

A-Rovin'

1. In Amsterdam there lived a maid
Mark well what I do say!
In Amsterdam there lived a maid
And she was mistress of her trade.
I'll go no more a-roving with you, fair maid.

**A-rovin', a-rovin',
Since rovin's been my ru-i-in
I'll go no more a-rovin with you fair maid**
2. One night I crept from my abode,
To meet this fair maid down the road.
3. I met this fair maid after dark
And took her to her favourite park.
4. I took this fair maid for a walk,
And we had such a loving talk.
5. I put my arm around her waist,
Says she, 'Young man you're in great haste'.
6. I put my hand upon her knee,
Says she, 'Young man, you're rather free'.
7. I put my hand upon her thigh,
Says she, 'Young man, you're rather high'.
8. I towed her to the *Maiden's Breast*,
From south, the wind veered sou'-sou'-west.
9. The eyes in her head turned east and west,
And her thoughts were as deep as an old sea-
chest.
10. We had a drink, of grub a snatch,
We sent two bottles down the hatch.
11. Her dainty charms was white as milk,
Her lovely hair was soft as silk.

12. Her heart was pounding like a drum,
Her lips was red as any plum.

The eyes in her head turned east and west
Then she was a-heaving of her chest.

In three weeks time I was broke and spent
And off to sea I sadly went.

13. We lay down on a grassy patch,
And I felt such a ruddy ass.

14. She pushed me over on me back,
She laughed so loud her lips did crack.

15. She swore that she'd be true to me,
But spent me pay-day fast and free.

16. In three week's time I was badly bent,
Then off to sea I sadly went.

17. In a bloodboat Yank bound round Cape Horn
Me boots and clothes were all in pawn.

18. Around Cape Stiff through ice and snow,
And up the coast to Callyo.

19. And then back to the Liverpool docks,
Saltpetre stowed in our boots and socks.

20. Now when I got back home from sea,
A sodger had her on his knee.

Notes:

Numbered verses from **Hugill**. The first six are unaltered and the rhyming words at the end of each solo are intact.

Sheringham Shantymen don't sing the indented verses but have added the un-numbered ones.



*Hugill, Stan:
At the Jiggety-jig Pump
from Shanties of the Seven Seas, 1994.*

Notes:

Pump shanty,

Alternative Titles: A-Rovin', Amsterdam, The maid of Amsterdam.

This version: **Hugill**, Stan, 1994, ***Shanties from the Seven Seas***, where Hugill wrote :

A-roving was originally sung at the pumps and old-fashioned windlass. In both labours, two long levers were worked up and down by the men: a backbreaking job. These levers - in the case of pumps they were known as "brakes" - had a long wooden handle inserted in their outboard ends, enabling three or four men to grasp each brake.

Many shanties started life at the pump brakes or old-fashioned windlass levers. Later, when ships began to use capstans with a large windlass below the fo'c'sle head and iron ships began to replace wooden ones, thereby doing away with the arduous toil of pumping ship with monotonous regularity, watch and watch, these shanties were adapted for use at the capstan and more modern and not-so-often -sed flywheel or Downton pump.

Naturally in conversion the tune and words remained unaltered, but the rhythm very often had to be adjusted to the new type of job. **A-Rovin'** is, I feel, always sung much too fast by modern professional singers. The words "A-rovin', a-rovin'" should be timed to fit the downward movement of a four-foot diameter pump wheel.

The flywheel pump handles, like the old-fashioned levers, allowed only three or four men at the most to do the job, but in the case of the [flywheel] so that many more hands could be employed, a rope known as a "bell-rope", with an eye spliced in one end, was looped over the end of each pump wheel handle, and as the wheel was about to descend the men, first on one side and then on the other, would haul on the rope, lightening the toil considerably.

The old-fashioned up and down or Jiggity-jig windlass for anchor-heaving was used right to the end of the days of sail in the coastal schooners and ketches of Great Britain; I have myself spent many hours at its brakes and know something of the back-breaking labour it must have caused in the larger deep-water ships of a bygone age.

A-Rovin' appears to be of fair antiquity. ... some say the tune is Elizabethan. As well as the shore folk-song found in Great Britain, there exist Dutch, Flemish and French versions of this tune. An English shorter version collected by Cecil **Sharp** is ***We'll go no more a-cruisin'***. And it has within recent years reappeared over the radio as ***Oh women, Oh women!*** with a touch of the cowboy and hillbilly about it!

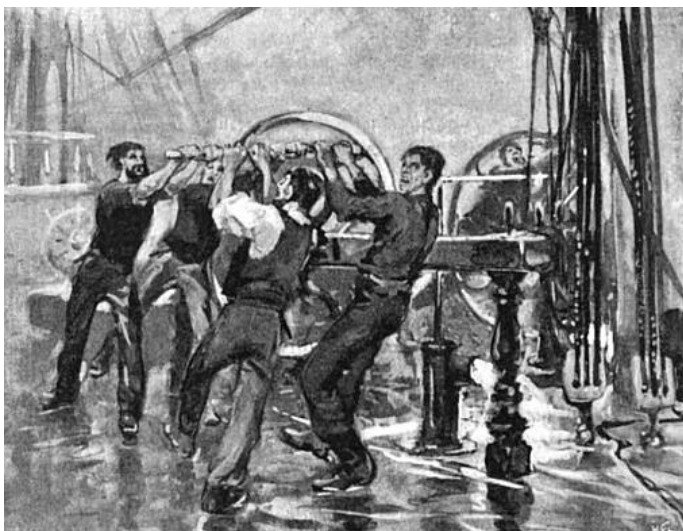
In the version sung by Sailor John the main theme was frankly Rabelaisian - "coarse and indelicate words wedded to a haunting rhythm", as one writer has expressed it. In my version I have tried to keep as much as possible to the story as it used to be sung at sea, Bowdlerising only at impossible places.

The first six verses are unaltered and in subsequent verses I have kept the rhyming words at the end of each solo intact. This is the nearest attempt yet made to give the shanty as Sailor John rendered it. I have versions from my father, from **Anderson**, a Scottish carpenter who had served in many Liverpool sailing ships, and from H. **Groetzmann**, a German seaman who had sailed for years in English barques in the West Coast of South America trade.

In the chorus very often: "I'll" was sung instead of "We'll", "roamin" for "rovin", "false maid" for "fair maid", and "overthrow" or "downfall" for "ruin".

...

The last three or four stanzas are fairly modern. Saltpetre, guano, and all kinds of nitrates were shipped from the south-west coast of South America to British and continental ports mainly in the latter days of sail.



Symons, W:
Sailors working at a Downton pump,

Illustration from an article on sailor chanteys, in ***"Sailors' Work Songs"*** by **Patterson**, J.E. 1900. via [Wikimedia Commons](#)