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DAILY BREAD

BOOK I.

The House of Candles
and Other Dramatic Poems

BY

WILFRID WILSON GIBSON

LONDON:

ELKIN MATHEWS, VICO STREET

BY THE SAME WRITER.

(Uniform with this Volume.)

(Paper, 1/-; boards, 1/6.)

DAILY BREAD. Book II.

The Garret, and other Dramatic Poems.

DAILY BREAD. Book III.

Mates, and other Dramatic Poems. (*In preparation.*)

AKRA, THE SLAVE. (*In preparation.*)

1st Edn
2 parts
signed

Wilfrid Gibson

DAILY BREAD



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DAILY BREAD

BOOK I

THE HOUSE OF CANDLES
AND OTHER DRAMATIC POEMS

BY
WILFRID WILSON GIBSON

LONDON
ELKIN MATHEWS, VIGO STREET
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*Al. life moving to one measure—
Daily bread, daily bread—
Bread of life, and bread of labour,
Bread of bitterness and sorrow,
Hand-to-mouth, and no to-morrow,
Dearth for housemate, death for neighbour. . . .*

*“Yet, when all the babes are fed,
Love, are there not crumbs to treasure?”*

TO
J. H.

SAINT ABB'S HAVEN.
1908.

*As one, at midnight, wakened by the call
Of golden-plovers in their seaward flight,
Who lies and listens, as the clear notes fall
Through tingling silence of the frosty night—
Who lies and listens, till the last note fails,
And then, in fancy, faring with the flock
Far over slumbering hills and dreaming dales,
Soon hears the surges break on reef and rock ;
And, hearkening, till all sense of self is drowned
Within the mightier music of the deep,
No more remembers the sweet piping sound
That startled him from dull, undreaming sleep :
So I, first waking from oblivion, heard,
With heart that kindled to the call of song,
The voice of young life, fluting like a bird,
And echoed that light lilt ; till, ere long,
Lured onward by that happy, singing-flight,
I caught the stormy summons of the sea,
And dared the restless deeps that, day and night,
Surge with the life-song of humanity.*

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DAILY BREAD

THE HOUSE OF CANDLES

Scene : GRISEL STARK'S cottage. GRISEL STARK lies unconscious on the bed. Two neighbours, BARBARA WILSON and REBECCA WOOD, stand watching her, and whispering together.

BARBARA. The house was dark ;
And so I knew, at once,
That something was amiss.

REBECCA. The house was dark ?

BARBARA. No blink of light
The window showed—
The window that had blazed, each night, for years.
I stood a moment, wondering, at my door ;
And then I crossed the roadway,
And listened on the threshold,
Before I dared to knock ;
Though, what I feared
I could not tell.
It seemed so strange
To find the house in darkness—
No candles in the window,
And not a glimmer 'neath the door.

THE HOUSE OF CANDLES

And when, with quaking heart,
At last I knocked,
And no one answered me,
I raised the latch
And entered.
The room was dark and silent—
So silent, that I felt
As though I'd stumbled suddenly
Into the house of death.

The fire was out,
And not a candle lit ;
And you know how the candles blazed,
Night-long, these many years.

REBECCA. She must have burned a fortune out in
candles.

BARBARA. And when, at last,
I'd fumbled for the matches,
And struck a light,
It only served to show
The candlesticks burnt empty ;
And naught I saw of Grisel,
Before it flickered out,
Although I felt her in the room,
And feared lest I should touch her
In the dark.
And so I ran to fetch my lamp,
And, in its friendly light,
I looked about me with a braver heart,
And quickly found her
Stretched before the hearth.
At first I thought her dead,
And shrank from her,
For she was ever cold and proud with all,

THE HOUSE OF CANDLES

And I had never touched her hand before.
And, as I looked on that lean hand outstretched,
I wondered if that hand
Had done the thing—
The thing that gossip told of it,
When first she came to Morton.
It frightened me ;
And, as I watched,
It seemed the fingers crooked
'To clutch a baby's throat ;
And yet I could not draw my eyes from them,
Until I realised
That only in my fancy they had stirred.
For still the hand lay, limp and white ;
And soon I was myself again,
And pity drove out fear ;
And bending down to lift that fallen head,
I found that still she breathed.
I loosed her bodice,
'Then I fetched my man,
And we together lifted her
And laid her on the bed—
It took us all our time ;
For, though she is so slight,
She was a dead-weight in our hands,
As though we lifted more than one weak body—
As if some dreadful burden bore her down.

REBECCA. God knows what sins are on her !
How dared you touch her, neighbour ?
'Twas madness, surely.

BARBARA. I could not leave her lying helpless.
And, maybe, she is innocent.
We know that babes die often,

THE HOUSE OF CANDLES

Though only God knows why.
My firstborn, Robert, died. . . .

REBECCA. The innocent are not afraid of darkness,
Nor waste a heifer's price
On candles in a twelvemonth.

BARBARA. She never stirred,
When we had laid her on the bed,
And nothing I could do would rouse her.
I sent my man to fetch the doctor,
But he can scarcely come
Ere daybreak, even if my man
Should chance to find him in.
'Twere dreadful should she die,
Before the doctor comes.

REBECCA. If she's to die, she'll die,
Whether he comes or not.
'Tis strange that such as she
Should have an easy end.

BARBARA. O neighbour, you are hard!
What would you have?

REBECCA. A murderer. . . .

BARBARA. Nay, you shall not in this house!
Nothing was known.

REBECCA. But you yourself have said,
These many times. . . .
I heard it from your lips.

BARBARA. Perhaps we all have wronged her.
May she not be as innocent
Of her poor baby's death,
As it . . .

REBECCA. As it! How can you tell
That even it was innocent?

BARBARA. The babe!

THE HOUSE OF CANDLES

REBECCA. A bastard brat,
You may be sure !
Else, where is her goodman ?
A woman's not worth much
Who comes, alone, from God knows where,
To a strange village, and sets up a house,
Where she, within a month, is brought to bed ;
And cannot name the father of her child.

BARBARA. Cannot ? How do you know ?
Has she told aught to you ?

REBECCA. To me !
Nay, not a word ;
For she was ever close.
But, you know well enough,
No man was ever seen to cross her threshold,
By day, at all events.
God knows what moths her candles singed !
Had she been all she should be,
What need for secrecy ?
Her silence proves her guilt ;
And her dead brat . . .

BARBARA. A babe is still a babe,
Whoever be its father.

REBECCA. Aye . . . and yet
She hadn't too much love for it,
To throttle . . .

BARBARA. Nay, you shall not, neighbour, here !

REBECCA. Why not ?
'Tis common knowledge.
You know, as well as I do,
How all the village whispered,
When it died,
That she had strangled it.

THE HOUSE OF CANDLES

BARBARA. Still, naught was known.

REBECCA. Why, I have heard you speak the thing
Right out, with your own lips,
In Farmer Thompson's field,
And Grisel hoeing not ten yards away !

BARBARA. But I was young and thoughtless,
And I've borne children of my own,
Since then . . .

And seen my firstborn die.
Oh, when we're young, we're hard of heart,
Till we ourselves have felt
A baby's fingers clutching at the breast.

REBECCA. Ah, who is hard and cruel now ?
You twit me that I'm barren,
And yet, I thank the Lord
That I'm not such as she
Whom you befriend.
Although I brought my man no child,
At least, I bore no nameless children.

BARBARA. Forgive my heedless words !
You will not, neighbour ?
'Tis ever careless words that hurt past healing.
The thought of me
Will rankle in your heart,
Because my heart,
That bears no grudge against you,
Let slip an idle word,
Beyond recall.
But you,
Though you have been denied so much,
Have been spared something, too ;
You have not stood
Beside your firstborn's grave.

THE HOUSE OF CANDLES

REBECCA. Your patient stirs.
You'd better keep your tenderness for her,
And not waste words on me.
You know the saying :
"Least said, is soonest mended."

[*She turns, as if to go.*]

BARBARA. Aye, she wakens.
But you're not going now ?

REBECCA. Why should I stay ?

BARBARA. You would not go and leave me,
Alone with her ?
If she should die !

REBECCA. If she's to die, she'll die.
Fear not, she's not the sort
To go before her time.

BARBARA. I dare not bide alone.

REBECCA. You dare not—you !
Oh, the brave mothers !
Must the barren wife
Lose her night's rest
To tend two shiftless mothers ?
For she,
The helpless wanton on the bed,
And you,
Who stand a-tremble by her side,
Are mothers both ;
While I—
I'm but a barren woman,
Hard of heart.

BARBARA. I never said so, neighbour.
But go,
I do not need you.

THE HOUSE OF CANDLES

I, who have brought to birth,
Can look on death alone, if need be.

I fear no longer.

Shut the door behind you.

REBECCA. Nay, but I'll stay.

BARBARA. Bide if you will,
But don't come nigh the bed.

REBECCA. Don't fear,
I would not soil my hands.

BARBARA. Your heart is soiled past cleansing.
But 'tis no time for words.

She'll die while we are wrangling.

She tries to speak.

[GRISEL STARK *raises herself on the bed and looks
about her.*]

GRISEL. Oh!
The great light!

BARBARA. The light?
'Tis but my lamp.
It hurts your eyes. . . .

GRISEL. Nay, do not move it.
'Tis not the lamp I mean.
The light is in my heart.
The candles all are quenched ;
Yet I fear nothing now.
But where am I?

BARBARA. You're on your bed,
In your own house.

GRISEL. But you—
How do you come here—
You and your lamp?
I never heard the latch.

BARBARA. Nay, you've been ill.

THE HOUSE OF CANDLES

I saw the house in darkness,
And feared that something was amiss.
And so I entered,
To find you stretched, unconscious, by your hearth.

GRISEL. I must have fallen then.

Yea, I've been ill for years ;
But I am better now,
And I shall ail no more.
You say the house was dark ;
Yet it was full of light—
The light within my heart—
The light that quenched the candles and my fears.
I, who have dwelt in darkness,
Know the light,
As you can never know it.
Since he died,
My little babe,
So many years ago,
My heart has dwelt in darkness.
And though fear ever kindled
Pale candles to dispel the night,
But little they availed ;
Nor even noon could drive away
That darkness from my heart—
My heart so choked with bitterness.
Since my babe died . . .
Nay, neighbour, don't shrink back !
These hands have never done a baby hurt.
I know what's in your mind ;
I heard those dreadful whisperings,
In years gone by ;
Though then I answered nothing.
But, oh ! if you have felt

THE HOUSE OF CANDLES

A newborn baby, cold against the breast,
You'll know I speak the truth.

BARBARA. I know.

GRISEL. Still . . . you were right to shrink ;
Although my hands are clean.

I killed the babe—

I killed it, in my heart,

Ere it was born.

I poisoned it with hate—

My hate of him who had forsaken me.

Why don't you shrink from me,

Now all is told ?

Your eyes are kind ;

And I can talk with you

As I have talked with no one.

But, who's that—

There, in the shadow . . .

Though it matters little ;

For I would have the whole world see

The light that floods my heart.

When first I left my home,

To hide my shame from friendly eyes,

And came into this countryside,

And thought to bear the pang

And burden of my misery

More easily, 'mid strangers,

My heart was black against . . .

But, even now,

Why should I name that name,

Which once was all-in-all to me !

And, that dark month

Before his child was born,

I brooded on my wrongs ;

THE HOUSE OF CANDLES

And nursed hate in my bosom,
Until there was no room
For any other care within my heart.
Ah, shut your ears,
If you would hear no more !
For I must tell out all.
Your brow is smooth :
I think you could not hate :
And few have known such hate as mine.
His child,
Within my womb,
Because it was his child—
Aye, even it,
My hatred would not spare,
But ever prayed
That it might never look upon the light,
Nor draw a mortal breath,
Though I, myself, must perish
To keep the life from it.
My time came ;
And I went through all, alone.
Nay, spare your pity neighbour !
'Twas my will.
I kept you all at bay
To serve my evil ends.
And little I remember of those days,
Save as a dream of anguish,
Until the morn I woke
To feel a lifeless baby at my breast—
Whose eyes had never looked upon the light—
Whose lips had never drawn a mortal breath—
And knew my prayer was answered ;
Though I lived ;

THE HOUSE OF CANDLES

For death had passed me by,
And left me to my punishment—
To live . . .
Knowing myself a murderer in my heart,
Although my hands were clean.
And, since that hour,
The babe has haunted me ;
And I have never dared
To be alone with darkness,
A moment, lest those eyes,
Which I denied the light of heaven,
Should burn out from the dark on me.
I strove to keep the night at bay
With flickering candles,
But, in vain,
Because my own breast still was dark.
The night was in my heart,
My stubborn heart,
That could not yet forgive.
But, when I came from work to-day,
I was so spent,
I scarce could lift the latch,
Or cross the threshold-stone ;
And could not eat nor sup ;
Just having strength to light my candles,
Before I fell asleep,
Beside the hearth.
How long I slept,
I cannot tell.
I wakened, with a start,
To find the room in darkness—
The candles all burnt out.
And I was frightened ;

THE HOUSE OF CANDLES

For it was long since I had looked
On utter night ;
And now,
I seemed to look in my own heart.
I feared to breathe ;
And then, for the first time
Since I had been forsaken,
The thought of him came to me,
Without a breath of hate ;
And pity stole like light into my heart ;
And, in a flash,
The room was filled with light.
And, as I wondered whence
The sudden glory sprang,
My little babe
Before me, laughing, stood,
With arms outstretched,
And happy, kindling eyes—
His little body filled with living light.
And, as I stooped . . .
To snatch him to my breast,
I fell . . .
And knew no more . . .
Till, in the night,
I saw you, standing by the bed.
But, nay !
There is no night,
Since I have cast out fear ;
And I shall dread the darkness nevermore.
But . . . I am weary . . .
And would sleep . . .
You need not watch with me,
For I fear nothing now . . .

THE HOUSE OF CANDLES

I, who have come through midnight . . .
And look . . . upon . . . the dawn.
The light . . . the light ! . . .
My babe . . . my newborn babe !

[*She sinks back exhausted, moaning.*]

BARBARA. She cannot last long now :
The end is nigh.
I fear he'll be too late.

REBECCA. Too late ?
What could he do if he were here ?
She's far beyond the need of doctors.

[*A noise of wheels is heard without ; the door opens, and the breath of morning sweeps through the room.*]

ON THE ROAD

Persons : REUBEN APPLEBY.

JESSIE APPLEBY, *his wife.*

PETER NIXON, *a stonebreaker.*

REUBEN APPLEBY *and his wife sit under a hedge by the highway. REUBEN is eating bread and cheese, while JESSIE is feeding her baby with milk out of a bottle.*

REUBEN. "Married!" he says,
And looks at me quite sharply—
"A boy like you!"
And civilly I answered:
"Not such a boy, sir;
I am nineteen past."
"Nineteen!" says he, and laughs;
"And you a husband, with a wife to keep—
A wife and family, I suppose."
"We have a baby, sir."
"A baby! and you're just a child yourself!
What right had you to marry,
And bring into the world
A tribe of helpless children
To starve, and beg, and steal?"
With that he took his children by the hand,
And walked away.
I could have flung his money after him;

ON THE ROAD

But I had laboured for it ;
And was hungry ;
And knew that you were famished ;
And the boy must have his milk.
What right !—

I could have flung . . .

JESSIE. Then, you had flung away
Your baby's life !

REUBEN. Aye, lass, that stopt me ;
And the thought of you ;
And so, I took the sixpence ;
And bought the bread and cheese and milk.

JESSIE. You brought it just in time.
He'd cried himself to sleep ;
But, in my arms, he lay so still, and white,
That I was frightened.

REUBEN. You were famished, lass.

JESSIE. Yes ; I was done,
I scarce could hold him,
Though he's light—
So thin and light.
But, when I laid him down, he cried so,
I could not bear . . .

REUBEN. Well, he looks happy now.
He's drinking like a fish.
The milk will make him fat again.
But you eat nothing, Jessie.

JESSIE. I cannot eat.

REUBEN. You cannot ?

JESSIE. Not just now.

REUBEN. Jessie, you must ;
You'll die of hunger.

JESSIE. I'm not hungry now ;

ON THE ROAD

But only weary.

After, perhaps . . .

REUBEN. What right had I to marry !

What right had he—

He, with his wife and children,

To speak to me like that ?

I could have flung . . .

JESSIE. Nay, lad ; don't vex yourself

With thought of such as he.

How can it matter what he said to you,

Now that 'tis over,

And the boy is fed ?

REUBEN. His money bought the milk—

Aye, and the bread and cheese.

JESSIE. And do they not taste sweet ?

You seem to relish them.

REUBEN. They're well enough.

But, would not any food taste sweet,

After starvation ?

And I'd worked for it.

JESSIE. How could it be his money,

If you'd earned it ?

REUBEN. True, lass.

Still, you eat nothing.

JESSIE. I cannot eat.

REUBEN. 'Tis ill work tramping all the livelong day,

With naught but hunger in the belly,

As we did yesterday ;

And then, at night,

To shelter 'neath a stack,

And lie, and think—

Too cold and tired to sleep—

To lie, and think,

ON THE ROAD

And wonder if to-morrow
Would bring us bite and sup ;
Envyng the very beasts that they could feed
Upon the hay that bedded us.
And still, 'twas good to rest
From tramping the hard road.
But, you were plucky, lass ;
And trudged so bravely.

JESSIE. Yet I could have dropped,
Had I not hoped to get him milk ere night.

REUBEN. Poor babe !
He cried all day.

My sleeve was wet with tears.

JESSIE. 'Twas a hard road, and long.

REUBEN. The road is hard and long the poor must
travel.

JESSIE. Aye ; and the end ?

REUBEN. The end ?

Where the end lies, who knows ?

[*A pause.*]

Wife, he spake truly ;
I'd no right to marry—
No right to wed, and bring into the world . . .

JESSIE. What's that you say ?
You're wearied of me, husband ?

REUBEN. Nay, wife, you know . . .
Still, he spake truly.

I never thought of it like this before ;
I never should have thought of it at all,
Had he not spoken ;
I'd not wits enough.
But now, I see ;
I had no right to marry,

ON THE ROAD

And bring into the world

A baby . . .

JESSIE. Don't you love your son ?

REUBEN. Love him !

I wouldn't see him starve.

I had no right . . .

Yet, when we married,

Things looked so different, Jessie.

I earned my weekly wage,

Enough to live on,

And to keep a wife on ;

And we were happy in our home,

Together, weren't we, wife ?

JESSIE. Aye, we were happy, Reuben.

REUBEN. And then, the baby came,

And we were happier still ;

For, how could we foresee

Bad times would follow,

And work be slack ;

And all the mills be stopt ;

And we be bundled out of house and home ;

With naught to do

But take the road,

And look for work elsewhere ?

'Tis a long looking . . .

Nay, but he spake truly . . .

I had no right . . .

JESSIE. Nay, Reuben, you talk foolishness ;

Your head is light with fasting.

An empty belly makes an empty head.

Leave idle talking to the rich ;

A poor man can't afford it.

And I've no patience with such folly.

ON THE ROAD

REUBEN. Nay, 'tis not folly, lass,
But truth, the bitter truth.

Is it not true, we're on the road,
I, and my starving wife and babe ?

JESSIE. Nay, husband ; see !
He's drunk the milk ;
And sleeps so sweetly.

REUBEN. But you're ill.

JESSIE. Ill ?
Nay, I'm well enough.

REUBEN. Yet you're too ill to eat.

JESSIE. Nay, I was only tired.
But I'll eat now, lad,
If you've left me aught !
See how it goes !

REUBEN. I had no right . . .

JESSIE. Not if you did not love me !

REUBEN. You know . . .

JESSIE. How can I tell ?
You talk so strangely ;
And say that you'd no right to wed me . . .
Why did you wed me, then ?

REUBEN. Because I couldn't help . . .
I could not do without you.
I did not think . . .
How could I think, when I was mad for you ?

JESSIE. And yet you had no right ?

REUBEN. Right ! What thought I of right ?
I only thought of you, lass.
Nay, but I did not think . . .
I only felt,
And knew I needs must have you.

JESSIE. You loved me . . .

ON THE ROAD

Then, was love not right enough ?

Why talk of right ?

Or, have you wearied of us—

Your wife and son ?

Poor babe !

He doesn't love us any longer.

REUBEN. Nay, wife, you know . . .

[PETER NIXON, *an elderly man, gaunt and bent with labour, comes slowly down the road, with his stonebreaker's hammer on his shoulder. He glances at REUBEN and JESSIE, in passing; hesitates, then turns, and comes towards them.*]

PETER. Fine morning, mate and mistress !

Might you be looking for a job, my lad ?

Well . . . there's a heap of stones to break, down yonder.

I was just on my way . . .

But I am old ;

And, maybe, a bit idle ;

And you look young,

And not afraid of work,

Or I'm an ill judge of a workman's hands.

And when the job's done, lad,

There'll be a shilling.

And there's worse work than breaking stones for bread.

And I'll just have a nap,

While you are busy ;

And, maybe, sleep away the afternoon,

Like the old, idle rascal that I am.

Nay, but there's naught to thank me for.

I'm old ;

And I've no wife and children,

And so, don't need the shilling.

But you are young ;

ON THE ROAD

And you must work for it,
While I sit by and watch you,
And keep you at it.
I like to watch folk working,
For I am old and idle.
Perhaps I'll sleep a bit, with one eye open ;
And when you think I'm nodding,
I'll come down on you like a load of metal.
Don't fear !
I'll make you earn it ;
You'll have to sweat,
Before that shilling's yours ;
Unless you're proud—
Too proud to work . . .
Nay ?
Well, the heap's down yonder—
There, at the turning.
Ah, the bonnie babe !
We had no children, mistress.
And what can any old man do with shillings,
With no one but himself to spend them on—
An idle, good-for-nothing, lone old man ?

[He leads them to the turning of the road.]

THE BETROTHED

Persons : DEBORAH GREY, *Reuben Grey's mother.*

FRANCES HALL, *betrothed to REUBEN GREY.*

Scene: A fishing village, on the return of the Boats from the season's fishing in foreign waters. DEBORAH GREY'S cottage. DEBORAH GREY, an infirm, middle-aged woman, sits by the hearth. FRANCES HALL enters, and sits down with her knitting.

DEBORAH. Why, Frances, you're not gone
To watch the Boats come in?
When I was but a wench,
With lad aboard a homing-boat,
I could not rest, nor work,
For days and days before ;
But spent my whole time on the quay,
To catch the first glimpse of his sail ;
And little recked, although my mother chided.
But you . . .

FRANCES. The Boats are not in sight yet.

DEBORAH. They're due to-day, lass, surely?
And, if you tarry here,
You'll miss the first sight of the sails,
That brings such sweet relief
Unto the anxious heart.

THE BETROTHED

How often have I stared
Upon the far horizon,
Until it seemed his sail
Would never sweep in sight ;
And, in the end,
I looked in vain.

FRANCES. In vain !
I, too, shall look in vain.

DEBORAH. Why, Frances, lass,
What ails you ?
Is this a brave girl's heart ?
Though, in the end,
I looked in vain,
Good hope was ever in my breast,
Until I knew.
A woman who gives way to foolish fears
May bring about the thing she dreads.
O lass, cast out that thought,
Lest it should bring his boat in deadly peril !
He will return.
Tell that unto your heart,
Till it believes.
Your doubt may breed disaster.
But, away !
You should be with the other women-folk,
As I would be,
If I could crawl as far.
Your eager eyes
Should welcome the first speck that swims in sight,
And know it for his sail.

FRANCES. Nay, I would stay with you.
We soon shall hear,
When any boat's in sight.

THE BETROTHED

DEBORAH. One scarce would think you had a lover,
Frances.

In my young days,
No girl could keep indoors,
Knowing the Boats were due.
Yet, here you sit
So calmly, knitting.

FRANCES. If I don't knit,
What can I do?

DEBORAH. What can . . .

FRANCES. I only knit
Because I dare not think.

DEBORAH. You dare not think?

FRANCES. But you . . .
You have no mercy . . .
Nay, forgive me!
I did not mean to hurt . . .
And yet,

If you had only let me knit in peace!

DEBORAH. In peace?

FRANCES. And now,
I cannot even knit.

Why should I knit for him?

DEBORAH. For Reuben?

FRANCES. Yea, for him.

Why should I,
Knowing that I knit in vain?

DEBORAH. What ails you lass?
Do you not love my son?

FRANCES. Do I not love him?
Love him . . . woman . . . love!
Why, you know naught of love
To question this!

THE BETROTHED

Have you no eyes, no heart ?

Ah, God !

I thought the dullest would have seen . . .

And you, his mother . . .

And you once were young !

But you are young no longer.

You look on Reuben as a child.

Still, you were young once,

And have loved, you say . . .

DEBORAH. Yea, lass, I loved.

God knows, none ever was more true to love . . .

FRANCES. Then you should know the terror and despair.

DEBORAH. At your age, Frances, love, to me,
Was naught but happiness and hope.

FRANCES. You have not loved !

DEBORAH. Yea, I have loved !

I, too, have known the terror and despair ;

But never looked to meet it ere its time.

I doubted naught,

Until disaster fell.

I did not go half-way to meet disaster.

FRANCES. And yet, disaster came ?

DEBORAH. Disaster came . . .

But I had known some happiness.

My maiden days of love

Were one long, happy dream.

Your heart should know no care now.

What can it dread ?

FRANCES. If I but knew !

DEBORAH. You foolish girl !

When you know more of life,

You will not spend your heart so easily

On idle fancies.

THE BETROTHED

'Twill be time enough
'To meet your trouble, when it comes.
I know, and none knows better,
The bitterness life brings.
And still, we better naught by dark foreboding,
And brooding on unknown . . .

FRANCES. 'Tis the unknown I dread.

DEBORAH. Nay, lass,
Enough of this!
There's naught to fear.
Your lover, even now, is on his way,
And strains his eyes to catch the earliest glimpse . . .

[A noise of voices and running footsteps without.]

Hark, lass!
They cry:
The Boats!
The Boats in sight!
Why do you tarry, lass?
Away with you!
Oh, would that I could go
To meet my son!

FRANCES. The Boats are still far off.
I cannot go yet.

DEBORAH. You must! Away!
Why, what would Reuben think,
Were you not there,
The first to greet him
As he steps ashore?

FRANCES. I nevermore shall greet him . . .

DEBORAH. Woman, peace!
I am his mother.
Could I fail to know,
If death had taken him?

THE BETROTHED

The sea could not withhold
Such knowledge from me for a single hour.
He is not drowned . . .
May he forgive my lips that slipt the word !
Your folly goaded me.
And, surely, never word of mine
Can bring my son in peril !

[FRANCES *goes out.*]

And yet, I, too, have feared . . .
Nay, surely, I have come
Unto the end of all my misery !
Life cannot hold fresh woe in store.
My days began in happiness ;
And now, it seems,
Though I have passed through terrors and despairs,
That I shall come again to happiness,
Before the end.
Nay, there is naught to dread.
My son is hale and hearty,
And comes to wed a lass who loves him ;
And she, I know, is true to him ;
And such a handy girl
Will make the best of wives.
And I, one day,
Shall nurse his child upon my knee.

[*Shouting without.*]

The Boats are in !
I know that cry !
How oft my heart has leapt with hope to hear it ;
Then fallen dead,
When no one came to answer my heart's cry.

[*A long pause, during which DEBORAH sits gazing
at the fire.*]

THE BETROTHED

But I'll not think of that now.
Reuben comes—
My son comes home—
And with him comes the hope
Of all my happiness.
For, surely, life . . .
How long it takes to get the nets ashore . . .
But I hear footsteps coming . . .
They stop short.
Some one has crossed his threshold, and won home.
Joy has come home to some one's heart.
Again, a rush of feet . . .
But they have passed the door.
I might have known 'twas not his foot.
And still, I thought
That no one could have beaten my boy home.
Surely, by now, the nets are out,
And all made trim and ship-shape.
And yet,
He does not come.
Some one must keep him . . .
Some one . . . I forget!
Nay, I'm no longer all-in-all to him.
Why should he haste,
With Frances by his side?
Two never trod a road as quick as one.
I must be patient still . . .
But, hark!
A woman's step . . .
A woman's . . .
And . . . alone!
She stops, thank God!
Nay . . . she comes slowly on.

THE BETROTHED

O God, that she may pass !
She stops . . .
She only stops for breath.
She will go by.
Perhaps, poor soul, her lover has been drowned—
Her lover,
Or her husband . . .
Or her son.
I wonder who . . .
And still,
She lingers . . .
I hear no sound.
Could I but rise !
She stirs at last.
Ah, God ! she's drawing nearer ;
Her foot is on the threshold . . .

[FRANCES *enters, slowly, and sinks wearily into a chair, without speaking.*]

DEBORAH. You come, alone ?

FRANCES. I come, alone.

DEBORAH. The Boats are in ?

FRANCES. The Boats are in.

DEBORAH. All in ?

Say, lass, that one has not yet reached the harbour.
Have pity !

FRANCES. All are in.

DEBORAH. No boat is missing ?

FRANCES. "The Family's Pride" has foundered.

DEBORAH. But that was not his boat.

He was not on her, lass, when she went down ?
Speak, lass !

FRANCES. He was not on her

THE BETROTHED

Her crew went down with her . . .

But he . . .

DEBORAH. He is not drowned?

FRANCES. He is not drowned.

DEBORAH. Thank God!

And yet, he stays . . .

What keeps him, Frances?

Will he soon be home?

Are all the nets not out yet?

And you . . .

Do you but come before him?

You frightened me;

You walked so slowly;

And you looked . . . you look . . .

O woman, tell me that he follows you!

FRANCES. He does not follow.

DEBORAH. Oh, you'll drive me crazed!

Have you no heart!

Speak out,

And tell me quickly

What keeps my son from me.

FRANCES. How should I know what keeps your son
from you?

DEBORAH. He is not dead?

FRANCES. He is not dead.

DEBORAH. And yet he bides from home.

O woman, speak!

For pity's sake,

Tell all you know—

For you know something;

And I'm strong;

I've gone through much.

Speak out the truth.

THE BETROTHED

FRANCES. There is not much to tell.
He left the Boats,
Ere they put out for home.
He gave no reason.
He only asked his mates
To let you have his share,
When they should make the season's reckoning.
He said he needed naught,
As he had done with fishing,
And never would return.

DEBORAH. My son!
And they knew nothing of the way he went?

FRANCES. Nothing!
They tried to turn him;
But in vain.

Woman . . . your son . . .

DEBORAH. He left no word for you?

FRANCES. Nay, not a word.
He had no thought for me . . .
Nor for his child.

DEBORAH. His child?

FRANCES. His child, that, even now,
Within my womb . . .

DEBORAH. Ah, God, had I but known!
Had I but known!
He is his father's son.

FRANCES. Woman, what's that you mutter?
Were you not married . . . you?

DEBORAH. Yes, I was wedded,
Ere my boy was born.
But that meant little;
For his father left me,
Ere Reuben saw the light.

THE BETROTHED

He went away,
Without a word ;
And I have not set eyes on him again.
He may be living still,
For all I know.

FRANCES. And you . . .
You let me love his son.

DEBORAH. His son ?
But Reuben was my son as well.
He never knew his father ;
And could I dream
He'd follow in his steps ?
Believe me, or believe not,
As you will,
This thing my heart could never have foreseen.
I have been blind and foolish, maybe, lass,
Because I loved my son ;
Yea, I was blind,
And you must curse me for that blindness,
And not for any evil purpose.
If I had seen,
I should have told you all ;
Yea, even though my words estranged
My only son from me.
Ah, God, that he had died,
Ere this could happen !
But time re-tells the old and bitter tale
I know too well already,
That he . . .
You say
" The Family's Pride " went down with all her men ;
And Martha Irwin is left desolate
Of all her sons ;

THE BETROTHED

And still I envy her.

Her sons have gallantly gone down to death ;

But mine . . .

I would that he, too . . .

I would that he . . .

FRANCES. Nay, woman, hush !

For he may still return.

And yet you say

His father came no more.

DEBORAH. He came no more.

FRANCES. Then there is nothing left for me,
But death . . .

And I . . . I loved him . . .

DEBORAH. No love is spent in vain.
Don't talk of death.

FRANCES. What else is left me, woman ?

DEBORAH. Life !

FRANCES. Life . . . without him !
Ah, God, I love him still !

And life without him were a living death.

And I would rather lie

Cold in my grave,

If I must die.

DEBORAH. You must not die.

FRANCES. Who bids me live ?

DEBORAH. The child.

FRANCES. His child !
Far better I should die
Than it be born to misery.

DEBORAH. 'Twas even so I talked,
Before my boy was born ;
And yet, I lived.

FRANCES. And what has life been worth to you ?

THE BETROTHED

DEBORAH. I have not found much happiness in life ;
And now all that I've toiled for,
The happiness I thought within my reach,
That I have laboured after all these years,
Is snatched from me ;
And, in the end,
I find no balm of peace.
And still, have I not toiled ?
And toil is something more than happiness ;
'Tis life itself.
I have not flinched from life,
But looked it in the face.
My son was born to me in bitterness,
And he has passed from me again
In bitterness.
And yet, meanwhile,
I've found my life worth living.
I have toiled ;
And I am old,
And broken ere my time—
The woman's life
Is not an easy one, at best.
But you are strong ;
And unto her who labours for a child
Life cannot be all barrenness.
Yea, you must live life out.
You cannot see the end ;
And happiness, that slips me, at the last,
May still be yours.
The child may be your child and mine—
Not Reuben's and his father's.
We two have loved,
And we will both be faithful to the end.

THE BETROTHED

I have not many years to live out,
But I would not die now ;
For I yet hope to nurse
My grandchild on my knee.
Life has denied me much ;
But you will not deny me this ?
Have pity on me,
Old and desolate.
Would you forsake me, lass ?
FRANCES. I will not leave you.

THE FIRSTBORN

Persons : DAVID ELLIOT.

MIRIAM ELLIOT, *his wife.*

Scene : DAVID ELLIOT'S cottage. MIRIAM ELLIOT stands
by the open door, looking out.

MIRIAM. The Boats are in ;
And I . . .
I dare not go to meet him.
I wouldn't have him hear the tidings
From other lips than mine—
His wife's . . .
And yet,
How shall I tell him—
I, his wife !
How shall I say :
" Husband, you have no son ;
For I, his mother—
I have let him die
While you were toiling for him on the deep ?"
Perhaps they'll break the news to him,
Before he . . .

THE FIRSTBORN

Nay, but he must learn it here—
Here, in his home,
And only from my lips,
Lest he should blench, and tremble, in the street,
Or turn upon the speaker in blind fury.
I think he'll not be fierce with me ;
Though he's so passionate,
And loves the child
Beyond all else.
He knows I, too,
Love . . .
And yet,
When all is told,
I nevermore shall dare
To look into his eyes.
His step . . .
He comes.

DAVID (*entering*). Well, wife ; I'm home.
Have you no word of welcome ?
Come, kiss me, wife.

MIRIAM. Nay, not till you know all.

DAVID. Know all . . .
Then it is true . . .
Wife, I know all.

[*Kisses her.*]

MIRIAM. Some one has told you ?

DAVID. Nay ;
I did not learn it, Miriam,
From mortal lips.
Before we reached the quay,
My heart already feared ;
And when I saw no face among the throng
To welcome me,

THE FIRSTBORN

I knew the boy was dead—
That he had died
The night I saw him, cradled in the foam.

MIRIAM. You saw him, David!

DAVID. Yea, I saw him, wife,
Aslumber in the hollow of a wave.

'Twas on a Friday night,
A fortnight since . . .

MIRIAM. The night he died!

DAVID. Yea, wife; I saw him die.

MIRIAM. You saw him die?

DAVID. 'Twas on the Friday night,
When we sailed out,
Beneath a cloudy moon,
To shoot the nets,
As, standing in the bow,
I watched the heaving waters,
My glance lit on a patch of foam
That held my gaze
Until it took a baby's form.

And all at once
I knew that it was he,
Our little David,
Who lay sleeping there.
And as the moon flashed out
I saw, more clearly,
His dear, white dimpling body—
One wee arm,
Curled on his breast,
The other, stretched towards me,
Although he seemed to sleep;
And, on his brow, his hair,
As ruddy as the new-dipt sails—

THE FIRSTBORN

Your hair he had, wife,
Though his eyes were mine—
His ruddy hair gleamed brightly,
Unwetted by the waves.
And as I looked on him,
My heart went cold.
And still I could not draw my eyes away,
Until the moon went in,
And he had slipt from sight,
Although I strained across the glooming waters
For one more glimpse of that foam-cradled form.
And then we reached the fishing ground ;
And I—I turned to work,
Although my heart was sore—
My heart, that knew too surely
All was not well with them I loved.

MIRIAM. That night,
I watched beside him as he slept ;
One little arm was curled upon his breast,
The other stretched towards me ;
His ruddy hair drooped o'er his brow.
He slept.
But in the end . . .

DAVID. Ah, God, I know !
For, as we hauled the nets,
I saw his body, tangled in the mesh—
His little body, struggling,
Frail and white,
Among the silver herring.
My heart stood still.
I could not stir,
Nor utter cry.
But, as the nets came in,

THE FIRSTBORN

I knew that there was nothing in the mesh
Save lashing fish ;
And, as we shook it out,
Naught flashed beneath the moon,
Or tumbled in the hold,
Save the live, quivering heap of silver herring.
A heavy catch they said.
But I—how should I know ?

MIRIAM. Ah, husband, how he struggled,
Ere he died !
He fought so hard—
So hard for life . . .
And I . . .
I could do nothing for him—
I, his mother.
David, you know my love for him.
My heart has well-nigh died with him.
You do not blame . . .

DAVID. Nay, wife ;
For he was taken in the nets ;
And I, his father,
Could not set him free.
We could do nothing, Miriam.
Once again,
I saw him, ere the dawning,
And once more,
He nestled in the hollow of a wave,
Foam-white amid the foam.
His little hands were clasped upon his breast ;
And then I knew he slumbered peacefully,
And would not wake again.
The day broke,
And I never saw him more.

THE FIRSTBORN

MIRIAM. He slumbered peacefully ;
His little hands were clasped upon his breast.
I watched with him till dawn.

DAVID. And my heart watched with you.

MIRIAM. And we are left without him.

DAVID. But we are left together, wife—
We two . . .

MIRIAM. We two . . .
And we three were so happy,
Together, husband !
Oh, why should he leave us ?
For he was always happy,
Till the end . . .

DAVID. Yea, he was always happy ;
His little life was full of happiness.
Perhaps 'tis for the best
That he's not lived to look,
As all must look,
Some day or other, on unhappiness.
He brought so much ;
And, though he's gone so suddenly,
He has not taken all away with him.
We still have memories.

MIRIAM. But memory is bitter.

DAVID. Can thought of him be anything but sweet ?
Do you remember, wife, when he was born,
Two years ago,
How I was out at sea ?
My heart was filled with fear for you,
And hankered to be home.
The wind and tide
Were dead against us ;
But my will was strong,

THE FIRSTBORN

And when I saw our chosen signal—
A snow-white kerchief by the chimney-stack—
Waving me welcome, with the welcome word,
That you were safely through,
And unto me a son was born—
Wife, I was mad for home,
And crazed to run the boat
Against the odds of wind and water,
Though other signals warned us from the shore.
What did I care !

My mates were daft with fear,
And cried out, we'd be dashed to death
Upon the Devil's Tooth.
But more they feared my eyes—
My eyes that saw your signal,
Aflutter with fair welcome.
And we rode in,
Against the odds of wind and wave ;
And folk ran down to greet us,
As if we had been snatched from death ;
Though I—
I did not heed them,
But leapt ashore,
And ran to you—
To you, who'd come through peril too,
And won safe into harbour.
And then I saw the babe,
Our little son,
That snuggled to your breast,
And nestled in my heart.

MIRIAM. My bosom yearns for him . . .
Your heart will evermore be empty.

DAVID. Nay, wife, nay !

THE FIRSTBORN

Shall not your breast and mine
Be ever full of love of him?
Sweet memories of him
Shall nestle in our hearts,
For evermore.
And we have still each other.
MIRIAM. And our son!

“ THE FAMILY’S PRIDE ”

Persons: MARTHA IRWIN, *a widow.*
KATHERINE IRWIN, *her daughter.*
AGNES IRWIN, *her daughter-in-law.*
EMMA PRUDDAH, *a neighbour.*

Scene: MARTHA IRWIN’S *cottage at dawn.*

KATHERINE. She has not stirred,
Nor spoken all the night,
Though I have never left her.

EMMA. I could not sleep for thinking of her face.
My man still slumbers soundly ;
And, 'tis so many nights
Since he has stretched his body on a bed,
I would not waken him.
There's little rest for men at sea,
Cramped in a narrow bunk,
Betwixt the watches,
For an hour or so.
And he has slept beside me,
All night long,
As soundly as a boat becalmed.
And it was good to see him
Sleeping there,

“THE FAMILY’S PRIDE”

As I recalled the wakeful nights
I’d lain alone.

’Tis weary waiting for your man’s return ;
But, when he comes again . . .

KATHERINE. She has not stirred,
Nor spoken once,
Nor lifted up her eyes
The livelong night ;
Nor can I rouse her now.
And she has taken neither bite nor sup.
Agnes, John’s wife,
And Michael’s lass have been,
Though they, poor wenches,
Were distraught themselves.
But nothing rouses her ;
And she has scarcely breathed,
Since first I broke the news to her,
And told her that her sons were drowned.
She stayed at home,
While I went down
To meet the Boats,
Saying, that wives and maids
Should be the first to welcome
The men on their return.

EMMA. ’Twas well she did not go.

KATHERINE. When first I heard the tidings,
I was stunned,
And stood awhile, dumfounded.
Then I remembered . . .
And I shook myself,
And ran straight home to her,
Lest she should hear of her sons’ death
From any stranger’s lips.

“THE FAMILY’S PRIDE”

She stood upon the threshold,
'Waiting them,
A smile of welcome on her face.
But when she saw me come, alone,
She caught her breath,
And looked into my eyes,
And spake to me,
Ere I could utter aught :
“ And has the sea kept all ? ”
And I . . .
I could but answer, “ All ! ”
She asked no more,
But turned upon her heel,
And went indoors,
And sat down by the hearth.
She has not stirred,
Nor spoken since to me ;
Though once I heard her
Murmur to herself
Her dead sons' names,
Slowly, as though she feared
Lest they should slip her memory.
“ John, William, Michael, Mark, and little Pete,”
She murmured to herself ;
And neither stirred nor spake again.

EMMA. 'Tis well that you are left her.

KATHERINE. My name she did not breathe.
I'm naught to her ;
She never cared for me.
Her sons were all-in-all to her.
I grudged them not her whole heart's love . .
My brothers ! . . .
Now I've none but her,

“THE FAMILY’S PRIDE”

And she has no one left
To keep life in her heart.

EMMA. Nay, do not say so ;
You’re her daughter, lass.

KATHERINE. Her sons were all-in-all,
And they are dead.
’Twas strange she never asked me how they died ;
She must have seen them drowning
In my eyes.

And I have told her nothing more,
For she has asked me nothing.
And yet, what should she ask ?
What was there left to tell her heart ?
Her mother’s heart knew all,
Ere aught was told.

EMMA. Lass, ’twas a cruel storm.
My husband scarce escaped.
“The Family’s Pride” . . .

KATHERINE. Nay, spare me, neighbour, now.
I cannot listen to that tale again—
I, who have looked upon that face all night,
And hearkened for a word from those dumb lips.
Had she but wept,
Or spoken once to me,
I might have helped her somewhat,
Even I.
Oh, how I long to lay that aching brow
In slumber on my breast.
And yet,
I dare not lay my hand on her,
Lest she turn round on me,
And realise
That only I am left her.

“THE FAMILY’S PRIDE”

EMMA (*going to the door*). Agnes comes,
And brings her babe with her.
Perhaps the boy will rouse your mother.

[*To AGNES, as she enters.*]

Lass, lay him in her lap,
He’ll rouse the spark of life in her,
And wake her from her brooding on the dead.

[*AGNES goes forward, without speaking, and lays the child
in its grandmother’s lap. MARTHA IRWIN gazes at
it, then takes it to her breast, looking up at AGNES.*]

MARTHA. Yea, I will tend the boy,
While you go down . . .
To meet your husband, Agnes.
Lass, away !
The Boats will soon be in,
And you will be the first to greet . . .
My son . . . your husband . . .
For he’s yours . . .
As well as mine . . .
And I must share with you.
The Boats will soon be in,
And soon my eyes shall look upon my sons—
My bonnie sons . . .
John, William, Michael, Mark,
And little Pete . . .
Though even Peter is not little now ;
He’s a grown man,
Though he’s my youngest son.
And still . . .
It seems but such a little while
Since I held John,
My eldest,
In my arms,

“THE FAMILY’S PRIDE”

As now . . .

I hold his son.

But . . . lass . . . away !

To greet . . . your husband . . .

And . . . my son . . .

AGNES. O God, have pity !

EMMA. She does not know what she is saying ;
Her grief has been too much for her.

MARTHA. Away . . . away . . .
You’ll be too late . . .

But, Katherine,

Stay with me . . .

I think . . .

I’ve suddenly grown old,

And I would have you with me . . .

Till . . . they come.

EMMA. Look to the child !
She doesn’t know . . .

’Twill fall !

AGNES. Nay, but I have it safe.

EMMA. The end is not far off.

KATHERINE. Come, mother,
Lay your head upon my bosom.

MARTHA. Ah, daughter, is that you ?
Yea, I am weary . . .

And would rest awhile . . .

I hope they’ll come

Before ’tis cold . . .

And you have set five plates ?

And not forgotten Peter’s knife ?

The Boats will soon be in . . .

And I shall look upon my sons,

Once more, before I die . . .

“THE FAMILY’S PRIDE”

For I am nigh death, Katherine . . .

Hark . . . they come . . .

Their feet are on the threshold . . .

Katherine, quick . . .

Fling the door wide . . .

That I . . . may look . . .

On them . . .

My sons . . .

My sons . . .

Oh!

KATHERINE. Death has pitied her.



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