

James Hogg (1770-1835)

7 *The Laird of Lairistan*

or The Three Champions of Liddisdale

The scene of this ballad is laid in the upper parts of Liddisdale, in which district the several residences of the three champions are situated, as is also the old castle of Hermitage, with the farm-houses of Saughtentree and Roughley.

As to the authenticity of the story, all that I can say of it is, that I used to hear it told when I was a boy, by William Scott, a joiner of that country, and was much taken with some of the circumstances. Were I to relate it verbatim, it would only be anticipating a great share of the poem. — One verse is ancient, beginning “O wae be to thee,” &c.

“O Dickie, ’tis light, and the moon shines bright,
Will ye gang and watch the deer wi’ me?”
“Ay, by my sooth, at the turn o’ the night,
We’ll drive the holm of the Saughtentree.”

The moon had turned the roof of heaven; 5
The ground lay deep in drifted snaw;
The Hermitage bell had rung eleven,
And our yeomen watched behind the ha’.

The deer was skight, and the snaw was light,
And never a blood-drap could they draw: 10
“Now, by my sooth!” cried Dickie then,
“There’s something yonder will fear us a’.

“Right owre the knowe where Liddel lies,
Nae wonder that it derkens my ee,
See yonder’s a thing of fearsome size, 15
And it’s moving this way hastilye.

“Say, what is yon, my brother John?
The Lord preserve baith you and me!
But our hearts are the same, and sure our aim,
And he that comes near these bullets shall prie.” 20

“O haud your tongue, my brother dear,
Let us survey’t wi’ steady ee;

'Tis a dead man they are carrying here,
And 'tis fit that the family warned should be."

They ran to the ha', and they wakened them a', 25
But none were at home but maidens three;
Then close in the shade of the wall they staid,
To watch what the issue of this would be.

And there they saw a dismal sight,
A sight had nearly freezed their blood; 30
One lost her sight in the fair moonlight,
And one of them fainted where they stood.

Four stalwart men, on arms so bright,
Came bearing a corpse with many a wound;
His habit bespoke him a lord or knight, 35
And his fair ringlets swept the ground.

They heard one to another say —
"A place to leave him will not be found:
The door is locked, and the key away;
In the byre will we lay him down." 40

Then into the byre the corpse they bore,
And away they fled right speedilye;
The rest took shelter behind the door,
In wild amazement as well might be.

And into the byre no ane durst gang, 45
No, not for the life of his bodye;
But the blood on the snaw was traile'd along,
And they kend a' wasna as it should be.

Next morning all the dalesmen ran,
For soon the word was far and wide; 50
And there lay the Laird of Lairistan,
The bravest knight on the Border side.

He was wounded behind, and wounded before,
And cloven through the left cheek-bone;
And clad in the habit he daily wore; 55
But his sword, and his belt, and his bonnet were gone.

Then east and west the word has gane,
And soon to Branxholm ha' it flew,
That Elliot of Lairistan was slain,
And how or why no living knew. 60

Buccleuch has mounted his milk-white steed,
With fifty knights in his company;
To Hermitage castle they rode with speed,
Where all the dale was summoned to be.

And soon they came, a numerous host, 65
And they swore and touched the fair bodye;
But Jocky o' Millburn he was lost,
And could not be found in the hale countrie.

“Now wae be to thee, Armstrong o' Millburn!
And O an ill death may'st thou dee! 70
Thou hast put down brave Lairistan,
But his equal thou wilt never be.

“The Bewcastle men may ramp and rave,
And drive away the Liddisdale kye;
For now is our guardian laid in his grave, 75
And Branxholm and Thirlestane distant lye.”

The dalesmen thus his loss deplore,
And every one his virtues tell:
His hounds lay howling at the door,
His hawks flew idle o'er the fell. 80

When three long years were come and gone,
Two shepherds sat on Roughley hill;
And aye they sighed and made their moan,
O'er the present times that looked so ill.

“Our young king lives at London town, 85
Buccleuch must bear him companye;
And Thirlestane's all to flinders gone,
And who shall our protector be?

“And jealous of the Stuart race,

The English lords begin to thraw; 90
The land is in a piteous case,
When subjects rise against the law.

“Our grief and ruin are forespoke,
The nation has received a stain —
A stain like that on Sundup’s cloak, 95
That never will wash out again.”

Amazement kythed in the shepherd’s face,
His mouth to open wide began;
He stared and looked from place to place,
As things across his mem’ry ran. 100

The broidered cloak of gaudy green,
Which Sundup wore, and was sae gay,
For three lang years had ne’er been seen,
At chapel, raid, nor holiday.

Once on a night he overheard, 105
From two old dames of southron land,
A tale the which he greatly feared,
But ne’er could th’roughly understand.

“Now tell me, neighbour, tell me true;
Your sim’lie bodes us little good; 110
I fear, the cloak you mentioned now —
I fear ’tis stained with noble blood!”

“Indeed, my friend, you’ve guessed aright;
I never meant to tell to man
That tale; but crimes will come to light, 115
Let human wits do what they can.

“But He, who ruleth wise and well,
Hath ordered from his seat on high,
That aye since valiant Elliot fell,
That mantle bears the purple dye; 120

“And all the waters in Liddisdale,
And all that lash the British shore,
Can ne’er wash out the wondrous maele;

It still seems fresh with purple gore.”

Then east and west the word is gane, 125
And soon to Branxholm ha’ it flew;
And Halbert o’ Sundup he was ta’en,
And brought before the proud Buccleuch.

The cloak was hung in open hall,
Where ladies and lords of high degree, 130
And many a one, both great and small,
Were struck with awe the same to see.

“Now tell me, Sundup,” said Buccleuch,
“Is this the judgment of God on high!
If that be Elliot’s blood we view, 135
False Sundup, thou shalt surely die!”

Then Halbert turned him where he stood,
And wiped the round tear frae his ee;
“That blood, my lord, is Elliot’s blood;
I winna keep in the truth frae thee.” 140

“O ever-alack!” said good Buccleugh,
“If that be true thou tell’st to me,
On the highest tree in Branxholm-heuch,
Stout Sundup, thou must hangit be.”

“Tis Elliot’s blood, my lord, ’tis true; 145
And Elliot’s death was wrought by me;
And were the deed again to do,
I’d do’t in spite of hell and thee.

“My sister, brave Jock Armstrong’s bride,
The fairest flower of Liddisdale, 150
By Lairistan foully was betrayed,
And roundly has he payed the mail.

“We watched him in her secret bower,
And found her to his bosom prest:
He begged to have his broad claymore, 155
And dared us both to do our best.

“Perhaps, my lord, ye’ll truly say,
In rage from laws of arms we swerved:
Though Lairistan got double play,
’Twas fairer play than he deserved. 160

“We might have killed him in the dark,
When in the lady’s arms lay he;
We might have killed him in his sark,
Yet gave him room to fight or flee.

“Come on then!” gallant Millburn cried, 165
My single arm shall do the deed;
Or heavenly justice is denied,
Or that false heart of thine shall bleed.’

“Then to’t they fell, both sharp and snell,
With steady hand and watchful een; 170
From both the trickling blood-drops fell,
And the words of death were said between[.]

“The first stroke Millburn to him gave,
He ript his bosom to the bone;
Though Armstrong was a yeoman brave, 175
Like Elliot living there was none.

“His growth was like the Border oak;
His strength the bison’s strength outvied;
His courage like the mountain rock;
For skill his man be never tried. 180

“Oft had we three in border fray,
Made chiefs and armies stand in awe;
And little weened to see the day
On other deadly thus to draw.”

The first wound that brave Millburn got, 185
The tear of rage rowed in his ee;
The next stroke that brave Millburn got,
The blood ran dreeping to his knee.

“My sword I gripped into my hand,
And fast to his assistance ran; — 190

What could I do? I could not stand
And see the base deceiver win.”

‘Now turn,’ I cried, ‘thou limmer loun!
Turn round and change a blow with me,
Or by the righteous powers aboon, 195
I’ll hew the arm from thy bodye.’

“He turned with many a haughty word,
And lounged and passed most furiouslye;
But, with one slap of my broad sword,
I brought the traitor to his knee. 200

‘Now take thou that,’ stout Armstrong cried,
‘For all the pain thou’st gi’en to me;
(Though then he shortly would have died)
And ran him through the fair bodye.”

Bucclench’s stern look began to change, 205
To tine a warrior loathe was he;
The crime was called a brave revenge,
And Halbert of Sundup was set free.

Then every man for Millburn mourned,
And wished him to enjoy his own; 210
But Mil[l]burn never more returned,
Till ten long years were come and gone.

Then loud alarms through England ring,
And deeds of death and dool began;
The commons rose against the king, 215
And friends to diff’rent parties ran.

The nobles join the royal train,
And soon his ranks with grandeur fill;
They sought their foes with might and main,
And found them lying on Edgehill. 220

The trumpets blew, the bullets flew,
And long and bloody was the fray;
At length, o’erpowered, the rebel crew
Before the royal troops gave way.

“Who was the man,” Lord Lindsey cried, 225
“That fought so well through all the fray?
Whose coat of rags, together tied,
Seems to have seen a better day.

“Such bravery in so poor array,
I never in my life did see; 230
His valour three times turned the day,
When we were on the point to flee.”

Then up there spoke a man of note,
Who stood beside his majesty,
“My liege, the man’s a Border Scot, 235
Who volunteered to fight for thee.

“He says you’re kind, but counselled ill,
And sit unstable on your throne;
But had he power unto his will,
He swears he’d kill the dogs each one.” 240

The king he smiled, and said aloud,
“Go bring the valiant Scot to me;
When we have all our foes subdued,
The lord of Liddle he shall be.”

The king gave him his gay gold ring, 245
And made him there a belted knight.
But Millburn bled to save his king,
The king to save his royal right.

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