

## OUR POPULAR BALLADS.



THE immense and universal influence of the ballad in bygone times has been stereotyped in the well-known expression of Fletcher of Saltoun. "I know a very wise man," wrote Fletcher, "who believed that, if a man were permitted to make all the ballads, he need not care who should make the laws of a nation." The saying points to times and circumstances when the administration of the law was uncertain and inefficient, especially in the

remoter districts, far from the central seat of authority. In those days the reputation of the ballad was sufficiently low, but a clear-sighted observer would nevertheless not fail to perceive its wide range and importance. It was the real popular circulating library—it was almost the newspaper—of the times. It passed to every nook and corner of society, to the fireside of hall and tavern, of farm kitchen and tradesman's workshop. The vivid narrative, with its tone of energy and pathos, came home to the everyday life of the hearers, whether gentle or simple, in a common sympathy. The bold achievement of arms and the doubtful course of a love adventure touched and satisfied both sides of a very unsophisticated human nature. We know from the pathetic strain of many an immortal ballad how wide a sympathy must have been evoked for the wrongs and the woes of many a "bonnie bonnie burd," and for the stratagems and triumphs of many a fair ladye. To this very day the Jacobite ballads maintain a considerable remnant of sentimental sympathy with the noble family, however morally perverse and politically intolerable, yet personally winning, who were supposed to be deprived of "their ain;" and it will be long before the diffusion of sound views of constitutional history may succeed in dislodging the generous feeling.

Literature also, no less than popular sentiment and imagination, has been enriched by the traditional narratives of unknown singers.\* For long the ballads and songs of the people lay under the cold contempt of a refined classicalism. It is not the least of the merits of Addison that he had the courage to raise the popular minstrelsy out of disrepute by his papers on the "Chevy Chase" ballad in the *Spectator*. Bishop Percy, but for his "Reliques," would now be forgotten;

yet such was the feeling of his age that he sent forth the work that now alone preserves his memory in literature with the timidest apologies, and was often sorely tempted to wish it safely in oblivion. But the day of recognition was slowly dawning. The genius of Burns had been nourished on the old songs and ballads, and made an abundant and thankful return. Walter Scott also was nurtured on similar lore as well as on tradition in other forms; it was the revival of the ballad, especially by Bürger (whose inspiration came direct from this country), that impelled and guided his first serious efforts in poetical composition; the "Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border," which conclusively established the dignity and popularity of the ballads, was, in his own words, "the first serious demand which he made on the patience of the public;" and the ballad spirit is closely allied with whatever is best and most characteristic in his later work.

It is extremely desirable that no part of our ballad literature should be lost for want of collecting. Numerous collections have been published since Scott's "Minstrelsy" made its appearance, and there has supervened a general impression that nothing further remains to be done in the matter. This is a mistake, however. Recognising this fact, Professor Child, of Harvard University, who is well known to scholars through his elaborate work on Chaucer, has been engaged for some nine or ten years on a thorough quest and comparison of all the extant remains of "The English and Scottish Popular Ballads," whether in print, or in manuscript, or in the precarious keeping of oral tradition. The foundation of this comprehensive, and in all probability final collection, is the "Percy Folio," supplemented of course by the other printed collections of Scott, Jamieson, Motherwell, Kinloch, Buchan, and the rest. But there still remains much additional matter in the seclusion of manuscript. In particular may be mentioned a collection of Motherwell's, which Mr. Child declares to be "second only in importance to the Percy," and thus to be "much the most important of hitherto unused materials." Next in extent to the Motherwell manuscripts are those of the late Mr. Kinloch, which have also been before Mr. Child, first in copy and afterwards in the original. Attempts have been made to get at the scattered ballads preserved in private copies; and, while much has been achieved, it is deeply to be regretted that "access to several manuscript collections has not yet been secured." A long, laborious, and gallant struggle has been carried on by Mr. Child, through willing helpers in Britain, Canada, and the United States, to recover such relics as may yet remain in popular tradition. It is gratifying now to be able to believe that "what is lacking bears no great proportion to what is in hand," and every literary student will cordially join in Mr. Child's cheerful hope that the rest "may soon come in."

\* For a comprehensive collection, extending down to modern times, the reader may be referred to "Cassell's Illustrated British Ballads," edited by George Barnett Smith.—Ed.



The collection is intended to embrace every accessible independent version of every ballad, with the important variations of copies which appear to be of the same proximate derivation. The first part of this magnificent work (there will be about eight parts in all) contains twenty-eight ballads, most of which appear in several forms, "Lord Randal" reaching fifteen and "The Twa Sisters" as many as twenty-one. The essays introductory to the several ballads, setting forth the sources and comparing the variations, are most learned and luminous, and to all appearance exhaustive. The variations are traced through every country of Europe where the ballads are known; and the discussion of "Lady Isabel and the Elf-Knight," perhaps the most widely-circulated of all ballads, presents a learned and detailed analysis that might well appal the boldest of German investigators. There are eleven Danish, twenty-six German, and about forty Polish versions of this ballad, to say nothing of the versions that come less numerous from every other European country.

Making every allowance for strong situations, vivid strokes of characterisation, and the frequent expression of intense passion, it is not improbable that "the general reader" would experience some disappointment with these ballads. If undeterred by the initial difficulty of language, he might still, on a cursory view, find a considerable proportion of them rugged, abrupt, sadly defective in rhyme and even in assonance, full of repetitions, and simple even to insipidity. Still, the effect of it may be indefinitely modified if one take care to place oneself in the positions of minstrels and auditors; for here, as ever, and indeed in a peculiar

degree, not to sympathise is not to understand. The recitation must be accompanied and animated with the appropriate music of instrument or of voice, or of the sympathetic mind. Perhaps nowhere does simpler language express a more mournful pathos alternated with the unmitigated savagery of revengeful satisfaction than in the intense lines of "Fair Helen," but how much depends on the imaginative realisation of the reader! The appreciation of knightly exploits rose high in the famous fellowship of fearless souls assembled around the blazing logs of the hall fire; the softer episodes—

"The spinsters and the knitters in the sun,  
And the free maids that wove their thread with bones,  
Did use to chant;"

are certainly not without alternation. One must endeavour to throw oneself into the situation. Minstrel and reader must come "with naked hearts together." It was thus that "the old song of Percy and Douglas," although it was "sung but by some blind crowder, with no rougher voice than rude style, evil appalled in the dust and cobwebs of an uncivil age," nevertheless was potent to move the gallant heart of Sir Philip Sidney "more than a trumpet." And so it is when a large-hearted, if humble, singer spontaneously croons a pathetic ballad, as her hands mechanically follow her knitting or her spinning-wheel, while her mind is far away with the forlorn damsel or the fated hero of her song. Certainly no one that understands the value of our ballad literature will fail to join in the chorus of gratitude and admiration that ought to greet the laborious and faithful work of Professor Child.

JAN MAYEN.



## WEDDING FLOWERS.

FROM the earliest times flowers have always held a prominent place in the religious and social ceremonies of most countries. Apart from their emblematical use, they seem to have been specially designed by their graceful beauty and varied character to represent the sympathy of nature in the sorrows and joys of human life. Referring to their festive associations, there are few events in life in

which their presence has been more conspicuous than at weddings. Indeed, it would be no easy task to exhaust the list of flowers which have, at different times, entered into the marriage customs of our own and other countries, not to mention the many pretty bridal emblems of which they

have been made symbolical. As far back as the time of Juno's nuptials we find, according to Homer's graphic account, how in honour of the occasion—

"Glad Earth perceives, and from her bosom pours  
Unbidden herbs and voluntary flowers:  
Thick new-born violets a soft carpet spread  
And clust'ring swell'd the rising bed;  
And sudden hyacinths the turf bestow,  
And flamy crocus made the mountain glow."

Among some of the chief uses to which flowers were applied at weddings, was the nuptial garland with which the bride and bridegroom were crowned. It was generally composed of sweet-scented flowers arranged in the most artistic manner. Due prominence was given to the myrtle because, as Dryden says, "Sacred to Venus is the myrtle shade."

This plant is still worn by brides on the Continent, and with us it is in high repute, for, according to a Somersetshire saying, "The myrtle is the luckiest plant to have in your window. Water it every morning and be proud of it." Another flower to which a foremost place was often allotted in the wedding crown was