

The Cooper : Narrator's script

[Introductory music, number 1, unless it is preferred to play this after the opening announcement]

Our little play was first performed in London in the summer of 1772, some 230 years ago. The music was specially written by Dr Arne, the libretto had been translated from that of a similar play in French. It was described as a “musical entertainment”, but although the music played an important role it wasn't continuous as in a modern opera; rather, the work was written as a comedy with musical interludes, a play in which the actors broke off the dialogue from time to time in order to sing. But we ourselves are singers and instrumentalists rather than actors, and in our present performance we are concentrating on the music and are giving just a summary of the intervening action. A little of the original music appears no longer to exist and we have inserted a couple of numbers from other works to fill out the whole, but we like to think that the insertions preserve the spirit of the original.

The action takes place in the workshop of Martin the Cooper [*MARTIN steps forward and takes a bow*]. You are to imagine the workplace of a skilled tradesman perhaps fifty years old, a kind and worthy man who over the years has perhaps become a little pompous and self-important; he runs his own business and seems to have done well enough to have a two-storey house with a garden, but there is an element of outward show in all this and it becomes clear in due course than in fact he is in debt up to his eyeballs. In the workshop itself, there are benches and tools, there is wood in profusion, there are barrels at all stages of manufacture; and when we say “barrels”, we don't mean the namby-pamby miniatures of the modern age, pathetic thimbles which hardly hold enough beer to get even a silly girl tipsy, but proper barrels fit for an Englishman, barrels big enough for a man to hide behind or even to climb inside [*one of these barrels plays an important role in the later action, and it is suggested that a couple of the performers should come forward at this point and arrange two or three chairs or other conveniently available props so as to represent a large barrel and help the audience imagine it*].

Martin has a young ward, the orphan girl Fanny [*FANNY steps forward and curtseys*]. She is a winsome, attractive, but deplorably artful lass of some fifteen summers [*if the part is being sung by a lady of more mature years, she should offer a second and more exaggerated curtsey at this point*]. Martin, being daily exposed to Fanny's charm, regrettably but understandably has fallen in love with her, and this is doubly unfortunate because Fanny herself is in love with Martin's young assistant Colin [*bow from COLIN*] and Colin in turn is in love with her. These are our principal actors, on whom our plot is based; there are some other characters, but their roles are only brief and we shall introduce them as they appear.

[Introductory music here, if not performed before the opening announcement]

When our curtain rises, Martin is temporarily absent from the workshop, leaving Fanny and Colin together, and I regret to say that she is having to tell him to stop it and to behave himself. Martin doesn't like seeing them together, and won't need much of an excuse to give Colin the sack. Colin begins to realise what she is getting at, and asks whether she seriously thinks that Martin at his age is in love with her. Fanny has to tell him the truth.

[Song by FANNY with chorus, number 2]

Colin is highly indignant at this, and Fanny has to calm him down. She tells him to get on with his work, to keep his temper even if provoked by Martin's surliness and fault-finding, and to leave the management of Martin to herself. Martin then enters and asks them what they are doing in his workshop. Fanny tells him that he cannot imagine how well they employ themselves in his absence, and Colin, like a naughty boy who has been caught out, hastens to point out the barrel he is working on. Martin is in no sense placated by these responses.

[Song by MARTIN followed by COLIN, number 3]

Martin, having half-heard Colin's additions, asks him what he is muttering, and when Colin says he is only singing he says he won't have him singing. When Colin protests, he says he won't have him speaking either. Fanny intervenes and starts soft-soaping Martin, and then asks why he shouldn't let Colin sing while he works - it will make them all merry. She invites Colin to start, and he does not hesitate to do so.

[Song by COLIN with chorus, number 4 or 4A]

Fanny asks Martin how he likes this song, and Martin unsurprisingly replies that he doesn't like it at all. Fanny tells Martin that he is hard to please, and Martin says No, not if Fanny will sing the song he has heard her singing in the garden [*FANNY trills a few notes from one of the hit songs of the day*] no, not that one [*a few more notes, possibly from something even more notorious*] and certainly not that one, but the one about Chloe and the grapes, and something about love, and it all ends in ruin. Ah yes, says Fanny...

[Song by FANNY with chorus, number 5]

Martin reflects sadly on this, but then perks up and proposes rewarding Fanny's singing with a kiss. Colin objects even more violently to this, and Fanny yet again has to calm them down. She points out that they haven't heard Martin's own favourite song yet, and she wheedles him into performing it. Martin agrees on condition that they all join in the chorus.

[Song by MARTIN with FANNY and COLIN joining in, number 6]

Martin now gives Fanny permission to pick a nosegay of flowers for herself but not to give any to Colin, and then leaves Colin with instructions to get on with his work. Colin, left alone, muses admiringly on how well the little minx has played Martin off. Fanny returns with a nosegay in her bosom, and she and Colin talk about gaining Martin's consent to their marriage. Fanny is afraid that he will never grant it, and he has brought her up with such care and tenderness since her parents died that she would not willingly do anything to hurt him. Then Colin has an idea. Colin's uncle Jarvis is the village miller, to whom Martin has long owed £50 (which was a year's income in 1772), and Colin knows that Martin doesn't have it. Uncle Jarvis has a soft spot for the young couple, and when he is told of their engagement he will come and demand immediate repayment of his money, agreeing to forgo it only if Martin agrees to the marriage. This strikes Fanny as the very thing. The matter being settled, she proposes slipping off before Martin catches them together, but Colin tries to claim one kiss before she goes. Not yet, says Fanny:

[Song by FANNY with chorus, number 7]

Fanny departs, and Colin contemplates his future happiness.

[Song by COLIN with chorus, number 8 or 8A]

Martin enters and enquires after Fanny, and Colin, elated by what has been happening, answers impertinently. Things rapidly go from bad to worse. Colin flings down his work and refuses to continue, Martin orders him out of the house, Colin agrees to go but taunts him with an invitation to his forthcoming wedding, Martin threatens Colin with the force of his arm, Colin claims to regard it as no more than an old broomstick...

[Duet by MARTIN and COLIN, number 9]

Colin departs, and the exhausted Martin sits down to recover himself. He spots a bottle of spirits lying conveniently to hand and addresses himself to it as his oldest and dearest friend, begging its forgiveness for his neglect of it since he has been in love.

[Song by MARTIN with chorus, number 10]

Fanny returns with some cakes and wine which a neighbour has given her for Colin, and Martin tells her that he has turned him off. Given courage by his recent session with the bottle, he then starts to talk about his own forthcoming wedding with her, but she pretends to be sleepy and goes off to bed (though not without an aside to the audience that she will soon be back). Martin now goes to his own room to look over his accounts before going to bed, and the workshop is left empty.

[Interlude, number 11]

It is now late evening. Fanny enters carrying a candle [*throughout this section, there is scope for the imaginative use of a few simple props*].

[Recitative and song by FANNY and chorus, number 12]

Colin arrives at last (he still has a key to the house which Martin in his rage has forgotten to reclaim) and brings the good news that Uncle Jarvis has agreed to play his part in the plot. But unfortunately he has left the street door open, and hardly have they settled to contemplate their forthcoming happiness than they are disturbed by the arrival of Farmer Twig. Twig and his cronies have won a lot of money on a big race at Newmarket, where a challenger put forward by an impudent Frenchman has been rightly and resoundingly defeated, and they have no doubts as to the reason for the British victory. They stumble into the workshop on their way down the road.

[Trio by TWIG and his CRONIES, number 13; they come unsteadily forward from the chorus with much waving of empty beer mugs, the more recently emptied the better, and weave their way back to it as they fade out]

Fanny and Colin have finally persuaded Twig and his fellows to continue on their way, but it is too late; Martin has been woken by the noise, and they hear him descending the stairs. Fanny hurriedly puts out her candle and manages to escape, but Colin is unable to do so in the dark and has to hide a barrel. Martin enters with another candle, and looks to see the cause of the noise.

[Recitative by MARTIN, number 14, with suitable actions by COLIN]

Martin just fails to catch Colin, who escapes. Fanny then re-enters, pretending to have been woken up by the noise, and asks Martin what he is doing. He says he is chasing Colin and accuses her of having let him in, but she pooh-poohs him as talking nonsense, and when he persists she bursts into tears. He is naturally unable to cope with this age-old feminine wile [*if the narrator's script is being read by a lady, she should alter this to something like "what my husband tells me is an age-old feminine wile"*], and taking her distress to be genuine he tries to placate her by asking her to help him: he needs to deal with a large barrel which needs to be scraped from the inside, and please will she help him climb into it. She does so, and when he is safely inside Colin re-enters. Fanny indicates that Martin is inside the barrel, and Colin quietly tells her that his Uncle Jarvis is on the way with the promised demand for repayment of his £50. In the meantime, Martin, from inside the barrel, asks Fanny if she is still angry with him, and Fanny, with a nod to Colin, says that on the contrary she is now well content. So Martin asks Fanny to sing him a comical song to while away the time while he is working inside the barrel, and Fanny offers to sing a new song she has learnt which is a banter on his old friend Jacques the Cooper. She fears it may offend, but he tells her not to worry and looks forward to the joke.

[Song by FANNY with chorus, number 15]

At the conclusion of this song, Colin kisses Fanny, carelessly putting one hand on the rim of the barrel which Martin is inside, and Martin, mistaking this hand for Fanny's, kisses it passionately [*readers wondering why this hand is placed on a barrel instead of firmly around Fanny's waist should attend any elementary course on theatrical plot construction*]. Martin then realises that something isn't quite right, and tips over his barrel and climbs out. He is duly enraged by the sight that meets his eyes, and is about to speak his mind to both of them when Jarvis enters [*JARVIS comes forward from the chorus*]. Jarvis has come to demand repayment of the long overdue £50, and threatens to distrain on Martin's goods if the money is not immediately forthcoming. Martin, taken aback, has to acknowledge that he hasn't got such a sum, but Jarvis is inflexible until Colin offers a solution: he will take the debt on himself, if Martin will agree to his marriage with Fanny. Martin is initially indignant at this impudent proposal, but then remembers that he is genuinely in trouble and asks for time to think. He looks at Fanny and Colin and sees that they are truly in love, he realises that he has been bubbled, and he reflects that if he were to marry her against her will he might very soon find himself cuckolded; so he decides to be philosophical about the matter, and to trade the loss of his Fanny against the cancellation of his debt. Jarvis commends his decision and hands over the promissory note for £50 to be torn up, and he and Martin give their blessing to the young couple.

[Grand finale for MARTIN, JARVIS, FANNY, COLIN, and chorus, number 16]

[*And when all is finished and the company starts to make its way home, some of the singers might prolong the illusion by singing Arne's four-part catch "See, Boy, see, the play is done", which can be conveniently found in volume 1 of the Stainer and Bell series Introduction to the Partsong.*]