

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



