

Joanna Baillie (1762-1851)

4 *Malcolm's Heir: A Tale of Wonder*

O go not by Duntorloch's Walls
When the moon is in the wane,
And cross not o'er Duntorloch's Bridge,
The farther bank to gain.

For there the Lady of the Stream 5
In dripping robes you'll spy,
A-singing to her pale wan babe,
An elrich lullaby.

And stop not at the house of Merne, 10
On the eve of good Saint John,
For then the Swathed Knig[h]t walks his rounds
With many a heavy moan.

All swathed is he in coffin weeds,
And a wound is in his breast,
And he points still to the gloomy vault, 15
Where they say his corse doth rest.

But pass not near Glencromar's Tower,
Though the sun shine e'er so bright;
More dreaded is this in the noon of day,
Than those in the noon of night. 20

The night-shade rank grows in the court,
And snakes coil in the wall,
And bats lodge in the rifted spire,
And owls in the murky hall.

On it there shines no cheerful light, 25
But the deep-red setting sun
Gleams bloody red on its battlements
When day's fair course is run.

And fearfully in night's pale beams,
When the moon peers o'er the wood, 30
Its shadow grim stretch'd o'er the ground
Lies blackening many a rood.

No sweet bird's chirping there is heard,
No herd-boy's horn doth blow;
But the owlet hoots and the pent blast sobs, 35
And loud croaks the carrion-crow.

No marvel! for within its walls
Was done the deed unblest,
And in its noisome vaults the bones
Of a father's murderer rest. 40

He laid his father in the tomb
With deep and solemn woe,
As rumour tells, but righteous heaven
Would not be mocked so.

There rest his bones in the mouldering earth, 45
By lord and by carle forgot;
But the foul, fell spirit that in them dwelt,
Rest hath it none, I wot!

"Another night," quoth Malcolm's heir,
As he turn'd him fiercely round, 50
And closely clench'd his ireful hand,
And stamp'd upon the ground:

“Another night within your walls
“I will not lay my head,
“Though the clouds of heaven my roof should be, 55
“And the cold dank earth my bed.

“Your younger son has now your love,
“And my stepdame false your ear;
“And his are your hawks and his are your hounds,
“And his your dark-brown deer. 60

“To him you have given your noble steed,
“As fleet as the passing wind;
“But me have you shamed before my friends,
“Like the son of a base-born hind:”

Then answer’d him the white-hair’d chief, 65
Dim was his tearful eye,
“Proud son, thy anger is all too keen,
“Thy spirit is all too high.

“Yet rest this night beneath my roof,
“The wind blows cold and shrill, 70
“With to-morrow’s dawn, if so it must be,
“E’en follow thy wayward will.”

Yet nothing moved was Malcolm’s heir,
And never a word did he say,
But cursed his father in his heart, 75
And sternly strode away.

And his coal-black steed he mounted straight,
As twilight gather’d round,
And at his feet with eager speed
Ran Swain, his faithful hound. 80

Loud rose the blast, yet ne'ertheless
With furious speed rode he,
Till night, like the gloom of a cavern'd mine,
Had closed o'er tower and tree.

Loud rose the blast, thick fell the rain, 85
Keen flash'd the light'ning red,
And loud the awful thunder roar'd
O'er his unshelter'd head.

At length full close before him shot
A flash of sheeted light, 90
And the high-arch'd gate of Glencromar's tower,
Glared on his dazzled sight.

His steed stood still, nor step would move,
Up look'd his wistful Swain,
And wagg'd his tail, and feebly whined; 95
He lighted down amain.

Through porch and court he pass'd, and still
His list'ning ear he bow'd,
Till beneath the hoofs of his trampling steed
The paved hall echo'd loud. 100

And other echoes answer gave
From arches far and grand;
Close to his horse and his faithful dog
He took his fearful stand.

The night-birds shriek'd from the creviced roof, 105
And the fitful blast sang shrill,
Yet ere the mid-watch of the night,
Were all things hush'd and still.

But in the mid-watch of the night,
 When hush'd was every sound, 110
Faint, doleful music struck his ear,
 As if waked from the hollow ground.

And loud and louder still it grew,
 And upward still it wore,
Till it seem'd at the end of the farthest aisle 115
 To enter the eastern door.

O! never did music of mortal make
 Such dismal sounds contain;
A horrid elrich dirge it seem'd —
 A wild unearthly strain. 120

The yell of pain, and the wail of woe,
 And the short shrill shriek of fear,
Through the winnowing sound of a furnace flame,
 Confusedly struck his ear.

And the serpent's hiss, and the tiger's growl, 125
 And the famish'd vulture's cry,
Were mix'd at times, as with measured skill,
 In this horrid harmony.

Up bristled the locks of Malcolm's heir,
 And his heart it quickly beat, 130
And his trembling steed shook under his hand,
 And Swain cower'd close to his feet.

When, lo! a faint light through the porch
 Still strong and stronger grew,
And shed o'er the walls and the lofty roof 135
 Its wan and dismal hue.

And slowly ent'ring then appear'd,
Approaching with soundless tread,
A funeral band in dark array,
As in honour of the dead. 140

The first that walk'd were torchmen ten,
To lighten their gloomy road,
And each wore the face of an angry fiend,
And on cloven goats' feet trode.

And the next that walk'd as mourners meet, 145
Were murderers twain and twain,
With bloody hands and surtout red,
Befoul'd with many a stain.

Each with a cut-cord round his neck,
And red-strain'd, starting een, 150
Show'd that upon the gibbet tree,
His earthly end had been.

And after these, in solemn state,
There came an open bier,
Borne on black, shapeless rampant forms, 155
That did but half appear.

And on that bier a corse was laid,
As corse could never lie,
That did by decent hands composed
In nature's struggles die. 160

Nor stretch'd, nor swathed, but every limb
In strong distortion lay,

As in the throes of a violent death
Is fix'd the lifeless clay.

1821

(From *The Dramatic and Poetical Works of Joanna Baillie*.
2nd. ed. 1851; Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1976)