Beneath this thorn when I was young,
This thorn that blooms so sweet,
We loved to stretch our lazy limbs
In summer’s noon-tide heat.

And hither too the old man came,
The maiden and her feer,
‘Then tell me, Sexton, tell me why
The toad has harbour here.

‘The Thorn is neither dry nor dead,
But still it blossoms sweet;
Then tell me why all round its roots
The dock and nettle meet.

‘Why here the hemlock, & c. [sic in MS.]

‘Why these three graves all side by side,
Beneath the flow’ry thorn,
Stretch out so green and dark a length,
By any foot unworn.’

There, there a ruthless mother lies
Beneath the flowery thorn;
And there a barren wife is laid,
And there a maid forlorn.

The barren wife and maid forlorn
Did love each other dear;
The ruthless mother wrought the woe,
And cost them many a tear.

Fair Ellen was of serious mind.
Her temper mild and even,
And Mary, graceful as the fir
That points the spire to heaven.

Young Edward he to Mary said,
'I would you were my bride,'
And she was scarlet as he spoke,
And turned her face to hide.

'You know my mother she is rich,
And you have little gear:
And go and if she say not Nay,
Then I will be your Fere.'

Young Edward to the mother went,
To him the mother said:
'In truth you are a comely man;
You shall my daughter wed.'

[In Mary's joy fair Eleanor
Did bear a sister's part:
For why, though not akin in blood,
They sisters were in heart.]

Small need to tell to any man
That ever shed a tear
What passed within the lover's heart
The happy day so near.

The mother, more than mothers use,
Rejoiced when they were by;
And all the 'course of wooing' passed
Beneath the mother's eye.

And here within the flowering thorn
How deep they drank of joy:
The mother fed upon the sight,
Nor . . . [sic in MS.]

[Part II — From MS.]
And now the wedding day was fix'd,
The wedding-ring was bought;
The wedding-cake with her own hand
The ruthless mother brought.

‘And when to-morrow’s sun shines forth
The maid shall be a bride’;
Thus Edward to the mother spake
While she sate by his side.

Alone they sate within the bower:
The mother’s colour fled,
For Mary’s foot was heard above —
She decked the bridal bed.

And when her foot was on the stairs
To meet her at the door,
With steady step the mother rose,
And silent left the bower.

She stood, her back against the door,
And when her child drew near —
‘Away! away!’ the mother cried,
‘Ye shall not enter here.

‘Would ye come here, ye maiden vile,
And rob me of my mate?’
And on her child the mother scowled
A deadly leer of hate.

Fast rooted to the spot, you guess,
The wretched maiden stood,
As pale as any ghost of night
That wanteth flesh and blood.

She did not groan, she did not fall,
She did not shed a tear,
Nor did she cry, ‘Oh! mother, why
May I not enter here?’

But wildly up the stairs she ran,
As if her sense was fled,
And then her trembling limbs she threw
Upon the bridal bed.

The mother she to Edward went
Where he sate in the bower,
And said, ‘That woman is not fit
To be your paramour.

‘She is my child — it makes my heart
With grief and trouble swell;
I rue the hour that gave her birth,
For never worse befel.

‘For she is fierce and she is proud,
And of an envious mind;
A wily hypocrite she is,
And giddy as the wind.

‘And if you go to church with her,
You'll rue the bitter smart:
For she will wrong your marriage-bed,
And she will break your heart.

‘Oh God, to think that I have shared
Her deadly sin so long:
She is my child, and therefore I
As mother held my tongue.

‘She is my child, I’ve risked for her
My living soul’s estate:
I cannot say my daily prayers,
The burthen is so great.

‘And she would scatter gold about
Until her back was bare;
And should you swing for lust of hers
In truth she’d little care.’

Then in a softer tone she said,
And took him by the hand:
‘Sweet Edward, for one kiss of your's
I'd give my house and land.

‘And if you'll go to church with me,
    And take me for your bride,
I'll make you heir of all I have —
    Nothing shall be denied.’

Then Edward started from his seat,
    And he laughed loud and long —
‘In truth, good mother, you are mad,
    Or drunk with liquor strong.’

To him no word the mother said,
    But on her knees she fell,
And fetched her breath while thrice your hand
    Might toll the passing-bell.

‘Thou daughter now above my head,
    Whom in my womb I bore,
May every drop of thy heart's blood
    Be curst for ever more.

‘And cursed be the hour when first
    I heard thee wawl and cry;
And in the Church-yard cursed be
    The grave where thou shalt lie!”

And Mary on the bridal-bed
    Her mother's curse had heard;
And while the cruel mother spake
    The bed beneath her stirred.

In wrath young Edward left the hall,
    And turning round he sees
The mother looking up to God
    And still upon her knees.

Young Edward he to Mary went
    When on the bed she lay:
‘Sweet love, this is a wicked house —
    Sweet love, we must away.’
He raised her from the bridal-bed,
   All pale and wan with fear;
‘No Dog,’ quoth he, ‘if he were mine,
   No Dog would kennel here.’

He led her from the bridal-bed;
   He led her from the stairs.
[Had sense been hers she had not dar’d
   To venture on her prayers.  MS. erased. ]

The mother still was in the bower,
   And with a greedy heart
She drank perdition on her knees,
   Which never may depart.

But when their steps were heard below
   On God she did not call;
She did forget the God of Heaven,
   For they were in the hall.

She started up — the servant maid
   Did see her when she rose;
And she has oft declared to me
   The blood within her froze.

As Edward led his bride away
   And hurried to the door,
The ruthless mother springing forth
   Stopped midway on the floor.

What did she mean?  What did she mean?
   For with a smile she cried:
‘Unblest ye shall not pass my door,
   The bride-groom and his bride.

‘Be blithe as lambs in April are,
   As flies when fruits are red;
May God forbid that thought of me
   Should haunt your marriage-bed.
‘And let the night be given to bliss,
The day be given to glee:  
I am a woman weak and old,  
Why turn a thought on me?  

‘What can an agéd mother do,  
And what have ye to dread?  
A curse is wind, it hath no shape  
‘To haunt your marriage-bed.’  

When they were gone and out of sight  
She rent her hoary hair,  
And foamed like any Dog of June  

When sultry sun-beams glare.  
*    *    *    *    *    *  

Now ask you why the barren wife,  
And why the maid forlorn,  
And why the ruthless mother lies  
Beneath the flowery thorn?  

Three times, three times this spade of mine,  
In spite of bolt or bar,  
Did from beneath the belfry come,  
When spirits wandering are.  

And when the mother’s soul to Hell  
By howling fiends was borne,  
This spade was seen to mark her grave  
Beneath the flowery thorn.  

And when the death-knock at the door  
Called home the maid forlorn,  

This spade was seen to mark her grave  
Beneath the flowery thorn.  

And ’tis a fearful, fearful tree;  
The ghosts that round it meet,
'Tis they that cut the rind at night,
Yet still it blossoms sweet.

*   *   *   *   *   *

[End of MS]

Part III
The grapes upon the Vicar's wall
Were ripe as ripe could be;
And yellow leaves in sun and wind
Were falling from the tree.

On the hedge-elms in the narrow lane
Still swung the spikes of corn:
Dear Lord! it seems but yesterday —
Young Edward’s marriage-morn.

Up through that wood behind the church,
There leads from Edward’s door
A mossy track, all over boughed,
For half a mile or more.

And from their house-door by that track
The bride and bridegroom went;

Sweet Mary, though she was not gay,
Seemed cheerful and content.

But when they to the church-yard came,
I've heard poor Mary say,
As soon as she stepped into the sun,
Her heart it died away.

And when the Vicar join’d their hands,
Her limbs did creep and freeze:
But when they prayed, she thought she saw
Her mother on her knees.

And o'er the church-path they returned —
I saw poor Mary’s back,
Just as she stepped beneath the boughs
Into the mossy track.
Her feet upon the mossy track
The married maiden set:
That moment — I have heard her say —
She wished she could forget.

The shade o'er-flushed her limbs with heat —
Then came a chill like death:

And when the merry bells rang out,
They seemed to stop her breath.

Beneath the foulest mother's curse
No child could ever thrive:
A mother is a mother still,
The holiest thing alive.

So five months passed: the mother still
Would never heal the strife;
But Edward was a loving man
And Mary a fond wife.

'My sister may not visit us,
My mother says her nay:'
O Edward! you are all to me,
I wish for your sake I could be
More lifesome and more gay.

'I'm dull and sad! indeed, indeed
I know I have no reason!
Perhaps I am not well in health,
And 'tis a gloomy season.'

'Twas a drizzly time — no ice, no snow!
And on the few fine days
She stirred not out, lest she might meet
Her mother in the ways.

But Ellen, spite of miry ways
And weather dark and dreary,
Trudged every day to Edward’s house,  
And made them all more cheery.

Oh! Ellen was a faithful friend,  
More dear than any sister!  
As cheerful too as singing lark;  
And she ne’er left them till ’twas dark,  
And then they always missed her.

And now Ash-Wednesday came — that day  
But few to church repair:  
For on that day you know we read  
The Commination prayer.

Our late old Vicar, a kind man,  
Once, Sir, he said to me,  
He wished that service was clean out  
Of our good Liturgy.

The mother walked into the church —  
To Ellen’s seat she went:  
Though Ellen always kept her church  
All church-days during Lent.

And gentle Ellen welcomed her  
With courteous looks and mild:  
Thought she, ‘What if her heart should melt,  
And all be reconciled!’

The day was scarcely like a day —  
The clouds were black outright:  
And many a night, with half a moon,  
I’ve seen the church more light.

The wind was wild: against the glass  
The rain did beat and bicker:  
The church-tower swinging over head,  
You scarce could hear the Vicar!
And then and there the mother knelt,
And audibly she cried —
‘Oh! may a clinging curse consume
This woman by my side!

‘O hear me, hear me, Lord in Heaven,
Although you take my life —
O curse this woman, at whose house
Young Edward woo’d his wife.

‘By night and day, in bed and bower,
O let her cursed be!!!’
So having prayed, steady and slow,
She rose up from her knee!
And left the church, nor e’er again
The church-door entered she.

I saw poor Ellen kneeling still,
So pale! I guessed not why:
When she stood up, there plainly was
A trouble in her eye.

And when the prayers were done, we all
Came round and asked her why:
Giddy she seemed, and sure, there was
A trouble in her eye.

But ere she from the church-door stepped
She smiled and told us why:
‘It was a wicked woman’s curse,’
Quoth she, ‘and what care I?’

She smiled, and smiled, and passed it off
Ere from the door she stept —
But all agree it would have been
Much better had she wept.

And if her heart was not at ease,
This was her constant cry —
‘It was a wicked woman’s curse —
God’s good, and what care I?”

There was a hurry in her looks,
    Her struggles she redoubled: 345
‘It was a wicked woman’s curse,
    And why should I be troubled?’

These tears will come — I dangled her
    When ’twas the merest fairy —
Good creature! and she hid it all:
    She told it not to Mary.

But Mary heard the tale: her arms
    Round Ellen’s neck she threw;
‘O Ellen, Ellen, she cursed me,
    And now she hath cursed you!’ 355

I saw young Edward by himself
    Stalk fast adown the lee,
He snatched a stick from every fence,
    A twig from every tree.

He snapped them still with hand or knee,
    And then away they flew!
As if with his uneasy limbs
    He knew not what to do!

You see, good sir! that single hill?
    His farm lies underneath:
He heard it there, he heard it all,
    And only gnashed his teeth.

Now Ellen was a darling love
    In all his joys and cares:
And Ellen’s name and Mary’s name
    Fast-linked they both together came,
When’er he said his prayers.

And in the moment of his prayers
He loved them both alike:
Yea, both sweet names with one sweet joy
Upon his heart did strike!

He reach'd his home, and by his looks
They saw his inward strife:
And they clung round him with their arms,
Both Ellen and his wife.

And Mary could not check her tears,
So on his breast she bowed:
Then frenzy melted into grief,
And Edward wept aloud.

Dear Ellen did not weep at all,
But closelier did she cling,
And turned her face and looked as if
She saw some frightful thing.

Part IV
To see a man tread o'er graves
I hold it no good mark;
'Tis wicked in the sun and moon,
And bad luck in the dark!

You see that grave? The Lord he gives,
The Lord, he takes away:
O Sir! the child of my old age
Lies there as cold as clay.

Except that grave, you scarce see one
That was not dug by me;
I'd rather dance upon 'em all
Than tread upon these three!

'Aye, Sexton! 'tis a touching tale.'
You, Sir! are but a lad:
This month I'm in my seventieth year,
And still it makes me sad.
And Mary’s sister told it me,
   For three good hours and more:
Though I had heard it, in the main,
   From Edward’s self, before.

Well! it passed off! the gentle Ellen
   Did well nigh dote on Mary;
And she went oftener than before,
   And Mary loved her more and more:
   She managed all the dairy.

To market she on market-days,
   To church on Sundays came;
All seemed the same: all seemed so, Sir!
   But all was not the same!

Had Ellen lost her mirth? Oh! no!
   But she was seldom cheerful:
And Edward looked as if he thought
   That Ellen’s mirth was fearful.

When by herself, she to herself
   Must sing some merry rhyme:
She could not now be glad for hours,
   Yet silent all the time.

And when she soothed her friend through all
   Her soothing words ’twas plain
She had a sore grief of her own,
   A haunting in her brain.

And oft she said, I’m not grown thin!
   And then her wrist she spanned:
And once when Mary was down-cast,
   She took her by the hand,
   And gazed upon her, and at first
   She gently pressed her hand:

Then harder, till her grasp at length
   Did gripe like a convulsion!
‘Alas!’ said she, ‘we ne’er can be
Made happy by compulsion!’

And once her both arms suddenly
Round Mary’s neck she flung,
And her heart panted, and she felt
The words upon her tongue.

She felt them coming, but no power
Had she the words to smother;
And with a kind of shriek she cried,
‘Oh Christ! you’re like your mother!’

So gentle Ellen now no more
Could make this sad house cheery;
And Mary’s melancholy ways
Drove Edward wild and weary.

Lingering he raised his latch at eve,
Though tired in heart and limb:
He loved no other place, and yet
Home was no home to him.

One evening he took up a book,
And nothing in it read:
Then flung it down, and groaning cried,
‘O! Heaven! that I were dead.’

Mary looked up into his face,
And nothing to him said;
She tried to smile, and on his arm
Mournfully leaned her head.

And he burst into tears, and fell
Upon his knees in prayer:
‘Her heart is broke! O God! my grief,
It is too great to bear!’

'Twas such a foggy time as makes
Old sextons, Sir! like me, 470
Rest on their spades to cough: the spring
Was late uncommonly.

And then the hot days, all at once,
They came, we knew not how:
You looked about for shade, when scarce
A leaf was on a bough. 475

It happened then (’twas in the bower,
A furlong up the wood:
Perhaps you know the place, and yet
I scarce know how you should.)

No path leads thither, ’tis not nigh
To any pasture-plot:
But clustered near the chattering brook,
Lone hollies marked the spot. 480

Those hollies of themselves a shape
As of an arbour took, 485
A close, round arbour; and it stands
Not three strides from a brook.

Within this arbour, which was still
With scarlet berries hung,
Were these three friends, one Sunday morn,
Just as the first bell rung. 490

’Tis sweet to hear a brook, ’tis sweet
To hear the Sabbath-bell,
’Tis sweet to hear them both at once,
Deep in a woody dell. 495

His limbs along the moss, his head
Upon a mossy heap,
With shut-up senses, Edward lay:
That brook e’en on a working day
Might chatter one to sleep. 500
And he had passed a restless night,
   And was not well in health;
The women sat down by his side,
   And talked as ’twere by stealth.

’Tis in the leaves, a little sun,
   No bigger than your ee:

The Sun peeps through the close thick leaves,
   See, dearest Ellen! see!

‘A tiny sun, and it has got
   A perfect glory too:
Ten thousand threads and hairs of light,
Make up a glory gay and bright
   Round that small orb, so blue.’

And then they argued of those rays,
   What colour they might be:
Says this, ‘They’re mostly green’; says that,
   ‘They’re amber-like to me.’

So they sat chatting, while bad thoughts
   Were troubling Edward’s rest;
But soon they heard his hard quick pants,
   And the thumping in his breast.

‘A mother too!’ these self-same words
   Did Edward mutter plain;
His face was drawn back on itself,
   With horror and huge pain.

Both groaned at once, for both knew well
   What thoughts were in his mind;
When he waked up, and stared like one
   That hath been just struck blind.

He sat upright; and ere the dream
   Had had time to depart,
‘O God, forgive me!’ (he exclaimed)
   ‘I have torn out her heart.’
Then Ellen shrieked, and forthwith burst
   Into ungentle laughter:
And Mary shivered, where she sat,
   And never she smiled after.

1809