

Mary Howitt (1799-1888)

5 *The Sin of Earl Walter*

PART I.

One summer day, in time of peace,
With a hundred men at his side,
Earl Walter rode to a holy house,
Where the gate stood open wide.

They raised a shout as they entered in, 5
They laughed and loudly sung,
Till the silent courts of the holy house
With the lawless revel rung.

They turned out the mules from the stables warm,
They laughed at many a jest, 10
As they fed their steeds with the provender
Which the holy priest had blessed.

They entered the hall with mailèd feet;
And a wild, discordant din
Came to the ear of the abbess old, 15
As those ruffians entered in.

By an evil chance, it happed, that morn,
That the aged priest had gone,
To meet the prior, at break of day,
In the town of Abingdon; 20
And the holy house had no defence,
And the nuns were all alone.

In pallid fear they hid themselves,
When they saw the earl was there;
For they knew he was a robber rude 25
Who any deed would dare,
Because the king, a thriftless man,
Had of the pillage share.

They hid themselves where'er they might,
In chests and chimneys too, 30
All but the abbess brave, who staid
To note what would ensue.

She heard them pile on the mighty logs,
And blow up a plenteous fire;
And she wished that she might see each one 35
In brimstone flame expire.

From the larder she heard them fetch each dish
Whereon she loved to dine,
And set on the table fowl and fish,
The venison and the chine; 40
And she wished the venom of toads and asps
Had savoured those meats so fine.

She heard them fetch up the good old wine,
She heard them pour it out,
And she heard how the cups of good old wine 45
Went circling round about.

She heard them pledge Earl Walter's name,
As louder mirth begun;
And she wished there were poison in the cup,
To poison them every one. 50

She heard Earl Walter bid his men
Go search where the wealth was stored,
And bring in the chalice and candlesticks
To grace that banquet board.

She heard them bring in the candlesticks, 55
And set them all in a row,
And set down the chalice of good red gold,
And the golden plates also;
And she prayed to the saints, that this sacrilege
Might hasten his overthrow. 60

She heard them pour unholy wine

Into the holy cup,
Then pledge the nuns of our Lady's shrine,
Before they drank it up;

And next she heard them name her name, 65
While drunken oaths they swear:
The angry woman had heard enough
Of their ill-doings there.

The abbess was withered, old, and lean, 70
Her hand was bony and thin,
And she waved it o'er her palsied head,
As the hall she entered in.

Earl Walter he was a bold young man, 75
As brave as man could be,
But he looked aghast a moment's space,
And so did his company.

"Thou hast done a deed, base earl," she said, 80
"And the king, thy master, too,
An evil deed which the judgment-day
Will sorely make ye rue."

Earl Walter anon regained his mood,
And took up a cup of wine,
Saying, "T' troth there were goodly things
In this old house of thine."

Saying, "'T were a sin, thou lady fair, 85
If the nuns be fair like thee,
That ye never before this day were seen
Of me and my company."

"Thou heathen dog!" said the abbess then, 90
"Thou shalt rue that ever we met;
For the lip that never spake curse in vain,
On thee a curse shall set."

Then she banned him here and banned him there,
Wherever his foot should stray;

And on him and all who sprung from him 95
An awful curse did lay.

And, lastly, said she: "I curse this man
In the field; at the bridal feast;
And death and dishonour shall be with him,
When he wots of them the least. 100

"All that he loves shall pass from him,
The young, the kind, the brave;
And old — the last of all his race —
Shall he go down to the grave."

PART II.

Earl Walter went to the battle-field, 105
But sickness laid him low;
And every knight had won him fame
Ere he had struck a blow.

Earl Walter wedded the fairest dame
In all the kingdom wide; 110
She bore him a son and daughters three,
And then she drooped and died.

His son was a fierce and desperate man,
And died a death of shame:
The sorest woe Earl Walter knew 115
Was the blot upon his name.

His daughters all were beautiful,
Their souls were pure and true,
Earl Walter wept when he looked on them,
And his sin did deeply rue. 120

The first, she wedded an aged lord,
A cankered soul had he,
Though rich in land, and rich in gold,
And noble of pedigree.

But hard was that young lady's fate, 125
Yet she told her grief to none,
But drooped and died of silent woe,
Ere the first twelve months were gone.

The second, she loved a gentleman
Below her own degree, 130
A brave man, though not a golden piece
Nor a rood of land had he.

"Thou shalt not wed thee to my shame,"
Said the true young knight and bold;
"I will cross the sea and gain me fame, 135
Shall serve instead of gold.

"I will bring me back a noble name,
Shall serve instead of land;
Then, from thy proud sire, will I claim
Thy fair and gentle hand." 140

He crossed the sea and he won him fame
By his good broad sword and lance;
He won him fame, but he lost his life
In the bloody fields of France.

Woe, woe to the gentle Isabel, 145
That she lived to see the day!
For the tidings came like the lightning's stroke,
And her senses went away.

For many weary months she lived
A mournful, moping thing; 150
Oft sitting 'neath the forest trees,
Or by some sylvan spring;

And singing of the wars of France,
And of the gallant men
Who, fighting for their ladies' sakes, 155
Would soon come back again.

And never did her sense return,

Until the day she died;
When her young sister Margaret
Sate singing by her side. 160

Then, gazing with her thoughtful eyes,
Her slumbering senses woke;
And she died in Christ, the purest heart
That ever true love broke.

Three years went on, and then a knight 165
Sought gentle Margaret's hand;
A knight renowned for gallant deeds,
And rich in gold and land.

He loved fair Margaret in the halls,
He loved her in the bower; 170
And their young ardent passion grew,
As grows the summer flower.

All gazed on them with joy and pride;
He brave as she was fair;
Again Earl Walter's soul was glad 175
In looking on that pair.

But, when the bridal morn was come,
Dim grew each look of pride;
And musing went the wedding guests,
And strove their thoughts to hide. 180

For some had dreamed a dismal dream,
Some seen a fearful sign,
Betokening that the bridal bread
Was baked for funeral wine.

'Twas in the cheerful month of May, 185
White was the flowering thorn,
And every sunny slope was green
With young blades of the corn,
When the feast was set, and the guests were met,
Upon the marriage morn. 190

“Sweet Margaret, haste!” the bridegroom said,
“In the hall thy maidens stand;
The priest is at the altar now,
And the book is in his hand.”

Fair Margaret yet in her chamber sate, 195
Before her mirror fair,
Alone, save for the aged nurse,
Who stood behind her chair.

And aye she combed her long, dark hair,
And laid the graceful curls, 200
And braided ’mong the drooping locks
White roses wreathed with pearls.

“Now, nurse,” said she, “come to my side,
Thou wont so glad to be;
Oh, weep not thus behind my chair; 205
My benison bide with thee!

“Tell me once more, before I leave
My pleasant home for aye,
The last words that my mother spake,
On death-bed when she lay. 210

“Come, talk about my sisters dear;
We all played at thy knee;
We all were dear, and thou wast kind
To all, but most to me.

“Thou hast been a mother unto me, 215
My blessing on thee bide!”
The old nurse kissed her lady’s cheek,
And wiped her tears aside.

But now, beside the chamber stair,
The bridegroom spake again: 220
“Come, dearest Margaret; why so long
Delay the wedding train?”

Fair Margaret, in her wedding dress,

As pure as the virgin snow,
Was mounted upon a milk-white steed, 225
That proudly moved, and slow.

And slowly she rode to Our Lady's church,
With an earl on either side;
And four and twenty maidens fair,
To wait upon the bride. 230

There were garlands hung from tree to tree,
And flowers strewn all the way;
And people came from the country round
To gaze on the rich array.

That day there was song and revelry, 235
Loud mirth and noble cheer;
The next, alas! there was wail and woe,
For the bride lay on her bier.

They laid her upon her bridal bed,
Like marble, deadly pale; 240
With the wedding ring upon her hand,
In her long white marriage veil.

The youthful bridegroom by her knelt,
In woe none might beguile;
And, after that sad morning broke, 245
Was never seen to smile.

For her soul's peace he gave his lands,
His goods to the poor he gave;
And died a knight of the Holy Cross,
Beside the Jordan's wave. 250

Earl Walter passed both out and in,
With a firm unfaltering tread;
But his brow grew wan, his cheek grew thin,
And his eye as heavy as lead.

He met the guests, he sate at meat; 255
But his was a joyless hall:

The hawk was never off the perch,
The steed from out the stall.

His was a cureless grief of soul;
He slowly wore away, 260
Like an oak upon the rifted rock,
Long struggling with decay.

At length, when he was worn and bowed,
With grief and years grown old,
It chanced that his tale unto the king 265
By a noble knight was told.

The king he sent that noble knight
Unto the pope at Rome,
To humbly crave his holiness
To abrogate his doom. 270

The pope gave absolution good:
And this to him was read,
As in his ninetieth year he lay
Upon his dying bed.

Earl Walter raised his aged eyes, 275
And gave great praise to Heaven:
And by this token all men knew
That his sin had been forgiven.

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