The Irish Patriot

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"The Irish Patriot" is a mysterious song. Judging by the title alone, one would guess it is of Irish origin, and after listening, the story told in the ballad would seem to confirm this suspicion. However, the song has only ever been collected in Maine, where it was likely a popular song among woodsmen, and the Maritime provinces of Canada. The song was first collected by Horace Beck and included in his book, The Folklore of Maine in 1957, and has appeared in a handful of other collections since then.

Other than the origins of the song, a few mysteries persist within the song's lyrics. Chief among these is the location of the meeting with the old man. The first line states "India's burning shore," but the rest of the song (the mention of Capetown and the roar of a lion, for example) suggests that Africa is the correct location for the meeting with the old man and the story he then relates. In other versions, this question is furthered by the mention of a tiger's roar, but tiger in this case was likely an anachronistic use of the word meaning a large cat that is not a lion. A final note on this song, and one that is important to the Northeastern song tradition, was the influence "The Irish Patriot" had on one of the area's great woods poets. Sandy Ives suggested that this song provided the tune and some lyrical inspiration for Joe Scott's ballad "Howard Carey," a common practice among traditional songs. Even though we do not know very much about the origins of "The Irish Patriot," it would seem that Joe Scott and his contemporaries knew it well.

1. I stood beneath the lofty palms on India's burning shore,  
While listening to the ceaseless tune and the savage lion roar;  
As I stood gazing on a scene that to me was blank and drear,  
Advancing to me from the wood an old man did appear.

2. The old man led to me a seat, being on a fallen tree,  
And at his request we both sat down for he wished to speak to me;  
Again the salt tears filled his eyes as he eagerly grasped my hand,  
"Behold in me," the old man cried, "I'm a native of thy land."

3. He looked at me inquiringly, I knew it caused him pain,  
He said, "Young man, you may doubt my word, but I'll tell you once again;  
It was by this hot and burning sun once my skin was fair as thine,  
But there's nothing but good old Irish blood flows in those veins of mine.

4.
"I lived down on the Shannon, in the year of 'Forty-eight,
Blessed by a loving babe and wife on the English lord's estate;
Until that cursed rebellion I was forced from them to go,
To fight for love and freedom in that hated Saxon's foe.

5.
"This English lord so cruel, he sought to take my life,
But soon he revenged his anger on my loving babe and wife;
He mangled their dead bodies with his cruel Saxon sword,
And he said, 'That Irish brat might live to join the rebel's hood.'

6.
"At midnight in the wildwood their dead bodies were brought to me,
And I swore by their dead bodies that revenged on him I'd be;
And to fulfill the oath I swore that revenged on him I'd be,
I sailed in the same ship with him for the coast Cape Colony.

7.
"When we arrived at Capetown I was chosen for to be,
Lieutenant in the army and to guard his own body;
One day while we were hunting alone out in the wood,
I raised my sword in vengeance and before that coward stood.

8.
"'Now raise that cursed sword of yours that slew my babe and wife,
Defend yourself, base murderer, a husband seeks your life.'
And to defend his wretched life he tried all his skill and art,
But I quickly plunged my naked steel into this coward's heart.

9.
"Then I fled to the wildwood where I thought I'd end my life,
But I'd rather die in old Ireland and be buried with my wife;
Here in a gold locket is the only thing I bear,
A shamrock from Ireland and some of my loved one's hair."

10.
I said, "My good and trusty friend, yonder big ship that I command,
To carry you softly o'er the flood to your own native land."
And now down on the Shannon in consecrated ground,
Lies the body of that good patriot and his loved ones can be found.