Snatches, Catches, Fragments, and Ditties

I have a seven-month old grandson named Rowan. When he was four months old, I got into the habit of singing this little ditty to him:

Mitty, Matty, big fat hen,
She laid eggs for gentlemen,
Sometimes nine and sometimes ten,
Mitty, Matty, big fat hen!

The effect was magical. His little face would light up and a huge smile would appear. It didn’t seem to matter what else was happening at the time, the effect was always the same. I began to try this when he was crying—something he seemed to be almost constantly doing. Same effect: the crying stopped, the face lit up, the huge smile appeared. It was magical.

I use the word magical on purpose because, as we know, these old rhymes and chants are distantly related to magical incantations of old.

But I found myself pondering these little ditties, snatches, catches, glees, fragments, whatever you want to call them, and thinking of their place in the world of song. For example, I often find myself singing:

Fiddle de dee, fiddle de dee,
The fly has married the bumblebee.

It’s a wonderful way to use an f-word without using the f-word, if you know what I mean. I sing it a lot.

These little gems are tiny, perfect songs. For the most part, however, they never get sung on a stage. They don’t get recorded on CDs. But they’re wonderful, and I decided to write a paean to the little song fragment.

For example, for my first grandson, Caymen, when he had just reached the stage where he could...
actually crawl upstairs, nervous parents and grandparents hovering below to catch him if he tumbled, I would sing:

another Scottish one, good practice for those glottal stops. You know, instead of saying butter you say buh-er:

such a getting upstairs I never did see,
such a getting upstairs I never did see.

it got so that if he were climbing the stairs and I was preoccupied and not paying attention, he would stop and wait expectantly for me, until someone shouted, “Sing him his going-up-the-stairs song!”

I used to follow this song with the poem from Mother Goose:

up the wooden hill to bedfordshire,
down sheet lane to blanket fair.

among spoken fragments I say frequently is:
a fried mosquito and a black-eyed pea, which is from the song about the wooing of a mouse by a frog. It’s a phrase I use a lot – “What are we having for dinner?” “A fried mosquito and a black-eyed pea.”

When I was a child at home and inadvertently put my elbows on the table during a meal, the family would burst out with:

mable, mabel, sweet and able,
keep your elbows off the table.

to the tune of Dvorak’s “Humoresque”, which I thought was terribly cultured and sophisticated.

(The rhyme, that is.)

Oh, my, there are all sorts of these little fragments coming back to me now as I write this.

there was an old woman who lived by the hill
and if she’s not dead she’s living there still.

Sometimes, when I’m wondering what song I’ll sing next in a concert, I’ll say:

sing, sing, what’ll I sing?
the cat’s run away with the pudding string.
do, do, what’ll I do?
the cat’s run away with the pudding too.

like Alice Kane, if I am given a fruit cake to eat, I find myself chanting or singing:

there were plums and prunes and cherries,
There were raisins and cinnamon too,
There was nutmeg, cloves, and ginger,
And a crust that stuck on with glue.
There was sugar and peel in abundance,
Built up for a fine tummy ache;
Sure it would kill a man twice after eating a slice
Of Miss Fogarty's beautiful cake.
Oh, here's another song:

Who's that, tapping at the window?
Who's that, knocking at the door.
To which I might answer:

Mama's tapping at the window,
Papa's knocking at the door.
Speaking of questions, here's one I've sung

for nearly sixty years:
Where do you come from, where do you go?
Where do you come from, Cotton-Eyed Joe?

Do you know this one?
A-hunting we will go, a-hunting we will go,
We'll catch a fox and put him in a box,
And then we'll let him go.

My grandmother sang a lot while she worked around my house. I can still see her down in the cellar, whitewashing the fruit cellar, singing,
Than four bare legs in a bed.
My friend Sally Yeager, the storyteller, loved hearing me sing “Waltzing with Bears” and she made up this little ditty which she called The Baby Bear Song:

One-two-three, one-two-three, waltzing with bears,
One-two-three, one-two-three, dance round the chairs,
One-two-three, one-two-three, that’s what we’ll do,
One-two-three, one-two-three, waltzing with you.

My favourite fiddler, Anne Lederman, added a beautiful fiddle section, and Kathy Reid-Naiman added another verse and recorded the whole thing on her children’s CD Say Hello to the Morning. I deliberately will not include the music here because I think this is one of the very best children’s CDs I have ever heard – Canadian, to boot – and you should do yourself a favour (and Kathy) and buy it. You’ll be singing this Baby Bear Song too!

So, I guess there are ways to sing these fragments on the stage, but, somehow, I think that misses the point. They are tiny, perfect little gems, as I have said, and their rightful place is not tarted up for public performance, but to be sung for the singer. For the singer alone, or for the singer and one or two other close acquaintances. Sung when the singer is working, sung when the singer is dreaming, sung when the singer is laughing, sung when the singer is crying, sung when the singer is loving, sung when the singer is living.

And is that not a good definition of traditional music?

LOST SOULS

The members listed below have moved without sending us a new address. Please help us find them! If you know of their new whereabouts, please let us know.

Jennifer Gregory, 9105 - 112 St., #2A, Edmonton, Alta. T6G 2C5

Kari Veblen, 50 Prince Arthur, #1102, Toronto, Ont. M5R 1B5
Now the schooner’s captain was a wild Newfoundlander
A hard-driving man, name of John Thomas Randall,
A decorated veteran of the First World War,
A sea-going gentleman adventurer.
From Belize, he’d take the I’m Alone
to the coast of Louisiana, and anchor
south of Trinity Shoal
Where he would meet his man and
 discharge the cargo according to plan.

It was all clear sailing for the I’m Alone
With the profits of six or seven trips salted down
The coastguard had bothered her a couple of times
But Skipper John’s seamanship had left them behind.
One March morning in the wind and the swell
She was reaching along under jumbo jib
and storm trysail
When the cutter Dexter swept on the I’m Alone’s starboard quarter.

Now the Dexter’s captain was a a very rough man
He had sworn he’d never lose the I’m Alone again
He ran a string of signals, saying, “How do you do?
You know that I’ll fire if you don’t heave to.”
Skipper John semaphored immediately,
“We’re on the high seas, you have no jurisdiction over me!”
But the Dexter’s captain sent several volleys
Through the I’m Alone’s rigging.

The bullets tore the booms, the sails, the lines,
Even tore a hole in the Red Ensign.
When Skipper John saw that he was fit to be tied
At this disrespect shown to his national pride.
The crew said, “Sir, don’t you trouble your mind -
We’ll all go down together with the old Red Ensign flyin’!”
So he signalled to the Dexter, “Shoot and be damned to ya!
I’ll not surrender!”

So the Dexter opened fire and it didn’t take long

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The I'M ALONE

Wade Hemsworth

Remember, yes I remember well,
The most famous rum-runner of them all:
Remember, yes, I remember well,
The most famous rum-runner of them all,
It was the schooner from Lunenberg, I’m Alone
In the Gulf of Mexico she went down under fire
Of a Yankee cutter on the high seas outside treaty waters.

Chorus
Oh, I’m alone
A long way from Lunenberg she went down
Because Skipper John Randall wouldn’t heave to
On the I’m Alone.

It was in nineteen hundred and twenty-nine
When the smuggling of liquor was a profitable pasttime
Many a Maritimer didn’t see why
He shouldn’t turn a profit, Uncle Sam was dry
Many a family took on style
Prohibition made it very worthwhile
To be a good Samaritan to long-suffering thirsty Americans.
Before her guns had stitched a seam along
the I'm Alone's waterline
Skipper John ordered every man to the sea
There was water on the bridge when he
himself jumped free.
Stern in the air, the I'm Alone went down
A heavy sea a-runnin', a wonder only one
man was drowned -
The bo'sun was the one who was pulled
aboard the cutter
When his life had gone.

That's how it happened, there isn't much
more.
The I'm Alone became an international
affair
Skipper John and his seamen were all
released,
The U.S. Government couldn't make a
case.
That kind of violence is bound to happen
When a law like Prohibition sits up and
begs to be broken.
And we'll still remember the story of the
I'm Alone
And Skipper John Randall.