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The Ballad of the H.M.S. Beagle

The Ballad of the H. M. S. *Beagle*

by

Joe R. Christopher

Tune: any standard ballad measure,
perhaps "In Peascod Time" or "Flying Fame"

His Majesty's Ship the *Beagle* sailed,
Three masts with canvas spread,
Across the ocean wide and deep,
As global purpose led.

Two hundred forty tons she carried,
And seventy men her crew,
To map the South American coastlines
And many islands too.

The captain on the holy days
Would lead the crew in prayer,
Him asking Jove to guide them right,
Neptune to give them care.

Then as the broad Pacific rolled,
Its waves with breezes blown,
That ship of ninety feet in length
Across the depths was known.

From 'neath the waves, from waters deep,
Cascading streamlets freely,
Poseidon and his court arose—
The ocean shores, their baillie.

Poseidon on his massive throne,
His trident as his scepter,
Beheld the ship, her sails filled full,
Nor thought to interrupt her.

With drops of water in his beard,
Poseidon, as he sat there,
Full pondered on that tiny ship,
As if he something sought there.
The court was still, the court was quiet,
To let their king beponder:
They turned their eyes upon the ship,

Which with the waves did wander.

Queen Amphitrite laid her hand
Upon Poseidon's arm,
But did not speak, but said no word,
That might his stillness harm.

Her own grandfather, Pontus, watched;
Her father, Nereus, too;
Her many sisters quietly sat
Nor sang while breezes blew.

"Look! look!" the captain cried, "look there!
Look starboard for the sight!
There's Neptune blessing us this trip,
And all his court in might."

But Darwin said, "A cloudbank low,
A foggy mist on sea—
No more than that my eyes behold,
Though writhing mist it be."

"You can't behold the sacred gods?
You cannot see them plain?
What blindness is this failure great?
They rise upon the main."

But Darwin said, "I train myself
To see the physical facts—
The gods I've lost to see the laws
Of how the earth transacts."

"Oh, once I joined the mysteries
And drank of Bacchus' wine;
I ate of Ceres' holy bread—
All that I now resign.



“The world gives all the truth there is,
If we with skill perceive;
I study it by day and night—
This world I do believe.”

Meanwhile Poseidon chose to speak:
“My brothers twain and I,
Upon this man much interest place;
Through him will worship die.

“These crafty apes will crown themselves,
Nor pray to gods for aid;
We’ll see if they pollute their world,
And all their means abrade.

“We’ll see if they control their births,
Or bring great famine on;

We’ll see if they withhold their bombs,
Or fight till all be gone.

“They’re adults now, sans parent-gods;
No punishments they dread;
Around a million, million stars,
Most sophonts now are dead.”

In harmony the sisters sang,
And Triton smiled at glee;
Perhaps the gods knew more than men,
Beyond all earthly dree.

Poseidon raised his trident high,
Then switched and pointed down—
The court beneath the waves submerged,
That court of fair renown.

The Wisest Wizard

¹ Kathy Edwards writes, “In this picture I have taken images of the ‘Statue of Poseidon at Copenhagen Port,’ some Greek and Roman statuary, the Renaissance painting ‘The Triumph of Amphitrite’ by Poussin, and a photograph of clouds over the ocean to create the effect brought to mind in the poem..”