

# Fleet Street Eclogue\*

St. George's Day

By John Davidson

BASIL. MENZIES. PERCY. BRIAN. HERBERT. SANDY.

MENZIES.

WHAT thought may burst the bond  
Of rasping spleen?  
What hope its victim soothe?  
What dream assuage his pains?

HERBERT.

An old stile stands between  
Two beeches silvery smooth,  
All carved and kissed by lovers fond.

MENZIES.

The foolish country swains!

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HERBERT.

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HERBERT.

Oh ! but the old stile stands,  
 For ever dear to me—  
 Foot-worn, its bars by many hands  
 Polished like ebony !

MENZIES.

But me my city spleen  
 Holds in a fretting bond.

HERBERT.

And the quickset hedges mantle green,  
 And the fields roll green beyond ;  
 While the antique footpath winds about  
 By farms and little towns,  
 By waterways, and in and out,  
 And up and over the downs.

MENZIES.

I hear the idle workmen's sighs ;  
 I hear their children's hungry cries ;  
 I hear the burden of the years ;  
 I hear the drip of women's tears ;  
 I hear despair, whose tongue is dumb,  
 Speak thunder in the ruthless bomb.

SANDY.

But why keep brooding over ill ?  
 Why hearken such discordant tones ?

HERBERT

HERBERT.

We dream, we sing ; we drive the quill  
To keep the flesh upon our bones :  
Therefore what trade have we with wrongs,  
With ways and woes that spoil our songs ?

MENZIES.

None, none ! Alas, there lies the sting !  
We see, we feel, but cannot aid ;  
We hide our foolish heads and sing ;  
We live, we die ; and all is said.

HERBERT.

To wonder-worlds of old romance  
Our aching thoughts for solace run.

BRIAN.

And some have stolen fire from France.

SANDY.

And some adore the Midnight Sun.

MENZIES.

I, too, for light the world explore,  
And, trembling, tread where angels trod ;  
Devout at every shrine adore,  
And follow after each new god.

But

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But by the altar everywhere  
I find the money-changer's stall ;  
And littering every temple-stair  
The sick and sore like maggots crawl.

BRIAN.

Hush, hush !

MENZIES.

I cannot hush ! The poor,  
The maimed, the halt, the starving come,  
Crying for help at every door ;  
But loud the ecclesiastic drum  
Outbids them ; and behind it wait  
The bones and cleavers of the State.

SANDY.

This smacks of Disestablishment !

BRIAN.

We'll find him next attacking Rent !

BASIL.

Your talk is vain ; your voice is hoarse.

MENZIES.

I would they were as hoarse and vain  
As their wide-weltering spring and source  
Of helpless woe, of wrath insane.

HERBERT.

HERBERT.

Why will you hug the coast of Hell ?

BRIAN.

Why antedate the Judgment Day ?

MENZIES.

Nay, flout me not ; you know me well.

BASIL.

Right, comrade ! Give your fancy way.

MENZIES.

I cannot see the stars and flowers,  
Nor hear the lark's soprano ring,  
Because a ruddy darkness lowers  
For ever, and the tempests sing.  
I see the strong coerce the weak,  
And labour overwrought rebel ;  
I hear the useless treadmill creak,  
The prisoner, cursing in his cell ;  
I see the loafer-burnished wall ;  
I hear the rotting match-girl whine ;  
I see the unslept switchman fall ;  
I hear the explosion in the mine ;  
I see along the heedless street  
The sandwichmen trudge through the mire ;  
I hear the tired quick-tripping feet

Of

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Of sad, gay girls who ply for hire ;  
 I hear the gibbering of the mad ;  
 Sinister workhouse folk I note ;  
 I mark the sable ironclad  
 In every sound and channel float,  
 The growl of armies, bound in chains  
 Of parchment peace that chafes and frets  
 Their seven-leagued limbs and bristled manes  
 Of glittering bayonets,  
 The glowing blast, the fire-shot smoke,  
 Where guns are forged and armour-plate,  
 The mammoth hammer's pounding stroke—  
 The din of our dread iron date ;  
 And always divers undertones  
 Within the roaring tempest throb—  
 The chink of gold, the labourer's groans,  
 The infant's wail, the woman's sob :  
 Hoarsely they beg of Fate to give  
 A little lightening of their woe,  
 A little time to love, to live,  
 A little time to think and know.  
 I see where in the East may rise  
 Some unexpected dreadful dawn—  
 The gleam of steeled and scowling eyes,  
 A flash of women's faces wan !

BASIL.

This is St. George's Day.

MENZIES.

St. George ? A wretched thief, I vow.

HERBERT.

HERBERT.

Nay, Menzies, you should rather say,  
St. George for Merry England, now !

SANDY.

That surely is a phantom cry,  
Hollow and vain for many years.

MENZIES.

I hear the idle workmen sigh ;  
I hear the drip of women's tears.

BASIL.

I hear the laughing, singing voice  
Of Shakespeare warming England through ;  
His birthday, this.

HERBERT.

Again rejoice,  
For this is Wordsworth's birthday, too.

MENZIES.

I hear the agitator shout ;  
I hear the broker cheapen love ;  
I hear poor ladies crying out  
For license men are weary of.

HERBERT.

HERBERT.

I hear the lofty lark,  
The lowly nightingale.

BASIL.

The Present is a dungeon dark  
Of social problems. Break the gaol!  
Get out into the splendid Past,  
Or bid the splendid Future hail.

MENZIES.

Nor then, nor now, nor first, nor last,  
I know. The slave of ruthless Law,  
To me Time seems a dungeon vast  
Where Life lies rotting in the straw.

BASIL.

I care not for your images  
Of Life and Law. I want to sing  
Of England and of Englishmen  
Who made our country what it is.

HERBERT.

And I to praise the English Spring.

PERCY.

St. George for Merry England, then!

MENZIES.



MENZIES.

There is no England now, I fear.

BASIL.

No England, say you ; and since when ?

MENZIES.

Cockney and Celt and Scot are here,  
And Democrats and "ans" and "ists"  
In clubs and cliques and divers lists ;  
But now we have no Englishmen.

BASIL.

You utter what you never felt,  
I know. By bog and mount and fen,  
No Saxon, Norman, Scot, or Celt  
I find, but only Englishmen.

HERBERT.

In all our hedges roses bud.

BASIL.

And thought and speech are more than blood.

HERBERT.

Away with spleen, and let us sing  
The English Spring, the English Spring !

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BASIL.

In weeds of gold and purple hues  
Glad April bursts with piping news  
Of swifts and swallows come again,  
And of the tender pensive strain  
The bullfinch sings from bush to bush.

PERCY.

And oh ! the blackbird and the thrush  
Interpret as no maestro may  
The meaning of the night and day.

SANDY.

They catch the whispers of the breeze  
And weave them into melodies.

BRIAN.

They utter for the hours that pass  
The purpose of their moments bright.

BASIL.

They speak the passion of the grass,  
That grows so stoutly day and night.

HERBERT.

St. George for Merry England then !  
For we are all good Englishmen !

PERCY.

PERCY.

We stand as our forefathers stood  
For Liberty's and Conscience' sake.

HERBERT.

We are the sons of Robin Hood,  
The sons of Hereward the Wake.

PERCY.

The sons of yeomen, English-fed,  
Ready to feast or drink or fight.

HERBERT.

The sons of kings—of Hal and Ned,  
Who kept their island right and tight.

PERCY.

The sons of Cromwell's Ironsides,  
Who knew no king but God above.

BASIL.

We are the sons of English brides,  
Who married Englishmen for love.

SANDY.

Oh, now I see Fate's means and ends !  
The Bruce and Wallace wight I ken,

Who

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Who saved old Scotland from its friends,  
Were mighty northern Englishmen.

BRIAN.

And Parnell, who so greatly fought  
To make a mob people, then  
With Fate inevitably wrought  
That Irish should be Englishmen.

BASIL.

By bogland, highland, down, and fen,  
All Englishmen, all Englishmen !

MENZIES.

There is no England now, I say—

BRIAN.

No England now ? My grief, my grief !

MENZIES.

We lie widespread, the dragon-prey  
Of any Cappadocian thief.  
In Arctic and Pacific seas  
We lounge and loaf ; and either pole  
We reach with sprawling colonies—  
Unwieldy limbs that lack a soul.

BASIL.

BASIL.

St. George for Greater England, then !  
The Boreal and the Austral men !  
They reverence the heroic roll  
Of Englishmen who sang and fought :  
They have a soul, a mighty soul,  
The soul of English speech and thought.

SANDY.

And when the soul of England slept—

BASIL.

St. George for foolish England, then !—

SANDY.

Lo ! Washington and Lincoln kept  
America for Englishmen !

BASIL.

Hurrah ! The English people reigns  
Across the wide Atlantic flood !  
It could not bind itself in chains,  
For Yankee blood is English blood !

HERBERT.

And here the spring is queen  
In robes of white and green.

PERCY.

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PERCY.

In chestnut sconces opening wide  
Tapers shall burn some fresh May morn.

BRIAN.

And the elder brightens the highway side,  
And the bryony binds the thorn.

SANDY.

White is the snow of the leafless sloe,  
The saxifrage by the sedge,  
And white the lady-smocks a-row  
And sauce-alone in the hedge.

BASIL.

England is in her Spring ;  
She only begins to be.  
Oh ! for an organ voice to sing  
The summer I can see !  
But the Past is there ; and a mole may know,  
And a bat may understand,  
That we are the people wherever we go—  
Kings by sea and land !

HERBERT.

And the spring is crowned and stoled  
In purple and in gold.

PERCY.

PERCY.

Wherever light, wherever shade is,  
Gold and purple may be seen.

BRIAN.

Gold and purple lords-and-ladies  
Tread a measure on the green.

SANDY.

Among the long brown furrow lines  
The charlock's mustard flowers come up.

HERBERT.

On happy banks the primrose shines ;  
In lustrous meads, the buttercup.

HERBERT.

In deserts where the wild wind blows  
Blossoms the magic hæmony.

PERCY.

Deep in the Chiltern woodland glows  
The purple pasque anemone.

BASIL.

And England still grows great,  
And never shall grow old ;

Within

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Within our hands we hold  
The world's fate.

MENZIES.

We hold the world's fate ?  
The cry seems out of date.

BASIL.

Not while a single Englishman  
Can work with English brains and bones !  
Awaiting us since time began,  
The swamps of ice, the wastes of flame  
In Boreal and Austral zones  
Took life and meaning when we came.  
The Sphinx that watches by the Nile  
Has seen great empires pass away :  
The mightiest lasted but a while ;  
Yet ours shall not decay.  
Because, although red blood may flow,  
And ocean shake with shot,  
Not England's sword but England's Word  
Undoes the Gordian Knot.  
Bold tongue, stout heart, strong hand, brave brow  
The world's four quarters win ;  
And patiently with axe and plough  
We bring the deserts in.

MENZIES.

Whence comes this patriotic craze ?  
Spare us at least the hackneyed brag  
About the famous English flag.

BASIL.



BASIL.

I'll spare no flourish of its praise.  
Where'er our flag floats in the wind  
Order and justice dawn and shine.  
The dusky myriads of Ind,  
The swarthy tribes far south the line,  
And all who fight with lawless law,  
And all with lawless men who cope,  
Look hitherward across the brine,  
For we are the world's forlorn hope.

MENZIES.

That makes my heart leap up! Hurrah!  
We are the world's forlorn hope!

HERBERT.

And with the merry birds we sing  
The English Spring, the English Spring.

PERCY.

Iris and orchis now unfold.

BRIAN.

The drooping-leaved laburnums ope  
In thunder-showers of greenish gold.

MENZIES.

And we are the world's forlorn hope!

SANDY.

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SANDY.

The lilacs shake their dancing plumes  
Of lavender, mauve, and heliotrope.

HERBERT.

The speedwell on the highway blooms.

MENZIES.

And we are the world's forlorn hope !

SANDY.

Skeletons lurk in every street.

HERBERT.

We push and strike for air and scope.

BRIAN.

The pulses of rebellion beat  
Where want and hunger sulk and mope.

MENZIES.

But though we wander far astray,  
And oft in utter darkness grope,  
Fearless we face the roughest day,  
For we are the world's forlorn hope.

SANDY.

SANDY.

St. George for Merry England then !  
For we are all good Englishmen !

BASIL.

St. George for Greater England then !  
The Boreal and the Austral men !

ALL.

By bogland, highland, down, and fen,  
All Englishmen, all Englishmen !  
Who with their latest breath shall sing  
Of England and the English Spring !

