

POETRY OF THE SEA.

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In precisely the same way, I suppose, as the best journalists—i. e., those who give the most vivid impressions of what they have seen to their readers — are men who have apparently devoted a wonderfully short space of time to their observations, so it would seem that for the writing of real sea poetry an extended acquaintance with maritime conditions is not merely unnecessary but hampering. I come to this conclusion reluctantly, but inevitably, for in common with all reading seafarers I have noticed that we may look in vain for sea poetry from sailors. Sailors have written verse, Falconer's "Shipwreck" to wit, but between that peculiar poem and the marvellous majesty, profound insight, and truly amazing knowledge of deep-sea secrets exhibited in the "Ancient Mariner" how great a gulf is fixed!

"Only those who brave its dangers comprehend its mystery" rings true, and yet it is no less true that Longfellow, very little more of a sailor than Coleridge, has also interpreted the mystery of the mighty ocean in a manner (most sailors think) only second in true poetic power to that of Coleridge. To the well-read sailor — and there are far more of him than one would imagine, remembering the poverty of his literary output — Coleridge always stands easily highest, Longfellow next, and Byron next as the interpreters of the voices of the sea. The Biblical allusions to the sea in the Old Testament (always in terms of poetry, be it remembered, the inspired writers seeming only able to express themselves rhythmically about the sea) stand on a plane of their own. Their truth, their stupendous power, is felt, as the voices of the sea are felt, rather than heard, but it is only seldom that the sailor obtains any enjoyment from them. They are overwhelming. Something

of sacrilege seems involved in the attempt to enjoy them as literature, and also, although I have only twice or thrice heard this mooted, there certainly is a feeling that grand as the passages are, they have lost immeasurably by translation. That could they but be read, with full comprehension, in the original, their splendour would be beyond all ordinary thought.

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And yet all the great masterpieces of prose and poetry are distinguished by clarity of expression, simplicity of diction. That is, if by masterpieces we understand those works that have gone down deepest into the hearts of the greatest multitude of people. Fords that a babe can wade, depths in which a mammoth may disport himself are these massive works of the giants of literature. In them the sailor luxuriates, pointing out their beauties to his shipmates in quaint language, and bewailing his inability to go and deal likewise with the glories amidst which he lives and moves and has his being.

There is one poet, however, over whose claim to the proud title there is much controversy among experts, who does certainly come nearer to satisfying the primitive needs of the sailor in the matter of adequate sea-expression than either of the three first mentioned. And yet he is placed in a class by himself—he does not appear to claim precedence to the sailor's mind among other poets. Really I think that sailors are apt to claim Rudyard Kipling as one of themselves — I know for a fact that any sailor five minutes in his company will find his tongue wagging freely in familiar nautical jargon and will never dream of stopping to explain. Yet Kipling is no seaman. He has never spent the long, long hours of the night watches on board of a sailing ship in a stark calm, or with all sail