

John Payne (1842-1916)

1 *The Ballad of Isobel*

I.

The day is dead, the night draws on,
The shadows gather fast:
Tis many an hour yet to the dawn,
Till Hallow-tide be past.

Till Hallow-tide be past and sped, 5
The night is full of fear;
For then, they say, the restless dead
Unto the live draw near.

Between the Saints' day and the Souls' 10
The dead wake in the mould;
The poor dead, in their grassy knolls
They lie and are a-cold.

They think upon the live that sit
And drink the Hallow-ale, 15
Whilst they lie stark within the pit,
Nailed down with many a nail.

And sore they wonder if the thought
Live in them of the dead;
And sore with wish they are distraught
To feel the firelight red. 20

Betwixt the day and yet the day
The Saints and Souls divide,
The dead folk rise out of the clay
And wander far and wide.

They wander o'er the sheeted snow, 25
Chill with the frore of death,
Until they see the windows glow
With the fire's ruddy breath.

And if the cottage door be fast
And but the light win out, 30
All night, until their hour is past,
The dead walk thereabout.

And all night long, the live folk hear
Their windy song of sighs
And waken all for very fear, 35
Until the white day rise.

But if the folk be piteous
And pity the poor dead
That weary in the narrow house,
Upon the cold earth's bed, 40

They pile the peats upon the fire
And leave the door ajar,
That so the rosy flame aspire
To where the grey ghosts are.

And syne they sweep the cottage floor 45
And set the hearthside chair:
The sad sprights watch beside the door
Till midnight still the air.

And then toward the friendly glow
Come trooping in the dead; 50
Until the cocks for morning crow,
They sit by the fire red.

II.

“Oh, I have wearied long enough!
I'll weary me no more;
But I will watch for my dead love 55
Till Hallow-tide be o'er.”

He set the door across the sill;
The moonlight fluttered in;
The sad snow covered heath and hill,
As far as eye could win. 60

The thin frost feathered in the air;
All dumb the white world lay;
Night sat on it as cold and fair
As death upon a may.

He turned him back into the room 65
And sat him by the fire:
Night darkened round him in the gloom;
The shadowtide rose higher.

He rose and looked out o'er the hill
To where the grey kirk lay; 70
The midnight quiet was so still,
He heard the bell-chimes play.

Twelve times he heard the sweet bell chime;
No whit he stirred or spoke;
But his eyes fixed, as if on Time 75
The hour of judgment broke.

And as the last stroke fell and died,
Over the kirkyard grey
Himseemed he saw a blue flame glide,
Among the graves at play. 80

A flutter waved upon the breeze,
As of a spirit's wings:
A wind went by him through the trees,
That spoke of heavenly things.

Himseemed he heard a sound of feet 85
Upon the silver snow:
A rush of robes by him did fleet,
A sighing soft and low.

He turned and sat him down again;
The midnight filled the place: 90
The tears ran down like silent rain
Upon his weary face.

“She will not come to me,” he said;
“The death-swoon is too strong:
She hath forgot me with the dead, 95
Me that she loved so long.

“She will not come: she sleeps too sweet
Within the quiet ground.
What worth is love, when life is fleet
And sleep in death so sound? 100

“She will not come!” — A soft cold air
Upon his forehead fell:
He turned him to the empty chair;
And there sat Isobel.

His dead love sat him side by side, 105
His minnie white and wan:
Within the tomb she could not bide,
Whilst he sat weeping on.

Ah, wasted, wasted was her face
And sore her cheek was white; 110
But in her eyes the ancient grace
Burnt with a feeble light.

Upon her breast the grave-wede grey
Fell to her little feet;
But still the golden tresses lay 115
About her bosom sweet.

“Ah, how is't with ye, Isobel?
How pale ye look and cold!
Ah, sore it is to think ye dwell
Alone beneath the mould! 120

“Is't weary for our love ye've grown
From dwelling with the dead,
Or shivering from the cold grave-stone
To find the firelight red?”

“Oh, 'tis not that I'm lorn of love 125

Or that a-cold I lie:
I trust in God that is above
To bring you by-and-by.

“I feel your kisses on my face,
Your kisses sweet and warm: 130
Your love is in the burial-place;
I fear nor cold nor warm.

“I feel the love within your heart
That beats for me alone:
I fear not change upon your part 135
Nor crave for the unknown.

“For to the dead no faint fears cling:
All certainty have they:
They know (and smile at sorrowing)
Love never dies away. 140

“No harm can reach me in Death’s deep:
It hath no fear for me:
God sweetens it to lie and sleep,
Until His face I see:

“He makes it sweet to lie and wait, 145
Till we together meet
And hand-in-hand athwart the gate
Pass up the golden street.

“But where’s the babe that at my side
Slept sweetly long ago? 150
So sore to me to-night it cried,
I could not choose but go.

“I heard its voice so full of wail,
It woke me in the grave:
Its sighs came to me on the gale, 155
Across the wintry wave.

“For though death lap her wide and mild,
A mother cannot rest,

Except her little sucking child
Be sleeping at her breast.” 160

“Ah, know’st thou not, my love?” he said:
“Methought the dead knew all.
When in that night of doom and dread
The moving waters’ wall

“Smote on our ship and drove it down 165
Beneath the raging sea,
All of our company did drown,
Alas! save only me.

“And me the cruel billows cast
Aswoon upon the strand; 170
Thou dead within mine arms held fast,
Hand locked in other’s hand.

“The ocean never to this day
Gave up our baby dead:
Ah, woe is me that life should stay, 175
When all its sweet is fled!”

“Go down,” said she, “to the seashore:
God taketh ruth on thee:
Search well; and I will come once more
Ere yet the midnight be.” 180

She bent her sweet pale mouth to his:
The snowdrift from the sky
Falls not so cold as did that kiss:
He shook as he should die.

She looked on him with yearning eyes 185
And vanished from his sight:
He heard the matin cock crow thrice;
The morning glimmered white.

Then from his place he rose and sought
The shore beside the sea: 190
And there all day he searched; but nought

Until the eve found he.

At last a pale star glittered through
The growing dusk of night
And fell upon the waste of blue, 195
A trembling wand of light.

And lo! a wondrous thing befell:
As though the small star's ray
Availed to break some year-old spell
That on the water lay, 200

A white form rose out of the deep,
Where it so long had lain,
Cradled within the cold death-sleep:
He knew his babe again.

It floated softly to his feet; 205
White as a flower it lay:
Christ's love had kept its body sweet
Unravished of decay.

He thanked God weeping for His grace;
And many a tear he shed 210
And many a kiss upon its face
That smiled as do the dead.

Then to the kirkyard where the maid
Slept cold in clay he hied;
And with a loving hand he laid 215
The baby by her side.

III.

The dark fell down upon the earth;
Night held the quiet air:
He sat before the glowing hearth,
Beside the empty chair. 220

Twelve times at last for middle night
Rang out the kirkyard bell:
Ere yet the twelfth was silent quite,

By him sat Isobel.

Within her arms their little child 225
Lay pillowed on her breast:
Death seemed to it as soft and mild
As heaven to the blest.

Ah, no more wasted was her face,
Nor white her cheek and wan! 230
The splendour of a heavenly grace
Upon her forehead shone.

She seemed again the golden girl
Of the long-vanished years:
Her face shone as a great sweet pearl, 235
Washed and made white in tears.

The light of heaven filled her eyes
With soft and splendid flame;
Out of the heart of Paradise
It seemed as if she came. 240

He looked upon her beauty bright;
And sore, sore sorrowed he,
To think how many a day and night
Between them yet must be.

He looked at her with many a sigh; 245
For sick he was with pain,
To think how many a year must fly
Ere they two met again.

She looked on him: no sadness lay
Upon her tender mouth; 250
And syne she smiled, a smile as gay
And glad as in her youth.

“Be of good cheer, dear heart,” said she:
“Yet but a little year
Ere thou and I together see 255
The end of doubt and fear.

“Come once again the saints’ night ring
Unto the spirits’ feet,
Glad with the end of sorrowing,
Once more we three shall meet; 260

“We three shall meet no more to part
For all eternity:
’Gin I come not to thee, sweetheart,
Do thou come then to me.”

IV.

Another year is past and gone; 265
Once more the lingering light
Fades from the sky and dusk falls down
Upon the Holy Night.

The hearth is clear; the fire burns red;
The door stands open wide; 270
He waits for the beloved dead
To come with Hallow-tide.

The midnight rings out loud and slow
Across the frosty air:
He sits before the firelight-glow, 275
Beside the waiting chair.

The last chime dies into the night:
The stillness grows apace:
And yet there comes no lady bright
To fill the empty place. 280

No soft hand falls upon his hair;
No light breath fans his brow:
The night is empty everywhere;
The birds sleep on the bough.

“Ah woe is me! the night fades fast; 285
Her promise is forgot:
Alas!” he said, “the hours fly past,
And still she cometh not!

“So sweet she sleeps and sleeps with her
The baby at her breast, 290
No thought of earthly love can stir
Their undesireful rest.

“Ah, who can tell but Time may lay
Betwixt us such a space
That haply at the Judgment Day 295
She will forget my face.”

The still night quivered as he spoke;
He felt the midnight air
Throb and a little breeze awoke
Across the heather bare. 300

And in the wind himseemed he heard
His true love’s voice once more:
Afar it came, and but one word
“Come!” unto him it bore.

A faint hope flickered in his breast: 305
He rose and took his way
Where underneath the brown hill’s crest
The quiet kirkyard lay.

He pushed the lychgate to the wall:
Against the moonless sky 310
The grey kirk towered dusk and tall:
Heaven seemed on it to lie.

Dead darkness held the holy ground;
His feet went in and out
And stumbled at each grassy mound, 315
As one that is in doubt.

Then suddenly the sky grew white;
The moon thrust through the gloom:
The tall tower’s shade against her light
Fell on his minnie’s tomb. 320

Full on her grave its shadow fell,
As 'twere a giant's hand,
That motionless the way doth tell
Unto the heavenly land.

He fell upon his knees thereby 325
And kissed the holy earth,
Wherein the only twain did lie
That made life living-worth.

He knelt; no longer did he weep;
Great peace was on his soul: 330
Sleep sank on him, a wondrous sleep,
Assaining death and dole.

And in the sleep himseemed he stood
Before a high gold door,
Upon whose midst the blessèd Rood 335
Burnt like an opal's core.

Christ shining on the cross to see
Was there for all device:
Within he saw the almond-tree
That grows in Paradise. 340

He knew the fallen almond-flowers
That drop without the gate,
So with their scent the tardy hours
Be cheered for those that wait.

And as he looked, a glimmering light 345
Shone through the blazoned bars:
The wide tall gate grew blue and bright
As Heaven with the stars.

A postern opened in his face;
Sweet savours breathed about; 350
And through the little open space
A fair white hand came out:

A hand as white as ermolin,

A hand he knew full well,
Beckoned to him to enter in — 355
The hand of Isobel.

Lord Christ, Thy morning tarrieth long:
The shadows come and go:
These three have heard the angels' song;
Still many wait below. 360

These three on Heaven's honey feed
And milk of Paradise:
How long before for us indeed
The hills of Heaven rise?

How long before, joined hand-in-hand 365
With all the dear-loved dead,
We pass along the heavenly land
And hear the angels' tread?

The night is long: the way is drear:
Our hearts faint for the light: 370
Vouchsafe, dear Lord, the day draw near,
The morning of Thy sight!

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