John Davidson (1857-1909)

4 A Ballad of a Workman

All day beneath polluted skies	
He laboured in a clanging town;	
At night he read with bloodshot eyes	
And fondly dreamt of high renown.	
'My time is filched by toil and sleep;	5
My heart,' he thought, 'is clogged with dust;	
My soul that flashed from out the deep,	
A magic blade, begins to rust.	
'For me the lamps of heaven shine;	
For me the cunning seasons care;	10
The old undaunted sea is mine,	
The stable earth, the ample air.	
'Yet a dark street—at either end,	
A bed, an anvil—prisons me,	
Until my desperate state shall mend,	15
And Death, the Saviour, set me free.	
'Better a hundred times to die,	
And sink at once into the mould,	
Than like a stagnant puddle lie	
With arabesques of scum enscrolled.	20
'I must go forth and view the sphere	
I own. What can my courage daunt?	
Instead of dying daily here,	
The worst is dying once of want.	
'I drop the dream of high renown;	25
I ask but to possess my soul.'	
At dawn he left the silent town,	
And quaking toward the forest stole.	

He feared that he might want the wit To light on Nature's hidden hearth,	30
And deemed his rusty soul unfit	
To win the beauty of the earth.	
But when he came among the trees,	
So slowly built, so many-ring'd,	
His doubting thought could soar at ease	35
In colour steep'd, with passion wing'd.	
Occult remembrances awoke	
Of outlaws in the good greenwood,	
And antique times of woaded folk	
Began to haunt his brain and blood.	40
No longer hope appeared a crime:	
He sang; his very heart and flesh	
Aspired to join the ends of time,	
And forge and mould the world afresh.	
'I dare not choose to run in vain;	45
I must continue toward the goal.'	
The pulse of life beat strong again,	
And in a flash he found his soul.	
'The worker never knows defeat,	
Though unvictorious he may die:	50
The anvil and the grimy street,	
My destined throne and Calvary!'	
Back to the town he hastened, bent—	
So swiftly did his passion change—	
On selfless plans. 'I shall invent	55
A means to amplify the range	
'Of human power: find the soul wings,	
If not the body! Let me give	
Mankind more mastery over things,	
More thought, more joy, more will to live.'	60
He overtook upon the way	

A tottering ancient travel-worn:	
'Lend me your arm, good youth, I pray;	
I scarce shall see another morn.'	
Dread thought had carved his pallid face, And bowed his form, and blanched his hair; In every part he bore some trace, Or some deep dint of uncouth care.	65
The workman led him to his room, And would have nursed him. 'No,' he said; 'It is my self-appointed doom To die upon a borrowed bed;	70
'But hear and note my slightest word. I am a man without a name. I saw the Bastille fall; I heard The giant Mirabeau declaim.	75
'I saw the stormy dawn look pale Across the sea-bound battle-field, When through the hissing sleet and hail The clarions of Cromwell pealed:	80
'I watched the deep-souled Puritan Grow greater with the desperate strife: The cannon waked; the shouting van Charged home; and victory leapt to life.	
'At Seville in the Royal square I saw Columbus as he passed Laurelled to greet the Catholic pair Who had believed in him at last:	85
'I saw the Andalusians fill Windows, and roofs, and balconies— A firmament of faces still, A galaxy of wondering eyes:	90
'For he had found the unknown shore, And made the world's great dream come true:	

I think that men shall never more	95
Know anything so strange and new.	
'By meteor light when day had set	
I looked across Angora's plain,	
And watched the fall of Bajazet,	
The victory of Tamerlane.	100
The victory of Tameriane.	100
'In that old city where the vine	
Dislodged the seaweed, once I saw	
The inexorable Florentine:	
He looked my way; I bent with awe	
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'Before his glance, for this was he	105
Who drained the dregs of sorrow's cup	
In fierce disdain; it seemed to me	
A spirit passed, my hair stood up.	
Draw nearer: breath and sight begin	
To fail me: nearer, ere I die.—	110
I saw the brilliant Saladin,	
Who taught the Christians courtesy;	
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'And Charlemagne, whose dreaded name,	
I first in far Bokhara heard;	
Mohammed, with the eyes of flame,	115
The lightning-blow, the thunder-word.	
(Taran II) and all all and a state of the st	
'I saw Him nailed upon a tree,	
Whom once beside an inland lake	
I had beheld in Galilee	100
Speaking as no man ever spake.	120
'I saw imperial Cæsar fall;	
I saw the star of Macedon;	
I saw from Troy's enchanted wall	
The death of Priam's mighty son.	
(I bound in atmosts of Duran at and I t	105
'I heard in streets of Troy at night	125
Cassandra prophesying fire A flamelit face upon my sight	
A Dament race upon my sight	

Flashes: I see the World's Desire!

'My life ebbs fast: nearer! I sought	
A means to overmaster fate:	130
Me, the Egyptian Hermes taught	
In old Hermopolis the Great:	
'I pierced to Nature's inmost hearth,	
And wrung from her with toil untold	
The soul and substance of the earth,	135
The Seed of life, the Seed of gold.	
'Until the end I meant to stay;	
But thought has here so small a range;	
And I am tired of night and day,	
And tired of men who never change.	140
'All earthly hope ceased long ago;	
Yet, like a mother young and fond	
Whose child is dead, I ache to know	
If there be anything beyond.	
'Dark—all is darkness! Are you there?	145
Give me your hand. —I choose to die.	
This holds my secret—should you dare;	
And this, to bury me Good-bye.	
Amazement held the workman's soul;	
He took the alchemist's bequest—	150
A light purse and a parchment scroll;	
And watched him slowly sink to rest.	
And nothing could he dream or think;	
He went like one bereft of sense,	
Till passion overbore the brink	155
Of all his wistful continence,	
When his strange guest was laid in earth	
And he had read the scroll: 'Behold,	
I can procure from Nature's hearth	
The Seed of Life, the Seed of Gold!	160

'For ever young! Now, time and tide Must wait for me; my life shall vie With fate and fortune stride for stride Until the sun drops from the sky.	
'Gold at a touch! Nations and kings Shall come and go at my command; I shall control the secret springs Of enterprise in every land;	165
'And hasten on the Perfect Day: Great men may break the galling chains; Sweet looks light up the toilsome way; But I alone shall hold the reins!	170
'All fragrance, all delightfulness, And all the glory, all the power, That sound and colour can express, Shall be my ever-growing dower.	175
'And I shall know, and I shall love In every age, in every clime All beauty I, enthroned above Humanity, the peer of Time!	180
'Nay—selfish! I shall give to men The Seed of Life, the Seed of Gold; Restore the Golden Age again At once, and let no soul grow old.	
'But gold were then of no avail, And death would cease—unhallowed doom! The heady wine of life grow stale, And earth become a living tomb!	185
'And youth would end, and truth decline, And only pale illusion rule; For it is death makes love divine, Men human, life so sweet and full!'	190

My destiny. Life, death for me!
The anvil and the grimy street,
My unknown throne and Calvary!

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'Only obedience can be great; It brings the Golden Age again: Even to be still, abiding fate, Is kingly ministry to men!

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'I drop the dream of high renown:
A nameless private in the strife,
Life, take me; take me, clanging town;
And death, the eager zest of life.

'The hammered anvils reel and chime;
The breathless, belted wheels ring true;
The workmen join the ends of time,
And forge and mould the world anew.'

1896

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