

The True History of Mary Anne Talbot

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Interpret the note durations freely and vary the melody slightly, as the text requires. If this shade of grey is visible, you can make use of the grey notes for guidance: Where a measure has both black and grey notes, the black pitches are the ones I use for the majority of verses, and the grey pitches are the ones I substitute for specific verses, as shown in the grey numbers in parentheses below the lyrics. HLK

Freely, naturally (♩ = 150)

My fam-ily name was Tal-bot, and my name was Ma-ry Anne,
Verses where the grey notes work better: (3)

And I was born a wo-man, though some thought I was a man.

My fa-ther was Lord Tal-bot, though I ne-ver saw his face;
(17)

My mo-ther died to bear me, though my sis-ter took her place.

You may have heard my sto-ry, though in part, but not in whole,
(15,20) (5,7,8,10,12,14,16,19)

For I fought and served my coun-try, though that was not wo-man's role.
(6,7,10,15,18,19)

That was no i-dle ta-le, fab-ri-ca-ted to a-muse,
(2,3,5,7,9,10,12,13,16,18,20,21) (5,15,16)

For I was made of flesh and blood, to hurt, to bleed, to bruise.

- 1 My family name was Talbot, and my name was Mary Anne, And I was born a woman, though some thought I was a man. My father was Lord Talbot, though I never saw his face; My mother died to bear me, though my sister took her place. You may have heard my story, though in part, but not in whole. For I fought and served my country, though that was not woman's role. That was no idle tale, fabricated to amuse, For I was made of flesh and blood, to hurt, to bleed, to bruise.
- 2 I rarely saw my sister. I found childhood sad, not cruel, Then, in my fourteenth summer, I was taken from my school, And Captain Essex Bowen, at my guardian's request, Set out to educate me in the manner he thought best. Well! Such an education I would wish no woman have, For he made of me his plaything, then he made of me his slave, As, being young, without a trade, I saw no other course But be John Taylor, foot-boy, and go with him to the wars.
- 3 We sailed to the West Indies, passing through so fierce a gale That I heard our fittings creaking, and I thought that they must fail. We lost half our provisions. When the fearsome gale had passed, I learned to grow accustomed to my life at sea at last. Aloft, among the rigging, where I once thought I'd be killed, I found work by no means irksome, as I grew to be more skilled. At Port-au-Prince new orders came, and soon we were prepared To fight the French Republic in the first war it declared.
- 4 It being inconvenient, or so Captain Bowen said, To keep me as his foot-boy, he insisted that instead I learn another line of work appropriate for boys, To beat the drum in battle and produce a fearsome noise. Now, townfolk, hearing soldiers march to instrumental sounds, Never guess we are most needed when our comrades suffer wounds, For, in the heat of battle, when we've gone to hell, it seems, It's there our work is drowning out our trampled comrades' screams.
- 5 The wounds I got at Valenciennes I had to hide from all: The first caused by a French shot, when a glancing musquet ball Bounced off my rib; the second, caused by accident, I'm sure, Came from an ally's broad sword. I effected my own cure With Dutch drops and basilican. I might have fought again, But I heard that my tormentor, Captain Bowen, had been slain. I should have gladdened at the news, but for so many years I had practiced woman's sympathies, I had to hide my tears.
- 6 Afraid to face the soldiers, out of fear I would reveal That I was born a woman, while my wounds took time to heal, I felt I had no option but deserting from the fight, And trying to reach England by whatever means I might. But, knowing not the country, as I wandered on my way, I proceeded east to Luxembourg, not westward to Calais, And, penniless and starving, where the French were in command, I signed on board Le Sage's ship and once more left the land.
- 7 The more I learned about that ship, the more I grew to fear That I must fight my countrymen: we were a privateer. But, by their luck, no merchantmen had passed across our bow Before we met the English fleet and Admiral Lord Howe. A coward or a patriot, I am not sure which one, I refused to join my ship's defence, and, when the fight was done, I told Lord Howe that cruel distress had placed me with his foes, And I'd intended to desert when first the chance arose.

8 Le Sage, an honest Frenchman, though a privateer by trade,
Confirmed before the Admiral the trouble I had made
When I'd refused the orders to assist in our defense,
And so Lord Howe believed me when I told of these events.
As powder monkey I returned to fighting for my king,
And was stationed on the Brunswick as we sailed forth that spring.
Unlike the other sailors, I was mannered and was clean,
And got to serve as cabin boy until the French were seen.

9 For us to fight as we'd been trained, it was not opportune
Until we met the French upon the glorious first of June.
One ship of theirs was sunk that day; another's crew was lost,
While we survived with most our men, although severely tossed.
And, as the battle ended, I was faint, in pain, alone,
For a shot had struck my ankle, tearing flesh and splitting bone,
And, higher up, a musquet ball had pierced me through the thigh.
The able kept on fighting, with the wounded left to lie.

10 The battle being over, I was living, though I bled.
Despite the pain the surgeon caused in probing me, he said
The grape-shot had been lodged too deep for his skill to remove.
He transferred me to Gosport, in the hope I would improve.
There, lodging near the hospital, but under surgeons' care,
I achieved at best a partial cure, an incomplete repair,
And, after four months rest had left me close enough to whole,
I served on the Vesuvius as it went on patrol.

11 While separated from our fleet — we'd just come through a gale —
We chanced upon two privateers, well-armed, and taut in sail.
We had no choice but fire — to escape, we were too slow —
But seven hours later, we were boarded by our foe.
And in the port of Dunkirk, in a prison of the French,
I spent eighteen months confinement, with the last three in the stench
And darkness of a dungeon, into which they made me crawl,
For trying to escape the yard by jumping from a wall.

12 But, at the end of eighteen months, my circumstances changed,
Because a trade of prisoners had lately been arranged,
And, walking out through Dunkirk, limping well behind my mates,
I chanced on the good fortune that makes some believe in fates.
I overheard some English words where Church Street market stood;
There a Captain Field was asking whether any sailor could
Direct him to a well-schooled lad prepared to make a trip
To New York in America as steward of his ship.

13 I offered him my services, being eager to obtain
Such suitable employment, and he asked me to explain
How I was loose in Dunkirk, being an enemy of France;
I told him how I had been freed that very day by chance.
The prison guards confirmed this, and I thereby gained some work
On a handsome trading vessel that was sailing for New York.
The trip was smooth, no gales blew, and Neptune played no tricks;
The harbour cranes unloaded us in August, 'ninety-six.

14 I then obtained a fortnight's leave from taking on new freight
And went to visit Providence, that's in Rhode Island State,
Along with Captain Field, where I met his wife and kin,
Who never made a visit, but I was included in.
But soon, the Captain's niece grew bold, and made a firm demand
That I not refuse the honour of the offer of her hand.
My reasons for declining I hoped she could not deduce,
But youth and inexperience sufficed for my excuse.

15 The winds blew well towards England when our time to sail came.
We soon were anchored in the Thames; of course, I still was lame.
The residents of Wapping thinking officers were spies,
I donned a seaman's outfit, plain and rough, as my disguise
And rowed from ship to shore with the American, John Jones,
In a search for drink to ease the pain that plagued my aching bones.
But, just before we landed, though we both tried to resist,
We were captured by a press gang. How the fates do turn and twist!

16 John Jones, being from Rhode Island, as his papers certified,
Could not be pressed for service. As for me, he could have lied
And said I was American, to keep me from their grip.
He told them I was English and the best hand on the ship.
The reason for his treachery was not hard to surmise,
For, across the wide Atlantic, I had seen it in his eyes,
And, if the press gang officers would grant me no release,
He would lose a handsome rival and regain the Captain's niece.

17 My age was almost nineteen years, and several times before,
I had escaped another fate by going off to war.
I'd drummed for troops in battle. I'd battled under sail.
I'd spent four months in surgeons' care and eighteen in a gaol.
And, caught without my papers, among scruffy, tradeless men,
There was but one plan to save me from being sent to fight again.
With nothing else to keep me from more years between the decks,
I claimed I had immunity by virtue of my sex.

18 Though many tales they had heard from conscripts, young, afraid,
That was the first occasion one had claimed to be a maid.
They bade the surgeon prove me wrong, so that they might proceed,
But soon I had convinced him that I was a maid, indeed.
My femaleness the basis of my claimed immunity,
I could not resume in conscience my work upon the sea,
And so I sent for Captain Field once I had been released:
I quit his service; I was paid. My sailing days had ceased.

19 I spent most days in London after that eventful date,
My life still filled with incident too numerous to relate,
So I'll be brief. One that I'll tell is still known to this day:
I was the first one of my sex to claim her Navy pay.
There is a House named Somerset, located near the Strand,
Which, although two hundred years have passed, continues still to stand.
There I made application and was granted my arrears,
Which barely kept me for some months. I lived eleven years.

20 I acted, though the pay was poor, for I liked being seen.
I worked gold for a jeweler who sold bracelets to the Queen.
Some nobles raised subscriptions when they heard me tell my tale,
And when I could not pay my debts, I spent more time in gaol.
The pension for my wounds that I received but twice each year
Could not keep me fed or sheltered, though it bought my friends good beer.
And once, the drink I'd taken to since living on the shore
Did surgeon's work and freed the shot that lodged some years before.

21 The kind of work to let me live in comfort never came.
The leg, which once was almost sawn, was only part to blame.
I'd been a steward; I'd kept books; I could have been a clerk,
But in those days no Englishman would offer me such work.
Yet, when the press gang freed me, and my sex had been revealed,
I could still have been of value to that good man, Captain Field,
Who begged me to disguise again, and do work as a man
That I could not do as my sex, though now most women can.

One might ask whether this song, in which there are 21 verses, could be shortened. I tried that once, splicing some partial verses together and eliminating whole other ones, and reduced the length to about 14 verses. I was not happy with the result: the remaining verses contained enough of the plot to justify the climax in verse 17, but much was lost in the way of texture and detail. For example, deleting verse 3 loses the development of Mary Anne's confidence and competence, leaving her as someone to whom misfortunes simply happen; deleting verses 14 and 16 loses the song's most interesting case of sexual confusion. For such reasons, I prefer the song as it is, sung only for audiences with the patience to appreciate it, to the pale reflection that would be left after a severe pruning. HLK

Sources:

"T.S.", article "Talbot, Mary Anne" in the [British] *Dictionary of National Biography (to 1900)*, pp. 325-326

Katherine Sturtevant, *Our Sisters' London: Feminist Walking Tours*, Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1990, p. 78

Mary Anne Talbot, "The Intrepid Female, or surprising life and adventures of Mary-Anne Talbot, otherwise John Taylor" [autobiographical to 1804, four years before her death at age 30], appearing in Robert S. Kirby's *Wonderful Museum*, London: 1804, pp. 160-225

An interesting parallel:

Before writing this song, I had heard a number of variants on the theme of the "cross-dressing sailor". However, it was only twelve years later, in 2002, that I first heard "The Soldier Maid", as found in Norman Buchan and Peter Hall's book *The Scottish Folksinger*. That song makes specific reference to Valenciennes, suggesting that its author knew at least part of Mary Anne Talbot's true story, though nothing in the rest of the song is specific to her own life.

Howard L. Kaplan
172 Howland Avenue
Toronto, Ontario M5R 3B6, Canada
howard@thrinberry-frog.com
<http://www.thrinberry-frog.com>
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