

Robert Southey (1774-1843)

8 *Lord William*

An imitation of this Ballad in French verse, by J. F. Chate-lain, was printed at Tournay, about 1820.

No eye beheld when William plunged
Young Edmund in the stream,
No human ear but William's heard
Young Edmund's drowning scream.

Submissive all the vassals own'd 5
The murderer for their Lord,
And he as rightful heir possess'd
The house of Erlingford.

The ancient house of Erlingford 10
Stood in a fair domain,
And Severn's ample waters near
Roll'd through the fertile plain.

And often the way-faring man 15
Would love to linger there,
Forgetful of his onward road,
To gaze on scenes so fair.

But never could Lord William dare 20
To gaze on Severn's stream;
In every wind that swept its waves
He heard young Edmund's scream.

In vain at midnight's silent hour
Sleep closed the murderer's eyes,
In every dream the murderer saw
Young Edmund's form arise.

In vain by restless conscience driven 25
Lord William left his home,
Far from the scenes that saw his guilt,

In pilgrimage to roam;

To other climes the pilgrim fled,
 But could not fly despair; 30
 He sought his home again, but peace
 Was still a stranger there.

Slow were the passing hours, yet swift
 The months appear'd to roll;
 And now the day return'd that shook 35
 With terror William's soul;

A day that William never felt
 Return without dismay,
 For well had conscience kalendar'd
 Young Edmund's dying day. 40

A fearful day was that; the rains
 Fell fast with tempest roar,
 And the swoln tide of Severn spread
 Far on the level shore.

In vain Lord William sought the feast, 45
 In vain he quaff'd the bowl,
 And strove with noisy mirth to drown
 The anguish of his soul.

The tempest, as its sudden swell
 In gusty howlings came, 50
 With cold and death-like feeling seem'd
 To thrill his shuddering frame.

Reluctant now, as night came on,
 His lonely couch he prest;
 And, wearied out, he sunk to sleep, . . 55
 To sleep . . but not to rest.

Beside that couch his brother's form,
 Lord Edmund seem'd to stand,
 Such and so pale as when in death
 He grasp'd his brother's hand; 60

Such and so pale his face as when
 With faint and faltering tongue,
To William's care, a dying charge,
 He left his orphan son.

"I bade thee with a father's love
 My orphan Edmund guard; . . .
Well, William, hast thou kept thy charge!
 Take now thy due reward." 65

He started up, each limb convulsed
 With agonizing fear; 70
He only heard the storm of night, . . .
 'T was music to his ear.

When lo! the voice of loud alarm
 His inmost soul appals;
"What ho! Lord William, rise in haste!
 The water saps thy walls!" 75

He rose in haste, beneath the walls
 He saw the flood appear;
It hemm'd him round, 't was midnight now,
 No human aid was near. 80

He heard a shout of joy, for now
 A boat approach'd the wall,
And eager to the welcome aid
 They crowd for safety all.

"My boat is small," the boatman cried, 85
 "T will bear but one away;
Come in, Lord William, and do ye
 In God's protection stay."

Strange feeling fill'd them at his voice,
 Even in that hour of woe, 90
That, save their Lord, there was not one
 Who wish'd with him to go.

But William leapt into the boat,
His terror was so sore;
"Thou shalt have half my gold," he cried, 95
"Haste . . . haste to yonder shore."

The boatman plied the oar, the boat
Went light along the stream;
Sudden Lord William heard a cry
Like Edmund's drowning scream. 100

The boatman paused, "Methought I heard
A child's distressful cry!"
"T was but the howling wind of night,"
Lord William made reply.

"Haste . . . haste . . . ply swift and strong the oar; 105
"Haste . . . haste across the stream!"
Again Lord William heard a cry
Like Edmund's drowning scream.

"I heard a child's distressful voice,"
The boatman cried again. 110
"Nay, hasten on . . . the night is dark . . .
And we should search in vain."

"O God! Lord William, dost thou know
How dreadful 't is to die?
And canst thou without pity hear 115
A child's expiring cry?"

"How horrible it is to sink
Beneath the closing stream,
To stretch the powerless arms in vain,
In vain for help to scream!" 120

The shriek again was heard: it came
More deep, more piercing loud;
That instant o'er the flood the moon
Shone through a broken cloud;

And near them they beheld a child; 125

Upon a crag he stood,
A little crag, and all around
Was spread the rising flood.

The boatman plied the oar, the boat
Approach'd his resting-place; 130
The moon-beam shone upon the child,
And show'd how pale his face.

"Now reach thine hand!" the boatman cried,
"Lord William, reach and save!"
The child stretch'd forth his little hands 135
To grasp the hand he gave.

Then William shriek'd; the hands he felt
Were cold and damp and dead!
He held young Edmund in his arms
A heavier weight than lead. 140

The boat sunk down, the murderer sunk
Beneath the avenging stream;
He rose, he shriek'd, no human ear
Heard William's drowning scream.

1798

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