

FOLK-SONG HUNTING AS A SPORT

THE Collector and the Musician were seated at a deal table opposite a venerable old man, in a room whose insistent features were a gritty floor and an acrid smell of stale tobacco. An earthenware mug containing the dregs of a pint of beer stood before the old man; while, in deference to superior social rank, glasses had been provided for the two friends. The old man was pulling at a long clay pipe, and the Musician was nervously fingering a notebook ruled for music. In a corner sat a younger man, imbibing at discreet intervals; his chuckling appearance suggested him being an amused spectator.

The fact was the Musician and the Collector were folk-song hunting in the tap-room of 'The Bonny Bunch of Roses,' for they had been assured that Hollybush-in-the-Hole was simply boiling over with folk-song, though a hitherto unexplored field. You had but to treat the oldest inhabitant to a pint of ale, and the floodgates of his memory would open to pour forth a stream of the most ancient song. The oldest inhabitant had been caught - Thomas Simpson by name - and had been duly and generously liquefied. The result was not so satisfactory as our friends could have wished. The old man was evidently getting querulous.

'Now, Thomas, let's have that again.'

'I've sung it four or five times already,' grumbled Thomas.

'Yes, but you've sung it differently every time. Let's have one more try,' urged the Musician.

'It wor allus sung t'way I sing,' grumpily protested the oldest inhabitant. 'That's tune it wor allus sung to 'at I ivver heard on.'

'Well, never mind; just once over again, there's a good fellow.'

'Singing's dry wark,' observed the old man, looking into the mug.

'I beg a thousand pardons,' said the Musician, as he tapped on the table with an empty lemonade bottle.

The young man in the corner gave a derisive chuckle, which Thomas was inclined to resent, save for the advent of the refill.

After a satisfactory draught, Thomas croaked forth:

As I wor a-going ---

'No, that's wrong.'

As I wor a-walking in the merry month o' May,

I met a young lady ---

' "Damsel," Thomas, "Damsel," ' interjected the young man in the corner.

'Well, then, "damsel," ' admitted Thomas, in a vexed tone: .

As I wor a-walking in the merry month o' May,

I met a fair young damsel, she was going on her way;

I boldly stept up to her, and made a low congee,

I said, 'My fair young maiden, oh, may I go with thee?'

The young man in the corner doubled up with suppressed mirth, and drank from his pint mug at an ill-timed moment. A fit of explosive coughing was the consequence.

'What's tha' laughing at?' queried the old man petulantly.

'I worn't laughing,' protested the young man, 'only coughing.'

'Tha'd better go home an' cough, Ezra Johnson.'

'I'm stopping to hear thee sing,' said Johnson.

'Tha's heard it afore.'

'Aye, many a time, but I like to hear *thee* sing it, Thomas,' said Johnson, with an emphasis on the last pronoun.

'I can't sing when he's about,' said the old man, turning to the Musician, who had been vainly endeavouring to reconcile Thomas's last rendering of the tune with former ones.

'Oh, go on;' said the Collector; 'never mind him, he's no judge of good singing; go on.' But Thomas was beginning to be mulish. With much persuasion, however, he commenced yet another version of the melody, and arriving at the first line of the second verse, abruptly stopped.

'That's all.'

'Nay, nay, surely not,' protested the Musician.

'It's all I knaw,' said Thomas, obstinate and irritable.

The young man sniggered; Thomas regarded him with venomous scorn. The Collector appealed to Ezra's sense of fair-play.

'Oh, I'm saying nowt,' said Ezra, with some attempt at innocence.

'Well, suppose we drop the song about the fair young damsel, and try another; do you know any more?'

'Aye, many a hundred,' was Thomas's cheering answer.

'Capital!' said the Musician, with renewed hope. 'Let's have the names of a few.' Thomas reflectively scratched his chin with his thumb nail.

'I'll sing you one of t'best songs 'at ivver wor made - a reight owd 'un, too.'

'Good,' said the Collector. Thomas began:

*Oh, pilot, 'tis a fearful night;
Theer's danger on the deep.*

'No, no,' exclaimed the Collector, 'we know that; we don't want that - Haynes Bayly,' he whispered to his companion.

Thomas the Rhymer was hurt at the rejection of his favourite, but was smoothed down by another screw of tobacco.

'Well, would you like this:

Oh wheer, and oh wheer, is my Highland laddie gone?

The Musician waved the 'Blue Bells of Scotland' on one side.

'Something different - you know the kind I mean. What else do you know?'

'I could sing you many a score. I wor noted for singing i' my day. Would you like "A Heart that can Feel for Another," or "A Life on the Ocean Wave," or "Say a Kind Word when You can?" All them's good 'uns; or if you want a comic, I'll sing you "The Cork Leg." I'm t'only one 'at knows it properly i' these parts.'

But Thomas's repertory was declined - he was hopeless, and getting rather hilarious. It was not every day that two gentlemen from London came down and treated him to unlimited beer and tobacco.

The Musician closed his notebook with a sigh, and the two friends, after slipping a coin into the old man's palm, prepared to leave the hall of harmony.

"Tis a pleasant sport, this folk-song hunting,' said the Musician, as they passed out.

'Quite fascinating,' agreed the Collector. The Musician opened his notebook and regarded his futile attempts to reconcile the different versions of the one tune they had endeavoured to extract from Thomas.

'I'm half inclined to think,' he said, 'that the young fellow in the corner would have been a less hopeless case, "a cover more worth the drawing."'

'Very likely,' agreed the Collector; 'he would, at least, have been able to sing; the old fellow simply "talked" the tune or tunes.'

'I have been,' said the Musician, 'an advocate for the use of the phonograph for recording folk-songs, but I am now inclined to think it wouldn't do at all.'

'No?'

'Well, imagine old Thomas being confronted with that weird-looking instrument, and being told to sing into, what would look to him, the mouth of a blunderbuss, while the whirring below suggested the possibility of its "going off" at any minute! Then, you see, even if we could have quieted his nerves into tunefulness, every version he would sing would be different from the others - as we have just now seen - and who is to say which is the right one, or to disentangle the jumble and chaos that his many breaks and beginnings again in other keys would produce?'

'I have, I confess, seen some extraordinary and bewildering notations done from phonographic records of folk-song - when, for example, an eight-bar melody has had half a dozen time signatures in the course of its wild career. Commencing, perhaps, in the normal 3-4 time, it has run through the abnormal 7-8 or 11-16, and so forth. This sort of notation is no doubt conscientious, but it is also confusing. The tune, whoever composed it, was never put forth in such a jumble of accent. To my fancy, the recorder's only task is to take a tune down with intelligence and commonsense, avoiding all obvious inaccuracies or false accents that an untrained singer is liable to. If an old man is singing flat, out of tune, or with sundry changes of key, it is not desirable that the recording musician should follow him into the boggy places. Let him rather take the best version the singer gives him in the course of many tries, and be satisfied with that. There can be no doubt, I think, that he will thus get the version nearest the original.'

'You may add,' quoth the Musician, 'that legitimate notes of expression exist that will fully indicate speed, accent, and the rest of the vagaries a singer may indulge in without disturbing the general embracing time signature.'

'I agree,' said the Collector; 'but what about a train to town? Have you been more successful in noting that important detail than in the case of Thomas's song?'

The two friends were here interrupted by the footsteps of Ezra Johnson, who had followed them from 'The Bonny Bunch of Roses.'

'I can sing you a few owd songs,' he said, in a rather shamefaced manner. 'I know a lot 'at my father used to sing - an' t' farmer's labourers round about here when there was a bit of a jollification, like.'

'Splendid!' exclaimed both friends. 'Is there a cocoa tavern anywhere near?' asked the Collector judiciously - not a public-house, you know.'

'Quite so, much better,' chimed in the Musician, with a memory of old Thomas toward the finale of the interview.

Providentially a London firm had planted just the very innocuous place needed, and the Musician filled his notebook in a very satisfactory manner before the arrival of the evening London train.

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