

John Davidson (1857-1909)

4 *A Ballad of a Workman*

All day beneath polluted skies
He laboured in a clanging town;
At night he read with bloodshot eyes
And fondly dreamt of high renown.

‘My time is filched by toil and sleep; 5
My heart,’ he thought, ‘is clogged with dust;
My soul that flashed from out the deep,
A magic blade, begins to rust.

‘For me the lamps of heaven shine;
For me the cunning seasons care; 10
The old undaunted sea is mine,
The stable earth, the ample air.

‘Yet a dark street—at either end,
A bed, an anvil—prisons me,
Until my desperate state shall mend, 15
And Death, the Saviour, set me free.

‘Better a hundred times to die,
And sink at once into the mould,
Than like a stagnant puddle lie
With arabesques of scum enscrolled. 20

‘I must go forth and view the sphere
I own. What can my courage daunt?
Instead of dying daily here,
The worst is dying once of want.

‘I drop the dream of high renown; 25
I ask but to possess my soul.’
At dawn he left the silent town,
And quaking toward the forest stole.

He feared that he might want the wit
 To light on Nature's hidden hearth, 30
And deemed his rusty soul unfit
 To win the beauty of the earth.

But when he came among the trees,
 So slowly built, so many-ring'd,
His doubting thought could soar at ease 35
 In colour steep'd, with passion wing'd.

Occult remembrances awoke
 Of outlaws in the good greenwood,
And antique times of woaded folk
 Began to haunt his brain and blood. 40

No longer hope appeared a crime:
 He sang; his very heart and flesh
Aspired to join the ends of time,
 And forge and mould the world afresh.

'I dare not choose to run in vain; 45
 I must continue toward the goal.'
The pulse of life beat strong again,
 And in a flash he found his soul.

'The worker never knows defeat,
 Though unvictorious he may die: 50
The anvil and the grimy street,
 My destined throne and Calvary!'

Back to the town he hastened, bent—
 So swiftly did his passion change—
On selfless plans. 'I shall invent 55
 A means to amplify the range

'Of human power: find the soul wings,
 If not the body! Let me give
Mankind more mastery over things,
 More thought, more joy, more will to live.' 60

He overtook upon the way

A tottering ancient travel-worn:
'Lend me your arm, good youth, I pray;
I scarce shall see another morn.'

Dread thought had carved his pallid face, 65
And bowed his form, and blanched his hair;
In every part he bore some trace,
Or some deep dint of uncouth care.

The workman led him to his room,
And would have nursed him. 'No,' he said; 70
'It is my self-appointed doom
To die upon a borrowed bed;

'But hear and note my slightest word.
I am a man without a name.
I saw the Bastille fall; I heard 75
The giant Mirabeau declaim.

'I saw the stormy dawn look pale
Across the sea-bound battle-field,
When through the hissing sleet and hail
The clarions of Cromwell pealed: 80

'I watched the deep-souled Puritan
Grow greater with the desperate strife:
The cannon waked; the shouting van
Charged home; and victory leapt to life.

'At Seville in the Royal square 85
I saw Columbus as he passed
Laurelled to greet the Catholic pair
Who had believed in him at last:

'I saw the Andalusians fill
Windows, and roofs, and balconies— 90
A firmament of faces still,
A galaxy of wondering eyes:

'For he had found the unknown shore,
And made the world's great dream come true:

I think that men shall never more 95
 Know anything so strange and new.

‘By meteor light when day had set
 I looked across Angora’s plain,
 And watched the fall of Bajazet,
 The victory of Tamerlane. 100

‘In that old city where the vine
 Dislodged the seaweed, once I saw
 The inexorable Florentine:
 He looked my way; I bent with awe

‘Before his glance, for this was he 105
 Who drained the dregs of sorrow’s cup
 In fierce disdain; it seemed to me
 A spirit passed, my hair stood up.

Draw nearer: breath and sight begin
 To fail me: nearer, ere I die.— 110
 I saw the brilliant Saladin,
 Who taught the Christians courtesy;

‘And Charlemagne, whose dreaded name,
 I first in far Bokhara heard;
 Mohammed, with the eyes of flame, 115
 The lightning-blow, the thunder-word.

‘I saw Him nailed upon a tree,
 Whom once beside an inland lake
 I had beheld in Galilee
 Speaking as no man ever spake. 120

‘I saw imperial Cæsar fall;
 I saw the star of Macedon;
 I saw from Troy’s enchanted wall
 The death of Priam’s mighty son.

‘I heard in streets of Troy at night 125
 Cassandra prophesying fire. . . .
 A flamelit face upon my sight

Flashes: I see the World's Desire!

'My life ebbs fast: nearer! I sought
A means to overmaster fate: 130
Me, the Egyptian Hermes taught
In old Hermopolis the Great:

'I pierced to Nature's inmost hearth,
And wrung from her with toil untold
The soul and substance of the earth, 135
The Seed of life, the Seed of gold.

'Until the end I meant to stay;
But thought has here so small a range;
And I am tired of night and day,
And tired of men who never change. 140

'All earthly hope ceased long ago;
Yet, like a mother young and fond
Whose child is dead, I ache to know
If there be anything beyond.

'Dark—all is darkness! Are you there? 145
Give me your hand. —I choose to die.
This holds my secret—should you dare;
And this, to bury me. . . . Good-bye.

Amazement held the workman's soul;
He took the alchemist's bequest— 150
A light purse and a parchment scroll;
And watched him slowly sink to rest.

And nothing could he dream or think;
He went like one bereft of sense,
Till passion overbore the brink 155
Of all his wistful continence,

When his strange guest was laid in earth
And he had read the scroll: 'Behold,
I can procure from Nature's hearth
The Seed of Life, the Seed of Gold! 160

‘For ever young! Now, time and tide
Must wait for me; my life shall vie
With fate and fortune stride for stride
Until the sun drops from the sky.

‘Gold at a touch! Nations and kings 165
Shall come and go at my command;
I shall control the secret springs
Of enterprise in every land;

‘And hasten on the Perfect Day:
Great men may break the galling chains; 170
Sweet looks light up the toilsome way;
But I alone shall hold the reins!

‘All fragrance, all delightfulness,
And all the glory, all the power,
That sound and colour can express, 175
Shall be my ever-growing dower.

‘And I shall know, and I shall love
In every age, in every clime
All beauty. . . . I, enthroned above
Humanity, the peer of Time! 180

‘Nay—selfish! I shall give to men
The Seed of Life, the Seed of Gold;
Restore the Golden Age again
At once, and let no soul grow old.

‘But gold were then of no avail, 185
And death would cease—unhallowed doom!
The heady wine of life grow stale,
And earth become a living tomb!

‘And youth would end, and truth decline,
And only pale illusion rule; 190
For it is death makes love divine,
Men human, life so sweet and full!’

He burnt the scroll. 'I shall not cheat
My destiny. Life, death for me!
The anvil and the grimy street, 195
My unknown throne and Calvary!

'Only obedience can be great;
It brings the Golden Age again:
Even to be still, abiding fate,
Is kingly ministry to men! 200

'I drop the dream of high renown:
A nameless private in the strife,
Life, take me; take me, clanging town;
And death, the eager zest of life.

'The hammered anvils reel and chime; 205
The breathless, belted wheels ring true;
The workmen join the ends of time,
And forge and mould the world anew.'

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