

Fennor, William. The Countess's Commonwealth. 1617. The Elizabethan Underworld. Ed. A-U. Judges, ^{1930. Rpt.} New York: October, 1965. 423-87

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with vials, painted boxes, and bills of all the famous cures they pretend to have done in many foreign parts of Christendom, which base and usual jugglings are only to enrich themselves and defraud the general rout that flock about them. Many mountebank citizens have we in this most sumptuous, but most subtle and sinful, city of London, that when they would ravish the mind and take the intuitive sense of many profuse prodigals, and, melting heirs with their siren-like seducings, lay open their wares, as satin, velvets, gold and silver lace, or any other braided commodities (or rather, indeed, discommodities) which though they show rich, yet are out of fashion or not saleable. These are springes to catch young country woodcocks or our City dottrels, that had rather be out of the world than out of the fashion; who will be brave for the present time, though their gallantry cost them all their future fortunes; who with more fervency and protestation woo the citizen for his trash and trumpery, than many decayed knights will rich widows to inherit their possessions.

"But our tradesman, perceiving their forwardness and follies, plays the ropemaker and will be extreme backward, and will not be brought to trust them with any of his Bartholomew-Fair stuff upon any condition. Bonds he refuseth, recognizances he disdaineth, judgments he will not hear of, statutes he scorneth, and tells them in a puritanical fashion, that he had rather trust a gentleman on his word, than his bond or oath. 'For,' saith he, 'they that will not have a care to keep their words, will not stick to have so large a conscience as to break their day, and slight the payment of their bonds.' Again, he tells them the danger he is in of losing of his debt. 'For,' saith he, 'when the bonds come to be due, and pay-day at hand, may not they straight fly over into the Low Countries, or take sanctuary in Milford Lane¹⁶, Duke Humphrey's Ordinary¹⁷, or get a Protection Royal¹⁸ from the King, and so defraud me of my debt; and many such collops as these have been cut from the body of mine estate since I have been a tradesman. Therefore good gentlemen,' saith he, 'I cannot dare trust any longer, for my kindness hath bred mine own calamity. Then set up your resolutions and trouble me no more, for I have given you your answer.'

"Thus are my young novices struck to the heart at the first venny, and dare come no more for fear of as sharp a repulse.

"Alas! alas! this is but to grind the blunt appetite of my commodity-taker into a sharper edge, and make them more greedy of their own ruins, imitating the cunning and deceit of pretty but petulant and close courtezans, that are nice when a sick-brained young gallant

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CHAPTER 4.

Containing: 1. The subtlety of many unconscionable citizens that entangle young gentlemen and lap them into bonds. 2. The craft and cunning of their confederates, gentlemenlike brokers, by whose wicked and un-Christian-like dealing many elder brothers and brave gentlemen are undone.

"I HAVE read that Italian mountebanks, before they speak in their drug-tongue and fustian language to the auditory of innocent and ignorant people, furnish out the play, where they sing their own encomiums,

importunes them upon any kindness, only to make him more fierce upon his own confusion, holding him off, like a fencer, at distance a month or two, because he shall come up the roundlier to her purpose. But to the matter.

"But some or one of my young gallants, that never gives over plodding with himself how he might get into the books of some goldsmith, haberdasher, silkman, woollen- or linen-draper, hath some broker or other coming early in a morning and certifies him that, if it pleased him, he should have a commodity that lay ready to be carried away, if he would enter into bond for it, nominating the same man that gave him the former repulse. My young heir, whose heart knocks against his ribs for joy, kindly bids the broker welcome, sends for a cup of wine, and drinks to him with all his heart, resolving to entertain his proffer upon any condition, protesting rather than he will let such a blessed opportunity slip, will set his hands to more parchment than a whole flock of sheep are able to furnish a scrivener with. But my broker, before-instructed by the commodity-letter, tells him that, though he heard him speak something doubtful of him, yet, if he would be ruled by him, he would undertake to make his credit pass as firm as any farmers' or yeomen in Kent. 'For,' saith he, 'I am a great friend of this tradesman's, and make no doubt but may prevail as much with him as any man in this town, especially if you will be ruled by me. You must not be too importunate, but as scornful as he is disdainful. Tell him that you are your father's heir, and that such lands he hath you must inherit, and that the entailment cannot be cut off, though he were never so heinous an enemy of yours. Besides you must tell him you are about to marry some rich widow which you know you might win, so that you could but have a hundred pound or two to put yourself in good clothes.'

"These spells charms my poor prodigal. So at last he and the wolf that came as legate from the tiger, go together and find my citizen busy in his shop, not taking any notice of their coming, but, as to other passengers, at first asks them what they lack, and what they would buy. But boldly they come into the shop, and, after acquaintance taken, the broker unfolds the matter and the occasion of their coming to him, telling him that he came with a friend of his about a commodity, and if he were a friend, as he always took him to be, as to condescend to the gentleman's request, and let him have an hundred pound. 'For,' saith he, 'I know his friends are of fair possessions. He is his father's eldest son. Besides, on my conscience, he would not trouble you at

this present, if he were not to marry with a rich widow, whom he may lose for want of setting forth, and then no doubt, when the match is made up, but he will have an honest care to pay in your money, with a million of thanks for your kindness.'

"Now all the while the broker is pleading, mine innocent doth second him, and will, rather than go without his trinkets, bind whatsoever the broker saith with half a score oaths.

"The citizen begins to hearken after this, and protests to my green gosling that he would be glad to do any man a pleasure, but that he hath had so many losses already, and that he would be willing to let him have an hundred pounds' worth of commodities, if so be he thought it would redound to his good, and that he might be sure at the six months' end to have his money paid in. The young gallant protests, the broker warrants it, and at last, though very loath, the citizen condescends; but how, thus, that if he could procure as good a man as himself to be bound with him, he should have what ware he could desire. 'For,' saith he, 'man's life is frail and brittle, and you may die a fortnight or a week hence for ought that I know, nay, tomorrow, or soon at night, and then where is mine hundred pound? Therefore, good sir, look out some of your most especial and endeared friends, and get one of them to be bound with you, and you shall have the wares at a quarter of an hour's warning.'

"The tide now is turned, and Signor Unthrift put to his nonplus, and at last falls to entreat Master Broker to be the man; who for two or three days together, will by no means or persuasions be won to enter into bond with him, except he must share half.

"Is not this extreme and almost incredible villainy, and most unconscionable dealings, thus to snare in the gentry of the land, and ruin his fortunes but newly in the spring, knowing that he will rather let him have three-quarters of the commodity than go without it, because, as many others do, he would go gallant, have money in his purse, and keep company with satin and velvet outsides?

"But suppose the commodities are delivered, after they have both sealed the bonds (you must suppose the heir always to be the principal), how must these hobby-horses, reams of brown paper, Jew's-trumps and baubles, babies and rattles be sold? The gentleman is ashamed to proffer them to sale himself; no, he trusts the other that shares half with him to put them off; who must be hired to sell them, and, perhaps, when they are all sold outright, will have to his own share three-quarters of them. Are not these dealings worthy of the sharpest

rod Justice ever did hold in her righteous hands? They are and have been soundly lashed and severely punished by that most noble, grave, wise and provident statesman, the Right Honourable the Lord High Chancellor of England¹⁹. Yet, for all this, there will such false play be acted, though the Sword of Justice continually were hanging over their heads.

"But I will return to our former subject. Let us now suppose my young gallant revelling in a tavern or ordinary. You may be sure the broker is triumphing, that he plucked the feathers of this young gull, and means ere long to leave him as bare of means as he is of brains. Now my usurious citizen dreams of nothing but his day, which he hopes my novice will break; which is no sooner expired, but instantly, by some stratagem or other, gets him within the liberty, then invites him to supper, by giving him fair words, either to his own or some of his neighbours' houses; and, when they have almost made an end, instead of a mess of fruit, or a piece of Banbury cheese to close up their stomachs, a brace (or more) of sergeants are not far from his shoulder, and, except he presently pay, he must presently to prison.

"Are these worthy the names of citizens? No, no, such may be citizens of London, but never of Heavenly Jerusalem!"

At this period I began to speak to him, saying: "Sir, I protest you have revealed a strange and monstrous abuse to the gentry of this land. If I did not take you to be (what I think you are) an honest man I should stand in a great doubt whether your discourse did taste of truth or no. But, good sir, proceed."

"Sir, as I hope for salvation," said he (an oath not for a Christian to dally with), "I relate no untruth, but what is as nigh akin to truth as I am to misery, for what I have spoken, I find by mine own woeful experience to be true, and what hath been practised on myself by these city cormorants. These tricks have been put on me, and for which I have suffered a long imprisonment; and yet they will have no compassion on me, but rather see me starve than relieve me, and either have my carcase or their coin. Yet their consciences know what I had from them was nothing but rotten, base and moth-eaten commodities, an hundred pounds' worth, of which, according to their rate, I never made fifty of; yet they stick not to demand an hundred of me, beside the interest and all their charges.

"Again, mark the policy they have to keep a poor prisoner in fetters of adversity. If they suppose the prisoner goeth about to sue out an *Audita querela*²⁰, forthwith they either put their debt over to some

alderman, or else agree with some officer in the Exchequer, and so put their debt over to the king, feigning they owe him so much money, knowing that the Chancery will not, or cannot, allow anything, in such a case as this, to proceed against his Majesty. This is a speeding trick, and such a one I am now trounced with, and many besides myself.

"I have read, when Jews have bought a red haired boy, at first they will clothe him in silks and taffetas, ravish him with all delights that can be thought on, never have music from his ears or banquets from his taste, and thus use him until such time they know he is plump, fat, and fit for their purpose; but when the poor Christian least thinks of his imminent ruin, he is taken by a brace of slaves, and tied up by the heels, so by degrees beaten to death with cudgels, having mummy made of his brains. Such as these are unconscionable citizens, that at first will clothe our young prodigals in silks and velvets, gold and silver lace, invite him home to dinner, use him very courteously, but when his bonds are due, and that he least dreams of his misfortunes, a couple or two of sergeants are set upon him, and hurry him to the Counter, where perhaps he shall lie two, three, four or five year, nay, a dozen or twenty years together, before he can get himself released; or, if he chance to prevail so much with his creditors as to enfranchise him, it must be upon some unreasonable, unconscionable condition, as to give [them] five hundred pound for an hundred at the death of his father. Vulcan fell from Heaven into the isle of Lemnos, and by that fall lost the use of one of his feet. Let all such unconscionable citizens take heed they fall not from the earth to Hell, and lose their souls!

"These are the boars that plough up whole acres, nay, whole fields, of gentlemen's lands with their snouts; these are swine that eat up whole orchards, and these are they whose fiery consciences drink up whole fish-pools at a draught. Their usurious dealings make so many cornutos in the City as there are; for, when young gentlemen have been beggared by their extortion, they have no other means than to fall in with their wives and seek to them for supply. It is this that makes Newmarket Heath²¹ and Royston Downs²² about Christmas-time so full of highwaymen that poor country people cannot pass quietly to their cottages, but some gentleman will borrow all the money they have—only, indeed, they will make them take their bonds. This makes Tyburn and Wapping²³ have so many hangers-on; and this is the cause so many such citizens' sons are plagued after their fathers' deaths, as their fathers when they were living have plagued others; for most commonly some knave or debauched fellow lurch the fools their sons

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as cunningly after their fathers' decease as *they* did others only to make their sons gentlemen, who at last may as miserably die in the Hole for want of sustenance²⁴ as some of his father's debtors have done before him."

Upon this I began to interrupt him, saying, "Sir, in this short time that I have been here I have seen some creditors bring their debtors both meat, drink and money, when they have been sick and ill at ease."

"'Tis true, sir," said he. "I acknowledge it; but did you never hear that when a lion hath got a pretty bleating lamb or kid in his paws, he will play and tumble up and down with them a little while; but you must not think it is for any love he bears them, but only to chafe their blood and make them eat more sweet and tender. Such are these kind of unkind citizens that, when they have got young gentlemen into prison, will, if the sum be anything weighty, relieve him with meat, drink, and money, if they see him begin to droop. But do you think this is in love to him? No! If you do, you wander a thousand leagues from a true construction. He doth it to keep him alive, that he may have his money if any means should fall to him, and that the world may take notice of his charity. Alas! alas! this is but a feigned holiness, which is a double iniquity. This kindness is but like Alchemy, or St. Martin's rings²⁵, that are fair to the eye, and have a rich outside, but if a man should break them asunder and look into them, they are nothing but brass, and copper. The apples of Gomorrah have glorious rinds, but infectious cores.

"It is an extreme misery for a prisoner to be indebted to a rich man, or a very poor man; for the first, most commonly, will have all or none, for if his debtor chance to die, the loss he may well spare, but if it is his fortune to live and pay him, it adds to his estate; the other, that is, the poor man, will have no pity, because it may be the debt is all he is worth.

"Thus do many gentlemen perish under the hands of cruel creditors! Nay, a father that hath brought up his child with care and pain, grief and heartbreaking, and thinks to leave him such fair possessions, after his decease, that he may live in his country like a gentleman (as his ancestors have done before him), either in his lifetime doth see his son lie rotting in prison, or is not able to show his face out of his father's gates, or, after his decease, his brothers, sisters, friends and kinsfolks see his lands extended on, his woods felled down before his face, those legacies and portions he should pay to his brothers and sisters, paid away to satisfy his debts (being base commodities), and so beggars a

whole worshipful family, who before that cursed time had lived a hundred years or more in grace and favour in his country. Alas! alas!"

With that, the tears fell from his eyes, and he could speak no more for weeping; yet I desired him to proceed. But he craved my pardon, and told me that he was at the farthest end of that discourse. "And thus," quoth he, "have I showed you the nature, property and quality of this main arm that hourly pays tribute to the ocean, the Counter. Now will I go to the second arm, which is concerning Gentlemen-cheaters."

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