

Fitzgerald, Francis Scott

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F4 [Fitzgerald, Francis Scott. Tarquin of Cheapside]

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F4

Running footsteps—light, soft-soled shoes made of curious leathery cloth brought from Ceylon setting the pace; thick flowing boots, two pairs, dark blue and gilt, reflecting the moonlight in blunt gleams and splotches, following a stone's throw behind.

5 Soft Shoes flashes through a patch of moonlight, then darts into a blind labyrinth of alleys and becomes only an intermittent scuffle ahead somewhere in the enfolding darkness. In go Flowing Boots, with short swords lurching and long plumes awry, finding a breath to curse God and the black lanes of London.

Soft Shoes leaps a shadowy gate and crackles through a hedgerow. Flowing Boots
10 leap the gate and crackles through the hedgerow—and there, startlingly, is the watch ahead—two murderous pikemen of ferocious cast of mouth acquired in Holland and the Spanish marches.

But there is no cry for help. The pursued does not fall panting at the feet of the watch, clutching a purse; neither do the pursuers raise a hue and cry. Soft Shoes
15 goes by in a rush of swift air. The watch curse and hesitate, glance after the fugitive, and then spread their pikes grimly across the road and wait for Flowing Boots. Darkness, like a great hand, cuts off the even flow the moon.

The hand moves off the moon whose pale caress finds again the eaves and lintels, and the watch, wounded and tumbled in the dust. Up the street one of Flowing
20 Boots leaves a black trail of spots until he binds himself, clumsily as he runs, with fine lace caught from his throat.

It was no affair for the watch: Satan was at large tonight and Satan seemed to be he who appeared dimly in front, heel over gate, knee over fence. Moreover, the adversary was obviously travelling near home or at least in that section of

25 London consecrated to his coarser whims, for the street narrowed like a road
 in a picture and the houses bent over further and further, cooping in natural
 ambushes suitable for murder and its histrionic sister, sudden death.
 Down long and sinuous lanes twisted the hunted and the harriers, always in
 and out of the moon in a perpetual queen's move over a checker-board of glints
 30 and patches. Ahead, the quarry, minus his leather jerkin now and half blinded
 by drips of sweat, had taken to scanning his ground desperately on both sides.
 As a result he suddenly slowed short, and retracing his steps a bit scooted up an
 alley so dark that it seemed that here sun and moon had been in eclipse since the
 last glacier slipped roaring over the earth. Two hundred yards down he stopped
 35 and crammed himself into a niche in the wall where he huddled and panted
 silently, a grotesque god without bulk or outline in the gloom.
 Flowing Boots, two pairs, drew near, came up, went by, halted twenty yards
 beyond him, and spoke in deep-lunged, scanty whispers:
 "I was attune to that scuffle; it stopped."
 40 "Within twenty paces."
 "He's hid."
 "Stay together now and we'll cut him up."
 The voice faded into a low crunch of a boot, nor did Soft Shoes wait to hear
 more—he sprang in three leaps across the alley, where he bounded up, flapped
 45 for a moment on the top of the wall like a huge bird, and disappeared, gulped
 down by the hungry night at a mouthful.

II

"He read at wine, he read in bed,
 He read aloud, had he the breath,

50 His every thought was with the dead,
And so he read himself to death.”

Any visitor to the old James the First graveyard near Peat’s Hill may spell out this bit of doggerel, undoubtedly one of the worst recorded of an Elizabethan, on the tomb of Wessel Caster.

55 This death of his, says the antiquary, occurred when he was thirty-seven, but as this story is concerned with the night of a certain chase through darkness, we find him still alive, still reading. His eyes were somewhat dim, his stomach somewhat obvious—he was a mis-built man and indolent—oh, Heavens! But an era is an era, and in the reign of Elizabeth, by the grace of Luther, Queen of
60 England, no man could help but catch the spirit of enthusiasm. Every loft in Cheapside published its *Magnum Folium* (or magazine)—of its new blank verse; the Cheapside Players would produce anything on sight as long as it “got away from those reactionary miracle plays,” and the English Bible had run through seven “very large” printings in, as many months.

65 So Wessel Caxter (who in his youth had gone to sea) was now a reader of all on which he could lay his hands—he read manuscripts in holy friendship; he dined with rotten poets; he loitered about the shops where the *Magna Folia* were printed, and he listened tolerantly while the young playwrights wrangled and bickered among them-selves, and behind each other’s backs made bitter and malicious
70 charges of plagiarism or anything else they could think of.

To-night he had a book, a piece of work which, though inordinately versed, contained, he thought, some rather excellent political satire. “*The Faerie Queene*” by Edmund Spenser lay before him under the tremulous candle-light. He had ploughed through a canto; he was beginning another:

75 THE LEGEND OF BRITOMARTIS OR OF CHASTITY

It falls me here to write of Chastity. The fayrest vertue, far above the rest....

A sudden rush of feet on the stairs, a rusty swing-open of the thin door, and a man thrust himself into the room, a man without a jerkin, panting, sobbing, on the verge of collapse.

80 “Wessel,” words choked him, “stick me away somewhere, love of Our Lady!”

Caxter rose, carefully closing his book, and bolted the door in some concern.

“I’m pursued,” cried out Soft Shoes. “I vow there’s two short-witted blades trying to make me into mincemeat and near succeeding. They saw me hop the back

85 wall!”

“It would need,” said Wessel, looking at him curiously, “several battalions armed with blunderbusses, and two or three Armadas, to keep you reasonably secure from the revenges of the world.”

Soft Shoes smiled with satisfaction. His sobbing gasps were giving way to quick,
90 precise breathing; his hunted air had faded to a faintly perturbed irony.