

James Hogg (1770-1835)

12 *Mess John*

Mess John stood in St. Mary's Kirk,
And preached and prayed so mightilye;
No monk nor abbot in the land,
Could preach or pray so well as he.

The words of peace flowed from his tongue, 5
His heart seemed wrapt with heavenly flame,
And thousands would the chapel throng,
So distant flew his pious fame.

His face was like the rising moon,
Imblushed with evening's purple dye; 10
His stature like the graceful pine,
That grew on Bowerhope hills so high.

Mess John lay on his lonely couch,
And oft he sighed and sorely pined;
A smothered flame consumed his heart, 15
And tainted his capacious mind.

It was not for the nation's sin,
Nor Kirk oppressed that he did mourn;
'Twas for a little earthly flower —
The bonny lass of Craigieburn. 20

Whene'er his eyes with her's did meet,
They pierced his heart without remedie;
And when he heard her voice so sweet,
Mess John forgot to say his creed.

"Curse on our foolish law," he said, 25
"That chains us back from social joy;
The sweetest bliss to mortals lent,
I cannot taste without alloy!

“Give misers wealth, and monarchs power;
Give heroes kingdoms to o’erturn; 30
Give sophists latent depths to scan —
Give me the lass of Craigieburn.”

O passion, what can thee surpass?
Mess John’s religious zeal is flown;
A priest in love is like the grass, 35
That fades ere it be fairly grown.

When thinking on her liquid eye,
Her maiden form so fair and gay,
Her limbs, the polished ivorye,
His heart, like wax, would melt away! 40

He tried the hom’lies to rehearse,
He tried it both by night and day;
But all his lair and logic failed,
His thoughts were on the bonny May.

He said the creed, he sung the mass, 45
And o’er the breviary did turn;
But still his wayward fancy eyed
The bonnie lass of Craigieburn.

One day upon his lonely couch
He lay, a prey to passion fell; 50
And aft he turned — and aft he wished
What bedesman’s tongue durst hardly tell.

A sudden languor chilled his blood,
And quick o’er all his senses flew;
But what it was, or what the cause, 55
He neither wished to know nor knew:

He weened he heard the thunder roll,
And then a laugh of malice keen;
Fierce whirlwinds shook the mansion-walls,
And grievous sobs were heard between: 60

And then a maid of beauty bright,

With blushing cheek, and claithing thin,
And many a fascinating air,
To his bedside came gliding in.

A silken mantle on her feet 65
Fell down in many a fold and turn:
Too well he knew the lovely form
Of bonny May of Craigieburn!

Though eye, and tongue, and every limb 70
Lay moveless as the mountain rock,
Yet fast his fluttering pulses played,
As thus the enticing demon spoke: —

“Poor heartless man! and wilt thou lie 75
A prey to this devouring flame?
That this fair form is not thine own,
None but thyself hast thou to blame.

“Thou little know’st the fervid fires 80
In female breasts that burn so clear!
The forward youth of fierce desires
To us is most supremely dear.

“Who ventures most to gain our charms,
By us is ever most approved;
The ardent kiss and clasping arms
By maid is ever best beloved.

“Then mould this form of fairest wax, 85
With adder’s eyes, and feet of horn;
Place this small scroll within its breast,
Which I from love have hither borne;

“And make a blaze of alder wood: 90
Before your fire make that to stand;
And the last night of every moon
Your bonny May’s at your command.

“With fire and steel to urge her weel,
See that you neither stint nor spare;

For if the cock be heard to crow, 95
The charm will vanish into air.”

Then bristly, bristly, grew her hair,
Her colour changed to black and blue;
And broader, broader, grew her face,
Till with a yell away she flew! 100

The charm was gone, — upstarts Mess John;
A statue now behold him stand!
Fain, fain he would suppose’t a dream —
But lo! the scroll is in his hand.

Read through this tale, and as you pass, 105
You’ll cry, “alas, the priest’s a man!
And man’s a worm, and flesh is grass,
And stand himself he never can.”

Within the chaplain’s sinful cell
Is done a deed without a name; 110
The lovely moulded image stands
A-melting at the alder flame.

The charm of wickedness prevails,
The eye of Heaven is shut for sin;
The maid of Craigieburn is seized 115
With burning of the soul within.

“O father dear! what ails my heart?
Ev’n but this minute I was well;
And now, though still in health and strength,
I suffer half the pains of hell.” 120

“My bonny May, my darling child!
Ill wots thy father what to say;
I fear ’tis for some secret sin
That Heaven this scourge on thee doth lay.

“Confess, and to thy Maker pray; 125
He’s kind; be firm, and banish fear;
He’ll lay no more on my poor child

Than he gives strength of mind to bear.”

“A thousand poignards pierce my heart!
I feel, I feel, I must away; 130
Yon holy man at Mary’s Kirk
Will pardon, and my pains allay.

“I mind when on a doleful night,
A picture of this black despair
Was fully open to my sight. 135
A vision bade me hasten there.”

“O stay, my child, till morning dawn,
The night is dark and danger night;
The hill-men in their wildered haunts
Will shoot thee for a nightly spy. 140

“Mong wild Polmoody’s mountains green,
Full many a wight their vigils keep;
Where roars the torrent from Loch Skene,
A troop is lodged in trenches deep.

“The howling fox and raving earn 145
Will scare thy reason quite away;
Regard thy sex and tender youth,
And stay my child till dawning day.”

But burning, raging, wild with pain,
By moorland cleuch and dark defile, 150
Away with many a shriek she ran
Straight forward for St. Mary’s aisle.

And lo! a magic lanthorn bright
Hung on the birks of Craigieburn;
She placed the wonder on her head, 155
Which shone around her like the sun.

She ran, impelled by racking pain,
Through rugged ways and waters wild;
Where art thou, guardian spirit, fled?
O haste to save an only child! 160

Hold! — he who dotes on earthly things,
 'Tis fit his frailty should appear;
Hold! — they who Providence accuse,
 'Tis just their folly cost them dear.

The God who guides the gilded moon, 165
 And rules the rough and rolling sea,
Without a trial ne'er will leave
 A soul to evil destiny.

When crossing Meggat's Highland strand, 170
 She stopt to hear an eldritch scream;
Loud crowed the cock at Henderland,
 The charm evanished like a dream!

The magic lanthorn left her head,
 And, darkling, now return she must.
She wept, and cursed her hapless doom; 175
 She wept — and called her God unjust.

But on that sad revolving day,
 The racking pains again return;
And wanders on her nightly way,
 The bonny lass of Craigieburn. 180

And back unto her father's hall,
 Weeping she journeys, ruined quite;
And still on that returning day,
 Yields to a monster's hellish might.

But o'er the scene we'll draw a veil, 185
 Wet with the tender tear of woe;
For we must to our magic tale,
 And all the shepherd's terrors show.

Once every month the spectre ran,
 With shrieks would any heart appal; 190
And every maid, and every man,
 Astonished fled at evening fall.

A bonny widow went at night
To meet the lad she loved so well;
“Ah! yon’s my former husband’s sprite!” 195
She cried, and into faintings fell.

An honest tailor leaving work,
Met with the lass of Craigieburn;
It was enough — he breathed his last
One shriek had done the tailor’s turn. 200

A mountain-preacher quat his horse,
And prayed aloud with lengthened phiz;
The damsel yelled — the father kneeled —
Dundee was but a joke to this!

Young Laidlaw of the Chapelhope, 205
Enraged to see the road laid waste,
Waylaid the damsel with a gun,
But in a panic home was chased.

But drunken John of Keppel-Gill,
Met with her on Carrifran Gans; 210
He staggering cried, “Who devil’s that?”
Then plashing on, cried, “Faith, God kens!”

The Cameronians left their camp,
And scattered wide o’er many a hill;
Pursued by men, pursued by hell, 215
They stoutly held their tenets still.

But at the source of Moffat’s stream,
Two champions of the cov’nant dwell,
Who long had braved the power of men,
And fairly beat the prince of hell: 220

Armed with a gun, a rowan-tree rung,
A Bible, and a scarlet twine,
They placed them on the Birkhill path,
And saw afar the lanthorn shine.

And nearer, nearer, still it drew, 225

At length they heard her piercing cries;
And louder, louder, still they prayed,
With aching heart, and upcast eyes!

The Bible, spread upon the brae,
No sooner did the light illumine, 230
Than straight the magic lanthorn fled,
And left the lady in the gloom.

With open book, and haggart look,
“Say what art thou?” they loudly cry;
“I am a woman, let me pass, 235
Or quickly at your feet I’ll die.

“O let me run to Mary’s Kirk,
Where, if I’m forced to sin and shame,
A gracious God will pardon me, —
My heart was never yet to blame.” 240

Armed with the gun, the rowan-tree rung,
The Bible, and the scarlet twine,
With her they trudged to Mary’s Kirk
To execute the will divine.

When nigh St. Mary’s aisle they drew, 245
Rough winds, and rapid rains began;
The livid lightning linked flew,
And round the rattling thunder ran.

The torrents rush, the mountains quake,
The sheeted ghosts run to and fro; 250
And deep and long, from out the lake,
The water-cow was heard to low.

The mansion then seemed in a blaze,
And issued forth a sulphurous smell;
An eldritch laugh went o’er their heads, 255
Which ended in a hellish yell.

Bauld Halbert ventured to the cell,
And, from a little window, viewed

The priest and Satan close engaged
In hellish rites and orgies lewd. 260

A female form, of melting wax,
Mess John surveyed with steady eye,
Which ever and anon he pierced,
Forcing the lady loud to cry.

Then Halbert raised his trusty gun, 265
Was loaded well with powder and ball,
And, aiming at the chaplain's head,
He blew his brains against the wall.

The devil flew with such a clap,
On door nor window did not stay; 270
And loud he cried, in jeering tone,
"Ha, ha, ha, ha, poor John's away!"

East from the kirk and holy ground,
They bare that lump of sinful clay,
And o'er him raised a mighty mound, 275
Called Binram's Corse unto this day.

An' ay when any lonely wight,
By yon dark cleugh is forced to stray,
He hears that cry at dead of night,
"Ha, ha, ha, ha, poor John's away!" 280

1807

(From *The Works of the Ettrick Shepherd*. With Memoir of
the Author by the Rev. Thomas Thomson. London: Blackie
& Son, 1876)