

Matthew Gregory Lewis (1775-1818)

21 *Sir Guy, the Seeker*

Like those in the head of a man just dead  
Are his eyes, and his beard's like snow;  
But when here he came, his glance was a flame,  
And his locks seemed the plumes of the crow.

Since then are o'er forty summers and more; 5  
Yet he still near the castle remains,  
And pines for a sight of that lady bright,  
Who wears the wizard's chains.

Nor sun nor snow from the ruins to go  
Can force that aged wight; 10  
And still the pile, hall, chapel, and aisle,  
He searches day and night:

But find can he ne'er the winding stair,  
Which he past that beauty to see,  
Whom spells enthrall in the haunted hall, 15  
Where none but *once* may be.

That once regret will not let him forget! —  
'Twas night, and pelting showers  
Did patter and splash, when the lightning's flash  
Showed Dunstanburgh's grey towers. 20

Raised high on a mound that castle frowned  
In ruined pagean-trie;  
And where to the north did rocks jut forth,  
In towers hung o'er the sea.

Proud they stood, and darkened the flood; 25  
For the cliffs were so rugged and steep,  
Had a plummet been dropt from their summit, unstopped  
That plummet had reached the deep.

Nor flower there grew; nor tree e'er drew  
Its nurture from that ground, 30  
Save a lonely yew, whose branches threw  
Their baleful shade around.

Loud was the roar on that sounding shore;  
Yet still could the Knight discern,  
Louder than all, the swell and the fall 35  
Of the bellowing Rumble Churn!

With strange turmoil did it bubble and boil,  
And echo from place to place;  
So strange was its dash, and so high did it splash,  
That it washed the castle's base: 40

The spray, as it broke, appeared like smoke  
From a sea-volcano pouring;  
And still did it rumble, and grumble, and tumble,  
Rioting! raging! roaring!

Up the hill Sir Guy made his courser fly, 45  
And hoped, from the wind and the rain  
That he there should find some refuge kind,  
But he sought it long in vain:

For fast and hard each portal was barred,  
And against his efforts proof; 50  
Till at length he espied a porch spread wide  
The shelter of its roof.

— "Gramercy, St. George!" quoth glad Sir Guy,  
And sought the porch with speed;  
And fast to the yew, which near it grew, 55  
He bound his Barbara steed.

And safety found on that sheltered ground  
From the sky's increasing gloom,  
From his brow he took his casque, and he shook  
The rain off, that burthened its plume. 60

Then long he stood in mournful mood

With listless sullen air,  
Propped on his lance, and with indolent glance  
Watched the red lightning's glare;

And sadly listened to the shower, 65  
On the clattering roof that fell;  
And counted twice the lonely hour,  
Tolled by some distant bell.

But scarce that bell could midnight tell, 70  
When louder roared the thunder,  
And the bolt so red whizzed by his head,  
And burst the gates asunder.

And lo! Through the dark a glimmering spark  
He espied of lurid-blue; 75  
Onward it came, and a form all flame  
Soon struck his wondering view!

'Twas an ancient man of visage wan,  
Gigantic was his height;  
And his breast below there was seen to flow  
A beard of grizzled white: 80

And flames o'er-spread his hairless head,  
And down his beard they streamed;  
And in his hand a radiant wand  
Of burning iron gleamed.

Of darkest grain, with flowing train, 85  
A wondrous robe he wore,  
With many a charm to work man's harm  
In fire embroidered o'er:

And this robe was bound his waist around 90  
With a triple chain red-hot! —  
And still came nigher that phantom of fire,  
Till he reached the self same spot,

Where stood Sir Guy while his hair bristled high,  
And his breath he scarce could draw;

And he crost his breast, for I wot, he guest, 95  
    'Twas Belzebub's self that he saw!

And full on the Knight that ghastly wight  
    Fixt his green and glassy eyes;  
And he clanked his chain, and he howled his pain,  
    Ere his words were heard to rise. 100

— “Sir Knight, Sir Knight! if your heart be right,  
    And your nerves be firm and true,  
Sir Knight, Sir Knight! a Beauty bright  
    In durance waits for you.

“But Sir Knight, Sir Knight! if you ever knew fright, 105  
    That Dame forbear to view;  
Or Sir Knight, Sir Knight! that you feasted your sight,  
    While you live, you'll sorely rue! —

— “That mortal ne'er drew vital air,  
    Who witnessed fear in me: 110  
Come what come will, come good come ill,  
    Lead on! I'll follow thee!” —

And now they go both high and low,  
    Above and under ground,  
And in and out, and about and about, 115  
    And round, and round, and round!

The storm is hushed, and lets them hear  
    The howlet's boding screech,  
And now through many a passage drear,  
    A winding stair they reach. 120

With beckoning hand, which flamed like a brand,  
    Still on the Wizard led;  
And well could Sir Guy hear a sob and a sigh,  
    As up the first flight he sped!

While the second he past with footsteps fast, 125  
    He heard a death-bell toll!  
While he climbed the third, a whisper he heard,

— “God’s mercy on thy soul!” —

And now at the top the wanderers stop  
A brazen gate before 130  
Of massive make; and a living snake  
Was the bolt, which held the door.

In many a fold round the staple ’twas rolled;  
With venom its jaws ran o’er;  
And that juice of hell, where-ever it fell, 135  
To a cinder burned the floor.

When the monster beheld Sir Guy, he swelled  
With fury, and threw out his sting;  
Sparks flashed from each eye, and he reared him on high,  
And prepared on the warrior to spring; 140

But the wizard’s hand extended his wand,  
And the reptile drooped his crest,  
Yet strove to bite in impotent spite  
The ground, which gave him rest!

And now the gate is heard to grate, 145  
On its hinges turning slow;  
Till on either side the valves yawn wide,  
And in the wanderers go.

’Twas a spacious hall, whose sides were all  
With sable hangings dight; 150  
And whose echoing floor was diamanded o’er  
With marble black and white;

And of marble black as the raven’s back  
A hundred steeds stood round;  
And of marble white by each a knight 155  
Lay sleeping on the ground;

And a hundred shafts of laboured bronze  
The fretted roof upheld;  
And the ponderous gloom of that vaulted room  
A hundred lights dispelled; 160

And a dead man's arm by a magic charm  
Each glimmering taper bore,  
And where it was lopt, still dropt and dropt  
Thick gouts of clotted gore.

Where ends the room, doth a chrystal tomb 165  
Its towering front uphold;  
And one on each hand two skeletons stand,  
Which belonged to two giants of old:

That on the right holds a faulchion bright,  
That on the left a horn; 170  
And crowns of jet with jewels beset  
Their eyeless skulls adorn:

And both those grim colossal kings  
With fingers long and lean  
Point tow'rds the tomb, within whose womb 175  
A captive Dame is seen.

A form more fair than that prisoner's, ne'er  
Since the days of Eve was known;  
Every glance, that flew from her eyes of blue,  
Was worth an Emperor's throne, 180  
And one sweet kiss from her roseate lips  
Would have melted a bosom of stone.

Soon as Sir Guy had met her eye,  
Knelt low that captive maid;  
And her lips of love seemed fast to move, 185  
But he heard not what she said.

Then her hands did she join in suppliant sign,  
Her hands more white than snow:  
And like dew[s] that streak the rose's cheek,  
Her tears began to flow. 190

The warrior felt his stout heart melt,  
When he saw those fountains run;  
— "Oh! What can I do," he cried, "for you?"

What mortal can do, shall be done!" —

Then out and speaks the wizard; 195  
Hollow his accents fall!

— "Was never man, since the world began,  
Could burst that chrystal wall:

"For the hand, which raised its magic frame,  
Had oft clasped Satan's own; 200  
And the lid bears a name . . . . . Young Knight the same  
Is stamped on Satan's throne;

"At its maker's birth long trembled the earth;  
The sky dropt showers of gore;  
And she, who to light gave the wondrous wight, 205  
Had died seven years before;

"And at Satan's right hand while keeping his stand,  
The foulest Fiend of fire  
Shrunk back with awe, when the babe he saw,  
For it shocked its very sire! 210

But hark, Sir Knight! and riddle aright  
The riddle I'll riddle to thee:  
Thou'lt learn a way without delay  
To set yon damsel free.

"See'st yonder sword, with jewels rare 215  
Its dudgeon crusted o'er?  
See'st yonder horn of ivory fair?  
'Twas Merlin's horn of yore!

"That horn to sound, or sword to draw,  
Now, youth, your choice explain; 220  
But that which you choose, beware how you lose,  
For you never will find it again:

"And that once lost, all hopes are crost,  
Which now you fondly form;  
And that once gone, the sun ne'er shone 225  
A sadder wight to warm;

“But such keen woe, as never can know  
Oblivion’s balmy power.  
With fixed despair your soul will share,  
Till comes your dying hour. 230

“Your choice now make for yon Beauty’s sake;  
To burst her bonds endeavour;  
But that which you chuse, beware how you lose:  
Once lost, ’tis lost for ever!” —

In pensive mood awhile now stood 235  
Sir Guy, and gazed around;  
Now he turned his sight to the left, to the right,  
Now he fixed it on the ground.

Now the faulchion’s blaze attracted his gaze;  
On the hilt his fingers lay; 240  
But he heard fear cry, — “you’re wrong, Sir Guy!”  
And he snatched his hand away!

Now his steps he addrest towards the North and the West;  
Now he turned tow’rds the East and the South:  
Till with desperate thought the horn he caught, 245  
And prest it to his mouth.

Hark! the blast is a blast so strong and so shrill,  
That the vaults like thunder ring;  
And each marble horse stamps the floor with force,  
And from sleep the warriors spring! 250

And frightful stares each stoney eye,  
As now with ponderous tread  
They rush on Sir Guy, poising on high  
Their spears to strike him dead.

At this strange attack full swift sprang back, 255  
I wot the startled Knight!  
Away he threw the horn, and drew  
His faulchion keen and bright.

But as soon as the horn his grasp forsook,  
Was heard a cry of grief; 260  
It seemed the yell of a soul in hell  
Made desperate of relief!

And straight each light was extinguished quite,  
Save the flame so lurid blue  
On the Wizard's brow, (whose flashings now 265  
Assumed a bloody hue,)  
And those sparks of fire, which grief and ire  
From his glaring eye-balls drew!

And he stamped in rage, and he laughed in scorn,  
While in thundering tone he roar'd, 270  
"Now shame on the coward who sounded a horn,  
When he might have unsheathed a sword!"

He said, and from his mouth there came  
A vapour blue and dank,  
Whose poisonous breath seemed the kiss of death, 275  
For the Warrior senseless sank.

Morning breaks! again he wakes;  
Lo! in the porch he lies,  
And still in his heart he feels the dart,  
Which shot from the captive's eyes. 280

From the ground he springs! as if he had wings,  
The ruin he wanders o'er,  
And with prying look each cranny and nook  
His anxious eyes explore:

But find can he ne'er the winding stair, 285  
Which he climbed that dame to see,  
Whom spells enthrall in the haunted hall,  
Where none but once may be.

The earliest ray of dawning day  
Beholds his search begun; 290  
The evening star ascends her car,  
Nor yet his search is done:

Whence the neighbours all the night now call  
By "Guy, the Seeker's" name;  
For never he knows one hour[']s repose 295  
From his wish to find the Dame;

But still he seeks, and aye he seeks,  
And seeks, and seeks in vain;  
And still he repeats to all he meets,  
— "Could I find the sword *again!* [']— 300

Which words he follows with a groan,  
As if his heart would break;  
And oh! that groan, has so strange a tone,  
It makes all hearers quake!

The villagers round know well its sound, 305  
And when they hear it poured,  
— "Hark! hark!" they cry; "the Seeker Guy  
Groans for the Wizard's sword." —

Twice twenty springs on their fragrant wings  
For his wound have brought no balm; 310  
For still he's found . . . . But hark! what sound  
Disturbs the midnight calm?

Good peasants, tell, why rings that knell?  
— 'tis the Seeker-Guy's we toll:  
"His race is run; his search is done." — 315  
God's mercy on his soul!

1808

(From *Romantic Tales*. New York, 1809)