

John Leyden (1775-1811)

2 *The Elfin-King*

— “O swift, and swifter far he speeds
“Than earthly steed can run;
“But I hear not the feet of his courser fleet,
“As he glides o’er the moorland dun.” —

Lone was the strath where he crossed their path, 5
And wide did the heath extend,
The Knight in Green on that moor is seen
At every seven years’ end.

And swift is the speed of his coal-black steed,
As the leaf before the gale, 10
But never yet have that courser’s feet
Been heard on hill or dale.

But woe to the wight who meets the Green Knight,
Except on his faulchion arm
Spell-proof he bear, like the brave St. Clair, 15
The holy Trefoil’s charm;

For then shall fly his gifted eye,
Delusions false and dim;
And each unblest’d shade shall stand pourtray’d
In ghostly form and limb. 20

O swift, and swifter far he speeds
Than earthly steed can run;
— “He skims the blue air,” said the brave St. Clair,
“Instead of the heath so dun.

“His locks are bright as the streamer’s light, 25
“His cheeks like the rose’s hue;
“The Elfin-King, like the merlin’s wing
“Are his pinions of glossy blue.” —

— “No Elfin-King, with azure wing,
“On the dark brown moor I see; 30
“But a courser keen, and a Knight in Green,
“And full fair I ween is he.

“Nor Elfin-King, nor azure wing,
“Nor ringlets sparkling bright;” —
Sir Geoffry cried, and forward hied 35
To join the stranger Knight.

He knew not the path of the lonely strath,
Where the Elfin-King went his round;
Or he never had gone with the Green Knight on,
Nor trode the charmed ground. 40

How swift they flew! no eye could view
Their track on heath or hill;
Yet swift across both moor and moss
St. Clair did follow still.

And soon was seen a circle green, 45
Where a shadowy wassel crew
Amid the ring did dance and sing,
In weeds of watchet blue.

And the windlestrae, so limber and gray,
Did shiver beneath the tread 50
Of the coursers’ feet, as they rushed to meet
The morrice of the dead.

— “Come here, come here, with thy green feere,
“Before the bread be stale;
“To roundel dance with speed advance, 55
“And taste our wassel ale.” —

Then up to the Knight came a grizzly wight,
And sounded in his ear,
—“Sir Knight, eschew this goblin crew,
“Nor taste their ghostly cheer.” — 60

The tabors rung, the lilts were sung,

And the Knight the dance did lead;
But the maidens fair seem'd round him to stare,
With eyes like the glassy bead.

The glance of their eye, so cold and so dry, 65
Did almost his heart appal;
Their motion is swift, but their limbs they lift
Like stony statues all.

Again to the Knight came the grizzly wight,
When the roundel dance was o'er; 70
— “Sir Knight, eschew this goblin crew,
“Or rue for evermore.” —

But forward press'd the dauntless guest
To the tables of ezlar red,
And there was seen the Knight in Green, 75
To grace the fair board head.

And before that Knight was a goblet bright
Of emerald smooth and green,
The fretted brim was studded full trim
With mountain rubies sheen. 80

Sir Geoffry the Bold of the cup laid hold,
With heath-ale mantling o'er;
And he saw as he drank that the ale never shrank,
But mantled as before.

Then Sir Geoffry grew pale as he quaffed the ale, 85
And cold as the corpse of clay;
And with horny beak the ravens did shriek,
And flutter'd o'er their prey.

But soon throughout the revel rout
A strange commotion ran, 90
For beyond the round, they heard the sound
Of the steps of an uncharm'd man.

And soon to St. Clair the grim wight did repair,
From the midst of the wassel crew;

— “Sir Knight, beware of the revellers there, 95
 “Nor do as they bid thee do.” —

— “What woeful wight art thou,” said the Knight,
 “To haunt this wassel fray?” —
 — “I was once,” quoth he, “a mortal, like thee,
 “Though now I’m an Elfin gray. 100

“And the Knight so Bold as the corpse lies cold,
 “Who trode the green sward ring;
 “He must wander along with that restless throng,
 “For aye, with the Elfin-King.

“With the restless crew, in weeds so blue, 105
 “The hapless knight must wend;
 “Nor ever be seen on haunted green
 “Till the weary seven years end.

“Fair is the mien of the Knight in Green,
 “And bright his sparkling hair; 110
 “’Tis hard to believe how malice can live
 “In the breast of aught so fair.

“And light and fair are the fields of air,
 “Where he wanders to and fro;
 “Still doom’d to fleet from the regions of heat, 115
 “To the realms of endless snow.

“When high over head fall the streamers red,
 “He views the blessed afar;
 “And in stern despair darts through the air
 “To earth, like a falling star. 120

“With his shadowy crew, in weeds so blue,
 “That Knight for aye must run;
 “Except thou succeed in a perilous deed,
 “Unseen by the holy sun.

“Who ventures the deed, and fails to succeed, 125
 “Perforce must join the crew.” —
 — “Then brief, declare,” said the brave St. Clair,

“A deed that a Knight may do.” —

“Mid the sleet and the rain thou must here remain,
“By the haunted green sward ring, 130
“Till the dance wax slow, and the song faint and low,
“Which the crew unearthly sing.

“Then right at the time of the matin chime,
“Thou must tread the unhallow’d ground,
“And with mystic pace the circles trace 135
“That enclose it nine times round.

“And next must thou pass the rank green grass
“To the tables of ezlar red;
“And the goblet clear away must thou bear,
“Nor behind thee turn thy head. 140

“And ever anon as thou tread’st upon
“The sward of the green charm’d ring,
“Be no word express’d in that space unblest’d
“That ’longeth of holy thing.

“For the charm’d ground is all unsound, 145
“And the lake spreads wide below,
“And the Water-Fiend there, with the Fiend of Air,
“Is leagued for mortals’ woe.” —

Mid the sleet and the rain did St. Clair remain
Till the evening star did rise; 150
And the rout so gay did dwindle away
To the elritch dwarfy size.

When the moon beams pale fell through the white hail,
With a wan and a watery ray,
Sad notes of woe seem’d round him to grow, 155
The dirge of the Elfins gray.

And right at the time of the matin chime
His mystic pace began,
And murmurs deep around him did creep,
Like the moans of a murder’d man. 160

The matin bell was tolling farewell,
When he reach'd the central ring,
And there he beheld, to ice congeal'd,
That crew, with the Elfin-King.

For ay, at the knell of the matin bell, 165
When the black monks wend to pray,
The spirits unblest'd have a glimpse of rest
Before the dawn of day.

The sigh of the trees, and the rush of the breeze,
Then pause on the lonely hill; 170
And the frost of the dead clings round their head,
And they slumber cold and still.

The Knight took up the emerald cup,
And the ravens hoarse did scream,
And the shuddering Elfins half rose up, 175
And murmur'd in their dream:

They inwardly mourn'd, and the thin blood return'd
To every icy limb;
And each frozen eye, so cold and so dry,
'Gan roll with lustre dim. 180

Then brave St. Clair did turn him there,
To retrace the mystic track,
He heard the sigh of his lady fair,
Who sobbed behind his back.

He started quick, and his heart beat thick, 185
And he listen'd in wild amaze;
But the parting bell on his ear it fell,
And he did not turn to gaze.

With panting breast, as he forward press'd,
He trode on a mangled head; 190
And the skull did scream, and the voice did seem
The voice of his mother dead.

He shuddering trode: — On the great name of God
He thought, — but he nought did say;
And the green sward did shrink, as about to sink, 195
And loud laugh'd the Elfins gray.

And loud did resound, o'er the unblest'd ground,
The wings of the blue Elf-King;
And the ghostly crew to reach him flew,
But he cross'd the charmed ring, 200

The morning was gray, and dying away
Was the sound of the matin bell;
And far to the west the Fays that ne'er rest,
Fled where the moon-beams fell.

And Sir Geoffry the Bold, on the unhallow'd mold, 205
Arose from the green witch-grass;
And he felt his limbs like a dead man's cold,
And he wist not where he was.

And that cup so rare, which the brave St. Clair
Did bear from the ghostly crew, 210
Was suddenly changed, from the emerald fair,
To the ragged whinstone blue;
And instead of the ale that mantled there,
Was the murky midnight dew.

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