

Matthew Gregory Lewis (1775-1818)

17 Osric the Lion

Original.

Since writing this Ballad, I have seen a French one, entitled "La Veillée de la Bonne Mère," which has some resemblance with it.

Swift roll the Rhine's billows, and water the plains,
Where Falkenstein Castle's majestic remains
 Their moss-cover'd turrets still rear:
Oft loves the gaunt wolf midst the ruins to prowl,
What time from the battlements pours the lone owl 5
 Her plaints in the passenger's ear.

No longer resound through the vaults of yon hall
The song of the minstrel, and mirth of the ball;
 Those pleasures for ever are fled:
There now dwells the bat with her light-shunning brood, 10
There ravens and vultures now clamour for food,
 And all is dark, silent, and dead!

Ha! dost thou not see, by the moon's trembling light
Directing his steps, where advances a knight,
 His eye big with vengeance and fate? 15
'Tis Osric the Lion his nephew who leads,
And swift up the crackling old staircase proceeds,
 Gains the hall, and quick closes the gate.

Now round him young Carloman casting his eyes,
Surveys the sad scene with dismay and surprise, 20
 And fear steals the rose from his cheeks.
His spirits forsake him, his courage is flown;
The hand of Sir Osric he clasps in his own,
 And while his voice falters he speaks.

— "Dear uncle," he murmurs, "why linger we here? 25

“Tis late, and these chambers are damp and are drear,
 “Keen blows through the ruins the blast!
“Oh let us away and our journey pursue:
“Fair Blumenberg’s Castle will rise on our view,
 Soon as Falkenstein forest is pass’d. 30

“Why roll thus your eyeballs? why glare they so wild?
“Oh! chide not my weakness, nor frown, that a child
 “Should view these apartments with dread;
“For know, that full oft have I heard from my nurse,
“There still on this castle has rested a curse, 35
 “Since innocent blood here was shed.

“She said, too, bad spirits, and ghosts all in white,
“Here use to resort at the dead time of night,
 “Nor vanish till breaking of day;
“And still at their coming is heard the deep tone 40
“Of a bell loud and awful — hark! hark! ’twas a groan!
 “Good uncle, oh! let us away! —

— “Peace, serpent!” thus Osric the Lion replies,
While rage and malignity gloom in his eyes;
 “Thy journey and life here must close: 45
“Thy castle’s proud turrets no more shalt thou see;
“No more betwixt Blumenberg’s lordship and me
 “Shalt thou stand, and my greatness oppose.

“My brother lies breathless on Palestine’s plains,
“And thou once remov’d, to his noble domains 50
 “My right can no rival deny:
“Then, stripling, prepare on my dagger to bleed;
“No succour is near, and thy fate is decreed,
 “Commend thee to Jesus, and die!” —

Thus saying, he seizes the boy by the arm, 55
Whose grief rends the vaulted hall’s roof, while alarm
 His heart of all fortitude robs;

His limbs sink beneath him; distracted with fears,
He falls at his uncle's feet, bathes them with tears,
And — "spare me! oh spare me!" — he sobs. 60

But vainly the miscreant he strives to appease;
And vainly he clings in despair round his knees,
And sues in soft accents for life;
Unmov'd by his sorrow, unmov'd by his prayer,
Fierce Osric has twisted his hand in his hair, 65
And aims at his bosom a knife.

But ere the steel blushes with blood, strange to tell!
Self-struck, does the tongue of the hollow-toned bell
The presence of midnight declare:
And while with amazement his hair bristles high, 70
Hears Osric a voice, loud and terrible cry,
In sounds heart-appaling — "Forbear!" —

Straight curses and shrieks through the chambers resound,
Shrieks mingled with laughter: the walls shake around;
The groaning roof threatens to fall; 75
Loud bellows the thunder, blue lightnings still flash;
The casements they clatter; chains rattle; doors clash,
And flames spread their waves through the hall.

The clamour increases, the portals expand! —
O'er the pavement's black marble now rushes a band 80
Of dæmons all dropping with gore,
In visage so grim, and so monstrous in height,
That Carloman screams, as they burst on his sight,
And sinks without sense on the floor.

Not so his fell uncle: — he sees, that the throng 85
Impels, wildly shrieking, a female along,
And well the sad spectre he knows!
The dæmons with curses her steps onwards urge;
Her shoulders, with whips form'd of serpents, they scourge,

And fast from her wounds the blood flows. 90

“Oh! welcome!” she cried, and her voice spoke despair;
“Oh! welcome, Sir Osric, the torments to share,
“Of which thou hast made me the prey.
“Twelve years have I languish’d thy coming to see;
“Ulrich, who perish’d dishonour’d by thee, 95
“Now calls thee to anguish away!

“Thy passion once sated, thy love became hate;
“Thy hand gave the draught which consign’d me to fate,
“Nor thought I death lurk’d in the bowl:
“Unfit for the grave, stain’d with lust, swell’d with pride, 100
“Unbless’d, unabsolv’d, unrepenting, I died,
“And dæmons straight seiz’d on my soul.

“Thou com’st, and with transport I feel my breast swell:
“Full long have I suffer’d the torments of hell,
“And now shall its pleasures be mine! 105
“See, see how the fiends are athirst for thy blood!
“Twelve years has *my* panting heart furnish’d their food,
“Come, wretch, let them feast upon thine!” —

She said, and the dæmons their prey flock’d around;
They dash’d him, with horrible yell, on the ground, 110
And blood down his limbs trickled fast;
His eyes from their sockets with fury they tore;
They fed on his entrails, all reeking with gore,
And his *heart* was Ulrich’s repast.

But now the grey cock told the coming of day! 115
The fiends with their victim straight vanish’d away,
And Carloman’s heart throbb’d again;
With terror recalling the deeds of the night,
He rose, and from Falkenstein speeding his flight,
Soon reach’d his paternal domain. 120

Since then, all with horror the ruins behold;
No shepherd, though stray'd be a lamb from his fold,
 No mother, though lost be her child,
The fugitive dares in these chambers to seek,
Where fiends nightly revel, and guilty ghosts shriek 125
 In accents most fearful and wild!

Oh! shun them, ye pilgrims! though late be the hour,
Though loud howl the tempest, and fast fall the shower;
 From Falkenstein Castle begone!
There still their sad banquet hell's denizens share; 130
There Osric the Lion still raves in despair:
 Breathe a prayer for his soul, and pass on!

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