

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-82)

11 *The White Ship*

HENRY I. OF ENGLAND. — 25TH NOVEMBER 1120.

By none but me can the tale be told,
The butcher of Rouen, poor Berold.

(Lands are swayed by a King on a throne.)

'Twas a royal train put forth to sea,
Yet the tale can be told by none but me.

5

(The sea hath no King but God alone.)

King Henry held it as life's whole gain
That after his death his son should reign.

'Twas so in my youth I heard men say,
And my old age calls it back to-day.

10

King Henry of England's realm was he,
And Henry Duke of Normandy.

The times had changed when on either coast
"Clerkly Harry" was all his boast.

Of ruthless strokes full many an one
He had struck to crown himself and his son;
And his elder brother's eyes were gone.

15

And when to the chase his court would crowd,
The poor flung ploughshares on his road,
And shrieked: "Our cry is from King to God!"

20

But all the chiefs of the English land
Had knelt and kissed the Prince's hand.

And next with his son he sailed to France

To claim the Norman allegiance

And every baron in Normandy 25
Had taken the oath of fealty.

'Twas sworn and sealed, and the day had come
When the King and the Prince might journey home.

For Christmas cheer is to home hearts dear,
And Christmas now was drawing near. 30

Stout Fitz-Stephen came to the King,—
A pilot famous in seafaring;

And he held to the King, in all men's sight,
A mark of gold for his tribute's right.

“Liege Lord! my father guided the ship 35
From whose boat your father's foot did slip
When he caught the English soil in his grip,

“And cried: ‘By this clasp I claim command
O'er every rood of English land!’

“He was borne to the realm you rule o'er now 40
In that ship with the archer carved at her prow:

“And thither I'll bear, an it be my due,
Your father's son and his grandson too.

“The famed White Ship is mine in the bay,
From Harfleur's harbour she sails to-day, 45

“With masts fair-pennoned as Norman spears
And with fifty well-tried mariners.”

Quoth the King: “My ships are chosen each one,
But I'll not say nay to Stephen's son.

“My son and daughter and fellowship
Shall cross the water in the White Ship.” 50

The King set sail with the eve’s south wind,
And soon he left that coast behind.

The Prince and all his, a princely show,
Remained in the good White Ship to go. 55

With noble knights and with ladies fair,
With courtiers and sailors gathered there,
Three hundred living souls we were:

And I Berold was the meanest hind
In all that train to the Prince assign’d. 60

The Prince was a lawless shameless youth;
From his father’s loins he sprang without ruth:

Eighteen years till then he had seen,
And the devil’s dues in him were eighteen.

And now he cried: “Bring wine from below;
Let the sailors revel ere yet they row: 65

“Our speed shall o’ertake my father’s flight
Though we sail from the harbour at midnight.”

The rowers made good cheer without check;
The lords and ladies obeyed his beck; 70
The night was light, and they danced on the deck.

But at midnight’s stroke they cleared the bay,
And the White Ship furrowed the water-way.

The sails were set, and the oars kept tune
To the double flight of the ship and the moon: 75

Swifter and swifter the White Ship sped
Till she flew as the spirit flies from the dead:

As white as a lily glimmered she
Like a ship's fair ghost upon the sea.

And the Prince cried, "Friends, 'tis the hour to sing! 80
Is a songbird's course so swift on the wing?"

And under the winter stars' still throng,
From brown throats, white throats, merry and strong,
The knights and the ladies raised a song.

A song,—nay, a shriek that rent the sky, 85
That leaped o'er the deep!—the grievous cry
Of three hundred living that now must die.

An instant shriek that sprang to the shock
As the ship's keel felt the sunken rock.

'Tis said that afar—a shrill strange sigh— 90
The King's ships heard it and knew not why.

Pale Fitz-Stephen stood by the helm
'Mid all those folk that the waves must whelm.

A great King's heir for the waves to whelm,
And the helpless pilot pale at the helm! 95

The ship was eager and sucked athirst,
By the stealthy stab of the sharp reef pierc'd:

And like the moil round a sinking cup
The waters against her crowded up.

A moment the pilot's senses spin,— 100
The next he snatched the Prince 'mid the din,

Cut the boat loose, and the youth leaped in.

A few friends leaped with him, standing near.
“Row! the sea’s smooth and the night is clear!”

“What! none to be saved but these and I?” 105
“Row, row as you’d live! All here must die!”

Out of the churn of the choking ship,
Which the gulf grapples and the waves strip,
They struck with the strained oars’ flash and dip.

’Twas then o’er the splitting bulwarks’ brim 110
The Prince’s sister screamed to him.

He gazed aloft, still rowing apace,
And through the whirled surf he knew her face.

To the toppling decks clave one and all 115
As a fly cleaves to a chamber-wall.

I Berold was clinging anear;
I prayed for myself and quaked with fear,
But I saw his eyes as he looked at her.

He knew her face and he heard her cry,
And he said, “Put back! she must not die!” 120

And back with the current’s force they reel
Like a leaf that’s drawn to a water-wheel.

’Neath the ship’s travail they scarce might float,
But he rose and stood in the rocking boat.

Low the poor ship leaned on the tide: 125
O’er the naked keel as she best might slide,
The sister toiled to the brother’s side.

He reached an oar to her from below,
And stiffened his arms to clutch her so.

But now from the ship some spied the boat, 130
And "Saved!" was the cry from many a throat.

And down to the boat they leaped and fell:
It turned as a bucket turns in a well,
And nothing was there but the surge and swell.

The Prince that was and the King to come, 135
There in an instant gone to his doom,

Despite of all England's bended knee
And maugre the Norman fealty!

He was a Prince of lust and pride;
He showed no grace till the hour he died. 140

When he should be King, he oft would vow,
He'd yoke the peasant to his own plough.
O'er him the ships score their furrows now.

God only knows where his soul did wake,
But I saw him die for his sister's sake. 145

By none but me can the tale be told,
The butcher of Rouen, poor Berold.

(Lands are swayed by a King on a throne.)
'Twas a royal train put forth to sea,
Yet the tale can be told by none but me. 150
(The sea hath no King but God alone.)

And now the end came o'er the waters' womb
Like the last great Day that's yet to come.

With prayers in vain and curses in vain,
The White Ship sundered on the mid-main: 155

And what were men and what was a ship
Were toys and splinters in the sea's grip.

I Berold was down in the sea;
And passing strange though the thing may be,
Of dreams then known I remember me. 160

Blithe is the shout on Harfleur's strand
When morning lights the sails to land:

And blithe is Honfleur's echoing gloam
When mothers call the children home:

And high do the bells of Rouen beat 165
When the Body of Christ goes down the street.

These things and the like were heard and shown
In a moment's trance 'neath the sea alone;

And when I rose, 'twas the sea did seem,
And not these things, to be all a dream. 170

The ship was gone and the crowd was gone,
And the deep shuddered and the moon shone,

And in a strait grasp my arms did span
The mainyard rent from the mast where it ran;
And on it with me was another man. 175

Where lands were none 'neath the dim sea-sky,
We told our names, that man and I.

"O I am Godefroy de l'Aigle hight,
And son I am to a belted knight."

"And I am Berold the butcher's son 180
Who slays the beasts in Rouen town."

Then cried we upon God's name, as we
Did drift on the bitter winter sea.

But lo! a third man rose o'er the wave,
And we said, "Thank God! us three may He save!" 185

He clutched to the yard with panting stare,
And we looked and knew Fitz-Stephen there.

He clung, and "What of the Prince?" quoth he.
"Lost, lost!" we cried. He cried, "Woe on me!"
And loosed his hold and sank through the sea. 190

And soul with soul again in that space
We two were together face to face:

And each knew each, as the moments sped,
Less for one living than for one dead:

And every still star overhead 195
Seemed an eye that knew we were but dead.

And the hours passed; till the noble's son
Sighed, "God be thy help! my strength's foredone!

"O farewell, friend, for I can no more!"
"Christ take thee!" I moaned; and his life was o'er. 200

Three hundred souls were all lost but one,
And I drifted over the sea alone.

At last the morning rose on the sea
Like an angel's wing that beat tow'rds me.

Sore numbed I was in my sheepskin coat; 205
Half dead I hung, and might nothing note,
Till I woke sun-warmed in a fisher-boat.

The sun was high o'er the eastern brim
As I praised God and gave thanks to Him.

That day I told my tale to a priest, 210
Who charged me, till the shrift were releas'd,
That I should keep it in mine own breast.

And with the priest I thence did fare
To King Henry's court at Winchester.

We spoke with the King's high chamberlain, 215
And he wept and mourned again and again,
As if his own son had been slain:

And round us ever there crowded fast
Great men with faces all aghast:

And who so bold that might tell the thing 220
Which now they knew to their lord the King?
Much woe I learnt in their communing.

The King had watched with a heart sore stirred
For two whole days, and this was the third:

And still to all his court would he say, 225
"What keeps my son so long away?"

And they said: "The ports lie far and wide
That skirt the swell of the English tide;

"And England's cliffs are not more white
Than her women are, and scarce so light 230
Her skies as their eyes are blue and bright;

"And in some port that he reached from France
The Prince has lingered for his pleasure."

But once the King asked: "What distant cry
Was that we heard 'twixt the sea and sky?" 235

And one said: "With suchlike shouts, pardie!
Do the fishers fling their nets at sea."

And one: "Who knows not the shrieking quest
When the sea-mew misses its young from the nest?"

'Twas thus till now they had soothed his dread, 240
Albeit they knew not what they said:

But who should speak to-day of the thing
That all knew there except the King?

Then pondering much they found a way,
And met round the King's high seat that day: 245

And the King sat with a heart sore stirred,
And seldom he spoke and seldom heard.

'Twas then through the hall the King was 'ware
Of a little boy with golden hair,

As bright as the golden poppy is 250
That the beach breeds for the surf to kiss:

Yet pale his cheek as the thorn in Spring,
And his garb black like the raven's wing.

Nothing heard but his foot through the hall,
For now the lords were silent all. 255

And the King wondered, and said, "Alack!
Who sends me a fair boy dressed in black?"

"Why, sweet heart, do you pace through the hall
As though my court were a funeral?"

Then lowly knelt the child at the dais, 260
And looked up weeping in the King's face.

"O wherefore black, O King, ye may say,
For white is the hue of death to-day.

"Your son and all his fellowship
Lie low in the sea with the White Ship." 265

King Henry fell as a man struck dead;
And speechless still he stared from his bed
When to him next day my rede I read.

There's many an hour must needs beguile
A King's high heart that he should smile,— 270

Full many a lordly hour, full fain
Of his realm's rule and pride of his reign:—

But this King never smiled again.

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