

GOTHIC BOURNES

The House Upon The Heath

A WELSH TALE.

(1799)

TRANSCRIPTION BY

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TALES
OF
TERROR AND WONDER

COLLECTED BY
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THE HOUSE UPON THE HEATH *

A WELSH TALE.

Triste jacet salebris, evitandumque Bidental. -PERSIUS.

The midnight bell had tolled, and all was still;
Fast fell the snow on Radnor's cloud-capt hill;
The moon's unshadowed orb reflected round,
Played o'er the roofs, and glistened on the ground;
Up the rude rock, where Glendower's fort once stood,
Hung with horrors of its ancient wood,
Lo! Anxious bending o'er his jaded steed,
A breathless horseman hastes with eager speed.
Loud ring the stones beneath his courser's feet,
And echo dies along the distant street;
And with a deep and hollow-murmuring groan,
The sighing gale sad whispers through the town.

* This story is founded on a fact, which happened at the beginning of the last century, in the neighbourhood of a market-town in the west of England; the real narrative involved the horror of incest, which the author, for many reasons, rejected; indeed, as it is, he has found his principal difficulty in composing those parts where the description must be *intelligible* without being too *minute*.

[95] Hark! At yon humble door, where deep repose
Relieves from care the friend of woman's woes,
A sudden silence marks the stranger staid;
Then thus his hurried voice invokes her aid:
"Arise! For pity's sake, kind Leech,¹ arise!
In childbed's pangs a wretched female dies!
Oh, here is gold, and here's a courser fast,
Oh haste! Or life's swift-waning hour is past!"
Prompt at the call of woe the Leech arose,
Faint creaks the stair, the lowly doors unclose,
When, his dark shadow lengthening on the night,
A muffled stranger met her wond'ring sight;
Black was his gab, a mask his face concealed,
Hid mien, his gestures, dignity revealed.

Silent he stood, and more than human seemed,
As on his scowling eye the full-moon beamed.
Starting the Leech awaits his stern command;
Slow to the courser points his waving hand.
Dismayed she shrinks—her arm the stranger grasps,
Mounts the proud steed and firm her body clasps.
She shrieks! But lo! A dagger at her breast
Instant the struggling sounds of fear repressed.
Around her eyes his murky vest he throws,
And spurs impetuous o'er the scattered snows;
Loud ring the stones beneath his courser's feet,
And echo dies along the distant street.

Now, downward shooting to the rock's deep base,
Headlong descends the steed's unbridled pace,
His thundering hoofs the craggy passage spurn,
Behind, a fainter sound, the woods return;
[96] And now, unbroken by o'ershadowing trees,

¹ Midwives were often referred to as "Leech Women"; "leech" was also a generic term for "healer" (Green, 41)

Full o'er the wild moor bursts the eddying breeze.
Now swifter still, and swifter as they speed,
The vales afar, and lessening hills recede;
Up the rough steep the panting courser strains,
Or bounds resistless o'er the level plains.
Long through the lonely night's unvarying hours
The fields he crosses, and the forest scours;
No voice, no sound, his silent course arrests,
Save where the screech-owls hover round their nests;
Or to their shrouds, from pain and penance borne,
Returning spirits speak the rising morn;
Droop as they pass, and with prophetic groan,
Bewail impending sorrows not their own.

Keen blows the gale, a barren heath they cross,
Light flies the courser o'er the yielding moss;
Round the bleak wold he winds his circling way,
Snuffs the fresh breeze, and vents the joyful neigh;
Deep sink his steps amid the waste of snows,
And slackening speed proclaims the journey's close.
They stop –the stranger lifts his sable hood–
Fast by the moor a lonely mansion stood;
Cheerless it stood! A melancholy shade
Its mouldering front, and rifted walls arrayed;
Barred were the gates, the shattered casements closed,
And brooding horror on its site reposed;
No tree o'erhung the uncultivated ground,
No trace of labour, nor of life around.

Appalled the Leech surveys the solemn scene,
But watches chief her guide's mysterious mien.
[97] He with fierce stride, and stern expressive look,
Where shelving walls concealed a gloomy nook,
Drags her reluctant. –There with anxious eyes,
'Mid the rank grass an iron grate she spies;

The jarring hinges with harsh sound unclose,
A broken stair the feeble twilight shows;
Cautious the stranger climbs the rough ascent,
No lamp its hospitable guidance lent;
Speechless he leads through chambers dark and drear—
When a deep dying *groan* appals [sic] the ear!
Now with increasing haste he hurries on,
Where, through a rent, the sickly moonbeams shone.
The light directs—his trembling hands explore,
Sunk in the panelled [sic] wall, a secret door.
“Within this sad retreat,” he faltering said,
“A hapless female asks thy instant aid.”
Aloof he stands. The door with thundering sound
Enclosed the Leech; loud rings the roof around,
The tattered arras o’er the wainscot falls,
And lengthening echoes shake the dreary walls.

Now breathless silence reigns the mansion o’er,
Save where a faint step treads the distant floor—
Anon it pauses—ceased the short delay,
It slowly stalks with measured pace away;
Anon, affrighted [sic] by the whispering blast,
Starts, as in doubt, irregularly fast;
And now, as listening, or in thoughtful mood,
Lo! near the secret door the stranger stood.
His eye distracted rolls, his threatening brow,
Through bristled hair, he knits, and mutters low;
[98] Lifts his clenched hands, a groan of death within
Impatient hears, and frantic rushes in.

Round a vast room with blackest arras hung,
Its blood-red hues a flaming furnace flung;
Full in the midst it casts a deadly glare,
And heats with sulphurous [sic] clouds the tainted air;
O’er the arched ceiling plays the quivering light,

And brings by turns each dark recess to sight;
Here, the approaching stranger's figure shows,
And tints of horror o'er his visage throws;
Here, on a humble couch, by grief bowed down,
The lovely mansion of a spirit flown!
A female form with yet unaltered charms,
A child embracing in its senseless arms.
The mother's blessing, with life's latest breath
Arrested on her lips, still smiles in death;
The unconscious infant on her bosom lies,
Pleased, and forgetful of its plaintive cries.

Oh! Could a brother unsubdued behold
The lifeless parent thus her child enfold;
Shed, as he calmly gazed, no pitying tear,
With steady foot, with brow serene draw near?
No— when extended in death's cold embrace,
That beauteous form he sees, that heavenly face,
Affection rushes on his downcast eye,
And yielding nature owns the powerful tie.

“Condemned,” he cried, “untimely to the tomb,
Disgrace, my sister, antedates thy doom!
Yet had thy life, unseen, ignobly flown,
Screened from the world, to virtuous scorn unknown,
[99] Though indignation wept thy wounded fame,
Though tinged thy brother's glowing cheek with shame,
Concealed dishonour had relieved my pain,
And this stern breast returned thy love again.
Hid, in this lone retreat, from censure's eye,
I deemed the hour of shame would quickly fly;
But vain the hope! – what words my rage can tell,
E'en wrath still mingles with my last farewell;
Before my eye the guilty visions roll,
New thirst of vengeance fires my angry soul.

“But thou, lost wretch, ere this dark scene’s revealed,
Thy lips in endless silence shall be sealed!
The means of vengeance has thy aid supplied,
Go! And the punishment of guilt divide!”
His murderous dagger strikes the Leech’s breast,
Groaning she sinks to everlasting rest.

“And thee! Foul offspring of a stol’n embrace,
The hateful image of thy father’s face,
Accursed remembrance of my injured pride,
Of a false sister to my foe allied;
Thee, ling’ring pangs, protracted tortures wait,
The parents’ crimes their child shall expiate.
This arm, to avenge a sister’s virgin bed,
The guilty blood of her defiler shed;
Insulting union with my deadliest foe,
How ill atoned by *one* vindictive blow!
Yes, should in thee, a trace of shame remain,
My tarnished honour still betrays a stain;
Love, yet unchanged, forbade a sister’s death,
But hate, unceasing, claims thy forfeit breath.”

[100] Furious the infant from the couch he tears,
Fierce, to the flames, its writhing body bears;
Aloft his arm with sway resistless whirls,
Then headlong down its trembling burthen hurls.
As round the child the fiery circle creeps,
Lo! From the midst, untouched, unhurt, it leaps!
Nerved with unnatural strength, by heavenly aid,
Its suppliant hands upraised for mercy prayed.

Aghast the villain stands in dumb amaze—
The aspiring flames in troubled volumes blaze;
Speechless he paused.— Wild frenzy fires his soul,

And bursting passions in confusion roll:
The child again he grasps.— Beneath his hand
In pointed spires, the flames uprising stand,
Back they recoil, nor dare their victim meet,
The furnace blackens with extinguished heat!

Swift, from the yawning depth of smothered fire,
A sulphurous stench exhales, and clouds aspire;
All ghastly pale, a form terrific stood,
Its side deep gaping, and distained with blood;
Full on the stranger's face its hollow eye
Intent it hurls, and pours a piteous cry;
Entwines its icy arms his limbs around,
Yells a loud yell, and cleaves the rending ground.

As through the black abyss the murderer falls,
Faint streaks of glory gild the mouldering walls,
Till, lo! enveloped in a flood of light,
Descends a seraph form, confessed to sight.
[101] A radiant shroud around the spirit floats,
Above, a requiem, breathes aërial notes,
When with a mother's fond encircling arms,
Sweetly it soothes the dying child's alarms,
And, as triumphant swells the angelic strain,
The soul untainted wafts to heaven again.

Far as they soar, removed from mortal eyes,
Lo! angry lightnings fire the troubled skies;
The sun, obscured, draws back his rising ray,
And volleyed thunders usher in the day.
The storm is o'er— with still unruffled breath,
The breeze of morning fans the desert heath;
Struck by the bolt of Heaven, in heaps around,
A prostate ruin strews the blasted ground!
Here wandering shades the spell-bound circle tread,

And midnight magic wakes the restless dead.
The yawning earth pours forth a stream of blood,
And groans re-echo, where the mansion stood.
Pale at the sound, with oft reverted eyes,
Far, far aloof, the starting traveller flies.

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