

Stella's Birthday

Jonathan Swift

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STELLA'S BIRTHDAY, 1718.

STELLA this day is thirty-four
(We shan't dispute a year or more)
However, Stella, be not troubled,
Although thy size and years are doubled
Since first I saw thee at sixteen,
The brightest virgin on the green.
So little is thy form declined;
Made up so largely in thy mind.
Oh, would it please the gods to split
Thy beauty, size, and years, and wit,
No age could furnish out a pair
Of nymphs so graceful, wise, and fair:
With half the lustre of your eyes,
With half your wit, your years, and size.
And then, before it grew too late,
How should I beg of gentle fate,
(That either nymph might lack her swain),
To split my worship too in twain.

STELLA'S BIRTHDAY, 1720.

ALL travellers at first incline
Where'er they see the fairest sign;
And if they find the chambers neat,
And like the liquor and the meat,
Will call again and recommend
The Angel Inn to every friend
What though the painting grows decayed,
The house will never lose its trade:
Nay, though the treach'rous tapster Thomas
Hangs a new angel two doors from us,
As fine as daubers' hands can make it,
In hopes that strangers may mistake it,
We think it both a shame and sin,
To quit the true old Angel Inn.
Now, this is Stella's case in fact,
An angel's face, a little cracked
(Could poets, or could painters fix
How angels look at, thirty–six):
This drew us in at first, to find
In such a form an angel's mind;
And every virtue now supplies
The fainting rays of Stella's eyes.
See, at her levee, crowding swains,
Whom Stella freely entertains,
With breeding, humour, wit, and sense;
And puts them but to small expense;
Their mind so plentifully fills,
And makes such reasonable bills,
So little gets for what she gives,
We really wonder how she lives!
And had her stock been less, no doubt,
She must have long ago run out.
Then who can think we'll quit the place,
When Doll hangs out a newer face;
Or stop and light at Cloe's Head,
With scraps and leavings to be fed.
Then Cloe, still go on to prate
Of thirty–six, and thirty–eight;
Pursue your trade of scandal picking,
Your hints that Stella is no chicken.
Your innuendoes when you tell us,
That Stella loves to talk with fellows;
And let me warn you to believe
A truth, for which your soul should grieve:
That should you live to see the day

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When Stella's locks, must all be grey,
When age must print a furrowed trace
On every feature of her face;
Though you and all your senseless tribe,
Could art, or time, or nature bribe
To make you look like beauty's queen,
And hold for ever at fifteen;
No bloom of youth can ever blind
The cracks and wrinkles of your mind;
All men of sense will pass your door,
And crowd to Stella's at fourscore.

STELLA'S BIRTHDAY.

A GREAT BOTTLE OF WINE, LONG BURIED, BEING THAT DAY DUG UP. 1722.

Resolved my annual verse to pay,
By duty bound, on Stella's day;
Furnished with paper, pens, and ink,
I gravely sat me down to think:
I bit my nails, and scratched my head,
But found my wit and fancy fled;
Or, if with more than usual pain,
A thought came slowly from my brain,
It cost me Lord knows how much time
To shape it into sense and rhyme;
And, what was yet a greater curse,
Long-thinking made my fancy worse
Forsaken by th' inspiring nine,
I waited at Apollo's shrine;
I told him what the world would sa
If Stella were unsung to-day;
How I should hide my head for shame,
When both the Jacks and Robin came;
How Ford would frown, how Jim would leer,
How Sh-r the rogue would sneer,
And swear it does not always follow,
That SEMEL'N ANNO RIDET Apollo.
I have assured them twenty times,
That Phoebus helped me in my rhymes,
Phoebus inspired me from above,
And he and I were hand and glove.
But finding me so dull and dry since,
They'll call it all poetic licence.
And when I brag of aid divine,
Think Eusden's right as good as mine.
Nor do I ask for Stella's sake;
'Tis my own credit lies at stake.
And Stella will be sung, while I
Can only be a stander by.
Apollo having thought a little,
Returned this answer to a tittle.
Tho' you should live like old Methusalem,
I furnish hints, and you should use all 'em,
You yearly sing as she grows old,
You'd leave her virtues half untold.
But to say truth, such dulness reigns
Through the whole set of Irish Deans;
I'm daily stunned with such a medley,

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Dean W-, Dean D-1, and Dean S-;
That let what Dean soever come,
My orders are, I'm not at home;
And if your voice had not been loud,
You must have passed among the crowd.
But, now your danger to prevent,
You must apply to Mrs. Brent,
For she, as priestess, knows the rites
Wherein the God of Earth delights.
First, nine ways looking, let her stand
With an old poker in her hand;
Let her describe a circle round
In Saunder's cellar on the ground
A spade let prudent Archy hold,
And with discretion dig the mould;
Let Stella look with watchful eye,
Rebecca, Ford, and Grattons by.
Behold the bottle, where it lies
With neck elated tow'rds the skies!
The god of winds, and god of fire,
Did to its wondrous birth conspire;
And Bacchus for the poet's use
Poured in a strong inspiring juice:
See! as you raise it from its tomb,
It drags behind a spacious womb,
And in the spacious womb contains
A sovereign med'cine for the brains.
You'll find it soon, if fate consents;
If not, a thousand Mrs. Brents,
Ten thousand Archys arm'd with spades,
May dig in vain to Pluto's shades.
From thence a plenteous draught infuse,
And boldly then invoke the muse
(But first let Robert on his knees
With caution drain it from the lees);
The muse will at your call appear,
With Stella's praise to crown the year.

STELLA'S BIRTHDAY, 1724.

As when a beauteous nymph decays,
We say she's past her dancing days;
So poets lose their feet by time,
And can no longer dance in rhyme.
Your annual bard had rather chose
To celebrate your birth in prose;
Yet merry folks who want by chance
A pair to make a country dance,
Call the old housekeeper, and get her
To fill a place, for want of better;
While Sheridan is off the hooks,
And friend Delany at his books,
That Stella may avoid disgrace,
Once more the Dean supplies their place.
Beauty and wit, too sad a truth,
Have always been confined to youth;
The god of wit, and beauty's queen,
He twenty-one, and she fifteen;
No poet ever sweetly sung.
Unless he were like Phoebus, young;
Nor ever nymph inspired to rhyme,
Unless like Venus in her prime.
At fifty-six, if this be true,
Am I a poet fit for you;
Or at the age of forty-three,
Are you a subject fit for me?
Adieu bright wit, and radiant eyes;
You must be grave, and I be wise.
Our fate in vain we would oppose,
But I'll be still your friend in prose;
Esteem and friendship to express,
Will not require poetic dress;
And if the muse deny her aid
To have them sung, they may be said.
But, Stella say, what evil tongue
Reports you are no longer young?
That Time sits with his scythe to mow
Where erst sat Cupid with his bow;
That half your locks are turned to grey;
I'll ne'er believe a word they say.
'Tis true, but let it not be known,
My eyes are somewhat dimish grown;
For nature, always in the right,
To your decays adapts my sight,
And wrinkles undistinguished pass,

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For I'm ashamed to use a glass;
And till I see them with these eyes,
Whoever says you have them, lies.
No length of time can make you quit
Honour and virtue, sense and wit,
Thus you may still be young to me,
While I can better hear than see:
Oh, ne'er may fortune show her spite,
To make me deaf, and mend my sight.

STELLA'S BIRTHDAY, MARCH 13, 1726.

THIS day, whate'er the Fates decree,
Shall still be kept with joy by me;
This day, then, let us not be told
That you are sick, and I grown old,
Nor think on our approaching ills,
And talk of spectacles and pills;
To-morrow will be time enough
To hear such mortifying stuff.
Yet, since from reason may be brought
A better and more pleasing thought,
Which can, in spite of all decays,
Support a few remaining days:
From not the gravest of divines
Accept for once some serious lines.
Although we now can form no more
Long schemes of life, as heretofore;
Yet you, while time is running fast,
Can look with joy on what is past.
Were future happiness and pain
A mere contrivance of the brain,
As Atheists argue, to entice,
And fit their proselytes for vice
(The only comfort they propose,
To have companions in their woes).
Grant this the case, yet sure 'tis hard
That virtue, styled its own reward,
And by all sages understood
To be the chief of human good,
Should acting, die, or leave behind
Some lasting pleasure in the mind.
Which by remembrance will assuage
Grief, sickness, poverty, and age;
And strongly shoot a radiant dart,
To shine through life's declining part.
Say, Stella, feel you no content,
Reflecting on a life well spent;
Your skilful hand employed to save
Despairing wretches from the grave;
And then supporting with your store,
Those whom you dragged from death before?
So Providence on mortals waits,
Preserving what it first creates,
You generous boldness to defend
An innocent and absent friend;
That courage which can make you just,

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To merit humbled in the dust;
The detestation you express
For vice in all its glittering dress:
That patience under to torturing pain,
Where stubborn stoics would complain.
Must these like empty shadows pass,
Or forms reflected from a glass?
Or mere chimaeras in the mind,
That fly, and leave no marks behind?
Does not the body thrive and grow
By food of twenty years ago?
And, had it not been still supplied,
It must a thousand times have died.
Then, who with reason can maintain
That no effects of food remain?
And, is not virtue in mankind
The nutriment that feeds the mind?
Upheld by each good action past,
And still continued by the last:
Then, who with reason can pretend
That all effects of virtue end?
Believe me, Stella, when you show
That true contempt for things below,
Nor prize your life for other ends
Than merely to oblige your friends,
Your former actions claim their part,
And join to fortify your heart.
For virtue in her daily race,
Like Janus, bears a double face.
Look back with joy where she has gone,
And therefore goes with courage on.
She at your sickly couch will wait,
And guide you to a better state.
O then, whatever heav'n intends,
Take pity on your pitying friends;
Nor let your ills affect your mind,
To fancy they can be unkind;
Me, surely me, you ought to spare,
Who gladly would your sufferings share;
Or give my scrap of life to you,
And think it far beneath your due;
You to whose care so oft I owe
That I'm alive to tell you so.