

John Davidson (1857-1909)

6 *A Ballad of Euthanasia*

In magic books she read at night,
And found all things to be
A spectral pageant brought to light
By nameless sorcery.

‘Bethink you, now, my daughter dear,’ 5
The King of Norway cried,
‘’Tis summer, and your twentieth year—
High time you were a bride!

‘The sunlight lingers o’er the wold
By night; the stars above 10
With passion throb like hearts of gold;
The whole world is in love.’

The scornful princess laughed and said,
‘This love you praise, I hate.
Oh, I shall never, never wed; 15
For men degenerate.

‘The sun grows dim on heaven’s brow;
The world’s worn blood runs cold;
Time staggers in his dotage now;
Nature is growing old. 20

‘Deluded by the summertime,
Must I with wanton breath
Whisper and sigh? I trow not!—I
Shall be the bride of Death.’

Fair princes came with gems of price, 25
And kings from lands afar.
‘Jewels!’ she said. ‘I may not wed
Till Death comes with a star.’

At midnight when she ceased to read, 30
 She pushed her lattice wide,
 And saw the crested rollers lead
 The vanguard of the tide.

The mighty host of waters swayed,
 Commanded by the moon;
 The wind a marching music made; 35
 The surges chimed in tune.

But she with sudden-startled ears
 O'erheard a ghostly sound—
 Or drums that beat, or trampling feet,
 Above or underground. 40

The mountain-side was girt about
 With forests dark and deep.
 'What meteor flashes in and out
 Thridding the darksome steep?'

Soon light and sound reached level ground, 45
 And lo, in blackest mail,
 Along the shore a warrior
 Rode on a war-horse pale!

And from his helm as on he came
 A crescent lustre gleamed; 50
 The charger's hoofs were shod with flame:
 The wet sand hissed and steamed.

'He leaves me! Nay; he turns this way
 From elfin lands afar.
 'Tis Death,' she said. 'He comes to wed 55
 His true love with a star!'

'No ring for me, no blushing groom,
 No love with all its ills,
 No long-drawn life! I am the wife
 Of Death, whose first kiss kills.' 60

The rider reached the city wall;

Over the gate he dashed;
Across the roofs the fire-shod hoofs
Like summer-lightning flashed.

Before her bower the pale horse pawed 65
The air, unused to rest;
The sable groom, he whispered 'Come!'
And stooped his shining crest.

She sprang behind him; on her brow
He placed his glowing star. 70
Back o'er the roofs the fire-shod hoofs
Like lightning flashed afar.

Through hissing sand and shrivelled grass
And flowers singed and dead,
By wood and lea, by stream and sea, 75
The pale horse panting sped.

At last as they beheld the morn
His sovereignty resume,
Deep in an ancient land forlorn
They reached a marble tomb. 80

They lighted down and entered in:
The tears, they brimmed her eyes;
She turned and took a lingering look,
A last look at the skies;

Then went with Death. Her lambent star 85
The sullen darkness lit
In avenues of sombre yews,
Where ghosts did peer and flit.

But soon the way grew light as day;
With wonderment and awe, 90
A golden land, a silver strand,
And grass-green hills she saw.

In gown and smock good country folk
In fields and meadows worked;

The salt seas wet the ruddy net 95
Where glistening fishes lurked.

The meads were strewn with purple flowers,
With every flower that blows;
And singing loud o'er cliff and cloud
The larks, the larks arose! 100

'The sun is bright on heaven's brow,
The world's fresh blood runs fleet;
Time is as young as ever now,
Nature as fresh and sweet.'

Her champion said; then through the wood 105
He led her to a bower;
He doffed his sable casque and stood
A young man in his flower!

'Lo! I am Life, your lover true!
He kissed her o'er and o'er. 110
And still she wist not what to do,
And still she wondered more.

And they were wed. The swift years sped
Till children's children laughed;
And joy and pain and joy again 115
Mixed in the cup they quaffed.

Upon their golden wedding day,
He said, 'How now, dear wife?'
Then she: 'I find the sweetest kind
Of Death is Love and Life.' 120

1894

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