

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822)

5 *Saint Edmond's Eve*

Oh! did you observe the Black Canon pass,
And did you observe his frown?
He goeth to say the midnight mass,
In holy St. Edmond's town.

He goeth to sing the burial chaunt, 5
And to lay the wandering sprite,
Whose shadowy, restless form doth haunt,
The Abbey's drear aisle this night.

It saith it will not its wailing cease,
'Till that holy man come near, 10
'Till he pour o'er its grave the prayer of peace,
And sprinkle the hallowed tear.

The Canon's horse is stout and strong
The road is plain and fair,
But the Canon slowly wends along, 15
And his brow is gloomed with care.

Who is it thus late at the Abbey-gate?
Sullen echoes the portal bell,
It sounds like the whispering voice of fate,
It sounds like a funeral knell. 20

The Canon his faltering knee thrice bowed,
And his frame was convulsed with fear,
When a voice was heard distinct and loud,
'Prepare! for thy hour is near.'

He crosses his breast, he mutters a prayer, 25
To Heaven he lifts his eye,
He heeds not the Abbot's gazing stare,
Nor the dark Monks who murmured by.

Bare-headed he worships the sculptured saints
That frown on the sacred walls, 30
His face it grows pale, — he trembles, he faints,
At the Abbot's feet he falls.

And straight the father's robe he kissed,
Who cried, 'Grace dwells with thee,
The spirit will fade like the morning mist, 35
At your benedicite.

'Now haste within! the board is spread,
Keen blows the air, and cold,
The spectre sleeps in its earthy bed,
'Till St. Edmond's bell hath tolled, — 40

'Yet rest your wearied limbs to-night,
You've journeyed many a mile,
To-morrow lay the wailing sprite,
That shrieks in the moonlight aisle.

'Oh! faint are my limbs and my bosom is cold, 45
Yet to-night must the sprite be laid,
Yet to-night when the hour of horror's told,
Must I meet the wandering shade.

'Nor food, nor rest may now delay, —
For hark! the echoing pile, 50
A bell loud shakes! — Oh haste away,
O lead to the haunted aisle.'

The torches slowly move before,
The cross is raised on high,
A smile of peace the Canon wore, 55
But horror dimmed his eye —

And now they climb the footworn stair,
The chapel gates unclose,
Now each breathed low a fervent prayer,
And fear each bosom froze — 60

Now paused awhile the doubtful band

And viewed the solemn scene, —
Full dark the clustered columns stand,
The moon gleams pale between —

‘Say father, say, what cloisters’ gloom
Conceals the unquiet shade,
Within what dark unhallowed tomb,
The corse unblessed was laid.’ 65

‘Through yonder drear aisle alone it walks,
And murmurs a mournful plaint, 70
Of thee! Black Canon, it wildly talks,
And call on thy patron saint —

The pilgrim this night with wondering eyes,
As he prayed at St. Edmond’s shrine,
From a black marble tomb hath seen it rise, 75
And under yon arch recline.’ —

‘Oh! say upon that black marble tomb,
What memorial sad appears.’ —
‘Undistinguished it lies in the chancel’s gloom,
No memorial sad it bears’ — 80

The Canon his paternoster reads,
His rosary hung by his side,
Now swift to the chancel doors he leads,
And untouched they open wide,

Resistless, strange sounds his steps impel, 85
To approach to the black marble tomb,
‘Oh! enter, Black Canon,’ a whisper fell,
‘Oh! enter, thy hour is come.’

He paused, told his beads, and the threshold passed,
Oh! horror, the chancel doors close, 90
A loud yell was borne on the rising blast,
And a deep, dying groan arose.

The Monks in amazement shuddering stand,
They burst through the chancel’s gloom,

From St. Edmond's shrine, lo! a skeleton's hand, 95
 Points to the black marble tomb.

Lo! deeply engraved, an inscription blood red,
 In characters fresh and clear —
‘The guilty Black Canon of Elmham's dead,
 And his wife lies buried here!’ 100

In Elmham's tower he wedded a Nun,
 To St. Edmond's his bride he bore,
On this eve her noviciate here was begun
 And a Monk's gray weeds she wore; —

O! deep was her conscience dyed with guilt, 105
 Remorse she full oft revealed,
Her blood by the ruthless Black Canon was spilt,
 And in death her lips he sealed;

Her spirit to penance this night was doomed,
 'Till the Canon atoned the deed, 110
Here together they now shall rest entombed,
 'Till their bodies from dust are freed —

Hark! a loud peal of thunder shakes the roof,
 Round the altar bright lightnings play,
Speechless with horror the Monks stand aloof, 115
 And the storm dies sudden away —

The inscription was gone! a cross on the ground,
 And a rosary shone through the gloom,
But never again was the Canon there found,
 Or the Ghost on the black marble tomb. 120

1810

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