

Mary Howitt (1799-1888)

7 *The Three Guests*

“Oh, where are you, ye three young men?  
Where, where on land or sea?  
My soul doth daily yearn for you;  
Oh, hasten back to me!

“Oh, hasten back, my best beloved, 5  
My gentle, wise, and brave!  
Or, be ye numbered with the dead,  
Come back e’en from the grave.

“Ay, from the grave, if ye are there, 10  
For once, my lost, come back;  
For once — so I may look on you,  
May know your mortal track.”

With that there blew a loud wind,  
With that there blew a low;  
The barred door on its hinges turned, 15  
Turned silently and slow,

And in there came the three young men,  
From lands that lay not near;  
And all as still their footsteps fell  
As dews that none can hear. 20

The first was pale, and cold, and thin,  
As the living cannot be:  
His robe was of the chill grey mist  
That hangeth on the sea.

The second bore upon his brow 25  
A Cain-like sign, severe and grim:  
His mother shrieked and crossed herself,  
Nor dared to look on him.

The third was as the morning fair,

Breathing forth odour sweet; 30  
A starry crown was on his head,  
A rainbow at his feet.

“Where have ye been, ye three young men?”  
Outspoke their mother in fear;  
“Sit down, sit down on your own hearth, 35  
’T is long since ye were here.

“Sit down, sit down, ye three young men,  
Take rest and break my bread:  
Ye’ve travelled far this weary night: —  
Woe’s me, ye’re of the dead!” 40

“I may not break thy bread, mother,”  
The eldest gan to say;  
“But I will sit on thy hearth, mother,  
And warm me while I may.

“For my bed is in the ocean-ice, 45  
Beyond the northern shore;  
There hath come no sunbeam to the place  
For seven long years and more.

“And but the last, great judgment-call  
Can set my body free; 50  
For the icy sea is my sepulchre,  
And winter keeps the key.

“And it is because of evil deeds,  
Because of a broken vow,  
That my soul is in the dreary place 55  
That holds my body now.

“When I left thy pleasant home, mother,  
I took me to the sea,  
And stately was the noble ship  
That I had built for me. 60  
Her masts were of the northern pine,  
Her hull of the oaken tree;

“Her sails were of the canvass stout,

To face the fiercest wind;  
Her mariners were bold young men, 65  
The bravest I could find.

“And off we sailed, through rough and smooth,  
Off to the Indian Seas;  
We captured every ship we met,  
And killed their companies. 70

“Our ship she carried seven ships’ store,  
From the deck unto the hold;  
And all we used within the ship  
Was made of beaten gold.

“We had seven ships’ freights within our ship, 75  
And heavily she sailed and slow:  
She sprang a leak; like lead she sank,  
When not a breath did blow.

“I woke as from a frightful dream,  
In a bower, I knew not where, 80  
And by me knelt an Indian maid,  
Who cooled the burning air;  
With a sweet fan of Indian flowers  
She cooled the burning air.

“T was the kindest maid that ever loved, 85  
A very child in truth;  
The meekest, though a king’s first-born,  
In the glory of her youth.

“She took me to her father’s house,  
A rich barbaric place; 90  
She won for me, her stranger-mate,  
The love of all her race.

“They clothed me as they clothe a king,  
They set me next the throne,  
And twenty snow-white elephants 95  
They gave me for my own.

“Ah me! how I requited them

It has been told in heaven;  
And mortal pangs must cleanse my soul  
From that unholy leaven, 100

“And drearier woe and darker still,  
Ere from my soul can fall  
The burthen of my broken vows,  
The heaviest guilt of all.

“I trampled on her true heart’s love; 105  
The Indian stream ran red,  
The sacred stream of her own land,  
With pure blood which I shed.

“Once more I built myself a boat,  
Of the teak-tree’s choicest core; 110  
I took seven mariners on board,  
And put to sea once more.

“My mast was made of Indian cane,  
My sails of silken twine,  
My ropes they were the tendrils strong 115  
Pulled from the Indian vine.

“I laded my bark with all the wealth  
Which guilt had made mine own;  
I took with me, for merchandise,  
The pearl and diamond stone. 120

“T was a heavy freight, a heavy freight,  
That lay that bark within;  
But the heaviest weight was in my soul,  
The load of seven years’ sin!

“I ne’er again set foot on land, 125  
It had no port for me;  
As Cain was a wanderer on the earth,  
So was I on the sea.

“My food was the fish that passed me by;  
My drink the gathered rain; 130  
I grew unsightly, dark, and fierce,

A spectre of the main.

“My fame was a terror every where,  
Like a spirit of the blast;  
And, when a tall ship crossed my track, 135  
Its people looked aghast.

“Thou couldst not have known thy son, mother,  
Hadst thou beheld my face,  
When, after seven years’ voyaging,  
I found my resting-place. 140

“In the North Sea, ’neath the billowy ice  
I lie, while time shall be,  
To all unknown, save God alone  
Who made that grave for me.

“But the first cock crows, I must be gone; 145  
No more have I to tell:  
The avenger must not find me thence;  
Dear mother, fare thee well!”

The second spake: — “Woe’s me for sin!  
My elder brother’s pain is light; 150  
His place of bondage is the earth,  
And there comes day and night.

“I left thy pleasant home, mother,  
With thy blessing on my head,  
Thy wisest son, as people deemed, 155  
And to the town I sped.

“I lived a life of rioting;  
To an ill course was I bent;  
The gold my careful father earned,  
In wickedness I spent. 160

“I ran the round of low debauch,  
Careless though all might see,  
There was no goodness in my soul,  
No human dignity.

“There was no kindness in my heart,  
Save for one living thing,  
A child — ’t was strange, that unto me  
Aught innocent could cling. 165

“It was my child, my little son,  
That in my heart had place; 170  
One lone affection, that in sin  
Made a redeeming trace.

“I loved him, cursed him with my love;  
And, if there had been aught  
Could save my soul, it had been he; 175  
And yet he saved me not.

“I dragged him with me night and day,  
Poor child! through scorn and shame;  
I hid him with me in the haunts  
Where but the wicked came. 180

“I never taught him holy things,  
Yet was he pure and meek;  
And my blood raged, if any dared  
To taunt him for my sake.

“I, and two other men like me, 185  
Were bound to do a deed of blood;  
In a church of Christ we pledged ourselves  
To that dark brotherhood.

“I took the little child with me,  
In my affection desperate-hearted; 190  
I bound him in my oath, that we  
In any chance might not be parted.

“Nor were we parted: we were cast  
Into a horrid dungeon-place;  
I could not see my hand at noon, 195  
Nor look upon my loved one’s face.

“And yet I felt it mattered not,  
While he was with me, where I lay;

Nor had I grieved, but that he pined  
For the sweet light of day. 200

“At length, when many weeks were gone,  
And his complainings chafed my blood —  
How shall I tell thee! — day by day  
Went on, and yet they brought no food.

“I knew man’s heart was hard and cold; 205  
I knew that Ugolin was slain  
With pangs like these: the sudden thought  
Kindled a frenzy in my brain!

“I raved for help; I clasped the child;  
I smote my breast, and fiercely cursed; 210  
And, in my madness of despair,  
I strove my prison walls to burst.

“My pangs they were not for myself;  
I bared my arm, and bade him eat:  
Life was a boon I did not prize, 215  
Save for the weak thing at my feet.

“Many days went on, many dreadful days,  
And on the dungeon floor at length  
I lay, as in a deadly dream;  
My rage had spent my strength. 220

“My utterest, hopeless misery  
I knew not for a little space,  
Until I felt his trembling hand  
Passed lightly o’er my face:

“Then in a changed and feeble tone 225  
I heard him whispering; and he said  
A little prayer, ‘Father in heaven,  
Give us our daily bread!’

“‘Where got you, child, that prayer?’ I cried;  
And he answered with a tranquil air, 230  
‘From a little child that went to school,  
Oh! father dear, I got that prayer.’

“This was the one pang that I lacked,  
The crowning to my misery given;  
Wretch that I was! for one so pure 235  
Could only have a place in heaven.

“I thought of all the priest had taught,  
And at that time I tried to pray;  
But I was not a sinless child,  
I could not find a word to say. 240

“Another frenzy seized my brain,  
A twofold madness in me burned;  
And which died first I never knew,  
For memory ne’er in life returned.

“My doom is not accomplished yet; 245  
But still one thought consoles my heart,  
Where’er my blessed child abides,  
With me he hath no longer part.

“But, hark! the second cock doth crow;  
I feel the freshness of the day; 250  
I hear a call I dare not shun;  
Farewell, farewell! I must not stay.”

With this the widow clasped her hands,  
And “Woe’s me!” in her grief she said,  
“Woe’s me, that I have been a mother! 255  
That I have looked upon the dead!

“My sons! my pride, my sinful boast,  
My earliest thought each coming morn,  
My latest joy each parting eve,  
Would God that ye had ne’er been born! 260

“Was it for this ye grew in strength?  
For this to comely manhood grew?  
My loved, my lost! — *my lost!* woe’s me!  
Oh that I could have died for you!”

“Peace! peace!” the youngest spake, “mother, 265

And let thy wailing ended be;  
If the third cock crow, I must away,  
And I am come from heaven for thee.

“They sinned, alas! they darkly sinned,  
The angels of bliss shed tears for them; 270  
Their place in heaven is empty yet,  
And they have dimmed their diadem.

“But of the end I may not speak,  
The purpose of God is never ill;  
And though thou mourn, yet murmur not; 275  
Confide in the all-righteous will.

“For me, when I left my pleasant home,  
To the city I too sped,  
And with the young, for many a year,  
An idle life I led. 280

“We lived with the world’s most beautiful;  
We raised the wine-cup high;  
We crowned ourselves with the summer’s rose,  
And let no flower pass by.

“We lived in sumptuous palaces, 285  
Death seemed an idle tale;  
And to a sweet philosophy  
We spread our silken sail.

“I thought not that the loved could die,  
Nor that the fair could fade; 290  
And I bound myself with a holy vow  
To a young Athenian maid.

“We loved, we lived for seven short years  
In a dream of gay delight;  
And beautiful young creatures grew, 295  
Like sweet flowers, in our sight.

“I dreamed not that the fair could fade,  
Nor that the loved could die;  
But the whirlwind came when day was calm,

And swept in fury by. 300

“My children, those fair, tender things,  
Faded like summer snow;  
I buried them 'neath a flowery sod,  
In a wild amaze of woe.

“I had not seen the pallid face 305  
Of awful death before,  
And back I went to my stately house  
With new and solemn lore.

“The pestilence had done its work,  
The glory of my life was gone, 310  
And my young, sweet Athenian wife  
Lay dead before the set of sun.

“I was a man and so I mourned;  
And, when they preached philosophy  
In my great grief, I drove them forth; 315  
And, tired of life, lay down to die.

“Body and soul they both were weak;  
And it was in the city said,  
That, like a madman or a fool,  
I made my mourning for the dead. 320

“The young, the happy shunned my door;  
I sate alone from morn till night;  
And at my lean and drooping form  
Men gazed as at a fearful sight.

“At length, by chance, I met a man, 325  
Old and despised, and very poor;  
A man of most religious life,  
Who yet asked alms from door to door.

“He was my comforter: from him  
I learned a faith that saved my soul; 330  
The blessings of the Christian's hope  
He gave me, and my mind grew whole.

“I saw that in God’s righteous will  
I had been smitten, and I bent  
My knee at length, and even gave thanks 335  
To him for that great chastisement.

“From that good time I spent my days  
Among the afflicted of men’s race;  
To dungeons and to battle-fields  
I passed, a minister of grace. 340

“The blessings of the Holy One  
Went with me to each distant land;  
And amid shipwrecks, strife, and foes,  
My soul was strengthened by his hand.

“But ere my noon of life was o’er, 345  
The Merciful saw meet to bless  
His servant with a peaceful death,  
In the far Syrian wilderness.

“Near a small church, that from the days  
Of the apostles had stood pure; 350  
Among their dead they laid my bones,  
With all old rites of sepulture.

“But, hark! the third cock crows aloud;  
Mother, thy race is well nigh run,  
The palm in heaven grows green for thee, 355  
Farewell! we meet at set of sun.”

*1830*

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