

Thomas Hood (1799-1845)

1 *The Dream of Eugene Aram, the Murderer*

'Twas in the prime of summer time,  
    An evening calm and cool,  
And four-and-twenty happy boys  
    Came bounding out of school:  
There were some that ran and some that leapt,           5  
    Like troutlets in a pool.

Away they sped with gamesome minds,  
    And souls untouched by sin;  
To a level mead they came, and there  
    They drave the wickets in:                                 10  
Pleasantly shone the setting sun  
    Over the town of Lynn.

Like sportive deer they cours'd about,  
    And shouted as they ran, —  
Turning to mirth all things of earth,                     15  
    As only boyhood can;  
But the Usher sat remote from all,  
    A melancholy man!

His hat was off, his vest apart,  
    To catch heaven's blessed breeze;                         20  
For a burning thought was in his brow,  
    And his bosom ill at ease:  
So he lean'd his head on his hands, and read  
    The book between his knees!

Leaf after leaf, he turn'd it o'er,                         25  
    Nor ever glanc'd aside,  
For the peace of his soul he read that book  
    In the golden eventide:  
Much study had made him very lean,  
    And pale, and leaden-ey'd.                                 30

At last he shut the ponderous tome,  
With a fast and fervent grasp  
He strain'd the dusky covers close,  
And fixed the brazen hasp:  
'Oh, God! could I so close my mind,  
And clasp it with a clasp!' 35

Then leaping on his feet upright,  
Some moody turns he took, —  
Now up the mead, then down the mead,  
And past a shady nook, — 40  
And, lo! he saw a little boy  
That pored upon a book!

'My gentle lad, what is't you read —  
Romance or fairy fable?  
Or is it some historic page, 45  
Of kings and crowns unstable?'  
The young boy gave an upward glance, —  
'It is "The Death of Abel."'

The Usher took six hasty strides,  
As smit with sudden pain, — 50  
Six hasty strides beyond the place,  
Then slowly back again;  
And down he sat beside the lad,  
And talk'd with him of Cain;

And, long since then, of bloody men, 55  
Whose deeds tradition saves;  
Of lonely folk cut off unseen,  
And hid in sudden graves;  
Of horrid stabs, in groves forlorn,  
And murders done in caves; 60

And how the sprites of injur'd men  
Shriek upward from the sod, —  
Aye, how the ghostly hand will point  
To show the burial clod;  
And unknown facts of guilty acts 65  
Are seen in dreams from God!



He told how murderers walk the earth  
    Beneath the curse of Cain, —  
With crimson clouds before their eyes,  
    And flames about their brain: 70  
For blood has left upon their souls  
    Its everlasting stain!

‘And well,’ quoth he, ‘I know, for truth,  
    Their pangs must be extreme, —  
Woe, woe, unutterable woe, — 75  
    Who spill life’s sacred stream!  
For why? Methought, last night, I wrought  
    A murder, in a dream!

‘One that had never done me wrong —  
    A feeble man, and old; 80  
I led him to a lonely field, —  
    The moon shone clear and cold:  
Now here, said I, this man shall die,  
    And I will have his gold!

‘Two sudden blows with a ragged stick, 85  
    And one with a heavy stone,  
One hurried gash with a hasty knife, —  
    And then the deed was done:  
There was nothing lying at my foot  
    But lifeless flesh and bone! 90

‘Nothing but lifeless flesh and bone,  
    That could not do me ill;  
And yet I fear’d him all the more,  
    For lying there so still:  
There was a manhood in his look, 95  
    That murder could not kill!

‘And, lo! the universal air  
    Seem’d lit with ghastly flame; —  
Ten thousand thousand dreadful eyes  
    Were looking down in blame: 100  
I took the dead man by his hand,

And call'd upon his name!

'Oh, God! it made me quake to see  
Such sense within the slain!  
But when I touch'd the lifeless clay, 105  
The blood gushed out amain!  
For every clot, a burning spot,  
Was scorching in my brain!

'My head was like an ardent coal,  
My heart as solid ice; 110  
My wretched, wretched soul, I knew,  
Was at the Devil's price:  
A dozen times I groan'd; the dead  
Had never groan'd but twice!

'And now, from forth the frowning sky, 115  
From the Heaven's topmost height,  
I heard a voice — the awful voice  
Of the blood-avenging Sprite: —  
"Thou guilty man! take up thy dead,  
And hide it from my sight!" 120

'I took the dreary body up,  
And cast it in a stream, —  
A sluggish water, black as ink,  
The depth was so extreme: —  
My gentle Boy, remember this 125  
Is nothing but a dream!

'Down went the corse with a hollow plunge,  
And vanish'd in the pool;  
Anon I cleans'd my bloody hands,  
And wash'd my forehead cool, 130  
And sat among the urchins young  
That evening in the school.

'Oh, Heaven, to think of their white souls,  
And mine so black and grim!  
I could not share in childish prayer, 135  
Nor join in Evening Hymn:



Like a Devil of the Pit, I seem'd,  
'Mid holy Cherubim!

'And Peace went with them, one and all,  
And each calm pillow spread; 140  
But Guilt was my grim Chamberlain  
That lighted me to bed;  
And drew my midnight curtains round  
With fingers bloody red!

'All night I lay in agony, 145  
In anguish dark and deep;  
My fever'd eyes I dared not close,  
But stared aghast at Sleep:  
For Sin had render'd unto her  
The keys of Hell to keep! 150

'All night I lay in agony,  
From weary chime to chime,  
With one besetting horrid hint,  
That rack'd me all the time, —  
A mighty yearning, like the first 155  
Fierce impulse unto crime!

'One stern tyrannic thought, that made  
All other thoughts its slave;  
Stronger and stronger every pulse  
Did that temptation crave, — 160  
Still urging me to go and see  
The Dead Man in his grave!

'Heavily I rose up, as soon  
As light was in the sky,  
And sought the black accursed pool 165  
With a wild misgiving eye;  
And I saw the Dead in the river bed,  
For the faithless stream was dry!

'Merrily rose the lark, and shook  
The dew-drop from its wing; 170  
But I never mark'd its morning flight,

I never heard it sing:  
For I was stooping once again  
Under the horrid thing.

‘With breathless speed, like a soul in chase, 175  
I took him up and ran; —  
There was no time to dig a grave  
Before the day began:  
In a lonesome wood, with heaps of leaves,  
I hid the murder’d man! 180

‘And all that day I read in school,  
But my thought was other where;  
As soon as the mid-day task was done,  
In secret I was there:  
And a mighty wind had swept the leaves, 185  
And still the corse was bare!

‘Then down I cast me on my face,  
And first began to weep,  
For I knew my secret then was one  
That earth refused to keep: 190  
Or land, or sea, though he should be  
Ten thousand fathoms deep.

‘So wills the fierce avenging Sprite,  
Till blood for blood atones!  
Ay, though he’s buried in a cave, 195  
And trodden down with stones,  
And years have rotted off his flesh, —  
The world shall see his bones!

‘Oh, God! that horrid, horrid dream  
Besets me now awake! 200  
Again — again, with a dizzy brain,  
The human life I take;  
And my red right hand grows raging hot,  
Like Cranmer’s at the stake.

‘And still no peace for the restless clay, 205  
Will wave or mould allow;



The horrid thing pursues my soul, —  
It stands before me now!  
The fearful Boy look'd up, and saw  
Huge drops upon his brow. 210

That very night, while gentle sleep  
The urchin eyelids kiss'd,  
Two stern-faced men set out from Lynn,  
Through the cold and heavy mist;  
And Eugene Aram walked between, 215  
With gyves upon his wrist.

1829

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