

"The Cross Roads" by Robert Southey

A Literary Gothic text.

1

There was an old man breaking stones
To mend the turnpike way;
He sate him down beside a brook,
And out his bread and cheese he took,
For now it was mid-day.

2

He leant his back against a post,
His feet the brook ran by;
And there were water-cresses growing,
And pleasant was the water's flowing,
For he was hot and dry.

3

A soldier with his knapsack on
Came travelling o'er the down;
The sun was strong and he was tired;
And he of the old man enquired
"How far to Bristol town?"

4

"Half an hour's walk for a young man,
By lanes and fields and stiles;
But you the foot-path do not know.
And if along the road you go
Why then 'tis three good miles."

5

The soldier took his knapsack off,
For he was hot and dry;
And out his bread and cheese he took,
And he sat down beside the brook
To dine in company.

6

"Old friend! in faith," the soldier says,
"I envy you almost;
My shoulders have been sorely prest,
And I should like to sit, and rest
My back against that post.

7

"In such a sweltering day as this
A knapsack is the devil;
And if on t' other side I sat,
It would not only spoil our chat,
But make me seem uncivil."

8

The old man laugh'd and moved... "I wish
It were a great-arm'd chair!
But this may help a man at need; . .
And yet it was a cursed deed
That ever brought it there.

9

"There's a poor girl lies buried here,
Beneath this very place,
The earth upon her corpse is prest,
This post was driven into her breast,
And a stone is on her face."

10

The soldier had but just leant back,
And now he half rose up.
"There's sure no harm in dining here,
My friend? and yet, to be sincere,
I should not like to sup."

11

"God rest her! she is still enough
Who sleeps beneath my feet!"
The old man cried. "No harm I trow,
She ever did herself, though now
She lies where four roads meet.

12

"I have past by about that hour
When men are not most brave;
It did not make my courage fail,
And I have heard the nightingale
Sing sweetly on her grave.

13

"I have past by about that hour
When ghosts their freedom have;
But here I saw no ghastly sight,
And quietly the glow-worm's light
Was shining on her grave.

14

"There's one who like a Christian lies
Beneath the church-tree's shade;
I'd rather go a long mile round
Than pass at evening through the ground
Wherein that man is laid.

15

"A decent burial that man had,
The bell was heard to toll,
When he was laid in holy ground,
But for all the wealth in Bristol town
I would not be with his soul!

16

"Did'st see a house below the hill
Which the winds and the rains destroy?
In that farm-house did that man dwell,
And I remember it full well
When I was a growing boy.

17

"But she was a poor parish girl
Who came up from the west:
From service hard she ran away,
And at that house in evil day
Was taken in to rest.

18

"A man of a bad name was he,
An evil life he led;
Passion made his dark face turn white,
And his grey eyes were large and light,
And in anger they grew red.

19

"The man was bad, the mother worse,
Bad fruit of evil stem;
'Twould make your hair to stand on end
If I should tell to you, my friend,
The things that were told of them!

20

"Did'st see an out-house standing by?
The walls alone remain;
It was a stable then, but now
Its mossy roof has fallen through
All rotted by the rain.

21

"This poor girl she had served with them
Some half-a-year or more,
When she was found hung up one day,
Stiff as a corpse and cold as clay,
Behind that stable door.

22

"It is a wild and lonesome place,
No hut or house is near;
Should one meet a murderer there alone,

'Twere vain to scream, and the dying groan
Would never reach mortal ear.

23

"And there were strange reports about;
But still the coroner found
That she by her own hand had died,
And should buried be by the way-side,
And not in Christian ground.

24

"This was the very place he chose,
Just where these four roads meet;
And I was one among the throng
That hither follow'd them along,
I shall never the sight forget!

25

"They carried her upon a board
In the clothes in which she died;
I saw the cap blown off her head,
Her face was of a dark dark red,
Her eyes were starting wide:

26

"I think they could not have been closed,
So widely did they strain.
O Lord, it was a ghastly sight,
And it often made me wake at night,
When I saw it in dreams again.

27

"They laid her where these four roads meet,
Here in this very place.
The earth upon her corpse was prest,
This post was driven into her breast,
And a stone is on her face."

Westbury, 1798.