

MORAL TALES

Poem: I--ROBIN AND BEN: OR, THE PIRATE AND THE APOTHECARY

Come, lend me an attentive ear
A startling moral tale to hear,
Of Pirate Rob and Chemist Ben,
And different destinies of men.

Deep in the greenest of the vales
That nestle near the coast of Wales,
The heaving main but just in view,
Robin and Ben together grew,
Together worked and played the fool,
Together shunned the Sunday school,
And pulled each other's youthful noses
Around the cots, among the roses.

Together but unlike they grew;
Robin was rough, and through and through
Bold, inconsiderate, and manly,

Like some historic Bruce or Stanley.
Ben had a mean and servile soul,
He robbed not, though he often stole.
He sang on Sunday in the choir,
And tamely capped the passing Squire.

At length, intolerant of trammels -
Wild as the wild Bithynian camels,
Wild as the wild sea-eagles--Bob
His widowed dam contrives to rob,
And thus with great originality
Effectuates his personality.
Thenceforth his terror-haunted flight
He follows through the starry night;
And with the early morning breeze,
Behold him on the azure seas.
The master of a trading dandy
Hires Robin for a go of brandy;
And all the happy hills of home
Vanish beyond the fields of foam.

Ben, meanwhile, like a tin reflector,
Attended on the worthy rector;
Opened his eyes and held his breath,
And flattered to the point of death;
And was at last, by that good fairy,
Apprenticed to the Apothecary.

So Ben, while Robin chose to roam,
A rising chemist was at home,
Tended his shop with learned air,
Watered his drugs and oiled his hair,
And gave advice to the unwary,
Like any sleek apothecary.

Meanwhile upon the deep afar
Robin the brave was waging war,
With other tarry desperadoes
About the latitude of Barbadoes.
He knew no touch of craven fear;
His voice was thunder in the cheer;
First, from the main-to'-gallan' high,
The skulking merchantmen to spy -
The first to bound upon the deck,
The last to leave the sinking wreck.
His hand was steel, his word was law,
His mates regarded him with awe.
No pirate in the whole profession
Held a more honourable position.

At length, from years of anxious toil,
Bold Robin seeks his native soil;
Wisely arranges his affairs,
And to his native dale repairs.

The Bristol SWALLOW sets him down
Beside the well-remembered town.
He sighs, he spits, he marks the scene,
Proudly he treads the village green;
And, free from pettiness and rancour,
Takes lodgings at the 'Crown and Anchor.'

Strange, when a man so great and good
Once more in his home-country stood,
Strange that the sordid clowns should show
A dull desire to have him go.

His clinging breeks, his tarry hat,
The way he swore, the way he spat,
A certain quality of manner,
Alarming like the pirate's banner -
Something that did not seem to suit all -
Something, O call it bluff, not brutal -
Something at least, howe'er it's called,
Made Robin generally black-balled.

His soul was wounded; proud and glum,
Alone he sat and swigged his rum,
And took a great distaste to men
Till he encountered Chemist Ben.
Bright was the hour and bright the day
That threw them in each other's way;

Glad were their mutual salutations,
Long their respective revelations.
Before the inn in sultry weather
They talked of this and that together;
Ben told the tale of his indentures,
And Rob narrated his adventures.

Last, as the point of greatest weight,
The pair contrasted their estate,
And Robin, like a boastful sailor,
Despised the other for a tailor.

'See,' he remarked, 'with envy, see
A man with such a fist as me!
Bearded and ringed, and big, and brown,
I sit and toss the stingo down.
Hear the gold jingle in my bag -
All won beneath the Jolly Flag!'

Ben moralised and shook his head:
'You wanderers earn and eat your bread.
The foe is found, beats or is beaten,
And, either how, the wage is eaten.
And after all your pully-hauly
Your proceeds look uncommon small-ly.
You had done better here to tarry
Apprentice to the Apothecary.

The silent pirates of the shore
Eat and sleep soft, and pocket more

Than any red, robustious ranger
Who picks his farthings hot from danger.
You clank your guineas on the board;
Mine are with several bankers stored.
You reckon riches on your digits,
You dash in chase of Sals and Bridgets,
You drink and risk delirium tremens,
Your whole estate a common seaman's!
Regard your friend and school companion,
Soon to be wed to Miss Trevanion
(Smooth, honourable, fat and flowery,
With Heaven knows how much land in dowry),
Look at me--Am I in good case?
Look at my hands, look at my face;
Look at the cloth of my apparel;
Try me and test me, lock and barrel;
And own, to give the devil his due,
I have made more of life than you.
Yet I nor sought nor risked a life;
I shudder at an open knife;
The perilous seas I still avoided
And stuck to land whate'er betided.
I had no gold, no marble quarry,
I was a poor apothecary,

Yet here I stand, at thirty-eight,
A man of an assured estate.'

'Well,' answered Robin--'well, and how?'

The smiling chemist tapped his brow.
'Rob,' he replied, 'this throbbing brain
Still worked and hankered after gain.
By day and night, to work my will,
It pounded like a powder mill;
And marking how the world went round
A theory of theft it found.
Here is the key to right and wrong:
STEAL LITTLE, BUT STEAL ALL DAY LONG;
And this invaluable plan
Marks what is called the Honest Man.
When first I served with Doctor Pill,
My hand was ever in the till.
Now that I am myself a master,
My gains come softer still and faster.
As thus: on Wednesday, a maid
Came to me in the way of trade.
Her mother, an old farmer's wife,
Required a drug to save her life.
'At once, my dear, at once,' I said,
Patted the child upon the head,
Bade her be still a loving daughter,

And filled the bottle up with water.'

'Well, and the mother?' Robin cried.

'O she!' said Ben--'I think she died.'

'Battle and blood, death and disease,

Upon the tainted Tropic seas -

The attendant sharks that chew the cud -

The abhorred scuppers spouting blood -

The untended dead, the Tropic sun -

The thunder of the murderous gun -

The cut-throat crew--the Captain's curse -

The tempest blustering worse and worse -

These have I known and these can stand,

But you--I settle out of hand!

Out flashed the cutlass, down went Ben

Dead and rotten, there and then.

Poem: II--THE BUILDER'S DOOM

In eighteen-twenty Deacon Thin
Fou'd the land and fenced it in,
And laid his broad foundations down
About a furlong out of town.

Early and late the work went on.
The carts were toiling ere the dawn;
The mason whistled, the hodman sang;
Early and late the trowels rang;
And Thin himself came day by day
To push the work in every way.
An artful builder, patent king
Of all the local building ring,
Who was there like him in the quarter
For mortifying brick and mortar,
Or pocketing the odd piastre
By substituting lath and plaster?
With plan and two-foot rule in hand,
He by the foreman took his stand,
With boisterous voice, with eagle glance
To stamp upon extravagance.

For thrift of bricks and greed of guilders,
He was the Buonaparte of Builders.

The foreman, a desponding creature,
Demurred to here and there a feature:
'For surely, sir--with your permeession -
Bricks here, sir, in the main parteetion. . . .'
The builder goggled, gulped, and stared,
The foreman's services were spared.
Thin would not count among his minions
A man of Wesleyan opinions.

'Money is money,' so he said.
'Crescents are crescents, trade is trade.
Pharaohs and emperors in their seasons
Built, I believe, for different reasons -
Charity, glory, piety, pride -
To pay the men, to please a bride,
To use their stone, to spite their neighbours,
Not for a profit on their labours.

They built to edify or bewilder;
I build because I am a builder.
Crescent and street and square I build,
Plaster and paint and carve and gild.
Around the city see them stand,
These triumphs of my shaping hand,

With bulging walls, with sinking floors,
With shut, impracticable doors,
Fickle and frail in every part,
And rotten to their inmost heart.
There shall the simple tenant find
Death in the falling window-blind,
Death in the pipe, death in the faucet,
Death in the deadly water-closet!
A day is set for all to die:
Caveat emptor! what care I?'

As to Amphion's tuneful kit
Thebes rose, with towers encircling it;
As to the Mage's brandished wand
A spiry palace clove the sand;
To Thin's indomitable financing,
That phantom crescent kept advancing.
When first the brazen bells of churches
Called clerk and parson to their perches,
The worshippers of every sect
Already viewed it with respect;
A second Sunday had not gone
Before the roof was rattled on:
And when the fourth was there, behold
The crescent finished, painted, sold!

The stars proceeded in their courses,

Nature with her subversive forces,
Time, too, the iron-toothed and sinewed,
And the edacious years continued.
Thrones rose and fell; and still the crescent,
Unsanative and now senescent,
A plastered skeleton of lath,
Looked forward to a day of wrath.
In the dead night, the groaning timber
Would jar upon the ear of slumber,
And, like Dodona's talking oak,
Of oracles and judgments spoke.
When to the music fingered well
The feet of children lightly fell,
The sire, who dozed by the decanters,
Started, and dreamed of misadventures.
The rotten brick decayed to dust;
The iron was consumed by rust;
Each tabid and perverted mansion
Hung in the article of declension.

So forty, fifty, sixty passed;
Until, when seventy came at last,
The occupant of number three
Called friends to hold a jubilee.
Wild was the night; the charging rack
Had forced the moon upon her back;
The wind piped up a naval ditty;

And the lamps winked through all the city.
Before that house, where lights were shining,
Corpulent feeders, grossly dining,
And jolly clamour, hum and rattle,
Fairly outvoiced the tempest's battle.
As still his moistened lip he fingered,
The envious policeman lingered;
While far the infernal tempest sped,
And shook the country folks in bed,
And tore the trees and tossed the ships,
He lingered and he licked his lips.
Lo, from within, a hush! the host
Briefly expressed the evening's toast;
And lo, before the lips were dry,
The Deacon rising to reply!
'Here in this house which once I built,
Papered and painted, carved and gilt,
And out of which, to my content,
I netted seventy-five per cent.;
Here at this board of jolly neighbours,
I reap the credit of my labours.
These were the days--I will say more -
These were the grand old days of yore!
The builder laboured day and night;
He watched that every brick was right:

The decent men their utmost did;

And the house rose--a pyramid!
These were the days, our provost knows,
When forty streets and crescents rose,
The fruits of my creative noddle,
All more or less upon a model,
Neat and commodious, cheap and dry,
A perfect pleasure to the eye!
I found this quite a country quarter;
I leave it solid lath and mortar.
In all, I was the single actor -
And am this city's benefactor!
Since then, alas! both thing and name,
Shoddy across the ocean came -
Shoddy that can the eye bewilder
And makes me blush to meet a builder!
Had this good house, in frame or fixture,
Been tempered by the least admixture
Of that discreditable shoddy,
Should we to-day compound our toddy,
Or gaily marry song and laughter
Below its sempiternal rafter?
Not so!' the Deacon cried.

The mansion
Had marked his fatuous expansion.
The years were full, the house was fated,
The rotten structure crepitated!

A moment, and the silent guests
Sat pallid as their dinner vests.
A moment more and, root and branch,
That mansion fell in avalanche,
Story on story, floor on floor,
Roof, wall and window, joist and door,
Dead weight of damnable disaster,
A cataclysm of lath and plaster.

SILOAM DID NOT CHOOSE A SINNER -
ALL WERE NOT BUILDERS AT THE DINNER.