

THE SONGS OF NATHAN HATT

By HELEN CREIGHTON

TO see him you would not expect Nathan Hatt to be a singer. He is an old man now, turned eighty-seven, and spends his days sitting in his rocking chair with head bowed solemnly until something pleases him when he looks up and his whole face becomes alight. Occasionally he enjoys a magazine because the pictures interest him, but he has to pass the stories by, for he can neither read nor write. Yet his life is full of stories—stories in song. If he had the strength he could sing a whole night through and never repeat. His voice has been heard a summer evening as he sat on his back porch and his neighbors listened from their homes all along the Middle River valley. Others remember him carting lumber to Beech Hill, a nine mile trip begun before dawn with a return at sunset, walking proudly in front of his ox team and singing all the way.

Mr. Hatt has no idea of his ancestry, but it is probably German. His mother's name was Ernst, and the name Att or Htt is written illegibly in the list of Lunenburg's early settlers from Wurtemberg. As a young man he must have been very strong. He owned and operated a mill first at Beech Hill and then at Middle River, which accounts for his nickname, Chippy. Then his world crashed about him. The "strong blood" that he likes to boast about forsook him, and he has suffered for the last fifteen years from pernicious anaemia. Being deaf and illiterate a less resourceful man might have given up in discouragement, but not Nathan Hatt. He had his songs for recreation, and they have been his constant companions.

Living a quiet and secluded life his marvelous gift might have gone unnoticed had he not been attended by Dr. E. C. Woodrooffe of Chester. The doctor noticed that his patient always whiled away the time of waiting for his treatments by singing quietly to himself, either at home or in the office. Knowing that I collected folk songs in Nova Scotia, he sent word last winter that he had a patient who might interest me. This sounded encouraging, and the moment my field season with the National Museum started this year, I set out for Chester. Dr. Woodrooffe then began to have qualms lest he had brought me on a wild goose chase. He need not have worried, for chasing wild geese is a large part of the collector's experience, and I am disappointed as often as rewarded.

The following day we drove five miles along the highway west of Chester, and turned inland up the Middle River road for slightly less than a mile. This side road was beautiful in May with birch and beech trees coming into leaf, and all the young growth of early spring to delight us. We turned beside a red barn and mounted a short steep hill on whose crest the Hatt's small white house stood. I learned later that the doctor's unsolicited visit had nearly given him another patient. Mrs. Hatt was sure her son working in the mill had been injured and the doctor had come to break the news. What else would bring him uncalled to their door?

Some time before, the doctor had told Mr. Hatt that I might be along one day, so there was no need of a lengthy explanation. As I passed through the spotless kitchen there was a delicious aroma of cookies being taken from the oven. Mr. Hatt was sitting in a rocking chair in the room next the kitchen and seemed pleased to have a visitor. The doctor made the introductions and left immediately. I asked Mr. Hatt to sing. He started off in something less than a minute, but with head averted from shyness. As he got to know me better his head came gradually around, and he would break into merry chuckles when something in his songs amused him.

His first song was *The Gay Spanish Maid*, pleasant, tuneful and a love song with a sea motif. His voice for all his years, and his manner of singing it were encouraging, but I had often taken this song down before, and wanted to hear more before jumping to any conclusion. He followed this with *The Foot of the Mountain Brow* which was also tuneful, and one I had only recorded once before.

But it was his third song that settled the matter as far as Nathan Hatt was concerned. This was a variant of *The Two Brothers* found in Child's *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, and in my *Traditional Songs From Nova Scotia* as well as a few other collections. It was so changed from my only other variant that at first I failed to recognize it although I knew it belonged to the category of songs known as Child ballads. It seemed reasonable to suppose that if he knew one ballad he would know others, and it began to look as though Nathan Hatt and I were to spend many hours together. Here are the words that set my eyes to dancing, as they always do when a rare ballad is discovered. The tune has not yet been written down.

THE TWA BROTHERS

I will sing you a song, it is all about John,
About John the piper's son,
How he was slain by his own brother dear
Away in the woods all alone.

2

O saying, "Now it's time to be going,"
"O no, that never can be,
For in this woods I mean to have your life
For the sake of loving pretty Susie."

3

He drew a sword all from his side,
He pierced his body through,
He dug his grave and he throwed him in
Saying, "That's the end of you."

4

He covered him over with leaves so deep
That he never could be seen,
Then thinking what he should say to his own father dear
When enquiring for his son John.

5

O the first one he met was his own father dear
Enquiring for his son John,
"O he is there, oh he is there into yonder green woods
A-hunting the woods all alone."

6

The next one he met was his own mother dear
Enquiring for her son John,
"He is there, oh he is there in yonder green woods
A-hunting the woods all alone."

7

The next one he met was his pretty Susie
Enquiring for her love John,
"O he's dead, oh he's dead and into his grave
And his face you'll see no more."

8

She throwed the apron over her head
And she mourned the streets all alone,
She mourned the fish all out of the sea
And the frogs all out of the pond.

9

She mourned the milk from the fair maid's breast
And the birds all from their nest,
She mourned her true love out of his grave
And he could no longer rest.

10

"O what do you want my pretty Susie?
And it's what do you want of me?"
"I want one kiss from the sweet ruby lips
And that's all I want from thee."

11

"Go home, go home my pretty Susie
And it's weep no more for me,
For I am dead, I am dead, and into my grave
And I'm sure I never can return."

For several days I worked with Mr. Hatt, adding more and more songs to my collection. Ten, twenty, thirty where was it going to end? And what of the tape recorder in my car, useless in a house without electricity? In the years when I recorded for the Library of Congress I was supplied with batteries and a converter which could be connected in cases like this, but since then most districts have been wired and this is seldom necessary. A younger man could be taken to a neighbor's house but when a man is old and an invalid he is best left in his familiar surroundings with as few distractions as possible. I realized the wisdom of this later when we recorded, for even with the minimum of change he occasionally forgot a song before the microphone that he had recalled easily at the first singing. Mr. Hennigar of the Chester Light and Power finally solved the problem by running a cable some three hundred feet from the nearest house, with a single outlet entering the Hatt house at the window.

Collecting from Mr. Hatt began to be something of a game, with a report to the Woodroffes and Mr. Hennigar every day, since the power was always disconnected at night and put on again in the morning. Forty-seven songs; could I get him up to fifty? Three more songs would do it, but that day he sang fifteen. To date he has sung seventy-two.

Like all folk singers, Mr. Hatt loves a bit of fun, and he had his game too, with the voice that came back from the machine. I often try to get a little conversation on the tape for dialect. His songs played back delighted him, and he always gave a satisfied "Umm" when one was finished, but the parts where he talked filled him with glee. He would say of the voice, "I made that mistake; now he does it". or, "That fellow forgets", and try to help him out. If he had stumbled very badly in his song he would say, "You're like me, you forget it" and laugh at the voice for being so silly. Often he forgot the tape was recording and he can be heard saying, "I've got sud

a tundering bad cold I can't sing. My memory's gone and I'm no good for nawthin'. I've got a toad in me troat. Nellie, bring me the salt. You know how to kill a toad? You put salt on his back". He would then put salt on his tongue.

Nellie is his daughter, Mrs. McInnes who helps her mother keep house and generally looks after the family. She proved a great help from the first, and if Mr. Hatt sang a song in the evening that he had not thought of during the day, she would jot it down on the calendar. His mind apparently is at its best in the evening, but the power was always off then and we could not record. In fact we only worked three hours in the afternoon each day because he did not get up until noon, but that was enough. With old people tunes become confused if too many are done at one sitting.

One afternoon we turned the recording machine off and plugged my radio in to listen to the C. B. C. program Folk Song Time. Singers love to hear their own songs, but it is seldom that two people sing them exactly the same. He listened to *Lady Isabel and the Elf Knight* which he had sung a few days before, and then repeated it as soon as the program was over. His version goes like this:

LADY ISABEL AND THE ELF KNIGHT

"O arise, oh arise, oh arise," said he,
 "Arise, oh arise," said he,
 "For we shall go to some foreign counteree
 And it's married we shall be."

2

She then jumped on her own horse
 And he on the iron grey,
 They roamed till they came to the riverside
 Three hours before it was day.

3

"There's alight, there's alight, there's alight," said he,
 "There's alight, there's alight," said he,
 "It's six purty maids I have drownded here
 And the seventh you shall be.

4

"Haul off, haul off your gay clothing
 And lay them upon the green,
 For I do think that your clothing is too gay
 For to lie in a watery tomb."

5

"If I haul off my gay clothing
And lay them upon the green,
I do not think it fit for a ruffian like you
A naked woman for to see."

6

Then he was ashamed of what he had said,
He turned his back towards her,
She gave to him a shove just with all her dear might
And she sunk him in the deep.

7

"O sink, oh sink, oh sink," said she,
"It's sink, oh sink," said she,
"For I don't think that your clothing is too gay
For to lie in the watery tomb."

8

Then she jumped on her own horse's back
And she led the iron grey,
She roamed till she came to her father's stable door
Two hours before it was day.

9

"Now it's hush, now it's hush my pretty Polly dear,¹
Don't tell no tales on me,
For your cage it shall be made out of yellow beaming gold
And hung up on an ivory tree."

10

The old man in his bed a-lying awake
A-listening to all that was said,
"What caused you to prattle my pretty Polly dear
So long before it was day?"

11

"The cat had clim on the window so high
A-thinking my sweet life to destroy,
I had to call in my youngest missus dear
For to take that cat away."

12

"Well turned, well turned, well turned," said he,
"Well turned, well turned," said he,
"For your cage it shall be made out of yellow beaming gold
And hung up on an ivory tree."

Other Child ballads sung by Mr. Hatt are *Geordie*, *Bonny Barbara Allan*, *The Farmer's Curst Wife*, *The Cruel Mother*, *The Gypsy Laddie*, and two verses of *Lord Bateman*. He also sings *He's Young But He's Daily A-Growing*.

(1) Parrot.

In his whole repertoire there are only three songs of local origin, *Peter Rambelay* and *Harry Dunn*, both telling of death in the lumber woods, and *Meagher's Children*, a story of two children lost in the woods at Preston. All the rest were brought over by early settlers from the British Isles. Many of his lyric folk songs were new to me and he sings them with great enjoyment. It was a joy to sit back and hear him sing to a bright and lilting tune a song like this:

If ever I do get married will be in the month of May
 When the birds they are singing and the flowers they are gay,
 When my love and I we can set, sport, and play,
 All down by the banks of the Rosies.

2

It was on the banks of Rosies where my love and I sat down,
 When I hauled out my German flute to play my love a tune,
 In the midst of the tune she sighed and she said,
 "Lovely Jimmy, dearest Jimmy, don't you leave me."

And so on. Another that I loved to hear him sing began with the chorus which goes this way:

Home dearest home and it's home you shall be,
 Home home home in your own counteree,
 Where the ash and the oak and the bonny bunch of trees
 They were all a-growing green in the North Americay.

Some of his songs are amusing, and these he sings with relish like the story of *Billy the Weaver*, who finds his wife entertaining another man whom she hides in the chimney when she hears her husband coming.

As I built on a raging fire
 Much against my wife's desire,
 As I kept piling on the fuel
 She cries out, "Don't be so cruel,
 Take him down and spare his life
 For the sake of your dear wife."

From the chimney oh I took him,
 O good God and how I shook him,
 And I said with every stroke,
 "Will you come back to stop my smoke?"

I never saw a chimney sweeper
 Half as black as Billy the Weaver,
 Two black hands and two black eyes,
 Kicked him home in that disguise.

Finally here is a song I have not yet identified. In it the ghost of the loved one returns. It appears to be a very old song.

WILLIE O

Willie he slipped on board of a tender
Bound to some place I do not know,
And true it is I received no answer
From my dearest Willie O.

2

When Mary was a-sleeping Willie came a-creeping
Through the bedroom door so low,
Saying, "Mary dear now don't be a-frighted.
For I'm your Willie and don't you know?"

3

"Where are those cheeks that were once so red and rosy
Not so very long ago?"
"The watery grave has changed their colour
And I'm the ghost of your Willie O".

4

Willie stood a-talking till daylight in the morning
About those courtships long ago,
"And Oh Mary, oh Mary I must be a-going
For the cocks they are a-going to crow."

5

And when she saw her true love disappearing
The tears all from her eyes did flow,
"Oh Mary dear, oh sweetheart, darling,
"Oh Mary dear, oh sweetheart, darling,
Weep no more for your Willie O".

6

"If I had all the gold that was in New England
And all the silver that's in Mexico
I would resign it to the king quite ready
If he'd send me home my Willie O".

Before long I plan to go back to Mr. Hatt. I may find that he is sung out. On the other hand he may recall another eighteen to make it one hundred. Neither will surprise me.