

Who was Terje Vigen?

The famous poem by Henrik Ibsen.

by Stein Opsal



Drawing by Christian Krogh

The poem "Terje Vigen" is the dramatic saga of the Norse pilot from Grimstad, Norway, who tried to run through the English blockade of the Norwegian coasts during the Napoleonic Wars in 1807-14, to smuggle food from Denmark back to his starving family.

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Henrik Ibsen

Henrik Ibsen is the most famous Norwegian dramatist of all times. Some critics have ranked Ibsen as one of the most important dramatists in the world, only after Shakespeare, and may be Molière. His plays are translated into a lot of languages, and are read and played every year all over the world.



Henrik Ibsen was born in Skien in 1828, a city at the south-eastern coast of Norway. He lived there until he was 15 years old, and then moved to the small town Grimstad at the south coast. He lived in Grimstad for six years, from December 1843 until April 1850. Ibsen's plan at that time was to become a doctor. His father got him job as a pharmacist in Grimstad. At the same time he began writing plays.

In Grimstad Ibsen was inspired by the stories of the Norse pilots. He became a close friend to one of the oldest and most experienced pilots, who had lived a remarkable life and had exciting stories to tell the young writer. His name was **Svend Hanssen Haaø**, from the Haaø Island (Håøya). The story of his life became the most important source for Ibsen when he wrote his famous poem Terje Vigen.

The poem Terje Vigen

Among Ibsen's writings the poem Terje Vigen is a masterpiece and is extremely well written and picturesque. The story and setting is from the area around Grimstad under the Napoleonic Wars in the years 1807-1814. England started a blockade of Norway's southern coast because Denmark and Norway had agreed with Napoleon's France and Russia to close its ports against English commerce.

The poem Terje Vigen describes the dramatic saga of the pilot Terje who tried to run through the English blockade. In a small rowboat he made a desperate attempt to smuggle food, especially grain, from Denmark back to his starving family. He was captured and put to prison in England. After the Napoleonic Wars were over in 1814 he was released and found that his family had died of hunger. Some years later as a pilot at the coast outside Grimstad, he rescued an English Lord and his wife and little daughter. It turned out that the Lord was the commander of the ship that had captured him, and Terje now was in as position to revenge his own wife and little daughter.

The poem Terje Vigen was probably written in 1861, many years after Henrik Ibsen left Grimstad, and the poem was published in 1862. Henrik Ibsen said that there were "many persons like Terje Vigen" at the coasts, and thereby pointed out that Terje Vigen first of all is a poem and not a biography.



Drawing by Christian Krogh

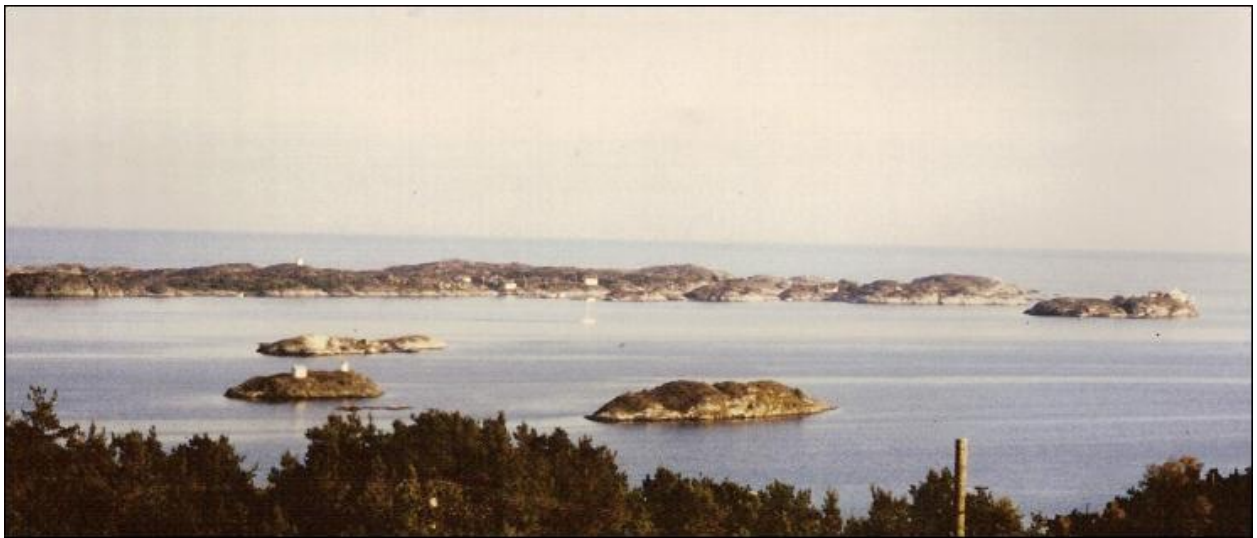
Svend Hanssen Haaø

The pilot Svend Hanssen Haaø was born at Haaø Island in 1778. His life contains most of the essential elements in the poem Terje Vigen. Henrik Ibsen never revealed if he had a model when he wrote the story of Terje Vigen, however all the most important specialists on Henrik Ibsen's life in Grimstad, around year 1900, were convinced that Ibsen's friendship with Svend, and Svend's remarkable life as a pilot at the coast, was the most important inspiration for Ibsen. Among them was the founder of the Ibsen House and Grimstad City Museum, the city treasurer Karl O. Knutson. Several historical documents from the period 1850 to 1930 reach the same conclusion, that Svend Hanssen Haaø was the model for Ibsen's Terje Vigen.

Svend Hanssen Haaø made several trips by rowboat to Denmark through the English blockade, in the years 1807-14, to smuggle food back to his family and friends in Grimstad. The Englishmen captured him as much as four times, and some of his crew were put to prison in England as in the poem. It is well documented that Henrik Ibsen and Svend Hanssen Haaø became close friends. They made a lot of visits to each other, both at Svend's house at the Haaø Island, and in Ibsen's apartment at Grimstad Pharmacy.

The poem Terje Vigen starts with the famous lines....

*There lived a remarkably grizzled man
on the uttermost, barren isle.....*



*The Haaø Island, the uttermost, barren isle, outside Grimstad.
The old pilohouses are still owned by the descendants of Svend Hanssen Haaø.*

The people at Haaø Island were pilots, farmers and fishermen, and were quite wealthy for the time. At the most there were 44 citizens at the island. The life as a Norse pilot at Haaø Island could however be dangerous when hard winter storms in the North Sea made the life as pilot challenging. In 1794, the worst year with a lot of heavy storms and bad weather, 8 pilots from Haaø Island drowned at sea. The life at the island never became the same again.

The pilot from Haaø Island

Henrik Ibsen was primarily a dramatist and poet, but he also made some paintings, among them a nice painting of his friend, the pilot Svend Hansen Haaø, sitting at Haaø Island watching over the sea after ships to help. The painting is called “The pilot from Haaø Island”.

This painting is placed in the Ibsen House in Grimstad, and is owned by Grimstad City Museum.



Pilot Svend Hansen Haaø.
Painting, 1849. 22,5x28
The Ibsen House and Grimstad City Museum
Painted in 1849 by Henrik Ibsen

In Terje Vigen's home



The national Norwegian newspaper, Nationen, in August 1927 wrote an article called “In Terje Vigen’s home”. The journalist Arnt Braathen told the story of the relationship between Henrik Ibsen and Svend Hanssen Haaø. Braathen lived one month close to the Haaø Island, and went on daily visits to Svend Hanssen Haaø’s grand-son with the same name – Svend.

Svend Janssen Haaø told the journalist lots of stories of his grandfathers’ life. A trip to Denmark for food in an open rowboat was quite a usual activity for his grandfather and some of the pilots at Haaø Island during the years of the Napoleonic Wars. Svend Janssen knew that his grandfather not only once, but many times, went by rowboat to Denmark, and that Svend Hanssen was captured four times by the Englishmen.

The grandchildren at Haaø told lots of details, also how their grandfather became Henrik Ibsen’s friend and model for the poem of Terje Vigen.

Svend Hanssen Haaø’s descendants were convinced that the story of his dramatic life, for Henrik Ibsen became the background and inspiration for the famous poem.

Terje Vigen
by Henrik Ibsen

English translation by John Northam

1. There lived a remarkably grizzled man
on the uttermost, barren isle
he never harmed, in the wide world's span,
a soul by deceit or by guile;
his eyes, though, sometimes would blaze and fret
most when a storm was nigh,-
and then people sensed he was troubled yet
and then there were few that felt no threat
with Terje Vigen by.

2. Distant the day, and that only day
I saw him with fish by the quay;
his hair was white, but he sang as gay
and blithe as a boy may be.
The lasses he used as a light banter toward,
he joined in the town-lads' talk,
he waved his sou-wester, and leaped aboard;
then homeward he sailed with the jib set broad
in sunshine, the aged hawk.

3. And now, all I've heard about Terje I'll try
to tell from the first to last,
and if it should sometimes strike you as dry
at least it is truly cast;
it came to me not as a firsthand piece
but from others, his intimates then,-
from those who stood by at his last release
and closed up his eyes in the sleep of peace
when he died at near three-score and ten.

4. He proved quite a scamp in his early days,
his family soon outgrew,
he learned about hardship's chastening ways
as youngest lad in the crew.
Later, jumped ship once in Amsterdam
but pined, in the end, for home,
and came on the 'Union', captain Pram;
but home there was no-one to care a damn,
he'd left it so young to roam.

5. Now he'd filled out, and he fairly shone
as a chap who would dress with pride.
But father and mother both were gone
and all of his kin be side.
He drooped for a while, but his miseries
where shed in a day or so.
With land underfoot he was never at ease;
no, better by far then to dwell on the seas,
on the mighty ebb and the flow.

6. The year that followed saw Terje wed,-
the die seemed hastily cast.
Folk thought he repented the thing he'd sped
that suddenly bound him fast.
So under a roof of his own he stayed
one winter in wild carouse-
though clear as daylight the windows displayed
their little curtains and blooms arrayed
in the tine red-painted house.

7. When thaw-winds ended the ice's drouth
then Terje's brig took to the main;
in autumn, when wild-geese were winging south
he met with their flying skein.
A heaviness fell on the sailor's breast;
he knew himself strong, in bloom,
he came from shores that sunlight blessed,
life lay astern with its fire and zest-
and ahead lay a winter's gloom.

8. They anchored, and off his crewmen went
with leave for a wild carouse.
He watched them with envy and discontent
while he stood by his silent house.
He stooped to peer through the curtain of white,-
indoors there were two bestowed,-
his wife sat and span in the peaceful light,
but in the crib held a rosy, healthy mite,
a baby girl, and it crowed.

9. That instant, and Terje's mind, men say,
turned sober upon the spot.
He toiled and he slaved, but at end of day
would be rocking his baby's cot.
On Sunday evenings, when the dance-tunes blare
wild from the nearest-by farm,
he would sing his happiest ditties there
where little Anna tugged his brown hair
and lay in his folding arm.

10. Life ambled along till the year of war
in eighteen-hundred and nine.
The tale's still told of what people bore,
where want and distress combine.
Cruisers from England blockaded each port,
by land there was dearth far and wide,
the poor people starved, and the wealthy went short,
two powerful arms were no longer support
with death and disease outside.

11. Then Terje drooped for a day or two
but his miseries quickly go;
he thought of a comrade, ancient and true,
the sea's great ebb and it's flow.
Out west men are still by his deeds beguiled,
his daring the legends still quote:
"When winds stopped blustering quite so wild
Terje Vigen roved for his wife and child,
crossed the sea in an open boat!"

12. The smallest dory there was to hand
he chose for his Skagen trip.
Sail and mast he left home on land,-
such gear he thought best not ship.
He reckoned, did Terje, the boat would steer
though seas ram a bit a-beam;
the Jutland reef was the devil to clear,-
but worse, he'd the English blockade to fear,
its look-out's eagle-eyed gleam.

13. Then trusting to fortune's grace profound
he smartly took on the oars.
At Fladstrand, reaching there safe and sound,
he gathered his precious stores.
God knows his cargo was nothing grand:
three casks of barley, that's all;
but Terje came from a wretched land,-
and here was the staff of life to hand;
and his wife and baby call.

14. He slaved on the thwart for three nights and days,
that brave and powerful man;
the fourth, at dawn, by sun's first rays,
a blurred, misty line to scan.
It wasn't the skeltering clouds he spied,
it was mountain and summit and brae:
but high above the ridges' pride,
Imenes-Saddle, blue and wide.
He knew then just where he lay.

15. Near home at last; a wretched time
he'd weathered with strength unflawed!
In hope and in trust his spirits climb,
he was ready to thank his Lord.
That instant the phrases froze on his lip;
he stared but his sighting was true,-
he could see, as the mist had relaxed its grip,
in Hesnes-sound lay an English ship
with canvas a-back and hove-to.

16. The boat was sighted; a challenged was heard,
and the handiest route was barred;
the dawn-breeze flickered and barely stirred-
so Terje went westwards, hard.
They lowered the jolly-boat over the side
he heard how the sailor men sang,-
he pressed on the ribs with his feet braced wide,
he rowed till the waters seethed to the stride,
and blood from his fingernails sprang.

17. Gjesling's the shoal with hidden top
just east of the Hombor sound.
An onshore wind makes an ugly chop,
and but two feet under, there's ground.
Its spraying foaming white, its spray flashing gold
the deadest of calms won't soothe;-
but heavy swells, run they never so bold,
shatter and break and lose their hold;
inshore it is most times smooth.

18. Inshore Terje Vigen's dory sped
like an arrow, through surf and spray;
but there on his track, by wake-waters led,
the jollyboat held its way.
'Twas then that he cried through the thunderous roar
to God in the depths of his dread;
'there on the most innermost beach a-shore
watches my wife at our pitiful door
and waits with our baby for bread!'

19. The crew's yell, of course,
drowned the prayer one voice cried;
it was Lyngør, happening once more.
Fortune preferred the Englishman's side
who preyed upon Norway's shore.
Then Terje rammed on the shelving top,
the jollyboat grounded as well;
the English officer shouted 'stop!'
He hoisted an oarbutt and let it drop
and stove in the dory's shell.

20. Rib was parted from shattered plank,
torrents of water gushed through;
in two feet depth all that treasure sank,
but Terje's defiance grew.
He hurled him self at the armed men
and cleared the far side with one bound,-
he dived and he swam and he dived yet again;
the jollyboat cleared; though he struggled like ten,
the sabres and muskets sound.

21. They lifted him out, and over the side,
the victory salvo rolled;
there on the poop-deck, stiff with pride,
the captain, an eighteen-year-old.
His first sea-encounter was Terje's boat,
his arrogance knew no check:-
but Terje knew any help was remote,-
that strong man collapsed, with sobbing throat
to plead on his knees on deck.

22. He offered his sorrow, they sold him their glee,
they bartered with scorn for prayer.
It blew from the east, so with speed to sea
stood England's conquering heir.
Then Terje fell silent; all hope was past,
he locked up his grief in his soul.
Yet non of his captors but marked how fast,
like warning of storm before the blast,
the clouds on his brow would roll.

23. He languished in prison for many a day,
for all five years, say some;
his shoulders rounded, his hair it turned grey
from dreaming about his home.
Something he brooded but hid like some hoard,
his only resource, from men's view.
Then eighteen-fourteen came and with it accord;
a Swedish frigate brought home onboard
Norways's prisoners, and Terje too.

24. Back at the jetty he came ashore,
a pilot by King's decree;
but few recalled in the greybeard they saw
the youngster who braved the sea.
His house was a stranger's; and how they fared
those two,- that was easily found:
'The husband forsook them, and nobody cared,
they came to the plot that the paupers shared
in the parish burial-ground.'-

25. Years went by, and he kept to his trade
as a pilot out there on the isle;
and never in world's wide span he made
foes by deceit or by guile.
His eyes, though, sometimes would blaze and fret,
when the reef to the breakers rang high,-
and then people sensed he was troubled yet,
and then there were few that felt no threat
with Terje Vigen by.

26. One moonlit night, with onshore wind,
there was stir wher e the pilots sit;
an English yacht being carried in
with mainsail torn and jib split.
The foretop dispatched with a flag of red
its wordless appeal abroad.
Close-reached to the weather, a cutter sped,
it tacked and it tacked, but it still drew ahead
till the pilot stood firm on board.

27. He seemed so assured, the grey-beard, so grand,
like a hero he seized on the wheel;-
the yacht responded, stood out from the land,
the pilot-boat towing at heel.
The lord, with his lady and babe she bore,
uncovered his head and came aft:
'Preserve us alive from the breakers' roar
I'll make you as wealthy as wretched before.'-
The pilot let go of the craft.

28. His cheeks, they went white, and his mouth
shaped a sound
like a smile that at last can break free.
They yacht was broached and ran squarely aground,
his lordship's queen of the sea.
'Abandon the ship! to the boats I say!
My lord and my lady, stay near!
We'll shiver to pieces - it's plain as day;
but there just inshore runs a sheltered way;
my wakeline will show where we steer!'

29. Phosphorus blazed as they sped along
towards shore with the precious load.
Aft stood the pilot, tall and strong,
his eyes, they were keen, and glowed.
To leeward he glanced at Gjæslingen's top,
and to windward at Hesnes' swell;
he let go helm and the foresail strop,
he hoisted an oarbutt and let it drop
and stove in the cutter's shell.

30. Sea rushed in and a foam-white spray - -
confusion swept over the wreck-;
but pale, the mother in stark dismay
had snatched up her child from deck.
'Anna, my child!' She cried out in dread;
the greyhaired man started and stared;
he caught up the mainsheet, he turned the boat's head,
it steadied, and trim as a bird it sped,
through surf and through spray it fared.

31. They grounded and sank; but calmness itself
inshore of the arc of rough seas;
under the surface a shoal of shelf,
the water but reached their knees.
The lord cried out: 'But look! look! -
this reef -it's shifting - it cannot be rock!'
The pilot smiled: 'here is no cause for grief;
a sunken dory supplies our relief,
three barleygrain casks our dock!'

32. A deed half-lost in the memory
like a lightning the lord's face swept-
he knew, now, the sailor that on his knees
had crouched on his deck and wept.
Then cried Terje Vigen 'You held my all
in your hand, it was spent on renown.
One moment longer and vengeance will fall - -
'Twas then that the pilot, the Norseman, stood tall
while the proud English lord knelt down.

33. But Terje stayed poised with the oarshaft's length,
as straight as he'd stood years before;
his eyes, they blazed with a frenzy's strength,
the wind at his grey hair tore.
'You sailed at your ease in your mighty corvette,
I rowed in my humble boat;
I toiled for my own in my forehead's sweat,
you robbed them of bread, and could mock me yet
and over my salt griefs gloat.

34. Your wealthy lady is bright as a Spring
and her hand is as soft as silk fine;
but my wife's hand was a calloused thing,
yet for all that she counted as mine.
Your child is golden, her eyes as blue
as a little guest of our Lord;
my daughter was nothing worth pointing to,
was thin, God help us, and sallow of hue-
what else can the poor afford?

35. See, those where my riches upon this earth,
it was all that I could reckon my own.
To you it appeared a trifle's worth
but it counted to me a throne.-
It's time for my vengeance to strike, beware,-
for your turn to suffer comes round
to match all the pain of long years' despair
that bowed down my shoulders and whitened my hair
and buried my joy in the ground!

36. Seizing the child from it's mother's care
while his left grasped her waist in a vice-
'Stand back there, my lord! On step if you dare,-
and your wife and child is the price!'
It seemed that the Englishman meant to raise
new war, but his arm lacked might; -
his breath was burning, unsure was his gaze,
and his hair,-it showed in the dawn's first rays-
turned grey in that one single night.

37. But Terje's forehead showed peaceful and fair,
his breast moved relaxed and free.
He set the child on its feet with care
and kissed its hands solemnly.
He breathed as though freed from a prison den,
his voice calm and level to say:
'And now Terje Vigen's himself again.
Like a rocky stream flowed my blood till then;
for I had to-I had to repay!

38. The years I spent in the prison's roar,
they bred my heart's sickness.
And after, I lay like a heathland straw,
I peered in a foul abyss.
But now it is over; we two are quit;
your debtor's not sly or low.
I gave all I had-and you squandered it,
and ask, if you think you've been dealt unfit,
ask God, who fashioned me so.'- -

39. When daylight had broken, then all was well;
long lay the yacht in the port.
The night's events they chose not to tell,
but Terje's great fame still caught.
Vanished the dreamer's clouded grey,
clear by one storm-night swept;
and Terje held straighter than most that day
the shoulders that bowed when, in deep dismay
he knelt on that deck and wept.

40. One day milord and lady came by
and many, many folk more;
they shook him by hand, bad 'farewell' and 'goodbye'
as they stood by his humble door.
They thanked him for rescue from storm's shrill blare,
for rescue from reef and from sea;
but Terje patted the child's long hair:
'No, rescue came in the nick out there
from this little mite by me!'

41. The yacht the headed for Hesnes-sound,
with Norway's own flag for wear.
And further west, near a foam-washed ground,
it fired a broadside there.
Then teardrops glistened in Terje's eyes;
he watched from the rising shores;
'Great are my losses, but great my prize.
Perhaps it was all for the best, in some wise,-
so thanks, God, are rightly yours!'

42. And such was the man on that only day
I saw him with fish by the quay.
His hair was white, but he sang as gay
and blithe as a boy might be.
The lasses he used a light banter towards,
he joined in the town-lads' talk:
he waived his sou-wester and leaped aboard,
the homeward he sailed with the jib broad
in sunshine, the aged hawk.

43. In Fjære churchyard I saw a pilot,
that lay in a weathered sward;
it looked all neglected, a mean sunken spot,
but kept still its blackened board.
It read 'Thærie Wiighen' in white,
the date his final repose had been.
He lay to the sun and the winds' keen weight,
and that's why the grass was so stubborn-straight,
but with wild field-flowers between.