

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
 Make beauty more? 50
Or a sinner bring
 To the heavenly door?

“The sun-rain fine
 Would sink and escape,
But is drunk by the vine, 55
 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 95
The heart of a warrior she understood,
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!”

1893

(From *The Poetical Works of George MacDonald*. Vol. 2.
London: Chatto & Windus, 1893)