

The Golden Vanity (Child #286)

By Lorne Brown

Ballad of the Month

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 galley ...*

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,*

*But my eldest daughter your wife never shall be."
 "Then fare you well, you cozening 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 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, Elisabeth the First, could walk over it and not muddy her feet. How people behave to their betters is not so much a sign of their character as is the way they behave to their underlings. Raleigh was once popularly charged with letting one of his seamen drown to avoid capture by a Spanish galleon.

He designed the famous *Ark Royale* which led many a fight against the Spanish armada. But when Elisabeth died, James the First took the throne. Raleigh was then framed as a member of a plot against the throne and sentenced to life imprisonment in London's infamous Tower, having no doubt let James walk across mud puddles unassisted. He was finally sentenced to be beheaded, after having written a history of the world(!). At his execution in 1618 he asked to see the axe and said, "This is a sharp Medicine, but it is a Physician for all Diseases." As was common at the time, his head was embalmed and presented to his wife.

The Golden Vanity is a ship that has as many names as Stockwell Day has detractors. It could probably be entered in the *Guinness Book of Records* under ships with the most names. Besides the afore-mentioned *The Sweet Trinity*, there are:

*The Golden Trinity
 The Golden China Tree
 The Golden Vallady
 The Merry Golden Tree
 The Golden Merrilee
 The Golden Willow Tree
 The Yellow Golden Tree
 The Green Willow Tree
 The Sweet Kumadee
 The English Canopy
 The George-a-Low
 The Gold Pinnatree
 The Bold Trellytee
 etc., etc.*

Nor does the foreign ship get off with only one name. For one thing, it might be French,

Spanish, or Turkish. In Pepys, it is unnamed, called simply the false galley. *The Turkish Revereer*, *The Spanish Canoe*, *The Spanish Galahee*, *The Turkey Shivaree* and *The Turkish Castalee* are just some of its many names.

Because of the association with Raleigh, there is the usual elusive hunt to see if this is an historical ballad. To help with the hunt, Robert Waltz, of the online Ballad Index, has provided us with some useful reference dates: 1453 - Fall of Constantinople gives the Turks good access to the Mediterranean (Lowland) Sea. 1571 - Battle of Lepanto cripples the Turkish navy. 1588 - Voyage of the Spanish Armada; Spanish navy crippled. I suspect that it is not a strictly historical event but, rather, is a telling of an all-too-likely story.

Lurking just under the surface of this old ballad, I also suspect, is religious symbolism. Think Saint George and the Dragon, where George represents Christianity and the dragon represents those mysterious eastern religions, the so-called infidels, as well as "the Old Religion" which still held on in England even into the twentieth century, or, dare I say, to this day. The Turkish enemy is quite common in these balladic variations, and the sweet Trinity makes more sense thought of this way.

The cabin boy was the squeegee kid of the 16th century. Faced with unbelievably harsh conditions on the streets, many a boy opted for a life at sea. He would soon learn that he had merely exchanged one set of harsh conditions for another. As low man on the pecking order, the ship's 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.

At the other end of the pecking order was the captain, a man of almost unlimited powers once his vessel slipped anchor. It was a dangerous act of mutiny to oppose the captain's wishes. 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.

The ingenious cabin boy in Child 286 has an auger of mythic ability. Not content merely to drill one hole at a time, this auger, depending on the version sung, bore two holes at twice, two holes at once, nine holes all at once, twenty holes in twice, thirty holes at twice, sixty holes and thrice, thirty three and thrice, fifty holes at once, and threescore holes he scuttled in a trice.

The action of the ballad usually takes place in the Lowland Sea, although sometimes a generic, no-name sea is substituted: the low and the lonesome sea. You will search nautical charts in vain for a Lowland Sea, but it is commonly understood to refer to the Mediterranean Sea. Holland is known as the low county, and the term

'lowlands low' often refers to Holland. Despite many choruses in Child 286 that change the Lowland Sea to the Lowland Low, this is a story that 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. Bronson, however, 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 in the *Canadian Bulletin of Folk Music* is, of course, a Canadian one.

In the summer of 1960, MacEdward Leach collected folklore on the Labrador coast under the auspices of the National Museum of Canada. In Lance au Clair he came upon the Letto family. Peter, the father, aged 73, was held in deep veneration by everyone in the community. There was never a question of whether anyone else would sing if Peter Letto were in the room. After he got tired and his voice got sore, he would suggest one of his three sons could now sing. Thus it was that Ben Letto got to sing *The Golden Vanity* into Leach's microphone one day in June, 1960. The ballad can be found in Leach's *Folk Ballads and Songs of the Lower Labrador Coast*, published by the National Museum in Ottawa in 1965. The book includes 138 songs in all, some of them Child ballads.

This is a wonderful version, more than worthy to keep company with the familiar Burl Ives' version, as well as Seeger's one, based on the Carter family. John Langstaff made it into a children's book. I delight in singing it, partly because of the wonderful chorus, and partly because of the extraordinary ending. Now as I look over the music and lyrics, I blush with shame to realize how far "my" version has wandered from my source.

I remember singing it in Winnipeg at a storytelling conference. There is nothing like an audience of storytellers to sing lustily and with beautiful harmonies when they're presented with a singable chorus!

Here are the lyrics as Ben Letto sang them. My notes on them follow.

1. *It's of a gallant ship in the North Amerikay,*¹

*She goes by the name of The Golden Vanity; She's liable to be taken by some Turkish gallee*²

For to sink her in the lowlands, Lowlands, lowlands,

*For to sink her in the lowlands low.*³

2. *First came on board was a little cabin boy, Saying, "Captain, what will you give me, if the ship I will destroy?"*

"Gold I will give you and my daughter for your bride,

If you sink her in ..."

3. *The boy bared his breast and overboard he jumped,*

The boy bared his breast and he swam away to sea;

*He swam till he came to the Turkish castalee,*⁴

For to sink her ...

4. *The boy bored some holes and some of them bore twice,*⁵

*Some were playing cards and some more were shaking dice.*⁶

The dice began to jingle and the water it poured in;

Now she's sinking in ...

5. *The boy turned around and he swam back again;*

He swam till he came to The Golden Vanity, Saying, "Captain, pick me up, for I'm drifting with the tide,

And I'm sinking in the ..."

6. *"Pick you up, pick you up, that I'll never do,*

Sink you, drown you, I'll do it with a will; Gold I will not give you, nor my daughter for your bride,

But sink you in ..."

7. *The boy turned around and swam the other side,*⁶

Saying, "Shipmates, pick me up!" O most pitiful he cried.

The shipmates picked him up and 'twas there on deck he died;

They sewed him in his hammock, and it was long and wide,

They sewed him in his hammock; they threwed him in the tide.

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,⁹
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,¹⁰
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 quite 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 Canadian Society for
Traditional Music has a website!
If you can connect to the Internet,
go to:

[Http://www.yorku.ca/cstm](http://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 Sparling,
and she can be reached at
cstm@yorku.ca

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

"The Golden Vanity" [Child 286]

$\text{♩} = 120$

Sung by Ben Letto, Lance au Clair, June 1960



1. It's of a gal - lant ship in the No - rth Am - er - i -



kay. She goes by the name of the Gol - den Va - ni -



ty; She's lia - ble to be ta - ken by some Turk - ish gal -



lee for to sink her in the low - lands, low - lands,



low - lands, for to sink her in the low - lands, low.