

Robert Southey (1774-1843)

15 *Rudiger*

“Divers Princes and Noblemen being assembled in a beautiful and fair Palace, which was situate upon the river Rhine, they beheld a boat or small barge make toward the shore, drawn by a Swan in a silver chain, the one end fastened about her neck, the other to the vessel; and in it an unknown soldier, a man of a comely personage and graceful presence, who stept upon the shore; which done, the boat guided by the Swan left him, and floated down the river. This man fell afterward in league with a fair gentlewoman, married her, and by her had many children. After some years, the same Swan came with the same barge unto the same place; the soldier entering into it, was carried thence the way he came, left wife, children, and family, and was never seen amongst them after.”

“Now who can judge this to be other than one of those spirits that are named Incubi?” says Thomas Heywood. I have adopted his story, but not his solution, making the unknown soldier not an evil spirit, but one who had purchased prosperity from a malevolent being, by the promised sacrifice of his first-born child.

Bright on the mountain's heathy slope
The day's last splendours shine,
And rich with many a radiant hue,
Gleam gaily on the Rhine.

And many a one from Waldhurst's walls 5
Along the river stroll'd,
As ruffling o'er the pleasant stream
The evening gales came cold.

So as they stray'd a swan they saw 10
Sail stately up and strong,
And by a silver chain he drew
A little boat along.

Whose streamer to the gentle breeze 15
Long floating flutter'd light;
Beneath whose crimson canopy
There lay reclined a knight.

With arching crest and swelling breast
On sail'd the stately swan,
And lightly up the parting tide

The little boat came on. 20

And onward to the shore they drew,
Where having left the knight,
The little boat adown the stream
Fell soon beyond the sight.

Was never a knight in Waldhurst's walls 25
Could with this stranger vie,
Was never a youth at aught esteem'd
When Rudiger was by.

Was never a maid in Waldhurst's walls
Might match with Margaret; 30
Her cheek was fair, her eyes were dark,
Her silken locks like jet.

And many a rich and noble youth
Had sought to win the fair,
But never a rich and noble youth 35
Could rival Rudiger.

At every tilt and tourney he
Still bore away the prize;
For knightly feats superior still,
And knightly courtesies. 40

His gallant feats, his looks, his love,
Soon won the willing fair;
And soon did Margaret become
The wife of Rudiger.

Like morning dreams of happiness 45
Fast roll'd the months away;
For he was kind and she was kind,
And who so blest as they?

Yet Rudiger would sometimes sit
Absorb'd in silent thought, 50
And his dark downward eye would seem
With anxious meaning fraught:

But soon he raised his looks again,
And smiled his cares away,
And mid the hall of gaiety 55
Was none like him so gay.

And onward roll'd the waning months,
The hour appointed came,
And Margaret her Rudiger
Hail'd with a father's name. 60

But silently did Rudiger
The little infant see;
And darkly on the babe he gazed, —
A gloomy man was he.

And when to bless the little babe 65
The holy Father came,
To cleanse the stains of sin away
In Christ's redeeming name,

Then did the cheek of Rudiger
Assume a death-pale hue, 70
And on his clammy forehead stood
The cold convulsive dew;

And faltering in his speech he bade
The Priest the rites delay,
Till he could, to right health restored, 75
Enjoy the festive day.

When o'er the many-tinted sky
He saw the day decline,
He called upon his Margaret
To walk beside the Rhine; 80

“And we will take the little babe,
For soft the breeze that blows,
And the mild murmurs of the stream
Will lull him to repose.”

And so together forth they went, 85
The evening breeze was mild,

And Rudiger upon his arm
Pillow'd the little child.

Many gay companies that eve
Along the river roam, 90
But when the mist began to rise,
They all betook them home.

Yet Rudiger continued still
Along the banks to roam,
Nor aught could Margaret prevail 95
To turn his footsteps home.

“Oh turn thee, turn thee, Rudiger!
The rising mists behold,
The evening wind is damp and chill,
The little babe is cold!” 100

“Now hush thee, hush thee, Margaret,
The mists will do no harm,
And from the wind the little babe
Is shelter'd on my arm.”

“Oh turn thee, turn thee, Rudiger! 105
Why onward wilt thou roam?
The moon is up, the night is cold,
And we are far from home.”

He answer'd not; for now he saw
A Swan come sailing strong, 110
And by a silver chain he drew
A little boat along.

To shore they came, and to the boat
Fast leapt he with the child,
And in leapt Margaret . . . breathless now, 115
And pale with fear, and wild.

With arching crest and swelling breast
On sail'd the stately Swan,
And lightly down the rapid tide
The little boat went on. 120

The full orb'd moon, that beam'd around
Pale splendour through the night,
Cast through the crimson canopy
A dim discolour'd light.

And swiftly down the hurrying stream 125
In silence still they sail,
And the long streamer fluttering fast,
Flapp'd to the heavy gale.

And he was mute in sullen thought,
And she was mute with fear, 130
Nor sound but of the parting tide
Broke on the listening ear.

The little babe began to cry;
Then Margaret raised her head,
And with a quick and hollow voice 135
"Give me the child!" she said.

"Now hush thee, hush thee, Margaret,
Nor my poor heart distress!
I do but pay perforce the price
Of former happiness. 140

"And hush thee too, my little babe!
Thy cries so feeble cease;
Lie still, lie still; . . . a little while
And thou shalt be at peace."

So as he spake to land they drew, 145
And swift he stept on shore,
And him behind did Margaret
Close follow evermore.

It was a place all desolate,
Nor house nor tree was there; 150
But there a rocky mountain rose,
Barren, and bleak, and bare.

And at its base a cavern yawn'd,

No eye its depth might view,
For in the moon-beam shining round 155
That darkness darker grew.

Cold horror crept through Margaret's blood,
Her heart it paused with fear,
When Rudiger approach'd the cave,
And cried, "Lo, I am here!" 160

A deep sepulchral sound the cave
Return'd "Lo, I am here!"
And black from out the cavern gloom
Two giant arms appear.

And Rudiger approach'd, and held 165
The little infant nigh;
Then Margaret shriek'd, and gather'd then
New powers from agony.

And round the baby fast and close
Her trembling arms she folds, 170
And with a strong convulsive grasp
The little infant holds.

"Now help me, Jesus!" loud she cries,
And loud on God she calls;
Then from the grasp of Rudiger 175
The little infant falls.

The mother holds her precious babe;
But the black arms clasp'd him round,
And dragg'd the wretched Rudiger
Adown the dark profound. 180

1796

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