

Classic Poetry Series

Ernest Favenc

- poems -

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Song of the Torres Strait Islands

Bold Torres, the sailor, came and went,
with his swarthy, storm-worn band,
he saw Saavedra's Isle to north-
to south a loom of land.
He left unknowing his name would live
through ages with big fate,
as the first to stem with broad-bowed ship
the wash of the Northern Strait.

Round the western coast the Dutch ships crept,
seeking the hidden way;
some left their bones on that bare, west coast,
and the others sailed away.
Turned back, turned back, by reef and shoal,
twin guards of the narrow gate-
the path of the sun from the eastern seas-
they were mocked by the Northern Strait.

Year in, year out, the monsoons swept
o'er the isles of the coral shore,
The savage tossed in his frail canoe,
but the white man came no more.
No sail in sight at the flash of dawn!
No sail at the gloaming late!
Silent and still was the lonely pass-
Unsought was the Northern Strait.

A rattle of arms and a roll of drums,
and the meteor flag flies free,
as an English voice proclaims King George
Lord of the tropic sea.
The parrots scream as the volleys flash;
the gulls their haunts vacate;
and the 'south-east' fills the 'Endeavours' sails
as she heads through the Northern Strait.

And ever since then has our watch been kept
o'er the ships in the narrow way,
where the smoking funnels flare by night,
and the house-flags flaunt by day.
Ever the same strong south-east blows,
and ever we watch and wait,
the wardens we, in Australia's name,
the guard of the Northern Strait.

Ernest Favenc