

The Silver Tassie

MY BONIE MARY

An old Jacobite ballad rewritten by the Bard. A silver tassie is a silver goblet and the Ferry which is mentioned in the poem is Queensferry, now the site of the two bridges which span the Forth, a short distance from Edinburgh.

Go fetch to me a pint o' wine,
And fill it in a silver tassie;
That I may drink before I go,
A service to my bonie lassie:
The boat rocks at the Pier o' Leith,
Fu' loud the wind blows frae the Ferry,
The ship rides by the Berwick-Law,
And I maun leave my bonie Mary.

maun = must

The trumpets sound, the banners fly,
The glittering spears are ranked ready,
The shouts o' war are heard afar,
The battle closes deep and bloody.
It's not the roar o' sea or shore,
Wad mak me longer wish to tarry;
Nor shouts o' war that's heard afar—
It's leaving thee, my bonie Mary!

Afton Water

This is a particularly lovely piece which is always a great favourite when sung at any Burns gathering. It refers to the River Afton, a small river, whose beauty obviously greatly enchanted the Bard.

Flow gently, sweet Afton, among thy green braes! *braes = banks*

Flow gently, I'll sing thee a song in thy praise!

My Mary's asleep by thy murmuring stream –

Flow gently, sweet Afton, disturb not her dream!

Thou stock-dove whose echo resounds thro' the glen, *stock dove = a wood pigeon*

Ye wild whistling blackbirds in yon thorny den, *yon = yonder*

Thou green-crested lapwing, thy screaming forbear,

I charge you, disturb not my slumbering Fair!

How lofty, sweet Afton, thy neighbouring hills,

Far mark'd with the courses of clear, winding rills! *rills = small brooks; cot = cottage*

There daily I wander, as noon rises high,

My flocks and my Mary's sweet cot in my eye

How pleasant thy banks and green valleys below,

Where wild in the woodlands the primroses blow,

There oft, as mild ev'ning weeps over the lea,

The sweet-scented birk shades my Mary and me *birk = birch*

Thy crystal stream, Afton, how lovely it glides,

And winds by the cot where my Mary resides!

How wanton thy waters her snowy feet lave,

As, gathering sweet flowerets, she stems thy

wave!

wanton = luxurious; lave = wash;

flowerets = little flowers; clear

stems = checks

Flow gently, sweet Afton, among thy green braes,

Flow gently, sweet river, the theme of my lays!

My Mary's asleep by thy murmuring stream –

Flow gently, sweet Afton, disturb not her dream!

lays = short narrative poems

Kirk and State Excisemen

The Bard is trying to excuse himself for having taken on the duties of the Excise by pointing out that all sorts of people in all sorts of positions are also tax gatherers.

Quite a turn-around from his words in 'Scotch Drink' when he referred to Excisemen as 'curst horse-leeches' and hoped they would suffer Hell and Damnation. However, Burns was in dire straits financially at this juncture and had little choice in his mode of employment.

Ye men of wit and wealth, why all this sneering
'Gainst poor Excisemen? Give the cause a hearing.
What are your Landlord's rent-rolls? Taxing ledgers!
What Premiers? What ev'n Monarchs? Mighty Gaugers!
Nay, what are Priests (those seemingly godly wise-men)?
What are they, pray, but Spiritual Excisemen!

The Wounded Hare

Once again we hear Burns tell of his sympathy towards the plight of a wild creature. In this instance he recalls hearing a shot while out working in the fields at Ellisland, and his anger when shortly afterwards, he sees a badly injured hare limp by. One can imagine his tears of outrage over such an act of violence and destruction.

Inhuman man! curse on thy barb'rous art,
And blasted be thy murder-aiming eye;
May never pity soothe thee with a sigh
Nor never pleasure glad thy cruel heart.

Go live, poor wanderer of the wood and field,
The bitter little that of life remains!
No more the thickening brakes and verdant plains
To thee shall home, or food, or pastime yield.

Seek, mangled wretch, some place of wonted rest,
No more of rest, but now thy dying bed!
The sheltering rushes whistling o'er thy head,
The cold earth with thy bloody bosom prest.

Oft as by winding Nith I, musing, wait
The sober eve, or hail the cheerful dawn,
I'll miss thee sporting o'er the dewy lawn,
And curse the ruffian's aim, and mourn thy
hapless fate.

The Kirk's Alarm

This satirical poem was written to mock several of Burns' old adversaries in the ministry. A good friend of his, a New-Licht preacher, the Rev. William McGill, was castigated by the General Assembly for having written an essay, 'The Death of Jesus Christ', which did not conform to the church's teachings. McGill was forced to make a grovelling apology to the Presbytery and denounce his own work. Burns recognised that the old guard, who had been the cause of his own public humiliation, were behind this and attacked them in verse.

Orthodox! orthodox!
Wha believe in John Knox—
Let me sound an alarm to your conscience:
A heretic blast
Has been heard i' the Wast,
That what is not sense must be nonsense—
Orthodox!
That what is not sense must be nonsense.

Doctor Mac! Doctor Mac!
You should stretch on a rack,
To strike wicked Writers wi' terror:
To join Faith and Sense
Upon onie pretence,
Was heretic, damnable error.
Doctor Mac!
'Twas heretic, damnable error.

Town of Ayr! Town of Ayr!
It was rash I declare,
To meddle wi' mischief a-brewing:
Provost John is still deaf
To the Church's relief,
And Orator Bob is its ruin—
Town of Ayr!
And orator Bob is its ruin.

Burns mocks the clergy for their closed minds and inability to understand any view which differs from their own narrow ideas on religion.
Wast = West

McGill will be castigated by the church hierarchy if his revolutionary ideas which encompass common sense and faith are not curbed.

John Ballantyne, the provost of Ayr, and Robert Aiken were friends of Burns who also stood against the tyranny of the old church teachings.

D'rymple mild! D'rymple mild
 Tho' your heart's like a child!
 An' your life like the new-driven snaw,
 Yet that winna save ye,
 Auld Satan must have ye,
 For preaching that three's ane an' twa—
 D'rymple mild!
 For preaching that three's ane an' twa.

Calvin's sons! Calvin's sons!
 Seize your sp'ritual guns
 Ammunition you can never need;
 Your hearts are the stuff
 Will be powther enough,
 And your skulls are storehouses o' lead.
 Calvin's sons!
 Your skulls are storehouses o' lead.

Rumble John! Rumble John!
 Mount the steps with a groan,
 Cry, 'The Book is wi' heresy cramm'd';
 Then lug out your ladle,
 Deal brimstone like adle,
 And roar ev'ry note of the damn'd—
 Rumble John!
 And roar ev'ry note of the damn'd.

Simper James! Simper James!
 Leave the fair Killie dames—
 There's a holier chase in your view:
 I'll lay on your head
 That the pack you'll soon lead,
 For puppies like you there's but few—
 Simper James!
 For puppies like you there's but few.

William Dalrymple was the man who baptised Burns, and Burns warns him that his faultless life will fail to save him if he continues to be so straightforward and honest in his teachings.

The Calvinists are vividly described here as unthinking people without love or compassion.

powther = powder

Rev 'Black Jock' Russell is described as one who preaches with the threat of fire and brimstone to the sinners.

adle = cow's urine

Rev James McKinlay is portrayed as being more interested in the female sex than in the church, but Burns has no doubt that he will join the pack in pursuit of McGill.

Singet Sawnie! Singet Sawnie,
 Are ye herdin the penny,
 Unconscious what evils await?
 Wi' a jump, yell and howl!
 Alarm ev'ry soul,
 For the Foul Fiend is just at your gate,
 Singet Sawnie!
 The Foul Fiend is just at your gate.

Daddie Auld! Daddie Auld!
 There's a tod in the fauld,
 A tod meikle waur than the clerk;
 Tho ye do little skaith,
 Ye'll be in at the death,
 And gif ye canna bite, ye may bark,
 Daddie Auld!
 For gif ye canna bite, ye may bark.

Jamie Goose! Jamie Goose!
 Ye hae made but toom roose,
 In hunting the wicked Lieutenant;
 But the Doctor's your mark,
 For the Lord's haly ark,
 He has cooper'd an' ca'd a wrang pin in't.
 Jamie Goose!
 He has cooper'd an' ca'd a wrang pin in't.

Davie Rant! Davie Rant!
 Wi' a face like a saunt,
 And a heart that wad poison a hog,
 Raise an impudent roar,
 Like a breaker lee-shore,
 Or the kirk will be tint in a bog.
 Davie Rant!
 Or the kirk will be tint in a bog.

Rev Alexander Moodie, already featured in *The Twa Herds*, is also painted as a minister who terrifies his congregation with his wild sermonising.

Rev William Auld, an old adversary of the Bard, is warned that there is a fox in the fold who might tempt away his congregation. Burns has no doubt that Auld will be in the kill although he will be at the back shouting.
tod = fox; *skaith* = damage; *gif* = if

Rev James Young is accused of producing nothing but empty rhetoric in his preaching, but will no doubt pursue McGill with the others as McGill has introduced doubt into their preaching.
cooper'd an' ca'd a wrang pin in't = knocked a hole in it

Rev David Grant may have a saintly appearance but is rotten through and through. Another who preaches Hell and damnation.
saunt = saint; *tint* = lost

Poet Willie! Poet Willie!
 Gie the Doctor a volley,
 Wi' your 'Liberty Chain' and your wit;
 O'er Pegasus' side
 Ye ne'er laid a stride,
 Ye but smelt, man, the place where he shit,
 Poet Willie!
 Ye but smelt, man, the place where he shit.

Andro Gowk! Andro Gowk!
 Ye may slander the Book,
 An' the Book no the waur, let me tell ye;
 Ye are rich, an' look big,
 But lay by hat an' wig,
 An' ye'll hae a calf's head o' sma' value,
 Andro Gowk!
 Ye'll hae a calf's head o' sma' value.

Barr Steenie! Barr Steenie!
 What mean ye? What mean ye?
 If ye meddle nae mair wi' the matter,
 Ye may hae some pretence,
 To havins and sense,
 Wi' people wha ken ye nae better,
 Barr Steenie!
 Wi' people wha ken ye nae better.

Irvine-side! Irvine-side!
 Wi' your turkey-cock pride
 Of manhood but sma' is your share:
 Ye've the figure 'tis true,
 Ev'n your faes maun allow.
 An' your friends daurna say ye hae mair,
 Irvine-side!
 Your friends daurna say ye hae mair.

Rev William Peebles is obviously not a man admired by Burns as he writes a highly insulting verse to describe his lack of charity.

Andrew Mitchell is described as being rich and vain, but he at least laughed at Burns' description of him and admitted it may have been correct.

Gowk = fool; *waur* = worse

Rev Stephen Young is only able to convince those who do not know him that he is a mannerly and sensible person.

havins = manners

Rev George Smith is a vain man, but Burns sees him as being a man with no stature.

Muirland Jock! Muirland Jock!
 Whom the Lord gave a stock
 Wad act up a tinker in brass;
 If ill-manners were wit,
 There's no mortal so fit
 To prove the poor Doctor an ass,
 Muirland Jock!
 To prove the poor Doctor an ass.

Holy Will! Holy Will!
 There was wit i' your skull,
 When ye pilfer'd the alms o' the poor;
 The timmer is scant
 When ye're taen for a saunt,
 Wha should swing in a rape for an hour,
 Holy Will!
 Ye should swing in a rape for an hour.

Poet Burns! Poet Burns!
 Wi' your priest-skelpin turns,
 Why desert ye your auld native shire?
 Your Muse is a gypsy,
 Yet were she e'en tipsy,
 She could ca' us nae waur than we are—
 Poet Burns!
 Ye could ca' us nae waur than we are.

John Sheppard considered himself to be a wit, but Burns saw him as no more than a foul-mouthed lout, no better than a tinker.

William Fisher, better known to us as Holy Willie, is described as being a thieving scoundrel who deserves to be hanged for his sins.
timmer = wood, material; *rape* = rope

Burns is obviously pleased with his priest-bashing, but thinks even if his Muse was drunk she could not describe them as being worse than they really are.
skelpin = hitting; *nae waur* = no worse

PRESENTATION STANZAS
TO CORRESPONDENTS

Afton's Laird! Afton's Laird,
 When your pen can be spared,
 A copy of this I bequeath,
 On the same sicker score
 As I mentioned before,
 To that trusty auld worthy, Clackleith—
 Afton's Laird!
 To that trusty auld worthy Clackleith.

John Logan, a laird and friend of Burns;
 Clackleith, a neighbour of Logan's.

Factor John! Factor John!
 Whom the Lord made alone,
 And ne'er made anither thy peer,
 Thy poor servant, the Bard,
 In respectful regard,
 He presents thee this token sincere,
 Factor John!
 He presents thee this token sincere.

Some doubt whether this refers to John
 Murdo or John Kennedy

Beware of Bonie Ann

This poem was dedicated to a young lady from Edinburgh, named Ann Masterton. Ann's father was a schoolmaster and composer and was a friend of Robert Burns.

It is certainly a poem which any young lass would feel flattered to have written in her honour, but as we read the various tributes which Burns has composed on behalf of the many other young ladies who have caught his eye, we must question just how much poetic licence the Bard allowed himself – or was eighteenth-century Scotland really awash with flawless beauties?

Ye gallants bright, I rede you right,
Beware o' bonie Ann!
Her comely face sae fu' o' grace,
Your heart she will trepan,
Her een sae bright, like stars by night,
Her skin is like the swan;
Sae jimply lac'd her genty waist,
That sweetly ye might span.

gallant = a splendid man; *rede* = advise;
bonie = beautiful; *comely* = pleasing;
sae fu' o' = so full of; *trepan* = snare;
een = eyes; *jimply lac'd* = neatly corseted;
genty = slender

Youth, Grace, and Love, attendant move,
And Pleasure leads the van;
In a' their charms, and conquering arms,
They wait on bonie Ann
The captive bands may chain the hands,
But Love enslaves the man:
Ye gallants braw, I rede you a',
Beware o' bonie Ann!

van = those who lead the way

John Anderson, My Jo

This beautiful simple old song tells the story of two people who have grown old together. It did not start off this way and it was in fact an old, bawdy ballad that the Bard breathed upon and revitalised.

John Anderson, my jo, John,
When we were first acquent;
Your locks were like the raven,
Your bonie brow was brent;
But now your brow is beld, John,
Your locks are like the snaw;
But blessings on your frosty pow,
John Anderson, my jo.

John Anderson, my jo, John,
We clamb the hill thegither;
And mony a cantie day, John,
We've had wi' ane anither;,
Now we maun totter down, John,
And hand in hand we'll go,
And sleep thegither at the foot,
John Anderson, my jo!

The wife is reminding her husband that when they first met, his hair was as black as a raven and his brow was smooth and unlined. However, now he is almost bald and his few remaining locks are as white as snow.

jo = sweetheart; *acquent* = acquainted; *locks* = hair; *brent* = smooth; *beld* = bald; *snaw* = snow; *frosty pow* = white head

They have gone through life together and shared many happy days. Now as they approach the end of their lives, they still have each other.

clamb = climbed; *thegither* = together; *mony* = many; *cantie* = cheerful; *wi' ane anither* = with one another; *maun* = must; *totter* = stagger

Scots Prologue for Mrs Sutherland

ON HER BENEFIT-NIGHT AT THE THEATRE, DUMFRIES, MARCH 3rd, 1790

Burns became involved with a new theatre that was being built in Dumfries around 1790, and he wrote the following lines to the wife of the proprietor. His irritation at the lack of Scottish material for theatregoers is evident.

What needs this din about the
town o' Lon'on?
How this new play an' that new song is comin'?
Why is outlandish stuff sae meikle courted?
Does nonsense mend, like brandy when
imported?
Is there nae poet, burning keen for fame,
Will bauldly try to gie us plays at hame?
For comedy abroad he need na toil:
A knave and fool are plants of ev'ry soil.
Nor need to stray as far as Rome or Greece
To gather matter for a serious piece:
There's themes enow in Caledonian story
Would shew the tragic Muse in a' her glory.

Is there no daring Bard will rise and tell
How glorious Wallace stood, how hapless fell?
Where are the Muses fled, that should
produce
A drama worthy o' the name o' Bruce?
How on this spot, he first unsheath'd the sword
'Gainst mighty England and her guilty lord,
And after monie a bloody, deathless doing,
Wrench'd his dear country from the
jaws of Ruin!
O! for a Shakespeare, or an Otway scene
To paint he lovely, hapless Scottish Queen!

In the opinion of Burns, there is little merit in London's influence upon the arts in Scotland. Rubbish will always be rubbish. Surely there is a writer who can recognise that it is unnecessary to look beyond the history of Scotland to find material for a serious drama to equal any Greek or Roman tragedy.
sae meikle = so greatly; *mend* = improve; *bauldly* = boldly; *enow* = enough

Is there not a writer who can describe the struggles and dreadful death that became William Wallace, are there no playwrights who can tell of Bruce's great battles against the English tyrant? Oh, for a Scottish Shakespeare who would write of the tribulations which befell Mary Queen of Scots.
Otway = a seventeenth-century dramatist

Vain ev'n th' omnipotence of female charms
'Gainst headlong, ruthless, mad

Rebellion's arms.

She fell, but fell with spirit truly Roman.

To glut that direst foe, — a vengeful woman;

A woman (tho' the phrase may seem uncivil),

As able — and as wicked as the Devil!

One Douglas lives in Home's immortal page,

But Douglases were heroes every age:

And tho' your fathers, prodigal of life,

A Douglas followed to the martial strife.

Perhaps, if bowls row right, and

Right succeeds,

Ye may yet follow where a Douglas leads!

As ye have generous done, if a' the land

Would take the Muses servants by the hand;

Not only hear, but patronise, befriend them,

And where ye justly can commend,

commend them;

And aiblins, when they winna stand the test,

Wink hard, and say: "The folks hae

done their best!"

Would a' the land do this, then I'll be caition,

Ye'll soon hae poets o' the Scottish nation

Will gar Fame blaw until her trumpet crack,

And warsle Time, an' lay him on his back!

Mary was the victim of the evil and jealous Elizabeth I of England, and was condemned to be beheaded by this woman whose cruelty could equal that of the Devil Himself.

Although the Douglases have fought for generations on the side of freedom for Scotland, only one is immortalised in print, yet the opportunity may arise to follow a Douglas in the battle for freedom.

omnipotence = unlimited power; *glut* = satiate;

Home = Earls of Home, an old border family;

row = roll

If only others would follow the example of Mrs Sutherland and encourage writers through patronage and friendship, and understand that not all will attain perfection, then so many poets and writers will emerge from Scotland that the trumpet of fame will blow until it breaks.

aiblins = perhaps; *caition* = guarantee; *gar* = make; *warsle* = wrestle

For us and for our stage, should onie spier:—
 'Whase aught thae chiels maks a' this
 bustle here?"
 My best leg foremost, I'll set up my brow:—
 We have the honour to belong to you!
 We're your ain bairns, e'en guide us as ye like,
 But like good mothers, shore before
 you strike;
 And gratefu' still, I trust ye'll ever find us,
 For genrous patronage, and meikle kindness
 We've got frae a' professions, sorts an' ranks;
 God help us! We're but poor
 ————ye'se get but thanks!

Should anyone ask who these fellows creating such a stir upon the stage are, Burns will bow and tell that we are your children, to be guided by you, but if they are to criticised, then do it gently. You will find them ever grateful for your patronage, but as they have no money, can only repay you with their grateful thanks.

spier = ask; *whase aught thae chiels maks a' this bustle here* = who owns these people making all this activity here; *shore* = threaten; *meikle* = great, *setts* = groups

On the Birth of a Posthumous Child

BORN IN PECULIAR CIRCUMSTANCES OF FAMILY DISTRESS

In 1790 a Swiss-born gentleman named James Henri died suddenly leaving behind a young widow, Susan Dunlop, in an advanced state of pregnancy. The Bard was extremely fond of both Susan and her mother and when Susan gave birth to a son, he wrote the following lines to the new-born boy, sending them to Mrs Dunlop, Senior.

This poem displays clearly how Burns was able to transfer tragedy into a thing of beauty and he once again reveals his high level of sensitivity and compassion.

Sweet flow'ret, pledge o' meikle love,
And ward o' monie a prayer,
What heart o' stane wad thou na move,
Sae helpless, sweet and fair!

Flow'ret = little flower; *pledge o'* = result of;
meikle = great; *monie* = many; *stane* = stone

November hirples o'er the lea,
Chill, on thy lovely form;
And gane, alas! the shelt'ring tree,
Should shield thee frae the storm.

hirples = limps; *lea* = meadow; *gane* = gone

May He who gives the rain to pour,
And wings the blast to blaw,
Protect thee frae the driving show'r
The bitter frost and snaw!

blast to blaw = wind to blow;
frae = from; *snaw* = snow

May He, the friend of Woe and Want,
Who heals life's various stounds,
Protect and guard the mother plant
And heal her cruel wounds!

stounds = times of trouble

Bur late she flourish'd, rooted fast,
Fair on the summer morn;
Now, feebly bends she, in the blast,
Unshelter'd and forlorn

Blest by thy bloom, thy lovely gem, *stem = branch forth, deck = grace*
Unscath'd by ruffian hand!
And from thee many a parent stem
Arise to deck our land!

The Gowden Locks of Anna

At first glance it would appear that this song is yet another of the Bard's works intended to flatter one of his lady loves. However, written around 1790, it actually relates to a very significant episode in his life.

Although married to Jean Armour at the time, Burns was having an affair with Anne Park, the niece of the landlady of the Globe Inn in Dumfries. This affair ended in Anne giving birth to a daughter, leaving Burns to present his wife with his illegitimate child a mere nine days before she herself gave birth to a son. Jean Armour must have been a truly remarkable woman, as she accepted young Elizabeth into her family and raised her as her own child. The words need no explanation. They speak clearly of Burns' feelings at the time.

Yestreen I had a pint o' wine,
A place where body saw na;
Yestreen lay on this breast o' mine
The gowden locks of Anna.
The hungry Jew in wilderness
Rejoicing o'er his manna,
Was naething to my hiney bliss
Upon the lips of Anna.

Yestreen = yesterday; *body saw na* = nobody saw anything; *gowden* = golden; *manna* = food of the Israelites in the wilderness; *naething* = nothing; *hiney* = honey

Ye Monarchs tak the East and West,
Frae Indus to Savannah!
Gie me within my straining grasp
The melting form of Anna.
There I'll despise Imperial charms,
An Empress or Sultana,
While dying raptures in her arms
I give and take with Anna!

Awa, thou flaunting God o' Day!
 Awa, thou pale Diana!
 Ilk Star gae hide thy twinkling ray!
 When I'm to meet my Anna!
 Come in thy raven plumage, Night;
 Sun, Moon and Stars withdrawn a';
 And bring an angel pen to write
 My transports wi' my Anna!

Diana = the moon-goddess; *ilk* = each;
transports = ecstasies

Postscript

The Kirk and State may join and tell,
 To do sic things I mauna;
 The Kirk and State can go to hell,
 And I'll gae to my Anna.
 She is the sunshine o' my e'e,
 To live but her I canna;
 Had I on earth but wishes three,
 The first should be my Anna.

kirk = church; *sic* = such; *mauna* = must
 not; *to live but her I canna* = I cannot live
 without her

Lament of Mary Queen of Scots

ON THE APPROACH OF SPRING

Burns considered Mary Queen of Scots to be a truly tragic heroine, worthy of a place of honour in Scottish history. He imagines her here, imprisoned in Fotheringay Castle, awaiting her execution at the hands of Queen Elizabeth I of England.

Now Nature hangs her mantle green
On every blooming tree,
And spreads her sheets o' daisies white
Out o'er the grassy lea:
Now Phoebus cheers the crystal streams,
And glads the azure skies:
But nought can glad the weary wight
That fast in durance lies.

Now laverocks wake the merry morn,
Aloft on dewy wing;
The merle, in his noontide bow'r,
Makes woodland echoes ring;
The mavis wild wi' monie a note,
Sings drowsy day to rest:
In love and freedom they rejoice,
Wi' care nor thrall opprest.

Now blooms the lily by the bank,
The primrose down the brae,
The hawthorn's budding in the glen,
And milk-white is the slae:
The meanest hind in fair Scotland
May rove their sweets amang;
But I, the Queen of a' Scotland,
Maun lie in prison strang.

The sun may be shining down through clear blue skies but nothing can lighten the despair which is weighing Mary down.

She envies the birds as they sing with no care to burden them.

laverocks = larks; *merle* = hawk

The flowers may be blooming and the deer running freely, but she must remain in prison.

slae = sloe; *maun* = must; *strang* = strong

I was the Queen o' bonie France,
 Where happy I hae been;
 Fu' lightly rase I in the morn,
 As blythe lay down at e'en:
 An' I'm the sov'reign of Scotland,
 And monie a traitor there;
 Yet here I lie in foreign bands,
 And never-ending care.

But as for thee, thou false woman,
 My sister and my fae,
 Grim vengeance, yet, shall whet a sword
 That thro' thy soul shall gae!
 The weeping blood in woman's breast
 Was never known to thee;
 Nor th' balm that drops on wounds of woe
 Frae woman's pitying e'e.

My son! My son! may kinder stars
 Upon thy fortune shine;
 And may these pleasures gild thy reign,
 That ne'er would blink on mine!
 God keep thee frae thy mother's faes,
 Or turn their hearts to thee;
 And where thou meet'st thy mother's friend,
 Remember him for me!

O! soon, to me, may summer-suns
 Nae mair light up the morn!
 Nae mair to me, the autumn winds
 Wave o'er the yellow corn!
 And in the narrow house of death,
 Let winter round me rave;
 And the next flowers, that deck the spring,
 Bloom on my peaceful grave.

She was happy in France and could relax without worries, but her foray into Scotland has seen her betrayed and resulted in her being held prisoner in England.

Elizabeth Tudor is a woman with no mercy in her soul and Mary hopes that she will suffer for her cruelty.

She hopes that her son, James VI of Scotland, and I of England, will live to have a much happier life than she, and asks him to remember her to the Earl of Bothwell who she married in 1567, should they meet. Bothwell had fled the country and was held prisoner in Denmark until his death.

She laments that she will never again enjoy the beauties of nature as her death is imminent.

The Selkirk Grace

This is by far the most famous of several graces ascribed to Burns, and is universally given at the start of the traditional Burns' Suppers held in memory of the Bard on the 25th of January each year. Burns was in the presence of the Earl of Selkirk when he stood up and delivered this wonderful piece with no prior preparation.

The following lines are how Burns actually gave the grace, but one will seldom hear it recited in this manner as the temptation to deliver it in the vernacular is now the norm.

Some have meat and cannot eat,
Some cannot eat that want it;
But we have meat and we can eat,
Sae let the Lord be thankit.

The more commonly used version is as follows.

Some hae meat and canna eat,
And some wad eat that want it.
But we hae meat and we can eat,
Sae let the Lord be thankit.

Tam O' Shanter

Here, without doubt, is one of the favourites from the poems of Robert Burns. It features both dark humour and nightmarish images. It tells the story of a country man whose great pleasure in life is drinking with his friends at the local hostelry and goes on to relate what happens one dreadful night when he comes across Satan, with his warlocks and witches, cavorting in wild revelry in a graveyard. All is going well until Tam gets so carried away with the excitement that the creatures of evil become aware that they are being watched and then all hell breaks loose, and Tam o' Shanter is forced to flee for his very life on his old horse. They must cross the river before they are caught, as the creatures cannot cross running water.

Cutty Sark probably means to most readers the name of a well-known brand of Scotch or perhaps the name of the magnificent old tea-clipper which is permanently moored in a dry-dock in Greenwich, England. However, Burns introduces the original meaning when he describes the witches dancing in their 'cutty sarks' or underwear (a 'sark' is generally taken to be a shift or slip or petticoat, and a 'cutty sark' a short version of that garment)..

Author's note: Should you ever be in the vicinity of Greenwich, go and take a look at the *Cutty Sark*. There you will see Nannie, the ship's figurehead, dressed in her cutty sark, and yes, that is poor old Meg's tail she is still clutching.

When chapman billies leave the street,
And drouthy neebors, neebors meet;
As market-days are wearing late
An' folks begin to tak the gate;
While we sit bousing at the nappy,
An' getting fou and unco happy,
We think na on the lang Scots miles,
The mosses, waters, slaps and styles,
That lie between us and our hame,
Whare sits our sulky, sullen dame,
Gathering her brows like gathering storm,
Nursing her wrath to keep it warm.

This truth fand honest Tam o' Shanter,
As he frae Ayr ae night did canter:
(Auld Ayr, wham ne'er a town surpasses,
For honest men and bonie lasses.)

The tale opens in the town of Ayr on market day. It is getting late, and the pedlars are leaving and the stallholders are closing. But we find Tam in the local alehouse, having a good time and not even thinking about the long journey home to face an angry wife.

drouthy = thirsty; *neebors* = neighbours / friends; *chapman* = pedlar; *billies* = fellows; *tak the gate* = leave; *bousing at the nappy* = drinking strong ale; *fou* = tipsy; *unco* = very; *slaps* = gaps in fences

fand = found; *frae* = from; *whan* = whom

O Tam! had'st thou but been sae wise,
 As ta'en thy ain wife Kate's advice!
 She tauld thee weel thou was a skellum
 A blethering, blustering, drunken blellum;
 That frae November till October,
 Ae market-day thou was nae sober;
 That ilka melder wi' the miller
 Thou sat as lang as thou had siller;
 That ev'ry naig was ca'd a shoe on
 The smith and thee gat roarin fou on;
 That at the Lord's house, even on Sunday,
 Thou drank wi' Kirkton Jean till Monday.
 She prophesied that, late or soon,
 Thou would be found, deep drown'd in Doon,
 Or catch'd wi' warlocks in the mirk
 By Alloways' auld haunted kirk.

Ah! gentle dames, it gars me greet
 To think how monie counsels sweet,
 How monie lengthen'd, sage advices
 The husband frae the wife despises!

Tam's wife, Kate, had told him that he was a good-for-nothing loud-mouth who had never been sober on market-day throughout the year; she told him that he would drink as long as he had money – getting drunk with the miller and with the blacksmith – and even on a Sunday, with Kirkton Jean. She warned him that, one of those days, sooner or later, he would be found drowned in the River Doon, or caught in the dark by the demons that lurked around the old haunted church in Alloway. *tauld* = told; *weel* – well; *skellum* = scoundrel; *bletherin'* = talking nonsense; *blellum* = a babbler; *ilka melder* = every grinding day at the mill; *lang* = long; *siller* = money; *naig* = a horse; *ca'd a shoe on* = put a horseshoe on; *gat roarin fou* = got drunk; *warlocks* = demons; *mirk* = dark; *kirk* = church

But sad to say, Tam, like so many other husbands, paid no attention to his wife's advice.
gars me greet = makes me cry; *monie* = many

But to our tale: – Ae market-night
 Tam had got planted unco right,
 Fast by an ingle, bleezing finely,
 Wi' reaming swats, that drank divinely;
 And at his elbow, Souter Johnnie,
 His ancient, trusty, drouthy cronie:
 Tam lo'ed him like a vera brither,
 They had been fou for weeks thegither.
 The night drave on wi' sangs and clatter;
 And ay the ale was growing better:
 The landlady and Tam grew gracious,
 Wi' favours, secret, sweet and precious:
 The Souter tauld his queerest stories;
 The Landlord's laugh was ready chorus:
 The storm without might rair and rustle,
 Tam did na mind the storm a whistle

Care, mad to see a man sae happy:
 E'en drown'd himself among the nappy:
 As bees flee hame wi' lades o' treasure,
 The minutes wing'd their way wi' pleasure:
 Kings may be blest, but Tam was glorious,
 O'er a' the ills o' life victorious!

On this particular night Tam was in his element – he was sitting by the blazing fire drinking foaming pints of beer that tasted better with each drink. By his side was Souter Johnnie, the cobbler. They were old friends and drinking buddies and got drunk together every week. They passed the evening with songs and small-talk and while Tam flirted with the landlady, Souter Johnnie had the landlord laughing at his stories. All this time the storm outside was raging, but Tam paid it no attention.

planted unco right = made himself comfortable; *fast by an ingle* = beside a fireplace; *bleezing* = blazing; *reaming swats* = foaming ale; *souter* = cobbler; *cronie* = comrade; *lo'ed* = loved; *vera* = very; *brither* = brother; *thegitter* = together; *drave on* = rolled on; *sangs and clatter* = songs and loud chatter; *rair* = roar

Oh life felt just so good for Tam that night. As the time flew by, he was gloriously happy.

sae = so; *hame* = home; *lades* = loads

But pleasures are like poppies spread:
 You seize the flow'r, its bloom is shed;
 Or like the snow falls in the river,
 A moment white – then melts for ever;
 Or like the borealis race,
 That flit ere you can point their place;
 Or like the rainbow's lovely form
 Evanishing amid the storm
 Nae man can tether time or tide;
 The hour approaches Tam maun ride:
 That hour, o' night's black arch the key-stane,
 That dreary hour he mounts his beast in;
 And sic a night he taks the road in,
 As ne'er poor sinner was abroad in.

The wind blew as 'twad blawn its last;
 The rattling showers rose on the blast;
 The speedy gleams the darkness swallow'd
 Loud, deep, and lang the thunder bellow'd:
 That night, a child might understand,
 The Deil had business on his hand.

Weel mounted on his gray mare, Meg,
 A better never lifted leg.
 Tam skelpit on thro' dub and mire,
 Despising wind, and rain, and fire;
 Whiles holding fast his guid blue bonnet,
 Whiles crooning o'er some auld Scots sonnet,
 Whiles glow'ring round wi' prudent cares,
 Lest bogles catch him unawares:
 Kirk-Alloway was drawing nigh,
 Whare ghaists and houlets nightly cry.

In the first eight lines of this verse, Burns uses poetry which is incredibly beautiful and moving to demonstrate that all good things must come to an end.

It was now time for Tam to get on his horse and head for home through the terrible storm.

flow'r = flower; *borealis race* = the aurora borealis or northern lights; *flit ere* = move before; *maun* = must; *key-stane* = key-one; *sic* = such; *taks* = takes

This was the kind of night when even a child might be aware that the devil was around.

twad blawn = was blowing; *Deil* = Devil

Mounted on his grey mare, Meg, Tam rode on through the storm, holding onto his hat and all the time singing to himself to bolster his courage as he kept glancing about him, just in case some goblin would catch him by surprise. But he was getting close to the church at Alloway, where he knew that the nights were filled with the cries of ghosts and owls.

ghaists and houlets = ghosts and owls; *meare* = mare; *skelpit on* = hurried on; *thro' dub and mire* = through puddles and mud

By this time he was cross the ford,
 Whare in the snaw the chapman smoor'd;
 And past the birks and meikle stane,
 Whare drunken Charlie brak's neck-bane;
 And thro' the whins, and by the cairn,
 Whare hunters fand the murder'd bairn;
 And near the thorn, aboon the well,
 Whare Mungo's mither hang'd hersel'.
 Before him Doon pours all his floods;
 The doubling storm roars thro' the woods;
 The lightnings flash from pole to pole,
 Near and more near the thunders roll:
 When, glimmering thro' the groaning trees,
 Kirk-Alloway seem'd in a bleeze,
 Thro' ilka bore the beams were glancing,
 And loud resounded mirth and dancing.

Inspiring bold John Barleycorn,
 What dangers thou canst make us scorn!
 Wi' tippenny, we fear nae evil;
 Wi' usquabae, we'll face the Devil!
 The swats sae reamed in Tammie's noddle,

Fair play, he car'd na deils a boddle.
 But Maggie stood, right sair astonish'd,
 Till, by the heel and hand admonished,
 She ventur'd forward on the light;
 And, vow! Tam saw an unco sight!

Now he was at the scary part of his journey.
 After he crossed the ford he was in the area
 where several frightening events had taken
 place: where a pedlar had been smothered in
 the snow; where drunken Charlie had fallen
 and broken his neck at the big stone; where
 some hunters had found the body of a
 murdered child; where Mungo's mother had
 hanged herself. And all the time the storm
 raged on! Tam could see that the church was
 brightly lit and there was the sound of
 laughter and dancing.

whare = where; *snaw* = snow; *chapman*; =
 pedlar; *smoor'd* = smothered; *birks* = birch
 trees; *meikle stane* = big stone; *brak's neck-bane*;
 = broke his neck; *whins* = gorse; *cairn* = a
 heap of stones; *fand* = found; *bairn* = child;
aboon = above; *bleeze* = blaze; *thro' ilka bore* =
 through the trees

It is amazing the courage that drinking can
 give. With a few beers we fear no evil and
 add some whisky and we will take on the
 Devil himself. And so, Tam, his brain
 addled by his night of imbibing, didn't give
 a farthing for what he might come across.

But such was not the case with Meg and
 she had to be given a kick to get her going
 again. And what a picture they saw!
John Barleycorn = alcohol; *tippenny* = ale;
usquabae = whisky; *noddle* = head; *he car'd*
na deils a boddle = he did not care a farthing
 for the devils; *sair* = sore; *unco* = strange

Warlocks and witches in a dance:
 Nae cotillion brent new frae France,
 But hornpipes, jigs, strathspeys, and reels,
 Put life and mettle in their heels.
 A winnock-bunker in the east,
 There sat Auld Nick, in shape o' beast;
 A touzie tyke, black, grim, and large,
 To gie them music was his charge:

He screw'd the pipes and gart them skirl,
 Till roof and rafters a' did dirl.
 Coffins stood round, like open presses,
 That shaw'd the dead in their last dresses;
 And by some devilish cantraip sleight,
 Each in its cauld hand held a light:
 By which heroic Tam was able
 To note upon the haly table,
 A murderer's banes, in gibbet-airns;
 Twa span-lang, wee, unchristen'd bairns;
 A thief, new-cutted frae a rape –
 Wi' his last gasp his gab did gape;
 Five tomahawks, wi' bluid red-rusted;
 Five scymitars, wi' murder crusted;
 A garter which a babe had strangled;
 A knife a father's throat had mangled –
 Whom his ain son o' life bereft –
 The grey-hairs yet stack to the heft;
 Three lawyers' tongues, turned inside-out
 Wi' lies seamed like a beggar's clout;
 Three priests' hearts, rotten, black as muck,
 Lay stinking, vile in every neuk.
 Wi' mair of horrible and awefu',
 Which even to name wad be unlawfu'.

The goblins and witches were dancing –
 not a decorous French cotillion but wild
 Scottish reels and strathspeys. And there,
 in a window-seat in the church, was Satan
 himself – he was playing the music for his
 terrible horde.

warlocks = demons; *brent* = brand; *winnock-bunker* = window-seat; *auld Nick* = Satan; *touzie tyke* = unkempt dog

The scene was horrific. While Satan was
 making the rafters ring with his pipes,
 there were coffins standing around, open
 like cupboards and in each one was a
 corpse with a candle in its cold hand. On
 the altar there were some dreadful relics of
 unspeakable events that had taken place –
 including hangings and murders!

gart = made; *dirl* = vibrate; *presses* =
 cupboards; *shaw'd* = showed; *devilish*
cantraip sleight = black magic; *cauld han'* =
 cold hand; *haly table* = altar; *banes* = bones;
gibbet-airns = gibbet irons; *twa span-lang*,
wee unchristen'd bairns = two tiny babies;
new cutted frae a rape = just cut down from
 a hangman's noose; *gab did gape* = mouth
 wide open; *bluid* = blood; *heft* = handle;
clout = ragged clothes; *neuk* = nook and
 cranny

As Tammie glowr'd, amaz'd and curious,
 The mirth and fun grew fast and furious;
 The piper loud and louder blew,
 The dancers quick and quicker flew,
 They reeld, they set, they cross'd, they deekit,
 Till ilka carlin swat and reekit,
 And coost her duddies to the wark,
 And linket at it in her sark!

Now Tam, O Tam! had thae been queans,
 A' plump and strapping in their teens!
 Their sarks, instead o' creeshie flannen.
 Been snaw-white, seventeen hunder linen!
 Thir breeks o' mine, my only pair,
 That ance were plush, o' guid blue hair
 I wad hae gien them off my hurdies,
 For ae blink o' the bonie burdies!

But wither'd beldams, auld and droll,
 Rigwoodie hags wad spean a foal,
 Louping and flinging on a crummock,
 I wonder did na turn thy stomach!

As Tam stared in fascination, the dancing
 got even faster and faster until the dancers
 were soaked in sweat and they threw off
 their clothes and danced only in their filthy
 underwear.

glowr'd = stared; *cleekeit* = linked together;
ilka carlin swat and reekit = all the old hags
 were sweating and breathless; *coost her
 duddies on the wark* = cast off her rags;
linket at it in her sark = danced in her slip

If only they had been young women in
 clean clothes, then Tam could easily have
 let his desires get the better of him and
 shed his trousers, but these wrinkled, ugly
 old women wearing greasy flannel, who
 were leaping and capering with their
 cudgels, should have been enough to make
 him throw up.

queans = young women; *creeshie flannen* =
 greasy flannel; *snaw-white* = snow-white;
seventeen hunder linen = fine-gauge linen;
thir breeks = these trousers; *ance* = once;
I wad hae gien them off my hurdies = I would
 have given them off my behind; *bonie burdies*
 lovely girls; *beldams* = old hags; *droll* =
 peculiar; *ringwoodie* = gallows worthy;
crummock = cudgel

But Tam kend what was what fu' brawlie:
 There was ae winsome wench and wawlie,
 That night enlisted in the core
 (Lang after kend on Carrick shore,
 For monie a beast to dead she shot,
 An' perish'd monie a bonie boat,
 And shook baith meikle corn and bear,
 And kept the country-side in fear:)
 Her cutty sark, o Paisley harn,
 That while a lassie she had worn
 In longitude tho' sorely scanty,
 It was her best, and she was vauntie...
 Ah! little kend thy reverend grannie,
 That sark she coft for her wee Nannie,
 Wi' twa pund Scots (twas a' her riches),
 Wad ever grac'd a dance of witches!

But here my Muse her wing maun cour,
 Sic flights are far beyond her pow'r;
 To sing how Nannie lap and flang,
 (A souple jade she was, and strang)
 And how Tam stood like ane bewitch'd,
 And thought his very een enrich'd;

Even Satan glowr'd and fidg'd fu' fain,
 And hotch'd and blew wi' might and main:
 Till first ae caper, syne anither,
 Tam tint his reason a' thegither,
 And roars out 'Weel done, Cutty-Sark!'
 And in an instant all was dark:
 And scarcely had he Maggie rallied
 When out the hellish legion sallied.

But Tam had spotted the one who was different, a lively attractive girl who had just joined the corp of witches that night (he was not aware of the evil and the deaths she had wrought). She was wearing a petticoat that her grandmother had used all her savings to buy for her when she was a little girl and who had never thought that it would ever be worn in a dance of witches. It was really more than a bit short for her, but it was her best and she was rather vain about it.

kend... fu'brawlie = knew very well; *winsome wench and wawlie* = a jolly, attractive girl; *core* = corp; *lang after kend'd* = known long after; *Paisley harn* = a coarse cloth; *vauntie* = vain; *coft* = bought; *twa pounds Scots* = two Scottish pounds

This young witch, Nannie, was an incredible dancer and Tam was enthralled just watching her, as was Satan himself who was struggling to keep his music going while watching the dancer. But Tam forgot where he was and in a moment of lunacy, so carried away was he by the spectacle, that he shouted out 'Well done Cutty-sark'. There was instant darkness and he hardly had time to get Maggie moving when the dreadful band came streaming out of the churchyard, intent on catching this interloper.

her wing maun cour = her imagination must be curbed; *lap and flang* = leaped and capered; *souple* = supple; *jade* = an ill-natured woman; *strang* = strong; *fidg'd fu' fain* = fidgeted in excitement; *syne* = then; *tint* = lost

As bees bizz out wi' angry fyke,
 When plundering herds assail their byke;
 As open pussie's mortal foes,
 When, pop! she starts before their nose;
 As eager runs the market-crowd,
 When 'Catch the thief!' resounds aloud:
 So Maggie runs, the witches follow,
 Wi' monie an eldritch skriech and hollow.

Ah, Tam! Ah, Tam! thou'll get thy fairing!
 In hell they'll roast thee like a herrin!
 In vain thy Kate awaits thy comin'
 Kate soon will be a woefu' woman!
 Now, do thy speedy utmost, Meg,
 And win the key-stane of the brig;
 There, at them thou thy tail may toss,
 A running stream they dare na cross!
 But ere the key-stane she could make,
 The fient a tail she had to shake;
 For Nannie, far before the rest,
 Hard upon noble Maggie prest,
 And flew at Tam w' furious ettle;
 But little wist she Maggie's mettle
 Ae spring brought off her master hale,
 But left behind her ain gray tail:
 The carlin claught her by the rump,
 And left poor Maggie scarce a stump.

Now, wha this tale o' truth shall read,
 Ilk man, and mother's son, take heed:
 Whene'er to drink you are inclin'd,
 Or cutty-sarks run in your mind,
 Think! ye may buy the joys o'er dear:
 Remember Tam o' Shanter's mare.

Just like a swarm of angry bees after an intruder in their hive, so the creatures of evil came storming after Tam and Maggie filling the darkness with their frightening screams and screeches. *bizz* = buzz; *fyke* = fuss; *herds* = shepherds; *byke* = bee-hive; *pussie* = hare; *eldritch skriech and hollow* = unearthly, frightful screams

Tam, what have you done? Now you are going to get your just reward. You will finish up in hell, being roasted like a herring. Kate will never see you again, unless Maggie can get across the bridge before the witches catch up with you, because the witches cannot cross running water. Maggie was going well but there was one witch who was away in front of the others – Nannie. She was right at their back and gaining. At the very last moment, Maggie made a surge and brought Tam past the all important key-stone of the bridge. But it was not without cost – the evil Nannie had made a desperate grab for Tam, but missed and caught the horse's rump, catching her by the tail which came off, leaving poor Maggie with only a stump. *fairin'* = reward; *fient* = fiend; *prest* = pressed; *ettle* = intention; *little wist she Maggie's mettle* = little was she aware of Maggie's spirit; *hale* = whole; *claught* = clutched

Now pay attention every man and mother's son who reads this true story. Any time you think about having a drink, or if the thought of a girl in a short petticoat crosses your mind, you may have to pay a high price for these pleasures!

To The Memory of The Unfortunate Miss Burns

Burns was constantly at war with both the church and the law over what he considered to be their tyranny and hypocrisy. This poem was dedicated to a celebrated Edinburgh prostitute whose activities had so offended the City Fathers of Edinburgh that they had banished the unfortunate woman to a nearby village where she died within three years of her expulsion.

The woman's name was Margaret Burns and although we know that the poet and Miss Burns were not related by blood, we know nothing of his relationship with the lady herself. Suffice to say that he knew her well enough to write these few lines in her memory, although we also know that he scorned any man who had to use the services of a prostitute.

By this time, Burns was himself a celebrity and a favourite in the drawing rooms of the very people he had held in such contempt in his earlier years. This poem is written with little dialect, therefore it requires no words of explanation but it does indicate once again the Bard's ability to produce verse that is as appropriate in today's society as it was some two hundred years ago.

Like to a fading flower in May,
Which Gardner cannot save,
So Beauty must, sometime, decay
And drop into the grave.

Fair Burns, for long the talk and toast
Of many a gaudy Beau,
That Beauty has forever lost
That made each bosom glow.

Think fellow sisters on her fate!
Think, think how short her days!
Oh! think and e'er it be too late,
Turn from your evil ways.

Beneath this cold, green sod lies dead
That once bewitching dame
That fired Edina's lustful sons,
And quenched their glowing flame.

Edina = Edinburgh

The Banks O' Doon

More commonly known as *Ye Banks and Braes* this sad, wistful song typifies the elegance and beauty of Burns' words when writing of love. He was never more wistful than when he was saying goodbye to one of his many loves, or when he was describing the misfortunes of someone else's love life. In this case, his tale is of a young lady who has been betrayed by her lover.

Ye banks and braes o' bonie Doon,
How can ye bloom sae fresh and fair?
How can ye chant, ye little birds,
And I sae weary, fu' o' care
Thou'll break my heart, thou warbling bird
That wantons thro' the flowering thorn!
Thou minds me o' departed joys,
Departed – never to return.

sae weary = so tired; *bonie* = beautiful;

wantons = to move freely

Aft hae I rov'd by bonie Doon,
To see the rose and woodbine twine,
And ilka bird sang o' its luvie,
And fondly sae did I o' mine.

ilka = every

Wi' lightsome heart I pu'd a rose,
Fu' sweet upon its thorny tree,
And my fause luvier staw my rose,
But ah! he left the thorn wi' me.

The girl's lover stole her rose and left her with nothing but the thorn. This could be interpreted as her being left with more than a broken heart. Times haven't changed as much as we may think, women in Burns' day were often left to bring up children alone.
pu'd = pulled; *fause* = false; *staw* = stole

On Genriddell's Fox Breaking His Chain

Captain Robert Riddell was a very good friend of Robert Burns, but to the disgust of the poet, he kept a fox chained to a kennel. Burns was totally against the keeping of any wild animal in captivity, and was inspired to write this poem when the fox managed to break its chain and escape.

Thou, Liberty, thou art my theme:
Nor such as idle poets dream,
Who trick thee up a heathen goddess
That a fantastic cap and rod has!
Such stale conceits are poor and silly:
I paint thee out, a Highland filly,
A sturdy, stubborn, handsome dapple,
As sleek's a mouse, as round's an apple,
That when thou pleasest, can do wonders,
But when thy luckless rider blunders,
Or if thy fancy should demur there,
Wilt break thy neck ere thou go further.

These things premis'd, I sing a Fox,
Was caught among his native rocks,
And to a dirty kennel chained,
How he his liberty regained.

Glenriddell! A Whig without a stain,
A Whig in principle and grain,
Couldst't thou enslave a free-born creature,
A native denizen of Nature?
How couldst't thou with heart so good
(A better ne'er was sluiced with blood),
Nail a poor devil to a tree,
That ne'er did harm to thine or thee?

Burns refuses to consider the idea of Liberty being represented by some strangely clad goddess. No, he saw her as a beautiful Highland pony that would never allow captivity to break her spirit.

trick thee up = dress you up; *stale conceits* = overused pretences; *demur* = hesitate

He tells of the fox being caught, but also of it eventually regaining its freedom.

premis'd = assumed

He asks his friend, Glenriddell, a man of truth and principle, how such a kind-hearted person could ever hold an animal in captivity, especially as the fox has done no harm to him or his family.

grain = moral fibre

The staunchest Whig Glenriddell was,
 Quite frantic in his Country's cause;
 And oft was Reynard's prison passing,
 And with his brother-Whigs canvassing,
 The Rights of Men, the Powers of Women,
 With all the dignity of Freemen.

Sir Reynard daily heard debates
 Of princes', kings', and nations' fates,
 With many rueful, bloody stories
 Of tyrants, Jacobites, and Tories:
 From liberty, how angels fell,
 That now art galley-slaves in Hell;
 How Nimrod first the trade began
 Of binding Slavery's chains on man;
 How fell Semiramis, – God damn her! –
 Did first with sacreligious hammer
 (All ills till then were trivial matters),
 For Man dethron'd forge hen-peck fetters;
 How Xerxes, that abandon'd Tory,
 Thought cutting throats was reaping glory,
 Until the stubborn Whigs of Sparta
 Taught him great Nature's Magna Charta;
 How mighty Rome her fiat hurl'd
 Resistless o'er a bowing world,
 And, kinder than they did desire,
 Polish'd mankind with sword and fire:
 With much too tedious to relate
 Of ancient and of modern date,
 But ending still, how Billy Pitt
 (Unlucky boy!) with wicked wit,
 Has gagg'd old Britain, drain'd her coffer,
 As butchers bind and bleed a heifer.

Glenriddell was a staunch Whig,
 regularly discussing the rights of men and
 women with his political allies as they
 passed by the fox's kennel. But they were
 free men while the fox was a prisoner.
Reynard = fox; *canvassing* = discussing

Each day during his captivity, the fox
 heard debates on man's inhumanity to
 man. An incredible range of topics fell
 upon his ever attentive ears, ranging from
 mythology to historical facts, from the
 ravagings of the Roman Empire to the
 imposition of income tax by William Pitt.

Thus wily Reynard, by degrees,
 In kennel listening at his ease,
 Suck'd in a mighty stock of knowledge,
 As much as some folks at a college;
 Knew Britain's rights and constitution,
 Her aggrandizement, diminution;
 How Fortune wrought us good from evil;
 Let no man then, despise the Devil,
 As who should say 'I ne'er can need him.'
 Since we to scoundrels owe our freedom.

By the time the fox made his escape, he had absorbed as much information as if he'd been a college graduate, but he also learned that tyrants and other evil people are why the British set such high store on freedom.

suck'd in = absorbed; *aggrandizement* = making great; *diminution* = lessening, *wrought* = fashioned