

The Little Grey Man

By H. Bunbury

Mary-Ann was the darling of Aix-la-Chapelle;
She bore through its province, unenvied, the belle;
The joy of her fellows, her parents delight;
So kind was her soul, and her beauty so bright:
No maiden surpass'd, or perhaps ever can,
Of Aix-la-Chapelle the beloved Mary-Ann.

Her form it was faultless, unaided by art;
And frank her demeanour, as guileless her heart;
Her soft melting eyes a sweet languor bedeck'd,
And youth's gawdy bloom was by love lightly check'd;
On her mien had pure nature bestow'd her best grace,
And her mind stood confess'd in the charms of her face.

Though with suitors beset, yet her Leopold knew,
As her beauty was matchless, her heart it was true,
So fearless he went to the wars; while the maid,
Her fears for brave Leopold often betray'd:
Full oft, in the gloom of the churchyard reclined,
Would she pour forth her sorrows and vows to the wind.

—“Ah me!”—would she sigh, in a tone that would melt
The heart that one spark of true-love ever felt;
—“Ah me!”—would she sigh—“past and gone is the day,
“When my father was plighted to give me away!
“My fancy, what sad gloomy presage appalls?
“Ah! sure on the Danube my Leopold falls!”—

One evening so gloomy, when only the owl
(A tempest impending) would venture to prow!;
Mary-Ann, whose delight was in sadness and gloom,
By a newly-made grave sat her down on a tomb;
But ere she to number her sorrows began,
Lo! out of the grave jump'd a Little Grey Man

His hue it was deadly, his eyes they were ghast;
Long and pale were his fingers, that held her arm fast;—
She shriek'd a loud shriek, so affrighted was she;
And grimly he scowl'd, as he jump'd on her knee.
With a voice that dismay'd her—"The Danube!"—he cried;
"There Leopold bleeds! Mary-Ann is my bride!"—

She shrunk, all appall'd, and she gazed all around;
She closed her sad eyes, and she sunk on the ground:
The Little Grey Man he resumed his discourse—
—"Tomorrow I take thee, for better, for worse
"At midnight my arms shall thy body entwine,
"Or this newly-made grave, Mary-Ann, shall be thine!"—

With fear and with fright did the maid look around,
When she first dared to raise her sad eyes from the ground;
With fear and with fright gazed the poor Mary-Ann,
Though lost to her sight was the Little Grey Man:
With fear and with fright from the churchyard she fled;
Reach'd her home, now so welcome, and sunk on her bed.

—"Woe is me!"— did she cry—"that I ever was born!
"Was ever poor maiden so lost and forlorn!
"Must that Little Grey Man, then my body entwine,
"Or the grave newly dug for another be mine?
"Shall I wait for to-morrow's dread midnight?—ah no!
"To my Leopold's arms—to the Danube I go!"—

Then up rose the maiden, so sore woe-begone,
And her Sunday's apparel in haste she put on;
Her close studded boddice of velvet so new;
Her coat of fine scarlet, and kirtle of blue;
Her ear-rings of jet, all so costly; and last,
Her long cloak of linsey, to guard from the blast.

A cross of pure gold, her fond mother's bequest,
By a still dearer riband she hung at her breast;
Round a bodkin of silver she bound her long hair,
In plaits and in tresses so comely and fair,
'Twould have gladden'd your heart, ere her journey began,
To have gazed on the tidy and trim Mary-Ann.

But, oh! her sad bosom such sorrows oppress'd,
Such fears and forebodings; as robb'd her of rest;
Forlorn as she felt, so forlorn must she go,
And brave the rough tempest, the hail, and the snow!
Yet still she set forth, all so pale and so wan—
Let a tear drop of pity for poor Mary-Ann.

Dark, dark was the night, and the way it was rude;
While the Little Grey Man on her thoughts would obtrude;
She wept as she thought on her long gloomy way;
She turn'd, and she yet saw the lights all so gay:
She kiss'd now her cross, as she heard the last bell;
And a long, long adieu bade to Aix-la-Chapelle.

Through the brown wood of Limbourg with caution she paced;
Ere the noon of the morrow she traversed the waste;
She mounted the hills of St. Bertrand so high;
And the day it declined, as the heath she drew nigh;
And she rested a wide-waving alder beneath,
And paused on the horrors of Sombermond's heath:

For there, in black groups (by the law 'tis imposed),
Are the bodies of fell malefactors exposed,
On wheels and on gibbets, on crosses and poles,
With a charge to the passing, to pray for their souls:
But a spot of such terror no robbers infest,
And there the faint pilgrim securely may rest.

Sore fatigued, the sad maid knelt, and said a short prayer;
She bound up her tresses, that flow'd in the air:
Again she set forth, and sped slowly along;
And her steps tried to cheer, but in vain, with a song:
In her thoughts all so gloomy, sad presages ran,
Of Leopold now, now the Little Grey Man.

The moon dimly gleam'd as she enter'd the plain;
The winds swept the clouds rolling on to the main;
For a hut e'er so wretched in vain she look'd round;
No tree promised shelter, no bed the cold ground:
Her limbs they now falter'd, her courage all fled,
As a faint beam display'd the black groups of the dead.

Shrill whistled the wind through the skulls, and the blast
Scared the yet greedy bird from its glutting repast;
From the new-rack'd assassin the raven withdrew,
But croak'd round the wheel still, and heavily flew;
While vultures, more daring, intent on their prey,
Tore the flesh from the sinews, yet reeking, away.

But the dread of banditti, some strength it restored;
And again she the aid of the Virgin implored;
She dragg'd her slow steps to where corpses, yet warm,
Threw their tatters and fresh mangled limbs to the storm
She reach'd the fell spot, and, aghast, looking round,
At a black gibbet's foot senseless sunk on the ground.

Now the battle was over, and o'er his proud foes
The Austrian eagle triumphantly rose;
Midst the groans of the dying, and blood of the slain,
Sorely wounded lay Leopold, stretch'd on the plain.
When reviving, he first to look round him began,
Lo! close by his side sat a Little Grey Man!

The Little Grey Man he sat munching a heart,
And, he growl'd in a tone all dismaying—"Depart!
"Don't disturb me at meals! pr'ythee rise, and pass on
"To Mary-Ann hie!—bind your wounds, and begone!—
"In a score and three days shall you meet Mary-Ann;
"And perhaps, uninvited, the Little Grey Man."—

With fear and dismay rose the youth from the ground,
His wounds he with balms and with bandages bound;
To quit his grim guest he made little delay,
And, faint though he was, he sped willing away:
For a score and three days did he journey amain,
Then sunk, all exhausted, on Sombermond's plain.

By the screams of the night-bird, though dark, he could tell
'Twas the gibbets amongst, and the wheels, where he fell.—
Now still her sad station did Mary-Ann keep,
Where Leopold, fainting, had sunk into sleep.
Ah! little thought he that his dear one was by!
Ah! little the maid that her love was so nigh!

Perch'd grim on a wheel sat the Little Grey Man,
Whilst his fierce little eyes o'er the sad lovers ran;
The Little Grey Man down to Leopold crept,
And open'd his wounds, all so deep, as he slept;
With a scream he the slumbers of Mary-Ann broke,
And the poor forlorn maid to new horrors awoke.

To her sight, sorely shock'd, did a moon beam display
Her lover, all bleeding and pale as he lay:
She shriek'd a loud shriek; and she tore her fine hair,
And she sunk her soft cheek on his bosom so fair;
With her long flowing tresses she strove to restrain,
And stop the dear blood that now issued amain,

To his wounds her fair hands she unceasingly press'd;
Her tears fast they fell on her Leopold's breast:
Entranced, and in slumber still silent he lay,
Till the Little Grey Man drove his slumbers away;
With a vision all horrid his senses betray'd,
And fatal to him and his much-beloved maid.

He dreamt, from his wheel an assassin had stepp'd,
And silent and slowly had close to him crept;
That the wretch, mangled piece-meal, and ghastly with gore,
From his wounds both the balms and the bandages tore;
And to search for his dagger as now he began,
—"Strike! strike!"—cried the voice of the Little Grey Man.

—"Strike! strike!" cried the fiend, "or your wounds bleed anew!"—
He struck—it was Mary-Ann's life-blood he drew—
With a shriek he awoke, nor his woes were they o'er;
He beheld his pale love, to behold her no more!—
Her eyes the poor maiden on Leopold cast,
Gave him one look of love, 'twas her fondest, her last!

The Little Grey Man now he set up a yell,
Which was heard in the halls of fair Aix-la-Chapelle,
He raised up his head, and he raised up his chin;
And he grinn'd, as he shouted, a horrible grin;
And he laugh'd a loud laugh, and his cap up he cast,
Exulting, as breathed the fond lovers their last.

As in each other's arms dead the fond lovers fell,
O'er the black lonely heath toll'd a low, distant bell;
From the gibbets and crosses shrieks issued, and groans,
And wild to the blast flew the skulls and the bones;
Whilst the Little Grey Man, midst a shower of blood,
In a whirlwind was hurl'd into Sombermond's wood.

Of Mary-Ann's sorrows, and Leopold's woes,
Long shall Maise's dark stream tell the tale as it flows:
Long, long shall the gossips of Aix-la-Chapelle,
Of the heath and its horrors, the traveller tell;
Who shall prick on his steed with what swiftness he can,
Lest he meet in the twilight the Little Grey Man.

On the Feast of St. Austin, to Sombermond's fair
Flock the youth of both sexes, its revels to share;
And in dainty apparel, all gallant and gay,
With dance, and with carols, and mirth, cheer the day;
While the proud castle's portal expanded, invites
To the hall's ample board, and its festive delights:

And there, on the richly-wrought arras, they view
Depicted, the woes of these lovers so true;
The troubles their sorrowful days that befel,
And the fate of the darling of Aix-la-Chapelle;
Behold, as she bloom'd, the beloved Mary-Ann,
And the heart-freezing scowl of the Little Grey Man.