

Polly Oliver (Isle of Wight Song)

Our daughter is called Polly. We decided on the name because we knew an IOW shepherd who played the fiddle. He lived on the Downs out Brighstone way. His girlfriend was called Polly. They were both very much free spirits with a zest for life. We also knew that the song Polly Oliver had versions relating to the Isle of Wight.

Polly Oliver is originally a 17th song well known for the lines about “musing in bed” and that “she had some strange or comical thoughts”. Here are the two versions that are known on the Island. The first one relates to Polly Oliver and the Sea Captain. The story in all of the versions of Polly Oliver is much the same. She falls in love with someone and decides to chase after him. She dresses up in disguise, pretends she is a man and then follows him. This is a common theme found in a number of songs. It seems it gave much excitement to ladies of this time and was considered saucy. This version we found over 40 years ago. We have made some textual additions.

Polly Oliver and the Sea Captain (IOW version)

It was on the Isle of Wight where a damsel did dwell
She was courted by a sea captain and we knew it quite well.
One night as Polly Oliver lay musing in her bed
She had some strange thoughts come into her head.

Neither father nor mother shall make me false prove
I'll enlist for a sailor and follow my true love.
With waistcoat and breeches and a sword by her side
And her father's black gelding away Polly Oliver did ride.

She rode and she rode until she reached the seaport town
And there she put up at the sign of the Crown.
The first man she saw was a man from abroad
The next man she saw was her own true love.

She says, “Sea captain here's a letter for you
It came from Polly Oliver, she's at home and loves you true.
And in this here letter there's a guinea and one crown
For you and your comrades to drink her health round.”

“Her health shall not be drunk by one or by two,
But her health shall be drunk by all the ship's crew;
And when I've a punch bowl all into my hand,
Here' a health to Polly Oliver who's on the dry land.”

Now Polly being weary she hung down her head
And asked for a candle to light her to bed.
Up spoke the sea captain, I've a bed at my ease
And you may lie by me country man as you please.

For to lie by a sea captain is a dangerous thing
I'm a new listed sailor going to fight for the king.
On the next morning pretty Polly arose
And dressed herself up in her own female clothes.

Then up spoke the sea captain "I did not use you right
But I hopes to use you better love upon the next night".
Now Polly is married, she lives at her ease
She goes out when she likes and comes back when she please.

This next version is found in Long's book. It is more in a music hall vain. The tune is repeated to make it a six line verse. This is the version we sang originally on our tapes.

Polly Oliver (from Long)

One night as Polly Oliver lay dozing in bed,
A comical fancy came into her head;
"No father nor mother shall make me false prove,
I'll enlist for a soldier and follow my love,"
With coat, waistcoat and breeches and a sword by her side,
Her father's black gelding as a dragon she did ride.

She rode till she came to fair London town,
Where she put up her horse at the sign of the crown;
When who should be there - in truth just come in,
But her true love, the captain, who tried her to win.
"Good even to you, my bold captain," she cried,
"I've a letter from Polly, your joy and your pride."

When he opened the letter, a guinea he found,
For he and his comrades to drink Polly's health round;
And supper being over, Polly hung down her head,
And called for a candle to light her to bed;
When up spoke the captain, "I've a bed at my ease,
And you may lie with me, countryman, if you please."

"To lie with a captain is a dangerous thing,
But I'm a new soldier come to fight for the king,
And we must obey orders by sea and by land,
And as you are my captain I'll obey your command."
So the captain and Polly together they lied,
And little thought he who it was by his side.

So early the next morning Polly Oliver arose,
And dressed herself neat in her maidenly clothes;
And cried, when the captain came down from above,
"Look here stands your Polly, your joy and your love,"
"Now welcome, my Polly, I'll make you my wife,
And we'll live happy together all the days of our life."

As I child I sang Polly Oliver and there were number of versions concerning the captain. In some he dies and Polly is a nurse. Here are three versions with some interesting endings:

Pretty Polly Oliver

As pretty Polly Oliver lay musing in bed
A comical fancy came into her head:
Nor father nor mother shall make me false prove,
I'll 'list for a soldier and follow my love.

The drums they did rattle and the trumpets did blow;
With heart all a-tremble into battle she did go;
Her lover he was wounded and fell by her side
But knew her and squeezed her dear hand before he died.

And as she sat crying beside his cold corpse
The General rode up to her, riding on a white horse.
Then Polly ups and says to him, though mortal afraid
"O sir, I'm no sodger lad, I'm nothing but a maid."

Now seeing as her lover was gone from this life
He kissed her full kindly and did make her his wife:
Now Polly is a lady and never knows care
But lives in contentment with a thousand pounds a year.

Sweet Polly Oliver

As sweet Polly Oliver lay musing in bed
A sudden strange fancy came into her head:
Nor father nor mother shall make me false prove,
I'll 'list for a soldier and follow my love.

So early next morning she softly arose
And dressed herself up in her dead brother's clothes;
She cut her hair close and she stained her face brown,
And went for a soldier to fair London town.

The up spoke the sergeant one day at his drill
"Now who's good for nursing? A Captain lies ill."
"I'm ready", said Polly. To nurse him she's gone,
And finds 'tis her true love all wasted and wan.

The first week the doctor kept shaking his head;
"No nursing, young fellow, can save him", he said.
But when Polly Oliver had nursed back his life,
He cried, "You have cherished him as if you were his wife!"

Oh then Polly Oliver she burst into tears,
And told the good doctor her hopes and her fears.
And very soon after, for better or for worse,
The Captain took joyfully his pretty soldier nurse.

Polly Oliver

As Pretty Polly Oliver sat musing 'tis said
A comical fancy came into her head;
Nor father nor mother shall make me false prove,
I'll enlist for a soldier and follow my love.

So in soldier's attire to the wars she set out,
And bore a brave part both in raid and in rout,
In the battle she found him slightly wounded and low
On the ground where he lay with his face to the foe.

Now Polly he knew in a moment's quick glance,
And he cried, "Why my dear, sure I've met you in France."
But the lass she said, "Nay, he was surely mistook"-
But her words were belied by the love in her look.

The sergeant he sent for the parson to come,
And couple the lovers who'd follow'd the drum;
And Polly restored to her womanly state,
Found all she had sought in a home and a mate.