

Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-94)

5 *Ticonderoga*

A Legend of the West Highlands

This is the tale of the man
Who heard a word in the night
In the land of the heathery hills,
In the days of the feud and the fight. 5
By the sides of the rainy sea,
Where never a stranger came,
On the awful lips of the dead,
He heard the outlandish name.
It sang in his sleeping ears,
It hummed in his waking head: 10
The name — Ticonderoga,
The utterance of the dead.

I. The Saying of the Name

On the loch-sides of Appin,
When the mist blew from the sea,
A Stewart stood with a Cameron: 15
An angry man was he.
The blood beat in his ears,
The blood ran hot to his head,
The mist blew from the sea,
And there was the Cameron dead. 20
“O, what have I done to my friend,
O, what have I done to mysel’,
That he should be cold and dead,
And I in the danger of all?
Nothing but danger about me, 25
Danger behind and before,
Death at wait in the heather
In Appin and Mamore,
Hate at all of the ferries
And death at each of the fords, 30
Camerons priming gunlocks

And Camerons sharpening swords.”

But this was a man of counsel,
This was a man of a score,
There dwelt no pawkier Stewart 35
In Appin or Mamore.
He looked on the blowing mist,
He looked on the awful dead,
And there came a smile on his face
And there slipped a thought in his head. 40

Out over cairn and moss,
Out over scrog and scaur,
He ran as runs the clansman
That bears the cross of war.
His heart beat in his body, 45
His hair clove to his face,
When he came at last in the gloaming
To the dead man’s brother’s place.
The east was white with the moon,
The west with the sun was red, 50
And there, in the house-doorway,
Stood the brother of the dead.

“I have slain a man to my danger,
I have slain a man to my death.
I put my soul in your hands,” 55
The panting Stewart saith.
“I lay it bare in your hands,
For I know your hands are leal;
And be you my targe and bulwark
From the bullet and the steel.” 60

Then up and spoke the Cameron,
And gave him his hand again:
“There shall never a man in Scotland
Set faith in me in vain;
And whatever man you have slaughtered, 65
Of whatever name or line,
By my sword and yonder mountain,
I make your quarrel mine.

I bid you in to my fireside,
I share with you house and hall; 70
It stands upon my honour
To see you safe from all.”

It fell in the time of midnight,
When the fox barked in the den
And the plaids were over the faces 75
In all the houses of men,
That as the living Cameron
Lay sleepless on his bed,
Out of the night and the other world,
Came in to him the dead. 80

“My blood is on the heather,
My bones are on the hill;
There is joy in the home of ravens
That the young shall eat their fill.
My blood is poured in the dust, 85
My soul is spilled in the air;
And the man that has undone me
Sleeps in my brother’s care.”

“I’m wae for your death, my brother,
But if all of my house were dead, 90
I couldnae withdraw the plighted hand,
Nor break the word once said.”

“O, what shall I say to our father,
In the place to which I fare?
O, what shall I say to our mother, 95
Who greets to see me there?
And to all the kindly Camerons
That have lived and died long-syne —
Is this the word you send them,
Fause-hearted brother mine?” 100

“It’s neither fear nor duty,
It’s neither quick nor dead
Shall gar me withdraw the plighted hand,
Or break the word once said.”

Thrice in the time of midnight, 105
 When the fox barked in the den,
And the plaids were over the faces
 In all the houses of men,
Thrice as the living Cameron
 Lay sleepless on his bed, 110
Out of the night and the other world
 Came in to him the dead,
And cried to him for vengeance
 On the man that laid him low;
And thrice the living Cameron 115
 Told the dead Cameron, no.

“Thrice have you seen me, brother,
 But now shall see me no more,
Till you meet your angry fathers
 Upon the farther shore. 120
Thrice have I spoken, and now,
 Before the cock be heard,
I take my leave for ever
 With the naming of a word.
It shall sing in your sleeping ears, 125
 It shall hum in your waking head,
The name — Ticonderoga,
 And the warning of the dead.”

Now when the night was over
 And the time of people’s fears, 130
The Cameron walked abroad,
 And the word was in his ears.
“Many a name I know,
 But never a name like this;
O, where shall I find a skilful man 135
 Shall tell me what it is?”
With many a man he counselled
 Of high and low degree,
With the herdsmen on the mountains
 And the fishers of the sea. 140
And he came and went unwearied,
 And read the books of yore,

And the runes that were written of old
 On stones upon the moor.
And many a name he was told, 145
 But never the name of his fears —
Never, in east or west,
 The name that rang in his ears:
Names of men and of clans;
 Names for the grass and the tree, 150
For the smallest tarn in the mountains,
 The smallest reef in the sea:
Names for the high and low,
 The names of the craig and the flat;
But in all the land of Scotland, 155
 Never a name like that.

II. The Seeking of the Name

And now there was speech in the south,
 And a man of the south that was wise,
A periwig'd lord of London,
 Called on the clans to rise. 160
And the riders rode, and the summons
 Came to the western shore,
To the land of the sea and the heather,
 To Appin and Mamore.
It called on all to gather 165
 From every scrog and scaur,
That loved their fathers' tartan
 And the ancient game of war.
And down the watery valley
 And up the windy hill, 170
Once more, as in the olden,
 The pipes were sounding shrill;
Again in highland sunshine
 The naked steel was bright;
And the lads, once more in tartan, 175
 Went forth again to fight.

“O, why should I dwell here
 With a weird upon my life,
When the clansmen shout for battle

And the war-swords clash in strife? 180
 I cannae joy at feast,
 I cannae sleep in bed,
 For the wonder of the word
 And the warning of the dead.
 It sings in my sleeping ears 185
 It hums in my waking head,
 The name — Ticonderoga,
 The utterance of the dead.
 Then up, and with the fighting men
 To march away from here, 190
 Till the cry of the great war-pipe
 Shall drown it in my ear!"

Where flew King George's ensign
 The plaided soldiers went:
 They drew the sword in Germany, 195
 In Flanders pitched the tent.
 The bells of foreign cities
 Rang far across the plain:
 They passed the happy Rhine,
 They drank the rapid Main. 200
 Through Asiatic jungles
 The Tartans filed their way,
 And the neighing of the warpipes
 Struck terror in Cathay.

"Many a name have I heard," he thought, 205
 "In all the tongues of men,
 Full many a name both here and there,
 Full many both now and then.
 When I was at home in my father's house
 In the land of the naked knee, 210
 Between the eagles that fly in the lift
 And the herrings that swim in the sea,
 And now that I am a captain-man
 With a braw cockade in my hat —
 Many a name have I heard," he thought, 215
 "But never a name like that."

There fell a war in a woody place,
Lay far across the sea,
A war of the march in the mirk midnight
And the shot from behind the tree, 220
The shaven head and the painted face,
The silent foot in the wood,
In a land of a strange, outlandish tongue
That was hard to be understood.

It fell about the gloaming 225
The general stood with his staff,
He stood and he looked east and west
With little mind to laugh.

“Far have I been and much have I seen,
And kent both gain and loss, 230
But here we have woods on every hand
And a kittle water to cross.

Far have I been and much have I seen,
But never the beat of this;
And there’s one must go down to that waterside 235
To see how deep it is.”

It fell in the dusk of the night
When unco things betide,
The skilly captain, the Cameron,
Went down to that waterside. 240

Canny and soft the captain went;
And a man of the woody land,
With the shaven head and the painted face,
Went down at his right hand.

It fell in the quiet night, 245
There was never a sound to ken;
But all of the woods to the right and the left
Lay filled with the painted men.

“Far have I been and much have I seen,
Both as a man and boy, 250
But never have I set forth a foot
On so perilous an employ.”
It fell in the dusk of the night

When unco things betide,
That he was aware of a captain-man 255
Drew near to the waterside.
He was aware of his coming
Down in the gloaming alone;
And he looked in the face of the man
And lo! the face was his own. 260
“This is my weird,” he said,
“And now I ken the worst;
For many shall fall the morn,
But I shall fall with the first.
O, you of the outland tongue, 265
You of the painted face,
This is the place of my death;
Can you tell me the name of the place?”
“Since the Frenchmen have been here
They have called it Sault-Marie; 270
But that is a name for priests,
And not for you and me.
It went by another word,”
Quoth he of the shaven head:
“It was called Ticonderoga 275
In the days of the great dead.”

And it fell on the morrow’s morning,
In the fiercest of the fight,
That the Cameron bit the dust
As he foretold at night; 280
And far from the hills of heather,
Far from the isles of the sea,
He sleeps in the place of the name
As it was doomed to be.

1887

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