

*A Voyage To The Fortunate Isles*

Sarah M. B. Piatt

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The Fable of A Household

“ YES, but I fear to leave the shore.  
So fierce, so shadowy, so cold,  
Deserts of water lie before—  
Whose secrets night has never told,  
Save in close whispers to the dead.  
I fear,” one vaguely said.

One answered : “ Will you waver here ?  
As wild and lonesome as the things  
Which hold their wet nests, year by year,  
In these poor rocks, are we. Their wings  
Grow restless—wherefore not our feet ?  
That which is strange is sweet.”

“ That which we know is sweeter yet.  
Do we not love the near Earth more  
Than the far Heaven ? Does not Regret  
Walk with us, always, from the door  
That shuts behind us, though we leave  
Not much to make us grieve ?”

“ Why fret me longer, when you know  
Our hands with thorny toil are torn ?  
Scant bread and bitter, heat and snow,  
Rude garments, souls too blind and worn  
To climb to Christ for comfort : these  
Are here. And there—the Seas.

“ True, our great Lord will let us drink  
At some wild springs, and even take  
A few slight dew-flowers. But, I think,  
He cares not how our hearts may ache.  
He comes not to the peasant’s hut  
To learn—the door is shut.

“ Oh, He is an hard Master. Still  
In His rough fields, for piteous hire,  
To break dry clods is not my will.  
I thank Him that my arms can tire.  
Let thistles henceforth grow like grain,  
To mock His sun and rain.

“ Others He lifts to high estate—  
Others, no peers of yours or mine.  
He folds them in a silken fate,  
Casts pearls before them—oh, the swine !  
Drugs them with wine, veils them with lace ;  
And gives us this mean place.”

“ Well. May there not be butterflies  
That lift with weary wings the air ;  
That loathe the foreign sun, which lies  
On all their colors like despair ;  
That glitter, home-sick for the form  
And lost sleep of the worm ?”

“ Hush—see the ship. It comes at last,”  
She whispered, through forlornest smiles :  
“ How brave it is ! It sails so fast.  
It takes us to the Fortunate Isles.  
Come.” Then the heart’s great silence drew  
Like Death around the Two.

Death-like it was—through pain and doubt,  
To leave their world at once and go,  
Pale, mute, and even unconscious, out  
Through dimness toward some distant Glow,  
That might be but Illusion caught  
In the fine net of Thought.

As ghosts, led by a ghostly sleep—  
Followed by Life, a breathless dream—  
Out in eternal dusk that keep  
Their way somewhere, these Two did seem,  
Till the sea-moon climbed to her place  
And looked in each still face.

“ The worm,” she waking said, “ must long  
To put on beauty and to fly,  
But”——coming toward them sad and strong,  
There was a little double cry.  
“ What hurts the children ? They should rest,  
In such a floating nest.”

“ Oh, Mother, look—we all are gone.  
Our house is swimming in the sea.  
It will not stop. It keeps right on.  
How far away we all must be !  
The wind has blown it from the cliff.  
It rocks us like a skiff.

“ We all will drown but Baby. He  
Is in his pretty grave so far.

He has to sleep till Judgment. We  
Must sink where all the sailors are,  
Who used to die, when storms would come,  
Away off from their home.”

“ Lie still, you foolish yellow heads.  
This is a ship. We re sailing.” “ Where ?”  
“ Go nestle in your little beds.  
Be quiet. We shall soon be there.”  
“ Where ?” “ Why, it is not many miles.”  
“ Where ?” “ To the Fortunate Isles.”

“ Home is the best. Oh, what a light !  
God must be looking in the sea.  
It is His glass. He makes it bright  
All over with His face. And He  
Is angry. Pie is talking loud  
Out of that broken cloud.

“ The men all hear Him, in the ropes :  
He’s telling them the ship must go.  
They d better climb to Him.” Pale Hopes  
Looked from each wretched breast, to know  
If somewhere, through the shattered night,  
One sail could be in sight.

And Two, who waited, dying slow,  
Said, clinging to their desperate calm :  
“ We had not thought such wind could blow  
Out of the warm leaves of the palm.  
Strange, with the Fortunate Isles so nigh—  
Strange, cruel, thus to die.”

“ The Fortunate Isles ?” one other cried ;  
“ You knew we were not sailing there ?  
They lie far back across the tide.  
Their cliffs are gray and wet and bare ;  
And quiet people in their soil  
Are still content to toil.

“ Toward shining snakes, toward fair dumb birds,  
Toward Fever hiding in the spice,  
We voyaged.” But his tropic words  
Dropped icy upon hearts of ice.  
The lonesome gulf to which they passed  
Had shown the Truth at last.

That wavering glare, the drowning see  
With phantoms of their life therein,  
Flashed on them both. Yet mostly she  
Felt all her sorrow, all her sin,

And learned, most bitterly, how dear  
Their crags and valleys were.

Their home, whose dim wet windows stared  
Through drops of brine, like eyes through tears ;  
The blue ground-blossoms that had cared  
To creep about their feet for years ;  
And their one grave so deep, so small—  
Sinking, they saw them all !

To leave the Fortunate Isles, away  
On the other side of the world, and sail  
Still farther from them, day by day,  
Dreaming to find them ; and to fail  
In knowing, till the very last,  
They held one's own sweet Past :

Such lot was theirs. Such lot will be,  
Ah, much I fear me, yours and mine.  
Because our air is cold, and we  
See Summer in some mirage shine,  
We leave the Fortunate Isles behind,  
The Fortunate Isles to find.

A voyage to the Fortunate Isles, etc. (1874)

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### That New World

How gracious we are to grant to the dead  
Those wide, vague lands in the foreign sky,  
Reserving this world for ourselves instead—  
For we must live, though others must die !

And what is this world that we keep, I pray ?  
True, it has glimpses of dews and flowers ;  
Then Youth and Love are here and away,  
Like mated birds—but nothing is ours.

Ah, nothing indeed, but we cling to it all.  
It is nothing to hear one's own heart beat,

It is nothing to see one's own tears fall ;  
Yet surely the breath of our life is sweet.

Yes, the breath of our life is so sweet, I fear  
We were loath to give it for all we know  
Of that charmed Country we hold so dear,  
Far into whose beauty the breathless go.  
Yet certain we are, when we see them fade  
Out of the pleasant light of the sun,  
Of the sands of gold in the palm-leaf's shade,  
And the strange, high jewels all these have  
won.

You dare not doubt it, O soul of mine !  
And yet, if these empty eyes could see  
One, only one, from that voyage divine,  
With something, anything, sure for me !

Ah, blow me the scent of one lily, to tell  
That it grew outside of this world, at most ;  
Ah, show me a plume to touch, or a shell  
That whispers of some unearthly coast !

That new world, and other poems (1877)  
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Three Little Emigrants :

A Romance of Cork Harbour, 1884.

“ THE soldier's coat was English-red,  
And Irish-red was Katy's cheek :  
“ But he's a handsome boy,” she said,  
“ And it's to-night he means to speak.

“ Who's English-born is not to blame  
For that ! (He *would* become the green.)  
Sure, but it is a burning shame  
To think he will stand by the Queen.

“ He and Sir Garnet, side-by-side,  
Fought beautifully, though, out there,—

Faith ! he's a splendid scar to hide  
With all that elegant black hair !”

So Katy set her cap—as clean  
As snow, pink ribbons, snares of lace—  
And waited by the hedge unseen.  
(Now Katy, you will lose your place ! )

At last the moon peeped, with a smile.  
Into a face that she had met  
Among the palm-leaves by the Nile—  
A face the moon could not forget.

Upon the scarlet breast she spied  
The usual medal—there to tell  
How bravely those dark Arabs died ?  
But Katy heard—the nursery-bell.

“ Sure, that's the mistress. She's come down  
To be a-meddling,” Katy said ;  
“ And it's herself would say the town  
By this time ought to be in bed !”

“ Where are the children, Katy ?” “ Sure,  
It is myself that ought to know !  
The air to-night, ma'am, was so pure  
I stole outside a bit, and so——”

“ Where are the children ?” “ It's asleep  
They ought to be ! Wait, ma'am, I say.  
I've been a-thinking.—Could I keep  
The things I couldn't see away ?

“ Sure it's the fairies ! They have got  
The children ! It 's their way, it is.  
Faith, it's the priest could read you what  
They're up to, in that book of his !”

. . . There lay the little, lonely beds.  
Above them bent a whiter face.  
What hollows those three precious heads  
Had left cold in the pillow-lace !

Then, in an instant, what a flight  
There was of drowsy dreams close by !  
What whispers to the pitiless night,  
And to the strangling river nigh !

Shadows with lanterns walked without.  
(One almost heard the fall of tears.)

Within—within, I do not doubt,  
The night was as a thousand years.

Scarce since that wailing midnight when  
This quaint old rebel city heard  
The muffled march of Cromwell's men  
Was it so passionately stirred.

Down that black alley, where the face  
Of Edmund Spenser peers sometimes,  
Through rags and want, to see the place  
Where once a courtier writ his rhymes ;

Through Shandon's shadow, where the earth  
Lies lightly on his happy head  
Who set its bells to ringing mirth,  
The trouble, like an arrow, sped.

Even the Red Abbey's buried chime  
(Made of old silver and the best)  
Half-lost in legend, deep in time.  
Longed to be ringing with the rest !

. . . Meanwhile, where *were* the children ? They  
Had heard a whistle at the gate :  
“ That's Katy's sweetheart. She's away.  
Now we can go. It isn't late.

“ Make haste, or she will catch us !” So,  
Without the nurse, somehow, they dressed  
And started. Whither ? Did they know ?  
They started—to the mighty West !

Under the stars and hand-in-hand,  
Held by another Hand, they went  
Through the dim hours, as they had planned.  
To seek—another continent.

Ah me, what scent of sandal-wood,  
What glory of Atlantic gold.  
Had lured them, faintly understood ?  
What tales a bird of the air had told !

The charmed swans that haunt the Lee,  
A trifle fluttered, curious quite.  
Sailed from their stately sleep to see  
These pretty people of the night.

Meanwhile those blue eyes saw, no doubt.  
Some wonder-sights that pleased them well :

Strange starlight creatures glimmered out  
From wayside bloom and wayside shell.

From level strongholds banners flew,  
Yellow or purple. (Only flowers,  
You say ? ) And one low trumpet blew  
( *Was* it the wind, indeed ? ) for hours.

At Irish Tivoli they feared  
To pass the evergreen's chill glooms—  
For lo ! a knight with sharpened beard  
Nodded Elizabethan plumes ! [1]

He broke a leaf or two from trees  
He planted ghostly years ago,  
And hid them in his breast.—“ You'll please  
Tell us the way, sir, if you know.”  
“ I knew, my pretty folk,” he said,  
“ God speed you !” Oh ! his eyes were sad  
And still. And what a gracious head  
For any man to lose, he had !

They journeyed till they met the light.  
Never before was dawn so fair.  
When Monkstown Castle stole in sight,  
The sunrise birds were singing there.

Milkmen and market-women, gay  
With primrose-gold, stared blankly out  
At these wee wonders of the way,  
From donkey-carts, with smile and shout.

On Queenstown Beach, a sleepy maid  
Muttered : “ A pretty time to ring !”  
At last she shivered, half afraid.  
Into the hall : “ Sure, such a thing,”

She cried, “ was never heard of yet !”  
There at the door they stood, all three  
(Seven, five, and two their years) as wet  
With dew as night-drenched buds would be.

“ We want some bread-and-butter, though,  
And strawberry jam and tea and cake,  
If you have any. You're too slow !—  
We're tired, we've been all night awake.”

Ah ! lovely sash and nun-wrought lace,  
And fairy boots of pink and blue,  
How did you come to such disgrace ?—  
Whatever will your mother do ?



Far off as heaven the enchanted mast  
Was lingering on the island sky ;  
The empty seas lay veiled and vast,  
The *Shamrock* [2] gave the cruel cry.

“ We have to stay here now, that 's all ! ”  
The boy sobbed, and he hid his face ;  
“ The tender’s gone. I tried to call  
The Captain. It’s a splendid place !—

“ America, that 's what I mean.  
It is a splendid place. Why not ?  
Indians and bears and snakes !—I’ve seen  
The pictures. . . . *But the ship forgot !*”

Then through his great still tears and vain,  
The baby hero choked his sighs. . . .  
Did the grey Admiral from Spain  
Look Westward with such longing eyes

[1] Sir Walter Raleigh is said to have once resided at Tivoli, Cork.

[2] The name of a tender.

Child’s-world ballads : Three little emigrants, a romance of Cork Harbor, etc. (1887)

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#### A Funeral on The Lee.

[The body of Mr. Jerome J. Collins, of the Jeannette expedition (with that of his mother, who died during his absence in the North), was brought from the United States to Cork, and buried near that city on March 9, 1884, with imposing ceremonies. The funeral procession of boats along the river Lee from Queenstown to Cork, under the flags of England, Ireland, and America, was an impressive sight. The incident of the sealed letter deposited by the Mayor of Cork upon the coffin of Mr. Collins when lowered into the grave at the written request of an unknown person, who signed himself “ A Poor Irish Peasant,” who had been befriended by the dead man was a touching one.]

Two voiceless voyagers, in their shrouds, together,  
Met after years of death,  
Land at the old pier in the weird night-weather,

And in the rain-wet breath  
Of the March primrose. By the torches, lo !  
To the cathedral's stony gloom they go.

Then yearned you not, O mouth by famine  
smitten,  
O mouth by frost shut fast,  
To say somewhat that never shall be written ?  
O love, the first and last  
That men shall know, then yearned you not to  
break  
Your bands, and kiss your frozen boy awake ?

Soldier and sailor, priest and child and mother,  
Close to the coffin pass ;  
The barefoot tenant crowds his landlord brother.  
I hear the Requiem Mass ;  
Shall the dead hear it ? Though the thrush  
should sing  
Outside—the dead would know not anything.

O eyes come home again so still and hollow,  
There be fair sights to see  
Under the green flag which you blindly follow  
This day along the Lee,  
What time the harp thereon, for all I know,  
Wails wind-wrung trouble, ghostly-far and low.

Three nations walk behind in funeral fashion  
(O world of moth and rust !)  
Lo, Ireland to her bosom in compassion  
Takes back her gift of dust,  
And England, by her sister-island, wears  
The show of sorrow which mayhap she shares.

And there, too, from far over seas, O sweetest,  
O best beloved of all,  
O Land of Promise—not yet broken !—thou  
meetest  
The bearers of the pall.  
Under thy saddened stars I see thee wait  
Alone where some must love and some must  
hate.

Ashes to ashes ! No, not yet. A debtor  
Long at the Mayor's door  
Waits in the storm and holds a black-sealed letter  
For folded hands. What more ?  
“ From a poor peasant, one to whom the dead  
Was a fast friend,” the superscription read.

What gracious record of past pity sleepeth  
Hid therein no man knows.  
Will that gray graveyard, when the Spring-sun  
keepeth  
Its bright tryst with the rose,  
Bud with strange flowers and sing with other  
birds  
Than men have heard, born of those buried  
Words ?

An Irish wild-flower, etc. (1891)

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