

NARRATIVE POEMS

BALLAD OF A CHRISTENING

THE burn was roarin' wild in spate
Upbye at Craigievairn,
The minister had gane that gate
To christen Annie's bairn.

The torrent wide he coodna cross,
For brig there wasna ony;
He raised his voice oot ower the moss
An' shoutit lood for Johnie.

The righteous dinna cry in vain,
The cottar folk were listenin';
Through blashin' rain John brocht the wean
Ootbye to get its christenin'.

Quo' Johnie, "Can ye no' win ower?
Then, troth, nae mair can I, sir."
The minister gied sic a glower:—
"Hoots! man, we maun baptize her.

"Sae wade ye in as faur's ye daur,
An' haud ye oot the bairn,
Gin I can splash some jaups as faur
Ye need hae nae concern."

Gey sweirt was John to brave the flude,
His feelin's were na hidden,
But, though a man o' cauldriife bluid,
He did as he was bidden.

He waded in, an' chitterin' there
Fulfilled the faither's function ;
The minister pit up a prayer
O' muckle poo'er an' unction ;

Doon on his hunkers then he gat
An' splashed right weel ower Johnie,
An' aye, as lood the bairn grat,
Speired, " Has it gotten ony? "

The rain did fa', the win' did blaw,
The minister peched sairly ;
The wean gat deil a drap ava,
But John was drookit fairly.

In vain the chiel a baurley socht,
For, deeved by win' an' storm,
The reverend man still dourly wrocht
His office to perform ;

An', though to rest he too was fain,
Wi' baith his loofs did blatter
Sic gowpens that syne Johnie's wean
Was draiglet weel wi' watter.

" Noo, Gude be thankit ! " he exclaimed,
" We've dune oor stent gey bonnie.
What did ye want the bairn named? "
" I've clean forgot," said Johnie.

The preacher gied the blae-cauld chiel
A glower that was uncanny ;
" The mither's name will serve gey weel ;
Sae—I baptize thee, Annie."

He hirpled aff; but left ahint . . .
A gey dumfooner't daddy,
Wha muttered, "Annie, deil be in't!
The puir wee wean's a laddie!"

SALLY

A' THROUGH the war, when horse were ill to get,
I paid a hape o' siller to the vet,
To keep a wheen auld spavined brutes in fettle;
But aye to get some younger beasts I'd ettle.
The war was ower, an' horse were no' so dear,
I gaed to Stirlin' toun an' bocht a mear:
A braw beast, risin' fifteen haun's, an' strang.
I got her frae the dealer, Geordie Lang.
"An army naig," he said, "an' shair to please.
She's seen a hape o' sairvice ower the seas,
Pu'in' the transport waigons through the glaur,
Dae'in' her bit," says he, "to win the war."
The mear was young, an' soond in wind an' limb,
No' heavy built, an' yet no' unco slim,
Fit to pu' furrows straucht frae rig to rig,
Soople eneuch to canter wi' a gig.
The price he askit for her wasna sma',
I thocht to bring him doun a poun' or twa.
But faith! to argy-bargy he was sweer,
An' sae I gied his feegure for the mear.
We ca'd her Sally, an' I little thocht
To rue my bargain ance the beast was bocht,
But dod! I hadna wrocht her for a week
Ere I'd gi'en Geordie Lang kail through the reek.
What was the trouble? ay, ye weel may speir,
Here's hoo I took a scunner to the mear.

Ye ken, nae doot, the man that hauds the ploo
Aye likes to steer his team by word o' mou',
But this daft naig ye had to guide by haun',
For guid braid Scots she couldna un'erstaun'.

The weel-kent plooman's cries, " hu'-back " an'
" yain,"

Seemed to convey nae meanin' to her brain ;
An' ye micht *click* your tongue aff, would she steer ?
An' ance she startit, " whoa " ne'er fashed her ear.
A gey thrawn brute, wi' cantrips a' her ain,
She'd answer nocht but ruggin' at the rein.
I couldna yoke her wi' anither horse,
Her thruther weys gied cause for quick divorce.
Ill could I thole the thocht that I'd been dune ;
O Geordie Lang, thinks I, it was a sin,
A judgment's shair to follow, but I mean
To pass her on to someane, no' a freen'.

Ae day the mear was grazin' in the park,
A simmer day it was, gey close an' dark ;
As I cam' by there cam' a clap o' thun'er,
Sally stood quate an' calm ; thinks I, nae wunner,
I ken your tribble noo, it's my belief
Your lugs are useless ornaments, ye're deaf,
Stane-deef, puir brute, it's no' your fau't, thinks I,
Ye canna answer to the plooman's cry.

My brither Jock ca'd in ae day to speir
What fau't I had to fin' wi' my new mear ;
Ower at the smiddy he had heard some crack
Frae yon auld haverin' body, Andra Black.
Noo, Jock's a lad that has a hape o' knowledge,
We ettled aye to pit him to the college,
But war upset oor plans, wi' a' its fykes—
Noo Jock contrac's for makin' dry-stane dykes ;
But, still an' on, he's somethin' o' a scholar,
For he was at the schule awhile at Dollar.

I tell't him a' my tale, an' brocht him oot
Whaur to a harrow we had yoked the brute.
Jock looked her ower, then said, " It's my belief
The mear's a foreigner, but isna deaf.
If ower in France she heard the guns, nae wunner
She isna frichtit at a clap o' thun'er ;
An' gin your speech she doesna un'erstaun',
At ither tongues ye e'en maun try your haun'."
Wi' that he took the reins an' shouted "*Allez!*"
Aff like a shot at ance gaed throuther Sally.
"*Doucement!*" cried Jock, she steadied in her pace,
But aye she pu'd richt willin' at the trace.
Sae, back an' forrit, ower the field they went,
Jock crackin' French to her, which weel she kent.

Aye sin' that day the mear has dune her turn,
But faith! I've had some kittle words to learn ;
"*Allez*" means "gang" to them that parlez-vous,
An' "*doucement*" 's juist the French for "canny
noo."

But Sally sair's me weel in a' respec's,
Though whiles tak's turrivees, like a' her sex.
But dod! man, strange to tell, although she's
foreign,
She nichers like a Clydesdale, that I'se warran',
An' when she nichers, saw ye e'er the like?
The cowlt gaes wud an' tries to sclim the dyke.
Oor auld, dune geldin' cocks his lugs gey bauld,
Syne capers roun' as skeich's a twa-year-auld.
The mear's e'en blink ; her morals are gey rotten :
Bluid tells, ye ken, French weys are no' forgotten.

RAB THE MILLER

A **BIG**, braw man was Rab the miller—
No' what ye'd ca' a leddy-killer,
Ower blate for that—a wyse-like chiel,
That aye looked like his meat, an' weel ;
Stracht-backit, strang as ony stirk,
Aye weel-put-on when gaun tae kirk—
For o' the kirk he was a pillar,
A weel-daein' chap was Rab the miller.

He had nae wife, which wasna queer :
The puir man had nae spunk tae speir ;
But weel he lo'ed an' reverenced woman ;
He thocht them somethin' mair than human—
Angels sent doun tae man's assistance,
But aye he worshipped frae a distance,
Till, youth awa', his prime nigh past,
Fate gar'd him tak' the loup at last.

A gey auld-farrant, crankie carline
Keepit his hoose, ane Kate MacFarlane ;
Near auld eneuch tae be his granny,
She used tae flyte on the puir mannie.
She was a kind o' family relic ;
Rab kent that she was no' angelic,
An' yet her worth he'd ne'er disparage,
An' when she dee'd he thocht on marriage.

But whatna lassie he would choose
Folk couldna juist at first jalouse.
Rab ponder't lang upon the brink,
Would scart his pow, an' think, an' think.

Until ae Sawbath, in the choir,
He glower'd at big Jean MacIntyre.
Conviction in his he'rt took root,
He thocht, "Aye, she would dae, nae doot."

Some youthfu' memories canna wither,
They had been bairns at schule thegither,
An' noo she dwelt a lanely wōman,
Nae angel either, juist gey human—
The sort that bide in but-an'-bens,
An' keep a coo an' twa-three hens ;
Forbye, she had a wee tait siller,
"That's aye a help," thinks Rab the miller.

But hoo tae speir an' him sae blate?
Man! he was fear't tae gang that gate ;
He swither'd lang upon the question.
The thocht o't gied him indigestion,
Gied him a staw at brose an' parritch.
Ae nicht a dram gied him the courage,
An' while the spirit in him glow'd
He toshed himsel' an' took the road.

It was a winter nicht, the mune
Shone cheery in the lift abune,
An' cranreuch pouter'd a' the grun'.
He heard the curlers at their fun
A mile awa', an' clear eneuch
He heard ice crackin' in the sheuch,
He heard his ain he'rt wildly slappin',
He heard himsel' at Jean's door chappin'.

Jean wasna aften fashed wi' men ;
She took him in, an' brocht him ben,
A wee thing puzzled at the ca'.
Rab gied his neb a dicht an' blaw.

Speired for the coo an' a' the hens,
An' crackit aboot odds an' en's;
But conversation sune ran dry,
Jean answerin' nocht but "naw" or "aye."

An' oor or twa Rab sat there sweetin',
Oh, drink! fause is thy strength an' cheatin'.
The dram's fine exaltation left him,
An' blateness noo o' speech bereft him,
While Jean, puir body, sat an' ganted,
An' wunner'd what on earth he wanted.
The knock chapp'd ten. "I hae some siller;
I'm bein' eneuch," said Rab the miller.

"That was a gey queer observation,"
Thocht Jean, "but Rab's a botheration.
What can he want? There's somethin' in't
Gin I were gleg tae tak' the hint."
Rab said, "Ye'll maybe think I'm wrang,
But women shouldna aye be thrang,
An' muckin' oot a clarty byre
Is no' for you, Jean MacIntyre."

Alas, puir Jean, Fate's weys are reuch,
Lang syne ye had been gleg eneuch.
In dreams ye aften got a glint o't;
The dream is here—ye see nae hint o't.
Fause comprehension lit the een
O' sony, hard-wrocht, luckless Jean.
"I ken fine what ye're efter noo,
Speak plain—ye want tae buy ma coo."

Puir Rab, the dice against him loaded,
Dumfouner'd an' abashed, juist nodded;
An' lest he should the compact rue
Jean there an' then brocht oot the coo.

A price was fix'd ; wi' inward groan
Rab bocht it. Hameward down the loan
He led the beast, wi' halter steerin',
An' like a drucken tinkler sweerin',

An', sad tae tell, in black ill-natur'
He yokit on the hermless cratur,
Its hurdies wi' his stauff weel skelpit,
As though the puir brute beast could help it.
Ower hill an' haugh they heard it bellow,
Till shame at last cam' ower the fellow.
He muttered, as he reached the mill,
" Oh, Rab, ye fule, ye muckle fule ! "

Alas ! the tale o' that auld coo
Gaed heich an' laich the parish through ;
Puir Rab, wha ettled tae get wed,
An' bocht an Ayrshire coo instead,
Raised mony a lauch whaur fermers gether'd,
Or ploomen ower a wee " hauf " blether'd.
Noo Rab the miller's ta'en a scunner
At matrimony. Dod ! nae wunner.