

Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832)

2 *The Battle of Sempach*

'Twas when among our linden-trees
The bees had housed in swarms,
(And grey-hair'd peasants say that these
Betoken foreign arms,)

Then look'd we down to Willisow, 5
The land was all in flame;
We knew the Archduke Leopold
With all his army came.

The Austrian nobles made their vow,
So hot their heart and bold, 10
"On Switzer carles we'll trample now,
And slay both young and old."

With clarion loud, and banner proud,
From Zurich on the lake,
In martial pomp and fair array, 15
Their onward march they make.

"Now list, ye lowland nobles all —
Ye seek the mountain strand,
Nor wot ye what shall be your lot
In such a dangerous land. 20

"I rede ye, shrive ye of your sins,
Before ye farther go;
A skirmish in Helvetian hills
May send your souls to woe." —

"But where now shall we find a priest 25

Our shrift that he may hear?" —
"The Switzer priest has ta'en the field,
He deals a penance drear.

"Right heavily upon your head
He'll lay his hand of steel; 30
And with his trusty partisan
Your absolution deal." —

'Twas on a Monday morning then,
The corn was steep'd in dew,
And merry maids had sickles ta'en, 35
When the host to Sempach drew.

The stalwart men of fair Lucerne
Together have they join'd;
The pith and core of manhood stern,
Was none east looks behind. 40

It was the Lord of Hare-castle,
And to the Duke he said,
"Yon little band of brethren true
Will meet us undismay'd." —

"O Hare-castle, thou heart of hare!" 45
Fierce Oxenstern replied. —
"Shalt see then how the game will fare,"
The taunted knight replied.

There was lacing then of helmets bright,
And closing ranks amain; 50
The peaks they hew'd from their boot-points
Might wellnigh load a wain.

And thus they to each other said,
"Yon handful down to hew
Will be no boastful tale to tell, 55

The peasants are so few.” —

The gallant Swiss Confederates there
They pray'd to God aloud,
And he display'd his rainbow fair
Against a swarthy cloud. 60

Then heart and pulse throbb'd more and more
With courage firm and high,
And down the good Confederates bore
On the Austrian chivalry.

The Austrian Lion 'gan to growl, 65
And toss his main and tail;
And ball, and shaft, and crossbow bolt,
Went whistling forth like hail.

Lance, pike, and halbert, mingled there,
The game was nothing sweet; 70
The boughs of many a stately tree
Lay shiver'd at their feet.

The Austrian men-at-arms stood fast,
So close their spears they laid;
It chafed the gallant Winkelreid, 75
Who to his comrades said —

“I have a virtuous wife at home,
A wife and infant son;
I leave them to my country's care, —
This field shall soon be won. 80

“These nobles lay their spears right thick,
And keep full firm array,
Yet shall my charge their order break,
And make my brethren way.”

He rush'd against the Austrian band, 85
In desperate career,
And with his body, breast, and hand,
Bore down each hostile spear.

Four lances splinter'd on his crest,
Six shiver'd in his side; 90
Still on the serried files he press'd —
He broke their ranks, and died.

This patriot's self-devoted deed
First tamed the Lion's mood,
And the four forest cantons freed 95
From thralldom by his blood.

Right where his charge had made a lane,
His valiant comrades burst,
With sword, and axe, and partisan,
And hack, and stab, and thrust. 100

The daunted Lion 'gan to whine,
And granted ground amain,
The Mountain Bull he bent his brows,
And gored his sides again.

Then lost was banner, spear, and shield, 105
At Sempach in the flight,
The cloister vaults at Konig's-field
Hold many an Austrian knight.

It was the Archduke Leopold,
So lordly would he ride, 110
But he came against the Switzer churls,
And they slew him in his pride.

The heifer said unto the bull,
"And shall I not complain?"

There came a foreign nobleman 115
To milk me on the plain.

“One thrust of thine outrageous horn
Has gall’d the knight so sore,
That to the churchyard he is borne
To range our glens no more.” 120

An Austrian noble left the stour,
And fast the flight ’gan take;
And he arrived in luckless hour
At Sempach on the lake.

He and his squire a fisher call’d, 125
(His name was Hans Von Rot,)
“For love, or meed, or charity,
Receive us in thy boat!”

Their anxious call the fisher heard,
And, glad the meed to win, 130
His shallop to the shore he steer’d,
And took the flyers in.

And while against the tide and wind
Hans stoutly row’d his way,
The noble to his follower sign’d 135
He should the boatman slay.

The fisher’s back was to them turn’d,
The squire his dagger drew,
Hans saw his shadow in the lake,
The boat he overthrew. 140

He ’whelm’d the boat, and as they strove,
He stunn’d them with his oar,
“Now, drink ye deep, my gentle sirs,
You’ll ne’er stab boatman more.

“Two gilded fishes in the lake
This morning have I caught,
Their silver scales may much avail,
Their carrion flesh is naught.” 145

It was a messenger of woe
Has sought the Austrian land: 150
“Ah! gracious lady, evil news!
My lord lies on the strand.

“At Sempach, on the battle-field,
His bloody corpse lies there.” —
“Ah, gracious God!” the lady cried, 155
“What tidings of despair!”

Now would you know the minstrel wight
Who sings of strife so stern,
Albert the Souter is he hight,
A burgher of Lucerne. 160

A merry man was he, I wot,
The night he made the lay,
Returning from the bloody spot,
Where God had judged the day.

1818

(From *The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott*. Ed. J. G. Lockhart. Edinburgh: Robert Cadell, 1841)