

TERJE VIGEN

By Henrik Ibsen (1861)

Based on translation by Fydell Edmund Garrett and

Axel Gerhard Dehly

Updated: 11 February 2008

1

There lived a strange and grizzled man,

On a bare island far out.

He never harmed a single soul; On land

Or on sea thereabout;

At times fierce sparks from his eyes would light

When stormy weather arose

Then people said “he is mad all right”

And then there were few who felt no fright

When Terje Vigen came close

2

He was old when I saw him once: his craft

With fish lay moored by the quay,

His hair was white, but he sang and laughed,

And brisk as a boy was he.

He had a jest for each lass on the pier,

With children he was full of fun;

He sprang aboard and waved them a cheer,

Hoisted the stay sail, for home to steer,

The old sea-hawk, in the sun.

3

I want to relate what I have heard  
Of Terje from start to end,  
But if it should seem a bit dry at times  
On its truth you can depend  
The story does not on hearsay rely,  
But told by friends who knew him best;  
From those who at his bed stood by  
Who saw him at a ripe age, die  
And laid his body to rest.

4

He was in his youth a head-strong lad

Left home at an early age;

Of wrecks and of hardship his share he had

He learned how the sea can rage.

Jumped ship from his apprentice place,

Some thought he saw life as a toy

He wished for home and familiar ways

No one there knew the young man's face

He had left as a beardless boy.

5

Now he was handsome and tall and strong

With a look that friends might win;

His mother and father were dead years long

And so was all of his kin.

So Terje grieved for a day or two

Then shook his broad shoulders free.

With land beneath him no rest he knew;

Nay, better make his home on the blue,

On the vast and surging sea!

6

A year thereafter Terje wed.

The wooing was short and sweet.

He repented this, or so folk said,

It fettered his roving feet.

But the sailor stayed by his own fireside,

One winter of married bliss

The windows, polished with careful pride,

Showed flower-pots, and curtains neatly tied

In the little red cottage of his.

7

When the ice broke and the thaw-wind blew,

Off in a brig Terje sailed

In autumn, when southward the wild geese flew,

He saw them as northward he trailed

Then fell a weight on the seaman's mind;

He was conscious of youth and strength,

Returning from shores where the sun was kind,

A world of life and light lay behind,

And ahead the dull winter's length.



8

They anchored; off went his mates, full cry,

Their eager thirst to souse

He followed their path with a longing eye

As he stood by his quiet house.

He stole a look through the window pane,

There were two in the small homestead

His wife sat winding yarn on a skein,

And there by her side he saw it plain

A laughing baby on the bed

9

They say that Terje, from that first sight,

Grew suddenly quiet and grave.

He loved to rock his girl at night;

He toiled like a willing slave.

When the dance rang loud from the neighbouring farm

Through the Sunday evening air,

He sang the old sea shanties to charm

Little Anna, who lay on his arm,

And played with his dark-brown hair.

10

So years drew on to the bloody war

In eighteen hundred and nine.

Legends abound of hardship sore

There was hardly any grain at the time.

By English cruisers the ports were barred;

All despair and sickness bore:

The poor went hungry, the rich fared hard,

For Terje's strength, fate had no regard

And death stood at every door.

11

So Terje grieved for a day or two,

Then shook his broad shoulders free;

He turned to his friend both tried and true

The vast and surging sea.

On the western coast they are still beguiled

By this courageous deed of note

“When the wind,” they say, “blew a bit less wild,

Terje Vigen rowed, for his wife and child,

Oversea in an open boat!”

12

The smallest dory that he could find

He chose for the daring quest.

Mast and canvas he left behind;

So he thought his chances best.

He hoped he could reach the Danish shore

By rowing the wild waves' crest;

Bravely he'd face the breakers' roar,

But feared the English "man-o'-war",

With their eagle eyes in "the nest".

13

So Terje bent his strength to the oar,

And trusted himself to fate.

He came safe and sound to the Danish shore,

And loaded his precious freight.

God knows, his cargo was nothing grand,

And yet to him it was life;

For Terje came from a barren land,

And three small barrels of barley in hand

Meant survival for child and wife.

14

Three days and nights to his grueling task

Bent the sailor, strong and grim;

On the fourth, as sunrise flooded the sea,

He glimpsed an outline, dim.

Aye, peaks and vales - they were mountains true,

Not shifting cloud-banks grey;

But high over all the heights he knew

A familiar landmark, broad and blue,

And recognised where he lay.

15

The last few strokes! He was almost home

Then he'd be safely there.

His grateful eyes looked up from the foam

He came near to breathing a pray'r.

Then suddenly his hopes ran aground -

Startled - his face turned pale -

For close to the shore and inward bound,

A English corvette in the nearest sound

Was luffing with reefed-in sail.



16

His boat was spied; they promptly closed

The only escape in sight.

A fresh new wind from east now rose

As westward he took his flight.

They lowered their tender and on him turned –

He could hear the seamen shout –

Bracing his feet, the danger he spurned:

He rowed so the water spouted and churned,

And blood from his nails ran out.

17

They call it the Gosling, a hidden shoal

Just eastward of Homborg Sound;

In a sea-wind, heavy the breakers roll;

At two feet deep there is ground.

On the calmest day there's a cloud of spray

With a yellow gleam from below;

And let the swell roar loud as it may,

In-shore there is mostly a sheltered bay

Unswept by the undertow.

18

Straight for this haven his small boat flew,

Like an arrow shot from a bow;

In his wake a strong and well-fed crew

They laughed as they saw him row.

To God, Terje cried through the breakers' roar

Loud, in his awful dread

"Just there, on the famine-stricken shore,

My wife and child faint by the door

They are starving for lack of bread!"

19

But louder cried the pursuing ten,

In tune with the strong man's boast:

"The Almighty favors the Englishmen

When plundering Norway's coast!"

Then Terje's boat reached the hidden reef

But the tender struck it aft:

"Halt!" the loud command of the chief;

He raises an oar in that moment brief

And drives it in Terje's craft.

20

In comes the sea with an angry spate.

As the shattered timbers part;

In two feet of water the precious freight

Sank - but not Terje's heart.

Despite their weapons, he dashed through the crew

And over the gunwale sprang.

He dived, he swam and he dived anew;

But their boat got clear; when he came in view

Swords clashed and muskets sang.

21

They hauled him up; a gun salute roared

For triumph from the corvette.

Tall and proud when they took him aboard,

Stood the captain, not twenty yet.

Terje's small boat was his maiden prize

He stood with arrogant head

But there were tears in Terje's eyes

This strong man begged with pleas and sighs

As he knelt with a heart of lead

22

His pleading they contemptuously ignored

They mocked at his misery.

The easterly wind swept out of the Fjord

England's conquering son to sea.

Then Terje was silent. All hope blast.

No words had his torment now

It bewildered his captors to see how fast

A look that shot like lightning passed

And left just a somber brow.

23

Long years in the prison Terje spent;

As many as five, they say.

He dreamed of home till his back grew bent

And his dark-brown hair turned grey.

He held the one hope that yet was his,

In silence with stubborn grip.

Then came Eighteen Fourteen, with peace

The captive Norseman got his release,

Was sent home on a Swedish ship.



24

At his homestead pier, ashore he ran

With a pilot license in hand.

But few recognized the grizzled man

Who long ago left the land.

His house had been sold! what had become

Of the two he had tried to save?

"When the sailor left, on the sea to roam,

They starved; they found their eternal home -

In the parish field in a grave."

25

Years passed; a living his pilot trade won

on a bare island far out

‘Tis certain, he did not harm anyone

On land or on sea thereabout

At times fierce sparks from his eyes would light

When the roaring waves arose

Then people said “he is mad all right”

And then there were few who felt no fright

When Terje Vigen came close.

26

One evening, the pilots were all on alert.

There was wind, and the moonbeams lit

An English yacht that threatened to skirt

The rocks, with her canvas split.

The fluttering signal told her tale,

And mutely for help she cried;

There crept towards her a boat under sail;

Tack by tack it beat up the gale,

Till the pilot climbed up her side.

27

He grasped the wheel with a strong, calm hand

Brilliant turns the sea dog showed.

She answered the helm, stood off from the land,

While astern his boat was towed.

A Lord, with his lady and child, drew near;

The pilot touched hand to brim;

“I will make you rich for many a year

if out of the breakers you get us clear !”

But the pilot just stared at him.

28

He paled, - then he smiled, like one who found

An answer he long had sought;

He let the wheel slip, and fast aground

went the beautiful English yacht.

“She will never answer the rudder more.

No saving her here, - she will break.

To the boats! I know a safe channel inshore,

Let my lord and my lady with me go before,

And the others follow my wake!”

29

His boat cut a phosphorescent track

Towards land, with its precious freight.

Stern stood the pilot, tall and black;

In his eyes were triumph and hate.

To leeward the Gosling, his glance could note,

To windward, the sound in view;

He let sheet and tiller go, and smote

With an oar so hard in his little boat

That he drove the bottom through.

30

In came the sea, all surging white;

There was struggle and wild alarm.

But the mother lifted, pale with fright,

Her daughter high on her arm.

“Anna, my darling child!” cried she.

Then Terje shook to his soul!

He caught the sheet, put the helm-alee,

And the boat like a gull took the sea

As she struck on the hidden shoal.

31

She sank; but they were all safe at last

From the threat of the raging seas;

On a reef the shipwrecked souls were cast

The water came just to their knees.

Then the Englishman seemed to stagger and reel

He cried "It's just shifting sand!"

And the pilot smiled, "nay, do but feel -

A sunken boat with three barrels of meal

Is the shoal on which we stand."



32

Like a lightning-strike on his lordship's mind,

Flashed the half-forgotten deed;

Once more he saw, on the corvette's deck,

The captive - and heard him plead.

Then Terje Vigen said, "You flung away

All I had for a triumph sweet; -

A moment more, and the debt you pay!"

Ah, then 'twas the proud lord's turn to pray

At the poor Norse pilot's feet.

33

Terje, grasping the oar, stood still;

Erect as in youth he seemed.

In his eyes burned strength and dauntless will;

His hair in the sea-wind streamed.

“You sailed in your great corvette,” he said,

“I rowed in my tiny craft;”

For dear ones at home I toiled, half dead,

You thought it naught to take their bread

At my bitter tears you laughed.

34

Fair as a flower, is your lady grand,

Her white hand smooth and fine;

Hard work had roughened my good wife's hand,

But all the same she was mine

A gift from God is your blue eyed maid

With gold hair and skin unflawed.

No one's gaze to my sad Anna strayed

Like poor people's children, her face would fade

She ate at a starving man's board.

35

“But mark you, these were my riches on earth;

They were all that I called my own.

It weighted with you as of little worth,

But here were my heart’s seeds sown.

Now strikes the hour of settlement;

You shall pay, with a moment’s stress,

The long account of the years I spent

That greyed my hair, my shoulders bent,

And made wreck of my happiness!”

36

He seized her ladyship round the waist,

On his arm the little one tossed:

"Stand back, your lordship! Or you will taste

How your wife and child are lost!"

Poised to spring stood the Briton, aghast,

But his head felt weak and light;

He was gasping for breath, his eyes downcast,

And his hair, when the slow dawn came at last,

Turned gray in a single night.

37

Then Terje became calm and clear

His soul now was free and at rest;

He gave back the child, his eye shed a tear,

As his lips to her small hands pressed.

He exhaled like a captive freed from his chain,

And calmly he turned to speak:

“Now is Terje Vigen himself again;

Till now I had fever in every vein,

There was vengeance, vengeance to wreak!”

38

“The years in the prison’s choking night,

They sickened my heart and hope;

In despair there was no wrong nor right

Reason fled on that slippery slope.

But now we are quit. This day I bless

You pay me the debt you owe.

You took my all, and I give no less.

If ye think to come short, you must seek redress

From the God that made me so.”

39

At break of day all hands were safe,

In port lay the yacht and crew;

Of the night's strange tale they had naught to say,

Though the fame of the pilot grew.

His burden of pain, of grief and of hate,

Had been swept away in the wreck;

The spring had come back to Terje's gait;

Gone was the stoop that had been his fate

Since that day on the corvette's deck.



40

The English lord and the lady came,

And with them came many more;

They wrung his hand and they blessed his name,

As they stood in his humble door.

For rescue brave from the waves fierce dread

They thanked him; but Terje smiled,

And gently stroking the golden head,

“The one you should thank stands here,” he said,

“You were saved by the little child.”

41

When the yacht swung round the Hesnes Sound,

The Norse flag flew at her mast.

Just westward, surf marks the shallow ground:

Guns saluted as she passed.

Then Terje watched till the sail grew small

the old man's eyes were wet;

“Much have I lost, much gained withal,

Maybe 'twas the best for each and all

Dear God, we are ever in thy debt.”

42

He was old when I saw him once; his craft

With fish lay moored by the quay;

His hair was white, but he sang and laughed,

And brisk as a boy was he.

He had a jest for each lass on the pier,

With children he was full of fun;

He sprang aboard and waved them a cheer,

Hoisted the stay sail, for home to steer,

The old sea-hawk, in the sun.

43

In his hometown churchyard a grave you'll find

In a weather-beaten spot;

'tis all untended, the place not signed

Except the stone that marks the plot.

There "THAERIE WIIGHEN", in letters neat,

With the date of his death, is seen.

It lies where the sun and the sea-winds beat,

Coarse grass covering head and feet

But with wild-flowers in between.