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,	10
Before the spears in splinters flew.	
Before the spears in spiniters from.	
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
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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 an array and an ailant wings	
'A snowy owl on silent wings	70
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 wreathe	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;

'Nay; I die fighting—even I!'

And happy and amazed fell dead.

1896

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