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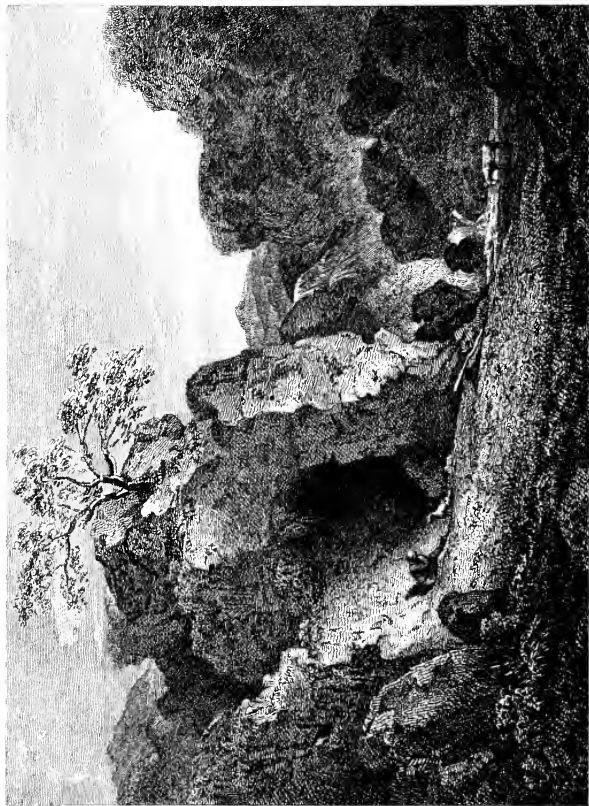


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PETER BELL

1819





Engraved by J. B. Thompson, from a Picture by the late George Bannister, Esq.

PETER BELL.

PETER BELL,

A

Tale in Verse,

BY

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH.

LONDON:

Printed by Strahan and Spottiswoode, Printers-Street ;
FOR LONGMAN, HURST, REES, ORME, AND BROWN,
PATERNOSTER-ROW.

1819.



TO

ROBERT SOUTHEY, Esq. P. L.

&c. &c.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

THE Tale of Peter Bell, which I now introduce to your notice, and to that of the Public, has, in its Manuscript state, nearly survived its *minority* ; — for it first saw the light in the summer of 1798. During this long interval, pains have been taken at different times to make the production less unworthy of a favourable reception ; or, rather, to fit it for filling *permanently* a station, however humble, in the Literature of my Country. This has, indeed,

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been the aim of all my endeavours in Poetry, which, you know, have been sufficiently laborious to prove that I deem the Art not lightly to be approached; and that the attainment of excellence in it, may laudably be made the principal object of intellectual pursuit by any man, who, with reasonable consideration of circumstances, has faith in his own impulses.

The Poem of Peter Bell, as the Prologue will shew, was composed under a belief that the Imagination not only does not require for its exercise the intervention of supernatural agency, but that, though such agency be excluded, the faculty may be called forth as imperiously, and for kindred results of pleasure, by incidents, within the compass of poetic probability, in the humblest departments of daily life. Since that Prologue was written, *you* have exhibited most

splendid effects of judicious daring, in the opposite and usual course. Let this acknowledgment make my peace with the lovers of the supernatural; and I am persuaded it will be admitted, that to you as a Master in that province of the art, the following Tale, whether from contrast or congruity, is a not unappropriate offering. Accept it then as a public testimony of affectionate admiration from one with whose name your's has been often coupled (to use your own words) for evil and for good; and believe me to be, with earnest wishes that life and health may be granted you to complete the many important works in which you are engaged, and with high respect,

Most faithfully your's,

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH.

Rydal Mount,
April 7. 1819.



PROLOGUE.

THERE'S something in a flying horse,
And something in a huge balloon;
But through the clouds I'll never float
Until I have a little Boat,
Whose shape is like the crescent-moon.

And now I *have* a little Boat,
In shape a very crescent-moon: —
Fast through the clouds my Boat can sail;
But if perchance your faith should fail,
Look up — and you shall see me soon!

The woods, my Friends, are round you roaring,
Rocking and roaring like a sea ;
The noise of danger fills your ears,
And ye have all a thousand fears
Both for my little Boat and me !

Meanwhile I from the helm admire
The pointed horns of my canoe ;
And, did not pity touch my breast,
To see how ye are all distrest,
Till my ribs ach'd, I'd laugh at you !

Away we go, my Boat and I —
Frail man ne'er sate in such another ;
Whether among the winds we strive,
Or deep into the heavens we dive,
Each is contented with the other.

Away we go — and what care we
For treasons, tumults, and for wars ?
We are as calm in our delight
As is the crescent-moon so bright
Among the scattered stars.

Up goes my Boat between the stars
Through many a breathless field of light,
Through many a long blue field of ether,
Leaving ten thousand stars beneath her,
Up goes my little Boat so bright !

The Crab — the Scorpion — and the Bull —
We pry among them all — have shot
High o'er the red-hair'd race of Mars
Cover'd from top to toe with scars ;
Such company I like it not !

The towns in Saturn are ill-built,
But proud let *him* be who has seen them ;
The Pleiads, that appear to kiss
Each other in the vast abyss,
With joy I sail between them !

Swift Mercury resounds with mirth,
Great Jove is full of stately bowers ;
But these, and all that they contain,
What are they to that tiny grain,
That darling speck of ours !

Then back to Earth, the dear green Earth ;
Whole ages if I here should roam,
The world for my remarks and me
Would not a whit the better be ;
I've left my heart at home.

And there it is, the matchless Earth !
There spreads the fam'd Pacific Ocean !
Old Andes thrusts yon craggy spear
Through the grey clouds — the Alps are here
Like waters in commotion !

Yon tawny slip is Lybia's sands —
That silver thread the river Dnieper —
And look, where cloth'd in brightest green
Is a sweet Isle, of isles the queen ;
Ye fairies from all evil keep her !

And see the town where I was born !
Around those happy fields we span
In boyish gambols — I was lost
Where I have been, but on this coast
I feel I am a man.

Never did fifty things at once
Appear so lovely, never, never, —
How tunefully the forests ring !
To hear the earth's soft murmuring
Thus could I hang for ever !

“ Shame on you,” cried my little Boat,
“ Was ever such a heartless loon,
Within a living Boat to sit,
And make no better use of it,
A Boat twin-sister of the crescent-moon !

Out — out — and, like a brooding hen,
Beside your sooty hearth-stone cower ;
Go, creep along the dirt, and pick
Your way with your good walking-stick,
Just three good miles an hour !

Ne'er in the breast of full-grown Poet
Flutter'd so faint a heart before —
Was it the music of the spheres
That overpower'd your mortal ears?
— Such din shall trouble them no more.

These nether precincts do not lack
Charms of their own; — then come with me —
I want a comrade, and for you
There's nothing that I would not do;
Nought is there that you shall not see.

Haste! and above Siberian snows
We'll sport amid the boreal morning,
Will mingle with her lustres gliding
Among the stars, the stars now hiding
And now the stars adorning.

I know the secrets of a land
Where human foot did never stray ;
Fair is the land as evening skies,
And cool, — though in the depth it lies
Of burning Africa.

Or we'll into the realm of Faery,
Among the lovely shades of things ;
The shadowy forms of mountains bare,
And streams, and bowers, and ladies fair ;
The shades of palaces and kings !

Or, if you thirst with hardy zeal
Less quiet regions to explore,
Prompt voyage shall to you reveal
How earth and heaven are taught to feel
The might of magic lore !”

“ My little vagrant Form of light,
My gay and beautiful Canoe,
Well have you play'd your friendly part;
As kindly take what from my heart
Experience forces — then adieu !

Temptation lurks among your words ;
But, while these pleasures you're pursuing
Without impediment or let,
My radiant Pinnacle, you forget
What on the earth is doing.

There was a time when all mankind
Did listen with a faith sincere
To tuneful tongues in mystery vers'd ;
Then Poets fearlessly rehears'd
The wonders of a wild career.

Go — but the world's a sleepy world
And 'tis, I fear, an age too late;
Take with you some ambitious Youth,
For I myself, in very truth,
Am all unfit to be your mate.

Long have I lov'd what I behold,
The night that calms, the day that cheers:
The common growth of mother earth
Suffices me — her tears, her mirth,
Her humblest mirth and tears.

The dragon's wing, the magic ring,
I shall not covet for my dower,
If I along that lowly way
With sympathetic heart may stray
And with a soul of power.

These given, what more need I desire,
To stir — to sooth — or elevate?
What nobler marvels than the mind
May in life's daily prospect find,
May find or there create?

A potent wand doth Sorrow wield;
What spell so strong as guilty Fear!
Repentance is a tender sprite;
If aught on earth have heavenly might,
'Tis lodg'd within her silent tear.

But grant my wishes, — let us now
Descend from this ethereal height;
Then take thy way, adventurous Skiff,
More daring far than Hippogriff,
And be thy own delight!

To the stone-table in my garden,
Lov'd haunt of many a summer hour,
The Squire is come; — his daughter Bess
Beside him in the cool recess
Sits blooming like a flower.

With these are many more convened;
They know not I have been so far —
I see them there in number nine
Beneath the spreading Weymouth pine —
I see them — there they are !

There sits the Vicar, and his Dame;
And there my good friend, Stephen Otter;
And, ere the light of evening fail,
To them I must relate the Tale
Of Peter Bell the Potter.”

Off flew my sparkling Boat in scorn,
Yea in a trance of indignation !
And I, as well as I was able,
On two poor legs, to my stone-table
Limp'd on with some vexation.

“ O, here he is !” cried little Bess—
She saw me at the garden door,
“ We’ve waited anxiously and long,”
They cried, and all around me throng,
Full nine of them, or more !

Reproach me not — your fears be still —
Be thankful we again have met ; —
Resume, my Friends ! within the shade
Your seats, and promptly shall be paid
The well-remembered debt.

Breath fail'd me as I spake — but soon
With lips, no doubt, and visage pale,
And sore too from a slight contusion,
Did I, to cover my confusion,
Begin the *promised* Tale.

PART FIRST.

ALL by the moonlight river side
It gave three miserable groans ;
“ ’Tis come then to a pretty pass,”
Said Peter to the groaning Ass,
“ But I will *bang* your bones !”

“ Good Sir !” — the Vicar’s voice exclaim’d,
“ You rush at once into the middle ;”
And little Bess, with accent sweeter,
Cried, “ O dear Sir ! but who is Peter ?”
Said Stephen, — “ ’Tis a downright riddle !”

The Squire said, " Sure as paradise
" Was lost to man by Adam's sinning,
" This leap is for us all too bold ;
" Who Peter was, let that be told,
" And start from the beginning."

— A potter, Sir, he was by trade,
Said I, becoming quite collected ;
And, wheresoever he appeared,
Full twenty times was Peter feared
For once that Peter was respected.

He two and thirty years or more
Had been a wild and woodland rover ;
Had heard the Atlantic surges roar
On farthest Cornwall's rocky shore,
And trod the cliffs of Dover.

And he had seen Caernarvon's towers,
And well he knew the spire of Sarum ;
And he had been where Lincoln bell
Flings o'er the fen its ponderous knell,
Its far-renowned alarum !

At Doncaster, at York, and Leeds,
And merry Carlisle had he been ;
And all along the Lowlands fair,
All through the bonny shire of Ayr —
And far as Aberdeen.

And he had been at Inverness ;
And Peter, by the mountain rills,
Had danced his round with Highland lasses ;
And he had lain beside his asses
On lofty Cheviot Hills :

And he had trudg'd through Yorkshire dales,
Among the rocks and winding *scars* ;
Where deep and low the hamlets lie
Beneath their little patch of sky
And little lot of stars :

And all along the indented coast,
Bespattered with the salt-sea foam ;
Where'er a knot of houses lay,
On headland, or in hollow bay ; —
Sure never man like him did roam !

As well might Peter, in the Fleet,
Have been fast bound, a begging debtor ; —
He travelled here, he travelled there ; —
But not the value of a hair
Was heart or head the better.

He rov'd among the vales and streams,
In the green wood and hollow dell;
They were his dwellings night and day, —
But Nature ne'er could find the way
Into the heart of Peter Bell.

In vain, through every changeful year,
Did Nature lead him as before;
A primrose by a river's brim
A yellow primrose was to him,
And it was nothing more.

Small change it made in Peter's heart
To see his gentle pannier'd train
With more than vernal pleasure feeding,
Where'er the tender grass was leading
Its earliest green along the lane.

In vain, through water, earth, and air,
The soul of happy sound was spread,
When Peter, on some April morn,
Beneath the broom or budding thorn,
Made the warm earth his lazy bed.

At noon, when by the forest's edge
He lay beneath the branches high,
The soft blue sky did never melt
Into his heart, — he never felt
The witchery of the soft blue sky !

On a fair prospect some have look'd
And felt, as I have heard them say,
As if the moving time had been
A thing as stedfast as the scene
On which they gaz'd themselves away.

With Peter Bell, I need not tell
That this had never been the case; —
He was a Carl as wild and rude
As ever hue-and-cry pursued,
As ever ran a felon's race.

Of all that lead a lawless life,
Of all that love their lawless lives,
In city or in village small,
He was the wildest far of all; —
He had a dozen wedded wives. —

Nay start not! — wedded wives — and twelve!
But how one wife could e'er come near him,
In simple truth I cannot tell;
For be it said of Peter Bell
To see him was to fear him.

Though Nature could not touch his heart
By lovely forms and silent weather,
And tender sounds, yet you might see
At once that Peter Bell and she
Had often been together.

A savage wildness round him hung
As of a dweller out of doors ;
In his whole figure and his mien
A savage character was seen,
Of mountains and of dreary moors.

To all the unshap'd half human thoughts
Which solitary Nature feeds
'Mid summer storms or winter's ice,
Had Peter join'd whatever vice
The cruel city breeds.

His face was keen as is the wind
That cuts along the hawthorn fence;
Of courage you saw little there,
But, in its stead, a medley air
Of cunning and of impudence.

He had a dark and sidelong walk,
And long and slouching was his gait;
Beneath his looks so bare and bold,
You might perceive, his spirit cold
Was playing with some inward bait.

His forehead wrinkled was and furr'd;
A work one half of which was done
By thinking of his *whens* and *hows*;
And half by knitting of his brows
Beneath the glaring sun.

There was a hardness in his cheek,
There was a hardness in his eye,
As if the man had fix'd his face,
In many a solitary place,
Against the wind and open sky !

ONE NIGHT, (and now, my little Bess !
We've reach'd at last the promis'd Tale;)
One beautiful November night,
When the full moon was shining bright
Upon the rapid river Swale,

Along the river's winding banks
Peter was travelling all alone ; —
Whether to buy or sell, or led
By pleasure running in his head,
To me was never known.

He trudg'd along through copse and brake,
He trudg'd along o'er hill and dale;
Nor for the moon car'd he a tittle,
And for the stars he car'd as little,
And for the murmuring river Swale.

But chancing to espy a path
That promis'd to cut short the way;
As many a wiser man hath done,
He left a trusty guide for one
That might his steps betray.

To a thick wood he soon is brought
Where cheerfully his course he weaves,
And whistling loud may yet be heard,
Though often buried, like a bird
Darkling among the boughs and leaves.

But quickly Peter's mood is chang'd,
And on he drives with cheeks that burn
In downright fury and in wrath —
There's little sign the treacherous path
Will to the road return !

The path grows dim, and dimmer still ;
Now up — now down — the rover wends
With all the sail that he can carry ;
Till he is brought to an old quarry,
And there the pathway ends.

“ What ! would'st thou daunt me grisly den ?

“ Back must I, having come so far ?

“ Stretch as thou wilt thy gloomy jaws,

“ I'll on, nor would I give two straws

“ For lantern or for star !”

And so, where on the huge rough stones
The black and massy shadows lay,
And through the dark, and through the cold,
And through the yawning fissures old,
Did Peter boldly press his way

Right through the quarry; — and behold
A scene of soft and lovely hue!
Where blue, and grey, and tender green,
Together made as sweet a scene
As ever human eye did view.

Beneath the clear blue sky he saw
A little field of meadow ground;
But field or meadow name it not;
Call it of earth a small green plot,
With rocks encompass'd round.

The Swale flow'd under the grey rocks,
But he flow'd quiet and unseen ; —
You need a strong and stormy gale
To bring the noises of the Swale
To that green spot, so calm and green !

Now you'll suppose that Peter Bell
Felt small temptation here to tarry,
And so it was, — but I must add,
His heart was not a little glad
When he was out of the old quarry.

And is there no one dwelling here,
No hermit with his beads and glass ?
And does no little cottage look
Upon this soft and fertile nook ?
Does no one live near this green grass ?

Across that deep and quiet spot
Is Peter driving through the grass —
And now he is among the trees ;
When, turning round his head, he sees
A solitary Ass.

“ No doubt I’m founder’d in these woods —
“ For once,” quoth he, “ I will be wise,
“ With better speed I’ll back again —
“ And, lest the journey should prove vain,
“ Will take yon Ass, my lawful prize !”

Off Peter hied, — “ A comely beast !
“ Though not so plump as he might be ;
“ My honest friend, with such a platter,
“ You should have been a little fatter,
“ But come, Sir, come with me !”

But first doth Peter deem it fit
To spy about him far and near ;
There's not a single house in sight,
No woodman's hut, no cottage light —
Peter you need not fear !

There's nothing to be seen but woods
And rocks that spread a hoary gleam,
And this one beast that from the bed
Of the green meadow hangs his head
Over the silent stream.

His head is with a halter bound ;
The halter seizing, Peter leapt
Upon the Ass's back, and plied
With ready heel the creature's side ;
But still the Ass his station kept.

“ What’s this !” cried Peter, brandishing
A new-peel’d sapling white as cream ;
The Ass knew well what Peter said,
But, as before, hung down his head
Over the silent stream.

Then Peter gave a sudden jirk,
A jirk that from a dungeon floor
Would have pulled up an iron ring ;
But still the heavy-headed thing
Stood just as he had stood before !

Quoth Peter, leaping from his seat,
“ There is some plot against me laid ;”
Once more the little meadow ground
And all the hoary cliffs around
He cautiously survey’d.

All, all is silent, rocks and woods,
All still and silent — far and near ;
Only the Ass, with motion dull,
Upon the pivot of his skull
Turns round his long left ear.

Thought Peter, What can mean all this? —
Some ugly witchcraft must be here !
Once more the Ass, with motion dull,
Upon the pivot of his skull
Turn'd round his long left ear.

“ I'll cure you of these desperate tricks”—
And, with deliberate action slow,
His staff high-raising, in the pride
Of skill, upon the Ass's hide
He dealt a sturdy blow.

What followed? — yielding to the shock
The Ass, as if to take his ease,
In quiet uncomplaining mood
Upon the spot where he had stood
Dropt gently down upon his knees.

And then upon his side he fell
And by the river's brink did lie
And, as he lay like one that mourn'd,
The patient beast on Peter turn'd
His shining hazel eye.

'Twas but one mild, reproachful look,
A look more tender than severe ;
And straight in sorrow, not in dread,
He turn'd the eye-ball in his head
Towards the river deep and clear.

Upon the beast the sapling rings, —
Heav'd his lank sides, his limbs they stirr'd;
He gave a groan — and then another,
Of that which went before the brother,
And then he gave a third :

All by the moonlight river side
He gave three miserable groans,
“ 'Tis come then to a pretty pass,”
Said Peter to the groaning ass,
“ But I will *bang* your bones !”

And Peter halts to gather breath,
And now full clearly was it shown
(What he before in part had seen)
How gaunt was the poor Ass and lean,
Yea wasted to a skeleton !

With legs stretched out and stiff he lay : —
No word of kind commiseration
Fell at the sight from Peter's tongue ;
With hard contempt his heart was wrung,
With hatred and vexation.

The meagre beast lay still as death —
And Peter's lips with fury quiver —
Quoth he, “ You little mulish dog,
“ I'll fling your carcase like a log
“ Head foremost down the river !”

An impious oath confirmed the threat —
But, while upon the ground he lay,
To all the echoes, south and north,
And east and west, the Ass sent forth
A loud and piteous bray !

This outcry, on the heart of Peter,
Seems like a note of joy to strike, —
Joy on the heart of Peter knocks ; —
But in the echo of the rocks
Was something Peter did not like.

Whether to cheer his coward breast,
Or that he could not break the chain,
In this serene and solemn hour,
Twin'd round him by demoniac power,
To the blind work he turn'd again. —

Among the rocks and winding crags —
Among the mountains far away —
Once more the Ass did lengthen out
More ruefully an endless shout,
The long dry see-saw of his horrible bray !

What is there now in Peter's heart ?
Or whence the might of this strange sound ?
The moon uneasy look'd and dimmer,
The broad blue heavens appear'd to glimmer,
And the rocks stagger'd all around.

From Peter's hand the sapling dropp'd !
Threat has he none to execute —
“ If any one should come and see
“ That I am here, they'll think,” quoth he,
“ I'm helping this poor dying brute.”

He scans the Ass from limb to limb ;
And Peter now uplifts his eyes ; —
Steady the moon doth look and clear,
And like themselves the rocks appear,
And tranquil are the skies.

Whereat, in resolute mood, once more
He stoops the Ass's neck to seize —
Foul purpose, quickly put to flight !
For in the pool a startling sight
Meets him, beneath the shadowy trees.

Is it the moon's distorted face ?
The ghost-like image of a cloud ?
Is it a gallows there pourtray'd ?
Is Peter of himself afraid ?
Is it a coffin, — or a shroud ?

A grisly idol hewn in stone ?
Or imp from witch's lap let fall ?
Or a gay ring of shining fairies,
Such as pursue their brisk vagaries
In sylvan bower, or haunted hall ?

It is a fiend that to a stake
Of fire his desperate self is tethering?
Or stubborn spirit doom'd to yell
In solitary ward or cell,
Ten thousand miles from all his brethren?

Is it a party in a parlour?
Cramm'd just as they on earth were cramm'd —
Some sipping punch, some sipping tea,
But, as you by their faces see,
All silent and all damn'd!

A throbbing pulse the Gazer hath —
Puzzled he was, and now is daunted;
He looks, he cannot choose but look;
Like one intent upon a book —
A book that is enchanted.

Ah, well-a-day for Peter Bell ! —

He will be turned to iron soon,

Meet Statue for the court of Fear !

His hat is up — and every hair

Bristles — and whitens in the moon !

He looks — he ponders — looks again ;

He sees a motion — hears a groan ; —

His eyes will burst — his heart will break —

He gives a loud and frightful shriek,

And drops, a senseless weight, as if his life were flown !

PART SECOND.

WE left our Hero in a trance,
Beneath the alders, near the river ;
The Ass is by the river side,
And, where the feeble breezes glide,
Upon the stream the moon-beams quiver.

A happy respite ! — but he wakes ; —
And feels the glimmering of the moon —
And to stretch forth his hands is trying ; —
Sure, when he knows where he is lying,
He'll sink into a second swoon.

He lifts his head — he sees his staff;
He touches — 'tis to him a treasure !
Faint recollection seems to tell
That he is yet where mortals dwell —
A thought receiv'd with languid pleasure !

His head upon his elbow propp'd,
Becoming less and less perplex'd
Sky-ward he looks — to rock and wood —
And then — upon the placid flood
His wandering eye is fix'd.

Thought he, that is the face of one
In his last sleep securely bound !
So, faltering not in *this* intent,
He makes his staff an instrument
The river's depth to sound —

Now — like a tempest-shatter'd bark
That overwhelm'd and prostrate lies
And in a moment to the verge
Is lifted of a foaming surge —
Full suddenly the Ass doth rise !

His staring bones all shake with joy —
And close by Peter's side he stands :
While Peter o'er the river bends,
The little Ass his neck extends,
And fondly licks his hands.

Such life is in the Ass's eyes —
Such life is in his limbs and ears —
That Peter Bell, if he had been
The veriest coward ever seen,
Must now have thrown aside his fears.

The Ass looks on — and to his work
Is Peter quietly resign'd ;
He touches here — he touches there —
And now among the dead man's hair
His sapling Peter has entwin'd.

He pulls — and looks — and pulls again,
And he whom the poor Ass had lost,
The man who had been four days dead,
Head foremost from the river's bed
Uprises — like a ghost !

And Peter draws him to dry land ;
And through the brain of Peter pass
Some poignant twitches, fast and faster,
“ No doubt,” quoth he, “ he is the master
“ Of this poor miserable Ass !”

The meagre Shadow all this while —
What aim is his? what is he doing?
His sudden fit of joy is flown, —
He on his knees hath laid him down,
As if he were his grief renewing.

That Peter on his back should mount
He shows a wish, well as he can,
“ I'll go, I'll go, whate'er betide —
“ He to his home my way will guide,
“ The cottage of the drowned man.”

This utter'd, Peter mounts forthwith
Upon the pleas'd and thankful Ass;
And then, without a moment's stay,
The earnest creature turn'd away,
Leaving the body on the grass.

Intent upon his faithful watch
The beast four days and nights had pass'd ;
A sweeter meadow ne'er was seen,
And there the Ass four days had been,
Nor ever once did break his fast !

Yet firm his step, and stout his heart ;
The mead is cross'd — the quarry's mouth
Is reach'd — but there the trusty guide
Into a thicket turns aside,
And takes his way towards the south.

When hark, a burst of doleful sound !
And Peter honestly might say,
The like came never to his ears
Though he has been full thirty years
A rover night and day !

'Tis not a plover of the moors,
'Tis not a bittern of the fen;
Nor can it be a barking fox —
Nor night-bird chamber'd in the rocks —
Nor wild-cat in a woody glen !

The Ass is startled — and stops short
Right in the middle of the thicket ;
And Peter, wont to whistle loud
Whether alone or in a crowd,
Is silent as a silent cricket.

What ails you now, my little Bess ?
Well may you tremble and look grave !
This cry — that rings along the wood,
This cry — that floats adown the flood,
Comes from the entrance of a cave :

I see a blooming Wood-boy there,
And, if I had the power to say
How sorrowful the wanderer is,
Your heart would be as sad as his
Till you had kiss'd his tears away !

Holding a hawthorn branch in hand,
All bright with berries ripe and red ;
Into the cavern's mouth he peeps —
Thence back into the moon-light creeps ;
What seeks the boy ? — the silent dead !

His father ! — Him doth he require,
Whom he hath sought with fruitless pains,
Among the rocks, behind the trees,
Now creeping on his hands and knees,
Now running o'er the open plains.

And hither is he come at last,
When he through such a day has gone,
By this dark cave to be distress
Like a poor bird — her plunder'd nest
Hovering around with dolorous moan !

Of that intense and piercing cry
The listening Ass doth rightly spell ;
Wild as it is he there can read
Some intermingl'd notes that plead
With touches irresistible ;

But Peter, when he saw the Ass
Not only stop but turn, and change
The cherish'd tenor of his pace
That lamentable noise to chase,
It wrought in him conviction strange ;

A faith that, for the dead man's sake
And this poor slave who lov'd him well,
Vengeance upon his head will fall,
Some visitation worse than all
Which ever till this night befel.

Meanwhile the Ass to gain his end
Is striving stoutly as he may;
But, while he climbs the woody hill,
The cry grows weak — and weaker still,
And now at last it dies away !

So with his freight the creature turns
Into a gloomy grove of beech,
Along the shade with footstep true
Descending slowly, till the two
The open moonlight reach.

And there, along a narrow dell,
A fair smooth pathway you discern,
A length of green and open road —
As if it from a fountain flowed —
Winding away between the fern.

The rocks that tower on either side
Build up a wild fantastic scene ;
Temples like those among the Hindoos,
And mosques, and spires, and abbey windows,
And castles all with ivy green !

And, while the Ass pursues his way,
Along this solitary dell,
As pensively his steps advance,
The mosques and spires change countenance,
And look at Peter Bell !

That unintelligible cry
Hath left him high in preparation, —
Convinced that he, or soon or late,
This very night, will meet his fate —
And so he sits in expectation !

The verdant pathway, in and out,
Winds upwards like a straggling chain ;
And, when two toilsome miles are past,
Up through the rocks it leads at last
Into a high and open plain.

The strenuous animal hath clomb
With the green path, — and now he wends
Where, shining like the smoothest sea,
In undisturbed immensity
The level plain extends.

How blank ! — but whence this rustling sound
Which, all too long, the pair hath chased !
— A dancing leaf is close behind,
Light plaything for the sportive wind
Upon that solitary waste.

When Peter spies the withered leaf,
It yields no cure to his distress —
“ Where there is not a bush or tree,
“ The very leaves they follow me —
“ So huge hath been my wickedness !”

To a close lane they now are come,
Where, as before, the enduring Ass
Moves on without a moment's stop,
Nor once turns round his head to crop
A bramble leaf or blade of grass.

Between the hedges as they go
The white dust sleeps upon the lane;
And Peter, ever and anon
Back-looking, sees upon a stone
Or in the dust, a crimson stain.

A stain — as of a drop of blood
By moonlight made more faint and wan —
Ha! why this comfortless despair?
He knows not how the blood comes there,
And Peter is a wicked man.

At length he spies a bleeding wound,
Where he had struck the Ass's head;
He sees the blood, knows what it is, —
A glimpse of sudden joy was his,
But then it quickly fled;

Of him whom sudden death had seized
He thought, — of thee, O faithful Ass !
And once again those darting pains,
As meteors shoot through heaven's wide plains,
Pass through his bosom — and repass !

PART THIRD.

I'VE heard of one, a gentle soul,
Though given to sadness and to gloom,
And for the fact will vouch, one night
It chanc'd that by a taper's light
This man was reading in his room ;

Reading, as you or I might read
At night in any pious book,
When sudden blackness overspread
The snow-white page on which he read,
And made the good man round him look.

The chamber walls were dark all round, —
And to his book he turn'd again ;
— The light had left the good man's taper,
And form'd itself upon the paper,
Into large letters — bright and plain !

The godly book was in his hand —
And, on the page more black than coal,
Appeared, set forth in strange array,
A *word* — which to his dying day
Perplex'd the good man's gentle soul.

The ghostly word, which thus was fram'd,
Did never from his lips depart ;
But he hath said, poor gentle wight !
It brought full many a sin to light
Out of the bottom of his heart.

Dread Spirits! to torment the good
Why wander from your course so far,
Disordering colour form and stature!
— Let good men feel the soul of Nature,
And see things as they are.

I know you, potent Spirits! well,
How with the feeling and the sense
Playing, ye govern foes or friends,
Yok'd to your will, for fearful ends —
And this I speak in reverence!

But might I give advice to you,
Whom in my fear I love so well,
From men of pensive virtue go,
Dread Beings! and your empire show
On hearts like that of Peter Bell.

Your presence I have often felt
In darkness and the stormy night ;
And well I know, if need there be,
Ye can put forth your agency
When earth is calm, and heaven is bright.

Then, coming from the wayward world,
That powerful world in which ye dwell,
Come, Spirits of the Mind ! and try
To-night, beneath the moonlight sky,
What may be done with Peter Bell !

— O, would that some more skilful voice,
My further labour might prevent !
Kind listeners, that around me sit,
I feel that I am all unfit
For such high argument.

I've play'd and danc'd with my narration —
I loiter'd long ere I began ;
Ye waited then on my good pleasure, —
Pour out indulgence still, in measure
As liberal as ye can !

Our travellers, ye remember well,
Are thridding a sequester'd lane ;
And Peter many tricks is trying,
And many anodynes applying,
To ease his conscience of its pain.

By this his heart is lighter far ;
And, finding that he can account
So clearly for that crimson stain,
His evil spirit up again
Does like an empty bucket mount.

And Peter is a deep logician
Who hath no lack of wit mercurial ;
“ Blood drops — leaves rustle — yet,” quoth he,
“ This poor man never, but for me,
“ Could have had Christian burial.

“ And, say the best you can, ’tis plain
“ That here hath been some wicked dealing ;
“ No doubt the devil in me wrought ; —
“ I’m not the man who could have thought
“ An Ass like this was worth the stealing !”

So from his pocket Peter takes
His shining horn tobacco-box,
And, in a light and careless way
As men who with their purpose play,
Upon the lid he knocks.

Let them whose voice can stop the clouds —
Whose cunning eye can see the wind —
Tell to a curious world the cause
Why, making here a sudden pause,
The Ass turn'd round his head—and *grinn'd*.

Appalling process ! — I have mark'd
The like on heath — in lonely wood,
And, verily, have seldom met
A spectacle more hideous — yet
It suited Peter's present mood.

And, grinning in his turn, his teeth
He in jocose defiance show'd —
When, to confound his spiteful mirth,
A murmur, pent within the earth,
In the dead earth beneath the road,

Roll'd audibly ! — it swept along —
A muffled noise — a rumbling sound !
'Twas by a troop of miners made,
Plying with gunpowder their trade,
Some twenty fathoms under ground.

Small cause of dire effect !— for, surely,
If ever mortal, King or Cotter,
Believed that earth was charg'd to quake
And yawn for his unworthy sake,
'Twas Peter Bell the Potter !

But, as an oak in breathless air
Will stand though to the centre hewn,
Or as the weakest things, if frost
Have stiffen'd them, maintain their post,
So he, beneath the gazing moon !—

But now the pair have reach'd a spot
Where, shelter'd by a rocky cove,
A little chapel stands alone,
With greenest ivy overgrown,
And tufted with an ivy grove.

Dying insensibly away
From human thoughts and purposes,
The building seems, wall, roof, and tower;
To bow to some transforming power,
And blend with the surrounding trees.

Deep sighing as he pass'd along,
Quoth Peter, " In the shire of Fife,
" 'Mid such a ruin, following still
" From land to land a lawless will,
" I married my sixth wife !"

The unheeding Ass moves slowly on,
And now is passing by an inn
Brim-full of a carousing crew,
Making, with curses not a few,
An uproar and a drunken din.

I cannot well express the thoughts
Which Peter in those noises found;—
A stifling power compressed his frame,
As if confusing darkness came
Over that dull and dreary sound.

For well did Peter know the sound;
The language of those drunken joys
To him, a jovial soul I ween,
But a few hours ago had been
A gladsome and a welcome noise.

Now, turn'd adrift into the past,
He finds no solace in his course ; —
Like planet-stricken men of yore
He trembles, smitten to the core
By strong compunction and remorse.

But more than all, his heart is stung
To think of one, almost a child ;
A sweet and playful Highland girl,
As light and beauteous as a squirrel,
As beauteous and as wild !

A lonely house her dwelling was,
A cottage in a heathy dell ;
And she put on her gown of green,
And left her mother at sixteen,
And followed Peter Bell.

But many good and pious thoughts
Had she; and, in the kirk to pray,
Two long Scotch miles, through rain or snow,
To kirk she had been used to go,
Twice every sabbath-day.

And, when she follow'd Peter Bell,
It was to lead an honest life;
For he, with tongue not used to falter,
Had pledg'd his troth before the altar
To love her as his wedded wife.

A mother's hope is her's; — but soon
She droop'd and pin'd like one forlorn; —
From Scripture she a name did borrow;
Benoni, or the child of sorrow,
She call'd her babe unborn.

For she had learn'd how Peter liv'd,
And took it in most grievous part ;
She to the very bone was worn,
And, ere that little child was born,
Died of a broken heart.

And now the Spirits of the Mind
Are busy with poor Peter Bell ;
Distraction reigns in soul and sense,
And reason drops in impotence
From her deserted pinnacle !

Close by a brake of flowering furze
(Above it shivering aspens play)
He sees an unsubstantial creature,
His very self in form and feature,
Not four yards from the broad highway ;

And stretch'd beneath the furze he sees
The Highland girl — it is no other ;
And hears her crying, as she cried
The very moment that she died,
“ My mother ! oh my mother ! ”

The sweat pours down from Peter's face,
So grievous is his heart's contrition ;
With agony his eye-balls ache
While he beholds by the furze-brake
This miserable vision !

Calm is the well-deserving brute,
His peace, hath no offence betray'd ; —
But now, while down that slope he wends,
A voice to Peter's ears ascends,
Resounding from the woody glade :

Though clamorous as a hunter's horn
Re-echoed from a naked rock,
'Tis from that tabernacle — List !
Within, a fervent Methodist
Is preaching to no heedless flock.

“ Repent ! repent ! ” he cries aloud,
“ While yet ye may find mercy ; — strive
“ To love the Lord with all your might ;
“ Turn to him, seek him day and night,
“ And save your souls alive ! ”

“ Repent ! repent ! though ye have gone
“ Through paths of wickedness and woe
“ After the Babylonian harlot,
“ And though your sins be red as scarlet
“ They shall be white as snow ! ”

Even as he pass'd the door, these words
Did plainly come to Peter's ears ;
And they such joyful tidings were
The joy was more than he could bear —
He melted into tears.

Sweet tears of hope and tenderness !
And fast they fell, a plenteous shower ;
His nerves, his sinews seem'd to melt ;
Through all his iron frame was felt
A gentle, a relaxing power !

Each fibre of his frame was weak,
Weak all the animal within,
But in its helplessness grew mild
And gentle as an infant child,
An infant that has known no sin.

'Tis said, that through prevailing grace
He not unmov'd did notice now
The cross * upon thy shoulders scored
Meek beast ! in memory of the Lord
To whom all human-kind shall bow ;

In memory of that solemn day
When Jesus humbly deign'd to ride
Entering the proud Jerusalem,
By an immeasurable stream
Of shouting people deified !

Meanwhile the persevering Ass,
Towards a gate in open view
Turns up a narrow lane ; his chest
Against the yielding gate he press'd,
And quietly pass'd through.

* The notion is very general, that the Cross on the back and shoulders of this Animal has the origin here alluded to.

And up the stony lane he goes ;
No ghost more softly ever trod ;
Among the stones and pebbles, he
Sets down his hoofs inaudibly,
As if with felt his hoofs were shod.

Along the lane the trusty Ass
Had gone two hundred yards, not more ;
When to a lonely house he came ;
He turn'd aside towards the same
And stopp'd before the door.

Thought Peter, 'tis the poor man's home !
He listens — not a sound is heard
Save from the trickling household rill ;
But, stepping o'er the cottage-sill,
Forthwith a little girl appear'd.

She to the meeting-house was bound
In hope some tidings there to gather —
No glimpse it is — no doubtful gleam —
She saw — and utter'd with a scream,
“ My father ! here's my father !”

The very word was plainly heard,
Heard plainly by the wretched Mother —
Her joy was like a deep affright ;
And forth she rush'd into the light,
And saw it was another !

And instantly, upon the earth
Beneath the full-moon shining bright,
Close at the Ass's feet she fell ;
At the same moment Peter Bell
Dismounts in most unhappy plight.

What could he do? — The Woman lay
Breathless and motionless; — the mind
Of Peter sadly was confus'd;
But, though to such demands unus'd,
And helpless almost as the blind,

He rais'd her up; and, while he held
Her body propp'd against his knee,
The Woman wak'd — and when she spied
The poor Ass standing by her side,
She moaned most bitterly.

“ Oh! God be prais'd! — my heart's at ease —
“ For he is dead — I know it well!”
— At this she wept a bitter flood;
And, in the best way that he could,
His tale did Peter tell.

He trembles — he is pale as death —
His voice is weak with perturbation —
He turns aside his head — he pauses ;
Poor Peter from a thousand causes
Is crippled sore in his narration.

At length she learn'd how he espied
The Ass in that small meadow ground ;
And that her husband now lay dead,
Beside that luckless river's bed
In which he had been drown'd.

A piercing look the sufferer cast
Upon the beast that near her stands ;
She sees 'tis he, that 'tis the same ;
She calls the poor Ass by his name,
And wrings, and wrings her hands.

“ O wretched loss ! — untimely stroke !
“ If he had died upon his bed !
“ — He knew not one forewarning pain —
“ He never will come home again —
“ Is dead — for ever dead !”

Beside the Woman Peter stands ;
His heart is opening more and more ;
A holy sense pervades his mind ;
He feels what he for human kind
Had never felt before.

At length, by Peter's arm sustain'd,
The Woman rises from the ground —
“ Oh, mercy ! something must be done, —
“ My little Rachael, you must run,
“ Some willing neighbour must be found.

“ Make haste — my little Rachael — do !
“ The first you meet with bid him come, —
“ Ask him to lend his horse to-night, —
“ And this good man, whom Heaven requite,
“ Will help to bring the body home.”

Away goes Rachael weeping loud ; —
An infant, waked by her distress,
Makes in the house a pitcous cry, —
And Peter hears the Mother sigh,
“ Seven are they, and all fatherless !”

And now is Peter taught to feel
That man’s heart is a holy thing ;
And Nature, through a world of death,
Breathes into him a second breath,
More searching than the breath of spring.

Upon a stone the Woman sits
In agony of silent grief —
From his own thoughts did Peter start ;
He longs to press her to his heart,
From love that cannot find relief.

But rous'd, as if through every limb
Had pass'd a sudden shock of dread,
The Mother o'er the threshold flies,
And up the cottage stairs she hies,
And to the pillow gives her burning head.

And Peter turns his steps aside
Into a shade of darksome trees,
Where he sits down, he knows not how,
With his hands press'd against his brow,
And resting on his tremulous knees.

There, self-involv'd, does Peter sit
Until no sign of life he makes,
As if his mind were sinking deep
Through years that have been long asleep !
The trance is past away — he wakes, —

He turns his head — and sees the Ass
Yet standing in the clear moonshine,
“ When shall I be as good as thou ?
“ Oh ! would, poor beast, that I had now
“ A heart but half as good as thine !”

— But *He* — who deviously hath sought
His father through the lonesome woods,
Hath sought, proclaiming to the ear
Of night, his inward grief and fear —
He comes — escaped from fields and floods ; —

With weary pace is drawing nigh —
He sees the Ass — and nothing living
Had ever such a fit of joy
As had this little orphan Boy,
For he has no misgiving !

Towards the gentle Ass he springs,
And up about his neck he climbs ;
In loving words he talks to him,
He kisses, kisses face and limb, —
He kisses him a thousand times !

This Peter sees, while in the shade
He stood beside the cottage door :
And Peter Bell, the ruffian wild,
Sobs loud, he sobs even like a child,
“ Oh ! God, I can endure no more !”

— Here ends my Tale :— for in a trice
Arrived a neighbour with his horse ;
Peter went forth with him straightway ;
And, with due care, ere break of day
Together they brought back the Corse.

And many years did this poor Ass,
Whom once it was my luck to see
Cropping the shrubs of Leming-Lane,
Help by his labour to maintain
The Widow and her family.

And Peter Bell, who, till that night,
Had been the wildest of his clan,
Forsook his crimes, repressed his folly,
And, after ten months' melancholy,
Became a good and honest man.

SONNETS,

SUGGESTED BY

MR. W. WESTALL'S VIEWS OF THE CAVES, &c.

IN YORKSHIRE.

*The following Sonnets having lately appeared in Periodical
Publications are here reprinted.*

SONNETS.

I.

PURE element of waters ! wheresoe'er
Thou dost forsake thy subterranean haunts,
Green herbs, bright flowers, and berry-bearing plants,
—Rise into life and in thy train appear :
And, through the sunny portion of the year,
Swift insects shine, thy hovering pursuivants :
And, if thy bounty fail, the forest pants ;
And hart and hind and hunter with his spear,
Languish and droop together. Nor unfelt
In man's perturbed soul thy sway benign ;
And, haply, far within the marble belt
Of central earth, where tortured Spirits pine
For grace and goodness lost, thy murmurs melt
Their anguish,—and they blend sweet songs with thine! *

* Waters (as Mr. Westall informs us in the letter-press prefixed to his admirable views) are invariably found to flow through these caverns.

II.

GORDALE.

AT early dawn, — or rather when the air
Glimmers with fading light, and shadowy eve
Is busiest to confer and to bereave, —
Then, pensive votary, let thy feet repair
To Gordale-chasm, terrific as the lair
Where the young lions couch ; — for so, by leave
Of the propitious hour, thou may'st perceive
The local Deity, with oozy hair
And mineral crown, beside his jagged urn
Recumbent : — Him thou may'st behold, who hides
His lineaments by day, and there presides,
Teaching the docile waters how to turn ;
Or, if need be, impediment to spurn,
And force their passage to the salt-sea tides !

III.

MALHAM COVE.

WAS the aim frustrated by force or guile,
When giants scoop'd from out the rocky ground
— Tier under tier — this semicirque profound?
(Giants — the same who built in Erin's isle
That Causeway with incomparable toil!)
O, had this vast theatric structure wound
With finish'd sweep into a perfect round,
No mightier work had gain'd the plausive smile
Of all-beholding Phœbus! But, alas,
Vain earth! — false world! Foundations must be laid
In Heav'n; for, mid the wreck of IS and WAS,
Things incomplete and purposes betrayed
Make sadder transits o'er truth's mystic glass
Than noblest objects utterly decayed.

COMPOSED DURING ONE OF THE MOST AWFUL OF THE
LATE STORMS, FEB. 1819.

One who was suffering tumult in his soul
Yet fail'd to seek the sure relief of prayer —
Went forth — his course surrendering to the care
Of the fierce wind, while mid-day lightnings prowl
Insidiously, — untimely thunders growl, —
While trees, dim-seen, in frenzied numbers tear
The lingering remnant of their yellow hair, —
And shivering wolves, surpris'd with darkness, howl
As if the sun were not ; — he lifted high
His head — and in a moment did appear
Large space, mid dreadful clouds, of purest sky,
An azure orb — shield of Tranquillity,
Invisible unlook'd-for minister
Of providential goodness ever nigh !

THE END.

P37

1819



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