

John Davidson (1857-1909)

2 *A Ballad of a Nun*

From Eastertide to Eastertide

For ten long years her patient knees
Engraved the stones—the fittest bride
Of Christ in all the diocese.

She conquered every earthly lust; 5
The abbess loved her more and more;
And, as a mark of perfect trust,
Made her the keeper of the door.

High on a hill the convent hung,
Across a duchy looking down, 10
Where everlasting mountains flung
Their shadows over tower and town.

The jewels of their lofty snows
In constellations flashed at night;
Above their crests the moon arose; 15
The deep earth shuddered with delight.

Long ere she left her cloudy bed,
Still dreaming in the orient land,
On many a mountain's happy head
Dawn lightly laid her rosy hand. 20

The adventurous sun took Heaven by storm;
Clouds scattered largesses of rain;
The sounding cities, rich and warm,
Smouldered and glittered in the plain.

Sometimes it was a wandering wind, 25
 Sometimes the fragrance of the pine,
Sometimes the thought how others sinned,
 That turned her sweet blood into wine.

Sometimes she heard a serenade
 Complaining sweetly far away: 30
She said, 'A young man woos a maid;'
 And dreamt of love till break of day.

Then would she ply her knotted scourge
 Until she swooned; but evermore
She had the same red sin to purge, 35
 Poor, passionate keeper of the door!

For still night's starry scroll unfurled,
 And still the day came like a flood;
It was the greatness of the world
 That made her long to use her blood. 40

In winter-time when Lent drew nigh,
 And hill and plain were wrapped in snow,
She watched beneath the frosty sky
 The nearest city nightly glow.

Like peals of airy bells outworn 45
 Faint laughter died above her head
In gusts of broken music borne:
 'They keep the Carnival,' she said.

Her hungry heart devoured the town:
 'Heaven save me by a miracle! 50
Unless God sends an angel down,
 Thither I go though it were Hell.'

She dug her nails deep in her breast,
Sobbed, shrieked, and straight withdrew the bar:
A fledgling flying from the nest, 55
A pale moth rushing to a star.

Fillet and veil in strips she tore;
Her golden tresses floated wide;
The ring and bracelet that she wore
As Christ's betrothed, she cast aside. 60

'Life's dearest meaning I shall probe;
Lo! I shall taste of love at last!
Away!' She doffed her outer robe,
And sent it sailing down the blast.

Her body seemed to warm the wind; 65
With bleeding feet o'er ice she ran:
'I leave the righteous God behind;
I go to worship sinful man.'

She reached the sounding city's gate;
No question did the warder ask: 70
He passed her in: 'Welcome, wild mate!'
He thought her some fantastic mask.

Half-naked through the town [s]he went;
Each footstep left a bloody mark;
Crowds followed her with looks intent; 75
Her bright eyes made the torches dark.

Alone and watching in the street
There stood a grave youth nobly dressed;
To him she knelt and kissed his feet;
Her face her great desire confessed. 80

Straight to his house the nun he led:
 ‘Strange lady, what would you with me?’
‘Your love, your love, sweet lord,’ she said;
 ‘I bring you my virginity.’

He healed her bosom with a kiss; 85
 She gave him all her passion’s hoard;
And sobbed and murmured ever, ‘This
 Is life’s great meaning, dear, my lord.

‘I care not for my broken vow;
 Though God should come in thunder soon, 90
I am sister to the mountains now,
 And sister to the sun and moon.’

Through all the towns of Belmarie
 She made a progress like a queen.
‘She is,’ they said, ‘whate’er she be, 95
 The strangest woman ever seen.

‘From fairyland she must have come,
 Or else she is a mermaid.’
Some said she was a ghoul, and some
 A heathen goddess born again. 100

But soon her fire to ashes burned;
 Her beauty changed to haggardness;
Her golden hair to silver turned;
 The hour came of her last caress.

At midnight from her lonely bed 105
 She rose, and said, ‘I have had my will.’
The old ragged robe she donned, and fled
 Back to the convent on the hill.

Half-naked as she went before,
She hurried to the city wall, 110
Unnoticed in the rush and roar
And splendour of the carnival.

No question did the warder ask:
Her ragged robe, her shrunken limb,
Her dreadful eyes! 'It is no mask; 115
It is a she-wolf, gaunt and grim!'

She ran across the icy plain;
Her worn blood curdled in the blast;
Each footstep left a crimson stain;
The white-faced moon looked on aghast. 120

She said between her chattering jaws,
'Deep peace is mine, I cease to strive;
Oh, comfortable convent laws,
That bury foolish nuns alive!

'A trowel for my passing-bell, 125
A little bed within the wall,
A coverlet of stones; how well
I there shall keep the Carnival!'

Like tired bells chiming in their sleep,
The wind faint peals of laughter bore; 130
She stopped her ears and climbed the steep,
And thundered at the convent door.

It opened straight: she entered in,
And at the wardress' feet fell prone:
'I come to purge away my sin; 135
Bury me, close me up in stone.'

The wardress raised her tenderly;
She touched her wet and fast-shut eyes:
'Look, sister; sister, look at me;
Look; can you see through my disguise?' 140

She looked and saw her own sad face,
And trembled, wondering, 'Who are thou?'
'God sent me down to fill your place:
I am the Virgin Mary now.'

And with the word, God's mother shone: 145
The wanderer whispered, 'Mary, hail!'
The vision helped her to put on
Bracelet and fillet, ring and veil.

'You are sister to the mountains now,
And sister to the day and night; 150
Sister to God.' And on the brow
She kissed her thrice, and left her sight.

While dreaming in her cloudy bed,
Far in the crimson orient land,
On many a mountain's happy head 155
Dawn lightly laid her rosy hand.

1894

(From *The Poems of John Davidson*. 2 vols. Ed. Andrew
Turnbull. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic P, 1973)