

"Tis vain that gallants call me fair,
Life's but a weary course;—
I have no pearls to deck my hair,—
No gold to fill my purse.

"I should not lack a joe this eve,
Were I but rich and great;
But I must sit alone and grieve,
No lover seeks the gate."

"Hollo! Mistress Dolly. Here is a brave wooer to give the lie to your ditty," shouted Fenwick, springing from his horse.

"Ah! well-a-day!" cried Dolly, returning his hearty salute; "it is a long time since we met."

"You see I have not forgotten you," said Fenwick; "and I have brought you a silk mantle cloak, and some pearls for your hair. So never let me hear you abuse your good fortune, by singing such a despairing ditty again. Why, Dolly!" he continued, chucking her under the chin, "you look handsomer than ever. But where are your father and brothers to-night?"

"They are gone to a town some ten miles off, to attend the fair to-morrow, with a load of baskets. Goodness knows, I have worked my fingers sore, in making fine ware for ladies' work; and father has been so cross, and these two imps have tormented me out of my life. A weary time I've had of it, since you went away to Court."

"Well! I am back once more, sweet Doll, so give over this whining. Your father is absent, you say, at a fair, and will not be home until to-morrow night, which is most opportune, as I can lodge with thee. Wilt give me houseroom, sweetheart?"

"Welcome! An' thou canst couch thy dainty body on such a bed!" said Dolly.

"I am easily contented, my pretty vixen!—but for my horse?"

"I will take care of him," said Dolly, laying hold of the bridle. "I do always curry father's mare, when she be off a long journey. Father will not trust her to the boys."

"Shew me the stable; I always prefer being my own groom," returned Fenwick.

"Stable! quotha! That shed, with its back to the north, is the best lair we have for old Jenny."

"Bad's the best, then," said Sir Walter, glancing at the rude shed, covered in with furze, which was the domicile of the basket-maker's nag. "But my noble chestnut, like his master, has been used to rough treatment." So saying, he unsaddled and unbridled his fine steed; rubbed him well down with a wisp of dry straw, and having supplied him with hay and water, followed Mistress Dolly into the house.

"Well, this is comfortable," he cried, flinging off his riding cloak, and spreading out his hands to the cheerful fire. "What hast thou for supper?"

"Enough, an' it were worth eating," said Dolly, spreading a cloth upon the table. "Canst eat brown bread, eggs, and smoked bacon?"

"Yes, and, with the best appetite in the world, will consider them a dainty."

While Dolly was busy preparing the supper, Fenwick was casting about in his mind how he could introduce a subject on which he much wished to speak. "Dolly," he said, carelessly. "Is there any news stirring?"

"None, since the death of good Master Brandon. The funeral will be to-morrow; it will be a grand sight, for Sir Miles will himself walk at the head of the corpse; and Dame Brandon, with the little baby, will follow as chief mourners."

"Does she grieve much for the death of her husband?"

"Ah, lack-a-day! She do take on terribly. She have never tasted food since he got his summons; and is well nigh blind with weeping. The kitchen wench told me to day, that she is sure if it were not for the baby, she would die, too."

"He came by his end suddenly, did he not?" said Fenwick, poking the fire with a long stick that lay on the hearth for that purpose.

"To be sure he did. Why he was attacked in our lane; and would have been killed outright if it had not been for father."

Sir Walter affected profound ignorance, while Dolly entered into the most minute particulars of the assault, which, she concluded, was in order to rob Master Brandon of his money.

"Did your father discover who the ruffians were?" asked Sir Walter.

"No; it was a dark, rainy night, and he could not see their faces. He thought he had heard the voices of both before."

"It is strange," said Fenwick, musing. "What if his wife had a hand in it?"

"His wife! Good lack! What makes you think so?" said Dolly, dropping the gridiron in her surprise. "His wife, who is nigh dying of grief for his loss?"

"Grief is easily feigned," said Walter. "She is a strange woman. Did you never hear, Dolly, that she had dealings with Satan?"

"Phoo! phoo! I have heard tell of some frolic of hers, when a maiden; how she appeared to Laurence Wilde, in the form of a bear, in the park. Dost think it were true?"

"I have no doubt of 'it," returned Fenwick, mysteriously. "Between ourselves, Dorothy, I am sure that she has bewitched me."

"The Lord preserve us!" said Dolly. "In what way?"

"In the mad love I bear her. Although I hate her, I am compelled to follow her to my ruin."