

# The Maid of Sweet Gurteen



The prais-es of a love-ly girl I mean to let you un-fold;



Her hair hung o'er her shoul-ders broad like flowing links of gold;



Her slen-der waist, her car-riage chaste, has frac-tured quite my braid;



Her skin is whi-ter than the swan swims o'er yon pur-ling stream.

*Sung by O.J. Abbott, Hull, Quebec*

*Collected by Edith Fowke, July, 1975. Transcribed by Gordon Sheard*

The praises of a lovely girl I mean to you unfold;  
Her hair hung o'er her shoulders broad like flowing links of gold;  
Her slender waist, her carriage chaste has fractured quite my brain;  
Her skin is whiter than the swan swims o'er yon purling stream.

Her eyes are like the diamonds that shine with crystal sheen  
So modest and so gentle, she was fit for any queen.  
The peaceful hours of time I have spent all in the garden green;  
She has won my heart, I cannot part from the maid of sweet Gurteen.

My father he arose one morn and this to me did say:  
"Son, dear son, be advised by me, don't throw yourself away,  
For to marry a poor servant girl whose parents are so mean,  
So stay at home and do not roam with the maid of sweet Gurteen."

"Oh, father, dearest father, don't part me from my dear.  
I would rather have my darling girl than ten thousand pound a year.  
Were I possessed of King George's crown, of her I would make my queen  
And in high renown I would wear the crown with the maid of sweet Gurteen."

My father in a passion flew and this to me did say:  
"Since that be the case, all in this place no longer shall she stay.  
Mark what I say: from this very day you ne'er shall see her face  
For I'll send her far far away from here unto some foreign place."

In two or three days after a horse he did prepare;  
He sent my darling far away to a place I know not where.  
I may go to my true love's room, or to the gardens green  
In hopes to get another sight of the maid of sweet Gurteen.

Now to conclude and finish, I mean to end my song.  
John O'Brien it is my name, Flower Hill it is my home.  
I may go to my true love's room, or to the gardens green  
But here in pain I now remain for the maid of sweet Gurteen.

This Irish broadside ballad was apparently popular in the nineteenth century but has been rarely reported from tradition. "The Catalogue of the Henry Bradshaw Collection" in the Cambridge Library lists four different broadside versions, and it appears in Manus O'Connor's *Irish Come-All-Ye's* (New York: L. Lipkin, 1901, p. 31). Colm O'Lochlainn included it in his *Irish Street Ballads* as heard from a Galway balad singer (Dublin: The Sign of the Three Candles, 1946, p. 44). On this continent it does not seem to have been reported from the United States, but Kenneth Peacock gives it in *Songs from the Newfoundland Outports* (Ottawa: National Museum, 1965, p. 375).

All versions are quite similar, although the title varies: O'Lochlainn, like Mr. Abbott, has Gurteen; O'Connor has Gorteen, and Peacock gives Gurtheen. O'Lochlainn's nine-stanza text is the most complete. Mr. Abbott has dropped the introductory stanza ("Come all ye gentle Muses, combine and lend an ear...") and another rather illogical stanza in which the lover complains that his cruel father has locked the girl up in a room. One rather interesting variation is that Peacock's text mentions "Queen Victoria's throne" instead of "King George's crown" while the Irish texts have "England's crown." The King George in Mr. Abbott's version was probably George IV who reigned from 1820 to 1830.

If Laws had catalogued this ballad it would obviously fall in his section of "Family Opposition to Lovers" (*American Ballads from British Broadside*s, Philadelphia: American Folklore Society, 1957, pp. 179-200). It is a very common theme: of parents objecting to their offspring marrying a sweetheart who is considered inferior. However, this text is rather unusual: in most of the ballads about family opposition it is the daughter of rich parents who is forbidden to marry a poor boy. Nearly all the thirty-nine ballads Laws reports follow that pattern; in only two is it a son who falls in love with a poor girl (Laws M20 and M21). Here it seems as though the ballad composer tried to reverse the usual pattern with a somewhat confused result. He has the boy's father locking the girl in her room, where it is normally the rich girl's father who locks his daughter up to prevent her running off with the poor suitor. Similarly, it is usually the rich girl's father who arranged for the poor boy to be taken away by a press gang or transported; here it is the boy's father who has the girl sent away. However, logic was not highly rated by the ballad singer; a familiar romantic theme was accepted without question.

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Photo: Phil Thomas



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