

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.

The landslide rolled with a deafening roar —
 At both ends, both here and there,
 One pier after the other burst and was seen no more,
 As if vanished into thin air.
 Soon the center pier was due to fall.
 “Merciful Heavens! Have mercy upon us all!”

High above the opposite bank there stands
 A crowd of onlookers, both young and old;
 And scream as they would and wring their hands,
 Yet to rescue the family, not one is so bold.
 The voice of the toll man, with wife and child,
 Pierces the storming elements begging for mercy mild.

When will you ring out – oh song of the man so good,
 Like a mighty organ resounding and church bells rung.
 Go ahead! Tell us his name! It’s time you should!
 Oh song sublime, when shall that name be sung?
 The collapse of the center pier is very near.
 Oh good man! Oh man so good! Appear!

Suddenly, mounted on a steed so fair,
 A noble count gallops onto the scene.
 What does His Lordship hold high in the air?
 A pouch, bulging and full, not to be o’erseen.
 “Two hundred pieces of gold I donate
 To the man who saves them before it is too late.”

Who is the good man? Is it the lord?
 The answer, my song, reveal, unearth!
 The count – by God! – was respected and adored!
 But I know a man of yet greater worth!
 Oh good man, oh man so good! Appear!
 Doom is already so terribly near.

And ever higher the waters did rise;
 And ever louder the winds did rage;
 And ever more rapid the spirits’ demise.
 Oh deliverer! Oh savior! Come onto the stage!
 Pier upon pier did burst and break.
 The arches cracked and fell, and the earth did shake.

Answer me this: who will accept the risk to save a man,
 his child and wife?
 The count held the prize up high.
 Every man heard his words, but not one man risked his life.
 From thousands there was not a single one upon whom he could rely.
 In vain, the voice of the toll man, with wife and child,
 Pierces the storming elements begging for mercy mild.

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