

W. Harrison Ainsworth (1805-82)

4 *The Legend of the Lady Rookwood*

Grim Ranulph home hath at midnight come, from the long wars of the Roses,  
And the squire who waits at his ancient gates, a secret dark discloses;  
To that varlet's words no response accords his lord, but his aspect stern  
Grows ghastly white in the wan moonlight, and his eyes like the gaunt wolf's burn.

To his lady's bower, at that lonesome hour, unannounced is Sir Ranulph gone; 5  
Through the dim corridor, through the hidden door, he glides — she is all alone!  
Full of holy zeal doth his young dame kneel at the meek Madonna's feet,  
Her hands are pressed on her gentle breast, and upturned is her visage sweet.

Beats Ranulph's heart with a joyful start, as he looks on her guiltless face;  
And the raging fire of his jealous ire is subdued by the words of grace; 10  
His own name shares her murmured prayers — more freely can he breathe;  
But ah! that look! Why doth he pluck his poniard from its sheath?

On a footstool thrown lies a costly gown of saye and of minevere,  
(A mantle fair for the dainty wear of a migniard cavalier),  
And on it flung, to a bracelet hung, a picture meets his eye; — 15  
“By my father's head,” grim Ranulph said, “false wife, thy end draws nigh.”

From off its chain hath the fierce knight ta'en that fond and fatal pledge;  
His dark eyes blaze, no word he says, thrice gleams his dagger's edge!  
Her blood it drinks, and, as she sinks, his victim hears his cry,  
“For kiss impure of paramour, adult'ress, dost thou die!” 20

Silent he stood, with hands embrued in gore, and glance of flame,  
As thus her plaint, in accents faint, made his ill-fated dame:  
“Kind Heaven can tell, that all too well, I've loved thee, cruel lord;  
But now with hate commensurate, assassin, thou'rt abhorred.

“I've loved thee long, through doubt and wrong; I've loved thee, and no other; 25  
And my love was pure, for my paramour, as thou call'st him, was my brother!  
The Red, Red Rose, on *thy* banner glows, on *his* pennon gleams the White,  
And the bitter feud, that ye both have rued, forbids ye to unite.  
“My bower he sought, what time he thought thy jealous vassals slept;

Of joy we dreamed, and never deemed that watch those vassals kept; 30  
An hour flew by, too speedily! — that picture was his boon:  
Ah! little thrift to me that gift: he left me all too soon!

“Wo worth the hour! dark fates did lower, when our hands were first united!  
Fell lord, my truth, ’mid tears and ruth, with death hast thou requited:  
In prayer sincere, full many a year of my wretched life I’ve spent; 35  
But to hell’s control would I give my soul, to work thy chastisement!”

These wild words said, low drooped her head, and Ranulph’s life-blood froze,  
For the earth did gape, as an awful shape from out its depths arose:  
“Thy prayer is heard, Hell hath concurred,” cried the Fiend, “thy soul is mine!  
Like fate may dread each dame shall wed with Ranulph or his line!” 40

Within the tomb to await her doom is that hapless lady sleeping,  
And another bride by Ranulph’s side through the livelong night is weeping.  
*This* dame declines — a third repines, and fades, like the rest, away:  
Her lot she rues, whom a Rookwood woos — *cursed is her Wedding Day!*

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