



Songs & Ballads



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This verses of
this ballad,
known as "The
Cruel Mother",
come from
versions
collected by
[Cecil Sharp](#)
throughout
Southern
Appalachians.

"The Cruel Mother"

Saturday, March 1, 2008

*"There was a lady near the town,
Low, so low and so lonely,
She walked all night and all around,
Down in the green woods of Ivry."*

This ballad, known as "The Cruel Mother" is #20 in Child's collection of the [English and Scottish Popular Ballads](#). My version is composed of verses which all come from the Southern Appalachian Mountain region, including Kentucky and Virginia, which were collected by [Cecil Sharp](#), and published as **English Folk Songs From The Southern Appalachians**. Click [HERE](#), [HERE](#), and [HERE](#) to see some of the originals from an earlier edition of this work.

The tune for my version is also from Sharp's collection. It comes from the singing of James Chisholm of Nellysford, Virginia, along with one verse, which Sharp noted on May 21, 1918. I currently live just outside of Nellysford.

The idea for combining this particular tune, with a different refrain, and collating verses from various versions that Sharp found in his travels comes from June Tabor's version on her CD "[An Echo of Hooves](#)". This is a very beautiful rendition and you can hear a snatch of it [HERE](#) and download it if you choose. I have taken her version and gone back to Sharp's original collection and taken my own selection of verses, leaving the dialects as I found them.

Here is the full, annotated text of my version.

The Cruel Mother

Child 20

June Tabor's arrangement

[With original sources noted from Sharp]

There was a lady near the town
low so low and so lonely
she walked all night and all around
down in the green woods of Ivry [Mrs. Maud Kilburn, at Berea, Madison Co., Ky., May 1, 1917]

She was a going across the bridge
she found herself a growing big [Mary Gibson, at Marion, N.C., September 3, 1918]

She laid herself all against the oak
and first it bent and then it broke [Mrs. Rosie Hensley, at Carmen, N.C. Aug. 10, 1916]

She leaned herself all against the thorn
and there she had two fine babes born [Rosie Hensley]

She pulled out her snow-white breast
and she bid them a-suck for that would be the last [Rosie Hensley]

She pulled down her yeller hair
And she bound it around their little feet and hands [Rosie Hensley]

She got a knife so keen and sharp
she pierced it through each tender heart [Mrs. Maud Kilburn]

She buried them under a bunch of rue
she prayed to the Lord they'd never come to [Mary Gibson]

Then she went out one moonlit night
she saw two babes all dressed in white [Mrs. Maud Kilburn]

Baby, o baby, if you were mine
I would dress you in the scarlet so fine [Mr. James H. Chisholm, at Nellysford, Va., May 21, 1918]

Oh mamma, oh mamma when we were yours
you dressed us in our own hearts' blood [Mrs. Maud Kilburn]

You wiped your penknife on your shoe
the more you wiped it the bloodier it grew [Mrs. Moore, at Rabun Co., Georgia, May 1, 1909]

You buried us under the marble stone [Mrs. Moore]
then you turned as fair maid home [Mrs. Julie Boone, at Micaville, N.C., Sept. 25,
1918]

Oh babes, sweet babes, can you tell me
what'll be my fate for killing you [Mrs. Doc Pratt, at Hindman, Knott Co., Ky., Sept. 22,
1917]

In seven years you'll hear a bell
in seven years you'll land in hell [Mrs. Maud Kilburn]

You can find discussion of this ballad at the Mudcat Cafe [HERE](#). And [HERE](#) is
an article in Wikipedia on this ballad. And [HERE](#) is some further discussion of
other versions of this ballad, including June Tabor's lyrics.

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