

**The League of the Alps
(and Other Poems)**

By

Felicia Hemans

**Taken from
The Edinburgh Annual Register
1819
Pages 358-368**

by

Peter J. Bolton

Contents

The League of the Alps
The Festal Hour
Alpine Song

THE LEAGUE OF THE ALPS,

OR THE MEETING ON THE FIELD OF GRÜTLI.

BY MRS HEMANS.

It was in the year 1308, that the Swiss rose against the tyranny of the Bailiffs appointed over them by ALBERT of Austria. The field called Grütli, at the foot of the Selisberg, and near the boundaries of Uri and Unterwalden, was fixed upon by three spirited yeomen, WALTER FÜRST, (the father-in-law of WILLIAM TELL,) WERNER STAUFFACHER, and ERNI, (or ARNOLD) MELCHTHAL, as their place of meeting to deliberate on the accomplishment of their projects. "Hither came FÜRST and MELCHTHAL along secret paths over the heights, and STAUFFACHER in his boat across the Lake of the Four Cantons. On the night preceding the 11th November 1307, they met here, each with ten associates, men of approved worth; and while, at this solemn hour, they were wrapt in the contemplation, that on their success depended the fate of their whole posterity, WERNER, WALTER, and ARNOLD held up their hands to heaven, and in the name of the ALMIGHTY, who has created man to an inalienable degree of freedom, swore jointly and strenuously to defend that freedom. The thirty associates heard the oath with awe, and with uplifted hands attested the same God and all his Saints, that they were firmly bent on offering up their lives for the defence of their original liberty. They then calmly agreed on their future proceedings, and, for the present, each returned to his hamlet."—*Planta's History of the Helvetic Confederacy.*

On the first day of the year 1308, they succeeded in throwing off the Austrian yoke; and "it is well attested," says the same author, "that not one drop of blood was shed on this memorable occasion, nor had one proprietor to lament the loss of a claim, a privilege, or an inch of land. The Swiss met on the succeeding Sabbath, and once more confirmed by oath their ancient, and (as they fondly named it) perpetual league."

THE LEAGUE OF THE ALPS.

'Twas night upon the Alps. The (1) Senn's wild horn,
Like a wind's voice, had pour'd its last long tone,
Whose thrilling echoes, through the larch-woods borne,
To the low cabins of the glens, made known
That welcome steps were nigh. The flocks had gone
By cliff and pine-bridge, to their place of rest ;
The chamois slumber'd, for the chase was done ;
His cavern-bed of moss the hunter press'd ;
And the rock-eagle couch'd, high on his cloudy nest.

Oh ! who may tell the Majesty of Night,
Thron'd on those summits ?—They, for whom her hours
Bring, with their stars, but softer sounds and light,
And richer scents, to float through citron bowers,
Know little of the marvels and the powers,
Whereby she rules the spirit !—Let them stand
By the blue Glaciers, midst the mountain towers,
When Heaven's deep silence wraps a voiceless land—
There may they learn the might and sorcery of her wand.

For awful, e'en as death, the calm around,
Awful and strange !—nor seem those regions made
Unto man's use, but in that rest profound,
For some dread being's wakeful eye array'd
With sad, yet glorious beauty !—To a shade
Dark as a Pall's, th' intensely azure sky (2)
Deepens its mantle, on the Alp-Domes laid ; (3)
And stars, like altar-fires, burn forth on high,
And each dim valley seems a world of mystery.

The leaves were falling, but without a sound,
In Uri's ancient forests, ev'n like snows
When winds are laid (4). With solemn radiance crown'd,
Clear through Heaven's purple gloom the mountains rose,
As the broad moon of Autumn's golden close
Look'd o'er their heights in stillness. But the roar
Of distant torrents, on the scene's repose,
Came rolling mightier to the lake's dark shore,
Where life's far murmur swell'd the breathless air no more.

Did the land sleep ?—The Woodman's axe had ceas'd
Its ringing strokes upon the beech and plane ;
The grapes were gather'd in ; the vintage-feast
Was clos'd upon the hills, the reaper's strain
Hush'd by the streams ; the year was in its wane,

The night in its mid-watch : it was a time
E'en mark'd and hallow'd unto slumber's reign !
—But thoughts were stirring, restless and sublime,
And o'er his white Alps mov'd the Spirit of the Clime.

For there, where snows, in crowning glory spread,
High and unmark'd by mortal footstep lay,
And there, where torrents, midst the Ice-caves fed,
Burst in their joy of light and sound away ;
And there, where Freedom, as in scornful play,
Had hung man's dwellings midst the realms of air,
O'er cliffs, the very birth-place of the day ;
—Oh ! Who would dream that Tyranny could dare
To lay her withering hand on God's bright works e'en there.

Yet thus it was !—Amidst the fleet streams gushing
To bring down rainbows o'er their sparry cell,
And the glad heights, through mist and tempest rushing
Up where the sun's red fire-glance earliest fell ;
And the green pastures, where the herd's sweet bell
Recall'd such life as eastern Patriarchs led ;
There peasant-men their free thoughts might not tell,
Save in the hour of shadows and of dread,
And hollow sounds that wake to Guilt's dull stealthy tread.

But in a land of happy shepherd-homes,
On its blue hills in quiet joy reclining,
With their bright hearth-fires, midst the twilight-glooms,
From bowery lattice through the dark woods shining ;
A land of legends and wild songs, entwining
Their memory with all memories lov'd and blest ;
In such a land there dwells a Power, combining
The strength of many a calm, but fearless breast,
—And woe to him who breaks the Sabbath of its rest !

For they, that from the forest-silence turn
Joyous at eve to their own threshold-floor ;
They whose deep hearts upon the mountains burn,
O'er the land's battle-tales and minstrel-lore ;
And unto whom the church-bells, as they pour
On the far Alps, their voices, bring a sense
Of love that folds the hallow'd things of yore ;—
Such men are strong !—there need no rocks to fence
The soil which rears those hearts, and draws its charter thence !

A sound went up—the wave's dark rest was broken ;
On Uri's Lake (5) was heard a midnight-oar !
To their eternal cliffs a moment's token
Of man's brief course the troubled waters bore ;
And then their sleep a glancing image wore

Of torch-fires streaming out o'er crag and wood;
And wild-birds woke, as footsteps rustled o'er
The sear dead leaves; and by that moonlight flood,
A band of patriot-men on Grütli's verdure stood (6).

They stood in arms—the wolf-spear and the bow
Had wag'd their war on things of mountain-race,
Might not their swift stroke reach a mail-clad foe?
—Strong hands in harvest, daring feet in chase,
True hands in fight, were gather'd on that place
Of secret counsel. Not for fame or spoil
So met those men in Heaven's majestic face;
To guard free hearths they rose, the sons of toil,
The hunter of the rocks, the tiller of the soil.

O'er their low pastoral valleys might the tide
Of years have flow'd, and still, from sire to son,
Their name and records on the green earth died,
As cottage lamps expiring one by one,
In the dim glades, when midnight hath begun
To hush all sound.—But silent on its height,
The snow-mass, full of death, while ages run
Their course, may slumber, bath'd in rosy light,
Till some rash voice or step disturb its brooding might.

So were they rous'd!—th' invading step had pass'd
Their cabin-thresholds, and the lowly door
Which well had stood against the Tæhnwind's blast, (7)
Could bar oppression from their homes no more.
—Why, what had she to do where all things wore
Wild grandeur's impress?—In the storm's free way,
How dar'd she lift her pageant crest before
Th' enduring and magnificent array
Of sovereign Alps, that wing'd their eagles with the day?

This might not long be borne!—the tameless hills
Have voices, from the cave and cataract swelling,
Fraught with His name, whose awful presence fills
Their deep lone places, and for ever telling
That he hath made man free!—and they, whose dwelling
Was in those ancient fastnesses, gave ear;
The weight of sufferance from their hearts repelling,
They rose—the forester, the mountaineer—
—Oh! what hath earth more strong than the good peasant-spear?

Sacred be Grütli's field!—their vigil keeping
Through many a blue and starry summer night,
There, while the sons of happier lands were sleeping,
Had those brave Switzers met; and in the sight
Of the just God, who pours forth burning might

To gird th' oppress'd, had given their deep thoughts way,
And brac'd their spirits for the patriot-fight,
With lovely images of homes, that lay
Bower'd 'midst the rustling pines, or by the torrent-spray.

Now had endurance reach'd its bounds!—They came
With courage set in each bright earnest eye,
The day, the signal, and the hour to name,
When they should gather on their hills to die,
Or shake the Glaciers with their joyous cry
For the land's freedom!—'Twas a scene, combining
All glory in itself!—the solemn sky,
The stars, the waves, their soften'd light enshrining,
And man's high soul supreme o'er mighty nature shining!

Beneath that field the waters lay reposing,
Stretch'd in dark stillness on their marble bed;
Around, soar'd up the mountain-chain, inclosing
Treasures and mysteries, wonderful, and dread,
And unapproach'd!—Above, serenely spread
Th' illimitable azure, with its zone
All regions of the living and the dead
Folding alike; but Grandeur's seat and throne
Amidst that scene lay deep, in those men's hearts alone.

Calmly they stood, and with collected mien,
Breathing their souls in voices firm but low,
As if the spirit of the hour and scene,
With the wood's whisper, and the wave's sweet flow,
Had temper'd in their thoughtful hearts the glow
Of all-indignant feeling. To the breath
Of Dorian flute, and lyre-note soft and slow,
E'en thus, of old, the Spartan from its sheath
Drew his devoted sword, and girt himself for death.

And three, that seem'd as chieftains of the band,
Were gather'd in the midst on that lone shore,
By Uri's Lake. A father of the land*,
One on his brow the furrow'd record wore
Of many days, whose shadows had pass'd o'er
His path amongst the hills, and quench'd the dreams
Of youth with sorrow: Yet from Memory's lore
Still his life's evening drew its loveliest gleams,
For he had walk'd with God, beside the mountain streams.

And his gray hairs, in happier times, might well
To their last pillow silently have gone,
As melts a wreath of snow. But who can tell
How life may task the spirit?—He was one

Walter Fürst.

Who through long years a Freeman's work had done,
And reap'd his harvest, and his vintage press'd,
Fearless of wrong!—And now, at set of sun,
He bow'd not to his years; for on the breast
Of a still chainless land, he deem'd it much to rest.

And for such holy rest strong hands must toil,
Strong hearts endure!—By that pale Elder's side,
Stood one that seem'd a monarch of the soil,
Serene and stately in his manhood's pride,
Werner, the brave and true *!—If men have died,
Their hearths and shrines inviolate to keep,
He was a mate for such!—The voice that cried
Within his breast "Arise!" came still and deep,
From his far home that smil'd, e'en there, in moonlight sleep.

It was a home to die for!—As it rose
Through its vine-foliage sending forth a sound
Of merry childhood, o'er the green repose
And laughing sunshine of the pastures round!
And he whose life to that sweet spot was bound,
Rais'd unto heaven a glad, yet thoughtful eye,
And set his free step firmer on the ground,
When o'er his soul its melodies went by,
As through some Alpine Pass a breeze of Italy (8).

But who was he, that on his hunting-spear
Lean'd with a prouder and more fiery bearing?
His was a brow for tyrant hearts to fear,
Within the shadow of its dark locks wearing
That which they may not tame—a soul, declaring
War against earth's oppressors!—Midst that throng,
Of other mould he seem'd, and loftier daring;
One whose blood swept high impulses along,
One that should pass, and leave a name for warlike song:

A memory on the mountains!—One, to stand
When the hills echoed with the deepening swell
Of hostile trumpets, foremost for the land,
And in some rock defile, or savage dell,
Array his peasant children, to repel
The invader—sending arrows for his chains!
Aye, one to fold around him, as he fell,
Her banner with a smile,—for through his veins
The joy of danger flow'd, as torrents to the plains.

There was, at times, a wildness in the light
Of his quick-flashing eye; a something born

* Werner Stauffacher.

Of the free Alps, and beautifully bright,
And proud and tameless, laughing Fear to scorn !
It might be well !—Young Erni's * step had worn
The mantling snows on their most regal steeps,
And track'd the Lynx above the clouds of morn, (9)
And follow'd where the flying chamois leaps,
Across the dark blue rifts, th' unfathom'd Glacier-deeps.

He was a creature of the Alpine sky,
A being, whose bright spirit had been fed
Midst the crown'd heights, with joy and liberty,
And thought of power !—He knew each path, which led
To the rock's treasure-caves, whose crystals shed
Soft light o'er secret fountains.—At the tone
Of his loud horn, the Lammer-Geyer (10) had spread
A startled wing !—for oft that peal had blown
Where the Lavange was wont to thunder forth alone.

His step had track'd the waste—his soul had stirr'd
The ancient solitudes !—His voice had told
Of wrongs to call down Heaven (11) !—That tale was heard
In Hasli's dales, and where the shepherds fold
Their flocks in dark ravine and craggy hold
On the bleak Oberland (12), and where the light
Of day's last footstep bathes in burning gold
Great Righi's cliffs ; and when Mount Pilate's height
Casts o'er his glassy lake the darkness of his might.

Nor was it heard in vain !—There all things press
Deep thoughts on man !—The fearless hunter pass'd,
And from the bosom of the wilderness,
There leap'd a spirit and a power, to cast
The weight of bondage down !—And bright and fast
As the clear waters, joyously and free
Burst from the desert rock, it rush'd at last
Through the far valleys, till the Patriot Three,
Thus, with their brethren stood, beside the Forest Sea (13).

They linked their hands—they pledg'd their stainless faith,
In the dread presence of attesting Heaven !
They bound their hearts to suffering and to death,
With the severe and solemn transport given
To bless such vows !—How noble men had striven,
How man might strive, and vainly strive, they knew,
And call'd upon their God, whose arm had riven
The crest of many a tyrant, since he blew
The foaming sea-wave on, and Egypt's might o'erthrew.

* Erni, Arnold Melchthal.

They knelt, and rose in strength.—The valleys lay
 Still in their dimness, but the heights which darted
 Into the blue mid-air, had caught from day
 A flush of fire, when those true Switzers parted,
 Each to his glen or forest, stedfast-hearted,
 And full of hope. Nor many suns had worn
 Their setting glory, ere from slumber started
 Ten thousand voices, of the mountains born ;
 So far was heard the blast of Freedom's echoing horn.

The Ice-vaults trembled, when that peal came rending
 The frozen stillness which around them hung ;
 From cliff to cliff the avalanche, descending,
 Gave answer, till the sky's blue hollows rung !
 And the flame signals through the midnight sprung,
 From the Surennen Peaks (14) like banners streaming
 To the far Selisberg, whence light was flung
 On Grütli's field, till all the red lake gleaming,
 Shone out, a meteor-Heaven in its wild splendour seeming.

And the winds toss'd each summit's blazing crest,
 As a host's plumage ; and the giant pines
 Fell'd where they wav'd o'er crag and eagle's nest,
 Heap'd up the flames. The clouds grew fiery signs ;
 As o'er a city's burning towers and shrines,
 Reddening the distance. Wine-cups, crown'd and bright,
 In Werner's dwelling flow'd ; through leafless vines
 From Walter's hearth stream'd out the festive light,
 And Erni's blind old Sire gave thanks to Heaven that night.

Then, on the silence of the snows there lay
 A Sabbath's quiet sunshine—and its bell
 Fill'd the hush'd air awhile with lonely sway,
 For the stream's voice was bound by winter's spell,
 The deep wood sounds had ceas'd. But rock and dell
 Rung forth, ere long, when strains of jubilee
 Burst from the mountain churches, with a swell
 Of praise to Him who stills the raging sea ;
 For now the strife was clos'd, the glorious Alps were free !

NOTES.

- (1) *Senn*, the name given to a herdsman amongst the Swiss Alps.
- (2) The dark azure, almost approaching to black, of an Alpine sky at midnight, has been frequently remarked by travellers.
- (3) Many of the highest Alpine peaks are called *Domes*.
- (4) "Like snows when winds are laid."
 "Come neve in Alpi senza venti."—DANTE.
- (5) The Lake of the Four Cantons is sometimes called the Lake of Uri. The scenery of its shores is wild and majestic in the highest degree. The rocks in many parts rise from the water like a wall, without leaving room even for a pathway at their feet.

(6) The meadow of Grütli covers a little craggy platform, immediately above the Lake.

(7) Tæhnwind, the wind of the south-east, which blows with such impetuosity, particularly in some parts of the Canton of Uri, as frequently to lay the country waste before it.

(8) "The air of the Glacier was remarkably inspiring and elating from its freshness and rarity. On a sudden, I was surprised to feel my face fanned by a sultry current from the south, which passed away, and then came again, like a Sirocco. On mentioning it to the guide, he said it was not uncommon, and that these warm winds were particularly felt on the Glacier des Bossons, owing to its being opposite several indentures or breaks of the Alpine chain, which give a passage to the currents of air from Italy and the South."—*Letters on a Tour in Switzerland*.

(9) It is said that the Lynx is not unfrequently found in the wilder regions of the Alps.

(10) The Lammer-Geyer, the largest kind of Alpine Eagle.

(11) The eyes of ARNOLD MELCHTHAL's father had been torn out, by command of the Austrian Bailiffs, as a punishment for some instance of contumacy on the part of his son.

(12) The Oberland. The solitudes of the Upper Alps are so called in some of the Swiss Cantons.

(13) The Lake of the Four Cantons is also sometimes called the *Sea of the Forest-towns*.

(14) Surennen Alps, a chain of high mountains between the Cantons of Uri and Unterwalden.

THE FESTAL HOUR.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

When are the lessons giv'n
That shake the startled earth?—When wakes the foe
While the friend sleeps?—When falls the traitor's blow?
When are proud sceptres riv'n—
High hopes o'erthrown?—It is, When lands rejoice,
When cities blaze, and lift th' exulting voice,
And wave their banners to the kindling heav'n.

Fear ye the festal hour!
When mirth o'erflows, then tremble!—'Twas a night
Of gorgeous revel, wreaths, and dance, and light,
When through the regal bow'r
The trumpet peal'd, ere yet the song was done;
And there were shrieks in golden Babylon,
And trampling armies, ruthless in their pow'r.

The marble shrines were crown'd;
Young voices, through the blue Athenian sky,
And Dorian reeds made summer-melody,

And censers wav'd around ;
And lyres were strung, and bright libations pour'd,
When, through the streets, flash'd out th' avenging sword,
Fearless and free, the sword with myrtles bound *!

Through Rome a triumph pass'd ;
Rich in her sun-god's mantling beams went by
That long array of glorious pageantry,
With shout and trumpet-blast.
An empire's gems their starry splendour shed
O'er the proud march ; a king in chains was led,
A victor, crown'd and rob'd, came stately last †.

And many a Dryad's bow'r
Had lent the laurels, which, in waving play,
Stirr'd the warm air, and glisten'd round his way,
As a quick-flashing show'r.
O'er his own porch, meantime, the cypress hung ;
Through his fair halls a cry of anguish rung—
Woe for the dead !—the father's broken flow'r!

A sound of lyre and song,
In the still night, went floating o'er the Nile,
Whose waves by many an old mysterious pile,
Swept with that voice along ;
And lamps were shining o'er the red wine's foam,
Where a chief revell'd in a monarch's dome,
And fresh rose-garlands deck'd a glittering throng.

'Twas Anthony that bade
The joyous chords ring out !—but strains arose
Of wilder omen at the banquet's close !
Sounds by no mortal made ‡,
Shook Alexandria through her streets that night,
And pass'd—and with another sunset's light
The kingly Roman on his bier was laid.

Bright midst its vineyards lay
The fair Campanian city §, with its tow'rs
And temples gleaming through dark olive bow'rs,
Clear in the golden day ;
Joy was around it as the glowing sky,
And crowds had fill'd its halls of revelry,
And all the sunny air was music's way.

* The sword of Harmodius.

† Paulius Æmilius, one of whose sons died a few days before, and another after his triumph upon the conquest of Macedon, when Perseus, the king of that country, was led in chains.

‡ See the description given by Plutarch, in his life of Anthony, of the supernatural sounds heard in the streets of Alexandria the night before Anthony's death.

§ Herculaneum, of which it is related, that all the inhabitants were assembled in the theatres, when the shower of ashes which covered the city, descended.

A cloud came o'er the face
Of Italy's rich heaven!—its crystal blue
Was changed and deepen'd to a wrathful hue
Of night, o'ershadowing space,
As with the wings of death!—in all his pow'r
Vesuvius woke, and hurl'd the burning show'r,
And who could tell the buried city's place?

Such things have been of yore,
In the gay regions where the citrons blow,
And purple summers all their sleepy glow,
On the grape-clusters pour;
And where the palms to spicy winds are waving
Along clear seas of melted sapphire, laving,
As with a flow of light, their Southern shore.

Turn we to other climes!
Far in the Druid-Isle a feast was spread,
Midst the rock-altars of the warrior-dead*,
And ancient battle-rhymes
Were chaunted to the harp; and yellow mead
Went flowing round, and tales of martial deed,
And lofty songs of Britain's elder time.

But ere the giant-fane
Cast its broad shadows on the robe of even,
Hush'd were the bards, and in the face of heaven,
O'er that old burial plain
Flash'd the keen Saxon daggers!—Blood was streaming,
Where late the mead-cup to the sun was gleaming,
And Britain's hearths were heap'd that night in vain.

For they return'd no more,
They that went forth at morn, with reckless heart,
In that fierce banquet's mirth to bear their part;
And on the rushy floor,
And the bright spears and bucklers of the walls
The high wood-fires were blazing in their halls;
But not for them—they slept—their feast was o'er!

Fear ye the festal hour!
Aye, tremble when the cup of joy o'erflows!
Tame down the swelling heart!—the bridal rose,
And the rich myrtle's flow'r,
Have veil'd the sword!—Red wines have sparkled fast
From venom'd goblets, and soft breezes pass'd
With fatal perfume through the revel's bow'r.

* Stonehenge, said by some traditions to have been erected to the memory of Ambrosius, an early British king; and by others, mentioned as a monumental record of the massacre of British chiefs here alluded to.

Twine the young glowing wreath
But pour not all your spirit in the song,
Which through the sky's deep azure floats along,
Like summer's quick'ning breath!
The ground is hollow in the path of mirth,
Oh! far too daring seems the joy of earth,
So darkly press'd and girdled in by death!



ALPINE SONG.

What dost thou here, brave Swiss?
Forgett'st thou thus thy native clime,
The lovely land of thy bright spring-time?
The land of thy home, with its free delights,
And fresh green valleys, and mountain-heights?
Can the stranger's yield thee bliss?

What welcome cheers thee now?
Dar'st thou lift thine eye to gaze around?
Where are the peaks, with their snow-wreaths crown'd?
Where is the song, on the wild winds borne,
Or the ringing peal of the joyous horn,
Or the peasant's fearless brow?

But thy spirit is far away!
Where a greeting waits thee in kindred eyes,
Where the white Alps look through the sunny skies,
With the low Senn cabins, and pastures free,
And the sparkling blue of the Glacier-sea,
And the summits cloth'd with day.

Back, noble child of Tell!
Back to the wild, and the silent glen,
And the frugal board of peasant-men:
Dost thou seek the friend, the lov'd one here?
—Away! not a true Swiss heart is near,
Against thine own to swell!

* See Note (1) to "The League of the Alps."