8-16-1958

The Old Beggar Man

Edmund Doucette

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/songstorysamplercollection

Part of the Ethnomusicology Commons, Folklore Commons, and the Oral History Commons

Recommended Citation


This Song is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Maine Song and Story Sampler by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact um.library.technical.services@maine.edu.
"The Old Beggar Man" is a version of Child 17, "Hind Horn." It is believed to have originated in Scotland and possibly derived from the 13th century King Horn and other related medieval romances, of which the ballad's story seems to be a part. "Hind Horn" is rather unusual among the Child ballads because, unlike the other ballads related to medieval romance that were composed by professional minstrels, "Hind Horn" seems to be of more popular origin. The exact relationship between this ballad and the romances is unclear. Romances and ballads with very similar plots to this one have been found throughout Europe. No version of Child 17 can be firmly dated earlier than 1810, although it could certainly be older. "The Old Beggar Man" is the name under which the song is commonly known in Maine and the Canadian Maritimes. Versions collected in North America all bear a marked similarity to one another in text and tune, and likely are all from one source. Versions from outside of Scotland, Ireland, and the Northeastern seaboard of North America are rare, and generally do not follow the same tune pattern as those collected within these areas.

The motifs in this tale are fairly common among other Child ballads and in other stories and ballads. The lover returning back just in time to claim his bride as she is about to marry someone else can be seen in Child 221 "Katharine Jaffarey." The ring as a token of remembrance and object to aid in recognition is in versions of "John Riley," among other ballads. The brightness of the ring in accordance with the lady's fidelity is similar to certain other tests in Child 29, "The Boy and the Mantle." Countless folktales include objects which, when given as a keepsake to a companion, foretell misfortune. A ring will change color. A knife blade will become stained. Often a magical object is indicative of the condition of the giver. This can be seen here with the ring. The fading of the ring is synonymous with the fading of the lover's loyalty. The lover returning disguised as a beggar is also in The Odyssey. Wealthy men disguised as beggars are present in Child 279, "The Jolly Beggar" and Child 280, "The Beggar-laddie." Child 252, "Kitchie Boy" is generally accepted as a relative of "Hind Horn," with a very similar plot line. The story is primarily one of triumph on the part of the hero. In some versions, the protagonist is sent away because he is not good enough for the king's daughter. When he returns, he is "the finest young man in the hall." The disguise of the beggar is meant to highlight the contrast between the hero's past and his newfound riches, "the gold that shone the brightest of them all." According to Willa Muir, in Living with Ballads, the song is sung because people are fantasizing about having the good fortune of the hero.

One notable feature of this ballad is the lack of a consistent rhyming pattern. According to Laurel Doucette and Colin Quigley, two aspects of British ballads in Canada differ from Child's collection. One is this lack of importance of rhyme; the other, which occurs less often, is the loss of the opening stanza, thus creating a more dramatic beginning for the songs. The reason for these differences, however, is unclear. Moreover, this only seems to be the case among Child ballads in Canada, as other Canadian songs in the Sampler include consistent rhyming patterns.

1.
"Where were you born and where were you bred,
In Scotland town in a foreign counteree?"
“In Scotland town where I was born,  
’Twas there were a maid and she gave to me a ring.”

2.  
“If this ring proves bright and clear,  
You’ll know that I’m true to you my dear,  
And if this ring proves pale and worn,  
You’ll know that your true love is with another man.”

3.  
I shipped on board and away sailed I;  
I sailed away to a foreign counteree  
I looked at the ring, ’twas pale and worn;  
I knew that my true love was with another man.

4.  
I shipped on board and back sailed I;  
I sailed back to my own counteree.  
One day as I was a-riding along,  
Whom did I meet but a poor old beggar man.

5.  
“What news, what news have you today?  
What news have you got for me today?”  
“Sad news I’ve got for you today:  
Tomorrow is your true lover’s wedding day.”

6.  
“Come and take my riding suit,  
And I will take the beggar’s suit.”  
“The riding suit is not fit for me.  
The beggar’s suit is not fit for thee.”

7.  
“Never mind if it’s right or wrong.”  
The beggar’s suit he did slip on.  
He toddled away at a weary rate;  
He laid his sack at yonder gate.

8.  
He begged from the parlour, he begged from hall;  
He begged from the poorest and the richest of them all.  
But as for wine he’d drink none at all  
Unless he’d get it from the bride’s own hand.

9.  
Down came the bride a-skipping down stairs,  
With rings on her fingers and gold in her hair,  
And in her hand a glass of wine  
To give it to this poor old beggar man.
10. Out of the glass he drank the wine,
And into the glass he slipped the ring,
“Did you get it by land or on sea,
Or did you take it off a drowned man's hand?”

11. “I didn't get it on land or on sea.
I didn't take it off a drowned man's hand.
I got it from my true love on our courting day
And given it back to her on her wedding day.”

12. Rings from her fingers she did pull off,
And gold from her hair she did let fall.
“'I'll follow my true love wherever he goes.
Although he begs my bread from door to door.”

13. Between the kitchen and the hall,
The beggar's ring he did pull off.
The gold that shone the brightest of them all;
He was the finest young man in the hall.

-----