

James Hogg (1770-1835)

15 *The Witch of Fife*

The Eighth Bard's Song from "The Queen's Wake"

"Quhare haif ye been, ye ill womyne,  
These three lang nightis fra hame?  
Quhat garris the sweit drap fra yer brow,  
Like clotis of the saut sea faem?

"It fearis me muckil ye haif seen 5  
Quhat guid man never knew;  
It fearis me muckil ye haif been  
Quhare the gray cock never crew.

"But the spell may crack, and the brydel breck,  
Then sherpe yer werde will be; 10  
Ye had better sleipe in yer bed at hame,  
Wi' yer deire littil bairnis and me." —

'Sit doune, sit doune, my leil auld man,  
Sit doune, and listin to me;  
I'll gar the hayre stand on yer crown, 15  
And the cauld sweit blind yer ee.

'But tell nae wordis, my guid auld man,  
Tell never word again;  
Or deire shall be yer courtisye,  
And driche and sair yer pain. 20

"The first leet night, quhan the new moon set,  
Quhan all was douffe and mirk,  
We saddled our naigis wi' the moon-fern leif,  
And rode fra Kilmerrin kirk.

‘Some horses ware of the brume-cow framit, 25  
And some of the greine bay tree;  
But mine was made of ane humloke schaw,  
And a stout stallion was he.

‘We raide the tod doune on the hill,  
The martin on the law; 30  
And we huntyd the hoolet out of brethe,  
And forcit him doune to fa’. —

“Quhat guid was that, ye ill womyne?  
Quhat guid was that to thee?  
Ye wald better haif been in yer bed at hame, 35  
Wi’ yer deire littil bairnis and me.” —

‘And aye we raide, and se merrily we raide,  
Throw the merkist gloffis of the night;  
And we swam the floode, and we darnit the woode,  
Till we cam to the Lommond height. 40

‘And quhan we cam to the Lommond height,  
Se lythlye we lychtid doune;  
And we drank fra the hornis that never grew,  
The beer that was never brewin.

‘Then up there raise ane wee wee man, 45  
Fra neithe the moss-gray stane;  
His fece was wan like the collifloure,  
For he nouthir had blude nor bane.

‘He set ane reid-pipe til his muthe,  
And he playit se bonnilye, 50  
Till the gray curlew and the black-cock flew  
To listen his melodye.

‘It rang se sweit through the grein Lommond,  
That the nycht-winde lowner blew;



And it soupit along the Loch Leven, 55  
And wakinit the white sea-mew.

'It rang se sweit through the grein Lommond,  
Se sweitly butt and se shill,  
That the wezilis laup out of their mouldy holis,  
And dancit on the mydnycht hill. 60

'The corby craw cam gledgin near,  
The ern gede veeryng bye;  
And the troutis laup out of the Leven Loch,  
Charmit with the melodye.

'And aye we dancit on the grein Lommond, 65  
Till the dawn on the ocean grew:  
Ne wonder I was a weary wycht  
Quhan I cam hame to you.' —

"Quhat guid, quhat guid, my weird weird wyfe,  
Quhat guid was that to thee? 70  
Ye wald better haif bein in yer bed at hame,  
Wi' yer deire littil bairnis and me." —

'The second nycht, quhan the new moon set,  
O'er the roaryng sea we flew;  
The cockle-shell our trusty bark, 75  
Our sailis of the grein sea-rue.

'And the bauld windis blew, and the fire-flauchtis flew,  
And the sea ran to the skie;  
And the thunner it growlit, and the sea-dogs howlit,  
As we gaed scouryng bye. 80

'And aye we mountit the sea-grein hillis,  
Quhill we brushit thro' the cludis of the hevin;  
Than sousit downright like the stern-shot light,  
Fra the liftis blue casement driven.

‘But our taickil stood, and our bark was good,                   85  
    And se pang was our pearily prow;  
Quhan we culdna speil the brow of the wavis,  
    We needilit them throu belowe.

‘As fast as the hail, as fast as the gale,  
    As fast as the mydnycht leme,                                   90  
We borit the breiste of the burstyng swale,  
    Or fluffit i’ the flotyng faem.

‘And quhan to the Norraway shore we wan,  
    We muntyd our steedis of the wynde,  
And we splashit the floode, and we darnit the woode,           95  
    And we left the shouir behynde.

‘Fleit is the roe on the grein Lommond,  
    And swift is the couryng grew;  
The rein-deir dun can eithly run,  
    Quhan the houndis and the hornis pursue.                   100

‘But nowther the roe, nor the rein-deir dun,  
    The hinde nor the couryng grew,  
Culde fly ovr montaine, muir, and dale,  
    As our braw steedis they flew.

‘The dales war deep, and the Doffrinis steep,                   105  
    And we raise to the skyis ee-bree;  
Quhite, quhite was our rode, that was never trode,  
    Ovr the snawis of eternity!

‘And quhan we cam to the Lapland lone,  
    The fairies war all in array;                                   110  
For all the genii of the north  
    War keipyng their holiday.

‘The warlock men and the weird wemyng,



And the fays of the wood and the steip,  
And the phantom hunteris all war there, 115  
And the mermaidis of the deip.

‘And they washit us all with the witch-water,  
Distillit fra the muirland dew,  
Quhill our beauty blumit like the Lapland rose,  
That wylde in the foreste grew.’ — 120

“Ye lee, ye lee, ye ill womyne,  
Se loud as I heir ye lee!  
For the warst-faurd wyfe on the shoris of Fyfe  
Is cumlye comparit wi’ thee.” —

‘Then the mermaidis sang and the woodlandis rang, 125  
Se sweitley swellit the quire;  
On every cliff a herpe they hang,  
On every tree a lyre.

‘And aye they sang, and the woodlandis rang,  
And we drank, and we drank se deip; 130  
Then saft in the armis of the warlock men,  
We laid us dune to sleip.’ —

“Away, away, ye ill womyne,  
An ill deide met ye dee!  
Quhan ye hae pruvit se false to yer God, 135  
Ye can never pruve true to me.” —

‘And there we learnit fra the fairy foke,  
And fra our master true,  
The wordis that can beire us throu the air,  
And lokkis and barris undo. 140

‘Last nycht we met at Maisry’s cot;  
Richt weil the wordis we knew;  
And we set a foot on the black cruik-shell,

And out at the lum we flew.

‘And we flew ovr hill, and we flew ovr dale, 145  
And we flew ovr firth an sea,  
Until we cam to merry Carlisle,  
Quhare we lightit on the lea.

‘We gaed to the vault beyond the towr,  
Quhare we enterit free as ayr; 150  
And we drank, and we drank of the bishopis wyne  
Quhill we culde drynk ne mair.’ —

“Gin that be true, my gud auld wyfe,  
Whilk thou hast tauld to me,  
Betide my death, betide my lyfe, 155  
I’ll beire thee companye.

“Neist time ye gaung to merry Carlisle  
To drynk of the blude-reid wyne,  
Beshrew my heart, I’ll fly with thee,  
If the deil should fly behynde.” — 160

‘Ah! little do ye ken, my silly auld man,  
The daingeris we maun dree;  
Last nychte we drank of the bishopis wyne,  
Quhill near near taen war we.

‘Afore we wan to the Sandy Ford, 165  
The gor-cockis nichering flew;  
The lofty crest of Ettrick Pen  
Was wavit about with blue,  
And, flichtering throu the ayr, we fand  
The chill chill mornyng dew. 170

‘As we flew ovr the hillis of Braid,  
The sun raise fair and cleir;  
There gurlly James, and his baronis brow,



War out to hunt the deir.

‘Their bowis they drew, their arrowis flew, 175  
And piercit the ayr with speide,  
Quhill purpil fell the mornyng dew  
Wi’ witch-blude rank and reide.

‘Littil do ye ken, my silly auld man,  
The daingeris we maun dree; 180  
Ne wonder I am a weary wycht  
Quhan I come hame to thee.’ —

‘But tell me the *word*, my guid auld wyfe,  
Come tell it me speedilye;  
For I lang to drynk of the guid reide wyne, 185  
And to wyng the ayr with thee.

‘Yer hellish horse I wilna ryde,  
Nor sail the seas in the wynde;  
But I can flee as weil as thee,  
And I’ll drynk quhill ye be blynd.” — 190

‘O fy! O fy! my leil auld man,  
That word I darena tell;  
It wald turn this warld all upside down,  
And make it warse than hell.

‘For all the lassies in the land 195  
Wald munt the wynde and fly;  
And the men wald doff their doublets syde,  
And after them wald ply.’ —

But the auld guidman was ane cunnyng auld man,  
And ane cunnyng auld man was he; 200  
And he watchit, and he watchit for mony a nychte,  
The witches’ flychte to see.

Ane nychte he darnit in Maisry's cot;  
The fearless haggs cam in;  
And he heard the word of awesome weird, 205  
And he saw their deidis of synn.

Then ane by ane they said that word,  
As fast to the fire they drew;  
Then set a foot on the black cruik-shell,  
And out at the lum they flew. 210

The auld guidman cam fra his hole  
With feire and muckil dreide,  
But yet he culdna think to rue,  
For the wyne cam in his head.

He set his foot in the black cruik-shell, 215  
With ane fixit and ane wawlying ee;  
And he said the word that I darena say,  
And out at the lum flew he.

The witches skalit the moonbeam pale;  
Deep groanit the trembling wynde; 220  
But they never wist till our auld guidman  
Was hoveryng them behynde.

They flew to the vaultis of merry Carlisle,  
Quhare they enterit free as ayr;  
And they drank and they drank of the bishopis wyne 225  
Quhill they culde drynk ne mair.

The auld guidman he grew se crouse,  
He dancit on the mouldy ground,  
And he sang the bonniest sangs of Fyfe,  
And he tuzzlit the kerlyngs round. 230

And aye he piercit the tither butt,  
And he suckit, and he suckit se lang,



Quhill his een they closit, and his voice grew low,  
And his tongue wald hardly gang.

The kerlyngs drank of the bishopis wyne 235  
Quhill they scentit the morning wynde;  
Then clove again the yielding ayr,  
And left the auld man behynde.

And aye he sleipit on the damp damp floor,  
He sleipit and he snorit amain; 240  
He never dreamit he was far fra hame,  
Or that the auld wyvis war gane.

And aye he sleipit on the damp damp floor,  
Quhill past the mid-day highte,  
Quhan wakenit by five rough Englishmen 245  
That trailit him to the lychte.

“Now quha are ye, ye silly auld man,  
That sleipis se sound and se weil?  
Or how gat ye into the bishopis vault  
Throu lokkis and barris of steel?” 250

The auld gudeman he tryit to speak,  
But ane word he culdna fynde;  
He tryit to think, but his head whirlit round,  
And ane thing he culdna mynde: —  
“I cam fra Fyfe,” the auld man cryit, 255  
“And I cam on the mydnycht wynde.”

They nickit the auld man, and they prickit the auld man,  
And they yerkit his limbis with twine,  
Quhill the reide blude ran in his hose and shoon,  
But some cryit it was wyne. 260

They lickit the auld man, and they prickit the auld man,  
And they tyit him till ane stone;

And they set ane bele-fire him about,  
To burn him skin and bone.

“O wae to me!” said the puir auld man, 265  
“That ever I saw the day!  
And wae be to all the ill wemyng  
That lead puir men astray!

“Let nevir ane auld man after this 270  
To lawless greide inclyne;  
Let nevir ane auld man after this  
Rin post to the deil for wyne.”

The reike flew up in the auld manis face,  
And choukit him bitterlye;  
And the lowe cam up with ane angry blese, 275  
And it syngit his auld breek-knee.

He lukit to the land fra whence he cam,  
For lukis he culde get nae mae;  
And he thochte of his deire littil bairnis at hame,  
And O the auld man was wae! 280

But they turnit their facis to the sun,  
With gloffe and wonderous glair,  
For they saw ane thing beth lairge and dun,  
Comin swaipin down the ayr.

That burd it cam fra the landis o’ Fyfe, 285  
And it cam rycht tymeouslye,  
For quha was it but the auld manis wyfe,  
Just comit his dethe to see?

Scho put ane reide cap on his heide, 290  
And the auld guidman lookit fain,  
Then whisperit ane word intil his lug,  
And tovit to the ayr again.



The auld guidman he gae ane bob,  
I' the mids o' the burnyng lowe;  
And the sheklis that band him to the ring, 295  
They fell fra his armis like towe.

He drew his breath, and he said the word,  
And he said it with muckil glee,  
Then set his fit on the burnyng pile,  
And away to the ayr flew he. 300

Till aince he clerit the swirlyng reike,  
He lukit beth ferit and sad;  
But whan he wan to the lycht blue ayr,  
He lauchit as he'd been mad.

His armis war spred, and his heid was hiche, 305  
And his feite stack out behynde;  
And the laibies of the auld manis cote  
War wauffing in the wynde.

And aye he neicherit, and aye he flew,  
For he thochte the ploy se raire; 310  
It was like the voice of the gander blue,  
Quhan he flees throu the ayr.

He lukit back to the Carlisle men  
As he borit the norlan sky;  
He noddit his heide, and gae ane girn, 315  
But he nevir said guid-bye.

They vanisht far i' the liftis blue wale,  
Ne mair the English saw,  
But the auld manis lauch cam on the gale,  
With a lang and a loud gaffa. 320

May ever ilke man in the land of Fyfe

Read what the drinkeris dree;  
And nevir curse his puir auld wife,  
Rychte wicked altho scho be.

*1813*

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