

Charles Stuart Calverley (1831-84)

3 *On the Brink*

I watched her as she stooped to pluck
A wild flower in her hair to twine,
And wished that it had been my luck
To call her mine.

Anon I heard her rate with mad, 5
Mad words, her babe within its cot,
And felt particularly glad
That it had not.

I knew (such subtle brains have men)
That she was uttering what she shouldn't, 10
And thought that I would chide, and then
I thought I wouldn't.

Who could have gazed upon that face,
Those pouting coral lips, and chided?
A Rhadamanthus, in my place, 15
Had done as I did.

For ire, wherewith our bosoms glow,
Is chained there oft by beauty's spell;
And, more than that, I did not know
The widow well. 20

So the harsh phrase passed unreprieved —
Still mute (O brothers, was it sin?)
I drank — unutterably moved —
Her beauty in.

And to myself I murmured low, 25
As on her upturned face and dress
The moonlight fell, "Would she say, 'No,'
By chance, or 'Yes?'"

Be kind to babes, and beasts, and birds:
Hearts may be hard though lips are coral,
And angry words are angry words —
And that's the moral.

1872

(From G. B. Smith, ed. *Illustrated British Ballads, Old and New*. Vol. 2. London, 1881)