

THE HOOSIER FOLKLORE SOCIETY

Officers, 1947

President: Miss Margaret Sweeney, 207 E. Chestnut, Jeffersonville, Indiana

Vice-President: Miss Nellie M. Coats, Indiana State Library, Indianapolis, Indiana

Secretary-Treasurer: Mrs. William Hugh Jansen, 729 East Hunter, Bloomington, Indiana

Editor: Ernest W. Baughman, Department of English, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana

Associate Editor: William Hugh Jansen, Department of English, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana

Regional Editor: David S. McIntosh, Department of Music, Southern Illinois Normal University, Carbondale, Illinois

Regional Editor: Ivan Walton, Department of English, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan

HOOSIER FOLKLORE

published quarterly for

The Hoosier Folklore Society

by

The Indiana Historical Bureau

Indianapolis, Indiana

Copyright, 1947, by the Hoosier Folklore Society. Permission to reprint material must be obtained from the officers of the society.

Entered as second-class matter June 15, 1946, at the post office at INDIANAPOLIS, INDIANA, under the Act of August 24, 1912.

Subscription price \$2.00 per year. Single numbers fifty cents. The membership fee of the Hoosier Folklore Society includes a subscription to HOOSIER FOLKLORE and each member of the Society receives the quarterly.

HOOSIER FOLKLORE

VOL. VI

JUNE, 1947

No. 2

FOLKLORE FROM WEST VIRGINIA

By RUTH ANN MUSICK

I. BALLADS

NOTE ON BALLADS CONTRIBUTED BY WALTER H. KEENER, FAIRMONT STATE COLLEGE

All of the following ballads were given me by Walter H. Keener, a student at Fairmont State College, Fairmont, West Virginia. He got all of them from his father.

Mr. Keener's father used to sing ballads between the acts of an original minstrel show, which he took from town to town and performed whenever and wherever he could do so before a reasonable-sized audience. The group of young men who took part in these original minstrel shows, written by Mr. Thomas T. Keener, were made up of members of a baseball team, who, at the end of the baseball season, decided to travel around and make an easy living. Mr. T. Keener, it seems, wrote the original scripts, took part in the show, sang ballads between acts, and sold popcorn. I believe Mr. Walter Keener said his father was a mixture of English and Irish—that some English ancestor had gone to Ireland and married there, but I don't believe he knew exactly when. It seems that his father's repertoire at one time included a fairly large number of Child's English and Scottish Ballads in one form or another. Mr. Walter Keener says:

My father in his younger days, rather than earn an honest living, produced plays and toured the country, showing wherever and whenever an audience would appear who looked the price of admission and a bag of popcorn—he had that concession also. During these plays,

and between acts, my father sang songs, including a number of old ballads. Because my father produced the plays, all this added to his reasons for claiming a larger part of the "take" as he called it. These songs were imposed upon me while I sat in his lap, as a young lad, on quiet summer evenings on our farm, when nothing interfered with his singing but the buzzing of the locusts, the harmonious cracking of the rocking chair and the croaking of the frogs.

At such times, I listened to "Oh, Hangsman, Hangsman, Spare That Rope" or "Father, Dear Father, Come Home With Me Now, The Clock In The Steeple Strikes Two." At other times I sat transfixed while he sang "not as well as I used to," to quote him—"He Cut His Wife's Head Off And Kicked It Up Against The Wall." My first picture of the sea was a song that he sang between brief imitations of those frogs and the "cracking" of the rocker:

"Oh, Captain, Captain, tell me true
Does my sweet Willie sail with you?
"Oh, no, kind sir, he is not here,
For he lies in yonder sea, I fear."¹

It seems Mr. Keener came by his knowledge of ballads from both sides of the family. He says further:

My old grandfather on my mother's side sang a dozen or more of these old ballads by popular request on his ninety-third birthday. Somehow, the beauty of his well-seasoned and rich baritone voice imparted a picture that linked me with those ballads these past sixteen years since his death.

The Maid Freed from the Gallows
Child Ballad No. 95

"Oh, Hangsman, Hangsman, spare that rope
Spare it for a while;
For I see my sister on yonders hill,
And she's come for many a mile.

¹ I think Mr. Keener may have forgotten his father's version, here, since it is a *woman*, who is seeking her sailor boy. My mother's version is:

Oh, no, fair lady, he's not here;
He's drowned in the ocean, I fear.
Rocky Island, as we passed by,
There's where we left your sweet sailor boy.
(Repeat last two lines).

"Sister, Sister, have you gold,
Gold to set me free?
Or have you come to see me hung
Beneath the old oak tree?"

"Yes, Brother, dear, I do have gold,
But none to set you free;
For I have come to see you hung
Beneath the old oak tree."

"Oh, Hangsman, Hangsman, spare that rope
Spare it for a while;
For I see my brother on yonders hill,
And he's come for many a mile.

"Brother, Brother, have you gold,
Gold to set me free?
Or have you come to see me hung
Beneath the old oak tree?"

"Yes, Brother, dear, I do have gold,
But none to set you free;
For I have come to see you hung
Beneath the old oak tree."

"Oh, Hangsman, Hangsman, spare that rope
Spare it for a while;
For I see my father on yonders hill
And he's come for many a mile.

"Father, Father, have you gold,
Gold to set me free,
Or have you come to see me hung
Beneath the old oak tree?"

"Yes, my son, I do have gold,
But none to set you free;
For I have come to see you hung
Beneath the old oak tree."

"Oh, Hangsman, Hangsman, spare that rope
Spare it for a while;

For I see my mother on yonders hill
And she's come for many a mile.

"Mother, Mother, have you gold,
Gold to set me free,
Or have you come to see me hung
Beneath the old oak tree?"

"Yes, my son, I do have gold,
But none to set you free;
For I have come to see you hung
Beneath the old oak tree."

"Oh, Hangsman, Hangsman, spare that rope
Spare it for a while;
For I see my sweetheart on yonders hill
And she's come for many a mile.

"Sweetheart, Sweetheart, have you gold,
Gold to set me free,
Or have you come to see me hung
Beneath the old oak tree?"

"Yes, Sweetheart, I do have gold,
Gold to set you free;
For I've not come to see you hung
Beneath the old oak tree."

(For a text and references see Paul G. Brewster, *Ballads and Songs of Indiana* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Publications, 1940) 125-127.—The Editor.)

Sir Hugh, or, The Jew's Daughter
Child Ballad No. 155

At first he cast his ball too high
Then he tossed it too low;
And then he tossed it in an old maid's yard,
Where no one's 'lowed to go, go, go,
Where no one's 'lowed to go.

"Come in, come in, my pretty little boy,
Come in and get your ball."

She showed him an apple as red as a rose
 To 'tice the little boy in, in, in,
 To 'tice the little boy in.

She led him down through a passage dark;
 The walls were black within;
 She showed him a basin wide and deep
 To catch his heart's blood in, in, in,
 To catch his heart's blood in.

"Oh bury the prayer book at my feet,
 The Bible at my head;
 And if my playmates call for me,
 Just tell them I am dead, dead, dead,
 Just tell them I am dead.

"Oh bury the Bible at my head,
 The prayer book at my feet;
 And if my parents call for me,
 Just tell them I am asleep, 'sleep, 'sleep,
 Just tell them I am asleep."

(For texts and references see Paul G. Brewster, *ibid.*, 128-133.—
 The Editor.)

Lady Isabel and the Elf-Knight
Child Ballad No. 4, H

He mounted on his milk white nag
 He leadeth the dappled gray
 Until he arrived at his true love's door,
 Six hours before it was day.

He rode upon his milk white nag,
 She rode the dappled gray
 Until they arrived at the dark seaside,
 Six hours before it was day.

Then he mounted off the milk white nag.
 "Dismount, I pray," said he,
 "For six pretty maids have I drowned here
 And the seventh one you shall be."

She mounted off the dappled gray.
 "Your rings and robe," said he.
 "Please take them off, my pretty maid,
 And deliver them unto me."

"Oh, Lover, Lover, this I pray,
 Please turn your back on me."
 She grabbed him 'round the slender waist
 And dashed him right into the sea.

"True love, true love, I cannot swim;
 Your hand please give to me!"
 "Six fair ones you have drowned here,
 But the seventh one you shall be!"

She mounted on his milk white nag.
 She leadeth the dappled gray,
 Until she arrived at her father's door,
 Six hours before it was day.

(For texts and references see Paul G. Brewster, *ibid.*, 31-36.—The Editor.)

4. *The Johnstown Flood*

On a balmy day in May,
 When old Nature held full sway,
 A mad storm came crashing through our quiet town;
 On that morning, 'twas so cold,
 Came a rider, brave and bold,
 On a big, bay horse, came flying like a deer.
 And this rider whoops and yells,
 "Quickly fly off to the hills!"
 But the people seemed to show no sign of fear.
 Then quick the thing was changed,
 For just like a thing arranged,
 The storm came tearing through our quiet town;
 There were thousands burnt and drowned
 In that city of Johnstown,
 Who were lost in that great overflow.

II. A FOLKTALE

A Black Snake Story

(As told by Mr. Norman C. Hannifan to Edward Zirkle, my student at Fairmont State College, Fairmont, West Virginia.)

The black snake has strange and mysterious powers and in some sections is more feared than the rattlesnake and the copperhead. There is a legend illustrating the power of the black snake that has circulated in the region of Queens, West Virginia, and goes something like this:

There was a young farm girl, of about three or four years of age, who was apparently normal both physically and mentally. One summer, as the story goes, the girl was observed going out behind the barn with a cup of milk and crumbled bread each day about noon. The natural assumption was that she had a pet of some sort and was feeding it. Nothing more was thought of it until the girl began to act peculiar.

Her parents followed her on her daily trip to the barn, and discovered that she was not feeding a dog or cat, as previously assumed, but a six-foot black snake. They immediately killed the snake and took the girl to the house.

For weeks following the incident, the little girl went back to the barn with the milk and bread for the snake. Finally the girl died. Everyone believes, to this day, that the snake had her charmed and that even after its death the spell continued until it killed her too.

(This is Type 285, Motif B 391.2 *Child feeds snake from milk-bottle*. See Grimm's *Kinder-und Hausmarchen*, story 105, version two.)

III. WEST VIRGINIA SUPERSTITIONS

This first group was given to me by Virginia Gray, evening school student at Fairmont State College. I believe she said that she got most of them from an old 1926 newspaper clipping.

1. In planting corn, if one misses a row, some member of the family is sure to die. (If the missed row is discovered before the corn comes up, the death will be prevented.)
2. Often the first and last hen's eggs of a season are small. If one of these is found in a nest, the finder must throw it backwards, over his left shoulder and over the house. If the egg falls in a soft clump of grass, good luck

will follow. If the egg is broken, bad luck will have been warded off.

3. It is bad luck to hand an open pocket knife (or a pin or other sharp article) to a friend, because the sharp blade will sever the friendship.

4. A woman who has never seen her father can take fire out of burns. (Usually a charm had to be repeated.)

5. A bag of asafetida worn around the neck will prevent a cold.

6. Toothache may be cured by picking the tooth and gums by a splinter taken from a tree struck by lightning. (However, this means the certain loss of the tooth, which begins to decay.)

7. If a child sees its reflection in a mirror before it is a year old, it is sure to die.

8. It is bad luck to leave the house by a different door than the one you entered.

9. At the first sound of the whippoorwill in spring, it is time for children to go barefoot.

10. If a rooster crows before midnight, it is a sign that someone is dead.

11. To be married on a rainy day means sorrow and unhappiness. To be married on a bright, sunny day, means happiness and contentment. If the bridegroom should drop the ring, that means the worst possible luck.

12. A "water witch" (or "water wizard") can locate the best possible well location, by the following method:

When wells were to be dug, the water wizard cut a peach tree fork with prongs about four inches long, and these were spread apart to form as nearly a straight line as possible. The water wizard held the stick, fork upward, between his thumbs, and then walked around and around in an ever-widening circle. Presently the fork would turn downward, and there the wizard set his foot.

13. Warts may be cured as follows: Steal a dishcloth, slip stealthily out of the house and without looking either to the right or left or behind, walk straight ahead until you come to a tree or stone. The dishcloth must then be hung on the tree or buried beneath the stone. Then as the cloth decays, the warts disappear. A second method of getting rid of warts is to rub a coin over the warts and