

John Sterling (1806-44)

1 *Alfred the Harper*

I.

Dark fell the night, the watch was set,
The host was idly spread,
The Danes around their watchfires met,
Caroused, and fiercely fed.
They feasted all on English food, 5
And quaffed the English ale;
Their hearts leapt up with burning blood
At each old Norseman tale.

II.

The chiefs beneath a tent of leaves,
And Guthrum, king of all, 10
Devoured the flesh of England's beeves,
And laughed at England's fall.
Each warrior proud, each Danish earl,
In mail and wolf-skin clad,
Their bracelets white with plundered pearl, 15
Their eyes with triumph mad.

III.

A mace beside each king and lord
Was seen, with blood bestained;
From golden cups upon the board
Their kindling wine they drained. 20
Ne'er left their sad storm-beaten coast
Sea-kings so hot for gore;
'Mid Selwood's oaks so dreadful host
Ne'er burnt a track before.

IV.

From Humber-land to Severn-land, 25
And on to Tamar stream,
Where Thames makes green the towery strand,
Where Medway's waters gleam, —

With hands of steel and mouths of flame
They raged the kingdom through; 30
And where the Norseman sickle came,
No crop but hunger grew.

V.

They loaded many an English horse
With wealth of cities fair;
They dragged from many a father's corse 35
The daughter by her hair.
And English slaves, and gems and gold,
Were gathered round the feast;
Till midnight in their woodland hold,
Oh! never that riot ceased. 40

VI.

In stalked a warrior tall and rude
Before the strong sea-kings;
"Ye Lords and Earls of Odin's brood,
Without a harper sings.
He seems a simple man and poor, 45
But well he sounds the lay,
And well, ye Norseman chiefs, be sure,
Will ye the song repay."

VII.

In trod the bard with keen cold look,
And glanced along the board, 50
That with the shout and war-cry shook,
Of many a Danish lord.
But thirty brows, inflamed and stern,
Soon bent on him their gaze,
While calm he gazed, as if to learn 55
Who chief deserved his praise.

VIII.

Loud Guthrum spake, — "Nay, gaze not thus,
Thou Harper weak and poor!
By Thor! who bandylooks with us
Must worse than looks endure. 60
Sing high the praise of Denmark's host,

High praise each dauntless Earl;
The brave who stun this English coast
With war's unceasing whirl."

IX.

The Harper sat upon a block, 65
Heaped up with wealthy spoil,
The wool of England's helpless flock,
Whose blood had stained the soil.
He sat and slowly bent his head,
And touched aloud the string; 70
Then raised his face, and boldly said,
"Hear thou my lay, O king!

X.

"High praise from all whose gift is song
To him in slaughter tried,
Whose pulses beat in battle strong, 75
As if to meet his bride.
High praise from every mouth of man
To all who boldly strive,
Who fall where first the fight began,
And ne'er go back alive. 80

XI.

"But chief his fame be quick as fire,
Be wide as is the sea,
Who dares in blood and pangs expire,
To keep his country free.
To such, great Earls, and mighty King! 85
Shall praise in heaven belong;
The starry harps their praise shall ring,
And chime to mortal song.

XII.

"Fill high your cups, and swell the shout,
At famous Regnar's name! 90
Who sank his host in bloody rout,
When he to Humber came.
His men were chased, his sons were slain,
And he was left alone.

They bound him in an iron chain 95
Upon a dungeon stone.

XIII.

“With iron links they bound him fast;
With snakes they filled the hole,
That made his flesh their long repast,
And bit into his soul. 100
The brood with many a poisonous fang
The warrior’s heart beset;
While still he cursed his foes, and sang
His fierce but hopeless threat.

XIV.

“Great chiefs, why sink in gloom your eyes? 105
Why champ your teeth in pain?
Still lives the song though Regnar dies!
Fill high your cups again.
Ye too, perchance, O Norsemen lords!
Who fought and swayed so long, 110
Shall soon but live in minstrel words,
And owe your names to song.

XV.

“This land has graves by thousands more
Than that where Regnar lies.
When conquests fade, and rule is o’er, 115
The sod must close your eyes.
How soon, who knows? Not chief, nor bard;
And yet to me ’tis given,
To see your foreheads deeply scarred
And guess the doom of Heaven. 120

XVI.

“I may not read or when or how,
But Earls and Kings, be sure
I see a blade o’er every brow,
Where pride now sits secure.
Fill high the cups, raise loud the strain! 125
When chief and monarch fall,
Their names in song shall breathe again,

And thrill the feastful hall.

XVII.

“Like God’s own voice, in after years
Resounds the warrior’s fame, 130
Whose deed his hopeless country cheers,
Who is its noblest name.
Drain down, O Chiefs! the gladdening bowl!
The present hour is yours;
Let death to-morrow take the soul, 135
If joy to-day endures.”

XVIII.

Grim sat the chiefs; one heaved a groan,
And one grew pale with dread,
His iron mace was grasped by one,
By one his wine was shed. 140
And Guthrum cried, “Nay, bard, no more
We hear thy boding lay;
Make drunk the song with spoil and gore!
Light up the joyous fray!”

XIX.

“Quick throbs my brain” — so burst the song — 145
“To hear the strife once more.
The mace, the axe, they rest too long;
Earth cries my thirst is sore.
More blithely twang the strings of bows
Than strings of harps in glee; 150
Red wounds are lovelier than the rose,
Or rosy lips to me.

XX.

“Oh! fairer than a field of flowers,
When flowers in England grew,
Would be the battle’s marshalled powers, 155
The plain of carnage new.
With all its deaths before my soul
The vision rises fair;
Raise loud the song, and drain the bowl!
I would that I were there! 160

XXI.

"Tis sweet to live in honored might,
 With true and fearless hand;
 'Tis sweet to fall in freedom's fight,
 Nor shrink before the brand.
 But sweeter far, when girt by foes, 165
 Unmoved to meet their frown,
 And count with cheerful thought the woes
 That soon shall dash them down."

XXII.

Loud rang the harp, the minstrel's eye
 Rolled fiercely round the throng; 170
 It seemed two crashing hosts were nigh,
 Whose shock aroused the song,
 A golden cup King Guthrum gave
 To him who strongly played;
 And said, "I won it from the slave 175
 Who once o'er England swayed."

XXIII.

King Guthrum cried, "Twas Alfred's own;
 Thy song befits the brave:
 The King who cannot guard his throne
 Nor wine nor song shall have." 180
 The minstrel took the goblet bright,
 And said, "I drink the wine
 To him who owns by justest right
 The cup thou bid'st be mine.

XXIV.

"To him, your Lord, Oh shout ye all! 185
 His meed be deathless praise!
 The King who dares not nobly fall,
 Dies basely all his days.
 The King who dares not guard his throne,
 May curses heap his head; 190
 But hope and strength be all his own
 Whose blood is bravely shed."

XXV.

“The praise thou speakest,” Guthrum said,
“With sweetness fills mine ear;
For Alfred swift before me fled, 195
And left me monarch here.
The royal coward never dared
Beneath mine eye to stand.
Oh, would that now this feast he shared,
And saw me rule his land!” 200

XXVI.

Then stern the minstrel rose, and spake,
And gazed upon the King, —
“Not now the golden cup I take,
Nor more to thee I sing.
Another day, a happier hour, 205
Shall bring me here again,
The cup shall stay in Guthrum’s power
Till I demand it then.”

XXVII.

The Harper turned and left the shed,
Nor bent to Guthrum’s crown; 210
And one who marked his visage said
It wore a ghastly frown.
The Danes ne’er saw that Harper more,
For soon as morning rose,
Upon their camp King Alfred bore, 215
And slew ten thousand foes.

(From *Poems*. London, 1839)