

John Stagg, “The Messenger of Death”

This poem was first published in *The Minstrel of the North* (1810).

A **Literary Gothic** etext.

“Rise from your couch, fair Lady Jane,
And drive the slumbers from your ee’,
Rise from your couch, fair Lady Jane,
For I have tidings brought for thee.”

But seldom slumbers Lady Jane, 5
But seldom visits sleep her ee’;
O'er-wakeful render'd by her woe,
Yet, say, what tidings bring'st thou me?

Loud blust'ring howls the wint'ry gale, 10
Hark! how the neighb'ring torrents pour!
I fear 'tis but some wanton night,
That mocks me at this midnight hour.

“Shake off thy slumbers, Lady Jane,
Rise from thy couch, and come away;
Shake off thy slumbers, Lady Jane, 15
For I'm in haste, and must not stay.”

“Say, stranger, what can be thy haste,
Or what may this thine errand be?
From whom, and wherefore art thou sent;
Or say, what tidings bring'st thou me? 20”

“Lord Walter, he my wedded Lord,
Now wins on fair Hesperia's¹ plains,
Where proud Britannia's banners fly,
Where death and devastation reigns!

“Three months are scarcely pass'd and gone, 25
Tho' three long tedious months to me,
Since brave Lord Walter left these arms,
And with his squadrons put to sea.

“Tho' long and tedious seems the time, 30
Yet well I ween too short by far,
To think of news from him my Lord,
Or tidings from the woeful war.”

¹ Hesperia, which means “western” or “evening” land, is usually used poetically to refer to Spain and/or Portugal (the Iberian Peninsula).

“Rise from thy couch, fair Lady Jane,
Rise from thy couch, and follow me;
’Tis from Lord Walter’s self I come, 35
I am his messenger to thee.”

“Bleak o’er the heath the whirlwind blows,
Fast falls the rain, as fast can be;
Yet, since thou bear’st my Lord’s behest,
I’ll leave my couch, and come to thee. 40

“But tell me, stranger, tell me where
Lord Walter wins, and how he fares;
For tho’ from him I fain would hear,
My bosom labours with its cares.

“Would it become Lord Walter’s wife, 45
Would it become his Lady Jane,
At midnight hour to leave her couch,
And with a stranger walk the plain?”

“Rise from thy couch, thou Lady Jane,
Arise, and make no more delay; 50
The night’s far spent, and I’m in haste,
And here I must no longer stay.

“Near where the foaming Derwent^o rolls, 55
Its currents westward to the sea,
There on the beach, by Solway’s^o side,
Lord Walter anxious waits for thee.”

^o a river in the Lake District

^o Solway Firth, on the English/Scottish border

Swift to her well-known master’s call,
Up from the brake the falcon springs,
And to the whistling summons hies,
In eager speed, on outstretch’d wings. 60

So from her couch sprang Lady Jane;
In sooth, she was not slack or slow,
Nor fear’d she once the drenching rain,
Nor car’d she how the winds might blow.

And she’s put on her kertle² green, 65
Her scarf and mantle made of blue;
And donn’d her up wi’ mickle^o haste,
Her midnight journey to pursue.

^o considerable

And she’s unbarr’d the outer door,
And ventur’d ’midst the wind and rain, 70
And with the urgent stranger sped,
All storm-struck o’er the dreary plain.

² A variant of “kirtle,” an outer skirt or petticoat.

O'er hill and dale, thro' bog and burn,³
And many a glen they swiftly hied;
Nor spoke they once, nor stopp'd, not stay'd, 75
Until they reach'd the Solway side.

The night was dark, the boist'rous main
Impetuous dash'd against the shore;
And oft the water sprite was heard
To shriek with loud terrific roar! 80

“Where is my love? (said Lady Jane.)
O bring Lord Walter quick to me;
I see the sea, I see the shore,
But no Lord Walter can I see.”

“O Lady Jane, (the stranger cried,) 85
Fair Lady, ever kind and true;
Why shrink you thus with foolish fear?
Lord Walter's spirit speaks to you!

“In Biscay's well-known stormy bay,⁴
Our vessel sank, no more to rise; 90
There, buried in a wat'ry grave,
All cold, thy long-lov'd husband lies.

“Constant and kind to me in life,
Thou held'st dominion o'er my heart;
Our love was mutual; then, shall death, 95
Our love, so well establish'd, part?”

Cold horror seiz'd fair Lady Jane,
Her frame with deadly terror shook;
An icy coldness chill'd her blood,
And motion ev'ry pulse forsook. 100

With silent and insensate stare,
She view'd the spectre o'er and o'er,
But such and awful hideous sight
Her eyes had never seen before.

All deadly meagre gloom'd his face, 105
Of flesh by hideous monsters stripp'd;
Sea-bubbles fill'd his vacant eyes,
And from his clothes the waters dripp'd.

His temples, once so comely fair,
Were now with sea-weed compass'd round; 110
And filthy coils of tangle foul
The parts of his fair body bound.

³ A small stream or brook.

⁴ the large bay between northern Spain and western France

When thus, with hollow voice, once more,
The phantom said – “Howe'er it be,
You must to-night, fair Lady Jane,
Expect to sleep in death with me!” *115*

She shriek'd, and lifeless on the shore
She fell; when swift a swelling wave
Roll'd over her, and, with its recoil,
Entomb'd her in a wat'ry grave! *120*

No more was heard of Lady Jane;
Lord Walter he was seen no more,
Save that the neighbours sometimes see
Their spirits wander by the shore;

And oft amidst the whirlwind's blast *125*
Is heard full many a hideous scream,
And two strange figures often glide
Along the side of Derwent stream!