

Best Loved Poems

Of mar k's

THE LEGION CLUB

Jonathan Swift (1667 – 1745)

As I stroll the city, oft I
See a building large and lofty,
Not a bow-shot from the college;
Half the globe from sense and knowledge:
By the prudent architect
Placed against the church direct,
Making good my grandam's jest,
"Near the church"- you know the rest.¹

Tell us what the pile contains?
Many a head that holds no brains.
These demoniacs let me dub
With the name of Legion Club.
Such assemblies you might swear
Meet when butchers bait a bear:
Such a noise, and such haranguing,
When a brother thief is hanging:
Such a rout and such a rabble
Run to hear Jackpudding² gabble:
Such a crowd their ordure throws
On a far less villain's nose.³

Could I from the building's top
Hear the rattling thunder drop,
While the devil upon the roof
(If the devil be thunder-proof)
Should, with poker fiery red,
Crack the stones and melt the lead;
Drive them down on every skull,
When the den of thieves is full;

Quite destroy that harpies' nest;
How might then our isle be blest!
For divines allow that God
Sometimes makes the devil his rod!
And the gospel will inform us
He can punish sins enormous.

Yet should Swift endow the schools
For his lunatics and fools
With a rood or two of land,
I allow the pile may stand.
You perhaps will ask me, Why so?
But it is with this proviso.
Since the house is like to last,
Let the royal grant be pass'd
That the club have right to dwell
Each within his proper cell,
With a passage left to creep in,
And a hole above for peeping.

Let them, when they once get in,
Sell the nation for a pin;
While they sit a-picking straws,
Let them rave at making laws;
While they never hold. their tongue,
Let them dabble in their dung:
Let them form a grand committee,
How to plague and starve the city;
Let them stare, and storm, and frown,
When they see a clergy gown;
Let them, ere they crack a louse,
Call for th' orders of the house;
Let them, with their gosling-quills,
Scribble senseless heads of bills;

¹ I.e., the proverbial "The nearer the Church, the farther from God."

² A buffoon who gathers a crown for a quack-doctor.

³ I.e., the nose of a villain in a pillory.

We may, while they strain their throats,
Wipe our arses with their votes.⁴

Let Sir Tom⁵, that rampant ass,
Stuff his guts with flax and grass;
But before the priest he fleeces,
Tear the Bible all to pieces:
At the parsons, Tom, halloo, boy,
Worthy offspring of a shoeboy,
Footman, traitor, vile seducer,
Perjured rebel, bribed accuser,
Lay thy paltry privilege aside,
Sprung from papists, and a regicide;
Fall a-working like a mole,
Raise the dirt about your hole.

Come, assist me, Muse obedient;
Let us try some new expedient;
Shift the scene for half an hour,
Time and place are in thy power.
Thither, gentle Muse, conduct me;
I shall ask, and you instruct me.

See, the Muse unbars the gate;
Hark, the monkeys, how the y prate!

All ye gods who rule the soul:
Styx, through hell whose waters roll!
Let me be allow'd to tell
What I heard in yonder hell.

Near the door an entrance gapes,
Crowded round with antic shapes,
Poverty, and Grief, and Care,
Causeless Joy, and true Despair;
Discord periwigg'd with snakes,
See the dreadful strides she takes!

By this odious crew beset,
I began to rage and fret,
And resolved to break their pates,

⁴ I.e., with printed lists of how the MPs voted.

⁵ Sir Thomas Prendergrast, MP, Postmaster General for Ireland, and hated by Swift for his antagonism toward the Church of Ireland and his opposition to the Church's claim for tithing.

Ere we enter'd at the gates;
Had not Clio in the nick
Whisper'd me, "Lay down your stick;"
What! said I, is this the mad-house?
These, she answer'd, are but shadows,
Phantoms bodiless and vain,
Empty visions of the brain.
In the porch Briareus⁶ stands,
Shows a bribe in all his hands;
Briareus the secretary,
But we mortals call him Carey.⁷
When the rogues their country fleece,
They may hope for pence a-piece.

Clio, who had been so wise
To put on a fool's disguise,
To bespeak some approbation,
And be thought a near relation,
When she saw three hundred brutes!⁸
All involved in wild disputes,
Roaring till their lungs were spent,
PRIVILEGE OF PARLIAMENT,
Now a new misfortune feels,
Dreading to be laid by th' heels.
Never durst a Muse before
Enter that infernal door;
Clio, stifled with the smell,
Into spleen and vapours fell,
By the Stygian streams that flew
From the dire infectious crew.
Not the stench of Lake Avernus⁹
Could have more offended her nose;
Had she flown but o'er the top,
She had felt her pinions drop,
And by exhalations dire,
Though a goddess, must expire.
In a fright she crept away,
Bravely I resolved to stay.

⁶ One of the hundred-handed giants, son of Earth and Sky.

⁷ Walter Carey, Secretary to the Duke of Dorset, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, 1730-37. The Secretary was the chief executive of the government in Ireland.

⁸ There were three hundred members in the Irish House of Commons.

⁹ The lake near Naples whose waters gives off poisonous fumes.

When I saw the keeper frown,
Tipping him with half-a-crown,
Now, said I, we are alone,
Name your heroes one by one,

Who is that hell-featured brawler?
Is it Satan? No; 'tis Waller.¹⁰
In what figure can a bard dress
Jack, the grandson of Sir Hardress?
Honest keeper, drive him further,
In his looks are hell and murder;
See his scowling visage drop,
Just as when he murder'd Throp.¹¹

Keeper, show me where to fix
On the puppy pair of Dicks:¹²
By their lantern jaws and leathern,
You might swear they both are brethren:
Dick Fitzbaker, Dick the player,
Old acquaintance, are you there?
Dear companions, hug and kiss,
Toast Old Glorious¹³ in your piss;
Tie them, keeper, in a tether,
Let them starve and sink together;
Both are apt to be unruly,
Lash them daily, lash them duly;
Though 'tis hopeless to reclaim them,
Scorpion rods, perhaps, may tame them.

Keeper, yon old dotard smoke,
Sweetly snoring in his cloak:
Who is he? 'Tis humdrum Wynne,¹⁴
Half encompass'd by his kin:

¹⁰ John Waller, MP, grandson of one of the regicides, Hardness Waller, who condemned Charles I to death in 1649.

¹¹ An Irish clergyman, the Reverend Roger Throp, who was persecuted by his patron, John Waller, and who, according to popular belief, was driven to his death by Waller's treatment of him.

¹² Richard Tighe, Irish MP and Privy Councillor – also called “Fitzbaker” by Swift. Richard Bettesworth, Irish MP and subject of numerous lampoons. At one point, he threatened to cut of Swift's ears. A subsequent confrontation produced nothing.

¹³ William III.

¹⁴ John Wynne, Irish, MP.

There observe the tribe of Bingham,
For he never fails to bring 'em;
While he sleeps the whole debate,
They submissive round him wait;
Yet would gladly see the hunks
In his grave, and search his trunks:
See, they gently twitch his coat,
Just to yawn and give his vote,
Always firm in his vocation,
For the court against the nation.

Those are Allens, Jack and Bob,¹⁵
First in every wicked job,
Son and brother to a queer
Brain-sick brute, they call a peer.
We must give them better quarter,
For their ancestor trod mortar,
And at Howth, to boast his fame,
On a chimney cut his name.

There sit Clements, Dilks, and
Harrison.¹⁶
How they swagger from their garrison!
Such a triplet could you tell
Where to find on this side hell?
Harrison, and Dilks, and Clements,
Keeper, see they have the ir payments,
Every mischief's in their hearts;
If they fail, 'tis want of parts.

Bless us! Morgan,¹⁷ art thou there,
man?
Bless mine eyes! art thou the chairman?
Chairman to yon damn'd committee!
Yet I look on thee with pity.
Dreadful sight! what learned Morgan
Metamorphosed to a Gorgon?

¹⁵ John and Robert Allen, brothers, were Irish MPs. Robert had accused Swift of being a liar and a Jacobite supporter of the Stuart Pretender to the English throne. Their great-grandfather (“their ancestor”) was a builder.

¹⁶ Irish MPs.

¹⁷ Maracus Antonius Morgan, Irish MP, chairman of the parliamentary committee that decided against the Irish Church on the tax issue. It was this that prompted Swift to write the poem.

For thy horrid looks, I own,
Half convert me to a stone.
Hast thou been so long at school
Now to turn a factious tool?
Alma Mater was thy mother,
Every young divine thy brother.
Thou, a disobedient varlet
Treat thy mother like a harlot!
Thou ungrateful to thy teachers,
Who are all grown rev'rend preachers?
Morgan, would it not surprise one?
Turn thy nourishment to poison!
When you walk among your books,
They reproach you with their looks;
Bind them fast, or from their shelves
They will come and right themselves:
Homer, Plutarch, Virgil, Flaccus,
All in arms, prepare to back us:
Soon repent, or put to slaughter
Every Greek and Roman author.
Will you, in your factious phrase,
Send the clergy all to graze?
And to make your project pass,
Leave them not a blade of grass?

How I want thee, humorous Hogarth!
Thou, I hear, a pleasant rogue art.
Were but you and I acquainted,
Every monster should be painted:
You should try your graving tools
On this odious group of fools:
Draw the beasts as I describe them:
Form their features while I gibe them;
Draw them like: for I assure you,
You will need no *car'atura*;
Draw them so that we may trace
All the soul in every face.

Keeper, I must now retire,
You have done what I desire:
But I feel my spirits spent
With the noise, the sight, the scent.
"Pray, be patient: you shall find
Half the best are still behind!
You have hardly seen a score;
I can show two hundred more."

Keeper, I have seen enough.
Taking then a pinch of snuff,
I concluded looking round them,
"May their god, the devil, confound them!"