

Wister Owen

The Dragon of Wantley: His Tale



Owen Wister
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The Dragon of
Wantley: His Tale

TO

*MY ANCIENT PLAYMATES IN APPIAN
WAY CAMBRIDGE THIS LIKELY
STORY IS DEDICATED FOR REASONS
BEST KNOWN TO THEMSELVES*

Preface

When Betsinda held the Rose
And the Ring decked Giglio's finger
Thackeray! 'twas sport to linger
With thy wise, gay-hearted prose.
Books were merry, goodness knows!
When Betsinda held the Rose.

Who but foggy drudglings doze
While Rob Gilpin toasts thy witches,
While the Ghost waylays thy breeches,
Ingoldsby? Such tales as those
Exorcised our peevish woes
When Betsinda held the Rose.

Realism, thou specious pose!
Haply it is good we met thee;
But, passed by, we'll scarce regret thee;
For we love the light that glows
Where Queen Fancy's pageant goes,
And Betsinda holds the Rose.

Shall we dare it? Then let's close
Doors to-night on things statistic,
Seek the hearth in circle mystic,

Till the conjured fire-light shows
Where Youth's bubbling Fountain flows,
And Betsinda holds the Rose.

Preface to the second edition

We two – the author and his illustrator – did not know what we had done until the newspapers told us. But the press has explained it in the following poised and consistent criticism:

“Too many suggestions of profanity.”

– *Congregationalist, Boston, 8 Dec. '92.*

“It ought to be the delight of the nursery.”

– *National Tribune, Washington, 22 Dec. '92.*

“Grotesque and horrible.”

– *Zion's Herald, Boston, 21 Dec. '92.*

“Some excellent moral lessons.”

– *Citizen, Brooklyn, 27 Nov. '92.*

“If it has any lesson to teach, we have been unable to find it.”

– *Independent, New York, 10 Nov. '92.*

“The story is a familiar one.”

– *Detroit Free Press, 28 Nov. '92.*

“Refreshingly novel.”

– *Cincinnati Commercial Gazette, 17 Dec. '92.*

“It is a burlesque.”

– *Atlantic Monthly, Dec. '92.*

“All those who love lessons drawn from life will enjoy this book.”

– *Christian Advocate, Cincinnati, 2 Nov. '92.*

“The style of this production is difficult to define.”

– *Court Journal, London, 26 Nov. '92.*

“One wonders why writer and artist should put so much labor on a production which seems to have so little reason for existence.”

– *Herald and Presbyterian, Cincinnati.*

Now the public knows exactly what sort of book this is, and we cannot be held responsible.

CHAPTER I.

How Sir Godfrey came to lose his Temper

There was something wrong in the cellar at Wantley Manor. Little Whelpdale knew it, for he was Buttons, and Buttons always knows what is being done with the wine, though he may look as if he did not. And old Popham knew it, too. He was Butler, and responsible to Sir Godfrey for all the brandy, and ale, and cider, and mead, and canary, and other strong waters there were in the house.

Now, Sir Godfrey Disseisin, fourth Baron of Wantley, and immediate tenant by knight-service to His Majesty King John of England, was particular about his dogs, and particular about his horses, and about his only daughter and his boy Roland, and had been very particular indeed about his wife, who, I am sorry to say, did not live long. But all this was nothing to the fuss he made about his wine. When the claret was not warm enough, or the Moselle wine was not cool enough, you could hear him roaring all over the house; for, though generous in heart and a staunch Churchman, he was immoderately choleric. Very often, when Sir Godfrey fell into one of his rages at dinner, old Popham, standing behind his chair, trembled so violently that his calves would shake loose, thus obliging him to hasten behind the tall leathern screen

at the head of the banquet-hall and readjust them.

Twice in each year the Baron sailed over to France, where he visited the wine-merchants, and tasted samples of all new vintages, – though they frequently gave him unmentionable aches. Then, when he was satisfied that he had selected the soundest and richest, he returned to Wantley Manor, bringing home wooden casks that were as big as hay-stacks, and so full they could not gurgle when you tipped them. Upon arriving, he sent for Mrs. Mistletoe, the family governess and (for economy’s sake) housekeeper, who knew how to write, – something the Baron’s father and mother had never taught him when he was a little boy, because they didn’t know how themselves, and despised people who did, – and when Mrs. Mistletoe had cut neat pieces of card-board for labels and got ready her goose-quill, Sir Godfrey would say, “Write, Château Lafitte, 1187;” or, “Write, Chambertin, 1203.” (Those, you know, were the names and dates of the vintages.) “Yes, my lord,” Mistletoe always piped up; on which Sir Godfrey would peer over her shoulder at the writing, and mutter, “Hum; yes, that’s correct,” just as if he knew how to read, the old humbug! Then Mistletoe, who was a silly girl and had lost her husband early, would go “Tee-hee, Sir Godfrey!” as the gallant gentleman gave her a kiss. Of course, this was not just what he should have done; but he was a widower, you must remember, and besides that, as the years went on this little ceremony ceased to be kept up. When it was “Château Lafitte, 1187,” kissing Mistletoe was one thing; but when it came to

“Chambertin, 1203,” the lady weighed two hundred and twenty-five pounds, and wore a wig.

But, wig and all, Mistletoe had a high position in Wantley Manor. The household was conducted on strictly feudal principles. Nobody, except the members of the family, received higher consideration than did the old Governess. She and the Chaplain were on a level, socially, and they sat at the same table with the Baron. That drew the line. Old Popham the Butler might tell little Whelpdale as often as he pleased that he was just as good as Mistletoe; but he had to pour out Mistletoe’s wine for her, notwithstanding. If she scolded him (which she always did if Sir Godfrey had been scolding her), do you suppose he dared to answer back? Gracious, no! He merely kicked the two head-footmen, Meeson and Welsby, and spoke severely to the nine house-maids. Meeson and Welsby then made life a painful thing for the five under-footmen and the grooms, while the nine house-maids boxed the ears of Whelpdale the Buttons, and Whelpdale the Buttons punched the scullion’s eye. As for the scullion, he was bottom of the list; but he could always relieve his feelings by secretly pulling the tails of Sir Godfrey’s two tame ravens, whose names were Croak James and Croak Elizabeth. I never knew what these birds did at that; but something, you may be sure. So you see that I was right when I said the household was conducted on strictly feudal principles. The Cook had a special jurisdiction of her own, and everybody was more or less afraid of her.

Whenever Sir Godfrey had come home with new wine, and after the labels had been pasted on the casks, then Popham, with Whelpdale beside him, had these carefully set down in the cellar, which was a vast dim room, the ceilings supported by heavy arches; the barrels, bins, kegs, hogsheads, tuns, and demijohns of every size and shape standing like forests and piled to the ceiling. And now something was wrong there.

“This ’ere’s a hawful succumstence, sir,” observed Whelpdale the Buttons to his superior, respectfully.

“It is, indeed, a himbroglío,” replied Popham, who had a wide command of words, and knew it.

Neither domestic spoke again for some time. They were seated in the buttery. The Butler crossed his right leg over his left, and waved the suspended foot up and down, – something he seldom did unless very grievously perturbed. As for poor little Whelpdale, he mopped his brow with the napkins that were in a basket waiting for the wash.

Then the bell rang.

“His ludship’s study-bell,” said Popham. “Don’t keep him waiting.”

“Hadn’t you better apprise his ludship of the facks?” asked Whelpdale, in a weak voice.

Popham made no reply. He arose and briefly kicked Buttons out of the buttery. Then he mounted a chair to listen better. “He has hentered his ludship’s apawtment,” he remarked, hearing the sound of voices come faintly down the little private staircase that

led from Sir Godfrey's study to the buttery: the Baron was in the habit of coming down at night for crackers and cheese before he went to bed. Presently one voice grew much louder than the other. It questioned. There came a sort of whining in answer. Then came a terrific stamp on the ceiling and a loud "Go on, sir!"

"Now, now, now!" thought Popham.

Do you want to hear at once, without waiting any longer, what little Whelpdale is telling Sir Godfrey? Well, you must know that for the past thirteen years, ever since 1190, the neighbourhood had been scourged by a terrible Dragon. The monster was covered with scales, and had a long tail and huge unnatural wings, beside fearful jaws that poured out smoke and flame whenever they opened. He always came at dead of night, roaring, bellowing, and sparkling and flaming over the hills, and horrid claps of thunder were very likely to attend his progress. Concerning the nature and quality of his roaring, the honest copyholders of Wantley could never agree, although every human being had heard him hundreds of times. Some said it was like a mad bull, only much louder and worse. Old Gaffer Piers the ploughman swore that if his tomcat weighed a thousand pounds it would make a noise almost as bad as that on summer nights, with the moon at the full and other cats handy. But farmer Stiles said, "Nay, 'tis like none of your bulls nor cats. But when I have come home too near the next morning, my wife can make me think of this Dragon as soon as ever her mouth be open."

This shows you that there were divers opinions. If you were

not afraid to look out of the window about midnight, you could see the sky begin to look red in the quarter from which he was approaching, just as it glares when some distant house is on fire. But you must shut the window and hide before he came over the hill; for very few that had looked upon the Dragon ever lived to that day twelvemonth. This monster devoured the substance of the tenantry and yeomen. When their fields of grain were golden for the harvest, in a single night he cut them down and left their acres blasted by his deadly fire. He ate the cows, the sheep, the poultry, and at times even sucked eggs. Many pious saints had visited the district, but not one had been able by his virtue to expel the Dragon; and the farmers and country folk used to repeat a legend that said the Dragon was a punishment for the great wickedness of the Baron's ancestor, the original Sir Godfrey Disseisin, who, when summoned on the first Crusade to Palestine, had entirely refused to go and help his cousin Godfrey de Bouillon wrest the Holy Sepulchre from the Paynim. The Baron's ancestor, when a stout young lad, had come over with William the Conqueror; and you must know that to have an ancestor who had come over with William the Conqueror was in those old days a much rarer thing than it is now, and any one who could boast of it was held in high esteem by his neighbours, who asked him to dinner and left their cards upon him continually. But the first Sir Godfrey thought one conquest was enough for any man; and in reply to his cousin's invitation to try a second, answered in his blunt Norman French, "Nul

tiel verte dedans ceot oyle,” which displeased the Church, and ended forever all relations between the families. The Dragon did not come at once, for this gentleman’s son, the grandfather of our Sir Godfrey, as soon as he was twenty-one, went off to the Holy Land himself, fought very valiantly, and was killed, leaving behind him at Wantley an inconsolable little wife and an heir six months old. This somewhat appeased the Pope; but the present Sir Godfrey, when asked to accompany King Richard Lion Heart on his campaign against the Infidel, did not avail himself of the opportunity to set the family right in the matter of Crusades. This hereditary impiety, which the Pope did not consider at all mended by the Baron’s most regular attendance at the parish church on all Sundays, feast days, fast days, high days, low days, saints’ days, vigils, and octaves, nor by his paying his tithes punctually to Father Anselm, Abbot of Oyster-le-Main (a wonderful person, of whom I shall have a great deal to tell you presently), this impiety, I say, finished the good standing of the House of Wantley. Rome frowned, the earth trembled, and the Dragon came. And (the legend went on to say) this curse would not be removed until a female lineal descendant of the first Sir Godfrey, a young lady who had never been married, and had never loved anybody except her father and mother and her sisters and brothers, should go out in the middle of the night on Christmas Eve, all by herself, and encounter the Dragon single handed.

Now, of course, this is not what little Whelpdale is trying to

tell the Baron up in the study; for everybody in Wantley knew all about the legend except one person, and that was Miss Elaine, Sir Godfrey's only daughter, eighteen years old at the last Court of Piepoudre, when her father (after paying all the farmers for all the cows and sheep they told him had been eaten by the Dragon since the last Court) had made his customary proclamation, to wit: his good-will and protection to all his tenantry; and if any man, woman, child, or other person, caused his daughter, Miss Elaine, to hear anything about the legend, such tale-bearer should be chained to a tree, and kept fat until the Dragon found him and ate him. So everybody obligingly kept the Baron's secret.

Sir Godfrey is just this day returned from France with some famous tuns of wine, and presents for Elaine and Mrs. Mistletoe. His humour is (or was, till Whelpdale, poor wretch! answered the bell) of the best possible. And now, this moment, he is being told by the luckless Buttons that the Dragon of Wantley has taken to drinking, as well as eating, what does not belong to him; has for the last three nights burst the big gates of the wine-cellar that open on the hillside the Manor stands upon; that a hogshead of the Baron's best Burgundy is going; and that two hogsheads of his choicest Malvoisie are gone!

One hundred and twenty-eight gallons in three nights' work! But I suppose a fire-breathing Dragon must be very thirsty.

There was a dead silence in the study overhead, and old Popham's calves were shaking loose as he waited.

“And so you stood by and let this black, sneaking, prowling,

thieving” (here the Baron used some shocking expressions which I shall not set down) “Dragon swill my wine?”

“St – st – stood by, your ludship?” said little Whelpdale. “No, sir; no one didn’t do any standing by, sir. He roared that terrible, sir, we was all under the bed.”

“Now, by my coat of mail and great right leg!” shouted Sir Godfrey. The quaking Popham heard no more. The door of the private staircase flew open with a loud noise, and down came little Whelpdale head over heels into the buttery. After him strode Sir Godfrey in full mail armour, clashing his steel fists against the banisters. The nose-piece of his helmet was pushed up to allow him to speak plainly, – and most plainly did he speak, I can assure you, all the way down stairs, keeping his right eye glaring upon Popham in one corner of the buttery, and at the same time petrifying Whelpdale with his left. From father to son, the Disseisins had always been famous for the manner in which they could straddle their eyes; and in Sir Godfrey the family trait was very strongly marked.

Arrived at the bottom, he stopped for a moment to throw a ham through the stained-glass window, and then made straight for Popham. But the head Butler was an old family servant, and had learned to know his place.

With surprising agility he hopped on a table, so that Sir Godfrey’s foot flew past its destined goal and caught a shelf that was loaded with a good deal of his wedding china. The Baron was far too dignified a person to take any notice of this mishap,

and he simply strode on, out of the buttery, and so through the halls of the Manor, where all who caught even the most distant sight of his coming, promptly withdrew into the privacy of their apartments.

CHAPTER II.

How his Daughter, Miss Elaine, behaved herself in Consequence

The Baron walked on, his rage mounting as he went, till presently he began talking aloud to himself. “Mort d’aieul and Cosenage!” he muttered, grinding his teeth over these oaths; “matters have come to a pretty pass, per my and per tout! And this is what my wine-bibbing ancestor has brought on his posterity by his omission to fight for the True Faith!”

Sir Godfrey knew the outrageous injustice of this remark as well as you or I do; and so did the portrait of his ancestor, which he happened to be passing under, for the red nose in the tapestry turned a deeper ruby in scornful anger. But, luckily for the nerves of its descendant, the moths had eaten its mouth away so entirely, that the retort it attempted to make sounded only like a faint hiss, which the Baron mistook for a little gust of wind behind the arras.

“My ruddy Burgundy!” he groaned, “going, going! and my rich, fruity Malvoisie, – all gone! Father Anselm didn’t appreciate it, either, that night he dined here last September. He said I had put egg-shells in it. Egg-shells! Pooh! As if any parson could talk about wine. These Church folk had better mind their business, and say grace, and eat their dinner, and be thankful. That’s what I say. Egg-shells, forsooth!” The Baron was passing through the

chapel, and he mechanically removed his helmet; but he did not catch sight of the glittering eye of Father Anselm himself, who had stepped quickly into the confessional, and there in the dark watched Sir Godfrey with a strange, mocking smile. When he had the chapel to himself again, the tall gray figure of the Abbot appeared in full view, and craftily moved across the place. If you had been close beside him, and had listened hard, you could have heard a faint clank and jingle beneath his gown as he moved, which would have struck you as not the sort of noise a hair-shirt ought to make. But I am glad you were not there; for I do not like the way the Abbot looked at all, especially so near Christmas-tide, when almost every one somehow looks kinder as he goes about in the world. Father Anselm moved out of the chapel, and passed through lonely corridors out of Wantley Manor, out of the court-yard, and so took his way to Oysterle-Main in the gathering dusk. The few people who met him received his blessing, and asked no questions; for they were all serfs of the glebe, and well used to meeting the Abbot going and coming near Wantley Manor.

Meanwhile, Sir Godfrey paced along. "To think," he continued, aloud, "to think the country could be rid of this monster, this guzzling serpent, in a few days! Plenty would reign again. Public peace of mind would be restored. The cattle would increase, the crops would grow, my rents treble, and my wines be drunk no more by a miserable, ignorant – but, no! I'm her father. Elaine shall never be permitted to sacrifice herself for one

dragon, or twenty dragons, either.”

“Why, what’s the matter, papa?”

Sir Godfrey started. There was Miss Elaine in front of him; and she had put on one of the new French gowns he had brought over with him.

“Matter? Plenty of matter!” he began, unluckily. “At least, nothing is the matter at all, my dear. What a question! Am I not back all safe from the sea? Nothing is the matter, of course! Hasn’t your old father been away from you two whole months? And weren’t those pretty dresses he has carried back with him for his little girl? And isn’t the wine – Zounds, no, the wine isn’t – at least, certainly it is – to be sure it’s what it ought to be —*what* it ought to be? Yes! But, Mort d’aieul! not *where* it ought to be! Hum! hum! I think I am going mad!” And Sir Godfrey, forgetting he held the helmet all this while, dashed his hands to his head with such violence that the steel edge struck hard above the ear, and in one minute had raised a lump there as large as the egg of a fowl.

“Poor, poor papa,” said Miss Elaine. And she ran and fetched some cold water, and, dipping her dainty lace handkerchief into it, she bathed the Baron’s head.

“Thank you, my child,” he murmured, presently. “Of course, nothing is the matter. They were very slow in putting the new” (here he gave a gulp) “casks of wine into the cellar; that’s all. ’Twill soon be dinner-time. I must make me ready.”

And so saying, the Baron kissed his daughter and strode

away towards his dressing-room. But she heard him shout “Mort d’aieul!” more than once before he was out of hearing. Then his dressing-room door shut with a bang, and sent echoes all along the entries above and below.

The December night was coming down, and a little twinkling lamp hung at the end of the passage. Towards this Miss Elaine musingly turned her steps, still squeezing her now nearly dry handkerchief.

“What did he mean?” she said to herself.

“Elaine!” shouted Sir Godfrey, away off round a corner.

“Yes, papa, I’m coming.”

“Don’t come. I’m going to the bath. A – did you hear me say anything particular?”

“Do you mean when I met you?” answered Elaine. “Yes – no – that is, – not exactly, papa.”

“Then don’t dare to ask me any questions, for I won’t have it.” And another door slammed.

“What did papa mean?” said Miss Elaine, once more.

Her bright brown eyes were looking at the floor as she walked slowly on towards the light, and her lips, which had been a little open so that you could have seen what dainty teeth she had, shut quite close. In fact, she was thinking, which was something you could seldom accuse her of. I do not know exactly what her thoughts were, except that the words “dragon” and “sacrifice” kept bumping against each other in them continually; and whenever they bumped, Miss Elaine frowned a little deeper,

till she really looked almost solemn. In this way she came under the hanging lamp and entered the door in front of which it shone.

This was the ladies' library, full of the most touching romances about Roland, and Walter of Aquitaine, and Sir Tristram, and a great number of other excitable young fellows, whose behaviour had invariably got them into dreadful difficulties, but had as invariably made them, in the eyes of every damsel they saw, the most attractive, fascinating, sweet, dear creatures in the world. Nobody ever read any of these books except Mrs. Mistletoe and the family Chaplain. These two were, indeed, the only people in the household that knew how to read, – which may account for it in some measure. It was here that Miss Elaine came in while she was thinking so hard, and found old Mistletoe huddled to the fire. She had been secretly reading the first chapters of a new and pungent French romance, called “Roger and Angelica,” that was being published in a Paris and a London magazine simultaneously. Only thus could the talented French author secure payment for his books in England; for King John, who had recently murdered his little nephew Arthur, had now turned his attention to obstructing all arrangements for an international copyright. In many respects, this monarch was no credit to his family.

When the Governess heard Miss Elaine open the door behind her, she thought it was the family Chaplain, and, quickly throwing the shocking story on the floor, she opened the household cookery-book, – an enormous volume many

feet square, suspended from the ceiling by strong chains, and containing several thousand receipts for English, French, Italian, Croatian, Dalmatian, and Acarnanian dishes, beginning with a poem in blank verse written to his confectioner by the Emperor Charles the Fat. German cooking was omitted.

“I’m looking up a new plum-pudding for Christmas,” said Mistletoe, nervously, keeping her virtuous eyes on the volume.

“Ah, indeed!” Miss Elaine answered, indifferently. She was thinking harder than ever, – was, in fact, inventing a little plan.

“Oh, so it’s you, deary!” cried the Governess, much relieved. She had feared the Chaplain might pick up the guilty magazine and find its pages cut only at the place where the French story was. And I am grieved to have to tell you that this is just what he did do later in the evening, and sat down in his private room and read about Roger and Angelica himself.

“Here’s a good one,” said Mistletoe. “Number 39, in the Appendix to Part Fourth. Chop two pounds of leeks and – ”

“But I may not be here to taste it,” said Elaine.

“Bless the child!” said Mistletoe. “And where else would you be on Christmas-day but in your own house?”

“Perhaps far away. Who knows?”

“You haven’t gone and seen a young man and told him – ”

“A young man, indeed!” said Elaine, with a toss of her head. “There’s not a young man in England I would tell anything save to go about his business.”

Miss Elaine had never seen any young men except when they

came to dine on Sir Godfrey's invitation; and his manner on those occasions so awed them that they always sat on the edge of their chairs, and said, "No, thank you," when the Baron said, "Have some more capon?" Then the Baron would snort, "Nonsense! Popham, bring me Master Percival's plate," upon which Master Percival invariably simpered, and said that really he did believe he *would* take another slice. After these dinners, Miss Elaine retired to her own part of the house; and that was all she ever saw of young men, whom she very naturally deemed a class to be despised as silly and wholly lacking in self-assertion.

"Then where in the name of good saints are you going to be?" Mistletoe went on.

"Why," said Elaine, slowly (and here she looked very slyly at the old Governess, and then quickly appeared to be considering the lace on her dress), "why, of course, papa would not permit me to sacrifice myself for one dragon or twenty dragons."

"What!" screamed Mistletoe, all in a flurry (for she was a fool). "What?"

"Of course, I know papa would say that," said Miss Elaine, demure as possible.

"Oh, mercy me!" squeaked Mistletoe; "we are undone!"

"To be sure, I might agree with papa," said the artful thing, knowing well enough she was on the right track.

"Oo – oo!" went the Governess, burying her nose in the household cookery-book and rocking from side to side.

"But then I might not agree with papa, you know. I might

think, – might think – ” Miss Elaine stopped at what she might think, for really she hadn't the slightest idea what to say next.

“You have no right to think, – no right at all!” burst out Mistletoe. “And you sha'n't be allowed to think. I'll tell Sir Godfrey at once, and he'll forbid you. Oh, dear! oh, dear! just before Christmas Eve, too! The only night in the year! She has no time to change her mind; and she'll be eaten up if she goes, I know she will. What villain told you of this, child? Let me know, and he shall be punished at once.”

“I shall not tell you that,” said Elaine.

“Then everybody will be suspected,” moaned Mistletoe. “Everybody. The whole household. And we shall all be thrown to the Dragon. Oh, dear! was there ever such a state of things?” The Governess betook herself to weeping and wringing her hands, and Elaine stood watching her and wondering how in the world she could find out more. She knew now just enough to keep her from eating or sleeping until she knew everything.

“I don't agree with papa, at all,” she said, during a lull in the tears. This was the only remark she could think of.

“He'll lock you up, and feed you on bread and water till you do – oo – oo!” sobbed Mistletoe; “and by that time we shall all be ea – ea – eaten up!”

“But I'll talk to papa, and make him change his mind.”

“He won't. Do you think you're going to make him care more about a lot of sheep and cows than he does about his only daughter? Doesn't he pay the people for everything the Dragon

eats up? Who would pay him for you, when you were eaten up?"

"How do you know that I should be eaten up?" asked Miss Elaine.

"Oh, dear! oh, dear! and how could you stop it? What could a girl do alone against a dragon in the middle of the night?"

"But on Christmas Eve?" suggested the young lady. "There might be something different about that. He might feel better, you know, on Christmas Eve."

"Do you suppose a wicked, ravenous dragon with a heathen tail is going to care whether it is Christmas Eve or not? He'd have you for his Christmas dinner, and that's all the notice he would take of the day. And then perhaps he wouldn't leave the country, after all. How can you be sure he would go away, just because that odious, vulgar legend says so? Who would rely on a dragon? And so there you would be gone, and he would be here, and everything!"

Mistletoe's tears flowed afresh; but you see she had said all that Miss Elaine was so curious to know about, and the fatal secret was out.

The Quarter-Bell rang for dinner, and both the women hastened to their rooms to make ready; Mistletoe still boo-hooing and snuffling, and declaring that she had always said some wretched, abominable villain would tell her child about that horrid, ridiculous legend, that was a perfect falsehood, as anybody could see, and very likely invented by the Dragon himself, because no human being with any feelings at all would

think of such a cruel, absurd idea; and if they ever did, they deserved to be eaten themselves; and she would not have it.

She said a great deal more that Elaine, in the next room, could not hear (though the door was open between), because the Governess put her fat old face under the cold water in the basin, and, though she went on talking just the same, it only produced an angry sort of bubbling, which conveyed very little notion of what she meant.

So they descended the stairway, Miss Elaine walking first, very straight and solemn; and that was the way she marched into the banquet-hall, where Sir Godfrey waited.

“Papa,” said she, “I think I’ll meet the Dragon on Christmas Eve!”

CHAPTER III.

Reveals the Dragon in his Den

Around the sullen towers of Oyster-le-Main the snow was falling steadily. It was slowly banking up in the deep sills of the windows, and Hubert the Sacristan had given up sweeping the steps. Patches of it, that had collected on the top of the great bell as the slanting draughts blew it in through the belfry-window, slid down from time to time among the birds which had nestled for shelter in the beams below. From the heavy main outer-gates, the country spread in a white unbroken sheet to the woods. Twice, perhaps, through the morning had wayfarers toiled by along the nearly-obliterated high-road.

“Good luck to the holy men!” each had said to himself as he looked at the chill and austere walls of the Monastery. “Good luck! and I hope that within there they be warmer than I am.” Then I think it very likely that as he walked on, blowing the fingers of the hand that held his staff, he thought of his fireside and his wife, and blessed Providence for not making him pious enough to be a monk and a bachelor.

This is what was doing in the world outside. Now inside the stone walls of Oyster-le-Main, whose grim solidity spoke of narrow cells and of pious knees continually bent in prayer, not a monk paced the corridors, and not a step could be heard above or

below in the staircase that wound up through the round towers. Silence was everywhere, save that from a remote quarter of the Monastery came a faint sound of music. Upon such a time as Christmas Eve, it might well be that carols in plenty would be sung or studied by the saintly men. But this sounded like no carol. At times the humming murmur of the storm drowned the measure, whatever it was, and again it came along the dark, cold entries, clearer than before. Away in a long vaulted room, whose only approach was a passage in the thickness of the walls, safe from the intrusion of the curious, a company is sitting round a cavernous chimney, where roars and crackles a great blazing heap of logs. Surely, for a monkish song, their melody is most odd; yet monks they are, for all are clothed in gray, like Father Anselm, and a rope round the waist of each. But what can possibly be in that huge silver rundlet into which they plunge their goblets so often? The song grows louder than ever.

We are the monks of Oyster-le-Main,
Hooded and gowned as fools may see;
Hooded and gowned though we monks be,
Is that a reason we should abstain
From cups of the gamesome Burgundie?

Though our garments make it plain
That we are Monks of Oyster-le-Main,
That is no reason we should abstain
From cups of the gamesome Burgundie.

“I’m sweating hot,” says one. “How for disrobing, brothers? No danger on such a day as this, foul luck to the snow!”

Which you see was coarse and vulgar language for any one to be heard to use, and particularly so for a godly celibate. But the words were scarce said, when off fly those monks’ hoods, and the waist-ropes rattle as they fall on the floor, and the gray gowns drop down and are kicked away.

Every man jack of them is in black armour, with a long sword buckled to his side.

“Long cheer to the Guild of Go-as-you-Please!” they shouted, hoarsely, and dashed their drinking-horns on the board. Then filled them again.

“Give us a song, Hubert,” said one. “The day’s a dull one out in the world.”

“Wait a while,” replied Hubert, whose nose was hidden in his cup; “this new Wantley tippie is a vastly comfortable brew. What d’ye call the stuff?”

“Malvoisie, thou oaf?” said another; “and of a delicacy many degrees above thy bumpkin palate. Leave profaning it, therefore, and to thy refrain without more ado.”

“Most unctuous sir,” replied Hubert, “in demanding me this favour, you seem forgetful that the juice of Pleasure is sweeter than the milk of Human Kindness. I’ll not sing to give thee an opportunity to outnumber me in thy cups.”

And he filled and instantly emptied another sound bumper of

the Malvoisie, lurching slightly as he did so. "Health!" he added, preparing to swallow the next.

"A murrain on such pagan thirst!" exclaimed he who had been toasted, snatching the cup away. "Art thou altogether unslakable? Is thy belly a lime-kiln? Nay, shalt taste not a single drop more, Hubert, till we have a stave. Come, tune up, man!"

"Give me but leave to hold the empty vessel, then," the singer pleaded, falling on one knee in mock supplication.

"Accorded, thou sot!" laughed the other. "Carol away, now!"

They fell into silence, each replenishing his drinking-horn. The snow beat soft against the window, and from outside, far above them, sounded the melancholy note of the bell ringing in the hour for meditation.

So Hubert began:

When the sable veil of night
Over hill and glen is spread,
The yeoman bolts his door in fright,
And he quakes within his bed.
Far away on his ear
There strikes a sound of dread:
Something comes! it is here!
It is passed with awful tread.
There's a flash of unholy flame;
There is smoke hangs hot in the air:
'Twas the Dragon of Wantley came:
Beware of him, beware!

But we beside the fire
Sit close to the steaming bowl;
We pile the logs up higher,
And loud our voices roll.

When the yeoman wakes at dawn
To begin his round of toil,
His garner's bare, his sheep are gone,
And the Dragon holds the spoil.
All day long through the earth
That yeoman makes his moan;
All day long there is mirth
Behind these walls of stone.
For we are the Lords of Ease,
The gaolers of carking Care,
The Guild of Go-as-you-Please!
Beware of us, beware!

So we beside the fire
Sit down to the steaming bowl;
We pile the logs up higher,
And loud our voices roll.

The roar of twenty lusty throats and the clatter of cups banging on the table rendered the words of the chorus entirely inaudible.

“Here’s Malvoisie for thee, Hubert,” said one of the company, dipping into the rundlet. But his hand struck against the dry

bottom. They had finished four gallons since breakfast, and it was scarcely eleven gone on the clock!

“Oh, I am betrayed!” Hubert sang out. Then he added, “But there is a plenty where that came from.” And with that he reached for his gown, and, fetching out a bunch of great brass keys, proceeded towards a tall door in the wall, and turned the lock. The door swung open, and Hubert plunged into the dark recess thus disclosed. An exclamation of chagrin followed, and the empty hide of a huge crocodile, with a pair of trailing wings to it, came bumping out from the closet into the hall, giving out many hollow cracks as it floundered along, fresh from a vigorous kick that the intemperate minstrel had administered in his rage at having put his hand into the open jaws of the monster instead of upon the neck of the demijohn that contained the Malvoisie.

“Beshrew thee, Hubert!” said the voice of a new-comer, who stood eyeing the proceedings from a distance, near where he had entered; “treat the carcase of our patron saint with a more befitting reverence, or I’ll have thee caged and put upon bread and water. Remember, that whosoever kicks that skin in some sort kicks me.”

“Long life to the Dragon of Wantley!” said Hubert, reappearing, very dusty, but clasping a plump demijohn.

“Hubert, my lad,” said the new-comer, “put back that vessel of inebriation; and, because I like thee well for thy youth and thy sweet voice, do not therefore presume too far with me.”

A somewhat uneasy pause followed upon this; and while

Hubert edged back into the closet with his demijohn, Father Anselm frowned slightly as his eyes turned upon the scene of late hilarity.

But where is the Dragon in his den? you ask. Are we not coming to him soon? Ah, but we have come to him. You shall hear the truth. Never believe that sham story about More of More Hall, and how he slew the Dragon of Wantley. It is a gross fabrication of some unscrupulous and mediocre literary person, who, I make no doubt, was in the pay of More to blow his trumpet so loud that a credulous posterity might hear it. My account of the Dragon is the only true one.

CHAPTER IV.

Tells you more about Him than was ever told before to Anybody

In those days of shifting fortunes, of turbulence and rapine, of knights-errant and minstrels seeking for adventure and love, and of solitary pilgrims and bodies of pious men wandering over Europe to proclaim that the duty of all was to arise and quell the pagan defilers of the Holy Shrine, good men and bad men, undoubted saints and unmistakable sinners, drifted forward and back through every country, came by night and by day to every household, and lived their lives in that unbounded and perilous freedom that put them at one moment upon the top limit of their ambition or their delight, and plunged them into violent and bloody death almost ere the moment was gone. It was a time when “fatten at thy neighbour’s expense” was the one commandment observed by many who outwardly maintained a profound respect for the original ten; and any man whose wit taught him how this commandment could be obeyed with the greatest profit and the least danger was in high standing among his fellows.

Hence it was that Francis Almoign, Knight of the Voracious Stomach, cumbered with no domestic ties worthy of mention, a tall slim fellow who knew the appropriate hour to slit a throat or

to wheedle a maid, came to be Grand Marshal of the Guild of Go-as-you-Please.

This secret band, under its Grand Marshal, roved over Europe and thrived mightily. Each member was as stout hearted a villain as you could see. Sometimes their doings came to light, and they were forced to hasten across the borders of an outraged territory into new pastures. Yet they fared well in the main, for they could fight and drink and sing; and many a fair one smiled upon them, in spite of their perfectly outrageous morals.

So, one day, they came into the neighbourhood of Oyster-le-Main, where much confusion reigned among the good monks. Sir Godfrey Disseisin over at Wantley had let Richard Lion Heart depart for the Holy Wars without him. "Like father like son," the people muttered in their discontent. "Sure, the Church will gravely punish this second offence." To all these whisperings of rumour the Grand Marshal of the Guild paid fast attention; for he was a man who laid his plans deeply, and much in advance of the event. He saw the country was fat and the neighbours foolish. He took note of the handsome tithes that came in to Oyster-le-Main for the support of the monks. He saw all these things, and set himself to thinking.

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