

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-82)

4 *The King's Tragedy*

I Catherine am a Douglas born,
A name to all Scots dear;
And Kate Barlass they've called me now
Through many a waning year.

This old arm's withered now. 'Twas once 5
Most deft 'mong maidens all
To rein the steed, to wing the shaft,
To smite the palm-play ball.

In hall adown the close-linked dance 10
It has shone most white and fair;
It has been the rest for a true lord's head,
And many a sweet babe's nursing-bed,
And the bar to a King's chambère.

Aye, lasses, draw round Kate Barlass, 15
And hark with bated breath
How good King James, King Robert's son,
Was foully done to death.

Through all the days of his gallant youth
The princely James was pent, 20
By his friends at first and then by his foes,
In long imprisonment.

For the elder Prince, the kingdom's heir,
By treason's murderous brood
Was slain; and the father quaked for the child 25
With the royal mortal blood.

I' the Bass Rock fort, by his father's care,
Was his childhood's life assured;
And Henry the subtle Bolingbroke,
Proud England's King, 'neath the southron yoke
His youth for long years immured. 30

Yet in all things meet for a kingly man
Himself did he approve;
And the nightingale through his prison-wall
Taught him both lore and love.

For once, when the bird's song drew him close 35
To the opened window-pane,
In her bower beneath a lady stood,
A light of life to his sorrowful mood,
Like a lily amid the rain.

And for her sake, to the sweet bird's note, 40
He framed a sweeter Song,
More sweet than ever a poet's heart
Gave yet to the English tongue.

She was a lady of royal blood;
And when, past sorrow and teen, 45
He stood where still through his crownless years
His Scottish realm had been,
At Scone were the happy lovers crowned,
A heart-wed King and Queen.

But the bird may fall from the bough of youth, 50
And song be turned to moan,
And Love's storm-cloud be the shadow of Hate,
When the tempest-waves of a troubled State
Are beating against a throne.

Yet well they loved; and the god of Love, 55
Whom well the King had sung,

Might find on the earth no truer hearts
His lowliest swains among.

From the days when first she rode abroad
With Scottish maids in her train, 60
I Catherine Douglas won the trust
Of my mistress sweet Queen Jane.

And oft she sighed, "To be born a King!"
And oft along the way
When she saw the homely lovers pass 65
She has said, "Alack the day!"

Years waned,—the loving and toiling years:
Till England's wrong renewed
Drove James, by outrage cast on his crown,
To the open field of feud. 70

'Twas when the King and his host were met
At the leaguer of Roxbro' hold,
The Queen o' the sudden sought his camp
With a tale of dread to be told.

And she showed him a secret letter writ 75
That spoke of treasonous strife,
And how a band of his noblest lords
Were sworn to take his life.

"And it may be here or it may be there,
In the camp or the court," she said: 80
"But for my sake come to your people's arms
And guard your royal head."

Quoth he, "'Tis the fifteenth day of the siege,
And the castle's nigh to yield."
"O face your foes on your throne," she cried, 85
"And show the power you wield;

And under your Scottish poople's love
You shall sit as under your shield."

At the fair Queen's side I stood that day
When he bade them raise the siege, 90
And back to his Court he sped to know
How the lords would meet their Liege.

But when he summoned his Parliament,
The louring brows hung round,
Like clouds that circle the mountain-head 95
Ere the first low thunders sound.

For he had tamed the nobles' lust
And curbed their power and pride,
And reached out an arm to right the poor
Through Scotland far and wide; 100
And many a lordly wrong-doer
By the headsman's axe had died.

'Twas then upspoke Sir Robert Græme,
The bold o'ermastering man:—
"O King, in the name of your Three Estates 105
I set you under their ban!

"For, as your lords made oath to you
Of service and fealty,
Even in like wise you pledged your oath
Their faithful sire to be:— 110

"Yet all we here that are nobly sprung
Have mourned dear kith and kin
Since first for the Scottish Barons' curse
Did your bloody rule begin."

With that he laid his hands on his King:— 115
"Is this not so, my lords?"

But of all who had sworn to league with him
Not one spake back to his words.

Quoth the King:—"Thou speak'st but for one Estate,
Nor doth it avow thy gage. 120
Let my liege lords hale this traitor hence!"
The Græme fired dark with rage:—
"Who works for lesser men than himself,
He earns but a witless wage!"

But soon from the dungeon where he lay 125
He won by privy plots,
And forth he fled with a price on his head
To the country of the Wild Scots.

And word there came from Sir Robert Græme
To the King at Edinbro':— 130
"No Liege of mine thou art; but I see
From this day forth alone in thee
God's creature, my mortal foe.

"Through thee are my wife and children lost,
My heritage and lands; 135
And when my God shall show me a way,
Thyself my mortal foe will I slay
With these my proper hands."

Against the coming of Christmastide
That year the King bade call 140
I' the Black Friars' Charterhouse of Perth
A solemn festival.

And we of his household rode with him
In a close-ranked company;
But not till the sun had sunk from his throne 145
Did we reach the Scottish Sea.

And that shape for thine I knew.

“A year again, and on Inchkeith Isle
I saw thee pass in the breeze, 180
With the cerecloth risen above thy feet
And wound about thy knees.

“And yet a year, in the Links of Forth,
As a wanderer without rest,
Thou cam’st with both thine arms i’ the shroud 185
That clung high up thy breast.

“And in this hour I find thee here,
And well mine eyes may note
That the winding-sheet hath passed thy breast
And risen around thy throat. 190

“And when I meet thee again, O King,
That of death hast such sore drouth,—
Except thou turn again on this shore,—
The winding-sheet shall have moved once more
And covered thine eyes and mouth. 195

“O King, whom poor men bless for their King,
Of thy fate be not so fain;
But these my words for God’s message take,
And turn thy steed, O King, for her sake
Who rides beside thy rein!” 200

While the woman spoke, the King’s horse reared
As if it would breast the sea,
And the Queen turned pale as she heard on the gale
The voice die dolorously.

When the woman ceased, the steed was still, 205
But the King gazed on her yet,
And in silence save for the wail of the sea

His eyes and her eyes met.

At last he said:—"God's ways are His own;
Man is but shadow and dust. 210
Last night I prayed by His altar-stone;
To-night I wend to the Feast of His Son;
And in Him I set my trust.

"I have held my people in sacred charge,
And have not feared the sting 215
Of proud men's hate,—to His will resign'd
Who has but one same death for a hind
And one same death for a King.

"And if God in His wisdom have brought close
The day when I must die, 220
That day by water or fire or air
My feet shall fall in the destined snare
Wherever my road may lie.

"What man can say but the Fiend hath set
Thy sorcery on my path, 225
My heart with the fear of death to fill,
And turn me against God's very will
To sink in His burning wrath?"

The woman stood as the train rode past,
And moved nor limb nor eye; 230
And when we were shipped, we saw her there
Still standing against the sky.

As the ship made way, the moon once more
Sank slow in her rising pall;
And I thought of the shrouded wraith of the King, 235
And I said, "The Heavens know all."

And now, ye lasses, must ye hear

How my name is Kate Barlass:—
But a little thing, when all the tale
Is told of the weary mass 240
Of crime and woe which in Scotland's realm
God's will let come to pass.

'Twas in the Charterhouse of Perth
That the King and all his Court
Were met, the Christmas Feast being done, 245
For solace and disport.

'Twas a wind-wild eve in February,
And against the casement-pane
The branches smote like summoning hands,
And muttered the driving rain. 250

And when the wind swooped over the lift
And made the whole heaven frown,
It seemed a grip was laid on the walls
To tug the housetop down.

And the Queen was there, more stately fair 255
Than a lily in garden set;
And the King was loth to stir from her side;
For as on the day when she was his bride,
Even so he loved her yet.

And the Earl of Athole, the King's false friend, 260
Sat with him at the board;
And Robert Stuart the chamberlain
Who had sold his sovereign Lord.

Yet the traitor Christopher Chaumber there
Would fain have told him all, 265
And vainly four times that night he strove
To reach the King through the hall.

But I knew her heavy thought,
And I strove to find in the good King's jest
What cheer might thence be wrought. 300

And I said, "My Liege, for the Queen's dear love
Now sing the song that of old
You made, when a captive Prince you lay,
And the nightingale sang sweet on the spray,
In Windsor's castle-hold." 305

Then he smiled the smile I knew so well
When he thought to please the Queen;
The smile which under all bitter frowns
Of fate that rose between
For ever dwelt at the poet's heart 310
Like the bird of love unseen.

And he kissed her hand and took his harp,
And the music sweetly rang;
And when the song burst forth, it seemed
'Twas the nightingale that sang. 315

*"Worship, ye lovers, on this May:
Of bliss your kalends are begun:
Sing with us, Away, Winter, away!
Come, Summer, the sweet season and sun!
Awake for shame,—your heaven is won,— 320
And amorously your heads lift all:
Thank Love, that you to his grace doth call!"*

But when he bent to the Queen, and sang
The speech whose praise was hers,
It seemed his voice was the voice of the Spring 325
And the voice of the bygone years.

*"The fairest and the freshest flower
That ever I saw before that hour,*

The which o' the sudden made to start
The blood of my body to my heart. 330

* * * * *

Ah sweet, are ye a worldly creature
Or heavenly thing in form of nature?"

And the song was long, and richly stored
 With wonder and beauteous things;
And the harp was tuned to every change 335
 Of minstrel ministerings;
But when he spoke of the Queen at the last,
 Its strings were his own heart-strings.

"Unworthy but only of her grace,
 Upon Love's rock that's easy and sure, 340
In guerdon of all my lovè's space
 She took me her humble creäture.
 Thus fell my blissful aventure
In youth of love that from day to day
Flowereth aye new, and further I say. 345

"To reckon all the circumstance
 As it happed when lessen gan my sore,
Of my rancour and woful chance,
 It were too long,—I have done therefor.
 And of this flower I say no more, 350
But unto my help her heart hath tended
And even from death her man defended."

"Aye, even from death," to myself I said;
 For I thought of the day when she
Had borne him the news, at Roxbro' siege, 355
 Of the fell confederacy.

But Death even then took aim as he sang
 With an arrow deadly bright;
And the grinning skull lurked grimly aloof,

And the wings were spread far over the roof 360
More dark than the winter night.

Yet truly along the amorous song
Of Love's high pomp and state,
There were words of Fortune's trackless doom
And the dreadful face of Fate. 365

And oft have I heard again in dreams
The voice of dire appeal
In which the King then sang of the pit
That is under Fortune's wheel.

*"And under the wheel beheld I there 370
An ugly Pit as deep as hell,
That to behold I quaked for fear:
And this I heard, that who therein fell
Came no more up, tidings to tell:
Whereat, astound of the fearful sight, 375
I wist not what to do for fright."*

And oft has my thought called up again
These words of the changeful song:—
*"Wist thou thy pain and thy travail
To come, well might'st thou weep and wail!" 380*
And our wail, O God! is long.

But the song's end was all of his love;
And well his heart was grac'd
With her smiling lips and her tear-bright eyes
As his arm went round her waist. 385

And on the swell of her long fair throat
Close clung the necklet-chain
As he bent her pearl-tir'd head aside,
And in the warmth of his love and pride
He kissed her lips full fain. 390

And her true face was a rosy red,
The very red of the rose
That, couched on the happy garden-bed,
In the summer sunlight glows.

And all the wondrous things of love 395
That sang so sweet through the song
Were in the look that met in their eyes,
And the look was deep and long.

'Twas then a knock came at the outer gate,
And the usher sought the King. 400
“The woman you met by the Scottish Sea,
My Liege, would tell you a thing;
And she says that her present need for speech
Will bear no gainsaying.”

And the King said: “The hour is lat 405
To-morrow will serve, I ween.”
Then he charged the usher strictly, and said:
“No word of this to the Queen.”

But the usher came again to the King.
“Shall I call her back?” quoth he: 410
“For as she went on her way, she cried,
‘Woe! Woe! then the thing must be!’”

And the King paused, but he did not speak.
Then he called for the Voidee-cup:
And as we heard the twelfth hour strike, 415
There by true lips and false lips alike
Was the draught of trust drained up.

So with reverence meet to King and Queen,
To bed went all from the board;
And the last to leave of the courtly train 420

Was Robert Stuart the chamberlain
Who had sold his sovereign lord.

And all the locks of the chamber-door
Had the traitor riven and brast;
And that Fate might win sure way from afar, 425
He had drawn out every bolt and bar
That made the entrance fast.

And now at midnight he stole his way
To the moat of the outer wall,
And laid strong hurdles closely across 430
Where the traitors' tread should fall.

But we that were the Queen's bower-maids
Alone were left behind;
And with heed we drew the curtains close
Against the winter wind. 435

And now that all was still through the hall,
More clearly we heard the rain
That clamoured ever against the glass
And the boughs that beat on the pane.

But the fire was bright in the ingle-nook, 440
And through empty space around
The shadows cast on the arras'd wall
'Mid the pictured kings stood sudden and tall
Like spectres sprung from the ground.

And the bed was dight in a deep alcove; 445
And as he stood by the fire
The King was still in talk with the Queen
While he doffed his goodly attire.

And the song had brought the image back
Of many a bygone year; 450

And many a loving word they said
With hand in hand and head laid to head;
And none of us went anear.

But Love was weeping outside the house,
A child in the piteous rain; 455
And as he watched the arrow of Death,
He wailed for his own shafts close in the sheath
That never should fly again.

And now beneath the window arose
A wild voice suddenly: 460
And the King reared straight, but the Queen fell back
As for bitter dule to dree;
And all of us knew the woman's voice
Who spoke by the Scottish Sea.

“O King,” she cried, “in an evil hour 465
They drove me from thy gate;
And yet my voice must rise to thine ears;
But alas! it comes too late!

‘Last night at mid-watch, by Aberdour,
When the moon was dead in the skies, 470
O King, in a death-light of thine own
I saw thy shape arise.

“And in full season, as erst I said,
The doom had gained its growth;
And the shroud had risen above thy neck 475
And covered thine eyes and mouth.

“And no moon woke, but the pale dawn broke,
And still thy soul stood there;
And I thought its silence cried to my soul
As the first rays crowned its hair. 480

“Since then have I journeyed fast and fain
In very despite of Fate,
Lest Hope might still be found in God’s will:
But they drove me from thy gate.

“For every man on God’s ground, O King, 485
His death grows up from his birth
In a shadow-plant perpetually;
And thine towers high, a black yew-tree,
O’er the Charterhouse of Perth!”

That room was built far out from the house; 490
And none but we in the room
Might hear the voice that rose beneath,
Nor the tread of the coming doom.

For now there came a torchlight-glare,
And a clang of arms there came; 495
And not a soul in that space but thought
Of the foe Sir Robert Græme.

Yea, from the country of the Wild Scots,
O’er mountain, valley, and glen,
He had brought with him in murderous league 500
Three hundred armèd men.

The King knew all in an instant’s flash;
And like a King did he stand;
But there was no armour in all the room,
Nor weapon lay to his hand. 505

And all we women flew to the door
And thought to have made it fast;
But the bolts were gone and the bars were gone
And the locks were riven and brast.

And he caught the pale pale Queen in his arms 510

As the iron footsteps fell,—
Then loosed her, standing alone, and said,
“Our bliss was our farewell!”

And 'twixt his lips he murmured a prayer,
And he crossed his brow and breast; 515
And proudly in royal hardihood
Even so with folded arms he stood,—
The prize of the bloody quest.

Then on me leaped the Queen like a deer:—
“O Catherine, help!” she cried. 520
And low at his feet we clasped his knees
Together side by side.
“Oh! even a King, for his people’s sake,
From treasonous death must hide!”

“For *her* sake most!” I cried, and I marked 525
The pang that my words could wring.
And the iron tongs from the chimney-nook
I snatched and held to the king:—
“Wrench up the plank! and the vault beneath
Shall yield safe harbouring.” 530

With brows low-bent, from my eager hand
The heavy heft did he take;
And the plank at his feet he wrenched and tore;
And as he frowned through the open floor,
Again I said, “For her sake!” 535

Then he cried to the Queen, “God’s will be done!”
For her hands were clasped in prayer.
And down he sprang to the inner crypt;
And straight we closed the plank he had ripp’d
And toiled to smooth it fair. 540

(Alas! in that vault a gap once was

Wherethro' the King might have fled:
But three days since close-walled had it been
By his will; for the ball would roll therein
When without at the palm he play'd.) 545

Then the Queen cried, "Catherine, keep the door,
And I to this will suffice!"
At her word I rose all dazed to my feet,
And my heart was fire and ice.

And louder ever the voices grew, 550
And the tramp of men in mail;
Until to my brain it seemed to be
As though I tossed on a ship at sea
In the teeth of a crashing gale.

Then back I flew to the rest; and hard 555
We strove with sinews knit
To force the table against the door;
But we might not compass it.

Then my wild gaze sped far down the hall 560
To the place of the hearthstone-sill;
And the Queen bent ever above the floor,
For the plank was rising still.

And now the rush was heard on the stair,
And "God, what help?" was our cry.
And was I frenzied or was I bold? 565
I looked at each empty stanchion-hold,
And no bar but my arm had I!

Like iron felt my arm, as through
The staple I made it pass:—
Alack! it was flesh and bone—no more! 570
'Twas Catherine Douglas sprang to the door,
But I fell back Kate Barlass.

With that they all thronged into the hall,
Half dim to my failing ken;
And the space that was but a void before 575
Was a crowd of wrathful men.

Behind the door I had fall'n and lay,
Yet my sense was wildly aware,
And for all the pain of my shattered arm
I never fainted there. 580

Even as I fell, my eyes were cast
Where the King leaped down to the pit;
And lo! the plank was smooth in its place,
And the Queen stood far from it.

And under the litters and through the bed 585
And within the presses all
The traitors sought for the King, and pierced
The arras around the wall.

And through the chamber they ramped and stormed
Like lions loose in the lair, 590
And scarce could trust to their very eyes,—
For behold! no King was there.

Then one of them seized the Queen, and cried,—
“Now tell us, where is thy lord?”
And he held the sharp point over her heart: 595
She drooped not her eyes nor did she start,
But she answered never a word.

Then the sword half pierced the true true breast:
But it was the Græme's own son
Cried, “This is a woman,—we seek a man!” 600
And away from her girdle zone
He struck the point of the murderous steel;

And that foul deed was not done.

And forth flowed all the throng like a sea
And 'twas empty space once more; 605
And my eyes sought out the wounded Queen
As I lay behind the door.

And I said: "Dear Lady, leave me here,
For I cannot help you now;
But fly while you may, and none shall reck 610
Of my place here lying low."

And she said, "My Catherine, God help thee!"
Then she looked to the distant floor,
And clasping her hands, "O God help *him*,"
She sobbed, "for we can no more!" 615

But God He knows what help may mean,
If it mean to live or to die;
And what sore sorrow and mighty moan
On earth it may cost ere yet a throne
Be filled in His house on high. 620

And now the ladies fled with the Queen;
And through the open door
The night-wind wailed round the empty room
And the rushes shook on the floor.

And the bed drooped low in the dark recess 625
Whence the arras was rent away;
And the firelight still shone over the space
Where our hidden secret lay.

And the rain had ceased, and the moonbeams lit
The window high in the wall,— 630
Bright beams that on the plank that I knew
Through the painted pane did fall,

And gleamed with the splendour of Scotland's crown
And shield armorial.

But then a great wind swept up the skies 635
And the climbing moon fell back;
And the royal blazon fled from the floor,
And nought remained on its track;
And high in the darkened window-pane
The shield and the crown were black. 640

And what I say next I partly saw
And partly I heard in sooth,
And partly since from the murderers' lips
The torture wrung the truth.

For now again came the armèd tread, 645
And fast through the hall it fell;
But the throng was less; and ere I saw,
By the voice without I could tell
That Robert Stuart had come with them
Who knew that chamber well. 650

And over the space the Græme strode dark
With his mantle round him flung;
And in his eye was a flaming light
But not a word on his tongue.

And Stuart held a torch to the floor, 655
And he found the thing he sought;
And they slashed the plank away with their swords;
And O God! I fainted not!

And the traitor held his torch in the gap, 660
All smoking and smouldering;
And through the vapour and fire, beneath
In the dark crypt's narrow ring,
With a shout that pealed to the room's high roof

They saw their naked King.

Half naked he stood, but stood as one 665
Who yet could do and dare:
With the crown, the King was stript away,—
The Knight was 'reft of his battle-array,—
But still the Man was there.

From the rout then stepped a villain forth,— 670
Sir John Hall was his name;
With a knife unsheathed he leapt to the vault
Beneath the torchlight-flame.

Of his person and stature was the King
A man right manly strong, 675
And mightily by the shoulder-blades
His foe to his feet he flung.

Then the traitor's brother, Sir Thomas Hall,
Sprang down to work his worst;
And the King caught the second man by the neck 680
And flung him above the first.

And he smote and trampled them under him;
And a long month thence they bare
All black their throats with the grip of his hands
When the hangman's hand came there. 685

And sore he strove to have had their knives,
But the sharp blades gashed his hands.
Oh James! so armed, thou hadst battled there
Till help had come of thy bands;
And oh! once more thou hadst held our throne 690
And ruled thy Scotish lands!

But while the King o'er his foes still raged
With a heart that nought could tame,

Another man sprang down to the crypt;
And with his sword in his hand hard-gripp'd, 695
There stood Sir Robert Græme.

(Now shame on the recreant traitor's heart
Who durst not face his King
Till the body unarmed was wearied out
With two-fold combating! 700

Ah! well might the people sing and say,
As oft ye have heard aright:—
*“O Robert Græme, O Robert Græme,
Who slew our King, God give thee shame!”*
For he slew him not as a knight.) 705

And the naked King turned round at bay,
But his strength had passed the goal,
And he could but gasp:—“Mine hour is come;
But oh! to succour thine own soul's doom,
Let a priest now shrive my soul!” 710

And the traitor looked on the King's spent strength,
And said:—“Have I kept my word?—
Yea, King, the mortal pledge that I gave?
No black friar's shrift thy soul shall have,
But the shrift of this red sword!” 715

With that he smote his King through the breast;
And all they three in that pen
Fell on him and stabbed and stabbed him there
Like merciless murderous men.

Yet seemed it now that Sir Robert Græme, 720
Ere the King's last breath was o'er,
Turned sick at heart with the deadly sight
And would have done no more.

Was the body purified;
And none could trace on the brow and lips
The death that he had died. 755

In his robes of state he lay asleep
With orb and sceptre in hand;
And by the crown he wore on his throne
Was his kingly forehead spann'd.

And, girls, 'twas a sweet sad thing to see 760
How the curling golden hair,
As in the day of the poet's youth,
From the King's crown clustered there.

And if all had come to pass in the brain 765
That throbbed beneath those curls,
Then Scots had said in the days to come
That this their soil was a different home
And a different Scotland, girls!

And the Queen sat by him night and day,
And oft she knelt in prayer, 770
All wan and pale in the widow's veil
That shrouded her shining hair.

And I had got good help of' my hurt:
And only to me some sign
She made; and save the priests that were there, 775
No face would she see but mine.

And the month of March wore on apace;
And now fresh couriers fared
Still from the country of the Wild Scots
With news of the traitors snared. 780

And still as I told her day by day,
Her pallor changed to sight,

And the frost grew to a furnace-flame
That burnt her visage white.

And evermore as I brought her word, 785
She bent to her dead King James,
And in the cold ear with fire-drawn breath
She spoke the traitors' names.

But when the name of Sir Robert Græme
Was the one she had to give, 790
I ran to hold her up from the floor;
For the froth was on her lips, and sore
I feared that she could not live.

And the month of March wore nigh to its end,
And still was the death-pall spread; 795
For she would not bury her slaughtered lord
Till his slayers all were dead.

And now of their dooms dread tidings came,
And of torments fierce and dire;
And nought she spake,—she had ceased to speak,— 800
But her eyes were a soul on fire.

But when I told her the bitter end
Of the stern and just award,
She leaned o'er the bier, and thrice three times
She kissed the lips of her lord. 805

And then she said,—“My King, they are dead!”
And she knelt on the chapel-floor,
And whispered low with a strange proud smile,—
“James, James, they suffered more!”

Last she stood up to her queenly height, 810
But she shook like an autumn leaf,
As though the fire wherein she burned

Then left her body, and all were turned
To winter of life-long grief.

And “O James!” she said,—“My James!” she said,— 815
“Alas for the woful thing,
That a poet true and a friend of man,
In desperate days of bale and ban,
Should needs be born a King!”

1880-01

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