

KING COMFORT.



GATHERED together on the lea-slopes, trees jostle elbows in sheer jolliness; wind makes cornfields heave in waves, like the sunny locks spread over a little girl's shoulders, who on the nursery floor lies laughing over her Nonsense Book; and blue skies grow jealous of the rival beauty of many streams, which gladden that land where stands, under steep tile roofs, the red-brick, slit-windowed, tall-towered castle of King Comfort.

This fortress was never even shaken by fierce assault or battery's bluff bluster; first, because the mortar its walls were built with had been welded with dragon's blood; secondly, as no one ever made attack or fired cannon against its walls.

On its blue bosom a moat bore water-lilies beneath the ladies' bower; and not infrequently apple-parings, crayfish claws, and other refuse swam on its shadow-blackened surface under the scullery-grate.

"Creak, creak," went the well-winder, while chain and pail rattled down to the depths; the groom, scratching his poll, stood and watched pigeons, whose nerves, never wrung with headache, give not the least start at the harsh cry of the iron; which stopped, he ejaculates "I'll swill ditch slush rather than believe but what the king lives," then bends his back and lengthens his arms as he labours at the now weighted handle. But when the bucket arrived at the top, mopping himself, he groaned out "By all the wool-spools my mother's spun, bless her heart, I'm as sure as that crabs are less sweet than pippins that good old Comfort's stone dead."

Then, the stable-lad flung the kennel doors open, and bulldogs, beagles, harriers, spaniels, retrievers, black, piebald, fox-coloured, milk-splashed, rush yelping, barking, and bounding into the court, while the pigeons wheel into the air; a great mastiff oversets the newly drawn water.

What Gunter said after the second descent of the pail, cannot be recorded; for it was more fit to have issued forth from the gargoyles, which yawned, like griffins, devils, belial-men, and bishops, round the roof, while swallows built nests between their rumps and the coping.

Prince Pleasance, straddling his legs as wide as the arch of a stone

bridge, stood in breeches of tan kid, which sprung, like sturdy oak saplings, from green velvet shoes gashed with white puffs; his coat, lined with fox-fur, hung open to the knees, within it a saffron doublet crossed by a maze of straps shining with buckles, to which hung his hunting-horn, knives, and wallets; he held between his teeth the lithe end of a dog-lash, while the short handle, made from a hart's foot, swung among a litter of boar-hound pups; they frisked, gambolled, and tumbled together in attempts to seize it, while their mother blinked at them from the sunlight that streamed through the hall-windows, over the head of his cousin Gascoigne.

Who, legs out-thrust, lounged on a settle, dressed scarcely less gaily than the other (capped with grey blue satin, a black plume of cock's feathers a-top), now and again grabbing at motes which spun in the large rays above.

"Say, Pleassy, I don't mind waging a sly couple of cousin Nell's kisses, the old boy's heart's cold, that is to say, you're king, lad." Presently, receiving no answer from his pup-engrossed cousin, he got up; strolled out over the drawbridge, then round by the moat, till he was under the bower-lattice; flopped down on the bank; and began to throw small stones in the moat, striking up at the same time a roundelay. In a few moments a display of wonderful caps flowered out from the windows, and showerlike little laughs, "Good morning, cousin," "Holiday health to Sir Gascoigne," "A merry matin," "Fine day, Sir," "Hope ye quit bed the right side," and like pleasant phrases dropt in the grass all round.

"Is poor Leonine's foot healed?"

"O, don't bother about dogs! I can't bear them, they always smell fusty."

"O, how can you! not when they're kept sweet."

"No, indeed, my sweet mistresses; there's many a gallant, I assure you, prefers his dogs to the ladies, though, in my opinion, with loss thereby of right to the title."

"Ah! they rank equally with you."

"No! now give me a chance; I'd swop a whole pack against any of your neat selves."

"Oh! oh! flattery."

"Does one of my witching queens know whether the king, haply, yet lives?"

All the girl-flowers vanish instantly; presently one only returns with "Hush, you must not shout so; but this moment there was light along the gallery, and the king's daughter walked."

"Ah, you lazy lout, stealing the dripping! There you go, slobberin' it on your face!—Body of me! if thou wasn't such a wain-load, I'd ha' caught the knave, and lugged his ear for 'im,—them boys's always got their lips to sucking something they'd no right touch.—Bless my puckered thumbs! what's a' that? Lor! beg pardon, I'm sure, sir, but your black hat is that tall,—well it just be nothing more nor less than a witch's steeple."

"Good cook, have no fears. I come from my prince, commissioned to add a wee pinch of spice, some little tit-bit, dainty morsel, or as the French

put it 'bonne bouche,' to the apple charlotte I hear you have prepared so skilfully for the daughter of our royal master."

"O, sir, it's no great matter to make a charlotte; I've done billions on 'em in my time.—Well! I wouldn't have thought that white powder 'ld make mickle difference; looks just like sugar."

"Yes, my good woman, it indeed is a subtle sweetener, most calming to the constitution. Have you a boy, haply, who might precede me with it to the king's chamber? I would not let it out of my sight, for fear of accidents."

"Aye, sir, I bet there be a plenty hanging round ready to filch some'at when one's back's turned.—Here, Tom—Sid—one o' you lubbers; make yourself a bit spruce off to the pump.—He'll be back 'fore a flea jumps, your worship."

The upper hall, weakly illumined with tallow dips; a gallery across its further end, to which leads a stairway on the left; on the right a huge hearth with its piled unlit logs; stray gleams twinkle like stars from false eyes, jetty claws, or shiny teeth all round; a long table runs under the gallery loaded with viands; servants move to and fro.

While, at the near end of the hall, under windows against which rain rattles, talk, almost lost in shadows, a group of courtiers.

"I say she's a witch."

"Nay, nay, for she's my sister."

"I beg your highness's pardon, but I think you must admit there's excuse."

"Well, may be so."

"I hope that your highness would not take it ill, should she die suddenly?"

"No, my fondness could bear the strain."

"Master Fustian is barely descended to the kitchen, so if you'd rather—"

"No, she is a traitor; for any who intercepts the authority of a sovereign is such."

"What I'm afraid of is, frankly, her tricks."

"I fear failure."

"Failure, pooh! barely possible, so far as I see."

"But look, here comes Master Fustian with the dish."

"There!"

"Bah! what a clumsy clown! he's got stumbling at the first step."

"Up they go."

Along the gallery light shines, and the king's daughter walks.

The boy stumbles and falls back on Master Fustian; they finish the descent together. Master Fustian, spitting all over the floor,—

"Gracious me! I believe—Oh! have pity, pity, my God! I think I have got some of it on my lips, my tongue. Oh! I'm lost, as good as dead! Poisoned! Arsenic!"

Confusion.

In which enters from a side door the prince's pretty wife and her maidens.

Her he had married and a bad temper; he rather would have had her alone, but could in no way help himself.

That night, getting her tantrums, she broke from its gold mount the coral branch which stood on the dressing-table for her rings to hang on ; caught her foot in the new silver-embroidered bed-testers, tearing loose half a dozen yards ; flounced about ; stamped her feet so hard she hurt them ; then cried, and said it was his fault ; at last said she would not have him in bed with her, and with an " I hate you " bade him crawl under.

Which he, though brave enough on horseback, began to do.

When a draught blew open the half-latched door, and a light shone in ; outside there walked the king's lonely daughter.

The prince scrambled out and slammed the door ; nevertheless, seemingly, the tantrums had found time to escape, for his wife said no more about going under the bed.

If on getting in he was pinched black and blue, as she had threatened, he made no one wiser about it.

Gusts teased the jolly trees till, wrathful, they cursed ; the sky, black and rugged as an old tarred barge-bottom, took a rusty glow of resentment from the torches ; all the folk stood shivering round the Home of Comfort.

The prince advances towards a great pile of combustibles heaped against the walls, a torch in his hand.

Flames leap, roar, and flare up into the sky ; but the spiteful wind drives them over, not on the castle but on the crowd, scattering it on all sides.

They would, in another instant, have caught autumn-dried hedge and tree, and have stretched devastating away over the country. But the king's daughter's taper gleams out of the great hall-window where she walks ; at the same instant the flames gobble one another up, and die away like fire-works.

Then a voice roared out from the interior, as from a giant's huge chest—

" Both hale and well and blithe and bland
I live when no one cares for me :
But he that would close grasp my hand
A dwindling death is sure to see.
But I'm King Comfort after all ;
Sins I can pardon great and small,
And need none handy to my call
Save my dear daughter, Privacy."

T. STURGE MOORE.