

John Davidson (1857-1909)

5 *A Ballad of an Artist's Wife*

'Sweet wife, this heavy-hearted age  
Is nought to us; we two shall look  
To Art, and fill a perfect page  
In Life's ill-written doomsday book.'

He wrought in colour; blood and brain 5  
Gave fire and might; and beauty grew  
And flowered with every magic stain  
His passion on the canvas threw.

They shunned the world and worldly ways:  
He laboured with a constant will; 10  
But few would look, and none would praise,  
Because of something lacking still.

After a time her days with sighs  
And tears o'erflowed; for blighting need  
Bedimmed the lustre of her eyes, 15  
And there were little mouths to feed.

'My bride shall ne'er be common-place.'  
He thought, and glanced; and glanced again:  
At length he looked her in the face;  
And lo, a woman old and plain! 20

About this time the world's heart failed—  
The lusty heart no fear could rend;  
In every land wild voices wailed,  
And prophets prophesied the end.

'To-morrow or to-day,' he thought, 25  
'May be Eternity; and I  
Have neither felt nor fashioned aught  
That makes me unconcerned to die.

'With care and counting of the cost  
My life a sterile waste has grown, 30  
Wherein my better dreams are lost  
Like chaff in the Sahara sown.

'I must escape this living tomb!  
My life shall yet be rich and free,  
And on the very stroke of Doom 35  
My soul at last begin to be.

'Wife, children, duty, household fires  
For victims of the good and true!  
For me my infinite desires,  
Freedom and things untried and new! 40

'I would encounter all the press  
Of thought and feeling life can show,  
The sweet embrace, the aching stress  
Of every earthly joy and woe;

'And from the world's impending wreck 45  
And out of pain and pleasure weave  
Beauty undreamt of, to bedeck  
The Festival of Doomsday Eve.'

He fled, and joined a motley throng  
That held carousal day and night; 50  
With love and wit, with dance and song,  
They snatched a last intense delight.

Passion to mould an age's art,  
Enough to keep a century sweet,  
Was in an hour consumed; each heart 55  
Lavished a life in every beat.

Amazing beauty filled the looks  
Of sleepless women; music bore  
New wonder on its wings; and books  
Throbbled with a thought unknown before. 60

The sun began to smoke and flare

Like a spent lamp about to die;  
The dusky moon tarnished the air;  
The planets withered in the sky.

Earth reeled and lurched upon her road; 65  
Tigers were cowed, and wolves grew tame;  
Seas shrank, and rivers backward flowed,  
And mountain-ranges burst in flame.

The artist's wife, a soul devout,  
To all these things gave little heed; 70  
For though the sun was going out,  
There still were little mouths to feed.

And there were also shrouds to stitch,  
And chares to do; with all her might,  
To feed her babes, she served the rich 75  
And kept her useless tears till night.

But by-and-by her sight grew dim;  
Her strength gave way; in desperate mood  
She laid her down to die. 'Tell him,'  
She sighed, 'I fed them while I could.' 80

The children met a wretched fate;  
Self-love was all the vogue and vaunt,  
And charity gone out of date;  
Wherefore they pined and died of want.

Aghast he heard the story: 'Dead! 85  
All dead in hunger and despair!  
I courted misery,' he said;  
'But here is more than I can bear.'

Then, as he wrought, the stress of woe  
Appeared in many a magic stain; 90  
And all adored his work, for lo,  
Tears mingled now with blood and brain!

'Look, look!' they cried; 'this man can weave  
Beauty from anguish that appals;'

And at the feast of Doomsday Eve 95  
They hung his pictures in their halls,

And gazed; and came again between  
The faltering dances eagerly;  
They said, 'The loveliest we have seen,  
The last, of man's work, we shall see!' 100

Then was there neither death nor birth;  
Time ceased; and through the ether fell  
The smoky sun, the leprous earth—  
A cinder and an icicle.

No wrathful vials were unsealed; 105  
Silent, the first things passed away:  
No terror reigned; no trumpet pealed  
The dawn of Everlasting Day.

The bitter draught of sorrow's cup  
Passed with the seasons and the years; 110  
And Wisdom dried for ever up  
The deep, old fountainhead of tears.

Out of the grave and ocean's bed  
The artist saw the people rise;  
And all the living and the dead 115  
Were borne aloft to Paradise.

He came where on a silver throne  
A spirit sat for ever young;  
Before her Seraphs worshipped prone,  
And Cherubs silver censers swung. 120

He asked, 'Who may this martyr be?  
What votaress of saintly rule?'  
A Cherub said, 'No martyr; she  
Had one gift; she was beautiful.'

Then came he to another bower 125  
Where one sat on a golden seat,  
Adored by many a heavenly Power

With golden censers smoking sweet.

‘This was some gallant wench who led  
Faint-hearted folk and set them free?’ 130  
‘Oh, no! a simple maid,’ they said,  
‘Who spent her life in charity.’

At last he reached a mansion blest  
Where on a diamond throne, endued  
With nameless beauty, one possessed 135  
Ineffable beatitude.

The praises of this matchless soul  
The sons of God proclaimed aloud;  
From diamond censers odours stole;  
And Hierarchs before her bowed. 140

‘Who was she?’ God himself replied:  
‘In misery her lot was cast;  
She lived a woman’s life, and died  
Working My work until the last.’

It was his wife. He said, ‘I pray 145  
Thee, Lord, despatch me now to Hell.’  
But God said, ‘No; here shall you stay,  
And in her peace for ever dwell.’

1895

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