

THE FLYING FISH

I

MYSELF am Hang, the buccaneer,
Whom children love and brave men fear,
Master of courage, come what come,
Master of craft and called Sea-Scum ;

Student of wisdom and waterways,
Course of moons and the birth of days :
To him in whose heart all things be
I bring my story from the sea.

The same am I as that sleek Hang,
Whose pattens along the stone quay clang
In sailing time ; whose pile is high
In the mart when the merchants come to buy ;

Am he who lounges, blue-cotton dressed,
With petticoat, and a sailor's vest ;
Am he who dissimulates therein
The beard you see adorn my chin ;

Am he who cumpers his lowly hulk
With refuse bundles of feeble bulk ;
Turns sailor's eyes to the weather skies ;
Bows low to the master of merchandise ;

Who hoists his sail with the broken slats ;
Whose lean crew is scarcely food for his rats ;
Am he who creeps from tower-top ken
And utmost vision of all men.

Ah then ! am he who changeth line,
And no man knoweth that course of mine ;
Am he, sir Sage, who sails to the sea
Where an island and other wonders be.

After six days we sight the coast ;
And my palace top ; (should the sailor boast)
Sail rattles down ; and then we ride,
Mean junk and proud, by my palace side.

For there lives a junk in that ancient sea,
Where the gardens of Hang and his palace be ;
O my fair junk ! which once aboard
The pirate knows no living lord.

Its walls are painted water-green
Like the green sea's self, both shade and sheen,
Lest any mark it. (The pirate's trade
Is to hover swiftly and make afraid.)

Its sails are fashioned of lithe bamboo,
All painted blue as the sky is blue,
So it be not seen till the prey be nigh.
(Hang loves not that the same should fly.)

In midst of the first a painted sun
Gleams gold like the celestial yon.
In midst of the second a tender moon,
That a lover might kiss his flute and swoon,

Or maid touch lute at sight of the third,
Pictured with all the crystal herd.
So the silly ships are mazed at sight
Of night by day and day by night :

For wind and water a goodlier junk
Than all that have ever sailed or sunk.
Which junk was theirs : none fiercer than
My fathers since the fall of man.

So cotton rags lays Hang aside ;
Lays bare the sailor's gristly hide ;
He wraps his body in vests of silk,
Ilk is as beautiful as ilk.

Then Hang puts on his ancient mail,
Silver and black, and scale on scale
Like dragons', which his grandsire bore
Before him, and his grandsire before.

He binds his legs with buskins grim,
Tawny and gold for the pride of him.
His feet are bare, like his who quelled
The dragon ; his feet are feet of eld.

His head is brave with a lac wrought casque,
The donning which is a heavy task ;
Its lappets are spiked like a dolphin's fin ;
'Tis strapped with straps of tiger skin.

The passions of his fathers whelm
The heart of Hang when he wears their helm.
Then Hang grows wrinkled betwixt his eyes,
He frowns like a devil, devilwise.

His eyeballs start, his mask is red
Like to the last judge of the dead ;
His nostrils gape ; his mouth is the mouth
Of the fish that swims in the torrid south.

His beard the pirate Hang lets flow.
He lays his hand on his father's bow ;
Wherewith a cunning man of strength
Might shoot a shaft the vessel's length.

I have another, of crimson lac,
Of a great man's height, so the silk be slack.
The bolt departs with a brazen clang.
'Tis drawn with the foot, and the foot of Hang.

Such house and harness become me when
I wait upon laden merchant men ;
'Twixt tears and the sea, 'twixt brine and brine,
They shudder at sight of me and mine.

Of the birds that fly in the furthest sea,
Six are more strange than others be ;
Under its tumble, among the fish,
Six are a marvel passing wish.

First is a hawk, exceeding great ;
He dwelleth alone, he hath no mate ;
His neck is bound with a yellow ring ;
On his breast is the crest of an ancient king.

The second bird is exceeding pale,
From little head to scanty tail ;
She is striped with black on either wing,
Which is roselined, like a costly thing.

Though small the bulk of the brilliant third,
Of all blue birds 'tis the bluest bird.
They fly in bands ; and, seen by day,
By the side of them the sky is gray.

I mind the fifth, I forget the fourth,
Save that it comes from east and north ;
The fifth is an orange, white-billed duck ;
He diveth for fish like the god of Luck ;

He hath never a foot on which to stand,
For water yields and he loves not land.
This is the end of many words,
Save one, concerning marvellous birds.

The great-faced dolphin is first of fish,
He is devil-eyed and devilish.
Of all the fishes is he most brave :
He walks the sea like an angry wave.

The second, the fishes call their lord.
Himself a bow, his face is a sword :
His sword is armed with a hundred teeth :
Fifty above and fifty beneath.

The third hath a scarlet suit of mail.
The fourth is naught but a feeble tail.
The fifth is a whip with a hundred strands ;
And every arm hath a hundred hands.

The last strange fish is the last strange bird.
Of him no sage hath ever heard ;
He roams the sea in a gleaming horde,
In fear of the dolphin and him o' the sword.

He leaps from the sea with a silken swish.
He beats the air, does the flying fish.
His eyes are round with excess of fright,
Bright as the drops of his pinions' flight.

In sea and sky he hath no peace,
For the five strange fish are his enemies.
And the five strange fowls keep watch for him.
They know him well by his crystal gleam.

Oftwhiles, sir Sage, on my junk's white deck,
Have I seen this fish-bird come to wreck ;
Oftwhiles (fair deck !) 'twixt bow and poop,
Have I seen that piteous skyfish stoop.

Scaled bird, how his snout and gills dilate,
All quivering and roseate!
He pants in crystal and mother of pearl,
While his body shrinks and his pinions furl.

His beauty passes like bubbles blown ;
The white bright bird is a fish of stone.
The bird so fair, for its putrid sake,
Is flung to the dogs in the junk's white wake.

II

Have thought, son Pirate, some such must be
As the beast thou namest in yonder sea.
Else, bring me a symbol from nature's gear
Of aspiration born of fear.

Hast been, my son, to the doctor's booth
Some day when Hang had a qualm to soothe?
Hast noted the visible various sign
Of each flask's virtue, son of mine?

Rude picture of insect seldom found,
Of plant that thrives in marshy ground,
Goblin of east wind, fog or draught,
Sign of the phial's potent craft?

'Tis even thus where the drug is sense,
Where wisdom is more than frankincense,
Wit's grain than a pound of pounded bones ;
Where knowledge is redder than ruby stones.

Hast thou marked how poppies are sign of sin ?
How bravery's mantle is tiger skin ?
How earth is dark and dumb with care ?
How song is the speech of all the air ?

(Thou hast ? Thou'rt wise in thy sailor kind.
Not every fruit is known by its rind.)
I've a truth distilled and strained and casked ;
Thou hast brought the symbol it sorely asked.

(Thou'rt wise, son Hang ; mayhap thou know'st
Though truth be much, its sign is most ?)
How deep man's heart, in its symbol truth
Is hidden ;—and this is the art of sooth.

A tree is the sign most whole and sure
Of aspiration plain and pure,
Of the variation one must wend
In search of the sign to the world's wide end.

Thy fish is the fairest of all that be
In the throbbing heart of yonder sea.
He says in his iridescent heart :
I am gorgeous-eyed and a fish apart ;

My back has the secret of every shell,
The Hang of fishes knows me well;
Scales of my breast are softer still,
The ugly fishes devise my ill.

He prays the maker of water-things
Not for a sword but cricket's wings ;
Not to be one of the sons of air ;
To be rid of the water is all his prayer.

All his hope is a fear-whipped whim,
All directions are one to him.
There are seekers of wisdom no less absurd,
Son Hang, than thy fish that would be a bird.

JOHN GRAY.