

James Hogg (1770-1835)

13 *The Pedlar*

This ballad is founded on a fact, which has been magnified by popular credulity and superstition into the terrible story which follows. It is here related, according to the *best informed* old people about Ettrick, as nearly as is consistent with the method pursued in telling it. I need not inform the reader, that every part of it is believed by them to be absolute truth.

'Twas late, late, late on a Saturday's night,
The moon was set an' the wind was lown;
The lazy mist crap down frae the height,
An' the dim blue lowe glimmered laigh on the downe.

O'er the rank-scented fen the bleeter was warping, 5
High on the black muir the foxes did howl,
All by the lone hearth the cricket sat harping,
An' far on the air came the notes o' the owl.

The linn it was rowting adown frae the height,
An' the water was soughin sae goustilye: 10
O it was sic an eeriesome Saturday night,
As ane in a lifetime hardly wad see,

When the lady o' Thirlestane rose in her sleep,
An' she shrieked sae loud that her maid ran to see;
Her een they were set, an' her voice it was deep, 15
An' she shook like the leaf o' the aspen tree.

"O where is the pedlar I drave frae the ha',
That pled sae sair to tarry wi' me?"
"He's gane to the mill, for the miller sells ale,
An' the pedlar's as weel as a man can be." 20

"I wish he had staid, he sae earnestly prayed,
An' he hight a brow pearling in present to gie;
But I was sae hard that I couldna regard,
Tho' I saw the saut tear trickle fast frae his ee.

“But O, what a terrible vision I’ve seen, 25
The pedlar a’ mangled – most shocking to see!
An’ he gapit an’ waggit, an’ stared wi’ his een,
An’ he seemed to lay a’ the blame upo’ me.

“I fear that in life he will ne’er mair be seen,
An’ the very suspicion o’t terrifies me: 30
I wadna hae siccan a vision again,
For a’ the gude kye upon Thirlestane lee.

“Yet wha wad hae heart the poor pedlar to kill?
O Grizzy, my girl, will ye gang an’ see!
If the pedlar is safe an’ alive at the mill, 35
A merk o’ gude money I’ll gie unto thee.”

“O lady, ’tis dark, an’ I heard the dead-bell;
An’ I darena gae yonder for goud nor fee:
But the miller has lodgings might serve yoursel,
An’ the pedlar’s as weel as a pedlar can be. 40

She sat till day, an’ she sent wi’ fear, —
The miller said there he never had been;
She went to the kirk an’ speered for him there,
But the pedlar in life was never mair seen.

Frae aisle to aisle she lookit wi’ care; 45
Frae pew to pew she hurried her een,
An’ a’ to see if the pedlar was there,
But the pedlar in life was never mair seen.

But late, late, late on a Saturday’s night,
As the laird was walking along the lee, 50
A silly auld pedlar came by on his right,
An’ a muckle green pack on his shoulders had he.

“O where are ye gaun, ye beggarly loun?
Ye’s nouter get lodging nor sale frae me!”
He turned him about, an’ the blude it ran down, 55
An’ his throat was a’ hacked, an’ ghastrly was he.

Then straight wi’ a sound he sank i’ the ground,

An' a fire-flaught out o' the place did flee!
To try a bit prayer the laird clappet down,
As flat an' as feared as a body could be. 60

He fainted: — but soon as he gathered his breath,
He tauld what a terrible sight he had seen:
The devil a' woundit, an' bleedin' to death,
In shape o' a pedlar upo' the mill-green.

The lady she shriekit, the door it was steekit, 65
The servants were glad that the devil was gane;
But ilk Saturday's night, when faded the light,
Near the mill-house the poor bleeding pedlar was seen,

An' aye when passengers by were gaun,
A doolfu' voice came frae the mill-ee, 70
At the turn o' the night when the clock struck one,
Cryin', "O Rob Riddle, hae mercy on me!"

The place was harassed, the mill was laid waste,
The miller he fled to a far countryside;
But aye at e'en the pedlar was seen, 75
An' at midnight the voice came frae the mill-ee.

The lady frae hame wad never mair budge,
From the time that the sun gade over the hill;
An' now she had a' the puir bodies to lodge,
As nane durst gae on for the ghost o' the mill. 80

But the minister there was a body o' skill,
Nae feared for devil or spirit was he;
An' he's gane awa to watch at the mill,
To see if this turbulent ghaist he could see.

He prayed an' he read, an' he sent them to bed, 85
An' the Bible anunder his arm took he,
An' round an' round the mill-house he gade,
To try if this terrible sight he could see.

Wi' a shivering groan the pedlar came on,
An' the muckle green pack on his shoulders had he; 90

But he nouthar had flesh, blude, nor bone,
For the moon shone through his thin bodye.

The ducks they whackit, the dogs they yowled,
The herons they skraiched maist piteouslie;
An' the horses they snorkit for miles around, 95
While the priest an' the pedlar together might be.

The minister opened the haly book,
An' charged him by a' the Sacred Three,
To tell why that ghastly figure he took,
To terrify a' the hale countrye. 100

The pedlar he opened his fleshless gums,
An' siccan a voice ne'er strack the ear;
It was like the stound an' whistling sound
Of the crannied wind at midnight drear.

“O weel,” he said, “may I rise frae the dead, 105
Guilt presses the hardest nearest hame;
An' here 'tis sae new that ye a' may rue,
An' yon proud lady was a' the blame.

“My body was butchered within that mill,
My banes lie under the inner mill-wheel, 110
An' here my spirit maun wander, until
Some crimes an' villanies I can reveal:

“I robbed my niece of three hundred pounds,
Which Providence suffered me not to enjoy;
For the sake of that money I gat my death's wounds; 115
The miller me kenned, but he missed his ploy.

“The money lies buried on Balderstone hill,
Beneath the mid bourack o' three times three:
O gie't to the owners, kind sir, an' it will
Bring wonderfu' comfort an' rest unto me. 120

“Tis drawing to day, nae mair I can say,
My message I trust, good father, with thee;
If the black cock should craw, when I am awa,

O weary, an' weary! what wad come o' me?"

Wi' a sound like a horn away he was borne; 125
The grass was a' fired where the spirit had been;
An' certain it is, from that day to this,
The ghost o' the pedlar was never mair seen.

The mill was repaired, an' low i' the yird,
The banes lay under the inner mill-wheel; 130
The box an' the ellwand beside him war hid,
An' mony a thimble an' mony a seal.

Must the scene of iniquity cursed remain?
Can this bear the stamp of the heavenly seal?
Yet certain it is, from that day to this, 135
The millers o' Thirlestane ne'er hae done weel.

But there was an auld mason wha wrought at the mill,
In the rules o' Providence skilfu' was he;
He keepit a bane o' the pedlar's heel,
An' a queerer wee bane you never did see. 140

The miller had fled to the forest o' Jed,
But time had now grizzled his haffets wi' snaw;
He was crookit an' auld, an' his head was turned bald,
Yet his joke he could brik wi' the best o' them a'.

Away to the Border the mason he ran, 145
To try wi' the bane if the miller was fey;
And into a smiddie wi' mony a man,
He fand him a gaffin fu' gaily that day.

The mason he crackit, the mason he taukit,
Of a' curiosities mighty an' mean; 150
Then pu'd out the bane, an' declared there was nane
Who in Britain had ever the equal o't seen.

Then ilka ane took it, an' ilka ane lookit,
An' ilka ane ca'd it a comical bane;
To the miller it goes, wha wi' specks on his nose, 155
To hae an' to view it was wondrous fain.

But what was his horror, as leaning he stood,
An' what the surprise o' his cronies around,
When the little wee bane fell a streamin' wi' blood,
Which dyed a' his fingers, an' ran to the ground! 160

They charged him wi' murder, an' a' the hale crew
Cried the truth should be told should they bring it frae hell;
A red goad o' airn frae the fire they drew,
An' they swore they wad spit him unless he wad tell.

“O hald,” said the mason, “for how can this be? 165
You'll find you're all out when the truth I reveal;
At fair Thirlestane I gat this wee bane,
Deep buried anunder the inner mill-wheel.”

“O God!” said the wretch, wi' the tear in his ee,
“O pity a creature lang doomed to despair; 170
A silly auld pedlar, wha begged of me
For mercy, I murdered, and buried him there!”

To Jeddart they hauled the auld miller wi' speed,
An' they hangit him dead on a high gallows-tree;
An' *afterwards* they in full counsel agreed, 175
That Rob Riddle he richly deserved to dee.

The thief may escape the lash and the rape,
The liar and swearer their vile hides may save,
The wrecker of unity pass with impunity,
But whan gat the murd'rer in peace to his grave? 180

Ca't not superstition, if reason you find it,
Nor laugh at a story attestit sae weel;
For lang will the *facts* i' the Forest be mindit,
O' the ghaist, an' the bane o' the pedlar's heel.

1807

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