

Robert Browning (1812-89)

2 *Hervé Riel*

I.

On the sea and at the Hogue, sixteen hundred ninety-two,  
Did the English fight the French, — woe to France!  
And, the thirty-first of May, helter-skelter through the blue,  
Like a crowd of frightened porpoises a shoal of sharks pursue,  
Came crowding ship on ship to Saint-Malo on the Rance, 5  
With the English fleet in view.

II.

'Twas the squadron that escaped, with the victor in full chase;  
First and foremost of the drove, in his great ship, Damfreville;  
Close on him fled, great and small,  
Twenty-two good ships in all; 10  
And they signalled to the place  
“Help the winners of a race!  
Get us guidance, give us harbour, take us quick — or, quicker still,  
Here’s the English can and will!”

III.

Then the pilots of the place put out brisk and leapt on board; 15  
“Why, what hope or chance have ships like these to pass?” laughed they:  
“Rocks to starboard, rocks to port, all the passage scarred and scored, —  
Shall the ‘Formidable’ here, with her twelve and eighty guns,  
Think to make the river-mouth by the single narrow way,  
Trust to enter — where ’tis ticklish for a craft of twenty tons, 20  
And with flow at full beside?  
Now, ’tis slackest ebb of tide.  
Reach the mooring? Rather say,  
While rock stands or water runs,  
Not a ship will leave the bay!” 25

IV.

Then was called a council straight.  
Brief and bitter the debate:  
“Here’s the English at our heels; would you have them take in tow

All that's left us of the fleet, linked together stern and bow,  
 For a prize to Plymouth Sound? 30  
 Better run the ships aground!"  
 (Ended Damfreville his speech).  
 "Not a minute more to wait!  
 Let the Captains all and each  
 Shove ashore, then blow up, burn the vessels on the beach! 35  
 France must undergo her fate.

V.

Give the word!" But no such word  
 Was ever spoke or heard;  
 For up stood, for out stepped, for in struck amid all these  
 — A Captain? A Lieutenant? A Mate — first, second, third? 40  
 No such man of mark, and meet  
 With his betters to compete!  
 But a simple Breton sailor pressed by Tourville for the fleet,  
 A poor coasting-pilot he, Hervé Riel the Croisickese.

VI.

And "What mockery or malice have we here?" cries Hervé Riel: 45  
 "Are you mad, you Malouins? Are you cowards, fools, or rogues?  
 Talk to me of rocks and shoals, me who took the soundings, tell  
 On my fingers every bank, every shallow, every swell  
 'Twixt the offing here and Grève where the river disembogues?  
 Are you bought by English gold? Is it love the lying's for? 50  
 Morn and eve, night and day,  
 Have I piloted your bay,  
 Entered free and anchored fast at the foot of Solidor.  
 Burn the fleet and ruin France? That were worse than fifty Hogues!  
 Sirs, they know I speak the truth! Sirs, believe me there's a way! 55  
 Only let me lead the line,  
 Have the biggest ship to steer,  
 Get this 'Formidable' clear,  
 Make the others follow mine,  
 And I lead them, most and least, by a passage I know well, 60  
 Right to Solidor past Grève,  
 And there lay them safe and sound;  
 And if one ship misbehave, —  
 — Keel so much as grate the ground,  
 Why, I've nothing but my life, — here's my head!" cries Hervé Riel. 65

VII.

Not a minute more to wait.

“Steer us in, then, small and great!

Take the helm, lead the line, save the squadron!” cried its chief.

Captains, give the sailor place!

He is Admiral, in brief. 70

Still the north-wind, by God’s grace

See the noble fellow’s face

As the big ship, with a bound,

Clears the entry like a hound,

Keeps the passage, as its inch of way were the wide sea’s profound! 75

See, safe thro’ shoal and rock,

How they follow in a flock,

Not a ship that misbehaves, not a keel that grates the ground,

Not a spar that comes to grief!

The peril, see, is past. 80

All are harboured to the last,

And just as Hervé Riel hollas “Anchor!” — sure as fate,

Up the English come, — too late!

VIII.

So, the storm subsides to calm:

They see the green trees wave 85

On the heights o’erlooking Grève.

Hearts that bled are stanchèd with balm.

“Just our rapture to enhance,

Let the English rake the bay,

Gnash their teeth and glare askance 90

As they cannonade away!

’Neath rampired Solidor pleasant riding on the Rance!”

How hope succeeds despair on each Captain’s countenance!

Out burst all with one accord,

“This is Paradise for Hell! 95

Let France, let France’s King

Thank the man that did the thing!”

What a shout, and all one word,

“Hervé Riel!”

As he stepped in front once more, 100

Not a symptom of surprise

In the frank blue Breton eyes,

Just the same man as before.

IX.

Then said Damfreville, "My friend,  
I must speak out at the end, 105  
    Though I find the speaking hard.  
Praise is deeper than the lips:  
You have saved the King his ships,  
    You must name your own reward.  
'Faith, our sun was near eclipse! 110  
Demand whate'er you will,  
France remains your debtor still.  
Ask to heart's content and have! or my name's not Damfreville."

X.

Then a beam of fun outbroke  
On the bearded mouth that spoke, 115  
As the honest heart laughed through  
Those frank eyes of Breton blue:  
"Since I needs must say my say,  
    Since on board the duty's done,  
    And from Malo Roads to Croisic Point, what is it but a run? — 120  
Since 'tis ask and have, I may —  
    Since the others go ashore —  
Come! A good whole holiday!  
    Leave to go and see my wife, whom I call the Belle Aurore!"  
    That he asked and that he got, — nothing more. 125

XI.

Name and deed alike are lost:  
Not a pillar nor a post  
    In his Croisic keeps alive the feat as it befell;  
Not a head in white and black  
On a single fishing-smack, 130  
In memory of the man but for whom had gone to wrack  
    All that France saved from the fight whence England bore the bell.  
Go to Paris: rank on rank  
    Search the heroes flung pell-mell  
On the Louvre, face and flank! 135  
    You shall look long enough ere you come to Hervé Riel.  
So, for better and for worse,

Hervé Riel, accept my verse!

In my verse, Hervé Riel, do thou once more

Save the squadron, honour France, love thy wife the Belle Aurore! 140

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