

Did You Ever Go To Sea

Did you ever trudge to the foc'sle head
On a dark and stormy night?
To stand and stare for an hour or two
Searching for a light.

Did you hold to the rail of the monkey isle
On a night too rough for the bow?
Did you clutch at your sou'wester
To try and see somehow?

Did you try not to think of leave now past
Or the girl you left behind?
Did you know for sure you'd never write
Even though she was kind?

Did you try not to think of money spent
On oilskins soon soaked through?
Bought from a grubby Commercial Road shop
From a shore bast'd that fleeced you.

Then when your Watch was over at last
Did you stumble down to the mess
To find some bast'ds drunk all the tea
And there's just a bare hot press?

Did you try to forget you were Cold and wet
And bloody well hungry too?
And the reason your belly felt so bad
Was cold slumgullion stew.

Did you curse as you pulled off your clothes
And felt your oilskins rip?
Did you swear that never again would
You sign on a British ship?

Did you ever lock our from Newport
Just to go to Cardiff town?
Did you ever make fast all the lines? Then,
"Let go! heave in, coil them down."

Did you ever walk down Scotty Road'
With the pubs all Irish full?
Did the winches keep you awake all night
In the port of Liverpool?

Did you listen to tales in the messroom?
When old seamen swung the lamp,
Of convoys, planes and sinking ships
And hungry, workhouse tramps.

Did you ever face Atlantic gales
And hang on for your life?
When green seas filled the alleyways
And the wind cut like a knife.

Did you ever see a phantom
Shape pass port hand close in a fog?
Did you know then, how ships go down
With no entry in the log?

Did you ever lie on top of a hatch
And soak up the tropical sun?
Feel yourself brown, turn yourself round
Say "wake me up when I'm done"

Did you go to the bridge in the dog watch
In a milk sea, slick and greasy?
Did you know the feel of a mahogany wheel
On a ship that was steering easy?

Did you see sombrero light house tall,
At the gate of the Caribbean?
Watch flying fish glide and skitter
Making marks on a sea serene?

Did you know that ahead lay Kingston Town?
Where the girls were warm and willing,
Where nobody wanted to do you down
Or steal a seaman's shilling.

Did you spend the night on rum and coke
So you could only stagger and stammer?
Did you creep aboard with an aching head
To be passed a chipping hammer?

Did you smell the oil of Curacao
Before you saw the land?
Did you moor the ship in Caracas bay
Where cacti grow in the sand?

Did you swim behind the shark net there
Morgan's Castle overhead?
Did you cross the bridge at Willemstad
See Dutch houses roofed in red?

Did you see USA efficiency
Through the the canal at Panama?
Did you tell the peggy "save some bread
For the mules that work so hard".

Did you ever stretch your aching
Back from painting iron decks?
To watch cavorting dolphins
On endless ocean treks.

Did you ever stare at an empty sea
With nothing at all in sight
Then see a whale stand on its tail
Stand tall in all it's might.

Did you ever attend a boat drill
Where everything went wrong?
And try to keep your face straight
Whilst the Bosun did his scon'?

Did you ever stop off Pitcairn's Isle
Deliver fuel and royal mail?
Have you talked with Fletcher Christian?
Have you seen their longboats sail?

Did you hear the sound of their singing?
As they headed for their home
Did you think that you'd like to join them?
Stay ashore and never roam.

Did you see palm trees rise up from the sea
On a smooth and windless day?
Then watch the white, from breakers strike
On a lonely tropic Cay?

Did you look eve to eve with an albatross
Gliding abaft the beam?
Did you see a poor drowned sailor's stare
Then shake yourself from a dream?

Did you watch the phosphorescence?
On a warm pacific night?
See falling stars, Magellan's clouds
Or sail the Australian bight?

Did you ever sleep with an Aussie girl
That woke and asked for more?
Did you ever jump through a window
When her husband came in the door?

Did you argue with an Australian?
Did you try to spin a tale?
Did you get into a fight in Sydney?
Did you spend a night in gaol?

Was your first port ever Auckland?

Did you anchor overnight?
Steam in, first thing in the morning
See Waitemata at first light?

In the days when high-rise buildings
Meant three or four floors high
And the wharves and the harbour were crowded
And the company flags flew high.

For the Waitemata was crowded then
with ships well-known, or strange
from the woodbine-funnelled Kent
to massive Ripplingham Grange.

Did you ever see a row of ships
From Rangitoto on?
While ashore the wharfies struggled and fought
In the strife of fifty-one

Did you ever keep the gangway watch
Moored at Aotea Quay?
When a southerly gale blew all the night
So you'd think you were still at sea.

Did you ever load a cargo of meat
At cold and southern Bluff?
Watch oyster boats come bustling in
From Foveaux, cold and rough?

Did you ever steam home, the long way round
And dream of cape horn seas?
Then pass around in a dead flat calm
With never a breeze.

Did you every buck the tide the wind
When up the channel bound?
And see a stately square rigged ship
All sails set, and outward bound?

Did you try to tell of the things you'd seen
When you met old friends ashore?
To find they just wanted to drink your pay
Or tell you the latest score.

Did you hurry back to the pool again
To find another ship?
Boast to your mates, of the time you'd had,
Doss down in your bunk for a kip?

Did you grin as the last line, wet and cold
Came up through the fairlead's eye?

'Cause you'd rather be outward bound again
Bound for a clear blue sky

Than be stuck in a house, in a mean little street
Drinking endless cups of tea
And talking of rates and mortgage, and such
When you'd rather be out at sea.

by Dennis Webster