

Alice Fell; or, Poverty¹

- 1 The post-boy drove with fierce career,
For threatening clouds the moon had drowned;
When, as we hurried on, my ear
Was smitten with a startling sound.
- 2 As if the wind blew many ways,
I heard the sound,—and more and more;
It seemed to follow with the chaise,
And still I heard it as before.
- 3 At length I to the boy called out;
He stopped his horses at the word,
But neither cry, nor voice, nor shout,
Nor aught else like it, could be heard.
- 4 The boy then smacked his whip, and fast
The horses scampered through the rain;
But, hearing soon upon the blast
The cry, I bade him halt again.
- 5 Forthwith alighting on the ground,
“Whence comes,” said I, “this piteous moan?”
And there a little Girl I found,
Sitting behind the chaise, alone.
- 6 “My cloak!” no other word she spake,
But loud and bitterly she wept,
As if her innocent heart would break;
And down from off her seat she leapt.
- 7 “What ails you, child?”—she sobbed “Look here!”
I saw it in the wheel entangled,
A weather-beaten rag as e'er
From any garden scare-crow dangled.
- 8 There, twisted between nave and spoke,
It hung, nor could at once be freed;
But our joint pains unloosed the cloak,
A miserable rag indeed!

¹ Alice Fell is based on the personal experience of a man named Mr. Graham who urged Wordsworth to put the incident into verse. In a diary entry dated February 16, 1802, Dorothy Wordsworth relates that Mr. Graham related the incident to her brother.

- 9 “And whither are you going, child,
To-night along these lonesome ways?”
“To Durham,” answered she, half wild—
“Then come with me into the chaise.”
- 10 Insensible to all relief
Sat the poor girl, and forth did send
Sob after sob, as if her grief
Could never, never have an end.
- 11 “My child, in Durham do you dwell?”
She checked herself in her distress,
And said, “My name is Alice Fell;
I’m fatherless and motherless.
- 12 “And I to Durham, Sir, belong.”
Again, as if the thought would choke
Her very heart, her grief grew strong;
And all was for her tattered cloak!
- 13 The chaise drove on; our journey’s end
Was nigh; and, sitting by my side,
As if she had lost her only friend
She wept, nor would be pacified.
- 14 Up to the tavern-door we post;
Of Alice and her grief I told;
And I gave money to the host,
To buy a new cloak for the old.
- 15 “And let it be of duffil grey,
As warm a cloak as man can sell!”
Proud creature was she the next day,
The little orphan, Alice Fell!

The Sailor’s Mother²

One morning (raw it was and wet—
A foggy day in winter time)
A Woman on the road I met,
Not old, though something past her prime:
Majestic in her person, tall and straight;
And like a Roman matron’s was her mien and gait.

² Like many of Wordsworth’s poems, “The Sailor’s Mother” is based on a personal experience. Dorothy Wordsworth relates their experience with beggars in her journal.

The ancient spirit is not dead;
Old times, thought I, are breathing there;
Proud was I that my country bred
Such strength, a dignity so fair:
She begged an alms, like one in poor estate;
I looked at her again, nor did my pride abate.

When from these lofty thoughts I woke,
“What is it,” said I, “that you bear,
Beneath the covert of your Cloak,
Protected from this cold damp air?”
She answered, soon as she the question heard,
“A simple burthen, Sir, a little Singing-bird.”

And, thus continuing, she said,
“I had a Son, who many a day
Sailed on the seas, but he is dead;
In Denmark he was cast away:
And I have travelled weary miles to see
If aught which he had owned might still remain for me.

“The bird and cage they both were his:
'Twas my Son's bird; and neat and trim
He kept it: many voyages
The singing-bird had gone with him;
When last he sailed, he left the bird behind;
From bodings, as might be, that hung upon his mind.

“He to a fellow-lodger's care
Had left it, to be watched and fed,
And pipe its song in safety;—there
I found it when my Son was dead;
And now, God help me for my little wit!
I bear it with me, Sir;—he took so much delight in it.”