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My Sister's Sleep

Dante Gabriel Rossetti

She fell asleep on Christmas Eve:
At length, the long-ungranted shade
Of weary eyelids overweighed
The pain naught else might yet relieve.

Our mother, who had leaned all day
Over the bed from chime to chime,
Then raised herself for the first time,
And as she sat her down, did pray.

Her little work-table was spread
With work to finish. For the glare
Made by her candle, she had care
To work some distance from the bed.

Without, there was a cold moon up,
Of winter radiance, sheer and thin;
The hollow halo it was in
Was like an icy crystal cup.

Through the small room, with subtle sound
Of flame, by vents the fire-shine drove
And reddened. In its dim alcove,
The mirror shed a clearness round.

I had been sitting up some nights,
And my tired mind felt weak and blank;
Like a sharp, strengthening wine, it drank
The stillness and the broken lights.

Twelve struck. That sound, by dwindling years
Heard in each hour, crept off; and then
The ruffled silence spread again,
Like water that a pebble stirs.

Our mother rose from where she sat:
Her needles, as she laid them down,
Met lightly, and her silken gown

Settled; no other noise than that.

"Glory unto the Newly Born,"
So as said angels, she did say;
Because we were in Christmas Day,
Though it would still be long till morn.

Just then, in the room over us,
There was a pushing back of chairs,
As someone who had sat unawares
So late now heard the hour and rose.

With anxious, softly-stepping haste,
Our mother went where Margaret lay,
Fearing the sounds overhead—should they
Have broken her long-watched-for rest!

She stooped an instant, calm, and turned;
But suddenly turned back again;
And all her features seemed in pain,
With woe, and her eyes gazed and yearned.

For my part, I but hid my face,
And held my breath, and spoke no word;
There was none spoken, but I heard
The silence for a little space.

Our mother bowed herself and wept;
And both my arms fell, and I said,
"God knows I knew that she was dead,"
And there, all white, my sister slept.

Then kneeling upon Christmas morn,
A little after twelve o'clock,
We said, ere the first quarter struck,
"Christ's blessing on the newly born!"



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