



Anne Page.

MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR. ACT I. SC. I.

New York: D. Appleton & Co. 346 & 348 Broadway.



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"SWEET ANNE PAGE" is one of those rare bits of poetic sketching which, with scarcely a defined outline, and not a touch of vivid coloring, leave on the fancy an indelible impression of refined beauty.

In her graceful quiet, her lady-like reserve, her pretty, modest ways, she is so far removed from those among whom we find her, and whose coarse good-humor, and cordial, homely virtues, are utterly devoid of taste or delicate sentiment, that we may almost regard her as a second Perdita—a gem of the first water, shining all the more brightly for the roughness of its setting.

The subtile, indescribable charm which accompanies this "pretty virginity" is evidently felt by her coarse companions, without being perceived or understood by them. Of her three lovers, two of them—the half-witted booby, Slender, (with whom, nevertheless, originated her inseparable surname, "Sweet,") and the old French doctor, Caius—cannot be supposed to have the faintest appreciation of her character, however profoundly they may be impressed by her first-rate gentility and her father's money-bags. We do not wonder, then, that her maiden preference is bestowed on "young Master Fenton, who dances, has eyes of youth,

writes verses, speaks holiday, smells April and May, has kept company with the wild prince, and is of too high a region" for her; in the one glimpse allowed us of their love-making, there is, in her two brief replies to Fenton's appeals, a delightful touch of unconscious coquetry. In the "why then," at the end, how much of vague hope, fear, delicious uncertainty, for the nice distinctions of a lover's heart:

Fent. I see I cannot get thy father's love;
Therefore no more turn me to him, sweet Nan.

Anne. Alas! how then?

Fent. Why, thou must be thyself.
He doth object I am too great of birth;
And that, my state being gall'd with my expense,
I seek to heal it only by his wealth.
Besides these, other bars he lays before me—
My riots past, my wild societies—
And tells me 'tis a thing impossible
I should love thee, but as a property.

Anne. May be, he tells you true.

Fent. No, Heaven so speed me in my time to come!
Albeit, I will confess, thy father's wealth
Was the first motive that I woo'd thee, Anne;
Yet, wooing thee, I found thee of more value
Than stamps in gold, or sums in sealed bags;
And 'tis the very riches of thyself
That now I aim at.

Anne. Gentle Master Fenton,
Yet seek my father's love; still seek it, sir:
If opportunity and humblest suit
Cannot attain it—*why then.*

But alas for the boasted guilelessness of this most innocent of maids! Love teaches even her shyness to be bold, and insinuates deceitful invention into that heart where loyal obedience and submission to parental will would seem to have built their throne: pretending to acquiesce in the contending views of both her father

and her mother, she plays them false, to consummate her own fond designs. Her stratagem, in which she shows herself not inferior in ready wit to the Merry Wives, is thus described by Fenton to mine host of the Garter Inn:

From time to time I have acquainted you
With the dear love I bear to fair Anne Page,
Who, mutually, hath answer'd my affection
(So far forth as herself might be her chooser,)
Even to my wish. I have a letter from her,
Of such contents as you will wonder at—
The mirth whereof so larded with my matter,
That neither, singly, can be manifested
Without the show of both—wherein fat Falstaff
Hath a great scene; the image of the jest

[*Showing the letter.*]

I'll show you here at large. Hark, good mine host!
To-night at Herne's oak, just 'twixt twelve and one,
Must my sweet Nan present the fairy queen—
The purpose why is here; in which disguise,
While other jests are something rank on foot,
Her father hath commanded her to slip
Away with Slender, and with him at Eton
Immediately to marry: she hath consented.
Now, sir,
Her mother, even strong against that match,
And firm for Dr. Caius, hath appointed
That he shall likewise shuffle her away,
While other sports are tasking of their minds,
And at the deanery, where a priest attends,
Straight marry her; to this her mother's plot
She, seemingly obedient, likewise hath
Made promise to the doctor.—Now thus it rests:
Her father means she shall be all in white;
And in that habit, when Slender sees his time
To take her by the hand, and bid her go,
She shall go with him. Her mother hath intended,
The better to denote her to the doctor,
(For they must all be masked and vizarded,)

That, quaint in green, she shall be loose enrob'd,
 With ribands pendant, flaring 'bout her head;
 And when the doctor spies his vantage ripe,
 To pinch her by the hand—and, on that token,
 The maid hath given consent to go with him.

Host. Which means she to deceive? father or mother?

Fent. Both, my good host, to go along with me;
 And here it rests—that you'll procure the vicar
 To stay for me at church, 'twixt twelve and one,
 And, in the lawful name of marrying,
 To give our hearts united ceremony.

And as lovers' excuses for their own misdemeanors are always
 the best, we cannot do better for our sweet Anne Page than to
 quote the plea of that plausible young Fenton:

The offence is holy that she hath committed,
 And this deceit loses the name of craft,
 Of disobedience; or unduteous title;
 Since therein she doth evitate and shun
 A thousand irreligious cursed hours,
 Which forced marriage would have brought upon her.