

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-82)

3 *The Ballad of Jan Van Hunks*

Full of smoke was the quaint old room
And of pleasant winter-heat;
Whence you might hear the hall-door slap,
And the wary shuffling of feet
Which from the carpeted floor stepped out 5
Into the ice-paved street.

Van Hunks was laughing in his paunch;
Ten golden pieces rare
Lay in his hand; with neighbour Spratz
He had smoked for a wager there; 10
He laughed, and from his neighbour's pipe
He looked to his neighbour's chair.

Even as he laughed, the evening shades
Rose stealthily and spread,
Till the smoky clouds walled up the sun 15
And hid his shining old head,
As though he too had his evening pipe
Before he tumbled to bed.

Van Hunks still chuckled as he sat:
It caused him an inward grin, 20
When he heard the blast shake shutter and blind
With its teeth-chattering din,
To fancy the many who froze without
While he sat sung within.

His bowl restuffed, again he puffed: 25
No noise the stillness broke
Save the tread of feet here and there in the street,

And the church-bells hourly stroke;
While silver-white through the deepening dusk
Up leaped the rapid smoke. 30

“For thirty years,” the Dutchman said,
“I have smoked both night and day;
I’ve laid great wagers on my pipe
But never had once to pay,
For my vapouring foes long ere the close 35
Have all sneaked sickly away.

“Ah! would that I could find but one
Who knew me not too well
To try his chance against me
After the evening bell, 40
Even though he came to challenge me
From the smoking-crib of Hell!”

His breath still lingered on the air
And mingled with the smoke,
When he was aware of a little old man 45
In broidered hosen and tocque,
Who looked as though from a century’s sleep
That instant he had woke.

Small to scan was the little old man
Passing small and lean; 50
Yet a something lurked about him,
Felt strongly though unseen,
Which made you fear the hidden soul
Whose covering was so mean.

What thunder dwelt there, which had left 55
On his brow that lowering trace, —
What lightning, which could kindle so
The fitful glare on his face, —
Though the sneering smile coursed over his lips,

And the laughter rose apace. 60

With cap in hand the stranger bowed
Till the feather swept his shoe: —
“A gallant wish was yours,” he said,
“And I come to pleasure you;
We’re goodly gossips, you and I, — 65
Let us wager and fall to.”

The Dutchman stared. “How here you came
Is nothing to me,” he said;
“A stranger I sought to smoke withal,
And my wish is seconded; 70
But tell me, what shall the wager be,
By these our pipes assay’d?”

“Nay now,” the old man said, “what need
Have we for a golden stake
What more do we ask but honour’s spur 75
To keep our hopes awake?
And yet some bond ’twixt our goodwills
Must stand for the wager’s sake.

“This be our bond: — two midnights hence
The term of our strife shall be; 80
And whichsoe’er to the other then
Shall yield the victory,
At the victor’s hest must needs accept
His hospitality.”

“Done, done!” the Dutchman cried; [“]your home, 85
I’d reach be it far or near;
But in my good pipe I set my trust,
And ’tis you shall sojourn here; —
Here many a time we’ll meet again
For the smokers’ welcome cheer.[”] 90

With that, they lit their pipes and smoked,
And never a word they said;
The dense cloud gathered about them there
High over each smoke-crowned head,
As if with the mesh of some secret thing 95
They sat encompassed.

But now when a great blast shook the house,
The Dutchman paused and spoke: —
“If ought this night could be devised
To sweeten our glorious smoke, 100
’Twere the thought of outcast loons who freeze
’Neath the winter’s bitter yoke.”

The stranger laughed: “I most have watched
The dire extremes of heat,
Ay, more than you, I have seen men quail, 105
And found their sufferings sweet
Fit gossips, you and I! But hark!
What sound comes from the street?”

To the street the chamber window stood,
With shutters strongly barred. 110
There came a timid knock without
And another afterward;
But both so low and faint and weak
That the casement never jarred.

And weak the voice that came with the knock: — 115
“My father, lend your ear!
’Twas store of gold that you bade me wed,
But the wife I chose was dear;
And she and my babes crave only bread.
O father, pity and hear!” 120

Van Hunks looked after the feathered smoke: —
“What thing so slight and vain

As pride whose plume is torn in the wind
And joy's rash flight to pain?"
Then loud: "Thou mind'st when I bad thee hence, — 125
Poor fool, go hence again!"

There came a moan to the lighted room,
A moan to the frosty sky: —
"O father, my loves are dying now, —
Father, you too must die. 130
Oh! on your soul, by God's good grace
Let not this dread hour lie!"

"Gossip, well done!" quoth the little old man;
And in a silvery spire,
Like a spider's web up leaped his smoke 135
Still twisting higher and higher;
And still through the veil his watchful eye
Burned with a fell desire.

A woman's voice came next to the wall: —
"Father, my mother's died: 140
'Twas three months since that you drove her forth
At bitter Christmastide:
How could I care for your proffered gold
And quit my mother's side?"

"For two months now I have begged my bread; 145
Father, I can no more:
My mother's deaf and blind in her grave,
But her soul is at Heaven's door;
And though we're parted on this side death,
We may meet on the further shore." 150

Van Hunks laughed up at the scudding smoke: —
"Ay, go what way you will!
Of folly and pride, in life or death,
Let a woman take her fill!

My girl, even choose this road or that, 155
So we be asunder still!"

"Gossip, well done!" the old man shrieked,
"And mark how the words come true!"
The smoke soared wildly around his head
In snakes of knotted blue; 160
And ever at heart of the inmost coil
Two fiery eyes shot through.

Above the hearth was a carven frame
Where seven small mirrors shone;
There six bright moon-shapes circled round 165
A centre rayed like a sun;
And ever the reflex image dwelt
Alike in every one.

No smokers' faces appeared there now,
But lo! by magic art, 170
Seven times one squalid chamber showed
A dull graves' counterpart;
For there two starving parents lay
With their starved babes heart to heart.

Then changed the scene. In the watered street, 175
"Twixt houses dim and tall,
Like shaggy dogs did the pollards shake
Above the dark canal;
And a girl's thin form gleamed through the night
And sank; and that was all. 180

And there the smoker beheld once more
Seven times his own hard face;
Half-dazed it seemed with sudden sights,
But it showed no sign of grace;
And seven times flashed two fiery eyes 185
In the mirror's narrow space.

The hours wore on, and still they sat
 'Mid the vapour's stifling cloud;
The one tow'rds sudden stupor sank,
 While the other laughed aloud. 190
Alas for the shrinking blinking owl
 The vulture over him bowed!

'Twas the second night of the wager now,
 And the midnight hour was near.
That glance like a kindled cresset blazed: — 195
 "Ho! gossip of mine, what cheer?"
But the smoke from the Dutchman's pipe arose
 No longer swift and clear.

The door-bell rang: "Peace to this house!" —
 'Twas the Pastor's voice that spoke. 200
Above Van Hunks's head still curled
 A fitful flickering smoke,
As the last half-hour ere full midnight
 From the booming clock-tower broke.

The old man doffed his bonnet and cringed 205
 As he oped the chamber-door;
The priest cast never a glance his way,
 But crossed the polished floor
To where the Dutchman's head on his breast
 Lolled with a torpid snore. 210

"Mynheer, your servant sought me out;
 He says that day and night
You have sat" — he shook the smoker's arm,
 But shrank in sudden fright;
The arm dropped down like a weight of lead, 215
 The face was dull and white.

And now the stranger stood astride,

And taller he seemed to grow:
The pipe sat firm in his sneering lips,
And with victorious glow 220
Like dancing figures around its bowl
Did the smoke-wreaths come and go.

“Nay, nay,” he said, “our gossip sits
On contemplation bent;
On son and daughter after, his mind 225
Is doubtless all intent;
Haply his silence breathes a prayer
Ere the midnight hour be spent.”

“And who art thou?” the Pastor cried
With a quaking countenance. 230
“A smoke-dried crony of our good friend
Here rapt in pious trance.”
And his chuckle shook the vaporous sprites
To a madder, merrier dance.

“Hence, mocking Fiend, for I know thee now!” 235
The Pastor signed the cross,
But the old man laughed and shrieked at once,
As over turret and fosse
The midnight hour in the sleeping town
From bell to bell did toss. 240

“Too late, poor priest!” In the Pastor’s ear
So rang the scornful croak.
With that, a swoon fell over his sense;
And when at length he woke,
Two pipes lay shattered upon the floor, 245
The room was black with smoke.

That hour a direful Monster sped
Home to his fiery place;
A shrieking wretch hung over his back

As he sank through nether space. 250
Of such a rider on such a steed
What tongue the flight shall trace?

The bearer shook his burden off
As he reached his retinue:
He's flung him into a knot of fiends, 255
Red, yellow, green and blue: —
"I've brought a pipe for my private use, —
Go trim it, some of you!"

They've sliced the very crown from his head, —
Worse tonsure than a monk's, — 260
Lopped arms and legs, — stuck a red-hot tube
In his wretchedest of trunks;
And when the Devil wants his pipe,
They bring him Jan Van Hunks.

1882

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