

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-82)

8 *The Staff and Scrip*

“Who rules these lands?” the Pilgrim said.
“Stranger, Queen Blanchelys.”
“And who has thus harried them?” he said.
“It was Duke Luke did this:
God’s ban be his!” 5

The Pilgrim said: “Where is your house?
I’ll rest there, with your will.”
“You’ve but to climb these blackened boughs
And you’ll see it over the hill,
For it burns still.” 10

“Which road, to seek your Queen?” said he.
“Nay, nay, but with some wound
You’ll fly back hither, it may be,
And by your blood i’ the ground
My place be found.” 15

“Friend, stay in peace. God keep your head,
And mine, where I will go;
For He is here and there,” he said.
He passed the hill-side, slow,
And stood below. 20

The Queen sat idle by her loom:
She heard the arras stir,
And looked up sadly: through the room
The sweetness sickened her
Of musk and myrrh. 25

Her women, standing two and two,

In silence combed the fleece.
The Pilgrim said, "Peace be with you,
Lady;" and bent his knees.
She answered, "Peace." 30

Her eyes were like the wave within;
Like water-reeds the poise
Of her soft body, dainty thin;
And like the water's noise
Her plaintive voice. 35

For him, the stream had never well'd
In desert tracks malign
So sweet; nor had he ever felt
So faint in the sunshine
Of Palestine. 40

Right so, he knew that he saw weep
Each night through every dream
The Queen's own face, confused in sleep
With visages supreme
Not known to him. 45

"Lady," he said, "your lands lie burnt
And waste: to meet your foe
All fear: this I have seen and learnt.
Say that it shall be so,
And I will go." 50

She gazed at him. "Your cause is just,
For I have heard the same,"
He said: "God's strength shall be my trust.
Fall it to good or grame,
'Tis in His name." 55

"Sir, you are thanked. My cause is dead.
Why should you toil to break

A grave, and fall therein?" she said.
He did not pause but spake
"For my vow's sake." 60

"Can such vows be, Sir—to God's ear,
Not to God's will?" "My vow
Remains: God heard me there as here,"
He said with reverent brow,
"Both then and now." 65

They gazed together, he and she,
The minute while he spoke;
And when he ceased, she suddenly
Looked round upon her folk
As though she woke. 70

"Fight, Sir," she said: "my prayers in pain
Shall be your fellowship."
He whispered one among her train,—
"To-morrow bid her keep
This staff and scrip." 75

She sent him a sharp sword, whose belt
About his body there
As sweet as her own arms he felt.
He kissed its blade, all bare,
Instead of her. 80

She sent him a green banner wrought
With one white lily stem,
To bind his lance with when he fought.
He writ upon the same
And kissed her name. 85

She sent him a white shield, whereon
She bade that he should trace
His will. He blent fair hues that shone,

And in a golden space
He kissed her face. 90

Born of the day that died, that eve
Now dying sank to rest;
As he, in likewise taking leave,
Once with a heaving breast
Looked to the west. 95

And there the sunset skies unseal'd,
Like lands he never knew,
Beyond to-morrow's battle-field
Lay open out of view
To ride into. 100

Next day till dark the women pray'd:
Nor any might know there
How the fight went: the Queen has bade
That there do come to her
No messenger. 105

The Queen is pale, her maidens ail;
And to the organ-tones
They sing but faintly, who sang well
The matin-orisons,
The lauds and nones. 110

Lo, Father, is thine ear inclin'd,
And hath thine angel pass'd?
For these thy watchers now are blind
With vigil, and at last
Dizzy with fast. 115

Weak now to them the voice o' the priest
As any trance affords;
And when each anthem failed and ceas'd,
It seemed that the last chords

Still sang the words. 120

“Oh what is the light that shines so red?
’Tis long since the sun set;”
Quoth the youngest to the eldest maid:
“’Twas dim but now, and yet
The light is great.” 125

Quoth the other: “’Tis our sight is dazed
That we see flame i’ the air.”
But the Queen held her brows and gazed,
And said, “It is the glare
Of torches there.” 130

“Oh what are the sounds that rise and spread?
All day it was so still;”
Quoth the youngest to the eldest maid:
“Unto the furthest hill
The air they fill.” 135

Quoth the other: “’Tis our sense is blurr’d
With all the chants gone by.”
But the Queen held her breath and heard,
And said, “It is the cry
Of Victory.” 140

The first of all the rout was sound,
The next were dust and flame,
And then the horses shook the ground:
And in the thick of them
A still band came. 145

“Oh what do ye bring out of the fight,
Thus hid beneath these boughs?”
“Thy conquering guest returns to-night,
And yet shall not carouse,
Queen, in thy house.” 150

“Uncover ye his face,” she said.
“O changed in little space!”
She cried, “O pale that was so red!
O God, O God of grace!
Cover his face.” 155

His sword was broken in his hand
Where he had kissed the blade.
“O soft steel that could not withstand!
O my hard heart unstayed,
That prayed and prayed!” 160

His bloodied banner crossed his mouth
Where he had kissed her name.
“O east, and west, and north, and south,
Fair flew my web, for shame,
To guide Death’s aim!” 165

The tints were shredded from his shield
Where he had kissed her face.
“Oh, of all gifts that I could yield,
Death only keeps its place,
My gift and grace!” 170

Then stepped a damsel to her side,
And spoke, and needs must weep:
“For his sake, lady, if he died,
He prayed of thee to keep
This staff and scrip.” 175

That night they hung above her bed,
Till morning wet with tears.
Year after year above her head
Her bed his token wears,
Five years, ten years. 180

That night the passion of her grief
 Shook them as there they hung.
Each year the wind that shed the leaf
 Shook them and in its tongue
 A message flung. 185

And once she woke with a clear mind
 That letters writ to calm
Her soul lay in the scrip; to find
 Only a torpid balm
 And dust of palm. 190

They shook far off with palace sport
 When joust and dance were rife;
And the hunt shook them from the court;
 For hers, in peace or strife,
 Was a Queen's life. 195

A Queen's death now: as now they shake
 To gusts in chapel dim,—
Hung where she sleeps, not seen to wake,
 (Carved lovely white and slim),
 With them by him. 200

Stand up to-day, still armed, with her,
 Good knight, before His brow
Who then as now was here and there,
 Who had in mind thy vow
 Then even as now. 205

The lists are set in Heaven to-day,
 The bright pavilions shine;
Fair hangs thy shield, and none gainsay
 The trumpets sound in sign
 That she is thine. 210

Not tithed with days' and years' decease

He pays thy wage He owed,
But with imperishable peace
Here in His own abode,
Thy jealous God.

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