Matthew Gregory Lewis (1775-1818)

6 Courteous King Jamie

Courteous King Jamie is gone to the wood,
The fattest buck to find;
He chased the deer, and he chased the roe,
Till his friends were left behind.

He hunted over moss and moor, 5
And over hill and down,
Till he came to a ruined hunting hall
Was seven miles from a town.

He entered up the hunting hall,
To make him goodly cheer, 10
Full of all the herds in the good green wood,
He had slain the fairest deer.

He sat him down, with food and rest
His courage to restore;
When a rising wind was heard to sigh, 15
And an earthquake rocked the floor.

And darkness covered the hunting hall,
Where he sat all at his meat;
The grey dogs howling left their food,
And crept to Jamie's feet. 20

And louder howled the rising storm,
And burst the fastened door,
And in there came a grizly Ghost,
Loud stamping on the floor.

Her head touched the roof-tree of the house, 25

Her waist a child could span;
I wot, the look of her hollow eye
Would have scared the bravest man.

Her locks were like snakes, and her teeth like stakes,
And her breath had a brimstone smell: 30
I nothing know that she seemed to be,
But the Devil just come from Hell!

"Some meat! some meat! King Jamie,
Some meat now give to me;"
"And to what meat in this house, lady, 35
Shall ye not welcome be?"
"Oh! ye must kill your berry-brown steed,
And serve him up to me!"

King Jamie has killed his berry-brown steed,
Though it caused him mickle care; 40
The Ghost eat him up both flesh and bone,
And left nothing but hoofs and hair.

"More meat! more meat! King Jamie,
More meat now give to me;"
"And to what meat in this house, lady, 45
Shall ye not welcome be?"
"Oh! ye must kill your good greyhounds,
They'll taste most daintily."

King Jamie has killed his good greyhounds,
Though it made his heart to fail; 50
The Ghost eat them all up one by one,
And left nothing but ears and tail.

"A bed! a bed! King Jamie,
Now make a bed for me!"
"And to what bed in this house, lady, 55
Shall ye not welcome be?"

"Oh! ye must pull the heather so green,
    And make a soft bed for me."

King Jamie has pulled the heather so green,
    And made for the Ghost a bed,
And over the heather, with courtesy rare,
    His plaid hath he daintily spread.

"Now swear! now swear! King Jamie,
    To take me for your bride;"
"Now heaven forbid!" King Jamie said,
    "That ever the like betide,
That the Devil so foul, just come from Hell,
    Should stretch him by my side."

"Now fye! now fye! King Jamie,
    I swear by the holy tree,
I am no devil, or evil thing,
    However foul I be.

"Then yield! then yield! King Jamie,
    And take my bridegroom's place,
For shame shall light on the dastard knight,
    Who refuses a lady's grace."

Then quoth King Jamie, with a groan,
    For his heart was big with care,
"It shall never be said that King Jamie
    Denied a lady's prayer."

So he laid him by the foul thing's side,
    And piteously he moaned;
She pressed his hand, and he shuddered!
    She kissed his lips, and he groaned!

When day was come, and night was gone,

And the sun shone through the hall;
The fairest lady that ever was seen,
Lay between him and the wall.

"Oh! well is me!" King Jamie cried,
"How long will your beauty stay?" 90
Then out and spake that lady fair,
"E'en till my dying day.

"For I was witched to a ghastly shape,
All by my step-dame's skill;
Till I could light on a courteous knight, 95
Who would let me have all my will."

I have altered and added so much to this ballad, that I might almost claim it for my own. It bears a great resemblance to the tale of "The Marriage of Sir Gawain" (in Percy's "Reliques of Ancient English Poetry"). But the stories are related in a manner so totally different, that I did not think the resemblance so strong as to destroy the interest of "King Jamie's adventure."

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