Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936)

17   *The Lament of the Border Cattle Thief*

O woe is me for the merry life
    I led beyond the Bar,
And a treble woe for my winsome wife
    That weeps at Shalimar.

They have taken away my long jezail,   5
    My shield and sabre fine,
And heaved me into the Central Jail
    For lifting of the kine.

The steer may low within the byre,
    The Jat may tend his grain,   10
But there'll be neither loot nor fire
    Till I come back again.

And God have mercy on the Jat
    When once my fetters fall,
And Heaven defend the farmer's hut   15
    When I am loosed from thrall.

It's woe to bend the stubborn back
    Above the grinching quern,
It's woe to hear the leg-bar clack
    And jingle when I turn!   20

But for the sorrow and the shame,
    The brand on me and mine,
I'll pay you back in leaping flame
    And loss of the butchered kine.

For every cow I spared before —   25

In charity set free —
If I may reach my hold once more
        I'll reive an honest three.

For every time I raised the lowe
        That scared the dusty plain,   30
By sword and cord, by torch and tow
        I'll light the land with twain!

Ride hard, ride hard to Abazai,
        Young Sahib with the yellow hair —
Lie close, lie close as Khattacks lie,   35
        Fat herds below Bonair!

The one I'll shoot at twilight-tide,
        At dawn I'll drive the other;
The black shall mourn for hoof and hide,
        The white man for his brother.   40

'Tis war, red war, I'll give you then,
        War till my sinews fail;
For the wrong you have done to a chief of men,
        And a thief of the Zukka Kheyl.

And if I fall to your hand afresh   45
        I give you leave for the sin,
That you cram my throat with the foul pig's flesh,
        And swing me in the skin!

1888

(From *Rudyard Kipling's Verse.*   Definitive edition.
London, 1940)