

Robert Louis Stevenson

## HEATHER ALE - A GALLOWAY LEGEND

From the bonny bells of heather  
They brewed a drink long-syne,  
Was sweeter far than honey,  
Was stronger far than wine.  
They brewed it and they drank it,  
And lay in a blessed swound  
For days and days together  
In their dwellings underground.

There rose a king in Scotland,  
A fell man to his foes,  
He smote the Picts in battle,  
He hunted them like roes.  
Over miles of the red mountain  
He hunted as they fled,  
And strewed the dwarfish bodies  
Of the dying and the dead.

Summer came in the country,  
Red was the heather bell;  
But the manner of the brewing  
Was none alive to tell.  
In graves that were like children's  
On many a mountain head,  
The Brewsters of the Heather  
Lay numbered with the dead.

The king in the red moorland  
Rode on a summer's day;  
And the bees hummed, and the curlews  
Cried beside the way.  
The king rode, and was angry,  
Black was his brow and pale,  
To rule in a land of heather  
And lack the Heather Ale.

It fortun'd that his vassals,  
Riding free on the heath,  
Came on a stone that was fallen  
And vermin hid beneath.  
Rudely plucked from their hiding,  
Never a word they spoke:  
A son and his aged father -  
Last of the dwarfish folk.

The king sat high on his charger,  
He looked on the little men;  
And the dwarfish and swarthy couple  
Looked at the king again.  
Down by the shore he had them;  
And there on the giddy brink -  
"I will give you life, ye vermin,  
For the secret of the drink."

There stood the son and father  
And they looked high and low;  
The heather was red around them,  
The sea rumbled below.  
And up and spoke the father,  
Shrill was his voice to hear:  
"I have a word in private,  
A word for the royal ear.

"Life is dear to the aged,  
And honour a little thing;  
I would gladly sell the secret,  
"Quoth the Pict to the King.  
His voice was small as a sparrow's,  
And shrill and wonderful clear:  
"I would gladly sell my secret,  
Only my son I fear.

"For life is a little matter,  
And death is nought to the young;  
And I dare not sell my honour  
Under the eye of my son.  
Take HIM, O king, and bind him,  
And cast him far in the deep;  
And it's I will tell the secret  
That I have sworn to keep."

They took the son and bound him,  
Neck and heels in a thong,  
And a lad took him and swung him,  
And flung him far and strong,  
And the sea swallowed his body,  
Like that of a child of ten; -  
And there on the cliff stood the father,  
Last of the dwarfish men.

"True was the word I told you:  
Only my son I feared;  
For I doubt the sapling courage  
That goes without the beard.  
But now in vain is the torture,  
Fire shall never avail:  
Here dies in my bosom  
The secret of Heather Ale."

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#### NOTE TO HEATHER ALE

Among the curiosities of human nature, this legend claims a high place. It is needless to remind the reader that the Picts were never exterminated, and form to this day a large proportion of the folk of Scotland: occupying the eastern and the central parts, from the Firth of Forth, or perhaps the Lammermoors, upon the south, to the Ord of Caithness on the north. That the blundering guess of a dull chronicler should have inspired men with imaginary loathing for their own ancestors is already strange: that it should have begotten this wild legend seems incredible. Is it possible the chronicler's error was merely nominal? that what he told, and what the people proved themselves so ready to receive, about the Picts, was true or partly true of some anterior and perhaps Lappish savages, small of stature, black of hue, dwelling underground--possibly also the distillers of some forgotten spirit?