

John Davidson (1857-1909)

5 *A Ballad of an Artist's Wife*

'Sweet wife, this heavy-hearted age
Is nought to us; we two shall look
To Art, and fill a perfect page
In Life's ill-written doomsday book.'

He wrought in colour; blood and brain 5
Gave fire and might; and beauty grew
And flowered with every magic stain
His passion on the canvas threw.

They shunned the world and worldly ways:
He laboured with a constant will; 10
But few would look, and none would praise,
Because of something lacking still.

After a time her days with sighs
And tears o'erflowed; for blighting need
Bedimmed the lustre of her eyes, 15
And there were little mouths to feed.

'My bride shall ne'er be common-place.'
He thought, and glanced; and glanced again:
At length he looked her in the face;
And lo, a woman old and plain! 20

About this time the world's heart failed—
The lusty heart no fear could rend;
In every land wild voices wailed,
And prophets prophesied the end.

'To-morrow or to-day,' he thought, 25
'May be Eternity; and I
Have neither felt nor fashioned aught
That makes me unconcerned to die.

‘With care and counting of the cost
My life a sterile waste has grown, 30
Wherein my better dreams are lost
Like chaff in the Sahara sown.

‘I must escape this living tomb!
My life shall yet be rich and free,
And on the very stroke of Doom 35
My soul at last begin to be.

‘Wife, children, duty, household fires
For victims of the good and true!
For me my infinite desires,
Freedom and things untried and new! 40

‘I would encounter all the press
Of thought and feeling life can show,
The sweet embrace, the aching stress
Of every earthly joy and woe;

‘And from the world’s impending wreck 45
And out of pain and pleasure weave
Beauty undreamt of, to bedeck
The Festival of Doomsday Eve.’

He fled, and joined a motley throng
That held carousal day and night; 50
With love and wit, with dance and song,
They snatched a last intense delight.

Passion to mould an age’s art,
Enough to keep a century sweet,
Was in an hour consumed; each heart 55
Lavished a life in every beat.

Amazing beauty filled the looks
Of sleepless women; music bore
New wonder on its wings; and books
Throbbled with a thought unknown before. 60

The sun began to smoke and flare

Like a spent lamp about to die;
The dusky moon tarnished the air;
The planets withered in the sky.

Earth reeled and lurched upon her road; 65
Tigers were cowed, and wolves grew tame;
Seas shrank, and rivers backward flowed,
And mountain-ranges burst in flame.

The artist's wife, a soul devout,
To all these things gave little heed; 70
For though the sun was going out,
There still were little mouths to feed.

And there were also shrouds to stitch,
And chares to do; with all her might,
To feed her babes, she served the rich 75
And kept her useless tears till night.

But by-and-by her sight grew dim;
Her strength gave way; in desperate mood
She laid her down to die. 'Tell him,'
She sighed, 'I fed them while I could.' 80

The children met a wretched fate;
Self-love was all the vogue and vaunt,
And charity gone out of date;
Wherefore they pined and died of want.

Aghast he heard the story: 'Dead! 85
All dead in hunger and despair!
I courted misery,' he said;
'But here is more than I can bear.'

Then, as he wrought, the stress of woe
Appeared in many a magic stain; 90
And all adored his work, for lo,
Tears mingled now with blood and brain!

'Look, look!' they cried; 'this man can weave
Beauty from anguish that appals;'

And at the feast of Doomsday Eve 95
 They hung his pictures in their halls,

 And gazed; and came again between
 The faltering dances eagerly;
 They said, 'The loveliest we have seen,
 The last, of man's work, we shall see!' 100

Then was there neither death nor birth;
 Time ceased; and through the ether fell
 The smoky sun, the leprous earth—
 A cinder and an icicle.

No wrathful vials were unsealed; 105
 Silent, the first things passed away:
 No terror reigned; no trumpet pealed
 The dawn of Everlasting Day.

The bitter draught of sorrow's cup
 Passed with the seasons and the years; 110
 And Wisdom dried for ever up
 The deep, old fountainhead of tears.

Out of the grave and ocean's bed
 The artist saw the people rise;
 And all the living and the dead 115
 Were borne aloft to Paradise.

He came where on a silver throne
 A spirit sat for ever young;
 Before her Seraphs worshipped prone,
 And Cherubs silver censers swung. 120

He asked, 'Who may this martyr be?
 What votaress of saintly rule?'
 A Cherub said, 'No martyr; she
 Had one gift; she was beautiful.'

Then came he to another bower 125
 Where one sat on a golden seat,
 Adored by many a heavenly Power

With golden censers smoking sweet.

‘This was some gallant wench who led
Faint-hearted folk and set them free?’ 130
‘Oh, no! a simple maid,’ they said,
‘Who spent her life in charity.’

At last he reached a mansion blest
Where on a diamond throne, endued
With nameless beauty, one possessed 135
Ineffable beatitude.

The praises of this matchless soul
The sons of God proclaimed aloud;
From diamond censers odours stole;
And Hierarchs before her bowed. 140

‘Who was she?’ God himself replied:
‘In misery her lot was cast;
She lived a woman’s life, and died
Working My work until the last.’

It was his wife. He said, ‘I pray 145
Thee, Lord, despatch me now to Hell.’
But God said, ‘No; here shall you stay,
And in her peace for ever dwell.’

1895

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