

The Song of the Good Man by **Gottfried August Bürger (1748 – 1794)**

The song of the good man wafts on high
Like a mighty organ resounding and church bells rung.
He whose courage no man can deny
Deserves not gold but his praises sung.
Thank God! that his song takes wing
And that I the good man my praises can sing.

At midday the warm thawing wind moved in from the sea,
And through Italy, wet and overcast it did sweep.
The frightened clouds were forced to flee,
As when a wolf scares away the timid sheep.
It raged through the fields; through the woods it ploughed;
The ice of frozen lakes and streams bursting loud.

In the Alps the snow began to melt;
A thousand cascading waterfalls roared;
Now a lake covered the valley where once the cattle grazing dwelt;
Across the land the waters rose and poured;
Along its course the wind surged uncontrolled,
And with it giant blocks of ice rolled.

On heavy arches and piers,
Fitted from top to bottom with hewn square stone,
A toll bridge was built here;
And on it in the very center a small toll house stood alone.
There the bridge keeper lived with his child and wife.
“Dear man! Dear man! Flee if you would save your life!”

A muffled rumbling sound gave proof
That howling wind and storm e'er nearer came.
The toll man climbed up onto his roof,
And gazed upon the raging elements both helpless and lame.
“Oh merciful Heavens, I do beg thee!
We are lost! Lost! Who can save my family?”

The landslide rolled with a deafening roar —
From both banks, from each side,
From both banks, the torrent tore.
Then both piers and arches were swept away by the tide.
For the toll man, with wife and child, their fate was clear;
Louder than the torrent and wind he cried out in fear.

Behold! This way a simple farmer came;
 Walking to the fore, he carried his cane;
 Clad in a homespun jacket to protect his frame.
 His stature tall, his face without blame,
 He listened to the count and his words he weighed,
 And saw the family in dire need of aid.

And in the name of God, his deed to perform,
 He boldly jumped into a fishing boat close by;
 Undaunted by the howling wind and raging storm,
 Unscathed the deliverer looked the elements in the eye:
 But alas! the boat was too small
 To save them all.

And three times his small boat the torrent did ply,
 Undaunted by the howling wind and raging storm;
 Unscathed three times the deliverer looked the elements in the eye,
 Until all three to the saving shore were borne.
 Hardly had they safely arrived on high ground,
 When the last ruins of the toll bridge rolled away with a deafening
 sound.

Who is, who is this man so bold?
 Tell me, tell me, my song so fine!
 Was it for a bag of gold
 That he laid his life on the line?
 If the count did not offer his bag of gold,
 Perhaps the farmer's courage would not unfold.

“Here, my courageous friend!” the lord did yell,
 “Here is your reward! Let me place it in your hand!
 Tell me, did His Lordship not mean well?
 By God! the count was a high-minded man.
 Yet nobler and more celestial, truly! was the farmer's heart blessed,
 A simple farmer in his coarse jacket dressed.

“My life cannot with gold be bought.
 Poor I may be, but I've enough to eat.
 Let the gold to the family be brought,
 Who the storm of their possessions did cheat!”
 Thus did he speak, in a hearty, upright voice,
 And turned to leave, for this was his choice.

You, the song of the good man, waft on high,
 Like a mighty organ resounding and church bells rung!
 He whose courage no man can deny
 Deserves not gold but his praises sung.
 Thank God! that his immortal song takes wing
 When I the good man my praises sing.

Translated by Norman Barry, August 2007