

# **BALLAD OF BONNYMEAD**

**By James Plimell Webb**

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Out of the North he came one day,  
    One day when spring was young,  
With flashing eyes and handsome face  
    And lightly flattering tongue,

He was a gambler, a gambling man,  
    Who'd earned his bread by chance  
Before the girl in Lexington  
    Had caught his wandering glance.

He met the maiden, Lena Shale,  
    And then no more he'd roam;  
There in the Bluegrass town he stayed,  
    And there he made his home.

He was arrayed in stocks and lace  
    And silver-buckled shoe,  
In garb such as was seldom seen  
    In eighteen twenty-two.

And often he went to Bonnymead,  
    To Bonnymead Court went he,  
To drink and talk with Colonel Shale  
    And his fair daughter see.

Oh, often he went to Bonnymead,  
    The farm where she abode,  
And rode away with his lady-love  
    On many a pike and road.

Oh, Arthur's moonlight-whispered words  
    Would make her heart rejoice;

He was a courtly mannered man  
With softly spoken voice.

And when he left her at the door,  
The girl would coyly say:  
"Come often back to Bonny mead;  
Come with the dying day."

*Oh, in the tall and tangled weed  
He fell upon his face;  
Dressed full and fine, he did not heed  
The stain-spots on his lace.*

She thought of him and hummed a song  
While she did comb her hair,  
And in her heart was feverish joy,  
But never a fear nor care

But others there were not so kind  
And did not like her man;  
Her brother John mistrusted him  
And trouble soon began.

"He is a man of lowly birth,"  
Her brother told the girl,  
And bade her turn him from the gate  
With scornful lip a-curl.

"He is a worthless gambling man,  
And is no match for you;  
He does not mean you well at all;  
Your love you are sure to rue."

But she was young and full of zeal,  
And all her mind and heart  
Were given up to thoughts of him,  
Together or apart.

"Oh, Brother dear," she answered him,  
    "He has a handsome face,  
And all his clothing is so fine.  
    With gentleman's own lace.

"He rides a horse with princely ease  
    And like a knight of old,  
And his two eyes are fine and bright.  
    And ever ray heart shall hold."

And often they rode by day and night,  
    When June was in the air,  
Along the turnpikes when the sky  
    Was clear and blue and fair.

Oh, many days were blue and fair  
    And many nights were clear,  
So many an hour she spent with him,  
    And every hour was dear.

Once when the moon was too, too bright,  
    And stars winked laughingly,  
She gave away what she would give  
    To never a man but he.

Beneath the oak tree near the road,  
    Where grass was lush and green,  
Two loving forms in close embrace  
    By only the moon were seen.

Oh, what is the power of the fair moonlight  
    And the tree that casts a shade  
And grass that grows up lush and green  
    To tempt a man and a maid?

*Ah, here it was, the selfsame spot.  
He fell upon his face,  
But then at last he could not heed  
The stains upon his lace.*

July was drawing to a close  
When Colonel Shale, her father,  
Urged on by headstrong Brother John,  
At last himself did bother

To put an end to this courtship,  
This madness of the springs  
He told his daughter sternly then  
She must return the ring.

"You must return the ring you wear,  
You must return the ring,  
For wearing a betrothal gem,  
It is a grievous thing;

"It is a grievous thing to do  
Unless you mean to wed,  
And if you marry this worthless man<sup>^</sup>  
I rather would see you dead\*"

So said the father of the girl,  
Who loved her in his heart.  
For he thought it best for his daughter's sake  
That she from Arthur part.

He did not know of the oak-tree shade  
And grasses lush and green,  
And the lure of love when skies were fair,  
And embraces the moon had seen.

He did not know that near her hearty  
A stirring she soon would feel  
To tell her their folly was bearing fruit,  
The doom of a lady to seal.

*Oh, he is lying cold and still,  
Where grass grows lush and green.  
And now he has no need to care  
For ruffles and laces clean.*

The doors of Bonnymead were locked,  
The gates of the court were barred  
Against the coming of Arthur there,  
And the lovers' lot was hard.

Deep in the night the whippoorwill called.  
In fields the Bob White cried,  
And in the meadow the sparrow chirped,  
But the man and the maiden sighed.

And Lena trusted a family slave,  
Whose aging heart was white,  
And gave him for Arthur a piteous note  
That told him of her plight.

The letter was written and tightly sealed,  
And told of stirrings within,  
It told of new life their folly had made,  
The fruit of a fervent sin.

She called her colored Uncle Dan,  
Whose kinky hair was white,  
The letter for Arthur to him she gave  
To deliver in the night.

Into the town at the twilight hour  
    Ventured the faithful slave,  
To find the man who might devise  
    A means her honor to save.

But a shadow stole behind the slave  
    And followed along the street;  
The shadow was none but Brother John,  
    Who followed on silent feet.

Inside a tavern of the town,  
    Arthur was found at last,  
With a pot of ale and a lively tale  
    Of dangerous days gone past.

The aged slave the message gave,  
    Bowed out into the night,  
And Brother John was in the room,  
    Ready and willing to fight.

But brawls are made for uncouth men  
    And not for gentlemen born,  
And so a pact was made for them  
    To fight at early morn.

With pistols they would shoot to kill  
    When the morning sun arose:  
"At twenty paces by the road  
    Where the aged oak tree grows."

*This was the spot where they had lain  
    So close in love's embrace.  
Where he would fall and never heed  
    The stains upon his lace*

At sunrise both the men were there,  
    With seconds standing by,

And it was known to every one  
Somebody here would die.

Young Arthur stood beneath the tree  
And did remember June,  
Remembered all the sweet, sweet hours,  
Which now were flown too soon.

He thought of grasses lush and green,  
Which now he trampled down,  
A couch for lovers beneath the moon,  
And a long, long mile from town.

Young Arthur stood beneath the tree,  
Where grasses lushly grew,  
And which would live and which would die  
It seems that Arthur knew.

And while he counted with the count  
As they tolled the fatal three,  
He knew that kinship's tie is strong,  
And none must die but he.

Inside the bosom of his shirt,  
His sweetheart's letter lay,  
Which he would keep untorn, unread,  
And buried with him away.

The signal came, the arms were raised,  
The shots rang out and died,  
Then John rode home to Bonnymead,  
But Arthur did not ride.

He lay upon the dew-wet weed,  
With new sun on his face,

But he lay still and did not heed  
The bloodstains on his lace.

And this is why a woman wept  
By a fresh-made grave at morn;  
And this is why, in Lexington,  
A fatherless child was born.