

PREFACE.

THE words on the preceding page seem to account all-sufficiently for the existence of popular traditional music and verse, their strength and their weakness.

The strength of traditional melodies is indeed almost undeniable. Originally the perfectly sincere expression of some musical soul, they have passed on from father to son, receiving the impress of simple music-lovers unaccustomed to harmony, and therefore the more critically alive to the essentials of fine melody.

It should not surprise us that the weakness of folk-song is most often apparent in its verse. A child will sing before it can speak. To compose a noble melody without harmony needs no teacher; whereas the invention of good poetry presupposes a varied vocabulary, a knowledge of grammar and the rules of rhyme and rhythm, and, above all, that habit of eloquence in daily speech and thought bred solely of familiarity with books. And books, even in their simplest form, were often unknown to the country dwellers through whom these old songs have descended.

Bearing this in mind we shall deal more justly with the doggerel narrative, faulty rhyme, and irregular metre of the country ballad. The most grotesque, when analyzed, will often prove to contain dramatic or noble elements in awkward disguise. Take, for example, "The Merchant's Daughter" in this collection: its plot is the same as that of the old story made famous by Boccaccio, versified by Hans Sachs, and immortalised by Keats in his poem "Isabella, or the Pot of Basil."

But, if traditional country verse has its weakness it also has its strength. Such a line as "Oh, love it is a killing thing! did you ever feel the pain?" lives in the memory of the hearer long after the old singer has passed away. There is something hauntingly beautiful in a verse such as this one from the "Bedfordshire May-Day Carol":—

"When I am dead, and in my grave,
And covered with cold clay,
The nightingale will sit and sing,
And pass the time away."

Burns, an inspired peasant himself, perceived these beauties in peasant poetry, and some of his sincerest and most famous lines are taken from homely ballads, familiar to the unlettered country singer and to most collectors of traditional song.

The words of many country ballads are derived, directly or indirectly, from broadsides. The invention of printing early gave birth to these, which recorded both the orally-traditional and newly-made ballads of the strolling minstrel and tavern-bard. Before the days of cheap literature, the broadside, indeed, took the place of the newspaper, political pamphlet, history, novel, poetry-book, and hymnal of our times; and upon the ballad-sheets—largely circulated by pedlars, themselves often singers—the country folk relied for fresh information, amusement, and moral instruction, the more easily assimilated when in homely verse.

With cheaper printing, there poured forth from the provincial presses an ever-swelling tide of broadsides, still bearing ballads taken from the lips of singers and local rhymesters ignorant of literary conventions.

Many ballads were common to most broadside printers, but the versions of these, as given by different publishers, are rarely identical. Indeed, the kaleidoscopic shifting of lines or whole verses, the additions, curtailments, borrowings, diversity of metre, and the strange corruptions in these printed versions (ancient or modern), go to prove that, however much the country singer or local bard may be beholden—directly or indirectly—to the broadside,* the broadside is equally indebted to the ballad-singer and hedge-poet.

"Seven Dials" is often rightly credited with having turned out feeble stuff of the "Villikins and his Dinah" type; but, on the other hand, the astute Northumbrian printer, James Catnach, (settled in London 1813), paid men to collect ballads from singers in country taverns; and there exists a serious broadside, "William and Diana," which is older than his burlesqued version, if hardly of greater literary merit. There is no doubt that other printers followed Catnach's plan, and this offers the only satisfactory explanation of the fluidity of traditional ballads throughout long centuries.

It must not be forgotten that the process of composing tunes and words is still going on amongst unsophisticated people, and in the British Isles. It is most noticeable amongst the more eloquent Celtic peasants of Scotland, Ireland and Wales, but the non-Celtic Scots of Yarrowside have preserved their poetical traditions, and still naturally express their emotions in verse. The more reticent and slow-tongued Englishman of limited education is often ill-pleased enough to be discovered a bard, but he not unfrequently makes tunes, or verse, of a kind.† I have myself met with several instances; and, as a child, was often privileged to read the valentines and letters in rhyme composed by a friendly Sussex bard, at the request of less poetical but love-sick swains.

Given the ballad, the metre and character of its words suggested an appropriate tune to the singer, who, recalling ballad-airs learnt usually from persons of an older generation, altered and adorned them according to his fancy, producing in traditional music similar kaleidoscopic changes to those through which the ballad itself had passed.

Thirty-four of the songs in this book represent a very small selection from a number noted and collected by myself, chiefly in Sussex and Surrey and between the years 1893 and 1901. To these are added five noted by others. In selecting for publication I preferred such songs as had already undergone my more leisurely examination and annotation. All editorial notes appear here in greatly condensed form, and references are necessarily very incomplete.

Every tune in the book is faithful to the version noted from the singer at the time named.

The original words of the singers remain also unaltered, save in trifling instances where a false rhyme, forgotten line, nonsensical corruption, or the like, has made it absolutely necessary to correct them. Each singer of these versions has thus the opportunity of being his own editor, and may compress or modify according to his individual taste, as the country singer has done before him. In two cases a verse has been omitted, and the wording of a line slightly changed. One song has been partly re-written, as stated elsewhere. The unaltered words may in many cases be found in the *Journal of the Folk Song Society*, together with various details omitted here.

* The broadside flourished from the early sixteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth, and still languishes in a debased form.

† See "The Poor Murdered Woman," p. 70.

The singers to whom I am indebted for songs in this collection are:—

1. MR. GRANTHAM, an old carter, of the Holmwood, Surrey, now dead. He was a native of Sussex, and learned his songs from other carters and labourers. He could not read.

2. MR. FOSTER, a young farm labourer of Milford, Surrey.

3. MESSRS. BAKER, BROMHAM, EDE, LOUGH AND SPARKS, all farm-labourers, mostly over fifty years of age, in the village and neighbourhood of Dunsfold, Surrey.

4. MRS. RUGMAN, wife of a labourer in Dunsfold, Surrey.

5. A GYPSY FAMILY OF THE NAME OF GOBY, wanderers in Sussex and Surrey.

6. MR. WALTER SEARLE, a young quarryman, near Amberley, Sussex.

7. MR. HENRY BURSTOW, a shoemaker, born in Horsham, 1826. As a boy he was apprenticed to the shoemaking trade, but is best known as a bell-ringer. It has lately been written of him that his reputation "stands unrivalled in England, and there is hardly a belfry in the land where his name and fame are not known and respected." And this, although during eighty-three years he has slept only six nights away from his native town. Mr. Burstow has from childhood made bell-ringing and song-singing his hobbies. He has a list of more than four hundred songs, old and new, which he knows by heart. Amongst them about fifty or sixty are of the traditional ballad type, and these have been noted and preserved. Mr. Burstow learned some of his songs from his parents, and many "old songs and ballets off shoemakers singing at their work." Others he learned from labourers, many of whom could not read. His excellent ear and sense of rhythm have probably been developed by constant bell-ringing, in which he still joins (in 1908), with energy and skill.

8. MR. JOSEPH TAYLOR, estate bailiff, of Saxby-All-Saints, North Lincolnshire; born in Binbrook, Lincs., 1833. He has been a choirman in his village for forty-two years, but familiarity with modern major and minor scales has not destroyed his power of singing purely modal tunes. His voice is a flexible true tenor, and his genius for delicately ornamenting his melodies, whilst exquisitely preserving the rhythm, is one which many a skilled musician might envy.

9. MRS. HILLS, an old family nurse; native of Stamford, Lincolnshire.

10. MRS. JEFFREYS, an old cottager in North Devonshire, now deceased.

11. MRS. THORBURN (Margaret Scott), native of Cumberland; formerly in service.

I must again express gratitude to the singers whose kindness and patience have made the task of collecting so pleasant. My thanks are also offered to the following, for valuable help of various kinds:—Mr. W. Albery, Mr. G. Arkwright, Miss C. Burne, Mr. Buttifant, Mrs. H. Carr, Sir Ernest Clarke, Mr. H. E. D. Hammond, Mr. F. Kidson, Miss M. B. Lattimer, Mr. C. A. Lidgely, the Rev. E. J. Nash, and the Rev. C. J. Shebbeare.

Beginners in the study of Folk Song, who may wish for more information than that scattered throughout the prefaces of published collections, will find the following useful: "Purity in Music," A. F. Thibaut; "The Study of National Music," Carl Engel; "The Literature of National Music," Carl Engel; "The Art of Music" (opening chapters), C. Hubert Parry; "The History of Music in England" (concluding chapter), Ernest Walker; "Popular Music of the Olden Time," W. Chappell; "English Folk Song," Cecil Sharp; "Rhythm in National Music," T. H. Yorke Trotter, and "On the Collecting of English Folk Song," L. E. Broadwood, (*Proceedings of the Musical Association, 1904-1905*); "The Ballad Sheet and Garland," F. Kidson (*Journal of the Folk Song Society*, Vol. ii., No. 7); "Folk Song in Buchan," Gavin Greig, (an essay printed by P. Scrogie, "Buchan Observer Office," Peterhead, N.B.); "Grove's Dictionary of Music," (see "Modes," "Song," etc.).

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