

WHAT can this work be? Sure, you will say, it must be an allegory; or (as the writer calls it) a religious PARABLE, showing the dreadful danger of self-righteousness? I cannot tell. Attend to the sequel: which is a thing so extraordinary, so unprecedented, and so far out of the common course of human events that, if there were not hundreds of living witnesses to attest the truth of it, I would not bid any rational being believe it.

In the first place, take the following extract from an authentic letter, published in Blackwood's Magazine for August, 1823.

"On the top of a wild height called Cowan's-Croft, where the lands of three proprietors meet all at one point, there has been for long and many years the grave of a suicide marked out by a stone standing at the head and another at the feet. Often have I stood musing over it myself, when a shepherd on one of the farms, of which it formed the extreme boundary, and thinking what could induce a young man, who had scarcely reached the prime of life, to brave his Maker, and rush into His presence by an act of his own erring hand, and one so unnatural and preposterous. But it never once occurred to me, as an object of curiosity, to dig up the mouldering bones of the Culprit, which I considered as the most revolting of all objects. The thing was, however, done last month, and a discovery made of one of the greatest natural phenomena that I have heard of in this country.

"The little traditionary history that remains of this unfortunate youth is altogether a singular one. He was not a native of the place, nor would he ever tell from what place he came; but he was remarkable for a deep, thoughtful, and sullen disposition. There was nothing against his character that anybody knew of here, and he had been a considerable time in the place. The last service he was in was with a Mr. Anderson, of Eltrive (Ault-Righ, the King's Burn), who died about 100 years ago, and who had hired him during the summer to herd a stock of young cattle in Eltrive Hope. It happened one day in the month of September that James Anderson, his master's son, went with this young man to the Hope to divert himself. The herd had his dinner along with him, and about one o'clock, when the boy proposed going home, the former pressed him very hard to stay and take share of his dinner; but the boy refused for fear his parents might be alarmed about him, and said he would go home: on which the herd said to him, 'Then, if ye winna stay with me, James, ye may depend on't I'll cut my throat afore ye come back again.'

"I have heard it likewise reported, but only by one person, that there had been some things stolen out of his master's house a good while before, and that the boy had discovered a silver knife and fork that was a part of the stolen property, in the herd's possession that day, and that it was this discovery that drove him to despair.

"The boy did not return to the Hope that afternoon; and, before evening, a man coming in at the pass called The Hart Loup, with a drove of lambs, on the way for Edinburgh, perceived something like a man standing in a strange frightful position at the side of one of Eldinhope hay-ricks. The driver's attention was riveted on this strange uncouth figure, and, as the drove-road passed at no great distance from the spot, he first called, but, receiving no answer, he went up to the spot, and behold it was the above-mentioned young man, who had hung himself in the hay rope that was tying down the rick.

"This was accounted a great wonder; and everyone said, if the Devil had not assisted him, it was impossible the thing could have been done; for, in general, these ropes are so brittle, being made of green hay, that they will scarcely bear to be bound over the rick. And, the more to horrify the good people of this neighbourhood, the driver said, when he first came in view, he could almost give his oath that he saw two people busily engaged at the hay-rick going round it and round it, and he thought they were dressing it.

“If this asseveration approximated at all to truth, it makes this evident at least, that the unfortunate young man had hanged himself after the man with the lambs came in view. He was, however, quite dead when he cut him down. He had fastened two of the old hay-ropes at the bottom of the rick on one side (indeed, they are all fastened so when first laid on) so that he had nothing to do but to loosen two of the ends on the other side. These he had tied in a knot round his neck, and then slackening his knees, and letting himself down gradually, till the hay-rope bore all his weight, he had contrived to put an end to his existence in that way. Now the fact is, that, if you try all the ropes that are thrown over all the out-field hay-ricks in Scotland, there is not one among a thousand of them will hang a colley dog; so that the manner of this wretch’s death was rather a singular circumstance.

“Early next morning, Mr. Anderson’s servants went reluctantly away, and, taking an old blanket with them for a winding sheet, they rolled up the body of the deceased, first in his own plaid, letting the hay-rope still remain about his neck, and then, rolling the old blanket over all, they bore the loathed remains away to the distance of three miles or so, on spokes, to the top of Cowan’s-Croft, at the very point where the Duke of Buccleuch’s land, the Laird of Drummelzier’s, and Lord Napier’s meet, and there they buried him, with all that he had on and about him, silver knife and fork and altogether. Thus far went tradition, and no one ever disputed one jot of the disgusting oral tale.

“A nephew of that Mr. Anderson’s who was with the hapless youth that day he died says that, as far as he can gather from the relations of friends that he remembers, and of that same uncle in particular, it is one hundred and five years next month (that is September, 1823) since that event happened; and I think it likely that this gentleman’s information is correct. But sundry other people, much older than he, whom I have consulted, pretend that it is six or seven years more. They say they have heard that Mr. James Anderson was then a boy ten years of age; that he lived to an old age, upwards of fourscore, and it is two and forty years since he died. Whichever way it may be, it was about that period some way: of that there is no doubt.

“It so happened that two young men, William Shiel and W. Sword, were out on an adjoining height this summer, casting peats, and it came into their heads to open this grave in the wilderness, and see if there were any of the bones of the suicide of former ages and centuries remaining. They did so, but opened only one half of the grave, beginning at the head and about the middle at the same time. It was not long till they came upon the old blanket—I think, they said not much more than a foot from the surface. They tore that open, and there was the hay-rope lying stretched down alongst his breast, so fresh that they saw at first sight that it was made of risp, a sort of long sword-grass that grows about marshes and the sides of lakes. One of the young men seized the rope and pulled by it, but the old enchantment of the Devil remained—it would not break; and so he pulled and pulled at it, till behold the body came up into a sitting posture, with a broad blue bonnet on its head, and its plaid around it, all as fresh as that day it was laid in! I never heard of a preservation so wonderful, if it be true as was related to me, for still I have not had the curiosity to go and view the body myself. The features were all so plain that an acquaintance might easily have known him. One of the lads gripped the face of the corpse with his finger and thumb, and the cheeks felt quite soft and fleshy, but the dimples remained and did not spring out again. He had fine yellow hair, about nine inches long; but not a hair of it could they pull out till they cut part of it off with a knife. They also cut off some portions of his clothes, which were all quite fresh, and distributed them among their acquaintances, sending a portion to me, among the rest, to keep as natural curiosities. Several gentlemen have in a manner forced me to give them fragments of these enchanted garments: I have, however, retained a small

portion for you, which I send along with this, being a piece of his plaid, and another of his waistcoat breast, which you will see are still as fresh as that day they were laid in the grave.

“His broad blue bonnet was sent to Edinburgh several weeks ago, to the great regret of some gentlemen connected with the land, who wished to have it for a keep-sake. For my part, fond as I am of blue bonnets, and broad ones in particular, I declare I durst not have worn that one. There was nothing of the silver knife and fork discovered, that I heard of, nor was it very likely it should; but it would appear he had been very near run out of cash, which I daresay had been the cause of his utter despair; for, on searching his pockets, nothing was found but three old Scotch halfpennies. These young men meeting with another shepherd afterwards, his curiosity was so much excited that they went and digged up the curious remains a second time, which was a pity, as it is likely that by these exposures to the air, and the impossibility of burying it up again as closely as it was before, the flesh will now fall to dust.”

The letter from which the above is an extract, is signed JAMESHOGG, and dated from Altrive Lake, August 1st, 1823. It bears the stamp of authenticity in every line; yet so often had I been hoaxed by the ingenious fancies displayed in that Magazine, that when this relation met my eye I did not believe it; but, from the moment that I perused it, I half formed the resolution of investigating these wonderful remains personally, if any such existed; for, in the immediate vicinity of the scene, as I supposed, I knew of more attractive metal than the dilapidated remains of mouldering suicides.

Accordingly, having some business in Edinburgh in September last, and being obliged to wait a few days for the arrival of a friend from London, I took that opportunity to pay a visit to my townsman and fellow collegian, Mr. L—t of C—d, advocate. I mentioned to him Hogg’s letter, asking him if the statement was founded at all on truth. His answer was: “I suppose so. For my part I never doubted the thing, having been told that there has been a deal of talking about it up in the Forest for some time past. But God knows! Hogg has imposed as ingenious lies on the public ere now.”

I said, if it was within reach, I should like exceedingly to visit both the Shepherd and the Scotch mummy he had described. Mr. L—t assented on the first proposal, saying he had no objections to take a ride that length with me, and make the fellow produce his credentials. That we would have a delightful jaunt through a romantic and now classical country, and some good sport into the bargain, provided he could procure a horse for me, from his father-in-law, next day. He sent up to a Mr. L—w to inquire, who returned for answer that there was an excellent pony at my service, and that he himself would accompany us, being obliged to attend a great sheep-fair at Thirlestane; and that he was certain the Shepherd would be there likewise.

Mr. L—t said that was the very man we wanted to make our party complete; and at an early hour next morning we started for the ewe-fair of Thirlestane, taking Blackwood’s Magazine for August along with us. We rode through the ancient royal burgh of Selkirk, halted and corned our horses at a romantic village, nigh to some deep linns on the Ettrick, and reached the market ground at Thirlestane-green a little before mid-day. We soon found Hogg, standing near the foot of the market, as he called it, beside a great drove of paulies, a species of stock that I never heard of before. They were small sheep, striped on the backs with red chalk. Mr. L—t introduced me to him as a great wool-stapler, come to raise the price of that article; but he eyed me with distrust, and, turning his back on us, answered: “I hae sell’d mine.”

I followed, and, shewing him the above-quoted letter, said I was exceedingly curious to have a look of these singular remains he had so ingeniously described; but he only answered me with the remark that “It was a queer fancy for a wool-stapler to tak.”

His two friends then requested him to accompany us to the spot, and to take some of his shepherds with us to assist in raising the body; but he spurned at the idea, saying: "Od bless ye, lad! I hae ither matters to mind. I hae a' thae paulies to sell, an', a' yon Highland stotts down on the green, every ane; an' then I hae ten scores o' yowes to buy after, an', If I canna first sell my ain stock, I canna buy nae ither body's. I hae mair ado than I can manage the day, foreby ganging to houk up hunder-year-auld-banes."

Finding that we could make nothing of him, we left him with his paulies, Highland stotts, grey jacket, and broad blue bonnet, to go in search of some other guide. L—w soon found one, for he seemed acquainted with every person in the fair. We got a fine old shepherd, named W—m B—e, a great original, and a very obliging and civil man, who asked no conditions but that we should not speak of it, because he did not wish it to come to his master's ears that he had been engaged in sic a profane thing. We promised strict secrecy; and accompanied by another farmer, Mr. S—t, and old B—e, we proceeded to the grave, which B—e described as about a mile and a half distant from the market ground.

We went into the shepherd's cot to get a drink of milk, when I read to our guide Mr. Hogg's description, asking him if he thought it correct. He said there was hardly a bit o't correct, for the grave was not on the hill of Cowan's-Croft nor yet on the point where three lairds' lands met, but on the top of a hill called the Faw-Law, where there was no land that was not the Duke of Buccleuch's within a quarter of a mile. He added that it was a wonder how the poet could be mistaken there, who once herded the very ground where the grave is, and saw both hills from his own window. Mr. L—w testified great surprise at such a singular blunder, as also how the body came not to be buried at the meeting of three or four lairds' lands, which had always been customary in the south of Scotland. Our guide said he had always heard it reported that the Eltrive men, with Mr. David Anderson at their head, had risen before day on the Monday morning, it having been on the Sabbath day that the man put down himself; and that they set out with the intention of burying him on Cowan's-Croft, where the three marches met at a point. But, it having been an invariable rule to bury such lost sinners before the rising of the sun, these five men were overtaken by day-light, as they passed the house of Berry-Knowe; and, by the time they reached the top of the Faw-Law, the sun was beginning to skair the east. On this they laid down the body, and digged a deep grave with all expedition; but, when they had done, it was too short, and, the body being stiff, it would not go down; on which Mr. David Anderson, looking to the east and perceiving that the sun would be up on them in a few minutes, set his foot on the suicide's brow, and tramped down his head into the grave with his iron-heeled shoe, until the nose and skull crashed again, and at the same time uttered a terrible curse on the wretch who had disgraced the family and given them all this trouble. This anecdote, our guide said, he had heard when a boy, from the mouth of Robert Laidlaw, one of the five men who buried the body.

We soon reached the spot, and I confess I felt a singular sensation when I saw the grey stone standing at the head, and another at the feet, and the one half of the grave manifestly new-digged, and closed up again as had been described. I could still scarcely deem the thing to be a reality, for the ground did not appear to be wet, but a kind of dry rotten moss. On looking around, we found some fragments of clothes, some teeth, and part of a pocket-book, which had not been returned into the grave when the body had been last raised, for it had been twice raised before this, but only from the loins upward.

To work we fell with two spades, and soon cleared away the whole of the covering. The part of the grave that had been opened before was filled with mossy mortar, which impeded us exceedingly, and entirely prevented a proper investigation of the fore parts of the body. I will

describe everything as I saw it before our respectable witnesses, whose names I shall publish at large if permitted. A number of the bones came up separately; for, with the constant flow of liquid stuff into the deep grave, we could not see to preserve them in their places. At length great loads of coarse clothes, blanketing, plaiding, etc. appeared; we tried to lift these regularly up, and, on doing so, part of a skeleton came up, but no flesh, save a little that was hanging in dark flitters about the spine, but which had no consistence; it was merely the appearance of flesh without the substance. The head was wanting, and, I being very anxious to possess the skull, the search was renewed among the mortar and rags. We first found a part of the scalp, with the long hair firm on it; which, on being cleaned, is neither black nor fair, but a darkish dusk, the most common of any other colour. Soon afterwards we found the skull, but it was not complete. A spade had damaged it, and one of the temple quarters was wanting. I am no phrenologist, not knowing one organ from another, but I thought the skull of that wretched man no study. If it was particular for anything, it was for a smooth, almost perfect rotundity, with only a little protuberance above the vent of the ear.

When we came to that part of the grave that had never been opened before, the appearance of everything was quite different. There the remains lay under a close vault of moss, and within a vacant space; and I suppose, by the digging in the former part of the grave, the part had been deepened, and drawn the moisture away from this part, for here all was perfect. The breeches still suited the thigh, the stocking the leg, and the garters were wrapt as neatly and as firm below the knee as if they had been newly tied. The shoes were all open in the seams, the hemp having decayed, but the soles, upper leathers and wooden heels, which were made of birch, were all as fresh as any of those we wore. There was one thing I could not help remarking, that in the inside of one of the shoes there was a layer of cow's dung, about one-eighth of an inch thick, and in the hollow of the sole fully one-fourth of an inch. It was firm, green, and fresh; and proved that he had been working in a byre. His clothes were all of a singular ancient cut, and no less singular in their texture. Their durability certainly would have been prodigious; for in thickness, coarseness, and strength, I never saw any cloth in the smallest degree to equal them. His coat was a frock coat, of a yellowish drab colour, with wide sleeves. It is tweeled, milled, and thicker than a carpet. I cut off two of the skirts and brought them with me. His vest was of striped serge, such as I have often seen worn by country people. It was lined and backed with white stuff. The breeches were a sort of striped plaiding, which I never saw worn, but which our guide assured us was very common in the country once, though, from the old clothes which he had seen remaining of it, he judged that it could not be less than 200 years since it was in fashion. His garters were of worsted, and striped with black or blue; his stockings grey, and wanting the feet. I brought samples of all along with me. I have likewise now got possession of the bonnet, which puzzles me most of all. It is not conformable with the rest of the dress. It is neither a broad bonnet nor a Border bonnet; for there is an open behind, for tying, which no genuine Border bonnet I am told ever had. It seems to have been a Highland bonnet, worn in a flat way, like a scone on the crown, such as is sometimes still seen in the West of Scotland. All the limbs, from the loins to the toes, seemed perfect and entire, but they could not bear handling. Before we got them returned again into the grave they were shaken to pieces, except the thighs, which continued to retain a kind of flabby form.

All his clothes that were sewed with linen yam were lying in separate portions, the thread having rotten; but such as were sewed with worsted remained perfectly firm and sound. Among such a confusion, we had hard work to find out all his pockets, and our guide supposed that, after all, we did not find above the half of them. In his vest pocket was a long clasp-knife, very sharp;

the haft was thin, and the scales shone as if there had been silver inside. Mr. Sc—t took it with him, and presented it to his neighbour, Mr. R—n, of W—n L—e, who still has it in his possession. We found a comb, a gimblet, a vial, a small neat square board, a pair of plated knee-buckles, and several samples of cloth of different kinds, rolled neatly up within one another. At length, while we were busy on the search, Mr. L—t picked up a leathern case, which seemed to have been wrapped round and round by some ribbon, or cord, that had been rotten from it, for the swaddling marks still remained. Both L—w and B—e called out that “it was the tobacco spleuchan, and a well-filled ane too”; but, on opening it out, we found, to our great astonishment, that it contained a printed pamphlet. We were all curious to see what sort of a pamphlet such a person would read; what it could contain that he seemed to have had such a care about. For the slough in which it was rolled was fine chamois leather; what colour it had been could not be known. But the pamphlet was wrapped so close together, and so damp, rotten, and yellow that it seemed one solid piece. We all concluded from some words that we could make out that it was a religious tract, but that it would be impossible to make anything of it. Mr. L—w remarked marked that it was a great pity if a few sentences could not be made out, for that it was a question what might be contained in that little book; and then he requested Mr. L—t to give it to me, as he had so many things of literature and law to attend to that he would never think more of it. He replied that either of us were heartily welcome to it, for that he had thought of returning it into the grave, if he could have made out but a line or two, to have seen what was its tendency.

“Grave, man!” exclaimed L—w, who speaks excellent strong broad Scotch. “My truly, but ye grave weel! I wad esteem the contents o’ that spleuchan as the most precious treasure. I’ll tell you what it is, sir: I hae often wondered how it was that this man’s corpse has been miraculously preserved frae decay, a hunder times langer than any other body’s, or than ever a tanner’s. But now I could wager a guinea it has been for the preservation o’ that little book. And Lord kens what may be in’t! It will maybe reveal some mystery that mankind disna ken naething about yet.”

“If there be any mysteries in it,” returned the other, “it is not for your handling, my dear friend, who are too much taken up about mysteries already.” And with these words he presented the mysterious pamphlet to me. With very little trouble, save that of a thorough drying, I unrolled it all with ease, and found the very tract which I have here ventured to lay before the public, part of it in small bad print, and the remainder in manuscript. The title page is written and is as follows:

THE PRIVATE MEMOIRS AND CONFESSIONS OF A JUSTIFIED SINNER:  
WRITTEN BY HIMSELF

Fideli certa merces.

And, amongst the head, it is the same as given in the present edition of the work. I altered the title to A Self-justified Sinner, but my booksellers did not approve of it; and, there being a curse pronounced by the writer on him that should dare to alter or amend, I have let it stand as it is. Should it be thought to attach discredit to any received principle of our Church, I am blameless. The printed part ends at page 201 and the rest is in a fine old hand, extremely small and close. I have ordered the printer to procure a facsimile of it, to be bound in with the volume. [v. Frontispiece.]

With regard to the work itself, I dare not venture a judgment, for I do not understand it. I believe no person, man or woman, will ever peruse it with the same attention that I have done, and yet I confess that I do not comprehend the writer’s drift. It is certainly impossible that these

scenes could ever have occurred that he describes as having himself transacted. I think it may be possible that he had some hand in the death of his brother, and yet I am disposed greatly to doubt it; and the numerous traditions, etc. which remain of that event may be attributable to the work having been printed and burnt, and of course the story known to all the printers, with their families and gossips. That the young Laird of Dalcastle came by a violent death, there remains no doubt; but that this wretch slew him, there is to me a good deal. However, allowing this to have been the case, I account all the rest either dreaming or madness; or, as he says to Mr. Watson, a religious parable, on purpose to illustrate something scarcely tangible, but to which he seems to have attached great weight. Were the relation at all consistent with reason, it corresponds so minutely with traditionary facts that it could scarcely have missed to have been received as authentic; but in this day, and with the present generation, it will not go down that a man should be daily tempted by the Devil, in the semblance of a fellow-creature; and at length lured to self-destruction, in the hopes that this same fiend and tormentor was to suffer and fall along with him. It was a bold theme for an allegory, and would have suited that age well had it been taken up by one fully qualified for the task, which this writer was not. In short, we must either conceive him not only the greatest fool, but the greatest wretch, on whom was ever stamped the form of humanity; or, that he was a religious maniac, who wrote and wrote about a deluded creature, till he arrived at that height of madness that he believed himself the very object whom he had been all along describing. And, in order to escape from an ideal tormentor, committed that act for which, according to the tenets he embraced, there was no remission, and which consigned his memory and his name to everlasting detestation.