

The Ballad of Jemmy Button

By Julia Donaldson

Around Cape Horn the wind howls cold; the glaciers meet the sea.
A captain came with button box to bid for natives three.

He named the man York Minster; Fuegia Basket was the maid.
The boy was Jemmy Button, which is how his price was paid.

York Minster was a moody man, Fuegia small and shy,
And sixteen-year-old Jemmy had a twinkle in his eye.

"You shall not paint your faces red or grease your copper skins,
Use porpoise jaws to comb your hair or shells to shave your chins.

You shall not feed on penguin meat, on dolphins or on seals
But you shall eat boiled mutton and say grace before your meals.

In England you shall spend a year, and then sail home again
To turn your savage brothers into Christian gentlemen."

He took them back to England and he carried out his plan.
They learnt that God made Adam and that manners makyth man.

Fuegia Basket learnt to sew; she mended York's cravats
And stitched the shiny buttons on to Jemmy Button's spats.

And when the year was over and they sailed again to sea
The ship was full of gravy-boats and tablecloths and tea.

At last they reached their homeland and they rowed their boats upstream.
The native gathered round to gaze at figures from a dream.

But Jemmy's sisters scattered when they saw him in his spats.
His brothers circled him like dogs and stared at him like cats.

He spoke to them in English but they did not understand,
And Jemmy could no longer speak the language of his land.

The crew put up three wigwams and they dug three garden plots,
Then sailed away and left them with their china chamberpots.

The natives went for Jemmy and they trampled on his beans.
York Minster and Fuegia Basket stole his soup tureens.

When next the captain called he found young Jemmy Button thin.
His hair was coarse, his eyes were dim, he wore an otter skin.

"Come back, young Jemmy Button, come and sail across the sea.
Oh leave the howling glaciers and come back home with me."

"Oh no," says Jemmy Button, "I shall never leave Cape Horn,
But stay and hunt for otters in the land where I was born."

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