

John Davidson (1857-1909)

8 *A Ballad of Hell*

'A letter from my love to-day!
Oh, unexpected, dear appeal!
She struck a happy tear away,
And broke the crimson seal.

'My love, there is no help on earth, 5
No help in heaven; the dead-man's bell
Must toll our wedding; our first hearth
Must be the well-paved floor of hell.'

The colour died from out her face,
Her eyes like ghostly candles shone; 10
She cast dread looks about the place,
Then clenched her teeth and read right on.

'I may not pass the prison door;
Here must I rot from day to day,
Unless I wed whom I abhor, 15
My cousin, Blanche of Valencay.

'At midnight with my dagger keen
I'll take my life; it must be so.
Meet me in hell to-night, my queen,
For weal and woe.' 20

She laughed although her face was wan,
She girded on her golden belt,
She took her jewelled ivory fan,
And at her glowing missal knelt.

Then rose, 'And am I mad?' she said; 25
She broke her fan, her belt untied;
With leather girt herself instead,
And stuck a dagger at her side.

She waited, shuddering in her room,
Till sleep had fallen on all the house. 30
She never flinched; she faced her doom:
They two must sin to keep their vows.

Then out into the night she went,
And stooping crept by hedge and tree;
Her rose-bush flung a snare of scent, 35
And caught a happy memory.

She fell, and lay a minute's space;
She tore the sward in her distress;
The dewy grass refreshed her face;
She rose and ran with lifted dress. 40

She started like a morn-caught ghost
Once when the moon came out and stood
To watch; the naked road she crossed,
And dived into the murmuring wood.

The branches snatched her streaming cloak; 45
A live thing shrieked; she made no stay!
She hurried to the trysting-oak—
Right well she knew the way.

Without a pause she bared her breast,
And drove her dagger home and fell, 50
And lay like one that takes her rest,
And died and wakened up in hell.

She bathed her spirit in the flame,
And near the centre took her post;
From all sides to her ears there came, 55
The dreary anguish of the lost.

The devil started at her side,
Comely, and tall, and black as jet.
'I am young Malespina's bride;
Has he come hither yet?' 60

'My poppet, welcome to your bed.'

‘Is Malespina here?’
‘Not he! To-morrow he must wed
His cousin Blanche, my dear!’

‘You lie, he died with me to-night.’ 65
‘Not he! it was a plot.’ ‘You lie.’
‘My dear, I never lie outright.’
‘We died at midnight he and I.’

The devil went. Without a groan
She, gathered up in one fierce prayer, 70
Took root in hell’s midst all alone,
And waited for him there.

She dared to make herself at home
Amidst the wail, the uneasy stir.
The blood-stained flame that filled the dome, 75
Scentless and silent, shrouded her.

How long she stayed I cannot tell;
But when she felt his perfidy,
She marched across the floor of hell;
And all the damned stood up to see. 80

The devil stopped her at the brink:
She shook him off; she cried, ‘Away!’
‘My dear, you have gone mad, I think.’
‘I was betrayed: I will not stay.’

Across the weltering deep she ran; 85
A stranger thing was never seen;
The damned stood silent to a man;
They saw the great gulf set between.

To her it seemed a meadow fair;
And flowers sprang up about her feet. 90
She entered heaven; she climbed the stair
And knelt down at the mercy-seat.

Seraphs and saints with one great voice
Welcomed that soul that knew not fear;

Amazed to find it could rejoice,
Hell raised a hoarse half-human cheer.

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1894

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