

The Dream of Eugene Aram

By Thomas Hood

'Twas in the prime of summer time,
An evening calm and cool,
And four-and-twenty happy boys
Came bounding out of school;
There were some that ran, and some that leapt
Like troutlets in a pool.

Away they sped with gamesome minds
And souls untouched by sin;
To a level mead they came, and there
They drove the wickets in:
Pleasantly shone the setting sun
Over the town of Lynn.

Like sportive deer they coursed about,
And shouted as they ran,
Turning to mirth all things of earth
As only boyhood can;
But the usher sat remote from all,
A melancholy man!

His hat was off, his vest apart,
To catch heaven's blessed breeze;
For a burning thought was in his brow,
And his bosom ill at ease,
So he leaned his head on his hands, and read
The book between his knees.

Leaf after leaf he turned it o'er,
Nor ever glanced aside—
For the peace of his soul he read that book
In the golden eventide;
Much study had made him very lean,
And pale, and leaden-eyed.

At last he shut the ponderous tome;
With a fast and fervent grasp
He strained the dusky covers close,
And fixed the brazen hasp:
"O God! could I so close my mind,
And clasp it with a clasp!"

Then leaping on his feet upright,
Some moody turns he took—
Now up the mead, then down the mead,
And past a shady nook;
And, lo! he saw a little boy
That pored upon a book.

“My gentle lad, what is ’t you read—
Romance or fairy fable?
Or is it some historic page,
O kings and crowns unstable?”
The young boy gave an upward glance—
“It is ‘The Death of Abel.’ ”

The usher took six hasty strides,
As smit with sudden pain—
Six hasty strides beyond the place,
Then slowly back again;
And down he sat besides the lad,
And talked with him of Cain

And, long since then, of bloody men,
Whose deeds tradition saves;
And lonely folk cut off unseen,
And hid in sudden graves;
And horrid stabs, in groves forlorn;
And murders done in caves;

And how the sprites of injured men
Shriek upward from the sod;
Ay, how the ghostly hand will point
To show the burial-clod;
And unknown facts of guilty acts
Are seen in dreams from God.

He told how murderers walked the earth
Beneath the curse of Cain—
With crimson clouds before their eyes,
And flames about their brain;
For blood has left upon their souls
Its everlasting stain!

“And well,” quoth he, “I know, for truth,
Their pangs must be extreme—
Woe, woe, unutterable woe!—
Who spill life’s sacred stream!
For why? Methought, last night I wrought
A murder, in a dream!

“One that had never done me wrong—
A feeble man and old;
I led him to a lonely field—
The moon shone clear and cold;
Now here, said I, this man shall die;
And I will have his gold!

“Two sudden blows with a ragged stick,
And one with a heavy stone,
One hurried gash with a hasty knife—
And then the deed was done:
There was nothing lying at my feet
But lifeless flesh and bone!

“Nothing but lifeless flesh and bone,
That could not do me ill;
And yet I feared him all the more
For lying there so still:
There was a manhood in his look
That murder could not kill!

“And lo! the universal air
Seemed lit with ghastly flame—
Ten thousand thousand dreadful eyes
Were looking down in blame;
I took the dead man by his hand,
And called upon his name.

“O God; it made me quake to see
Such sense within the slain;
But when I touched the lifeless clay,
The blood gushed out amain!
For every clot a burning spot
Was scorching in my brain!

“My head was like an ardent coal,
My heart as solid ice;
My wretched, wretched soul, I knew,
Was at the Devil’s price:
A dozen times I groaned—the dead
Had never groaned but twice.

“And now, from forth the frowning sky,
From the heaven’s topmost height,
I heard a voice—the awful voice
Of the blood-avenging sprite;
‘Thou guilty man! take up thy dead,
And hide it from my sight!’

“I took the dreary body up,
And cast it in a stream—
The sluggish water black as ink,
The depth was so extreme:
My gentle boy, remember, this
Is nothing but a dream!

“Down went the corpse with a hollow plunge,
And vanished in the pool;
Anon I cleansed my bloody hands,
And washed my forehead cool,
And sat among the urchins young,
That evening, in the school.

“O Heaven! to think of their white souls,
And mine so black and grim!
I could not share a childish prayer,
Nor join in evening hymn;
Like a devil of the pit I seemed,
’Mid holy cherubim!

“And peace went with them, one and all,
And each calm pillow spread;
But Guilt was my grim chamberlain,
That lighted me to bed,
And drew my midnight curtains round
With fingers bloody red!

“All night I lay in agony,
In anguish dark and deep;
My fevered eyes I dared not close,
But stared aghast at Sleep:
For sin had rendered unto her
The keys of hell to keep!

“All night I lay in agony,
From weary chime to chime;
With one besetting horrid hint
That racked me all the time—
A mighty yearning, like the first
Fierce impulse unto crime—

“One stern tyrannic thought, that made
All other thoughts its slave!
Stronger and stronger every pulse
Did that temptation crave—
Still urging me to go and see
The dead man in his grave!

“Heavily I rose up, as soon
As light was in the sky,
And sought the black accursed pool
With a wild, misgiving eye:
And I saw the dead in the river-bed,
For the faithless stream was dry.

“Merrily rose the lark, and shook
The dew-drop from its wing;
But I never marked its morning flight,
I never heard it sing:
For I was stooping once again
Under the horrid thing.

“With breathless speed, like a soul in chase,
I took him up and ran;
There was no time to dig a grave
Before the day began—
In a lonesome wood, with heaps of leaves,
I hid the murdered man!

“And all that day I read in school,
But my thought was elsewhere;
As soon as the midday task was done,
In secret I was there—
And a mighty wind had swept the leaves,
And still the corpse was bare!

“Then down I cast me on my face,
And first began to weep,
For I knew my secret then was one
That earth refused to keep—
On land or sea, though he should be
Ten thousand fathoms deep.

“So wills the fierce avenging sprite,
Till blood for blood atones!
Ay, though he’s buried in a cave,
And trodden down with stones,
And years have rotted off his flesh—
The world shall see his bones!

“O God! that horrid, horrid dream
Besets me now awake!
Again—again, with dizzy brain,
The human life I take;
And my red right hand grows raging hot,
Like Cranmer’s at the stake.

“And still no peace for the restless clay
Will wave or mold allow;
The horrid thing pursues my soul—
It stands before me now
The fearful boy looked up, and saw
Huge drops upon his brow.

That very night, while gentle sleep
The urchin eyelids kissed,
Two stern-faced men set out from Lynn,
Through the cold and heavy mist;
And Eugene Aram walked between,
With gyves upon his wrist.