

Thomas Hood (1799-1845)

12 *The Last Man*

'Twas in the year two thousand and one,
A pleasant morning of May,
I sat on the gallows-tree all alone,
A chaunting a merry lay, —
To think how the pest had spared my life, 5
To sing with the larks that day!

When up the heath came a jolly knave,
Like a scarecrow, all in rags:
It made me crow to see his old duds
All abroad in the wind, like flags: — 10
So up he came to the timbers' foot
And pitch'd down his greasy bags. —

Good Lord! how blythe the old beggar was!
At pulling out his scraps, —
The very sight of his broken orts 15
Made a work in his wrinkled chaps:
'Come down,' says he, 'you Newgate bird,
And have a taste of my snaps!' ——

Then down the rope, like a tar from the mast,
I slid, and by him stood; 20
But I wished myself on the gallows again
When I smelt that beggar's food,
A foul beef-bone and a mouldy crust;
'Oh!' quoth he, 'the heavens are good!'

Then after this grace he cast him down: 25
Says I, 'You'll get sweeter air
A pace or two off, on the windward side,'
For the felons' bones lay there.
But he only laugh'd at the empty skulls,
And offered them part of his fare. 30

'I never harm'd *them*, and they won't harm me:
Let the proud and the rich be cravens!
I did not like that strange beggar man,
He look'd so up at the heavens.
Anon he shook out his empty old poke; 35
'There's the crumbs,' saith he, 'for the ravens!'

It made me angry to see his face,
It had such a jesting look;
But while I made up my mind to speak,
A small case-bottle he took; 40
Quoth he, 'though I gather the green water-cress,
My drink is not of the brook!'

Full manners-like he tender'd the dram;
Oh, it came of a dainty cask!
But, whenever it came to his turn to pull, 45
'Your leave, good sir, I must ask;
But I always wipe the brim with my sleeve,
When a hangman sups at my flask!'

And then he laugh'd so loudly and long,
The churl was quite out of breath; 50
I thought the very Old One was come
To mock me before my death,
And wish'd I had buried the dead men's bones
That were lying about the heath!

But the beggar gave me a jolly clap — 55
'Come, let us pledge each other,
For all the wide world is dead beside,
And we are brother and brother —
I've a yearning for thee in my heart,
As if we had come of one mother. 60

'I've a yearning for thee in my heart
That almost makes me weep,
For as I pass'd from town to town
The folks were all stone-asleep, —
But when I saw thee sitting aloft, 65
It made me both laugh and leap!'

Now a curse (I thought) be on his love,
And a curse upon his mirth, —
An' if it were not for that beggar man
I'd be the King of the earth, — 70
But I promis'd myself an hour should come
To make him rue his birth —

So down we sat and bous'd again
Till the sun was in mid-sky,
When, just when the gentle west-wind came, 75
We hearken'd a dismal cry;
'Up, up, on the tree,' quoth the beggar man,
'Till these horrible dogs go by!

And, lo! from the forest's far-off skirts,
They came all yelling for gore, 80
A hundred hounds pursuing at once,
And a panting hart before,
Till he sunk down at the gallows' foot,
And there his haunches they tore!

His haunches they tore, without a horn 85
To tell when the chase was done;
And there was not a single scarlet coat
To flaunt it in the sun! —
I turn'd, and look'd at the beggar man,
And his tears dropt one by one! 90

And with curses sore he chid at the hounds,
Till the last dropt out of sight,
Anon, saith he, 'Let's down again,
And ramble for our delight,
For the world's all free, and we may choose 95
A right cozie barn for to-night!'

With that, he set up his staff on end,
And it fell with the point due West;
So we far'd that way to a city great,
Where the folks had died of the pest — 100
It was fine to enter in house and hall

Wherever it liked me best;

For the porters all were stiff and cold,
And could not lift their heads;
And when we came where their masters lay, 105
The rats leapt out of the beds;
The grandest palaces in the land
Were as free as workhouse sheds.

But the beggar man made a mumping face,
And knocked at every gate: 110
It made me curse to hear how he whined,
So our fellowship turned to hate,
And I bade him walk the world by himself,
For I scorn'd so humble a mate!

So *he* turn'd right, and *I* turn'd left, 115
As if we had never met;
And I chose a fair stone house for myself,
For the city was all to let;
And for three brave holidays drank my fill
Of the choicest that I could get. 120

And because my jerkin was coarse and worn,
I got me a properer vest;
It was purple velvet, stitch'd o'er with gold,
And a shining star at the breast! —
'Twas enough to fetch old Joan from her grave 125
To see me so purely drest!

But Joan was dead and under the mould,
And every buxom lass;
In vain I watch'd, at the window pane
For a Christian soul to pass! 130
But sheep and kine wander'd up the street,
And browz'd on the new-come grass. —

When lo! I spied the old beggar man,
And lustily he did sing! —
His rags were lapp'd in a scarlet cloak, 135
And a crown he had like a King;

So he stept right up before my gate
And danc'd me a saucy fling!

Heaven mend us all! — but, within my mind,
I had killed him then and there; 140
To see him lording so braggart-like
That was born to his beggar's fare,
And how he had stolen the royal crown
His betters were meant to wear.

But God forbid that a thief should die 145
Without his share of the laws!
So I nimbly whipt my tackle out,
And soon tied up his claws, —
I was judge myself, and jury, and all,
And solemnly tried the cause. 150

But the beggar man would not plead, but cried
Like a babe without its corals,
For he knew how hard it is apt to go
When the law and a thief have quarrels, —
There was not a Christian soul alive 155
To speak a word for his morals.

Oh, how gaily I doff'd my costly gear,
And put on my work-day clothes;
I was tired of such a long Sunday life, —
And never was one of the sloths; 160
But the beggar man grumbled a weary deal,
And made many crooked mouths.

So I haul'd him off to the gallows' foot,
And blinded him in his bags;
'Twas a weary job to heave him up, 165
For a doom'd man always lags;
But by ten of the clock he was off his legs
In the wind, and airing his rags!

So there he hung, and there I stood,
The LAST MAN left alive, 170
To have my own will of all the earth:

Quoth I, now I shall thrive!
But when was ever honey made
With one bee in a hive?

My conscience began to gnaw my heart, 175
Before the day was done,
For other men's lives had all gone out,
Like candles in the sun! —
But it seem'd as if I had broke, at last,
A thousand necks in one! 180

So I went and cut his body down
To bury it decentlie; —
God send there were any good soul alive
To do the like by me!
But the wild dogs came with terrible speed, 185
And bade me up the tree!

My sight was like a drunkard's sight,
And my head began to swim,
To see their jaws all white with foam,
Like the ravenous ocean brim; — 190
But when the wild dogs trotted away
Their jaws were bloody and grim!

Their jaws were bloody and grim, good Lord!
But the beggar man, where was he? —
There was naught of him but some ribbons of rags 195
Below the gallows' tree! —
I know the Devil, when I am dead,
Will send his hounds for me! —

I've buried my babies one by one,
And dug the deep hole for Joan, 200
And covered the faces of kith and kin,
And felt the old churchyard stone
Go cold to my heart, full many a time,
But I never felt so lone!

For the lion and Adam were company, 205
And the tiger him beguiled:

But the simple kine are foes to my life,
And the household brutes are wild.
If the veriest cur would lick my hand,
I could love it like a child! 210

And the beggar man's ghost besets my dream,
At night to make me madder, —
And my wretched conscience within my breast,
Is like a stinging adder; —
I sigh when I pass the gallows' foot, 215
And look at the rope and ladder! —

For hanging looks sweet, — but, alas! in vain
My desperate fancy begs, —
I must turn my cup of sorrows quite up,
And drink it to the dregs, — 220
For there is not another man alive,
In the world, to pull my legs!

1826

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