

Richard Harris Barham (1788-1845)

6 *Nell Cook*

A Legend of the "Dark Entry."

The King's Scholar's Story.

"From the 'Brick Walk' branches off to the right a long narrow vaulted passage, paved with flagstones, vulgarly known by the name of the 'Dark Entry.' Its eastern extremity communicates with the cloisters, crypt, and, by a private staircase, with the interior of the cathedral. On the west it opens into the 'Green-court,' forming a communication between it and the portion of the 'Precinct' called the 'Oaks.'" — *A Walk round Canterbury, etc.*

[Scene — A back parlor in Mr. John Ingoldsby's house in the Precinct. — A blazing fire. — Mine Uncle is seated in a high-backed easy chair, twirling his thumbs, and contemplating his list shoe. — Little Tom, the "King's Scholar," on a stool opposite. — Mrs. John Ingoldsby at the table, busily employed in manufacturing a cabbage-rose (cauliflower?) in many-colored worsteds. — Mine Uncle's meditations are interrupted by the French clock on the mantel-piece. — He prologizeth with vivacity.]

"Hark! listen, Mrs. Ingoldsby, — the clock is striking nine!
Give Master Tom another cake, and half a glass of wine,
And ring the bell for Jenny Smith, and bid her bring his coat,
And a warm bandana handkerchief to tie about his throat.

"And bid them go the nearest way, for Mr. Birch has said 5
That nine o'clock's the hour he'll have his boarders all in bed;
And well we know when little boys their coming home delay,
They often seem to walk and sit uneasily next day!" —

"Now, nay, dear Uncle Ingoldsby, now send me not, I pray,
Back by that Entry dark, for that you know's the nearest way; 10
I dread that Entry dark with Jane alone at such an hour,
It fears me quite — it's Friday night! — and then Nell Cook hath pow'r!"

"And who's Nell Cook, thou silly child? — and what's Nell Cook to thee?
That thou should'st dread at night to tread with Jane that dark entrée?" —
"Nay, list and hear, mine Uncle dear! such fearsome things they tell 15
Of Nelly Cook, that few may brook at night to meet with Nell!"

"It was in bluff King Harry's days, — and Monks and Friars were then,

You know, dear Uncle Ingoldsby, a sort of Clergymen.
They'd coarse stuff gowns, and shaven crowns — no shirts, — and no cravats,
And a cord was placed about their waist — they had no shovel hats! 20

“It was in bluff King Harry's days, while yet he went to shrift,
And long before he stamped and swore, and cut the Pope adrift;
There lived a portly Canon then, a sage and learned clerk;
He had, I trow, a goodly house, fast by that Entry dark!

“The Canon was a portly man — of Latin and of Greek, 25
And learned lore, he had good store — yet health was on his cheek.
The Priory fare was scant and spare, the bread was made of rye,
The beer was weak, yet he was sleek — he had a merry eye.

“For though within the Priory the fare was scant and thin,
The Canon's house it stood without; — he kept good cheer within; 30
Unto the best he prest each guest with free and jovial look,
And Ellen Bean ruled his *cuisine*. — He called her ‘Nelly Cook.’

“For soups, and stews, and choice *ragouts*, Nell Cook was famous still!
She'd make them even of old shoes, she had such wondrous skill:
Her manchets fine were quite divine, her cakes were nicely brown'd, 35
Her boil'd and roast, they were the boast of all the ‘Precinct’ round;

“And Nelly was a comely lass, but calm and staid her air,
And earthward bent her modest look — yet was she passing fair;
And though her gown was russet brown, their heads grave people shook; —
They all agreed no Clerk had need of such a pretty Cook. 40

“One day, 'twas on a Whitsun Eve — there came a coach and four; —
It passed the ‘Green-court’ gate, and stopped before the Canon's door;
The travel-stain on wheel and rein bespoke a weary way, —
Each panting steed relax'd its speed — out stept a Lady gay.

“Now, welcome! welcome! dearest Niece,’ — the Canon then did cry, 45
And to his breast the Lady prest — he had a merry eye, —
‘Now, welcome! welcome! dearest Niece! in sooth, thou'rt welcome here,
’Tis many a day since we have met — how fares my Brother dear?’ —

“Now, thanks, my loving Uncle,’ that Lady gay replied:
‘Gramercy for thy benison!’ — then ‘Out, alas!’ she sighed; 50

My father dear he is not near; he seeks the Spanish Main;
He prays thee give me shelter here till he return again!" —

"Now, welcome! welcome! dearest Niece; come lay thy mantle by!"
The Canon kiss'd her ruby lip — he had a merry eye, —
But Nelly Cook askew did look, — it came into her mind
They were a little less than 'kin,' and rather more than 'kind.'

55

"Three weeks are gone and over — full three weeks and a day,
Yet still within the Canon's house doth dwell that Lady gay;
On capons fine they daily dine, rich cates and sauces rare,
And they quaff good store of Bordeaux wine, — so dainty is their fare.

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"And fine upon the virginals is that gay Lady's touch,
And sweet her voice unto the lute, you'll scarce hear any such;
But is it '*O Sanctissima!*' she sings in dulcet tone?
Or '*Angels ever bright and fair?*' — Ah, no! — it's '*Bobbing Joan!*'

"The Canon's house is lofty and spacious to the view;
The Canon's cell is ordered well — yet Nelly looks askew;
The Lady's bower is in the tower, — yet Nelly shakes her head —
She hides the poker and the tongs in that gay Lady's bed!

65

"Six weeks were gone and over — full six weeks and a day,
Yet in that bed the poker and the tongs unheeded lay!
From which, I fear, it's pretty clear that Lady rest had none;
Or, if she slept in any bed — it was not in her own.

70

"But where that Lady pass'd her night, I may not well divine,
Perhaps in pious orisons at good St. Thomas' Shrine,
And for her father far away breathed tender vows and true —
It may be so — I cannot say — but Nelly look'd askew.

75

"And still at night, by fair moonlight, when all were lock'd in sleep,
She'd listen at the Canon's door, — she'd through the keyhole peep —
I know not what she heard or saw, but fury fill'd her eye —
She bought some nasty Doctor's stuff, and she put it in a pie!

80

“It was a glorious summer’s eve — with beams of rosy red
The Sun went down — all Nature smiled — but Nelly shook her head.
Full softly to the balmy breeze rang out the Vesper bell —
Upon the Canon’s startled ear it sounded like a knell!

“Now here’s to thee, mine Uncle! a health I drink to thee! 85
Now pledge me back in Sherris sack, or a cup of Malvoisie!’ —
The Canon sigh’d — but, rousing, cried, ‘I answer to thy call,
And a Warden-pie’s a dainty dish to mortify withal!’

“Tis early dawn — the matin chime rings out for morning pray’r —
And Prior and Friar is in his stall — the Canon is not there! 90
Nor in the small Refect’ry hall, nor cloister’d walk is he —
All wonder — and the Sacristan says, ‘Lauk-a-daisy-me!’

“They’ve search’d the aisles and Baptistery — they’ve search’d above — around —
The ‘Sermon House’ — the ‘Audit Room’ — the Canon is not found.
They only find that pretty Cook concocting a *ragout*, 95
They ask her where her master is — but Nelly looks askew.

“They call for crow-bars — ‘jemmies’ is the modern name they bear —
They burst through lock, and bolt, and bar — but what a sight is there! —
The Canon’s head lies on the bed — his Niece lies on the floor! —
They are as dead as any nail that is in any door! 100

“The livid spot is on his breast, the spot is on his back!
His portly form, no longer warm with life, is swoln and black! —
The livid spot is on her cheek, — it’s on her neck of snow,
And the Prior sighs, and sadly cries, ‘Well — here’s a pretty Go!’

“All at the silent hour of night a bell is heard to toll, 105
A knell is rung, a *requiem*’s sung as for a sinful soul,
And there’s a grave within the Nave; it’s dark, and deep, and wide,
And they bury there a Lady fair, and a Canon by her side!

“An Uncle — so ’tis whisper’d now throughout the sacred fane, —
And a Niece — who’s father’s far away upon the Spanish Main — 110
The Sacristan, he says no word that indicates a doubt,
But he puts his thumb unto his nose, and he spreads his fingers out!

“And where doth tarry Nelly Cook, that staid and comely lass?
Ay, where? — for ne’er from forth that door was Nelly known to pass.
Her coif and gown of russet brown were lost unto the view, 115
And if you mentioned Nelly’s name — the monks all looked askew!

“There is a heavy paving-stone fast by the Canon’s door,
Of granite gray, and it may weigh some half a ton or more,
And it is laid deep in the shade within that Entry dark,
Where sun or moonbeam never play’d, or e’en one starry spark. 120

“That heavy granite stone was moved that night, ’twas darkly said,
And the mortar round its sides next morn seem’d fresh and newly laid,
But what within the narrow vault beneath that stone doth lie,
Or if that there be vault or no — I cannot tell — not I!

“But I’ve been told that moan and groan, and fearful wail and shriek 125
Came from beneath that paving-stone for nearly half a week —
For three long days and three long nights came forth those sounds of fear;
Then all was o’er — they nevermore fell on the listening ear.

“A hundred years have gone and past since last Nell Cook was seen,
When worn by use, that stone got loose, and they went and told the Dean. — 130
Says the Dean, says he, ‘My Masons three! now haste and fix it tight’;
And the Masons three peep’d down to see, and they saw a fearsome sight.

“Beneath that heavy paving-stone a shocking hole they found —
It was not more than twelve feet deep, and barely twelve feet round; —
A fleshless, sapless skeleton lay in that horrid well! 135
But who the deuce ’twas put it there those Masons could not tell.

“And near this fleshless skeleton a pitcher small did lie,
And a mouldy piece of ‘kissing-crust,’ as from a Warden-pie!
And Dr. Jones declared the bones were female bones and, ‘Zooks!
I should not be surprised,’ said he, ‘if these were Nelly Cook’s!’ 140

“It was in good Dean Bargrave’s days, if I remember right,
Those fleshless bones beneath the stones these Masons brought to light;
And you may well in the ‘Dean’s Chapelle’ Dean Bargrave’s portrait view,

‘Who died one night,’ says old Tom Wright, ‘in sixteen forty-two!’

“And so two hundred years have passed since that these Masons three, 145
With curious looks, did set Nell Cook’s unquiet spirit free;
That granite stone had kept her down till then — so some suppose, —
Some spread their fingers out, and put their thumbs unto their nose.

“But one thing’s clear — that all the year, on every Friday night
Throughout that Entry dark doth roam Nell Cook’s unquiet Sprite: 150
On Friday was that Warden-pie all by that Canon tried;
On Friday died he, and that tidy Lady by his side!

“And though two hundred years have flown, Nell Cook doth still pursue
Her weary walk, and they who cross her path the deed may rue;
Her fatal breath is fell as death! the Simoom’s blast is not 155
More dire — (a wind in Africa that blows uncommon hot).

“But all unlike the Simoom’s blast, her breath is deadly cold,
Delivering quivering, shivering shocks unto both young and old,
And whoso in that Entry dark doth feel that fatal breath,
He ever dies within the year some dire untimely death! 160

“No matter who — no matter what condition, age, or sex,
But some ‘get shot,’ and some ‘get drown’d,’ and some ‘get’ broken necks;
Some ‘get run over’ by a coach; — and one beyond the seas
‘Got’ scraped to death with oyster-shells among the Caribbees!

“Those Masons three, who set her free, fell first! — it is averred 165
That two were hang’d on Tyburn tree for murdering of the third:
Charles Storey, too, his friend who slew, had ne’er, if truth they tell,
Been gibbeted on Chatham Down, had they not met with Nell!

“Then send me not, mine Uncle dear, oh! send me not, I pray,
Back through that Entry dark to-night, but round some other way! 170
I will not be a truant boy, but good, and mind my book,
For Heaven forbend that ever I foregather with Nell Cook!”

The class was call’d at morning tide, and Master Tom was there;
He looked askew, and did eschew both stool, and bench, and chair.
He did not talk, he did not walk, the tear was in his eye, — 175

He had not e'en that sad resource, to sit him down and cry.

Hence little boys may learn, when they from school go out to dine,
They should not deal in rigmarole, but still be back by nine;
For if, when they've their greatcoat on, they pause before they part,
To tell a long and prosy tale, — perchance their own may smart. 180

MORAL.

A few remarks to learned Clerks in country and in town —
Don't keep a pretty serving-maid, though clad in russet brown! —
Don't let your Niece sing "Bobbing Joan!" — don't, with a merry eye
Hob-nob in Sack and Malvoisie, — and don't eat too much pie!!

And oh! beware that Entry dark, — Especially at night, — 185
And don't go there with Jenny Smith all by the pale moonlight! —
So bless the Queen and her Royal Weans, — And the Prince whose hand she took, —
And bless us all, both great and small, — and keep us from Nell Cook!

1842

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