

The Rape of Death

By Aleister Crowley

ARGUMENT.—Sir Godfrey, a knight of Normandy, leapeth into a light vessel of Jan Hungard, while they sit at feast, and, slaying the crew, seeketh the high seas with the Lady Thurla. He slayeth the swiftest pursuers, and escapeth in a great tempest; which on the second day abating, he maketh the inside of a bar, and must await the breeze. Jan Hungard coming with his men and two dragons, is wrecked, but a knave shooting, slayeth the Lady Thurla. Sir Godfrey forthwith sinketh the other dragon, and saileth forth into the ocean, and is not heard of ever after.

Pale vapours lie like phantoms on the sea,
The tide swells slumberous beneath our keel,
The pulses of our canvas fail; and we

No faint sweet summons from the south wind feel:
The crimson waters of the west are pale,
And bloodless arrows like a stream of steel

Flash from the moon, that rises where the gale
Only a day past raged; the clouds are lost
In pleasant rains that ripple on the sail.

The sudden fascination of the frost
Touches the heavy canvas; and there form
Reluctant crystals, and the vessel, tossed

The wild night through in the devouring storm,
Glistens with dew made sharp and bright with cold,
And no north wind may drive us to the warm

Long-looked-for lands where day, with plumes of gold,
Flaps like a lazy eagle in the air,
Where night, a bird of prey divinely bold,

Wings through the sky, intangible but fair,
And pale with subtle passion; and no wind
Turns our prow southward, till the canvas bear

No more up into it, but still behind
Follow like flame, and lead our love along
Into the valleys of the ocean, blind,

But seeing all the world awake with song
Of many lyres and lutes and reeds of straw,
And all the rivers musical that throng

In bright assemblage of unchanging law,
Like many flute-players; and seeing this,
(That all the mountains looked upon and saw)

The sweetness of the savour of a kiss,
And all its perfume wafted to the sky.
Nay, but no wind will drive our fortalice

(So strong against the sun) to where they ply
Those pallid wings, or turn our vessel's beak
With utmost fury to the North, to dye

Our prows with seaweed, such as wise men seek
For cleansing of their altars with slow blood
Wrenched from the long dark leaves, with fingers weak

With age and toil; to stem the restless flood
That boils between the islands; to attain
The ultimate ice, where some calm hero stood

And looked one last time for a sail in vain,
And looking upward not in vain, lay down
And died, to pass where cold and any pain

Are not. So still the night is, like the crown
Most white of the high God that glittereth,
The stars surround the moon, and Nereids drown

Their rippled tresses in her golden breath.
Let us keep watch, my true love, caught at last
Between my hands, and not remember death.

Only bethink us of the daylight past,
The long chase oversea, the storm, the speed
Whereby we ran before the leaping blast,

And left the swift pursuers at our need
With one wrecked dragon and one shattered; yea!
And on their swiftest many warriors bleed,

Having beheld, above the gray seaway
Between them and the sun, my sword arise,

Like the first dagger flashing for the day,

My sword, that darts among them serpentwise—

And all their warriors fell back a space,
And all the air rang out with sudden cries,

Seeing the death and fury of my face,

And feeling the long sword sweep out and kill,
Till there was won the slippery path, the place

Whence I might sever the white cords, and fill

The ship with tangled wreckage of the sail.
All this I did, and bore the blade of ill

Back, dripping blood, to thee most firm and pale

Who held our rudder, all alone, and stood
Fierce and triumphant in the rising gale,

Bent to my sword, and kissed the stinging blood,

While the good ship leapt free upon the deep,
And felt the feet of the resistless flood

Run, and the fervour of the billows sweep

Under our keel—and we were clean away,
Laughing to see the foamheads sough and sleep,

As we kept pace with ocean all the day

And one long night of toil; until the sun
Lit on these cliffs his morning beams that play

With our sails' rent and rifted white, and run

Like summer lightning all about the deck,
And laugh upon the work my sword had done

When the feast turned to death for us; we reck

Nothing to-night of all that past despair:
Only to-night I watch your curving neck,

And play with all the kisses of your hair,

And feel your weight, as if you were to be
Always and always—O my queen, how rare

Your lips' perfume; like lilies on the sea

Your white breasts glimmer; let us wait awhile.
There is no breeze to drive us down to lee

On the cold rocks of yonder icy isle,
And your sire's passion must forget the chase
As I forget, the moment that you smile,

And sea and sky are brighter for your face—
I hear the sound of many oars; perchance
Your father's, but within this iron place

The heavy dragons will not dare advance
Where our light vessel barely skimmed the rock:
Their anger may grow cool, the while they dance

Like fools before the bar we crossed, and mock
Pursuit. Behold! one dragon strikes the reef
Breaks in the midst before the dreadful shock,

Shattered and stricken by the rousing sheaf
Of wild intolerable foam that breaks
Full on their stem: she sinks. One fierce foul thief

Springs desperate upon her poop; she shakes;
He strings a sudden arrow. Ocean sweeps
Over his curséd craft. The arrow takes

The straight swift road—Ah God!—to her who sleeps,
To her bright bosom as at peace she lies.
She is dead quickly, and the ocean keeps

The secret of my sorrow from her eyes.
I will not weep; I cannot weep; I turn
And watch the sail fill with the wind that sighs

A little for pure pity—I discern
The cowards shake with fear; the vessel springs
Light to the breezes, as the golden erne

That seeks a prey on its impetuous wings:
The reef is past; I crash upon the foe,
And all the fury of my weapon rings

On armour temperless; the waters flow
Through the dark rent within the side; I leap
Back to my dead love; back, desiring so

That they had killed me, for I cannot weep.
They killed her, and a mist of blood consumes

My sight; they killed my lover in her sleep.

The breeze has freshened, and the water fumes,
The vessel races on beneath the sky;
Beneath her bows the eager billow spumes.

I wonder whither, and I wonder why.
No ray of light this sea of blood illumines.
I wonder whether God will let me die.