

Joanna Baillie (1762-1851)

3 *Lord John of the East: A Ballad*

The fires blazed bright till deep midnight,  
And the guests sat in the hall,  
And the lord of the feast, Lord John of the East,  
Was the merriest of them all.

His dark-grey eye, that wont so sly 5  
Beneath his helm to scowl,  
Flash'd keenly bright, like a new-waked sprite,  
As pass'd the circling bowl.

In laughter light, or jocund lay,  
That voice was heard, whose sound, 10  
Stern, loud, and deep, in battle-fray  
Did foe-men fierce astound;

And stretch'd, as balm, like lady's palm,  
To every jester near,  
That hand which through a prostrate foe 15  
Oft thrust the ruthless spear.

The gallants sang, and the goblets rang,  
And they revell'd in careless state,  
Till a thund'ring sound, that shook the ground,  
Was heard at the castle gate. 20

“Who knocks without, so loud and stout?  
“Some wand'ring knight, I ween,  
“Who from afar, like a guiding star,  
“Our blazing hall hath seen.

“If a stranger it be of high degree, 25  
    “(No churl durst make such din,)”  
“Step forth amain, my pages twain,  
    “And soothly ask him in.

“Tell him our cheer is the forest deer,  
    “Our bowl is mantling high, 30  
“And the lord of the feast is John of the East,  
    “Who welcomes him courteously.”

The pages twain return’d again,  
    And a wild, scared look had they;  
“Why look ye so? — is it friend or foe?” 35  
    Did the angry baron say.

“A stately knight without doth wait,  
    “But further he will not hie,  
“Till the baron himself shall come to the gate,  
    “And ask him courteously.” — 40

“By my mother’s shroud, he is full proud!  
    “What earthly man is he?”  
“I know not, in truth,” quoth the trembling youth,  
    “‘If earthly man it be.

“In reveller’s plight, he is bedight, 45  
    “With a vest of cramoisie meet;  
“But his mantle behind, that streams on the wind,  
    “Is a corse’s bloody sheet.”

“Out, paltry child! thy wits are wild,  
    “Thy comrade will tell me true: 50  
“Say plainly, then, what hast thou seen?  
    “Or dearly shalt thou rue.”

Faint spoke the second page with fear,  
And bent him on his knee,  
“Were I on your father’s sword to swear, 55  
“The same it appear’d to me.”

Then dark, dark lower’d the baron’s eye,  
And his red cheek changed to wan;  
For again at the gate more furiously,  
The thund’ring din began. 60

“And is there ne’er of my vassals here,  
“Of high or low degree,  
“That will unto this stranger go, —  
“Will go for the love of me?”

Then spoke and said, fierce Donald the Red, — 65  
(A fearless man was he,)  
“Yes; I will straight to the castle gate,  
“Lord John, for the love of thee.”

With heart full stout, he hied him out,  
Whilst silent all remain: 70  
Nor moved a tongue those gallants among,  
Till Donald return’d again.

“O speak,” said his lord, “by thy hopes of grace,  
“What stranger must we hail?”  
But the haggard look of Donald’s face 75  
Made his falt’ring words to fail.

“It is a knight in some foreign guise,  
“His like did I never behold;  
“For the stony look of his beamless eyes  
“Made my very life-blood cold. 80

“I did him greet in fashion meet,  
“And bade him your feast partake,  
“But the voice that spoke, when he silence broke,  
“Made the earth beneath me quake.

“O such a tone did tongue ne’er own 85  
“That dwelt in mortal head; —  
“It is like a sound from the hollow ground, —  
“Like the voice of the coffin’d dead.

“I bade him to your social board,  
“But in he will not hie, 90  
“Until at the gate this castle’s lord  
“Shall entreat him courteously.

“And he stretch’d him the while with a ghastly smile,  
“And sternly bade me say,  
“’Twas no depute’s task your guest to ask 95  
“To the feast of the woody bay.”

Pale grew the baron, and faintly said,  
As he heaved his breath with pain,  
“From such a feast as there was spread,  
“Do any return again? 100

“I bade my guest to a bloody feast,  
“Where the death’s wound was his fare,  
“And the isle’s bright maid, who my love betray’d,  
“She tore her raven hair.

“The sea-fowl screams, and the watch-tower gleams, 105  
“And the deaf’ning billows roar,  
“Where he unblest was put to rest,  
“On a wild and distant shore.

“Do the hollow grave and the whelming wave  
“Give up their dead again? 110  
“Doth the surgy waste waft o’er its breast  
“The spirits of the slain?”

But his loosen’d limbs shook fast, and pour’d  
The big drops from his brow,  
As louder still the third time roar’d 115  
The thund’ring gate below.

“O rouse thee, baron, for manhood’s worth!  
“Let good or ill befall,  
“Thou must to the stranger knight go forth,  
“And ask him to your hall.” 120

“Rouse thy bold breast,” said each eager guest,  
“What boots it shrinking so?  
“Be it fiend or sprite, or murder’d knight,  
“In heaven’s name thou must go.

“Why shouldst thou fear? dost thou not wear 125  
“A gift from the great Glendower,  
“Sandals blest by a holy priest,  
“O’er which nought ill hath power?”

All ghastly pale did the baron quail,  
As he turn’d him to the door, 130  
And his sandals blest by a holy priest  
Sound feebly on the floor.

Then back to the hall and his merry mates all,  
He cast his parting eye.  
“God send thee amain, safe back again!” 135  
He heaved a heavy sigh.

Then listen'd they, on the lengthen'd way,  
    To his faint and less'ning tread,  
And, when that was past, to the wailing blast,  
    That wail'd as for the dead. 140

But wilder it grew, and stronger it blew,  
    And it rose with an elrich sound,  
Till the lofty keep on its rocky steep,  
    Fell hurtling to the ground.

Each fearful eye then glanced on high, 145  
    To the lofty-window'd wall,  
When a fiery trace of the baron's face  
    Through the casements shone on all.

But the vision'd glare pass'd through the air,  
    And the raging tempest ceased, 150  
And never more, on sea or shore,  
    Was seen Lord John of the East.

The sandals, blest by a holy priest,  
    Lay unscathed on the swarded green,  
But never again, on land or main, 155  
    Lord John of the East was seen.

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