

John Davidson (1857-1909)

1 *A Ballad of a Coward*

The trumpets pealed; the echoes sang
A tossing fugue; before it died,
Again the rending trumpets rang,
Again the phantom notes replied.

In galleries, on straining roofs, 5
At once ten thousand tongues were hushed,
When down the lists a storm of hoofs
From either border thundering rushed.

A knight whose arms were chased and set
With gold and gems, in fear withdrew 10
Before the fronts of tourney met,
Before the spears in splinters flew.

He reached the wilds. He cast away
His lance and shield and arms of price;
He turned his charger loose, and lay 15
Face-downwards in his cowardice.

His wife had seen the recreant fly:
She followed, found, and called his name.
'Sweetheart, I will not have you die:
My love,' she said, 'can heal your shame.' 20

Not long his vanity withstood
Her gentleness. He left his soul
To her; and her solicitude,
He being a coward, made him whole.

Yet was he blessed in heart and head; 25
 Forgiving; of his riches free;
Wise was he too, and deeply read,
 And ruled his earldom righteously.

A war broke out. With fateful speed
 The foe, eluding watch and ward, 30
Conquered; and none was left to lead
 The land, save this faint-hearted lord.

'Here is no shallow tournament,
 No soulless, artificial fight.
Courageously, in deep content, 35
 I go to combat for the right.'

The hosts encountered: trumpets spoke;
 Drums called aloud; the air was torn
With cannon, light by stifling smoke
 Estopped, and shrieking battle born. 40

But he?—he was not in the van!
 The vision of his child and wife?
Even that deserted him. He ran—
 The coward ran to save his life.

The lowliest men would sooner face 45
 A thousand dreadful deaths, than come
Before their loved ones in disgrace;
 Yet this sad coward hurried home:

For, as he fled, his cunning heart
 Declared he might be happy yet 50
In some retreat where Love and Art
 Should swathe his soul against regret.

'My wife! my son! For their dear sakes.'
He thought, 'I save myself by flight.'—
He reached his place. 'What comet shakes 55
Its baleful tresses on the night

'Above my towers?' Alas, the foe
Had been before with sword and fire!
His loved ones in their blood lay low:
Their dwelling was their funeral pyre. 60

Then he betook him to a hill
Which in his happy times had been
His silent friend, meaning to kill
Himself upon its bosom green.

But an old mood at every tread 65
Returned; and with assured device
The wretched coward's cunning head
Distilled it into cowardice.

'A snowy owl on silent wings
Sweeps by; and, ah! I know the tune 70
The wayward night-wind sweetly sings
And dreaming birds in coverts croon.

'The cocks their muffled catches crow;
The river ripples dark and bright;
I hear the pastured oxen low, 75
And the whole rumour of the night.

'The moon comes from the wind-swept hearth
Of heaven; the stars beside her soar;
The seas and harvests of the earth
About her shadowy footsteps pour. 80

'But though remembrances, all wet
With happy tears, their tendrils coil
Close round my heart; though I be set
And rooted in the ruddy soil,

'My pulses with the planets leap; 85
The veil is rent before my face;
My aching nerves are mortised deep
In furthest cavities of space;

'Through the pervading ether speed
My thoughts that now the stars rehearse; 90
And should I take my life, the deed
Would disarray the universe.'

Gross cowardice! Hope, while we breathe,
Can make the meanest prize his breath,
And still with starry garlands wreath 95
The nakedness of life and death.

He wandered vaguely for a while;
Then thought at last to hide his shame
And self-contempt far in an isle
Among the outer deeps; but came, 100

Even there, upon a seaboard dim,
Where like the slowly ebbing tide
That weltered on the ocean's rim
With sanguine hues of sunset dyed,

The war still lingered. Suddenly, 105
Ere he could run, the bloody foam
Of battle burst about him; he,
Scarce knowing what he did, struck home,

As those he helped began to fly,
 Bidding him follow. 'Nay,' he said; 110
'Nay; I die fighting—even I!'
 And happy and amazed fell dead.

1896

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