

[3] Lénore

Op. 81

William and Helen
(after Bürger's "Lenore")

From heavy dreams fair Helen rose,
And eyed the dawning red:
"Alas, my love, thou tarriest long!
O art thou false or dead?"

With gallant Fred'rick's princely power
He sought the bold Crusade;
But not a word from Judah's wars
Told Helen how he sped.

With Paynim and with Saracen
At length a truce was made,
And every knight return'd to dry
The tears his love had shed.

Our gallant host was homeward bound
With many a song of joy;
Green waved the laurel in each plume,
The badge of victory.

And old and young, and sire and son,
To meet them crowd the way,
With shouts, and mirth, and melody,
The debt of love to pay.

Full many a maid her true-love met,
And sobb'd in his embrace,
And flutt'ring joy in tears and smiles
Array'd full many a face.

Nor joy nor smile for Helen sad;
She sought the host in vain;
For none could tell her William's fate,
If faithless, or if slain.

The martial band is past and gone;
She rends her raven hair,
And in distraction's bitter mood
She weeps with wild despair.

"O rise, my child," her mother said,
"Nor sorrow thus in vain;
A perjured lover's fleeting heart
No tears recall again."

"O mother, what is gone, is gone,
What's lost for ever lorn:
Death, death alone can comfort me;
O had I ne'er been born!

"O break, my heart—O break at once!
Drink my life-blood, Despair!
No joy remains on earth for me,
For me in heaven no share."

"O enter not in judgment, Lord!"
The pious mother prays;
"Impute not guilt to thy frail child!
She knows not what she says.

"O say thy pater noster, child!
O turn to God and grace!
His will, that turn'd thy bliss to bale,
Can change thy bale to bliss."

"O mother, mother, what is bliss?
O mother, what is bale?
My William's love was heaven on earth,
Without it earth is hell.

"Why should I pray to ruthless Heaven,
Since my loved William's slain?
I only pray'd for William's sake,
And all my prayers were vain."

"O take the sacrament, my child,
And check these tears that flow;
By resignation's humble prayer,
O hallow'd be thy woe!"

"No sacrament can quench this fire,
Or slake this scorching pain;
No sacrament can bid the dead
Arise and live again.

"O break, my heart—O break at once!
Be thou my god, Despair!
Heaven's heaviest blow has fallen on me,
And vain each fruitless prayer."

"O enter not in judgment, Lord,
With thy frail child of clay!
She knows not what her tongue has spoke;
Impute it not, I pray!

"Forbear, my child, this desperate woe,
And turn to God and grace;
Well can devotion's heavenly glow
Convert thy bale to bliss."

"O mother, mother, what is bliss?
O mother, what is bale?
Without my William what were heaven,
Or with him what were hell?"

Wild she arraigns the eternal doom,
Upbraids each sacred power,
Till, spent, she sought her silent room,
All in the lonely tower.

She beat her breast, she wrung her hands,
Till sun and day were o'er,
And through the glimmering lattice shone
The twinkling of the star.

Then, crash! the heavy drawbridge fell
That o'er the moat was hung;
And, clatter! clatter! on its boards
The hoof of courser rung.

The clank of echoing steel was heard
As off the rider bounded;
And slowly on the winding stair
A heavy footstep sounded.

And hark! and hark! a knock—tap! tap!
A rustling stifled noise;
Door-latch and tinkling staples ring;
At length a whispering voice: