

Mary Howitt (1799-1888)

8 *The Voyage with the Nautilus*

I made myself a little boat,
As trim as trim could be;
I made it of a great pearl shell
Found in the Indian Sea.

I made my masts of wild sea-rush 5
That grew on a secret shore,
And the scarlet plume of the halcyon
Was the pleasant flag I bore.

For my sails I took the butterfly's wings;
For my ropes the spider's line; 10
And that mariner old, the Nautilus,
To steer me over the brine.

For he had sailed six thousand years,
And knew each isle and bay;
And I thought that we, in my little boat, 15
Could merrily steer away.

The stores I took were plentiful:
The dew as it sweetly fell;
And the honey that was hoarded up
In the wild bee's summer cell. 20

"Now steer away, thou helmsman good,
Over the waters free;
To the charm'd Isle of the Seven Kings,
That lies in the midmost sea."

He spread the sail, he took the helm; 25
And, long ere ever I wist,
We had sailed a league, we had reached the isle
That lay in the golden mist.

The charmed Isle of the Seven Kings,
 'T is a place of wondrous spell; 30
 And all that happed unto me there
 In a printed book I 'll tell.

Said I, one day, to the Nautilus,
 As we stood on the strand,
 "Unmoor my ship, thou helmsman good, 35
 And steer me back to land;

"For my mother, I know, is sick at heart,
 And longs my face to see.
 What ails thee now, thou Nautilus?
 Art slow to sail with me? 40
 Up! do my will; the wind is fresh,
 So set the vessel free."

He turned the helm; away we sailed
 Towards the setting sun:
 The flying-fish were swift of wing, 45
 But we outsped each one.

And on we went for seven days,
 Seven days without a night;
 We followed the sun still on and on,
 In the glow of his setting light. 50

Down and down went the setting sun,
 And down and down went we;
 'T was a splendid sail for seven days
 On a smooth descending sea.

On a smooth, descending sea we sailed, 55
 Nor breeze the water curled:
 My brain grew sick, for I saw we sailed
 On the down-hill of the world.

"Good friend," said I to the Nautilus,
 "Can this the right course be? 60
 And shall we come again to land?"
 But answer none made he;

And I saw a laugh in his fishy eye,
As he turned it up to me.

So on we went; but soon I heard 65
A sound as when winds blow,
And waters wild are tumbled down
Into a gulf below.

And on and on flew the little bark,
As a fiend her course did urge; 70
And I saw, in a moment, we must hang
Upon the ocean's verge.

I snatched down the sails, I snapped the ropes,
I broke the masts in twain;
But on flew the bark and 'gainst the rocks, 75
Like a living thing did strain.

"Thou'st steered us wrong, thou helmsman vile!"
Said I to the Nautilus bold;
"We shall down the gulf; we 're dead men both!
Dost know the course we hold?" 80

I seized the helm with a sudden jerk,
And we wheeled round like a bird;
But I saw the Gulf of Eternity,
And the tideless waves I heard.

"Good master," said the Nautilus, 85
"I thought you might desire
To have some wondrous thing to tell
Beside your mother's fire.

"What's sailing on a summer sea?
As well sail on a pool; 90
Oh, but I know a thousand things
That are wild and beautiful!

"And if you wish to see them now,
You 've but to say the word."
"Have done!" said I to the Nautilus, 95

“Or I ’ll throw thee overboard.

“Have done!” said I, “thou mariner old,
And steer me back to land.”

No other word spake the Nautilus,
But took the helm in hand. 100

I looked up to the lady moon,
She was like a glow-worm’s spark;
And never a star shone down to us
Through the sky so high and dark.

We had no mast, we had no ropes, 105
And every sail was rent;
And the stores I brought from the charmèd isle
In the seven days’ sail were spent.

But the Nautilus was a patient thing,
And steered with all his might 110
On the up-hill sea; and he never slept,
But kept the course aright.

And for thrice seven nights we sailed and sailed;
At length I saw the bay
Where I built my ship, and my mother’s house 115
’Mid the green hills where it lay.

“Farewell!” said I to the Nautilus,
And leaped upon the shore;
“Thou art a skilful mariner,
But I ’ll sail with thee no more!” 120

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