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, And all the wandering waters sing	25
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 throbbed on high Had left the upper world; and still A cry rang in my heart–a cry! For lo, far in the hollow hill,	55
'The dulcet melody withdrawn Kept welling through the fierce uproar.	
As I have seen the molten dawn	00
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.	
¹I scarce could breathe, I might not stir, The while there came across the lea,With singing maidens after her, A woman wonderful to see.	65
'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— A woman wonderful to love.	75
'As I lay worshipping my bride,	
While rose leaves in her bosom fell,	
And dreams came sailing on a tide	0.0
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.	

'Most Holy Father, save my soul! Ah God! again I hear the chime, Sweeter than liquid bells that toll Across a lake at vesper time	110
 'Her eyelids droop I hear her sigh The roseleaves fall She falls asleep The cry rings in my blood—the cry That surges from the deepest deep. 	115
'No man was ever tempted so!— I say not this in my defence Help, Father, help! or I must go! The dulcet music draws me hence!'	120
He knelt—he fell upon his face. Pope Urban said, 'The eternal cost Of guilt like yours eternal grace Dare not remit: your soul is lost.	
'When this dead staff I carry grows Again and blossoms, heavenly light May shine on you.' Tannhäuser rose; And all at once his face grew bright.	125
He saw the emerald leaves unfold, The emerald blossoms break and glance; They watched him, wondering to behold The rapture of his countenance.	130
The undivined, eternal God Looked on him from the highest heaven, And showed him by the budding rod There was no need to be forgiven.	135

He heard melodious voices call	
Across the world, an elfin shout;	
And when he left the council-hall,	
It seemed a great light had gone out.	140
With anxious heart, with troubled brow,	
The Synod turned upon the Pope.	
They saw; they cried, 'A living bough,	
A miracle, a pledge of hope!'	
And Urban trembling saw: 'God's way	145
Is not as man's,' he said. 'Alack!	
Forgive me, gracious heaven, this day	
My sin of pride. Go, bring him back.'	
But swift as thought Tannhäuser fled,	
And was not found. He scarcely slept;	150
He scarcely ate; for overhead	
The ceaseless, dulcet music kept	
Wafting him on. And evermore	
The foliate staff he saw at Rome	
Pointed the way; and the winds bore	155
Sweet voices whispering him to come.	
The air, a world-enfolding flood	
Of liquid music poured along;	
And the wild cry within his blood	
Became at last a golden song.	160
'All day,' he sang—'I feel all day	
The earth dilate beneath my feet;	
l hear in fancy far away	
The tidal heart of ocean beat.	

'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 Themselves in space; like fire in fire I melt into the universe.	170
'For I am running to my love: The eager roses burn below; Orion wheels his sword above, To guard the way God bids me go.'	175
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; The wilder voices shrieked despair; A stealthy step with his kept pace; And subtle terror steeped the air.	185
But once again the magic note, Transformed to light, a glittering brand, Out of the storm and darkness smote A peaceful sky, a dewy land.	190

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