

Once I Had a True Love Phoebe Smith

- 1 **Once I Had A True Love**
- 2 **A Blacksmith Courted Me**
- 3 **Young Ellender**
- 4 **Higher Germany**
- 5 **Molly Vaughan**
- 6 **The Tanyard Side**
- 7 **The Yellow Handkerchief**
- 8 **The Wexport Girl**
- 9 **The Dear Little Maiden**

Recorded in Suffolk, 1969
Notes by Frank Purslow
First issued by Topic 1970
Cover photograph Brian Shuel



Near a small Suffolk market town is a well-conducted scrap metal business run by Joe Smith and some of his sons. Next to the yard, in a neat garden, stands the Smiths' bungalow (built mostly by family labour) surrounded by the trailers of the Smith boys and their families. Phoebe, Joe's wife, is a warm, homely, motherly woman adored by her family, despite the strict upbringing they have received at her hands. To Phoebe the most important things in her life are her home, her husband, her family and her friends. Both Joe and Phoebe come from backgrounds where the importance of making one's own entertainment was a necessity - and a tradition. From her childhood Phoebe had been a stepper, tapper and singer.

She was born at Faversham, Kent, in a street now demolished. "In those days," she told me, "people used to make their own amusements, used to have nice week-ends together, used to sit round and have a little sing-song; and of course you'd learn songs from your parents, and you'd learn them from the people that used to come round. They were made of things that really happened. I mean, years ago when I was a child - and I'm not all that old - we never had radios and that sort of thing; and of course things that happened they used to make songs about, and stories. People used to learn them by listening to other people singing them. I learned one particularly from my father's brother George. He was my favourite uncle, and I remember he used to get me on his knee and give me sixpence to sing for him. I used to love to hear him sing, he used to be - well you know - so *dedicated* into his songs when he was singing . . . he used to *help* the songs."

When I asked Phoebe what attracted her to a particular song, she was quite definite. "I like the words of a song to have a real, true meaning, and I like a tune that goes according to the words and the happenings in the song. You can imagine - I can - as well as feeling for them - things that happened - what they did. I can picture them, you know, in the sorrow

parts as well as the happiness. They're *human*. Oh! I sing modern songs as well; there's some very very, nice modern songs, but I don't think they hit you quite so deep inside, because a lot of the songs today are just made up from out of the wind. No, I never went out and had music lessons, or dancing or singing lessons. All I learned I was self taught or from my parents. And I think that is the only true way that anyone can call themselves a tapper or a singer. I mean, if you learn it yourself you're interested, you're dedicated. There's a lot of people today that do it just to get around and some money and that sort of thing. They don't do it for the *love* of it, they just do it for what they can get. I always did singing and tapping and dancing just to please myself and make other people happy."

I first met Phoebe and Joe in the unlikely venue of Cecil Sharp House, some years ago. My experience of traditional singers up to then had been confined to a number of ex-farm-workers trying manfully to remember songs they had not sung since their youth, or heard sung since their childhood. Phoebe was a revelation! I have long since wanted to see her on record, but she is rather a difficult singer to record satisfactorily. Attempts to record her at "special occasions" have failed to capture what I consider to be the real Phoebe. Faced with a strange audience she tends to put on a "performance". So we sat with Phoebe and Joe in their lounge and chatted and drank tea and then recorded a few songs. The results were excellent. A few days later I visited them again and had a long chat with Phoebe about the songs and her attitude to them, which I taped, and which shows how aware she is of the content of the songs and their meaning - and the tradition behind them, a *living* tradition, of which she, and Joe, and the family are a vital part.

1 Once I Had A True Love

A condensed form of an abandoned girl's lament, it is also known as *As Sally Sat A-weeping*, *As Sylvie Was Walking* etc. The earliest recorded existence of the song is the use of its tune in the ballad opera *The Beggar's Wedding* of 1729 - and hence it was popular before that date - followed by its inclusion in a flute tutor of about 1733, both reported by Frank Kidson, in his note to two versions noted by Cecil Sharp, in the *Journal of the Folk Song Society* no. 18. Most collectors early in the century recorded the song in their note-books, either to Mixolydian or Dorian variants of the same tune, or a mixture of both modes. W. P. Merrick discovered a very full version of the song in Australia, now printed in the *Penguin Book of English Folk Songs*, sung by an immigrant from Gloucestershire. The earliest broadsides of the text I have seen date from very late in the 18th century or early 19th, but presumably the piece must have appeared in this form earlier.

2 A Blacksmith Courted Me

Phoebe's favourite song ... 'It's got the real feeling of a girl that was very much in love, and he deceived her ... well, ambitious to travel abroad and all that. I feel as if I'm living it all over again for a while' ... To me, an English classic whose fine tune Vaughan Williams purloined (and strait-jacketed) for his setting of Milton's *He Who Would Valiant Be*.

Actually, the singer from whom he heard it sang the words of *Our Captain Called All Hands* to it, see Journal no. 8, and all over Southern England the tune serves as a vehicle for both sets of words. In true traditional style, verses from one song frequently appear as part of the other, as here. The tune also appears traditionally allied to other songs. The words of *Our Captain* are of late 17th-century origin and so, presumably, are those of this song.

3 Young Ellender

Another of Phoebe's favourites ... she was a rich man's daughter and, of course, the young man she fell in love with, he was just a commoner. Her father, he wanted to break them up, and she had no intention of giving him up whatever happened. She just went through fire and water for him. At last her Dad gave in, you know - I like those sort of songs 19th century broadside texts exist, but most traditional versions seem to have an earlier origin. Noted versions are rather rare and the song appeared to have been passing out of traditional memory by the beginning of this century. Phoebe's version - though incomplete - is therefore all the more surprising and welcome. A Hampshire version collected in 1908, with a note on two others, is printed in the *Folk Music Journal*, 1967 under the title *Down In The Town Of Marlborough*. The tunes of noted versions differ widely.

4 Higher Germany

Trying to place this song historically is a bit of a puzzle. At no time does a British army seem to have been officially and actively engaged in Southern (High) Germany, though many groups of mercenaries were engaged by all the European nations at one time or another, and this practice continued into the 18th century. The most important war in this part of the continent was the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-8) in which British forces certainly took part - but in France and Spain. Personally I feel that the song is of slightly later date, probably from the end of the 18th century. It seems significant that all collected versions, including Phoebe's, are allied to tunes of a decidedly Irish melodic cast.

5 Molly Vaughan

At first sight one could be excused for dismissing this song, also known as *The Fowler*, *The Shooting of His Dear* etc., as a broadside ballad describing a shooting accident, reduced to near nonsense by oral transmission. Phoebe thinks differently for, although a few details of the story are here missing, she knows that it deals with the supernatural. The story is almost certainly Celtic, although there are Nordic analogues - the scenario of the ballet *Swan Lake* is based on one: the girl is an enchanted swan maiden, swan by day, maiden by night in which form she has been encountered by a young man who has fallen in love with her. One evening, whilst fowling, he comes across her still in the form of a swan and shoots her. As she dies she assumes human shape. The young man is tried for murder but at his trial, after a clap of thunder, the spirit of the swan-maiden appears to explain matters. Phoebe's text, although corrupted, is extremely interesting as it is obviously older than any broadside version I have seen, apparently even older than the several Appalachian versions recovered by Sharp. Anne Gilchrist's long note on the song in the *Journal of the Folk Song Society* no. 26 is important.

6 The Tanyard Side

This is its English title. Of Irish origin, the usual title is *The Slaney Side*, although it has others. Phoebe's tune is the usual one for the song. One of the pleasantest of this type of 19th-century broadside pieces; in full versions the girl's father hands the young man over to the press gang.

7 The Yellow Handkerchief

This song, also known as *Flash Company*, seems nowadays to be remembered only in East Anglia, although it was collected in Hampshire, Sussex and elsewhere early in the century. It always approximates to the same form: the two essential verses about singing and dancing and the yellow handkerchief (often used also as a chorus), with sometimes a third describing the 'flash lad's' mode of dress, plus one or two 'floaters', as here, usually associated with such songs as *The Cuckoo* or *The False Young Man*. Phoebe's tune is a much used Irish *Come-All-Ye* mainly associated with *Pretty Susan*, *the Pride of Kildare*.

8 The Wexport Girl

One of the most powerful and best known of our traditional murder ballads, also found as *The Berkshire Tragedy*, *The Oxford/Wexford Girl*, *The Cruel Miller* etc., it seems to have derived from the opening verses of a broadside of 1650 describing William Grismond's murder of his sweetheart at Lainterdine, Herefordshire on March 12th of that year. The verses were subsequently pruned, recomposed and reprinted several times, coupled with later crimes of a similar nature, including that committed by John Mauge, for which he was hanged at Reading in 1744. He apparently lived at Wytham, just outside Oxford, but over the Berkshire border, and this crime gave rise to the most influential of the broadside versions of the text entitled *The Berkshire Tragedy*; or, *The Wittam Miller*. Versions of the story were still being printed late in the last century.

9 The Dear Little Maiden ...

'And then there's that other little song - that's a real true little song. I mean, that was actually a woman living on her own, and someone had had this little girl and abandoned her on a doorstep, and she found her and took her in and did her best - she pinched to help feed her - and that's really interesting. It's life. It's something that really happened - and even today - but no-one ever thinks of remembering or writing about it. It's just on the television, they're put to prison or something, and they're all forgot about. You see, that's the trouble. I mean, now they don't have to sing about them. They just read it and it's all forgotten. I don't think there'll be a lot of songs sung about people's life-stories in the future as there have been in the past. It's a pity because I love it. Well, I mean it shows that people are not forgotten, doesn't it.



Digital remaster ©2009 Topic Records Ltd.
©2012 Topic Records Ltd.
The copyright in this sound recording and
digital artwork is owned by Topic Records Ltd.
All rights reserved.

