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The Four Marys

British Ballad

Moderately

Last night there were four Marys, To - night there'll

be but three. There was Mary Bea - ton and

Ma - ry Sea-ton, And Ma - ry Car - mi - chael and me.

Oh, often have I dressed my queen
And put on her braw silk gown;
But all the thanks I've got tonight
Is to be hanged in Edinburgh town.

Full often have I dressed my queen;
Put gold upon her hair;
But I have got for my reward
The gallows to be my share.

4. They'll tie a kerchief around my eyes
That I may not see to dee;
And they'll never tell my father or mother,
But that I'm across the sea.
5. Last night there were four Maries,
Tonight there'll be but three;
There was Mary Beaton and Mary Seaton,
And Mary Carmichael and me.

PROGRAM GUIDE: *British ballad*

Word's gane to the kitchen,
And word's gane to the ha,
That Marie Hamilton gangs wi bairn
To the hichest Stewart of a'.

So begins one of the most popular and beautiful of the old Scottish ballads. Long before soap operas were invented the ballad medium was used to entertain us during the long dreary stretches of the day or night. "The Four Marys" tells the story of a legendary scandal at the court of Mary Stuart—Mary, Queen of Scots. There are so many Marys in the song and in its historical scene that it is difficult to keep them all straight. Mary Stuart had four ladies in waiting: Mary Seaton, Mary Beaton, Mary Fleming, and Mary Livingston. The four Maries, as they were popularly known in France, were chosen to accompany her when she went to France as a little girl of five or six. These four girls, who were about her own age and who came from "honorable houses," remained with Mary Stuart while she was in France and returned to Scotland with her thirteen years later, in 1561. Despite the fact that they have been woven into the ballad, there is no record to indicate that any of these Marys was involved in a specific situation that would provide a basis for the story of this ballad. The Mary Carmichael and Mary Hamilton of the ballad appear from nowhere, although historians have located a Mary Hamilton who was a Scottish maid of honor at Peter the Great's court and was beheaded for infanticide (the crime in this ballad) in 1719. Surrounding Mary Stuart and her court there was considerable gossip, rumor, and criticism of romantic and political intrigues. This atmosphere in itself was sufficient to provide the basis for ballad and legend. Stories of illegitimate births occurring to members of her court and to the queen herself circulated widely at the time. Until research and scholarship turn up a better answer, if they ever do, we will have to assume the ballad emerged from this background of popular rumor and legend, with the customary confusions and distortions that accompany the folk processes of oral circulation. This short version of the ballad enables you to get through the song in less time than it would take you to explain the story. There are longer versions that run in excess of twenty verses. The melody flows very nicely at a slow one-beat-to-the-measure pace, or a relatively fast three beats to the measure. *Braw* (verse 2, line 2) means "fine-looking," or "splendid." It can also mean "gaudy."