

The sheets were frozen hard,
and they cut the naked hand
The decks were like a slide,
where a seaman scarce could stand;
The wind was a nor'-wester, blowing squally off the sea;
And cliffs and spouting breakers were the only things a-lee.

They heard the suff a-roaring before the break of day;
But 'twas only with the peep of light we saw how ill we lay.
We tumbled every hand on deck instanter, with a shout,
And we gave her the maintops'l, and stood by to go about.

All day we tacked and tacked between the
South Head and the North
All day we hauled the frozen sheets,
and got no further forth
All day as cold as charity, in bitter pain and dread,
For very life and nature we tacked from head to head.

We gave the South a wider berth,
for there the tide-race roared
But every tack we made we brought
the North Head close aboard.
So's we saw the cliff and houses
and the breakers running high,
And the coastguard in his garden,
with his glass against his eye.

The frost was on the village roofs as white as ocean foam;
The good red fires were burning
bright in every longshore home;
The windows sparkled clear, and the chimneys volleyed out;
And I vow we sniffed the victuals as the vessel went about.

The bells upon the church were
rung with a mighty jovial cheer;
For it's just that I should tell you how (of all days in the year)
This day of our adversity was blessed Christmas morn,
And the house above the coastguard's
was the house where I was born.

O well I saw the pleasant room, the pleasant faces there,
My mother's silver spectacles, my father's silver hair;
And well I saw the firelight, like a flight of homely elves,
Go dancing round the china plates that stand upon the
shelves.

And well I knew the talk they had, the talk that was of me,
Of the shadow on the household
and the son that went to sea;
And O the wicked fool I seemed, in every kind of way,
To be here and hauling frozen ropes
on blessed Christmas Day.

They lit the high sea-light, and the dark began to fall.
"All hands to loose topgallant sails,"
I heard the captain call.
"By the Lord, she'll never stand it,"
our first mate, Jackson, cried.
"It's the one way or the other, Mr. Jackson," he replied.

She staggered to her bearings,
but the sails were new and good,
And the ship smelt up to windward
just as though she understood;
As the winter's day was ending, in the entry of the night,
We cleared the weary headland,
and passed below the light.

And they heaved a mighty breath,
every soul on board but me,
As they saw her nose again pointing handsome out to sea;
But all that I could think of, in the darkness and the cold,
Was just that I was leaving home
and my folks were growing old."