## 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, Mad words, her babe within its cot, And felt particularly glad That it had not.	5
I knew (such subtle brains have men) That she was uttering what she shouldn't, And thought that I would chide, and then I thought I wouldn't.	10
Who could have gazed upon that face, Those pouting coral lips, and chided? A Rhadamanthus, in my place, Had done as I did.	15
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 unreproved — Still mute (O brothers, was it sin?) I drank — unutterably moved — Her beauty in.	
And to myself I murmured low, As on her upturned face and dress The moonlight fell, "Would she say, 'No,' By chance, or 'Yes?'"	25

She stood so calm, so like a ghost,	
Betwixt me and that magic moon,	30
That I already was almost	
A finished coon	
But when she caught adroitly up	
And soothed with smiles her little daughter,	
And gave it, if I'm right, a sup	35
Of barley-water;	
And, crooning still the strange sweet lore,	
Which only mothers' tongues can utter,	
Snowed with deft hand the sugar o'er	
Its bread-and-butter;	40
And kissed it clingingly — (Ah! why	
Don't women do these things in private?) —	
I felt that if I lost her, I	
Should not survive it:	
And from my mouth the words nigh flew —	45
The past, the future, I forgat 'em —	
"O! if you'd kiss me as you do	
That thankless atom!"	
But this thought came ere yet I spake,	
And froze the sentence on my lips —	50
"They err who marry wives that make	
Those little slips."	
It came like some familiar rhyme,	
Some copy to my boyhood set;	
And that's perhaps the reason I'm	55
Unmarried yet.	
Would she have owned how pleased she was,	
And told her love with widow's pride?	
I never found that out, because	
I never tried.	60

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

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