

Broken Ring

As sung by
Lester A. Coffee
08-20-1946 Harvard, IL

THE BROKEN RING



A beau - ti - ful dam - sel stood at the gate one morn - ing, ^{the} View - ing /
plains all 'round so gay, When a gay young gen - tle - man stepped up
to her, Say - ing, "Mad - am, can you fan - cy me?"

Verse 1.

A beautiful damsel stood at the gate one morning
Viewing the plain all around so gay,
When a gay young gentleman stepped up to her
Saying, "Madam, can you fancy me?"

Verse 2.

"Can I fancy you? A man of honor,
A gentleman I take you to be.
How could you think of such a lady,
Who is not fit for your bride to be?"

Verse 3.

"If you're not fit for to be my servant,
If you're not fit for my bride to be,
If you will only consent to marry me
You shall have servants to wait on thee."

Verse 4.

"Kind sir, I've a lover on the ocean,
Seven long years he's been gone to sea
And seven more I'll still wait on him
For if he's alive he'll return to me."

Verse 5.

"Seven long years make an alteration.
Since your true love's been gone to sea,
Perhaps he's in the ocean drowned
Never to return to thee."

Verse 6.

"If he's dead I hope he's happy
Or if he's in some battle slain,
Or if he's took some pretty girl married
I love that girl as well as him."

Verse 7.

His fingers being both slim and slender,
His fingers being both slim and small
He showed her the ring they broke between
them,
Down in the garden this maid did fall.

Verse 8.

He picked her up from in the garden
And gave her kisses, one, two, by three
Saying "Mary, oh Mary, don't you know me?
I'm your Willie returned from sea."

Transcription from the Helene Stratman-Thomas Collection, lyrics from Peters.

Critical Commentary

Transcription by Peters, p. 165.

HST notes:

In the Professional Papers series:

Sung by Lester A. Coffee age - Harvard, ILL, 1946.

Mr. Coffee, formerly of Pittsville, Wis., learned this song as a small boy.

Mr. Coffeey, the singer of many of these English ballads was a resident of Pittsville, Wisconsin until he moved to Illinois.

Editor's notes:

Scholars have found many different versions of the text, tune, and title of this song. McNeil writes that "Miss Mary Belle," a related song, was first published as a broadside in England in the early nineteenth century titled "The Sailor's Return" (McNeil 81). Another related song, "Young John Riley," is probably based on "The Constant Damsel," first published in 1791 in a Dublin songbook (McNeil 83). In the former, the returned lover has a ring that the woman recognizes (as in Coffee's version), in the latter he simply announces his identity.

Alternate titles/related songs: "The True Sweetheart," "The Maiden in the Garden," "Pretty Fair Maid," "The Broken Token," "The Young and Single Soldier," "There was a Lady in her Father's Garden," "Fair Phoebe and Her Darkeyed Sailor," "The Banks of Sweet Primrose," "A Lily Fair Damsel," "Miss Mary Belle," "Little Willie and Mary," "Young John Riley," "The Sailor's Return," "The Constant Damsel."

Sources:

Campbell, Olive Dame and Cecil J. Sharp, collectors. *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians: Comprising 122 Songs and Ballads, and 323 Tunes*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1917.

Cazden, Norman, Herbert Haufrecht, and Norman Studer, editors. *Folk Songs of the Catskills*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982. "Johnny Riley," different tune (editors note that the version they collected is not common)

Creighton, Helen. *Songs and Ballads from Nova Scotia*. Toronto and Vancouver: J.M. Dent and Sons Limited, 1932.

Flanders, Helen Hartness, Elizabeth Flanders Ballard, George Brown, and Phillips Barry, collectors, transcribers, and editors. *The New Green Mountain Songster: Traditional Folk Songs of Vermont*. New Haven: Yale University Press; London: H. Milford: Oxford University Press, 1939.

The Folksong Fake Book: A Collection of over 1000 Folksongs from around the World. Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Corporation, 2000. "John Riley," different tune

Journal of American Folklore 22 (1909): pp. 67-68.

McNeil, W.K., ed. *Southern Folk Ballads*, vol. 1. The American Folklore Series, ed. W.K. McNeil. Little Rock: August House Publishers, 1987. "Miss Mary Belle," "Little Willie and Mary," and "Young John Riley" have similar stories, but different tunes.

Peters, Harry B., ed. *Folk Songs out of Wisconsin: An Illustrated Compendium of Words and Music*. Madison, WI: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1977.

Randolph, Vance, collector and editor. *Ozark Folksongs*. Vol. I. Columbia, Mo.: State Historical Society of Missouri, 1946-50. "The maiden in the garden," different tune

Scarborough, Dorothy. *A Song Catcher in Southern Mountains; American Folk Songs of British Ancestry*. New York, Columbia University Press, 1937.

Tillett, Beverly, editor. *Jerry Silverman's Folk song Encyclopedia*. Vol. I. New York: Chappell Music Company, 1975. "John Riley," different tune

K.G.