

# P.G. Tait's poem on Bismark [sic.]

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## **An introductory note**

The following poem, written by Tait in October 1870, finds its context in the height of the Franco–Prussian War (July 1870 to May 1871). It was discovered in a small pocket notebook which had once belonged to Tait and which came in to my possession in January 2011, retained prior by the Edinburgh Mathematical Society. I believe few are aware of the existence of the notebook and perhaps none have made a careful study of its contents. Having said this, it appears Tait had sent a copy of the poem on to a correspondent and therefore the poem may be published elsewhere.

Although every effort has been made to produce an accurate transcription, the poem has been written in pencil and reading is difficult at times, especially with Tait's habit of scoring through, writing over and inserting corrections and additions. In some places, this has made the text very dense and sometimes nearly illegible.

Footnotes of explanation and additional information have been inserted where I thought they may be helpful to the reader.

For photographs of the original please see:  
<http://www-history.mcs.st-andrews.ac.uk/history/Tait/Notebook.pdf>

*Elizabeth Lewis.*

Sent to Russel<sup>1</sup>  
11/11/70

*Oct*<sup>r</sup> 31/70

A Who is this G<sup>2</sup> fat but quick?  
The hound that crouched 'neath B's<sup>3</sup> stick  
What time the plunderers of the Dane  
Quarrelled about their shameless gain.  
Beery & fat and scant of wind  
He puffs along the battle plain  
For is not B's "stick" behind?  
Who's dead to honor, lives to pain.  
This is your G, fat yet quick  
Driven to war by B's stick.

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What is this G's lawful prize?  
Whate'er finds favor in his eyes.  
The accursed one who hounds him on  
Knows well his selfrespect is gone.  
He fears his reckless discontent,  
And so in devilish mood  
Delighted sees it find a vent  
In rapine<sup>4</sup>, lust and blood.  
That is this German's lawful prize  
Whate'er finds favor in his eyes.

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<sup>1</sup>Russel: I am yet to identify the person whom Tait refers to as 'Russel'. It may be that the transcribed spelling is inaccurate.

<sup>2</sup>G: Tait's shorthand for 'German'.

<sup>3</sup>Bismarck: Otto von Bismarck (1815–1898) Prusso–German diplomat and statesman; chief architect of the German Empire. He is held responsible for having provoked the Franco–Prussian war. Note (in Section E) Tait spells Bismarck as 'Bismark.'

<sup>4</sup>Rapine: a violent seizure of property.

**B** What does his master hope to gain?  
That does not seem so very plain.  
To inscribe in each historic tome  
Another rush of Goths<sup>5</sup> to Rome?  
Seeks he the immortality  
Of him who fired Diana's<sup>6</sup> shrine,  
Or with the ambition cursed is he  
With Caliph Omar's<sup>7</sup> fame to shine?  
What then does B hope to gain?  
I give it up — my quest is vain —

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But what then will this G gain?  
The answer is both full & plain —  
Contempt from every honest man  
The thief's reward, the murderer's ban,  
When Europe's slow but sure police  
Are set upon his bloody track  
And all shall feel that lasting peace  
Requires he should be beaten back.  
These will the rabid Germain gain  
Fettered at length in Europe's chain.

**C** But are not Gs civilized?  
Is justice not among them prized?  
These statements which have long been made  
But yesterday were not gainsaid<sup>8</sup> —  
But he who runneth now may read  
Unlikely as it may seem  
This quiet content, devoid of greed  
Is but an empty dream.  
For Germans are not civilised  
Say rather they are brutalized.

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<sup>5</sup>The Goths: a Teutonic people, originating in South Sweden (Gotland) who encroached on the Roman Empire during the 4th Century. They split into two divisions: the Visigoths and the Ostrogoths. The Visigoths under Alaric devastated Greece and sacked Rome in 410.

<sup>6</sup>Diana: the Italian goddess of the woods, women, childbirth and the moon.

<sup>7</sup>Caliph Omar (581–644): adviser to Mohammed. Succeeded Abu Bakr as 2nd Caliph. In his reign Islam became an imperial power, though he was to meet his death at the hands of a foreign slave.

<sup>8</sup>Gainsaid: to declare falsely, deny or oppose by contradiction.

What should the wretched Fman<sup>9</sup> feel,  
Downtrodden by the G's heel?  
Glad that the veil is drawn aside  
Which did so long the monster hide  
That lust of Blood & Rapine rife  
Are plainly now revealed  
Which secretly preparing strife  
Were but by Tartuffe's<sup>10</sup> cant concealed.  
This satisfaction he may feel  
Though crushed beneath that brutal heel.

**D** Say what shall be the wretches fate  
Who finds this monster at his gate?  
Dares he to act the part of man  
And shoot the murderer if he can?  
Dares she her honor to defend  
Who face has pleased some Gman<sup>11</sup> door,  
Or dare the starving peasant tend  
His little stock, his winter's store?  
The fallows is the wretches fate  
Behold this monster at his gate.

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Death and Dishonour, that is all.  
In vain for mercy do ye call.  
Hell is abroad — his hounds obscene  
Are loosed on every village green —  
The fairest spots on earth that smiled  
Are soiled by murderer's tread  
The grey-beard and the sucking child  
Heighten the piles of dead.  
Pity has fled, & right is wrong,  
Nature aghast — Oh Lord how long?

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<sup>9</sup>Fman: Tait's shorthand for 'Frenchman'.

<sup>10</sup>Tartuffe: a comedy by Molière.

<sup>11</sup>Gman: a variation on Tait's shorthand for 'German'.

**E** But, Frenchman, though thou feel the curse,  
Rejoice — thy foeman's case is worse.  
When from his hordes thy land is free  
Thou shalt enjoy thy liberty —  
He, crushed beneath an iron hand<sup>12</sup>,  
With none from "stick" to save,  
May yell in praise of Vaterland<sup>13</sup>  
But is not less a Slave!  
Hurrah — each mangy skulking hound  
In Bismark's leash is firmly bound.

— —

All honor, Bismark, to thy stick  
Which makes thy beery slaves so quick —  
But act with caution — have a care —  
And dread the vigor of despair!  
Even Germans may at last feel shame  
The "stick" so long to bear —  
Syne<sup>14</sup> play to thee this pleasant fame  
For "turn about" is fair.  
And Frenchman will pronounce it "chic"  
When Bismark's slaves give him the "stick."

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<sup>12</sup>Iron hand: Bismarck was known as the "iron chancellor".

<sup>13</sup>Vaterland: German homeland or fatherland.

<sup>14</sup>Syne: a Scottish adverb, with its origin in Middle English, meaning 'ago' or 'ever since.'