



Songbook

[Home](#)

[Songbook](#)

[Albums](#)

[News](#)

[Gigs](#)

[Biography](#)

[Discography](#)

[Promo Gallery](#)

[Reviews/Articles](#)

[Links](#)

[Contact/
Bookings/Online](#)

[Shop](#)

THE FAIR FLOWER OF NORTHUMBERLAND

Traditional- arranged by Alistair Hulett (Pub. AMCOS)

An outlaw ballad set in the badlands around Berwick on Tweed, this fine song was well known and widely sung on both sides of the border for several centuries. The region between Scotland and England was known in ancient times as The Debatable Lands, and was home to the fierce 'reiver clans' of Scotland. 'Reiving' is the old Border Scots word for robbery and was considered an honourable profession among the likes of the Armstrongs, Elliots, Lindsays, Graemes and Douglasses who held sway over the wild marches of 'The Debatables'.

I learned the version of it performed here from a vintage recording by Enoch Kent from Glasgow, now resident in Canada. Enoch was a member of the wonderful 60s folk band, The Exiles, who's albums have withstood the test of time and richly deserve a digitalised second lease of life.

The central male character in the ballad manages to win his own second lease by conning the daughter of the English noble who's captured him into aiding and abetting a joint elopement north. The song provides a caution to well bred young English women to steer well clear of Scots Border Reivers. Sound advice and well worth following I'm sure.

G Em G D
 The Provost's ae dochter was walkin' her lane only daughter....alone
 G C G
 Oh but her love it was easy won
 C G D
 When she heard a Scots prisoner makin' his mane lamenting
 D7 G Em C G
 Aye and she was the floo'er o' Northumberland

Gin I had a lassie tae set me free if
 Oh but her love it be easy won
 I wad mak' her a lady o' high degree
 If she'd loose me oot fae my prison sae strang out from

Noo she's gone her ben tae her faither's bed-stock inside
 Oh but he love it was easy won
 And she's stolen the keys oot o' mony stout locks
 For tae loose him oot fae his prison sae strang

And she's gone her ben tae her faither's stable
 And it's oh but her love it was easy won
 And she's stolen the steed that was baith fleet and able
 For tae hurl them over tae bonny Scotland

But as they were a-ridin' oot o'er yon Scots muir moor
 He cried Oh but yer love it was easy won
 Get doon fae my horse, ye're a brazenfaced hoor whore
 Although ye're the floo'er o' Northumberland

She said cook in yer kitchen I surely will be
 Oh but my love it was easy won
 For I cannae gae back tae my ain country
 Although I'm the floo'er o' Northumberland

He said cook in my kitchen ye cannae weel be
 Oh but yer love it was easy won
 For my lady she wadnae have servants like thee
 So ye'll need tae gae back tae Northumberland

But laithe was he thon lassie tae tine loath....vex
 And said Oh but yer love it was easy won
 So he's hired an auld horse and he's hired an auld man

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For tae carry her back tae Northumberland

Noo when she gaed in her faither did frown went
And said Oh but yer love it was easy won
Tae gang wi' a Scotsman when ye're barely sixteen go
Aye, and ye were the floo'er o' Northumberland

But when she gaed in her mither did smile
And said Oh but yer love it was easy won
But ye're no' the first that yon Scots have beguiled
And ye're welcome back hame tae Northumberland

Oh ye winnae want breid and ye winnae want wine won't lack
Oh but yer love it was easy won
And ye winnae want siller tae buy a man wi' money
And ye're aye the fair floo'er o' Northumberland

Chord Chart

Capo at the 5th fret and play G shapes (Key of C)

Verse:

G // I Em // I G // I D // I

G // I G // I C // I G // I

C // I G // I G // I D // I D7 // I

G // I Em // I C // I G // I

Outro:

G // I Am // I G // I D // I

G // I Em // I C // I G - - I

Playing Tips

With a capo at the 5th fret, I use G chords here to play in the key of C. I like using G shapes because it's one of the only guitar keys that lets you play a melody over two full octaves within the 'first position' using standard tuning. Bluegrass guitarists favour this key above all the others for exactly that reason and the chord formations I use here were learned from watching those guys. I decided against adopting the grinning as well as the picking, though.

The song is in 3/4 time, which is a bit tricky to finger pick in. You can get quite a nice effect by strumming out the rhythm with a flat pick though, if you prefer.

The recording posted here is taken from a live studio session and interview I did for Radio Rai in Rome during a tour of Italy in June 2006.

