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The
Return of the
Prodigal

By
Charles Richard Williams



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A Monodrama

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The Return of the Prodigal

A Monodrama

(A room of Oriental type, with large windows wide open to the west. Men in festal attire are seated at a long table. The table is richly laid. The men have just finished their feast, but cups of wine are still before them, from which one or another sips at times. The sun is near his setting and soft light irradiates the faces. The center of the group is a handsome young man, with flowing curls of soft brown hair. But his face is bronzed and haggard, and it bears marks of dissolute life. He lifts his bowed head and seems about to speak, when suddenly the sound of singing outside is heard. It comes from a company of young men and maidens returning from the vineyards, which are dimly seen across a narrow valley, softening the sloping hillside with their trellises of green. It is the season of the vintage, and the air is sweet with the scent of grapes, and mellowing apples and pomegranates. The song that is heard is this:)

*The vines that we through spring and summer tended
With patient care,
Are heavy now with purple clusters splendid,
Which scent the air;
But now, the long day's labor being ended,
Homeward we fare.*

*We've plucked the grapes, and in the wine vats trodden;
Sweet was the foam
Of spirting must, in which our feet were sodden,
As honeycomb;
But sweeter, flower-decked, with fresh sandals shodden,
Now to come homel!*

(As the singing gradually dies away in the distance, with a repetition of the last phrase, "Now to come homel" the young man, who has listened intently, again raises his head and begins slowly to speak.)

Home! "Now to come home!" You, O my friends,
Who always were at home, can never know
How much those words mean; how they pierce my heart
And thrill it with emotion beyond speech.
Mine eyes were dewy as I heard the song;
I thought of those old times when I too sang,
Happy and careless, on the homeward way
From days spent in the vineyard, or from nights,
Under the stars, up yonder with the sheep.
And now, back from my wandering in strange lands,
To feel at home—at home! I nurse the word,
And hug it to my heart, repeating it
Over and over, like the glad refrain
Of that best lullaby my mother crooned
In that far-off elysium, when I first
Knew I was I, and she was all my world.
Ah, do not wonder that the tears will start
To mist mine eyes and choke my utterance!
I cannot yet quite grasp the rapture of it,
That I am home—am *home*—and see you all.

You ask me for my story. O my friends,
'Tis hard to tell—my heart so grieves and quivers!
Footsore, unkempt, in tatters, I came hither,
A suppliant to my father. On my knees
I thought first to approach him, to appeal
For his compassion, that he take me in
And make me as a hireling. Lo, far off,
He saw my halting footsteps, and he knew
Me for his son, despite my sorry plight.
He ran to me and fell upon my neck
And kissed me—in full welcome to my home.
He cared for me as when I was a child
And had o'erstaid my license, and came home
Weary from play, with raiment soiled and torn;
Showing the love parents alone can feel
Or fathom—love that utters no reproach
Nor asks one question, while the need is great.

He took me to his bosom, led me home,
Had all my rags—my filthy rags—removed,
And clad me in fresh raiment, clean and sweet,
And hung about me in mute happiness.
And here now he hath made a feast for me,
As though I had come home a conqueror,
And not a beggar, pleading for his grace.
The fatted calf he's killed and called you in
That you might share in his compassionate joy
That I, unworthy, whom he long had mourned
As lost forever to him, was returned!

I cannot yet believe that I am here,
And look into your faces that I knew
And loved in my old days of innocence!
Weak, famished though I am from days of dearth—
More than I wish to think of—yet, my friends,
I say to you I've had no heart to eat
Of all this bounty. I have hardly tasted
The savory roast; the fragrant œnomel
My lips hath barely moistened, with such stress
The waves of reminiscence beat my soul.

Now for the first I feel the beauty and depth
Of David's Shepherd Psalm, learned when a lad
I bowed my head upon my mother's knee
And lisped the words she taught. Familiar hence
From frequent repetition, I scarce thought
How full it was of faith and hope and love.

(The young man pauses. As if oblivious of his surroundings he reaches for the harp and gently thrums the strings. In a trembling tenor voice, he softly chants :)

*The Lord my shepherd is,
No want shall I e'er know;
To verdant meads my feet He leads,
And where still waters flow.*

*In paths of righteousness
My way He bids me take;
My weary soul He maketh whole,
All for His dear name's sake.*

*Yea, though my feet should fare
Adown the valley drear,
Where death's black shade makes men afraid,
No evil will I fear.*

*For Thou art by my side
To make the darkness flee;
Thy shepherd's rod, Thy staff, O God,
They keep and comfort me.*

*Thou spreadst a feast for me
In presence of my foes;
Oil Thou dost shed upon my head,
My cup with joy o'erflows.*

*Goodness and mercy sure
Shall always be my store,
And I will bide, whate'er betide,
In God's house evermore.*

(All present have listened absorbed and as the psalm ends there is a deep sigh, as of relieved tension and suspense. After a brief interval the young man resumes.)

Some way to me now—reverently I speak—
My father seemeth that good shepherd. He
Hath made whole my soul, or set it in the way
Of being made whole; he hath my head anointed;
And he hath spread this table, not indeed
In presence of mine enemies but friends;—
For ye are friends, I trust, though with strange looks
And doubtful whisperings ye greeted me
When first ye came to share my homecoming.
—Nay do not shake your heads—I doubt you not!

I cannot tell when first the longing came
To see far lands—it is so long agone.
I know that as a little lad, at play
Among my fellows, I would pause at times
And wonder what the world was—what I was—
And why and wherefore. Was this all the world—
The space mine eyes could measure, fenced by hills,
Blue in the distance, over which the sun
Climbed slowly to the zenith, or behind
Sank in strange glory—and then came the night?
I wished to know what lay beyond the morning
And the sunset; what people lived—and boys;
How they too flourished and what games they played.
I questioned of my father—he'll recall—
And marvelled as he answered. 'On and on,'
He said, 'stretched out the world; and there was none
'Knew its beginning or could find its end,
'Though men supposed that a great ocean flood
'Flowed round it all and fixed its boundary.
'And everywhere, for all he knew, men lived
'And loved and labored; or were torn with strife
'And fought fierce battles in their lust for power
'Or passion for their gods. But where we lived,
'Here in this happy region, the Lord God,
'The one and only true God, blessed men's lives
'And made this land the best. True, where men lived
'In the great cities there were larger ways
'And ampler modes of life. But it was best
'To be contented with our home and lot;
'For life was much the same in any place—
'In court or cot—by the same motives swayed;
'Stirred by like passions, made sweet by like love!'

Seldom does counsel, sane and wise as this,
The ripe conclusion of experienced age,
Completely satisfy, though it may still
A youth's hot thought—a youth's impetuous wish
To seek, and taste and know things for himself.

And so I nursed my longing, my desire
To pass beyond the gray horizon far,
And mingle among men of other lands,
And know myself the 'ampler modes of life.'

When I was older and I kept the sheep,
Out on the breezy upland, I would ask,
'Whence comes this breeze with its keen salty tang,
'From what far sea hath it winged here its way?
'And whence the birds that build their nests and rear
'Their fledgelings, and then fly away—away—
'We know not whither?'

To the far blue sky
I sent my thoughts by day, dreaming the clouds
That floated fleece-like, hid behind their depths
The fair pavilions where men's spirits abode
Before they were endued with flesh, and whither
They should return once more when they were free.
And when at night I lingered by the fold,
I watched the stars shine—tiny disks of pearl—
And marvelled what they were, and how they shone
On other lands and peoples—gory Mars,
White-shining Venus, all the Pleiad train,
And Sirius and Antares, and the host
Whose names I did not know. 'Oh,' I would cry,
'Ye constant dots of light, ye burning points,
'That break through to the glory of the heavens,
'Which no man hath yet seen nor can conceive,
'What is this world ye look on, what the life
'We little creatures of a day pursue?
'The heavens, David sang, declare God's glory;
'The firmament doth show His handiwork.
'But what are we, the brothers of the dust,
'That He, the Unspeakable, hath thought of us?
'—Nay, let me live my life, and see the world,
'Eat even of the fruit forbidden—so
'I be as God and know both good and evil!'

But all these thoughts I hid within my heart,
Nor breathed them to another. They were mine!
And I was vain to think them all my own.
And constantly the flame that fired my thought
Was fanned to fiercer heat, when I by chance
Had speech of travellers on the great highway
That bent round our demesne. The caravans,
Going afar into the shadowy East,
Where, somewhere in the vague, lay Babylon—
Whose very name was magic to my blood—
Would halt sometimes beside the little brook,
Which dances in the sunlight from our glebe,
To give their camels water and partake
Of their noontide refreshment. Eager then
I mingled with the group, and heard the talk,
Of what men did in Sidon and in Tyre;
Or rumors of far Greece and farther Rome;
Of Egypt and the mystic Nile that rose
No man knew where but gave the land its life;
Of how bold mariners sailed into the West,
Beyond the pillars named for Hercules,
And found that ocean stream which girds the world.
(Oh, the great world! the wonders that it held!)

But mostly they would speak of Babylon;
How great and fair and full of life it was;
How beautiful the hanging gardens were;
How wonderful the river that flowed by;
And how the streets teemed with the joy of life.

One day I'll ne'er forget: upon a barb
Pure white as milk, with housings richly dight,
A princess—so, at least, she seemed to me—
Sat with the careless grace of perfect ease
In converse with some noble. I saw her hair,
Great masses of spun gold, in sunlight gleaming,
And her gray eyes, as piercing bright as stars.
I gazed in shy distress, smit by her beauty.

Suddenly she ceased speaking, and her voice—
Sweeter it smote mine ears than philomel's—
Brake forth in singing, and this song she sang:

(To passionate strains from the harp the young man sings in dreamy tones:)

*Rise up, my love, my fair one, come away!
The winter hath withdrawn;
The flowers once more have made the meadows gay;
The rain is past and gone.*

*The singing birds are come, and in the land
Is heard the turtle's voice;
The figs are ripening, and the vineyards stand
In blossom and rejoice.*

*The air is sweet with fragrance. Why delay,
When all the world invites?
Rise up, my love, my fair one, come away,
And share in love's delights!*

I stood entranced and listened to the song.
I had not known before the human voice
And simple words could have such power to move.
Then Lilith—so I heard her name pronounced—
Catching sight of me, standing so absorbed,
And staring,—I was bare of head, my hair
Blown back in ringlets (people thought me fair)—
Said to her neighbor,—doubting not, I ween,
I could not understand her way of speech,—
'Who is this comely youth? A shepherd, he?
'Or does he dress the vines whose blossoms now
'Gleam on yon slope and so perfume the air?
'What pity that so fair a youth as he
'Should be condemned to live this lonely life
'Here in this obscure corner of the land,
'Nor ever taste the large life that men lead,
'Nor ever know the glory of the world!'

Her song had stirred me like a bugle call
That summoned me to life and love and joy;
But her speech like a sword thrust cut the quick!
And I turned, blushing at my awkwardness,
And fled away to find peace with my sheep.

But no peace came! My soul was racked, tormented.
—‘Nor ever know the glory of the world!’
Those few words lashed my soul like scorpions’ tails.
I fell prone on the sward and writhed and wept;
And all that night, aye, and long nights that followed,
I lay unsleeping, agonizing sore,
And brooded on my future. ‘Surely I,’
I cried defiant, ‘will not come to death
‘Not knowing aught of life but this small dale!
‘I will go out beyond the morning, I!
‘I too will taste the large life that men lead,
‘Will seek and know the glory of the world!’

So when I came to manhood’s full estate,
I told my father all my heart’s desire,
Insistent and imperious, full of hope,
Long, long pent up within me; prayed that he,
Out of the great love that I knew he bore me,
Would give me for my portion whatso part
Of his possessions I might hope to share,
And, with his blessing, bid me journey forth
Into the wide, fair world, to see the life
Men elsewhere lived and make or break my way.
‘I must see life or perish,’ I exclaimed,
‘Life where men gather and the ways are large,
‘And ampler are the modes of thought and action,
‘And glory waits for those who strive and win!’

My father would dissuade me; spake sage words—
I know their wisdom now, for life hath taught me!—
About my inexperience and my lack
Of serious aim or purpose; of the wiles
That crafty men would use to trip my steps;

Of the temptations and the lures to sin
That should beset me to betray and curse.
'Ah, better,' said he, 'bide where you are known,
'And where you know the simple ways of life,
'And find your joys here, as your fathers did,
'Dressing your vines, and pressing the ripe grapes,
'Tending your flocks and seeing their increase,
'Wedding the maid that hath kind eyes for you,
'And rearing sons to honor you and love—
'True to your God and all that makes life sweet.'

But I—I would not hearken. So, at last,
Out of the great love for me that he bore,
Reluctantly my father heard my plea,
Gave me my portion, and with joyous heart
I bade him, sorrowing, my elate good-bye,
And gaily took the road for Babylon.

Singing I went the happy eastward way—
The way should lead me to my heart's desire!
The spring was in the air with scent of flowers,
And birds a-wing, busy to build their nests,
And all seemed love and light and joyousness.
The song that Lilith sang recurred to me,—
The song of earth's renewal and of love,—
The cadence of her voice, her piercing eyes
That seemed to look clear through me and beyond;
And I dreamed I might see her once again
When I should tread the streets of Babylon,
And take my place in the large life men led,
Seeing at last the glory of the world.

I know not what I'd thought a city like;
But when I first passed through the brazen gates
And saw the crowded streets and palaces,
Such as no shepherd lad could e'er conceive,
I was bewildered with the vastness; dazed
To meet such throngs of men, each one intent,
It seemed, but unconcerned save for himself.

And all at once, a sense of loneliness
O'ercame me and oppressed. In that dense concourse
No face looked kindly and not one I knew.
And no one thought or cared that I had come
To make my life there. I felt all alone!
And I was fain at first to turn my face
Against it all and go my homesick way
Back to my home—this home that I had left
So gladly. But shame hindered and I staid.

The talents that my purse held soon won friends—
At least, I thought them friends—and they were kind
After their manner. I gave up to them,
And let them lead me in the paths they knew—
O paths of dalliance and of revelry!
Days of abandon, days of reckless life
That had no memory of the past, no thought
Of the long future followed fast; and I,
Not knowing aught of the base ways of men,
And trusting all that said they were my friends,
Began to think life one mad holiday;—
That only lust of the flesh, lust of the eye,
And life's vainglory were worth any thought.

And so, before I knew, I found myself
Immersed in riotous living, with false friends
Urging me on and seeking out new ways
To dissipate my substance. I had thought—
I, in my ignorance of the worth of things—
The talents, heavy in my pouch, must last
Forever, and I took slight thought against
The morrow; sought no way to use my means,—
Fool that I was, fool I was bound to be!—
Or fit myself into the city's life
Of bustling trade and busy industry.
Only the gaming table and the rout
Of idlers, trifling through the sunlight hours,
And dallying the long night hours away,

Won me—to my undoing! No excuse
I offer, no defense. Weakness and folly,
Folly and weakness; so my days were ruled.

Nay, I will tell it all!—My dream came true—
The dream I loved when I was on the way—
Of once more seeing Lilith. One fair day
When summer was in glory, I went forth
Seeking adventure to beguile the time,
And wandered in the great King's gardens. There,
Under a canopy, with dancing girls,
Whose anklets tinkled as they swayed and whirled,
Herself the chiefest dancer, was the maid.
And oh, the mad dance that men gazed upon
And rapturously applauded! The spun gold
Of Lilith's hair, which in the sunlight gleamed,
Hung all unsnooded, falling to her waist,
Veiling and half-revealing her twin breasts
And candid shoulders so enticingly
I shuddered at the comments it provoked.
Then, when the dance paused, Lilith took her lyre
And poured her voice out; oh, the same sweet voice
That once had driven me breathless when it sang
Of summer's newness and the joy of love—
Love, as I thought, as pure as angels know.
And now too it was love that was her theme,
But wanton love, rhymed of in shameless phrase,
Such as to you I would not dare repeat!

And I was still enraptured with her voice;
Still smitten with her beauty. Eyes and soul
Of mine devoured her greedy while she sang;
And when she ceased, and the mad dance began
Once more,—but this time she not in the dance,—
Still I kept gazing on her where she sat,
As though mine eyes could never drink their fill
Of her strange beauty, which lured men to sin
And made them glad to sin.

At last my gaze,

Which must have seared her senses, made her turn
Those piercing eyes upon me. Pale I grew,
And would have fled, but something chained my feet,
And I stood staring hopelessly at her.

Then suddenly she left her place and came,
Threading her way among gross men that leered
And flung their coarse jests after as she passed,
Direct toward me, who had no power to move.

When she was near me she looked in mine eyes,
Incredulous, as though she searched my soul.
Half-doubtingly she smiled then—such a smile
As we dream seraphs use—and questioned me:

‘Aye, are you not that comely youth I saw
‘Once on the highway, by the vineyard brook,
‘In Israel, what time I journeyed hither?
‘I was from Tyre; I rode a milk-white barb,
‘And as we rested there I sang a song,
‘A song of summer’s gladness and of love;
‘And a fair youth that listened turned and fled
‘When I spoke pityingly that one so comely
‘Should bide forever in so lone a land.
‘Do you remember, and are you that youth?’

As though I could forget that face, that voice!

‘Aye, I am he,’ I answered. ‘’Twas your song,
‘Your eyes, your voice, your words that pierced my soul,
‘And made me long more than I’d ever longed
‘To leave that little life and seek my way
‘Into the larger life that you proclaimed
‘And were a part of. Here am I, at last,
‘Breathing this ampler air; and now, once more
‘I see you—you that long have filled my dreams;
‘You that my heart has cried for endless days!’

Oh, you can guess the rest! I was her slave;
Although I could not doubt from what she sang
That she had many lovers. What she willed

I did because she willed it. For a smile
I would with joy have given my hope of heaven!
And so, delirious days and maddening nights
Of spendthrift revelry were passed with her
And with her troupe of dancers; those good friends,
As they professed themselves, that clung to me,
Aiding to waste my lessening store of gold.

(The young man pauses, overcome with emotion, smiting some crashing chords from the harp, followed by notes of haunting sadness. At last, half-dreamily, he takes up his tale again.)

'Aiding to waste my lessening store of gold!'
Ah me! how fast it melted! But, unheeding,
I plunged on my mad course precipitate,
Draining the cup of pleasure to the dregs.

(Then rousing himself, as with an effort, he proceeds in level bitter tones.)

Then, one late morning, after a wild night,
Which I remembered ill, I woke to find
My purse was empty. 'What of that?' I said,
'I have good friends that will not see me want;
'And I shall soon find ways to mend my state.'
—'Good friends,' forsooth! How quick I came to know,
Now I had need, how much their friendship meant!

I went to him whom I had loved the most;
Together we had roamed long afternoons
Through shaded byways, listening to the birds,
And holding converse; together we
Had talked the evening into morning light;
For he was dowered with a poet's gift
And had seen many lands and knew to weave
Long tales and wondrous of the ways of men.
I went to him and shamefaced told my case.
He was all sympathy, but he too, alas!
Had met with losses, for the times were hard,
And creditors were clamorous; why, that day

He had been minded to come unto me
And seek himself for aid. He was most sorry!
Indeed, most sorry! but—you see, you see!
What was it he could do?

From him I went,
Hurt to the heart and halting in my pace,
Now somewhat doubting those good friends of mine,
To one whom I had more than once bestead
In his extremity. He blunt refused.

And my tale travelled!

The next door I knocked at
Barely was opened, and a saucy knave
Declared his master—who had won much gold
In many a game of hazard to my cost—
Had gone upon a journey, where he knew not,
But knew it would be long ere he was home;
So 'twould be useless to try seek him out.

'Twas thus I made the round of my good friends!
Not one that I had favored favored me;
Not one that had sworn endless brotherhood,
Over the winecup and the dicing table,
Now showed fraternal feeling; aye, not one
Would throw me one poor crust to break my fast!

I noticed soon men shunned me in the street,
Abruptly turning corners where I came,
And my heart sank within me. Bitterly
I cursed my folly, bitterly cried out
Upon those feast-won friends I had thought true.

Aye, and sore dearth now fell upon the land,
And there was grievous want. Where'er I went
Seeking some work, I met the same rebuff:
'What could I do—I country born and bred?
'And even had I skill in any craft,
'Men now were turned adrift in these slack times.'

And all these days I was ashamed to go
To Lilith. How could I to her my state
Disclose,—confess my folly to her scorn?
Ah, but dire need at last drove me to her.
I was an-hungred, oh, not more for bread
Than for some words that might have pity in them!
And she, that light-of-love, whom I had loved,—
Loved truly, though not ignorant of her past—
She listened while I stammered forth my tale;
And I saw tears swim in her piercing eyes
As she leaned toward me, took my aching head
Upon her breast, which rocked me with its heaving.

‘Poor boy!’ she murmured. Tears were in her voice—
Tears and long sighs. She softly stroked my hair,
And pressed one swift hot kiss upon my brow.
‘Poor boy, poor boy! I would I ne’er had sung
‘That song of love and longing by the brook,
‘Whose rippling music challenged me to sing;
‘I would I had not noted your brown curls
‘The wind played with, nor yet your eager eyes
‘Which seemed to search for something never seen;
‘I would I had not spoken those light words
‘In pity of that lonely life you led!
‘So, it may be, you might have bided there,
‘And kept your soul clean in its innocence,
‘And kept your eyes clear, seeing no vile thing.
‘—But, oh, how much I’d missed! ’Tis you alone
‘Have given me thought of what pure love might be,—
‘Me, that have laughed and danced the world away,
‘Me, that have been the play-fellow of shame!’

So she alone,—she that had sung and danced
And played with sin—of all that I had known,
Had pity for me; shared some days with me
Out of her scanty hoard; for those sad times
Of famine, who had heart for song and dance?
Then, one day when I sought her, she was gone,

Leaving me word she'd joined a caravan
And would go home to Tyre; saying good-bye
And bidding me not think too ill of her;
For she would live henceforth, she bravely said,
So that no man could question or reproach.

Then, driven in my hard distress to live,
I found me out a farmer in the land,
And begged him let me work, if but for food.
He gave me swine to tend! Oh, work the most
Abhorred, abominable, to our race!
But I was in no case to choose my task
And so I served, half-starving; even the husks
On which the swine did feed tempted my palate!

One morning, busy with my odious charge,
Ready almost to blaspheme God and die,—
Life seemed so bare and empty, and my thoughts
Mocked me with infinite recurrences
Of all my hopes, my vain desires of life,—
Suddenly on the highway, near the sty,
Where in my noisome tatters I toiled on,
I heard the tramp of pilgrims, moving west;
Joy like the morning lighted up their faces,
As they fared onward. Then one raised his voice
Strong, clear and sweet, and all joined in this psalm:

(The young man lightly sweeps the harp strings as he sings the pilgrims' song.)

*We hanged our harps on the willows
In Babylon's alien land;
We added our tears to the billows,
Sitting sad on the strand.*

*Our captors to sing them besought us,
They required of us mirth in our pain;
But the songs that our fathers had taught us
How dared we profane?*

*Oh, thorny the bed that we lie on,
And grievous the woes that we bear,
If our hearts be not fixed upon Zion,
Uplifted in prayer!*

*Let our tongues from their function dis sever,
Our right hands be withered and rot,
If Jerusalem's glory shall ever
By us be forgot!*

I listened as one rapt; then all at once,
A flood of memories of my boyhood days,—
The temple worship with its stately chants,
The appealing viols and antiphonies,
The pomp and splendor of processional,
As priests moved forward to the sacrifice,
The swinging censers and the acolytes,
The pungent scent of myrrh and frankincense,—
Swept over me and brought me to my knees.
There I recalled my father and my home—
Long absent in my madness from my thought.
My heart reproved me saying, as it seemed:
'Think! in your father's house abundance rules;
'The servants feast, and still there's bread to spare;
'And here you starve, with these polluted beasts!'

And so, at last, I came unto myself!

'I will arise'—and now I spoke aloud—
'I will arise,' I shouted, 'I will go
'Unto my father. I will say to him:
'Lo, I have sinned in God's sight and in thine;
'I am not worthy to be called thy son;
'But take me home, and make me as a hireling!'

And I arose and fled along the highway
Into the West. It was the way I came—
How long ago it seemed now—joy and hope
Spurring me on to find the larger life,

And on my lips a song of confidence.
How changed now was the journey! *I had failed!*
That pitiless phrase stared at me in the sky;
That pitiless phrase rang constant in my heart,
A wild refrain, as by mad furies sung.
—But I kept fleeing on into the West;
Hungry and faint at times, then helped to food
By stranger hands that pitied my distress.

At last, nigh spent, I came into this land
Where men spoke in the old familiar speech;
I saw our hills again, and on them sheep;
I heard young men and maidens as they sang,
Busied among the vines. I felt my heart
Eased somewhat of its burden. But my feet
Faltered and halted when I turned the last
Bend of the road, and saw the rippling brook,
Where Lilith sang upon her milk-white barb
That song of summer and of longing love,
And caught sight of this home my childhood knew.
I feared to come these last remaining steps,
And waited, gazing long and eagerly.
And then!—my father saw me, afar off,
And ran to greet me!—You know all the rest.

(The young man's head droops on his bosom as he stops speaking. All can see by his clenched hands and his heaving breast that he labors in the throes of great agitation of spirit. Meanwhile servants light the swaying lamps and refill the wine cups. The stars come out one by one in the cloudless heaven. Voices are heard outside. The father rises quietly and leaves the room. Fragments of earnest conversation between him and his elder son are heard—enough for all to know that the elder son disapproves of such a welcome to the younger and is offended by his father's partiality and compassion. Then the voices die away, and the father, followed reluctantly by the elder son, reappears. Both find places at the board. Presently the young man, recovering his composure, begins anew.)

I said just now that you knew all the rest.
No; not quite all. I must say something further.
I am the man, yet not the man, you knew

In those old days of youth and innocence.
The life I've led has left deep marks on me—
Marks that must last forever. God Himself,
Albeit His power and grace are infinite,
He can forgive our sin, if we repent,
But He cannot erase the cicatrix
That sin leaves on the soul. That must abide
To haunt us and make sorry all our days,
Aye, and all days to come, world without end!
We are, I say, what we are in each stage
Because of what we have been in all stages
We have passed through already. Every life
That touches us to help us or to harm,
Must leave behind some impress on our hearts.
Each deed we do and every word we speak,
Nay, every thought we think and dare not utter,
Works its effect to good or evil purpose.

So I come back from Babylon to you
The same, yet not the same. The ways of life
I trod in, all the men I met—and women,
Their ampler modes of thought, or right or wrong,
Their larger outlook, their unfaith and faith,
And all the riot and the revelry
That fill my sleep with nightmares, now remembering,—
These have wrought changes in me, made me now
The man you see—worsed, but, no doubt, wiser.

I am come home, not hoping any more
To be just what I was in those old days
Of happy innocence and ignorance,
But hoping once again to find my soul,
To have it clean once more—save for the scars!
And in the wholesome life here, dressing the vines,
Or on the breezy upland with the sheep,
Breathing the pure, sweet air, seeing the stars,
And hearing only speech of sober men
That think clean thoughts and speak God-fearing words,

I may, God willing, commune with myself,
And purge me of my sin, and come to know
What all this life means—what it might be made.
And so I hope the wrongs that I have done
Unto myself and others, I may find
Some method to repair; may learn some way
To stay the steps of others where they slip.

(The young man pauses a moment. Turning his eyes appealingly toward his brother he addresses him in sad but resolute tones.)

Nay, brother, you have right to make complaint.
I do not blame you. Faithful you have been
And filial. Your deservingness all know,
And most of all our father. All his love
Is yours. And if he hath not spread a feast
To pleasure you with friends and merry-making,
'Tis not from lack of love but lack of thought;
For growing older men lose zest for things,
And scarce bethink them what the younger care for.

Of course, I have no rights here. I claim none.
I've had my portion; I have wasted it.
I come here naked, not to take of you
Aught that is yours, but to be as one hired,
Only to have what my two hands may earn.

But oh! our father could not still his love;
Could not forget that I was once his son!
He did not stop to think what were my rights;
But in his great compassion set me here,
Clothed as you see, a ring placed on my hand,
And made this feast—not so much honoring me
As giving thanks that one that had been dead
Once more was living; one that had been lost—
How lost God grant you never know!—was found.

This fine attire I wear but this one night.
But let me just tonight—for this one night—
After my bitter days of stress and dearth—

Feel as a son—feel that I am at home.
Tomorrow I lay off this festal robe;
I don the shepherd's homely habit; take
My crook and go to keep the sheep. The brook,
Where Lilith sat on her white barb and sang,
Shall babble its old music in mine ears;
The upland pasture give me welcome back.
And while I watch, my thoughts shall wander far,
And I shall lift my heart in thanks to God,
That He out of the depths hath heard my cry
And brought me back to the clean ways of life.

And some day, maybe, when my soul is clean,
When it hath been made whole, and when mine eyes,
Can look once more straight into any face;
When I am strong in courage and right purpose—
All which, please God, I may in time become,
Stronger, perhaps, for all the life I've led,—
Ah then, maybe, I shall go forth once more,
And seek a place in the large life of men.

And maybe, sometime, somewhere, I shall meet
Lilith again, cleansed, pure of soul, and fairer
Because a new light shines in her clear eyes,
And we shall walk together through this life,
(O life! how strange, how full of mystery!)
Coming to know, with God's love in our hearts,
The joy of service in all righteous ways,
And so may win the glory of the world!

(As the young man's voice sinks to a whisper at the end, a rapt look comes over his face, and involuntarily his fingers play among the harp strings softly eliciting a sacred melody. The sky is thickly studded now with stars, which shine through the clear atmosphere like white globes of fire. As the guests start forth in unbroken silence into the solemn hush of the night the voices of shepherds are heard from the hill-top singing in resonant tones this psalm:)

*Out of the depths have I called unto Thee;
Lord, hear my cry!
Remember not my great iniquity,
Lest I should die!*

*Thou wilt forgive the sins that mar my state,
Vain though I cope;
On Thee, on Thee my poor, weak soul doth wait,
In Thy word hope!*

*More than tired watchmen for the morning sigh,
For Thee I crave;
Me, by Thy loving mercy, Thou, Most High,
From sin wilt save!*

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