

AND ALL HIS SONGS WERE SAD

(A Full-length Play)

Mattie Lennon

SCENE ONE

Time; 1937.

Set; A stretch of country road in late autumn as daylight is fading. Centre back is a small open shed with straw bedding and dying foliage on either side. It contains a milking-stool.

(A middle-aged man with clay on his boots and carrying a spade enters from R. Two boys aged about fourteen, Willie McSweeney and the more precocious Sean McCarthy, enter from L. They meet centre stage)

- MAN: Good evening to yis both.
WILLIE: Have you them all dug?
Man : Almost.
Willie: How far is it to Limerick?
MAN: *(without " breaking his step")* Twenty-six statute miles.
SEAN; When a stranger tells you how far we have to go will you believe him? Will we lie down here? It's getting dark and my feet are sore.
WILLIE: My feet are sore too, we must be after walking thirty mile.
SEAN: It's not thirty miles from Listowel to Newcastlewest.
WILLIE: How far is it?
SEAN: Well. It's six miles to Duagh. It's another four and a half to Abbeyfeale, and twelve and a half from Abbeyfeale to here. Twenty-three miles altogether.

WILLIE: Well aren't you the smart fellow.

SEAN: *(Sitting down on milking-stool, milking an imaginary cow in time to the tune as he sings)*
 I'm intelligent Sean McCarthy.
 An' I'm known to all the boys,
 I live at the foot of Haley's wood
With muck up to my eyes.

WILLIE: You made that up didn't you?

SEAN : I wrote that, Willie, when I was seven years old. But I did get a bit of help from the Tailor Roche.

WILLIE: What was that rhyme that you got slapped for saying in school?

SEAN: That was written by Paddy Drury from Knockanure. Paddy was working for the Vicar. And the Vicar's housekeeper, Kate Nealon, according to Paddy, kept her loins exceptionally well girded (even by the standards of the day) and out of bounds to Paddy. Then Paddy found himself jobless when he expressed his bewilderment and frustrations in verse,
Kate Nealon's virtue remains intact
'Tis locked up hard and tight.
One puzzling aspect of that fact,
How does she piss at night?

WILLIE: You were always different. You always noticed things that the rest of us missed. Maybe that's what the School-Master meant when he said that you were special.

SEAN; I suppose everyone is special in their own way. But if you don't play football in Galvin's field and pitch-and-toss on the Forge road you're considered a sissy. My brother Mick always said I was a dreamer; that I was going around in a daze.

WILLIE; What does Mick think of you going to join the army?

SEAN; He doesn't know, he's in London. But I don't think he'd mind me joining the Irish Army, sure he went to join the Free State army himself. Then when he got

there recruiting was closed down for Easter. Oh, he was too cute to tramp to Limerick. He hopped on the train when it stopped at the level-crossing and stowed away. He once threatened all sorts of things on me if I ever even thought of joining the British Army.

WILLIE; I didn't think Mick was like that.

SEAN; He's not. A girl he was great with was after being drowned in Bundoran. The Doctor said he had a nervous breakdown.

WILLIE; He still wouldn't want you to join the English Army?

SEAN; Three years before I was born the Black-and-Tans kicked down the door of the house at my grandmother's wake and shot the little dog. Mick was there. He remembers that. And another night they nearly shot him and my father.

WILLIE; And that made him turn against the English.

SEAN; It did an' it didn't. In the first letter he sent home he told my mother how kind the English people were and about how a London cop had given him half-a-crown.

WILLIE;(*losing interest in what Sean is saying*) You that's good at sums....what year would you have to be born to be seventeen now.

SEAN; Nineteen twenty....why?

WILLIE; When we tell the army people in Limerick we're seventeen they might try to catch us out. (*Both take off their boots and sit down on the straw and there is silence for a few moments*)

WILLIE; (*Suddenly*) Is it true that girls go for fellows in uniform?

SEAN; I don't know much about girls or what they go for. Although my uncle, the Tumbler McCarthy, gave me a bit of advice about them but I can't vouch for the validity of it. I think he was a bit hard on the fairer sex. Do you know what a man that doesn't like women is called?

WILLIE: No. What?

SEAN: A Misogynist.

WILLIE: (*Not impressed*) What did the Tumbler tell you?

SEAN: The Tumbler was a man that spoke in Parables. He said, “ Remember Seaneen, be careful of the mule with the calm look. You know what to expect from the mule with the mad eyes, but the hoor with the docile eyes will kick you when your mind is on other things”.

WILLIE: I suppose you’ll write a song about this some time. Or can you write about hardship?

SEAN; Of course you can. According to Shelley;
Most wretched men are cradled into poetry by wrong.
They learn in suffering what they teach in song.
And didn’t Dickens write about hardship?

WILLIE; If his feet were skinned from traipsing the roads to get away from the hunger and bogs of North Kerry he mightn’t be so fond of the pen.

SEAN; Whatever about the hunger, the bog is part of us. You don’t grow up in the bog....you grow up with the bog. It’s not so much a place...it’smore of a feeling.

WILLIE; A feeling? What sort of a feeling.

SEAN: I don’t know, but it’s there. (*Thoughtfully*) I think no matter where I’m posted in the army, in my head, I’ll still hear the wild geese over Lyrocrompane and the trout jumping in the Cashen. When the wind howls at night it seems to be calling to me and wanting to tell me something....a tormented wind begging to be listened to.

WILLIE: How would the wind be tormented and want to be listened to?

SEAN: Sure tormented people want to be listened to. Maurice Walshe, the writer from Ballydonoghue, had it summed up.

WILLIE: How?

SEAN: He wrote, “ A place acquires an entity of its own, an

entity that is the essence of all the life and thoughts and griefs and joys that have gone before”.

I know what he means. In my own case how could I ever forget things like the sheer, lunacy of the Rambling House that I experienced as a barefoot child? The stories of people like the Whisper Hogan and the lilting of “Doodlededom”. They’re things that a person would carry with them for.....

(Sean looks over and sees the Willie is asleep. He finds a cigarette packet in the straw, tears it open, produces a stump of a pencil, and starts to write. As he is writing, in his head he can hear his own voice singing “Blow The Candles Out” .

*There is a mansion on the hill where my love does reside,
Through the windows I do watch, I see my love inside.
I am cold and hungry, my aching heart does shout,
Oh, come into my arms love and we’ll blow the candles out.*

*The door it silent opens and my love comes to me,
I do rush to his arms and hold him tenderly.
One stolen hour all in the night, he cries my name aloud,
Oh, take me in your arms love and we’ll blow the candles out.*

*His mother she does slight me for I am not his kind,
I have no courtly manners and am I nor refined.
The waiting stars up in the sky, they pass by a cloud,
Take me in your arms.....*

(As twilight slowly turns to darkness he lies down and the song fades out)

CURTAIN.

SCENE TWO.

Set; The same as in scene one.

(It's the next day. Willie and Sean enter from Stage R. looking dirtier and more travel-worn than the evening before)

- WILLIE: How far would you say we walked since this time yesterday?
- Sean: Thirty-five miles if you subtract the distance between Newcastlewest and Patrickswell, where we got the lift with the blacksmith.
- WILLIE: You'd nearly be better walking than listening to his blather.
- SEAN: Ah, he was very interesting. I could listen to him all day....The story about the Troubles.....how young Willie was shot in that town in West Limerick. That would be a lovely line in a song, "He died in Shanagolden on a lonely summer's night ". (*Sings*)

**And you fought them darling Willie all through the summer days
I heard the rifles firing in the mountains far away
I held you in my arms love and your blood ran free and bright
And you died by Shanagolden on a lonely summer's night.**

- WILLIE: There's no fear of us being shot in action anyway, even our own army wouldn't have us. It was a wasted journey.
- SEAN; It's hard to know when anything is wasted. We learned something.
- WILLIE; Oh we did. We learned that you should have worn a long trousers for a week or a fortnight before you tried that trick. The minute you dropped your brother Mick's trousers for the medical examination your man knew by your weather-beaten legs that you weren't long out of short trousers. Seventeen how are you!

(Sean looks pensive)

WILLIE; What's wrong with you?

SEAN; I have an ache.

WILLIE: I'm sore all over. That was a long walk. We're not used to walking that far in one go.

SEAN: Not that kind of an ache; an ache in my brain.

WILLIE: A headache?

SEAN: Not quite. An ache to write a song that will be published...and sung....especially sung (*dreamily*) Or to have a record made of one of my songs. Imagine what it must be like to be passing a house, maybe miles from home, and to hear your song played on the gramophone.

WILLIE: Do you think that will ever happen?

SEAN: It's not likely to happen in Kerry anyway. When I was still in school I wrote this song "Horo My Johnny". And when I asked O'Leary in Listowel to print it he said, " ...waste o' time, who in the name of Christ wants to horo my Johnny.

WILLIE: What sort of a song was it?

(Sean sings "Horo My Johnny")

Chorus;

Oh! Horo my Johnny will you come home soon,
The winter is coming and I'm all alone.
The candle is burning in my window low,
And the wild geese they are going home.

A young man's love is something to behold,
First it burns and then it soon grows cold.
He'll whisper in the moonlight and your hand he'll hold,
Then he'll vanish like the morning dew.

Chorus.

He'll court you by a meadow in the summertime,
When first you love it is the sweetest time.
He'll promise you a golden ring and then one day,
He'll vanish like the morning dew.

You'll be waiting for his footsteps in a lonely room,
Listen by the window he'll be coming soon.
Your heart it will be breaking by the early dawn,
For he's vanished with the morning dew.

Chorus.

So come all you young men who are in your prime,
A young maiden's love is like the rarest wine.
When first you taste it 'tis a golden time,
And sweeter than the morning dew.

WILLIE: What sort of things can you make a song about?

SEAN: You can compose a song about anything.

WILLIE: This road?

SEAN: Yes....I suppose so.

WILLIE: But this is the road to nowhere.

SEAN: *(Brightening up)* That's great., *(Sings)*

**The Road to Nowhere turned dark with ugly alien gore
The Quiet Man was dreaming of the Key Above the
Door.**

WILLIE: What's that about?

SEAN: It's about a couple of things. It's acknowledging the titles of the works of Maurice Walshe, the man that I told you about yesterday. And more importantly it's about our search.

WILLIE: Our searchfor what?

SEAN: I don't know. We don't always know what we're searching for. I saw in the Reader's Digest where Albert Einstein said, "If I knew what I was looking for it wouldn't be called research".

WILLIE: You read a lot. I can't settle down to read.

SEAN: There are many ways of reading; it's not all about books. You can listen, that's a form of reading. You can read the seasons and the landscape... And people. Most of all you can read people. You can learn everything from people. James Joyce says that he never met a boring person.

WILLIE: He didn't spend much time around Listowel then.
SEAN: Listowel has no boring people. It has kind people and it has nasty people. It has clever people and people that are not so clever. But we can learn something from them all.

WILLIE: A lot of them say that you have a great imagination.
SEAN: I think I got it from my mother's side. My uncle, the Salmon Roche, had great stories. Unkind people would call them lies. When I was small he told me about one time he made a scarecrow. And the scarecrow was so effective that not alone did the crows not take any potatoes but they left back the ones they took the year before.

WILLIE, SEAN; That's a cod.
SEAN; And he had another story about a cleaving straddle.. He was drawing out turf with an ass and cleeves.. Do you know the creels that you see on the backs of donkeys. You'd see them nowadays on postcards and such like? Well up in Rathea they're called "cleeves" and they're held in position by a "cleaving-straddle"; which is a saddle-like harness with a spike, or hook, on either side to hold the cleeves. Anyway the Salmon was using said mode of haulage when, due to inadequate upholstering, didn't he cleaving-straddle irritate and cut the ass, leaving a nasty lesion on either side of his backbone. (The ass's now, not the Salmon's)
The weather being warm of course the flies attacked the open wounds, which festered (savin' your presence) developing into two raw nasty-looking holes in the ass's back.
The ass, tired after a hard day's work, went out and lay down at the back of the house under a hawthorn tree. And what do you think but didn't a couple of haws fall into the holes in his back. The holes eventually healed but the next Spring didn't two little whitethorn trees sprout up out of his back.

Do you know what the Salmon did? (according to himself). He waited for them to grow fairly strong and then he sawed them off about four inches from the base. And thereafter he had the only ass in Ireland with a permanent cleaving-straddle.

(When Sean notices that Willie is not amused by his story he sits down on the stool and puts his head in his hands)

WILLIE; Are you coming home or are you going to stay here?

SEAN: *(Standing up and moving slowly towards the right)*
I'm doing neither. I've been thinking..... I left home yesterday to better myself and at the first sign of rejection I turned back. My people were mountainy people and they wouldn't be impressed. A mountainy person shouldn't turn back. *(He turns around and shakes hands with Willie)*

SEAN: Goodbye Willie. *(Sean exits)* Willie, mesmerised, mumbles "goodbye", hesitates centre stage before exiting and Sean can be heard singing "Finuge".)
**There is a cabin by a glen,
The place where I was born.
There eagles fly the summer sky
To greet the smiling morn.
Finuge, Finuge, oh golden wood
You meadows wild.....
*(Song fades out)***

CURTAIN.

SCENE THREE.

Time; 1980.

Set; a narrow boreen with a small bridge-wall running three-quarters the length of stage. It is Summer and wild flowers are in bloom at the end of the wall. There is a sound of water gurgling.

Sean McCarthy (*now in his mid-fifties*) is sitting on the low wall smoking a Meerschaum pipe. He is casually dressed in a good quality tweed jacket and twill trousers. He is writing in a copybook. A girl can be heard approaching singing a pop song. (*Maggie Sheehan enters. She is aged about fourteen or slightly more and is dressed in a school uniform. She is a lively, pleasant girl*)

MAGGIE: Hello.

SEAN: Hello girleen. You have a lovely voice. What's your name?

MAGGIE: Maggie Sheehan.

SEAN: Ah, your father was Tim Sheehan. He died young, may he have a bed in Heaven. He was a dancing teacher..... and a powerful singer. That's where you got the voice from; you didn't lick it off the ground.

MAGGIE: My mother says I got it from her.

SEAN: Yes, she was a Stack from Lyre. A talented family too you got it on the double. (*Pauses*) You don't know me.

MAGGIE: I do so. You're Sean McCarthy, the songwriter.

SEAN: That's right, but a young one like you wouldn't be interested in my songs.

MAGGIE: Yes I would and Sister Ignatious asked me to sing one of your songs yesterday.

SEAN: Which one?

MAGGIE: "Where Wild Winds Blow".

SEAN: And did you know the words of it?

MAGGIE: I did, I know the words of all you songs.
SEAN: Yerrah, no you don't. I wrote 160 songs. How would you know the words of them all?
MAGGIE: Which one do I not know?
SEAN: Eh....eh.... Cloheen.
(*She sings "Cloheen"*)

I have seen the green fields of my native Cloheen,
I have walked in the valley by a rippling stream,
I've seen the proud eagle soar high in the sky.
I have cried o'er the grave where my Mary does lie.

These twenty five years I have sailed the seas wide,
I have watched golden sunsets with sadness my guide.
The memories haunt me, at night I do dream,
I still walk with my Mary along by Cloheen.

I can still see her standing where the bright waters flow,
And the Church where we married so long, long ago.
I welcome the morning it brings peace of mind,
From the dreams of the young love that I left behind.

The day of our marriage, we walked hand in hand.
No prouder man walked on this green fertile land.
No honeymoon bower, no baby to cry,
Just a quiet lonely grave, where my Mary does lie.

So adieu lovely Mary, rest well in Cloheen,
In your grave you've found peace by the rippling stream,
The proud eagle guard you from high in the sky,
And a rose marks the grave where my young love does lie.

SEAN: That song was born when an old man pointed a gnarled finger at a clump of briars and bushes to show me a famine grave. When I asked how many perished he looked dreamily at Knockanoir and said, "Only one, the rest took the cattle boat to America".

“You’ll have no trouble finding it” he said. And I didn’t. When I scraped the moss off a flat stone I could read the inscription, “MARY R.I.P.” Then I wondered... Was she young?...Was she beautiful?...Did she have a lover....? Did her eyes shine when she heard a young man singing in a moonlit meadow?

I had no way of knowing. But I used my imagination to put her story in song. And some day your story will be told in song. And it will be a story of success. You’ll go places girl. You have the voice, you have the personality and you have the confidence. (*As if to himself*) I sang songs, wrote songs and poems. I wrote stories. I even wrote a book but I didn’t have the confidence. The world didn’t succeed in taking Sands’s bog out of me. Whether I was in Fort Sade or Philadelphia I always perceived myself as a Kerry bogman, who couldn’t spell, typed with one finger and had no idea where commas went. But that’s another story.

MAGGIE: You have plenty of other stories but I have to be going, bye.

SEAN: o nEirigh an Bhotair leat.

(He sits down, takes a battered school-copy from his pockets and thoughtfully peruses it)

SEAN: I took a bit of poetic licence with that one. Killury’s Golden Corn. Sure Killury wouldn’t feed a snipe not to mind grow corn. As John Joe Kennelly said about Killocrim, “..... if the land was any poorer the crows would have to carry flasks”. But nobody lives in Killury so I won’t have any objections from the natives.....but the song.....(*closes eyes and sits back*) I can hear it....I can hear that young Sheehan one singing it. *Sean hears Maggie singing Killury’s Golden Corn in his head.*”) (“

Where are you now Sean Hanrahan
In that cold land far away.
Can you not hear the wild birds call
In the hills across the bay.
The cooing winds are blowing love,
As in the days of yore
And the wild winds keep a rolling
On the lonely Kerry Shore.

The soft dew is falling love
Upon the Mountain side.
The meadows green near Beencuneen
Keep singing to the tide.
The piper plays his lonely air
To greet the smiling morn'
And the summer rain keeps falling
On Killury's Golden Corn.

The prison yard is dark and bare
Where no man speaks my name.
Van Dieman's peak though sad and bleak,
Can't hide my burning shame.
My eyes grow dim remembering
The love that once I knew
And a smiling maid that loved me there
Where falls the morning dew.

Sometimes I dream of my Maura Lee
Though it was long ago.
I hear the wild birds singing free
In the valley down below.
I see you smiling in the sun
To kiss the summer dawn
And the soft rain that keeps falling
On Killury's Golden Corn.

The famine walls and mountains tall
That took my youth from me
The cold-eyed stranger came to take
Me o'r the raging sea.
They stole the sunlight from my eyes
And the love my soul did know
And I left you waiting Maura Lee
Where the soft winds gently blow.

Once I walked my broken land
To light the burning flame
Through fields and glens we wandered then
To play the freedom games
Some died in lanes with twisted limbs
Where wild flowers sweetly bloom.
Their young eyes closed forever now
To a weeping harvest moon.

My span of life is over
And peace steals over me
My soul will fly that stormy sky,
Across the raging sea.
Place me near my Maura Lee
In the land where I was born,
Then I'll hear the soft rain falling
On Killury's Golden Corn.

CURTAIN.