

John Davidson (1857-1909)

9 *A Ballad of Tannhäuser*

‘What hardy, tattered wretch is that
Who on our Synod dares intrude?’
Pope Urban with his council sat,
And near the door Tannhäuser stood.

His eye with light unearthly gleamed; 5
His yellow hair hung round his head
In elf locks lusterless: he seemed
Like one new-risen from the dead.

‘Hear me, most Holy Father, tell
The tale that burns my soul within. 10
I stagger on the brink of hell;
No voice but yours can shrive my sin.’

‘Speak, sinner.’ ‘From my father’s house
Lightly I stepped in haste for fame;
And hoped by deeds adventurous 15
High on the world to carve my name.

‘At early dawn I took my way;
My heart with peals of gladness rang;
Nor could I leave the woods all day,
Because the birds so sweetly sang. 20

‘But when the happy birds had gone
To rest, and night with panic fears
And blushes deep came stealing on,
Another music thrilled my ears.

'I heard the evening wind serene, 25
 And all the wandering waters sing
The deep delight the day had been,
 The deep delight the night would bring.

'I heard the wayward earth express
 In one long-drawn melodious sigh 30
The rapture of the sun's caress,
 The passion of the brooding sky.

'The air, a harp of myriad chords,
 Intently murmured overhead;
My heart grew great with unsung words: 35
 I followed where the music led.

'It led me to a mountain-chain,
 Wherein athwart the deepening gloom,
High-hung above the wooded plain,
 Appeared a summit like a tomb. 40

'Aloft a giddy pathway wound
 That brought me to a darksome cave:
I heard, undaunted, underground
 Wild winds and wilder voices rave,

'And plunged into that stormy world. 45
 Cold hands assailed me impotent
In the gross darkness; serpents curled
 About my limbs; but on I went.

'The wild winds buffeted my face;
 The wilder voices shrieked despair; 50
A stealthy step with mine kept pace,
 And subtle terror steeped the air.

‘But the sweet sound that throbbd on high
Had left the upper world; and still
A cry rang in my heart—a cry! 55
For lo, far in the hollow hill,

‘The dulcet melody withdrawn
Kept welling through the fierce uproar.
As I have seen the molten dawn
Across a swarthy tempest pour, 60

‘So suddenly the magic note,
Transformed to light, a glittering brand,
Out of the storm and darkness smote
A peaceful sky, a dewy land.

‘I scarce could breathe, I might not stir, 65
The while there came across the lea,
With singing maidens after her,
A woman wonderful to see.

‘Her face—her face was strong and sweet;
Her looks were loving prophecies; 70
She kissed my brow: I kissed her feet—
A woman wonderful to kiss.

‘She took me to a place apart
Where eglantine and roses wove
A bower, and gave me all her heart— 75
A woman wonderful to love.

‘As I lay worshipping my bride,
While rose leaves in her bosom fell,
And dreams came sailing on a tide
Of sleep, I heard a matin bell. 80

'It beat my soul as with a rod
Tingling with horror of my sin;
I thought of Christ, I thought of God,
And of the fame I meant to win.

'I rose; I ran; nor looked behind; 85
The doleful voices shrieked despair
In tones that pierced the crashing wind;
And subtle terror warped the air.

'About my limbs the serpents curled;
The stealthy step with mine kept pace; 90
But soon I reached the upper world:
I sought a priest; I prayed for grace.

'He said, "Sad sinner, do you know
What fiend this is, the baleful cause
Of your dismay?" I loved her so 95
I never asked her what she was.

He said, "Perhaps not God above
Can pardon such unheard-of ill:
It was the pagan Queen of Love
Who lured you to her haunted hill! 100

' "Each hour you spent with her was more
Than a full year! Only the Pope
Can tell what heaven may have in store
For one who seems past help and hope."

'Forthwith I took the way to Rome: 105
I scarcely slept; I scarcely ate:
And hither quaking am I come,
But resolute to know my fate.

'My heart amasses as I run
The depth of heaven's sapphire flower;
The resolute, enduring sun
Fulfils my soul with splendid power. 165

'I quiver with divine desire;
I clasp the stars; my thoughts immerse 170
Themselves in space; like fire in fire
I melt into the universe.

'For I am running to my love:
The eager roses burn below;
Orion wheels his sword above, 175
To guard the way God bids me go.'

At dusk he reached the mountain chain,
Wherein athwart the deepening gloom,
High hung above the wooded plain
The Hörselberg rose like a tomb. 180

He plunged into the under-world;
Cold hands assailed him impotent
In the gross darkness; serpents curled
About his limbs; but on he went.

The wild winds buffeted his face; 185
The wilder voices shrieked despair;
A stealthy step with his kept pace;
And subtle terror steeped the air.

But once again the magic note,
Transformed to light, a glittering brand, 190
Out of the storm and darkness smote
A peaceful sky, a dewy land.

And once again he might not stir,
The while there came across the lea
With singing maidens after her 195
The Queen of Love so fair to see.

Her happy face was strong and sweet;
Her looks were loving prophecies;
She kissed his brow; he kissed her feet—
He kissed the ground her feet did kiss. 200

She took him to a place apart
Where eglantine and roses wove
A bower, and gave him all her heart—
The Queen of Love, the Queen of Love.

As he lay worshipping his bride 205
While rose-leaves in her bosom fell,
And dreams came sailing on a tide
Of sleep, he heard a matin-bell.

‘Hark! Let us leave the magic hill,’
He said, ‘And live on earth with men.’ 210
‘No; here,’ she said, ‘we stay, until
The Golden Age shall come again.’

And so they wait, while empires sprung
Of hatred thunder past above,
Deep in the earth for ever young 215
Tannhäuser and the Queen of Love.

1896

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