

The Serpent-Ship

By M. P. Shiel

‘O that I knew where I might find Him! that I might even come into His presence!’

‘My help!’
the Emperor called,
‘the bard!
 With teaching touch
 who toucheth the harp,
 and teacheth the heart,
 to harp.’

Nor long:
a rhapsody brave
of song:
 A hive of breath;
 and busy amongst,
 the lyrical buzz
 and throng:—

‘Good-bye!’
the Viking his Gerd-
-a pressed:
 Two sobs that kiss—
 then life is a sail—
 then life is a-blurr,
 and mist.

Ten years:
the consequent times
revolved:
 But Hrolf, in Logres,
 with Heracles moils,
 was making the world
 for God.

That night,
so, spinning, to Gurth,
the churl,
 The lady glozed,
 ‘how fine was his calm,
 when Hakon besieged
 the burg!’

And Gurth:
'but that was a day,
at Dvaiss!
I wounded fell,
pernicious as Thor,
he hewed me a lane,
and saved.'

So she:
'he loved thee at heart,
poor Gurth!
A heart, though strong,
yet kingly infirm
with fatherly lodes,
and throes.'

And Gurth:
'but where can his Sail
be spread?
His Bones where white?
or plies he till now
his continent rage
with men?'

She laughed:
'reblooms in the night
a gourd!
He, thrilling plumb,
like shuttlecocks falls;
recurs like the moons
his Sword!

'What Bones!
I know that my warr-
-ior lives!
Yet O, that Nord
would wing me with winds,
their wings to the winds
who gives!'

At last
a rumour from God
has vogue:
A myth, a breath:
at Thanet he lies,
his wounds unaneled,
unmoaned.

Nor long:
a schip from the burg-
-bay runs:

Her sixty oars
unanimous troop,
voluminous hoops
her lug.

In vain!
at Thanet was void,
and ah:

One knew—one thought—
he'd fared for the Franks
he'd passed to the Picts—
afar!

'No more?
and *will* he no more
be *kind*?

Then Gurth,' she cries,
'the wave be my world,
though waste be its ways,
and wild!'

She cruised:
at London is nought,
but germ:

At Hythe no news—
at Wyht he has stormed—
at Dwyght he was yet
—to storm.

When Day—
his cyclops inflamed
enlaved:

When fairy Night,
in lazuli grot,
her lamp-lit bazaar
unveiled;

Till dawn,
the swarm of her wake
she notes:

Her sea-bitch hunts,
a-hunt is the moon,
and solves in gavottes
the coast.

'How droll!
so, pious and boon,
she taled:

'On Triss, my mare,
when tipsy one day,
his feet on the ground
he trailed.'

And Gurth:
'but that was a day,
at Fahl!

Our *yolle* capsized,
and there was his head,
like echoes and claps
a-laugh!

So she:
'you men in his train
were rich!

The world, and woes,
were made for his sake,
to furnish with realm
a prince.'

And Gurth:
'but where can his sword
be groans?

Or south, or north,
with Logresman or Scot,
or rolls with the flood
his Bones?'

She smiled:
'he wounds, but himself
is Balm!

'Tis said, you know,
the hair of a hound,
though bitter the bite,
can salve.

I wait
a Silence through things
is spun:

The first of men
was made in the night,
and skipped when he saw
the sun.'

Three years:
the seas with her oars
were thronged:
 But Hrolf, returned,
 in haven was heaved,
 and home-sick at home
 was strong.

Then four:
the voluble times
returned:
 A fame had steered
 to Zetland her helm:
 at Zetland was void,
 and dearth.

He mourned:
all patient, adult,
arrived:
 His glance was worth,¹
 and expert his heart,
 and chaste from the rods
 of Time.

He mourned:
a warrior crowned,
and trite:
 His hair was hoar,
 his warrings were o'er,
 his war-gear he wore
 and died.

And rich—
with breastplate of gold,
and targe,
 And broidered zone,—
 his mort they propose,
 sublime on his poop,
 and huge.

¹ Weorthan = werden, *become*.

All day,
like mourners with griefs
a-rave,
 The crooning surfs
 to funeral troop,
 and funerals taint
 the rain.

At eve:
his rovers the shore
bethrong:
 The torch they use,
 the moorings they loose,
 the holocaust moves,
 is gone!

How grand!
thou mariners' Nurse,
though wet,
 Berock him now!
 with languidest waft
 they hail him a last
 Fare-well!

Afar,
the desert a Sign
acclaims:
 Between the hills
 a Pillar of Cloud,
 with banner of blue,
 her sail.

A-rave,
up sun-smears in oils
she glides:
 The buxom swell
 she glibly excels,
 a Pillar of Flame
 she rides.

But lo!—
by flurry applied,
her flame—
 the billows' bursts
 and cataracts quench:
 her peril she slips,
 though scathed.

* * *

'Twas night:
and Gerda from Zet-
-land works:
 The sea-room's lurch
 her governing oar,
 andante her cords,
 beskirl.

It chanced—
when Imbrifer sets²
in murk,
 And sea, and sky,
 with dribbly rheums
 and equinox squalls,
 conturbs.

She fronts,
sedate on the deck,
the storm:
 The spoil of hope,
 though foundered in night,
 instinctive of light,
 her orbs.

And thus,
inclining her head,
to Gurth:
 'I saw, one night,
 a mist in his eye,
 when Dagmar, the scald,
 rehearsed.'

And Gurth:
'but that was a day,
at Voss!
 He felled an oak,
 which fell on a thrall,
 and fell on the trunk,
 and sobbed.'

² In October.

So she:
'a typical man,
and tall!
 His social wo—
 his musical weird . . .
 but talk not of oaks
 —that fall.'

And Gurth:
'but who shall his Se-
-cret guess?
 Or far, or near,
 his Dragon he steers,
 or broads to the kites
 his Breast?'

She wept:
'the world is its own
redress!
 Its orb, though dark,
 is starlight afar,
 and smiles like a bride
 a death.

'The past,
like throeings and growth,
we slight;
 The future dark
 may, dazzling dark,
 be dark with excess
 of bright.

'And say:
that sockets for eyes
he keep:
 And worst be truth:
 an outcome's innate;
 from death-beds a babe
 may creep.

'Twas morn:
a sail through the squall
they spy:
 Some pirate keel?
 upon them he bears!
 she, thoral below,
 bids fly.

He looms—
a 'serpent-schip' lank,
and high:
 But slighter she—
 and ruffling in stays,
 she yaws on the yeast,
 and flies.

And now—
with sea-winds my tale
I wet:
 In down-hill glee,
 each following threat
 she wins to her use,
 adept.

Their flow
with melting reserves
she rides:
 By noon he's air:
 they breathe from the oars:
 a westering blotch
 he hides.

Away!
affairé on Ahs
the Vault:
 The self-sick sea
 its bosom bespues:
 unearthly the world,
 and salt.

The prow
its dissolute Ghost
—out-pants!
 The eddies pair
 in scampering reel
 the regiment stalks,
 and tramps.

And bleak,—
comes brooding the dark,
like doom:
 A rift remains,
 and darkling bleak,
 that wraith through the rift
 relooms.

One eve—
(the Dead-sea terrasse
I roamed)—
 I saw a form,
 and still as I fled,
 a presence that form
 I found;

So they:
and plies them a name-
less cark!
 He steadfast drifts,
 and rudderless steers,
 an Argonaut blind,
 his bark.

* * *

There is—
engraved in the deep—
a place,
 With eddies vext,
 a caldron morose,
 all ringstraked with froths,
 that race

And midst,
circumference vast,
—it yawns!
 And harab dark,
 that staggering void,
 and wails from its whorls
 a swan.

To this—
for foul was the night,—
they drive:
 To this that ship,
 as sheep-dogs the sheep's,
 had shiftily shaped
 their flight.

As bent—
his jennet some flag-
rant steed

Pursues a-marsh,
with scattery scamp,
rotatory tramp,
a-ramp.

And soon—
that influence wild
involves:

She twists, she shoots,—
a manad of death,
she planets, remote,
that orb.

He too:
to lightning my tale
I link!

A-keel they wing,
and fluttering poised,
with shuddering joys,
they wing.

As hunts—
a drake his unwife-
-ly bird,

(Their heads are far,—
—and half on the lake—
—and half on the wing—
they churn.)

So he:
a cable-length late,
he throes:

And round, and round,
in mizmazy rote,
in blackness secerned,
they roam.

When lo!
in rufous she bursts
the tomb!

Some shattered lamp—
in Tophet is dawn;
pregnated he, too,
—up-blooms!

But yet—
not *yet* does she dream
him nigh—
 (As round, and round,
 in narrowing whorls,
 in volutes of lame,
 they fly.)

Till now—
That chiselled extreme
they reach;
 (Those satin depths
 with shimmering shafts,
 like Seraphim swords,
 they parch.)

Then first!
then first does she dream
him close!
 His streaming flag
 —with wondering awe—
 —his bulk on the pyre—
 she notes.

As when—
some chymist his drugs
combines:
 He waits, he frowns,
 the menstruum fails;
 but rallies the world,
 he smiles:

So she—
dismays from her eyes
dismay,
 As trance of dawn
 at sunset arrests
 the withering eye
 of day.

'Tis Hrolf!
Reclaimant! how deep!
and strange!
 (He *whispers dumb,*
 and Gorgon he smiles;
 surmising her heart,
 and sage.)

And swift!
she runs the blockade
of reek—

With poisoning arms,
like tottering bairns,
her prow she attains
—and leaps.

Nor fails:
for courtly he holds
his poop:

Bonanza rare!
She falls on his Length!
and down to the skies
they swoop.

* * *

He ceased:
but silence with song
was rife:

The world's a star!
more stringèd a psalm
than trills on the ear,
its life.