

George MacDonald (1824-1905)

1 *Abu Midjan*

“If I sit in the dust  
For lauding good wine,  
Ha, ha! it is just:  
So sits the vine!”

Abu Midjan sang as he sat in chains, 5  
For the blood of the grape ran the juice of his veins.  
The Prophet had said, “O Faithful, drink not!”  
Abu Midjan drank till his heart was hot;  
Yea, he sang a song in praise of wine,  
He called it good names — a joy divine, 10  
The giver of might, the opener of eyes,  
Love’s handmaid, the water of Paradise!  
Therefore Saad his chief spake words of blame,  
And set him in irons — a fettered flame;  
But he sings of the wine as he sits in his chains, 15  
For the blood of the grape runs the juice of his veins:

“I will not think  
That the Prophet said  
*Ye shall not drink*  
*Of the flowing red!* 20

“’Tis a drenched brain  
Whose after-sting  
Cries out, *Refrain:*  
*’Tis an evil thing!*

“But I will dare, 25  
With a goodly drought,  
To drink, nor spare  
Till my thirst be out.

“I do not laugh  
Like a Christian fool 30  
But in silence quaff  
The liquor cool

“At door of tent  
    ’Neath evening star,  
With daylight spent, 35  
    And Uriel afar!

“Then, through the sky,  
    Lo, the emerald hills!  
My faith swells high,  
    My bosom thrills: 40

“I see them hearken,  
    The Houris that wait!  
Their dark eyes darken  
    The diamond gate!

“I hear the float 45  
    Of their chant divine,  
And my heart like a boat  
    Sails thither on wine!

“Can an evil thing 50  
    Make beauty more?  
Or a sinner bring  
    To the heavenly door?

“The sun-rain fine 55  
    Would sink and escape,  
But is drunk by the vine,  
    Is stored in the grape;

“And the prisoned light  
    I free again:  
It flows in might  
    Through my shining brain: 60

“I love and I know;  
    The truth is mine;  
I walk in the glow  
    Of the sun-bred wine.

“I will not think 65

That the Prophet said  
*Ye shall not drink*  
*Of the flowing red!*

“For his promises, lo,  
Sevenfold they shine 70  
When the channels o’erflow  
With the singing wine!

“But I care not, I! — ’tis a small annoy  
To sit in chains for a heavenly joy!”

Away went the song on the light wind borne; 75  
His head sank down, and a ripple of scorn  
Shook the hair that flowed from his curling lip  
As he eyed his brown limbs in the iron’s grip.

Sudden his forehead he lifted high:  
A faint sound strayed like a moth-wing by! 80  
Like beacons his eyes burst blazing forth:  
A dust-cloud he spied in the distant north!  
A noise and a smoke on the plain afar?  
’Tis the cloud and the clang of the Moslem war!  
He leapt aloft like a tiger snared; 85  
The wine in his veins through his visage flared;  
He tore at his fetters in bootless ire,  
He called the Prophet, he named his sire;  
From his lips, with wild shout, the Tecbir burst;  
He danced in his irons; the Giaours he cursed; 90  
And his eyes they flamed like a beacon dun,  
Or like wine in the crystal twixt eye and sun.

The lady of Saad heard him shout,  
Heard his fetters ring on the stones about  
The heart of a warrior she understood, 95  
And the rage of the thwarted battle-mood:  
Her name, with the cry of an angry prayer,  
He called but once, and the lady was there.

“The Giaour!” he panted, “the Godless brute!  
And me like a camel tied foot to foot! 100  
Let me go, and I swear by Allah’s fear

At sunset I don again this gear,  
Or lie in a heaven of starry eyes,  
Kissed by moon-maidens of Paradise!  
O lady, grant me the death of the just! 105  
Hark to the hurtle! see the dust!”

With ready fingers the noble dame  
Unlocked her husband’s iron blame;  
Brought his second horse, his Abdon, out,  
And his second hauberk, light and stout; 110  
Harnessed the warrior, and hight him go  
An angel of vengeance upon the foe.

With clank of steel and thud of hoof  
Away he galloped; she climbed the roof.

She sees the cloud and the flashes that leap 115  
From the scythe-shaped swords inside it that sweep  
Down with back-stroke the disordered swath:  
Thither he speeds, a bolt of wrath!  
Straight as an arrow she sees him go,  
Abu Midjan, the singer, upon the foe! 120  
Like an eagle he vanishes in the cloud,  
And the thunder of battle bursts more loud,  
Mingled of crashes and blows and falls,  
Of the wish that severs the throat that calls,  
Of neighing and shouting and groaning grim: 125  
Abu Midjan, she sees no more of him!  
Northward the battle drifts afar  
On the flowing tide of the holy war.

Lonely across the desert sand,  
From his wrist by its thong hung his clotted brand, 130  
Red in the sunset’s level flame  
Back to his bonds Abu Midjan came.

“Lady, I swear your Saad’s horse —  
The Prophet himself might have rode a worse!  
Like the knots of a serpent the play of his flesh 135  
As he tore to the quarry in Allah’s mesh!  
I forgot him, and mowed at the traitor weeds,  
Which fell before me like rushes and reeds,

Or like the tall poppies that sudden drop low  
Their heads to an urchin's unstrung bow! 140  
Fled the Giaour; the faithful flew after to kill;  
I turned to surrender: breath me still  
Was Abdon unjaded, fresh in force,  
Faithful and fearless — a heavenly horse!  
Give him water, lady, and barley to eat; 145  
Then haste thee and fetter the wine-bibber's feet.”

To the terrace he went, and she to the stall;  
She tended the horse like guest in hall,  
Then to the warrior unhasting returned.  
The fire of the fight in his eyes yet burned, 150  
But he sat in a silence that might betoken  
One ashamed that his heart had spoken —  
Though where was the word to breed remorse?  
He had lauded only his chief's brave horse!  
Not a word she spoke, but his fetters locked; 155  
He watched with a smile that himself bemocked;  
She left him seated in caitiff-plaint,  
Like one that had feared and fled the fight.

But what singer ever sat lonely long  
Ere the hidden fountain burst in song! 160  
The battle wine foamed in the warrior's veins,  
And he sang sword-tempest who sat in chains.

“Oh, the wine  
Of the vine  
Is a feeble thing! 165  
In the rattle  
Of battle  
The true grapes spring!

“When on whir  
Of Tecbir 170  
Allah's wrath flies,  
And the power  
Of the Giaour  
A blasted leaf lies!

“When on force 175

Of the horse  
The arm flung abroad  
Is sweeping,  
And reaping  
The harvest of God! 180

“Ha! they drop  
From the top  
To the sear heap below!  
Ha! deeper,  
Down steeper, 185  
The infidels go!

“Azrael  
Sheer to hell  
Shoots the foul shoals!  
There Monker 190  
And Nakir  
Torture their souls!

“But when drop  
On their crop  
The scimitars red, 195  
And under  
War’s thunder  
The faithful lie dead,

“Oh, bright  
Is the light 200  
On hero slow breaking!  
Rapturous faces  
Bent for embraces  
Watch for his waking!

“And he hears 205  
In his ears  
The voice of Life’s river,  
Like a song  
Of the strong,  
Jubilant ever! 210

“Oh, the wine

Of the vine  
    May lead to the gates,  
But the rattle  
Of battle 215  
    Wakes the angel who waits!

“To the lord  
Of the sword  
    Open it must!  
The drinker, 220  
The thinker  
    Sits in the dust!

“He dreams  
Of the gleams  
    Of their garments of white; 225  
He misses  
Their kisses,  
    The maidens of light!

“They long  
For the strong 230  
    Who has burst through alarms —  
Up, by the labour  
Of stirrup and sabre,  
    Up to their arms!

“Oh, the wine of the grape is a feeble ghost! 235  
The wine of the fight is the joy of a host!”

When Saad came home from the far pursuit,  
An hour he sat, and an hour was mute.  
Then he opened his mouth: “Ah, wife, the fight  
Had been lost full sure, but an arm of might 240  
Sudden rose up on the crest of the battle,  
Flashed blue lightnings, thundered steel rattle,  
Took up the fighting, and drove it on —  
Enoch sure, or the good Saint John!  
Wherever he leaped, like a lion he, 245  
The battle was thickest, or soon to be!  
Wherever he sprang with his lion roar,  
In a minute the battle was there no more!

With a headlong fear, the sinners fled,  
And we swept them down the steep of the dead: 250  
Before us, not from us, did they flee,  
They ceased in the depths of a new Red Sea!  
But him who saved us we saw no more;  
He went as he came, by a secret door!  
And strangest of all — nor think I err 255  
If a miracle I for truth aver —  
I was close to him thrice — the holy Force  
Wore my silver-ringed hauberk, rode Abdon my horse!”

The lady rose up, withholding her word,  
And led to the terrace her wondering lord, 260  
Where, song-soothed, and weary with battle strain,  
Abu Midjan sat counting the links of his chain:  
“The battle was raging, he raging worse;  
I freed him, harnessed him, gave him thy horse.”

“Abu Midjan! the singer of love and of wine! 265  
The arm of the battle, it also was thine?  
Rise up, shake the irons from off thy feet:  
For the lord of the fight are fetters meet?  
If thou wilt, then drink till thou be hoar:  
Allah shall judge thee; I judge no more!” 270

Abu Midjan arose; he flung aside  
The clanking fetters, and thus he cried:  
“If thou give me to God and his decrees,  
Nor purge my sin with the shame of these,  
Wrath against me I dare not store: 275  
In the name of Allah, I drink no more!”

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