

Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936)

23 Our Lady of the Sackcloth

(Ethiopic Version: founded on Brit. Mus. M. S. Orient No. 652, Folio 9)

There was a Priest at Philæ,
Tongue-tied, feeble, and old;
And the daily prayer to the Virgin
Was all the Office he could.

The others were ill-remembered, 5
Mumbled and hard to hear;
But to Mary, the two-fold Virgin,
Always his voice rang clear.

And the congregation mocked him,
And the weight of the years he bore, 10
And they sent word to the Bishop
That he should not serve them more.

(Never again at the Offering
When the Bread and the Body are one:
Oh, never the picture of Mary 15
Watching him serve her Son!)

Kindly and wise was the Bishop.
Unto the Priest said he: —
“Patience till thou art stronger,
And keep meantime with me. 20

“Patience a little; it may be
The Lord shall loosen thy tongue
And then thou shalt serve at the Offering
As it was when we were young.”

And the Priest obeyed and was silent, 25
And the Bishop gave him leave

To walk alone in the desert
Where none should see him grieve.

(Never again at the Offering
When the Wine and the Blood are one! 30
Oh, never the picture of Mary
Watching him honour her Son!)

Saintly and clean was the Bishop,
Ruling himself aright
With prayer and fast in the daytime 35
And scourge and vigil at night.

Out of his zeal he was minded
To add one penance the more —
A garment of harshest sackcloth
Under the robes he wore. 40

He gathered the cloth in secret
Lest any should know and praise —
The shears, the palm and the packthread —
And laboured it many ways.

But he had no skill in the making, 45
And failed and fretted the while;
Till there stood a Woman before him,
Smiling as Mothers smile.

Her feet were burned by the desert —
Like a desert-dweller she trod — 50
Even the two-fold Virgin,
Spouse and Bearer of God!

She took the shears and the sacking,
The needle and stubborn thread,
She cut, she shaped, and she sewed them, 55
And, "This shall be blessed," she said.

She passed in the white hot noontide,

On a wave of the quivering air;
And the Bishop's eyes were opened,
And he fell on his face in prayer. 60

But — *far from the smouldering censers —*
Far from the chanted praise —
Oh, far from the pictures of Mary
That had watched him all his days —

Far in the desert by Philæ, 65
The old Priest walked forlorn,
Till he saw at the head of her Riders
A Queen of the Desert-born.

High she swayed on her camel,
Beautiful to behold: 70
And her beast was belled with silver,
And her veils were spotted with gold!

Low she leaned from her litter —
Soft she spoke in his ear: —
“Nay, I have watched thy sorrow! 75
Nay, but the end is near!

“For again thou shalt serve at the Offering
And thy tongue shall be loosed in praise,
And again thou shalt sing unto Mary
Who has watched thee all thy days. 80

“Go in peace to the Bishop,
Carry him word from me —
That the Woman who sewed the sackcloth
Would have him set thee free!”

1935

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