

John Davidson (1857-1909)

7 *A Ballad of Heaven*

He wrought at one great work for years;
The world passed by with lofty look:
Sometimes his eyes were dashed with tears;
Sometimes his lips with laughter shook.

His wife and child went clothed in rags, 5
And in a windy garret starved:
He trod his measures on the flags,
And high on heaven his music carved.

Wistful he grew but never feared;
For always on the midnight skies 10
His rich orchestral score appeared
In stars and zones and galaxies.

He thought to copy down his score:
The moonlight was his lamp: he said,
'Listen, my love;' but on the floor 15
His wife and child were lying dead.

Her hollow eyes were open wide;
He deemed she heard with special zest:
Her death's-head infant coldly eyed
The desert of her shrunken breast. 20

'Listen, my love: my work is done;
I tremble as I touch the page
To sign the sentence of the sun
And crown the great eternal age.

'The slow adagio begins; 25
The winding-sheets are ravelled out
That swathe the minds of men, the sins
That wrap their rotting souls about.

‘The dead are heralded along;
 With silver trumps and golden drums, 30
And flutes and oboes, keen and strong,
 My brave andante singing comes.

‘Then like a python’s sumptuous dress
 The frame of things is cast away,
And out of Time’s obscure distress, 35
 The thundering scherzo crashes Day.

‘For three great orchestras I hope
 My mighty music shall be scored:
On three high hills they shall have scope
 With heaven’s vault for a sounding-board. 40

‘Sleep well, love; let your eyelids fall;
 Cover the child; goodnight, and if . . .
What? Speak . . . the traitorous end of all!
 Both . . . cold and hungry . . . cold and stiff!

‘But no, God means us well, I trust: 45
 Dear ones, be happy, hope is nigh:
We are too young to fall to dust,
 And too unsatisfied to die.’

He lifted up against his breast
 The woman’s body stark and wan; 50
And to her withered bosom pressed
 The little skin-clad skeleton.

‘You see you are alive,’ he cried.
 He rocked them gently to and fro.
‘No, no, my love, you have not died; 55
 Nor you, my little fellow; no.’

Long in his arms he strained his dead
 And crooned an antique lullaby;
Then laid them on the lowly bed,
 And broke down with a doleful cry. 60

‘The love, the hope, the blood, the brain,

Of her and me, the budding life,
And my great music—all in vain!
My unscored work, my child, my wife!

‘We drop into oblivion, 65
And nourish some suburban sod:
My work, this woman, this my son,
Are now no more: there is no God.

‘The world’s a dustbin; we are due, 70
And death’s cart waits: be life accurst!’
He stumbled down beside the two,
And clasping them, his great heart burst.

Straightway he stood at heaven’s gate,
Abashed and trembling for his sin:
I trow he had not long to wait, 75
For God came out and led him in.

And then there ran a radiant pair,
Ruddy with haste and eager-eyed
To meet him first upon the stair—
His wife and child beatified. 80

They clad him in a robe of light,
And gave him heavenly food to eat:
Great seraphs praised him to the height,
Archangels sat about his feet.

God, smiling, took him by the hand, 85
And led him to the brink of heaven:
He saw where systems whirling stand,
Where galaxies like snow are driven.

Dead silence reigned; a shudder ran
Through space; Time furl’d his wearied wings; 90
A slow adagio then began
Sweetly resolving troubled things.

The dead were heralded along:
As if with drums and trumps of flame,

And flute and oboes keen and strong, 95
A brave andante singing came.

Then like a python's sumptuous dress
The frame of things was cast away,
And out of Time's obscure distress
The conquering scherzo thundered Day. 100

He doubted; but God said 'Even so;
Nothing is lost that's wrought with tears:
The music that you made below
Is now the music of the spheres.'

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