The White Ship

There have been many tragedies in history. But few can be compared to the accident that took place on the 25th of November, 1120, a few metres off the coast of Barfleur, a small port on the Normandy coast. In a matter of minutes, the future of the English nobility of that time was reduced to ashes, in what was supposed to be a festive occasion. To place this tragedy in its context, we must recount the events leading up to this fateful evening.

The Norman Conquest of 1066 had succeeded in overwhelming the lands and lives of every soul in England, Wales and Scotland. Although it required many years to complete the invasion of Britain, by the end of the century, most of the British Isles had been quelled, even down to the resisting Welsh, and the ardent Scots. William, whose name had changed overnight from "the Bastard" to "the Conqueror", had gambled and won, by succeeding in invading a country only distant from the mainland of Europe by a mere 30 kilometres, a pitiful distance that had only been breached once before, more than a thousand years earlier, by the Romans.

More than 50 years after the Conquest, the situation in England had changed radically. Any resistance had been severely repressed by Williams forces. Few people have any knowledge of the brutality imposed upon this conquered land to silence any revolt. The rebellion of 1169 in the North of England was met with savage reprisals. Crops were burned, towns and villages were razed to the ground. There was not even a dog to bark to show unwillingness to Norman oppression. In fact, the starving people of Yorkshire were forced to eat dogs and cats in order to stay alive. Such were the cruelties imposed upon a rebellious nation, who refused to lie down to Norman occupation.

The French language was commonly used among the Norman nobility, a language still unknown to the lower classes. Normans and other mercenaries who had made the Conquest possible were showered with confiscated land and manors. English nobility was treated in a different manner by William. In true medieval style, the principle of the carrot was applied to this country. Some lands were restored to English nobles on the basic principles of "I will take it back, if you displease me in any way." And so the XIIth century opened in a strange manner with frequent displacements of Anglo-Norman nobility across the Channel, from France to England, and from England to France, as if the magic barrier of this stretch of water, which had resisted invasion for so long, had ceased to exist. The lucky Anglo-Norman nobility managed to hold estates in their native country, and had been "rewarded" with land in the other country, and made frequent trips from one side of the Channel to the other. The reigning King, at first William the Conqueror, and later, his son Henry I, would make frequent trips to and from France, to ensure that their affaires were in order.

Henry had had many illegitimate children, but he had a surviving son, William, who was destined to guarantee the continuation of his family. William, called the Aethling, would be an acceptable successor to his father in the future, because his parents had united both the Saxon and the Norman royal houses. William, even at the early age of seventeen, had fought alongside his father in claiming their rights to lands in

France. After defeating King Louis of France at the battle of Brémule, Henry began preparations to return to England with his court, and the hundreds of "hangers on", always eager to follow the King and his son William. Thomas Fitz-Stephen [1] offered his new ship, "La Blanche-Nef" (the White Ship) to carry the King and his entourage from Barfleur to England. Henry had already made his own plans, but accepted the offer for his son and their retinue. Orderic Vitalis tells us that much wine had been brought aboard the ship, not only for the revellers, but also for the crew. Henry left Barfleur first, and had a head start against the new ship. Fitz-Stephen ordered the crew to make all efforts to overtake the Kings vessel. As the new ship was by far a superior vessel, this would have been possible, but in their haste, and possibly under the influence of the wine, the crew were over confident, and the ship struck a submerged rock while exiting the port of Barfleur. In complete darkness, the ship sank quickly, and of more than 300 English and French nobles were drowned, leaving only two survivors [2]. The future king, William, so it is told, was able to escape in a small boat, but hearing the cries for help from his half-sister, Mathilda, he returned to save her, but perished when his tiny boat capsized.

Since the assistance that Geoffrey III of Mortagne and his brothers had given to William, father of Henry I, in his conquest of England, the relations between the Rotrou Family and the new Anglo-Norman royalty, had become close. Henry had given his illegitimate daughter Mathilda, in marriage to Rotrou III. Rotrou had become a friend and counsellor to Henry, during the time that Henry had spent in Normandy. When Henry decided to return to England with his family and royal following, it was because he had made peace with the King of France, and solved his major problems in France, at that time. We do not know why Rotrou did not accompany his wife to England. He was perhaps much occupied with local affairs of the Perche. And so Mathilda took the second boat, the White Ship, a special treat offered by her father, with her half-brother William, and so their destiny was sealed. Two sons of Julienne de Perche, the daughter of Geoffrey III of Mortagne, were also lost on this tragic night, where more than 300 of the cream of royalty and nobles of Normandy and England were lost.

Over in England, next day, King Henry became puzzled when the White Ship did not dock or even appear on the horizon. But the news of the catastrophe reached the nobles at his court soon enough, and everyone discovered they had lost family and friends. Stewards, chamberlains and cupbearers had all died – wives and husbands, sons and daughters. As the court mourned, no one dared break the dreadful news to the King, and a whole day and night went by before a young boy was finally pushed into the royal presence, weeping, to throw himself at the King’s feet. When Henry realised what had happened, he fell to the ground himself, grief-stricken at the news. He had to be shepherded away to a room where he could mourn privately – this stern Norman king did not care to display weakness in public

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[1] Thomas was the son of Stephen FitzAirard, the captain of the Mora, the ship which brought William the Conqueror over from Normandy, during his invasion of England in 1066, FitzStephen owned and captained the White Ship which at that time was docked in Barfleur harbour.

[2] A butcher from Rouen (Berold) and a French noble Geoffrey de l'Aigle (Rotrou III's nephew by marriage). However, Geoffrey (brother of Gilbert de l'Aigle who married Julienne de Perche, Rotrou's sister) has been defined by others, as having drowned on the White Ship.

The death of William [the Aethling] left Henry with only one legitimate child, a daughter called Matilda. Matilda was vey unpopular, as she was married to Geoffrey, Count of Anjou, a traditional enemy of Englands Norman nobles. Repercussion of this tragedy was incommensurable. Stephen of Blois, a relative of Henry I, usurped the position of Mathilda, Henry's daughter, to become King of England. In revenge, Mathilda and her husband Geoffrey, launched a long and devastating war against Stephen, in order to control the throne of England. This anguished period of English history was called "The Anarchy", the war between England and Normandy, which lasted between 1135 and 1154. Neither side could gain a decisive advantage, and the war dragged on for many years. Mathilda eventually succeeded in placing her son Henry to become the new King of England in detriment to the attempt by Stephen to put his own son, Eustace, on the throne. After the siege of Wallingford, Stephen and Henry agreed to a truce [3] When Stephen and Henry sealed the treaty with the "Kiss of Peace [4]", the city of Wallingford was assigned the Royal Charter for its help in reuniting the belligerants.

This catastrophe left a mark on English and French aristocracy for many a year. The House of Rotrou also suffered a great loss, for Mathilda, the daughter of King Henry was also the wife of Rotrou III. So saddened by the loss of his wife, Rotrou vowed that he would never remarry. However, after some years, he relented, and married Hawise de Salisbury, who gave him three sons, Rotrou IV, Geoffrey and Stephen. And so, by a stroke of fate, the House of Rotrou was given a new lease of life, by a tragedy off the coast of Normandy, during a winter night in November, 1120.

[3] The truce was known as the Treaty of Winchester (1153), where Stephen recognised Henry as his future heir. Stephen died one year later (1154), and the new king Henry II began the reconstruction of his kingdom.

[4] The Kiss of Peace was an ancient Christian custom which was later interpreted as a sign of peace in between enemies.

This is a poem written in 1878, about the White Ship Disaster

By none but me can the tale be told,
The butcher of Rouen, poor Berold.
(Lands are swayed by a King on a throne.)
'Twas a royal train put forth to sea,
Yet the tale can be told by none but me.
(The sea hath no King but God alone)

King Henry held it as life's whole gain
That after his death his son should reign.

`Twas so in my youth I heard men say,
And my old age calls it back today.

King Henry of England's realm was he,
And Henry Duke of Normandy.

The times had changed when on either coast
“Clerkly Harry” was all his boast.

Of ruthless strokes full many an one
He had struck to crown himself and his son;
And his elder brother's eyes were gone.

But all the chiefs of the English land
Had knelt and kissed the Prince's hand.

And next with his son he sailed to France
To claim the Norman allegiance:

And every baron in Normandy
Had taken the oath of fealty.

'Twas sworn and sealed, and the day had come
When the King & the Prince might journey home:

For Christmas cheer is to home hearts dear,
And Christmas now was drawing near.

Stout Fitz-Stephen came to the King;—
A pilot famous in sea-faring;

And he held to the King, in all men's sight,
A mark of gold for his tribute's right.

”Liege Lord! my father guided the ship
From whose boat your father's foot did slip
When he caught the English soil in his grip,

“And cried,” By this clasp I claim command
O'er every rood of English land!”

“He was borne to the realm you rule o'er now
In that ship with the archer carved at her prow:

“And thither I'll bear, an' it be my due,
Your father's son and his grandson too.

“The famed White Ship is mine in the bay;
From Harfleur's harbour she sails today,

With masts fair-pennon'd as Norman spears
And with fifty well-tried mariners.”

Quoth the King: “My ships are chos'n each one,
But I'll not say nay to Stephen's son.

“My son and daughter and fellowship
Shall cross the water in the White Ship.”

The King set sail with the eve's south wind,
And soon he left that coast behind.

The Prince and all his, a princely show,
Remained in the good White Ship to go.

With noble knights and with ladies fair,
With courtiers and sailors gathered there,
Three hundred living souls we were:

And I Berold was the meanest hind
In all that train to the Prince assign'd.

The Prince was a lawless shameless youth;
From his father's loins he sprang without ruth:

Eighteen years till then he had seen,
And the devil's dues in him were eighteen.

And now he cried: “Bring wine from below;
Let the sailors revel ere yet they row:

“Our speed shall o'ertake my father's flight
Though we sail from the harbour at midnight.”

The rowers made good cheer without check,
The lords and ladies obeyed his beck;
The night was light, and they danced on the deck.

But at midnight's stroke they cleared the bay,
And the White Ship furrowed the water-way.

The sails were set, and the oars kept tune
To the double flight of the ship and the moon:

Swifter and swifter the White Ship sped
Till she flew as the spirit flies from the dead:

As white as a lily glimmered she
Like a ship's fair ghost upon the sea.

And the Prince cried, ”Friends, 'tis the hour to sing!
Is a songbird's course so swift on the wing?”

And under the winter stars' still throng,
From brown throats, white throats, merry & strong,
The knights and the ladies raised a song.

A song,—nay, a shriek that rent the sky,
That leaped o'er the deep!—the grievous cry
Of three hundred living that now must die.

An instant shriek that sprang to the shock
As the ship's keel felt the sunken rock.

'Tis said that afar—a shrill strange sigh—
The King's ships heard it and knew not why.

Pale Fitz-Stephen stood by the helm
'Mid all those folk that the waves must whelm.

A great King's heir for the waves to whelm,
And the helpless pilot pale at the helm!

The ship was eager and sucked athirst
As a swimming bladder fills when pierc'd;

And like the moil round a sinking cup,
The waters against her crowded up.

A moment the pilot's senses spin,—
The next he snatched the Prince 'mid the din,
Cut the boat loose, and the youth leaped in.

A few friends leaped with him, standing near.
“Row! the sea's smooth and the night is clear!”

“What! none to be saved but these and I?”
“Row, row as you'd live! All here must die.”

Out of the churn of the choking ship,
Which the gulf grapples and the waves strip,
They struck with the strained oars' flash & dip.

'Twas then o'er the splitting bulwarks' brim
The Prince's sister screamed to him.

He turned about, still rowing apace,
And through the whirled surf he knew her face.

To the toppling decks clave one and all
As a fly cleaves to a chamber-wall.

I Berold was clinging anear;
I prayed for myself and quaked with fear,
But I saw his eyes as he looked at her.

He knew her face and he heard her cry,
And he said, “Put back! she must not die!”

And back through the flying foam they reel
Like a leaf that scuds in a water-wheel.

'Neath the ship's travail they scarce might float,
But he rose and stood in the rocking boat.

Prone the poor ship leaned on the tide:
O'er the naked keel as she best might slide,
The sister toiled to the brother's side.

He reached an oar to her from below,
And stiffened his arms to clutch her so.

But now from the ship some spied the boat,
And “Saved!” was the cry from many a throat:

And down to the boat they leaped and fell:
It turned as a bucket turns in a well,
And nothing was there but the surge & swell.

The Prince that was and the King to come,
There in an instant gone to his doom,

Despite of all England's bended knee
And maugre the Norman fealty!

He was a Prince of lust and pride;
He showed no grace till the hour he died.

When he should be King, he oft would vow,
He'd yoke the peasant to his own plough.
O'er him the ships score their furrows now.

God only knows where his soul did wake,
But I saw him die for his sister's sake.

By none but me can the tale be told,
The butcher of Rouen, poor Berold.
(Lands are swayed by a King on a throne.)
'Twas a royal train put forth to sea,
Yet the tale can be told by none but me.
(The sea hath no King but God alone.)

And now the end came o'er the waters' womb
Like the last great Day that's yet to come.

With prayers in vain and curses in vain,
The White Ship sundered on the mid-main:

And what were men and what was a ship
Were toys and splinters in the sea's grip.

I Berold was down in the sea;
And passing strange though the thing may be,
Of dreams then known I remember me.

Blithe is the shout on Harfleur's strand
When morning lights the sails to land:

And blithe is Honfleur's echoing gloam
When mothers call the children home:

And high do the bells of Rouen beat

When the Body of Christ goes down the street.

These things and the like were heard & shown
In a moment's trance 'neath the sea alone;

And when I rose, 'twas the sea did seem,
And not these things, to be all a dream.

The ship was gone and the crowd was gone,
And the deep shuddered & the moon shone:

And in a strait grasp my arms did span
The mainyard split from the mast where it ran;
And on it with me was another man.

Where lands were none 'neath the dim sea-sky,
We told our names, that man and I.

“O I am Godefroy de l'Aigle hight,
And son I am to a belted knight.”

“And I am Berold the butcher's son
Who slays the beasts in Rouen town.”

Then cried we upon God's name, as we
Did drift on the bitter winter sea.

But lo! a third man rose o'er the wave,
And we said, “Thank God! us three may He save!”

He clutched to the yard with panting stare,
And we looked & knew Fitz-Stephen there.

He clung, and “What of the Prince?” quoth he.
“Lost, lost!” we cried. He cried, “Woe on me!”
And loosed his hold & sank through the sea.

And soul with soul again in that space
We two were together face to face:

And each knew each, as the moments sped,
Less for one living than for one dead:

And every still star overhead
Seemed an eye that knew we were but dead.

And the hours passed; till the noble's son

Sighed, “God be thy help! my strength's foredone!—

“O farewell, friend, for I can no more!”
“Christ take thee!” I moaned; & his life was o'er.

Three hundred souls were all lost but one,
And I drifted over the sea alone.

At last the morning rose o'er the sea
Like an angel's wing that beat tow'rds me.

Sore numbed I was in my sheepskin coat;
Half dead I hung, and might nothing note
Till I woke sun-warmed in a fisher-boat.

The sun was high o'er the eastern brim
As I praised God and gave thanks to Him.

That day I told my tale to a priest,
Who charged me, till the shrift were releas'd,
That I should keep it in mine own breast.

And with the priest I thence did fare
To King Henry's court at Winchester.

We spoke with the King's high chamberlain,
And he wept and mourned again & again,
As if his own son had been slain:

And round us ever there crowded fast
Great men with faces all aghast:

And who so bold that might tell the thing
Which now they knew to their lord the King?
Much woe I learnt in their communing.

The King had watched with a heart sore stirr'd
For two whole days, and this was the third:

And still to all his court would he say,
“What keeps my son so long away?”

And they said:— “The ports lie far and wide
That skirt the swell of the English tide;

“And England's cliffs are not more white
Than her women are, and scarce so light

Her skies as their eyes are blue and bright;

“And in some port that he reached from France
The Prince has lingered for his pleasaùnce.”

But once the King asked: “What distant cry
Was that we heard 'twixt the sea and sky?”

And one said: “With suchlike shouts, pardie!240
Do the fishers fling their nets at sea.”

And one: “Who knows not the shrieking quest
When the sea-mew misses its young from the nest?”

'Twas thus till now they had soothed his dread,
Albeit they knew not what they said:

But who should speak today of the thing
That all knew there except the King?

Then pondering much they found a way,
And met round the King's high seat that day:

And the King sat with a heart sore stirr'd,
And seldom he spoke and seldom heard.

'Twas then through the hall the King was 'ware
Of a little boy with golden hair,

As bright as the golden poppy is
That the beach breeds for the surf to kiss:

Yet pale his cheek as the thorn in Spring,
And his garb black like the raven's wing.

Nothing heard but his foot through the hall,
For now the lords were silent all.

And the King wondered, and said, “Alack!
Who sends me a fair boy dressed in black?

“Why, sweet heart, do you pace through the hall
As though my court were a funeral?”

Then lowly knelt the child at the dais,
And looked up weeping in the King's face.

“O wherefore black, O King, ye may say,
For white is the hue of death today.

“Your son and all his fellowship
Lie in the Sea's bed with the White Ship.”

King Henry fell as a man struck dead;
And speechless still he stared from his bed
When to him next day my rede I read.

There's many an hour must needs beguile
A King's high heart that he should smile,—

Full many a lordly hour, full fain
Of his realm's rule and pride of his reign:—

But this King never smiled again.

By none but me can the tale be told,
The butcher of Rouen, poor Berold.
(Lands are swayed by a King on a throne.)
'Twas a royal train put forth to sea,
Yet the tale can be told by none but me.
(The sea hath no King but God alone.)

Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 1880.