A Voyage To The Fortunate Isles

Sarah M. B. Piatt

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 valley's 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,
Haw 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.

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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The Fortunate Isles or Isles of the Blessed (Greek: μακάων νῆσοι, makáōn nēsoi) were semi-legendary islands in the Atlantic Ocean, variously treated as a simple geographical location and as a winterless earthly paradise inhabited by the heroes of Greek mythology. The related idea of Brasil and other islands in Celtic mythology are sometimes conflated with the Greek sense of islands in the western Mediterranean: Sicily, the Aeolian Islands, the Aegadian Islands or other smaller islands of Sicily.