

# The Inchcape Rock

(Adapted from the *Mothers' Companion* Volume 8)

No stir in the air, no stir in the sea,  
The ship was as still as she could be,  
Her sails from heaven received no motion,  
Her keel was steady in the ocean.

Without either sign or sound of their shock  
The waves flowed over the Inchcape Rock;  
So little they rose, so little they fell,  
They did not move the Inchcape Bell.

The Abbot of Aberbrothock  
Had placed that bell on the Inchcape Rock;  
On a buoy in the storm it floated and swung,  
And over the waves its warning rung.

When the Rock was hid by the surge's swell  
The mariners heard the warning bell;  
And then they knew the perilous Rock  
And blest the Abbot of Aberbrothock.

The sun in heaven was shining gay,  
All things were joyful on that day;  
The sea-birds screamed as they wheeled round,  
And there was joyance in their sound.

The buoy of the Inchcape Bell was seen  
A darker speck on the ocean green;  
Sir Ralph the Rover walked his deck,  
And he fixed his eye on the darker speck.

He felt the cheering power of spring;  
It made him whistle, it made him sing;  
His heart was mirthful to excess,  
But the Rover's mirth was wickedness.

His eye was on the Inchcape float;  
Quoth he, 'My men, put out the boat,  
And row me to the Inchcape Rock,  
And I'll plague the Abbot of Aberbrothock.'

The boat is lowered, the boatmen row,  
And to the Inchcape Rock they go;  
Sir Ralph bent over from the boat,  
And he cut the bell from the Inchcape float.

Down sunk the bell with a gurgling sound,  
The bubbles rose and burst around;  
Quoth Sir Ralph, 'The next who come to the Rock  
Won't bless the Abbot of Aberbrothock.'

Sir Ralph the Rover sailed away,  
He scoured the seas for many a day;  
And now grown rich with plundered store,  
He steers his course for Scotland's shore.

So thick a haze o'erspreads the sky  
They cannot see the sun on high;  
The wind doth blown a gale all day,  
At evening it hath died away.

On the deck the Rover takes his stand,  
So dark it is he sees no land.  
Quoth Sir Ralph, 'It will be lighter soon,  
For there is the dawn of the rising moon.'

'Canst hear,' said one, 'the breakers roar?  
For methinks we should be near the shore.'  
'Now where we are I cannot tell,  
But I wish I could hear the Inchcape Bell.'

They hear no sound, the swell is strong;  
Though the wind hath fallen they drift along,  
Till the vessel strikes with a shivering shock –  
Alas! It is the Inchcape Rock!

Sir Ralph the Rover tore his hair;  
He curst himself in his despair;  
The waves rush in on every side,  
The ship is sinking beneath the tide.

But even in his dying fear  
One dreadful sound could the Rover hear  
A sound as if with the Inchcape Bell  
The sea below was ringing his knell.

Robert Southey<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> altered.

The Inchcape Rock (also known as Bell Rock) is to the east of the Tay estuary in Scotland. Find it on a map. What is the Scottish word for estuary?

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What is the name of the city on the Tay estuary?

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Find the town of Arbroath (Aberbrothock) on the Scottish coast – it is roughly north-west of the Inchcape Rock.



“Inch” is the Scottish word for island. “Scape” may be the same word as skep in English meaning a beehive. The rock is roughly the shape of a traditional beehive. The Inchcape rock is a hazard to shipping because only a small part of it is above the water; the rest forms an area of dangerously shallow water. You can just see part of the rock itself in the picture to the right of the lighthouse. The lighthouse was constructed on the rock between 1807 and 1810 and it is still in operation today.

Southey made his poem out of a legend that a Dutch pirate had taken away the bell about a year after the Abbot put it there. You can read about the poet Southey in H. E. Marshall’s *English Literature* Chapter 76 which is on CD7 of the *Mothers’ Companion*.

At what time of year did Ralph the Rover remove the bell from the rock?

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Describe the weather at that time.

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Why did Ralph need to put out in the ship’s small rowing boat to reach the Inchcape rock?

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How did Ralph the Rover get his wealth?

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When Ralph the Rover returned to Scotland what sequence of weather did he experience?

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Although there was no wind what caused the ship to keep moving?

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What is a “knell”?

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Mark the rhyme scheme on the first verse of the poem.

Look at the way Southey uses different tenses in this poem. Mostly the story is narrated in the past tense. However in some of the verses Southey switches to the present tense to make the action more immediate and exciting. Identify the verses where the present tense is used and mark them on the poem above.