

Joseph Dempster Town Crier & Bellman 1836

In 1836 the new Town Crier and Bellman was appointed. The Bellman's official duty was in the service of the public, in that he would 'Cry' out personal announcements. At times his office was adjoined with that of sexton. In 1556 it was laid down that his fees for "making of graves" in St Clement's churchyard (later the vault) should be "for ane man's grave, twelf pennies, and for ane bairn's grave, ane plack, and for puir creatures that hes na thing – na thing."

The New Bellman was one Joseph Dempster. He had been a boot & shoemaker in Edinburgh, and a Member of the Cordiner craft.

Dempster had fallen on hard times and moved to Dundee. Because of the necessity of giving long term credit, he could not get a business started.

Whilst still a cordiner he had fed and nourished a porker, intending it to feed his family; but the pig was pointed by the messenger-at-arms for debt. "Fare ye weel, Sandy Cawmel" was recorded as his parting words to the pig, "Ye'll no hae lang noo to mind yer auld maister. The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away –Blessed be his holy name."

Once Dempster took a pair of boots to Dudhope Castle for one of the officers of the regiment quartered there, expecting to be paid on delivery. He overheard the officer tell his servant to tell the fellow to call back, as he was not in. Joseph immediately popped in his bald head, with the query, "Pray sir, when will your honour be in?"

On another occasion, when making a pair of shoes, he had so little money that although he had prepared the soles, he could not afford to buy material for the uppers, and was at his wit's end as to what to do. He remembered that he had a quarto Bible bound in calf. He took the leather from it, blackened it over, made the uppers with it, and completed the job.

Dempster had several times been charged by his clergymen for "making lies", an accusation often brought against his craft. "No, No," replied Joseph indignantly "my master makes the lies; I only retail them."

He was quite a character, and after being given the job of Bellman, more out of an act of charity than anything else, there are numerous stories told of his droll sense of humour. The "Dundee Advertiser" of 24th August 1838, contains the following paragraph: -"The Bellman at the close of last week announced a serious loss which had befallen a householder in Fish Street. It was nothing less than the loss of a wife and a child. 'Lost!' said the eccentric Bellman, 'belonging to a man, his wife, and a child along with her. Whoever can give such information as may lead to the recovery of the child will be handsomely rewarded; but, 'continued the Bellman, with a swing round and great emphasis, 'the wife is not wanted.'

Another intimation was "Lost, between the top of the Murraygate and the Wellgate, five five-pound notes. Whoever will return the same will be handsomely rewarded. – I dinna believe it; they were lost in some other gait!"

A curious story is told as to how he once magnified his office. Sir John Munro was in command of a detachment of the 71st Highland Regiment, quartered in Dudhope Castle, and he had the misfortune to lose his dog. The Bellman was engaged to make the proclamation of the loss, but he had some difficulty on obtaining payment of his fee. One day, whoever, he donned his "berrial blacks" and went up to the Barracks. He found that Sir John was there, and he directed the orderly to inform him that one of the officials of Dundee wishes to see him. This message brought out Sir John, who enquired curtly "Who are you, sir?"

With an obsequious bow, Joseph answered "You are the Right Honourable Sir John Munro, and I am the Honourable the Bellman of Dundee."

The purpose of the visit was disclosed and Dempster got the half-crown due to him, when, making a profound obeisance, the Bellman said "I thank the most Honourable Sir John Munro for his patronage and generosity."

He was a Member of the Seceder's Kirk, and was precentor there for several years. This brought him into good-humoured discussions with the clergy of the auld Kirk, and his native wit often brought him off victorious. One day the Rev. George Tod, of St. David's Church, was chaffing Joseph, and he smartly took him up thus:- "Ou ay; I've heard you preachin' about Balaam's ass; but I'll wager, wi' a' yer Bible knowledge, ye couldna tell me what Awbraham's coo said when he gied her a poke wi' his staff." "No I could not Joseph,"

said Mr Tod, "and I don't think you could tell either, if it had to be told." "Hoot awa', man" said Joseph, "it just cried 'Boo' like ony other coo!"

Dempster lived in Thorter Row, and on the evening of Tuesday, 28th July 1840, he was coming down the stair leading from his house when his foot slipped, and he fell to the bottom, landing on his head. He was taken up, medical aid procured, but at about four o'clock on the following morning he passed away.

The newspapers of the time bore testimony to the esteem with which he was regarded. One writer says:- "However trifling the matter Joseph had to publish, his manner of doing it always attracted the attention of passers-by. No Sovereign in Europe could address his Parliament or Diet with more pomposity than he announced the sale of a quantity of furniture in the Greenmarket, or the sailing of a steam vessel. In private life Joseph was highly esteemed for his general kindness and urbanity of manners. As far as his limited means would allow, he was always ready to assist the needy and destitute."

No better epitaph need be desired than this, so frankly pronounced over Joseph Dempster.