

William E. Aytoun (1813-65)

3 *The Heart of the Bruce*

I.

It was upon an April morn,
While yet the frost lay hoar,
We heard Lord James's bugle-horn
Sound by the rocky shore.

II.

Then down we went, a hundred knights, 5
All in our dark array,
And flung our armour in the ships
That rode within the bay.

III.

We spoke not as the shore grew less,
But gazed in silence back, 10
Where the long billows swept away
The foam behind our track.

IV.

And aye the purple hues decayed
Upon the fading hill,
And but one heart in all that ship 15
Was tranquil, cold, and still.

V.

The good Lord Douglas paced the deck—
Oh, but his face was wan!
Unlike the flush it used to wear
When in the battle-van.— 20

VI.

“Come hither, I pray, my trusty knight,
Sir Simon of the Lee;
There is a freit lies near my soul
I needs must tell to thee.

VII.

“Thou know’st the words King Robert spoke 25
Upon his dying day:
How he bade me take his noble heart
And carry it far away;

VIII.

“And lay it in the holy soil
Where once the Saviour trod, 30
Since he might not bear the blessed Cross,
Nor strike one blow for God.

IX.

“Last night as in my bed I lay,
I dreamed a dreary dream:—
Methought I saw a Pilgrim stand 35
In the moonlight’s quivering beam.

X.

“His robe was of the azure dye—
Snow-white his scattered hairs—
And even such a cross he bore
As good Saint Andrew bears. 40

XI.

“Why go ye forth, Lord James,’ he said,
‘With spear and belted brand?
Why do you take its dearest pledge
From this our Scottish land?

XII.

“The sultry breeze of Galilee 45

Creeps through its groves of palm
The olives on the Holy Mount
Stand glittering in the calm.

XIII.

“But ’tis not there that Scotland’s heart
Shall rest, by God’s decree, 50
Till the great angel calls the dead
To rise from earth and sea!

XIV.

“Lord James of Douglas, mark my rede!
That heart shall pass once more
In fiery fight against the foe, 55
As it was wont of yore.

XV.

“And it shall pass beneath the Cross,
And save King Robert’s vow;
But other hands shall bear it back,
Not, James of Douglas, thou!” 60

XVI.

“Now, by thy knightly faith, I pray,
Sir Simon of the Lee—
For truer friend had never man
Than thou hast been to me—

XVII.

“If ne’er upon the Holy Land 65
’Tis mine in life to tread,
Bear thou to Scotland’s kindly earth
The relics of her dead.”

XVIII.

The tear was in Sir Simon’s eye
As he wrung the warrior’s hand— 70

“Betide me weal, betide me woe,
I’ll hold by thy command.

XIX.

“But if in battle-front, Lord James,
’Tis ours once more to ride,
Nor force of man, nor craft of fiend, 75
Shall cleave me from thy side!”

XX.

And aye we sailed, and aye we sailed,
Across the weary sea,
Until one morn the coast of Spain
Rose grimly on our lee. 80

XXI.

And as we rounded to the port,
Beneath the watch-tower’s wall,
We heard the clash of the atabals,
And the trumpet’s wavering call.

XXII.

“Why sounds yon Eastern music here 85
So wantonly and long,
And whose the crowd of armèd men
That round yon standard throng?”

XXIII.

“The Moors have come from Africa
To spoil, and waste, and slay, 90
And King Alonzo of Castile
Must fight with them to-day.”

XXIV.

“Now shame it were,” cried good Lord James,
“Shall never be said of me,
That I and mine have turned aside 95

From the Cross in jeopardie!

XXV.

“Have down, have down, my merry men all—
Have down unto the plain;
We’ll let the Scottish lion loose
Within the fields of Spain!” 100

XXVI.

“Now welcome to me, noble lord,
Thou and thy stalwart power;
Dear is the sight of a Christian knight,
Who comes in such an hour!

XXVII.

“Is it for bond or faith you come, 105
Or yet for golden fee?
Or bring ye France’s lilies here,
Or the flower of Burgundie?”

XXVIII.

“God greet thee well, thou valiant king,
Thee and thy belted peers— 110
Sir James of Douglas am I called,
And these are Scottish spears.

XXIX.

“We do not fight for bond or plight,
Nor yet for golden fee;
But for the sake of our blessed Lord, 115
Who died upon the tree.

XXX.

“We bring our great King Robert’s heart
Across the weltering wave,
To lay it in the holy soil
Hard by the Saviour’s grave. 120

XXXI.

“True pilgrims we, by land or sea,
Where danger bars the way;
And therefore are we here, Lord King,
To ride with thee this day!”

XXXII.

The King has bent his stately head, 125
And the tears were in his eyne—
“God’s blessing on thee, noble knight,
For this brave thought of thine!

XXXIII.

“I know thy name full well, Lord James;
And honoured may I be, 130
That those who fought beside the Bruce
Should fight this day for me!

XXXIV.

“Take thou the leading of the van,
And charge the Moors amain;
There is not such a lance as thine 135
In all the host of Spain!”

XXXV.

The Douglas turned towards us then,
Oh, but his glance was high!
“There is not one of all my men
But is as frank as I. 140

XXXVI.

“There is not one of all my knights
But bears as true a spear—
Then—onwards, Scottish gentlemen,
And think, King Robert’s here!”

XXXVII.

The trumpets blew, the cross-bolts flew, 145
The arrows flashed like flame,
As, spur in side, and spear in rest,
Against the foe we came.

XXXVIII.

And many a bearded Saracen
Went down, both horse and man; 150
For through their ranks we rode like corn,
So furiously we ran!

XXXIX.

But in behind our path they closed,
Though fain to let us through;
For they were forty thousand men, 155
And we were wondrous few.

XL.

We might not see a lance's length,
So dense was their array,
But the long fell sweep of the Scottish blade
Still held them hard at bay. 160

XLI.

"Make in! make in!" Lord Douglas cried—
"Make in, my brethren dear!
Sir William of St Clair is down;
We may not leave him here!"

XLII.

But thicker, thicker grew the swarm, 165
And sharper shot the rain;
And the horses reared amid the press,
But they would not charge again.

XLIII.

“Now Jesu help thee,” said Lord James,
“Thou kind and true St Clair! 170
An’ if I may not bring thee off,
I’ll die beside thee there!”

XLIV.

Then in his stirrups up he stood,
So lion-like and bold,
And held the precious heart aloft 175
All in its case of gold.

XLV.

He flung it from him far ahead,
And never spake he more,
But—“Pass thee first, thou dauntless heart,
As thou wert wont of yore!” 180

XLVI.

The roar of fight rose fiercer yet,
And heavier still the stour,
Till the spears of Spain came shivering in,
And swept away the Moor.

XLVII.

“Now praised be God, the day is won! 185
They fly o’er flood and fell—
Why dost thou draw the rein so hard,
Good knight, that fought so well?”

XLVIII.

“Oh, ride ye on, Lord King!” he said,
“And leave the dead to me; 190
For I must keep the dreariest watch
That ever I shall dree!

XLIX.

“There lies above his master’s heart,

The Douglas, stark and grim;
And woe, that I am living man, 195
Not lying there by him!

L.

“The world grows cold, my arm is old,
And thin my lyart hair,
And all that I loved best on earth
Is stretched before me there. 200

LI.

“O Bothwell banks, that bloom so bright
Beneath the sun of May!
The heaviest cloud that ever blew
Is bound for you this day.

LII.

“And, Scotland, thou may’st veil thy head 205
In sorrow and in pain:
The sorest stroke upon thy brow
Hath fallen this day in Spain!

LIII.

“We’ll bear them back unto our ship,
We’ll bear them o’er the sea, 210
And lay them in the hallowed earth,
Within our own countrie.

LIV.

“And be thou strong of heart, Lord King,
For this I tell thee sure,
The sod that drank the Douglas’ blood 215
Shall never bear the Moor!”

LV.

The King he lighted from his horse,
He flung his brand away,

And took the Douglas by the hand,
So stately as he lay. 220

LVI.

“God give thee rest, thou valiant soul!
That fought so well for Spain;
I’d rather half my land were gone,
So thou wert here again!”

LVII.

We lifted thence the good Lord James, 225
And the priceless heart he bore;
And heavily we steered our ship
Towards the Scottish shore.

LVIII.

No welcome greeted our return,
Nor clang of martial tread, 230
But all were dumb and hushed as death,
Before the mighty dead.

LIX.

We laid our chief in Douglas Kirk,
The heart in fair Melrose;
And woeful men were we that day— 235
God grant their souls repose!

1849

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