

THE MARTYR OF PRIESTHILL.

JOHN BROWN, the Christian carrier of Priesthill, in the parish of Muirkirk, Ayrshire, deservedly occupies a high place in the martyr-roll of Scottish Covenanters. He was shot by Claverhouse at his own door, in presence of his wife and children. The hardened troopers were so melted by Brown's prayer, offered up in the expectation of immediate death, that they refused to fire upon him at the word of command, whereupon their commander himself shot his victim through the head with his own hand. The interview between Brown and his wife before they were parted by death, and the conduct of the poor woman in composing and weeping over her husband's mangled remains, are among the most pathetic things in all history. The character of Brown, both in life and at death, shone forth with the highest lustre; while the act of Claverhouse, in killing him so brutally, is universally execrated.

THE MARTYR OF PRIESTHILL.

Time—The First Morning of May, 1685.

SCENE I.—Interior of the Cottage of Priesthill ; Early dawn ; John Brown and his family engaged in their morning devotions ; His family, consisting of his wife, by a second marriage, whose maiden name was Isabella Weir ; his daughter Janet, about ten years of age, by his first marriage ; and an infant boy by the second.

They sing part of Psalm xxvii.—

“ Against me though an host encamp,
 My heart yet fearless is :
 Though war against me rise, I will
 Be confident in this.

One thing I of the Lord desired,
 And will seek to obtain,
 That all days of my life I may
 Within God’s house remain ;

That I the beauty of the Lord
 Behold may and admire,
 And that I in his holy place
 May rev’reently inquire.”

He then reads in the gospel of John, chapter xvi., in which the following passages occur :—

“ These things have I spoken unto you, that ye should not be offended. They shall put you out of the synagogues : Yea, the time cometh, that whosoever

killeth you will think that he doeth God service. And these things will they do unto you, because they have not known the Father, nor me.

“It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you. When he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, *that* shall he speak: and he will show you things to come.

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, That ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice: and ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy. A woman when she is in travail hath sorrow, because her hour is come: but as soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born into the world. And ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you.”

After offering up a solemn and memorable prayer, he rises, blesses his family, and goes out with his implements of labour.

SCENE II.—The Heights to the west of Lesmahagow; Claverhouse, at the head of three troops of dragoons, and attended by Cannon, the spy, who has undertaken to betray Brown.

CLAVERTHOUSE. Another vile, misty morning. May-day, too! May-day in Ayrshire! Certainly this Ayrshire is a great breeder of Whigs and mists, very suitable companions. (*Turning to the Spy*). We shall catch the weasel, though?

CANNON. No doubt of it, sir. His wife, who takes me for one of the brotherhood, told me he was to steal home this morning from his hiding in the moors. But, may I beseech

you, sir, spare his life! If he were not crazed by conventicles, he is a good, innocent man, that would not do an act of wrong or violence to gain the whole world. In one way and another, he has been friend to almost everybody from Clyde to Ayr's mouth. When my own wife and children were lying ill in one bed——

CLAVERHOUSE. Peace, chattering booby! I have let you talk so far, because I like to know what edge my tools have got. Hark ye, sirrah! I keep two pistols in my belt, one for Whig vermin, the other for such ill-dipt rascals as you. Beware! Soldiers! see that you are charged. We're on the Ayrshire moors, and belike may start a covey of psalm-singers in some of the hollows.

SCENE III.—The high moor ground overtopping Priesthill; Cairntable Hill rising straight opposite; Brown occupied in casting turf for fuel, but often stopping from working, and looking around him, and upwards, in an earnest and meditative manner.

In a glen in the same moorland, but at some little distance, and unseen, a number of the young men and women of the surrounding hamlets are supposed to have met together, to hold the old revels of "May Morning."

BROWN. Again the earth, waked from her wintry trance,
Starts up with looks of promise and of joy.
All nature is alive, all life is fresh
With youthful brightness and a new-felt power.
Copy, tho' faint, not utterly defaced,

Of that first glorious birth and spring of being,
When on the shapeless mass the Spirit of God
Moved, and brought forth a world all good, all fair.

Down from the mountains gently come the winds,
The plains beneath open their breasts to meet them:
The mist, which erewhile hung upon the morn,
Veiling its extreme loveliness, disparts;
And bird and beast to one great song of praise
Are all attuned.

'Tis the First Morn of May!

(*A pause.*)

And there thou look'st abroad, Cairntable! watching
As with a hunter's eye the growing light;
While the Sun paws the orient clouds, impatient
To run his mighty race. Into thy bosom,
Swelling with vernal impulse, dost thou draw
The fatness and rich influence of the morn,
For nourishment of all thy founts and streams,
And all thy herds, and manifold sweet creatures
To whom thou art a nurse, yea, and a mother.
And yonder (dearest, loveliest sight of all!),
Deep in the hollow of the valley, like
The lark's nest in the wilderness, peeps forth
Mine own beloved home! lightly the smoke

Curls on the morning breeze, where Isabel,
God's richest earthly gift to me, attends
Her household and her household duties, with
A care no less than Martha's, yet is not
Like her world-cumber'd, but the better part,
Like holier Mary, hath she wisely chosen.
Methinks I see my little Janet skipping
About the door, blithest of children she!
Yet never thoughtless in her merriment,
Prudent already as a housewife, and
A help and meet companion to her mother.

(*A pause.*)

O wife! O children! can I give you up?
Most precious are ye to me; never man
Yearned with more fondness o'er his home of love.
Myself of silent spirit, in them I found
A centre, and perpetual stored-up fountain
For all the gushing fulness of my heart.
Too much of idols have they been, too much
Have come between me and the Sovereign Lord.
Yet merciful as sovereign, blessed Saviour!
Forgive this frailty, subjugate this passion,
And make mine earth-affections stoop in awe,
And, even as bondmaids, to their heavenly mistress
In deep and all-resigning homage bow.

And verily the hour of trial comes !
 The blast already ruffles in the branches ;
 I hear its fatal singing.

Tho' 'tis May-day,

And bud and sap around me, yet I know
 That not with me 'tis May-day.

'Tis at hand,

The withering tempest that will strip my home,
 Not the abode as now of simple joys,
 But house of death and mourning! I am warned
 By the times and seasons. In the cave and dungeon,
 On scaffold and on highway and lone moor,
 And hard-fought battle-field, one after one
 My brethren perish. I am also warned
 By inward tokens and foreshadowings,
 By presages and burdens from without.
 But yestermorn, when Peden left the dwelling,
 (Whose sore, wayfaring feet turned for a night
 To seek short respite underneath our roof),
 Thrice did he press poor Isabel's hand and groaned,
 His eyes with sorrow more than age, bedimmed,
 "Alas, poor thing! a dark, a misty morning!"
 'Tis seldom now he speaks. His heart is dumb
 Beneath the visitation of the Lord.
 In desert paths he wanders, and all night
 Durns in the clifty rock, sleepless, and wrestling

For the remnant of the people!

Yes! I know

Mine end is near: we must be hunted down.

And now, Lord! I am ready to be offered:

My times are in Thine hand, so is my strength;

Through suffering make me perfect!

Sweet the ties

That bind me to the earth; but greater still

The voice that calls me on!

(Noise as of shouting and singing heard at a distance.)

What strange and startling noise is this which breaks

Upon the desert solitude!

(Noise continues, and voices heard singing confusedly.)

MAY-SONG.

“Round the thorn on the sweet May-morn,
Dance it merrily, dance it merrily!”

Alas!

Now I remember; 'tis an heathenish custom

Amongst the village youth to celebrate

The first May-morning with wild dance and song;

Dark relic of old Pagan revelries.

For many bygone years, whilst in this land

Flourished a pure and gospel ministry,

This baneful weed was all but rooted out.

Since Antichrist again hath raised his horn,

These secret, poisonous seeds are springing up:
 As blight or mildew in one night may rot
 What a long fertile spring hath richly nourished.
 And they that would enslave the human soul,
 And turn to their base ends the powers of man,
 Must first corrupt before they fetter.

Wise

And uncorrupted spirits brook no chain!

O sinful, woeful land! where half thy children
 Cain-like destroy the other, or but mock
 Their dying groans, and dance upon their graves:
 Where God's poor flock are slaughtered all day long,
 And no account is taken, save in heaven!
 But know, the axe is laid at thy vile root,
 And thou shalt be hewn down, with stroke on stroke.

*(The voices become louder, and seem approaching nearer,
 singing in a rough and boisterous manner.)*

MAY SONG—*continued.*

“Round the thorn on the sweet May-morn,
 Dance it merrily, dance it merrily!
 They that mourn when buds are born,
 Will certainly die in December.

Maids and shepherds! fresh and young,
 Light of heel and blythe of tongue,
 Ere lamb has leapt or lark has sung,
 Merrily keep the May-day

Who can tell what may hap to-morrow?
 Who would couple youth and sorrow?
 Then come and range the green woods thorough:
 Merrily keep the May-day!

Round the thorn on the sweet May-morn,
 Dance it merrily, dance it merrily!
 They that mourn when buds are born,
 Will certainly die in December.

The curate sits at the alehouse door,
 And benison gives to the wild uproar,
 Mess John was not so jolly of yore:
 Merrily keep the May-day!
 Troubles there be by land and sea,
 Things are not as they used to be:
 But—Youth and May!—ho, what care we?
 Merrily keep the May-day!

Round the thorn on the sweet May-morn,
 Dance it merrily, dance it merrily!
 They that mourn when buds are born,
 Will certainly die in December!"

(The voices suddenly stop; in a few moments a shout is heard: "The troopers! the troopers!" and the multitude rush down the slopes dispersedly. Claverhouse marches up with his troops, who surround Brown.)

SCENE IV.—Same part of the moor; the troops surrounding Brown;
 Claverhouse rides up to him.

CLAVERHOUSE. Your name is John Brown of Priesthill?

BROWN. It is.

CLAVERHOUSE. Pray for the king.

BROWN. Prayer is like the gales of heaven, which come not at man's bidding, but when and how the Spirit of God determineth. I neither feel call of duty, nor inward motion, to pray for the man whom thou callest king.

CLAVERHOUSE. The *man* indeed! manifest traitor that you are.

BROWN. I am no traitor. I owe James Stuart no allegiance. Unto me the tyrant and antichristian cannot be king, although by force of circumstances he may have usurped the throne of the land wherein I dwell.

CLAVERHOUSE. Enough, brood of Satan! What punishment were sufficient for such a villainous rebel? You have sealed your own doom; you shall die within a few minutes.

BROWN. So be it as to God seemeth meet! But mark me: I am no rebel, even against the lawless and unchristian authorities of the time. I have had no light to join in active resistance as many have done. Besides mine own calling as a shepherd and tiller of the ground, a sense of duty hath led me only to teach, instruct, and admonish the young, and to minister such comforts as mine own experience enabled me to the sick and dying. Thus have I humbly sought to do my generation-work in the Church and commonwealth. Beyond this circle have I never walked; and though willing and rejoicing to die, if it be God's time, and for His honour, I protest that I die not for rebellion, confusion, bloodshed, or any violent act.

CLAVERHOUSE. I come to execute sentence of death, not to hear a morning lecture. I shall be better to you than you deserve, and allow you to go down and see your family before you suffer punishment for your proclaimed and obstinate treason. Soldiers! advance with the prisoner.

SCENE V.—Cottage of Priesthill; little Janet, who has been at the door, runs in to her mother in great terror.

LITTLE JANET. O mother! mother! what a troop of soldiers
Are coming down, and father in the midst!

ISABEL. 'Tis come, the thing that I so long have feared:
Oh for the grace to grapple with this hour!

(Takes up the infant from the cradle.)

My boy! my boy! my fatherless!—

(Rushes out with the infant in her arm, and leading Janet by the hand.)

SCENE VI.—Bank before the cottage; Brown in front of the troops; Claverhouse near him; his wife and children come forward.

BROWN. Isabel! this is the day I spake of,
When in thy father's house at Sorn I sought
Thy hand in marriage.
I told thee then what now is come to pass!
You see me summoned shortly to appear

Before the Court of Heaven : another witness,
 With testimony sealed in mine own blood,
 Against the rulers of this land. The call
 Is instant. I must take the yawning pass
 Even at a bound : brief time for leave-taking,
 Or for the weighty and the solemn things
 Which the departing spirit fain would say.
 Isabel ! (*looks at her with great anxiety*)
 Art thou then willing that we part ?

ISABEL (*taking him by the hand, and raising both their
 hands towards heaven*)—

Jesus ! look down,
 Behold thine handmaid offers unto Thee
 This priceless jewel of her life, beyond
 All reckoning rich and dear !

BROWN. Then, Answerer of Prayers, my voice is heard !
 This, this is all I wait for. Not a cloud
 Or speck hangs on my parting hour, but bright
 As May's first sun, the path before me shines.

CLAVERHOUSE. Go to thy prayers : the morning wears apace.

BROWN. I thank thee that thou dost not cut me off,
 As thy authority might well avouch,
 Even at one sweep ; but giv'st me time for prayer,
 That I may gird my loins and trim my lamp,
 Ere I go down into the darksome vale :
 The vale of shadows called, but pathway rather

Unto the only true realities :

Where shadow broods no more nor any darkness,
But all things have their end, and God shines forth,
Final and manifest in all His works !

CANNON (*aside*). Most wonderful, that he of such reserved
And maiden bashful ways, who always shrank
From strangers and great throngs of people,
And from a constant lowliness of mind,
Did stammer in his speech, speaks now with boldness,
And with a ready and commanding utterance,
As if he were the general of these troops,
Not their poor prisoner—and woe's me ! my victim !
Angels are near, his ministering servants :
Whilst I, sold to the devil ! feel through my brain,
And through my limbs, a freezing dizziness,
As if a curse were cleaving to my bones.

Could I undo

The fatal knot which yesternight I twisted !
Or that the earth would crush me, ne'er to rise !

BROWN (*who has been standing for some time in silent
thought, kneels down to pray. His wife and children
kneel beside him*)—

“ Eternal One ! Holy and Ever-blessed !
Inhabiting the high and holy place !
Who with Thy glory fillest earth and heaven,
And holdest all things in Thine infinite hand,

And rulest all by Thine almighty will !
Angels and men, creatures and substances
In every place and state, are but Thy servants,
And at Thy bidding move, or are at rest.
All living things are Thine. The dying also
And the dead are Thine.

“ Father of mercies !

God of all comfort ! unto Thee I come !
To Thee in mine extremity I come !
To Thee my closing eyes look up ! To Thee
My soul, about to quit this tabernacle,
And pass into the far and unknown path,
Lifts up its supplications ere it flies !
For Thou alone canst guide me through this gloom,
Where creature unto creature can no more
Give help or passage !

“ Unto Thee I come !

And rest upon Thy promises, and take
Thee as my covenant God in Christ. All hope,
All other refuge I disclaim, and cling
With simple faith unto the uplifted Cross !
Hide not Thy countenance, nor take away
Thy Holy Spirit, promised Comforter,
Eternal Dove from the Redeeming Ark,
Bearing the olive-branch to drowning souls,
And tidings that the flood is overpast !

“ Oh, may the death
 Which now awaits me, as a mustard-seed,
 Small in itself, and weak, nursed by Thy grace,
 Spring in due season from beneath the clod,
 And bud, and cast forth fruit, though but an handful,
 In honour of Thy blessed name and cause !
 And, Lord! Thy Church and people in this land,
 Oh, visit them, and listen to their cry!
 Build up our Zion's walls, and on her towers
 Be Thou the glory!”

CLAVERHOUSE. Tush with thy babbling! thou hadst leave to
 pray,
 But not to preach. Done with thy sermonising !
 BROWN. Thou knowest not what preaching is, or prayer,
 If this thou callest preaching.

Bear with me
 For a short space. My tongue shall soon be sealed
 In silence of the dead, never again
 To jar upon thine ear, or any man's.
 Then suffer me, thus called so suddenly,
 Before the great tribunal, here to spread,
 In mine own way, though barbarous unto thee,
 My supplications and my wrestling thoughts
 Before the Lord who is to be my Judge,
 In whom I also trust as my Redeemer.
 Mine is the great part in this morning's work ;

Bear with me, for my soul is in its throes,
And in the travail of the immortal birth!

CLAVERHOUSE. Death and ten thousand furies! dost thou
play

Conventicler with me? (*Aside.*) The soldiers melt;
This praying must be stopped. You three in front,
File out, and instantly despatch the prisoner!

(*The soldiers do not move or obey the order.*)

BROWN. (*Still kneeling.*)

“O Son of Man, who stand’st at the right hand
Of God! rend Thou the heavens, come down. Receive
My parting spirit, which now is lost in love,
In beatific love! Amen! Amen!”

(*Rises and goes forward to his family.*)

Isabel, farewell! Thou know’st where comfort is:

One in the Lord, an higher union waits us!

My sweet, unconscious, smiling babe! one kiss! (*Kisses him.*)

In malice be a babe, a man in Christ!

My daughter! be thou faithful to thy mother,

As thou hast ever been, and serve the Lord:

As thy years ripen, may thy graces grow!

(*He hangs over them and weeps, then suddenly checks
himself, and walks apart.*)

Blessed, O Holy Spirit, be Thou! that speak’st
More comfort to my heart than speaks the voice
Of my oppressors’ terror to my ears.

1ST SOLDIER. (*In a low broken voice.*)

'Tis work for butchers this, and not for soldiers.
I'd sooner dip my hands in burning brimstone,
Than in such innocent blood. My conscience stings me.

SOLDIERS. (*A murmur through the whole troops.*)

So say we all.

CLAVERHOUSE. What, curs! vile mongrels! do ye whinge,
and cower,

And change your colour at a Whiggish rant,
At old sing-songs learn'd at conventicles?

(*Aside.*) What! knitting their brows! upon the very verge
Of mutiny! 'tis time to end this business.

(*Draws a large pistol from his belt, and presents it at
Brown.*)

Die in thy folly, rebel! peasant slave!

(*Fires; Brown instantly falls; his wife, with a piercing
shriek, falls upon the body; the troops hurry off, with
horror depicted upon their countenances; Claver-
house remains, looking on the scene with affected
indifference and contempt.*)

CLAVERHOUSE. Woman! what think'st thou of thy husband
now?

ISABEL. (*Raising herself from the body.*)

Much did I always think of him, but more
Than ever now, when, from an humble state,

The Lord hath chosen him to be a witness,
Even unto death, for His own cause and kingdom.

CLAVERHOUSE. 'Twere a good deed to lay thee by his side.

ISABEL. And so thou wouldst, were it permitted thee!
But canst not do what hath not been decreed.
But you! how will you answer for this work?

CLAVERHOUSE. To man I'll answer; as for God, I'll take Him
Into mine own hand. So much for gossip!

*(Claverhouse rides off; the widow wraps her plaid over
the mangled body, gathers her children around her
and sits down and weeps. A short time having
elapsed, there arrives on the spot old Christian Steel,
from the Cummerhead, "that singular godly and
Christian woman," who comes up to the mourners
and throws her arms around them.)*

CHRISTIAN. O Isabel! and is thy master taken,
And from thy head removed this day? and hath
He won the martyr's crown, which ever shines
The brightest mid the diadems of heaven?
And hath the Lord espoused thee to Himself,
Adopting all thy children? In one day,
How great the loss, but greater the exchange!
No wonder that thou sittest on the ground,
Gazing on earth and heaven, and telling them,
"See what the Lord hath wrought! Holy His name!"

Arise, my daughter! and dry up thy tears.

(Raising her, and still keeping her arms around her.)

Enough of lamentation for the dead,

Whose death hath been a triumph, and whose triumph

Shall never fade. Enough of lamentation!

But for a moment hath the Lord forsaken,

With tenderest mercies will He gather thee.

Arise, my daughter! my fair children, rise!

Large is your need, but Grace hath large supplies.

Deeply the creature yearneth, but not more

Than may be filled at heaven's unbounded store.

This cottage henceforth shall a Bethel be,

An angel spot, which men will come to see

From the far lands, and as they see will say,

“The just man's memory passeth not away!”

The Martyr of Priesthill shall be a name,

In cloudiest times, to kindle Scotland's flame.

A sample of her ancient chosen seed,

Stedfast to truth, and strong in word and deed.

He lived by faith, and faith lived in its fruit,

The harvest showed the richness of the root:

His soul serene in Nature's dying strife,

Faithful to death, he won the crown of Life!”