

THE COLLECTOR'S BALLAD SHEETS

WE have not heard of the Collector lately, but, despite his years, he is vigorous as ever and as enthusiastic over his particular hobbies.

Today he was busy with his paste pot. The Collector's paste pot was a family joke, but the rest of the household found it extremely useful on occasions. The Collector vowed that no true collector of old music and such flimsy things could do without the paste pot, for what soulless bookbinder's hireling would take the loving care over torn leaves and decaying paper, with a view to neat restoration, other than one who loved the article he so carefully mended.

The Collector was mounting on thick paper an acquisition of broadsides, printed on that thin, cheap paper that the ballad printers of over a century ago used for their wares. The Collector chuckled over his task as to sheet after sheet he lovingly applied paste of the right consistency, and delicately placed the wet sheet, with a deftness born of practice, on to the supporting paper.

In a little old-fashioned shop in a remote by-street he had found his treasure. They, the ballad sheets, had been lying hidden in a drawer for more years than the spectacled old lady could remember. She had timidly placed half a dozen in her window panes, in a tentative manner, with little hope of realising a penny on each. The keen eye of the Collector had spotted them and, like Oliver, asked for more.

The old lady said they had belonged to her father, who liked such things, and they had been placed in a drawer and forgotten.

The Collector had many volumes of these old and semi-old ballad sheets, and as he pursued his task he mentally reviewed his 'bags,' as the sporting phrase has it.

Time was when at many a market a shabby old man or woman displayed on canvas screen his or her stock of ballad wares. The Collector remembered how often he had waited the return of the lady ballad monger, who, at the foot of Shaw's Brow, in Liverpool, had left her rolled up canvas, with the ballads pinned, to take care of itself while she refreshed in an adjacent public-house.

At another time he had bought the whole stock of a ballad seller, whose canvas had been fastened to the railings of Hull Parish Church.

But ballad vendors and ballad singer have vanished this twenty or thirty years. And collectors, like our friend, have to depend on chance purchase of stored ballad sheets.

It is on ballad sheets that folk-songs in their original state are only found. The folk-song expert has almost always to 'clean' them up before presentation to a modern audience. And this process of cleaning and smoothing lines can be done either artistically or the reverse, for truly the ballad printer who took down from the imperfect recitation the ballad he issued was not to be depended upon for either accuracy or delicacy.

The Collector had a passable gathering of eighteenth-century ballad sheets from the presses of Evans, T. Batchelor, Bow Church Yard Press, and Johnny Pitts. This latter personage, it is whispered, was a lady who was a retired bum-boat woman. She advertises that she sells marbles, toys and such children's delights as well as a rare selection of ballad sheets.

Of such dainty ballads, each having a story to tell, the Collector possessed copies, all from the press of the ex-bum-boat lady: 'Polly Oliver's Rambles,' 'The Methodist Parson, or the Flitch of Bacon,' 'The Irish Butcher's Frolick,' 'The Gentleman turned Tinker,' 'The Crafty Ploughboy, or the Highwayman Outwitted,' 'The Adventures of a Penny,' and similar stories done in more or less doggerel rhyme.

The home of the ballad printer was near Seven Dials in some of those mazes of streets that Charing Cross Road and Shaftesbury Avenue have so ruthlessly cut into. Pitts was in Great St. Andrew

Street, and the great Catnach in Monmouth Street. James Catnach came from Alnwick, in Northumberland, and was the son of a printer there - a printer of great excellence, who freely used the Bewick illustrations in the books he printed. James, the son, inherited many of these woodcuts, and also inherited his father's skill and taste in printing even ballad sheets. He was working when Evans and Pitts were on their last legs, and he produced ballad sheets on clear white paper, fairly free from typographical errors, with many a dainty wood block that had been cut by one or the other of the Bewick brothers, or their favoured pupils.

Evans, Batchelor, and Pitts were content with the coarse wrapping paper of the period, none the less acceptable to the true collector of such things. Catnach supplied in the early years of the nineteenth century half the ballad sellers in England. Besides the ballad sheet, he printed 'Garlands' (a little book of songs, so called) in all sorts of sizes; for instance, those scarcely bigger than a postage stamp - the 'Little Warblers,' adapted for the waistcoat pocket of 'nice young men at small tea-parties' or other social gatherings, who were fully armed if called upon for a song.

The ordinary ballad printer usually had a limited supply of wood blocks to decorate his sheet, and he did his best to apportion them with taste and discernment. He had bought or acquired them in job lots, and they were mostly worn out or defective. Still, he did his best, and no man can do more. The purchasing public demanded an illustration, and he was bound to comply with the demand. And so cuts of all characters are found; many from old-time spelling-books which had their pages headed with more or less authentic portraits of the Kings and Queens of England. These would be used over and over again, whatever the subject of the ballad might be. There was a quite appropriate heading to the song:-

*I'm sitting on the stile, Mary
Where you sat by my side,*

This, one which the Collector was accustomed to show his friends, depicted a gentleman seated on a spiked gate, with an angry bull on one side and a fierce dog on the other. Perhaps the printer saw the humour of the situation or perhaps he didn't! Another print to 'The Dame of Honour or Hospitality,' is a party of gentlemen sitting round a perfectly empty table.

And so the old Collector mooned over his treasures, and hummed to himself the folkairs to the respective ballads he knew, and fell into a reverie. The bygone sport of collecting was a pleasant memory. He thought he was getting old and feeble, and fell to wondering what, when he had passed away, would become of all these things he had so lovingly collected and cherished. Would some vandal come along and consign the whole to the dust-bin, or, equally without reverence, hand the whole contents of his drawers and boxes for a few shillings to some ignorant broker? The thought made the Collector shiver, and yet the puzzle remained. He was certainly unique in his collecting and he was too poor and unknown to have his collection blazoned forth as one of importance and rarity. And so we leave the old Collector putting away his paste-pot and closing his books of mounted ballad sheets, muttering to himself, 'I wonder! I wonder!'

FRANK KIDSON.