

*The Ballad of Herbert*

-by-

Edmund Hardy



*Let us go then, you and I, to  
find the Isle of Pingo Pong*

Where the water fizzes sweetly –  
and the fish all join in song.

Pack some breakfast, lunch and dinner,  
pack some orange lollipops.

Build a boat of oak and cedar,  
hoist a sail of polka dot!

To the land of blue flamingos,  
to that distant, long-lost shore.

Bring along our ship's cat Herbert –  
then cast off, glide through the door.



Soon we leave the house and city,  
launch ourselves on ocean flow ~

Blue waves topple, white hems showing,  
casting ripples down below.

Green seas flaked with blue and silver  
splash across our makeshift sail.

Then the sea turns grey, and darkens –  
as the sun falls, and light fails.

When the day is all sea-swallowed,  
voices gather all around –

Creeping whispers, trickling sea-talk,  
asking, *Where is your ship bound?*

Every sound now makes you shiver,  
every breeze portends our doom,

Till a sign comes to our rescue,  
just a twitch to lift our gloom:

Herbert's whiskers start a-buzzing  
and his claws begin to curl,

Ears enlarge and fur stands fuzzy,  
and his Tail begins to twirl –

“Land ahoy!” cries skipper Herbert,  
“Land ahoy!” this time from you.

I'm about to join “ahoying”  
but can see no land in view.

Only birds, with fire-bright feathers,  
wheeling words across the sky.

Scribble-quick on the horizon,  
H and I, and that spells “Hi!”

Streaming close, flocks cluster round us,  
guide us through the misty whorl –

‘til the sun, like sea-washed bullion,  
hauls up morning to the world.



First a smell of ripe bananas,  
then the sound of rustling leaves.

Birds take flight, spell 'Good Bye' briefly,  
as we row for land and trees.

We jump for it, splash amid the  
foamy lace of breaking waves,

Where the beach is white as paper,  
lined with tide-marks like a stave.

Soon we start a day's exploring,  
find a nest of Big-Nosed Beaks,

And a bank of Seed-Clocks growing,  
then we climb up Top-Notch Peak.

There we find a rocky cliff-face  
dropping down to southern shores

Where the sky whirls to a storm-cone  
and the sea begins to roar.

One grey eye stares from the rain-clouds  
and it blinks a crooked lash –

Running back to hide in our boat –  
lightning strikes, a thund'rous flash.

Hissing-hot the sparks fly madly,  
and the mast is set alight.

Herbert's tail fluffs up in terror,  
you and I curl up in fright. . .

Then that trickling, eerie singing  
once again rings from all sides.

So we chant out, "Please, please help us!"  
And these voices soon reply:

"My name's little Incognita."  
"I am spinning Octopede."

"You can call me Momentilla."  
"And my name is Mustardseed."

Passing gleams like eyeball glimmers,  
points of speaking lantern-light \*

\*

Lift us \* up \*  
\* in fairy flight.

\*

Looking back we see the island  
now a green smudge on the blue,

As we fly to town and city,  
dive right down a chimney flue. . .



Landing in a pile of linen  
by a large washing machine,

Our four helpers all say “Goodbye!”  
and a man (in mask) comes in.

He begins to load more washing,  
finds us cowering, hiding here –

What’s this, hiding? Better take you  
“to your proper Ward of Care.”

He’s the Warden, leads us outside  
past a Nurse on rollerskates

To a Doctor with a clipboard  
who advises – “Must sedate!”

We protest, “But we’re not patients!”  
and we shout impatiently.

But she says, “You seem quite patient,  
that is good enough for me.”

“What’s the mask for, Mister Warden,  
Made of china, chipped and worn?”

“It’s because at every daybreak  
I am changed, with different form.”

We pass operating theatres  
for the show of surgeon’s arts,

Each with curtain and a trapdoor  
for transplanted lungs and hearts.

Then we’re pushed through double swing-doors  
to the ward for “NOT YET ILL”.

It’s a place which slowly goes round  
like the grindstone of a mill –

Rows of shiny clean compartments  
where the patients Eat and Sleep.

We are booked inside Box 90.  
Barely room to place our feet.



Herbert prowls by pitch of night-time,  
guided solely by his paunch –

Finds a mouse who is ill-mannered  
and a button labelled: LAUNCH.

Mustn't touch it, thinks our Herbert,  
but his tail thinks otherwise –

Like a bird the ward starts flapping,  
and the building takes the sky

With a wing of Special Units  
and Reception at the head,

With a tail of trailing bandage  
and a spine of trolley-beds.

In a panic all the Nurses  
skate haphazard to the right.

Doctors cry, "Who gave the order?  
We can't diagnose in flight!"

Hospitals like flying sky high  
and they like to loop the loop.

But the clouds are death's dominion  
waiting for a chance to shoot –

The Consultant on watch duty  
screams, “A Graveyard, twelve o'clock!”

Bearing down, a tombstone lizard,  
mossy scales of headstone rock.

See it flies the Skull and Crossbones  
and its spine is made of bells,

Ringin' for the dead (who dance through  
reeds of heaven, snakes of hell.)

First the Graveyard fires some tulips  
then it fires a ‘rest in peace’

Followed by a marble tombstone,  
then it backs off in retreat.

Crack! the marble breaks a ward down  
(set aside for treating knees)

Then the well-aimed 'rest in pieces'  
r.i.p.s right through the Pharmacy.

Nurses dab on anti-septic  
where the Hospital is hit

But the Warden says, "It's prudent!  
We must all abandon ship."

So the Nurses jump on sky-boards,  
patients strap on parachutes.

But the pressure sucks us outside  
through the clouds, then down we shoot.

Spinning round we clasp each other,  
hand to hand and ear to tail.

"Dear, oh dear," you say to cheer us.  
And our courage starts to fail.

Ground is hard and fast below us,  
we prepare to burn and crash.

Then a pool of bright blue water  
takes our fall with a ker-*plash!*



Wind-up penguins, with their flippers,  
push an orange rubber ring,

Where an Orange sits contented  
with her mind on other things.

Pears are flipping from the high board,  
pre-washed grapes are doing lengths.

There's an apple at the pool's edge,  
looking shy and rather tense:

“In the mirror of the water  
my left cheek is that fruit's right.

If I plunge I might turn *elppa*,  
be reversed by surface light.”

Then she, fearless, leaps and swims down  
to the tiled and sloping floor

Where she presses on a pattern  
which slides back as a Trap Door –

Curious, we draw some deep breaths,  
Herbert's tail begins to spin,

Which propels us quickly downward  
just in time to enter in.



Through the trapdoor is a long room  
full of creatures wearing suits.

We swim down and share a table  
with a family of newts.

Then the room starts moving forwards –  
it's the carriage of a train.

Through the window, coral cities,  
pink and yellow waving brains.

Seems it's rush hour for the molluscs,  
piling in at the next stop.

And for busy sea cucumbers  
on their way to hit the shops.

Then a man in snorkel-helmet  
charges in with sword and axe.

Slumps down in the aisle beside us,  
says, "How do you do? I'm Max."

Max, a mer-knight, tells his story,  
how he longed to win his spurs:–

Pledged his troth to Princess Tulip  
but she made him her chauffeur.

Next he vowed to vanquish Dragons,  
bought a scroll which thus revealed:

“Dragons often stop at stations,  
and they run on metal wheels.”

He tried duelling with express-trains,  
threw his gauntlet on the track.

There he'd find it crushed, discarded,  
torn apart, when he went back.

Now Max cries, “Is this the belly  
of the hell-bound ocean Beast?”

“This is First Class,” says a pin-striped  
shark, “I'm shocked, to say the least!”

“So you’re not a half-digested  
crew of captives, racked by pain?”

“No not really, thank you kindly.”  
Max, rebuffed, departs the train –

Quick as silver, with his sword-fish,  
cuts a hole, prepares to leap.

With a wink at you and Herbert,  
charges off into the deep.

Though we took some very long breaths  
we are nearly out of air.

We alight at the next station,  
catch a bubble waiting there.

Safe inside, our transport squeezes,  
and we shrink to tiny size

As the bubble winks through space-time  
at the blinking of our eyes: : :

**Bubbling on down waterfalls and  
bubbling when the earth was made,**

**Bubbling through a soapy car-wash,  
bubbling into lemonade. . . .**

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Where we three are tiny sparkles,  
smaller than the lemon pips,

In a riptide pulling upwards  
to a drinking pair of lips.

Soon our bubble breaks the surface  
near a straw striped red and white.

If we reach it we can climb it,  
so we swim with all our might.

Now, what's this, the lips stop drinking,  
quiver, scream, and back away!

As a bee climbs down beside us,  
"Need a lift?" "Why yes, okay."

So we cling to noisy bee-stripes,  
black and honey-golden hair,

As the bee our host goes buzzing  
off to wing the lower air

With its breezy, fuzzed meander  
over meadows, passing cows.

Bossing over hedge and garden  
To the blossom-covered boughs.

Swooping down past yellow lilies  
rooted on a murky lake,

Dragonflies dart there beside us  
close above the water's break.

Dodging reeds and darting frog-tongues,  
past the stars of brown sedge,

Petal radar guides the bee's flight  
in towards a bearded hedge

Where the world turns all to velvet  
in a purple, speckled bell –

We have flown inside a foxglove,  
whiff that spring-sweet pollen smell.

Anthers prickling make me – *atchoo!*  
and this makes us lose our hold –

We three land in folds of nectar,  
specks of sweet and fiery gold.

So we swim into the flower,  
struggling right inside the stalk.

It's a green and sticky tunnel,  
to the stem, where we can walk.

We head down to foxglove seed pods,  
seed ourselves and then squeeze out. . .

You and I and also Herbert,  
waiting in the earth to sprout.



Underground it floods and freezes  
where the life of last year lies.

When it warms the birds peck downwards,  
at the worms which wriggle by.

Up we grow, back to our full size,  
eating lunch and lollipops.

In the sun which fills the garden,  
our adventures never stop. . .

