

Matthew Gregory Lewis (1775-1818)

5 *The Cloud-King*

“Adjectives have but three degrees of comparison,
the positive, comparative, and superlative.”

English Grammar.

Why how now, Sir Pilgrim? why shake you with dread?
Why brave you the winds of night, cutting and cold?
Full warm was your chamber, full soft was your bed,
And scarce by the castle-bell twelve has been toll'd.

— “Oh! hear you not, Warder, with anxious dismay, 5
“How rages the tempest, how patters the rain?
“While loud howls the whirlwind, and threatens, ere day,
“To strow these old turrets in heaps on the plain!” —

Now calm thee, Sir Pilgrim! thy fears to remove, 10
Know, yearly, this morning is destin'd to bring
Such storms, which declare that resentment and love
Still gnaw the proud heart of the cruel Cloud-King.

One morning, as borne on the wings of the blast, 15
The fiend over Denmark directed his flight,
A glance upon Rosenhall's turrets he cast,
And gazed on its lady with wanton delight:

Yet proud was her eye, and her cheek flush'd with rage, 20
Her lips with disdain and reproaches were fraught:
And lo! at her feet knelt a lovely young page,
And thus in soft accents compassion besought.

— “Oh drive not, dear beauty, a wretch to despair,
“Whose fault is so venial, a fault if it be;
“For who could have eyes, and not see thou art fair?”

“Or who have an heart, and not give it to thee?”

“I own I adore you! I own you have been 25
“Long the dream of my night, long the thought of my day;
“But no hope had my heart that its idolized queen
“Would ever with passion *my* passion repay.

“When insects delight in the blaze of the sun,
“They harbour no wish in his glory to share: 30
“When kneels at the cross of her Saviour, the nun,
“He scorns not the praises she breathes in her prayer.

“When the pilgrim repairs to St. Hermegild’s shrine,
“And claims of her relics a kiss as his fee,
“His passion is humble, is pure, is divine, 35
“And such is the passion I cherish for thee!” —

— “Rash youth! how presumest thou with insolent love,”
Thus answered the lady, “her ears to profane,
“Whom the monarchs of Norway and Jutland, to move
“Their passion to pity attempted in vain? 40

“Fly, fly from my sight, to some far distant land!
“That wretch must not breathe, where Romilda resides,
“Whose lips, while she slept, stole a kiss from that hand,
“No mortal is worthy to press as a bride’s.

“Nor e’er will I wed till some prince of the air, 45
“His heart at the throne of my beauty shall lay,
“And the two first commands which I give him, shall swear,
“(Though hard should the task be enjoin’d) to obey.” —

She said. — Straight the castle of Rosenhall rocks
With an earthquake, and thunders announce the Cloud-King, 50
A crown of red lightnings confined his fair locks,
And high o’er each arm waved an huge sable wing.

His sandals were meteors; his blue eye reveal'd
The firmament's lustre, and light scatter'd round;
While his robe, a bright tissue, of rain-drops congeal'd, 55
Reflected the lightnings his temples that bound.

— “Romilda!” he thundered, “thy charms and thy pride
“Have drawn down a spirit; thy fears now dismiss,
“For no mortal shall call thee, proud beauty, his bride;
“The Cloud-Monarch comes to demand thee for his. 60

“My eyes furnish lightnings, my wings cloud the air,
“My hand guides the thunder, my breath wakes the storm;
“And the two first commands which you give me, I swear,
“(Though hard should the task be enjoin'd) to perform.” —

He said, and he seized her; then urging his flight, 65
Swift bore her away, while she struggled in vain;
Yet long in her ears rang the shrieks of affright,
Which pour'd for her danger the page Amorayn.

At the Palace of Clouds soon Romilda arrived,
When the Fiend, with a smile which her terrors increased, 70
Exclaim'd — “I must warn my three brothers I'm wived,
“And bid them prepare for my wedding the feast.” —

Than lightning then swifter thrice round did he turn,
Thrice bitterly cursed he the parent of good,
And next in a chafing-dish hasten'd to burn 75
Three locks of his hair, and three drops of his blood:

And quickly Romilda, with anxious affright,
Hears the tramp of a steed, and beheld at the gate
A youth in white arms — 'twas the false Water-Spright,
And behind him his mother, the sorceress, sate. 80

The youth he was comely, and fair to behold,
The hag was the foulest eye ever survey'd;

Each placed on the table a goblet of gold,
While thus to Romilda the Water-King said. —

— “Hail, Queen of the Clouds! lo! we bring thee for drink 85
“The blood of a damsel, both lovely and rich,
“Whom I tempted, and left ’midst the billows to sink,
“Where she died by the hands of my mother, the witch.

“But see’st thou yon chariot, which speeds from afar?
“The Erl-King with his daughter it brings, while a throng 90
“Of wood-fiends and succubi sports round the car,
“And goads on the night-mares that whirl it along.” —

The maid, while her eyes tears of agony pour’d,
Beheld the Erl-King and his daughter draw near:
A charger of silver each placed on the board, 95
While the fiend of the forests thus greeted her ear.

— “With the heart of a warrior, Cloud Queen, for thy food,
“The head of a child on thy table we place:
“She spell-struck the knight as he stray’d through the wood;
“I strangled the child in his father’s embrace.” — 100

The roof now divided. — By fogs half conceal’d,
Suck’d from marshes, infecting the air as he came,
And blasting the verdure of forest and field,
On a dragon descended the Giant of Flame.

Fire seem’d from his eyes and his nostrils to pour; 105
His breath was a volume of sulphurous smoke;
He brandish’d a sabre still dropping with gore,
And his voice shook the palace when silence he broke.

— “Feast, Queen of the Clouds! the repast do not scorn;
“Feast, Queen of the Clouds! I perceive thou hast food! 110
“To-morrow I feast in my turn, for at morn
“Shall I feed on thy flesh, shall I drink of thy blood!

“Lo! I bring for a present this magical brand,
“The bowels of Christians have dyed it with red;
“This once flamed in Albert the renegade’s hand, 115
“And is destined to-morrow to strike off thy head.” —

Then paler than marble Romilda she grew,
While tears of regret blamed her folly and pride.
— “Oh! tell me, Cloud-King, if the giant said true,
“And wilt thou not save from his sabre thy bride?” — 120

— “Tis in vain, my fair lady, those hands that you wring,
“The bond is completed, the dye it is cast;
“For she who at night weds an element-king,
“Next morning must serve for his brother’s repast.” —

— “Yet save me, Cloud-King! by that love you profess’d 125
“Bear me back to the place whence you tore me away.” —
— “Fair lady! yon fiends, should I grant your request,
“Instead of to-morrow, would eat you to day.” —

— “Yet mark me, Cloud-King! spread in vain is your snare,
“For my bond must be void, and escap’d is your prey, 130
“The two first commands which I give you, howe’er
“The task should be wondrous, unless you obey.” —

— “Well say’st thou, Romilda; thy will, then, impart,
“But hope not to vanquish the King of the Storm,
“Or baffle his skill by invention or art; 135
“*Thou* can’st not command what *I* cannot perform?” —

Then clasping her hands, to the Virgin she pray’d,
While in curses the wicked ones vented their rage.
— “Now show me the truest of lovers!” — she said,
And lo! by her side stood the lovely young Page. 140

His mind was all wonder, her heart all alarms;

She sank on his breast as he sank at her knee.
— “The truest of lovers I fold in my arms,
“Than the *truest*, now show me a *truer!*” — said she.

Then loud yell'd the dæmons! the cloud-fashion'd halls 145
Dissolved, thunder bellow'd, and heavy rains beat;
Again stood the Fair midst her own castle walls,
And still knelt the lovely young page at her feet.

And soon for her own, and for Rosenhall's lord,
Did Romilda the *truest of lovers* declare, 150
Nor e'er on his bosom one sigh could afford,
That for him she had quitted the Monarch of Air.

Full long yonder chapel has shelter'd their urns,
Long ceased has the tear on their ashes to fall;
Yet still, when October the twentieth returns, 155
Roars the fiend round these turrets, and shakes Rosenhall.

Oh! Pilgrim, thy fears let these annals remove,
For day to the skies will tranquillity bring;
This storm but declares that resentment and love
Still gnaw the proud heart of the cruel Cloud-King. 160

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