

Mary Howitt (1799-1888)

3 *An Old Man's Story*

There was an old and quiet man,
And by the fire sate he;
"And now," he said, "to you I'll tell
A dismal thing, which once befell
Upon the Southern Sea. 5

"T is five and fifty years gone by,
Since, from the river Plate,
A young man, in a home-bound ship,
I sailed as second mate.

"She was a trim stout-timbered ship, 10
And built for stormy seas;
A lovely thing on the wave was she,
With her canvass set so gallantly
Before a steady breeze.

"For forty days, like a winged thing, 15
She went before the gale;
Nor all that time we slackened speed,
Turned helm, or shifted sail.

"She was a laden argosy,
With gold from the Spanish Main, 20
And the treasure-hoards of a Portuguese
Returning home again.

"An old and silent man was he,
His face was yellow and lean;
In the golden lands of Mexico 25
A miner he had been.

"His body was wasted, bent, and bowed,
And 'mid his gold he lay,
'Mid iron chests bound round with brass,

And he watched them night and day. 30

“No word he spoke to any on board,
His step was heavy and slow;
And all men deemed that an evil life
He had led in Mexico.

“But list ye me! On the lone high seas 35
As we went smoothly on,
It chanced, in the silent second watch,
As I sate on the deck alone,
That I heard from ’mong those iron chests
A sound like a dying groan. 40

“I started to my feet, and lo!
The captain stood by me;
He bore a body in his arms,
And dropped it in the sea.

“I heard it drop into the sea, 45
With a heavy splashing sound;
I saw the captain’s bloody hands
As quickly he turned round.
He drew in his breath when me he saw,
Like one whom the sudden withering awe 50
Of a spectre doth astound:

“But I saw his white and palsied lips,
And the stare of his wild eye,
As he turned in hurried haste away,
Yet had no power to fly; 55
He was chained to the deck by his heavy guilt,
And the blood that was not dry.

“‘T was a cursèd thing,’ said I, ‘to kill
That old man in his sleep.
The curse of blood will come from him 60
Ten thousand fathoms deep.

“‘The plagues of the sea will follow us,
For Heaven his groans hath heard.’

The captain's white lips slowly moved,
And yet he spoke no word. 65

“And slowly he lifted his bloody hands,
As if his eyes to shade;
But the blood that was wet did freeze his soul,
And he shrieked like one afraid.

“And even then, that very hour, 70
The wind dropped; and a spell
Was on the ship, was on the sea;
And we lay for weeks, how wearily!
Where the old man's body fell.

“I told no one within the ship 75
That horrid deed of sin;
For I saw the hand of God at work,
And punishment begin.

“And, when they spoke of the murdered man
And the El-Dorado hoard, 80
They all surmised he had walked in dreams,
And fallen overboard.

“But I alone, and the murderer,
That dreadful thing did know,
How he lay in his sin, a murdered man, 85
A thousand fathoms low.

“And many days, and many more,
Came on, and lagging sped;
And the heavy waves of the sleeping sea
Were dark, like molten lead. 90

“But not a breeze came east or west,
And burning was the sky,
And stifling was each breath we drew;
The air was hot and dry.

“Oh me! a very smell of death 95
Hung round us night and day;

Nor dared I look into the sea,
Where the old man's body lay.

"The captain in his cabin kept,
And bolted fast the door; 100
The seamen, they walked up and down,
And wished the calm was o'er.

"The captain's son was on board with us,
A fair child, seven years old,
With a merry face that all men loved, 105
And a spirit kind and bold.

"I loved the child; and I took his hand
And made him kneel, and pray
That the crime for which the calm was sent
Might clean be purged away. 110

"For I thought that God would hear his prayer,
And set the vessel free:
'T was a dreadful curse, to lie becalmed
Upon that charnel sea.

"Yet I told him not wherefore he prayed, 115
Nor why the calm was sent;
I could not give that knowledge dark
To a soul so innocent.

"At length I saw a little cloud
Rise in that sky of flame, 120
A little cloud, that grew and grew,
And blackened as it came.

"We saw the sea beneath its track
Grow dark as was the sky;
And waterspouts, with rushing sound, 125
Like giants passed us by.

"And all around, 'twixt sky and sea,
A hollow wind did blow;
The sullen waves swung heavily;

The ship rocked to and fro. 130

“I knew it was that fierce death-calm
Its horrid hold undoing;
I saw the plagues of wind and storm
Their missioned work pursuing.

“There was a yell in the gathering winds, 135
A groan in the heaving sea:
The captain rushed from his place below,
But durst not look on me.

“He seized each rope with a madman’s haste,
And set the helm to go, 140
And every sail he crowded on
As the furious winds did blow.

“Away they went, like autumn leaves
Before the tempest’s rout;
The naked masts came crashing down, 145
The wild ship plunged about.

“The men to spars and splintered boards
Clung, till their strength was gone;
And I saw them from their feeble hold
Washed over, one by one; 150

“And ’mid the creaking timber’s din,
And the roaring of the sea,
I heard the dismal, drowning cries
Of their last agony.

“There was a curse in the wind that blew, 155
A curse in the boiling wave;
And the captain knew that vengeance came
From the old man’s ocean-grave.

“I heard him say, as he sate apart,
In a hollow voice and low, 160
“T is a cry of blood doth follow us,
And still doth plague us so!’

“And then those heavy iron chests
With desperate strength took he,
And ten of the strongest mariners 165
Did cast them into the sea.

“And out from the bottom of the sea
There came a hollow groan; —
The captain by the gunwale stood,
And looked like icy stone, 170
With a gasping sob he drew in his breath,
And spasms of death came on.

“And a furious boiling wave rose up,
With a rushing thundering roar;
I saw him fall before its force, 175
But I never saw him more.

“Two days before, when the storm began,
We were forty men and five,
But ere the middle of that night
There were but two alive — 180

“The child and I: we were but two;
And he clung to me in fear.
Oh! it was pitiful to see
That meek child in his misery,
And his little prayers to hear. 185

“At length, as if his prayers were heard,
’T was calmer; and anon
The clear sun shone; and, warm and low,
A steady wind from the west did blow,
And drove us gently on. 190

“And on we drove, and on we drove,
That fair young child and I;
His heart was as a man’s in strength,
And he uttered not a cry.

“There was no bread within the wreck, 195

And water we had none,
Yet he murmured not, and talked of hope,
When my last hopes were gone:
I saw him waste and waste away,
And his rosy cheek grow wan. 200

“Still on we drove, I know not where,
For many nights and days,
We were too weak to raise a sail,
Had there been one to raise.

“Still on we went, as the west wind drove, 205
On, o’er the pathless tide;
And I lay in sleep, ’twixt life and death,
With the young child at my side.

“And, as we thus were drifting on
Amid the Great South Sea, 210
An English vessel passed us by
That was sailing cheerily.
Unheard by me that vessel hailed,
And asked what we might be.

“The young child at the cheer rose up, 215
And gave an answering word;
And they drew him from the drifting wreck,
As light as is a bird.

“They took him gently in their arms,
And put again to sea: — 220
‘Not yet! not yet!’ he feebly cried;
‘There was a man with me!’

“Again unto the wreck they turned,
Where, like one dead, I lay;
And a ship-boy small had strength enough 225
To carry me away.

“Oh! joy it was, when sense returned,
That fair warm ship to see,
And to hear the child within his bed

Speak pleasant words to me! 230

“I thought at first that we had died;
That all our pain was o’er,
And in a blessed ship of Heaven
We voyaged to its shore:

“But they were human forms that knelt 235
Beside our bed to pray,
And men with hearts most merciful
That watched us night and day.

“T was a dismal tale I had to tell 240
Of wreck and wild distress;
But, even then, I told to none
The captain’s wickedness.

“For I loved the boy, and could not cloud
His soul with sense of shame;
’T were an evil thing, thought I, to blast 245
A sinless orphan’s name!
So he grew to be a man of wealth
And honourable fame.

“And in after years, when he had ships,
I sailed with him the sea, 250
And in all the sorrows of my life
He was a friend to me;
And God hath blessed him everywhere
With a great prosperity.”

1847

(From *Ballads and Other Poems*. London, 1847)