

The Ship That Never Returned



1. On a summer day, as the waves were rippling
By the soft and gentle breeze
Did a ship set sail with her cargo laden
For a port beyond the seas.
Did she ever return? No, she never returned
And her fate was yet unlearned.
Tho' for years and years there were fond ones waiting
For the ship that never returned.
2. Said a feeble lad to his anxious mother,
"I must cross the wide, wide sea,
For they say, perchance, in a foreign climate
There is health and strength for me!"
'Twas a gleam of hope in a maze of danger
And her heart for her youngest yearned;
Though she sent him forth with a smile and a blessing
On the ship that never returned.
3. "Only one more trip," said a gallant captain,
As he kissed his weeping wife.
"Only one more bag of the golden treasure,
And 'twill last us all through life.
Then we'll spend our days in a cozy cottage
And enjoy the rest I've earned."
But, alas, poor man, who sailed commander
On the ship that never returned.

"The Ship That Never Returned" was written by Henry Clay Work in 1868, nearly 50 years before Titanic left port and never returned. It was remembered for decades largely due to the singable tune and the chorus:

Did she ever return? She never returned.

And her fate, was yet unlearned....

The tune was resurrected in the 1920's and adapted for new lyrics in Vernon Dalhart's recording "The Wreck of the Old 97", the song that was the first country music "hit" and the subject of the first big copyright lawsuit over a recording.

In the 1950's "The Ship That Never Returned" returned again as another train song. This time it was a Boston Metropolitan Transit Authority subway train in the Kingston Trio's 1959 hit "Charlie on the MTA" and it was the passenger, Charlie, that never returned. Carl Sandburg's collection **American Songbag** recorded an adaptation from the Kentucky mountains.

It was printed in Laws' **Native American Balladry: A descriptive study and bibliographical syllabus** (1964), Randolph's **Ozark Folksongs** (1946-1950), Peters' **Folk Songs out of Wisconsin** (1977), Sandburg's **The American Songbag** (1927), Hubbard's **Ballads and Songs from Utah** (1961) Arnett's **I Hear America Singing! Great Folk Songs from the Revolution to Rock** (1975), Spaeth's **Weep Some More, My Lady** (1927), Silber's **Folksinger's Wordbook** (1973) and Cohen's **Long Steel Rail** (1981/2001).

It appears in the **Roud Folk Song Index** as #775.

It was recorded by Omar Blondahl, Vernon Dalhart, Connie Foley, Bradley Kincaid, -Asa Martin, Gene McNulty, Roe Bros. & Morrell, Charles Lewis Stine and others.