

A. C. Swinburne (1837-1909)

3 *A Ballad of Burdens*

The burden of fair women. Vain delight,
And love self-slain in some sweet shameful way,
And sorrowful old age that comes by night
As a thief comes that no heart by day,
And change that finds fair cheeks and leaves them grey, 5
And weariness that keeps awake for hire,
And grief that says what pleasure used to say;
This is the end of every man's desire.

The burden of bought kisses. This is sore,
A burden without fruit in childbearing; 10
Between the nightfall and the dawn threescore,
Threescore between the dawn and evening.
The shuddering in thy lips, the shuddering
In thy sad eyelids tremulous like fire,
Makes love seem shameful and a wretched thing. 15
This is the end of every man's desire.

The burden of sweet speeches. Nay, kneel down,
Cover thy head, and weep; for verily
These market-men that buy thy white and brown
In the last days shall take no thought for thee. 20
In the last days like earth thy face shall be,
Yea, like sea-marsh made thick with brine and mire,
Sad with sick leavings of the sterile sea.
This is the end of every man's desire.

The burden of long living. Thou shalt fear 25
Waking, and sleeping mourn upon thy bed;
And say at night 'Would God the day were here,'
And say at dawn 'Would God the day were dead.'

With weary days thou shalt be clothed and fed,
And wear remorse of heart for thine attire, 30
Pain for thy girdle and sorrow upon thine head;
This is the end of every man's desire.

The burden of bright colours. Thou shalt see
Gold tarnished, and the grey above the green;
And as the thing thou seest thy face shall be, 35
And no more as the thing beforetime seen.
And thou shalt say of mercy 'It hath been,'
And living, watch the old lips and loves expire,
And talking, tears shall take thy breath between;
This is the end of every man's desire. 40

The burden of sad sayings. In that day
Thou shalt tell all thy days and hours, and tell
Thy times and ways and words of love, and say
How one was dear and one desirable,
And sweet was life to hear and sweet to smell, 45
But now with lights reverse the old hours retire
And the last hour is shod with fire from hell;
This is the end of every man's desire.

The burden of four seasons. Rain in spring,
White rain and wind among the tender trees; 50
A summer of green sorrows gathering,
Rank autumn in a mist of miseries,
With sad face set towards the year, that sees
The charred ash drop out of the dropping pyre,
And winter wan with many maladies; 55
This is the end of every man's desire.

The burden of dead faces. Out of sight
And out of love, beyond the reach of hands,
Changed in the changing of the dark and light,
They walk and weep about the barren lands 60
Where no seed is nor any garner stands,

Where in short breaths the doubtful days respire,
And time's turned glass lets through the sighing sands;
This is the end of every man's desire.

The burden of much gladness. Life and lust 65
Forsake thee, and the face of thy delight;
And underfoot the heavy hour strews dust,
And overhead strange weathers burn and bite;
And where the red was, lo the bloodless white,
And where truth was, the likeness of a liar, 70
And where day was, the likeness of the night;
This is the end of every man's desire.

L'ENVOY

Princes, and ye whom pleasure quickeneth,
Heed well this rhyme before your pleasure tire;
For life is sweet, but after life is death. 75
This is the end of every man's desire.

1866

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