



A Thwarted Romance (part 1 of 2)

When night was glamorous, a fellow amorous • Went out to woo a pretty little maid • Beneath her window, far, he tuned his gay guitar • And sang beneath a star this serenade:

Lady Romantical, list to my canticle • Slip from your coverlet, fleecy and white • My heart's a-flutter now, open your shutter now • Here how I utter now, sighs in the night

Back in January of 2009, I used part of this column to ask for reader help in tracking down the origins of the above goofy song (only the first half of which is quoted here) whose authorship I could not find anywhere on the web or in the library. Six years later, thanks to a very recent e-mail out of the blue, I have been given an answer. But it's a complex answer, and the quest for it has been complicated, too.

My bandmate Lou and I both learned the song in fifth or sixth grade from a school songbook, loved it, and memorized the lyrics. Fifty years later, after the 2009 Whither Zither came out, a few other fans of the song began to help me look for it, cruising bookstores both virtual and real. The only new piece of information we ended up with was that someone remembered the title of the song as *A Thwarted Romance*.

Moving ahead to 2014, Lou and I were working on putting together songs for another blockbuster CD. I decided to risk copyright infringement and write a new beginning and end verse to the song, and in these verses, ask again for information regarding the song's author. When I was a boy I really liked the song's humor and tumbling wordplay, but later on, when I drifted into lyric writing myself, I realized this song was truly well crafted, with a dizzy collection of cleverly constructed rhymes. When you come upon something like this, it's only natural to try to find out who wrote it, in hopes of locating other writings by the same author, as well as for giving credit where it's

due. So part of our intro verse goes like this:

Although we quote the thing, don't know who wrote the thing • But we are confident somebody knows • To fix this oversight, and at the risk we might • Infringe a copyright, here's how it goes...

Then we sing the song, and end with another added verse soliciting authorship information. We put out the CD in the fall of 2014, and began performing the extended song at gigs. We called it *Lady Romantical*. More people joined in the search as a result of our singing this extended version. But through the winter, no luck.

Then suddenly BAM! Just three days before I sat down to write this column, a glorious email out of the blue arrived from Carol Achtman of Palo Alto, California, with two scans attached, one of each facing page of a songbook, and THERE it WAS!

I asked her how she had found out about my quest. Curious about the song, Carol had searched on Google using a few words from the lyrics, and up popped Whither Zither from January 2009. She went on to say, "It was so gratifying to discover that I am not the only person in the world who knows and loves this song... I learned it in fifth grade in 1950 and have sung it to myself many times since then." Many people have expressed similar feelings toward the song.

Sure enough, according to the scan, it was called *A Thwarted Romance*. I had wrongly remembered that the song was in the *American Singer* series. It turned out to be in *New Music Horizons* for grade 5, Silver, Burdett Company, 1946. And now things became a bit more interesting. The very first thing I looked for was the author's name. But the credits read as follows:

A Thwarted Romance (Incognito) Paraphrased from the original Spanish by Phyllis McGinley; Popular throughout Latin America.

"Paraphrased from the original Spanish"? I have NEVER seen a song credited in that way. Not *translated*, but *paraphrased*. McGinley obviously tweaked it, and quite nicely.

The name Phyllis McGinley sounded familiar. It turns out that Phyllis McGinley won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1964 for her light verse collection *Times Three: Selected Verse from Three Decades*. More about her strange poetry in next month's column, but this helped explain why the lyrics felt so well crafted.

Searching further, I found a version of the original folk song translated (not "paraphrased") in the 1917 *Memoirs of the American Folklore Society*, in the chapter *Spanish American Folk Songs*. A footnote gives credit to the book *Folk Songs of Mexico and South America*, H.W. Gray Co. There is this note: "Very familiar in all parts of Spanish America." The melody, notated in the *Memoirs*, is definitely the melody to *A Thwarted Romance*. The lyrics to the original song, called *El Galan Incognito*, has the following first verse. Compare this translation to the "paraphrase" at the beginning of this column. There are interesting parallels but wild differences:

One cloudy evening a gallant incognito • Passed through the crowded streets and public square • Then at the base of the carved Doric window • He leaned and played his guitar, and sang this air:

O, here me, lovely sylph! The moon so pale and wan • Sends down no rays to me through veils of mist • Now from the face of Heav'n rain falls in tears like mine • I am drenched through and through, singing to thee

Next month: It gets crazier. There was a comic opera called *El Galan Incognito* written by Cristobal Oudrid in 1862. According to Wikipedia, *It was "a complete fiasco."* Was this opera based on the folk song? Was the song written by Oudrid for the opera? I'm looking into it. Meanwhile, I will put the second halves of the "paraphrased" song and the "translated" song in next week's column, and more about Oudrid and McGinley.

Many and deep thanks to Carol Achtman for tracking me down and sending me the treasured scans that started me a-delving so. Stay tuned for part two. *WZ May 2015*