

Death and Doctor Hornbook : A True Story

Some books are lies frae end to end,
 And some great lies were never penn'd:
 Ev'n ministers they hae been kenn'd,
 In holy rapture,
 A rousing whid at times to vend,
 And nail't wi' Scripture.

But this that I am gaun to tell,
 Which lately on a night befell,
 Is just as true's the Deil's in hell
 Or Dublin city:
 That e'er he nearer comes oursel'
 'S a muckle pity.

The clachan yill had made me canty,
 I was na fou, but just had plenty;
 I stacher'd whiles, but yet too tent aye
 To free the ditches;
 An' hillocks, stanes, an' bushes, kenn'd eye
 Frae ghaists an' witches.

The rising moon began to glowre
 The distant Cumnock hills out-owre:
 To count her horns, wi' a my pow'r,
 I set mysel';
 But whether she had three or four,
 I cou'd na tell.

I was come round about the hill,
 An' todlin down on Willie's mill,
 Setting my staff wi' a' my skill,
 To keep me sicker;
 Tho' leeward whiles, against my will,
 I took a bicker.

I there wi' Something did forgather,
 That pat me in an eerie swither;
 An' awfu' scythe, out-owre ae shouter,
 Clear-dangling, hang;
 A three-tae'd leister on the ither
 Lay, large an' lang.

Its stature seem'd lang Scotch ells twa,
 The queerest shape that e'er I saw,
 For fient a wame it had ava;
 And then its shanks,
 They were as thin, as sharp an' sma'
 As cheeks o' branks.

"Guid-een," quo' I; "Friend! hae ye been mawin,
 When ither folk are busy sawin!"
 I seem'd to make a kind o' stan'
 But naething spak;
 At length, says I, "Friend! whare ye gaun?
 Will ye go back?"

It spak right howe, - "My name is Death,
 But be na fley'd."-Quoth I, "Guid faith,
 Ye're maybe come to stap my breath;
 But tent me, billie;
 I red ye weel, tak care o' skaith
 See, there's a gully!"

"Gudemane," quo' he, "put up your whittle,
 I'm no designed to try its mettle;

But if I did, I wad be kittle
 To be mislear'd;
 I wad na mind it, no that spittle
 Out-owre my beard."

"Weel, weel!" says I, "a bargain be't;
 Come, gie's your hand, an' sae we're gree't;
 We'll ease our shanks an tak a seat-
 Come, gie's your news;
 This while ye hae been mony a gate,
 At mony a house."

"Ay, ay!" quo' he, an' shook his head,
 "It's e'en a lang, lang time indeed
 Sin' I began to nick the thread,
 An' choke the breath:
 Folk maun do something for their bread,
 An' sae maun Death.

"Sax thousand years are near-hand fled
 Sin' I was to the butching bred,
 An' mony a scheme in vain's been laid,
 To stap or scar me;
 Till ane Hornbook's ta'en up the trade,
 And faith! he'll waur me.

"Ye ken Hornbook i' the clachan,
 Deil mak his king's-hood in spleuchan!
 He's grown sae weel acquaint wi' Buchan
 And ither chaps,
 The weans haud out their fingers laughin,
 An' pouk my hips.

"See, here's a scythe, an' there's dart,
 They hae pierc'd mony a gallant heart;
 But Doctor Hornbook, wi' his art
 An' cursed skill,
 Has made them baith no worth a f-t,
 Damn'd haet they'll kill!

"'Twas but yestreen, nae farther gane,
 I threw a noble throw at ane;
 Wi' less, I'm sure, I've hundreds slain;
 But deil-ma-care,
 It just play'd dirl on the bane,
 But did nae mair.

"Hornbook was by, wi' ready art,
 An' had sae fortify'd the part,

That when I looked to my dart,
 It was sae blunt,
 Fient haet o't wad hae pierc'd the heart
 Of a kail-runt.

"I drew my scythe in sic a fury,
 I near-hand cowpit wi' my hurry,
 But yet the bauld Apothecary
 Withstood the shock;
 I might as weel hae tried a quarry
 O' hard whin rock.

"Ev'n them he canna get attended,
 Altho' their face he ne'er had kend it,
 Just-in a kail-blade, an' sent it,
 As soon's he smells 't,
 Baith their disease, and what will mend it,
 At once he tells 't.

"And then, a' doctor's saws an' whittles,
Of a' dimensions, shapes, an' mettles,
A' kind o' boxes, mugs, an' bottles,
He's sure to hae;
Their Latin names as fast he rattles
as A B C.

"Calces o' fossils, earths, and trees;
True sal-marinum o' the seas;
The farina of beans an' pease,
He has't in plenty;
Aqua-fontis, what you please,
He can content ye.

"Forbye some new, uncommon weapons,
Urinus spiritus of capons;
Or mite-horn shavings, filings, scrapings,
Distill'd per se;
Sal-alkali o' midge-tail clippings,
And mony mae."

"Waes me for Johnie Ged's Hole now,"
Quoth I, "if that thae news be true!
His brow calf-ward whare gowans grew,
Sae white and bonie,
Nae doubt they'll rive it wi' the plew;
They'll ruin Johnie!"

The creature grain'd an eldritch laugh,
And says "Ye needna yoke the pleugh,
Kirkyards will soon be till'd eneugh,
Tak ye nae fear:
They'll be trench'd wi' mony a sheugh,
In twa-three year.

"Whare I kill'd ane, a fair strae-death,
By loss o' blood or want of breath
This night I'm free to tak my aith,
That Hornbook's skill
Has clad a score i' their last claith,
By drap an' pill.

"An honest wabster to his trade,
Whase wife's twa nieves were scarce weel-bred
Gat tippence-worth to mend her head,
When it was sair;
The wife slade cannie to her bed,
But ne'er spak mair.

"A country laird had ta'en the batts,
Or some curmurring in his guts,
His only son for Hornbook sets,
An' pays him well:
The lad, for twa guid gimmer-pets,
Was laird himsel'.

"A bonie lass-ye kend her name-
Some ill-brewn drink had hov'd her wame;
She trusts hersel', to hide the shame,
In Hornbook's care;
Horn sent her aff to her lang hame,
To hide it there.

"That's just a swatch o' Hornbook's way;
Thus goes he on from day to day,
Thus does he poison, kill, an' slay,
An's weel paid for't;

Yet stops me o' my lawfu' prey,
Wi' his damn'd dirt:

"But, hark! I'll tell you of a plot,
Tho' dinna ye be speakin o't;
I'll nail the self-conceited sot,
As dead's a herrin;
Neist time we meet, I'll wad a goat,
He gets his fairin!"

But just as he began to tell,
The auld kirk-hammer strak the bell
Some wee short hour ayont the twal',
Which rais'd us baith:
I took the way that pleas'd mysel',
And sae did Death.