

# The Old Actor's Story - song lyrics

**American Old-time song lyrics from [www.traditionalmusic.co.uk](http://www.traditionalmusic.co.uk)**

THE OLD ACTOR'S STORY.

By George R. Sims. As recited by Alex. J. Brown.

Mine is a wild, strange story-the strangest you ever heard;  
There are many who won't believe it, but it a Gospel, every word:  
It's the biggest drama of any in a long, adventurous life;  
The scene was a ship, and the actors were myself and my new-wed wife.

You mustn't mind if I ramble and lose the thread now and then;  
I'm old. you know, and I wander-it's a way with old women and men,  
For their lives lie all behind them, and their thoughts go far away,  
And are tempted afield, like children lost on a summer day.

The years must be live-And twenty that have passed since that awful night.  
But I see it again this evening, I can never shut out the sight.  
We were only a few weeks married, I and the wife, you know.  
When we had an offer for Melbourne, And made up our minds to go.

We'd acted together in England, travelling up and down  
With a strolling band of players, going from town to town;  
We played the lovers together-we were leading lady and gent-  
And at last we played in earnest, and straight to the church we went.

The parson gave us his blessing, and I gave Nellie the ring.  
And swore that I'd love and cherish, and endow her with everything.  
How we smiled at that part of the service when I said: "I thee endow!"  
But as to the "love and cherish," I meant to keep that vow.

We were only a couple of strollers; we had coin when the show was good;  
When it wasn't we went without it, and we did the best we could.  
We were happy, and loved each other, and laughed at the shifts we made-  
Where love makes plenty of sunshine, there poverty casts no shade.

Well, at last we got to London, and did pretty well for a bit;  
Then the business dropped to nothing, and the manager took a flit-  
Stepped off one Sunday morning, forgetting the treasury call:  
But our luck was in, and we managed right on our feet to fall.

We got an offer for Melbourne-got it that very week.  
Those were the days when thousands went over to fortune seek,  
The days of the great gold fever, and a manager thought the spot  
Good for a "spec," And took us as actors among his lot.

We hadn't a friend In England-we'd only ourselves to please-  
And we jumped at the chance of trying our fortune across the seas.  
We went on a sailing vessel, and the journey was long and rough;  
We had'nt been out a fortnight before we had had enough.

But use is a second nature, and we'd got not to mind a storm  
When misery came upon us-came in a hideous form.  
My poor little wife fell ailing, grew worse, and at last so bad  
That the doctor said she was dying-I thought 'twould have sent me mad -

Dying where leagues of billows seemed to shriek for their prey,  
And the nearest land was hundreds-ay, thousands-of miles away.  
She raved one night in a fever, and the next lay still as death,  
So still I'd to bend and listen for the faintest sign of breath.

She seemed in a sleep, and sleeping, with a smile on her thin, wan face,  
She passed away one morning, while I prayed to the throne of grace.  
I knelt in the little cabin, and prayer after prayer I said,  
Till the surgeon came and told me it was useless-my wife was dead'

Dead! I wouldn't believe it. They forced me away that night,  
For I raved in my wild despairing, the shock sent me mail outright.  
I was shut in the farthest cabin, and I beat my head on the side,  
And all day long in my madness, "They've murdered her!" I cried.  
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They locked me away from my fellows-put me in cruel chains;  
It seems I had seized a weapon to beat out the surgeon's brains.  
I cried in my wild, mad fury, that he was a devil sent  
To gloat o'er the frenzied anguish with which my heart was rent.

I spent that night with the irons heavy upon my wrists.  
And my wife lay dead quite near me. I beat with my fettered fists,  
Beat at my prison panels, And then-oh, God!-and then  
I heard the shrieks of women and the tramp of hurrying men.

I heard the cry, "Ship a-fire!" caught up by a hundred throats.  
And over the roar the captain shouting to lower the boats;  
Then cry upon cry, and curses, and the crackle of burning wood.  
And the place grew hot as a furnace, I could feel it where I stood.

I beat at the door and shouted, but never a sound came back,  
And the timbers above me started, till right through a yawning crack  
I could see the flames shoot upward, seizing on mast and sail.  
Fanned in their burning fury by the breath of the howling gale.

I dashed at the door in fury, shrieking, "I will not die!  
Die in this burning prison!" -but I caught no answering cry,  
Then, suddenly, right upon me, the flames crept up with a roar,  
And their fiery tongues shot forward, cracking my prison door.

I was free-with the heavy iron door dragging me down to death;  
I fought my way to the cabin, choked with the burning breath  
Of the flames that danced around me like man-mocking fiends at play,  
And then-oh, God!-I can see it, and shall to my dying day.

There lay my Nell as they'd left her, dead in her berth that night;  
The flames flung a smile on her features-a horrible, lurid light.  
God knows how I reached and touched her, but found myself by her side;  
I thought she was living a moment, I forgot that my Nell had died.

In the shock of those awful seconds reason came back to my brain;  
I heard a sound as of breathing, and then a low cry of pain;  
Oh, was there mercy in heaven? Was there a God I'll the skies?  
The dead woman's lips were moving, the dead woman opened her eyes.

I cursed like a madman raving-I cried to her, "Nell, my Nell!"  
They had left us alone and helpless, alone in that burning hell;  
They had left us alone to perish-forgotten me living-and she  
Had been left for the fire to bear her to heaven, instead of the sea.

I clutched at her, roused her shrieking, the stupor was on her still;  
I seized her in spite of my fetters-fear gave a giant's will.  
God knows how I did it, but blindly I fought through the flames and the wreck  
Up-up to the air, and brought her safe to the untouched deck.

We'd a moment of life together-a moment of life, the time  
For one last word to each other-'twas a moment supreme, sublime.  
From the trance we'd for death mistaken, the heat had brought her to life,  
And I was fettered And helpless, so we lay there, husband and wife!

It was but a moment, but ages seemed to have passed away,  
When a shout came over the water, and I looked, And lo! there lay,  
Right away from the vessel, a boat that was standing by;  
They had seen our forms on the vessel, as the flames lit up the sky.

I shouted a prayer to heaven, then called to my wife, and she  
Tore with new strength at my fetters-God helped her, and I was free;  
Then over the burning bulwarks we leaped for one chance of life.  
Did they save us? Well, here I am, sir, and yonder's my dear old wife.

We were out in the boat till daylight, when a great ship passing by  
Took us on board, And at Melbourne landed us by And by.  
We've played many parts in dramas since we went on that famous trip,  
But ne'er such a scene together as we had on the burning ship!