

BROADSIDE BALLADS

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"I love a ballad in print, a' life," said Mopsa, in the "Winter's Tale," and the clown confessed to the same liking. "I love a ballad but even too well; if it be doleful matter merrily set down, or a very pleasant thing indeed and sung lamentably."



Fig. 37.—BALLAD SINGER, FROM A BROADSIDE.

In 1653 Dorothy Osborne tells Sir William Temple that she has received from her brother a ballad "much older than my Lord of Lorne, and she sends it on to him." Would that she had told us more about it. And then she writes, "The heat of the day is spent in reading or working, and about six or seven o'clock I walk out into a common that lies hard by the house, where a great many young wenches keep sheep and cows, and sit in the shade singing of ballads. I go to them and compare their voices and beauties to some ancient shepherdesses that I have read of and find a vast difference there; but, trust me, I think these are as innocent as those could be. I talk to them, and find they want nothing to make them the happiest people in the world but the knowledge that they are so."

Walton in his "Complete Angler," printed in the very same year in which Dorothy Osborne wrote to her lover of the singing peasant girls, says: "I entered into the next field, and a second pleasure entertained me: 'twas a handsome milk-maid, that had cast away all care, and sung like a nightingale; her voice was good, and the ditty fitted for it; 'twas that smooth song which was made by Kit Marlow, now at least fifty years ago; and the milk-maid's mother sung an answer to it, which was made by Sir Walter Raleigh in his younger dayes."

We know what the song was, "Come, live with me and be my love."

The mother says to Walton, "If you will but speak the word, I will make you a good sillabub, and then you may sit down in a hay-cock and eat it, and Maudlin shall sit by and sing you the good old song of the Hunting in Chevy Chase, or some other good ballad, for she hath good store of them: Maudlin hath a notable memory."

But ballad-singing was not confined to milk-maids and clowns, for Walton proposes to spend a pleasant evening with his brother, Peter, and his friends, "to tell tales, or sing ballads, or make a catch, or find some harmless sport to content us."

It is a somewhat sad fact – fact it is, that the ballad is at its last gasp among us. It has gone through several phases, and it has now reached the last, when it disappears altogether.

The ballad was anciently a story set to music, and music to which the feet could move in dance. The ballet is the dance to which the ballad was sung. It was not always danced to, but it always could be danced to. It was of great length, but not too long for light hearts or light feet on a threshing-floor. The ballad was accommodated to the exigencies of the dance, by being given a burden, or bourdon, a drone that was sung by the young men, when no bagpipe was there. This burden appears in numerous ballads, and has usually no reference to the story told by the singers, and when printed is set in italics. In the scene in the "Winter's Tale," already quoted, the servant alludes to these burdens, "He has the prettiest love-songs for maids – with such delicate burdens of 'dildos and fadings.' "

Thus:–

"There was a lady in the North country,
Lay the bent to the bonny broom,
And she had lovely daughters three,
Fa, la la la; fa, la la la ra re."

Or:–

"There were three sisters fair and bright,
Jennifer, Gentle, and Rosemaree,
And they three loved one valiant knight,
As the doo (dove) flies over the mulberry tree."

In the first edition of Playford's "Dancing Master," in 1650-1, nearly every air can be proved to have been that of a song or ballad of earlier date than the book. Of these only a few have the words preserved, and we cannot be sure that the words of those we have got were the original, as ballads were continually being written afresh.

It was not till about 1690 that tunes were composed expressly for dancing, and in the later editions of the "Dancing Master," 1715 and 1728, about half the airs given are old ballad tunes. The other half, newly composed dance tunes, had no traditional words set to them, and none were composed to fit them.

In the old English romance of "Tom of Reading," printed before 1600, we have an instance of the way in which a ballad came to be turned into a dance. Tom Dove was an Exeter clothier passionately fond of music. William of Worcester loved wine, Sutton of Salisbury loved merry tales, Simon of Southampton "got him into the kitchen and to the pottage and then to a venison pasty."

Now a ballad was composed relative to Tom of Exeter:–

"Welcome to town, Tom Dove, Tom Dove,
The merriest man alive.
Thy company still we love, we love,
God grant thee well to thrive.
And never will we depart from thee
For better or worse, my joy !
For thou shalt still have our good-will,

God's blessing on my sweet boy."

And the author adds, "This song went up an I down through the whole country, and at length became a dance among the common sort."

The old heroic ballad was a *geste*, and the singer was a *gestour*. Chaucer speaks of –

"Jestours that tellen tales
Both of weeping and of game."

The tales of game were stories calculated to provoke laughter, in which very often little respect was paid to decency; sometimes, however, they were satirical. These tales of game were much more popular than those of weeping, and the *gestour*, whose powers were mainly employed in scenes of conviviality, finding by experience that the long lays of ancient paladins were less attractive than short and idle tales productive of mirth, accommodated himself to the prevailing coarse taste, and the consequence was that nine of the pieces conceived in a light vein have been preserved to every one of the other.

In the "Rime of Sir Thopas," Chaucer speaks of –

"Minestrales
And gestours for to tellen tales,
Of romaunces that ben reales,
Of popes and of cardinales
And eke of love-longing."

Here we have the historic *geste* and the light and ribald tale. When Chaucer recited the Ballad of Sir Thopas, conceived after the fashion of the old romances, the host interrupted him and said –

"This may well be rime – dogerel,
Mine eres aken of thy drafty speche."

We heartily wish that Chaucer had finished the talc. The host merely repeated the general objection to the heroic ballad, and showed the common preference for the ribald tales. The author of the "Vision of Piers the Ploughman," complains that the Passion for songs and ballads was so strong that men attended to these to the neglect of more serious and of sacred matters.

"I cannot parfitly my paternoster, as the priest it singeth,
But I can ryme of Roben Hode, of Randolf erl of Chester,
But of our Lord and our Lady I learn nothing at all
I am occupied every day, holy daye and other, with idle tales
at the ale."

The degradation in the meaning of the names once given to minstrels of various classes tells its own sad tale. The *rybaud* has lent his name to ribaldry the *scurra* to whatever is

scurrilous; the *gestour*, who sang the *gestes* of heroes, became the jester, the mere buffoon; the *joculator* degenerated into a joker ; and the *jongleur* into a juggler.

A few men of taste and of reverence for the past stood up for the old heroic ballads, which, indeed, contained the history of the past, mixed with much mythical matter. So the great Charles, says his scribe, Eginhard, "commanded that the barbarous and most ancient song in which the acts and wars of the old kings were sung should be written down and committed to memory." And our own Alfred, says Asser, "did not fail to recite himself and urge on others, the recitation by heart of the Saxon songs." But the English ballad found no favour with the Norman conquerors, who readily received the Provençal troubadour. The old heroic ballad lingered on, and was killed, not so much by the ridicule of Chaucer as by the impatience of the English character, which will not endure the long-drawn tale, and asks in preference what is pithy and pointed.

Of song and ballad there were many kinds, characterised rather by the instrument to which it was sung, than by the nature of the song itself ; or perhaps we may say most justly that certain topics and certain kinds of composition suited certain instruments, and were, therefore, accommodated to them.

In the *Romans de Brut* " we have a list of some of these:

"Molt of a la cort juleors,
Chanteors, estrumanteors;
Molt poissiez oir chansons,
Rotruanges et noviaz sons
Vieleures, lais, et notes,
Lais de vieles, lais de rotes,
Lais de harpe et de fretiax."

Here we have the juggler, the chanter, and the strummer. What the *strumentum*¹ was we do not exactly know, but it was clearly a stringed instrument that was twanged, and it has left its reminiscence in our language, - every child strums before it can play a piano. There exists an old table of civic laws for Marseilles of the date 1381, in which all playing of minstrel and jongleur, - in a word, all strumming was disallowed in the streets without a license.

To return to the passage quoted from the "*Romans de Brut*," we have among the chançons, those on the rote, and those on the vielle, those on the harp and those on the fret, (*i.e.* flute).² The rote was a pierced board, over which strings were drawn, and it could be played with both hands, one above, the other below, through the hole. The vielle was a hurdy-gurdy.

A healthier taste existed in Scotland than in England, and the old heroic ballads were never completely killed out there. In England they had been expelled the court, and banished from

¹ The word is, of course, derived from *Instrumentum*.

² See "Fretella," in Ducange, "Fistulae species."

the hall long before they disappeared from the alehouse and the cottage. The milk-maids sang them; the nurses sang them; the shepherds sang them; but not the cultured ladies and gentlemen of the Elizabethan period. The musicians of that period set their faces against ballad airs, and introduced the motette and madrigal, in which elaborate part-singing taxed the skill of the performers. But the common people loved the simple melodious ballads. Miles Coverdale, in his "Address unto the Christian Reader," in 1538, which he prefixed to his "Goastly Psalms," laments it. "Wolde God that our mynstrels had none other thyng to play upon, neither our carters and pluomen other thyng to whistle upon, save psalmes, hymns, and such godly songes. And if women at the rockes (distaff), and spinnyng at the wheles, had none other songes to pass their tyme withal than such as Moses' sister ... songe before them, they should be better occupied than with, *Hey none y nonny, - Hey trolly lolly*, and such like fantasies."

Laneham, in 1575, thus describes his evening amusements : "Sometimes I foot it with dancing; now with my gittern, and else with my cittern, then at the virginals (ye know nothing comes amiss to me); then carol I up a song withal; that by and by they come flocking about me like bees to honey; and ever they cry, Another, good Laneham, another!"

In the great agitation of minds caused by the Reformation, the itinerant minstrels were an element of danger to the Crown, for they kept alive the popular feeling against the changes in religion, and the despotic measures of the Sovereign. Moreover, an immense number of ballads were printed, having a religious or political character, were set to the old ballad airs, and sung in place of the traditional lays, and then hawked by the singers. Accordingly, in 1543, an Act was passed "for the advancement of true religion," and it recites that, forasmuch as certain froward persons have taken upon them to print "ballads, rhymes, etc., subtilly and craftily to instruct His Highness' people untruly, for the reformation whereof His Majesty considereth it most requisite to purge the realm of all such books, ballads, rhymes, and songs." The Act contains a list of exceptions; but it is noticeable that no ballads of any description were excepted.

In the reign of Queen Elizabeth another Act was passed, in 1597, against "minstrels wandering abroad," by virtue of which they were to be whipped, put in the stocks, and imprisoned, if caught going from place to place with their ballads.

Then came the period of Puritan domination under the Commonwealth, when every engine was set to work to suppress popular music and ballad singing, and to sour the English character. The first Act levelled against them and stage players was in 1642. In the following year a tract was issued complaining that this measure had been ineffective, in which the writer says, " Our musike that was held so delectable and precious that they scorned to come to a tavern under twenty shillings salary for two hours, now wander with their instruments under their cloaks (I mean such as have any), to all houses of good fellowship, saluting every room where there is company with, *Will you have any musike, gentlemen?*" But even the license to go round the country was to be denied the poor wretches. In 1648 Captain Bertham was appointed Provost Marshall," with power to seize upon all ballad-singers, and to suppress stage-plays." The third Parliament of Cromwell struck the heaviest blow of all. It enacted that any minstrel or ballad-singer who was caught singing, or making

music in any alehouse or tavern, or was found to have asked anyone to hear him sing or play, was to be haled before the nearest magistrate, whipped and imprisoned.



With the Restoration came a better time for ballad-singing; but the old romantic ballad was almost dead, and though many of the ancient melodies remained, to them new ballads were set. Of these vast numbers poured from the press. The printed ballad which supplanted the traditional ballad was very poor in quality. It turned on some moral or religious topic; it satirised some fashion of the day; it recorded in jingling rhymes some fire, earthquake, flood, or other accident. Above all, it narrated the story of a murder. Now for the first time did the vulgar assassin stand forward as the hero of English

poetry and romance.

Many an old song or ballad was parodied. Thus the famous song of "The Hunt is up," was converted into a political ballad in 1537; and a man named John Hogon was arrested for singing it. "An Old Woman Clothed in Grey" was the tune to which all England rang at the Restoration, with the words, "Let Oliver now be forgotten." "Grim King of the Ghosts" was made use of for "The Protestants' Joy," a ballad on the coronation of King William and Queen Mary; and "Hey, then, up go we!" served, with parodied words against the Rump Parliament, as the "Tories' Delight," as an anti-Papal ballad, and even as a ballad on the great frost of the Winter of 1683-4.

The dissociation of the old tunes from the ballads that had given them their names, and to which they had been composed, did much to occasion the loss of our early ballads. Not only so, but with James I.'s reign there came in a fashion for recomposing the old themes in the new style; and the new editions caused the disappearance of the earlier ballad. There can be little doubt that the romantic and historic ballad, which has been happily preserved in Scotland, was common to all English-speaking people. These ballads are called Scottish, because they have been preserved in Scotland, but it is more than doubtful that they are of Scottish origin. Ballads travelled everywhere. We have in Thomas of Erceldoune's "Sir Tristram," an instance of a French metrical romance turned into a long poem in Scotland, in the thirteenth century. Many of the Scottish ballads have, as their base, myths or legends common to all the Norse people, and found in rhymes among them.

At the beginning of this century, Mr. Davis Gilbert published a collection of Cornish Christmas Carols, and subjoined a couple of samples of the ballads sung by the Cornish people. One is "The Three Knights." It begins-

"There did three knights come from the West,
With the high and the lily oh
And these three knights courted one lady,
And the rose was so sweetly blown."

This is precisely the ballad given by Herd and others as The Cruel Brother." One version in Scotland begins :-

"There was three ladies play'd at the ba'
With a hegh-ho ! and lily gay;
There came a knight and play'd o'er them a',
And the primrose spread so sweetly."

But another version sung in Scotland begins-

"There was three ladies in a ha',
Fine flowers the valley;
There came three lords among them a',
Hi' the red, green, and the yellow."

Now, the remarkable thing is, that there is still sung in Cornwall – or was, till quite recently—a form of the ballad with a burden like this latter. It begins-

"There was a woman and she was a widow,
O the red, the green, and the yellow
And daughters had three as the elm tree,
The flowers they blow in the valley."

with this chorus :-

"The harp, the lute, the fife, the flute, and the cymbal.
Sweet goes the treble violin,
The flowers that blow in the valley."

How is it possible that a ballad sung in two forms in Scotland, and recovered there in a fragmentary condition, should be known in very similar forms in Cornwall? To suppose that the two versions were carried from the Highlands to the Land's End, so as to have become popular, is inconceivable. It is more likely that the same English ballad found its way both north and south-west, and when it had been displaced elsewhere, remained in the extremities of the island. The burden in each case is clearly that which marked the melody. We very much wish that the Scottish airs, to which these ballads were sung, had been preserved, that they might be compared with those to which they were sung in Cornwall. The burden in each case has nothing to do with the story, but it seems to indicate that the same ballad in its two forms, to two independent airs, was carried all over Great Britain at some period unknown. The same ballad was also sung in Cheshire at the close of last century, and also in Ireland.

Another specimen given by Mr. Gilbert is that of the "Three Sisters."

"There were three sisters fair and bright,
Jennifer, Gentle and Rosemaree ;
And they three loved one valiant knight ;
As the doo (dove) flies over the mulberry tree."³

The same is found in broadside, in the Pepysian and other collections, and as "The Unco Knicht's Wooing "in Scotland.

Take again the ballad of "The Elfin Knight" or The Wind hath blown my Plaid away." This is found in Scotland, but also as a broadside in the Pepysian collection; it was the subject within the memory of man of a sort of play in farmhouses in Cornwall; it is found in a more or less fragmentary condition all over England. The same ballad is found in German, in Danish, in Wend and the story in Tyrol, in Siberia, and Thibet.

Buchan, in his "Ballads of the North of Scotland," gives the ballad of "King Malcolm and Sir Colvin," but it is based on a story told by Gervase of Tilbury, in his *Otia Imperialia*, and the scene is laid by him on the Gogmagog Hills in Cambridgeshire. He wrote in the 12th century, and his story is clearly taken from a ballad. So also Buchan's "Leesome Brand " is found in Danish and Swedish. And "The Cruel Sister" is discovered in Sweden and the Faroe Isles. At an early period there was a common body of ballad, where originated no one can say ; the same themes were sung all over the North of Europe, and the same words, varied slightly, were sung from the Tweed to the Tamar, in the marches of Wales and in Ireland.

The greatest possible debt of gratitude is due to the Scots for having preserved these ballads when displaced and forgotten elsewhere, and it speaks volumes for the purity of Scottish taste that it appreciated what was good and beautiful, when English taste was vitiated and followed the fashion to prefer the artificial and ornate to the simple and natural expression of poetic fancy.

It has been said that about the period of James 1., the fashion set in for re-writing the old ballads in the style then affected.

There is a curious illustration of this accessible.

A ballad still sung by the English peasants, and found in an imperfect condition in Catnach's broadsides, is "Henry Martyn." It is couched in true ballad metre, and runs thus-

"In merry Scotland, in merry Scotland
There lived brothers three,
They all did cast lots which of them should go
A robbing upon the salt sea.

"The lot it fell upon Henry Martyn,
The youngest of the three,
That he should go rob on the salt, salt sea,

³ Gilbert prints, "As the dew flies," etc.; this is a mistake -"doo" is dove.

To maintain his brothers and he.

"He had not a-sailed a long winter's night,
Nor yet a short winter's day,
Before he espied a gay merchant ship
Come sailing along that way.

"Oh when that she came to Henry Martyn,
Oh prithee, now let me go
Oh no ! oh no ! but that will I not,
I never that will do.

"Stand off! stand off! said he, God wot,
And you shall not pass by me.
For I am a robber upon the salt seas,
To maintain my brothers and me.

"How far? how far? cries Henry Martyn,
How far do you make it ? says he,
For I am a robber upon the salt seas,
To maintain my brothers and me.

"They merrily fought for three long hours,
They fought for hours full three.
At last a deep wound got Henry Martyn
And down by the mast fell he.

"Twas a broadside to a broadside then,
And a rain and a hail of blows.
But the salt, salt sea ran in, ran in
To the bottom then she goes.

"Bad news! bad news for old England ;
Bad news has come to the town,
For a rich merchant vessel is cast away,
And all her brave seamen drown.

"Bad news ! bad news through London street,
Bad news has come to the King,
For all the brave lives of his mariners lost,
That sunk in the watery main."

Now there is sad confusion here. The ballad as it exists is a mere fragment. Clearly the "bad news" belongs to an earlier portion of the ballad, and it induces the King to send against the pirate and to sink his vessel. This "Henry Martyn" is, in fact, Andrew Barton. In 1476, a Portuguese squadron seized a richly laden vessel, commanded by John Barton, in consequence of which letters of reprisal were granted to Andrew, Robert, and John Barton,

sons of John, and these were renewed in 1506. The King of Portugal remonstrated against reprisals for so old an offence, but he had put himself in the wrong four years before, by refusing to deal with a herald sent by the Scottish King for the arrangement of the matter in dispute. Hall, in his Chronicle, says: "In June, 1511, the King (Henry VIII.) being at Leicester, tidings were brought him that Andrew Barton, a Scottish man, and a pirate of the sea, did rob every nation, and so stopped the King's streams that no merchants almost could pass, and when he took the Englishmen's goods, he said they were Portingale's goods, and thus he haunted and robbed at every haven's mouth. The King, moved greatly with this crafty pirate, sent Sir Edward Howard, Lord Admiral of England, and Lord Thomas Howard, son and heir to the Earl of Surrey, in all haste to the sea, which hastily made ready two ships, and without any more abode, took the sea, and by chance of weather, were severed. The Lord Howard lying in the Downs, perceived when Andrew blew his whistle to encourage the men, yet, for all that, the Lord Howard and his men, by clean strength, entered the main deck then the Englishmen entered on all sides, and the Scots fought sore on the hatches, but, in conclusion, Andrew was taken, which was so sore wounded that he died there; then all the remainder of the Scots were taken with their ship, called the *Lion*."

Buchanan, about twenty years after Hall – i.e., in 1582 – also tells the story. Barton he calls Breton with further details. He says that Andrew Breton, though several times wounded, and with one leg broken by a cannon ball, seized a drum and beat a charge to inspirit his men to fight, until breath and life failed.

Now a ballad relative to Sir Andrew Barton has been given by Percy; it is found among the Douce, the Pepysian, the Roxburghe, the Bagford, and the Wood collection of old English ballads. In the Percy MS. the ballad consists of eighty-two stanzas, but there is something lost between the thirty-fifth and the next, It begins :-

"As itt beffell in Midsummer-time
When birds sing sweetlye on every tree,
Our noble king, King Henry the Eighth,
Over the river Thames past he."

Another version is in the black letter collection. It begins:-

"when Flora, with her fragrant flowers,
Bedeckt the earth so firm and gay,
And Neptune, with his dainty showers,
Came to present the month of May,

"King Henry would a progress ride;
Over the river Thames past he,
Upon a mountain top also
Did walk, some pleasure for to see."

The first is a recomposition of the earlier ballad in the reign of James I. It makes a historical blunder. It supposes that Lord Charles Howard, who was not born till twenty-five years after the death of Andrew Barton, was sent against the pirate. The memory of the admiral who

served against the Armada had eclipsed the fame of the earlier high admiral. The fact of this historic error existing in the ballad marks it as a late composition.

The second ballad is a still later recast, probably of the reign of Charles II. These two later versions would be all that we have, had not the popular memory held to the earliest and original ballad because associated with a remarkably fine melody. Unhappily, it has retained but a few of the stanzas.

The Robin Hood ballads most fortunately escaped remodelling, and they retain the fresh character of the ancient ballad.

Ravenscroft preserved some ballads in his "Deuteromelia," 1609. One begins:

"Yonder comes a courteous knight
Lustily raking over the lay.
He was full 'ware of a bonny lasse,
As she came wandering over the way.
Then she sang, downe a down a down,
Hey down derry."

Another is "John Dory":

"As it fell on a hole day
And upon a hole tide,
John Dory bought him an ambling nag,
Ambling nag to Paris for to ride."

Another:-

"Who liveth so merry in all the land
As cloth the poor widow that selleth sand,
And ever she singeth as I can guess,
Will you buy my sand, my sand, mistress?"

Also :--

"The Flye she sat in the shamble row,
And shambled with her heels, I trow,
And then came Sir Cranion
With legs so long and many a one."

A few – but only a few, unspoiled ballads have found their way into print in broadsides. Such are, "The Baffled Knight," "The Knight and the Shepherd's Daughter," "Lord Thomas and the fair Eleanor," "Barbara Allen," "The Bailiff's Daughter of Islington," "The Brown Girl." They are miserably few, but they are all that remain to us of the ballad poetry of England, except what has been preserved to us by the Scotch, who knew better than ourselves what was good, and had a finer poetic sense.



Fig. 39.—WOMAN AT HER SPINNING WHEEL, FROM A BROADSIDE.

Moreover, our English ballad collectors never went to the right sources. There were to be had black and white letter broadsides, more or less scarce, and they set their booksellers to work to gather for them the drifting sheets, and fondly thought that they were collecting the ballad poetry of England. They were collecting make-shifts, the wretched stuff which had ousted the old ballad poetry. It occurred to none of them to go to the people. What would have been the result had Motherwell, Kinloch, Buchan, and

Herd set to work in the same fashion? There is to be found in the British Museum a volume of Scottish Broadside Ballads printed at Aberdeen, and Glasgow, and Edinburgh. What do these sheet ballads contain? As great rubbish as do the English broadsides? Herd, Motherwell, and Buchan had more sense than our Ritson, Phillips, and Evans; they sat at the feet of the shepherds, listened beside the wheels of the old spinners, sat at the tavern table and over the peat fires with the peasants, and collected orally. Percy went to his MS. folio, Ritson to his booksellers, and passed over the great living wellspring of traditional poetry. Now it is too late. The utmost that can be gleaned is fragments. But enough does remain either in MS. or in black letter broadside, or in allusion and quotation by our early dramatists, to show that we in England had a mass of ballad poetry, one in kind and merit with the Scottish.

The first collection of scattered ballads and songs in a garland was made in the reign of James I., by Thomas Delony and Richard Johnson, and from that time forward these little assemblages of fugitive pieces were issued from the press. They rarely contain much that is good; they are stuffed with recent compositions. Everyone knew the traditional ballads, and it was not thought worth while reprinting them. A new ballad had to be entered at Stationers' Hall, and composer as well as publisher reaped a profit from the sale, as a novelty.

The old tunes remained after that the words to which they had been wedded were forgotten and it may be said that in the majority of cases the music is all that does remain to us of the old ballad song of England.

This is the sort of balderdash that was substituted by a degraded taste for the swinging musical Poetry of the minstrel epoch-

"In searching ancient chronicles
It was my chance to finde
A story worth the writing out
In my conceit and mind," etc.

Or:-

“Of two constant lovers, as I understand,
Were born near Appleby, in Westmoreland;
The lad's name Anthony, Constance the lass;
To sea they both went, and great dangers did pass.

Or:-

"I reade in ancient times of yore,
That men of worthy calling
Built almshouses and spittles store,
Which now are all downfalling," etc.

Compare the following with such beginnings as these:-

"In summer-time, when leaves grow green,
And blossoms bedecke the tree,
King Edward wold a hunting ryde,
Some pastime for to see."

Or:-

There came a bird out o' a bush,
On water for to dine;
An' sicking sair, says the King's dochter,
O wae's this heart o' mine," etc.

Or:-

There was a pretty shepherd boy
That lived upon a hill,
He laid aside his bag o' pipes
And then he slept his fill."

Or:-

"O! blow away, ye mountain breezes,
Blow the winds, heigh-ho!
And clear away the morning kisses,
Blow the winds, heigh-ho ! "etc.

The ring of the latter is fresh and pleasant; the former have no ring at all. The first articles are manufactured in a garret by a publisher's poetaster, the latter have sprung spontaneously from the hearts of the people in the merry month of May.

Of black-letter printed ballads, the earliest we have are, "The Nut-brown Maid," which was discovered in a book of customs, dues, etc., published at Antwerp, about 1502, and "The Ballade of the Scottish King," written by John Skelton, poet laureate to King Henry VIII., and

of the date 1513. This was found within the binding of an old book that was knocking about on the floor of a garret in a farmhouse at Whaddon, in Dorset. Mr. Arber's Transcripts of the entries in Stationers' Hall give us the list of ballads issued from the press, with their dates. The list begins in the year 1557. We will take a few extracts only.

1588, 4th March. John Wolfe obtained leave to print three ballads; one was, "Goe from my window, goe." Now this no longer exists as a ballad, but as a folk-tale, in which occur snatches of rhyme, with a certain melody attached to them; and this air, with the snatches of rhyme, has been preserved. Both are printed by Mr. Chappell in his "Popular Music of the Olden Time." What the subject of the ballad was the writer learned from a blacksmith, who told him that he was in a village inn about 1860, when a very old man came in, and standing by the fire, recited and sang the following story :-

"Two men courted a pretty maid the one was rich, the other was poor; and the rich man was old, but the poor man she loved; he was young. Her father forced her to marry the rich man, but still she loved the poor man; and sometimes he came under her window and tapped, and when the husband was away she let him in.

"So passed a twelvemonth and a day, and she had a little child.

"Then one night the lover came under the window, thinking her good man was from home. With his tapping the husband woke, and asked what the sound was. She said an ivy leaf was caught in a cobweb, and fluttered against the pane. Then the lover began to call, and her husband asked what that sound was. She said the owls were hooting in the night. But fearing lest her lover should continue to call and tap, she began to sing, as she rocked the cradle:-

" 'Begone, begone, my Willy, my Billy!
Begone, my love and my dear.
O the wind, and O the rain,
They have sent him back again,
So thou can'st not have a lodging here.'

"Again the lover tapped, and the husband asked what that meant. She said it was a flittermouse that had flown against the pane. Then she sang:-

" 'Begone, begone, my Willy, my Billy !
Begone, my love and my dear.
O the weather is so warm,
It will never do thee harm,
And thou can'st not have a lodging here.'

"Then the lover began to call a third time, and the husband asked what it was. She said it was the whistling of the wind among the trees, and she sang:-

"Begone, begone, my Willy, my Billy!
Begone, my love and my dear.

O the wind is in the West,
And the cuckoo's in his nest,
So thou can'st not have a lodging here.'

"Again the lover tapped. Then she sprang out of bed, threw open the casement, and sang:

"Begone, begone, my Willy, you silly;
Begone, you fool, yet my dear.
O the devil's in the man,
And he can not understan'
That he cannot have a lodging here.'"

The melody was arranged for Queen Elizabeth, and is in her Virginal Book. In Beaumont and Fletcher's "Knight of the Burning Pestle," old Merrythought says,

"Go from my window, love, go;
Go from my window, my dear.
The wind and the rain
Will drive you back again;
You cannot be lodged here.

"Begone, begone, my juggy, my puggy;
Begone, my love, my dear.
The weather is warm;
'Twill do thee no harm;
Thou can'st not be lodged here."

It is again quoted in Fletcher's "Monsieur Thomas," and again in "The Tamer Tamed." Almost certainly this was originally a ballad. But the ballad tale has been lost, and only scraps of rhyme were committed to writing.

1588, 26th Sept. John Wolfe had license to print "Peggy's Complaint for the Death of her Willye."⁴

9th Nov. Thomas Orwyn had license to print "Martyn said to his man, Who is the foole now?"

This has been preserved for us, with its tune, by Ravenscroft, in his "Deuteromelia."

"Martyn said to his man, fie man, fie O!
Who's the fool now?
Martyn said to his man, fill the cup and I the can,
Thou hast well drunken, man,
Who's the fool now?"

⁴ Possibly we may have this in the still popular Cornish lament, "Have you seen my Billy coming?"

"I see a sheep sheering come, fie man, fie O
And a cuckold blow his horn.

"I see a man in the moon
Clouting St. Peter's shoon.

"I see a hare chase a hound
Twenty miles above the ground.

"I see a goose ring a hog,
And a snayle that did bite a dog.

"I see a mouse catch a cat,
And the cheese to eat a rat."

1591, 27th August. Robert Bourne obtained license to print a ballad on "A combat between a man and his wife for the breeches." This has been often re-written.

1592, 5th Jan. Richard Jones, "The Valliant Acts of Guy of Warwick," to the tune of "Was ever man soe tost (lost) in love?" The ballad of Guy is lost. The tune we have.

1592, 18th Jan. H. Kyrkham, "The crowe she sitteth upon a wall:" "Please one and please all." The former is, perhaps, the original of "The crow sat in a pear-tree." "Please one and please all" has been preserved.

1592, 21st July. John Danter, "The soules good morrowe."

1592, 28th July. H. Kyrkham, "The Nightingale's Good-night."

1593, 1st Oct. Stephen Peel, "Betwixt life and death," to the tune of "Have with you into the country."

1594, 16th Oct. John Danter, "Jones' ale is new." This is sung to the present day in village taverns. One verse is roared forth with special 'emphasis. It is that of the mason:-

He dashed his hammer against the wall;
He hoped both tower and church would fall;
For Joan's ale is new, my boys,
For Joan's ale is new."

1594, 16th Oct. E. White, "The Devil of Devonshire and William of the West, his Sonne." This is lost.

1595, 14th Jan. Thomas Creede, "The Saylor's Joye," to the tune of "Heigh-ho! hollidaie." Both ballad and air lost.

1595, 24th Feb. Thomas Creede, The first part of "The Merchante's Daughter of Bristole." This we have, but it is a recast in the sixteenth century of a far earlier ballad.

1595, 15th Oct. Thomas Millington, "The Norfolk Gentleman, his Will and Testament, and howe he committed the keeping of his children to his owne brother." This - "The Babes in the Wood," we have, as well as the melody.

1595, 15th Oct. W. Blackwall, "The Prowde Mayde of Plymouth." Lost.

1603, 11th June. Wm. White, "A Sweet Maie Flower;" "The Ladie's Fall;" "The Bryde's Buriell;" "The Spanish Ladie's Love;" "The Lover's Promises to his Beloved;" "The Fayre Lady Constance of Cleveland and of her Disloyal Knight."

We have "The Lady's Fall" and the two that follow. "A Sweet Mayflower" is probably a real loss, as also the ballad of the Lady Constance and her disloyal knight. This will suffice to show how interesting are these records, and also how much has perished, as well as how much is preserved. It must not, however, be lost to mind that these were all new ballads, and were serving to displace the earlier and better ballads.⁵

Every accident, every murder, every battle was turned into doggerel and printed as a new ballad. Fourpence was the cost of a license.

In Beaumont and Fletcher's "Philastes," Megra threatens the King-

" By all those gods you swore by, and as many
More of mine own—
The princess, your daughter, shall stand by me
On walls, and sung in ballads."

She refers to the manner in which every bit of court scandal was converted into rhythmic jingle, and also to the custom of pasting the ballads on the walls. The least acquaintance with the old black-letter ballads will make the reader understand the allusion to the two figures heading the broadside, in rude woodcut, standing side by side.

⁵ On December 14, 1624, as many as 128 ballads were licensed, the names of which are given. "The Blind Beggar (of Bethnal Green);" "Maudline of Bristowe (The Merchant's Daughter of Bristol);" "Sweet Nansie I doe love thee;" "The Lady's Fall;" "My minde to me a kingdom is" (Sir Edward Dyer's famous song); "Margaret, my sweetest;" "In London dwelt a merchantman;" "I am sorry, I am sorry;" "In May when flowers springe;" "I am a poore woman and blinde;" "The Devil and the Paritor (Apparitor)" "It was a Lady's daughter;" "Roger's Will;" "Bateman (Lord);" "Bride's Good Morrow;" "The King and the Shepherd;" "As I went forth one summer's day;" "Amintas on a summer's day;" "Ah me, not to thee alone;" "Sir John Barley Corne;" "It was a youthful knight;" "Jane Shore;" "Before my face;" "George Barnwell;" "From Sluggish Sleepe;" "Down by a forrest;" "The Miller and the King;" "Chevie Chase;" "How shall we good husbands live;" "Jerusalem, my happie home;" "The King and the Tanner;" "Single life the only way;" "The Lord of Lorne;" "In the daies of old;" "I spide a Nymph trip over the plaine;" "Shakeing hay;" "Troy Toun;" "Walking of late abroad;" "Kisse and bide me welcome home;" "The chirping lark;" "John Carelesse;" "Tell me, Susan, certainly;" "Spanish Lady;" "When Arthur first in Court;" "Diana and her darlings;" "Dear love, regard my life;" "Bride's buryal;" "Shakeing of the sheets;" "A rich merchantman;" "Gilian of Bramfield;" "Fortune my Foe;" "Cripple of Cornwall;" "Whipping the catt at Abingdon;" "On yonder hill there springs;" "Upon a summertime;" "The Miser of Norfolk."

A large proportion of the black-letter ballads were of moral and religious import. In Beaumont and Fletcher's "The Coxcomb," the tinker refers to these, when he finds poor Viola wandering in the streets at night, and listens to her doleful words. He says:-

"What's this? a prayer or a homily, or a ballad of good counsel?"

If we compare the black-letter issues of the sixteenth century with the snatches of ballads that come to us through the playwrights, we find that they do not wholly agree.

The dramatists made their characters sing the folk-ballads, the same that are described in "A Defence for Milksmaydes " in 1563.

"They rise in the morning to hear the larke sing,
And welcome with balletts the somer's coming.
In going to milking, or coming away,
They sing merry balletts, or storeys they say.
Their mouth is as pure and as white as their milk;
- You can not say that of your velvett and silke."

So the mad jailor's daughter in Fletcher's and Shakespeare's "The Two Noble Kinsmen."

She says: "Is not this a fine song?"

Brother: "Oh, a very fine one!"

Daughter: "I can say twenty more, I can sing *The Broom and Bonny Robin.*"

And she begins to troll "Oh fair! oh sweet!" etc.

Unhappily the authors of this play did not write out the song, as it was too well known to require transcription, and now it is lost. So also are those she sings in another scene.

"The George aloes came from the South,
From the Coast of Barbary-a!
And there we met with brave gallants of war,
By one, by two, by three-a!

"Well hail'd, well hail'd, you jolly gallants
And whither now are you bound-a?
Or let me have your company
Till I come to the Sound-a!

This sounds as though a part of the "Henry Martyn (Andrew Barton) already given. Another of the mad girl's songs is:-

"There were three fools fell out about an howlet.
The one said 'twas an owl;
The other said nay.
The third he said it was a hawk,
And her bells were cut away."

So also with some of the songs and ballads of Ophelia. They were too well known to be printed, and now they are irrecoverably gone.

We have lost nearly the whole of our earliest ballad poetry, and only a tithe of that which took its place has come down to us.

"Our earliest ballads," says the editor of Percy's folio, "though highly popular in the Elizabethan age, were yet never collected into any collections, save in Garlands, till the year 1723. They wandered up and down the country without even sheepskins or goatskins to protect them they flew about like the birds of the air, and sung songs dear to the hearts of the common people – songs whose power was sometimes confessed by the higher classes, but not so thoroughly appreciated as to conduce them to exert themselves for their preservation."

In the reign of Queen Anne and through the early Hanoverian period, sheets of copperplate were issued with engraved songs and ballads, together with their music. Among them may be found a few – but only a very few – of the old favourites. Most are compositions of Arne, Carey, Berg, Dunn, etc., and the words are quite unsuited to hold the attention of the peasantry. Hardly any of these found their way into broadsides and garlands, and none can now be heard by the cottage fire or in the village ale-house.

In 1808, John Catnach of Newcastle settled in London, and began to print broadsides. He was quickly followed by others in London and in country towns. Catnach kept a number of ballad-mongers in his pay, who either composed verses for him or swept up such traditional ballads as they chanced to hear. They were paid half-a-crown for a copy, whether original or adulterate. If one of these poetasters chanced to hear an ancient ballad, he added to it some of his own verses, so as to be able to call it his property, and then disposed of it to one of the broadside publishers.

If these men had been sent round the country to collect from cottages and village hostelries, in the way in which Wardour Street Jews send about into every part of England to pick up old oak, then a great amount of our traditional ballad poetry might have been recovered. It was not too late in the first ten or twenty years of this century. But this was not done. These pot-poets loafed about in the low London public-houses, where it was only by the rarest chance that a country man, fresh from the fields, and woods, and downs, with his memory laden with the fragrance of the rustic music, was to be found. Moreover, these fellows were overweening in their opinion of their own powers. They had neither taste, nor ear, nor genius. They poured forth floods of atrocious rhymes, and of utter balderdash, as was required, as an occasion offered, and as they stood in need of half-crowns. Consequently the broadside "white-letter" ballad no more represents the folk ballad of the English people than does the black-letter ballad.

Who that has a sprinkling of grey on his head does not remember the ballad-singer at a fair, with his or her yards of verse for sale? The ballad-seller, who vended his broadsheets, did much to corrupt the taste of the peasant. He had begun to read, and he read the ha'penny broadside, and learned by heart what he had bought; then he set it to some fine old melody

as ancient as the Wars of the Roses, and sang it; and what is unfortunate, discarded the old words for the sake of the vile stuff composed by the half-tipsy, wholly-stupid band, in the pay of Ryle, Catnach, Harkness of Preston, Williams of Portsea, Snidall of Manchester, etc.

Mr. Hindley, in his "History of the Catnach Press," 1886, gives an amusing account of his acquaintance with John Morgan, the last surviving of Catnach's poets: - "Mr. John Morgan, full of bows and scrapes, was ushered into our presence. Take a seat, sir.' 'Yes, sir, and thank you too,' he replied, at the same time sitting down, and then very carefully depositing his somewhat dilapidated hat under – far under – the chair. We then inquired whether he would have anything to eat, or have a cup of coffee. No! it was a little too early for eating, and coffee did not agree with him. Or, a drop of good 'Old Tom,' we somewhat significantly suggested. Mr. John Morgan would very much like to have a little drop of gin, for it was a nasty, raw, cold morning. In answer to our inquiry whether he would prefer hot or cold water, elected to have it neat, if it made no difference to us.

"Mr. John Morgan, at our suggestion, having 'wet the other eye,' i.e., taken the second glass, the real business commenced thus:- We have been informed that you were acquainted with, and used to write for, the late James Catnach, who formerly lived in Seven Dials, and that you can give us much information that we require towards perfecting a work we have in hand, treating on street literature.' . . . Here Mr. Morgan expressed his willingness to give all the information he could on the subject, and leave it to our generosity to pay him what we pleased, and adding that he had no doubt that we should not fall out on that score. Mr. Morgan talked and took gin. Mr. Morgan got warm – warmer, and warmer, - and very entertaining. We continued to talk and take notes, and Mr. Morgan talked and took gin, until he emulated the little old woman who sold 'Hot Codlings,' for of her it is related that, The glass she filled, and the bottle she shrunk, And this little old woman in the end got – '

"At last it became very manifest that we should not be able to get any more information out of Mr. John Morgan on that day, so proposed for him to call again on the morrow morning. Then having presented him with a portrait of Her Most Gracious Majesty, set in gold, we endeavoured to see him downstairs, which, we observed, were very crooked ; Mr. Morgan thought they were very old and funny ones. . . .

"At length the wishful morrow came, also ten of the clock, the hour appointed, but not so Mr. John Morgan, nor did he call at any hour during the day. But soon after eleven o'clock the next day he made his appearance; but being so stupidly drunk we gave him some money and told him to call again tomorrow. And he did, but still so muddled that we could make nothing out of him, and so curtly dismissed him."

Here are specimens of the sort of stuff turned out for Catnach by John Morgan and the like. The first is on the birth of the Princess Royal.

"Of course you've heard the welcome news
Or you must be gaby,
That England's glorious queen has got
At last a little baby.

"A boy we wanted – 'tis a girl
Thus all our hopes that were
To have an heir unto the Throne
Are all thrown to the air."

Here is a ballad on a policeman of the old style when the new regulations came in, in 1829:-

"Upon his beat he stood to take a last farewell
Of his lantern and his little box wherein he oft did dwell.
He listen'd to the clock, so familiar to his ear,
And with the tail of his drab coat he wiped away a tear.

"Beside that watchhouse door a girl was standing close,
Who held a pocket handkerchief, with which she blew her nose.
She rated well the policeman, which made poor Charley queer,
Who once more took his old drab coat to wipe away a tear.

"He turn'd and left the spot; O do not deem him weak;
A sly old chap this Charley was, though tears were on his cheek.
Go watch the lads in Fetterlane, where oft you've made them fear;
The hand, you know, that takes a bribe, can wipe away a tear."

Here is one stanza by a composer with whom the writer of this article made acquaintance:-

"Pale was the light of the Pole-axe star,
When breakers would hide them so near.
But Love is the ocean of hunters far,
And convoys him to darkness so drear.
Then sad at the door of my love I lay,
Slumbering the six months all away."

Horace sang something about lying exposed to the cold and rain at the door of his beloved, and vowed he would not do it again. There is certainly a distance of something beside two thousand years between Horace and the gentleman who wrote the above lines.

There is a really astonishing poem entitled "The Lights of Asheaton," which, happily, everyone can purchase for a ha'penny. It is the composition of a recent Irish poet of the same class as Mr. John Morgan, and is a dissuasive against Protestantism. What the "Lights" of Asheaton are does not transpire. It opens thus:-

"You Muses now aid me in admonishing Paganism,
The new Lights of Asheaton, whose fate I do deplore.
From innocence and reason they are led to condemnation,
Their fate they've violated, the occasion of their woe."

After some wonderful lines that we hardly like to quote, as savouring of irreverence though that was far from the poet's intention – he assures us :-

"Waters will decrease most amazing to behold,
No fanatic dissenter, no solvidian (sic) cripple,
Dare them to dissemble, the truths for to relinquish,
For the enthusiast will tremble at the splendors of the Pope."

The sheet of broadside ballad that is passing away deserves a little attention before it disappears. It reveals to us the quality of song that commended itself to the uneducated. It shows us how the song proper has steadily displaced the ballad proper. It is surprising for what it contains, as well as for what it omits. Apparently in the latter part of this century the sole claim to admission is that words — no matter what they be — should be associated to a taking air.

We find on the broadsheets old favourites of our youth songs by Balfe, and Shield, and Hudson but the Poet Laureate is unrepresented; even Dibdin finds but grudging admission. When we look at the stuff that is home-made, we find that it consists of two sorts of production – one, the ancient ballad in the last condition of wreck, cast up in fragments; and the other, of old themes worked up over and over again by men without a spark of poetic fire in their hearts. A century or two hence we shall have this rubbish collected and produced as the folk song of the English peasantry, just as we have had the black-letter ballads raked together and given to the world as the ballad poetry of the ancient English.

The broadside ballad is at its last gasp. Every publisher in the country who was wont to issue these ephemerides has discontinued doing so for thirty or forty years. In London, in place of a score of publishers of these leaves, there are but three – Mr. Fortey, of Seven Dials; Mr. Such, of the Boro'; and Mr. Taylor, of Bethnal Green. As the broadside dies, it becomes purer. There are ballads in some of the early issues of a gross and disgusting nature. These have all had the knife applied to them, and nothing issues from the press of Mr. Fortey, Mr. Such, and Mr. Taylor which is offensive to good morals. Mr. Such, happily, has all his broadsides numbered, and publishes a catalogue of them; some of the earlier sheets are, however, exhausted, and have not been reprinted.

It is but a matter of a few years and the broadside will be as extinct as the Mammoth and the Dodo, only to be found in the libraries of collectors. Already sheets that fetched a ha'penny thirty years ago are cut down the middle, and each half fetches a shilling. The garlands are worth more than their weight in gold. Let him that is wise collect whilst he may.

Sabine Baring-Gould, *Strange Survivals*, London: Methuen (1892), p. 180 - 219