

GOTHIC BOURNES

**THE BLACK CANON OF ELMHAM;
OR, SAINT EDMOND'S EVE**

**by M. G. Lewis (?)
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TRANSCRIPTION BY

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TALES
OF
TERROR AND WONDER

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THE BLACK CANON OF ELMHAM;* OR,
SAINT EDMOND'S EVE.
AN OLD ENGLISH BALLAD.

Hic *Niger* est!—HORAT.

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.

[76] He goeth to sing the burial chaunt,
And to lay the wand'ring sprite,
Whose shadowy form doth restless haunt
The abbey's drear aisle this night.

It saith it will not its wailings cease
Till that holy man comes near;
Til he breathes o'er its grave the prayer of peace,
And sprinkles the hallowed tear.

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

* North-Elmham (formerly written Elmenham) was, before the Conquest, the seat of a bishop, who, together with the Bishop of [76] Dunwich, in Suffolk, governed the present diocese of Norwich. It will easily be conceived that the episcopal residence was sufficiently surrounded with monasteries and nunneries to give probability to the foundation of my story; and as for the journey which the Canon is obliged to take, it is no very extraordinary distance, and it certainly may be supposed that there was an excellent road between the Bishop's See and the principal convent in the diocese. This tale, if it be not given with the *spirit*, is at any rate versified with the *irregularity*, of an ancient ballad.

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!

The Canon his faltering knee thrice bowed,
His body it shook with fear;
And a voice he heard cry, distinct and loud,
“Prepare! for thy hour is near.”

[77] He crosses his breast, he mutters a prayer,
To heaven he lifts his eye;
He heeds not the abbot’s gazing stare,
Nor the monks that murmured by.

Bareheaded he worships the sculptured saints
That frown on the sacred walls;
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 sprite will fade, like the morning mist
At your Benedicite.

“Now haste within—the board is spread—
Keen blows the air and cold;
The spectre sleeps in its earthly bed
Till St. Edmond’s eve hath tolled.

“Yet rest your weary limbs to-night,
You’ve journeyed many a mile;
To-morrow lay the wailing sprite,
That shrieks in the moon-light aisle.”

“Oh! faint are my limbs, and my bosom cold!
Yet to-night must the sprite be laid;
Yet to-night when the hour of horror’s tolled,
Must I meet the wandering shade!

[78]

“Nor food, nor rest can now delay,
For hark! the echoing pile
A bell loud shakes! Oh! haste away,
Oh! lead to the haunted aisle.”

The torches slowly move before,
The cross is reared on high;
A smile of peace the Canon wore,
But horror fixed his eye.

And now they climb the foot-worn stair,
The chapel gates unclose;
Now each breathed low a fervent prayer,
And fear each bosom froze.

Now paused awhile the doubtful band,
And viewed the solemn scene;
Full dark the clustered columns stand,
The moon gleams bright between.

“Say, Father, say, what cloister’s gloom
Conceals the unquiet shade?
Within what dark, unhallowed tomb
The corse unblessed was laid?”

“Through yonder drear aisle alone it walks,
And murmurs a mournful plaint;
Of thee, Black Canon, it wildly talks,
And calls on thy patron saint.

“The pilgrim this night, with wondering eyes,
When he prays at St. Edmond’s shrine,
From a black marble tomb hath seen it rise,
And under yon arch recline.”

[79]

“Oh! say upon that black marble tomb
What memorial sad appears?”
“Undistinguished it lies in the chancel’s gloom,
No memorial sad it bears!”

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

“Oh! enter, Black Canon!” a whisper fell,
“Oh! enter! thy hour is come!”
The sounds irresistless¹ his steps impel
To approach the marble tomb.

He paused—told his beads—and the threshold passed—
Oh, horror! the chancel doors close;
A loud yell was borne on the howling 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 withered hand,
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!

¹ *Editor’s note:* In his *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), Samuel Johnson refers to this adjective as “a barbarous ungrammatical conjunction of two negatives”.

[80]

“In Elmham’s tower he wedded a nun,
To St. Edmonds his bride he bore;
On this eve her novitiate was here begun,
And a friar’s grey weeds she wore.

“Oh! deep was her conscience dyed with guilt,
Remorse she full oft revealed;
The Black Canon her blood relentless spilt,
And in death her lips he sealed!

“Her spirit to penance this night was doomed,
Till the Canon atoned the deed;
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—
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,
Nor the ghost on the black marble tomb.