

CHAPTER II.

Talk you of young Master Lancelot?
MERCHANT OF VENICE.

AFTER some brief interval, Master Goldthred, at the earnest instigation of mine host, and the jocular concurrence of his guests, indulged the company with the following morsel of melody:—

Of all the birds on bush or tree,
Commend me to the owl,
Since he may best ensample be
To those the cup that trowl.
For when the sun hath left the west,
He chooses the tree that he loves the best,
And he whoops out his song, and he laughs at his jest;
Then though hours be late, and weather foul,
We'll drink to the health of the bonnie, bonnie owl.

The lark is but a bumpkin fowl,
He sleeps in his nest till morn;
But my blessing upon the jolly owl,
That all night blows his horn.
Then up with your cup though you stagger in speech,
And match me this catch till you swagger and screech,
And drink till you wink, my merry men each;
For though hours be late, and weather be foul,
We'll drink to the health of the bonnie, bonnie owl.

'There is savour in this, my hearts,' said Michael, when the mercer had finished his song, 'and some goodness seems left among you yet—but what a bead-roll you have read me of old comrades, and to every man's name tacked some ill-omened motto! And so Swashing Will of Wallingford hath bid us good-night?'

'He died the death of a fat buck,' said one of the party, 'being shot with a crossbow bolt, by old Thatcham, the duke's stout park-keeper at Donington Castle.'

'Ay, ay, he always loved venison well,' replied Michael, 'and a cup of elated to boot—and so here's one to his memory. Do me right, my masters.'

When the health of this departed worthy had been duly honoured, Lambourne proceeded to inquire after Prance of Padworth.

'Pranced off—made immortal ten years since,' said the mercer; 'marry, sir, Oxford Castle and Goodman Thong, and a tenpenny-worth of cord, best know how.'

'What, so they hung poor Prance high and dry? so much for loving to walk by moonlight—a cup to his memory, my masters—all merry fellows like moonlight. What has become of Hal with the plume—he who lived near Yat-tenden, and wore the long feather—I forget his name.'

'What, Hal Hempseed?' replied the mercer. 'Why, you may remember, he was a sort of a gentleman, and would meddle in State matters, and so he got into the mire about the Duke of Norfolk's matter these two or three years since, fled the country with a pursuivant's warrant at his heels, and has never since been heard of.'

'Nay, after these baulks,' said Michael Lambourne, 'I need hardly inquire after Tony Foster; for when ropes, and crossbow shafts, and pursuivants' warrants, and such-like gear, were so ripe, Tony could hardly 'scape them.'

'Which Tony Foster mean you?' said the innkeeper.

'Why, he they called Tony Fire-the-Fagot, because he brought a light to kindle the pile round Latimer and Ridley, when the wind blew out Jack Thong's torch, and no man else would give him light for love or money.'

'Tony Foster lives and thrives,' said the host. '—But, kinsman, I would not have you call him Tony Fire-the-Fagot, if you would not brook the stab.'

'How! is he grown ashamed on't?' said Lambourne; 'why, he was wont to boast of it, and say he liked as well to see a roasted heretic as a roasted ox.'

'Ay, but, kinsman, that was in Mary's time,' replied the landlord, 'when Tony's father was reeve here to the Abbot of Abingdon. But since that, Tony married a pure precisian, and is as good a Protestant, I warrant you, as the best.'

'And looks grave, and holds his head high, and seems his old companions,' said the mercer. 'Then he hath prospered, I warrant him,' said Lambourne; 'for ever when a man hath got nobles of his own, he keeps out of the way of those whose exchequers lie in other men's purchase.'

'Prospered, quotha!' said the mercer; 'why, you remember Cumnor Place, the old mansion-house beside the churehyard?'

'By the same token, I robbed the orchard three times—what of that?—It was the old abbot's residence when there was plague or sickness at Abingdon.'

'Ay,' said the host, 'but that has been long over; and Anthony Foster had a right in it, and lives there by some grant from a great courtier, who had the church-lands from the crown; and there he dwells, and has as little to do with any poor wight in Cumnor, as if he were himself a belted knight.'

'Nay,' said the mercer, 'it is not altogether pride in Tony neither—there is a fair lady in the case, and Tony will scarce let the light of day look on her.'

'How!' said Tressilian, who now for the first time interfered in their conversation; 'did ye not say this Foster was married, and to a precisian?'

'Married he was, and to as bitter a precisian as ever ate flesh in Lent; and a cat-and-dog life she led with Tony, as men said. But she is dead, rest be with her, and Tony hath but a slip of a daughter; so it is thought he means to wed this stranger, that men keep such a coil about.'

'And why so?—I mean, why do they keep a coil about her?' said Tressilian.

'Why, I wot not,' answered the host, 'except that men say she is as beautiful as an angel, and no one knows whence she comes, and every one wishes to know why she is kept so closely mewed up. For my part, I never saw her—you have, I think, Master Goldthred?'

'That I have, old boy,' said the mercer. 'Look you, I was riding hither from Abingdon—I passed under the east oriel window of the old mansion, where all the old saints and histories and such-like are painted—It was not the common path I took, but one through the park; for the postern-door was upon the lath, and I thought I might take the privilege of an old comrade to ride across through the trees, both

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