

**THE MAN FORBID,
AND OTHER ESSAYS**

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The man forbid, and other essays by John Davidson & Edward J. O'Brien

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JOHN DAVIDSON & EDWARD J. O'BRIEN

**THE MAN FORBID,
AND OTHER ESSAYS**

~~Davidson~~

THE MAN FORBID AND OTHER ESSAYS

BY
JOHN DAVIDSON

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
EDWARD J. O'BRIEN



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INTRODUCTION

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CONTENTS

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION	7
THE MAN FORBID	21
PRE-SHAKESPEARIANISM	33
BANDEROLE'S ÆSTHETIC BILL	41
ON WRITING A CAUSERIE	55
THE CRITICISM OF POETRY	65
TÊTE-A-TÊTE	75
A SPIRIT	89
TÊTE-A-TÊTE	99
A WOULD-BE LONDONER	109
THE ART OF POETRY	125
THOUGHTS ON IRONY	138
GEORGE MEREDITH'S ODES	139
EVOLUTION IN LITERATURE	151
TÊTE-A-TÊTE	155
POETRY AND CRITICISM	163
TÊTE-A-TÊTE	169
TÊTE-A-TÊTE	183
CHANCTONBURY RING	195
BY-WAYS	207
PROSE ECLOGUE	219
ON INTERVIEWING	231
ON THE DOWNS	247

INTRODUCTION

JOHN DAVIDSON has given notable work to his generation as a poet, as a novelist, as an essayist, and as a critic. All his literary work comprehends a philosophy of life, and whether or not this philosophy be original or echoed, true or false, the fact remains that it has had a strongly marked, though not always clearly recognised, influence on English letters. If his views of life seem merely the result of mental indigestion brought on by an overdose of Nietzsche, it is likewise true that his forceful expression gave to these views a more serious hearing by a larger audience than had hitherto been granted to most English followers of the Apostle of the *Uebersensch*.

By reason of his doctrines, the facts of his life are interesting, if only for the light they shed on the pathetic though not uncommon contrast between this man's dream and

his deed. For like many more before him he glimpsed the Grail, but only through a mist of error which he lacked the will to disperse. Yet inasmuch as he followed the quest long and faithfully, ere he succumbed to the final weakness, the chronicle of his days is ennobling, and though simple as far as outward happenings were concerned, shows much complexity in the literary product.

John Davidson was born at Barrhead, in Renfrewshire, Scotland, on the eleventh of April, 1857. His father, the Reverend Alexander Davidson, was a minister of the Evangelical Union. The boy's training was hardly academic in the true sense of the word, and was limited to what he was inclined to gather in The Highlanders' Academy in Greenock, where he acted as a sort of pupil-teacher, and in the course of a single session at the University of Edinburgh. Leaving college in 1877, he wrote his first play, now known as "An Unhistorical Pastoral," which, however, was not published until over ten years later. As a boy he had worked as an assistant in a chemical laboratory in Greenock, and later as assistant to the Town Analyst,

and the training which this occupation gave him was utilised to no little advantage in later days when he sought for an apt simile to convey his meaning. Upon leaving the University, he took refuge in teaching, and between 1877 and 1889 he gave instruction in numerous private and charity schools, devoting his leisure to poetic and dramatic composition. In 1890, he came up to London, and eked out a scanty subsistence by writing articles and reviews for the Glasgow Herald and the Speaker, until his poetry began to attract the attention of the literary public. For the next few years his career was that of the successful journalist who elevated his craft by the sheer energy of his effort to a position where it might probably be called inspired. The irony of his life was this. Potentially capable of leadership, he bowed to public opinion and followed the line of least resistance. The immediate success was possibly greater; the ultimate painful outcome is unhappily well-known to everyone. In the latter part of April, 1909, he suddenly disappeared, leaving behind him manuscripts which clearly revealed a suicidal purpose.

Several months later his body was discovered, and to-day the world mourns him as a talented genius whose will-power succumbed to despair.

To turn from John Davidson's life to his work is as if the reader's mind were suddenly to be plunged into an over-stimulating current of mental activity. The effect is pleasant, but it is a shock. No matter what the form of Davidson's expression may be, whether it be prose or poetry, essay or drama, we are brought face to face with a strongly combative intellect which does violence to our beliefs, and half convinces us by sheer force of epigram and paradox. What more shocking mental stimulant can be found than such an interrogation as this, which stands all by itself in "A Rosary." "Is not hope only a more subtle form of despair?" These arresting questions, or statements such as this, "Dignity is impudence," are invariably novel, and their appeal to the reader's intellectual pride is so subtly calculated as to take by storm the position which a more suave and ordered argument would leave intact. By reason of this and other characteristics, John