

WOMEN WORKERS' SONGS.

By LAURA ALEX. SMITH.

"In ancient Germany there was a town known by the name of Singone, and it is believed that in all probability our English word 'sing,' in Dutch 'zingen,' and its various forms in other languages, were derived from the habit of singing of the gypsies."

There is just something of the gipsy in almost everyone who leads an out-of-door life, a *freemasonry with liberty*, a comradeship with nature, and part of this free, untrammelled existence resolves itself into outbursts of joyous song. Amongst the men and women who are accustomed to give up many hours of their day in one occupation, song is very frequently its accompaniment, and it is of these songs as sung by the women that I am going to speak to you. Undoubtedly it is a help, a solace and an encouragement, this habit of singing over work; or as the poet says—

"For the tired slave, song lifts the languid oar."

And as the Greeks of old found it possible to build the walls of Thebes to the sound of Amphion's lyre, so do our less legendary people of the latter centuries bind a thread of melody round the world's labours, which, beginning with the cradle song which starts unbidden to the lips of every mother, only ends in solemn chanting over the peaceful dead.

One of our best-beloved of English poetesses thus writes of spinning and singing—

"The woman singing at her spinning-wheel
A pleasant chant, ballad, or barcarolle;
She thinketh of her song upon the whole,
Far more than of her flax, and yet the reel
Is full, and artfully her fingers feel
With quick adjustment, provident, control
The lines too subtly twisted to unroll,
Out to a perfect thread."

Mrs. Barrett Browning's lines often recur to me when some song of labour is heard.

Amongst the older women of Perthshire one frequently hears this quaint little spinning song—

"My lady Dundonald sits singing and spinning,
Drawing a thread frae her tow rock;
And it weel sets me for to wear a gude cloak,
And I span ilka thread o't myself so I did,
Lilty teedle doodle doo, doodle doo,
Lilty teedle doodle doodle, lilty teedle doo."

There is something very pathetic in the sad verses which follow, and which are known in most parts of Scotland as "The Auld Spinning-Wheel."

"As ilk shepherd-lad gangs by,
Wi' his hirsle and his crook,
They steal a blink at me;
But I cower aneath their look.
For I think o' ane that's gane,
Who lo'ed me aye sae weel.
Till the spokes a' melt in ane
O' my auld spinning-wheel.

"In my reverie sae deep
I offer break a thread,
An' my Jamie comes again
Back frae the quiet dead;
For I think sae oft and lang
Till reason seems to reel,
An' I'm waukened wi' the hum
O' my auld spinning-wheel."

In the Emerald Isle the songs sung by the peasant-women, when spinning at their wheels, are known as "loobeens." The "loobeen" is a peculiar species of chant, having a well-marked time and a frequently-recurring chorus, or catchword. It is sung at merry-makings and assemblages of the young women, when

they meet at "spinnings" or "quiltings," and the words consist of extemporaneous verses, of which each singer successively furnishes a line. The intervention of the chorus after each line gives time for the preparation of the succeeding one by the next singer, and thus the "loobeen" runs until the chain of song is completed. Hence its name, which signifies the "link-tune."

Formerly, when the Irish peasant-girls were engaged in the preparation of flax and wool for the loom, they used to perform this task in groups, and generally to the accompaniment of singing. In County Clare the following song is a great favourite. The words of the lines beginning "Mallo lero" are merely musical accented sounds, and serve as starting- and resting-points for the dialogue.

"Mallo lero, and eembo nero,
I traversed the wood when day was breaking,

Mallo lero, and eembo nero.

Mallo lero, and eembo nero,
For John O'Carroll you wandered so early,

Mallo lero and eembo nero.

Mallo lero, and eembo nero,
With gods begirt, let him plough through Erinn,

Mallo lero, and eembo nero.

Mallo lero, and eembo nero,
I take and I hail, and may I well wear my husband,

Mallo lero, and eembo nero.

Mallo lero, and eembo nero,
To the east and the west may you never be parted,

Mallo lero, and eembo nero."

The next specimen is not of a very lively character. When the young woman named for marriage is not approved of by the leading singer, she puts the interrogatory, as to the young man in the following words:—

"Who is the young man that is struck with misfortune?"

After this very complimentary allusion to the young lady's charms, the singing is resumed—

"Oro thou loved one, and ioro thou fair dear one,

Who's the young woman that's to be married this Shrovetide?

Oro thou fair loved one, thou lamb and thou love.

Oro thou fair loved one, and ioro thou fair dear one,

Mary O'Cleary, according as I understand,
Oro thou fair loved one, thou lamb and thou love."

And so on throughout the song.

The quaint "Spinning Song," which follows, is one of many which are sung by Roumanian peasant-girls when at their work, and is quoted from the interesting collection of Folk Songs, "The Bard of the Dombovitz," which was made by Mdle. Helène Vacaresco, and translated by the Queen of Roumania and Miss Alma Strettell.

"What didst thou, mother, when thou wert a maiden?"

'I was young—'

'Didst thou, like me, hark to the moon's soft footfalls

Across the sky?

Or didst thou watch the little stars' betrothal?'

'Thy father cometh home, leave the door open.'

'Down to the fountain didst thou go, and there

Thy wooden pitcher filled didst thou yet linger

Another hour with the full pitcher by the —'

'I was young —'

'And did thy tears make glad thy countenance?

And did thy sleep bring gladness to the night?

And did thy dreams bring gladness to thy sleep?

And didst thou smile, even by graves, despite

Thy pity for the dead?'

'Thy father cometh home, leave the door open.'

'Lovest thou strawberries and cherries
Because they are as red as maidens' lips?
Didst love thy girdle for its many pearls,
The river and the wood because they lie
So close behind the village?
Didst love the beating of thy heart,
There close beneath thy bodice,
Even although 'twere not thy Sunday
bodice?'

'Thy father cometh, leave the door open.'

Roumanian women have numbers of strangely-beautiful songs which they sing over their work, not the least exquisite of which are the lullabies which are crooned over the little babies. I have not given any of these songs of motherhood, for there are so many in every country, that it would I believe be better to reserve them for a separate article.

FLAX-SPINNERS' SONG.

(Sung by the peasants of Westphalia.)

"Now is the flax so fair and long,

Ho! ho! ho!

And now the poor man's heart is strong,

And now ascends his swelling song,

The grateful heart's o'erflow.

* * *

And now the bride will be so gay,

Ho! ho! ho!

She'll spin by night, she'll spin by day,

Her bridal dress she'll spin away

Fine as her waist, I know.

Hurrah! hurrah! the flax is good,

Ho! ho! ho!

Who does his duty daily he

Must always bright and happy be,

Whether in weal or woe."

The following is an old knitting-song of Lower Brittany:—

"Mon rouet et ma coiffe de paille,
Et mon corsage (mon justaucorps) de toile
blanche,

Seront tous à mon fils clerc

Pour qu'il puisse se faire prêtre;

Et mes écuilles et mes cuillers,

Il emportera le tout en une fois;

Et ma vieille pécelle, et ma broie

Et mes vieux peigne-lui ensuite.

Et quand il aura été fait prêtre,

Moi, je serai d'une robe vêtue,

Et mes chaussures seront en rubannées,

Et ma collerette sera frisée,

Et une coiffure sera sur ma tête,

Pareille à celle d'une demoiselle."

Amongst the most coquettish of women's working-songs are those which used to be sung by the dairymaids in the Highlands of Scotland. Those who know the Highlanders as a people will be rather surprised at this, for they are by nature thoughtful, courteous, and

reserved, and coquetry is as far from their manner as it is innate in a Frenchwoman. In their original Gaelic these "Songs of the Shielings," as they are called, are very soft and melodious.

ENGLISH VERSION.

I.

"Darling, mine, the spotted heifer,
Whose feet I'd bind in softest fetters,
I would them bind with binds the choicest,
With silken cords of rarest texture.

Chorus.

E ho o, lakin, E ho o, darling,
E ho o, lakin, E ho o, darling,
E ho o, lakin, E ho o, darling.

II.

On the horizon stands my roan one,
The brightly spotted standing o'er her;
Mother fruitful of my beauties,
My fold's queen above her co-mates.

III.

Darling mine of all my herd-flock,
Me she'll give her precious milking,
Me she'll give her precious milking,
And if not, how great my wanting."

This is another favourite milking-song amongst the dairymaids of the Highlands:—

"TIL AN CRODLE A'DHONNACHAIDLE.

(TURN THE KINE, DUNCAN.)

I.

Turn the kine, Duncan,
Turn the kine, Duncan,
Turn the kine, Duncan,
And you will get a bonny wife.
'Sgheible in beau bhoideach.

Chorus.

Till an cradle drimean duble,
Odhar duble ceannean duble.

II.

Turn the white-ridged cows,
Turn the dark dun white-faced cows,
Turn the dun-dark cows,
And you will get a bonny wife."

That much-parodied ditty, "Where are you going to, my pretty maid?" is sung by dairymaids in various parts of England in the rural districts, but it is too well-known to give here.

In Brittany and in Normandy the *laitouses* have some gay little songs which they troll out while they milk their cows, but as these are not absolutely confined to the dairymaids, being general favourites, I have not included them here. There used to be a song which was peculiar to the cheese-makers of Yorkshire, but I have not found any authentic version of this churning-song.

Switzerland too has some pretty songs sung on the mountain slopes by the girls who tend the sheep and the cows.

In Russia on the wharves of the big shipping towns, the women are employed to crush the oats which are being sent to other parts of the world; this has to be done quite near the ships, and as they are crushed they are poured into large funnels down into the hold of the vessel. Whilst engaged upon this monotonous task the women sing some sad, slow song; this, they say, helps them through their labours, and makes them regular in doing it. I give the words of one verse of the favourite melody they use; it is known as

THE NIGHTINGALE.

"Nightingale, O Nightingale,
Thou of richest song,
Say whither thou fliest now,
Where to-morrow thou'lt belong.
Nightingale, O Nightingale," etc.

Another women-workers' song, quite peculiar to Russia, is that of the millet-sowers.

It is sung by two choirs of girls standing opposite to each other.

1st Chorus:—

"We have sown, we have sown millet.
Oi, Did-Lado, we have sown."

To which the second chorus replies:

"But we will trample it, trample it."

Then they sing alternately:—

1st. "But with what will ye trample it?"

2nd. "Horses will we turn into it."

1st. "But we will catch the horses."

2nd. "What will ye catch them with?"

1st. "With a silken rein."

And so on till the second chorus says:—

"What is it then that ye want?"

1st Chorus. "What we want is a maiden."

On this one of the girls in the second choir goes over to the first, the two sides singing respectively:—

2nd. "Our Band has lost."

1st. "Our Band has gained."

Till all the girls have gone over from one side to another. The idea is very like that in our popular nursery game "Nuts and May."

For miles and miles along the banks of the Caspian Sea stretch large fields of rice. The care of these fields belong to the women and girls, and as they bend over their work, knee-deep in the water, and exposed sometimes to great extremes of heat, from dawn to sunset, they occasionally burst into a chorus, a sample of which is given. The work in the rice-fields consists of weeding and transplanting, and the songs peculiar to them are known as "Loulou," or songs of the reapers. The music is sad and monotonous, and the echo of the plaintive voices is repeated again and again in the surrounding woods.

LOULOU.

"You have sung Halloa, Halloa, ho Leylah,
lay, lay, lay, O Sweetheart, lolay.

"Halloa, halloa, the Shah arrived at Kazdin, and presented my master with a saddle for his horse."

"Halloa, halloa, the Shah came on foot.
Thank God, our master has got great riches."

Chorus: "Yallelley, yallelah! beloved sound of yallelah. This yallelley, yallelah pleases me."

"O singers of Loulou! O reapers! The Khan has come on our rice fields—our slender girdled khan. I bring you this news, merry girls. I say to the beloved lord, 'Take the sickle, the sickle! Among a hundred youths thou art taller by a head. Merry girls, put aside your shy faces and be merry!'"

The peculiar refrain of "yallelley yallelah" is merely a meaningless ejaculation.

The girl-reapers in Casteignano dei Greci, a Greek-speaking settlement in Terra d'Otranto, have a little harvesting song of their own—

"Be merry, O comrades!

Be merry, and go not on your way so down-cast;

I saw things you cannot see.

I saw the housewife kneading dough,

Or preparing macaroni;

And she does it for us to eat

So that we may work like lions at the harvest,

And rejoice the heart of the husbandman."

The "Mitylenean Mill Song" was the ditty by which the Lesbian women used to enliven their labours at the mill years and years ago.

Most people are familiar with Lady Nairne's song "Caller Herrin'," which is really a musical version of the cry used by the women fish-sellers of Newhaven, and many know that

the effect of the carillon of bells in the second part of it is the sound of the bells of old St. Giles' church in Edinburgh, just as the sonorous tones blended with the homely sounds of the fishwives in days gone by. But a song which is peculiar to the little fishing village of Cullercoats on the Northumbrian coast is not quite so well known. These Cullercoats fishwomen are quite a feature of the artistic little village, and of the busy streets of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, where their cry of "Buy any fish?" and "Shares o' caller ling?" are as familiar as household words. They wear a skirt and turned-up tunic of coarse navy serge, a little folded kerchief over the breast, and a large coarse black straw bonnet. On their backs the "creel" of fresh tempting fish.

"The Cullercoats fishwives so cosy and free,
We live in our cottages close by the sea;
And we sell our fine fish
To the poor and the rich.
Will ye buy? Will ye buy?
Will ye buy my fine fish?"

The maidens of Venice have some delicious little songs which they sing as they thread their beads, for this is an almost universal employment amongst them. The subject of these same threading songs is generally a lover, and as they have some very quaint opinions on the callings men should follow, the verses are oftentimes very comical. A sailor is not considered at all a desirable *parti*, and fishermen are deemed too poor. The maid who has entrusted her heart to a sailor's keeping sings—

"My love is far and far away from me,
I am at home, and he has gone to sea.
He is at sea, and he has sails to spread,
I am at home, and I have beads to thread."

Another song runs—

"I want no fisher with a fishy smell,
A market gardener would not suit me well;
Nor yet a mariner who sails the sea,
A fine flour merchant is the man for me."

Then all the girls will sometimes join in—

"Sailor's trade, at sea to die,
Merchant's trade, that's bankruptcy;
Gambler's trade in cursing ends,
Thief's trade to the gallows sends."

In Tuscany the busy fingers of the straw-plaiters are plied to some of the lovely *stornelli* or *rispetti* of the country. One known as "Flower of the Pea" is a particular favourite amongst them.

"Fior di piselli,
Avesti tanto cuore da lassarmi?
Innamorati siam da bam binelli!"

"Flower of the pea,
We were but children and we loved each other,
What heart is thine, if thou canst go from me?"

In the time of harvest or olive-gathering the *stornelli* are sung from field to field, or from tree to tree, one set of girls answering another. "Oh *biondina*, come la va" is most popular. In Naples and in Florence the flower-girls sing the well-known "Santa Lucia" as they arrange their fragrant wares.

Talking of fragrant wares reminds me of the pretty lavender cry which used to echo through the streets of Kensington about 1880; dear old Kensington, as one pictures it through Miss Thackeray's pleasant glasses, the lavender criers could only have seemed a proper part of the life in that sunny court suburb—

"Will you buy my sweet lavender,
Sweet blooming lavender?
Oh, buy my pretty lavender,
Sixteen bunches a penny."