

1819

THE EVE OF SAINT MARK

John Keats

Keats, John (1795-1821) - Widely regarded as the most talented of the English romantic poets, Keats, whose work was poorly received during his lifetime, could not have foreseen his later recognition. Ironically, he wrote for his own epitaph: "Here lies one whose name was writ in water." Eve of Saint Mark (1819) A fragment based on the superstition that if you stand by a church door on St.Mark's eve, you can see the ghosts of those who will die in the coming year. Opening line: Upon a Sabbath-day it fell;

THE EVE OF SAINT MARK

Upon a Sabbath-day it fell;
 Twice holy was the Sabbath-bell
 That call'd the folk to evening prayer;
 The city streets were clean and fair
 From wholesome drench of April rains;
 And, on the western window panes,
 The chilly sunset faintly told
 Of unmatur'd green vallies cold,
 Of the green thorny bloomless hedge,
 Of rivers new with spring-tide sedge,
 Of primroses by shelter'd rills,
 And daisies on the aguish hills.
 Twice holy was the Sabbath-bell:
 The silent streets were crowded well
 With staid and pious companies,
 Warm from their fire-side orat'ries,
 And moving with demurest air
 To even-song and vesper prayer.

Each arched porch and entry low
 Was fill'd with patient folk and slow,
 With whispers hush, and shuffling feet,
 While play'd the organ loud and sweet.

The bells had ceas'd, the prayers begun,
 And Bertha had not yet half done
 A curious volume, patch'd and torn,
 That all day long, from earliest morn,
 Had taken captive her two eyes
 Among its golden broideries;
 Perplex'd her with a thousand things,
 The stars of Heaven, and angels' wings,
 Martyrs in a fiery blaze,
 Azure saints in silver rays,
 Moses' breastplate, and the seven
 Candlesticks John saw in Heaven,
 The winged Lion of Saint Mark,
 And the Covenantal Ark
 With its many mysteries,
 Cherubim and golden mice.

Bertha was a maiden fair,

Dwelling in the old Minster-square;
 From her fire-side she could see
 Sidelong its rich antiquity,
 Far as the Bishop's garden-wall;
 Where sycamores and elm-trees tall,
 Full-leav'd, the forest had outstript,
 By no sharp north-wind ever nipt,
 So shelter'd by the mighty pile.
 Bertha arose, and read awhile
 With forehead 'gainst the window-pane.
 Again she try'd, and then again,
 Until the dusk eve left her dark
 Upon the legend of St. Mark.
 From plaited lawn-frill, fine and thin,
 She lifted up her soft warm chin,
 With aching neck and swimming eyes,
 And daz'd with saintly imageries.

All was gloom, and silent all,
 Save now and then the still foot-fall
 Of one returning homewards late
 Past the echoing minster-gate.

The clamorous daws, that all the day
 Above tree-tops and towers play,
 Pair by pair had gone to rest,
 Each in its ancient belfry-nest,
 Where asleep they fall betimes
 To music of the drowsy chimes.

All was silent, all was gloom
 Abroad and in the homely room:
 Down she sat, poor cheated soul!
 And struck a lamp from the dismal coal;
 Lean'd forward with bright drooping hair
 And slant book full against the glare.
 Her shadow, in uneasy guise, hover'd about, a giant size,
 On ceiling-beam and old oak chair,
 The parrot's cage, and panel square;
 And the warm angled winter screen,
 On which were many monsters seen,
 Call'd doves of Siam, Lima mice,
 And legless birds of Paradise,
 Macaw, and tender Avadavat,

And silken-furr'd Angora cat.
 Untir'd she read, her shadow still
 Glower'd about as it would fill
 The room with wildest forms and shades,
 As though some ghostly queen of spades
 Had come to mock behind her back,
 And dance, and ruffle her garments black.
 Untir'd she read the legend page
 Of holy Mark, from youth to age,
 On land, on sea, in pagan chains,
 Rejoicing for his many pains.
 Sometimes the learned Eremite
 With golden star, or dagger bright,
 Referr'd to pious poesies
 Written in smallest crow-quill size
 Beneath the text; and thus the rhyme
 Was parcell'd out from time to time:
 "Gif ye wol stonden hardie wight
 Amiddes of the blacke night
 Righte in the churche porch, pardie
 Ye wol behold a companie
 Approchen thee full dolourouse
 For sooth to sain from everich house
 Be it in City or village
 Wol come the Phantom and image
 Of ilka gent and ilka carle
 Whom colde Deathe hath in parle
 And wol some day that very year
 Touchen with foule venime spear
 And sadly do them all to die
 Hem all shalt thou see verilie
 And everichon shall by thee pass
 All who must die that year Alas
 -Als writith he of swevenis
 Men han beforne they wake in bliss,
 Whanne that hir friendes thinke hem bound
 In crimped shroude farre under grounde;
 And how a litling child mote be
 A saint er its nativitie,
 Gif that the modre (God her blesse!)
 Kepen in solitarinesse,
 And kissen devoute the holy croce.
 Of Goddes love and Sathan's force
 He writith; and thinges many mo:

Of swiche thinges I may not show,
Bot I must tellen verilie
Somdel of Sainte Cicilie,
And chieflie what he auctorethe
Of Sainte Markis life and dethe:"

At length her constant eyelids come
Upon the fervent martyrdom;
Then lastly to his holy shrine,
Exalt amid the tapers' shine At Venice,-

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THE END