

John Davidson (1857-1909)

10 *A Runnable Stag*

When the pods went pop on the broom, green broom,  
And apples began to be golden-skinned,  
We harboured a stag in the Priory coomb,  
And we feathered his trail up-wind, up-wind,  
We feathered his trail up-wind- 5  
A stag of warrant, a stag, a stag,  
A runnable stag, a kingly crop,  
Brow, bay and tray and three on top,  
A stag, a runnable stag.

Then the huntsman' s horn rang yap, yap, yap, 10  
And 'Forwards' we heard the harbourer shout;  
But 'twas only a brocket that broke a gap  
In the beechen underwood, driven out,  
From the underwood antlered out  
By warrant and might of the stag, the stag, 15  
The runnable stag, whose lordly mind  
Was bent on sleep, though beamed and tined  
He stood, a runnable stag.

So we tufted the covert till afternoon  
With Tinkerman' s Pup and Bell-of-the-North; 20  
And hunters were sulky and hounds out of tune  
Before we tufted the right stag forth,  
Before we tufted him forth,  
The stag of warrant, the wily stag,  
The runnable stag with his kingly crop, 25  
Brow, bay and tray and three on top,  
The royal and runnable stag.

It was Bell-of-the-North and Tinkerman' s Pup  
That stuck to the scent till the copse was drawn.  
'Tally ho! tally ho!' and the hunt was up, 30  
The tufters whipped and the pack laid on,  
The resolute pack laid on,

And the stag of warrant away at last,  
 The runnable stag, the same, the same,  
 His hoofs on fire, his horns like flame, 35  
 A stag, a runnable stag.

‘Let your gelding be: if you check or chide  
 He stumbles at once and you’ re out of the hunt;  
 For three hundred gentlemen, able to ride,  
 On hunters accustomed to bear the brunt, 40  
 Accustomed to bear the brunt,  
 Are after the runnable stag, the stag,  
 The runnable stag with his kingly crop,  
 Brow, bay and tray and three on top,  
 The right, the runnable stag.’ 45

By perilous path in coomb and dell,  
 The heather, the rocks, and the river-bed,  
 The pace grew hot, for the scent lay well,  
 And a runnable stag goes right ahead,  
 The quarry went right ahead- 50  
 Ahead, ahead, and fast and far;  
 His antlered crest, his cloven hoof,  
 Brow, bay and tray and three aloof,  
 The stag, the runnable stag.

For a matter of twenty miles and more, 55  
 By the densest hedge and the highest wall,  
 Through herds of bullocks he baffled the lore  
 Of harbourer, huntsman, hounds and all,  
 Of harbourer hounds and all-  
 The stag of warrant, the wily stag, 60  
 For twenty miles, and five and five,  
 He ran, and he never was caught alive,  
 This stag, this runnable stag.

When he turned at bay in the leafy gloom,  
 In the emerald gloom where the brook ran deep, 65  
 He heard in the distance the rollers boom,  
 And he saw in a vision of peaceful sleep,  
 In a wonderful vision of sleep,  
 A stag of warrant, a stag, a stag,

A runnable stag in a jewelled bed, 70  
Under the sheltering ocean dead,  
A stag, a runnable stag.

So a fateful hope lit up his eye,  
And he opened his nostrils wide again,  
And he tossed his branching antlers high 75  
As he headed the hunt down the Charlock glen,  
As he raced down the echoing glen  
For five miles more, the stag, the stag,  
For twenty miles, and five and five,  
Not to be caught now, dead or alive, 80  
The stag, the runnable stag.

Three hundred gentlemen, able to ride,  
Three hundred horses as gallant and free,  
Beheld him escape on the evening tide,  
Far out till he sank in the Severn Sea, 85  
Till he sank in the depths of the sea—  
The stag, the buoyant stag, the stag  
That slept at last in a jewelled bed  
Under the sheltering ocean spread,  
The stag, the runnable stag. 90

*1905*

(From *The Poems of John Davidson*. 2 vols. Ed. Andrew  
Turnbull. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic P, 1973)