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Dramatic Publishing

BALLAD HUNTER

by
JENNY LAIRD



Dramatic Publishing

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(BALLAD HUNTER)

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BALLAD HUNTER

A Play in Two Acts
For 2 Men and 3 Women
(no gender flexibility or doubling possibilities)

CHARACTERS

GUSSIE: Mid- to late 30s, a midwife. Big-boned and a little heavy around the hips, she's a raw, unrefined beauty.

LOTTA: A small girl of 14, suffers from rickets. Her bones aren't so much deformed as they are small, childlike. Gussie's daughter.

HETTY: Aged by life more than years, she looks 70, but is still in her 50s. Gussie's mother.

BUZZY: A mute man, indeterminate age. Although his face and hands are severely scarred from long-ago burns, he remains a man of real stature. Junkyard proprietor.

CECIL ("REA") Early 20s. He is employed by the Rural Electrification Administration and, as was sometimes the custom, he wears WWI clothes as his uniform. He is handsome and sunburned, and in comparison, the picture of health.

TIME: Late spring 1937.

PLACE: Somewhere amidst the hills of the Appalachian Mountains of Southwestern Virginia.

SETTING: A shanty of sorts, comprised of Hetty's kitchen, porch and yard, although these areas are hardly distinguishable from one another because they seem inexorably connected to each other and to the earth. Adjacent to the home is a small junkyard that looks more like a graveyard for useless artifacts. The two areas should be separated so that it appears there is some distance between the "homes." Surrounding the homes is a vast woodland, the depth and density of which should be suggested with lights.

SPECIAL NOTE: "The Devil's Nine Questions," a ballad with origins that can be traced back to England as early as 1450, can also be found under the titles, "Riddles Wisely Expounded" and "The Nine Questions." The version that appears in this play is a compilation of several variations recovered in the American South in the early 20th century.

ACT I

(Just before the lights rise we hear the sound of a lone rooster crowing as the sun slowly makes its way over the roof of the house. A solitary, diffuse light rises on GUSSIE who stands clutching freshly pulled roots. From the dark of the stage we hear the sound of a young girl singing to herself. It is the ballad, The Devil's Nine Questions.)

LOTTA. "If you don't answer my questions nine
Sing ninety-nine and ninety
You're not God's, you're one of mine
An—a you the weaver's bonny"

(The lights have fully risen to reveal LOTTA in the woods. She is encircling a tree, one hand never leaving the trunk.)

LOTTA *(cont'd)*.
"O what is higher than a tree?
Sing ninety-nine and ninety"

(CECIL enters and immediately stops when he sees her.)

LOTTA (*cont'd.*).

“And what is deeper than the sea?
Say you’re the weaver’s bonny.”

(LOTTA sees CECIL and stops, completely still. They stare at each other for a long moment.)

GUSSIE. Lotta! Lotta, that bird’s been callin’ ten minutes now, now you get yer tail home afore you ain’t got no more tail to get!

(Lights fade on CECIL and LOTTA and rise on GUSSIE in the kitchen. HETTY enters carrying a miner’s lantern in one hand and a dead rabbit in the other.)

HETTY. I’ll have you know my suspicions have been righted.

GUSSIE. Ain’t it a little early to be out rightin’ yer suspicions. *(HETTY carefully places the miner’s lamp in its proper place.)*

HETTY. Too hungry to sleep, too tired to weep.

GUSSIE *(hands HETTY a root, notices the rabbit)*. Here, this’ll help the hunger a little. You best leave that rabbit outdoors.

HETTY. Oh, it don’t got the fever, Gussie May.

GUSSIE. Well hallelujah, Maw! Let’s skin the critter an’ cook us up a proper meal.

HETTY. Oh, no...what it do got, worse than the fever.

GUSSIE. To a rabbit, I reckon there ain’t nothin’ *worse* than rabbit fever.

HETTY. Don’t get smart, Gussie. I been talkin’ to Virgie, and he say, well he done counted six rabbits dead in two

days, and Lit Arthur, well, she don't count too good, but she say she saw at least that many "jist fall asleep" right outside her door, that's how she put it, she got such a gentle heart an' all.

GUSSIE. Like the wing of a bird.

HETTY. 'Course nobody want to say what they was really thinkin', but I drug it out...they all know, deep in they bones, this place been *curse*d again.

GUSSIE. Only curse on this mountain, Maw, is being born to it.

HETTY. Mind yerself. Remember it only took God six days to make this earth, I reckon it won't take him much longer to shake it.

GUSSIE. Good, maybe he shakes hard enough some apples'll fall out the sky, or better, some maple syrup and sweet corn—

HETTY. I hear none a Hooney's corn come in neither, none a their crop, and Hooney's people got the best soil we ever seen—and she's havin' some more trouble. Now you tell me the devil ain't at work in these hills—

GUSSIE. The devil ain't at work in these hills—

HETTY (*not willing to play*). 'Less we get rid of him, Gussie, we all gonna starve.

GUSSIE. Hooney's crop ain't come in, Maw, 'cause *he* run off afore a thing was planted and Hooney weren't in no condition to do it herself, plain as that.

HETTY. An' what about these'uns? (*HETTY holds up the rabbit.*)

GUSSIE. It must be the worms, Maw, rot out their little rabbit guts.

HETTY. Virgie was hopin' that hisself, 'cause nobody *want* to point a finger— (*HETTY pries open a slit in the*

rabbit's belly.) But Virgie and me, we cain't find hide nor hair a no worm. Go on. (*HETTY hands the rabbit to GUSSIE, she takes it and holds it as if it were an infant and gently inspects its belly.*)

GUSSIE. Poor thing. Poor little babe... (*To the rabbit.*) I'm fixin' up a balm fer the rest of yer kin.

HETTY. Maybe it ain't a balm you need to be fixin', Gussie. You ought could mix sumthin' up to...to take the curse offa them rabbits.

GUSSIE. There ain't no curse, Maw...sometimes things jist die, it's jist the way things is. (*Suddenly calling.*) Lotta! I'm cuttin' me a switch, child, get on home! I told her I didn't want her sleepin' in them woods no more. Stubborn as weeds—

HETTY. You cain't take a fish outta water and 'spect it to swim.

GUSSIE (*gently places the rabbit in the trash box*). Maw, you ain't makin' a bit a sense today.

HETTY. Oh, I make sense, Gussie, see, I'm jist hungry, so my sense is comin' out...different. (*Pause.*) Everyone knows fairies got two favorite places to sleep. Eggshells and trees. An' eggs is hard to come by, so I reckon she prefers trees.

GUSSIE. I don't think I care to know yer meanin'.

HETTY. No, I don't think you do.

GUSSIE. Maybe them rabbits is jist starvin' like the rest of us. You ever think a that? Maybe they jist dyin' a hunger in these hills.

HETTY. Or maybe that's God's way a feedin' us, Gussie, he figger we too tired to trap the things ourselves so he jist gonna do all the work for us, a little reward for our earthy toil, if you please.

GUSSIE. Maybe so.

HETTY. And maybe I got a leg a lamb up my sleeve sent from Jesus himself, and grapes a'tween my toes and collards around my neck.

GUSSIE. Let's stop talkin' 'bout all this food!

HETTY. God don't work that way, if'n you go to church more, you'd know that.

GUSSIE. I know the way God *works*, Maw. I jist can't always make sense of it is all.

(Lights up on LOTTA as she approaches the junkyard. She sings loudly, hoping to awaken BUZZY.)

LOTTA. "Oh, what is whiter than the milk?
Sing ninety-nine and ninety
And what is softer than the silk?
Say you're the weaver's bonny."

(BUZZY enters.)

LOTTA *(a little too nonchalant)*. Oh, hey, Buzzy...hope I didn't wake ya. *(BUZZY stares at her.)* I was tryin' to sing real soft-like 'cause I didn't wanna wrestle ya outta yer dreams if they was good enough to let you sleep through that cock a yers crowin' like he do. Boy he's loud. *(Pause.)* 'Sides, you know how Maw feel about singin'. *(BUZZY moves to sit down. Pause. They stare at each other for a long moment.)* Well she don't allow singin' is all. And don't ask me why, 'cause I don't know right yet. She's always sayin', that's a story for another day. *(Pause.)* Hey, you know what's whiter than milk, Buzzy? I always forget what's whiter than milk.

Teacher say that's why I'm so small, I don't drink enough a the milk, but I ain't small. I mean I'm small fer my age I reckon I am, but fer a lotta ages, Buzzy, I'm right big.

(Lights up on GUSSIE and HETTY in the kitchen. They are silent for a moment.)

HETTY. That Buzzy's got to go. Somewheres far away.

GUSSIE. We *all* got to go...find someplace where things live and die for a reason.

HETTY. Lit Arthur hear tell that Buzzy...well he ain't give his maw a proper burial and that's the "reason" for the rabbits dyin'.

GUSSIE *(slight pause)*. Lit Arthur hear tell?

HETTY. Umm-hmm. She say that's how Buzzy ended up on this mountain.

GUSSIE. Is that right?

HETTY. Lit Arthur say he done took the money he was s'posed to use for his maw's coffin and he bought hisself all that junk he ain't never been able to sell.

GUSSIE. Didn't he buy a little piece a yer land with *that money*?

HETTY. That was different money.

GUSSIE. Lit Arthur hear tell?

HETTY. That's right. Now listen, this is where it gets real suspicious—

GUSSIE. Suspicious all right.

HETTY. See, after Buzzy took the money his maw had saved fer her coffin, then his brothers, God-fearin' men that they was, chase after him, and Buzzy go runnin' up in the hills—choppin' his maw inta li'l pieces along the

way, throwin' an arm here, a leg there, to distract the brothers I reckon, 'cause being decent folk, they had to stop to bury each limb as they come upon it. And now his maw's feelin' restless and betrayed and that ain't a good combination in the dead. Hell that ain't a good combination fer the livin'.

GUSSIE (*under her breath*). Idle hearts is the devil's playpen.

HETTY. That's right. You learned that the hard way.

GUSSIE. I meant, Lit Arthur.

HETTY. Mind yerself, Gussie.

GUSSIE. Maw, Lit Arthur ain't left her house in twenty years, how you figure she knowed all that?

HETTY. That woman got a way.

GUSSIE. That woman can't stand the sound a silence is all. Talk just to remind herself she still alive.

HETTY. Neverstill, that Buzzy ain't give his maw a proper burial and he done cursed the lot of us.

GUSSIE. How you know Buzzy even had a maw? We ain't never known him to have any kin.

HETTY. Everyone had a maw, Gussie...shoot, ain't you learned yerself that much by now? Jist what kinda mid-wifery you doin' out there, besides?

(GUSSIE looks to HETTY as if she is about to fight back, but takes a moment and goes back to scrubbing her roots. Lights up on LOTTA and BUZZY.)

LOTTA (*proudly*). I know what's softer than silk. *Down's* softer than silk. So's Mama's hair. So's my tongue. You ever felt yer own tongue, Buzzy? Tongues is softer than you'd 'spect. (*Pause.*) You got one, dontcha? That

rooster a yers sure got one. I was thinkin'...th'other day, 'bout what's the *use* of a bird like that. I mean, the sun do all the work, climbin' its way over the mountain, creepin' in your door, lettin' you know it's mornin' time, and then the rooster crows his head off like he the one made the sun come up, like he the one givin' light to the world! And I was thinkin', maybe there ain't no real need fer roosters, maybe if our dreams is so good the sun can't get to 'em, maybe we oughta just keep asleep. (*Looks off into the distance.*) There's a whole lotta men sleepin' way back in them woods right now, you seen 'em, Buzzy? They got on clothes look like the trees themselves. (*Whispering.*) I asked one to come fer supper tonight. I heard a girl do that to my teacher once, so I knew jist what to say...and he said "surely," just like that! "Surely." (*Slight pause.*) Well, see, thing is, well...we ain't got much to offer a man, what with the rabbit fever spreadin' like it is, and 'pecially a man so big as the one I got comin' fer supper. So I was thinkin'...maybe that rooster a yers would make a nice meal, Mama's got half a sack a flour left from the birth a that little boy come out backwards, and a li'l sugar too, ain't no tellin' what kinda meal she could cook up fer the whole lot of us...Buzzy! There jist ain't no tellin'. (*LOTTA sees that BUZZY is less than enthusiastic.*) Well, you jist think on it awhile.

(*Lights on GUSSIE and HETTY.*)

GUSSIE. Why you all the sudden pickin' at that boy?

HETTY. I ain't "all the sudden" pickin' at that boy. I been pickin' at him fer years now.

GUSSIE. When? You ain't said two words to Buzzy since we known him.

HETTY. I been doin' it quietly...inside my own head... Well I have. He never fooled me.

GUSSIE. Neverstill, Buzzy ain't got nothin' to do with dyin' rabbits.

HETTY. How you know? Maybe you ain't the only one with powers on this mountain.

GUSSIE. Where you reckon that kinlin' come from last winter? And the winter before, and the one before? Huh? You think it just show up on yer porch by magic? You see any other mens out there choppin' up wood fer us? *(Pause. Threatening.)* Now you tell Lit Arthur and you tell Virgie to leave that boy be, or I'll tell 'em myself...you understand me?

HETTY. How you know he's a boy a'tall? All mangled like he is? How you know he ain't the devil hisself? They say the devil gonna be disguised when he make his way to your door. You go to church—

GUSSIE. You smell that?

HETTY. Hmm?

GUSSIE. I thought I smelled blackberries fer jist a spell.

HETTY. Another two weeks.

GUSSIE *(pause)*. I reckon.

HETTY *(long pause, waiting for the right moment, very carefully)*. Gussie...Lotta say she seein' men in them woods.

GUSSIE *(pause)*. Lotta likes to pertend.

HETTY. Like mother, like daughter, I reckon.

GUSSIE. Well maybe she *is*, Maw, maybe she is seein' men, you ever think to believe your own flesh and blood when they tell you their secrets?

HETTY. Well, ain't nobody else seen hide nor hair!

GUSSIE. Nobody else go as far back as Lotta. They all scared. I seen 'em, walking around, takin' the *long way*—to and fro...afraid they gonna meet him, afraid he might steal what little song they got left in they hearts.

HETTY. Maybe they got cause to be scared, maybe they done learned the hard way. (*HETTY adjusts the position of the miner's lamp. GUSSIE then readjusts the lamp to its original position.*)

GUSSIE (*pause*). Lotta ain't got no real friends, Maw, maybe that's jist her way.

HETTY. I'm jist sayin'—

GUSSIE. I *know* what you're sayin', and I'm tellin' you...you so much as look at her sideways, you so much as whisper a word against her—

HETTY. Gussie, I wouldn't do nothin' to harm that child, understand? It's Buzzy that's to blame for them rabbits, it's *him* that's cursed. Even Lit Arthur says.

(GUSSIE looks to HETTY, pause. Lights on LOTTA surveying the junkyard, picking up various pieces.)

LOTTA. I know I ain't come by to see you much, lately...but...but if you 'member I did say hello to ya in the mornin's on my way to school. I know I did. I'm sure when you think real hard on it you'll 'member it plain as day. (*Pause.*) First mem'ry I got is a my maw fixin' to jump off the roof a that there house. It's a tin roof, Buzzy, did you know that? Makes the pertiest music ever heard when it rains...like each little drop got the breath a God stored up in it. I was one day old, people say you don't 'member things from when you was one

day old, but I 'member it plain as day. Mee Maw say Maw was jumpin' 'cause folks was suspicious 'bout *the nature a my birth*. Now I like the way that sound, like maybe I hatched from a egg or something! She say Maw had a story about some man out huntin' fer ballads...but nobody ever met this man, nobody but Maw, and so they thought maybe Maw done met up with the devil instead... I reckoned *that's* why she jumped, 'cause if nobody believed her 'bout the man, then maybe he wasn't true to her neither. Either way, she jumped from that roof and she landed, jist like she had wings and springs Mee Maw said. But Lit Arthur say no righteous being coulda survived that fall and it just went to prove that Maw *was* in cahoots with the devil, and that's why Mee Maw's ankles is always so swolled up...'cause she gotta walk a mile "fer a li'l comp'ny, 'cause folks is too spooked by Maw to come around these parts. It's a pitiful shame...fer *you* I mean. You got all that perty stuff to sell and nobody around to buy it. An' I was thinkin', if Maw jist found herself a man, a real one like the one I got comin' fer supper, maybe folks wouldn't be so spooked by m...by Maw, and maybe they'd start comin' 'round, and they could buy yer things. So in a way, you'd be doin' yerself a favor killin' that rooster, I mean with yer livelihood an' all.

(HETTY notices LOTTA in the junkyard with BUZZY.)

HETTY. Well, look over yonder. You care anything about that girl a yers, you best pay more mind to what I got to say about that mongrel.