

Charles Stuart Calverley (1831-84)

3 *On the Brink*

I watched her as she stooped to pluck  
A wild flower in her hair to twine,  
And wished that it had been my luck  
To call her mine.

Anon I heard her rate with mad, 5  
Mad words, her babe within its cot,  
And felt particularly glad  
That it had not.

I knew (such subtle brains have men)  
That she was uttering what she shouldn't, 10  
And thought that I would chide, and then  
I thought I wouldn't.

Who could have gazed upon that face,  
Those pouting coral lips, and chided?  
A Rhadamanthus, in my place, 15  
Had done as I did.

For ire, wherewith our bosoms glow,  
Is chained there oft by beauty's spell;  
And, more than that, I did not know  
The widow well. 20

So the harsh phrase passed unreprieved —  
Still mute (O brothers, was it sin?)  
I drank — unutterably moved —  
Her beauty in.

And to myself I murmured low, 25  
As on her upturned face and dress  
The moonlight fell, "Would she say, 'No,'  
By chance, or 'Yes?'"

She stood so calm, so like a ghost,  
    Betwixt me and that magic moon,                     30  
That I already was almost  
    A finished coon

But when she caught adroitly up  
    And soothed with smiles her little daughter,  
And gave it, if I'm right, a sup                     35  
    Of barley-water;

And, crooning still the strange sweet lore,  
    Which only mothers' tongues can utter,  
Snowed with deft hand the sugar o'er  
    Its bread-and-butter;                     40

And kissed it clingingly — (Ah! why  
    Don't women do these things in private?) —  
I felt that if I lost her, I  
    Should not survive it:

And from my mouth the words nigh flew —             45  
    The past, the future, I forgot 'em —  
"O! if you'd kiss me as you do  
    That thankless atom!"

But this thought came ere yet I spake,  
    And froze the sentence on my lips —             50  
"They err who marry wives that make  
    Those little slips."

It came like some familiar rhyme,  
    Some copy to my boyhood set;  
And that's perhaps the reason I'm             55  
    Unmarried yet.

Would she have owned how pleased she was,  
    And told her love with widow's pride?  
I never found that out, because  
    I never tried.                     60

Be kind to babes, and beasts, and birds:  
Hearts may be hard though lips are coral,  
And angry words are angry words —  
And that's the moral.

1872

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