

Classic Poetry Series

**John Hookham Frere**  
**- poems -**

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# John Hookham Frere(21 May 1769 – 7 January 1846)

John Hookham Frere PC was an English diplomat and author.

<b>Life</b>

Frere was born in London. His father, John Frere, the member of a Suffolk family, had been educated at Caius College, Cambridge, and would have been senior wrangler in 1763 but for the competition of William Paley; his mother, Jane, daughter of John Hookham, a rich London merchant, was cultured and wrote verse in private. His father's sister Ellenor, who married Sir John Fenn, editor of the Paston Letters, wrote educational works for children under the pseudonyms "Mrs Lovechild" and "Mrs Teachwell". Young Frere was sent to Eton College in 1785, and there began an intimacy with George Canning which greatly affected his after life. From Eton, he went to his father's college at Cambridge, and graduated BA in 1792 and MA, in 1795. He entered public service in the foreign office under Lord Grenville, and sat from 1796 to 1802 as member of parliament for the close borough of West Looe in Cornwall.

From his boyhood he had been a warm admirer of <a href="http://www.poemhunter.com/william-pitt-the-younger/">William Pitt</a> the Younger, and along with Canning he entered heart and soul into the defence of his government, and contributed freely to the pages of the Anti-Jacobin, edited by Gifford. He contributed, in collaboration with Canning, The Loves of the Triangles, a clever parody of Erasmus Darwin's Loves of the Plants, The Needy Knife-Grinder and The Rovers. On Canning's removal to the board of trade in 1809 he succeeded him as under-secretary of state; in October 1800 he was appointed envoy extraordinary and plenipotentiary to Lisbon; and in September 1802 he was transferred to Madrid, where he remained for two years. He was recalled on account of a personal disagreement he had with the duke of Alcudia, but the ministry showed its approval of his action by a pension of £700 a year.

He was made a member of the privy council in 1805; in 1807 he was appointed plenipotentiary at Berlin, but the mission was abandoned, and Frere was again sent to Spain in 1808 as plenipotentiary to the Central Junta. The condition of Spain rendered his position responsible and difficult. When Napoleon began to advance on Madrid it became a matter of supreme importance to decide whether Sir John Moore, who was then in the north of Spain, should endeavour to anticipate the occupation of the capital or merely make good his retreat, and if he did retreat whether he should do so by Portugal or by Galicia. Frere was strongly of opinion that the bolder was the better course, and he urged his views

on Sir John Moore with an urgent and fearless persistency that on one occasion at least overstepped the limits of his commission. After the disastrous retreat to A Coruña, the public accused Frere of having endangered the British army, and though no direct censure was passed upon his conduct by the government, he was recalled, and the Marquess Wellesley was appointed in his place.

Thus ended Frere's public life. He afterwards refused to undertake an embassy to St Petersburg, and twice declined a peerage. In 1816 he married Elizabeth Jemima, dowager countess of Erroll, and in 1820, on account of her failing health, he went with her to the Mediterranean. There he finally settled in Malta, and though he afterwards visited England more than once, the rest of his life was for the most part spent in the island of his choice. In quiet retirement he devoted himself to literature, studied his favorite Greek authors, and taught himself Hebrew and Maltese. He welcomed English guests, was popular with his Maltese neighbors, and befriended Mikiel Anton Vassalli, the first Professor of Maltese at the University of Malta. He died at Villa Frere in Pietà close to Valletta.

### <b>Works</b>

Frere's literary reputation now rests entirely upon his spirited verse translations of Aristophanes, which remain in many ways unrivalled. The principles according to which he conducted his task were elucidated in an article on Mitchell's Aristophanes, which he contributed to *The Quarterly Review*, vol. xxiii. The translations of *The Acharnians*, *The Knights*, *The Birds*, and *The Frogs* were privately printed, and were first brought into general notice by George Cornwall Lewis in the *Classical Museum* for 1847. They were followed some time after by *Theognis Restitutus*, or the personal history of the poet Theognis of Megara, deduced from an analysis of his existing fragments. In 1817 he published a mock-heroic Arthurian poem entitled *Prospectus and Specimen of an intended National Work*, by William and Robert Whistlecraft, of Stowmarket in Suffolk, Harness and Collar Makers, intended to comprise the most interesting particulars relating to King Arthur and his Round Table. William Tennant in *Anster Fair* had used the ottava rima as a vehicle for semi-burlesque poetry five years earlier, but Frere's experiment is interesting because <a href="http://www.poemhunter.com/george-gordon-lord-byron/">Byron</a> borrowed from it the measure that he brought to perfection in *Don Juan*.

Frere's complete works were published in 1871, with a memoir by his nephews, WE and Sir Henry Bartle Frere, and reached a second edition in 1874.

# Christmas At The Round Table

The great King Arthur made a royal feast,  
And held his Royal Christmas at Carlisle,  
And thither came the vassals, most and least,  
From every corner of the British Isle;  
And all were entertained, both man and beast,  
According to their rank, in proper style;  
The steeds were fed and littered in the stable,  
The ladies and the knights sat down to table.

The bill of fare (as you may well suppose)  
Was suited to those plentiful old times,  
Before our modern luxuries arose,  
With truffles, and ragouts, and various crimes;  
And, therefore, from the original in prose  
I shall arrange the catalogue in rhymes:  
They served up salmon, venison and wild boars  
By hundreds, and by dozens, and by scores.

Hogsheads of honey, kilderkins of mustard,  
Muttons, and fatted beeves, and bacon swine;  
Hérons and bitterns, peacocks, swan, and bustard,  
Teal, mallard, pigeons, widgeons, and, in fine.  
Plum-puddings, pancakes, apple-pies, and custard,  
And therewithal they drank good Gascon wine,  
With mead, and ale, and cider of our own;  
For porter, punch, and negus were not known.

All sorts of people there were seen together,  
All sorts of characters, all sorts of dresses;  
The fool with fox's tail and peacock feather,  
Pilgrims, and penitents, and grave burgesses;  
The country people with their coats of leather,  
Vintners and victuallers with cans and messes,  
Grooms, archers, varlets, falconers, and yeomen,  
Damsels, and waiting-maids, and waiting-women.

John Hookham Frere

# The Friend Of Humanity, And The Knife-Grinder

FRIEND OF HUMANITY.

"Needy Knife-grinder! whether are you going?  
Rough is the road, your wheel is out of order--  
Bleak blows the Blast;--your hat has got a hole in't,  
So have your breeches!

"Weary Knife-grinder! little think the proud ones  
Who in their coaches roll along the turnpike-  
-road, what hard work 'tis crying all day, 'Knives and  
'Scissars to grind O!

"Tell me Knife-grinder, how came you to grind knives?  
Did some rich man tyrannically use you?  
Was it the squire? or parson of the parish;  
Or the attorney?

"Was it the squire, for killing of his game? or  
Covetous parson, for his tithes distraining?  
Or roguish lawyer, made you lose your little  
All in a lawsuit?

"(Have you not read the Rights of Man, by Tom Paine?)  
Drops of compassion tremble on my eyelids,  
Ready to fall, as soon as you have told your  
Pitiful story."

KNIFE-GRINDER.

"Story! God bless you! I have none to tell, Sir,  
Only last night a-drinking at the Chequers,  
This poor old hat and breeches, as you see, were  
Torn in a scuffle.

"Constables came up for to take me into  
Custody; they took me before the justice;  
Justice Oldmixon put me in the parish-  
stocks for a vagrant.

"I should be glad to drink your Honor's health in  
A pot of beer, if you will give me sixpence;  
But for my part, I never love to meddle  
With Politics, Sir."

FRIEND OF HUMANITY.

"I give thee sixpence! I will see thee damn'd first--  
Wretch! whom no sense of wrongs can rouse to vengeance--  
Sordid, unfeeling, reprobate, degraded,  
Spiritless outcast!"

Kicks the Knife-grinder, overturns his wheel, and exit in a transport of Republican  
enthusiasm and universal philanthropy.

John Hookham Frere