

Go Down, you Blood Red Roses

A traditional halyard shanty, the earliest written reference to which seems to be in 1879, this piece was popularised in its current form by A.L. Lloyd in a 1956 film adaptation of Moby Dick. His version was based on a transcription by Doerflinger in 1951, who had found it in a sailor's manuscript dated 1893. Though widely believed to refer to the welts from a flogging, there is no true consensus on the meaning of "blood red roses" in the song's refrain, and in fact the phrase seems to originate with Lloyd's version. Doerflinger and all earlier known examples give the title as some variation on "Come Down, You [Bunch of] Roses". It also appears to be related to a Caribbean children's play song called "Coming Down with a Bunch of Roses". Hugill speculates that the "roses" were a reference to British soldiers in the Napoleonic wars, but there is little evidence to support this; it may simply refer to a sweetheart, or indeed, literal flowers. Hugill says it was a real 'Cape Horner' very popular in Liverpool ships.

Well our boots and clothes are all in pawn
Go down, you blood red ro-o-se-e-es, Go down
It's mighty drafty 'round Cape Horn
Go down, you blood red ro-o-se-e-es, Go down

Oh, you pinks and posies
Go down, you blood red roses, Go down

But it's round Cape Horn that we must go
For that is where them whalefish blow

My dear old mother wrote to me
Oh, son, dear son come home from sea

It's growl you may, but go you must
If you growl too hard your head they'll bust

Now one more pull and that will do
For we're the boys to pull her through