

Joanna Baillie (1762-1851)

6 *Sir Maurice: A Ballad*

Sir Maurice was a wealthy lord,
He lived in the north countrie;
Well could he cope with foeman's sword,
Or the glance of a lady's eye.

Now all his armed vassals wait, 5
A staunch and burly band,
Before his stately Castle's gate,
Bound for the Holy Land.

Above the spearmen's lengthen'd file, 10
Are pictured ensigns flying;
Stroked by their keeper's hand the while,
Are harness'd chargers neighing.

And looks of woe, and looks of cheer, 15
And looks the two between,
On many a warlike face appear,
Where tears have lately been.

For all they love is left behind, 20
Hope beckons them before;
Their parting sails swell with the wind,
Blown from their native shore.

Then through the crowded portal pass'd
Six goodly knights and tall,
Sir Maurice himself, who came the last,
Was goodliest of them all.

And proudly roved his hasty eye 25
O'er all the warlike train; —
“Save ye! brave comrades! — prosperously,
Heaven send us cross the main!

“But see I right? — an armed band
From Moorham's lordless hall; 30
And he, who bears the high command,
Its ancient Seneschal!

“Return, your stately keep defend;
Defend your lady's bower,
Lest rude and lawless hands should rend 35
That lone and lovely flower.”

“God will defend our lady dear,
And we will cross the sea,
From slavery's chain, his lot severe,
Our noble lord to free.” 40

“Nay, nay! some wandering minstrel's tongue,
Hath framed a story vain;
Thy lord, his liege-men brave among,
Near Acre's wall was slain.”

“Nay, good my lord! for had his life 45
Been lost on battle-ground,
When ceased that fell and fatal strife,
His body had been found.”

“No faith to such delusion give;
His mortal term is past” — 50
“Not so, not so! he is alive,
And will be found at last!”

These latter words, right eagerly,
From a slender stripling broke,
Who stood the ancient warrior by, 55
And trembled as he spoke.

Sir Maurice started at the sound,
And all, from top to toe,
The stripling scann'd, who to the ground,
His blushing face bent low. 60

“Is this thy kinsman, Seneschal?
Thy own or thy sister’s son?
A gentler page, in tent or hall,
Mine eyes ne’er look’d upon.

“To thine own home return, fair youth! 65
To thine own home return;
Give ear to likely, sober truth,
Nor prudent counsel spurn.

“War suits thee not if boy thou art;
And if a sweeter name 70
Befit thee, do not lightly part
With maiden’s honour’d fame.”

He turn’d him from his liege-men all,
Who round their chieftain press’d;
His very shadow on the wall 75
His troubled mind express’d.

As sometimes slow and sometimes fast
He paced to and fro,
His plummy crest now upwards cast
In air, now drooping low. 80

Sometimes, like one in frantic mood,
Short words of sound he utter'd,
And sometimes, stopping short, he stood
As to himself he mutter'd:

“A daughter’s love, a maiden’s pride! 85
And may they not agree?
Could man desire a lovelier bride,
A truer friend than she?

“Down, cursed thought! a stripling’s garb,
Betrays not wanton will; 90
Yet sharper than an arrow’s barb,
That fear might wound me still.”

He mutter’d long, then to the gate
Return’d and look’d around,
But the Seneschal and his stripling mate 95
Were nowhere to be found.

With outward cheer and inward smart
In warlike, fair array,
Did Maurice with his bands depart,
And shoreward bent his way. 100

Their stately ship rode near to port,
The warriors to receive,
And there, with blessings kind but short,
Did friends of friends take leave.

And soon they saw the crowded strand 105
Wear dimly from their view,
And soon they saw the distant land,
A line of hazy blue.

The white-sail'd ship with favouring breeze,
In all her gallant pride, 110
Moved like the mistress of the seas,
That rippled far and wide.

Sometimes with steady course she went,
O'er wave and surge careering,
Sometimes with sidelong mast she bent, 115
Her wings the sea-foam sheering.

Sometimes with poles and rigging bare
She scudded before the blast,
But safely by the Syrian shore
Her anchor dropp'd at last. 120

What martial honours Maurice won,
Join'd with the brave and great,
From the fierce, faithless Saracen,
I may not here relate.

With boldest band on bridge or moat, 125
With champion on the plain,
I' the narrow bloody breach he fought,
Choked up with grisly slain.

Most valiant by the valiant deem'd,
Their praise his deeds proclaim'd, 130
And the eyes of his liege-men brightly beam'd,
When they heard their leader named.

But fate will quell the hero's strength,
And dim the loftiest brow,
And this our noble chief at length 135
Was in the dust laid low.

He lay the heaps of dead beneath,
As sank life's flickering flame,
And thought it was the trance of death,
That o'er his senses came. 140

And when again day's blessed light
Did on his vision fall,
There stood by his side — a wondrous sight —
The ancient Seneschal.

He strove, but could not utter word; 145
His misty senses fled;
Again he woke, and Moorham's lord
Was bending o'er his bed.

A third time sank he as if dead,
And then his eye-lids raising, 150
He saw a chief with turban'd head,
Intently on him gazing.

“The Prophet's zealous servant I;
His battles I've fought and won:
Christians I scorn, their creeds deny, 155
But honour Mary's Son.

“And I have wedded an English dame,
And set her parent free;
And none who bear an English name,
Shall e'er be thrall'd by me. 160

“For her dear sake I can endure
All wrong, all hatred smother;
Whate'er I feel, thou art secure,
As though thou wert my brother.”

“And thou hast wedded an English dame!” 165

Sir Maurice said no more,
For o'er his heart soft weakness came,
He sigh'd and wept full sore.

And many a dreary day and night,
With the Moslem Chief stay'd he, 170

But ne'er could catch, to bless his sight,
One glimpse of the fair lady.

Oft gazed he on her lattice high,
As he paced the court below,
And turn'd his listening ear to try, 175
If word or accent low

Might haply reach him there; and oft
Traversed the garden green,
And thought some footstep, small and soft,
Might on the turf be seen. 180

And oft to Moorham's lord he gave
His eager ear, who told
How he became a wretched slave,
Within that Syrian hold;

What time from liege-men parted far, 185
Upon the battle-field,
By stern and adverse fate of war,
He was compell'd to yield:

And how his daughter did by stealth,
So boldly cross the sea, 190
With secret store of gather'd wealth,
To set her father free:

And how into the foeman's hands
She and her people fell;
And how (herself in captive bands) 195
She sought him in his cell;

And but a captive boy appear'd,
Till grief her sex betray'd;
And the fierce Saracen, so fear'd,
Spoke kindly to the maid: 200

How for her plighted hand sued he,
And solemn promise gave,
Her noble father should be free,
With every Christian slave;

(For many there, in bondage kept, 205
Felt the base rule of vice,)
How long she ponder'd, sorely wept,
Then paid the fearful price.

A tale that made his bosom thrill, —
His faded eyes to weep; 210
He waking thought upon it still,
And saw it in his sleep.

But harness rings, and the trumpet's bray
Again to battle calls,
And Christian Powers in grand array, 215
Are near those Moslem walls.

Sir Maurice heard; untoward fate!
Sad to be thought upon!
But the castle's lord unlock'd its gate,
And bade his guest be gone. 220

“Fight thou for faith by thee adored,
By thee so well maintain’d;
But never may this trusty sword,
With blood of thine be stain’d!”

Sir Maurice took him by the hand, 225
“God bless thee too!” — he cried;
Then to the nearest Christian band,
With mingled feelings hied.

The battle join’d, with dauntless pride,
’Gainst foemen, foemen stood, 230
And soon the fatal field was dyed
With many a brave man’s blood.

At length gave way the Moslem force;
Their valiant chief was slain;
Maurice protected his lifeless corse, 235
And bore it from the plain.

There’s mourning in the Moslem halls,
A dull and dismal sound;
The lady left its ’leaguer’d walls,
And safe protection found. 240

When months were past, the widow’d dame
Look’d calm and cheerfully;
Then Maurice to her presence came,
And bent him on his knee.

What words of penitence or suit 245
He utter’d, pass we by;
The lady wept, awhile was mute,
Then gave this firm reply:

“That thou didst doubt my maiden pride,
(A thought that rose and vanish’d 250
So fleetingly) I will not chide;
'Tis from remembrance banish’d.

“But thy fair fame, earn’d by that sword,
Still spotless shall it be:
I was the bride of a Moslem lord, 255
And will never be bride to thee.”

So firm though gentle was her look,
Hope on the instant fled;
A solemn, dear farewell he took,
And from her presence sped. 260

And she a plighted nun became,
God serving day and night;
And he of blest Jerusalem,
A brave and zealous knight,

But that their lot was one of woe, 265
Wot ye, because of this
Their separate single state? — if so,
In sooth ye judge amiss.

She tends the helpless stranger’s bed,
For alms her wealth is stored; 270
On her meek worth God’s grace is shed,
Man’s grateful blessings pour’d.

He still in warlike mail doth stalk,
In arms his prowess prove;
And oft of siege or battle talk, 275
And sometimes of his love.

His noble countenance the while,
 Would youthful listeners please,
When with alter'd voice, and a sweet sad smile
 He utter'd such words as these: 280

“She was the fairest of the fair,
 The gentlest of the kind;
Search ye the wide world every where,
 Her like ye shall not find.

“She *was* the fairest, *is* the best, 285
 Too good for a monarch's bride;
I would not give her, in nun's coif drest,
 For all her sex beside.”

1790

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