

Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832)

21 *William and Helen*

Imitated from the "Lenore" of Bürger.

The Author had resolved to omit the following version of a well-known Poem, in any collection which he might make of his poetical trifles. But the publishers having pleaded for its admission, the Author has consented, though not unaware of the disadvantage at which this youthful essay (for it was written in 1795) must appear with those which have been executed by much more able hands, in particular that of Mr. Taylor of Norwich, and that of Mr. Spencer.

The following Translation was written long before the Author saw any other, and originated in the following circumstances: — A lady of high rank in the literary world read this romantic tale, as translated by Mr. Taylor, in the house of the celebrated Professor Dugald Stewart of Edinburgh. The Author was not present, nor indeed in Edinburgh at the time; but a gentleman who had the pleasure of hearing the ballad, afterwards told him the story, and repeated the remarkable chorus —

“Tramp! tramp! across the land they speede,
 Splash! splash! across the sea;
Hurrah! The dead can ride apace!
 Dost fear to ride with me?”

In attempting a translation, then intended only to circulate among friends, the present Author did not hesitate to make use of this impressive stanza; for which freedom he has since obtained the forgiveness of the ingenious gentleman to whom it properly belongs.

I.

From heavy dreams fair Helen rose,
 And eyed the dawning red:
“Alas, my love, thou tarriest long!
 O art thou false or dead?” —

II.

With gallant Fred'rick's princely power
 He sought the bold Crusade;
But not a word from Judah's wars
 Told Helen how he sped.

III.

With Paynim and with Saracen
At length a truce was made, 10
And every knight return'd to dry
The tears his love had shed.

IV.

Our gallant host was homeward bound
With many a song of joy;
Green waved the laurel in each plume, 15
The badge of victory.

V.

And old and young, and sire and son,
To meet them crowd the way,
With shouts, and mirth, and melody,
The debt of love to pay. 20

VI .

Full many a maid her true-love met,
And sobb'd in his embrace,
And flutt'ring joy in tears and smiles
Array'd full many a face.

VII.

Nor joy nor smile for Helen sad; 25
She sought the host in vain;
For none could tell her William's fate,
If faithless, or if slain.

VIII.

The martial band is past and gone;
She rends her raven hair, 30
And in distraction's bitter mood
She weeps with wild despair.

IX.

“O rise, my child,” her mother said,
“Nor sorrow thus in vain;
A perjured lover’s fleeting heart 35
No tears recall again.” —

X.

“O mother, what is gone, is gone,
What’s lost for ever lorn:
Death, death alone can comfort me;
O had I ne’er been born! 40

XI.

“O break, my heart, — O break at once!
Drink my life-blood, Despair!
No joy remains on earth for me,
For me in heaven no share.” —

XII.

“O enter not in judgment, Lord!” 45
The pious mother prays;
“Impute not guilt to thy frail child!
She knows not what she says.

XIII.

“O say thy pater noster, child!
O turn to God and grace! 50
His will, that turn’d thy bliss to bale,
Can change thy bale to bliss.” —

XIV.

“O mother, mother, what is bliss?
O mother, what is bale?
My William’s love was heaven on earth, 55
Without it earth is hell.

XV.

“Why should I pray to ruthless Heaven,
Since my loved William’s slain?
I only pray’d for William’s sake,
And all my prayers were vain.” — 60

XVI.

“O take the sacrament, my child,
And check these tears that flow;
By resignation’s humble prayer,
O hallow’d be thy woe!” —

XVII.

“No sacrament can quench this fire, 65
Or slake this scorching pain;
No sacrament can bid the dead
Arise and live again.

XVIII.

“O break, my heart, — O break at once!
Be thou my god, Despair! 70
Heaven’s heaviest blow has fallen on me,
And vain each fruitless prayer.” —

XIX.

“O enter not in judgment, Lord,
With thy frail child of clay!
She knows not what her tongue has spoke; 75
Impute it not, I pray!

XX.

“Forbear, my child, this desperate woe,
And turn to God and grace;
Well can devotion’s heavenly glow
Convert thy bale to bliss.” — 80

XXI.

“O mother, mother, what is bliss?

O mother, what is bale?
Without my William what were heaven,
Or with him what were hell?" —

XXII.

Wild she arraigns the eternal doom, 85
Upbraids each sacred power,
Till, spent, she sought her silent room,
All in the lonely tower.

XXIII.

She beat her breast, she wrung her hands,
Till sun and day were o'er, 90
And through the glimmering lattice shone
The twinkling of the star.

XXIV.

Then, crash! the heavy drawbridge fell
That o'er the moat was hung;
And, clatter! clatter! on its boards 95
The hoof of courser rung.

XXV.

The clank of echoing steel was heard
As off the rider bounded;
And slowly on the winding stair
A heavy footstep sounded. 100

XXVI.

And hark! and hark! a knock — Tap! tap!
A rustling stifled noise; —
Door-latch and tinkling staples ring; —
At length a whispering voice.

XXVII.

Awake, awake, arise, my love! 105
How, Helen, dost thou fare?

Wak'st thou, or sleep'st? laugh'st thou, or weep'st?
Hast thought on me, my fair?" —

XXVIII.

"My love! my love! — so late by night! —
I waked, I wept for thee: 110
Much have I borne since dawn of morn;
Where, William, couldst thou be?" —

XXIX.

"We saddle late — from Hungary
I rode since darkness fell;
And to its bourne we both return 115
Before the matin-bell." —

XXX.

"O rest this night within my arms,
And warm thee in their fold!
Chill howls through hawthorn bush the wind: —
My love is deadly cold." — 120

XXXI.

"Let the wind howl through hawthorn bush!
This night we must away;
The steed is wight, the spur is bright;
I cannot stay till day.

XXXII.

"Busk, busk, and boune! Thou mount'st behind 125
Upon my black barb steed:
O'er stock and stile, a hundred miles,
We haste to bridal bed." —

XXXIII.

"To-night — to-night a hundred miles! —
O dearest William, stay! 130
The bell strikes twelve — dark, dismal hour!

O wait, my love, till day!" —

XXXIV.

"Look here, look here — the moon shines clear —
Full fast I ween we ride;
Mount and away! for ere the day 135
We reach our bridal bed.

XXXV.

"The black barb snorts, the bridle rings;
Haste, busk, and boune, and seat thee!
The feast is made, the chamber spread,
The bridal guests await thee." — 140

XXXVI.

Strong love prevail'd: She busks, she bounes,
She mounts the barb behind,
And round her darling William's waist
Her lily arms she twined.

XXXVII.

And, hurry! hurry! off they rode, 145
As fast as fast might be;
Spurn'd from the courser's thundering heels
The flashing pebbles flee.

XXXVIII.

And on the right, and on the left,
Ere they could snatch a view, 150
Fast, fast each mountain, mead, and plain,
And cot, and castle, flew.

XXXIX.

"Sit fast — dost fear? — The moon shines clear —
Fleet goes my barb — keep hold!
Fear'st thou?" — "O no!" she faintly said; 155
"But why so stern and cold?"

XL.

“What yonder rings? what yonder sings?
Why shrieks the owlet grey?”—
“’Tis death-bells’ clang, ’tis funeral song,
The body to the clay. 160

XLI.

“With song and clang, at morrow’s dawn,
Ye may inter the dead:
To-night I ride, with my young bride,
To deck our bridal bed.

XLII.

“Come with thy choir, thou coffin’d guest, 165
To swell our nuptial song!
Come, priest, to bless our marriage feast!
Come all, come all along!” —

XLIII.

Ceased clang and song; down sunk the bier;
The shrouded corpse arose: 170
And, hurry! hurry! all the train
The thundering steed pursues.

XLIV.

And, forward! forward! on they go;
High snorts the straining steed;
Thick pants the rider’s labouring breath, 175
As headlong on they speed.

XLV.

“O William, why this savage haste?
And where thy bridal bed?” —
“’Tis distant far, low, damp, and chill,
And narrow, trustless maid.” — 180

XLVI.

“No room for me?” — “Enough for both; —
Speed, speed, my barb, thy course!” —
O'er thundering bridge, through boiling surge,
He drove the furious horse.

XLVII.

Tramp! tramp! along the land they rode, 185
Splash! splash! along the sea;
The scourge is wight, the spur is bright,
The flashing pebbles flee.

XLVIII.

Fled past on right and left how fast
Each forest, grove, and bower! 190
On right and left fled past how fast
Each city, town, and tower!

XLIX.

“Dost fear? dost fear? The moon shines clear,
Dost fear to ride with me? —
Hurrah! hurrah! the dead can ride!” — 195
“O William, let them be! —

L.

“See there, see there! What yonder swings
And creaks 'mid whistling rain?” —
“Gibbet and steel, th' accursed wheel;
A murderer in his chain. — 200

LI.

“Hollo! thou felon, follow here:
To bridal bed we ride;
And thou shalt prance a fetter dance
Before me and my bride.” —

LII.

And, hurry! hurry! clash, clash, clash! 205
The wasted form descends;
And fleet as wind through hazel bush
The wild career attends.

LIII.

Tramp! tramp! along the land they rode,
Splash! splash! along the sea; 210
The scourge is red, the spur drops blood,
The flashing pebbles flee.

LIV.

How fled what moonshine faintly show'd!
How fled what darkness hid!
How fled the earth beneath their feet, 215
The heaven above their head!

LV.

“Dost fear? dost fear? The moon shines clear,
And well the dead can ride;
Does faithful Helen fear for them?” —
“O leave in peace the dead!” — 220

LVI.

“Barb! Barb! methinks I hear the cock;
The sand will soon be run:
Barb! Barb! I smell the morning air;
The race is wellnigh done.” —

LVII.

Tramp! tramp! along the land they rode, 225
Splash! splash! along the sea;
The scourge is red, the spur drops blood,
The flashing pebbles flee.

LVIII.

“Hurrah! hurrah! well ride the dead;

The bride, the bride is come; 230
And soon we reach the bridal bed,
For, Helen, here's my home." —

LIX .

Reluctant on its rusty hinge
Revolved an iron door,
And by the pale moon's setting beam 235
Were seen a church and tower.

LX.

With many a shriek and cry whiz round
The birds of midnight, scared;
And rustling like autumnal leaves
Unhallow'd ghosts were heard. 240

LXI.

O'er many a tomb and tombstone pale
He spurr'd the fiery horse,
Till sudden at an open grave
He check'd the wondrous course.

LXII.

The falling gauntlet quits the rein, 245
Down drops the casque of steel,
The cuirass leaves his shrinking side,
The spur his gory heel.

LXIII.

The eyes desert the naked skull,
The mould'ring flesh the bone, 250
Till Helen's lily arms entwine
A ghastly skeleton.

LXIV.

The furious barb snorts fire and foam,
And, with a fearful bound,

Dissolves at once in empty air, 255
And leaves her on the ground.

LXV.

Half seen by fits, by fits half heard,
Pale spectres flit along,
Wheel round the maid in dismal dance,
And howl the funeral song; 260

LXVI.

“E’en when the heart’s with anguish cleft,
Revere the doom of Heaven,
Her soul is from her body reft;
Her spirit be forgiven!”

1796

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