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A Man's Descent to Hell

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A Man's Descent to Hell

We'd never seen the man before,
whose grizzled beard was full.
But he captured every barroom ear,
as he teetered on his stool.

"When she was gone," his tale began,
"gone far away from me;
I did what foolish young men do
and sold myself to sea.

I toiled and banned all thoughts of her
and half a year went by,
till, at the place where blue meets blue,
land replaced the sky.

A small and jungled watering isle
our tired ship did reach.
And men were rowed to fill our casks,
and I to guard the beach.

Alone I walked the sunlit sands
till sudden did appear
a short and squatting colored man
sat smoking by a fire.

I put my revolver to his head,
but he turned to me and smiled.
He spoke with words so sweet and kind
and bade me sit a while.

His eyes which shone within his head
had fiery tales to tell.

"Come and share a bowl," he said,
"And I will show you hell."

I took the pipe. The graceful smoke
my lungs and head did fill.
Each grain of sand then glowed like gold
and the ocean waves stood still.

That little man then rose to go
and by forest green was swallowed.
Lured by his promise, I left my post
and foolishly I followed.

He lost me with lightning pace,
but my path seemed more wise;
I beheld a place that held not hell,
but wondrous paradise.

A marbled fount of sparkling wine
this place before me filled.
This courtyard touched not by the sun
was lit by fruits and rills.

Beside the fountain was a thing
that made this world more sweet.
For Kubla Khan's unfinished dome,
I beheld complete.

Across the cool, dark grass she lay;
clothed in crimson hair.
I embraced my lady's loving face.
Her flesh was soft and fair.

As if this deed had caused a storm,
a shrieking wind whipped stark.
The flowers wilted all at once.
The wondrous place fell dark.

The marble fountain cracked and fell.
Its ruined wine ran red.
The woman in my arms became
a twisted corpse decayed.

A long and bitter wail escaped
then from my bloodied lips.
I ran then from that wretched place
to my comrades and my ship.

That haunting man spoke true, " he said,
"my life this truth has stained.
For hell is love and beauty lost,
to never be regained."

Ale and tears boiled in his eyes.
The barroom silent fell.
"I have been to hell," he cried.
"And, damned, I dwell there still."

Chris Rynd