

Mary Howitt (1799-1888)

4 *The Ballad of Richard Burnell*

PART I.

From his bed rose Richard Burnell  
At the early dawn of day,  
Ere the bells of London city  
Welcomed in the morn of May.

Early on that bright May morning 5  
Rose the young man from his bed,  
He, the happiest man in London,  
And thus to himself he said: —

“When the men and maids are dancing,  
And the folk are mad with glee, 10  
In the Temple’s shady gardens  
Let me walk and talk with thee!”

“Thus my Alice spake last even,  
Thus with trembling lips she spake,  
And those blissful words have kept me 15  
Through the live-long night awake.

“Tis a joy beyond expression,  
When we first, in truth, perceive  
That the love we long have cherished  
Will not our fond hearts deceive! 20

“Never dared I to confess it —  
Deeds of homage spoke instead;  
True love is its own revealer,  
She must know it! oft I said.

“All my words, and all my actions, 25  
But one meaning could impart;  
Love can love’s least sign interpret,  
And she reads my inmost heart.

“And her good old merchant father, —  
 Father he has been to me — 30  
 Saw the love grow up between us,  
 Saw — and was well pleased to see.

“Seven years I truly served him,  
 Now my time is at an end;  
 Master is he now no longer: 35  
 Father will be — has been friend.

“I was left betimes an orphan,  
 Heir unto great merchant-wealth,  
 But the iron rule of kinsfolk  
 Dimmed my youth, and sapped my health. 40

“Death had been my early portion  
 Had not my good guardian come;  
 He, the father of my Alice,  
 And conveyed me to his home.

“Here began a new existence, — 45  
 Then how new the love of friends!  
 And for all the child’s afflictions  
 Each one strove to make amends.

“Late my spring-time came, but quickly  
 Youth’s rejoicing currents run, 50  
 And my inner life unfolded  
 Like a flower before the sun.

“Hopes, and aims, and aspirations  
 Grew within the growing boy;  
 Life had new interpretation; 55  
 Manhood brought increase of joy.

“In and over all was Alice,  
 Life-infusing, like the spring;  
 My soul’s soul! even joy without her  
 Was a poor and barren thing! 60

“And she spoke last eve at parting,

‘When the folk are mad with glee,  
In the Temple’s pleasant gardens  
Let me walk and talk with thee!’

“As she spoke, her sweet voice trembled, — 65  
Love such tender tones can teach!  
And those words have kept me waking,  
And the manner of her speech!

“For such manner has deep meaning,”  
Said young Burnell, blithe and gay; — 70  
And the bells of London city  
Pealed a welcome to the May.

PART II.

Whilst the folk were mad with pleasure,  
’Neath the elm-tree’s vernal shade,  
In the Temple’s quiet gardens 75  
Walked the young man and the maid.

On his arm her hand was resting,  
And her eyes were on the ground;  
She was speaking, he was silent;  
Not a word his tongue had found. 80

“Friend beloved,” she thus addressed him,  
“I have faith and hope in thee!  
Thou canst do what no one else can —  
Thou canst be a friend to me!

“Richard, we have lived together 85  
All these years of happy youth;  
Have, as sister and as brother,  
Lived in confidence and truth.

“Thou from me hast hid no feelings,  
Thy whole heart to me is known; 90  
I — I only have kept from thee  
One dear, little thought alone.

“Have I wronged thee in so doing?  
Then forgive me! But give ear;  
’Tis to bare my heart before thee 95  
That I now am with thee here.

“Well thou know’st my father loves thee;  
’Tis his wish that we should wed, —  
I shame not to speak thus frankly —  
Wish, or *will* more justly said. 100

“But this cannot be, my brother,  
Cannot be — ’twere nature’s wrong! —  
I have said so to my father;  
But thou know’st his will is strong.”

Not a word spake Richard Burnell; 105  
Not a word came to his lips;  
Like one tranced he stood and listened;  
Life to him was in eclipse.

In a lower tone she murmured,  
Murmured like a brooding dove, 110  
“Know thou, — Leonard Woodvil loves me, —  
And — that he has won my love.”

— Came a pause. The words she uttered  
Seemed to turn him into stone;  
Pale he stood and mute beside her, 115  
And with blushes she went on.

“This is known unto my father; —  
Leonard is well known to thee,  
Thou hast praised him, praised him often —  
Oh, how dear such praise to me! 120

“But my father, stern and steadfast,  
Will not list to Leonard’s prayer; —  
And ’tis only thou canst move him, —  
Only thou so much canst dare.

“Tell my father firmly, freely, 125  
That we only love each other —

'Tis the truth, thou know'st it, Richard, —  
As a sister and a brother!

“Tell my father, if we wedded,  
Thou and I, it would be guilt! 130  
Thus it is that thou canst aid us —  
And thou wilt — I know thou wilt!

“Yes, 'tis thus that thou must aid us,  
And thou wilt! I say no more! —  
We've been friends, but this will make us 135  
Better friends than heretofore!”

Yet some moments he was silent;  
His good heart was well-nigh broke;  
She was blinded to his anguish; —  
And “I will!” at length he spoke. 140

### PART III.

They were wedded. 'Twas a wedding  
That had far and high renown,  
And from morning until even  
Rang the bells of London town.

Time went on: the good old merchant 145  
Wore a cloud upon his brow:  
“Wherefore thus?” his friends addressed him,  
“No man should be blithe as thou!”

“In my old age I am lonely,”  
Said the merchant, “she is gone; — 150  
And young Burnell, he I nurtured,  
He who was to me a son;

“He has left me! — I'm deserted —  
E'en an old man feels such woe!  
'Twas but natural *she* should marry, 155  
But *he* should not have served me so.

“'Twas not that which I expected!

He was very dear to me, —  
 And I thought no London merchant  
 Would have stood as high as he! 160

“He grew very strange and moody,  
 What the cause I cannot say; —  
 And he left me when my daughter,  
 My poor Alice, went away!

“I had been a father to him, 165  
 He to me was like a son:  
 Young folks should have more reflection, —  
 ’Twas what *I* could not have done!

“True, he writes me duteous letters;  
 Calls me father, tells me all 170  
 That in foreign parts is doing, —  
 But young people write so small,

“That I’m often forced to leave them,  
 Pleasant letters though they be,  
 Until Alice comes from Richmond, 175  
 Then she reads them out to me.

“Alice fain would have me with her;  
 Leonard well deserves my praise —  
 But he’s not my Richard Burnell,  
 Knows not my old wants and ways! 180

“No, my friends, I’ll not deny it,  
 It has cut me to the heart,  
 That the son of my adoption  
 Thus has played a cruel part!”

So the merchant mourned and murmured; 185  
 And all foreign charms unheeding,  
 Dwelt the lonely Richard Burnell,  
 With his bruised heart still bleeding.

Time went on, and in the spring-tide,  
    When the birds began to build, 190  
And the heart of all creation  
    With a vast delight was filled,

Came a letter unto Alice —  
    Then a babe lay on her breast —  
'Twas the first which Richard Burnell 195  
    Unto Alice had addressed.

Few the words which it contained,  
    But each word was like a sigh;  
"I am sick and very lonely; —  
    Let me see thee ere I die! 200

"In this time of tribulation  
    Thou wilt be a friend to me:  
Therefore in the Temple Gardens  
    Let me once more speak with thee."

Once more in the Temple Gardens 205  
    Sat they 'neath the bright blue sky,  
With the leafage thick around them,  
    And the river rolling by.

Pale and weak was Richard Burnell,  
    Gone all merely outward grace, 210  
Yet the stamp of meek endurance  
    Gave sad beauty to his face.

Silent by his side sat Alice,  
    Now no word her tongue could speak,  
All her soul was steeped in pity, 215  
    And large tears were on her cheek.

Burnell spake: "Within these Gardens  
    Thy commands on me were laid,  
And, although my heart was breaking,  
    Yet were those commands obeyed. 220

"What I suffered no one knoweth,  
    Nor shall know, I proudly said,

And, when grew the grief too mighty,  
Then — there was no help — I fled.

“Yes, I loved thee, long had loved thee, 225  
And alone the God above,  
He, who at that time sustained me,  
Knows the measure of my love!

“Do not let these words displease thee;  
Life’s sore battle soon will cease; 230  
I have fallen amid the conflict,  
But within my soul is peace.

“It has been a fiery trial,  
But the fiercest pang is past;  
Once more I am come amongst you — 235  
Oh! stand by me at the last!

“Leonard will at times come to me,  
And thy father. I will try  
To be cheerful in his presence,  
As I was in days gone by. 240

“Bitter has it been to leave him;  
But in all my heart’s distress,  
The great anguish which consumed me  
Seemed to swallow up the less.

“Let me go! my soul is wearied, 245  
No fond heart of me has need,  
Life has no more duties for me; —  
I am but a broken reed!

“Let me go, ere courage faileth,  
Gazing, gazing thus on thee! — 250  
But in life’s last awful moment,  
Alice! thou wilt stand by me!”

From her seat rose Alice Woodvil,  
And in steadfast tones began,  
Like a strong consoling angel, 255  
To address the dying man.



“Not in death alone, my brother,  
    Would I aid thee in the strife;  
I would fain be thy sustainer  
    In the fiercer fight of life. 260

“With the help of God, thy spirit  
    Shall not in this conflict yield;  
Prayer, the key which opens heaven,  
    Is the Christian’s sword and shield.

“God will aid thee! We will hold thee 265  
    By our love! — thou shalt not go! —  
And from out thy wounded spirit,  
    We will pluck the thorns of woe.

“Say not life has no more duties  
    Which can claim thee! Where are then 270  
All the sinners; the neglected;  
    All the weeping sons of men?

“Ah, my friend, hast thou forgotten  
    All our dreams of early days?  
How we would instruct poor children, 275  
    How we would the fallen raise!

“God has not to me permitted  
    Such great work of human love;  
He has marked me out a lower  
    Path of duty where to move. 280

“But to thee, His chosen servant,  
    Is this higher lot allowed;  
He has brought thee through deep waters,  
    Through the furnace, through the cloud;

“He has made of thee a mourner, 285  
    Like the Christ, that thou may’st rise  
To a purer height of glory,  
    Through the pangs of sacrifice!

“Tis alone of His appointing,

That thy feet on thorns have trod; 290  
Suffering, woe, renunciation,  
Only bring us nearer God.

“And when nearest Him, then largest  
The enfranchised heart’s embrace: —  
It was Christ, the Man rejected, 295  
Who redeemed the human race.

“Say not, then, thou hast no duties: —  
Friendless outcasts on thee call,  
And the sick and the afflicted,  
And the children, more than all. 300

“Oh, my friend, rise up, and follow  
Where the hand of God shall lead;  
He has brought thee through affliction,  
But to fit thee for His need!”

Thus she spoke; and as from midnight 305  
Springs the opal-tinted morn,  
So, within his dreary spirit,  
A new day of life was born.

Strength sublime may rise from weakness,  
Groans be turned to songs of praise, 310  
Nor are life’s divinest labours  
Only told by length of days.

Young he died: but deeds of mercy  
Beautified his life’s short span,  
And he left his worldly substance 315  
To complete what he began.

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