

W. Harrison Ainsworth (1805-82)

3 *The Custom of Dunmow*

Showing how it arose.

Fytte the First.

A Fond Couple make a Vow before the Good Prior of the Convent of our Lady of Dunmow, that they have loved each other well and truly for a Twelvemonth and a Day; and crave his Blessing.

I.

“What seek ye here, my children dear?
Why kneel ye down thus lowly
Upon the stones, beneath the porch
Of this our Convent holy?”
The Prior old the pair bespoke 5
In faltering speech, and slowly.

II.

Their modest garb would seem proclaim
The pair of low degree,
But though in cloth of frieze arrayed,
A stately youth was he: 10
While she, who knelt down by his side,
Was beautiful to see.

III.

“A Twelvemonth and a Day have fled
Since first we were united;
And from that hour,” the young man said, 15
“No change our hopes has blighted.
Fond faith with fonder faith we’ve paid,
And love with love requited.

IV.

“True to each other have we been;
No dearer object seeing, 20
Than each has in the other found;

In everything agreeing.
And every look, and word, and deed
That breed dissension fleeing.

V.

“All this we swear, and take in proof 25
Our Lady of Dunmow!
For She, who sits with saints above,
Well knows that it is so.
Attest our Vow, thou reverend man,
And bless us, ere we go!” 30

VI.

The Prior old stretch'd forth his hands:
“Heaven prosper ye!” quo' he;
“O'er such as ye, right gladly we
Say '*Benedicite!*' ”
On this, the kneeling pair uprose — 35
Uprose full joyfully.

Fytte the Second.

*The Good Prior merrily bestoweth a boon upon the Loving Couple;
and getteth a noble Recompence.*

I.

Just then, pass'd by the Convent cook —
And moved the young man's glee;
On his broad back a mighty Flitch
Of Bacon brown bore he.
So heavy was the load, I wis, 5
It scarce mote carried be.

II.

“Take ye that Flitch,” the Prior cried,
“Take it, fond pair, and go:
Fidelity like yours deserves
The boon I now bestow. 10
Go, feast your friends, and think upon
The Convent of Dunmow.”

III.

“Good Prior,” then the youth replied,
“Thy gift to us is dear,
Not for its worth, but that it shows 15
Thou deem’st our love sincere.
And in return broad lands I give —
Broad lands thy Convent near;
Which shall to thee and thine produce
A Thousand Marks a Year! 20

IV.

“But this Condition I annex,
Or else the Grant’s forsaken:
That whensoever a pair shall come,
And take the Oath we’ve taken,
They shall from thee and thine receive 25
A goodly Flich of Bacon.

V.

“And thus from out a simple chance
A usage good shall grow;
And our example of true love
Be held up evermo’: 30
While all who win the prize shall bless
The Custom of Dunmow.”

VI.

“Who art thou, son?” the Prior cried;
His tones with wonder falter —
“Thou shouldst not jest with reverend men, 35
Nor with their feelings palter.”
“I jest not, Prior, for know in me
Sir Reginald Fitzwalter.

VII.

“I now throw off my humble garb,
As I what I am, confest; 40
The wealthiest I of wealthy men,
Since with this treasure blest.”
And as he spoke, Fitzwalter clasp’d

His lady to his breast.

VIII.

“In peasant guise my love I won, 45
Nor knew she whom she wedded;
In peasant cot our truth we tried,
And no disunion dreaded.
Twelve months’ assurance proves our faith
On firmest base is steadied.” 50

IX.

Joy reign’d within those Convent walls
When the glad news was known;
Joy reign’d within Fitzwalter’s halls
When there his bride was shown.
No lady in the land such sweet 55
Simplicity could own;
A natural grace had she, that all
Art’s graces far outshone:
Beauty and worth for want of birth
Abundantly atone. 60

L’Enboy.

Hence the Custom.

What need of more? That Loving Pair
Lived long and truly so;
Nor ever disunited were; —
For one death laid them low!
And hence arose that Custom old — 5
The Custom of Dunmow.

(From *Ballads: Romantic, Fantastical, and Humorous*.
London, 1855)