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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MISS PHILLY FIRKIN, THE CHINA-WOMAN ***

MISS PHILLY FIRKIN,
The China-Woman.
By Mary Russell Mitford

In Belford Regis, as in many of those provincial capitals of the south of England, whose growth and importance have kept pace with the increased affluence and population of the neighbourhood, the principal shops will be found clustered in the close, inconvenient streets of the antique portion of the good town; whilst the more showy and commodious modern buildings are quite unable to compete in point of custom with the old crowded localities, which seem even to derive an advantage from the appearance of business and bustle occasioned by the sharp turnings, the steep declivities, the narrow causeways, the jutting-out windows, and the various obstructions incident to the picturesque but irregular street-architecture of our ancestors.

Accordingly, Oriel Street, in Belford,—a narrow lane, cribbed and confined on the one side by an old monastic establishment, now turned into alms-houses, called the Oriel, which divided the street from that branch of the river called the Holy Brook, and on the other bounded by the market-place, whilst one end abutted on the yard of a great inn, and turned so sharply up a steep acclivity that accidents happened there every day, and the other *terminus* wound with an equally awkward curvature round the churchyard of St Stephen's,—this most strait and incommodious avenue of shops was the wealthiest quarter of the Borough. It was a provincial combination of Regent Street and Cheapside. The houses let for double their value; and, as a necessary consequence, goods sold there at pretty nearly the same rate; horse-people and foot-people jostled upon the pavement; coaches and phaetons ran against each other in the road. Nobody dreamt of visiting Belford without wanting something or other in Oriel Street; and although noise, and crowd, and bustle, be very far from usual attributes of the good town, yet in driving through this favoured region on a fine day, between the hours of three and five, we stood a fair chance of encountering as many difficulties and obstructions from carriages, and as much din and disorder on the causeway as we shall often have the pleasure of meeting with out of London.

One of the most popular and frequented shops in the street, and out of all manner of comparison the prettiest to look at, was the well-furnished glass and china warehouse of Philadelphia Firkin, spinster. Few things are indeed more agreeable to the eye than the mixture of glittering cut glass, with rich and delicate china, so beautiful in shape, colour, and material, which adorn a nicely-assorted showroom of that description. The manufactures of Sèvres, of Dresden, of Derby, and of Worcester, are really works of art, and very beautiful ones too; and even the less choice specimens have about them a clearness, a glossiness, and a nicety, exceedingly pleasant to look upon; so that a china-shop is in some sense a shop of temptation: and that

it is also a shop of necessity, every housekeeper who knows to her cost the infinite number of plates, dishes, cups, and glasses, which contrive to get broken in the course of the year, (chiefly by that grand demolisher of crockery ware called Nobody,) will not fail to bear testimony.

Miss Philadelphia's was therefore a well accustomed shop, and she herself was in appearance most fit to be its inhabitant, being a trim, prim little woman, neither old nor young, whose dress hung about her in stiff regular folds, very like the drapery of a china shepherdess on a mantel-piece, and whose pink and white complexion, skin, eyebrows, eyes, and hair, all tinted as it seemed with one dash of ruddy colour, had the same professional hue. Change her spruce cap for a wide-brimmed hat, and the damask napkin which she flourished in wiping her wares, for a china crook, and the figure in question might have passed for a miniature of the mistress. In one respect they differed The china shepherdess was a silent personage. Miss Philadelphia was not; on the contrary, she was reckoned to make, after her own mincing fashion, as good a use of her tongue as any woman, gentle or simple, in the whole town of Belford.

She was assisted in her avocations by a little shopwoman, not much taller than a china mandarin, remarkable for the height of her comb, and the length of her earrings, whom she addressed sometimes as Miss Wolfe, sometimes as Marianne, and sometimes as Polly, thus multiplying the young lady's individuality by three; and a little shopman in apron and sleeves, whom, with equal ingenuity, she called by the several appellations of Jack, Jonathan, and Mr. Lamb—mister!—but who was really such a cock-o'-my-thumb as might have been served up in a tureen, or baked in a pie-dish, without in the slightest degree abridging his personal dimensions. I have known him quite hidden behind a china jar, and as completely buried, whilst standing on tip-toe, in a crate, as the dessert-service which he was engaged in unpacking. Whether this pair of originals was transferred from a show at a fair to Miss Philips warehouse, or whether she had picked them up accidentally, first one and then the other, guided by a fine sense of congruity, as she might match a wineglass or a tea-cup, must be left to conjecture. Certain they answered her purpose, as well as if they had been the size of Gog and Magog; were attentive to the customers, faithful to their employer, and crept about amongst the china as softly as two mice.

The world went well with Miss Philly Firkin in the shop and out. She won favour in the sight of her betters by a certain prim, demure, simpering civility, and a power of multiplying herself as well as her little officials, like Yates or Matthews in a monopolologue, and attending to half-a-dozen persons at once; whilst she was no less popular amongst her equals in virtue of her excellent gift in gossiping. Nobody better loved a gentle tale of scandal, to sweeten a quiet cup of tea. Nobody evinced a finer talent for picking up whatever news happened to be stirring, or greater liberality in its diffusion. She was the intelligencer of the place—a walking chronicle.

In a word, Miss Philly Firkin was certainly a prosperous, and, as times go, a tolerably happy woman. To be sure, her closest intimates, those very dear friends, who as our confidence gives them the opportunity, are so obliging as to watch our weaknesses and report our foibles,—certain of these bosom companions had been heard to hint, that Miss Philly, who had refused two or three good matches in her bloom, repented her of this cruelty, and would probably be found less obdurate now that suitors had ceased to offer. This, if true, was one hidden grievance, a flitting shadow upon a sunny destiny; whilst another might be found in a circumstance of which she was so far from making a secret, that it was one of her most frequent topics of discourse.

The calamity in question took the not un-frequent form of a next-door neighbour. On her right dwelt an eminent tinman with his pretty daughter, two of the most respectable, kindest, and best-conducted persons in the town; but on her left was an open bricked archway, just wide enough to admit a cart, surmounted by a dim and dingy representation of some horned animal, with "The Old Red Cow" written in white capitals above, and "James Tyler, licensed to sell beer, ale, wine, and all sorts of spirituous liquors," below; and down the aforesaid passage, divided only by a paling from the spacious premises where her earthenware and coarser kinds of crockery were deposited, were the public-house, stables, cowhouses, and pigsties of Mr. James Tyler, who added to his calling of publican, the several capacities of milkman, cattle dealer, and pig merchant, so that the place was one constant scene of dirt and noise and bustle without and within;—this Old Red Cow, in spite of its unpromising locality, being one of the best frequented houses in Belford, the constant resort of drovers, drivers, and cattle dealers, with a market dinner on Wednesdays and Saturdays, and a club called the Jolly Tailors, every Monday night.

Master James Tyler—popularly called Jem—was the very man to secure and increase this sort of custom. Of vast stature and extraordinary physical power, combined with a degree of animal spirits not often found in combination with such large proportions, he was at once a fit ruler over his four-footed subjects in the yard, a miscellaneous and most disorderly collection of cows, horses, pigs, and oxen, to say nothing of his own five boys, (for Jem was a widower,) each of whom, in striving to remedy, was apt to enhance the confusion, and an admirable lord of misrule at the drovers' dinners and tradesmen's suppers over which he presided. There was a mixture of command and good-humour, of decision and fun, in the gruff, bluff, weather-beaten countenance, surmounted with its rough shock of coal-black hair, and in the voice loud as a stentor, with which he now guided a drove of oxen, and now roared a catch, that his listeners in either case found irresistible. Jem Tyler was the very spirit of vulgar jollity, and could, as he boasted, run, leap, box, wrestle, drink, sing, and shoot (he had been a keeper in his youth, and still retained the love of sportsmanship which those who imbibe it early seldom lose) with any man in the county. He was discreet, too, for a man of his occupation; knew precisely how drunk a journeyman tailor ought to get, and when to stop a fight between a Somersetshire cattle-dealer and an Irish pig-driver. No inquest had ever sat upon any of his customers. Small wonder, that with such a landlord the Old Red Cow should be a hostelry of unmatched resort and unblemished reputation.

The chief exception to Jem Tyler's almost universal popularity was beyond all manner of doubt his fair neighbour Miss Philadelphia Firkin. She, together with her trusty adherents, Miss Wolfe and Mr. Lamb, held Jem, his alehouse, and his customers, whether tailor, drover, or dealer, his yard and its contents, horse or donkey, ox or cow, pig or dog, in unmeasured and undisguised abhorrence: she threatened to indict the place as a nuisance, to appeal to the mayor; and upon "some good-natured friend" telling her that mine host had snapped his fingers at her as a chattering old maid, she did actually go so far as to speak to her landlord, who was also Jem's, upon the iniquity of his doings. This worthy happening, however, to be a great brewer, knew

better than to dismiss a tenant whose consumption of double X was so satisfactory. So that Miss Firkin took nothing by her motion beyond a few of those smoothening and pacificatory speeches, which, when administered to a person in a passion, have, as I have often observed, a remarkable tendency to exasperate the disease.

At last, however, came a real and substantial grievance, an actionable trespass; and although Miss Philly was a considerable loser by the mischance, and a lawsuit is always rather a questionable remedy for pecuniary damage, yet such was the keenness of her hatred towards poor Jem, that I am quite convinced that in her inmost heart (although being an excellent person in her way, it is doubtful whether she told herself the whole truth in the matter) she rejoiced at a loss which would enable her to take such signal vengeance over her next-door enemy. An obstreperous cow, walking backward instead of forward, as that placid animal when provoked has the habit of doing, came in contact with a weak part of the paling which divided Miss Firkin's back premises from Master Tyler's yard, and not only upset Mr. Lamb into a crate of crockery which he was in the act of unpacking, to the inexpressible discomfiture of both parties, but Miss Wolfe, who, upon hearing the mixture of crash and squall, ran to the rescue, found herself knocked down by a donkey who had entered at the breach, and was saluted as she rose by a peal of laughter from young Sam Tyler, Jem's eldest hope, a thorough Pickle, who, accompanied by two or three other chaps as unlucky as himself, sat quietly on a gate surveying and enjoying the mischief.

"I'll bring an action against the villain!" ejaculated Miss Philly, as soon as the enemy was driven from her quarters, and her china and her dependants set upon their feet:—"I'll take the law of him!" And in this spirited resolution did mistress, shopman, and shopwoman, find comfort for the losses, the scratches, and the bruises of the day.

This affray commenced on a Thursday evening towards the latter end of March; and it so happened that we had occasion to send to Miss Philly early the next morning for a cart-load of garden-pots for the use of my geraniums.

Our messenger was, as it chanced, a certain lad by name Dick Barnett, who has lived with us off and on ever since he was the height of the table, and who originally a saucy, lively, merry boy, arch, quick-witted, and amusing, has been indulged in giving vent to all manner of impertinences until he has become a sort of privileged person, and takes, with high or low, a freedom of speech that might become a lady's page or a king's jester. Every now and then we feel that this licence, which in a child of ten years old we found so diverting, has become inconvenient in a youth of seventeen, and favour him and ourselves with a lecture accordingly. But such is the force of inveterate habit that our remonstrances upon this subject are usually so much gravity wasted upon him and upon ourselves. He, in the course of a day or two, comes forth with some fresh prank more amusing than before, and we (I grieve to confess such a weakness) resume our laughter.

To do justice, however, to this modern Robin Goodfellow, there was most commonly a fund of goodnature at the bottom of his wildest tricks or his most egregious romances,—for in the matter of a jest he was apt to draw pretty largely from an inventive faculty of remarkable fertility; he was constant in his attachments, whether to man or beast, loyal to his employers, and although idle and uncertain enough in other work, admirable in all that related to the stable or the kennel—the best driver, best rider, best trainer of a greyhound, and best finder of a hare, in all Berkshire.

He was, as usual, accompanied on this errand by one of his four-footed favourites, a delicate snow-white greyhound called Mayfly, of whom Miss Philly flatteringly observed, that "she was as beautiful as china;" and upon the civil lady of the shop proceeding to inquire after the health of his master and mistress, and the general news of Aberleigh, master Ben, who well knew her proficiency in gossiping, and had the dislike of a man and a rival to any female practitioner in that art, checked at once this condescending overture to conversation by answering with more than his usual consequence: "The chief news that I know, Miss Firkin, is, that our geraniums are all pining away for want of fresh earth, and that I am sent in furious haste after a load of your best garden-pots. There's no time to be lost, I can tell you, if you mean to save their precious lives. Miss Ada is upon her last legs, and master Diomedes in a galloping consumption—two of our prime geraniums, ma'am!" quoth Dick, with a condescending nod to Miss Wolfe, as that Lilliputian lady looked up at him with a stare of unspeakable mystification; "queerish names, a'nt they? Well, there are the patterns of the sizes, and there's the order; so if your little gentleman will but look the pots out, I have left the cart in Jem Tyler's yard, (I've a message to Jem from master,) and we can pack 'em over the paling. I suppose you've a ladder for the little man's use, in loading carts and waggons, if not Jem or I can take them from him. There is not a better-natured fellow in England than Jem Tyler, and he'll be sure to do me a good turn any day, if it's only for the love of our Mayfly here. He bred her, poor thing, and is well nigh as fond of her as if she was a child of his own; and so's Sam. Nay, what's the matter with you all?" pursued Dick, as at the name of Jem Tyler Miss Wolfe turned up her hands and eyes, Mr. Lamb let fall the pattern pots, and Miss Philly flung the order upon the counter—"What the deuce is come to the people?"

And then out burst the story of the last night's adventure, of Mr. Lamb's scratched face, which indeed was visible enough, of Miss Wolfe's bruises, of the broken china, the cow, the donkey, and the action at law.

"Whew!" whistled Dick in an aside whistle; "going to law is she? We must pacify her if we can," thought he, "for a lawsuit's no joke, as poor Jem would find. Jem must come and speechify. It's hard if between us we can't manage a woman."

"Sad affair, indeed, Miss Firkin," said Dick, aloud, in a soft, sympathising tone, and with a most condoling countenance; "it's unknown what obstropolous creatures cows and donkies are, and what mischief they do amongst gim-cracks. A brute of a donkey got into our garden last summer, and ate up half-a-dozen rose-trees and fuchsias, besides trampling over the flower-beds. One of the roses was a present from France, worth five guineas. I hope Mr. Lamb and Miss Wolfe are not much hurt. Very sad affair! strange too that it should happen through Jem Tylers cattle—poor Jem, who had such a respect for you!"

"Respect for me!" echoed Miss Philly, "when he called me a chattering old maid,—Mrs. Loveit heard him. Respect for me!"

"Aye," continued Dick, "it was but last Monday was a fortnight that Kit Mahony, the tall pig-dealer, was

boasting of the beauty of the Tipperary lasses, and crying down our English ladies, whereupon, although the tap was full of Irish chaps, Jem took the matter up, and swore that he could show Kit two as fine women in this very street—you, ma'am, being one, and Miss Parsons the other—two as fine women as ever he saw in Tipperary. Nay, he offered to lay any wager, from a pot of double X to half a score of his own pigs, that Kit should confess it himself. Now, if that's not having a respect I don't know what is," added Dick, with much gravity; "and I put it to your good sense, whether it is not more likely that Mrs. Loveit, who is as deaf as a post, should be mistaken, than that he should offer to lay such a wager respecting a lady of whom he had spoken so disparagingly."

"This will do," thought Dick to himself as he observed the softening of Miss Philly's features and noted her very remarkable and unnatural silence—"this will do;" and reiterating his request that the order might be got ready, he walked out of the shop.

"You'll find that I have settled the matter," observed the young gentleman to Jem Tyler, after telling him the story, "and you have nothing to do but to follow up my hints. Did not I manage her famously? 'Twas well I recollected your challenge to Mahony, about that pretty creature, Harriet Parsons. It had a capital effect, I promise you. Now go and make yourself decent; put on your Sunday coat, wash your face and hands, and don't, spare for fine speeches. Be off with you."

"I shall laugh in her face," replied Jem.

"Not you," quoth his sage adviser: "just think of the length of a lawyer's bill, and you'll be in no danger of laughing. Besides, she's really a niceish sort of a body enough, a tidyish little soul in her way, and you're a gay widower—so who knows?"

And home went Dick, chuckling all the way, partly at his own good management, partly at the new idea which his quick fancy had started.

About a fortnight after, I had occasion to drive into Belford, attended as usual by master Richard. The bells of St. Stephen's were ringing merrily as we passed down Oriel Street, and happening to look up at the well-known sign of the Old Red Cow, we saw that celebrated work of art surmounted by a bow of white ribbons—a bridal favour. Looking onward to Miss Philly's door, what should we perceive but Mr. Lamb standing on the step with a similar cockade, half as big as himself, stuck in his hat; whilst Miss Wolfe stood simpering behind the counter, dispensing to her old enemy Sam, and four other grinning boys in their best apparel, five huge slices of bridecake.

The fact was clear. Jem Tyler and Miss Philly were married.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MISS PHILLY FIRKIN, THE CHINA-WOMAN ***

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