

Folk & Traditional Song Lyrics

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Johnny Armstrong (2)

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Sum speiks of lords, sum speiks of lairds,
And siclyke men of hie degrie;
Of a gentleman I sing a sang,
Sumtyme calld Laird of Giluockie.

The king he wrytes a laving letter,
With his ain hand see tenderly:
And he hath sent it to Johnnie Armstrang,
To cum and speik with him speidily.

The Eliots and Armstrangs did convene,
They were a gallant company:
'We'll ryde and meit our lawful king,
And bring him safe to Gilnockiel'

'Make kinnen(1) and capon ready, then,
And venison in great plenty;
We'll welcome hame our royal king;
I hope he'll dyne at Gilnockiel'

They ran their horse on the Langum howm(2)
And brake their speirs with mekle main;
The ladys lukit free their loft-windows,
'God bring our men weil back again!'

When Johnnie came before the king,
With all his men see brave to see,
The King he movit his bonnet to him;
He weind he was a king as well as he.

'May I find grace, my sovereign liege,
Grace for my loyal men and me?
For my name it is Johnnie Armstrang,
And subject of yours, my liege,' said he.

'Away, away, thou traytor, strang!
Out of my sicht thou mayst sune be!
I grantit nevir a traytors lyfe,
And now I'll not begin with thee.'

"Grant me my lyfe, my liege, my king,
And a bony gift I will give to thee:

Full four-and-twenty milk-whyt steids.
Were a' foald in a yeir to me.

'I'll gie thee all these milk-whyt steids,
that prance and nicher at a speir,
With as mekle gude Inglis gilt
As four of their braid backs dow beir.'

'Away, away, thou traytor strang!
Out o' my sicht thou mayst sune be!
I grantit nevir a traytors lyfe,
And now I'll not begin with thee.'

'Grant me my lyfe, my liege, my king,
And a bony gift I'll gie to thee;
Gude four-and-twenty ganging mills,
That gang throw a' the yeir to me.

'These four-and-twenty mills complete
Sall gang for thee throw all the yeir,
And as mekle of gude reid wheat
As all their trappers dow to bear.'

'Away, away, thou traytor, strang!
Out of my sicht thou mayst sune be!
I grantit nevir a traytors lyfe,
And now I'll not begin with thee.'

'Grant me my lyfe, my liege, my king,
And a great gift I'll gie to thee;
Bauld four-and-twenty sisters sons,
Sall for the fecht, tho all sould flee.'

'Away, away, thou traytor, strang!
Out of my sicht thou mayst sune be!
I grantit nevir a traytors lyfe,
And now I'll not begin with thee.'

'Grant me my lyfe, my liege, my king,
And a brave gift I'll gie to thee;
All betwene heir and Newcastle town
Sall pay chair yeirly rent to thee.'

Away, away, thou traytor, strang!
Out of my sicht thou mayst sune be!
I grantit nevir a traytors lyfe,
And now I'll not begin with thee.'

'Ye lied, ye lied, now, king,' he says,

'Althocht a king and prince ye be,
For I luid naithing in all my lyfe,
I dare well say it, but honesty;

'But a fat horse, and a fair woman,
Twa bony dogs to kill a deir:
But Ingland suld half found me meil and malt,
Gif I had livd this hundred yeir!

'Scho suld half found me meil and malt,
And beif and mutton in all plentie;
But neir a Scots wyfe could half said
That eir I skaithd her a pure flie.(3)

'To seik het water beneth cauld yce,
Surely it is a great folie;
I half asked grace at a graceless face,
But there is nane for my men and me.

'But had I kend, or I came free hame,
How thou unkynd wadst bene to me,
I wad half kept the border-syde,
In spyte of all they force and thee.

'Wist Englands king that I was tane,
O gin a blyth man wald he be!
For anes I slew his sisters son,
And on his breist-bane brak a tree.'

John wore a girdle about his midle,
Imbroidered owre with burning gold,
Bespangled with the same mettle,
Maist beautiful! was to behold.

Ther hang nine targets at Johnnies hat,
And ilk an worth three hundred pound:
'What wants that knave that a king suld haif,
But the sword of honour and the crown!

'O whair get thou these targets, Johnnie,
That blink see brawly abune thy brie?'
'I get them in the field fechting,
Wher, cruel king, thou durst not be.

'Had I my horse, and my harness gude,
And ryding as I wont to be,
It sould half bene tald this hundred yeir
The meiting of my king and me.

'God be withee, Kirsty, my brither,
Lang live thou Laird of Mangertoun!
Lang mayst thou live on the border-syde
Or thou se thy brither ryde up and down.

'And God be withee, Kirsty, my son,
Whair thou sits on thy nurses knee!
But and thou live this hundred yeir,
Thy fathers better thould never be.

'Farweil, my bonny Gilnock-Hall,
Whair on Esk-syde thou standest stout!
Gif I had lived but seven yeirs mair,
I wad haff gilt thee round about.'

John muredred was at Carlinrigg,
And all his galant companie,
But Scotlands heart was never sae wae,
To see sae mony brave men die.

Because they savd their country deir
Frae Englishmen; nane were sae bauld,
Whyle Johnnie livd on the border-syde,
Nane of them durst cum neir his hald.

- (1) oxen
- (2) low flat ground by river
- (3) I did her a fly's worth of harm

The events of "Johnnie Armstrong" took place in 1530, and the events depicted match reasonably well with contemporary accounts. Brander says, "This version of the ballad comes from Allan Ramsay's *The Ever Green*, Vol II, page 190, which is 'copied from a gentleman's mouth of the name of Armstrang, who is 6th generation from this John'. This certainly dates it prior to 1724 and it may well be the original sixteenth-century version." p73 td

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