

## Boy Basset and his Monument

Bert Biscoe

Old Frankie de Dunstanville, Boy Basset –  
Hard man, they d’say, hard but fair –  
Owned every mine and every stack,  
And every pound of coal  
That made steam to swing a beam  
All around Carn Brea. They d’say  
Old Boy Basset could swing his cob  
Out the gates of Tehidy  
And ride away as far as a day  
In any direction he chose, and the land  
The old man rode upon was his;  
And the shafts and stopes,  
The adits and levels,  
The fathoms of copper darkness  
And cassiterite waters he rode above,  
And all the ore he rode alongside,  
The stamps, they tables shakin’, shakin’,  
The blowing houses and coinagehalls,  
The shares, adventures and Duchy taxes,  
All of Trevithick’s billowed steam,  
Was all his – his, one and all!

Mothers told their boys as they crouched  
Beside the slab to listen and imbibe,  
To hear the crack of furze, the wisdom of tongues,  
The thomasine spells and whispered old charms,  
That they who was called up to *‘The House’*,  
Up to Tehidy’s purgatory door,  
Would trudge like the damned  
Along the drive, under the elms,  
While the old man, Francis the Lord,  
Looked down from his compass window,  
Up there, by the tickery hands of time,  
In the shade of the tockery tower –  
They mothers said  
That great House would swallow’em up,  
All they who was out of sorts  
With conscience and mirror, swallow  
And spill’em and swill’em like Jonah  
In the ghastly gut of the whale, forever  
And ever, forever and a day!

The Lord de Dunstanville had borrowed his name  
To parade and style as fitted his fame –  
He could tell from the gate  
If a boy was clear in his heart  
Or broken, cursed; he was, he’d tell’ee,

The Instrument, the Infernal Probe of Justice,  
She with the scales, the wigs and the power –  
*'Boy Basset's was the hand of righteousness hereabouts'*.  
That's what Mothers'd say  
Beside the slab, after dark,  
In the lowest sharpest quarter of a moon,  
Where truth and fear,  
Wrasslers for the souls of the young,  
Would grapple as winter drew near.

Later, they boys'd touch drink as much  
As drink would touch they; they'd grow  
Warm and songful, blasphemous  
In the clutch of the wink, and the old crones  
Whose livings they made  
By falling from Eden into the drink,  
They'd tell how, with moon like a plate,  
Old Frankie, wrapped to the nines,  
Scourge of the tap, the snug, the settle,  
Would listen for the creak, the whine  
And complaint of a scullery door –  
And he'd descend like a spirit  
Into the cauldron, like a ghost  
Down through his old house,  
Floor by floor by floor,  
Neither turning to admire his treasures,  
Nor stopping to pass time with child or wife –  
And he would stretch out his cold hand –

The same hand, so they say,  
Which could clasp the gavel to rap  
Cold silence in any courtroom  
Between Heaven and Hell,  
And hand down a sentence with quiet throat  
And the rasp of vengeance between his teeth –  
He could pronounce 'Death' with the love  
Of a sailor for rope, or a sexton for clay –  
And, so they say, his bald head would itch  
From the agitation of that harshest of caps –  
Colder than a sovereign, harder than iron,  
He'd turn into the flare of Tehidy's flame.

Poor Francis, richest of all rich men,  
Would sip at the Excise plunder,  
The magistrate's peculiar reward,  
And listen for strains of hymns from the wink –  
But, for all the tendons of atonement,  
All he would hear would be the scold  
And loving admonitions of Illogan mothers  
As they held him up, in all his terror,  
To frighten their angels curled by the range,

To turn their souls from communion with rum.

Poor Francis! When that morning gavel fell,  
His head, tender as boiled pork, claret  
As beetroot cheeks, rang like St Euny's bells  
In Calvary's lee, in the wake of ascension –  
And when they bells rang out,  
All the Great Flat Lode and its people,  
Mothers, boys, bal-maids, tutters, tributers,  
Capn's and carpenters raced for their lives,  
Raised to grass, the peak of the Carn,  
To sliding rock and wishing well,  
To give thanks on the Third Day, thanks  
For the Lord arisen, the Lord  
Arisen out of Basset's shafts, out of his ships,  
His blowing houses and calciners –  
Up there, between the hour and minute,  
There by his clock, he stood, upright,  
Alone in his mighty house, counting,  
Piling, recounting, reckoning the fortune  
Lost to religion, to salvation, to Revival!

Alone up there, as old Frankie de Dunstanville,  
The greatest of all the Bassets, was bound to be,  
He would decree – discreetly – how fine it would be  
If, when he went, when thousands would walk  
Behind to see and affirm his committal,  
A monument, a finger, magisterial and upright,  
Pointed straight to the heart of heaven,  
Might arise by subscription to greet all they,  
Full of homecoming and departure, clambered  
From his endless ladders, laboured to skin and bone –  
A monument to give thanks to the Lord  
For the sweetness of His air, for the wisdom  
Of clouds and harmony of choirs and comforts  
Of hard-won and stone-written names in cluttered yards –  
How deaf the riders of man engine and storm,  
The fiery spirits of Tuckingmill moor, how loud  
And wrathful the crank and crash of Dolcoath's belly!

That's why Camborne mothers screech at their boys:  
*'Naw matter what 'appens in the gift of yer lives,  
Upon Easter's Sabbath, as a cadaver do arise  
Behind the slidden magdelene stone, not one of thee  
Must enter the dark door of that monument  
Up there upon old Frankie's Carn, on old Carn Brea!  
Be afraid of the cold and damp,  
Hear the howling of they crows,  
Feel how they black priestly birds  
Will infest your spirit with shame and sin –  
Oh! They may warn thee with wagging finger,*

*Warn of the craven thing, more ugly than sin,  
And dark and dank, gloomy and rank –  
Oh! See how they will lure each and all inside  
That stiff old magistrate's finger  
To be pecked by crows for evermore'.*

When you stand, my children, with temptation  
Like an angel posted by your door,  
When you wrasse with the sun and seductive breeze,  
When you innocently wish at the shadow well  
Of some anonymous saint upon that Carn,  
Dab the brow of your dilemma,  
Think, and think again –  
They who raised it, who gained their fortunes  
From the arc of law under Frankie's frown,  
They did smooth the old devil's coat-tails,  
The vulture of a good and honest land – the one  
Who, when that land most needed comfort  
All home from France and broken by war, fled  
And made their parlours and staterooms  
Cold wards for desperate lungs and festered wounds –  
These coins donated by Basset's gifts  
To build the mansions in his eponymous street,  
If it was not guilt which caused their flight  
Then would not doves live in his monument's crown?

