

William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

1 *Alice Fell*

or, Poverty

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

As if the wind blew many ways, 5
I heard the sound, — and more and more;
It seemed to follow with the chaise,
And still I heard it as before.

At length I to the boy called out;
He stopped his horses at the word, 10
But neither cry, nor voice, nor shout,
Nor aught else like it, could be heard.

The boy then smacked his whip, and fast
The horses scampered through the rain;
But, hearing soon upon the blast 15
The cry, I bade him halt again.

Forthwith alighting on the ground,
'Whence comes,' said I, 'this piteous moan?'
And there a little Girl I found,
Sitting behind the chaise, alone. 20

'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.

'What ails you, child?' — she sobbed, 'Look here!' 25
I saw it in the wheel entangled,
A weather-beaten rag as e'er
From any garden scare-crow dangled.

There, twisted between nave and spoke,
It hung, nor could at once be freed; 30

But our joint pains unloosed the cloak,
A miserable rag indeed!

‘And whither are you going, child,
To-night along these lonesome ways?’
‘To Durham,’ answered she, half wild — 35
‘Then come with me into the chaise.’

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. 40

‘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.

‘And I to Durham, Sir, belong.’ 45
Again, as if the thought would choke
Her very heart, her grief grew strong;
And all was for her tattered cloak!

The chaise drove on; our journey’s end
Was nigh; and, sitting by my side, 50
As if she had lost her only friend
She wept, nor would be pacified.

Up to the tavern-door we post;
Of Alice and her grief I told;
And I gave money to the host, 55
To buy a new cloak for the old.

‘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! 60

1802

(From *Wordsworth: Poetical Works*. With Introductions
and Notes. Ed. Thomas Hutchinson. Rev. Ernest de
Selincourt. Oxford UP, 1936)