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DAILY BREAD

WILFRID WILSON GIBSON

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DAILY BREAD



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TORONTO

DAILY BREAD

BY

WILFRID WILSON GIBSON

AUTHOR OF "FIRES," "BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES," ETC.

New York

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

1916

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TO
JANE HAY

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 quiet of the frosty night—
Who lies and listens, till the wild notes fail;
And then, in fancy, following the flock
Fares over slumbering hill and dreaming dale,
Until he hears the surf on reef and rock
Break, thundering; and all sense of self is drowned
Within the mightier music of the deep,
And he no more recalls the 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 wild piping; 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

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.
And when with quaking heart

THE HOUSE OF CANDLES

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;

THE HOUSE OF CANDLES

For she was ever cold and proud with all,
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,
I seemed to see the fingers crooking
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.

THE HOUSE OF CANDLES

BARBARA. I could not leave her lying helpless.

And, maybe, she is innocent.
We know that babes die often,
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.
It's 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.

THE HOUSE OF CANDLES

BARBARA. Perhaps we have all 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!

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. Ay . . . and yet

THE HOUSE OF CANDLES

She hadn't too much love for it,
To throttle . . .

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

REBECCA. Why not?

It's common knowledge.

You know, as well as I do,
How all the village whispered,
When it died,
That she had strangled it.

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?

THE HOUSE OF CANDLES

It's 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.

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. Ay, 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

THE HOUSE OF CANDLES

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.
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 it's 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?

THE HOUSE OF CANDLES

It's but my lamp.
It hurts your eyes . . .

GRISEL. Nay, do not move it.
It's 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.
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.
Yes, 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,

THE HOUSE OF CANDLES

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
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

THE HOUSE OF CANDLES

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;
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—

THE HOUSE OF CANDLES

Ay, 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;
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,

THE HOUSE OF CANDLES

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;
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,

THE HOUSE OF CANDLES

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 . . .
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 HOUSE OF CANDLES

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 have 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. Ay, 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;

ON THE ROAD

You'll die of hunger.

JESSIE. I'm not hungry now;
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 it's over,
And the boy is fed?

REUBEN. His money bought the milk—
Ay, 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. It's ill work tramping all the livelong
day,
With naught but hunger in the belly,
As we did yesterday;

ON THE ROAD

And then, at night,
To shelter 'neath a stack;
And lie, and think—
Too cold and tired to sleep—
To lie, and think,
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. Ay, 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,
 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. Ay, 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?

ON THE ROAD

It's 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.

REUBEN. Nay, it's 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?

ON THE ROAD

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 . . .
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:

ON THE ROAD

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;
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 . . .

ON THE ROAD

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, *Edward Grey's mother.*
FRANCES HALL, *betrothed to EDWARD 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.
How often have I stared
Upon the far horizon,

THE BETROTHED

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 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 Edward?

FRANCES. Yes, 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!

THE BETROTHED

Why, you know naught of love
To question this!
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 Edward as a child.
Still, you were young once,
And have loved, you say . . .

DEBORAH. Yes, 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. Yes, 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?

THE BETROTHED

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.

'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. It's 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 Edward think,

THE BETROTHED

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 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.

THE BETROTHED

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.*]

But I'll not think of that now.
Edward 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.
Someone has crossed his threshold, and won home.
Joy has come home to someone'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.

THE BETROTHED

Someone must keep him . . .
Someone . . . 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.
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.*]

THE BETROTHED

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.

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.

THE BETROTHED

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.

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:

THE BETROTHED

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 Edward saw the light.
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 Edward was my son as well.
He never knew his father;
And could I dream
He'd follow in his steps?

THE BETROTHED

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;
Yes, 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;
Ay, 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;
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.

THE BETROTHED

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?

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;

THE BETROTHED

And, in the end,
I find no peace.
And still, have I not toiled?
And toil is something more than happiness;
It's 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.
Ay, 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 Edward's and his father's.
We two have loved,
And we will both be faithful to the end.
I have not many years to live out,
But I would not die now;
For I yet hope to nurse

THE BETROTHED

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 . . .
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.

THE FIRSTBORN

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. Someone 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,

I knew the boy was dead—

That he had died

The night I saw him, cradled in the foam.

THE FIRSTBORN

MIRIAM. You saw him, David!

DAVID. Yes, 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. Yes, 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 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—
Your hair he had, wife,

THE FIRSTBORN

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.

THE FIRSTBORN

But, as the nets came in,
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,

THE FIRSTBORN

And would not wake again.

The day broke,

And I never saw him more.

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. Yes, he was always happy;
His little life was full of happiness.
Perhaps it's 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,

THE FIRSTBORN

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,
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,

THE FIRSTBORN

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!
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, it’s 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,
As I recalled the wakeful nights
I’d lain alone.

“THE FAMILY’S PRIDE”

It’s 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. It's 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 . . .

“THE FAMILY’S PRIDE”

My brothers! . . .
Now I’ve none but her,
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 harkened 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,

“THE FAMILY’S PRIDE”

I dare not lay my hand on her,
Lest she turn round on me,
And realise
That only I am left her.

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. Yes, 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 . . .

“THE FAMILY’S PRIDE”

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,

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.

“THE FAMILY’S PRIDE”

MARTHA. Ah, daughter, is that you?
Yes, I am weary . . .
And would rest awhile . . .
I hope they’ll come
Before it’s 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 . . .
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.

THE GARRET

Persons: ISAAC OXLEY.
ADAH ROBSON.

Scene: A garret in the slums, furnished only with a bed. It is almost midnight; but ADAH ROBSON, with her hat and jacket on, and an old carpet-bag by her side, sits on an empty box by the window, in the light reflected from the lamps in the court below. Presently a step is heard on the stairs; the door opens, and ISAAC OXLEY enters.

ISAAC. You . . . Adah . . . here!

ADAH. Yes, Isaac, I have come.

ISAAC. Come . . . Adah . . . come?

But how've you come so far?

ADAH. Much of the way I walked;
And only took the train,
When I could trail no farther.

ISAAC. 'Twas a long way for you to come
alone.

And how, lass, did you find me—
You, who had never seen a bigger town
Than Morton, with its one long, straggling street?

ADAH. I had the letter with me that you wrote,
So long ago.
And folk were good to me.
And, when I was dumfounded by the noise,

THE GARRET

And by the throngs of people
That, like a never-ending flock of sheep,
Met in a narrow lane,
Daft with the yapping of the dogs,
Scurried and jostled round me,
Someone would pity my bewilderment,
And put me on the way;
Though many that I asked
Had never even heard of Barker's Court.
But all of them were kind,
And did their best to help me.

ISAAC. How long have you been here?

ADAH. Close on three hours.

ISAAC. So long!

ADAH. I could have cried,

I was so wearied;

And after all,

When I got here, to find you out!

ISAAC. I'm sorry, lass.

If I'd but known . . .

ADAH. The neighbours could not tell me where
you were;

But thought that night

Would bring you home.

ISAAC. Home, lass!

It's well that you won hither,

Safe through the streets.

Were you not frightened, Adah?

ADAH. Though sore bewildered,

I was not afraid.

The folk were kind.

THE GARRET

ISAAC. Ay, folk are kind enough,
As far as words go,
And are always willing
To squander breath on strangers;
For city-folk are not like hill-folk, Adah.
But why did you leave home?

ADAH. To come to you . . .
But you're not pleased to see me.

ISAAC. Yes, lass; you know . . . but

ADAH. Mother died last week,
And I have no one else to turn to.
And, Isaac, when you went away,
You said you'd come again for me;
And that is nigh a year since.

I waited for you;
Yet you never came.
And when my mother died,
I had no home;
And so I thought . . .
But, maybe, I did wrong
To come to you like this.

But you . . .
You said . . .
And still you did not come;
And only wrote one letter.
Why did you never come for me?
You said you would,
When you had found . . .

ISAAC. When I had found a home for you.
But I have found no home.

ADAH. Yet this . . .

THE GARRET

ISAAC. This is no home for you—
This empty garret.

ADAH. It's bare;
Still, we soon . . .

ISAAC. We soon!
Nay, you must not stay here;
You must go back again.

ADAH. I must go back?

ISAAC. You must go home.

ADAH. I have no home . . .
I thought . . .

But I did wrong to come.
Forgive me, Isaac; yet . . .

ISAAC. O Adah, lass,
There's nothing to forgive.
But you can never live here—
Here in this reeking hell.
And I . . .

How could I bear to see you starve . . .

ADAH. To see me starve!
Why should I starve?
For I am strong;
And I can work.

ISAAC. When I came to the city first,
I, too, was strong;
And I could work;
And yet,
I starve.

ADAH. Starve, Isaac!
Oh, but you are thin and worn!
While you were standing in the dark,

THE GARRET

I did not see;
But now the light falls on you,
You look famished.
Are you not working, Isaac?
Are you ill—
Too ill to work?

ISAAC. Nay, Adah, I'm not ill,
Save for the want of work.

ADAH. A man like you,
Who used to work . . .

ISAAC. Ay, lass,
While there was work for me.
You know how hard I toiled at home,
Until my father died,
And Stephen married;
And there was room for me no longer;
And not a cottage in the countryside
That I could get,
For love or money,
To make a home
For you and me.
And I was forced to turn my back
On all familiar things—
On all that I'd grown up with,
And all that had not changed,
Since first I blinked in daylight;
To leave my friends,
And go out into the world,
To seek my fortune among strangers—
A stranger among strangers—
To seek my fortune!

THE GARRET

ADAH. And have you not found . . .

ISAAC. My fortune?

Ay, here is my fortune, lass,
This empty garret
In the mouth of hell.

ADAH. Yet, when you left,
You were so full of hope,
And said that in the city
There would be work enough;
Ay, and a home for us.

ISAAC. Yes, I was hopeful,
For I was strong,
And full of meat,
And did not know in cities strong men starve—
Starve in the midst of plenty,
And wander, homeless,
In a maze of houses.

ADAH. But, wherefor . . .

ISAAC. Because there is no work for them.
“If a man toil not, neither shall he eat.”

It's a just law, I thought,
While I could labour,
And eat my fill.

But when there was no work for me,
And I saw many who had never worked,
Rich, and full-fed, and happy,
While old men starved,
Because work failed them,
Things seemed quite different.
You know that life's not easy
For us poor country folk at any time;

THE GARRET

Still, at the worst,
Up ere the dawn, and labouring till dark,
We somehow scrape along
On hard-won earnings;
For while there's work, there's hope;
But when work fails . . .

ADAH. And you have had no work,
Since you left home?

ISAAC. Nay, none that I call work.

ADAH. How have you lived?

ISAAC. You know I'd saved a pound or two
Towards our home . . .

ADAH. But that would never serve . . .

ISAAC. Nay, 'twas soon gone;
Though I spent sparingly enough, God knows!
I should have died without it.
It's hungry tramping through the streets all day
From works to works,
And standing in the throng
Outside the factory gates,
Still hoping against hope, that when they open,
I, too, may be allowed to slip inside.
But times are bad;
And when the gates close to,
I ever find myself among the crowd,
Shut out from work and bread.

ADAH. How have you lived?

ISAAC. Why, lass, I hardly know—
An odd job here and there;
Enough to put a copper in the pocket;
Still, never fit work for a man like me.

THE GARRET

These hands, lass, were not made
To open carriage doors—
These arms to carry papers—
And this big, hulking body,
To scramble in the gutter
With starveling boys for life!

ADAH. Nay, surely!

ISAAC. O Adah, you must go away from
here;

For here men starve;
Ay, men and women starve;
And starving folk are ill to live with.
Such sights I've seen!
I did not think that hell could hold such sights.
But here, where hundreds hunger,
And wander shelterless at night,
Or sleep beneath dark arches,
Or on cold benches, wrapped in soaking fog,
Here . . . here is hell! . . .
Go . . . go . . . before . . .

ADAH. O Isaac, you are ill!

ISAAC. Nay, I'm not ill!

ADAH. Yet you seem faint.

ISAAC. Naught ails me—save starvation.

One cannot trudge all day
Without a bite . . .

ADAH. Oh, you are famished!
And I'm hungry too,
For I've had little since I left.
I thought to find you sooner,
And then together . . .

THE GARRET

ISAAC. You are hungry, Adah!
And I have naught to offer,
Not a crust.
The cupboard is quite empty,
As empty as my pocket.
I have not earned a copper all day long.

ADAH. But I've some money, Isaac,
Though not much;
Still, a few shillings.
There was little left
When mother died.
Yet, while there is a penny,
Why should we sit and hunger?
I'll go and buy some food,
If there's a bite to get at such an hour.

ISAAC. Yes, there is always food to get .
For money.

ADAH. Then I will go . . .

ISAAC. Nay, you shall not go down
Into that hell at such a time of night.
I'll get the food.

ADAH. But you're too weak.

ISAAC. Nay, I am strong enough . . .
It is not far.

ADAH. Then take the purse.

ISAAC. Nay, lass; it's safer here;
And sixpence is enough to buy a feast.
It's long since I've had silver in my hand.
Would God that I had earned it!
I hardly like to take your money.

ADAH. O Isaac, I am famished!

THE GARRET

ISAAC. I'll not be long.

[He goes out, and is heard hurrying downstairs. ADAH takes off her hat and jacket, and unpacks her bag, laying her scanty stock of clothes and other belongings on the bed; then, unfolding a parcel, she takes out a cheap tin clock and winds it up, and sets it on the mantelpiece, where it ticks loudly in the vacant silence. After a while ISAAC returns, carrying a basin of coffee and a chunk of bread, which he lays on a box beside ADAH.]

ADAH. So quickly!

ISAAC. 'Twas not far;

And I came back as quickly as I could,

Lest it should get too cold,

And filled with fog.

Come, take a drink,

While there's some heat in it;

'Twill do you good.

ADAH. Nay, you drink first.

You need it more than I.

ISAAC. Nay, lass, it's yours.

And I—I have no cup.

I paid a penny for the basin;

But they will make that good again,

When I return it.

ADAH. You'd not take it back—

The first thing that you've bought to set up house
with!

THE GARRET

If you've no cup,
Can we not drink together from the basin,
As man and wife
In their own home?
We are not strangers.

ISAAC. Set up house . . .
As man and wife . . .
Together . . .
In their home . . .

Nay, lass,
That cannot be.
You shall not starve for my sake.
Oh, had you seen the faces round the stall—
The hungry faces in the flare
Of naphtha, and the eyes
That glared out from the shadows greedily;
And as I passed them with the coffee,
The cold, blue lips that drank up the rich steam,
As though they feasted . . .

ADAH. And you'd naught for them!

ISAAC. To one poor girl I gave
A penny of your money;
A child, almost, she seemed!
But she was naught but skin and bone, and rags—
And oh, such eyes;
I little thought I'd live to see
That look in any girl's eyes.
But when the body starves,
The best of us are weak;
And there's small blame
To such as she.

THE GARRET

ADAH. Come drink your coffee, lad.
It's long since we two supped together.

ISAAC. A merry meeting this!
Hark!

What is that?

A clock!

Where did it come from?

ADAH. Don't you know it, Isaac?

I brought it with me;

It's my very own.

They could not take it from me.

I'd paid for it at Morton Fair

With my own money.

And, while you were gone,

I took it from my bag,

And wound it up.

Things seemed more homelike

When I heard it ticking.

ISAAC. Homelike . . .

Ay, Adah, there's a kind of comfort

In listening to the ticking of a clock.

That coffee's made another man of me.

This garret never seemed like home before.

Yet, since you came, somehow . . .

But you must go to-morrow.

ADAH. Go . . . Isaac . . . where?

ISAAC. I do not know.

I only know,

If you stay here,

You'll starve.

ADAH. And if I go, I'll starve.

THE GARRET

Why should we starve apart?
But we'll not starve, lad,
If we stick together.
We'll win through somehow.
Though there's none for you,
There may be work for me;
And better times will come,
And bring you work.

ISAAC. I've truded the streets,
All day . . .

ADAH. Bût that day's gone;
And has not even it brought something to you?

ISAAC. Ay; though it's been a black and bitter
day—

The ending's brave.

If there were no to-morrow . . .

ADAH. We don't know what to-morrow brings.

ISAAC. To-morrow!

Lass, have I not said
Unto my heart each night
To-morrow will bring work?
And yet, to-morrow
Comes ever empty-handed.

ADAH. Nay, surely, Isaac,
Yesterday your garret
Was bare save for the bed and this old box.
Now have you not a clock and basin
To start housekeeping with?

ISAAC. And you?

ADAH. If you will let me stay . . .

ISAAC. If I will let you . . . let you . . .

THE GARRET

O lass, I cannot let you go again,
Though we should starve . . .

ADAH. We shall not starve . . .

But live and work together. [*The clock strikes.*]

ISAAC. It's a brave clock.

ADAH. What! three, already!

And to-morrow comes.

The day is not far off,

Though it is dark.

ISAAC. Ay, lass;

And now, at home, the village cocks

Will all be stretching their long necks, and crowing.

THE SHIRT

SCENE: *A room in tenements, near the railway.*

CAROLINE ALDER *sits by the fire, sewing.* ISA GREY *is standing near her, gazing at the blaze.*
The clank and rumble of waggons being shunted sounds loudly through the night-air.

CAROLINE. Ay, lass, the shirt's for Will;
I'll not be sorry when it's finished,
Though it's the last I'll make for him.

ISA. The last?

CAROLINE. You'll make the next, I trust.
You surely don't expect, my girl,
I'll still be making for him, when he's married?
You're much mistaken . . .

ISA. Nay! . . .

But, when you said the last, somehow . . .

CAROLINE. The very last!
And well I mind the first I made,
Or ever he was born,
Nigh twenty year ago;
And I was but a lass, like you;
And, as I sewed it, by the fire,
His father sat and watched me; and we talked . . .
We talked of him . . .
His father always hoped 'twould be a boy;
And yet, before he came
To wear the shirt, I'd made for him . . .

ISA. His father never saw him?

THE SHIRT

CAROLINE. Nay; he'd not leave his engine,
Although the fireman leapt . . .

[*A pause.*]

But 'twas a dainty shirt!
For I had eyes in those days,
And nimble fingers too—
You never saw the like.
Why, this would make a score of it;
He's grown a bit since then!
See, what a neck and shoulders—
His father's, to an inch!
You'll have your work set . . .

ISA. Yes, it's big enough.

CAROLINE. He's just his father's spit and image;
And he's his father, in more ways than one.
I've never had a wrong word from his lips.
However things have gone with him,
He always comes in just as he went out.
You're lucky, lass, as I was . . .
Though I . . .
And now I've made his shirts for twenty year,
Just twenty year, come Michaelmas.
He's aye slept snugly in my handiwork.
At one time, I could scarce keep pace with him;
He sprouted up so quickly;
And every year, I've had to cut them bigger,
Till now that he's a man, fullgrown . . .
And still, to-night, somehow, I almost wish
That I was hemming baby-shirts again,
His father, sitting by me, as I sewed . . .
But you will soon be stitching, lass . . .

THE SHIRT

ISA. I wonder . . .
How clearly we can hear the trains, to-night!

CAROLINE. Perhaps the air is frosty;
Though I have always seemed to hear them clearer
Since . . . since his father . . .

ISA. I hate to hear them clanking.

CAROLINE. Ay, lass; but you'll get used to it,
Before you've lived here long.

I couldn't sleep at night without it now.

Once, when I stayed at Mary's,

I could not sleep a wink . . .

The quiet seemed so queer . . .

I missed the clank . . .

ISA. I never shall get used to it.

I hate that clanking . . .

I wish that Will could leave the shunting . . .

CAROLINE. Ay, coupling's chancy work;

But life's a chancy thing, at best.

And other jobs are bad to get;

And he's a steady lad.

ISA. Yet, if he slipped!

CAROLINE. There's little fear of him;

He's always been surefooted, from a boy;

And such a nerve!

I've seen him walk the tiles . . .

ISA. To think that he'll be at it all night long!

CAROLINE. Well, he must take his shift among
the rest.

It's hard, at first, to miss your man, at night;

But, wives must needs get used to it.

My man was often gone from me,

THE SHIRT

The day and night together;
And it was on the night-shift . . .
He hadn't slept a wink for days,
For he'd been sitting up with me—
The doctor thought I'd scarce pull through—
But he'd to go, and leave me.
I never saw him more.
They'd buried him, and all,
Ere I was out of bed again.

[*Pause.*

But, that was long ago—
Nigh twenty year—
And now, his son's a man;
And soon to marry.
There, lass: it's almost done:
I've just one button now . . .

ISA. I'll sew it on.

I've never done a stitch for him.

CAROLINE. Nay! it's the last I'll make for him:
And no one else must have a hand in it.
You'll have enough to do,
Before you've long been married . . .

ISA. I wonder . . .

CAROLINE. Wonder, lass!
What's wrong with you to-night?
You seem so . . . why, you're all atremble!

ISA. The trains have stopped . . .
I cannot hear a sound.

CAROLINE. Ay, lass: it's queer . . .
But soon they'll start again.
I never knew such quiet . . .

THE SHIRT

ISA. That they would all start clanking!
I cannot bear the silence . . .

CAROLINE. It's time that you were getting
home to bed:
You're overwrought to-night.

ISA. I wish I knew . . .
There's not a sound yet . . .

CAROLINE. Nay, lass, hark!

[An express thunders by, shaking the houses.]

ISA. Well, I'll be getting home.
Goodnight!

CAROLINE. Goodnight!
There, that's the last stitch done.
Is't not a brave shirt, lass!
It's ready for him when he comes.

[ISA goes out, and down the stairs.]

She's overwrought a bit.
About the time that I was wed . . .
It's strangely quiet now again . . .
I never knew . . .
They must have finished shunting . . .
Yet . . .

[She stands, listening, as a hurrying step is heard on the stairs, and ISA bursts into the room, panting.]

CAROLINE. What's wrong, lass!

ISA. Will! O, Will!

CAROLINE. Speak, woman, speak!

THE SHIRT

ISA. They're bringing him . . .
I met them in the street . . .
O Will! O Will!

CAROLINE. His son . . . too . . .

[CAROLINE *picks up the shirt which has fallen from her hand. They stand silent waiting: and there is no sound in the room, until the shunting of waggons starts again, when ISA puts her fingers to her ears, and sinks to the ground.*]

ISA. 'Twill never stop again;
I'll always hear . . .

THE MOTHER

Persons: ROSE ALLEN, a young widow.

HER CHILD.

ANNIE FEATHERSTONE, Rose Allen's sister.

Scene: A lonely moorland cottage, in the early morning. The child sleeps on the bed. ANNIE FEATHERSTONE is tending the fire when ROSE, dressed as for a holiday, enters from the other room.

ANNIE. You are not going, surely,
After all!

ROSE. Why not?
The boy is better.

ANNIE. Better, Rose?

ROSE. Well, he's no worse to-day than yesterday.

ANNIE. I think he's worse.

ROSE. You think?

You always think the worst of everything.

Don't you remember . . .

ANNIE. I remember much.

ROSE. Then you must know
How often you've cried "wolf!"

Already, Annie.

Had you but children of your own,
You'd know how little makes them sick,
How quickly they recover;
And would not fret yourself

THE MOTHER

At every baby ailment,
Nor see a tragedy
In every prick or scratch.
He sleeps,
And little ails a child when he can sleep.

ANNIE. But how he tosses!
It's no healthy slumber.
His hands are hot and restless,
His brow's afire—
Come, feel it.

ROSE. Why, that's nothing, Annie.
It's the old story—
Spinster's children . . .
You know the rest.

ANNIE. I know the rest.

ROSE. Ah, well!
But you should know a mother
Has something else to do
Than break her heart, whenever
A fractious baby pukes and pules,
Or sit and weep her eyes out
At every scratch and tumble.
How should we get through life,
If we paid heed
To every whine and whimper?
But even you
Will learn in time, perhaps,
And . . .

ANNIE. Even I!

ROSE. Yes, even you.
But don't be angry with me,

THE MOTHER

And think that I don't love my child.
You know how much I love him,
Though he's so troublesome;
And how I've worked
My fingers to the bone
To keep him, since his father died.
My life is hard enough, God knows!
And must I miss the little fun life offers?
I get so little pleasure;
And Morton Fair comes only once a year.
But you are hard,
And you'd deny me this.
Ah, well!
Then I must stay.

ANNIE. I would deny you nothing, child.

ROSE. You call me "child!"

Then you are angry.
But I'll not quarrel with you.
Child!
Yes, I'm young—
I wedded young—
But you are old and wise,
And never cared for fairings.
There's but twelve months betwixt us,
And yet, what years and years!
A widow and a mother, too,
I am not half as old.
I wonder if I'll ever be . . .

ANNIE. Nay you will never be as old as I . . .

ROSE. Never?

How can you know?

THE MOTHER

Do you foretell my death?
Shall I not live to see the year out?

ANNIE. Though you should live to see
A hundred years out,
You will still be young.

ROSE. Ah, now I understand you.
You frightened me at first
With your long face and solemn words.
You mean my heart is young,
And think I'm thoughtless.

Yet, a girl
Can hardly go through all that I've gone through,
And still be thoughtless.
Annie, I know life
As you have never known it.

[*The clock strikes.*]

Is that five?
But I must go,
If I'm to catch the train.
It's full three hours' fast walking.
I've stood too long already,
Chattering.
Well, lass, good-bye.

ANNIE. You have not kissed the boy "good-
bye."

ROSE. He sleeps so soundly,
I'll not waken him.
Now, lass, you see
That I'm the careful mother after all,
And I deny myself for him.
How sweet he sleeps!

THE MOTHER

I'll bring him home a fairing
Which he will like far better
Than all your precious kisses.
And now you're angry with me,
Though I meant nothing, Annie.
You must not worry so.
You know I love him,
And would bide at home,
Did I not know I leave him
In safe hands.
Still, if you mind . . .

ANNIE. I do not mind.

ROSE. Good-bye, then.

I could not leave the boy in better hands.

[*Goes out.*]

ANNIE. And she has gone through all,
And yet,
Knows naught!
Life has not touched her,
Though a man has spent
His whole heart's love on her;
And she has stood
Beside her husband's deathbed;
And borne his child within her womb,
Yet, she's unchanged,
And still a child,
As ignorant of life as her poor babe.
While I, whom life denied
All, save the yearning,
I am old at heart.
Life fed her to the full,

THE MOTHER

While I went hungry for the crumbs.
Already I am old and famine-worn,
While she is young and careless.
Passion has brought no tenderness to her;
She never has known love—
Nay, though she drank a strong man's love,
His very life-blood, yet,
She knew not what she drank.
She drained that draught
As though 'twere water,
And soon forgot the cup,
When it was empty,
And broken at her feet.
And now the crystal spring of baby-love
Is spilt in vain for her,
While I am parched,
And thirst for one sweet drop.
Ah, God, have I not thirsted!
And yet the cup
Has ever passed my lips,
Untasted . . .
Now I never shall drink life.
His love had not been spent, in vain,
On me,
Had life but let him love me,
As I loved.
But he . . .
He was so happy in his love,
And I—I loved
To see him happy in his love.
And still my selfish heart

THE MOTHER

Was often sore
That he could be so happy,
While I . . .
And yet,
He never knew of my unhappiness,
For Rose was all the world to him;
And I,
But Rose's shadow—
She, ever fresh and fair,
And I, so gloomy;
And he loved the light,
And never knew his star was cold at heart.
Thank God, he did not know—
Not even in the end!
What would not I have given for the right
To stand beside him at the last,
And hold his hand in mine—
To lay that weary head upon my bosom!
I burned with love for him.
And still, denied all else,
Had it been mine
To bring him balm and quiet in the end,
And spend on him a mother's tenderness,
I should have been content . . . I think . . .
And yet,
Had things been otherwise,
Was not my heart
His heart's true mate?
But he . . .
His child another bore him,
And scarcely knew that 'twas his child—

THE MOTHER

His child, that should have brought into her breast
The milk of tenderness,
And to her heart, the light of understanding.
His child, and fatherless!
But motherhood to her méant little.
A cold and careless wife,
So is she now a careless mother.
The pangs and labouring
Of travail taught her nothing.
She rose from off her bearing-bed
As easily as she had left
The deathbed of her love.
'Twas I, indeed,
Who bore the pangs of travail
To bring his child to birth—
Ay, even as on me
Fell the whole burden of the husband's death.

[The child wakens and stirs restlessly.]

THE CHILD. Mother!

ANNIE. Yes, son.

He does not know me.

And am not I his mother!

She only bore his body . . .

THE CHILD. Mother, a drink.

ANNIE. And she . . .

She is not here!

Drink this, my son.

You are his son . . . and mine!

Your young soul was brought forth

Of my great love for him,

THE MOTHER

The father of your soul.
Have I not mothered it,
And nurtured its young life
With my heart's love,
And fed it on the milk of tenderness?
He sleeps again, our child.
Her eyes he has;
But when he sleeps,
She has no part in him.
Then he is all his father . . .
And all mine—
All mine, all mine,
My babe, my babe!
He sleeps . . .
And yet . . .
I fear . . .
He lies so still.
O God, and I,
His mother,
Can do naught,
Alone and helpless,
In this wilderness!
Had she not gone . . .
But I,
What can I do?
I dare not leave him, yet scarce dare to bide.
If there were but a neighbour . . .
But where could I seek help . . .
If help there be at all
For him in this world now?
He stirs again.

THE MOTHER

Nay, I must stay with him,
My babe, my babe!
Don't fear;
I'll not forsake you!
And, in the end,
You shall not lack a mother's hand
Upon your brow,
Nor lack a mother's bosom
On which to lay your head.

THE CHILD. Mother. . .
A drink . . .

ANNIE. Your thirst is quenched.
Those lips will never breathe that word again.
Much have I craved of life . . .
And it is given unto me
To close your eyes in death.
My child, my child!
Now you are ours, all ours . . .
All his . . . and mine!

*[The day wears slowly through as ANNIE watches
by the dead child. In the late afternoon the
door opens, and ROSE ALLEN enters.]*

ROSE. Am I not a good mother?
I've left the Fair half over.
I could not stay,
For something made me anxious.
Your words kept dinning in my ears,
And spoilt the fun;
And so I left quite early;
And yet,

THE MOTHER

I did not quite forget my boy,
Though I'm so careless, Annie.
I bring a fairing for him

See!

A jumping . . .

Does he sleep?

He lies so very still.

ANNIE. Yes, he sleeps sound.

THE FURNACE

Persons: JACOB PRINGLE, a stoker.
ELEANOR PRINGLE, his wife.
THEIR CHILDREN.
BESSIE PURDHAM, a neighbour.

Scene: A room in tenements. JACOB PRINGLE, his head and body swathed in bandages, lies on the bed, unconscious, moaning incessantly. ELEANOR PRINGLE, with her young baby at her breast, stands near the door, talking to BESSIE PURDHAM. The other two children, aged three and two years, stand silent by the bed, gazing wonderingly at their father.

BESSIE. I heard the doctor go;
And so I've come
To see if I may help you.

ELEANOR. There's nothing more to do.

BESSIE. I thought, perhaps . . .

ELEANOR. There's nothing more to do.
The doctor and the nurse did all they could,
Before they left.
They only went,
When they could do no good by staying.
They said they'd come again to-night,
If he . . . if he . . .

BESSIE. Nay, don't take on so, woman.

THE FURNACE

Your man will soon be well again.

Keep a brave heart within you.

ELEANOR. The doctor says there's little hope.

BESSIE. 'Twas strange to bring him here.

ELEANOR. Here, to his home?

Does it seem strange to you

To bring him home?

Where would you have him taken?

They brought him home . . . Ah, God!

BESSIE. The hospital . . .

ELEANOR. It was too far.

The doctor said:

'Twas not worth while

To take him such a journey,

When there was little hope.

And so,

They did not pass the door,

To bear him among strangers,

But brought him in,

And laid him on the bed.

'Twas not worth while . . .

And so they brought him home,

Home to his wife and children.

'Twas not worth while . . .

BESSIE. How did it happen?

ELEANOR. None can tell.

They found him on his face

Before the furnace-door,

The life well-nigh burnt out of him;

His head, and breast, and hands . . .

Oh, it's too terrible to think of, neighbour!

THE FURNACE

BESSIE. He must have fainted.

ELEANOR. None will ever know,
Unless . . .

But, he's not spoken since.

He only moans, and moans;

The doctor says that he's not conscious,

And cannot feel it much,

And mayn't come to himself again.

If he should never speak!

BESSIE. 'Twas strange that he . . .
He seemed so strong . . .

ELEANOR. They say his shovel
Had tumbled in the furnace, and the heat
Had crumpled it like paper;

And it was almost melted;

And he himself had only fallen short.

His head, and breast, and hands . . .

Oh, how he moans!

The doctor says he cannot feel much;

And still he moans, and moans.

He has not spoken . . .

If he should never speak . . .

If he should not come to himself . . .

If he . . . Ah, God!

And he so young!

BESSIE. How old's your husband?

ELEANOR. Twenty-three next March.

BESSIE. So young! And you?

ELEANOR. Just twenty, turned.

BESSIE. Why, you are only children,
The pair of you!

THE FURNACE

ELEANOR. Yet he's a father,
I, a mother . . .
A father . . . and his children—
What can his children do,
If he should leave them,
And they, but babes,
And Winter coming on?

BESSIE. He may be well before then;
And they've you.

ELEANOR. What can I do without him?

BESSIE. You can but do your best.
If only they'd been boys . . .
Still, keep a brave heart, woman;
For, surely, at the worst,
The masters will do something;
And there'll be money . . .

ELEANOR. Money . . . woman . . . money!
I want naught with their money.
I want my husband,
And my children's father.
Let them pitch all their money in the furnace
Where he . . .
I wouldn't touch a penny;
'Twould burn my fingers.
Money . . .
For him!

BESSIE. You wouldn't have your children starve?
Money is bread . . .

ELEANOR. Nay; but I'll work for them:
They shall not want,
While I can lift a finger.

THE FURNACE

He loves them,
And has slaved so hard for them.
If he can work no more,
Am I not strong to work?
He is so proud of them.
And oft when he comes home . . .
Ah, God, they brought him home!
And he has never spoken;
He has no word for them—
He who was always cheery,
And dandled them, and danced them,
And tossed them to the ceiling.
Look, how they wait, poor babes!
They cannot understand
Why he should say no word,
But only moan, and moan . . .
Ah, how he moans!
He tries to speak, I think.
If he should speak!

JACOB (*in a hoarse whisper*). The big, red, gaping mouth . . .

ELEANOR. Ah, God, he's wandering!

BESSIE. He thinks he's at the furnace.

JACOB. I feed, and feed, and feed it,
And yet it's never full;
But always gaping, gaping,
And licking its red lips.
I feed it with my shovel,
All night long.
I shovel without ceasing;
But it just licks the coke up in a twinkling,

THE FURNACE

And roars, and roars for more.
I cannot feed it faster;
And it's angry.
I shovel all night long,
Till I can scarcely stand.
The sweat pours out of me;
And then it licks the sweat up with its breath,
And roars more fiercely.
My eyes are coals of fire;
My arms can scarcely lift
Another shovelful . . .
Oh, how it roars, and roars! It's angry
Because I cannot feed it fast enough.
The red tongue licks the shovel,
As though it would devour it.
The shovel is red-hot . . .
It melts . . . it melts . . .
It's melting in my hands . . .
I cannot drop it . . .
My hands are full of molten iron.
Water . . . Ah, God!
My hands . . . my hands!
Oh!

ELEANOR. And there is nothing I can do for him!
I am his wife:
And still, I can do nothing.
The doctor said, there was no more to do.
They left me naught to do for him.

BESSIE. Nay, lass, there's nothing to be done.
He's quiet now.
Perhaps he'll sleep.

THE FURNACE

JACOB. The great, red eyes . . .
They burn me through and through.
They glare upon me all night long;
They never sleep:
But always glower on me.
They never even blink;
But stare, and stare . . .
I cannot look upon them any longer—
I cannot face them . . . still . . .
Ah, God, I cannot shut them out!
They burn right through my eyelids,
And set my eyes afire.
My eye-lids are red-hot,
And scorch my eyes . . .
My eyes, my eyes!
Oh, I would tear them out . . .
But I . . . I cannot lift my hands;
They're full of molten iron.
My hands!
Oh!

BESSIE. He seems quite spent.
Perhaps the worst is over.

ELEANOR. Oh, would to God . . .

JACOB. The big, red, gaping mouth . . .
It gapes,
And licks its lips,
And roars, and roars for food.
I cannot breathe,
Its hot breath stifles me.
It puffs at me,
Then tries to suck me in—

THE FURNACE

Into that roaring hell.
It gapes . . . it gapes . . .
For me!
I cannot feed it fast enough;
And it is angry,
And roars, and roars with hunger.
Some night the red tongue will shoot out and lick
me

Into that blazing hell-mouth—
Will lick me to a cinder,
A handful of white ash.
It will shoot out . . .
Ah, God!
The fiery tongue . . .
Is all about me now;
It wraps me round and round,
And licks me in.
At last the furnace has me—
The furnace that I feared.
I burn . . .

ELEANOR. That he should suffer so!
Ah, God, that he might . . .

THE ELDEST CHILD. Mother, what's a furnace?

ELEANOR. Ah, child, that you should hear!
I scarcely knew you listened.
A furnace is the mouth . . .
Nay, it's a fire.
A big, big fire.

CHILD. A fire?
But why is Daddy frightened?

THE FURNACE

I do not fear the fire.
I sit quite close,
And warm my hands.
I'd love a big, big fire,
And would not be afraid of it:
So, why is Daddy?
I've often sat upon his knee,
Quite close,
And watched the pretty flames.
He never told me he was frightened,
Or I'd have held his hand.

ELEANOR. And he will nevermore
Sit by the hearth,
His children on his knee,
And listen to their prattle.
He was proud . . .

BESSIE. He does not moan so much
And hardly moves.
I think . . .
But, hark!
He tries to speak again.
His voice is weaker;
He can scarcely whisper.

JACOB. O mother, do you see the little flame
That leaps above the bars,
And dances in and out?
Look how he dances, dances,
Upon the red-hot coals.
Oh, now, he's gone—
He must have heard me talking.
But there he is again:

THE FURNACE

And laughing at me,
And waving his red cap.

BESSIE. The worst is over.
He's easier now.

ELEANOR. His mind is wandering back to his
old home.

He's heard the child;
And thinks that he's a child, too.

JACOB. I love to watch the fire;
And when I am a man,
I'll mind a furnace, mother,
And feed it all day long;
And watch it blaze;
And listen to its roaring.

Look, mother, do you see the little flame,
That runs right down into that deep, red hollow;
And waves to me to follow after?

I'd like to follow him,
And run right down—
Right down that golden lane,
Among the dancing flames,
And dance with them.

Ah, there he is;

And laughing at me,
And waving his red cap . . .

And dancing . . . dancing . . . [A pause.]

CHILD. O mother, look,
The fire has gone quite out;
And I am cold.

BESSIE. He moans no longer . . .

ELEANOR. He seems more easy . . .

THE FURNACE

He does not stir . . .
How quiet he has grown . . .
It's strange, he lies so still,
So suddenly . . .
That he would speak to me!
 BESSIE. Ay, he is easy now;
But he will never stir again, nor speak . . .
 ELEANOR. Jacob!
 CHILD. He is not frightened now.

THE CHILD

Persons: AMOS WOODMAN.

JOAN WOODMAN, *his wife.*

Scene: A garret in the slums. It is afternoon and a gleam of sunshine, struggling through the grimy window, reveals the nakedness of the room, which is quite bare of furniture. In one corner JOAN WOODMAN crouches by a heap of rags and straw, on which is lying the dead body of her child. She is a young woman, but looks older than her years, being worn and haggard with want and suffering. The door opens and AMOS WOODMAN enters, wearily. He is lame and coughs almost incessantly. As he pauses on the threshold, his wife rises and goes towards him.

JOAN. He's gone.

AMOS. Forgive me, Joan.

JOAN. Forgive you, Amos?

AMOS. Ay, forgive me—

Forgive me that I left you with the child.

I could not bear

To sit and watch him dying,

When there was nothing I could do to save **him**.

JOAN. 'Twas better that you went.

It is not good to see a baby die . . .

And yet . . .

THE CHILD

When all was over,
I knew 'twas best.

AMOS. Best, wife?

JOAN. Yes, husband;
For he suffers nothing now.

AMOS. Ah, how he suffered!
And I,
His father,
Could do naught to ease him.
He cried for bread;
And I—I had no bread—
I had no bread to give him.
Perhaps it's best . . .

And yet . . .
If he'd but lived . . .

JOAN. Lived, Amos?
It's not good to see a baby starve—
To watch him wasting day by day,
To hear him crying . . .

AMOS. Yes, he cried for bread—
And I, his father, had no bread to give him.
I would have worked these fingers to the bone,
To save him—
To the bone!
They're little else already.
But times are bad,
And work is slack,
And so I needs must watch my baby starving—
Must sit with idle hands and see him starving—
Must watch him starve to death;
His little body wasting day by day;

THE CHILD

The hunger gnawing at his little life;
His weak voice growing weaker.
He cried for bread . . .

JOAN. He'll cry no more.
He feels no hunger now;
And wants for nothing.

AMOS. Ay, he's quiet . . .
We'll never hear his voice again.
If he'd but lived . . .
Yet he is free from pain now,
And will not thirst nor hunger any more.
And though, if no help comes,
We two must starve.

The hunger will no longer gnaw our hearts,
Knowing that he's beyond the clutch of hunger.

JOAN. Ay, we must starve, it seems,
If you have found no work;
Though I am free now . . .
Free to seek for work.
He does not need me now;
And nevermore will need me.
Ah, God, I'm free . . .
Free!

AMOS. They only look at me,
And shake their heads;
Though I was strong once, wife,
And I could work,
When there was work to get.
But times are bad,
And work is slack;
And I must needs sit idle.

THE CHILD

While he was dying—
While he was dying for the want of food—
The hands that should have earned his bread were
idle.

I gave him life,
Yet could not feed the life that I had given.

JOAN. Ay, Amos, you were always steady,
And ever worked well;
And I, too, have worked;
And yet we've not a penny in the world,
And scarce a bite to eat.
Reach down the loaf
And cut yourself a slice;
You've eaten naught all day.

AMOS. And you, wife?

JOAN. Nay, I cannot eat just now.
He drank the milk,
But could not touch the bread;
He was too ill to eat.

AMOS. And when he cried to me for bread,
I had no bread to give him.
Wife, how should I eat bread
When I'd no bread to give him till too late?

*[They sit for a while silent on an upturned
empty orange-box by the window.]*

JOAN. Your cough is worse to-day.
You've eaten naught,
And sit so still,
Save when the coughing takes you.

AMOS. Wife, I was thinking.

THE CHILD

JOAN. Thinking!
Nay, lad, don't think;
It is not good to think,
At times like these.

I dare not—
I, who bore him,
And gave him suck.

AMOS. Wife, I was thinking of a little child.

JOAN. Of him?

AMOS. Nay, not of him,
But of a happy child,
Who played and paddled daylong in the brook
That ran before his father's cottage.
And, as I thought,
I seemed to hear the pleasant noise of waters—
The noise that once was in my ears all day,
Though then I never heard it,
Or, hearing, did not heed.
Yes, I was thinking of a happy child—
A happy child . . .
And yet, of him;
For, as I listened to the sound,
It seemed to me the baby that we loved
No longer lay upon that heap of rags,
Lifeless and cold,
But, somewhere, far away,
Beyond this cruel city,
Among the northern hills,
Played happily the livelong day,
Paddling and splashing in the brook that runs
Before a cottage door.

THE CHILD

O wife, do you not hear the noise of water—
Of water, running in and out,
And in and out among the stones,
And tumbling over boulders?
He does not hear it,
For he's far too happy.
O wife, do you not hear the noise of water—
Of water, running, running . . .

*[The room slowly darkens as they sit, hand in
hand, gazing at the sky beyond the chimney-
stacks.]*

THE NIGHT-SHIFT

Persons: JENNY CRASTER, *Robert Craster's wife.*
TAMAR CRASTER, *Robert Craster's mother.*
MAGGIE THOMSON, *a neighbour.*
LIZZIE THOMSON, *her daughter.*

Scene: ROBERT CRASTER'S cottage, in the early morning. JENNY CRASTER lies in bed, her newborn baby by her side. Her eyes are closed, and she seems barely conscious. TAMAR CRASTER stands at the door talking with MAGGIE THOMSON.

TAMAR. My son!
But, hush!
She must not hear;
'Twould be the death of her.
'Twill take her all her time, poor lass,
To pull through as it is.
And, if she heard, her husband . . .
But it's not true . . .
Oh, say it is not true!

MAGGIE. Ay, Tamar, it is true enough;
And there's but little hope
That any man will leave the pit alive.

TAMAR. My son!
She must not hear a whisper;
The news would kill her, and her newborn babe.

THE NIGHT-SHIFT

MAGGIE. Sooner or later,
She must know, poor soul!

TAMAR. Ay, but not yet;
For she's in need of sleep.
When there's no help,
And she must know,
Then 'twill be time enough
To break the news to her.
Perhaps, when she has slept a bit,
She will be strong to bear much
That's now beyond her strength.

MAGGIE. Well, I'm away!
My man has gone already
To see if there's a chance of doing aught.
Thank God, he's on the day-shift!
If he'd been in the pit . . .
But he was sleeping soundly,
Beside me, snug in bed,
Until the rumbling roused us;
When he leapt up and ran
Nigh naked to the pit.
I had to stay and hush the children
To sleep again;
The noise had startled them.
And then I came to tell you.
There's scarce a body left
In all the village.
The cottages were empty,
And every door ajar,
As I came by;
For all the women-folk

THE NIGHT-SHIFT

Have run to the pit-head.
And I must go;
I cannot stay behind,
Not knowing what is happening.
If there is any news,
I'll bring you word;
Although it's feared
There's little hope of rescue.

[She goes out, closing the door behind her.]

TAMAR. Robert, my son!
But I must breathe no word,
Lest she should hear.
She must not know my son's in peril;
For he's her husband.
The women-folk are gathered round the shaft—
Poor wives and mothers,
Waiting and watching,
And hoping against hope.
Would that I, too, watched with them—
A mother 'mid the mothers—
To share with them what little hope there may
be.
But I must bide at home,
Alone with her I dare not speak to,
Or breathe a word of all my fears to.
Nay, I must keep them to myself,
Even though my heart . . .
My son's in danger,
Yet I dare not go . . .
No longer he belongs to me alone;

THE NIGHT-SHIFT

For he's her husband and a father now:
And I must stay
To tend his wife and son.

JENNY (*opening her eyes and speaking in a whisper.*)

Is Robert not home yet?

TAMAR. Nay, daughter . . .
He's not home yet.

JENNY. What time is it?

TAMAR. It's nearly . . .
Nay . . .

*[She goes to the clock on the wall and holds the
pendulum until it stops.]*

The clock has stopt.

JENNY. I thought I heard it ticking;
Though now I cannot hear it.
Still, it seems almost light;
And he should not be long.
How pleased he'll be to have a boy!
I hope that they'll not tell him,
Before he reaches home.
I'd like to see his face,
When first he learns
That he's the father of a son.
He'll soon be home . . . be home . . .
My babe!
He'll be so pleased.
I hope . . .

That they'll not tell him . . .

TAMAR. Nay . . . they'll not tell.
But you must not talk now,

THE NIGHT-SHIFT

For you're too weakly,
And should save yourself.
Until . . .

JENNY. Until he comes.
Yes, I'll lie very quiet,
And save myself that I may see him,
When he first learns . . .
But there's a sound of tapping . . .
Do you not hear it?

TAMAR. Nay, lass, I hear nothing.

JENNY. I thought it was the clock.

TAMAR. The clock has stopt.

JENNY. It must be in my head then.
It keeps on tapping . . . tapping . . .
He'll soon be home.
But I'm so tired,
And cannot keep awake.
I'll sleep . . .
Till he comes home.
And, Tamar, you'll be sure to waken me
The moment he comes home?
You'll not forget?

TAMAR. Nay, lass, I'll not forget.

JENNY (*drowsily sinking back into unconsciousness*). It keeps on tapping . . . tapping . . .
Tap . . . tap . . . tap . . . tap . . .

TAMAR. Till he comes home . . .

Ah, God, how shall I tell her!
For I must tell her soon;
I cannot keep it from her long.
And I, his mother,

THE NIGHT-SHIFT

Must be the first to tell his wife
That he . . .
But he may come yet . . .
And she must know naught now.
For she's too weakly,
And 'twould kill her outright;
And, after all,
He may come home again,
Before there's any need to tell her aught.
When there's no help,
And she must know,
Then 'twill be soon enough . . .
She'll have a longer spell than I
To bear it . . .
She is young!
And I . . . I seem quite old,
So suddenly!
She said she heard a sound of tapping . . .
She might have heard my heart almost,
It beat so loudly at my side
While she was speaking of my son,
Her husband,
And wondering, poor soul . . .
But, may he not come safe home after all?
She may speak truly, when she says
He'll soon be home.
And yet . . .
She heard a sound of tapping . . .
While I heard nothing—
Nothing save my heart,
My old heart dinning in my ears.

THE NIGHT-SHIFT

JENNY (*sitting up suddenly in bed and gazing into vacancy*). Hark!

There it is again . . .

A sound of tapping . . .

I hear it tapping, tapping . . .

Like a pick . . .

Tap . . . tap . . . tap . . . tap . . .

TAMAR. A pick . . .

Ah, God!

Nay, daughter; there is nothing.

You must lie quiet now,

Or you . . .

JENNY. Tap . . . tap . . .

It goes on tapping, tapping,

In the dark . . .

It's dark . . . so dark;

And I can scarcely breathe,

The darkness lies so heavily upon me,

As though I wandered somewhere underground,

With all the earth above me,

With great rocks hanging overhead,

So close that my hair brushes them,

Although I cannot see them;

And I can touch them with my hand . . .

Oh, they are falling, falling . . .

I've pulled them down on me . . .

The great black rocks . . .

[*She sinks back exhausted.*]

TAMAR. Nay, lass, you're lying in your bed,
Your own warm bed,
Beside your little son.

THE NIGHT-SHIFT

JENNY (*drowsily*). My little son!
When he comes home
He'll be so pleased . . .
But still I hear a sound
Of tapping . . .
Tap . . . tap . . . tap . . . tap . . .

[*She dozes over.*]

TAMAR. My son!
Nay, there's no hope,
For she hears something . . .
Something that I cannot.
The wife's heart hears
What the old mother's may not,
Because it beats too loudly.

[*She sits for a while gazing into the fire.*]

JENNY (*sitting up again suddenly*.) Will no one
stop that tapping?
I cannot sleep for it.
I think that someone is shut in somewhere,
And trying to get out.
Will no one let them out,
And stop the tapping?
It keeps on tapping, tapping . . .
Tap . . . tap . . . tap . . . tap . . .
And I can scarcely breathe,
The darkness is so thick.
It stifles me,
And weighs so heavily upon me,
And drips, and drips . . .
My hair is wet already;

THE NIGHT-SHIFT

There's water all about my knees.
I cannot see it,
But I feel it creeping,
Higher and higher,
Cold as death, about me:
I cannot see it,
But I hear it swishing
At every step,
And feel it dripping cold—
The darkness dripping down upon me,
So cold, so cold.
And yet . . . I cannot breathe . . .
The darkness is so thick, so hot:
It's like a furnace-blast
Upon my brow;
And weighs so heavily,
As though great rocks were hanging overhead!
And dripping, dripping . . .
I cannot lift my feet,
The water holds them,
It's creeping . . . creeping . . . creeping . . .
My wet hair drags me down.
Ah, God!
Will no one stop that tapping . . .
I cannot sleep . . .
And I would sleep
Till he comes home . . .
Tap . . . tap . . . tap . . . tap . . .
[Sinks back exhausted.]
TAMAR. O God, have mercy on her . . . and
on me!

THE NIGHT-SHIFT

She hears,
And yet,
She knows not what she hears.
But I,
Though I hear nothing,
I know all.
Robert, my son!

JENNY (*starting up again*). I cannot breathe
The darkness is so thick—
So thick and hot,
It stifles me . . .
Ah, God! Ah, God!
The darkness is ablaze.
The rocks are falling, falling . . .
The great, black, dripping rocks . . .
And I am falling . . .

[*A pause.*]

And there's someone tapping,
As though they would be in.
Why don't you let him in?
It is my husband;
He would see his son—
His firstborn son.
Can you not hear a tapping, tapping?
It's like the tapping of a pick . . .
Tap . . . tap . . .
But it grows fainter:
Now I cannot hear it.
The darkness has come down on me.
I sink . . . I sink . . .

[*She lies back exhausted.*]

THE NIGHT-SHIFT

TAMAR. She does not hear it now.
And now . . . it almost seems
As if . . . my heart had stopt . . .
I cannot breathe . . .
But she is sleeping soundly,
And sleep will give her strength.
She's scarcely slept,
Since he was born—
The poor wee babe!—
And he is sleeping too.
I would that I were in as deep a slumber,
For I am weary . . .
Yet, how could I sleep?
They sleep,
Because they do not know,
But I . . . I know.
Robert, my son!

*[She sits gazing into the fire. After a while
JENNY wakens and looks about her.]*

JENNY. My little son,
Your father'll soon be home.
He'll be so pleased . . .
But he should be home now,
For it is light.
Has Robert not come home yet?

TAMAR. Not . . . yet . . .

JENNY. What time . . .

TAMAR. The clock has stopt.

JENNY. I wonder what can keep him.
It is light . . .

THE NIGHT-SHIFT

TAMAR. Nay, woman, it's not light yet.
It's dark . . . quite dark . . .
You're weakly still;
And you've been wandering;
And now you're talking foolishness.
You must not speak;
But go to sleep again,
And waken well and strong.

JENNY. It seems quite light . . .

TAMAR. Nay . . . it is dark . . . God knows!

JENNY (*drowsily*). I think that I could sleep
again—

Sleep . . . till he comes.

[She sinks into a deeper slumber. TAMAR sits for a while, gazing into the fire with vacant eyes. Suddenly she speaks, her voice little more than a whisper, and tries to rise, but falls forward on to the hearthrug, and lies motionless.]

TAMAR. It's dark . . . quite dark . . .
Robert . . . my son!

[Time passes; presently a sound of voices is heard without; the door opens quietly, and MAGGIE THOMSON enters, followed by her daughter, LIZZIE.]

MAGGIE. Tamar . . . where are you?
Quick, lass, . . . she's fallen!

THE NIGHT-SHIFT

She must have fainted . . .

The shock . . .

*[They turn TAMAR'S face to the light and loosen
her bodice.]*

O God!

She does not breathe;

Her heart has failed her.

And I—

I left her here alone . . .

His mother . . .

LIZZIE. The clock has stopt.

MAGGIE. Look to the wife . . .

She may . . .

LIZZIE. She's sleeping quietly.

MAGGIE. Poor Jennie!

And her babe is fatherless.

LIZZIE. He's snuggled to her breast,

And sleeping soundly.

A fine big boy he is.

AGATHA STEEL

Persons: ZILLAH PAXTON.

AGATHA STEEL, *her daughter.*

Scene: A room in tenements. It is evening; and ZILLAH PAXTON, an elderly woman, sits by the fire, with folded hands; when the door opens and AGATHA STEEL enters.

ZILLAH. You, Agatha!
You startled me . . .
I heard the staircase creaking;
But little dreamt 'twas your foot.
I never thought to look on you again.
Since you and Jim went off, so suddenly,
Without a word, and only newly wedded,
It seemed I'd heard the last of you.
You went without a word to me—
Without a word to me, your mother!
And you've not written me a line—
A single line in all these years—
Three years, at least:
And I, for all you cared,
I might have been both dead and buried,
And say you nothing now!
Have you no tongue at all?
I'm glad to see your face, although it looks . . .

But you—you must be ailing, daughter,
 To look like that!
 Have you come back to me, because you're ailing,
 Come back to me . . .
 Speak, woman!

AGATHA. Nay . . . I'm well enough.

ZILLAH. Well? Nay, you're ailing, Agatha.
 A mother's eye is quick . . .
 But, where is Jim?

Is he not with you, lass?

AGATHA. I don't know where he is.

ZILLAH. You don't know where!
 He has not left you, daughter?

AGATHA. He's left me for another woman.

ZILLAH. A curse . . .

AGATHA. Nay! you've no right to curse him.

ZILLAH. Right! I've no right to curse the man
 Who leaves my daughter, his own wedded wife . . .
 Have I, your mother . . .

AGATHA. You've no right:
 For you, my mother, let me wed him.

ZILLAH. I let you! Why, what else was there
 to do?

The thing was past my mending,
 Before I even heard of it.

AGATHA. You know that is not true.
 I married him for your sake:
 You drove me to it,
 Though you knew I loathed him.

ZILLAH. For my sake! I—I drove you!
 So I'm to bear the blame of your ill-doing,

AGATHA STEEL

Because I tried to do the best for you,
And save you from the gutter!

AGATHA. The best for me . . . the best!
To make me wed the man I hated!

ZILLAH. You did not always hate him.

AGATHA. True . . . yet, I think,
I never really loved him.

ZILLAH. More shame to you!

AGATHA. Perhaps, and still,
Even I would not have married him.
But you—you knew him,
And you let me wed him,
Though I was your own daughter, just a child.
Yea, I was young, God knows!
But he . . .

He always had a way with him:
And I was in his arms, before I knew.
And then . . .

I loathed him, loathed him!
And you . . . you knew . . . and yet . . .

ZILLAH. What else was left?
Would you have had . . .

AGATHA. Ay! anything save this.
But you . . . you cannot understand.
You have not changed, while I . . .

ZILLAH. Changed, Agatha?

AGATHA. And yet, how should you change?
You've not gone through what I have.
Still, it is strange to think three years
Should make no difference, when, to me . . .
But you . . . you speak, as you spoke then—

Then, when you scolded me, and said,
 The Beals had always been respectable:
 And so, I married him:
 And I have been respectable:
 And clung unto the man who hated me,
 Until he shook me off.

ZILLAH. But you're his wife . . .

AGATHA. Oh, mother, will you never understand!

Yes, I'm his wife, his wedded wife:
 And I've been faithful to him,
 Been faithful to the husband that I hated,
 Though he was ever faithless.
 Yes, mother, I, your daughter,
 Have been respectable.
 I've not disgraced you, mother.

ZILLAH. Ah, lass, you're bitter;
 But, it's little wonder,
 Since you're forsaken.
 Jim was always wild . . .

AGATHA. Wild!

ZILLAH. From a boy . . .
 And still, I never thought . . .
 A curse . . .

AGATHA. Nay! bless him, rather,
 That he, at least, has left me.

ZILLAH. Ay! maybe, you're well rid of him,
 If he's been cruel . . .

AGATHA. Cruel, woman!
 You know that he was drunk, the night we married.
 He's scarce been sober, since.

And, when a man's in drink . . .

But, that's past now:

We'll talk no more about it.

A blow is neither here nor there,

If only you're respectable!

ZILLAH. But, how've you lived these years?

AGATHA. God knows!

He never did a stroke of work;

But, lived upon the little I could earn.

We've travelled all the countryside:

For, when I'd worked my fingers to the bone,

To get a home together,

He'd always break it up;

And drag me out again,

To trail behind him to another town.

ZILLAH. You've had no children, daughter?

AGATHA. Children . . . ah, God!

ZILLAH. Dead, Agatha!

Perhaps, it's well . . .

AGATHA. It's well that I should bear three still-born babies!

ZILLAH. Stillborn! Ah, daughter!

AGATHA. If only one had lived . . .

But he . . . he killed them . . .

Ay! I'm bitter.

ZILLAH. You've cause enough: he's used you cruelly.

Three stillborn babes!

AGATHA. Mother, you understand!

ZILLAH. Ay, Agatha!

My first was stillborn . . .

AGATHA STEEL

AGATHA. I never knew.

ZILLAH. And yet, your father, lass,
Was always good to me.

Ay! he was ever kind . . .

But, Jim has used you cruelly.

AGATHA (*rising*). Well . . . now, it's over!

And I have some hope . . .

But, I must not stay talking here.

It's time . . .

ZILLAH. You would not go again?

Where can you go?

You'll live here, surely, now?

AGATHA. Nay! anywhere but here.

He'll likely weary of his mistress—

Poor soul, I pity her!

And seek again his wife to keep him.

He'd come here, first . . .

What startles you?

ZILLAH. I thought I heard a step.

AGATHA. Oh! I've no fear he'll come yet;

She's young, and strong . . .

ZILLAH. I did not think 'twas Jim,

But Richard.

AGATHA. Richard? Who?

ZILLAH. Yes, Agatha, you've given me no chance
To tell you that I'd wed again.

AGATHA. You . . . married!

ZILLAH. Ay, a year ago,

To Richard Paxton.

AGATHA. Mother! not to him!

ZILLAH. Why not . . .

AGATHA STEEL

AGATHA. You've married him . . .
And, yet, you knew that he was never steady!
ZILLAH. Well, life's a lonely thing without
man:

And you had left me, daughter:
You left, without a word: and never wrote:
You didn't care, though I was dead, and buried.
Why should you mind . . .
And there's small blame to them
Who drink too much, at whiles.
There's little else the poor can get too much of:
And life, at best, is dull enough, God knows.
Sometimes, it's better to forget . . .
And . . . it's a lovely dizziness.

AGATHA. You! Mother!

ZILLAH. Ay! you'll blame me.
But, Richard is not always kind . . .

AGATHA. Nay, mother, I don't blame you:
It's better to forget.
Forgive me if I spoke too harshly:
I am not bitter, now.
But I must go.

ZILLAH. Where will you go?

AGATHA. I cannot tell—but, far away from
here . . .
That I, too, may forget . . .
Yes; even I!
Since I am free;
And there is hope within me
That I may bear a living child.

MATES

Persons: MARTIN AYSLEY, a *pitman*.
CHARLOTTE AYSLEY, *his mother*.
GRACE HARDY, *his betrothed*.

Scene: CHARLOTTE AYSLEY'S *cottage*. CHARLOTTE AYSLEY, and GRACE HARDY, *stand by fire, talking together*.

CHARLOTTE. Nay, lass! I cannot turn him;
He pays no heed to me:
He'll have his will, for all that I can say.
He's just his father over.

GRACE. But, have you said . . .

CHARLOTTE. Said! Have I not said all to him
A mother's heart can say—
A heart left mateless,
And with one son left . . .
How could I leave a single word unspoken,
To save the only son that's left me—
To save him from the death
That overtook his father and his brothers,
That night . . .
When I . . .
I slumbered soundly;
And never dreamt of danger,
While they, my husband and my sons . . .
And Martin—

Though 'twas only by a hair's breadth
 That he himself escaped,
 And came to me again—
 Yet, he'll not leave the pit,
 For all my pleading,
 Perhaps if you . . .

GRACE. Nay! but I've talked, and talked, with
 him;

And he would answer nothing.
 I could not win a word from him,
 Will you not try again?

CHARLOTTE. Try, daughter, try!
 What is there left to try?
 How could I leave a stone unturned!
 Do I not lie awake the livelong night,
 To think of ways and means
 To keep him from the pit?
 I've scarcely slept a wink since . . .
 Since that night—
 That night I slept so soundly . . .

[*Pause.*]

It seems as though he could not break with it—
 The pit that all his folk have worked in.
 It's said, his father's grandfather
 Was born at the pit-bottom—
 Ay, daughter! born and died there:
 For, two days after he was married,
 They found him, crushed beneath a rock,
 Dead, in the very shaft—
 The very shaft in which his mother bore him:
 For womenfolk worked in the pits in those days,

MATES

Young girls, and mothers near their time,
And little children, naked . . .

GRACE. But is there nothing else that Martin
Would care to try his hand at?

CHARLOTTE. Have I not offered, lass,
To set him up in any trade he fancies?
This very morn, when he came in,
I said I'd buy a horse and cart,
With stock-in-trade for him to hawk:
For hawking's scarce a job
That needs a man brought up to it.
At least, I thought that he . . .

GRACE. What did he say?

CHARLOTTE. He only laughed at first;
But, when I pressed him, shrugged his shoulders,
You know the way he has with him,
And looked me straight betwixt the eyes—
Looked at me with his father's eyes—
And then he said:
“Nay, mother! I'm a pitman;
And I must take my chance among my mates.”
He's just his father over . . .

GRACE. That was all?

CHARLOTTE. All, daughter! Was it not enough?
There's nothing more to say.
He will not leave the pit,
Although his father, and his brothers . . .
And he, himself . . .
I never shall sleep soundly any more—
Though sound I slept that night,
While they were dying . . . I . . .

MATES

GRACE. I'll speak with him again.
Perhaps . . .

CHARLOTTE. Ay, lass: he'll listen unto you,
If he'll pay heed to anyone.

GRACE. Oh, Charlotte, do you think that I . . .
When you, his mother . . .
Do you think he cares . . .
He cares so much for me?
If I could only turn him!
And yet, if he'll not heed . . .

CHARLOTTE. It seems, I've lost my hold:
He's broken from my apron-strings,
It's your turn now;
And you must try your strength with him.
He's stubborn; but he's fond of you;
And when his heart is set on anything,
He's just his father over.
When Stephen first walked out with me,
His mother bade . . .
But Martin's stirring;
I must get his bait.
Ay! even while we talk of him, he's dressing
To go upon the night-shift.
Talk! Talk!

GRACE. Yet, I must try to save him.
If I could only turn . . .

CHARLOTTE. Pray God, you may!
There's still a chance;
Though I . . .
It's your turn now.
I'm only Martin's mother;

MATES

But, you . . .

When Stephen wooed me, I was more to him . . .

And you'll be more to Martin . . .

How he whistles!

His heart, at least, is light enough.

And, in a moment he'll be out.

I'll leave you here to wait for him,

And speak with him, alone;

And if he asks for me,

Say that I'm seeking coals—

Coals! seeking coals!

God knows their cost . . .

Sometimes I cannot bear to see a fire,

And think of all the burning lives . . .

He'll soon be out.

His bait is on the table;

Though I'll be back before he leaves.

GRACE. Nay, do not go

What can I say to him!

CHARLOTTE. Your heart will tell you, if you
love . . .

But, here he comes.

[She picks up the scuttle and shovel and goes out.

MARTIN AYNSLEY *enters from the inner room.*]

MARTIN. Mother, this button . . .

You here, lass!

I thought I heard my mother's voice,

But did not know who talked with her.

Has she gone out?

I wanted . . .

GRACE. Come, lad, I'll sew the button on.

MARTIN. You, Grace!

Well, you've got nimble fingers.

But, mother, lass . . .

GRACE. She'll not be long.

Come nearer to the window:

Nay, but you must stand quietly,

Or you'll be pricked, in no time.

MARTIN. Nay, then, I'd best be quiet,

For I shall often want you . . .

I play the deuce with buttons.

You're not afraid, lass, when you think of
all . . .

GRACE. Nay, I'll not mind the buttons;

They'll be the least . . .

MARTIN. The least?

GRACE. If wives had naught to do for men,

But sew on buttons,

They would thank their stars.

But, maybe, someone else than I

Will sew yours on for you.

MARTIN. Why, Grace, who else?

GRACE. Who knows!

The chance is, you'll go buttonless,

For any stitch that I . . .

MARTIN. What ails you, lass?

You would not have your husband . . .

GRACE. My husband! Nay; I'll tend my husband:

'Twas you that I was speaking of.

MARTIN. Well: I don't understand you:

But if you keep your husband's buttons on,
Then I'll go snug and decent.

GRACE. Lad, don't you be too sure.

MARTIN. Too sure! Why, Grace!
But you, you cannot help yourself.
I've set my heart upon you:
And mother says I'm stubborn.

GRACE. And if I'm stubborn, too? .

MARTIN. You, Grace! But you don't know me!

GRACE. And, are you sure you've naught to
learn of me?

MARTIN. I'm sure you're mine, beyond all help.
You're true to me . . .

GRACE. God knows, I'm true . . .
But still . . . it's not too late . . .

MARTIN. Come, woman! no more foolishness,
You're stitched to me as firmly as this button
That you've sewn on so strongly.

GRACE. As firmly! yes: I sewed it on:
But I can snip it off with much less labour.

MARTIN. Not if I hold the scissors!

[Snatches them up.]

Nay! you may tug, and tug:
Your work will stand it easily:
'Twill not give way, though you should tug my
shirt off.

Your work's too good: and you are mine, as
surely . . .

But, lass, enough of this.
If I had only known that you were here,
I would . . . yet, you and she—

MATES

You seemed to have enough to talk of,
Without me . . .

GRACE. Ay! we'd much to talk of.

MARTIN. When only half awake, I heard you at
it;

And lay, and wondered what 'twas all about.
You womenfolk must always chatter, chatter:
You've got such restless tongues.

GRACE. And yet, it is the men that keep them
wagging.

MARTIN. The men?

GRACE. Foolhardy, heedless men,
That don't care how they break the women's peace.

MARTIN. Ah, now, I understand! There's more
than buttons!

I've little need to ask what kept you talking.
You've put your heads together: but, it's useless.
I cannot leave the pit, though you should talk till
doomsday:

So let no more be said.

GRACE. For my sake, Martin!

MARTIN. Your sake, Grace?

There's little I'd not do for you, you know, lass, but
not this.

You would not have me cowardly, for your sake?
How should I face my mates, if I forsook them?
You would not have me spend my days,
A cur, with tail betwixt his legs,
And slinking round the nearest corner,
Whenever my old mates went by
To take their usual shift?

MATES

Nay; I will hold my head up,
A man, among the men,
For your sake—ay! for your sake!

GRACE. And who would dare to call you coward—

Who, knowing all you've been through?

MARTIN. There's one who knows what I've been through,

Who'd call me coward.

GRACE. Who, lad?

MARTIN. Can you ask?

One, Martin Aynsley.

GRACE. Ay . . . and yet . . .

If you care naught for me,

Think of your mother, Martin.

You know she's lost her husband,

And all her sons but you;

And cannot rest, while you are in the pit.

MARTIN. You know I care for you; and think of her;

And yet, I'm sure of one thing,

Though you may little think it now,

If I forsook the pit,

The time would surely come

When you would both despise me in your hearts.

GRACE. Nay, Martin!

MARTIN. Grace, I know:

It's sure as death.

I cannot leave the pit.

My father died,

And I will die, a pitman.

MATES

You wouldn't have me throw up work
That I was born and bred to:
You surely wouldn't have me
Throw over all my mates—
The lads I went to school with,
That I've grown up with,
Played and worked with,
And had such larks . . .
There's not too many of them left now . . .
But all there are went through that night with me.
Before that night,
Perhaps, I might have left them;
But now, how could I!
Nay, I'll take my chance.

GRACE. Then someone else must sew . . .

MARTIN. Hark!

GRACE. What d'you hear?

MARTIN. I thought I heard him whistling.

GRACE. Who, lad?

MARTIN. I thought 'twas Nicholas, my mate:
But that was not his whistle.
He always whistles for me,
Every night at Jackson's Corner;
And we go to work together.

GRACE. Ay! he'd whistle you to death . . .
And you . . . you'd follow . . .

MARTIN. Shame upon you, lass!

How can you talk like that!

You know as well as I do

That, but for him, I'd be a dead man now.

'Twas he alone who dragged me—

MATES

Who dragged me from the death
That overtook my father and my brothers.
Grace, he did not forsake me:
Shall I desert him now?
He sought me, at the first alarm,
And we two fled together,
Before the creeping choke-damp,
Until it gained upon us,
And I was overcome,
And dropped, to die:
When Nicholas picked me up,
And bore me in his arms,
Along the stifling galleries—
Stumbling over dead and dying
Every step he staggered.
Though he could scarcely struggle
Against the damp himself,
He bore me into safety;
And kept the spark of life in me,
Till we at last were rescued.

GRACE. And yet, you'd go through that again?

MARTIN. If need be, lass, with Nicholas.

GRACE. You love him more than me.

MARTIN. Nay, Grace! you know . . .

GRACE. Yet you'll not even leave the pit for
my sake,

While you would go to death for his.

MARTIN. I'd go to death for him;
But I'd not be a coward
For your sake, even, Grace.

GRACE. Then you must choose between us.

MATES

MARTIN. Grace!

GRACE. Ay! you must choose, and now!
I cannot lead your mother's life,
Or my own mother's, either.
You know that in the dead of night
My father and my brothers
Were lost with yours . . . and I . . .
Who saw them brought in, one by one,
And laid upon their beds,
With faces covered . . .
How could I ever rest at all,
With that remembrance in my heart,
While you were in the pit—
With dread forever on me,
That you, too, would be brought,
And laid, a broken bundle, at my feet,
Or never come at all to me again?
How could I live,
With ears forever listening for the rumble
Of fresh disaster?
With eyes forever wide with dread to see
The flames leap up the shaft?
How could I sleep . . . [*A shrill whistling is heard.*
He whistles you—your mate!
And who am I to keep you?
Forsake me now for him . . .
And I . . . and I . . .

MARTIN. Grace!

GRACE. Nay, Martin! you must choose . . .
He whistles louder . . .
He's impatient . . .

MATES

Hark!

Now you must choose between us.

MARTIN. The choice is made, lass;
I choose him—and you!

[He takes her in his arms, snatches a kiss, and goes out.]

GRACE (*gazing after him*). The choice is made . . .
He knows I cannot break with him.
And I must sew . . . (*calling after him*).
You've gone without your bait!
Martin!

[She picks up the basket and can, and runs out after him.]

THE OPERATION

*Persons: WILLIAM LOWRY, a printer.
HESTER LOWRY, his wife.
LETTY LOWRY, their daughter.*

Scene: A room in tenements, late at night. WILLIAM LOWRY sits with his coat off, in an armchair, smoking, and reading a newspaper. The door opens, and HESTER LOWRY enters. Over her arm is a basket, laden with purchases, which she lays on the table with a sigh.

WILLIAM. You're late to-night.
You should have let me come with you:
That basket's heavy, wife.

HESTER. 'Twas not the basket, William:
I was kept.

WILLIAM. What kept you, wife?
The shops would not be thronged, to-night.

HESTER. I finished with the shops, three hours
ago.
I had to wait my turn.

WILLIAM. Your turn?
Who kept you waiting?

HESTER. The doctors, husband.

WILLIAM. Doctors, wife?

HESTER. I thought 'twas time to have the thing
away;

THE OPERATION

And so, I went to see.
The doctors shook their heads;
And said, next week, it might have been too
late . . .

WILLIAM. Too late? What ails you, wife? I
never knew . . .

HESTER. They say it's cancer.
They were very kind;
And wanted me to stay, to-night,
And have it done, at once.
They'd hardly let me leave.
I said, I must come home to see you first.
They'll take me in to-morrow.

WILLIAM. To-morrow, wife! And I . . . I
never knew.

You must have guessed, before you went . . .

HESTER. Yes, lad; I knew: and 'twas no shock
to me;

I've known so long.

WILLIAM. So long! . . . and never told me!
But, lass, the pain . . .

HESTER. Ay; it was bad to bear.
At first I scarce could keep from crying out;
But, as the years went by . . .

WILLIAM. The years! You've had the pain for
years?

HESTER. Ay, off and on.
It's full eleven years, since first I felt it.

WILLIAM. And, from the first, you knew . . .

HESTER. I knew.
My father died of it.

THE OPERATION

WILLIAM. Eleven years! And never breathed a word,
Nor murmured once, but patiently . . .

HESTER. I come of fisherfolk, who live on patience.

It's little use for any man
To be impatient with the sea.

WILLIAM. And I . . . I never guessed.
I've seen you, day by day,
And slept, each night, beside you in the bed;
And yet, you never breathed a word . . .

HESTER. Nay, lad; I've kept the thing from you:

'Twould not have eased the pain to share it.
You slept the sounder, knowing nothing;
Though, there were times the gnawing was so bad,
I could have torn . . .

WILLIAM. And I slept on unknowing!
You never even wakened me.
And every little ache I've had,
I've made a pretty song about it!

HESTER. You've made a song!
And what about the time your arm was caught . . .
Was caught in the machine, and you were hanging . . .

Were hanging by the flesh, a mortal hour!

WILLIAM. Nay; Michael held me up upon his back.

HESTER. But, all that time your arm was in the wheels;
And you . . . you never murmured, once, they say;

THE OPERATION

But, only laughed, and jested;
Although they had to take a chisel,
And cut each cog out separately,
Before the flesh was freed.
How you could bear the strain and jar,
And never once lose heart,
I cannot think; and your poor arm . . .
Your poor, poor arm, with all the sinews torn . . .

WILLIAM. I've never really played the fiddle
since:

I've got to make the notes, that used to come.
But you, wife, all these years . . .
And I slept on . . .

HESTER. 'Twould not have eased . . .

WILLIAM. But, if I'd known,
You should have had the doctor, at the first.

HESTER. I knew you could not spare me then:
Those were not easy times!
You, laid off idle through your accident,
And Letty, but a baby:
And we had both enough to do,
To keep the home together.
I hoped, at least, to keep things going;
Till I should be past doing things.
The time has come . . .
But I . . . I've saved a bit:
And Letty's thirteen past,
And finished schooling,
And old enough to manage for you.
Is she in bed?

WILLIAM. She went an hour ago.

THE OPERATION

She wanted sorely to wait up for you;
But she was sleepy, so I wouldn't let her.

HESTER. Ay, she's been at it all day long;
And she's a handy lass,
And will do well enough for you,
Until . . . until . . .

WILLIAM. Does Letty know?

HESTER. Nay, she knows nothing, William;
And I'll not tell her now till morning.
I would not spoil her sleep.

Poor child, she little dreams!
But she's a plucky girl,
And I have taught her everything:
And she can cook, and scrub, and wash,
As well as any woman.

You'll scarcely miss me . . .

WILLIAM. Wife!

HESTER. I've seen to all your clothes,
And there are shirts and stockings
To last for many weeks,
To last until . . .
I mayn't be long away.

WILLIAM. O, wife, it's terrible . . . I cannot
think . . .

It seems so strange that all these years . . .

HESTER. You never saw my father:
He suffered long, poor fellow,
But never rightly knew that it was cancer,
Till very nigh the end.
It laid him low at last,
When he was far from home,

THE OPERATION

After the herring in the Western seas.
The doctor said he must return by train,
But he'd not leave his boat;
And so his mates set sail,
(The season just begun,
And catches heavier than they'd been for years)
And brought him home.
And, when the "Ella" neared the harbour,
He left his bunk, and took the tiller,
And brought her in himself.
Though, in his heart, he knew it was the last time,
Yet he'd a smile for us;
And when the boat was berthed,
He looked my mother bravely in the eyes,
And clasped her hand, and they went home together.

He never rose again:
The doctors could do nothing:
But he was brave and gay until the end;
And always smiled, and said it did not hurt,
Although his teeth were clenched,
And his strong fingers clutched the bedclothes tightly.

WILLIAM. And you're his daughter, wife!

HESTER. But I've cried out before I'm hurt too sorely.

Next week, the doctors said, it might have been . . .
It's taken in the nick of time,
And I will soon be well again.
Folk go through such, and worse, each day:
It's naught to make a fuss about.

THE OPERATION

I've only one more night to bear the pain . . .
And then . . .

WILLIAM. Ay, wife, you'll soon be well again,
With such a heart in you.
And yet, if you had gone too long . . .
You should have told me at the first,
And let us fend . . .

HESTER. My father brought his boat in.

*[The inner door opens, and LETTY stands in
the doorway, in her night-dress.]*

LETTY. Is mother not home yet?
Oh, there you are!
You stayed so long to-night,
I've been asleep and dreaming!
Oh, such a dreadful dream!
I dreamt that you . . .
But you are safe and sound!
You are not ailing, mother?

HESTER. Lass, I'm as well as I have been for
years.
But you'll catch cold:
You'd better get to bed again.

LETTY. But, I shall dream.

HESTER. Nay, you'll sleep sound, to-night.

*[LETTY kisses her father and mother good-night,
and goes back to the bedroom.]*

THE CALL

Persons: SETH HERDMAN, a fireman.

MARY HERDMAN, his mother.

CHRISTOPHER BELL, a fireman.

Scene: The engine-house of a fire-station. The men are gathered in knots, talking in subdued voices, scarcely audible above the racket of the street.

SETH HERDMAN paces backwards and forwards, impetuously, by himself, when CHRISTOPHER BELL approaches him, holding out his hand.

CHRISTOPHER. The best of luck!

SETH. I fear there's little hope.

CHRISTOPHER. Nay, keep your heart up. You can never tell.

When my first lass was born, my wife had long been ailing:

There seemed to be no chance for her:

And now, though she's the mother

Of six brave, sonsy lasses,

She's heartier than she's been in all her life.

SETH. The doctor says . . .

CHRISTOPHER. But even doctors don't know everything.

Your wife was always plucky,

And she'll surprise them yet.

You must be plucky, too.

THE CALL

Your mother tends her—and you know your
mother!

And only think, if all goes well upstairs,

How proud you'll be!

For I'm a father, and I know.

There's not a prouder man in all the world.

SETH. If all goes well . . .

CHRISTOPHER. You'll be the happiest man . . .
There'll be no doing with you!

SETH. If I but knew!

CHRISTOPHER. The waiting's a sore trial.
But think, what luck we're not called out to-night!
It would be hard to go . . .

SETH. It's harder still to stand here, doing nothing,
While she . . . I'd bear it better,
If only I'd a job to tackle—
A job that left no time for thinking.
I'd rather be upon a blazing roof,
Than standing idle, with such thoughts at work,
While she . . .

CHRISTOPHER. Ay, lad, I understand.
Uncertainty's the devil.
But dwell upon the lucky chance,
And maybe, 'twill be yours:
And then you'll be the happiest of men.
You cannot think the difference children make:
No house is home, unless there's children in it.
My girls are always in my mind:
And yet, whenever I go in,
It's fresh delight to see them,

THE CALL

And take them in my arms.
They're more to me than I can tell you;
I'm always dull at saying
The thing that's in my heart:
But they have brought so much to me,
And just made all the difference to my life—
Ay, to my life and work—
For now I've them to work for.
Though I was never slack, they hearten me;
And when I hear the cry
That there are children in a burning house,
I always think of them,
And see their faces in the flames,
Their arms stretched out to me;
And hear their little voices calling, "Daddy!"
Then naught could hold me back.

SETH. Ay, you were always reckless.

CHRISTOPHER. Not reckless, lad. No father
dare be reckless.

Upon the toppling walls,
Amid the flames and smoke,
I always know they're 'waiting me at home
That I must win through all to them.
And when at last, perhaps at dawn,
I'm free to cross my threshold,
Drenched, stifled, scorched and scalded,
To see them lying quietly,
In dreamless slumber, clean and sweet!

SETH. If but the bell would sound,
And call us out to tackle
The biggest blaze . . .

THE CALL

CHRISTOPHER. Nay, lad, you don't know what
you're saying.

That thought's not worthy of you:
For you're no coward in the face of danger.
The waiting's hard to bear;
But she bears more than you.

SETH. It's her I think of;
She bears all . . . while I . . .
I can do nothing . . . nothing!
The doctor said . . . Ah, God!
If she should not win through!

CHRISTOPHER. Lad, at the worst, I know that
you'll be brave.

But, see, your mother . . . Courage!

[MARY HERDMAN enters hurriedly, and goes up
to SETH, and takes him in her arms, with-
out speaking.]

SETH. Mother!

MARY. My son!

SETH. Is there no hope?

MARY. The babe's alive.

SETH. And she . . . and she . . . [The fire
alarm sounds, and all the men spring to the
engine.]

Thank God, there's work!

Come, lads.

THE WOUND

Persons: HETTY DROVER, *Phillip Drover's wife.*
SUSAN WELCH, *her mother.*
JOHN RIDDLE, *a ship's riveter.*

Scene: A room in tenements. HETTY DROVER stands near the window, gazing out with unseeing eyes. She has a wound on her brow, and another on her hand; but seems oblivious of them. A footstep on the stairs arouses her; and she hastily pulls her hair over her brow, hides her hand beneath her apron; and moves towards the cradle in which her baby is sleeping. The door opens; and SUSAN WELCH enters.

HETTY. You, mother!

SUSAN. I've just come . . .

Why, daughter, what's amiss?

You look so pale . . .

And, oh! your brow is bleeding—

A dreadful wound . . .

Nay! do not touch it, woman.

Your hand bleeds, too!

HETTY. It's nothing.

SUSAN. Nothing!

A wound like that—you call it nothing!

But, I must bind it up, instead of talking.

THE WOUND

Words won't heal wounds,
Though often they're the cause of them.

[She takes some old linen from a drawer; fills a basin with water, and washes, and binds the wound while she is talking.]

Ah, what a gash! your poor, poor brow!
How you could come by such a wound,
I cannot think . . .

HETTY. I fell.

SUSAN. You fell? How did you come to
fall?

HETTY. I hardly know.

SUSAN. You hardly know?

HETTY. I think I must have slipt; and struck
the fender;
And clutched the bars, in falling:
My hand is burnt,
Although I did not feel it then.

SUSAN. You think you slipt! And then you
call it nothing—

A wound like that, clean to the bone!
But, maybe, you are dazed a bit;
I shouldn't wonder if . . .

When did it happen, daughter?

HETTY. Long ago . . .

SUSAN. It cannot be so long; the wound still
bleeds.

HETTY. Long . . . long ago . . .
I don't know what I'm saying!
An hour ago, perhaps.

THE WOUND

SUSAN. An hour ago? Then Phillip had not gone?

HETTY. Nay . . . he'd not gone . . .

SUSAN. How comes it that he left you, lass,
In such a state as this?

HETTY. Oh, but I'm dazed!
And don't know what I'm saying.
He'd left, long, long before.

SUSAN. What set him off so early?
He hasn't far to go.
The Yard would scarce be open.

HETTY. I don't know why he went.
Perhaps, he thought he'd take a turn . . .

SUSAN. On such a morning, daughter!

HETTY. Why not? A drop or two of rain
Is neither here nor there with menfolk.
'Twould take a pretty splash, I fancy,
To keep my man indoors.
But, I know nothing where he went.
I only know he'd gone . . . long, long before . . .
Why, woman, can you think he'd go—
He'd go, and leave me lying,
Half-senseless, on the hearth;
And never turn . . . though I . . . though I . . .
But he had gone, long, long before I tumbled.
He kissed me . . . ere he went;
He always kisses . . .
Ay, and his babe,
He kissed the babe and took it in his arms;
For he's the best of fathers;
He loves his babe . . . he's never harsh with it.

THE WOUND

I thought of that, while I lay, listening
For his return . . .

SUSAN. For his return? You thought he'd come
again?

HETTY. I don't know what I'm saying!
How could he come, when he's been long at work?
And knowing nothing . . .

SUSAN. Still . . .

HETTY. You don't believe me, mother?

SUSAN. I scarce know what to think.

HETTY. When did I ever lie to you,
That you should doubt . . .

SUSAN. Nay; you've been always truthful;
But Phillip . . .

HETTY. Can you think he'd go,
And slam the door behind him,
And leave me, lying helpless . . .
But you . . .

Why do you look at me like that;
What can I say . . .

SUSAN. Say nothing, daughter.

HETTY. You don't believe me, mother?

SUSAN. I know that Phillip's hot, at times;
And you would screen him.

HETTY. Nay! there's naught to screen.
'Twas I that . . . Nay!
And, if he's hot, at times,
You know he's much to try him;
The racket that he works in, all day long,
Would wear the best of tempers.
Why, mother, who should know as well as you

THE WOUND

How soon a riveter is done?
The hammers break a man, before his time;
And father was a shattered man at forty;
And Phillip's thirty-five;
And if he's failed a bit . . .
And, sometimes, overhasty,
Well, I am hasty, too;
You know my temper; no one knows it better.

SUSAN. But, such a wound! And then to
leave . . .

HETTY. You do not dare to look me in the eyes,
And say you think he struck . . .

SUSAN. There's someone at the door; I'll open it.

*[She goes to the door, and throws it open. JOHN
RIDDLE steps in, but hesitates on the thresh-
old without speaking.]*

SUSAN. Why, John, you here?
Are you not working, then?

JOHN. Ay, . . . I am working, Susan.
I've only left the Yard . . . I've come . . .

HETTY. Oh, tell me what has happened!
Why don't you speak!
Will you stand there, all day, and never speak . . .

JOHN. I've that to say which is not spoken
easily,
Nor easy hearing for a wife.

HETTY. Speak out! Speak out!
You know that I'm no coward.
Speak! Where is Phillip? Speak!

JOHN. They're bringing him along.

THE WOUND

SUSAN. Ah, God!

HETTY. They're bringing him . . . And I . . .

I lay, and listened . . .

SUSAN. How did it happen?

JOHN. How? I scarcely know,
Though I was face to face with him;
For he and I were hammer-mates.
We sat astride the beam;
And I was chaffing him;
But, he was dazed, and silent;
And, when the red-hot rivet was thrust up,
He never struck at it;
He must have lost his nerve;
And so, I took his turn;
And still he did not strike,
But, looked at it, bewildered;
And, all at once, cried out:
"It bleeds! It bleeds!"
And then, his fingers slackened on the hammer,
Which clattered to the bottom of the ship:
And then, he swayed,
And tumbled after it . . .
I tried to clutch . . .

SUSAN. And nothing broke his fall?

JOHN. We found him in a heap.

SUSAN. Dead?

JOHN. At the point of death:
He scarcely breathed a moment;
But, as I bent down over him,
I heard him whisper . . .

HETTY. Spare me what he said!

THE WOUND

I dare not hear it . . .

JOHN. I'd not hurt . . .

HETTY. Nay! Nay! speak out.

I am no coward . . . I . . .

Tell all, tell all.

JOHN. There is not much to tell.

He whispered: "Lass, forgive me."

Then, he died.

HETTY. Forgive you, lad!

There's nothing to forgive.

'Twas I who angered you; my foolish tongue . . .

It's I who need . . .

But, I . . . I'm dazed;

And don't know what I'm saying . . .

Nay! Nay! you did not hear aright!

He needed no forgiveness.

Why should he beg forgiveness,

Of me, his wife . . . and he, the best of husbands . . .

And I . . . I lay, and listened for his footstep . . .

If he'd but turned!

There's nothing to forgive . . .

'Twas I . . . and now,

Where shall I seek forgiveness!

SUSAN. I hear steps coming up the court.

JOHN (*starting forward, and catching HETTY, as she swoons*). Nay, steady, lass!

HETTY. He's coming back.

SUMMER-DAWN

Persons: LABAN CARPENTER, *a hind.*

BETTY CARPENTER, *his wife.*

Scene: LABAN CARPENTER'S *cottage, before dawn.*

LABAN still lies in bed, dozing; but his wife is already dressed; and is setting the kettle on a newly-lit fire. In the bed, beside LABAN, is a six-months old baby; and, in another bed, are five children, all under the age of seven; the boys sleeping at one end, the girls, at the other.

BETTY. Come, lad, get up, or we'll be late.

LABAN. So soon, lass! What o'clock is it?

BETTY. It's getting on for three.

The fire is kindling famously:

I'll have the kettle boiling in a twinkling.

We'll have a sup of tea, before we start,

To keep the bitter chill out.

It's raw work, turning out these dewy mornings

LABAN. It seems but half-an-hour ago,
Since I lay down in bed.

BETTY. Nay, Laban, it was half-past ten,
At most, when you turned in.

You'd scarcely got your trousers off,

Before you dropt asleep;

And, you were snoring, like a pig,

Until I turned you off your back.

SUMMER-DAWN

'Twas nigh eleven, when I got to bed.

LABAN. I can't tell how you manage.
A man must have his sleep out,
If he's to do his day's work:

But, women, somehow, seem . . .

BETTY. Come, lad, don't lie there, talking:
But, stir yourself . . .

LABAN. My back is nearly broken.

BETTY. Ay, some folks' backs are broken easily.

LABAN. You call it easily!
It's easy, hoeing turnips, every night,
Until it is too dark to see our feet;
And then, to start again, at dawn:
And, Summer-nights so short!

BETTY. If Summer-nights were longer,
Your children would go shoeless through the Win-
ter.

LABAN. And still, it's heavy on a man,
As well as all his day's work.

BETTY. Have I no day's work, too?
Your day's work will not keep you, housed and
fed—

You, and your wife, and children.
And if your father'd talked like that,
Lad, where would you be now?
He can have been no lie-abed:
He'd not a lazy bone in all his body.
You've heard him boast, a hundred times:
"Though I have had bad seasons,
I've not done far amiss:
Since I have reared eleven men and women."

SUMMER-DAWN

Ay! and your mother, crippled with rheumatics,
For more than half her lifetime:
And only him to do the housework;
And see to all the lot of you,
And keep you decent, single-handed,
Until the girls were old enough,
As well as all his day's work.
You talk of day's work!
Why, I've heard him tell,
How, once, to save the corn,
He worked a week, without a wink of sleep:
All day, at his own job in Stobshill mine:
And, all night, helping in the harvest-field.

LABAN. And then, he slept . . .

BETTY. He slept his fill:
But, not till all was harvested.
He saved the corn.

LABAN. Ay: somehow, fathers . . .

Betty. You're a father, too:
And should think shame to lie and grumble there;
And only be too glad that we are able,
To earn a little extra in the Summer,
To tide us over Winter.

LABAN. True, wife, true:
And yet, it's hard that, in an honest day's work,
A strong man cannot earn enough,
To keep his wife and family.

BETTY. Twelve shillings won't go far,
With rents so high,
And food, and clothes, and firing.
But I have naught to grumble at:

SUMMER-DAWN

I only have six babes to feed:
My mother had thirteen;
And ten of us were born,
After my father lost his sight,
While blasting in the quarry.
And she'd three babes-in-arms, at once—
The twins, and Dick.
I've heard her say that, ere the boy was born,
While she lay sick in bed, and near her time,
Her two, poor helpless babies at the bed-foot,
Sat up, with big eyes, watching her,
As good as gold;
And she, poor woman, wondering,
How ever she would nurse the three, at once.
I cannot think how she got through, at all:
But, when I used to ask her, she would answer:
"Ay! looking back, you wonder how you managed;
But, at the time, each single thing you do for them
Makes you yourself so happy,
That you think nothing of it."
And mother had the truth of things.
And we're quite rich to her—
She'd hoe, a summer's day, for sixpence:
And spent her life's best years in picking stones.
She only had one holiday,
That ever I heard tell of:
And that, when she'd been married fourteen years.
She went to see her cousin at the Stell:
And rode both ways in Farmer Thomson's pig-
cart;
And, ever afterwards, she said:

SUMMER-DAWN

She couldn't tell why folks liked holidays,
Or why they need go seeking happiness,
While they had homes to work in;
And that, for her part, she found little pleasure
In sitting still all day,
In other people's houses, with cold legs,
And idle, folded hands,
When there was darning to be done at home,
And one's own hearth to sit by;
Though there was little sitting down for her,
At any time at all.
She couldn't rest;
Up first, and last to bed,
I never saw her quiet, till the end.
She always hoped that death would find her work-
ing,
Her wish was granted her . . .
Death found her at the job she liked the best . . .
The clothes she washed that week were left for
me to iron . . .
Ay, mother knew what hardship was;
And laboured, day and night, to rear her children.
LABAN. It's ever children, children!
A woman slaves her very life away
To rear her children;
And they grow up and slave their lives away
To rear their children.
We little thought, lass, when we married!
Do you remember the fine Summer-nights,
When first we walked together?
Ah, those were happy times!

SUMMER-DAWN

We little thought . . .

BETTY. You little thought;
I knew.

Yes; those were happy times;
No girl was ever happier than I was,
When first I walked with you in Malden Meadows:
But I am happy now, for all the difference.
Life was not over easy, even then:
They worked me sorely at the farm,
Though I was but a child.
On Monday mornings, we were up at one,
To get the washing through,
Before the day's work started.
I wasn't fifteen then; but I remember
The coastguards whistling to us,
As they passed the lighted window,
On the cold, black Winter-mornings.
And often, I'd been working many hours,
Before you turned out with your team.
I used to think that you went bravely, Laban,
Behind your dappled horses.

LABAN. Ay! then I little knew—
I little knew that life was labour, labour,
And labour till the end.
I thought that there'd be ease, somewhere. [*Rises
and begins to dress.*]

BETTY. If men will marry, and have children,
They must not look for ease.
Yet, husband, you'd not be a boy again,
Unwedded . . .

LABAN. Nay! I couldn't do without you.

SUMMER-DAWN

BETTY. But, you've too many children?
Too many hungry mouths to fill,
Too many little feet to keep in leather!
And can you look upon them, sleeping there,
(My father ne'er set eyes on me, poor fellow!)
And talk like that?
And is it Tommy you would be without?
You've had him longest; and perhaps you're
tired . . .

LABAN. Nay, wife: he was the first;
And you were such a girl—just seventeen!
And I, but two years older.
Do you remember, lass, how proud . . .

BETTY. Or is it Nell, who brings your bait to
you?

LABAN. She grows more like her mother every
day.

BETTY. It must be Robin, then,
That all the neighbours say takes after you.

LABAN. He's got my temper, sure enough,
The little Turk!

BETTY. Or Kit and Kate the twins?
They're surely twice too much for you.

LABAN. Folk say that never such a pair
Was seen in all the countryside.

BETTY. There's just the baby left.
Poor little mite, so you're the one too many!

LABAN. Come, Betty, come!
Enough of teasing!
You know that I was only talking;
I'm ready, now, for work.

SUMMER-DAWN

BETTY. The kettle's boiling. [*She makes the tea, and fills two mugs.*]

Drink it up;

'Twill help to keep the chill out.

LABAN. Ay; but it's dank work, hoeing swedes at dawn.

BETTY. The sun will soon be up.

LABAN. The sun gets up a deal too soon for me.

BETTY. Nay; never rail against the sun.

I'd sooner, lad, be shut away from you,

Than from the sunshine, any day.

I'll never hear a word against the sun.

[*They take up their hoes from behind the door, give a last look at their sleeping children, and go out together into the dawn.*]

HOLIDAY

Persons: EVA SPARK, a widow.

NELLY SPARK, }
POLLY SPARK, } *her daughters.*

DANIEL WEBB, a navy.

Scene: a room in tenements: evening. NELLY SPARK lies unconscious on the bed with her eyes open and her hands moving in a regular succession of mechanical motions. Her mother sits by the bed sewing. POLLY SPARK stands near the window looking out into the dingy court.

EVA. Her hands are never quiet.

POLLY. She's tending the machine;
And slipping in the brush-backs
As we do all day long.
Day after day, and every day,
Year in, year out, year in, year out,
Save Sunday and the holiday . . .
To think to-day's a holiday—
And what a holiday for her!

EVA. She cannot rest a moment.
Her hands are working, working . . .
It must be weary work, at best;
But now . . .

POLLY. And yet we do it,
Year in, year out, year in, year out,

HOLIDAY

Until it drives us dizzy,
And we, maybe, slip in a hand as she did—
Six holes it drills—
And then they call it carelessness!

EVA. Ay! that began the trouble—
Her poor hand!
It gives me quite a turn to think of it.
She's never been herself since.
It's hard she cannot rest.

POLLY. To think to-day's a holiday!
And last year she was dancing . . .

EVA. She's ever been a dancer,
From a baby:
Ay! even as a child-in-arms,
I could not keep her quiet,
If she but heard an organ;
And though 'twas half a street away,
'Twould take me all my time to hold her
From tumbling off my lap.
'Twas in her blood;
I danced before I married—
Though afterwards, God knows,
I'd little list for dancing—
And, in my day,
While I'd the heart for it,
I danced among the best.
When first your father saw me,
I was dancing.

POLLY. Last year, she danced the live-long day
She danced us all out easily,
Although the sun was blazing;

HOLIDAY

And we were fit to drop.
She would have danced herself to death;
But, someone stopped the music—
I think 'twas Daniel—
Even he was done,
Though he's not beaten easily.

EVA. He'd scarcely go to-day.
He said, he could not go without her.
I told him that 'twas worse than useless
For him to sit here, watching her.
I think he only went, at last,
Because he could not bear to see her hands.
It's bad enough for me . . .
I could not have him, too . . .
I cannot help but watch . . .
Her poor, poor hands!
They're never still a moment.
All night, I watched them working.

POLLY. And, last year, she was dancing—
Was dancing in the sun!
And there was none could dance with her—
Not one!
I never knew where she could pick the steps up:
There seemed to be no end to them,
As though she made them up as she went on.
They came to her, I fancy,
As trudging comes to us.

EVA. Ay! she'd a dancing heart.

POLLY. You scarcely saw her feet move,
Because they went so quickly:
It dazzled me to watch them.

HOLIDAY

And, as she danced so madly,
She waved a branch of hawthorn
That Daniel plucked for her.

EVA. That night when she came home
Her arms were full of blossom.
The room was white for days:
She'd scarcely left a pot or pan
For me to cook a meal in:
And, yet, I dared not toss it out.
The scent was nigh too much for me:
A hawthorn grew beside the door at home;
And, in the drenching rain,
It used to smell so fresh and sweet.
'Twill be there still . . . but I . . .
And she was born about the blossom-time;
For I remember how I lay,
And dreamt that I could smell the hawthorn,
Though we had left the country then,
And I was far from any blowing thing.
And I can smell it now,
Though I've not seen a growing thorn for years.

POLLY. The smell of hawthorn, and the heat,
Together, turned me faint.
She did not seem to mind it;
But, danced, till I was dizzy—
Quite dizzy, watching her:
And, when I called to stop her,
She only laughed, and answered:
That she could dance forever—
Forever in the sunshine,
Until she dropt down dead.

HOLIDAY

Then Daniel stopped the music,
Suddenly . . .
Her feet stopt with it:
And, she nearly tumbled:
But, Daniel caught her in his arms:
And she was dazed and quiet:
And scarcely spoke a word,
Till we were home in bed,
And I had blown the light out.
I did not take much notice at the time:
For I was half-asleep:
Yet, I remember every word,
As though she said them over, lying there:
"At least, I've danced a day away!
To-morrow, we'll be working—
To-morrow, and to-morrow,
Till we're dead.
And yet, to-day,
The job was nearly done:
If they'd not stopt the music,
I might have finished, dancing!"

EVA. Her hands are never quiet:
They're always working, working . . .
They move so quickly,
I can scarcely follow . . .

POLLY. She always worked like that:
Indeed, the only wonder is
She'd never slipt her hand before.
She worked as madly as she danced:
And she danced madly.

EVA. Ay . . . she'll dance no more.

HOLIDAY

Poor Daniel, I'd no heart to tell him,
That there . . . that there's no hope for her.
He never asked me what the doctor said:
I think he knew, somehow.

He'd scarcely go:

But, he . . . he could not bear to see . . .

I cannot bear to watch them;

Yet, cannot keep my eyes off:

They're always working, working—

Poor broken hands!

And, once, they'd beat to music, on my breast,

When she was but a baby in my lap.

Would God, that time had never passed . . .

POLLY. To think they'll all be dancing.

While she . . . she's lying . . .

EVA. Daniel went, poor lad;

But, he was loth to go;

And there'll be little dancing,

For him, to-day,

And many days to come.

He'll not stay late:

I looked for him, ere now.

POLLY. Ay! we are only "hands."

And, in the end . . .

I wonder if I'll lie like that, one day,

With useless fingers working . . .

God spare me!

But I think there's little chance.

I never worked, or danced, as she did.

She danced, and danced . . .

EVA. I smell the hawthorn now, as strongly

HOLIDAY

As we could smell it, after rain . . .

POLLY. There's someone on the stairs:
I think it's Dan.

[The door opens, gently; and DANIEL WEBB enters, quietly, carrying a branch of hawthorn.]

DANIEL. How's Nelly, now?
I've brought some bloom for her.
I thought she might . . .
Last year, she liked the hawthorn:
A year to-day, she danced beneath the blossom . . .
I could not stay,
And see them jigging . . .
And yet I cannot bear to watch . . .

EVA (*turning suddenly*). Her hands have stopt!
She's quiet now . . .
Ah, God!
She's getting up!
She'll fall . . .

[They all rush towards NELLY, as she rises from the bed; but, something in her eyes stays them halfway; and they stand, spell-bound, watching her, as she steps to the floor; and moves towards DANIEL, stretching out her hand for the hawthorn, which he gives to her without a word. Holding the branch over her head, she begins to dance slowly; her feet gradually moving more rapidly.]

HOLIDAY

NELLY. Faster . . . faster . . . fast . . .
Who's stopt the music?

*[She pauses; stands a moment, dazed; then drops
to the floor in a heap.]*

EVA (*running towards her*). Ah, God!
She's done!
She does not breathe . . .

*[They bend over her; and DANIEL picks up the
dropt branch.]*

DANIEL. It's fallen, now—
The bloom . . .
I thought she might . . .
Last year . . .
And now!
I brought the bloom . . .

EVA. Her hands stopt working,
When she smelt it.
It set her dancing . . . dancing to her death.

DANIEL. Oh, Christ!
What have I done!
Nelly!
I brought the bloom . . .

POLLY. She's had her wish.

1908-9

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