

NOT ONE TO SPARE

“Which shall it be?” “Which shall it be?”
I looked at John – John looked at me,
(Dear patient John, who loves me yet,
As well as though my locks were jet ;)
And when I found that I must speak,
My voice seemed strangely low and weak.
“Tell me again what Robert said!”
And then I, listening, bent my head.
“This is his letter: ‘I will give
A house and land while you shall live,
If, in return, from out your seven,
One child to me for aye is given’.”
I looked at John’s old garments worn;
I thought of all that John had borne
Of poverty, and work, and care,
Which I, though willing, could not share;
I thought of seven mouths to feed,
Of seven little children’s need,
And then of this, – “Come, John,” said I,
“We’ll choose among them as they lie
Asleep; “so, walking hand in hand,
Dear John and I surveyed our band.
First to the cradle lightly stepped,
Where Lilian, the baby, slept,
A glory ’gainst the pillow white.
Softly the father stooped to lay
His rough hand down in loving way,
When dream or whisper made her stir,
And huskily he said, “Not her.”
We stopped beside the trundle-bed,
And, one long ray of lamplight shed
Athwart the boyish faces there,
In sleep so pitiful and fair.
I saw on Jamie’s rough, red cheek
A tear undried. Ere John could speak,
“He’s but a baby, too,” said I,
And kissed him as we hurried by.
Pale, patient Robbie’s angel face
Still in his sleep bore suffering’s trace.
“No, for a thousand crowns, not him,
”He whispered, while our eyes were dim.
Poor Dick! bad Dick! our wayward son,
Turbulent, reckless, idle one, –

Could he be spared? "Nay, He who gave
Bid us befriend him to his grave.
Only a mother's heart can be
Patient enough for such as he;
And so", said John, "I would not dare
To send him from her bedside prayer".
Then stole we softly up above,
And knelt by Mary, child of love.
"Perhaps for her 't would better be",
I said to John. Quite silently
He lifted up a curl, that lay
Across her cheek in wilful way,
And shook his head, "Nay, love, not thee."
The while my heart beat audibly.
Only one more, our eldest lad,
Trusty and truthful, good and glad,—
So like his father. "No, John, no;
I cannot, will not, let him go."
And so he wrote, in courteous way,
We could not drive one child away;
And afterward toil lighter seemed,
Thinking of that of which we dreamed,
Happy in truth, that not one face
Was missed from its accustomed place;
Thankful to work for all the seven,
Trusting the rest to One in heaven!

Songs and Rhymes for the Little Ones, 1884. – p.162-164