

Fortunio

By Quiller-Couch

At Tregarrick Fair they cook a goose in twenty-two different ways; and as no one who comes to the fair would dream of eating any other food, you may fancy what a reek of cooking fills the narrow grey street soon after mid-day.

As a boy, I was always given a holiday to go to the goose-fair; and it was on my way thither across the moors, that I first made Fortunio's acquaintance. I wore a new pair of corduroys, that smelt outrageously—and squeaked, too, as I trotted briskly along the bleak high road; for I had a bright shilling to spend, and it burnt a hole in my pocket. I was planning my purchases, when I noticed, on a windy eminence of the road ahead, a man's figure sharply defined against the sky.

He was driving a flock of geese, so slowly that I soon caught him up; and such a man or such geese I had never seen. To begin with, his rags were worse than a scarecrow's. In one hand he carried a long staff; the other held a small book close under his nose, and his lean shoulders bent over as he read in it. It was clear, from the man's undecided gait, that all his eyes were for this book. Only he would look up when one of his birds strayed too far on the turf that lined the highway, and would guide it back to the stones again with his staff. As for the geese, they were utterly draggle-tailed and stained with travel, and waddled, every one, with so woe-begone a limp that I had to laugh as I passed.

The man glanced up, set his forefinger between the pages of his book, and turned on me a long sallow face and a pair of the most beautiful brown eyes in the world.

"Little boy," he said, in a quick foreign way—"rosy little boy. You laugh at my geese, oh?"

No doubt I stared at him like a ninny, for he went on—

"Little wide-mouthed Cupidon, how you gaze! Also, by the way, how you smell!"

"It's my corduroys," said I.

"Then I discommend your corduroya. But I approve your laugh. Laugh again—only at the right matter: laugh at this—"

And, opening his book again, he read a long passage as I walked beside him; but I could make neither head nor tail of it.

"That is from the 'Sentimental Journey,' by Laurence Sterne, the most beautiful of your English wits. Au, he is more than French! Laugh at it."

It was rather hard to laugh thus to order; but suddenly he set me the example, showing two rows of very white teeth, and fetching from his hollow chest a sound of mirth so incongruous with the whole aspect of the man, that I began to grin too.

"That's right; but be louder. Make the sounds that you made just now—"

He broke off sharply, being seized with an ugly fit of coughing, that forced him to halt and lean on his staff for a while. When he recovered we walked on together after the geese, he talking all the way in high-flown sentences that were Greek to me, and I stealing a look every now and then at his olive face, and half inclined to take to my heels and run.

We came at length to the ridge where the road dives suddenly into Tregarrick. The town lies along a narrow vale, and looking down, we saw flags waving along the street and much smoke curling from the chimneys, and heard the church-bells, the big drum, and the confused mutterings and hubbub of the fair. The sun—for the morning was still fresh—did not yet pierce

to the bottom of the valley, but fell on the hillside opposite, where cottage-gardens in parallel strips climbed up from the town to the moorland beyond.

“What is that?” asked the goose-driver, touching my arm and pointing to a dazzling spot on the slope opposite.

“That’s the sun on the windows of Gardener Tonken’s glass-house.”

“Eh?—does he live there?”

“He’s dead, and the garden’s ‘to let;’ you can just see the board from here. But he didn’t live there, of course. People don’t live in glass-houses; only plants.”

“That’s a pity, little boy, for their souls’ sakes. It reminds me of a story—by the way, do you know Latin? No? Well, listen to this:—if I can sell my geese to-day, perhaps I will hire that glass-house, and you shall come there on half holidays, and learn Latin. Now run ahead and spend your money.”

I was glad to escape, and in the bustle of the fair quickly forgot my friend. But late in the afternoon, as I had my eyes glued to a peep-show, I heard a voice behind me cry “Little boy!” and turning, saw him again. He was without his geese.

“I have sold them,” he said, “for £5; and I have taken the glass-house. The rent is only £3 a year, and I shan’t live longer, so that leaves me money to buy books. I shall feed on the snails in the garden, making soup of them, for there is a beautiful stove in the glass-house. When is your next half-holiday?”

“On Saturday.”

“Very well. I am going away to buy books; but I shall be back by Saturday, and then you are to come and learn Latin.”

It may have been fear or curiosity, certainly it was no desire for learning, that took me to Gardener Tenken’s glass-house next Saturday afternoon. The goose-driver was there to welcome me.

“Ah, wide-mouth,” he cried; “I knew you would be here. Come and see my library.”

He showed me a pile of dusty, tattered volumes, arranged on an old flower-stand.

“See,” said he, “no sorrowful books, only Aristophanes and Lucian, Horace, Rabelais, Molière, Voltaire’s novels, ‘Gil Blas,’ ‘Don Quixote,’ Fielding, a play or two of Shakespeare, a volume or so of Swift, Prior’s Poems, and Sterne—that divine Sterne! And a Latin Grammar and Virgil for you, little boy. First, eat some snails.”

But this I would not. So he pulled out two three-legged stools, and very soon I was trying to fix my wandering wits and decline *mensa*.

After this I came on every half-holiday for nearly a year. Of course the tenant of the glass-house was a nine days’ wonder in the town.

A crowd of boys and even many grown men and women would assemble and stare into the glass-house while we worked; but Fortunio (he gave no other name) seemed rather to like it than not. Only when some wiseaeres approached my parents with hints that my studies with a ragged man who lived on snails and garden-stuff were uncommonly like traffic with the devil, Fortunio, hearing the matter, walked over one morning to our home and had an interview with my mother. I don’t know what was said; but I know that afterwards no resistance was made to my visits to the glass-house.

They came to an end in the saddest and most natural way. One September afternoon I sat construing to Fortune out of the first book of Virgil’s “Æneid”—so far was I advanced; and coming to the passage—

“*Tum breviter Dido, vultum demiss, profatur*”.

I had just rendered *vultum demissa* “with downcast eyes,” when the book was snatched from me and hurled to the far end of the glasshouse. Looking up, I saw Fortunio in a transport of passion.

“Fool—little fool! Will you be like all the commentators? Will you forget what Virgil has said and put your own nonsense into his golden mouth?”

He stepped across, picked up the book, found the passage, and then turning back a page or so, read out—

“*Sæpta armis solioque alte subnixa* resedit.”

“*Alte! Alte!*” he screamed: “Dido sat on high: Æneas stood at the foot of her throne. Listen to this:— ‘Then Dido, bending down her gaze . . .’ ”

He went on translating. A rapture took him, and the sun beat in through the glass roof, and lit up his eyes. He was transfigured; his voice swelled and sank with passion, swelled again, and then, at the words—

“*Qua te tam læta tulerunt*

Sæcula? Qui tanti talem genuere parentes?”

it broke, the Virgil dropped from his hand, and sinking down on his stool he broke into a wild fit of sobbing.

“Oh, why did I read it? Why did I read this sorrowful book?” And then checking his sobs, he put a handkerchief to his mouth, took it away, and looked up at me with dry eyes.

“Go away, little one, Don’t come again: I am going to die very soon now.”

I stole out, awed and silent, and went home. But the picture of him kept me awake that night, and early in the morning I dressed and ran off to the glass-house.

He was still sitting as I had left him. “Why have you come?” he asked, harshly. I have been coughing. I am going to die.”

“Then I’ll fetch a doctor.”

“No.”

“A clergyman?”

“No.”

But I ran for the doctor.

Fortunio lived on for a week after this, and at length consented to see a clergyman. I brought the vicar, and was told to leave them alone together and come back in an hour’s time.

When I returned, Fortunio was stretched quietly on the rough bed we had found for him. And the Vicar, who knelt beside it, was speaking softly in his ear.

As I entered on tiptoe, I heard—

“. . . in that kingdom shall be no weeping—”

“Oh, Parson,” interrupted Fortunio, “that’s bad. I’m so bored with laughing that the good God might surely allow a few tears.”

The parish buried him, and his books went to pay for the funeral. But I kept the Virgil; and this, with the few memories that I impart to you, is all that remains to me of Fortunio.