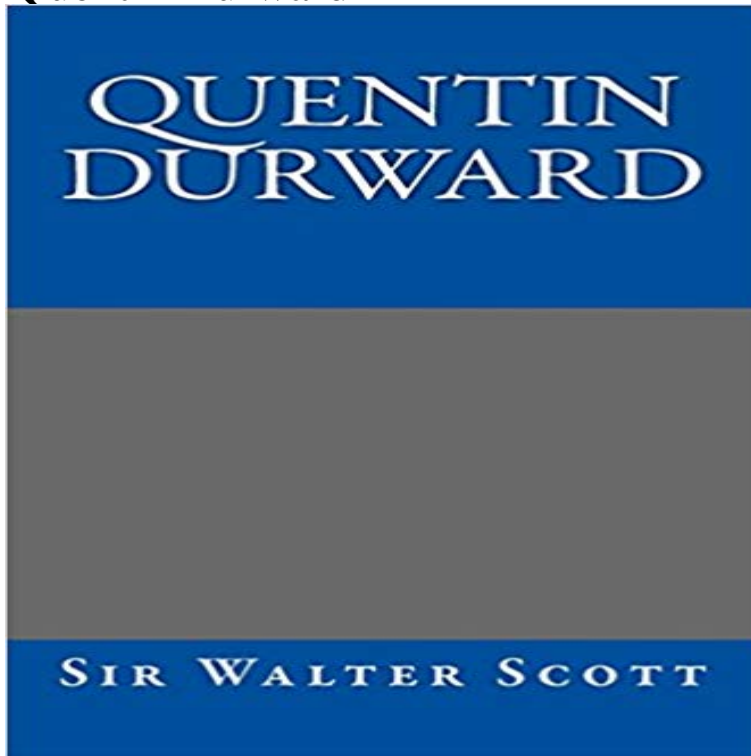


Quentin Durward



The scene of this romance is laid in the fifteenth century, when the feudal system, which had been the sinews and nerves of national defence, and the spirit of chivalry, by which, as by a vivifying soul, that system was animated, began to be innovated upon and abandoned by those grosser characters who centred their sum of happiness in procuring the personal objects on which they had fixed their own exclusive attachment. The same egotism had indeed displayed itself even in more primitive ages; but it was now for the first time openly avowed as a professed principle of action. The spirit of chivalry had in it this point of excellence, that, however overstrained and fantastic many of its doctrines may appear to us, they were all founded on generosity and self denial, of which, if the earth were deprived, it would be difficult to conceive the existence of virtue among the human race. Among those who were the first to ridicule and abandon the self denying principles in which the young knight was instructed and to which he was so carefully trained up, Louis XI of France was the chief. That sovereign was of a character so purely selfish so guiltless of entertaining any purpose unconnected with his ambition, covetousness, and desire of selfish enjoyment that he almost seems an incarnation of the devil himself, permitted to do his utmost to corrupt our ideas of honour in its very source. Nor is it to be forgotten that Louis possessed to a great extent that caustic wit which can turn into ridicule all that a man does for any other persons advantage but his own, and was, therefore, peculiarly qualified to play the part of a cold hearted and sneering fiend. The cruelties, the perjuries, the suspicions of this prince, were rendered more detestable, rather than amended, by the gross and debasing superstition which he constantly practised. The devotion to the heavenly saints, of which he made such a

parade, was upon the miserable principle of some petty deputy in office, who endeavours to hide or atone for the malversations of which he is conscious by liberal gifts to those whose duty it is to observe his conduct, and endeavours to support a system of fraud by an attempt to corrupt the incorruptible. In no other light can we regard his creating the Virgin Mary a countess and colonel of his guards, or the cunning that admitted to one or two peculiar forms of oath the force of a binding obligation which he denied to all other, strictly preserving the secret, which mode of swearing he really accounted obligatory, as one of the most valuable of state mysteries. To a total want of scruple, or, it would appear, of any sense whatever of moral obligation, Louis XI added great natural firmness and sagacity of character, with a system of policy so highly refined, considering the times he lived in, that he sometimes overreached himself by giving way to its dictates.

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