

The Joker and the Fishes

by Jean de La Fontaine

A joker at a banker's table,
Most amply spread to satisfy
The height of epicurean wishes,
Had nothing near but little fishes.
So, taking several of the fry,
He whisper'd to them very nigh,
And seem'd to listen for reply.
The guests much wonder'd what it meant,
And stared upon him all intent.
The joker, then, with sober face,
Politely thus explain'd the case:
"A friend of mine, to India bound,
Has been, I fear,
Within a year,
By rocks or tempests wreck'd and drown'd.
I ask'd these strangers from the sea
To tell me where my friend might be.
But all replied they were too young
To know the least of such a matter--
The older fish could tell me better.
Pray, may I hear some older tongue?"
What relish had the gentlefolks
For such a sample of his jokes,
Is more than I can now relate.
They put, I'm sure, upon his plate,
A monster of so old a date,
He must have known the names and fate
Of all the daring voyagers,
Who, following the moon and stars,
Have, by mischances, sunk their bones
Within the realms of Davy Jones;
And who, for centuries, had seen,
Far down, within the fathomless,
Where whales themselves are sceptreless,
The ancients in their halls of green.