The Golden Vanity (Child #286)

By Lorne Brown

The Golden Vanity is one of the most popular of all the Child ballads, thereby giving lie to those who claim the best Child ballads are the earliest ones. Only nineteen ballads follow this one in Child's famed collection of 305 traditional ballads.

Child called it The Sweet Trinity, and put Golden Vanity in brackets. His logical reason for so doing was because the earliest version he could find was a broadside published by the famous Samuel Pepys in 1682-5: Sir Walter Raleigh sailing in the Low-lands: Shewing how the famous ship called The Sweet Trinity was taken by a false gally, and how it was again restored by the craft of a little sea-boy, who sunk the gally...

Essentially, the story is this: a ship is threatened by a foreign ship. The captain asks aloud who can sink the enemy ship and the ship's boy, or cabin boy, volunteers, having first asked what's in it for him. The desperate captain offers gold and silver and his own daughter in marriage. The boy dives overboard, swims to the foreign ship, and sinks it with an auger. Upon returning to his ship and claiming his reward, he finds that the captain has changed his mind and will not take him up on board.

There are various endings to this ballad, a fact which intrigues storytellers greatly. Storytellers know that while details of a story can change, the essential plot does not. The prince does not marry Cinderella's step-sister; that would be an entirely different story!

But there are many endings to the Golden Vanity: The captain sails away and the boy drowns. The boy swims around to the other side and his shipmates take him up, unfortunately too late, and he dies on deck where he is given a sailor's funeral and lowered back into the water. Sometimes the boy threatens the captain that he will do the same to him as he did to the enemy ship; the captain, under duress, picks him up and gives him his rewards.

Why so many endings? Child theorizes that the initial ending in Pepys is so weak that it inspired others to create different endings. Here is the Pepys ending:

"You promised me gold and you promised me fee,
Your eldest daughter my wife she must be."

"You shall have gold and you shall have fee,"
Sir Walter Raleigh (pronounced Raw-lye and probably spelled Raleigh) was born in 1552 and is a Physician for all Diseases. As was common at the time, he designed the famous Ark Royale, the Turkey Slugger, and The Turkish Costume. He would win veneration by everyone in the community. There is a saying: "If you speak ill of your neighbour, a swarm of flies will follow you."

His fame grew when Elisabeth died, James the First took the throne; a ship's captain still has the authority to perform marriages, for example. Sir Walter Raleigh, the ingenious cabin boy in Child 286 has an auger of mythic ability. Not content merely to drill holes, he scuttled in a trice. Not content merely to drill holes, he scuttled in a trice.

The cabin boy was the squeegee kid of the cabin boy. He would soon learn that he had merely exchanged one set of harsh conditions for another. As low man on the pecking order, the cabin boy was at everyone else's beck and call. He usually had no place to sleep and tasted the lash more than he tasted a regular meal.

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At the other end of the pecking order was the captain, a man of almost unlimited powers once he had a vessel slumbering at his side. He was a dangerous act of mutiny to oppose the captain's will. Vestiges of the captain's enormous power live on to this day: a ship's captain still has the authority to perform marriages, for example.

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But my eldest daughter your wife never shall be."

"Then fare you well, you courting lord,
Seeing you are not so good as your word."

And thus I shall conclude my song.

Of the sailing in the Low-lands,
Wishing all happiness to all seamen both old and young.

In their sailing in the Low-lands.
Yes, it is weak. For one thing, where did the sea-boy go when he bid his captain farewell?

Sir Walter Raleigh (pronounced Raw-lye and probably spelled Raleigh) was born in 1552 and who spread his cloak over a mud puddle so his sea-boy go when he bid his captain farewell?

Days when people were much shorter than they grew to be six feet tall, almost unheard of in those days when people were much shorter than they are now. He is well remembered as the gallant who spread his cloak over a mud puddle so his Queen, Elizabeth the First, could walk over it and not soil her silk dress.

The ingenious cabin boy in Child 286 has an action of the ballad usually takes place in the Mediterranean. It is clear from seeing these many variations that this was a very popular ballad. It has been found in England, Scotland and Ireland. It is probably even more popular in North America, with many versions found in the United States. In Canada, it has been found in Ontario and in Atlantic Canada.

Child gives only three versions, although he makes reference to many others. He also gives two tunes. Given that Child only included fifty-five tunes, this is remarkable in itself. However, there are listed one hundred and eleven versions. It is found in just about every authoritative collection of ballads, and has been recorded by such luminaries as Burl Ives, the Almanac Singers, Pete Seeger, and Richard Dyer-Bennett. Stan Hugill even sang it as a capstan shanty.

The version printed here is the Canadian Bulletin of Folk Music, is of course, a Canadian one.

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The boy bored his holes and some of them in vain for a Lowland Sea, but it is commonly generic, no-name sea is substituted: the Lowland Low, this is a story that takes place in the Lowland Low.

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And he sank in ...
Most versions end here. I kind of swell with patriotic pride that Canada has provided yet another variation on the ending of this ballad. And a great ending it is, too! Sort of reflects our sense of justice, methinks. It's interesting to note that O. J. Abbott, the great Ontario traditional singer, sang two very similar verses at the end of his version of Child 286, which was also nine verses in length.

8. A voice was heard from heaven as the air was calm and still,
Saying, "Captain, dearest captain, I have got you at my will,
Gold you wouldn't give me, nor your daughter for my bride,
But I'm sinking you in ..."

9. The captain stood amazed and he didn't know what to say,
The captain stood amazed till the mainmast it gave way,
She levelled with the water and she sunk beneath the tide.
Now she's sinking in the lowlands,
Lowlands, lowlands,
Now she's sinking in the lowlands, low.

Notes:
(1) The singers loved these ballads, and made them their own. An English ship fighting a Turkish ship in the Mediterranean makes perfect sense. A North American ship in the Mediterranean fighting a Turkish ship? Oh, yes, the singers loved these ballads and personalized them, the heck with logic!
(2) Later, the ship is a castalee, not a galee. A ship that was castellated had battlements; it was castle-like.
(3) The lowlands low is not Holland, but the Mediterranean Sea, the Lowland Sea.
(4) Not only does the foreign ship have different names in different versions, it has different names in this version alone!
(5) This auger is not so mythic. In fact, it's downright prosaic - only able to bore holes twice.
(6) Foreign sailors, of course, played cards and dice rather than attending to their ship as English sailors would! See also my suggestion of a religious sub-context. This moralizing line found its way into versions of The Titanic as well.
(7) This is a bloodthirsty line; the captain not only does these dreadful things, he does them with a will. We will see the cabin boy's will in verse 8.
(8) Repeat the tune of these first two lines starting at line 3 and the verse will sing properly.
(9) The cabin boy now gets to use his will.
(10) Amazed is a Middle English word meaning overwhelmed with wonder. And I am overwhelmed with wonder at this great ballad story and song, as I trust you are, too.

Lorne Brown is a Toronto storyteller and ballad singer.

"The Golden Vanity" [Child 286]

Sung by Ron Letto, LANCE au CLAIR, June 1960

Melody

1. It's of a gal-lant ship in the North Amer-i-
key. She goes by the name of the Golden Va-
ty; She's liable to be taken by some Turk-
lee for to sink her in the low-lands, low-lands,
low-lands, low.

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The Canadian Society for Traditional Music has a website! If you can connect to the Internet, go to:
https://www.yorku.ca/cstm

It consists of a Home Page, and the following sites: Publications, Memberships, Folk Festival Directory, Conferences, Relevant Links, and Board Members.
The webmistress who does such a wonderful job is Heather Sparkling, and she can be reached at cstm@yorku.ca.

Thanks to our design editor and computer whiz Meryl Arbinger, there might be the possibility of the tunes in the Bulletin appearing in midi some time in the future.
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