

Joe Law or The Hermit of Kildwick Grange

Beyond the winding banks of Aire
A moorland stretches wide and bare,
And near its edge at Kildwick Grange
Lives old Joe Law, morose and strange,
Whom Turkey Legs the neighbours name
From some mishap which made him lame.
This man stood more than six feet high,
Grey was his hair and quick his eye.
And strong his arm, but yet unwilling
By real hard work to earn a shilling.

His legs, although his greatest failing,
Would stretch across a deer-park paling;
Crooked and bandy, lean and wide,
They bore him fully two yards a stride.
His hut had been a donkey shed,
Where mice and filthy rattens bred;
The door was once the penfold gate
In better days, 'er cruel fate
Condemned it to a lot obscure,
The charge of Turkey's furniture.

Before his fire of peat and wood
A chair and three legged table stood;
Near hand a water-pot and can,
A *posnet* and a frying-pan,
A looking-glass not worth a rush,
A razor and a lather brush,
An ark of flour and one of meal,
A broken jug without a *beal*,
A wooden spoon and porridge ladle,
Made from his mothers oaken cradle,
A pipe to smoke his parsley-pert in,
A bowl to mix oatmeal and dirt in.

A beam of oak that weigh'd a pack,
And propp'd the leaning chimney back,
Begrin'd by years of soot and smoke
Was fix'd above the ingle nook.
Two niggard windows gave him light,
Eight inches broad and twelve in height,
Their broken panes fill'd up with bags
Of dusters, clothes and cotton rags.

A bedstead left him by his sire
Stood right *agent* the blazing fire;
Its top bestrewn with dust and herbs
And cobwebs that no brush disturbs.
And swinging right above the head
A heavy rack of oaten bread,
The cakes so hard and tough and coarse,
Would break the teeth of dog or horse.

One stormy night when skies were dull
And sluggish Aire ran nearly full,
When..... their murmers hoarse, (unclear)
Croak in the putrid water course,
When stars conceale'd as if in fear
Glance thro' the clouds then disappear,
And winds half furious dash the rain
Against old Turkey's window pane,
Then Law himself all snug and warm,
And where wet could do no harm –
Except the kind that toppers buy
To slake their drunken throats when dry –
Within The Ship's bright kitchen gasped,
His hat half on, his clogs unclasp'd,
One hand an empty tankard grasped,
The other dangled on the floor,
And Turkey Legs could drink no more.

At length he rose and tried to find
His pathway home through wet and wind;
To Ralph, the poacher, honest Will,
And Johnny Hey, all drinking still,
He bade good-night without delay
And stumbling onward steer'd his way
In that direction which he guessed
Would be for Kildwick Grange the best.

But alcohol has wondrous strength,
And soon poor Joe was stretched his length,
Prostrated by his deep carouse,
In Simpson's handy shoeing house.
They raised him up in piteous plight,
For wet and murky was the night.
But Joe no sooner found his feet
Than forth he staggered up the street;
Then cursing them, as bent on theft,

Nor thinking them the friends he'd left,
He quickly lay him down again
In all the filthy mire and rain.

Determined now to end the spree
Begun by Joe, the jokers three
Procured a barrow rope and spade,
And wheeled them where their friend was laid;
They then enroll'd him in a sheet,
And tied his clumsy hands and feet,
And threaten'd him with instant death
By burking him to stop his breath. (smothering)

When placed across the barrow's whirl
His heated brain began to whirl,
And thinking that his last hour had come
He lost his equilibrium
And eas'd the barrow of its load
By tumbling headlong on the road.

A carriers cart now passed the way
Where Turkey Legs half conscious lay;
Then they ran to the horses head
And to the trembling driver said
In tones disguised, "One boon we crave,
'Twill spare the digging of a grave,
Pray help us with this helpless creature,
This poacher, drunkard, local preacher,
This senseless lump of flesh and blood
And throw it into Hawcliffe Wood."

At this the driver stood aghast,
And flogged his horse in terror past,
Leaving that awful scene of strife
Well pleased that fate had spared his life.
Then Will began to use the spade,
And Turkey more and more afraid,
In noisy dread for mercy prayed,
"Oh Lord, these wicked men control,
And mercy take on my poor soul,
And keep them from this crime,
Relieve us, Oh! For once relieve us,
Thou'st promised always to deceive us,
Deceive us then this time."

His prayer being done, they cried "Amen."
Joe's woeful visage brighten'd then,
He recognised his faithless friend
And knew his woes were at an end,
And cried, "Ah! Johnny, thee I know,
Untie my legs and let me go."
Shouting as on the grass he lay,
"I'll have the law and mak' you pay,
I'll stop your merry midnight revels,
You cursed pack of drunken devils."
No sooner had he found relief
Than oath and curse succeeded grief,
Deliverance from all fear of ill
Left him a swearing sinner still.

[Note:- The above sketch of Joe Law was composed in 1856 when the author was 16 years of age. It has now (1886) been re-written with one or two slight alterations, but the piece in the main stands as it was originally printed. Those who knew the subject of the sketch will bear me out in saying that this description of "Law", however imperfect in some respects, is neither an exaggeration nor a caricature.]

Goe.E Dodson