

**“The Erl-King”<sup>1</sup> by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1782)**

Translated by Matthew G. Lewis (1796)

A **LITERARY GOTHIC** etext.

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Who is it that rides through the forest so fast,  
While night frowns around him, while shrill roars the blast?  
The father, who holds his young son in his arm,  
And close in his mantle has wrapp'd him up warm.

“Why trembles my darling? why shrinks he with fear?” 5  
“Oh, father! my father! the Erl-King is near!  
The Erl-King, with his crown and his beard long and white!  
“Oh! your eyes are deceived by the vapours of night.”

“Come, baby, sweet baby, with me go away!  
Fine clothes you shall wear, we will play a fine play; 10  
Fine flowers are growing, white, scarlet, and blue,  
On the banks of yon river, and all are for you.”

‘Oh! father! my father! and dost thou not hear,  
What words the Erl-King whispers low in mine ear?’  
“Now hush thee, my darling, thy terrors appease; 15  
Thou hear’st, ‘mid the branches, where murmurs the breeze.’

“Oh! baby, sweet baby, with me goaway!  
My daughter shall nurse you, so fair and so gay;  
My daughter, in purple and gold whois dress’d,  
Shall tend you, and kiss you, and singyou to rest! 20

“Oh! father! my father! and dost thou not see  
The Erl-King and his daughter arewaiting for me?”  
“Oh! shame thee, my darling, ‘tis fear makes thee blind:  
Thou see’st the dark willows which wave in the wind.”

“I love thee! I doat on thy face so divine! 25  
I must and will have thee, and force makes thee mine!”  
“My father! my father! oh! hold me now fast!  
He pulls me! he hurts, and will have me at last!”

The father he trembled, he doubled his speed;  
O’er hills and through forests he spurr’d his black steed; 30  
But when he arrived at his own castle door,  
Life throbb’d in the sweet baby’s bosom no more.

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<sup>1</sup> “Erl” is a German word not effectively translated by “elf,” which is sometimes used in translations of this poem. “Elf” typically connotes a diminutive and generally benign (or even downright helpful) being; the German word has darker connotations.