looked at the fire again— “I was quite sorry to lose her.”

“It was a woman, then? Now I think,” said Miss Blanche, “that female ghosts are the horriddest of all. They wear little shoes with high red heels, and go about

tap, tap, wringing their hands.”

“This one wrung her hands, certainly. But I don’t know about the high red heels, for I never saw her feet. Perhaps she was like the Queen of Spain, and hadn’t any. And as for the hands, it all depends how you wring them. There’s an elderly shop-walker at Knightsbridge, for instance—”

“Don’t be prosy, dear, when you know that we’re just dying to hear the story.”

Miss Le Petyt turned to me with a small deprecating laugh. “It’s such a little one.”

“The story, or the ghost?”

“Both.”

The above passage helps to define what type of female ghost is acceptable or unacceptable based on how they wring their hands. In the eyes of the characters, if a female ghost wrings her hands the wrong way she is horrid. If she wrings them in another way, she could be harmless like the ghost Miss Le Petyt is referring to. Also, Miss Le Petyt is using her hands to knit as the story begins, which is a very common, if not expected, activity for a woman to be doing in this era (Plante 156). This detail could be an allusion to the proper types of activities, or wringing, a woman’s hands should be doing, setting the tone for the rest of the story. Miss Le Petyt learns in the next passage that a ghostly pair of little girl hands has been doing the housework for her at night:

“Over the porcelain basin and beneath the water trickling from the tap I saw two hands. That was all—two small hands, a child’s hands. I cannot tell you how they ended. No: they were not cut off. I saw them quite distinctly: just a pair of small hands and the wrists, and after that—nothing. They were moving briskly—washing themselves clean. I saw the water trickle and splash over them—not through them—but just as it would on real hands. They were the hands of a little girl, too. Oh, yes, I was sure of that at once. Boys and girls wash their hands differently. I can’t just tell you what the difference is, but it’s unmistakable.

“I saw all this before my candle slipped and fell with a crash. I had set it down without looking—for my eyes

Notes

14. This story, originally published within one of the author’s short story collections called *Old Fires and Profitable Ghosts: A Book of Stories* in 1900, was edited and published by Lionel G. Sear in 2006 and cataloged by Project Gutenberg.

were fixed on the basin—and had balanced it on the edge of the nest of drawers. After the crash, in the darkness there, with the water running, I suffered some bad moments. Oddly enough, the thought uppermost with me was that I must shut off that tap before escaping. I had to. And after a while I picked up all my courage, so to say, between my teeth, and with a little sob thrust out my hand and did it. Then I fled.”

In the Victorian era, a woman’s destiny was to provide the perfect domestic sphere to shelter her family from the harmful world, and housekeeping was a major part of keeping the home running smoothly (Plante 35). This theme is evident in both James’s story and Quiller-Couch’s story. A significant question to raise is: why would the ghost of the girl who died in the house only come back as a pair of hands? This question could be partly answered in the explanation of how she is washing her hands: “They were the hands of a little girl, too. Oh yes, I was sure of that at once. Boys and girls wash their hands differently. I can’t just tell you what the difference is, but it’s unmistakable.” As in “The Romance of Certain Old Clothes,” these hands were being used to represent the work women were expected to do in the private sphere.

*Excerpts from “The Cold Embrace” by Mary E. Braddon*¹⁵

Mary E. Braddon’s story “The Cold Embrace,” published in 1860, takes on the ghostly hands motif in a similar way to James’s story in that there is a pair of hands that kill someone. Braddon’s story is focused on a secret engagement of two cousins, Gertrude and an unnamed man, that never results in marriage because of her cousin’s disregard to his initial promise. This engagement is unconventional for the Victorian era because Gertrude’s father did not consent and because her cousin never followed through with the marriage (Plante 23). James’s story is also centered around atypical engagement and marriage processes, apparent in Mr. Lloyd’s choice between the two sisters and in his allowing Rosalind to take over Perdita’s private sphere after her death. Thus the hands in both these stories are

connected to dead females who were wronged within their marital commitments.

This excerpt describes the initial engagement of Gertrude and her cousin. Note the detail of Gertrude’s hands in this scene:

So they are betrothed; and standing side by side when the dying sun and the pale rising moon divide the heavens, he puts the betrothal ring upon her finger, the white and taper finger whose slender shape he knows so well. This ring is a peculiar one, a massive golden serpent, its tail in its mouth, the symbol of eternity; it had been his mother’s, and he would know it amongst a thousand. If he were to become blind tomorrow, he could select it from amongst a thousand by the touch alone.

He places it on her finger, and they swear to be true to each other for ever and ever—through trouble and danger—sorrow and change—in wealth or poverty. Her father must needs be won to consent to their union by and by, for they were now betrothed, and death alone could part them.

But the young student, the scoffer at revelation, yet the enthusiastic adorer of the mystical, asks:

“Can death part us? I would return to you from the grave, Gertrude. My soul would come back to be near my love. And you—you, if you died before me—the cold earth would not hold you from me; if you loved me, you would return, and again these fair arms would be clasped round my neck as they are now.”

But she told him, with a holier light in her deep-blue eyes than had ever shone in his—she told him that the dead who die at peace with God are happy in heaven, and cannot return to the troubled earth; and that it is only the suicide—the lost wretch on whom sorrowful angels shut the door of Paradise—whose unholy spirit haunts the footsteps of the living.

After making his promise to Gertrude, he goes to Italy to work as an artist, and his communication with Gertrude slowly fades until they lose all contact. Gertrude kills herself because of his thoughtless actions and because of her unwillingness to marry another man whom her father has arranged for her to wed.

Notes

15. This story, originally published in 1860, is from the anthology called *Victorian Ghost Stories: By Eminent Women Writers* which was edited and published by Richard Dalby in 1989.

According to Calder, the “helpless female borne off by the villainous male or, worse, the susceptible female compliant to the false promises of the unscrupulous male” was a common theme in Victorian fiction (16). Gertrude fits this description, but later in the story her ghostly hands and arms seek vengeance and refuse to be compliant with the transgressions inflicted by her unethical cousin. The hands first appear in both James’ and Braddon’s stories when engagement is brought into the plot, and the stories end with the hands killing the betrayer of their marital promise. However, while Perdita retaliates against Rosalind, Gertrude takes her revenge out on the man who was unfaithful to her.

In the following scene, Gertrude’s suicide leaves her ghost to roam the earth, and she fulfills her cousin’s expressed wish from the first excerpt: “if you loved me, you would return, and again these fair arms would be clasped round my neck as they are now.”

He is not thinking of his drowned cousin, for he has forgotten her and is happy.

Suddenly some one, something from behind him, puts two cold arms round his neck, and clasps its hands on his breast.

And yet there is no one behind him, for on the flags bathed in the broad moonlight there are only two shadows, his own and his dog’s. He turns quickly round—there is no one—nothing to be seen in the broad square but himself and his dog; and though he feels, he cannot see the cold arms clasped round his neck.

It is not ghostly, this embrace, for it is palpable to the touch—it cannot be real, for it is invisible.

He tries to throw off the cold caress. He clasps the hands in his own to tear them asunder, and to cast them off his neck. He can feel the long delicate fingers cold and wet beneath his touch, and on the third finger of the left hand he can feel the ring which was his mother’s—the golden serpent—the ring which he has always said he would know among a thousand by the touch alone. He knows it now!

His dead cousin’s cold arms are round his neck—his dead cousin’s wet hands are clasped upon his breast. He asks himself if he is mad. “Up, Leo!” he shouts. “Up, up, boy!” and the Newfoundland leaps to his shoulders—the dog’s paws are on the dead hands, and the animal utters a terrific howl, and springs away from his master.

The student stands in the moonlight, the dead arms around his neck, and the dog at a little distance moaning piteously.

The previous scene marks the first time Gertrude’s ghostly embrace haunts and threatens her cousin. She is a ghost enraged by the actions of an ungentlemanly suitor, one who defied the conventions of engagement in the Victorian era by not committing properly and by not treating Gertrude like a lady because, as Plante states, “no true gentleman would pay excessive visits to or shower constant attention upon a lady whom he was not considering for marriage” (20). The ring that bound the couple is on Gertrude’s ghostly hands, tormenting her cousin with the reminder of his broken promise, and threatening him for breaking it. The next scene marks the death of Gertrude’s cousin through her last angry, ghostly embrace:

Alone, and, in the terrible silence, he hears the echoes of his own footsteps in that dismal dance which has no music.

No music but the beating of his breast. The cold arms are round his neck—they whirl him round, they will not be flung off, or cast away; he can no more escape from their icy grasp than he can escape from death. He looks behind him—there is nothing but himself in the great empty salle; but he can feel—cold, deathlike, but O, how palpable!—the long slender fingers, and the ring which was his mother’s.

He tries to shout, but he has no power in his burning throat. The silence of the place is only broken by the echoes of his own footsteps in the dance from which he cannot extricate himself. Who says he has no partner? The cold hands are clasped on his breast, and now he does not shun their caress. No! One more polka, if he drops down dead.

The lights are all out, and, half an hour after, the gendarmes come in with a lantern to see that the house is empty; they are followed by a great dog that they have found seated howling on the steps of the theatre. Near the principal entrance they stumble over—

The body of a student, who has died from want of food, exhaustion, and the breaking of a blood-vessel.

In James’s story, Perdita’s hands kill Rosalind, who

betrayed her by replacing her in every important aspect of a Victorian-era female’s life through taking over her home, husband, and child; Mr. Lloyd, however, is not physically harmed. Braddon’s ghost, by contrast, is less petty than the sisters within James’s story. Instead of bickering over possessions or rights to a suitor, Braddon’s ghost exacts her revenge upon the man who wrongs her by breaking his promise. Braddon’s powerful female ghost, strengthened by spiritualist ideals, makes a commentary on the patriarchal system that entrapped and silenced women from voicing their opinions or grievances. In each case, the hands that bound the women to commitment are the weapons they use against those who wronged them.

Excerpts from “Some Odd Facts About the Tiled House—Being an Authentic Narrative of the Ghost of a Hand” by J. Sheridan Le Fanu¹⁶

In another Victorian ghost story concerning hands, we see a house being haunted by a ghostly hand that tries to make its way inside. This chapter, from J. Sheridan Le Fanu’s book *The House by the Church-Yard*, later republished in 1863 as “The Narrative of a Ghost of a Hand,” tells a story of a ghostly hand that terrorizes all levels of a household, from the servants to the upper-class family.

The family within “The Romance of Certain Old Clothes” is very concerned with keeping up with a class system. Though they are living in America, they are very concerned with keeping their allegiance with Europe. We see a similar kind of class anxiety in Le Fanu’s story. In this tale, a family, the Prossers, rent out a house from Mrs. Prosser’s father, Alderman Harper. Upon moving in, a mysterious hand begins to haunt the family and their servants. The hand first appears to Mrs. Prosser one evening as she is sitting in the back parlor of the house, looking out into the garden:

“...looking out into the orchard, [she] plainly saw a hand stealthily placed upon the stone window-sill outside, as if by some one beneath the window, at her right side, intending to climb up. There was nothing

but the hand, which was rather short but handsomely formed, and white and plump, laid on the edge of the window-sill; and it was not a very young hand, but one aged, somewhere about forty, as she conjectured. It was only a few weeks before that the horrible robbery at Clondalkin had taken place, and the lady fancied that the hand was that of one of the miscreants who was now about to scale the windows of the Tiled House. She uttered a loud scream and an ejaculation of terror, and at the same moment the hand was quietly withdrawn.”

It is important to note the description of the hand as “white and plump . . . [and] aged.” This description suggests it belongs to someone of higher class as a lower-class person’s hand would be tanned and rough with work. Indeed, a discussion on class begins to develop within this story just as it did in “The Romance of Certain Old Clothes.”

Soon the hand begins appearing to the servants, and we realize that the hand desperately wishes to come inside the house. It raps on windows and doors and tries to push its way inside at one point and later succeeds. Like the grappling of lower classes for higher status in society, the hand wishes to enter where it has been forbidden to enter. However, the hand seems to be one of an upper-class gentleman, as it is hinted at in the end of the story:

The person to whom that hand belonged never once appeared: nor was it a hand separated from a body, but only a hand so manifested and introduced that its owner was always, by some crafty accident, hidden from view.

In the year 1819, at a college breakfast, I met a Mr. Prosser—a thin, grave, but rather chatty old gentleman, with very white hair drawn back into a pigtail—and he told us all, with a concise particularity, a story of his cousin, James Prosser, who, when an infant, had slept for some time in what his mother said was a haunted nursery in an old house near Chapelizod, and who, whenever he was ill, over-fatigued, or in anywise feverish, suffered all through his life as he had done from a time he could scarce remember, from a vision of a certain gentleman, fat and pale, every curl of whose wig, every button and

Notes

16. This story is a chapter from a book by Le Fanu called *The House by the Church-Yard*. This particular edition was originally published in 1904 by The Macmillan Company and was cataloged by Project Gutenberg in 2006 by Ted Garvin and Janet Blenkinship.

fold of whose laced clothes, and every feature and line of whose sensual, benignant, and unwholesome face, was as minutely engraven upon his memory as the dress and lineaments of his own grandfather’s portrait, which hung before him every day at breakfast, dinner, and supper.-

.....

This hand, then, is the ghost of a previous owner, specifically an earl who died with financial troubles. After this incident, the hand is seen at other times by servants, some of whom die of fright or run off. Mr. Prosser becomes very angry that his servants are acting so foolishly. Believing his servants are just acting like normal, lower-class servants, Mr. Prosser plans

an investigation into the origin of a handprint within the kitchen that has frightened many of his servants believing it to be from the ghostly hand. However, as Katherine Rowe points out, he does not find the owner of the print and soon he and his wife become just as hysterically “imaginative” as their servants, reversing from the higher class to the stereotypes of the lower classes (155). Meanwhile, the hand of the owner goes about the house surveying what used to be his property. Like the hand of the owner of the house in this story, the hands of Perdita in “The Romance of Certain Old Clothes,” return to claim what is rightfully hers.

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