Old Peter Grimes made fishing his employ,
His wife he cabined with him and his boy,
And seemed that life laborious to enjoy;
To town came quiet Peter with his fish,
And had of all a civil word and wish.

He left his trade upon the sabbath day,
And took young Peter in his hand to pray;
But soon the stubborn boy from care broke loose,
At first refused, then added his abuse;
His father's love, he scorned, his power defied,
But being drunk, wept sorely when he died.

Yes! then he wept, and to his mind there came
Much of his conduct, and he felt the shame—
How he had oft the good old man reviled,
And never paid the duty of a child;
How, when the father in his Bible read,
He in contempt and anger left the shed;
“It is the word of life,” the parent cried;
—“This is the life itself,” the boy replied;
And while old Peter in amazement stood,
Gave the hot spirit to his boiling blood;
How he, with oath and furious speech, began
To prove his freedom and assert the man;
And when the parent checked his impious rage,
Nay, once had dealt the sacrilegious blow
On his bare head, and laid his parent low;
The father groaned—“If thou art old,” said he,
“And hast a son—thou wilt remember me.
Thy mother left me in a happy time,
Thou kill’dst not her—Heaven spares the double crime.”

On an inn-settle,\(^2\) in his maudlin grief,
This he revolved, and drank for his relief.
Now lived the youth in freedom, but debarred
From constant pleasure, and he thought it hard;
Hard that he could not every wish obey,
But must awhile relinquish ale and play;
Hard! that he could not to his cards attend,
But must acquire the money he would spend.

With greedy eye he looked on all he saw,
He knew not justice, and he laughed at law;
On all he marked he stretched his ready hand;
He fished by water, and he filched by land.
Oft in the night has Peter dropped his oar,
Fled from his boat and sought for prey on shore;
Oft up the hedgerow glided, on his back
Bearing the orchard’s produce in a sack,
Or farmyard load, tugged fiercely from the stack;
And as these wrongs to greater numbers rose,
The more he looked on all men as his foes.

He built a mud-walled hovel, where he kept
His various wealth, and there he oftentimes slept;
But no success could please his cruel soul,
He wished for one to trouble and control;
He wanted some obedient boy to stand
And bear the blow of his outrageous hand,
And hoped to find in some propitious hour
A feeling creature subject to his power.

Peter had heard there were in London then—
Still have they being!—workhouse-clearing men,
Who, undisturbed by feelings just or kind,
Would parish-boys to needy tradesmen bind;
They in their want a trifling sum would take,
And toiling slaves of piteous orphans make.

Such Peter sought, and when a lad was found,
The sum was dealt him, and the slave was bound.
Some few in town observed in Peter’s trap
A boy, with jacket blue and woolen cap;
But none inquired how Peter used the rope,
Or what the bruise, that made the stripling stoop;
None could the ridges on his back behold,
None sought him shivering in the winter’s cold;
None put the question—“Peter, dost thou give
The boy his food?—What, man! the lad must live!

Consider, Peter, let the child have bread,
He’ll serve thee better if he’s stroked and fed.”
None reasoned thus—and some, on hearing cries,
Said calmly, “Grimes is at his exercise.”

Pinned, beaten, cold, pinched, threatened, and abused—
His efforts punished and his food refused—
Awake tormented—soon aroused from sleep—
Struck if he wept, and yet compelled to weep,
The trembling boy dropped down and strove to pray,

3. At this time, the poor were confined, at the expense of the local church parish, to “workhouses,” where they were put to compulsory labor. It was a common practice for “workhouse-clearing men” to remove young people from the workhouses and “bind them over” (i.e., sell them practically as slaves) to tradesmen.
4. I.e., two-wheeled carriage.
Received a blow, and trembling turned away,
Or sobbed and hid his piteous face; while he,
The savage master, grinned in horrid glee;
He'd now the power he ever loved to show,
A feeling being subject to his blow.
   Thus lived the lad, in hunger, peril, pain,
His tears despised, his supplications vain;
Compelled by fear to lie, by need to steal,
His bed uneasy and unblessed his meal,
For three sad years the boy his tortures bore,
And then his pains and trials were no more.
   “How died he, Peter?” when the people said,
He growled—“I found him lifeless in his bed,”
Then tried for softer tone, and sighed, “Poor Sam is dead.”
Yet murmurs were there, and some questions asked—
How he was fed, how punished, and how tasked?
Much they suspected, but they little proved,
And Peter passed untroubled and unmoved.
   Another boy with equal ease was found,
And what his fate?—One night it chanced he fell
From the boat's mast and perished in her well,
Where fish were living kept, and where the boy
(So reasoned men) could not himself destroy.
   “Yes, so it was,” said Peter, “in his play
(For he was idle both by night and day),
He climbed the mainmast and then fell below”—
Then showed his corpse and pointed to the blow.
What said the jury?—They were long in doubt,
But sturdy Peter faced the matter out;
So they dismissed him, saying at the time,
“Keep fast your hatchway when you've boys who climb.”
This hit the conscience, and he colored more
Than for the closest questions put before.
   Thus all his fears the verdict set aside,
And at the slave-shop Peter still applied.
   Then came a boy of manners soft and mild—
Our seamen's wives with grief beheld the child;
All thought (the poor themselves) that he was one
Of gentle blood, some noble sinner's son,
Who had, belike, deceived some humble maid,
Whom he had first seduced and then betrayed.
However this, he seemed a gracious lad,
In grief submissive and with patience sad.
   Passive he labored, till his slender frame
Bent with his loads, and he at length was lame;
Strange that a frame so weak could bear so long
The grossest insult and the foulest wrong!
But there were causes: in the town they gave
Fire, food, and comfort to the gentle slave,
And though stern Peter, with a cruel hand
And knotted rope, enforced the rude command,
Yet he considered what he’d lately felt,
And his vile blows with selfish pity dealt.
One day such drafts\textsuperscript{5} the cruel fisher made,
He could not vend them in his borough trade,
But sailed for London mart; the boy was ill,
But ever humbled to his master’s will;
And on the river, where they smoothly sailed,
He strove with terror and awhile prevailed;
But new to danger on the angry sea,
He clung affrightened to his master’s knee.
The boat grew leaky and the wind was strong,
Rough was the passage and the time was long;
His liquor failed, and Peter’s wrath arose—
No more is known—the rest we must suppose,
Or learn of Peter; Peter says, he “spied\textsuperscript{6}
The stripling’s danger and for harbor tried;
Meantime the fish, and then the apprentice died.”
The pitying women raised a clamor round,
And weeping said, “Thou hast thy ’prentice drowned.”
Now the stern man was summoned to the hall,
To tell his tale before the burghers all;
He gave the account, professed the lad he loved,
And kept his brazen features all unmoved.
The mayor himself with tone severe replied,
“Henceforth with thee shall never boy abide;
Hire thee a freeman,\textsuperscript{6} whom thou durst not beat,
But who, in thy despite, will sleep and eat;
Free thou art now!—Again shouldst thou appear,
Thou’lt find thy sentence, like thy soul, severe.”
Alas! for Peter, not a helping hand,
So was he hated, could he now command.
Alone he rowed his boat, alone he cast
His nets beside, or made his anchor fast;
To hold a rope or hear a curse was none—
He toiled and railed, he groaned and swore alone.
Thus by himself compelled to live each day,
To wait for certain hours the tide’s delay;
At the same times the same dull views to see,
The bounding marsh-bank and the blighted tree;
The water only, when the tides were high,
When low, the mud half-covered and half-dry;
The sunburnt tar that blisters on the planks,
And bank-side stakes in their uneven ranks,
Heaps of entangled weeds that slowly float,
As the tide rolls by the impeded boat.
When tides were neap\textsuperscript{7} and, in the sultry day,
Through the tall bounding mudbanks made their way,
Which on each side rose swelling, and below
The dark warm flood ran silently and slow;

\textsuperscript{5} Catches of fish.
\textsuperscript{6} Paid laborer.
\textsuperscript{7} Low.
There anchoring, Peter chose from man to hide,
There hang his head, and view the lazy tide
In its hot slimy channel slowly glide;
Where the small eels that left the deeper way
For the warm shore within the shallows play;
Where gaping mussels, left upon the mud,
Slope their slow passage to the fallen flood.
Here dull and hopeless he’d lie down and trace
How sidelong crabs had scrawled their crooked race,
Or sadly listen to the tuneless cry
Of fishing gull or clanging goldeneye;
What time the seabirds to the marsh would come,
And the loud bittern, from the bulrush home,
Gave from the salt-ditch side the bellowing boom.
He nursed the feelings these dull scenes produce,
And loved to stop beside the opening sluice;
Where the small stream, confined in narrow bound,
Ran with a dull, unvaried, saddening sound;
Where all, presented to the eye or ear,
Oppressed the soul with misery, grief, and fear.
Besides these objects, there were places three,
Which Peter seemed with certain dread to see;
When he drew near them he would turn from each,
And loudly whistle till he passed the reach.

A change of scene to him brought no relief;
In town, ’twas plain, men took him for a thief.
The sailors’ wives would stop him in the street,
And say, “Now, Peter, thou’st no boy to beat!”
Infants at play, when they perceived him, ran,
Warning each other—“That’s the wicked man!”
He growled an oath, and in an angry tone
Cursed the whole place and wished to be alone.
Alone he was, the same dull scenes in view,
And still more gloomy in his sight they grew;
Though man he hated, yet employed alone
At bootless labor, he would swear and groan,
Cursing the shoals that glided by the spot,
And gulls that caught them when his arts could not.
Cold nervous tremblings shook his sturdy frame,
And strange disease—he couldn’t say the name;
Wild were his dreams, and oft he rose in fright,
Waked by his view of horrors in the night—
Horrors that would the sternest minds amaze,
Horrors that demons might be proud to raise;
And though he felt forsaken, grieved at heart
To think he lived from all mankind apart,
Yet, if a man approached, in terrors he would start.
A winter passed since Peter saw the town,
And summer lodgers were again come down.

8. A species of wild duck.
9. The main part of the river.
1. Schools of fish.
These, idly curious, with their glasses spied
The ships in bay, as anchored for the tide—
The river's craft—the bustle of the quay—
And seaport views, which landmen love to see.
One, up the river, had a man and boat
Seen day by day, now anchored, now afloat;
Fisher he seemed; yet used no net nor hook,
Of seafowl swimming by no heed he took,
But on the gliding waves still fixed his lazy look.
At certain stations he would view the stream,
As if he stood bewildered in a dream,
Or that² some power had chained him for a time,
To feel a curse or meditate on crime.
This known, some curious, some in pity went,
And others questioned—“Wretch, dost thou repent?”
He heard, he trembled, and in fear resigned
His boat; new terror filled his restless mind;
Furious he grew, and up on the country ran,
And there they seized him—a distempered man.
Him we received, and to a parish-bed,³
Followed and cursed, the groaning man was led.
Here when they saw him whom they used to shun,
A lost, lone man, so harassed and undone,
Our gentle females, ever prompt to feel,
Perceived compassion on their anger steal;
His crimes they could not from their memories blot,
But they were grieved, and trembled at his lot.
A priest too came, to whom his words are told;
And all the signs they shuddered to behold.
“Look! look!” they cried, “his limbs with horror shake,
And as he grinds his teeth, what noise they make!
How glare his angry eyes, and yet he’s not awake.
See! what cold drops upon his forehead stand,
And how he clenches that broad bony hand.”
The priest, attending, found he spoke at times
As one alluding to his fears and crimes:
“It was the fall,” he muttered; “I can show
The manner how—I never struck a blow”—
And then aloud—“Unhand me, free my chain!
On oath, he fell—it struck him to the brain—
Why ask my father?—that old man will swear
Against my life; besides, he wasn’t there—
What, all agreed?—Am I to die today?—
My Lord, in mercy, give me time to pray.”
Then, as they watched him, calmer he became,
And grew so weak he couldn’t move his frame,
But murmuring spake—while they could see and hear
The start of terror and the groan of fear;
See the large dew-beads on his forehead rise.

² I.e., or as if.
³ Bed in a charity hospital.
And the cold death-drop glaze his sunken eyes;
Nor yet he died, but with unwonted force
Seemed with some fancied being to discourse.
He knew not us, or with accustomed art
He hid the knowledge, yet exposed his heart;
Twas part confession and the rest defense,
A madman’s tale, with gleams of waking sense.

“I’ll tell you all,” he said, “the very day
When the old man first placed them in my way,
My father’s spirit—he who always tried
To give me trouble, when he lived and died—
When he was gone, he could not be content
To see my days in painful labor spent,
But would appoint his meetings, and he made
Me watch at these, and so neglect my trade.

’Twas one hot noon, all silent, still, serene,
No living being had I lately seen;
But (such his pleasure) I could nothing get—
A father’s pleasure, when his toil was done,
To plague and torture thus an only son!
And so I sat and looked upon the stream,
How it ran on and felt as in a dream,
But dream it was not; no!—I fixed my eyes
On the midstream and saw the spirits rise;
I saw my father on the water stand,
And hold a thin pale boy in either hand;
And there they glided ghastly on the top
Of the salt flood, and never touched a drop;
I would have struck them, but they knew the intent,
And smiled upon the oar, and down they went.

Now, from that day, whenever I began
To dip my net, there stood the hard old man—
He and those boys. I humbled me and prayed
They would be gone—they heeded not, but stayed;
Nor could I turn, nor would the boat go by,
But gazing on the spirits, there was I;
They bade me leap to death, but I was loath to die.
And every day, as sure as day arose,
Would these three spirits meet me ere the close;
To hear and mark them daily was my doom,
And ‘Come,’ they said, with weak, sad voices, ‘come.’
To row away with all my strength I tried,
But there were they, hard by me in the tide,
The three unbodied forms—and ‘Come,’ still ‘come,’ they cried.

Fathers should pity—but this old man shook
His hoary locks, and froze me by a look.
Thrice, when I struck them, through the water came
A hollow groan, that weakened all my frame.
‘Father!’ said I, ‘have mercy!’—He replied,
I know not what—the angry spirit lied—
‘Didst thou not draw thy knife?’ said he—’Twas true,
But I had pity and my arm withdrew:
He cried for mercy which I kindly gave,
But he has no compassion in his grave.

“There were three places, where they ever rose—
The whole long river has not such as those—
Places accursed, where, if a man remain,
He’ll see the things which strike him to the brain;
And there they made me on my paddle lean,
And look at them for hours—accurséd scene!
When they would glide to that smooth eddy-space,
Then bid me leap and join them in the place;
And at my groans each little villain sprite
Enjoyed my pains and vanished in delight.

“In one fierce summer day, when my poor brain
Was burning hot and cruel was my pain,
Then came this father-foe, and there he stood
With his two boys again upon the flood;
There was more mischief in their eyes, more glee
In their pale faces when they glared at me.
Still did they force me on the oar to rest,
And when they saw me fainting and oppressed,
He, with his hand, the old man, scooped the flood,
And there came flame about him mixed with blood;
He bade me stoop and look upon the place,
Then flung the hot-red liquor in my face;
Burning it blazed, and then I roared for pain,
I thought the demons would have turned my brain.

“Still there they stood, and forced me to behold
A place of horrors—they cannot be told—
Where the flood opened, there I heard the shriek
Of tortured guilt—no earthly tongue can speak:
‘All days alike! forever!’ did they say,
‘And unremitted torments every day!’—
Yes, so they said.”—But here he ceased and gazed
On all around, affrightened and amazed;
And still he tried to speak, and looked in dread
Of frightened females gathering round his bed;
Then dropped exhausted and appeared at rest,
Till the strong foe the vital powers possessed;
Then with an inward, broken voice he cried,
“Again they come,” and muttered as he died.