

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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