KelticDead Music

Stories, Tunes and Songs in the Traditions of our Celtic Dead

To the Four Ayrts to Guide Us, and For the Four Winds to Get Us There!

The mission of the **KelticDead Music** initiative is to find tunes and songs from around the world that have Celtic, Folk, World, Americana, and Seafaring origins, and arrange them into simple sheet music formats for folk musicians to use and share. In addition, the KDM initiative provides the in-depth stories with possible lyrics for a more complete music-education experience.

*All the selections and sheet music content provided in the **KelticDead Music** initiative are from traditional, made-public, made-public with credits, or cited credits where applicable. This material content is the personal interpretations of the subject provided by **Patrick O-Shaun Young, KelticDead Music**.*

Ballad of Impossible Tasks
A Francis Child Ballad

It is believed that the tale about a young maiden being bewitched or enchanted by an elfin knight (or a dark spirit) comes out of northern Europe several thousand years ago. Over the years the tale changed from a dire magical theme into one where a girl is being rudely propositioned by a cavalier, and she rebukes his illicit proposal in a very creative way.

The ballad first made its appearance in print in a self-published collection of folk tales and ballads by Peter Bucan (4 August 1790 to 19 September 1854) who collected a wide variety of Scots and Northern European ballads and folktales. In his collection, the ballad was known as the "Elfin Knight," and he asserted it came from the 16th Century.



Made public painting of a cavalier with a young maiden. The fellow on the right is playing a whistle or a "horn" (something like an oboe) which was popular in the middle ages.

Peter apprenticed with a Jack-of-all-trades, and in 1814 produced his first book of verse which failed to draw any notice. His hometown lacked any printer shops, and in 1816, Peter went to Stirling to learn the printing process, and within a matter of days he established a business as a printer in Peterhead in March 1816. The Earl of Buchan recommended a friend to Peter to fund the purchase of the press.

Ballad of Impossible Tasks



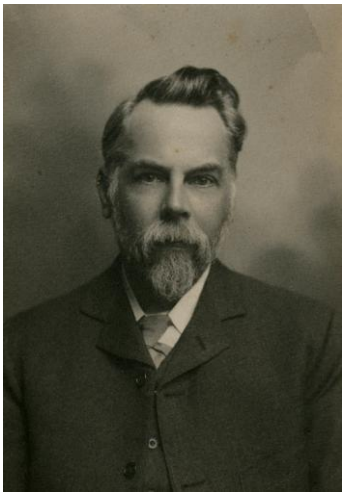
In the early years of business, he printed a series of chapbooks (aka “Broadsides”), and invented his own printing press named the "Auchmedden,“ which was a pedal-operated device that accepted stone, copper, as well as type surfaces for printing. One of his publications, “The Annals of Peterhead” (1819), had copper-plate illustrations which he himself engraved.

Made Public Painting of Peter Bucan.

Scarce Ancient Ballads (1819) and **Gleanings of Scarce Old Ballads** (1825) were part of his early publications. Having compromised his health, Peter retired to Peterhead and devoted himself to printing a collection of Scottish ballads from oral sources. **Ancient Ballads and Songs of the North of Scotland** (1828) contained a large number of unpublished ballads. He also created a collection called **Scottish Traditional Versions of Ancient Ballads** (1845). Two unpublished volumes of Buchan's ballad collections can be found in the British Museum. The connection with Peter’s efforts is probably why many believe that the popular ballad that we know today as “**Scarborough Faire**” was from Scots origins, though that may not be entirely accurate.

Francis James Child (February 1, 1825 – September 11, 1896) was an American scholar, educator, and folklorist who also collected Scots, English, and other European ballads. Francis J. Child was Boylston professor of rhetoric and oratory at Harvard University, where he produced influential editions of English poetry. The **Child Ballads** were published in five volumes between 1882 and 1898. Child was primarily a literary scholar with little interest in the music of the ballads, but his work became a major contribution to the study of English-language and of folk music. A version of his “**Ballad of Impossible Tasks**” is the one presented in this broadside.





The melody that we associate for the ballad today first appeared within the works of Frank Kidson (15 November 1855 – 7 November 1926). Frank was an English folksong collector and music scholar, and he was interested in capturing folk music, which he gathered with the help of his niece Emma Mary Kidson (whom he called Ethel).

His early work on folk music was published in **Old English Country Dances** (1890) and **Traditional Tunes: A collection of ballad airs** (1891). He was also one of the founders of the Folk-Song Society in 1898 and this guided his knowledge of early ballad literature. **English folk-song and dance by Frank Kidson and Mary Neal** was published in 1915.

KelticDead Music Broadside

Ballad of Impossible Tasks

The modern, more recent, version of the ballad called "**Scarborough Faire**," created by Simon and Garfunkel in 1966, actually had nothing to do with the longest held faire in Scarborough in Yorkshire, England. However, I've held to the theme of a maiden going to a faire carrying her wares of sage, rosemary, and thyme which were common herbs sold in the markets and fairs in the 1600s. And, I've held to the incident where she met with a "bold cavalier" who were known to be womanizers.

In Child's descriptions, a young maiden was the older, unmarried sister, and she desired to be married like her younger sister. When she saw a handsome cavalier, she hoped he could be the one, but unfortunately, … he was not.

She walked the hills and carried her wares,
Of savory sage, rosemary and thyme.
'Twas then that she met the bold cavalier,
She hoped he could be a true love in time.





"Oh, Are you going on to the faire?
And every rose grows fairer with time.
Oh, think of me from the one who lives there,
And then you will be a true love of mine."





"Oh, Make for me a camb(e)ric shirt.
You are a rose that blossoms in time.
Without any seams, nor needle to work,
And then you will be a true love of mine."

"Oh, We will wash it in yonder dry well.
Oh, savory sage, rosemary and thyme.
Where no water springs, nor rain ever fell,
And then you could be a true love of mine."

The girl responds ….





"Oh, Yes, I'm going on to the faire,
And my … poor heart betrays me this time.
I'll do this for you .. If you'll do these for me,
And then I will be a true love of thine."

"Oh, Please go find me an acre of land.
Oh, parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme.
Between the sea foam and rocky strand,
And then you will be a true love of mine."

"Oh, then go plough it with your own blowin' horn.
Oh, parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme.
And then sow it all with one pepper corn,
And then I will be a true love of thine."





"And when you've done and finished your work.
Oh, parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme.
Oh, then you may have your camb(e)ric shirt.
Only then we could be a true love in time.

KelticDead Music Broadside

Ballad of Impossible Tasks

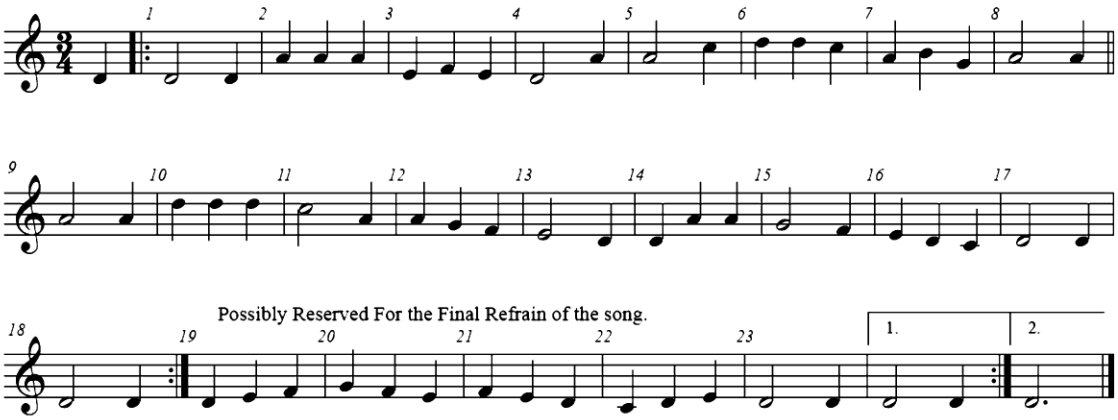


There have been many variations of the song and the melody since this tale has been told and played. This ballad was popular among the musicians and troubadours who frequented the fairs and festivals. The festival at Scarborough in England was the longest held faire known lasting over 350 years.

Ballad of Impossible Tasks

Lyrics derived from the "Elfin Knight" and the "Ballad of Impossible Tasks" from the collections by Peter Bucan and Francis Child, circa 1800s

Arrangement by KelticDead Music Melody derived from Folk Music collection by Frank Kidson, 1891.



https://on.soundcloud.com/2BHmeC8gdMymkPGul1

The version of the melody and ballad used by Simon and Garfunkel in 1966 with the name "**Scarborough Faire**" was unique in that Garfunkel blended in a "counter" melody (a canticle) that had an anti-war theme to it. It made the already cryptic verses even more so, but it made a really great folk tune and song.

In the melody, I used a Low-Octave, Irish-Tuned Bouzouki, a Kerry Mezzo C whistle, an MK1 Low-C whistle, bodhran, and voices.



Shaun Young

You Tube Video Presentation

Ballad of Impossible Tasks

KelticDead Music Initiative

is a private, on-line music-education initiative. All the music projects are recorded with live, acoustic instruments and performed in accordance with simplified sheet music arranged in eight bar formats (whenever possible) in accordance with the guidelines that are within the Celtic music traditions. For more music videos and stories visit …

https://KelticDeadMusic.org