

High Barbary

"The Coast of High Barbary" is a traditional sailors' song that was most frequently sung as a ballad but can also be a shanty and which was popular among British and American sailors. It tells the story of a sailing ship that came across a pirate ship off the Barbary Coast (western coast of North Africa) and defeated the pirates, who were left to drown.

An earlier version of the Ballad is found in the Stationers' Register for January 14, 1595. The most common lyrics, which we sing, refer to the problems European and North American trade had with North African pirates in the last half of the 18th century and the early 19th century which was the reason for the Barbary wars. Roud 134.

"Quarter" is a request to surrender. It stems from the custom by which officers, upon surrender, could free themselves by paying a ransom of one quarter of a year's pay.

There were two lofty ships
From old England came
Blow high, blow low
And so sailed we
One was the Prince of Luther
The other the Prince of Wales
Down along the coast
Of the High Barbary

"Aloft there, aloft there"
Our jolly bosun cried
Blow high, blow low
And so sailed we
"Look ahead, look astern,
Look to weather look a-lee"

"There's naught upon the stern, sir
There's naught upon our lee
Blow high, blow low
And so sailed we
But there's a lofty ship to windward
An' she's cruisin' fast and free"

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"Oh hail 'er, oh hail 'er"
Our gallant captain cried
Blow high, blow low
And so sailed we
"Are you a man-o-war
Or a privateer?" cried he

"No, I'm not a man-o-war
Or a privateer," said he
Blow high, blow low
And so sailed we
"But I'm a salt sea pirate
Looking for me fee"

For broadside, for broadside
All day long did lay
Blow high, blow low
And so sailed we
'Til at last the Prince of Luther
Shot the pirate's mast away

"Oh quarter, oh quarter"
Those pirates they did cry
Blow high, blow low
And so sailed we
But the quarter that we gave them
Was we sank 'em in the sea