

Robert Southey (1774-1843)

7 *Jaspar*

Jaspar was poor, and vice and want
Had made his heart like stone;
And Jaspar look'd with envious eyes
On riches not his own.

On plunder bent abroad he went 5
Toward the close of day,
And loiter'd on the lonely road
Impatient for his prey.

No traveller came . . he loiter'd long,
And often look'd around, 10
And paused and listen'd eagerly
To catch some coming sound.

He sate him down beside the stream
That crost the lonely way,
So fair a scene might well have charm'd 15
All evil thoughts away:

He sate beneath a willow tree
Which cast a trembling shade;
The gentle river full in front
A little island made; 20

Where pleasantly the moon-beam shone
Upon the poplar trees,
Whose shadow on the stream below
Play'd slowly to the breeze.

He listen'd . . and he heard the wind 25
That waved the willow tree;
He heard the waters flow along,
And murmur quietly.

He listen'd for the traveller's tread,
The nightingale sung sweet; . . . 30
He started up, for now he heard
The sound of coming feet;

He started up and graspt a stake,
And waited for his prey;
There came a lonely traveller, 35
And Jaspar crost his way.

But Jaspar's threats and curses fail'd
The traveller to appal,
He would not lightly yield the purse
Which held his little all. 40

Awhile he struggled, but he strove
With Jaspar's strength in vain;
Beneath his blows he fell and groan'd,
And never spake again.

Jaspar raised up the murder'd man, 45
And plunged him in the flood,
And in the running water then
He cleansed his hands from blood.

The waters closed around the corpse,
And cleansed his hands from gore, 50
The willow waved, the stream flow'd on,
And murmured as before.

There was no human eye had seen
The blood the murderer spilt,
And Jaspar's conscience never felt 55
The avenging goad of guilt.

And soon the ruffian had consumed
The gold he gain'd so ill,
And years of secret guilt pass'd on,
And he was needy still. 60

One eve beside the alehouse fire

He sate as it befell,
When in there came a labouring man
Whom Jaspar knew full well.

He sate him down by Jaspar's side, 65
A melancholy man,
For spite of honest toil, the world
Went hard with Jonathan.

His toil a little earn'd, and he
With little was content; 70
But sickness on his wife had fallen,
And all was well-nigh spent.

Long with his wife and little ones
He shared the scanty meal,
And saw their looks of wretchedness, 75
And felt what wretches feel.

Their Landlord, a hard man, that day,
Had seized the little left,
And now the sufferer found himself
Of every thing bereft. 80

He leant his head upon his hand,
His elbow on his knee,
And so by Jaspar's side he sate,
And not a word said he.

"Nay, . . . why so downcast?" Jaspar cried, 85
"Come . . . cheer up, Jonathan!
Drink, neighbour, drink! 't will warm thy heart . . .
Come! come! take courage, man!"

He took the cup that Jaspar gave,
And down he drain'd it quick; 90
"I have a wife," said Jonathan,
"And she is deadly sick.

"She has no bed to lie upon,
I saw them take her bed . . .

And I have children . . would to God 95
That they and I were dead!

“Our Landlord he goes home to-night,
And he will sleep in peace . . .
I would that I were in my grave,
For there all troubles cease. 100

“In vain I pray’d him to forbear,
Though wealth enough has he!
God be to him as merciless
As he has been to me!”

When Jasper saw the poor man’s soul 105
On all his ills intent,
He plied him with the heartening cup,
And with him forth he went.

“This Landlord on his homeward road
’T were easy now to meet. 110
The road is lonesome, Jonathan! . .
And vengeance, man! is sweet.”

He listen’d to the tempter’s voice,
The thought it made him start; . .
His head was hot, and wretchedness 115
Had harden’d now his heart.

Along the lonely road they went
And waited for their prey,
They sate them down beside the stream
That crost the lonely way. 120

They sate them down beside the stream
And never a word they said,
They sate and listen’d silently
To hear the traveller’s tread.

The night was calm, the night was dark, 125
No star was in the sky,
The wind it waved the willow boughs,

The stream flow'd quietly.

The night was calm, the air was still,
Sweet sung the nightingale; 130
The soul of Jonathan was soothed,
His heart began to fail.

"T is weary waiting here," he cried,
"And now the hour is late, . . .
Methinks he will not come to-night, 135
No longer let us wait."

"Have patience, man!" the ruffian said,
"A little we may wait;
But longer shall his wife expect
Her husband at the gate." 140

Then Jonathan grew sick at heart;
"My conscience yet is clear!
Jaspar . . it is not yet too late . .
I will not linger here."

"How now!" cried Jaspar, "why, I thought 145
Thy conscience was asleep;
No more such qualms, the night is dark,
The river here is deep."

"What matters that," said Jonathan,
Whose blood began to freeze, 150
"When there is One above whose eye
The deeds of darkness sees?"

"We are safe enough," said Jaspar then,
"If that be all thy fear!
Nor eye above, nor eye below, 155
Can pierce the darkness here."

That instant as the murderer spake
There came a sudden light;
Strong as the mid-day sun it shone,
Though all around was night; 160

It hung upon the willow tree,
It hung upon the flood,
It gave to view the poplar isle,
And all the scene of blood.

The traveller who journies there, 165
He surely hath espied
A madman who has made his home
Upon the river's side.

His cheek is pale, his eye is wild,
His look bespeaks despair; 170
For Jaspar since that hour has made
His home unshelter'd there.

And fearful are his dreams at night,
And dread to him the day;
He thinks upon his untold crime, 175
And never dares to pray.

The summer suns, the winter storms,
O'er him unheeded roll,
For heavy is the weight of blood
Upon the maniac's soul. 180

1798

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