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JOAN MERRYWEATHER

AND OTHER TALES

BY

KATHERINE SAUNDERS.

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JOAN MERRYWEATHER.

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THE hubbub of the fair was at its height. The smoke of innumerable fires crept up lazily towards the blue September sky. The fields outlying the noisy impromptu city were strewn with prostrate beasts of burden, sweltering under the burning sun. Children moaned in their sleep under the vans and carts, or drank incessantly from buckets of tepid water brought for the horses from the little river Cam.

“Come, come, Master Barber, keep up your spirits! there’s corn in Egypt, and golden locks in Sturbridge fair, take your oath on’t. Why, see, here comes a bevy of hussies now.”

“Yes, with polls as brown as my coat, and I tell you my order is for the palest flaxen shade.”

It was a smart mercer standing at the open side

of his booth, who had thus addressed a young man leaning idly against some bales of goods.

Suddenly the young man started.

"Eh, what now?" asked the mercer.

"By the mass!" said the young man, "'tis the very colour, the very shade. Ah, if I could get that head of hair, Mister Mercer, I should not have come all the way from Lancashire for nothing, even if my mysterious friend at Harwich should fail to turn up on the 17th. Who is that girl, Mister Mercer? Do you know her? Is she poor? Have I, think you, any chance? Flourish your ribbons, man; make her come this way."

"Gently, gently, my friend," said the mercer, laughing. "'Tis Joan Merryweather, the spinner. She is coming, trust her; she's been cheapening my kerchiefs for the last three days. Last night she left me to consider if I would not take a sixpence off that black and white."

"Then she is poor?" said the young man eagerly.

"Or stingy! stingy as a miser," returned his