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Unusual spellings are assumed to be intentional unless there is strong reason to believe otherwise. The use of parentheses in stage directions is as in the original. The word "thon" (a regional variant of "yon") is used several times in the text. The pronoun "thou" does not occur.

## KRINDLESYKE

BY WILFRID GIBSON

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TO

CATHERINE AND LASCELLES ABERCROMBIE

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### NOTE

ON the occasion of an obscure dramatic presentation, an early and rudimentary draft of Book I. was published in 1910. It has since been entirely re-written. Book II., written 1919-22, has not been printed hitherto. Though the work was not conceived with a view to stage-production, the author reserves the acting rights.

It may be added that, while "Krindlesyke" is not in dialect, it has been flavoured with a sprinkling of local words; but as these are, for the most part, words expressive of emotion, rather than words conveying information, the sense of them should be easily gathered even by the south-country reader.

W. G.

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## PRELUDE

Four bleak stone walls, an eaveless, bleak stone roof,  
Like a squared block of native crag, it stands,  
Hunched, on skirlnaked, windy fells, aloof:  
Yet, was it built by patient human hands:  
Hands, that have long been dust, chiselled each stone,  
And bedded it secure; and from the square  
Squat chimneystack, hither and thither blown,  
The reek of human fires still floats in air,  
And perishes, as life on life burns through.  
Squareset and stark to every blast that blows,  
It bears the brunt of time, withstands anew  
Wildfires of tempest and league-scouring snows,  
Dour and unshaken by any mortal doom,  
Timeless, unstirred by any mortal dream:  
And ghosts of reivers gather in the gloom  
About it, muttering, when the lych-owls scream.

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“From one generation to another.”

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### BOOK I

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PHCEBE BARRASFORD

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### BOOK I

PHCEBE BARRASFORD

*Krindlesyke is a remote shepherd's cottage on the Northumbrian fells, at least three miles from any other habitation. It consists of two rooms, a but and a ben. EZRA BARRASFORD, an old herd, blind and decrepit, sits in an armchair in the but, or living-room, near the open door, on a mild afternoon in April. ELIZA BARRASFORD, his wife, is busy, making griddle-cakes over the peat fire.*

ELIZA (*glancing at the wag-at-the-wa'*):

It's hard on three o'clock, and they'll be home  
Before so very long now.

EZRA:

Eh, what's that?

ELIZA:

You're growing duller every day. I said  
They'd soon be home now.

EZRA:

They? And who be they?

ELIZA:

My faith, you've got a memory like a milk-sile!  
You've not forgotten Jim's away to wed?  
You're not that dull.

EZRA:

We cannot all be needles:  
And some folk's tongues are sharper than their wits.  
Yet, till thon spirt of hot tar blinded me,  
No chap was cuter in all the countryside,  
Or better at a bargain; and it took  
A nimble tongue to bandy words with mine.  
You'd got to be up betimes to get round Ezra:  
And none was a shrewder judge of ewes, or women.  
My wits just failed me once, the day I married:  
But, you're an early riser, and your tongue  
Is always up before you, and with an edge,  
Unblunted by the dewfall, and as busy

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As a scythe in the grass at Lammas. So Jim's away  
To wed, is he, the limb? I thought he'd gone  
For swedes; though now, I mind some babblement  
About a wedding: but, nowadays, words tumble  
Through my old head like turnips through a slicer;  
And naught I ken who the bowdykite's to wed—  
Some bletherskite he's picked up in a ditch,  
Some fond fligary flirtigig, clarty-fine,  
Who'll turn a slattern-shrew and a cap-river  
Within a week, if I ken aught of Jim.  
Unless ... Nay, sure, 'twas Judith Ellershaw.

ELIZA:

No, no; you're dull, indeed. It's Phœbe Martin.

EZRA:

Who's Phœbe Martin? I ken naught of her.

ELIZA:

And I, but little.

EZRA:

Some trapsing tatterwallops,  
I'll warrant. Well, these days, the lads are like  
The young cockgrouse, who doesn't consult his dad  
Before he mates. In my—yet, come to think,  
I didn't say overmuch. My dad and mammy  
Scarce kenned her name when I sprung my bride on them;  
Just loosed on them a gisseypig out of a poke  
They'd heard no squeak of. They'd to thole my choice,  
Lump it or like it. I'd the upper hand then:  
And well they kenned their master. No tawse to chide,  
Nor apron-strings to hold young Ezra then:  
His turn had come; and he was cock of the midden,  
And no braw cockerel's hustled him from it yet,  
For all their crowing. The blind old bird's still game.  
They've never had his spirit, the young cheepers,  
Not one; and Jim's the lave of the clutch; and he  
Will never lord it at Krindlesyke till I'm straked.  
But this what's-her-name the gaby's bringing ...

ELIZA:

Phœbe.

EZRA:

A posical name; I never heard the like.  
She'll be a flighty faggit, mark my words.

ELIZA:

She's only been here once before; and now  
She'll be here all the time. I'll find it strange  
With another woman in the house. Needs must  
Get used to it. Your mother found it strange,  
Likely ... It's my turn now, and long in coming.  
Perhaps, that makes it harder. I've got set  
Like a vane, when the wind's blown east so long, it's clogged  
With dust, and cannot whisk with the chopping breeze.  
'Twill need a wrench to shift my bent; for change  
Comes sore and difficult at my time of life.

EZRA:

Ay, you may find your nose put out of joint,  
If she's a spirited wench.

ELIZA:

Due east it's blown  
Since your mother died. She barely outlived my coming;  
And never saw a grandchild. I wonder ... Yet,  
I spared her all I could. Ay, that was it:  
She couldn't abide to watch me trying to spare her,  
Another woman doing her work, finoodling  
At jobs she'd do so smartly, tidying her hearth,  
Using her oven, washing her cups and saucers,  
Scouring her tables, redding up her rooms,  
Handling her treasures, and wearing out her gear.  
And now, another, wringing out my dishclout,  
And going about my jobs in her own fashion;  
Turning my household, likely, howthery-towthery,

While I sit mum. But it takes forty years'  
Steady east wind to teach some folk; and then  
They're overdried to profit by their learning.  
And so, without a complaint, and keeping her secrets,  
Your mother died with patient, quizzical eyes,  
Half-pitying, fixed on mine; and dying, left  
Krinklesyke and its gear to its new mistress.

EZRA:

A woman, she was. You've never had her hand  
At farls and bannocks; and her singing-hinnies  
Fair melted in the mouth—not sad and soggy  
As yours are like to be. She'd no habnab  
And hitty-missy ways; and she'd turn to,  
At shearing-time, and clip with any man.  
She never spared herself.

ELIZA:

And died at forty,  
As white and worn as an old table-cloth,  
Darned, washed, and ironed to a shred of cobweb,  
Past mending; while your father was sixty-nine  
Before he could finish himself, soak as he might.

EZRA:

Don't you abuse my father. A man, he was—  
No fonder of his glass than a man should be.  
Few like him now: I've not his guts, and Jim's  
Just a lamb's head, gets half-cocked on a thimble,  
And mortal, swilling an eggcupful; a gill  
Would send him randy, reeling to the gallows.  
Dad was the boy! Got through three bottles a day,  
And never turned a hair, when his own master,  
Before we'd to quit Rawridge, because the dandy  
Had put himself outside of all his money—  
Teeming it down his throat in liquid gold,  
Swallowing stock and plenishing, gear and graith.  
A bull-trout's gape and a salamander thrapple—  
A man, and no mistake!

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ELIZA:

A man; and so,  
She died; and since your mother was carried out,  
Hardly a woman's crossed the threshold, and none  
Has slept the night at Krinklesyke. Forty-year,  
With none but men! They've kept me at it; and now  
Jim's bride's to take the work from my hands, and do  
Things over that I've done over for forty-year,  
Since I took them from your mother—things some woman's  
Been doing at Krinklesyke since the first bride  
Came home.

EZRA:

Three hundred years since the first herd  
Cut peats for that hearth's kindling. Set alow,  
Once and for all, it's seen a wheen lives burn  
Black-out: and when we, too, lie in the house  
That never knew housewarming, 'twill be glowing.  
Ay! and some woman's tongue's been going it,  
Like a wag-at-the-wa', in this steading, three hundred years,  
Tick-tocking the same things over.

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ELIZA:

Dare say, we'll manage:  
A decent lass—though something in her eye,  
I couldn't quite make out. Hardly Jim's sort ...  
But, who can ever tell why women marry?  
And Jim ...

EZRA:

Takes after me: and wench'es buzz  
Round a handsome lad, as wasps about a bunghole.

ELIZA:

Though now they only see skin-deep, those eyes  
Will search the marrow. Jim will have his hands full,  
Unless she's used to menfolk and their ways,  
And past the minding. She'd the quietness

That's a kind of pride, and yet, not haughty—held  
Her head like a young blood-mare, that's mettlesome  
Without a touch of vice. She'll gan her gait  
Through this world, and the next. The bit in her teeth,  
There'll be no holding her, though Jim may tug  
The snaffle, till he's tewed. I've kenned that look  
In women's eyes, and mares', though, with a difference.  
And Jim—yet she seemed fond enough of Jim:  
His daffing's likely fresh to her, though his jokes  
Are last week's butter. Last week's! For forty-year  
I've tholed them, all twice-borrowed, from dad and granddad,  
And rank, when I came to Krindlesyke, to find  
Life, the same jobs and same jests over and over.

EZRA:

A notion, that, to hatch, full-fledged and crowing!  
You must have brooded, old clocker.

9

ELIZA:

True enough,  
Marriage means little more than a new gown  
To some: but Phœbe's not a fancicle tauntril,  
With fingers itching to hansel new-fangled flerds.  
Why she'd wed ...

EZRA:

Tuts! Girls take their chance. And you'd  
Conceit enough of Jim, at one time—proud  
As a pipit that's hatched a cuckoo: and if the gowk  
Were half as handsome as I—you ken, yourself,  
You needed no coaxing: I wasted little breath  
Whistling to heel: you came at the first "Isca!"

ELIZA:

Who kens what a lass runs away from, crazed to quit  
Home, at all hazards, little realizing  
It's life, itself, she's trying to escape;  
And plodging deeper.

EZRA:

Trust a wench for kenning.  
I've to meet the wife who'd be a maid again:  
Once in the fire, no wife, though she may crackle  
On the live coals, leaps back to the frying-pan.  
It's against nature.

ELIZA:

Maybe: and yet, somehow,  
Phœbe seemed different.

EZRA:

I've found little difference  
Betwixt one gimmer and another gimmer,  
When the ram's among them. But, where does she hail from?

ELIZA:

Allendale way. Jim met her at Martinmas fair.

EZRA:

We met ...

ELIZA:

Ay, fairs have much to answer for.

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EZRA:

I thought 'twas Judith Ellershaw.

ELIZA:

God forbid  
'Twas Judith I'd to share with: though Jim fancied  
The lass, at one time. He's had many fancies:  
Light come, light go, it's always been with Jim.

EZRA:

And I was gay when I was young—as brisk  
As a yearling tup with the ewes, till I'd the pains,  
Like red-hot iron, clamping back and thighs.  
My heart's a younker's still; but even love  
Gives in, at last, to rheumatics and lumbago.  
Now, I'm no better than an old bell-wether,

A broken-winded, hirpling tattyjack  
That can do nothing but baa and baa and baa.  
I'd just to whistle for a wench at Jim's age:  
And Jim's ...

ELIZA:

His father's son.

EZRA:

He's never had  
My spirit. No woman's ever bested me.  
For all his bluster, he's a gaumless nowt,  
With neither guts nor gall. He just butts blindly—  
A woolly-witted ram, bashing his horns,  
And spattering its silly brains out on a rock:  
No backbone—any trollop could twiddle him  
Round her little finger: just the sort a doxy,  
Or a drop too much, sets dancing, heels in air:  
He's got the gallows' brand. But none of your sons  
Has a head for whisky or wenches; and not one  
Has half my spunk, my relish. I'd not trust  
Their judgment of a ewe, let alone a woman:  
But I could size a wench up, at a glance;  
And Judith ...

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ELIZA:

Ay: but Krindlesyke would be  
A muckheap-lie-on, with that cloffy slut  
For mistress. But she flitted one fine night.

EZRA:

Rarely the shots of the flock turn lowpy-dyke;  
Likelier the tops have the spunk to run ramrace;  
And I think no worse ...

ELIZA:

Her father turned her out,  
'Twas whispered; and he's never named her, since:  
And no one's heard a word. I couldn't thole  
The lass. She'd big cow-eyes: there's little good  
In that sort. Jim's well shot of her; he'll not  
Hear tell of her: that sort can always find  
Another man to fool: they don't come back:  
Past's past, with them.

EZRA:

I liked ...

ELIZA:

Ay, you're Jim's dad.  
But now he's settling down, happen I'll see  
Bairn's bairns at Krindlesyke, before I die.  
Six sons—and only the youngest of the bunch  
Left in the old home to do his parents credit.

EZRA:

Queer, all went wild, your sons, like collies bitten  
With a taste for mutton bleeding-hot. Cold lead  
Cures dogs of that kidney, peppering them one fine night  
From a chink in a stell; but, when they're two-legged curs,  
They've a longer run; and, in the end, the gallows  
Don't noose them, kicking and squealing like snarled rabbits,  
Dead-certain, as 'twould do in the good old days.

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ELIZA:

You crack your gallows-jokes on your own sons—  
And each the spit of the father that drove them wild,  
With cockering them and cursing them; one moment,  
Fooling them to their bent, the moment after,  
Flogging them senseless, till their little bodies  
Were one blue bruise.

EZRA:

I never larruped enough,  
But let the varmints off too easily:  
That was the mischief. They should have had my dad—  
An arm like a bullock-walloper, and a fist  
Could fell a stot; and faiks, but he welted me  
Skirlnaked, yarked my hurdies till I yollered,

In season and out, and made me the man I am.  
Ay, he'd have garred the young eels squirm.

ELIZA:

And yet,  
My sons, as well: though I lost my hold of each  
Almost before he was off my lap, with you  
To egg them on against me. Peter went first:  
And Jim's the lave. But he may settle down.  
God kens where you'd be, if you'd not wed young.

EZRA:

And the devil where you'd be, if we hadn't met  
That hiring-day at Hexham, on the minute.  
I'd spent last hiring with another wench,  
A giggling red-haired besom; and we were trysted  
To meet at the Shambles: and I was awaiting her,  
When I caught the glisk of your eye: but she was late;  
And you were a sonsy lassie, fresh and pink;  
Though little pink about you now, I'd fancy.

13

ELIZA:

Nay, forty-year of Krindlesyke, and all!

EZRA:

Young carroty-pow must have been in a fine fantigue,  
When she found I'd mizzled. Yet, if she'd turned up  
In time, poor mealy-face, for all your roses,  
You'd never have clapped eyes on Krindlesyke:  
This countryside and you would still be strangers.

ELIZA:

In time!

EZRA:

A narrow squeak.

ELIZA:

If she'd turned up,  
The red-haired girl had lived at Krindlesyke,  
Instead of me, this forty-year: and I—  
I might ... But we must dree our weird. And yet,  
To think what my life might have been, if only—  
The difference!

EZRA:

Ay, and hers, "if ifs and ans!"  
But I'm none certain she'd have seen it, either.  
I could have had her without wedding her,  
And no mistake, the nickering, red-haired baggage.  
Though she was merry, she'd big rabbit-teeth,  
Might prove gey ill to live with; ay, and a swarm  
Of little sandy moppies like their doe,  
Buck-teeth and freckled noses and saucer-eyes,  
Gaping and squealing round the table at dinner,  
And calling me their dad, as likely as not:  
Though little her mug would matter, now I'm blind;  
And by this there'll scarce be a stump in her yellow gums,  
And not a red hair to her nodding poll—  
That shock of flame a shrivelled, grizzled wisp  
Like bracken after a heathfire; that creamy skin,  
Like a plucked hen's. But she'd a merry eye,  
The giglet; and that coppertop of hers  
Was good to think on of a nippy morning:  
While you—but you were young then ...

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ELIZA:

Young and daft.

EZRA:

Nay, not so gite; for I was handsome then.

ELIZA:

Ay, the braw birkie of that gairishon  
Of menseless slubberdegullions: and I trusted  
My eyes, and other people's tongues, in those days:  
And you'd a tongue to glaver a guff of a girl,  
The devil's own; and whatever's gone from you,  
You've still a tongue, though with a difference:

Now it's all edge.

EZRA:

The knife that spreads the butter  
Will slice the loaf. But it's sharper than my teeth.

ELIZA:

Ay, tongues cut deeper than any fang can bite,  
Sore-rankling wounds.

EZRA:

You talk of tongues! I'm deaf:  
But, for my sins, I cannot be deaf to yours,  
Nattering me into my grave; and, likely, your words  
Will flaffer about my lugs like channering peesweeps,  
When I lie cold.

ELIZA:

Yes, I was young, and agape  
For your wheedling flum, till it fleeced my self from me.  
There's something in a young girl seems to work  
Against her better sense, and gives her up,  
Almost in spite of her.

EZRA:

It's nature.

ELIZA:

Then  
Nature has more than enough to answer for.  
Young, ay! And you, as gallant as the stallion,  
With ribboned tail and mane, that pranced to the crack  
Of my father's whip, when first I saw you gaping,  
Kenspeckle in that clamjamfrey of copers.

EZRA:

Love at first sight!

ELIZA:

And I was just as foolish  
As you were braw.

EZRA:

Well, we'd our time of it,  
Fools, or no fools. And you could laugh in those days,  
And didn't snigger like the ginger fizgig.  
Your voice was a bird's: but you laugh little now;  
And—well, maybe, your voice is still a bird's.  
There's birds and birds. Then, 'twas a cushy-doo's  
That's brooding on her nest, while the red giglet's  
Was a gowk's at the end of June. Do you call to mind  
We sat the livelong day in a golden carriage,  
Squandering a fortune, forby the tanner I dropt?  
They wouldn't stop to let me pick it up;  
And when we alighted from the roundabout,  
Some skunk had pouched it: may he pocket it  
Red-hot in hell through all eternity!  
If I'd that fortune now safe in my kist!  
But I was a scatterpenny: and you were bonnie—  
Pink as a dog-rose were your plump cheeks then:  
Your hair'd the gloss and colour of clean straw:  
And when, at darkening, the naphtha flares were kindled,  
And all the red and blue and gold aglitter—  
Drums banging, trumpets braying, rattles craking;  
And we were rushing round and round, the music—  
The music and the dazzle ...

ELIZA:

Ay: that was it—  
The rushing and the music and the dazzle.  
Happen 'twas on a roundabout that Jim  
Won Phœbe Martin.

EZRA:

And when you were dizzy,  
And all a hazegaze with the hubblyshew;  
You cuddled up against me, snug and warm:  
And round and round we went—the music braying  
And beating in my blood: the gold aglitter ...



ELIZA:

And there's been little dazzle since, or music.

EZRA:

But I was merry, till I fetched you home,  
To swarm the house with whinging wammerels.

ELIZA:

You fetched me from my home. If I'd but known  
Before I crossed the threshold. I took my arles,  
And had to do my darg. And another bride  
Comes now. They'll soon be here: the train was due  
At half-past one: they'd walk it in two hours,  
Though bride and groom.

EZRA:

I wish he'd married Judith.  
Cow-eyed, you called the wench; but cows have horns,  
And, whiles, they use them when you least expect.  
'Twould be no flighty heifer you'd to face,  
If she turned mankeen. But, I liked the runt.  
Jim might do worse.

ELIZA:

You liked ... But come, I'll set  
Your chair outside, where you can feel the sun;  
And hearken to the curlew; and be the first  
To welcome Jim and Phœbe as man and wife.  
Come!

17

EZRA:

Are the curlew calling?

ELIZA:

Calling? Ay!  
And they've been at it all the blessed day,  
As on the day I came to Krindlesyke.  
Likely the new bride—though 'twasn't at the time  
I noticed them: too heedless and new-fangled.  
She may be different: she may hear them now:  
They're noisy enough.

EZRA:

I cannot catch a note:  
I'm getting old, and deaved as well as darkened.  
When I was young, I liked to hear the whaups  
Calling to one another down the slacks:  
And I could whistle, too, like any curlew.  
'Twas an ancient bird wouldn't answer my call: and now  
I'm ancient myself—an old, blind, doddering heron,  
Dozing his day out in a syke, while minnows  
Play tiggy round his shanks and nibble his toes;  
And the hawk hangs overhead. But then the blood  
Was hot, and I'd a relish—such a relish!  
Keen as a kestrel ... and now ...

ELIZA:

It's Jim and Phœbe—  
The music and the dazzle in their heads:  
And they'll be here ...

EZRA:

I wish he'd married Judith:  
She's none the worse for being a ruddled ewe.

ELIZA:

Nay, God forbid! At least, I'm spared that bildert.

*(EZRA rises; and ELIZA carries out his chair, and he hobbles after her. She soon returns, and puts griddle-cakes into the oven to keep hot. Presently a step is heard on the threshold, and JUDITH ELLERSHAW stands in the doorway, a baby in her arms. ELIZA does not notice her for a few moments; then, glancing up, recognizes her with a start.)*

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ELIZA:

You, Judith Ellershaw! I thought 'twas Jim.

JUDITH:

You thought 'twas Jim?

ELIZA:

Jim and ... To think it's you!  
Where've you sprung from? It's long since you've shown face  
In these parts; and we'd seen the last of you,  
I reckoned, little dreaming—and, least of all,  
To-day!

JUDITH:

And should I be more welcome, then,  
On any other?

ELIZA:

Welcome? I hardly know.  
Decent folk don't keep open house for your sort  
At any time. Your foot's not dirtied that doorstep  
A dozen times in your life: and then, to come,  
To-day, of all days, just when Jim ...

*(Breaks off abruptly.)*

JUDITH:

When Jim?

ELIZA:

But, don't stand there. You're looking pale and peaked.  
It's heavy, traiking the fell-tracks with a baby:  
Come in, and rest a moment, if you're tired.  
You cannot bide here long: I'm sorry, lass;  
But I'm expecting company; and you  
Yourself, I take it, won't be over-eager  
For company.

19

JUDITH:

I'm tired enough, God kens—  
Bone-weary: but we'll not stay long, to shame you:  
And you can send us packing in good time,  
Before your company comes.

*(She enters, and seats herself on a chair near the door. ELIZA busies herself, laying the table for tea, and there is silence for a while.)*

JUDITH:

And so, Jim's gone  
To fetch the company?

ELIZA:

Ay, Jim has gone ...

*(She breaks off again abruptly, and says no more for a while. Presently she goes to the oven, takes out a griddle-cake, splits and butters it, and hands it to JUDITH.)*

ELIZA:

Likely, you're hungry, and could do with a bite?

JUDITH *(taking it)*:

I'm famished. Cake! We're grand, to-day, indeed!  
And scones and bannocks—carties, quite a spread!  
It's almost like a wedding.

ELIZA:

A wedding, woman?  
Can't folk have scones and bannocks and singing-hinnies,  
But you must prate of weddings—you, and all!

JUDITH:

I meant no harm. I thought, perhaps, Jim might ...  
Though, doubtless, he was married long ago?

*(ELIZA does not answer. JUDITH'S baby begins to whimper, and she tries to hush it in an absent manner.)*

20

JUDITH:

Whisht, whisht! my little lass! You mustn't cry,  
And shame the ears of decent folk. Whisht, whisht!

ELIZA:

Why, that's no way to hush the teelytoon.  
Come, give the bairn to me. Come, woman, come!

*(Taking the child from JUDITH.)*

I'll show you how to handle babies. There!

JUDITH:

And you would nurse my brat?

ELIZA:

A bairn's a bairn—  
Ay, even though its mother ...

*(Breaks off abruptly, and stands, gazing before her, clasping the baby to her bosom.)*

JUDITH:

Why don't you finish?  
"Ay, even though its mother ..." you were saying.

ELIZA:

It's ill work, calling names.

JUDITH:

You needn't fear  
To make me blush by calling me any name  
That hasn't stung me to the quick already.  
My pious father had a holy tongue;  
And he had searched the Scriptures to some purpose.

ELIZA *(gazing before her in an abstracted manner):*

Ay: likely enough.... Poor bairn, poor little bairn—  
It's strange, but, as you snuggled to my breast,  
I could have fancied, a moment, 'twas Jim I held  
In my arms again. I'm growing old and foolish,  
To have such fancies.

JUDITH:

Fancied 'twas Jim, your son—  
My bastard brat?

ELIZA:

Shame on you, woman, to call  
Your own bairn such, poor innocent. It's not  
To blame for being a chance-bairn. Yet ... O Jim!

JUDITH:

Why do you call on Jim? He's not come home yet?  
But I must go, before your son brings back ...  
Give me the bairn ...

ELIZA *(withholding the baby):*

Nay, daughter, not till I learn  
The father's name.

JUDITH:

What right have you ...

ELIZA:

God kens ...  
And yet ...

JUDITH:

Give me the bairn. You'll never learn  
The father's name from me.

ELIZA:

Go, daughter, go.  
What ill-chance made you come to-day, of all days?

JUDITH:

Why not to-day? Come, woman, I'd ken that,  
Before I go. I've half a mind to stay.

ELIZA:

Nay, lass, you said ...

JUDITH:

I've said a lot, in my time.  
I've changed my mind. 'Twas Jim I came to see—  
Though why, God kens! I liked the singing-hinny:  
Happen, there'll be some more for me, if I stay.  
I find I cannot thrive on nettle-broth:  
And it's not every day ...

ELIZA:

Judith, you ken.

JUDITH:

Ken? I ken nothing, but what you tell me.

ELIZA:

Daughter,  
I'll tell you all. You'll never have the heart ...

JUDITH:  
The heart!

ELIZA:  
To stay and shame us, when you ken all.

JUDITH:  
All?

ELIZA:  
When you talked of weddings, you'd hit the truth:  
And Jim brings home his bride to-day. Even now ...

JUDITH:  
And Jim brings home ...

ELIZA:  
I looked for them by this:  
But you've still time ...

JUDITH:  
The bride comes home to-day.  
Brides should come home: it's right a man should bring  
His bride home—ay! And we must go, my wean,  
To spare her blushes. We're no company  
For bride and bridegroom. Happen, we should meet them,  
You must not cry to him: I must not lift  
My eyes to his. We're nothing now to him.  
Your cry might tell her heart too much: my eyes  
Might meet her eyes, and tell ... It isn't good  
For a bride to know too much. So, we must hide  
In the ditch, as they pass by, if we should chance  
To meet them on the road—their road and ours—  
The same road, though we're travelling different ways.  
The bride comes home. Brides come home every day.  
And you and I ...

ELIZA:  
There's nothing else for it.

JUDITH:  
There's nothing else?

ELIZA:  
Nay, lass! How could you bide?  
They'll soon ... But, you'll not meet them, if you go ...

JUDITH:  
Go, where?

ELIZA:  
And how should I ken where you're bound for?  
I thought you might be making home.

JUDITH:  
Home—home!  
I might be making home? And where's my home—  
Ay, and my bairn's home, if it be not here?

ELIZA:  
Here? You'd not stay?

JUDITH:  
Why not? Have I no right?

ELIZA:  
If you'll not go for my sake, go for Jim's.  
If you were fond ...

JUDITH:  
And, think you, I'd be here,  
If I had not been fond of Jim? And yet,  
Why should I spare him? He's not spared me much,  
Who gave him all a woman has to give.

ELIZA:  
But, think of her, the bride, and her home-coming.

JUDITH:

I'll go.

ELIZA:

You lose but little: too well I ken  
How little—I, who've dwelt this forty-year  
At Krindlesyke.

JUDITH:

Happen you never loved.

ELIZA:

I, too, was young, once, daughter.

JUDITH:

Ay: and yet,  
You've never tramped the road I've had to travel.  
God send it stretch not forty-year!

ELIZA:

I've come  
That forty-year. We're out on the selfsame road,  
The three of us: but, she's the stoniest bit  
To travel still—the bride just setting out,  
And stepping daintily down the lilylea.  
We've known the worst.

JUDITH:

But, she can keep the highway,  
While I must slink in the ditch, among the nettles.

ELIZA:

I've kept the hard road, daughter, forty-year:  
The ditch may be easier going, after all:  
Nettles don't sting each other.

JUDITH:

Nay: but I'm not  
A ditch-born nettle, but, among the nettles,  
Only a woman, naked to every sting:  
And there are slugs and slithery toads and paddocks  
In the ditch-bottom; and their slimy touch  
Is worse to bear than any nettle ...

ELIZA:

Ay—  
The pity of it! A maid blooms only once:  
And then, that a man should ruin ... But, you've your bairn:  
And bairns, while we can hold them safe in our arms,  
And they still need the breast, make up for much:  
For there's a kind of comfort in their clinging,  
Though they only cling till they can stand alone.  
But yours is not a son. If I'd only had  
One daughter ...

JUDITH:

Well, you'll have a daughter now.  
But we must go our way to—God kens where!  
Before Jim brings the bride home. You've your wish:  
Jim brings you home a daughter ...

*(As she speaks, a step is heard, and EZRA BARRASFORD appears in the doorway. Turning to go, JUDITH meets him. She tries to pass him, but he clutches her arm; and she stands, dazed, while his fingers grope over her.)*

EZRA:

So Jim's back:  
And has slipped by his old dad without a word?  
I caught no footfall, though once I'd hear an adder  
Slink through the bent. I'm deafer than an adder—  
Deaf as the stone-wall Johnny Looney built  
Around the frog that worried him with croaking.  
I couldn't hear the curlew—not a note.  
But I forget my manners. Jim, you dog,  
To go and wed, and never tell your dad!  
I thought 'twas swedes you were after: and, by gox!  
It's safer fetching turnips than a wife.  
But, welcome home! Is this the bonnie bride?  
You're welcome, daughter, home to Krindlesyke.

*(Feeling her face.)*

But, wife, it's Judith, after all! I kenned  
That Judith was the lucky lass. You said  
'Twas somebody else: I cannot mind the name—  
Some fly-by-the-sky, outlandish name: but I  
Was right, you see. Though I be blind and deaf,  
I'm not so dull as some folk think. There's others  
Are getting on in years, forby old Ezra.  
Though some have ears to hear the churchyard worms  
Stirring beneath the mould, and think it time  
That he was straked and chested, the old dobbie  
Is not a corpse yet: and it well may happen  
He'll not be the first at Krindlesyke to lie,  
Cold as a slug, with pennies on his eyes.  
Aiblains, the old ram's cassen, but he's no trake yet:  
And, at the worst, he'll be no braxy carcass  
When he's cold mutton. Ay, I'm losing grip;  
But I've still got a kind of hold on life;  
And a young wench in the house makes all the difference.  
We've hardly blown the froth off, and smacked our lips,  
Before we've reached the bottom of the pot:  
Yet the last may prove the tastiest drop, who kens?  
You're welcome, daughter.

26

*(His hand, travelling over her shoulder, touches the child.)*

Ah, a brat—Jim's bairn!  
He hasn't lost much time, has Jim, the dog!  
Come, let me take it, daughter. I've never held  
A grandchild in my arms. Six sons I've had,  
But not one's made me granddad, to my knowledge:  
And all the hoggerels have turned lowpy-dyke,  
And scrambled, follow-my-leader, over the crag's edge,  
But Jim, your husband: and not for me to say,  
Before his wife, that he's the draft of the flock.  
Give me the baby: I'll not let it fall:  
I've always had a way with bairns, and women.  
It's not for naught I've tended ewes and lambs,  
This sixty-year.

*(He snatches the baby from JUDITH, before she realizes what he is doing, and hobbles away with it to the high-backed settle by the fire, out of sight. Before JUDITH can move to follow him, steps are heard on the threshold.)*

ELIZA:

Ah, God: they're at the door!

*As she speaks, JIM and PHOEBE BARRASFORD enter, talking and laughing. JUDITH ELLERSHAW shrinks into the shadow behind the door, while they come between her and the settle on which EZRA is nursing the baby unseen. ELIZA stands dazed in the middle of the room.*

27

JIM:

And they lived happy ever afterwards,  
Eh, lass? Well, mother: I've done the trick: all's over;  
And I'm a married man, copt fair and square,  
Coupled to Phœbe: and I've brought her home.  
You call the lass to mind, though you look moidart?  
What's dozzened you? She'll find her wits soon, Phœbe:  
They're in a mullock, all turned howthery-towthery  
At the notion of a new mistress at Krindlesyke—  
She'll come to her senses soon, and bid you welcome.  
Take off your bonnet; and make yourself at home.  
I trust tea's ready, mother: I'm fairly famished.  
I've hardly had a bite, and not a sup  
To wet my whistle since forenoon: and dod!  
But getting married is gey hungry work.  
I'm hollow as a kex in a ditch-bottom:  
And just as dry as Molly Miller's milkpail  
She bought, on the chance of borrowing a cow.  
Eh, Phœbe, lass! But you've stopped laughing, have you?  
And you look fleyed: there's nothing here to scare you:  
We're quiet folk at Krindlesyke. Come, mother,  
Have you no word of welcome for the lass,  
That you gape like a foundered ewe at us? What ghost  
Has given you a gliff, and set you chittering?  
Come, shake yourself, before I rax your bones;  
And give my bride the welcome due to her—  
My bride, the lady I have made my wife.

28

Poor lass, she's quaking like a dothery-dick.

ELIZA (to PHOEBE):

Daughter, may you ...

EZRA (crooning, unseen, to the baby):

"Dance for your mammy,  
Dance for your daddy ..."

JIM:

What ails the old runt now?

You mustn't heed him, Phœbe, lass: he's blind  
And old and watty: but there's no harm in him.

(Goes towards settle.)

Come, dad, and jog your wits, and stir your stumps,  
And welcome ... What the devil's this? Whose brat ...

EZRA:

Whose brat? And who should ken—although they say,  
It's a wise father knows his own child. Ay!  
If he's the devil, you're the devil's brat,  
And I'm the devil's daddy. Happen you came  
Before the parson had time to read the prayers.  
But, he's a rum dad ...

(JUDITH ELLERSHAW steps forward to take the child from EZRA.)

JIM:

Judith Ellershaw!

Why, lass, where ever have ...

(He steps towards her, then stops in confusion. Nobody speaks as JUDITH goes towards the settle, takes the child from EZRA, and wraps it in her shawl. She is moving to the door when PHOEBE steps before her and closes it, then turns and faces JUDITH.)

29

PHOEBE:

You shall not go.

JUDITH:

And who are you to stop me? Come, make way—  
Come, woman, let me pass.

PHOEBE:

I—I'm Jim's bride.

JUDITH:

And what should Jim's bride have to say to me?  
Come, let me by.

PHOEBE:

You shall not go.

JUDITH:

Come, lass.

You do not ken me for the thing I am:  
If you but guessed, you'd fling the door wide open,  
And draw your petticoats about you tight,  
Lest any draggletail of mine should smutch them.  
I never should have come 'mid decent folk:  
I never should have crawled out of the ditch.  
You little ken ...

PHOEBE:

I heard your name. I've heard  
That name before.

JUDITH:

You heard no good of it,  
Whoever spoke.

PHOEBE:

I heard it from the lips  
That uttered it just now.

JUDITH:

From Jim's? Well, Jim  
Kens what I am. I wonder he lets you talk  
With me. Come ...

PHOEBE:

Not until I know the name  
Of your baby's father.

JUDITH:

You've no right to ask.

PHŒBE:

Maybe: and yet, you shall not cross that doorsill,  
Until I know.

JUDITH:

Come, woman, don't be foolish.

PHŒBE:

You say I've no right. Pray God, you speak the truth:  
But there may be no woman in the world  
Who has a better right.

JUDITH:

You'd never heed  
A dotting doobby's blethering, would you, lass—  
An old, blind, crazy creature ...

PHŒBE:

If I've no right,  
You'll surely never have the heart to keep  
The name from me? You'll set my mind at ease?

JUDITH:

The heart! If it will set your mind at ease,  
I'll speak my shame ... I'll speak my shame right out ...  
I'll speak my shame right out, before you all.

JIM:

But, lass!

ELIZA (to PHŒBE):

Nay: let her go. You're young and hard:  
And I was hard, though far from young: I've long  
Been growing old; though little I realized  
How old. And when you're old, you don't judge hardly:  
You ken things happen, in spite of us, willy-nilly.  
We think we're safe, holding the reins; and then  
In a flash the mare bolts; and the wheels fly off;  
And we're lying, stunned, beneath the broken cart.  
So, let the lass go quietly; and keep  
Your happiness. When you're old, you'll not let slip  
A chance of happiness so easily:  
There's not so much of it going, to pick and choose:  
The apple's speckled; but it's best to munch it,  
And get what relish out of it you can;  
And, one day, you'll be glad to chew the core:  
For all its bitterness, few chuck it from them,  
While they've a sense left that can savour aught.  
So, let the lass go. You may have the right  
To question her: but folk who stand on their rights  
Get little rest: they're on a quaking moss  
Without a foothold; and find themselves to the neck  
In Deadman's Flow, before they've floundered far.  
Rights go for little, in this life: few are worth  
The risk of losing peace and quiet. You'll have  
Plenty to worrit, and keep you wakeful, without  
A pillow stuffed with burrs and briars: so, take  
An old wife's counsel, daughter: let well alone;  
And don't go gathering grievances. The lass ...

JIM:

Ay, don't be hard on her. Though mother's old,  
She talks sense, whiles. So let the poor lass go.

JUDITH:

The father of my bairn ...

JIM:

She's lying, Phœbe!

JUDITH:

The father of my bairn is—William Burn—  
A stranger to these parts. Now, let me pass.

*(She tries to slip by, but PHŒBE still does not make way for her.)*

JIM:



Ay, Phœbe, let her go. She tells the truth.  
 I thought ... But I mistook her. Let her go.  
 I never reckoned you'd be a reesty nag:  
 Yet, you can set your hoofs, and champ your bit  
 With any mare, I see. I doubt you'll prove  
 A rackle ramstam wife, if you've your head.  
 She's answered what you asked; though, why, unless ...  
 Well, I don't blame the wench: she should ken best.

PHŒBE:

Judith, you lie.

JUDITH:

I lie! You mean ...

PHŒBE:

To-day,  
 I married your bairn's father.

ELIZA:

O God!

JIM:

Come, lass,  
 I say!

JUDITH:

No woman, no! I spoke the truth.  
 Haven't I shamed myself enough already—  
 That you must call me liar! *(To ELIZA)* Speak out now,  
 If you're not tongue-tied: tell her all you ken—  
 How I'm a byword among honest women,  
 And yet, no liar. You'd tongue enough just now  
 To tell me what I was—a cruel tongue  
 Cracking about my ears: and have you none  
 To answer your son's wife, and save the lad  
 From scandal?

ELIZA:

I've not known the lass to lie ...  
 And she's the true heart, Phœbe, true as death,  
 Whatever it may seem.

JIM:

That's that: and so ...

*(While they have been talking, EZRA has risen from the settle, unnoticed; and has hobbled to where PHŒBE and JUDITH confront one another. He suddenly touches PHŒBE'S arm.)*

EZRA:

Cackling like guinea-fowl when a hawk's in air!  
 I must have snoozed; yet, I caught the gabble. There'll be  
 A clatter all day now, with two women's tongues,  
 Clack-clack against each other, in the house—  
 Two pendulums in one clock. Lucky I'm deaf.  
 But, I remember. Give me back the bairn.  
 Nay: this is not the wench. I want Jim's bride—  
 The mother of his daughter. Judith, lass,  
 Where are you? Come, I want to nurse my grandchild—  
 Jim's little lass.

ELIZA *(stepping towards EZRA)*:

Come, hold your foolish tongue.  
 You don't know what you're saying. Come, sit down.

*(Leads him back to the settle.)*

JIM:

If he don't stop his yammer, I'll slit his weasen—  
 I'll wring his neck for him!

EZRA:

What's wrong? What's wrong?  
 I'm an old man, now; and must do as I'm bid like a bairn—  
 I, who was master, and did all the bidding.  
 And you, Jim, I'd have broken your back like a rabbit's,  
 At one time, if you'd talked to me like that.  
 But now I'm old and sightless; and any tit  
 May chivvy a blind kestrel. Ay, I'm old  
 And weak—so waffly in arms and shanks, that now  
 I couldn't even hold down a hog to be clipped:

So, boys can threaten me, and go unskelped:  
 So you can bray; and I must hold my peace:  
 Yet, mark my words, the hemp's ripe for the rope  
 That'll throttle you one day, you gallows-bird.  
 But, something's happening that a blind man's sense  
 Cannot take hold of; so, I'd best be quiet—  
 Ay, just sit still all day, and nod and nod,  
 Until I nod myself into my coffin:  
 That's all that's left me.

JUDITH (*to PHOEBE*):

You'd weigh an old man's gossip  
 Against my word? O woman, pay no heed  
 To idle tongues, if you'd keep happiness.

PHOEBE:

While the tongue lies, the eyes speak out the truth.

JUDITH:

The eyes? Then you'll not take my word for it,  
 But let a dotard's clatterjaw destroy you?  
 You ken my worth: yet, if you care for Jim,  
 You'll trust his oath. If he denies the bairn,  
 Then, you'll believe? You'd surely never doubt  
 Your husband's word, and on your wedding-day?  
 Small wonder you'd be duberous of mine.  
 But Jim's not my sort; he's an honest lad;  
 And he'll speak truly. If he denies the bairn ...

PHOEBE:

I've not been used to doubting people's word.  
 My father's daughter couldn't but be trustful  
 Of what men said; for he was truth itself.  
 If only he'd lived, I mightn't ...

JUDITH:

If Jim denies ...

PHOEBE:

If Jim can look me in the eyes, and swear ...

JUDITH:

Come, set her mind at ease. Don't spare me, Jim;  
 But look her in the eyes, and tell her all;  
 For she's your wife; and has a right to ken  
 The bairn's no bairn of yours. Come, lad, speak out;  
 And don't stand gaping. You ken as well as I  
 The bairn ... Speak! Speak! Have you no tongue at all?

*(She pauses; but JIM hesitates to speak.)*

Don't think of me. You've naught to fear from me.  
 Tell all you ken of me right out: no word  
 Of yours can hurt me now: I'm shameless, now:  
 I'm in the ditch, and spattered to the neck.  
 Come, don't mince matters: your tongue's not so modest  
 It fears to make your cheeks burn—I ken that;  
 And when the question is a woman's virtue,  
 It rattles like a reaper round a wheatfield,  
 And as little cares if it's cutting grain or poppies.  
 So, it's too late to blush and stammer now,  
 And let your teeth trip up your tongue. Speak out!

*(JIM still hesitates.)*

Your wife is waiting; if you don't tell her true,  
 And quick about it, it's your own look-out.  
 I wouldn't be in your shoes, anyway.  
 See, how she's badgered me; and all because ...  
 Come: be a man: and speak.

JIM:

The brat's no brat  
 Of mine, Phœbe, I swear ...

*(He stops in confusion, dropping his eyes. PHOEBE turns from him, lays one hand on the latch and the other on JUDITH'S arm.)*

PHOEBE:

Come, lass, it's time  
 We were getting home.

JUDITH:

We?

PHOEBE:

Ay, unless you'd stay?

You've the right.

JUDITH:

I stay? O God, what have I done!

That I'd never crossed the threshold!

ELIZA:

You're not going

To leave him, Phœbe? You cannot: you're his wife;  
And cannot quit ... But, I'm getting old ...

JIM:

Leave me?

Leave me? She's mad! I never heard the like—  
And on my wedding-day—stark, staring mad!  
But, I'm your husband; and I bid you bide.

PHOEBE:

O Jim, if you had only told the truth,  
I might, God knows—for I was fond of you,  
And trusted ...

JIM:

Now you're talking sense. Leave me—  
And married to me in a church, and all!  
But, that's all over; and you're not huffed now.  
There's naught in me to take a scunner at.  
Yet the shying filly may prove a steady mare,  
Once a man's astriddle her who'll stand no capers.  
You've got to let a woman learn who's master,  
Sooner or later: so, it's just as well  
To get it over, once and for all. That's that.  
And now, let Judith go. Come, Phœbe, lass:  
I thought you'd a tender heart. Don't be too hard  
On a luckless wench: but let bygones be bygones.  
All's well that ends well. And what odds, my lass,  
Even if the brat were mine?

PHOEBE:

Judith, you're ready?

JIM:

Let the lass bide, and sup with us. I'll warrant  
She'll not say nay: she's a peckish look, as though  
She'd tasted no singing-hinnies this long while back.  
Mother, another cup. Draw up your chairs.  
We've not a wedding-party every day  
At Krindlesyke. I'm ravenous as a squab,  
When someone's potted dad and mammy crow.  
So sit down, Phœbe, before I clear the board.

PHOEBE:

Judith, it's time we were getting home.

JUDITH:

Home, lass?

I've got no home: I've long been homeless: I ...

PHOEBE:

That much he told me about you: he spoke the truth  
So far, at least: but I have still a home,  
My mother will be glad to see me back—  
Ay, more than glad: she was loth to let me go;  
Though, trusting Jim, as she trusted everyone,  
She said but little: and she'll welcome you,  
If only for your baby's sake. She's just  
A child, with children. Unless you are too proud ...  
Nay! But I see you'll come. We'll live and work,  
And tend the bairn, as sisters, we who care.  
Come, Judith.

*(She throws the door wide and goes out, without looking back. JIM steps forward to stay her, but halts, bewildered, on the threshold, and stands gazing after her.)*

JIM:

I'm damned! Nay, lass, I bid you bide:  
I'd see you straked, before I'd let you go ...  
Do you hear, I bid ... The blasted wench, she's gone—  
Gone! I've a mind ... If I don't hang for her ...  
Just let me get my fingers ... But, I'm betwattled  
Like a stoorded tup! And this is my wedding-day!

*(He stands speechless; but at length turns to JUDITH, who is gazing after PHOEBE with an unrealizing stare.)*

JIM:

Well ... anyway, you'll not desert me, Judith.  
Old friends are best: and I—I always liked you.  
The other lass was a lamb to woo, but wed,  
A termagant: and I'm well shot of her.  
I'd have wrung the pullet's neck for her one day,  
If she'd—and the devil to pay! So it's good riddance ...  
Yet, she'd a way with her, she had, the filly!  
And I'd have relished breaking her in. But you  
Were always easy-going, and fond of me—  
Ay, fond and faithful. Look, how you stood up  
To her, the tawpy tauntril, for my sake!  
We'll let bygones be bygones, won't we, Judith?  
My chickens have come home to roost, it seems.  
And so, this is my baby? Who'd have dreamt ...  
I little looked to harvest my wild oats.

*(JUDITH starts, shrinking from JIM: and then, clutching her baby to her bosom, she goes quickly out of the door.)*

JUDITH:

I'm coming, Phoebe, coming home with you!

*(JIM stands on the doorstone, staring after her, dumbfounded, till she is out of sight; then he turns, and clashes the door to.)*

ELIZA:

Ay, but it's time to bar the stable door.

JIM:

I've done with women: they're a faithless lot.

EZRA:

I can't make head or tail of all the wrangling—  
Such a gillaber and gilravishing,  
As I never heard in all my born days, never.  
Weddings were merrymakings in my time:  
The reckoning seldom came till the morrow's morn.  
But, Jim, my boy, though you're a baa-waa body,  
And gan about like a goose with a nicked head,  
You've, aiblains, found out now that petticoats  
Are kittle-cattle, the whole rabblement.  
The reesty nags will neither heck nor gee:  
And they're all clingclang like the Yetholm tinkers.  
Ay: though you're just a splurging jackalally,  
You've spoken truth for once, Jim: womenfolk,  
Wenches and wives, are all just weathercocks.  
I've ever found them faithless, first and last.  
But, where's your daughter, Jim? I want to hold  
The bairn.

JIM:

They've taken even her from me.

*(ELIZA, who has been filling the teapot, takes EZRA by the hand, and leads him to his seat at the table.)*

ELIZA:

Come, husband: sup your tea, before it's cold:  
And you, too, son. Ay, we're a faithless lot.

38

39

*Midsummer morning. EZRA BARRASFORD sits crouched over the fire. ELIZA BARRASFORD, looking old and worn, and as if dazed by a shock, comes from the ben, or inner room, with a piece of paper in her hand. As she sinks to a chair to recover her breath, the paper flutters to the floor, where she lets it lie, and sits staring before her.*

ELIZA:

So that's the last.

EZRA:

The last? The last of what?

ELIZA:

The last of your sons to leave you. Jim's gone now.

EZRA:

Gone where, the tyke? After his wife, I'll warrant.  
 'Twill take him all his time to catch her up:  
 She's three months' start of him. The gonneril,  
 To be forsaken on his wedding-day:  
 And the ninneyhammer let her go—he let her!  
 Do you reckon I'd let a woman I'd fetched home  
 Go gallivanting off at her own sweet will?  
 No wench I'd ringed, and had a mind to hold,  
 Should quit the steading till she was carried, feet-first  
 And shoulder-high, packed snug in a varnished box.  
 The noodle couldn't stand up to a woman's tongue:  
 And so, lightheels picked up her skirts, and flitted,  
 Before he'd even bedded her—skelped off  
 Like a ewe turned lowpy-dyke; and left the nowt,  
 The laughing-stock of the countryside. He should  
 Have used his fist to teach her manners. She seemed  
 To have the fondy flummoxed, till his wits  
 Were fozy as a frosted swede. Do you reckon  
 I'd let a lass ...

44

ELIZA:

And yet, six lads have left you,  
 Without a by-your-leave.

EZRA:

Six lads?

ELIZA:

Your sons.

EZRA:

Ay ... but they'd not the spunk to scoot till I  
 Was blind and crippled. The scurvy rats skidaddled  
 As the old barn-roof fell in. While I'd my sight,  
 They'd scarce the nerve to look me in the eye,  
 The blinking, slinking squealers!

ELIZA:

Ay, we're old.  
 The heat this morning seems to suffocate me,  
 My head's a skep of buzzing bees; and I pant  
 Like an old ewe under a dyke, when the sun gives scarce  
 An inch of shade. You harp on sight: but eyes  
 Aren't everything: my sight's a girl's: and yet  
 I'm old and broken: you've broken me, among you.  
 I'd count the pens of a hanging hawk: yet my eyes  
 Have saved me little: they've never seen to the bottom  
 Of the blackness of men's hearts. The very sons  
 Of my body, I reckoned to ken through and through,  
 As every mother thinks she knows her sons,  
 Have been pitch night to me. We never learn.  
 I thought I'd got by heart each turn and twist  
 Of all Jim's stupid cunning: but even he's  
 Outwitted me. Six sons, and not one left;  
 All gone in bitterness—firstborn to reckling:  
 Peter, twelve-year since, that black Christmas Eve:  
 And now Jim ends ...

45

EZRA:

You mean Jim's gone for good?

ELIZA:

For good and all: he's taken Peter's road.

EZRA:

And who's to tend the ewes? He couldn't go—  
No herd could leave his sheep to an old wife's care:  
For this old carcass, once counted the best herd's  
In the countryside, is a useless bag of bones now.  
Jim couldn't leave ...

ELIZA:

For all I ken or care,  
He's taken them with him too.

EZRA:

You're hawering!  
Your sons aren't common thieves, I trust. And Jim  
Would scarce have pluck to sneak a swede from the mulls  
Of a hobbled ewe, much less make off with a flock—  
Though his forbears lifted a wheen Scots' beasts in their time—  
And Steel would have him by the heels before  
He'd travelled a donkey's gallop, though he skelped along  
Like Willie Pigg's dick-ass. But how do you ken  
The gawky's gone for good? He couldn't leave ...

ELIZA:

I found a paper in the empty chest,  
Scrawled with a bit of writing in his hand:  
"Tell dad I've gone to look for his lost wits:  
And he'll not see me till he gets new eyes  
To seek me himself."

EZRA:

Eyes or no eyes, I'll break  
The fougart's back, in this world or the next:  
He'll not escape. He thinks he's the laugh of me;  
But I've never let another man laugh last.  
Though he should take the short cut to the gallows,  
I'll have him, bibbering on his bended knees  
Before me yet, even if I have to wait  
Till I find him, brizzling on the coals of hell.  
But, what do you say—the empty chest—what chest?

ELIZA:

The kist beneath the bed.

EZRA:

But, that's not empty!  
How could you open it, when I'd the key  
Strung safely on a bootlace next my skin?

ELIZA:

The key—you should have chained the kist, itself,  
As a locket round your neck, if you'd have kept  
Your precious hoard from your own flesh and blood.

EZRA:

To think a man begets the thieves to rob him!  
But, how ...

ELIZA:

I had no call to open it.  
I caught my foot against the splintered lid,  
When I went to make the bed.

EZRA:

The splintered lid!  
And the kist—the kist! You say 'twas empty?

ELIZA:

Not quite:  
The paper was in.

EZRA:

But the money, you dam of thieves—  
Where was the money?

ELIZA:

It wasn't in the box—  
Not a brass farthing.

EZRA:

The money gone—all gone?  
Why didn't you tell me about it right away?

ELIZA:

I wasn't minding money: I'd lost a son.

EZRA:

A son—a thief! I'll have the law of him:  
I'll sprag his wheel: for all his pretty pace,  
He'll come a cropper yet, the scruntty wastrel.  
This comes of marrying into a coper's family:  
I might have kenned: thieving runs in their blood.

ELIZA:

I've seen the day that lie'd have roused ... But now,  
It's not worth while ... worth while. I've never felt  
Such heat: it smothers me: it's like a nightmare,  
When you wake with your head in the blankets, all asweat:  
Only, I cannot wake ... It snowed the night  
That Peter went ...

EZRA:

Blabbering of heat and snow:  
And all that money gone—my hard-earned savings!  
We're beggared, woman—beggared by your son:  
And then, to sit and yammer like a yieldewe:  
Come, stir your stumps; and clap your bonnet on:  
Up and away!

ELIZA:

And where should I away to?

EZRA:

I'll have the law of him: I'll have him gaoled,  
And you must fetch the peeler.

ELIZA:

Policemen throng  
Round Krindlesyke, as bees about a thistle!  
And I'm to set the peelers on my son?  
If he'd gone with Peter, they'd have tracked his hobnails ...  
It snowed that night ... The snowflakes buzz like bees  
About the prickling thistles in my head—  
Big bumblebees ... I never felt such heat.

EZRA:

And I must sit, tied to a chair, and hearken  
To an old wife, havoring of bumblebees,  
While my hard-earned sovereigns lie snug and warm  
In the breeches' pocket of a rascal thief—  
Fifty gold sovereigns!

ELIZA:

Fifty golden bees—  
Golden Italian queens ... My father spent  
A sight of money on Italian queens:  
For he'd a way with bees. He'd handle them  
With naked hands. They swarmed on his beard, and hung,  
Buzzing like fury: but he never blinked—  
Just wagged his head, swaying them, till they dropped,  
All of a bunch, into an upturned skep....  
My head's a hive of buzzing bees—bees buzzing  
In the hot, crowded darkness, dripping honey ...

EZRA:

You're wandering, woman—maffling like a madpash.  
Jim's stolen your senses, when he took my gold.

ELIZA:

Don't talk of money now: I want to think.  
Six sons, I had. My sons, you say. You're right:  
For menfolk have no children: only women  
Carry them: only women are brought to bed:  
And only women labour: and, when they go,  
Only the mothers lose them: and all for nothing,  
The coil and cumber! If I could have left one son,  
Wedded, and settled down at Krindlesyke,  
To do his parents credit, and carry on ...  
First Peter came: it snowed the night he came—

A feeding-storm of fisselling dry snow.  
I lay and watched flakes fleetering out of the dark  
In the candleshine against the wet black glass,  
Like moths about a lanthorn ... I lay and watched,  
Till the pains were on me ... And they buzzed like bees,  
The snowflakes in my head—hot, stinging bees ...  
It snowed again, the night he went.... In the smother  
I lost him, in a drift down Bloodysyke ...  
I couldn't follow further: the snow closed in—  
Dry flakes that stung my face like swarming bees,  
And blinded me ... and buzzing, till my head  
Was all ahum; and I was fair betwattled ...  
I've not set eyes ...

EZRA:

Gather your wits together.  
There's no one else; and you must go to Rawridge—  
No daundering on the road; and tell John Steel  
Jim's gone: and so, there's none to look to the sheep.  
He must send someone ... Though my money melt  
In the hot pocket of a vagabond,  
They must be minded: sheep can't tend themselves.

ELIZA:

I'll go. 'Twas cruel to leave them in this heat,  
With none to water them. This heat's a judgment.  
They were my sons: I bore and suckled them.  
This heat's a judgment on me, pressing down  
On my brain like a redhot iron ...

50

*(She rises with difficulty, and goes, bareheaded, into the sunshine. In a few moments she staggers back, and stumbles, with unseeing eyes, towards the inner room. She pauses a second at the door, and turns, as if to speak to EZRA; but goes in, without a word. Presently a soft thud is heard within: then a low moan.)*

EZRA:

Who's there? Not you,  
Eliza? You can't be back already, woman?  
Why don't you speak? You yammered enough, just now—  
Such havers! Haven't you gone? What's keeping you?  
I told you to step out. What's wrong? What's wrong?  
You're wambling like a wallydraigling waywand.  
The old ewe's got the staggers. Boodyankers!  
If I wasn't so crocked and groggy, I'd make a fend  
To go myself—ay, blind bat as I am.  
Come, pull yourself together; and step lively.  
What's that? What's that? I can't hear anything now.  
Where are you, woman? Speak! There's no one here—  
Though I'd have sworn I heard the old wife waigling,  
As if she carried a hoggerel on her shoulders.  
I heard a foot: yet, she couldn't come so soon.  
I'm going watty. My mind's so set on dogging  
The heels of that damned thief, hot-foot for the gallows,  
I hear his footsteps echoing in my head.  
He'd hirple it barefoot on the coals of hell,  
With a red-hot prong at his hurdies to prog him on,  
If I'd my way with him: de'il scart the hanniel!

51

*(He sits, brooding; and some time has passed, when the head of a tramp, shaggy and unkempt, is thrust in at the door; and is followed by the body of PETER BARRASFORD, who steps cautiously in, and stealing up to the old man's chair, stands looking down upon him with a grin.)*

EZRA (*stirring uneasily*):

A step, for sure! You're back? Though how you've travelled  
So quickly, Eliza, I can't think. And when's  
John Steel to turn us out, to follow Jim  
And the other vagabonds? And who's he sending?  
He's not a man to spare ... But, sheep are sheep:  
Someone must tend them, though all else go smash.  
I've given my life to sheep, spent myself for them:  
And now, I'm not the value of a dead sheep  
To any farmer—a rackle of bones for the midden!  
A bitter day, 'twill be, when I turn my back  
On Krindlesyke. I little reckoned to go,  
A blind old cripple, hobbling on two sticks.  
Pride has a fall, they say: and I was proud—



Proud as a thistle; and a donkey's cropt  
The thistle's prickly pride. Why don't you speak?  
I'm not mistaken this time: I heard you come:  
I feel you standing over me.

*(He pokes round with his stick, catching PETER on the shin with it.)*

PETER *(wresting the stick from EZRA'S grasp):*

Easy on!

Peter's no lad to take a leathering, now.  
Your time's come round for breeches down, old boy:  
But don't be scared; for I'm no walloper—  
Too like hard work! My son's a clean white skin:  
He's never skirled, as you made me. By gox,  
You gave me gip: my back still bears the stripes  
Of the loundering I got the night I left.  
But I bear no malice, you old bag-of-bones:  
And where's the satisfaction in committing  
Assault and battery on a blasted scarecrow?  
'Twas basting hot young flesh that you enjoyed:  
I still can hear you smack your lips with relish,  
To see the blue weals rising, as you laid on,  
Until the tawse was bloody. Not juice enough  
In your geyzened carcase to raise one weal: and I never  
Could bear the sound of cracking bones: and you're  
All nobs and knuckles, like the parson's pig.  
To think I feared you once, old spindleshanks!  
But I'm not here for paying compliments:  
I've other pressing business on that brings me  
To the God-forsaken gaol where I was born.  
If I make sense of your doting, mother's out:  
And that's as well: it makes things easier.  
She'd flutter me: and I like to take things easy,  
Though I'm no sneak: I come in, bold as brass,  
By the front, when there's no back door. I'll do the trick  
While she's gone: and borrow a trifle on account.  
I trust that cuddy hasn't cropt your cashbox,  
Before your eldest son has got his portion.

52

*(He starts to go towards the inner room, but stops half-way as he hears a step on the threshold.)*

PETER:

The devil!

BELL HAGGARD, *a tall young tinker-woman, with an orange-coloured kerchief about her head, appears in the doorway with her young son, MICHAEL.*

53

PETER:

You, Bell? Lass, but you startled me.

EZRA *(muttering to himself):*

This must be death: the crows are gathering in.  
I don't feel like cold carrion, but corbies will gather,  
And flesh their bloody beaks on an old ram's carcase,  
Before the life's quite out.

PETER *(to BELL):*

I feared 'twas mother.

Lucky, she's out; it's easier to do—  
Well, you ken what, when she's ... But didn't I bid  
You keep well out of sight, you and the lad?

BELL:

You did. What then?

PETER:

I thought 'twas better the bairn ...

BELL:

You think too much for a man with a small head:  
You'll split the scalp, some day. I've not been used  
To doing any man's bidding, as you should ken:  
And I'd a mind to see the marble halls  
You dreamt you dwelt in.

PETER:

Hearken, how she gammons!

BELL:

She—the cat’s mother? You’ve no manners, Peter:  
You haven’t introduced us.

PETER:

Only hark!

Well, dad, she’s Bell—Bell Haggard, tinker-born—  
She’ll tell you she’s blood-royal, likely as not—  
And this lad happens to be hers and mine,  
Somehow, though we’re not married.

54

BELL:

What a fashion

To introduce a boy to his grandfather—  
And such a dear, respectable old sheep’s head!

(to MICHAEL)

Look well on granddad, son, and see what comes  
Of minding sheep.

MICHAEL:

I mean to be a shepherd.

BELL:

Well, you’ve a knack of getting your own way:  
But, tripe and trotters, you can look on him,  
And still say that? Ay, you’re his grandson, surely—  
All Barrasford, with not a dash of Haggard,  
No drop of the wild colt’s blood. Ewe’s milk you’d bleed  
If your nose were tapped. Who’d ever guess my dug  
Had suckled you? Even your dad’s no more  
Than three-parts mutton, with a strain of reynard—  
A fox’s heart, for all his weak sheep’s head.  
Lad, look well round on your ancestral halls:  
You’ll likely not clap eyes on them again.  
I’m eager to be off: we don’t seem welcome.  
Your venerable grandsire is asleep,  
Or else he’s a deaf mute; though, likely enough,  
That’s how folk look, awake, at Krindlesyke.  
I’d fancied we were bound for the Happy Return:  
But we’ve landed at the Undertaker’s Arms—  
And after closing time, and all. You’ve done  
That little business, Peter—though it’s not bulged  
Your pockets overmuch, that I can see?

PETER:

Just setting about it, when you interrupted ...

BELL:

Step lively, then. I find this welcome too warm  
On such a sultry day: I’m choked for air.  
These whitewashed walls, they’re too like—well, you ken  
Where you’ll find yourself, if you get nobbled ...

55

PETER:

It seems

There’s no one here to nab us; Jim’s gone off:  
But I’d as lief be through with it, and away,  
Before my mother’s back.

BELL:

You’re safe enough:

There’s none but sheep in sight for three miles round:  
And they’re all huddled up against the dykes,  
With lollering tongues too baked to bleat “Stop thief!”  
Look slippy! I’m half-scumfished by these walls—  
A weak flame, easily snuffed out: the stink  
Of whitewash makes me queasy—sets me listening  
To catch the click of the cell-door behind me:  
I feel cold bracelets round my wrists, already.  
Is thon the strong-room?

PETER:

Ay.

BELL:

Then sharp’s the word:

It’s time that we were stepping, Deadwood Dick.

(As PETER goes into the other room, EZRA tries to rise from his chair.)

EZRA:

Help! Murder! Thieves!

BELL (*thrusting him easily back with one hand*):

The oracle has spoken.

And so, old image, you've found your tongue at last:  
Small wonder you mislaid it, in such a mug.  
Help, say you? But, you needn't bleat so loud:  
There's none within three miles to listen to you,  
But me and Peter and Michael; and we're not deaf:  
So don't go straining your voice, old nightingale,  
Or splitting your wheezy bellows. And "thieves," no less!  
Tastes differ: but it isn't just the word  
I'd choose for welcoming my son and heir,  
When he comes home; and brings with him his—well,  
His son, and his son's mother, shall we say,  
So's not to scandalize your innocence?  
And, come to think, it's none too nice a word  
For grandson's ears: and me, his tender mammy,  
Doing all I can to keep the lamb's heart pure.  
And as for "murder"—how could there be murder?  
Murder's full-blooded—no mean word like "thieves":  
And who could murder a bundle of dried peas-sticks?  
Flung on the fire, happen they'd crackle and blaze:  
But I'm hot enough, to-day, without you frizzling.  
Still, "thieves" sticks in my gullet, old heel-of-the-loaf.  
Yet I'm not particular, myself, at times:  
And I've always gathered from your dutiful son  
Manners were taken for granted at Krindlesyke,  
And never missed: so I'll overlook the word.  
You've not been used to talking with a lady,  
Old scrag-end: still, I'm truly honoured, sir,  
In making your acquaintance: for I've heard  
Some pretty things about you from your son.

(EZRA, *who has shrunk back, gasping, into his chair, suddenly starts chuckling to himself.*)

BELL:

You're merry, sir! Will you not share the jest?  
Aren't you the sparky blade, the daffing callant,  
Naffing and nickering like a three-year-old?  
Come, none-so-pretty, cough the old wheeze up,  
Before it chokes you. Let me clap your back.  
You're, surely, never laughing at a lady?

(*Seizing him by the collar, and shaking him.*)

You deafy nut—you gibbet—you rusty corncrake!  
Tell me what's kittling you, old skeleton,  
Or I'll joggle your bones till they rattle like castanets.

(*Suddenly releasing him.*)

Come, Peter: let's away from this mouldy gaol,  
Before old heeltaps takes a fit. Your son  
Will be a full-grown shepherd before we leave—  
And his old mother, trapped between four walls—  
If you don't put a jerk in it.

(PETER *comes slowly from the inner room, empty-handed; and stands, dazed, in the doorway.*)

BELL:

Well, fumble-fingers?

What's kept you this half-year? I could have burgled  
The Bank of England in the time. What's up?  
Have you gone gite, now?

EZRA (*still chuckling*):

Thieves cheated by a thief!

BELL:

But, where's the box?

PETER:

I didn't see the box.

BELL:

You didn't see it?

PETER:

No; I didn't see it:

The valance hangs too low.

BELL:

And you're too proud—  
Too proud a prig to stoop? Did you expect  
The box to bounce itself into your arms,  
The moment it heard your step?

58

PETER:

I dared not stoop:  
For there was someone lying on the bed,  
Asleep, I think.

BELL:

You think?

PETER:

I only saw  
A hunched-up shoulder, poking through the curtain.

BELL:

A woman?

PETER:

Ay, my mother, or her fetch.  
I couldn't take my eyes from that hunched shoulder—  
It looked so queer—till you called my name.

BELL:

You said  
Your mother was out. But, we've no time to potter.  
To think I've borne a son to a calf that's fleyed  
Of a sleeping woman's back—his minney's, and all!  
Collops and chitterlings, if she's asleep,  
The job's the easier done. There's not a woman,  
Or a woman's fetch, would scare me from good gold.  
I'll get the box.

*(She steals softly into the other room, and is gone for some time. The others await her expectantly in silence. Presently she comes out bareheaded and empty-handed. Without a word, she goes to the window, and pulls down the blind; then closes the outer door: PETER and MICHAEL watching her in amazement.)*

EZRA:

So Jim, the fox, has cheated Peter, the fox—  
And vixen and cub, to boot! But, he made off  
Only this morning: and the scent's still fresh.  
You'll ken the road he'd take, the fox's track—  
A thief to catch a thief! He's lifted all:  
But, if you cop him, I'll give you half, although  
'Twill scarcely leave enough to bury us  
With decency, when we have starved to death,  
Your mother and I. Run, lad: there's fifty-sovereign!  
And mind you clout and clapperclaw the cull:  
Spanghew his jacket, when you've ripped his pockets—  
The scurvy scrunt!

59

BELL:

Silence, old misery:  
There's a dead woman lying in the house—  
And you can prate of money!

PETER:

Dead!

EZRA:

Eliza!

BELL:

I found the body, huddled on the bed,  
Already cold and stiffening.

EZRA:

I thought I heard ...  
Yet, she set out for Rawridge, to fetch a man ...  
I felt her passing, in my very bones.  
I knew her foot: you cannot hear a step  
For forty-year, and mistake it, though the spring's  
Gone out of it, and it's turned to a shuffle, it's still  
The same footfall. Why didn't she answer me?

She chattered enough, before she went—such havers!  
Words tumbling from her lips in a witless jumble.  
Contrary, to the last, she wouldn't answer:  
But crept away, like a wounded pheasant, to die  
Alone. She's gone before me, after all—  
And she, so hale; while I was crutched and crippled.  
I haven't looked on her face for eleven-year:  
But she was bonnie, when I saw her first,  
That morning at the fair—so fresh and pink.

BELL:

She must have died alone. It's an ill thing  
To die alone, folk say; but I don't know.  
She'd hardly die more lonely than she lived:  
For every woman's lonely in her heart.  
I never looked on a lonelier face.

PETER:

Come, Bell:

We'd best be making tracks: there's nothing here:  
So let's be going.

BELL:

Going, Peter, where?

PETER:

There's nothing to bide here for: we're too late.  
Jim's stolen a march on us: there's no loot left.

BELL:

And you would leave a woman, lying dead;  
And an old blind cripple who cannot do a hand's-turn,  
With no one to look after them—and they,  
Your father and mother?

PETER:

Little enough I owe them:

What can we do for them, anyway? We can't  
Bring back the dead to life: and, sooner or later,  
Someone will come from Rawridge to see to the sheep:  
And dad won't hurt, meanwhile: he's gey and tough.

BELL:

And you would leave your mother, lying dead,  
With none but strangers' hands to lay her out—  
No soul of her kin to tend her at the last?

*(She goes to the dresser and looks in the drawers, taking out an apron and tying it round her waist.)*

EZRA:

I never guessed she'd go, and leave me alone.  
How did she think I could get along without her?  
She kenned I could do nothing for myself:  
And yet she's left me alone, to starve to death—  
Just sit in my chair, and starve. It wasn't like her.  
And the breath's scarce out of her body, before the place  
Is overrun with a plague of thieving rats.  
They'll eat me out of house and home: my God,  
I've come to this—an old blind crippled dobbie,  
Forsaken of wife and bairns; and left to die—  
To be nibbled to death by rats: de'il scart the vermin!

BELL:

Time's drawn your teeth, but hasn't dulled your tongue's edge.

PETER:

Come, woman: what the devil are you up to?  
What's this new game?

BELL:

Peter, I'm biding here.

PETER:

You're biding here?

BELL:

And you are staying, too.

PETER:

By crikey, no! You'll not catch me: I cannot—

With thon in the other room. I never could bear ...

BELL:

You'll stop, till Michael's old enough to manage  
The sheep without your aid: then you may spurt  
To overtake Jim on the road to the gallows;  
And race, the pair of you, neck and neck, for hell:  
But not till I'm done with you.

PETER:

Nay, I'll be jiggered ...

BELL:

Truth slips out.

PETER:

I've a mind ...

BELL:

She's gone to earth.

PETER:

Just hold your gob, you ...

BELL:

Does the daft beast fancy  
That just because he's in his own calfyard  
He can turn his horns on me? Michael, my son,  
You've got your way: and you're to be a herd.  
You never took to horseflesh like a Haggard:  
Yet your mother must do her best for you. A mattress  
Under a roof; and sheep to keep you busy—  
That's what you're fashioned for—not bracken-beds  
In fellside ditches underneath the stars;  
And sharing potluck by the roadside fire.  
Well, every man must follow his own bent,  
Even though some woman's wried to let him do it:  
So, I must bide within this whitewashed gaol,  
For ever scrubbing flagstones, and washing dishes,  
And darning hose, and making meals for men,  
Half-suffocated by the stink of sheep,  
Till you find a lass to your mind; and set me free  
To take the road again—if I'm not too doddery  
For gallivanting; as most folk are by the time  
They've done their duty by others. Who'd have dreamt  
I'd make the model mother, after all?  
It seems as though a woman can't escape,  
Once she has any truck with men. But, carties!  
Something's gone topsy-turvy with creation,  
When the cuckoo's turned domestic, and starts to rear  
The young housesparrow. Granddad, Peter's home  
To mind the sheep: and you'll not be turned out,  
If you behave yourself: and when you're lifted,  
There'll be a grandson still at Krindlesyke:  
For Michael is a Barrasford, blood and bone:  
And till the day he fetches home a bride,  
I'm to be mistress here. But hark, old bones,  
You've got to mend your manners: for I'm used  
To having my own way.

PETER:

By gox, she is!

BELL:

And there's not room for two such in one house.  
Where I am mistress, there can be no master:  
So, don't try on your pretty tricks with me.  
I've always taken the whiphand with men.

PETER:

You'll smart yet, dad.

BELL:

You go about your business,  
Before your feet get frozen to the flagstones:  
Winter's but six months off, you ken. It's time  
You were watering those sheep, before their tongues  
Are baked as black as your heart. You'd better take  
The lad along with you: he cannot learn

The job too soon; so I'll get shot of the sight  
Of your mug, and have one lout the less to do for.  
Come, frisk your feet, the pair of you; and go:  
I've that to do which I must do alone.

*(As soon as PETER and MICHAEL are gone, BELL fills a basin with water from a bucket, and carries it into the other room, shutting the door behind her.)*

EZRA:

To think she should go first, when I have had  
One foot in the grave for hard on eleven-year!  
I little looked to taste her funeral ham.

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## PART II

*An October afternoon, fifteen years later. There is no one in the room: and the door stands open, showing a wide expanse of fell, golden in the low sunshine. A figure is seen approaching along the cart-track: and JUDITH ELLERSHAW, neatly dressed in black, appears at the door; and stands, undecided, on the threshold. She knocks several times, but no one answers: so she steps in, and seats herself on a chair near the door. Presently a sound of singing is heard without: and BELL HAGGARD is seen, coming over the bent, an orange-coloured kerchief about her head, her skirt kilted to the knee, and her arms full of withered bracken. She enters, humming: but stops, with a start, on seeing JUDITH; drops the bracken; whips off her kerchief; and lets down her skirt; and so appears as an ordinary cottage-wife.*

JUDITH:

You're Mistress Barrasford?

BELL:

Ay; so they call me.

JUDITH:

I knocked; but no one answered; so, I've taken  
The liberty of stepping in to rest.  
I'm Judith Ellershaw.

BELL:

I've heard the name;  
But can't just mind ... Ay! You're the hard-mouthed wench  
That took the bit in her teeth, and bolted: although  
You scarcely look it, either. Old Ezra used  
To mumble your name, when he was raiming on  
About the sovereigns Jim made off with: he missed  
The money more than the son—small blame to him:  
Though why grudge travelling-expenses to good-riddance?  
And still, 'twas shabby to pinch the lot: a case  
Of pot and kettle, but I'd have scorned to bag  
The lot, and leave the old folk penniless.  
'Twas hundreds Peter blabbed of—said our share  
Wouldn't be missed—or I'd have never set foot  
In Krindlesyke; to think I walked into this trap  
For fifty-pound, that wasn't even here!  
I might have kenned—Peter never told the truth,  
Except by accident. I did ... and yet,  
I came. I had to come: the old witch drew me.  
But, Jim was greedy ...

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JUDITH:

Doesn't Jim live here, now?

BELL:

You're not sent back by the penitent, then, to pay  
The interest on the loan he took that morning  
In an absent-minded fit—and pretty tales  
Are tarradiddles? Jim's not mucked that step  
In my time: Ezra thought he'd followed you.

JUDITH:

Me?

BELL:

You're Jim's wife—though you've not taken his name—  
Stuck to your own, and rightly: I'd not swap mine  
For any man's: but, you're the bride the bridegroom  
Lost before bedtime?

66

JUDITH:

No, 'twas Phœbe Martin:

And dead, this fifteen-year: she didn't last  
A twelvemonth after—it proved too much for her,  
The shock; for all her heart was set on Jim.

BELL:

Poor fool: though I've no cause to call her so;  
For women are mostly fools, where men come in.  
You're not the vanished bride? Then who've I blabbed  
The family-secrets to, unsnecking the cupboard,  
And setting the skeleton rattling his bones? I took you  
For one of us, who'd ken our pretty ways;  
And reckoned naught I could tell of Jim to Jim's wife  
Could startle her, though she'd no notion of it.

JUDITH:

I took you for Jim's wife.

BELL:

Me! I'm a fool—  
But never fool enough to wear a ring  
For any man.

JUDITH:

Yet, Mistress Barrasford?

BELL:

They call me that: but I'm Bell Haggard still;  
And will be to the day I die, and after:  
Though, happen, there'll be marriage and giving in marriage  
In hell; for old Nick's ever been matchmaker.  
In that particular, heaven would suit me better:  
But I've travelled the wrong road too far to turn now.

JUDITH:

Then you're not the mother of Michael Barrasford?

BELL:

And who's the brass to say he's not my son?  
I'm no man's wife: but what's to hinder me  
From being a mother?

JUDITH:

Then Jim is his father?

BELL:

And what's it got to do with you, the man  
I chose for my son's father? Chose—God help us!  
That's how we women gammon ourselves. Deuce kens  
The almighty lot choice has to do with it!

JUDITH:

It wasn't Jim, then?

BELL:

Crikey! You're not blate  
Of asking questions: I've not been so riddled  
Since that old egg-with-whiskers committed me.  
Why harp on Jim? I've not clapped eyes on Jim,  
Your worship; though I fear I must plead guilty  
To some acquaintance with the family,  
As you might put it; seeing that Jim's brother  
Is my son's father; though how it came to happen,  
The devil only kenned; and he's forgotten.

JUDITH:

Thank God, it wasn't Jim.

BELL:

And so say I:  
Though, kenning only Peter, I'm inclined  
To fancy Jim may be the better man.  
What licks me is, what it's to do with you?  
And why I answer your delicate questions, woman?  
Even old hard-boiled drew the line somewhere.

JUDITH:

I'm the mother of Jim's daughter.

BELL:

You're the wench  
The bride found here—and the mother of a daughter;



And live ...

JUDITH:

At Bellingham.

BELL:

Where Michael finds  
So often he's pressing business, must be seen to—  
Something to do with sheep. I see ... To think  
I didn't guess! Why is it, any man  
Can put the blinkers on us? But, was I blind,  
Or only wanting not to see—afraid  
Of what I've been itching after all these years?  
Can a hawk be caged so long, it's scared to watch  
The cage door opening? More to it than that:  
After all, there's something of the mother in me.  
Ay: you've found Michael's minney! As for his dad,  
It's eight-year since he quitted Krindlesyke,  
The second time, for good.

68

JUDITH:

He left you?

BELL:

Hooked it:  
But, shed no tears for me: he only left me,  
As a sobering lout will quit the bramble-bush  
He's tumbled in, blind-drunk—or was it an anthill  
He'd pillowed his fuddled head on? Anyway,  
He went, sore-skinned; and gay to go; escaped  
From Krindlesyke—he always had the luck—  
Before the bitter winter that finished Ezra:  
But, I'd to stay on, listening all day long  
To that old dotard, counting the fifty sovereigns  
Your fancy man made off with, when he cleaned out  
The coffers of Krindlesyke, the very day  
Ananias and I came for our share, too late:  
And so, got stuck at Back-o'-Beyont, like wasps  
In a treacle-trap—the gold all gone: naught left  
But the chink of coins in an old man's noddle, that age  
Had emptied of wits. He'd count them, over and over—  
Just stopping to curse Jim, when he called to mind  
The box was empty: and, often, in the night,  
I'd hear him counting, counting in the dark,  
Till the night he stopped at forty-nine, stopped dead,  
With a rattle—not a breath to whisper fifty.  
A crookt corpse, yellow as his lost gold, I found him,  
When I fetched my candle.

69

JUDITH:

Dead?

BELL:

Ay, guttered out—  
A dip burned to the socket. May chance puff out  
My flame, while it still burns steady, and not sowse it  
In a sweel of melted tallow.

JUDITH:

Ay, but it's sad  
When the wits go first.

BELL:

And he, so wried and geyzened,  
The undertakers couldn't strake him rightly.  
Even when they'd nailed him down, and we were watching  
By candle-light, the night before the funeral,  
Nid-nodding, Michael and I, just as the clock  
Struck twelve, there was a crack that brought us to,  
Bolt-upright, as the coffin lid flew off:  
And old granddaddy sat up in his shroud.

JUDITH:

God save us, woman! Whatever did ...

BELL:

I fancied  
He'd popped up to say fifty: but he dropped back  
With knees to chin. They'd got to screw him down:

And they'd sore work to get him underground—  
Snow overnight had reached the window-sill:  
And when, at length, the cart got on the road,  
The coffin was jolted twice into the drifts,  
Before they'd travelled the twelve-mile to the church-yard:  
And the hole they'd howked for him, chockful of slush:  
And the coffin slipt with a splash into the sluther.  
Ay—we see life at Krindlesyke, God help us!

70

JUDITH:

A fearsome end.

BELL:

Little to choose, 'twixt ends.  
So, Michael's granddad, and your girl's, went home  
To his forefathers, and theirs—both Barrasfords:  
Though I'd guess your bairn's a gentler strain: yet mine's  
No streak of me. All Barrasford, I judged him:  
But, though he's Ezra's stubbornness, he's naught  
Of foxy Peter: and grows more like Eliza,  
I'd fancy: though I never kenned her, living:  
I only saw her, dead.

JUDITH:

Eliza, too?

BELL:

I was the first to look on her dead face,  
The morn I came: if she'd but lived a day—  
Just one day longer, she'd have let me go.  
No living woman could have held me here:  
But she was dead; and so, I had to stay—  
A fly, caught in the web of a dead spider.  
It must be her he favours: and he's got  
A dogged patience well-nigh crazes me:  
A husband, born, as I was never born  
For wife. But, happen, you ken him, well as I,  
Leastways, his company-side, since he does business  
At Bellingham? A happy ending, eh!  
For our mischances, they should make a match:  
Though naught that ever happens is an ending;  
A wedding, least of all.

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JUDITH:

I've never seen him.  
Ruth keeps her counsel. I'd not even heard  
His name, till late last night; and then by chance:  
But, I've not slept a wink since, you may guess.  
When I heard "Barrasford of Krindlesyke,"  
My heart went cold within me, thinking of Jim,  
And what he'd been to me. I'd had no news  
Of all that's happened since I left the day  
Jim wedded; and ...

BELL:

The nowt felt like a poacher,  
When keeper's sneaked his bunny, and broken his snare?

JUDITH:

I fancied he, perhaps ...

BELL:

Ay, likely enough.  
Jim's wasted a sight of matches, since that day  
He burnt his fingers so badly: but he's not kindled  
A hearthfire yet at Krindlesyke. Anyway,  
For Michael to be his son, I'd need to be  
Even an older flame of his than you:  
For Michael's twenty-one.

JUDITH:

As old as that?  
But I could never rest, till I'd made sure.  
Knowing myself, I did not question Ruth ...

BELL:

What's worth the kenning's seldom learned by speiring.

JUDITH:

Though, knowing myself, I dreaded what might chance,  
What might already ...

BELL:

You'd no cause to worrit  
Michael's not that sort: he's respectable—  
Too staid and sober for his tinker-mother:  
He'll waste no matches, lighting wayside fires.

JUDITH:

Like me, Ruth's easy kindled; hard to quench—  
A flying spark, and the heather's afire in a gale;  
And the fell's burned to the rock—naught but black ash,  
When the downpour comes, too late.

BELL:

Ay—but the flare,  
And crackle, and tossing flames, and golden smoke;  
And the sting of the reek in the nostrils!

JUDITH:

Ruth'll love  
Once and for all: like me, she's born for marriage:  
Though, in my eager trustfulness, I missed it.  
You'll scorn me, as I often scorn myself:  
But, kenning the worst, in my heart of hearts, I hanker ...  
Jim meant so much to me once: I can't forget,  
Or keep from dwelling on the might-have-been.  
Snow on the felltop, now: but underground  
Fire smoulders still: and still might burst to flame.  
Deceived and broken ...

BELL:

What's this jackadandy,  
That you and Phoebe, both—and kenning him!

JUDITH:

What's kenning got to do with love? It makes  
No difference, once you've given ...

BELL:

If I've a heart,  
And it's broken, it's a broken stone, sunk deep  
In bottomless mosshags, where no heat can touch it,  
Till the whole world grills, at last, on hell's gridiron.

JUDITH:

Nothing you ken of broken hearts, or hell,  
To talk so lightly. I have come through hell:  
But you have never loved. What's given in love,  
Is given. It's something to have loved, at least:  
And I have Ruth.

BELL:

Ay, the green bracken-shoots,  
Soon push through the black litter of charred heath:  
And you have Ruth.

JUDITH:

Or, had her, till last night:  
I've lost her, now, it seems.

BELL:

You let life hurt you:  
You shy at shadows; and shrink from the crack of the whip,  
Before the lash stings: and life loves no sport  
Like yarking a shivering hide: you ask for it.

JUDITH:

I've been through much.

BELL:

And so, you should ken better  
Than to hang yourself, before the judge gives sentence:  
His honour can put the black cap on for himself,  
Without your aid. You'll die a thousand deaths,  
Before your end comes, peacefully in bed.  
Why should you go half-way to meet your funeral?

JUDITH:

Though there's a joy in giving recklessly,  
In flinging all your faggots on the blaze,  
In losing all for love—a crazy joy  
Long years of suffering cannot quench, I'd have  
Ruth spared that madness: and kenning she's just myself  
Born over, how could I sleep with the dread upon me?  
She'd throw herself away; would burn to waste,  
Suffering as I have ...

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BELL:

Anyway, you burned:  
And who's to say what burns to waste, even when  
The kindled peatstack fires the steading? Far better  
To perish in a flare, than smoulder away  
Your life in smother: and what are faggots for,  
If not for firing? But, you've suffered, woman,  
More than need be, because you were ashamed.  
The lurcher that slinks with drooping tail and lugs  
Just asks for pelting. It's shame makes life bad travelling—  
The stone in the shoe that lames you. Other folk  
Might be ashamed to do the things I've done:  
That's their look-out; they've got no call to do them:  
I've never done what I would blush to own to:  
I've got my self-respect. For all my talk,  
I'm proud of Michael: and you're proud of Ruth,  
I take it?

JUDITH:

Ay.

BELL:

Then, where's the need for shame,  
Because they were come-by-chances? A mean thief  
That snivels, because the fruit he relishes  
Is stolen; and keeps munching it to the core.  
Married, and so lived happily ever after?  
A deal of virtue in a wedding-ring:  
And marriage-lines make all the difference, don't they?  
Your man and mine were born in lawful wedlock:  
And sober, honest, dutiful sons they've proved:  
While our two bastards, Ruth and ...

75

JUDITH:

Never been  
A better daughter!

BELL:

Then, what would you have?  
You've had her to yourself, without the worrit  
Of a man to wear your soul out, all these years.  
If I'd been married, before a week was through,  
I'd have picked my husband's pocket, to buy rats' bane:  
Envyng the spiders who can gobble up  
Husbands they've no more use for between meals.  
But I wasn't born to kick my heels in air  
For a plaguey husband: and if I'm to dangle,  
'Twon't be for that, but something worth putting myself  
Out of the way for. You say I'll scorn you, woman.  
Who 'm I, to scorn? You're not my sort: but I ken  
Too much of life for easy scorn: I've learnt  
The lessons of the road.

JUDITH:

I've known the road, too;  
And learned its bitter ...

BELL:

You didn't relish it?  
It's meat to me; but then, I like mixed pickles—  
Life, with an edge, and a free hand with the pepper.  
You can't make a good hotchpotch with only 'taties:  
And a good hotchpotch I'm fairly famished for:  
I've starved on the lean fare of Krindlesyke:  
My mouth is watering for the old savoury mess—  
Life, piping hot: for I'm no man-in-the-moon,  
To sup off cold peaseporridge: and it's the wash  
Of bitters over the tongue gives bite to the pepper:

But you've no taste for bitter, or devilled collops—  
 Roast scrag on Sunday: cold mutton and boiled 'taties  
 The rest of the week, is the most you'd ask of life—  
 Nay, a cup of milky tea by a white hearth—  
 And you're in heaven!

JUDITH:

You're not far out.

BELL:

I take  
 Mine, laced with rum, by a camp-fire under the stars;  
 And not too dainty to mind the smatch of smoke.

JUDITH:

Tastes differ.

BELL:

Yet, for all my appetite,  
 At Krindlesyke, I'm a ewe overhead in a drift  
 That's cropped the grass round its feet, and mumbles its wool  
 For nourishment: and that's what you call life!  
 You're you: I'm I. It takes all turns for a circus:  
 And it's just the change and chances of the ring  
 Make the old game worth the candle: variety  
 At all costs: hurly-burly, razzle-dazzle—  
 Life, cowping creels through endless flaming hoops,  
 A breakneck business, ending with a crash,  
 If only in the big drum. The devil's to pay  
 For what we have, or haven't; and I believe  
 In value for my money.

JUDITH:

Peace and quiet  
 And a good home are worth ...

BELL:

But, you've no turn  
 For circuses: your heart's a pipeclayed hearthstone—  
 No ring for hoofs to trample to the clang  
 Of cymbals, blare of trumpets, rattle of drums:  
 No dash of brandy in your stirabout:  
 Porridge in peace, with a door 'twixt you and the weather;  
 A sanded floor; and the glow and smother of peat:  
 But I'd rather be a lean pig, running free,  
 Than the fattest flitch of bacon on the rafters.

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JUDITH:

And yet, you've kept ...

BELL:

Ay: but my fingers have itched  
 Sorely to fire the peatstack in a west wind,  
 That flames might swarm walls and roof-tree, and Krindlesyke,  
 Perishing in a crackle and golden flare-up,  
 Tumble a smoking ruin of blackened stone.

JUDITH:

Yet, you've kept house ...

BELL:

Ay, true enough; I've been  
 Cook, slut, and butler here this fifteen-year,  
 As thrang as Throp's wife when she hanged herself  
 With her own dishclout. Needs must, the fire will burn,  
 Barred in the grate: burn—nay, I've only smouldered  
 Like sodden peat. Ay, true, I've drudged; and yet,  
 What could I do against that old dead witch,  
 Lying in wait for me the day I came?  
 Her very patience was a kind of cunning  
 That challenged me, hinting I'd not have grit  
 To stand her life, even for a dozen years.  
 What could I do, but prove I could stick it out?  
 If I'd turned tail, she'd have bared her toothless gums  
 To grin at me: and how could I go through life,  
 Haunted by her dead smile? But now the spell  
 Is snapt: I've proved her wrong: she cannot hold me.  
 I've served my sentence: the cell-door opens: and yet,  
 You would have done that fifteen-years-hard willingly?

78

Some folk can only thrive in gaol—no nerve  
To face the risks outside; and never happy  
Till lagged for life: meals punctual and no cares:  
And the king for landlord. While I've eaten my head off,  
You've been a galled jade, fretting for the stable.  
Tastes differ: but it's just that you're not my sort  
Puzzles me why you gave yourself to Jim.

JUDITH:

There are no whys and wherefores, when you love.

BELL:

I gave myself to Peter, with a difference.  
You'd have wed Jim: I just let Peter travel  
With me, to keep the others from pestering;  
And scooted him when Michael could manage the sheep.

JUDITH:

You never loved him. I loved Jim ...

BELL:

A deal  
Of difference that's made!

JUDITH:

More than you can guess.

BELL:

Peter stuck longer, tangled in the brambles.

JUDITH:

I loved Jim; so, I trusted him.

BELL:

But when  
You found him out?

JUDITH:

If you had loved, you'd ken  
That finding out makes little difference.  
There are things in this life you don't understand,  
For all your ready tongue.

BELL:

Ay: men and women  
I've given up—just senseless marionettes,  
Jiggling and bobbing to the twitching strings:  
Though I like to fancy I pick my steps, and choose  
The tunes I dance to; happen, that's my pride;  
But, choose or not, we've got to pay the piper.

JUDITH:

Ay: in your pride, you think you've the best of life.  
You're missing more than you reckon, the best of all.

BELL:

Well, I've no turn for penal servitude.  
But, have you never gabbed to keep your heart up?  
What are hats for, if not for talking through?  
Pride—we've both pride; yours, hot and fierce, and mine  
Careless and cold: yet, both came the same cropper—  
Not quite ... for you were hurt to death almost:  
While I picked myself up, scatheless; not a scratch;  
Only my skirt torn; and it always draggled.

JUDITH:

You never cared: I couldn't have borne myself,  
If I'd not cared: I'd hate myself as much  
As I've hated Jim, whiles, when I thought of all.  
They're mixer-maxter, hate and love: and, often,  
I've wondered if I loathed, or loved, Jim most.  
I understand as little as you, it seems:  
Yet, it's only caring counts for anything  
In this life; though it's caring's broken me.

BELL:

It stiffens some. But, why take accidents  
So bitterly? It's all a rough-and-tumble  
Of accidents, from the accident of birth  
To the last accident that lays us out—

A go-as-you-please, and the devil take the hindmost.  
 It's pluck that counts, and an easy seat in the saddle:  
 Better to break your neck at the first ditch,  
 Than waste the day in seeking gates to slip through:  
 Cold-blooded crawlers I've no sort of use for.  
 You took the leap, and landed in the quickset:  
 But, at least, you leapt sky-high, before you tumbled:  
 And it's silly to lie moaning in the prickles:  
 Best pick yourself up sharp, and shake the thorns out,  
 Else the following hoofs will bash you. Give life leave  
 To break your heart, 'twill trample you ...

JUDITH:

Leave, say you?

Life takes French-leave: your heart's beneath the hoofs  
 Before ...

BELL:

But grin, and keep yourself heartwhole;  
 And you'll find the fun of the fair's in taking chances:  
 It's the uncertainty makes the race—no sport  
 In putting money on dead-certainties.  
 I back the dark horse; stake my soul against  
 The odds: and I'll not grouse if life should prove  
 A welsher in the end: I'll have had my fling,  
 At least: and yet talk's cheap ...

JUDITH:

Ay, cheap.

BELL:

Dirt-cheap:

Three-shots-a-penny; and it's not every time  
 You hit Aunt Sally and get a good cigar,  
 Or even pot a milky coconut:  
 And, all this while, life's had the upper hand:  
 I slipt, the day I came; and lost my grip:  
 Life got me by the scruff of the neck, and held  
 My proud nose to the grindstone. My turn, now—  
 I'll be upsides with life, and teach it manners,  
 Before death gets the stranglehold: I'll have  
 The last laugh, though it choke me. And what's death,  
 To set us twittering? I'll be no frightened squirrel:  
 Scolding and scolding never yet scared death:  
 When he's a mind to crack me like a nut,  
 I'd be no husk: still ripe and milky, I'd have him  
 Swallow the kernel, and spit out the shell,  
 Before all's shrivelled to black dust. But, tombstones,  
 What's turned my thoughts to death? It's these white walls,  
 After a day in the open. When I came,  
 At first, these four walls seemed to close in on me,  
 As though they'd crush the life out: and I felt  
 I'd die between them: but, after all ... And yet,  
 Who kens what green sod's to be broken for him?  
 Queer, that I'll lie, like any innocent  
 Beneath the daisies; but the gowans must wait.  
 Sore-punished, I'm not yet knocked out: life's had  
 My head in chancery; but I'll soon be free  
 To spar another round or so with him,  
 Before he sends me spinning to the ropes.  
 And life would not be life, without the hazards.

JUDITH:

Too many hazards for me.

BELL:

Ay: so it seems:

But you're too honest for the tricky game.  
 I've a sort of honesty—a liar and thief  
 In little things—I'm honesty itself  
 In the things that matter—few enough, deuce kens:  
 But your heart's open to the day; while mine's  
 A pitchy night, with just a star or so  
 To light me to cover at the keeper's step.  
 You're honest, to your hurt: your honesty's  
 A knife that cuts through all; and will be cutting—  
 Hacking and jabbing, and thirsting to draw blood;

And turning in the wound it makes—a gully,  
 To cut your heart out, if you doubted it:  
 And so, you're faithful, even to a fool;  
 While I would just be faithful to myself.  
 You thrive on misery.

JUDITH:

Nay: I've only asked  
 A little happiness of life: I've starved  
 For happiness, God kens.

BELL:

What's happiness?  
 You've got a sweet-tooth; and don't relish life:  
 You want run-honey, when it's the honeycomb  
 That gives the crunch and flavour. Would you be  
 As happy as a maggot in a medlar,  
 Swelling yourself in sweet deliciousness,  
 Till the blackbird nips you? None escapes his crop.  
 You'd quarrel with the juiciest plum, because  
 Your teeth grit on the stone, instead of cracking  
 The shell, and savouring the bitter kernel.  
 Nigh all the jests life cracks have bitter kernels.

JUDITH:

Ay, bitter enough to set my teeth on edge.

BELL:

What are teeth for, if we must live on pap?  
 The sweetest marrow's in the hardest bone,  
 As you've found with Ruth, I take it.

JUDITH:

Ay: and still,  
 You have been faithful, Bell.

BELL:

A faithful fool,  
 Against the grain, this fifteen-year: my son  
 And that dead woman were too strong for me:  
 They turned me false to my nature; broke me in  
 Like a flea in harness, that draws a nutshell-coach.  
 Till then I'd jumped, and bit, at my own sweet will.  
 Oh! amn't I the wiseacre, the downy owl,  
 Fancying myself as knowing as a signpost?  
 And yet, there's always some new twist to learn.  
 Life's an old thimblerrigger; and, it seems,  
 Can still get on the silly side of me,  
 Can still bamboozle me with his hanky-panky:  
 He always kens a trick worth two of mine;  
 Though he lets me spot the pea beneath the thimble  
 Just often enough to keep me in good conceit.  
 And he's kept you going, too, with Ruth to live for.

JUDITH:

If it hadn't been for Ruth ...

BELL:

He kens, he kens:  
 As canny as he's cute, for his own ends,  
 He's a wise showman; and doesn't overfeed  
 The living skeleton or let the fat lady starve:  
 And so, we're each kept going, in our own kind,  
 Till we've served our turn. Mine's talking, you'll have gathered!

JUDITH:

Ay, you've a tongue.

BELL:

It rattles in my head  
 Like crocks in a mugger's cart: but I've had few  
 To talk with here; and too much time for brooding,  
 Turning things over and over in my own mind,  
 These fifteen years.

JUDITH:

True: neighbours, hereabouts,  
 Are few, and far to seek.

BELL:



The devil a chance  
I've ever had of a gossip: and, as for news,  
I've had to fall back on the wormy Bible  
That props the broken looking-glass: so, now  
I've got the chance of a crack, my tongue goes randy;  
And patters like a cheapjack's, or a bookie's  
Offering you odds against the favourite, life:  
Or, wasn't life the dark horse? I have talked  
My wits out, till I'm like a drunken tipster,  
Too milled to ken the dark horse from the favourite.  
My sharp tongue's minced my very wits to words.

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JUDITH:

Ay, it's been rattling round.

BELL:

A slick tongue spares  
The owner the fag of thinking: it's the listeners  
Who get the headache. And yet, I could talk  
At one time to some purpose—didn't dribble  
Like a tap that needs a washer: and, by carties,  
It's talking I've missed most: I've always been  
Like an urchin with a withy—must be slashing—  
Thistles for choice: and not once, since I came,  
Have I had a real good shindy to warm my blood.

JUDITH:

I'd have thought Ezra ...

BELL:

Ay: we fratched, at first;  
For he'd a tongue of his own; and could use it, too,  
Better than most menfolk—a bonnie sparrer,  
I warrant, in his time; but past his best  
Before I kenned him; little fight left in him:  
And when his wits went cranky, he just havered—  
Ground out his two tunes like a hurdygurdy,  
With most notes missing and a creaky handle.

JUDITH:

And Michael?

BELL:

Michael! The lad will sit mumchance  
The evening through: he's got a powerful gift  
Of saying nothing: no sparks to strike off him;  
Though he's had to serve as a whetstone, this long while,  
To keep an edge on my tongue.

JUDITH:

He's quiet?

BELL:

Quiet!  
A husband born. No need to fear for Ruth:  
She's safe with Michael, safe for life.

JUDITH:

He's steady?

BELL:

He's not his mother's son: he banks his money;  
And takes no hazards; never risks his shirt:  
As canny as I'm spendthrift, he's the sort  
Can pouch his cutty, half-smoked, ten minutes after  
I've puffed away my pipeful. Ay: Ruth's safe.  
His peatstacks never fire: he'll never lose  
A lamb, or let a ewe slip through his hands,  
For want of watching; though he go for nights  
Without a nap. The day of Ezra's funeral,  
A score of gimmers perished in the snow,  
But not a ewe of Michael's: his were folded  
Before the wind began to pile the drifts:  
He takes no risks.

JUDITH:

Ruth needs a careful man:  
For she's the sort that's steady with the steady,  
And a featherhead with featherheads. She's sense:

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And Michael ...

BELL:

Michael's sense itself—a cob  
Too steady to shy even at the crack of doom:  
He'll keep the beaten track, the road that leads  
To four walls, and the same bed every night.  
Talk of the devil—but he's coming now  
Up Bloodsyke: ay, and there's someone with him—  
A petticoat, no less!

JUDITH:

Mercy! It's Ruth:  
Yet I didn't leave, till she was safely off  
To work ...

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BELL:

Work? Michael, too, had business  
In Bellingham this morning, oddly enough.  
Doubtless, they helped each other; and got through  
The job the quicker, working well together:  
And a parson took a hand in it for certain,  
If I ken Michael: likes things proper, he does;  
And always had a weakness for black lambs.  
But, who'd have guessed he'd ... Surely, there's a strain  
Of Haggard in the young limb, after all:  
No Haggard stops to ask a parent's leave,  
Even should they happen to ken the old folk by sight:  
My own I knew by hearsay. But, what luck  
You're here to welcome the young pair.

JUDITH:

No! They'll wonder ...  
I bring no luck to weddings ... I must go ...

BELL:

You can't, without being spotted: but you can hide  
Behind the door, till I speak with them.

JUDITH:

No! No!  
Not that door ... I can't hide behind that door  
Again.

BELL:

That door? Well, you ken best what's been  
Between that door and you. It's crazy and old,  
But, it looks innocent, wooden-faced humbug: yet  
I don't trust doors myself; they've got a knack  
Of shutting me in. But you'll be snug enough  
In the other room: I'd advise you to lie down,  
And rest; you're looking trashed: and, come to think,  
I've a deal to say to the bridegroom, before I go.

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JUDITH:

Go?

BELL:

Quick, this way: step lively, or they'll catch  
Your skirt-tail whisking round the doorcheek.

*(BELL hustles JUDITH into the inner room; closing the door behind her. She then thrusts the orange-coloured kerchief into her pocket; picks up the bracken, and flings it on the fire; seats herself on the settle, with her back to the door; and gazes at the blaze: not even glancing up, as MICHAEL and RUTH enter.)*

MICHAEL:

Mother!

BELL:

Is that you, Prodigal son? You're late, to-day,  
As always when you've business in Bellingham.  
That's through, I trust: those ewes have taken a deal  
Of seeing to: and I'm lonely as a milestone,  
When you're away.

MICHAEL:

I've taken the last trip, mother:  
That job's through: and I've made the best of bargains.  
You'll not be lonely, now, when I'm not here:

I've brought you a daughter to keep you company.

BELL (*turning sharply*):

I might have known you were no Prodigal son:  
He didn't bring home even a single sausage,  
For all his keeping company with swine.  
But, what should I do with a daughter, lad?  
Do you fancy, if I'd had a mind for daughters,  
I couldn't have had a dozen of my own?  
One petticoat's enough in any house:  
And who are you, to bring your mother a daughter?

MICHAEL:

Her husband. Ruth's my bride. Ruth Ellershaw  
She was till ten o'clock: Ruth Barrasford,  
Till doomsday, now.

BELL:

When did I give you leave  
To bring strange lasses to disturb my peace,  
Just as I'm getting used to Krindlesyke?  
To think you'd wed, without a word!

MICHAEL:

Leave, say you?  
You'll always have your jest. I said no word:  
For words breed words: and I'd not have a swarm  
Of stinging ants bumming about my lugs  
For days beforehand.

BELL:

Ants? They'd need be kaidis,  
To burrow through your fleece, and prog your skin.

MICHAEL:

I'd as lief ask leave of the tricky wind as you:  
And, leave or not, I'd see you damned, if you tried  
To part us. None of your games! I'm no young wether,  
To be let keep his old dam company;  
Trotting beside her ...

BELL:

Cock-a-whoop, my lad!  
Well done, for you, Ruth, lass; you've kindled him,  
As I could never do, for all my chaff.  
I little dreamt he'd ever turn lobsterplous:  
I hardly ken him, with his dander up,  
Swelling and bridling like a bubblyjock.  
If I pricked him now, he'd bleed red blood—not ewe's milk:  
The flick of my tongue can nettle him at last:  
His haunches quiver, for all his woolly coat;  
He'll prove a Haggard, yet. Nay—he said "husband":  
No Haggard I've heard tell on's been a husband:  
But, if your taste's for husbands, lass, you're suited,  
Till doomsday, as he says. He kens his mind:  
When barely breeched, he chose to bide with sheep;  
Though he might have travelled with horses: and it's sheep  
His heart is set on still. But, I've no turn  
For certainties myself: no sheep for me:  
Life, with a tossing mane, and clattering hoofs,  
The chancy life for me—not certain death,  
With the stink of tar and sheepdip in my nostrils.

MICHAEL:

Life, with a clattering tongue, you mean to say.

BELL:

Well: you're a bonnie lass, I must admit:  
And, if I'd fancied daughters, I might have done  
Much worse than let young Michael pick them for me:  
He's not gone posing in the kitchen garden.  
I never guessed he'd an eye for aught but ewes:  
As, blind as other mothers, I'd have sworn  
I'd kenned him, inside-out, since he was—nay!  
But he was never a rapscallion ripstitch—  
Always a prim and proper little man,  
A butter-won't-melt-in-my-mouth young sobersides,  
Since he found his own feet. Yet, the blade that's wed—

The jack-knife, turned into a pair of scissors—  
Without a word, is not the son I thought him.  
There's something of his mammy, after all,  
In Michael: and as for you, my lass, you're just  
Your minney's very spit.

RUTH:

You ken my mother?

BELL:

Ken Judith Ellershaw? You'll ask me, next,  
If I'm acquainted with Bell Haggard. Well,  
Gaping for turnips, Michael?

MICHAEL:

I never heard ...

BELL:

What have you heard this fifteen-year, except  
The bleat of sheep, till Ruth's voice kittled your ear?  
But, Judith sent some message by her daughter?

RUTH:

She doesn't ken I've come: nay, doesn't dream  
I'm married even; though I meant to tell her  
This morning; but I couldn't: she started so,  
When I let slip Michael's name; and turned so pale.  
I don't know why; but I feared some word of hers  
Might come between us: and I couldn't let  
Even my mother come between us now:  
So, I pretended to set out for work  
As usual: then, when we were married, went back  
With Michael, to break the news. But the door was locked:  
And neighbours said she was out—been gone some time:  
And Michael was impatient to be home:  
So, I had to come. I can't think what has happened.  
I hated leaving her like that: I've never  
In all my life done such a thing.

BELL:

Well, Michael  
Should be relieved to learn it's a first offence.

RUTH:

She'd gone without a word ...

BELL:

A family failing—  
And, happen, on like errand to your own.

RUTH:

Mother? Nay, she's too old: you said you knew her.

BELL:

Ay, well enough to reckon I'm her elder:  
And who's to tell me I'm too old to marry?  
A woman is never too old for anything:  
It's only men grow sober and faint-hearted:  
And Judith's just the sort whose soul is set  
On a husband and a hearthstone: I ken that.

RUTH:

Nay: mother'll never marry.

BELL:

You can speak  
With all the cock-a-whoop of ignorance:  
For you're too young to dare to doubt your wisdom.  
It's a wise man, or a fool, can speak for himself,  
Let alone for others, in this haphazard life.  
But give me a young fool, rather than an old—  
A plucky plunger, than a canny crone  
Who's old enough to ken she doesn't ken.  
You're right: for doubting is a kind of dotage:  
Experience ages and decays; while folk  
Who never doubt themselves die young—at ninety.  
Age never yet brought gumption to a ninny:  
And you cannot reckon up a stranger's wits  
By counting his bare patches and grey hairs:

It's seldom sense that makes a bald head shine:  
And I'm not partial to Methuselahs.  
Keep your cocksureness, while you can: too soon,  
Time plucks the feathers off you; and you lie,  
Naked and skewered, with not a cock-a-doodle,  
Or flap of the wings to warm your heart again.  
And so, you quitted your mammy, without a word,  
When the jockey whistled?

RUTH:

Nay: I left a letter:  
'Twas all I could do.

BELL:

She's lost a daughter; and got  
A bit of paper, instead: and what have I,  
For my lost son?

MICHAEL:

You've lost no son; but gained  
A daughter. You'll always live with us.

BELL:

Just so.  
I've waited for you to say that: and it comes pat.  
You'll think his thoughts; and mutter them in your mind,  
Before he can give them tongue, Ruth. He's not said  
An unexpected thing since he grew out  
Of his first breeches: and, like the most of men,  
He speaks so slowly, you can almost catch  
The creaking of his wits between the words.

RUTH:

Well: I've a tongue for two: and you, yourself,  
Don't lack for ...

BELL:

So, all's settled: you've arranged  
The world for your convenience; and have planned  
Your mothers' lives between you? I'm to be  
The dear old grannie in the ingleneuk;  
And hide my grizzled wisps in a mutch with frills?  
Nay, God forbid! I'm no tame pussycat,  
To snuggle on the corner of a settle,  
With one eye open for the chance-thrown titbit,  
While the good housewife goes about her duties:  
Me! lapping with blinking eyes and passing paws,  
The saucer of skim-milk that young skinflint spares me,  
And purring, when her darlings pull my tail—  
Great-grandchildren, too, to Ezra, on both sides.  
Ay: you may gape like a brace of guddled brandling:  
But that old bull-trout's grandsire to you both;  
And a double dose of his blue blood will run  
In the veins of your small fry—if fish have veins.

MICHAEL:

You surely never mean to say ...

BELL:

I do.  
More than a little for you young know-alls to learn,  
When you meet Judith Ellershaw: for havers  
As it sounds to your young lugs, the world went round,  
And one or two things happened, before you were born.  
Yet, none of us kens what life's got up his sleeve:  
He's played so long: and had a deal of practice,  
Since he sat down with Adam: he's always got  
A trump tucked out of sight, that takes the trick.  
But, son, you've lived with me for all these years;  
And yet ken me so little? Grannie's mutch-frills!  
I'd as lief rig myself in widow's weeds  
For my fancy man, who may have departed this life,  
For all I ken or care.

MICHAEL:

Come, hold your tongue:  
Enough of shameless talk. I'm master, now:  
And I'll not have Ruth hear this radgy slack.

If you've no shame yourself, I'll find a way  
To bridle your loose tongue: so mind yourself:  
I'll have no tinker's tattle.

BELL:

The tinker's brat  
Rides the high-horse now, mounted on prime mutton.  
Ruth, lass, you're safe, you're safe—if safety's all:  
He'll never guess your heart, unless you blab.  
I've never told him mine: I've kept him easy,  
Till he'd found someone else to victual him,  
And make his bed, and darn his hose; and you  
Seem born to take the job out of my hands.

RUTH:

But I'd not come between you ...

BELL:

Think not, lass?  
I bear you no ill-will: you set me free.  
I'm a wildcat, all bristling fur and claws:  
At Krindlesyke, I've been a wildcat, caged:  
And Michael never twigged! Son, don't you mind  
The day we came—was I a tabby then?  
The day we came here, with no thought to bide,  
Once we had got the plunder; and were trapped  
Between these four white walls by a dead woman?  
She held me—forced my feet into her shoes—  
Held me for your sake. Ay: there seemed some link  
'Twixt your dead grannie and you, too strong for me  
To break; though it's been strained to the snapping-point,  
Times out of mind, whenever a hoolet's screech  
Sang through my blood; or poaching foxes barked  
On a shiny night to the cackle of wild geese,  
Travelling from sea to sea far overhead:  
Or whenever, waking in the quiet dark,  
The ghosts of horses whinneyed in my heart.  
Ghosts! Nay, I've been the mare between the limmers  
Who hears the hunters gallop gaily by;  
Or, rather, the hunter, bogged in a quaking moss,  
Fankit in sluthery strothers, belly-deep,  
With the tune of the horn tally-hoing through her blood,  
As the field sweeps out of sight.

MICHAEL:

Wildcats and hunters—  
A mongrel breed, eh, Ruth?

BELL:

But, now it seems,  
I can draw my hocks out of the clungy sump  
I've floundered in so long; and, snuffing the wind,  
Shew a clean pair of heels to Krindlesyke.  
A mongrel breed, say you? And who but a man  
Could have a wildcat-hunter making his bed  
For him for fifteen-year, and never know it?  
But, the old wife's satisfied, at last: she should be:  
She's had my best years: I've grown old and grizzled,  
And full of useless wisdom, in her service.  
She's taught me much: for I've had time and to spare,  
Brooding among these God-forsaken fells,  
To turn life inside-out in my own mind;  
And study every thread of it, warp and weft.  
I'm far from the same woman who came here:  
And I'll take up my old life with a difference,  
Now she and you've got no more use for me:  
You've squeezed me dry betwixt you.

MICHAEL:

Dry, do you say?  
The Tyne's in spate; and we must swim for life,  
Eh, Ruth? But, you'll soon get used ...

BELL:

She's done with me.  
She'll not be sorry to lose me: I fancy, at times,  
She felt she'd got more than she'd bargained for—

A wasp, rampaging in her spider's web.  
"Far above rubies" has never been my line,  
Though I could wag a tongue with Solomon,  
Like the Queen of Sheba herself: I doubt if she  
Rose in the night to give meat to her household.  
She must have been an ancestor of mine:  
For she'd traik any distance for a crack,  
The gipsy-hearted ganwife that she was.

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MICHAEL:

Wildcats and hunters and the Queen of Sheba—  
A royal family, Ruth, you've married into!

BELL:

But now I can kick Eliza's shoes sky-high:  
Nay—I must shuffle them quietly off; and lay  
The old wife's shoes decently by the hearth,  
As I found them when I came—a slattern stopgap—  
Ready for the young wife to step into.  
They'll fit her, as they never fitted me:  
For all her youth, they will not gall her heels,  
Or give her corns: she's the true Cinderella:  
The clock has struck for her; and the dancing's done;  
And the Prince has brought her home—to wash the dishes.  
But now I'm free: and I'll away to-night.  
My bones have been restless in me all day long:  
They felt their freedom coming, before I kened.  
I've little time to lose: I'm getting old—  
Stiff-jointed in my wits, that once were nimble  
As a ferret among the bobtails, old and dull.  
A night or so may seem to matter little,  
When I've already lost full fifteen-year:  
But I hear the owls call: and my fur's a-tingle:  
The Haggard blood is pricking in my veins.

*(She loosens the string of her apron, which slips to the ground, kilts her skirt to her knee,  
takes the orange-coloured kerchief from her pocket, and twists it about her head;  
while MICHAEL and RUTH watch the transformation in amazement.)*

MICHAEL:

But you don't mean to leave us?

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BELL:

Pat it comes:

You've just to twitch the wire and the bell rings:  
You'll learn the trick, soon, Ruth. *(To MICHAEL)* Bat, don't you see  
I've just put on my nightcap, ready for bed—  
Grannie's frilled mutch? I leave you, Michael? Son,  
The time came, as it comes to every man,  
When you'd to make a choice betwixt two women.  
You've made your choice: and chosen well: but I,  
Who've always done the choosing, and never yet  
Tripped to the beck of any man, or bobbed  
To any living woman—I'm free to follow  
My own bent, now that that old witch's fingers  
Have slackened their cold clutch; and your dead grannie  
Has gained her ends, and seen you settled down  
At Krindlesyke: and from this on I, too,  
Am dead to you. You'll soon enough forget me:  
The world would end if a man could not forget  
His mother's deathbed in his young wife's arms—  
I'm far from corpse-cold yet; and it may be years  
Before they pluck Bell Haggard's kerchief off,  
To tie her chin up with, and ripe her pockets  
Of her last pennies to shut up her eyes.  
Even then, they'll have to tug the chin-clout tight,  
To keep her tongue from wagging. Well, my son,  
So, it's good-bye till doomsday.

MICHAEL:

You're not going?

I thought you only havered. You can't go.  
Do you think I'd let you go, and ...

BELL:

Hearken, Ruth:

That's the true husband's voice: for husbands think,  
If only they are headstrong and high-handed,

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Till the words bite hot as ginger on the tongue.  
Anger's the stuff to loose a tongue grown rusty:  
And keep it in good fettle for all chances.  
I'm sick of dozing by a dumb hearthstone—  
And the peat, with never a click or crackle in it—  
Famished for news.

MICHAEL:

For scandal.

BELL:

There's no scandal  
For those who can't be scandalized—just news:  
All's fish that comes to their net. I was made  
For company.

MICHAEL:

And you'd go back again  
To that tag-rag-and-bobtail? What's the use  
Of a man's working to keep a decent home,  
When his own mother tries to drag him down?

BELL:

Nay: my pernicketty, fine gentleman,  
But I'll not drag you down: you're free of me:  
I've slipt my apron off; and you're tied now  
To your wife's apron-strings: for menfolk seem  
Uneasy on the loose, and never happy  
Unless they're clinging to some woman's skirt. 101  
I'm out of place in any decent house,  
As a kestrel in a hencoop. Ay, you're decent:  
But, son, remember a man's decency  
Depends on his braces; and it's I who've sewn  
Your trouser-buttons on; so, when you fasten  
Your galluses, give the tinker's baggage credit.  
She's done her best for you; and scrubbed and scoured,  
Against the grain, for all these years, to keep  
Your home respectable; though, in her heart,  
Thank God, she's never been respectable—  
No dry-rot in her bones, while she's alive:  
Time and to spare for decency in the grave.  
So, you can do your duty by the sheep,  
While I go hunting with the jinneyhoolets—  
Birds of a feather—ay, and fleece with fleece:  
And when I'm a toothless, mumbling crone, you'll be  
So proper a gentleman, 'twill be hard to tell  
The shepherd from the sheep. Someone must rear  
The mutton and wool, to keep us warm and fed;  
But that's not my line: please to step this way  
For the fancy goods and fakish faldalals,  
Trinkets and toys and fairings. Son, you say,  
You're master here: well, that's for Ruth to settle:  
I'll be elsewhere. I've never knuckled down  
To any man: and I'll be coffin-cold  
Before I brook a master; so, good-night,  
And pleasant dreams; and a long family  
Of curly lambkins, bleating round the board.

RUTH:

Michael, you'll never let her go alone?  
She's only talking wild, because she's jealous.  
Mothers are always jealous, when their sons 102  
Bring home a bride: though she needn't be uneasy:  
I'd never interfere ...

BELL:

Too wise to put  
Your fingers 'twixt the cleaver and the block?  
Jealous—I wonder? Anyhow, it seems,  
I've got a daughter, too. Alone, you say?  
However long I stayed, I'd have to go  
Alone, at last: and I'd as lief be gone,  
While I can carry myself on my two pins.  
Being buried with the Barrasfords is a chance  
I've little mind to risk a second time:  
I'm too much of a Haggard, to want to rise,  
At the last trump, among a flock of bleaters.

If I've my way, there'll be stampeding hoofs  
About me, startled at the crack of doom.

MICHAEL:

When you've done play-acting ...

BELL:

Play-acting? Ay: I'm through:  
Exit the villain: ring the curtain down  
On the happy ending—bride and bridegroom seated  
On either side the poor, but pious, hearth.

MICHAEL:

I'd as soon argue with a weathercock  
As with a woman ...

BELL:

Yet the weathervanes  
Are always cocks, not hens.

MICHAEL:

You shall not go.

BELL:

Your naked hurdles cannot hold the wind.

MICHAEL:

Wind? Ay, I'm fairly tewed and hattered with words:  
And yet, for all your wind, you shall not go.

BELL:

While you've a roof to shelter me, eh, son?  
You mean so well; and understand so little.  
Yours is a good thick fleece—no skin that twitches  
When a breath tickles it. Sheep will be sheep,  
And horses, horses, till the day of judgment.

MICHAEL:

Better a sound tup than a spavined nag.

BELL:

Ay, Ruth, you've kindled him! Good luck to you:  
And may your hearthfire warm you to the end.

(To MICHAEL.)

You've been a good son to me, in your way:  
Only, our ways are different; and here they part.  
For all my blether, there's no bitterness  
On my side: I've long kenned 'twas bound to come:  
And, in your heart, you know it's for the best,  
For your sake, and for Ruth's sake, and for mine.  
I couldn't obey, where I have bid; nor risk  
My own son's fathering me in second childhood:  
And you'd not care to have me like old Ezra,  
A dothing haiveril in your chimney corner,  
Babbling of vanished gold? I read my fortune  
In the flames just now: and I'll not rot to death:  
It's time enough to moulder, underground.  
My death'll come quick and chancy, as I'd have had  
Each instant of life: but still there are risky years  
Before me, and a sudden, unlooked-for ending.  
And I'll not haunt you: ghosts enough, with Ezra,  
Counting his ghostly sovereigns all night long,  
And old Eliza, darning ghostly stockings.  
My ghost will ride a broomstick...

(As she speaks, the inner door opens, and RUTH and MICHAEL, turning sharply at the click  
of the latch, gaze, dumbfounded, at JUDITH ELLERSHAW, standing in the doorway.)

BELL:

Fee-fo-fum!  
The barguest bays; and boggles, brags, and bo-los  
Follow the hunt. How's that for witchcraft, think you?  
Hark, how the lych-owl screeches!

RUTH (running to her mother's arms):

Mother, you!

BELL:

Now there's a sweet, domestic picture for you!  
My cue's to vanish in a puff of smoke

And reek of brimstone, like the witch I am.  
I'm coming, hoolet, my old cat with wings!  
It's time I was away: there never yet  
Was room for two grandmothers in one house.  
I'm through with Krindlesyke. Good-bye, old gaol!

*(While MICHAEL still gazes at RUTH and her mother in amazement, BELL HAGGARD slips out of the door, unnoticed, and away through the bracken in the gathering dusk. An owl hoots.)*

105

PART III

*A wet afternoon in May, six years later. The table is already set for tea. JUDITH ELLERSHAW sits, knitting, by the hearth; a cradle with a young baby in it by her side. The outer door is closed, but unlatched. Presently the unkempt head of a man appears furtively at the window; then vanishes. The door is pushed stealthily open: and JIM BARRASFORD, ragged and disreputable (and some twenty years older than when he married PHOEBE MARTIN) stands on the threshold a moment, eyeing JUDITH'S unconscious back in silence: then he speaks, limping towards her chair.*

JIM:

While the cat callevers the hills of Back-o'-Beyont,  
The rats make free of the rick: and so, you doubled,  
As soon as my hurdies were turned on Krindlesyke,  
And settled yourself in the ingle?

JUDITH *(starting up, and facing him)*:

Jim!

JIM:

Ay, Jim—

No other, Judith. I'll be bound you weren't  
Just looking to see me: you seem overcome  
By the unexpected pleasure. Your pardon, mistress,  
If I intrude. By crikes! But I'm no ghost  
To set you adither: you don't see anything wrong—  
No, no! What should you see? I startled you.  
Happen I look a wee bit muggerishlike—  
A ragtag hipplety-clinch: but I've been travelling  
Mischancy roads; and I'm fair muggert-up.  
Yet, why should that stagnate you? Where's the sense  
Of expecting a mislucket man like me  
To be as snod and spruce as a young shaver?  
But I'm all right: there's naught amiss with Jim,  
Except too much of nothing in his belly.  
A good square meal, and a pipe, and a decent night's rest,  
And I'll be fit as a fiddle. I've hardly slept ...  
Well, now I'm home, I'll make myself at home.

106

*(He seizes the loaf of bread from the table; hacks off a hunch with his jack-knife; and wolfs it ravenously.)*

JUDITH:

Home? You've come home, Jim?

JIM:

Nay, I'm my own fetch!

God's truth! there's little else but skin and bone  
Beneath these tatters: just a two-legged boggart,  
With naught but wind to fill my waim—small wonder  
You're maiselt, to see a scarecrow stottering in—  
For plover's eggs and heather-broth don't sleek  
A wrinkled hide or swell a scrankit belly.  
But still, what should there be to flabbergast you  
About a man's returning to his home?  
Naught wrong in coming home, I hope? By gox,  
A poor lad can't come home, but he's cross-questioned,  
And stared at like ... Why do you stare like that?  
It's I should be agape, to find you here:  
But no, I'm not surprised: you can't surprise me:  
I'm a travelled man: I've seen the world; and so,  
Don't look for gratitude. My eyes were opened,  
Once and for all, by Phœbe and you, that day—  
Nigh twenty-year since: and they've not been shut ...  
By gum, that's so! it seems like twenty-year  
Since I'd a wink of sleep ... And, anyway,  
I've heard the story, all the goings-on;

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And a pretty tale it is: for I'd a drink,  
A sappy-crack with that old windywallops,  
Sep Shanks, in a bar at Bellingham: and he let out  
How you'd crawled back to Krindlesyke with your daughter—  
Our daughter, I should say: and she, no less,  
Married to Peter's son: though how the deuce  
You picked him up, is more that I can fashion.  
Sep had already had his fill of cheerers,  
Before I met him; and that last rum-hot  
Was just the drop too much: and he got fuddled.  
Ay, Sep was mortal-clay, the addled egg:  
And I couldn't make head or tail of his hiccuping,  
Though he tried to make himself plain: he did his best,  
Did Sep: I'll say that for him—tried so hard  
To make himself plain, he got us both chucked out:  
And I left him in the gutter, trying still.

JUDITH:

You've come from Bellingham hiring?

JIM:

I couldn't stand  
The dindum: felt fair-clumpered in that cluther—  
Such a hubblyshew of gowks and flirtigigs,  
Craking and cackling like a gabble of geese:  
And folk kept looking: I might have been a bizen,  
The way they gaped: so I thought I'd just win home  
For a little peace and quiet. Where's my daughter,  
And this young cuckoo, calls himself my nephew,  
And has made himself free and easy of my nest?  
Ay, but you've fettled things nicely, the lot of you,  
While I tramped the hungry roads. He's pinched my job:  
But I bear no grudge: it's not a job I'm after,  
Since I've a married daughter I can live with.  
I've seen the world, a sight too much: and I mean  
To settle down, and end my days in peace  
In my old home.

108

JUDITH:

Your home? But you can't stay here.

JIM:

You'll see! Now that I'm home, I mean to clag  
Like a cleaver to a flagstone: they'll have to lift  
The hearth, to get me out of Krindlesyke.  
I've had enough of travelling the turnpike,  
Houffling and hirpling like a cadging faa:  
And, but for you and your brat, I'd settled down,  
A respectable married man, this twenty-year.  
But you shan't drive me from my home again.

JUDITH:

We drove you?

JIM:

You began it, anyway—  
Made me an April-gowk and laughing-stock,  
Till I couldn't face the neighbours' fleers. By joes!  
You diddled me out of house and home, among you:  
And settled yourselves couthily in my calfyard,  
Like maggots in a muckheap, while I went cawdrife.  
But I've had my fill of it, Judith, Hexham-measure:  
I'm home for good: and isn't she my daughter?  
You stole her from me once, when you made off  
With hoity-toity Phœbe—ay, I ken  
She died: I learned it at the time—you sneaked  
My only bairn: I cannot mind her name,  
If ever I heard it: you kept even that  
From me, her dad. But, anyway, she's mine:  
I've only her and you to turn to now:  
A poor, lone widower I've been any time  
This twenty-year: that's what's been wrong with me,  
Though it hadn't entered my noddle till this minute.  
But where's the canny couple?

109

JUDITH:

Ruth and Michael

Are at the hiring.

JIM:

Well, I'll not deny  
That suits my book. I'd a notion, Judith lass,  
I'd find you alone, and make my peace with you,  
Before I tackled the young folk. Poor relations  
Aren't made too welcome in this ungrateful world—  
Least so, by those who've taken the bread from their mouths,  
And beggared them of bit and brat: and so  
I thought 'twould be more couthy-like with you,  
Just having a crack and talking old times over,  
Till I was more myself. I don't like strangers,  
Not even when they're my own flesh and blood:  
They've got a trick of staring at a man:  
And all I want is to be let alone—  
Just let alone ... By God, why can't they let me  
Alone! But you are kind and comfortable:  
And you won't heckle me and stare at me:  
For I'm not quite myself: I'll own to that—  
I'm not myself ... Though who the devil I am  
I hardly ken ... I've been that hunted and harried.

110

JUDITH:

Hunted?

JIM:

Ay, Judith—in a manner of speaking,  
Hunted's the word: and I'm too old for the sport.  
I'm getting on in years: and you're no younger  
Than when I saw you last—you mind the day,  
My wedding-day? A fine fligarishon  
You made of it between you, you and Phœbe:  
And wasn't she the high and mighty madam,  
The niffy-naffy don't-come-nigh-me nonesuch?  
But I've forgiven her: I bear no malice.

JUDITH:

You bear no malice: and she died of it!

JIM:

Ay, ay: she showed some sense of decency  
In that, at least: though she got her sting in first  
Like an angry bee. But, Judith, doesn't it seem  
We two are tokened to end our days together?  
Nothing can keep us parted, seemingly:  
So let bygones be bygones.

*(Catching sight of the cradle.)*

What, another!

Have you always got a brat about you, Judith?  
Last time you sprang a daughter on me, and now ...  
But I'm forgetting how the years have flitted.  
Don't tell me I'm a grandfather?

JUDITH:

The boy  
Is Ruth's.

JIM:

Well, I've come into a family,  
And no mistake—a happy family:  
And I was born to be a family-man.  
They'll never turn against their bairn's granddad:  
And I'm in luck.

111

JUDITH:

You cannot bide here, Jim.

JIM:

And who the hell are you, to say me nay?

JUDITH:

The boy's grandmother.

JIM:

Ay: and so the grandam's  
To sit in the ingleneuk, while granddad hoofs it?

JUDITH:

When you left Krindlesyke, you quitted it  
For good and all.

JIM:

And yet, I'm here again,  
Unless I'm dreaming. It seems we all come back  
To Krindlesyke, like martins to the byre-baulks:  
It draws us back—can't keep away, nohow.  
Ay, first and last, the old gaol is my home.  
You're surely forgetting ...

JUDITH:

I'm forgetting nothing.  
It's you've the knack of only recollecting  
What you've a mind to. How could you have come  
If you remembered all these walls have seen?

JIM:

So walls have eyes as well as ears? I can't  
Get away from eyes ... But they'll not freeze my blood,  
Or stare me out of countenance: they've no tongues  
To tittle-tattle: they're no tell-tale-tits,  
No slinking skeadlicks, nosing and sniffing round,  
To wink and nod when I turn my back, colloquing,  
With heads together, to lay me by the heels.  
Nay: I'm not fleyed of a bit of whitewashed plaister.  
But you're a nice one to welcome home a traveller  
With "cannots" and clavers of eyes. Why can't you let  
Things rest, and not hark back, routing things out,  
And casting them in my teeth? Why must you lug  
The dead to light—dead days? ... I'm not afraid  
Of corpses: the dead are dead: their eyes are shut:  
Leastways, they cannot glower when once the mould's  
Atop of them: though they follow a chap round the room,  
Seeking the coppers to clap them to ... dead eyes  
Can't wink: and twopence shuts their bravest stare.  
So, ghosts won't trouble my rest at Krindlesyke.  
I vowed that I'd sleep sound at Krindlesyke,  
When I ...

112

JUDITH:

You cannot bide.

JIM:

I bear no malice.  
Why can't you let bygones be bygones? But that's  
A woman all over; must be raking up  
The ashes into a glow, and puffing them red,  
To roast a man for what he did, or didn't,  
Twenty-year syne. Why should you still bear malice?

JUDITH:

I bear no malice: but you cannot bide.

JIM:

Why do you keep cuckooing "cannot, cannot"?  
And who's to turn me out of Krindlesyke,  
Where I was born and bred, I'd like to ken?  
You can't gainsay it's my home.

JUDITH:

Not your home now.

JIM:

Then who the devil's home ...

JUDITH:

It's Ruth's and Michael's.

JIM:

My daughter's and her man's: their home's my home.

113

JUDITH:

You shall not stay.

JIM:

It's got to "shall not" now?  
The cuckoo's changed his tune; but I can't say  
I like the new note better: it's too harsh:  
The gowk's grown croupy. But, lass, I never thought

You'd be harsh with me: yet even you've turned raspy ...  
First "cannot," then ...

JUDITH:

Nay! I'll not have their home  
Pulled down about their ears by any man;  
And least of all by you—the home they've made ...

JIM:

Stolen, I'd say.

JUDITH:

Together, for themselves  
And their three boys.

JIM:

Jim, granddad three times over?  
It's well you broke it piecemeal: the old callant's  
A waffly heart; and any sudden joy  
Just sets it twittering: but the more the merrier!

JUDITH:

You shall not wreck their happiness. I'd not dreamed  
Such happiness as theirs could be in this world.  
Since it was built, there's not been such a home  
At Krindlesyke: it's only been a house ...

JIM:

'Twas just about as homely as a hearse  
In my young days: but my luck's turned, it seems.

JUDITH:

It takes more than four walls to make a home,  
And such a home as Michael's made for Ruth. 114  
Though she's a fendy lass; she's too like me,  
And needs a helpmate, or she'll waste herself;  
And, with another man, she might have wrecked,  
Instead of building. She's got her man, her mate:  
Husband and father, born, day in, day out,  
He works to keep a home for wife and weans.  
There's never been a luckier lass than Ruth:  
Though she deserves it, too; and it's but seldom  
Good lasses are the lucky ones; and few  
Get their deserts in this life.

JIM:

True, egox!

JUDITH:

Few, good or bad. But Ruth has everything—  
A home, a steady husband, and her boys.  
There never were such boys.

JIM:

A pretty picture:  
It takes my fancy: and the dear old grannie,  
Why do you leave her out? And there's a corner  
For granddad in it, surely—an armchair  
On the other side of the ingle, with a pipe  
And packet of twist, and a pot of nappy beer,  
Hot-fettled four-ale, handy on the hob?  
Ay: there's the chair: I'd best secure it now.

*(As he seats himself, with his back to the door, the head of BELL HAGGARD, in her orange-coloured kerchief, peeps round the jamb: then slowly withdraws, unseen of JIM or JUDITH.)*

JIM:

Fetch up the swipes and shag. I can reach the cutty ...

*(He takes down MICHAEL'S pipe from the mantel-shelf; and sticks it between his teeth: but JUDITH snatches at it, breaking the stem, and flings the bowl on the fire.)*

115

JUDITH:

And you, to touch his pipe!

*(JIM stares at her, startled, as she stands before him, with drawn face and set teeth: then, still eyeing her uneasily, begins to bluster.)*

JIM:

You scarting randy!  
I'll teach you manners. That's a good three-halfpence

Smashed into smithereens: and all for nothing.  
I've lammed a wench for less. I've half a mind  
To snap you like the stopple, you yackey-yaa!  
De'il rive your sark! It's long since I've had the price  
Of a clay in my pouch: and I'm half-dead for a puff.  
What's taken you? What's set you agee with me?  
You used to like me; and you always seemed  
A menseful body: and I lippeded to you.  
But you're just a wheepie-leekie weathercock  
Like the lave of women, when a man's mislucket,  
Moidart and mismeaved and beside himself.  
I fancied I'd be in clover at Krindlesyke,  
With you and all: but, sink me, if I haven't  
Just stuck my silly head into a bee-bike!  
What's turned you vicious? I only want to smoke  
A cutty in peace: and you go on the rampage.  
I mustn't smoke young master's pipe, it seems—  
His pipe, no less! Young cock-a-ride-a-roosie  
Is on the muckheap now; and all the hens  
Are clucking round him. I ken what it is:  
The cockmadendy's been too easy with you.  
It doesn't do to let you womenfolk  
Get out of hand. It's time I came, i' faiks,  
To pull you up, and keep you in your place.  
I'll have no naggers, narr-narring all day long:  
I'll stand no fantigues. If the cull's too soft ...

116

JUDITH:

Soft, did you say? I've seen him hike a man,  
And a heftier man than you, over a dyke,  
For yarking a lame beast. That drover'll mind—  
Ay, to his dying day, he'll not forget  
He once ran into something hard.

JIM:

Ay—ay ...  
He's that sort, is he? My luck is out again.  
I want a quiet life, to be let alone:  
And Krindlesyke won't be a bed of roses,  
With that sort ramping round. (*Starting uneasily.*)  
What's that? I thought ...  
There's no one in the other room, is there?  
I've a feeling in my bones somebody's listening.  
You've not deceived me, Judith? You've not trapped ...  
I'm all a-swither, sweating like a brock.  
I little dreamt you'd turn against me, Judith:  
But even here I don't feel safe now.

JUDITH:

Safe?

JIM:

So you don't know? I fancied everyone kenned.  
Else why the devil should they stare like that?  
And when you, too, looked ... Nay, how could you learn?  
I'm davered, surely: Seppy Shank's rum  
Has gone to my noddle: drink's the very devil  
On an empty waim: and I never had a head.  
What have I done? Ay, wouldn't you like to ken,  
To holler on the hounds?

117

JUDITH:

Jim!

JIM:

But what matter  
Whether you ken or not? You've done for me  
Already, dang you, with your hettle-tongue:  
You've put the notion in my head, the curs  
Are on my scent: and now, I cannot rest.  
Happen, they're slinking now up Bloodysyke,  
Like adders through the bent ... Nay, they don't yelp,  
The hounds that sleuth me: it's only in my head  
I hear the yapping: they're too cunning to yelp.  
The sleichers slither after me on their bellies,  
As dumb and slick as adders ... But I'm doitered,  
And doting like a doobby. I want to sleep ...



A good night's rest would pull my wits together.  
I swore I'd sleep ... but I couldn't close an eye, now  
Since ...

JUDITH:

Jim, what ails you? Tell me what you've done.  
I'm sorry, Jim ...

JIM:

I swear I never set out  
To do it, Judith; and the thing was done,  
Before I came to my senses: that's God's truth:  
And may hell blast ... You're sorry? Nay, but Jim's  
Too old a bird to be caught with chaff. You're fly:  
But, Jim's fly, too. No: mum's the word.

JUDITH:

O Jim,  
You, surely, never think I'd ...

JIM:

I don't know.  
A man in my case can't tell who to trust,  
When every mongrel's yowling for his carcase. 118  
Mum's my best friend, the only one ... though, whiles,  
It's seemed even he had blabbered out my secrets,  
And hollered them to rouse the countryside,  
And draw all eyes on me. But, I must mizzle.

JUDITH:

You're going, Jim?

JIM:

I'll not be taken here,  
Like a brock in his earth: I'll not be trapped and torn ...  
Yet, I don't know. Why should I go? No worse  
To be taken here than elsewhere: and I'm dead beat:  
I'm all to rovers, my wit's all gone agate:  
And how can I travel in these boots? A week since  
The soles bid a fond farewell to the uppers: I've been  
Hirpling it, barefoot—ay, kind lady, barefoot.  
You'd hardly care to be in my shoes, Judith?  
While you've been sitting doose ...

JUDITH:

I've known the road:  
I've trudged it, too, lad: and your feet are bleeding.  
I'll bathe them for you, Jim, before you go:  
And you shall have a pair of Michael's boots.

JIM:

So, I may have young master's cast-off boots,  
Since he's stepped into my shoes—a fair swap!  
And tug my forelock, like a lousy tinker;  
And whine God bless the master of this house,  
Likewise the mistress, too ... By gox, I've come  
To charity—Jim Barrasford's come to mooch  
For charity at Krindlesyke! Shanks's mare's  
A sorry nag at best; and lets you down,  
Sooner or later, for certain—the last straw, 119  
When a man can't trust his feet, and his own legs  
Give under him, in his need, and bring him down  
A devasher in the ditch as the dogs are on him!  
You're sorry? I don't know. How can I tell?  
You're sly, you faggit; but don't get over Jim  
With jookery-pawkry, Judith: I may be maiselt,  
But I've a little rummelgumption left:  
I still ken a bran from a brimmer—bless your heart!  
It suits you to get rid of me; and you judge  
It's cheaply done at the price of a pair of tackities.  
Nay: I'll be taken here.

JUDITH:

You cannot stay.

JIM:

Do you take me for a cangling cadger, to haggle ...  
Forgimety! I cannot ... God's truth, I dare not!  
You've got me on the hop; and I must hirple;

But if I go, I will not go alone:  
I've a mind to have a partner for this polka.

JUDITH:

Alone? And who do you think that ...

JIM:

Who but you?

JUDITH:

I!

JIM:

If I've got to take the road again,  
You've got to pad it with me: for I'm tired  
Of travelling lonesome: I've a mind to have  
My doxy with me. By crikes! I'm fleyed to face  
The road again, alone. You'll come ...

JUDITH:

I cannot.

How could I leave ...

JIM:

Then I'll be taken here:

You'll be to blame.

JUDITH:

But, Jim, how could I leave ...

JIM:

The sooner it's over, the better I'll be pleased.

JUDITH:

You mustn't stop: and yet, I cannot go.  
How could I leave the bairn?

JIM:

The brat's asleep.

JUDITH:

It won't sleep long.

JIM:

Its mammy'll soon be home.

JUDITH:

Not for three hours, at earliest.

JIM:

Then I'll wait

Till then: they can't be on my track so soon:  
And when its dad and mammy come back ...

JUDITH:

Nay, nay:

They mustn't find you here.

JIM:

Judith, you're right:

For they might blab. I'd best be hooking it.  
I'll go: but, mind, you're not yet shot of me.

*(As he is speaking, BELL HAGGARD appears in the doorway, and stands, with arms akimbo, watching them; but JIM has his back to the door, and JUDITH, gazing into the fire, doesn't see her either.)*

JIM:

I'll wait for you beneath the Gallows Rigg,  
Where the burn skirts the planting, in the slack  
We trusty in, in the old days—do you mind?

JUDITH:

I mind.

JIM:

Trust you for that! And I'll lie low:  
It's a dry bottom: and when the family's snoring  
You'll come to me. Just whicker like a peesweep  
Three times, and I'll be with you in a jiffy.  
We'll take the road together, bonnie lass;  
For we were always marrows, you and I.  
If only that flirtigig, Phoebe, hadn't come

Between me and my senses, we'd have wed,  
And settled down at Krindlesyke for life:  
But now we've got to hoof it to the end.  
My sang! 'twill be a honeymoon for me,  
After the rig I've run. But, hearken, Judith:  
If you don't turn up by ten o'clock, I'll come  
And batter on that door to wake the dead:  
I'll make such a rumpus, such a Bob-'s-adying,  
Would rouse you, if you were straked. I'll have you with me,  
If I've got to carry you, chested: sink my soul!  
And for all I care, that luggish slubberdegullion  
May lounder my hurdies; and go to Hecklebarney!  
I'm desperate, Judith ... and I don't mind much ...  
But, you'll come, lass?

JUDITH:

I'll come.

JIM:

Well, if you fail,  
They'll take me here, as sure as death.

BELL (*stepping forward*):

That's so.

JIM (*wheeling round*):

The devil!

BELL:

Nay: not yet: all in good time.  
But I question they'll wait till ten o'clock: they seemed  
Impatient for your company, deuce kens why:  
But then, what's one man's meat ...

JIM:

What's that you say?

BELL:

They seemed dead-set ... You needn't jump like that:  
I haven't got the bracelets in my pocket.

JIM:

And who the hell are you? and what do you mean?

BELL:

You've seen my face before.

JIM:

Ay—ay ... I've seen it:  
But I don't ken your name. You dog my heels:  
I've seen your face ... I saw it on that night—  
That night ... and sink me, but I saw it last  
In the bar at Bellingham: your eyes were on me.  
Ay, and I've seen that phisgog many times:  
And it always brought ill-luck.

BELL:

It hasn't served  
Its owner so much better: yet it's my fortune,  
Though I'm no peachy milkmaid. Ay: I fancied  
'Twas you they meant.

JIM:

Who meant?

BELL:

How should I know?  
You should ken best who's after you, and what  
You're wanted for? They might be friends of yours,  
For all I ken: though I've never taken, myself,  
To the little boy-blues. But, carties, I'd have fancied  
'Twould make your lugs burn—such a gillaber about you.  
They talked.

JIM:

Who talked?

BELL:

Your friends.

JIM:

Friends? I've no friends.

BELL:

Well: they were none of mine. Last night I slept  
'Neath Winter's Stob ...

JIM:

What's that to do with me?

BELL:

I slept till midnight, when a clank of chains  
Awakened me: and, looking up, I saw  
A body on the gibbet ...

JIM:

A body, woman?  
No man's hung there this hundred-year.

BELL:

I saw  
A tattered corpse against the haggling moon,  
Above me black.

JIM:

You didn't see the face?

BELL:

I saw its face—before it disappeared,  
And left the gibbet bare.

JIM:

You kenned the face?

BELL:

I kenned the face.

JIM:

Whose face? ...

BELL:

Best not to ask.

JIM:

O Christ!

BELL:

But we were talking of your friends:  
Quite anxious about you, they seemed.

JIM (*limping towards BELL HAGGARD with lifted arm*):

You cadger-quean!  
You've set them on. I'll crack you over the cruntle—  
You rummel-dusty ... You muckhut ... You windyhash!  
I'll slit your weazen for you: I'll break your jaw—  
I'll stop your gob, if I've to do you in!  
You'll not sleep under Winter's Stob to-night.

BELL (*regarding him, unmoved*):

As well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb?

JIM (*stopping short*):

Hanged?

BELL:

To be hanged by the neck till you are dead.  
That bleaches you? But you'll look whiter yet,  
When you lie cold and stiffening, my pretty bleater.

JIM (*shrinking back*):

You witch ... You witch! You've got the evil eye.  
Don't look at me like that ... Come, let me go!

BELL:

A witch? Ay, wise men always carry witch-bane  
When they've to do with women. Witch, say you?  
Eh, lad, but you've been walking widdershins:  
You'd best turn deazil, crook your thumbs, my callant,  
And gather cowgrass, if you'd break the spell,  
And send the old witch skiting on her broomstick.  
They said that you'd make tracks for Krindlesyke:  
And they'd cop you here, for certain—dig you out  
Like a badger from his earth. I left them talking.

JIM:

Where, you hell-hag?

BELL:

Ah, where? You'd like to learn?  
It's well to keep a civil tongue with witches,  
If you've no sliver of rowan in your pocket:  
Though it won't need any witch, my jackadandy,  
To clap the clicking jimmies round your wrists.  
To think I fashed myself to give you warning:  
And this is all the thanks I get! Well, well—  
They'll soon be here. As I came up Bloodysyke ...

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JIM:

Up Bloodysyke: and they were following?  
I'd best cut over Gallows Rigg. My God,  
The hunt's afoot ... But it may be a trap—  
And you ... And you ...

BELL:

Nay: but I'm no ratcatcher.  
You'd best turn tail, before the terriers sight you.  
*(As JIM bolts past her and through the open door)*  
Rats! Rats! Good dog! ... And now we're rid of vermin.

JUDITH:

Oh, Bell, what has he done? What has he done?

BELL:

How should I ken?

JUDITH:

And yet you said ...

BELL:

I said?  
You've surely not forgotten Bell Haggard's tongue,  
After the taste you had of it the last time?

JUDITH:

What did you hear?

BELL:

A drunken blether-breeks  
In a bar at Bellingham: and I recognized  
Peter's own brother, too; and guessed 'twas Jim:  
And when they gossiped of Krindlesyke ... Oh, I ken  
Ladies don't listen: but not being a lady  
Whiles has advantages: and when he left  
His crony sprawling, splurging in the gutter,  
I followed him, full-pelt, hot on his heel,  
Guessing the hanniel was up to little good.  
But he got here before me: so I waited  
Outside, until I heard him blustering;  
And judged it time to choke his cracking-croose.  
I couldn't have that wastrel making mischief  
In Michael's house: I didn't quit Krindlesyke  
That it might be turned into a tinker's dosshouse,  
Hotching with maggots like a reesty gowdy,  
For any hammy, halfnabs, and hang-gallows  
To stretch his lousy carcass in at ease,  
After I'd slutted to keep it respectable  
For fifteen-year.

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JUDITH:

But what do you think he's done—  
Not murder?

BELL:

Murder? Nay: it takes a man  
To murder.

JUDITH:

Ay ... But when you spoke of hanging,  
He turned like death: and when he threatened you,  
I saw blue-murder in his eyes.

BELL:

At most,

'Twould be manslaughter with the likes of him.  
I've some respect for murderers: they, at least,  
Take things into their own hands, and don't wait  
On lucky chances, like the rest of us—  
Murderers and suicides ...

JUDITH:

But Jim?

BELL:

I'd back  
Cain against Abel, ay, and hairy Esau  
Against that smooth sneak Jacob. Jim? He's likely  
Done in some doxy in a drunken sleep:  
'Twould be about his measure.

JUDITH:

Jim—O Jim!

BELL:

Nay: he'll not dangle in a hempen noose.

JUDITH:

And yet you saw his body ...

BELL:

Dead men's knuckles!  
You didn't swallow that gammon? Why should I  
Be sleeping under Winter's Stob? But Jim—  
I doubt if he'd the guts to stick a porker:  
You needn't fear for him. But I must go.

JUDITH:

Go? You'll not go without a sup of tea,  
After you've traiked so far? Michael and Ruth ...

BELL:

Ay, Judith: I just caught a squint of them  
Among the cluther outside the circus-tent:  
But I was full-tilt on Jim's track, then: and so,  
I couldn't daunder: or I'd have stopped to have  
A closer look: yet I saw that each was carrying  
A little image of a Barrasford:

*(Looking into the cradle.)*

And here's the reckling image, seemingly—  
The sleeping spit of Michael at the age.

JUDITH:

You never saw such laleeking lads: and they  
All fashion after their father.

BELL:

I'm glad I came.  
Even if I'd not struck Jim, I'd meant to come,  
And have a prowl round the old gaol, and see  
How Michael throve: although I hadn't ettled  
To cross the doorstone—just to come and go,  
And not a soul the wiser. But it turns out  
I was fated to get here in the nick of time:  
It seems the old witch drew me here once more  
To serve her turn and save the happy home.  
I judged you'd lost your hold on me, Eliza:  
But, once a ghost has got a grip of you,  
It won't let go its clutch on your life until  
It's dragged you into the grave with it: even then ...  
Although my ghost should prove a match for any,  
I'd fancy, with a fair field, and no favour.  
But ghosts and graves! I'm down-in-the-mouth to-day:  
I must have supped off toadstools on a tombstone,  
Or happen the droppy weather makes me dyvous:  
I never could thole the mooth and muggy mizzle,  
Seeping me sodden: I'd liefer it teemed wholewater,  
A sousing, drooking downpour, any time.  
I'm dowf and blunkit, why, deuce only kens!  
It seems as if Eliza had me fey:  
And that old witch would be the death of me:  
And these white walls ... 'Twould be the queerest start!  
But, Michael's happy?

JUDITH:

He's the best of husbands—  
The best of fathers: he ...

BELL:

I ken, I ken.  
Well ... He's got what he wanted, anyway.

JUDITH:

And you?

BELL:

Ay ... I was born to take my luck.  
But I must go.

JUDITH:

You'll not wait for them?

BELL:

Nay:  
I'm dead to them: I've bid good-bye to them  
Till doomsday: and I'm through with Krindlesyke,  
This time, I hope—though you can never tell.  
I hadn't ettled to darken the door again;  
Yet here I am: and even now the walls  
Seem closing ... It would be the queerest start  
If, after all ... But, dod, I've got the dismals,  
And no mistake! I'm in the dowie dumps—  
Maundering and moonging like a spancelled cow:  
It's over dour and dearn for me in this loaning  
On a dowly day. Best pull myself together,  
And put my best foot foremost before darkening:  
And I've no mind to meet them in the road.  
So long!

*(She goes out of the door and makes down the syke.)*

JUDITH:

Good-bye! If you'd only bide a while ...  
Come back! You mustn't go like that ... Bell, Bell!

*(She breaks off, as BELL HAGGARD is already out of hearing, and stands watching her till she is out of sight; then turns, closing the door, and sinks into a chair in an abstracted fashion. She takes up her knitting mechanically, but sits, motionless, brooding by the fire.)*

JUDITH:

To think that Jim—and after all these years ...  
And then, to come like that! I wonder what ...  
I wish he hadn't gone without the boots.

*(She resumes her knitting, musing in silence, until she is roused by the click of the latch. The door opens, and BELL HAGGARD stumbles into the room and sinks to the floor in a heap. Her brow is bleeding, and her dress, torn and dishevelled.)*

JUDITH *(starting up)*:

Bell! What has happened, woman? Are you hurt?  
Oh, but your brow is bleeding!

BELL:

I'd an inkling  
There must be blood somewhere: I seemed to smell it.

JUDITH:

But what has happened, Bell? Don't say 'twas Jim!

BELL:

Nay ... nay ... it wasn't Jim ... I stumbled, Judith:  
And, seemingly, I cracked my cruntle a bit—  
It's Jill fell down, and cracked her crown, this journey.  
I smelt the blood ... but, it's not there, the pain ...  
It's in my side ... I must have dunched my side  
Against a stone in falling ... I could fancy  
A rib or so's gone smash.

JUDITH *(putting an arm about her and helping her to rise)*:

Come and lie down,  
And I'll see what ...

BELL:

Nay: but I'll not lie down:

I'm not that bad ... and, anyhow, I swore  
I'd not lie down again at Krindlesyke.  
If I lay down, the walls would close on me,  
And scrunch the life out ... But I'm hivering—  
Craitching and craking like a doitered crone.  
Lighthheaded from the tumble ... mother-wit's  
jirbled and jumbled ... I came such a flam.  
I'm not that bad ... I say, I'll not lie down ...  
Just let me rest a moment by the hearth,  
Until ...

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*(JUDITH leads her to a chair, fetches a basin of water and some linen, and bathes the wound on BELL's brow.)*

JUDITH:

I wish ...

BELL:

I'm better here. I'll soon  
Be fit again ... Bell isn't done for, yet:  
She's a tough customer—she's always been  
A banging, bobberous bletherskite, has Bell—  
No fushenless, brashy, mim-mouthed mealy-face,  
Fratished and perished in the howl-o'-winter.  
No wind has ever blown too etherish,  
Too snell to fire her blood: she's always relished  
A gorly, gousty, blusterous day that sets  
Her body alow and birselling like a whinfire.  
But what a windyhash! My wit's wool-gathering;  
And I'm waffling like a ... But I'd best be stepping,  
Before he comes: I've far to travel to-night:  
And I'm not so young ... And Michael mustn't find  
His tinker-mother, squatted by the hearth,  
Nursing a bloody head. But, mind you, Judith:  
I stumbled; and I hurt my side in falling:  
Whatever they may say, you stick to that:  
Swear that I told you that upon my oath—  
So help me God, and all—my bible-oath.  
I'm better ... already ... I fancy ... and I'll go  
Before ... What was I saying? Well, old hob,  
I little ettled I'd look on you again.  
The times I've polished you, the elbow-grease  
I've wasted on you: but I never made  
You shine like that ... You're winking red eyes at me:  
And well you may, to see ... I little guessed  
You'd see me sitting ... I've watched many fires  
Since last I sat beside this hearth—good fires:  
Coal, coke, and peat, but wood-fires in the main.  
There's naught like izles for dancing flames and singing:  
Birch kindles best, and has the liveliest flames:  
But elm just smoulders—it's the coffin-wood ...  
Coffins? Who muttered coffins? Let's not talk  
Of coffins, Judith ... Shut in a black box!  
They couldn't keep old Ezra in: the lid  
Flew off; and old granddaddy sat up, girning ...  
They had to screw him down ... And Solomon  
Slept with his fathers ... I wonder he could sleep,  
After the razzle-dazzle ... Concubines!  
'Twould take a pyramid to keep him down!  
And me ... That tumble's cracked the bell ... not stopt  
The crazy clapper, seemingly ... But, coffins—  
Let's talk no more of coffins: what have I  
To do with coffins? Let us talk of fires:  
I've always loved a fire: I'd set the world  
Alow for my delight, if it would burn.  
It's such a soggy, sodden world to-day,  
I'm duberous I could kindle it with an izle:  
It might just smoulder with muckle funeral-plumes  
Of smoke, like coffin-elder ... And the blaze—  
The biggest flare-up ever I set eyes on,  
It was a kind of funeral, you might say—  
A fiery, flaming, roaring funeral,  
A funeral such as I ... but no such luck  
For me in this world—likely, in the next!  
And anyway, it wouldn't be much fun,  
If I couldn't watch it, myself ... Ay, Long Nick Salkeld,

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And his old woman, Zillah, died together,  
The selfsame day, within an hour or so.  
'Twas on Spadeadam Waste we'd camped that time ...  
And kenning how they loved their caravan,  
And how they'd hate to leave it, or be parted  
From one another, even by a foot of earth,  
We laid them out, together, side by side,  
In the van, as they'd slept in it, night after night,  
For hard on fifty-year. We took naught out,  
And shifted naught: just burnished up the brasses,  
Till they twinkled as Zillah'd kept them, while she could ...  
And so, with not a coffin-board betwixt them,  
At dead of night we fired the caravan ...  
The flames leapt up; and roaring to the stars,  
As we stood round ... The flames leapt up, and roaring ...  
I hear them roaring now ... the flames ... I hear ...  
Flames roaring in my head ... I hear ... I hear ...  
And flying izles ... falling sparks ... I hear  
Flames roaring ... roaring ... roaring ...

*(She sways forward, but JUDITH catches her in her arms.)*

Where am I? Judith, is that you?  
How did I come here, honey? But, now I mind—  
I fell ... He must have hidden in the heather  
To trip me up ... He kicked me, as I lay—  
The harrýgad!

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JUDITH:

Jim!

BELL:

Nay! What am I saying?  
I stumbled, Judith: you must stick to that,  
Whatever they may say ... I stumbled, Judith.  
Think what would happen if they strung Jim up;  
Should I ... you can't hang any man alone ...  
Think what would happen should I ... Don't you see,  
We cannot let them string up Michael's uncle?  
Respectable ... it wouldn't be respectable ...  
And I ... I slutted, fifteen ... I'd an inkling  
There must be blood, somewhere ... I thought I smelt it ...  
And it tastes salt on the lips ... It's choking me ...  
It's fire and salt and candle-light for me  
This time, and Whinny Muir and Brig-o'-Dread ...  
I'm done for, Judith ... It's all up with me ...  
It's been a fine ploy, while it lasted ...

JUDITH:

Come ...

BELL:

Life with a smack in it: death with a tang ...

JUDITH:

I'll help you into bed.

*(BELL HAGGARD gazes about her in a dazed fashion, as JUDITH raises her and supports her across the floor towards the inner room.)*

BELL:

Bed, did you say?  
Bed, it's not bedtime, is it? To bed, to bed,  
Says Sleepyhead: tarry awhile, says Slow:  
Put on the pot, says Greedygut ... I swore  
I'd not lie down ... You cannot dodge your luck:  
It had to be ... And I must dree my weird.  
When first I came to Krindlesyke, I felt  
These walls ... these walls ... They're closing on me now!  
Let's sup before we go!

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*(They pass into the other room, but BELL HAGGARD'S voice still sounds through the open door.)*

BELL:

Nay! not that bed—  
Eliza's bed! The old witch lay in wait  
For me ... and now she has me! Well, what odds?  
Jim called me witch: and the old spaewife and I  
Should be the doose bedfellows, after all.

Early to bed and early to rise ... I've never  
Turned in, while I could wink an eye, before:  
I've always sat late ... And I'd sit it out  
Now ... But I'm dizzy ... And that old witch, Eliza—  
I little guessed she'd play this cantrip on me:  
But what a jest—Jerusalem, what a jest!  
She must be chuckling, thinking how she's done me:  
And I could laugh, if it wasn't for the pain ...  
It doesn't do to rattle broken ribs—  
But I could die of laughing, split my sides,  
If they weren't split already. Yet my clapper  
Keeps wagging: and I'm my own passing-bell—  
They knew, who named me ... Talking to gain time ...  
It's running out so quick ... And mum's the word:  
I mustn't rouse her ... She sleeps couthily,  
Free of the coil of cumber and trouble ... I never  
Looked on a lonelier face ... The flames ... the flames ...  
They're roaring to the stars ... roaring ... roaring ...  
The heather's all turned gold ... and golden showers—  
Izles and flying embers and falling stars ...  
Great flakes of fire ... They've set the world alow ...  
It's all about me ... blood-red in my eyes ...  
I'm burning ... What have I to do with worms!  
Burning ... burning ... burning ...

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*(Her voice sinks to a low moaning, which goes on for some time, then stops abruptly.  
After a while, JUDITH comes into the living-room, fills a basin of water from a bucket,  
and carries it into the other room. She returns with BELL's orange-coloured kerchief,  
which she throws on the fire, where it burns to a grey wisp. She then takes a  
nightdress and a white mutch from a drawer in the dresser, and carries them into the  
other room, where she stays for some time. The baby in the cradle awakens, and  
begins to whimper till JUDITH comes out, shutting the door behind her, and takes it in  
her arms.)*

JUDITH:

Whisht, whisht, my canny hinny, my bonnie boy!  
Your wee warm body's good to cuddle after ...  
Whisht, whisht! *(Gazing in the fire.)*  
First, Phœbe—and then, Bell ... Oh, Jim!

*Steps are heard on the threshold, and MICHAEL and RUTH enter, carrying their sleeping  
sons, NICHOLAS, aged five, and RALPH, aged three. They put down the children on the  
settle by the hearth, where they sit, dazed and silent, sleepily rubbing their eyes.*

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RUTH:

Well, I'm not sorry to be home again:  
My arms are fairly broken.

MICHAEL:

Ay: they're heavy.  
The hoggerel you lift up turns a sheep  
Before you set it down again. Well, Judith,  
You've had a quiet day of it, I warrant?

JUDITH *(in a low voice)*:

Michael, your mother's here.

MICHAEL:

My mother here?

RUTH:

I always fancied she'd turn up again,  
In spite of all her raivelling—Michael, you mind,  
About the mutch with frills, and all thon havers?  
But where we are to put her I can't think:  
There's not a bed for her.

JUDITH:

She's on my bed.

RUTH:

Your bed? But you ...

JUDITH:

She's welcome to my bed,  
As long as she has need. She'll not lie long,  
Before they lift her.

MICHAEL:

Judith!

RUTH:

She's not dead?

JUDITH:

Ay, son: she breathed her last an hour ago.

RUTH:

So, after all, the poor old soul crept back  
To Krindlesyke to die.

(MICHAEL BARRASFORD, *without a word, moves towards the inner room in a dazed manner, lifts the latch, and goes in. After a moment's hesitation, RUTH follows him, closing the door behind her. The boys, who have been sitting staring at the fire, drowsily and unheeding, rouse themselves gradually, stretching and yawning.*)

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NICHOLAS:

Grannie, we saw the circus:  
And Ralph still says he wants to be a herd,  
Like dad: but I can't bide the silly baas.  
When I'm a man I'll be a circus-rider,  
And gallop, gallop! I'm clean daft on horses.

(*An owl hoots piercingly without.*)

RALPH:

Grannie, what's that?

JUDITH:

Only an owl, son.

NICHOLAS:

Bo!

Fearent of hoolets!

RALPH:

I thought it was a bo-lo.

NICHOLAS:

Bo-los or horneys or wirrakows can't scare me:  
And I like to hear the jinneyhoolets scritch:  
It gives me such a queer, cold, creepy feeling.  
I like to feel the shivers in my hair.  
When I'm a man I'll ride the fells by moonlight,  
Like the mosstroopers, when the owls are skirling.  
They used to gallop on their galloways,  
The reivers, dad says ...

(*The owl calls again, and is answered by its mate; and then they seem to be flying round and round Krindlesyke, hooting shrilly.*)

RALPH:

Oh, there it is again!  
Grannie, I'm freckened ...

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JUDITH:

Its an ellerish yelling:  
I never heard ...

RALPH:

What's in the other room?  
I want my dad and mammy.

JUDITH:

You're overtired.  
Come, I'll undress you, and tuck you into bed:  
And you'll sleep sound, my lamb, as sound and snug  
As a yeanning in a maud-neuk.

NICHOLAS:

I'll ride! I'll ride!

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## EPILOGUE

Ghosts of my fathers, where you keep  
On ghostly hills your ghostly sheep,  
Should you a moment chance to turn  
The pages of this book to learn  
What trade your offspring's taken to,

Because my exiled heart is true  
To your Northumbrian fells and you,  
Forgive me that my flocks and herds  
Are only barren bleating words.

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All following text was printed at the beginning of the book.

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*BY WILFRID GIBSON*

*Author of 'Livelihood,' 'Whin,'  
'Neighbours,' &c.*

*Crown 8vo.*

*6/-*

*Net.*

*MACMILLAN & CO., LIMITED*

*St. Martin's Street, London*

*1922*

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*Some Press Opinions*

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