

S. T. Coleridge (1772-1834)

4 *The Three Graves*

A Fragment of A Sexton's Tale

[Part I — From MS.]

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, 5
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; 10
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, 15
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, 20
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. 25

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, 30
‘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; 35
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; 40
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.] 45

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, 50
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: 55
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. 60

‘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. 65

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 70
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 — 75
‘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 80
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. 85

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, 90
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, 95
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, 100
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. 105

'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 110
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: 115
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 120
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. 125

‘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, 130
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, 135
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 140
Be curst for ever more.

‘And curséd be the hour when first
I heard thee wawl and cry;
And in the Church-yard curséd be
The grave where thou shalt lie!’ 145

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, 150
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: 155
‘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.' 160

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 165
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, 170
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. 175

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? 180
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; 185
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, 190
Why turn a thought on me?

‘What can an aged mother do,
And what have ye to dread?
A curse is wind, it hath no shape
To haunt your marriage-bed.’ 195

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, 200
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, 205
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 210
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. 215

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.

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[*End of MS.*]

Part III

The grapes upon the Vicar's wall 220
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: 225
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, 230
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. 235

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, 240
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, 245
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 — 250
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. 255

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 260
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: 265
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! 270
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 275
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. 280

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. 285

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, 290
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: 295
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!' 300

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. 305

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, 310
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 — 315
O curse this woman, at whose house
Young Edward woo'd his wife.

'By night and day, in bed and bower,
O let her curséd be!!!'
So having prayed, steady and slow, 320
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: 325
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 330
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?' 335

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, 340
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 dandled her
When 'twas the merest fairy —
Good creature! and she hid it all: 350
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, 360
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: 365
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 370
Fast-linked they both together came,
Whene'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 375
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. 380

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, 385
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 over graves
I hold it no good mark; 390
'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 395
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! 400

'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, 405
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 410
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; 415
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 420
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. 425

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! 430
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; 435

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 440
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; 445
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 450
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. 455

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, 460
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: 465
‘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,
Rest on their spades to cough; the spring
Was late uncommonly. 470

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 480
To any pasture-plot;
But clustered near the chattering brook,
Lone hollies marked the spot.

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, 490
Just as the first bell rung.

'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.

'The Sun peeps through the close thick leaves, 505
See, dearest Ellen! see!
'Tis in the leaves, a little sun,
No bigger than your ee;

'A tiny sun, and it has got
A perfect glory too; 510
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; 515
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, 520
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. 525

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 530
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;

535

And Mary shivered, where she sat,

 And never she smiled after.

1809

(From *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. Ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge. Oxford, 1912)