

John Davidson (1857-1909)

12 *Thomas the Rhymer*

Home from the wedding of the king
The earl rode late and soon.
A wizard' s strain sang in his brain;
And in the afternoon
He met the wizard by the sea— 5
Thomas of Ercildoune.

'And this,' said then the scornful earl,
'This is your stormiest day!
The clouds that drift across the lift
Are soft and silver-grey; 10
One sail, too near to be a bird,
Glides o' er to Norrway.

'A blush is on the weather-gleam,
The sun sinks low and lower;
The gloaming fills the cup he spills, 15
The faint moon bending o' er
The sleepy waves, reluctant, poised,
Drop peacefully ashore.'

The elfin lord of Ercildoune,
That weary wizard, said: 20
'Tell me, I pray, what chanced that day
The King of Scots was wed.
An uninvited bridal guest,
They say, came from the dead.'

'They truly tell. The king led forth 25
His bride to head the dance;

And in her mood fair maidenhood
Had summoned every lance
Of nameless, gracious witchery,
Of matchless smile and glance, 30

‘For one last conquest of mankind.
A shout rang to the roof;
Each star-bright eye shone eagerly
To weave the viewless woof
Of airy motion through the warp 35
Of music. Swift reproof

‘Fell on us; for a soundless wind
Blew purple every light;
The dancing ceased; the dancers clasped
Each other’s hands; each knight 40
Before his trembling lady stood,
Blanched, breathless, at the sight.

‘An odour, chill, sepulchral, spread,
And lo, a skeleton!
A creaking stack of bones as black 45
As peat! It seemed to con
Each face with yawning eyeless holes,
And in a breath ’twas gone.’

Three times aloud laughed Ercildoune,
He laughed a woeful laugh. 50
‘A sign!’ he cried. ‘Say not I lied
Till night-fall.’ With his staff
He wrought grotesquely in the air,
Then said: ‘Our land must quaff

‘The bitterest potion nations drink; 55
This token is the last.

Recall, my lord, the weltering horde
Of loathly worms that passed
Northward, and like a filthy sponge
Wiped greenness off as fast 60

‘As west winds wash the snow; that orb
That shook its spear of awe
Beside the brand Orion’ s hand
Is still in act to draw,
A hideous star—these eyes of mine 65
Its glare at noonday saw;

‘The floods that swamped flocks, fields, and towns,
While men in throngs were slain;
Earthquakes that took the land and shook
The meads beneath the main— 70
Shells gleamed by drenched flowers, tangle clung
Like snakes about the grain:

‘Herewith strange fire from heaven fell,
Mayhap for priestly crimes,
On abbeyes fair; the hinds still stare, 75
And mutter saving rhymes,
At belfries in fantastic heaps
Resoldered by their chimes.

‘I rede these signs to mean a storm:
That storm shall break to-day.’ 80
With face on flame a rider came.
‘It’ s herald, by my fay!’
The Rhymer said, and sudden swept
His robe and beard away.

Said then the panting messenger 85
‘The King of Scots is dead!’

The earl grew white. 'The King! —Alight.'

But he rode on ahead.

'The heir' s a baby over seas:

In truth are we stormstead!

90

1891

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