

THE SEA-FARER

The poem translated below, has been interpreted as a dialogue between a weather-beaten old sailor and a youth eager to go to sea. The parts are not assigned in the original MS., and the only warrant for our dialogue form lies in the structure of the poem itself.

The Old Sailor:

True is the tale that I tell of my travels,
5 Sing of my sea-faring sorrows and woes;
Hunger and hardship's heaviest burdens,
Tempest and terrible toil of the deep,
Daily I've borne on the deck of my boat.
Fearful the welter of waves that encompassed me,
10 Watching at night on the narrow bow,
As she drove by the rocks, and drenched me with
spray.

Fast to the deck my feet were frozen,
Gripped by the cold, while care's hot surges
My heart o'erwhelmed, and hunger's pangs
15 Sapped the strength of my sea-weary spirit.

Little he knows whose lot is happy,
Who lives at ease in the lap of the earth,
How, sick at heart, o'er icy seas,
Wretched I ranged the winter through,
20 Bare of joys, and banished from friends,

Hung with icicles, stung by hail-stones. (17)
Nought I heard but the hollow boom
Of wintry waves, or the wild swan's whoop.
For singing I had the solan's scream;
5 For peals of laughter, the yelp of the seal;
The sea-mew's cry, for the mirth of the mead-hall.
Shrill through the roar of the shrieking gale
Lashing along the sea-cliff's edge,
Pierces the ice-plumed petrel's defiance,
10 And the wet-winged eagle's answering scream.

Little he dreams that drinks life's pleasure,
By danger untouched in the shelter of towns
Insolent and wine-proud, how utterly weary
Oft I wintered on open seas.
15 Night fell black, from the north it snowed
Harvest of hail.

The Youth:

Oh wildly my heart
Beats in my bosom and bids me to try
The tumble and surge of seas tumultuous,
20 Breeze and brine and the breakers' roar.
Daily, hourly, drives me my spirit
Outward to sail, far countries to see.
Liveth no man so large in his soul,
So gracious in giving, so gay in his youth,
25 In deeds so daring, so dear to his lord,
But frets his soul for his sea-adventure,
Fain to try what fortune shall send.
Harping he heeds not, nor hoarding of treasure;
Nor woman can win him, nor joys of the world.
30 Nothing doth please but the plunging billows;

Ever he longs, who is lured by the sea. (47)
Woods are abloom, the wide world awakens,
Gay are the mansions, the meadows most fair;
These are but warnings, that haste on his journey
5 Him whose heart is hungry to taste
The perils and pleasures of the pathless deep.

The Old Sailor:

Dost mind the cuckoo mournfully calling?
The summer's watchman sorrow forbodes.
What does the landsman that wantons in luxury,
10 What does he reck of the rough sea's woe,
The cares of the exile, whose keel has explored
The uttermost parts of the ocean-ways!

The Youth:

Sudden my soul starts from her prison-house,
Soareth afar o'er the sounding main;
15 Hovers on high, o'er the home of the whale;
Back to me darts the bird-sprite and beckons,
Winging her way o'er woodland and plain,
Hungry to roam, and bring me where glisten
Glorious tracts of glimmering foam.
20 This life on land is lingering death to me,
Give me the gladness of God's great sea. (66)

The Seafarer *

A song I sing of my sea-adventure,
The strain of peril, the stress of toil,
Which oft I endured in anguish of spirit
Through weary hours of aching woe.
My bark was swept by the breaking seas;
Bitter the watch from the bow by night
As my ship drove on within sound of the rocks.
My feet were numb with the nipping cold,
Hunger sapped a sea-weary spirit,
And care weighed heavy upon my heart.

Little the landlubber, safe on shore,
Knows what I've suffered in icy seas
Wretched and worn by the winter storms,
Hung with icicles, stung by hail,
Lonely and friendless and far from home.
In my ears no sound but the roar of the sea,
The icy combers, the cry of the swan;
In place of the mead-hall and laughter of men
My only singing the sea-mew's call,
The scream of the gannet, the shriek of the gull;
Through the wail of the wild gale beating the bluffs
The piercing cry of the ice-coated petrel,
The storm-drenched eagle's echoing scream.
In all my wretchedness, weary and lone,
I had no comfort of comrade or kin.

Little indeed can he credit, whose town-life
Pleasantly passes in feasting and joy,
Sheltered from peril, what weary pain
Often I've suffered in foreign seas.
Night shades darkened with driving snow
From the freezing north, and the bonds of frost
Firm-locked the land, while falling hail,

* *The Seafarer* 1-64.

Coldest of kernels, encrusted earth.

Yet still, even now, my spirit within me
Drives me seaward to sail the deep,
To ride the long swell of the salt sea-wave.
Never a day but my heart's desire
Would launch me forth on the long sea-path,
Fain of far harbors and foreign shores.
Yet lives no man so lordly of mood,
So eager in giving, so ardent in youth,
So bold in his deeds, or so dear to his lord,
Who is free from dread in his far sea-travel,
Or fear of God's purpose and plan for his fate.
The beat of the harp, and bestowal of treasure,
The love of woman, and worldly hope,
Nor other interest can hold his heart
Save only the sweep of the surging billows;
His heart is haunted by love of the sea.

Trees are budding and towns are fair,
Meadows kindle and all life quickens,
All things hasten the eager-hearted,
Who joyeth therein, to journey afar,
Turning seaward to distant shores.
The cuckoo stirs him with plaintive call,
The herald of summer, with mournful song,
Foretelling the sorrow that stabs the heart.
Who liveth in luxury, little he knows
What woe men endure in exile's doom.

Yet still, even now, my desire outreaches,
My spirit soars over tracts of sea,
O'er the home of the whale, and the world's expanse.
Eager, desirous, the lone sprite returneth;
It cries in my ears and it urges my heart
To the path of the whale and the plunging sea.