La Belle Dame sans Merci: A Ballad

1. O what can all thee, knight-at-arms,
   Alone and palely loitering?
   The sedge is wither'd from the lake,
   And no birds sing.

2. O what can all thee, knight-at-arms,
   So haggard and so woe-begone?
   The squirrels' granary is full,
   And the harvest's done.

3. I see a lily on thy brow
   With anguish moist and fever dew,
   And on thy cheeks a fading rose
   Fast withereth too.

4. I met a lady in the meads,
   Full beautiful, a fairy's child;
   Her hair was long, her foot was light,
   And her eyes were wild.

5. I made a garland for her head,
   And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;
   She look'd at me as she did love,
   And made sweet moan.

6. I set her on my pacing steed,
   And nothing else saw all day long.
   For sidelong would she bend, and sing
   A fairy's song.

7. She found me roots of relish'd sweet,
   And honey wild, and manna dew,
   And sure in language strange she said—
   "I love thee true."

8. She took me to her elfin grove
   And there she wept, and sigh'd full sore;
   And there I shut her wild wild eyes
   With kisses four.

9. And there she lulled me asleep,
   And there I dreamt—Ah! woe betide!
   The latest' dream I ever dreamt
   On the cold hill's side.

10. I saw pale kings, and princes too,
    Pale warriors, death pale were they all;
    They cried—"La belle dame sans merci"
    Hath thee in thrall!

11. I saw their star'd lips in the gloam*
    With horrid warning gaping wide,
    And I awoke and found me here
    On the cold hill's side.

12. And this is why I sojourn here,
    Alone and palely loitering,
    Though the sedge is wither'd from the lake,
    And no birds sing.

4. In the earlier version: "Half passionless, and so soon on to death."
   1. The title, though not the subject, was taken from a medieval poem by Alain Chartier and
   means "The Lovely Lady without Play." The story of a mortal destroyed by his love for a supernatural
   femme fatale has been told repeatedly in myth, fairy tale, and ballad. The text printed here is
   Keats's earlier version of the poem, as transcribed by Charles Brown. The version published in 1820
   begins, "Ah, what can all thee, wretched wight."
   Keats imitates a frequent procedure of folk ballads by casting the poem into the dialogue
   form. The first three stanzas are addressed to the knight, and the rest of the poem is his reply.
   2. Belt (of flowers).
   3. Keats commented in a letter to his brother and sister-in-law, "Why four kisses—you will say—
      why four because I wish to restrain the headlong impetuosity of my Muse—she would have fair
      said 'score' without hurting the rhyme—but we must temper the imagination as the Critics say
      with Judgment. I was obliged to choose an even number that both eyes might have fair play?"