

Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-94)

3 *Heather Ale*

A Galloway Legend

From the bonny bells of heather
They brewed a drink long-syne,
Was sweeter far than honey,
Was stronger far than wine.
They brewed it and they drank it, 5
And lay in a blessed swound
For days and days together
In their dwellings underground.

There rose a king in Scotland,
A fell man to his foes, 10
He smote the Picts in battle,
He hunted them like roes.
Over miles of the red mountain
He hunted as they fled,
And strewed the dwarfish bodies 15
Of the dying and the dead.

Summer came in the country,
Red was the heather bell;
But the manner of the brewing
Was none alive to tell. 20
In graves that were like children's
On many a mountain head,
The Brewsters of the Heather
Lay numbered with the dead.

The king in the red moorland 25
Rode on a summer's day;
And the bees hummed, and the curlews
Cried beside the way.
The king rode, and was angry,
Black was his brow and pale, 30
To rule in a land of heather

And lack the Heather Ale.

It fortune'd that his vassals,
Riding free on the heath,
Came on a stone that was fallen 35
And vermin hid beneath.
Rudely plucked from their hiding,
Never a word they spoke:
A son and his aged father —
Last of the dwarfish folk. 40

The king sat high on his charger,
He looked on the little men;
And the dwarfish and swarthy couple
Looked at the king again. 45
Down by the shore he had them;
And there on the giddy brink —
“I will give you life, ye vermin,
For the secret of the drink.”

There stood the son and father
And they looked high and low; 50
The heather was red around them,
The sea rumbled below.
And up and spoke the father,
Shrill was his voice to hear:
“I have a word in private, 55
A word for the royal ear.

“Life is dear to the aged,
And honour a little thing;
I would gladly sell the secret,”
Quoth the Pict to the King. 60
His voice was small as a sparrow's,
And shrill and wonderful clear:
“I would gladly sell my secret,
Only my son I fear.

“For life is a little matter, 65
And death is nought to the young;
And I dare not sell my honour

Under the eye of my son.
Take *him*, O king, and bind him,
And cast him far in the deep; 70
And it's I will tell the secret
That I have sworn to keep."

They took the son and bound him,
Neck and heels in a thong,
And a lad took him and swung him, 75
And flung him far and strong,
And the sea swallowed his body,
Like that of a child of ten; —
And there on the cliff stood the father,
Last of the dwarfish men. 80

"True was the word I told you:
Only my son I feared;
For I doubt the sapling courage
That goes without the beard.
But now in vain is the torture, 85
Fire shall never avail:
Here dies in my bosom
The secret of Heather Ale."

1890

(From *Ballads*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1890)