

Robert Southey (1774-1843)

15 *Rudiger*

“Divers Princes and Noblemen being assembled in a beautiful and fair Palace, which was situate upon the river Rhine, they beheld a boat or small barge make toward the shore, drawn by a Swan in a silver chain, the one end fastened about her neck, the other to the vessel; and in it an unknown soldier, a man of a comely personage and graceful presence, who stept upon the shore; which done, the boat guided by the Swan left him, and floated down the river. This man fell afterward in league with a fair gentlewoman, married her, and by her had many children. After some years, the same Swan came with the same barge unto the same place; the soldier entering into it, was carried thence the way he came, left wife, children, and family, and was never seen amongst them after.”

“Now who can judge this to be other than one of those spirits that are named Incubi?” says Thomas Heywood. I have adopted his story, but not his solution, making the unknown soldier not an evil spirit, but one who had purchased prosperity from a malevolent being, by the promised sacrifice of his first-born child.

Bright on the mountain's heathy slope  
The day's last splendours shine,  
And rich with many a radiant hue,  
Gleam gaily on the Rhine.

And many a one from Waldhurst's walls 5  
Along the river stroll'd,  
As ruffling o'er the pleasant stream  
The evening gales came cold.

So as they stray'd a swan they saw 10  
Sail stately up and strong,  
And by a silver chain he drew  
A little boat along.

Whose streamer to the gentle breeze 15  
Long floating flutter'd light;  
Beneath whose crimson canopy  
There lay reclined a knight.

With arching crest and swelling breast  
On sail'd the stately swan,  
And lightly up the parting tide

The little boat came on. 20

And onward to the shore they drew,  
Where having left the knight,  
The little boat adown the stream  
Fell soon beyond the sight.

Was never a knight in Waldhurst's walls 25  
Could with this stranger vie,  
Was never a youth at aught esteem'd  
When Rudiger was by.

Was never a maid in Waldhurst's walls  
Might match with Margaret; 30  
Her cheek was fair, her eyes were dark,  
Her silken locks like jet.

And many a rich and noble youth  
Had sought to win the fair,  
But never a rich and noble youth 35  
Could rival Rudiger.

At every tilt and tourney he  
Still bore away the prize;  
For knightly feats superior still,  
And knightly courtesies. 40

His gallant feats, his looks, his love,  
Soon won the willing fair;  
And soon did Margaret become  
The wife of Rudiger.

Like morning dreams of happiness 45  
Fast roll'd the months away;  
For he was kind and she was kind,  
And who so blest as they?

Yet Rudiger would sometimes sit  
Absorb'd in silent thought, 50  
And his dark downward eye would seem  
With anxious meaning fraught:

But soon he raised his looks again,  
And smiled his cares away,  
And mid the hall of gaiety 55  
Was none like him so gay.

And onward roll'd the waning months,  
The hour appointed came,  
And Margaret her Rudiger  
Hail'd with a father's name. 60

But silently did Rudiger  
The little infant see;  
And darkly on the babe he gazed, —  
A gloomy man was he.

And when to bless the little babe 65  
The holy Father came,  
To cleanse the stains of sin away  
In Christ's redeeming name,

Then did the cheek of Rudiger  
Assume a death-pale hue, 70  
And on his clammy forehead stood  
The cold convulsive dew;

And faltering in his speech he bade  
The Priest the rites delay,  
Till he could, to right health restored, 75  
Enjoy the festive day.

When o'er the many-tinted sky  
He saw the day decline,  
He called upon his Margaret  
To walk beside the Rhine; 80

“And we will take the little babe,  
For soft the breeze that blows,  
And the mild murmurs of the stream  
Will lull him to repose.”

And so together forth they went, 85  
The evening breeze was mild,

And Rudiger upon his arm  
Pillow'd the little child.

Many gay companies that eve  
Along the river roam, 90  
But when the mist began to rise,  
They all betook them home.

Yet Rudiger continued still  
Along the banks to roam,  
Nor aught could Margaret prevail 95  
To turn his footsteps home.

“Oh turn thee, turn thee, Rudiger!  
The rising mists behold,  
The evening wind is damp and chill,  
The little babe is cold!” 100

“Now hush thee, hush thee, Margaret,  
The mists will do no harm,  
And from the wind the little babe  
Is shelter'd on my arm.”

“Oh turn thee, turn thee, Rudiger! 105  
Why onward wilt thou roam?  
The moon is up, the night is cold,  
And we are far from home.”

He answer'd not; for now he saw  
A Swan come sailing strong, 110  
And by a silver chain he drew  
A little boat along.

To shore they came, and to the boat  
Fast leapt he with the child,  
And in leapt Margaret . . . breathless now, 115  
And pale with fear, and wild.

With arching crest and swelling breast  
On sail'd the stately Swan,  
And lightly down the rapid tide  
The little boat went on. 120

The full orb'd moon, that beam'd around  
Pale splendour through the night,  
Cast through the crimson canopy  
A dim discolour'd light.

And swiftly down the hurrying stream 125  
In silence still they sail,  
And the long streamer fluttering fast,  
Flapp'd to the heavy gale.

And he was mute in sullen thought,  
And she was mute with fear, 130  
Nor sound but of the parting tide  
Broke on the listening ear.

The little babe began to cry;  
Then Margaret raised her head,  
And with a quick and hollow voice 135  
"Give me the child!" she said.

"Now hush thee, hush thee, Margaret,  
Nor my poor heart distress!  
I do but pay perforce the price  
Of former happiness. 140

"And hush thee too, my little babe!  
Thy cries so feeble cease;  
Lie still, lie still; . . . a little while  
And thou shalt be at peace."

So as he spake to land they drew, 145  
And swift he stept on shore,  
And him behind did Margaret  
Close follow evermore.

It was a place all desolate,  
Nor house nor tree was there; 150  
But there a rocky mountain rose,  
Barren, and bleak, and bare.

And at its base a cavern yawn'd,

No eye its depth might view,  
For in the moon-beam shining round 155  
That darkness darker grew.

Cold horror crept through Margaret's blood,  
Her heart it paused with fear,  
When Rudiger approach'd the cave,  
And cried, "Lo, I am here!" 160

A deep sepulchral sound the cave  
Return'd "Lo, I am here!"  
And black from out the cavern gloom  
Two giant arms appear.

And Rudiger approach'd, and held 165  
The little infant nigh;  
Then Margaret shriek'd, and gather'd then  
New powers from agony.

And round the baby fast and close  
Her trembling arms she folds, 170  
And with a strong convulsive grasp  
The little infant holds.

"Now help me, Jesus!" loud she cries,  
And loud on God she calls;  
Then from the grasp of Rudiger 175  
The little infant falls.

The mother holds her precious babe;  
But the black arms clasp'd him round,  
And dragg'd the wretched Rudiger  
Adown the dark profound. 180

1796

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