

The Collection of Folk-Airs

By The Rev. S. Baring-Gould, M.A.

WHEN, some seven years ago, I began to collect the folk-music of Devon and Cornwall, I found it comparatively easy to get at the stores of traditional ballad and song music of the old men, shepherds, miners, hedgers, ditchers, moormen, who had been wont to sing over the great fires in public-houses; but it was a very difficult thing for me to open the lips of the old women who had been singing milkmaids and nurses. I found them very shy of giving up to me their treasures of old-world song. In 1889 I lectured on our old folk-music with illustrations, in various towns of the West, in the hopes of stirring up enthusiasm, and of being able to inspire ladies with the desire to assist me in collecting this ancient music, from those sources which were sealed to me. The result was not great. A few ladies most kindly sent me the songs and tunes they recollected having heard their nurses sing many years ago, but none took up the task of going about, hunting up the old women, and noting down their songs. I have not been out of heart, and have continued to push the matter, and my object in writing this article is to stir up those ladies of England who live in country places, and who are able to note down melodies when heard, to take this matter up, and prosecute it with zeal.

A fact that deserves to be insisted on emphatically is this – that there always has till now existed in all parts of England a large body of popular music that has never been printed, never noted down in MS. by the singers, and that much of this is first-rate in quality; that it has a freshness, a sparkle, a beauty of its own; that it has its own character as truly as Scottish, Irish, and Welsh national music. Take such books as Chappell's "Old English Ditties" and Hatton's "Songs of England," and we find that they contain airs that have been printed over and over again, and that with few exceptions they are all wholly unknown to our old English peasantry. We sing Scottish airs in abundance, Irish airs and Welsh airs are familiar to us – and all the while there is a body of lovely music, English grown, under our feet, and we will not stoop to pick it up. Yet some ladies have set the example of collecting, as Miss L. E. Broadwood, who has done noble work in Sussex.¹ A selection of those songs she had gathered was published a few years ago by Stanley Lucas, Weber, and Co., and Miss M. H. Mason has made a collection of country and nursery songs that has been published by Metzler and Co., but there is almost any amount more to be had, and whole tracts of England are unworked. Northumbrian minstrelsy has been gathered and preserved by M. Stokoe and that of Yorkshire by Mr Kidson; but where are we to look for the folk-music of Somersetshire, of Norfolk and Suffolk, of Derbyshire, of Lancashire?

I will venture, now I am urging ladies to collect, to quote an example to show what may be done. Last year a lady on the south coast of Devon, near Dartmouth, wrote to tell me that she believed there was at least one woman in the parish where she lived who remembered old songs - would I visit her and ascertain their value? Of course I went, and I was taken to a farmhouse, where this woman was then engaged washing - her husband was a day labourer. The farmer's wife very kindly said she could spare her for an hour, and then I got this singer - Mary Langworthy is her name - to tell me what songs she could recall, and to chant me a verse of each. I very soon satisfied myself that I had come upon a new vein of melody and of words. The songs Mary Langworthy knew she had acquired from her mother,

¹ Her latest work is 'English Country Songs' – an admirable work

long ago dead. My kind hostess then drove me on to a cottage in a lovely primrose Devonshire lane, where lived a fresh-faced handsome old woman, who also knew some songs which she had heard her grandmother sing when making butter. Now my hostess, who has gone into the matter with enthusiasm, has been engaged for some time in getting both these women to sing to her, and in noting down their airs; and very charming and quaint some of these are.

But that is not all. She unearthed a dear old fiddler, absolutely homeless, who wanders about with his loved instrument, and works at farms mending harness. The aged man, with snow white hair, lame, in the poorest garments, with a beautiful, intelligent face that lights up as though the sun fell on it, whenever he strikes up an old folk-air on his fiddle, is now engaged by me to go about collecting; old melodies, and then he brings his fiddle to the lady, plays them over, and also ancient country dance tunes, and she notes them down, preserving by this means what would otherwise be irretrievably lost.

The songs sung by old toppers in public-houses were of one sort, those sung by milkmaids were of another; I can collect the former in my own county, but the assistance of ladies is necessary for the gleaning of the ballads formerly sung by those who rocked the cradle and milked the cows, and that not in the West only, but all over England. One evening I sang after dinner a folk-air, "The Streams of Nantsian," when a lady over seventy exclaimed, "Why! I used to hear the harvesters sing that when I was a mite of a child, but there was a difference in the second strain." Then she sat down to the piano and played and sung it as she recalled having heard it sixty years before.

"Do you remember any more?" I asked.

"Dear me! The harvesters used to come in and sup in our servants' hall, and after supper sing songs, and we children listened at the door. I can't say I remember all the words of the songs, but. I recollect most of the tunes, and some verses of each."

Need I add that I have set this lady to note down what she recalls?

The necessity for setting to work at once is apparent. Only the old people sing these songs. The young ones are too superior to lend their voices to anything so old-fashioned. Shortly before last Christmas a farmer said to me: "Have you ever heard old Nanny sing? She was our milkmaid when I was a little boy, and a wonderful singer of old ballads she was." I found she lived a few miles off. I wrote to the rector's wife in January, 1894, and her answer came back: "I had no idea old Nanny was a singer. Alas! She had a stroke on Christmas Eve, and I greatly fear will never stir her lips in song again in this world." So chances pass.

A lady in N. Devon wrote to me: "There is a tidy old woman, Suey, in this parish, who sings what strikes me as very quaint and beautiful airs. Unhappily, I cannot note them down. Will you come?"

I could not make arrangements for a visit to this very out-of-the-world spot for some months. When I was ready I wrote, and received an answer: "Alas! - an attack of influenza has carried off poor Suey."

Anyone who has traveled along the north coast of Cornwall must know the lovely Vale of Lanherne. In that vale, at Mawgan, is an inn, the Falcon. Quite by chance I visited it two years ago, and was welcomed with extraordinary delight at the door by the daughter of the very aged host.

"Oh! We are so glad you have come. We have been so longing you would come here. Dear old father used to be: famous singer and it has been a sorrow to us for many a year that his sweet old airs should be lost for ever. Now you have come you shall collect his songs, and, if he is too frail and feeble in voice to sing, we can sing for you the airs that we have heard since childhood, and you can take them down."

And some fresh and lovely ballads I have got from this source.

Now it is not easy to note down airs from singers who know nothing of bars, and who very generally have melodies to give that are set in the Mixo-Lydian or Hypo-Dorian modes. But with pains, patience, and practice it can be done. For my own part, I cannot "prick down a tune " without the help of a piano, and that is a clumsy way, for the singer becomes impatient, and alters his or her key; but a true musician can dot down an air readily enough without an instrument. I am thankful to acknowledge the help of some such. Pains, patience, and practice are necessary whichever way is adopted but then – the results are worth the expenditure.

A woman is much more shy of singing before men, especially – "old-fashioned" songs, than is a man. She is humble-minded, as well as shy. She fears lest her songs, "silly trash they be," as she deprecatingly says, should seem ridiculous, and make her seem ridiculous in the eyes of a man! But she will open out to a fellow woman, and here it is that a lady can do so much more than is possible for a man.

In one of her charming letters to Sir William Temple, Dorothy Osborne writes of the maids sitting at the fringe of a wood of a summer evening singing old ballads. Where are these? What has become of them - music and words? Alas! Such has been our neglect of popular song in England that nearly all is lost. Our collectors of ballads have gone to sales and bought up broadside ballads, our collectors of old English music have been diligent in purchasing engraved sheets; but these are not representative of the folk-song; of our people. If we want to rescue that from complete oblivion, we must go to the peasants themselves. We want in every county enthusiasts like Miss L. E. Broadwood or Miss Burne for Shropshire who will make it their occupation and delight to hunt out the old women who crone ancient ditties to their grandchildren. They are to be found. In the autumn there is a cheap-jack who makes his rounds in Surrey and, I doubt not, elsewhere, and offers a copper kettle to the man who can sing the longest ballad, and a Britannia metal tea-pot to the woman who can sing the sweetest song. Surely some collector of old folk-music should follow after him and glean. This man usually appears in the neighbourhood of Godalming at the beginning of September.

Is there anything more that can be urged to raise some ladies to do this work before the chance is gone for ever? Much work that is done can be done at another time, and with more knowledge and experience done better; but this work of rescuing our English folk-song from extinction must be done now or never, and such as are instrumental in so doing will in very truth have deserved well of their country.

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