

THE FORGE



LONG and narrow shop, magenta black
Mottled with rose ; ten fires along one wall.
Faint day comes through the skylight overhead
Smoke-grimed to orange, when it comes at all.
The blast shut off for breakfast, fires are slack.

The buzzing neighbouring engine quieted,
You hear the mates talking from berth to berth ;
The silence is complete. The seldom noises
Reverberate as, quaintly, under earth
The graves repeat the sayings of the dead.

Contrasted with the metals, human voices
Sound hoarse and soft, as out of hollowed wood.
Their beverage made : of boiling water, stained
With tea and sugar, they prepare their food :
“ Tiger,” to envy, even where there choice is ;

Here and now, truly, not to be disdained.
Hear in what manner it is perfected ;
How old world 'tis. The anvil polished bright
With leather skirt, two hearty chunks of bread,
Protecting ivory bacon, purple veined,

Are set thereon with caution ; and the wight
Who owns the morsel, passes over it
A piece of red-hot iron till 'tis brown.
It cleans the tongue to hear it fizzle and spit,
If two hours' work vouchsafe no appetite.

This done, the smith has only to sit down
To eat his greasy “ tiger,” and drink off

His sweet, strong tea. This, being yet too hot,
Hangs in the rust-red water of the trough
To cool. The smith is sleeping, with a frown

Upon his shapeless features. This is not
The ballad wag they tell of: at his best
Maimed in his poor hands, wry, with crooked back,
Great-armed, bow-legged, and narrow in the chest.
It bends a man to make no matter what.

A rumour stirs, a hum, the blast comes back ;
Shadows on wall and roof start forth and die.
Rattle of tongs, slosh, fume ; unlovely night
Grown Chinese hell, to seeming, suddenly,
Where strange gods heap the fire and trim the rack.

Half shapes of light leap higher than man's height
Out from the blackness and as soon subside,
Flame-flesh-shapes, sweat-swamped clinging cotton swathed,
In violent action, following the guide
Of the smith's gesture bidding where to smite.

The smitten steel complains, all bruised and scathed,
From thud to bark, from bark to metal scream ;
Through ordeal of the fire and scaling trough,
To wake it from its long-embowelled dream,
To uses brought, flame-licked and torture-bathed.

This the arena wherein stubborn stuff
With man locks strength ; where elements dispute
The mastery, where breath and fire bear blaze,
Where sullen water aids, to quell the brute
Earth into shape, to make it meek enough.

And this day is the type of many days.

JOHN GRAY