100 POEMS

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I

HOW IT SEEMED TO US

A grey flat lying out against the sea,
    Where the strait guts are choked with weeded wood
And tangled cordage, moving aimlessly
Upon the lazy leaden ebb or flood –
A waste of stunted gorze and withered tree,
    Warped by a wind that chills the running blood
And crisps the slime masked puddles in the mud
A place of desolation verily!
But yet this place is dearer to us two
    Than any other spot we know on earth –
The North wind ushered in our passion's birth,
When by the waste my heart went out to you.
And the blind tide at ebb crawled back again
To scatter golden spume flakes at our feet,
And hail us – who had served a time of pain
And being free, had found deliverance sweet.
Our galley chafes against the Quay,
The full tide calls us from the beach
While far away across the sea
Is set the isle that we would reach
The haven where we fain would be.

Let us go forward — doubting not —
Into the grey waste flecked with foam
Adventurers that have no spot
So dear that they should call it home —
Lone men, of all men most forgot

Grim men, with some deep hidden sin,
About their bosom, haggard eyes
That shew the bitter soul within
Warped by a thousand miseries
Pale men, with drawn white lips and thin.

Old men, that lose their faith in good,
And so take service recklessly
In any strife by land or flood,
Wherever evil chance to be,
Prodigal of their life’s last blood

Young faces, very old with woe,
Strong men, in evil stronger still
These make our crew and so we go
Climbing each shifting waterhill
That heaves us upward from below.
Our galley lamps are bright with hope,
Our voices ring across the sea
In other lands is wider scope
For all our virile energy
Let be the past, leave we the quay
With firm hands on the tiller rope
In the hush of the cool, dim dawn when the shades begin to retreat
And the jackal bolts his lair at the sound of your horse’s feet;
When the great kite preens his wings and calls to his mate on the tree
And the lilac opens her buds ’ere the sun shall be up to see;
When the trailing rosebush thrills with the sparrows pent up strife,
Oh! a ride in an Indian dawn, there’s no such pleasure in life.

“There’s a bend on the (Ravee) river” by the ruined temple gate
There’s a halt in the flowering millet; some twenty minutes to wait
There’s a glimpse of a dark blue habit – a ripple of laughter sweet
And . . . only the mynas are witness how the Sahib and the Miss Sahib
meet —
There’s a whispered sentence of greeting as we canter over the grass —
Where the river runs to the sea like a river of molten glass
Ah! well it is to be living when hands and heart are good
To fetter a pulling horse or to love as a youngster should
When pay and the ponies prosper, and the bunniab cheap his gram,
And the munshi swears by the prophet, that the Sahib will pass his exam.
What matter if life has its sorrows while the Present sufficeth for me,
And I live a life in an hour by the bend of the blue Ravee!
With a spade I went to play
Hunting starfish on the shore,
Mother, that was yesterday
Or at most the day before.
You remember how I brought
To your lap the beasts I caught?

Judge of Ultimate Appeal,
Dear undoubted referee;
How could you endure the feel
Of the slab anemone
As I clamoured at your ear: –
“Does you like it, Mother dear?”

Bladder-wrack and red sea-grass,
Dogfish-purse and worm-worn wood,
Solemnly I bade you class
Asking: – “Mother, is they good?”
Then to make their merits clear,
“Cause I found ‘em, Mother dear.”

Time has whirled the spade away,
Turned to slang the baby-speech,
And the child of yesterday
Hunts, alone, a flinty beach –
Catches starfish as of old,
Gives ‘em not for Love but gold.

Drenched is he in green sea-pools
Seeming shallows, sounding deep,
And the wisdom of the schools
    Shows him not where lobsters creep;
Never word of pity flows
When the creatures tweak his toes.

Sponges gathered from the cove
    Where the gay Medusa stings,
Shells and cuttle make the trove
    That in heaviness he brings
To a Judge who doesn’t care
     Twopence for the whole affair.

Wherefore let the grown-ups slide
    We’ll go back to half past three,
Hunting starfish by a tide
    Always still for you and me.
Take my trove and – stoop more near: –
   “Does you like it Mother dear?”
What can I send to a sweet little sister
Kisses, on paper, are lukewarm stuff –
She knows, too well, how much I have missed her
To tell it again would be stupid enough.
Love, I have long ago sent to my sister
There’s little left over. Isn’t it rough.

Let me then think of a gift to my sister
I’ve a notion she wouldn’t like cheroots,
Black and knotty, her face to blister
And a gentleman’s saddle scarcely suits
The figure and style of a female sister
Any more than Manilla cheroots

Would she care for an army revolver my sister –
Bore 450, weight not small,
Many a time have its bullets missed a
Six inch mark on the stable wall
’Tis an unsafe gift to give to a sister
Who shuts her eyes when she fires at all.

Would she care for a grass-green parrot my sister?
Hundreds harry our gardens now,
Plucking our loquats just as they list, a
Band of Brigands whose fort is the bough –
I am rather afraid one would reach my sister
As the French of the school says – *Tray no gow*
Io triumphi! Eureka, my Sister
  Bueno! Bahut accha! ver guten! Tres bon(g)
I will send Trinchinopoly gold to my sister
  And finish my terribly tedious song
A goddess in gold shall be sent to my sister
  May she think of her “Brer” and be pleased with it long.