

Mary Howitt (1799-1888)

6 *Thomas Harlowe*

All amid the summer roses  
    In his garden, with his wife,  
Sate the cheerful Thomas Harlowe,  
    Glancing backward through his life.

Woodlarks in the trees were singing, 5  
    And the breezes, low and sweet,  
Wafted down laburnum blossoms,  
    Like an offering, at his feet.

There he sate, good Thomas Harlowe,  
    Living o'er the past in thought; 10  
And old griefs, like mountain summits,  
    Golden hues of sunset caught.

Thus he spake: "The truest poet  
    Is the one whose touch reveals  
Those deep springs of human feeling 15  
    Which the conscious heart conceals.

"Human nature's living fountains,  
    Ever-flowing, round us lie,  
Yet the poets seek their waters  
    As from cisterns old and dry. 20

"Hence they seldom write, my Ellen,  
    Aught so full of natural woe,  
As that song which thy good uncle  
    Made so many years ago.

"My sweet wife, my life's companion, 25  
    Canst thou not recall the time  
When we sate beneath the lilacs,

Listening to that simple rhyme?

“I was then just five-and-twenty,  
Young in years, but old in sooth; 30  
Hopeless love had dimmed my manhood,  
Care had saddened all my youth.

“But that touching, simple ballad,  
Which thy uncle writ and read,  
Like the words of God, creative, 35  
Gave a life unto the dead.

“And thenceforth have been so blissful  
All our days, so calm, so bright,  
That it seems like joy to linger  
O'er my young life's early blight. 40

“Easy was my father's temper,  
And his being passed along  
Like a streamlet 'neath the willows,  
Lapsing to the linnet's song.

“With the scholar's tastes and feelings, 45  
He had all be asked of life  
In his books and in his garden,  
In his child, and gentle wife.

“He was for the world unfitted;  
For its idols knew no love; 50  
And, without the serpent's wisdom,  
Was as guileless as the dove.

“Such men are the schemer's victims.  
Trusting to a faithless guide,  
He was lured on to his ruin, 55  
And a hopeless bankrupt died.

“Short had been my father's sorrow;

He had not the strength to face  
What was worse than altered fortune,  
Or than faithless friends — disgrace. 60

“He had not the strength to combat  
Through the adverse ranks of life;  
In his prime he died, heart-broken,  
Leaving unto us the strife.

“I was then a slender stripling, 65  
Full of life, and hope, and joy;  
But, at once, the cares of manhood  
Crashed the spirit of the boy.

“Woman oft than man is stronger 70  
Where are inner foes to quell,  
And my mother rose triumphant,  
When my father, vanquished, fell.

“All we had we gave up freely,  
That on him might rest less blame;  
And, without a friend in London, 75  
In the winter, hither came.

“To the world-commanding London,  
Came as atoms, nothing worth;  
’Mid the strift of myriad workers,  
Our small efforts to put forth. 80

“Oh, the hero-strength of woman,  
When her strong affection pleads,  
When she tasks her to endurance  
In the path where duty leads!

“Fair my mother was and gentle, 85  
Reared ’mid wealth, of good descent;  
One who, till our time of trial,  
Ne’er had known what hardship meant.

“Now she toiled. Her skillful needle  
Many a wondrous fabric wrought, 90  
Which the loom could never equal,  
And which wealthy ladies bought.

“Meantime I, among the merchants  
Found employment; saw them write,  
Brooding over red-lined ledgers, 95  
Ever gain, from morn till night.

“Or amid the crowded shipping  
Of the great world’s busy hive,  
Saw the wealth of both the Indies,  
For their wealthier marts, arrive. 100

“So we lived without repining,  
Toiling, toiling, week by week;  
But I saw her silent sufferings  
By the pallor of her cheek.

“Love like mine was eagle sighted; 105  
Vainly did she strive to keep  
All her sufferings from my knowledge,  
And to lull my fears to sleep.

“Well I knew her days were numbered;  
And, as she approached her end, 110  
Stronger grew the love between us,  
Doubly was she parent — friend!

“God permitted that her spirit  
Should through stormy floods be led,  
That she might converse with angels 115  
While she toiled for daily bread.

“Wondrous oft were her communings,  
As of one to life new-born,

When I watched beside her pillow,  
'Twixt the midnight and the morn. 120

"Still she lay through one long Sabbath,  
But as evening closed she woke,  
And like one amazed with sorrow,  
Thus with pleading voice she spoke:

"God will give whate'er is needful; 125  
Will sustain from day to day;  
This I know — yet worldly fetters  
Keep me still a thrall to clay!

"Oh, my son, from these world-shackles  
Only thou canst set me free!" 130  
'Speak thy wish,' said I, 'my mother,  
Lay thy lov'd commands on me!'

"As if strength were given unto her  
For some purpose high, she spake:  
'I have toiled, and — like a miser — 135  
Hoarded, hoarded for thy sake.

"Not for sordid purpose hoarded,  
But to free from outward blame,  
From the tarnish of dishonor,  
Thy dead father's sacred name, 140

"And I lay on thee this duty —  
'Tis my last request, my son, —  
Lay on thee this solemn duty  
Which I die and leave undone!

"Promise, that thy dearest wishes, 145  
Pleasure, profit, shall be naught,  
Until, to the utmost farthing,  
Thou this purpose shalt have wrought!

“And I promised. All my being  
    Freely, firmly answered, yea! 150  
Thus absolved, her angel-spirit,  
    Breathing blessings, passed away.

“Once more in the noisy, jostling  
    Human crowd; I seemed to stand,  
Like to him who goes to battle, 155  
    With his life within his hand.

“All things wore a different aspect;  
    I was now mine own no more:  
Pleasure, wealth, the smile of woman  
    All a different meaning bore. 160

“Thus I toiled — though young, not youthful,  
    Ever mingling in the crowd,  
Yet apart; my life, my labor,  
    To a solemn purpose vowed.

“Yet even duty had its pleasure, 165  
    And I proudly kept apart;  
Lord of all my weaker feelings;  
    Monarch of my subject heart.

“Foolish boast! My pride of purpose  
    Proved itself a feeble thing, 170  
When thy uncle brought me hither,  
    In the pleasant time of Spring.

“Said he, ‘Thou hast toiled too closely;  
    Thou shalt breathe our country air;  
Thou shalt come to us on Sundays, 175  
    And thy failing health repair!’

“Now began my hardest trial.  
    What had I with love to do?  
Loving thee was sin ’gainst duty,

And 'gainst thy good uncle too! 180

“Until now my heart was cheerful;  
Duty had been light till now.  
— Oh that I were free to woo thee;  
That my heart had known no vow!

“Yet, I would not shrink from duty; 185  
Nor my vow leave unfulfilled!  
— Still, still, had my mother known thee,  
Would she thus have sternly willed?

“Wherefore did my angel-mother  
Thus enforce her dying prayer? 190  
— Yet what right had I to seek thee,  
Thou, thy uncle’s wealthy heir!

“Thus my spirit cried within me;  
And that inward strife began,  
That wild warfare of the feelings 195  
Which lays waste the life of man.

“In such turmoil of the spirit,  
Feeble is our human strength;  
Life seems stripped of all its glory:  
—Yet was duty lord at length. 200

“So at least I deemed. But meeting  
Toward the pleasant end of May  
With thy uncle, here he brought me,  
I who long had kept away.

“He was willful, thy good uncle; 205  
I was such a stranger grown;  
I must go to hear the reading  
Of a ballad of his own.

“Willing to be won, I yielded.

Canst thou not that eve recal, 210  
When the lilacs were in blossom  
And the sunshine lay o'er all?

“On the bench beneath the lilacs,  
Sate we; and thy uncle read  
That sweet, simple, wondrous ballad, 215  
Which my own heart's woe portrayed.

“’Twas a simple tale of nature —  
Of a lowly youth who gave  
All his heart to one above him,  
Loved, and filled an early grave. 220

“But the fine tact of the poet  
Laid the wounded spirit bare,  
Breathed forth all the silent anguish  
Of the breaking heart's despair.

“’Twas as if my soul had spoken, 225  
And at once I seemed to know,  
Through the poet's voice prophetic,  
What the issue of my woe.

“Later, walking in the evening  
Through the shrubbery, thou and I, 230  
With the woodlarks singing round us,  
And the full moon in the sky;

“Thou, my Ellen, didst reproach me,  
For that I had coldly heard  
That sweet ballad of thy uncle's, 235  
Nor responded by a word.

“Said I, ‘If that marvelous ballad  
Did not seem my heart to touch;  
It was not from want of feeling,  
But because it felt too much.’ 240

“And even as the rod of Moses  
    Called forth water from the rock;  
So did now thy sweet reproaches  
    All my secret heart unlock.

“And my soul lay bare before thee; 245  
    And I told thee all; how strove,  
As in fierce and dreary conflict,  
    My stern duty and my love.

“All I told thee — of my parents, 250  
    Of my angel-mother’s fate;  
Of the vow by which she bound me;  
    Of my present low estate.

“All I told thee, while the woodlarks 255  
    Filled with song the evening breeze,  
And bright gushes of the moonlight  
    Fell upon us through the trees.

“And thou murmured’st, oh! my Ellen, 260  
    In a voice so sweet and low;  
‘Would that I had known thy mother,  
    Would that I might soothe thy woe!’

“Ellen, my sweet, life’s companion!  
    From my being’s inmost core  
Then I blessed thee; but I bless thee,  
    Bless thee, even now, still more!

“For, as in the days chivalric 265  
    Ladies armed their knights for strife,  
So didst thou, with thy true counsel,  
    Arm me for the fight of life.

“Saidst thou, ‘No, thou must not waver;  
    Ever upright must thou stand: 270

Even in duty's hardest peril,  
All thy weapons in thy hand.

“Doing still thy utmost, utmost;  
Never resting till thou’rt free! —  
But, if e’er thy soul is weary, 275  
Or discouraged — think of me!’

“And again thy sweet voice murmured,  
In a low and thrilling tone;  
‘I have loved thee, truly loved thee,  
Though that love was all unknown! 280

“And the sorrows and the trials  
Which thy youth in bondage hold,  
Make thee to my heart yet dearer  
Than if thou hadst mines of gold!

“Go forth — pay thy debt to duty; 285  
And when thou art nobly free,  
He shall know, my good old uncle,  
Of the love ’twixt thee and me!’

“Ellen, thou wast my good angel!  
Once again in life I strove — 290  
But the hardest task was easy,  
In the light and strength of love.

“And, when months had passed on swiftly,  
Canst thou not that hour recall —  
’Twas a Christmas Sabbath evening — 295  
When we told thy uncle all?

“Good old uncle! I can see him,  
With those calm and loving eyes,  
Smiling on us as he listened,  
Silent, yet with no surprise. 300

