

AMONG THE WESTERN SONG-MEN.

By S. BARING GOULD.

With Illustrations by LOUIS DAVIS.



WHEN, about the beginning of this century, the main highway connecting London with Falmouth was reconstructed, then, in that particular part between Exeter and Launceston it was fresh engineered, and in so doing, before it reached Okehampton it was carried along the side of a hill, a spur of Dartmoor, deserting completely a village or hamlet called Zeale Monachorum, through which the old road had run.

Zeale thereupon ceased to have importance, and went to sleep, and remained till recently a most singular specimen of a village of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the centre stood, and I am glad to say, still stands the old village cross, of granite, in perfect preservation. Near it was the old chapel, turned into a school, but now through the munificence of Sir Roper Lethbridge, whose family derives from Zeale, restored for divine service. The village inn is still the same, with deep porch, granite mullioned windows, anciently the mansion, and cradle of the Burgoyne family, now the Oxenham Arms, for it passed from the Burgoynes to the family that has the mysterious white bird which appears fluttering above the head of whatever member of the family is about to die. The old village street possessed other quaint old houses, with parvise chambers supported on granite pillars and with richly sculptured oak and granite doors. Alas! most of these have now disappeared. It was not so five-and-thirty years ago, when, one summer evening, after a ride of some days round Dartmoor I first dropped upon Zeale, and thought that I had dropped back, at the same time, three centuries, into a village of the Elizabethan age. I put up for the night at the Oxenham Arms, and the incidents of that evening did not dispel the illusions. That day happened to have been pay day at a mine on the edge of the moor, and the miners had come to spend their money at the tavern.

The room in which they caroused was the old hall of the mansion. The great fireplace had logs and peat burning in it, not that a fire was needed in summer, but, because this room served also as kitchen. The rafters and old timber of roof and walls were black with smoke. One candle with long wick smoked and guttered near the fire. At the table and in the high-backed settle sat the men, smoking, talking, drinking. Conspicuous among them was one man with a high forehead, partly bald, who with upturned eyes sang ballads. I learned that he was given free entertainment at the inn, on condition that he sang as long as the tavern was open, for the amusement of the guests. He seemed to be inexhaustible in his store of songs and ballads; with the utmost readiness, whenever called on, he sang, and skilfully varied the character of his pieces—to grave succeeded gay, to a ballad a lyric.

At the time I listened, amused, till I was tired, and then went to bed, leaving him singing.

Years, in fact, thirty-five passed, and this evening, in the tavern, had almost passed from my remembrance, when accident turned my attention to the popular songs and ballads in vogue among the peasantry and miners of Devon and Cornwall, and I began to make inquiries about the old song-men.

Everywhere I met with the same answer—"Ah! there was old so-and-so, he was a famous singer, but he's been dead these many years." When I came to inquire what the younger men knew—men of forty and fifty—I could find nothing old, only Christy Minstrel songs, music-hall pieces, and of course, Salvation Army hymns. They laughed and curled their lips contemptuously when asked for the songs sang by their fathers and grandfathers.

Determined however, not to be balked, I set to work around Dartmoor, a region less invaded by modern ideas than almost any others in England, and discovered some of the old song-men still hanging on to life, and from them I collected in a couple of years a pretty large number of songs and ballads with their traditional melodies.

These old song-men, in many cases inherit their songs from their fathers; singing was a family possession, and the stock-in-trade consisted in a batch of some fifty to a hundred songs. These a father taught his son, air and words, and there can be no question that by this

means many were handed down through several hundreds of years, in one family of professional song-men, the successors of the mediæval glee-men.

I know of one case where two rival song-men met and sang against each other for a wager. They began at six o'clock in the evening, and sang one after the other till six o'clock the following morning, and neither had then come to the end of his *repertoire*; consequently, the stakes were drawn. Of one of the old fellows from whom I have gathered some of the most interesting pieces, I was told the following story.

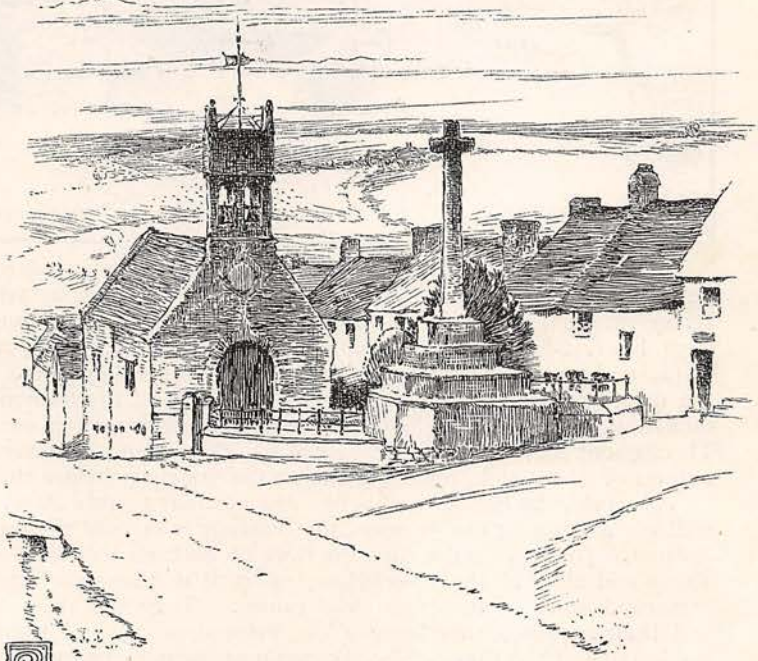
He had been singing all the evening in a tavern to a party of labourers, when, feeling himself a little the worse for liquor, he rose to leave, when the other toppers called on him to stay.

"Will you give me a pint of ale for every fresh song I sing you?" he asked.

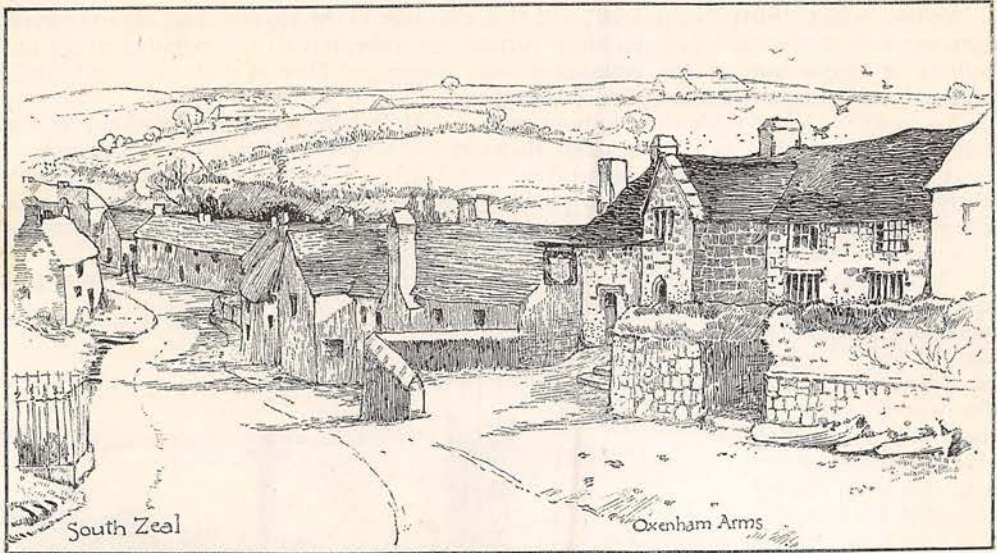
"Certainly I will," answered one of the men present. He sat down, and he sang sixteen entirely fresh songs, and drank "sixteen pints of ale."

This story seemed to me incredible; I questioned him on it, and he admitted with pride, that it was true. As it happened the man who had made the promise was working for me, and he also admitted that it was true; he had to pay for the sixteen pints. "But then," said the man, "that was a long time ago."

One of the old fellows who has furnished me with songs was in his day a notable song-man, now he is toothless and asthmatical; but notable as he was, he was less notable than his father who went by the name of "The Singing Machine," and whose stock was believed to be quite inexhaustible.



CHAPEL AND CROSS, SOUTH ZEAL.



In former times, at the beginning of this century, indeed down through the first quarter it was customary for every ale-house to have attached to it its song-man. Every village had one, just as every village had its fiddler; and at all gatherings, pay-days, harvest-homes, these men were in requisition. They received their food, their drink, and largesses, in return for the amusement they gave. When cider was made, the cider had to be watched all night and day and the fermentation stopped, the cider racked at the moment when the fermented scum at the surface was about to sink. Throughout the time of cider-watching, these song-men were engaged to relieve the tedium of the watch, and by amusing the watchers insure their wakefulness.

As a rule, the ballads and songs are peculiar to this class. There are other songs well known among the yeomen, the hunting men, and the farmers, but they are quite distinct. Just as, on the Alps the flora of each zone is different from that of the zone above and that of the one below, so is it in the social classes. The gentry have preserved none of the traditional music. They had their harpsichords and spinets, and their pianos; they bought the printed music and played and sang what was fashionable at the time. The yeomen and farmers had their songs, bacchanalian and hunting, knew nothing of the fashionable music, the classic music sung in the squire's parlours, nor anything of that sung in the taverns. The professional song-men held to what was traditional; they added to their stock from time to time, and from time to time some old pieces dropped away, but their songs remained distinct in character from those of the class that employed labour.

As already said, these old songs are now despised. The generation to which we middle-aged men belong, and more so the rising generation, despise them, and the profession of song-man is at an end. The few old fellows that represent the class are all between seventy-five and eighty-five, and they are few. A curious instance of the way in which traditional airs linger on may be cited.

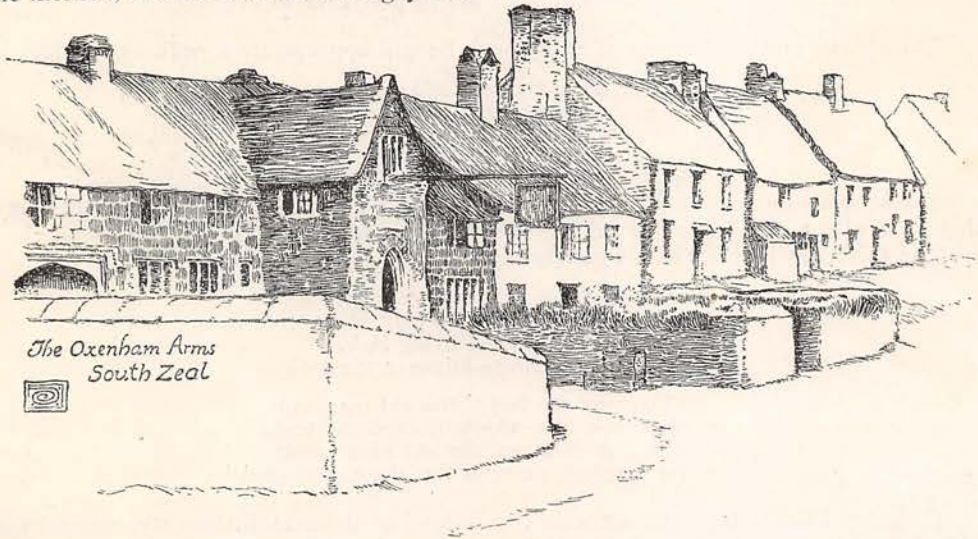
In Queen Elizabeth's virginal book, that is to say, a MS. collection of tunes to be played on the virginal, an old instrument like a square piano, with the strings struck by quills, is a tune to a song on "Rush Gathering." Chappell extracted it from this MS., and from another by Dr. Byrd, and printed it in his *Popular Music of the Olden Time*; but this identical melody I recovered from an old man who breaks stones on the road, and who had learned it from his father. For three-hundred years this melody had been handed down orally.

In *Twelfth-Night* Sir Toby Belch says that Malvolio's song is "Three Merry Men be We." Chappell found the air in a MS. of old John Playford's in private possession, and prints it in his *Popular Music of the Olden Time*. I found that one of the old singers knew the air, and could sing one verse of the words. His memory failed him as to the entire song. Here is a melody of the time of Shakespeare still sung by our song-men.

At South Brent, a village under a remarkable outstanding "tor" or granite rock-crowned hill, a spur of Dartmoor, on which formerly stood a beacon, live two old men, a miller and a stone-breaker, the latter a cripple, earning about four shillings a week. These two men possess astonishing memories, they are stored with old songs. They are men of striking faces, full of intelligence and refinement, very characteristic of the "West Countree."

My first acquaintance with these old singers was striking. My kind host, who had invited me to hear them, had invited neighbours to dinner, to meet me, and after dinner the entire party adjourned to the roomy, warm, and pleasant kitchen, where we found the miller and the stone-breaker, and the wife of one of them, seated by the fire, with a table before them on which stood grog. A good supper and a roaring fire are essential, if the lips of the old singers are to be unsealed.

The servants of the house sat along one side of the kitchen, the guests on the other. The old fellows were somewhat shy at first, but gradually warmed to their work under the influence of the steaming grog, and sang, sometimes in parts, with quaint effect. The old woman striking in with a *faux bourdon*. When they ceased singing, we applauded, then came a lull, during which the roar of the river Ewne, that leaps and brawls through a cleft of rocks, and thunders over a cascade, hard by, filled the kitchen, like the roar of an angry sea.



The Oxenham Arms
South Zeal

One of the songs then sung was "The Tythe Pig," the date the end of last century.

"All you that love a bit of fun, come listen here awhile
I'll tell you of a droll affair, will cause you all a smile.
The parson dress'd in Sunday best,
Cock'd hat and bushy wig
He went into a farmer's house, to choose a sucking pig.
'Good morning,' said the Parson, 'good morning, sirs, to you,
I've come to choose a sucking-pig, a pig that is my due.'

"Then sent the farmer to the sty, amongst the piglings small,
He chose the very smallest pig, the smallest of them all.
But when the Parson saw his choice,
How he did stamp and roar!
He snorted loud, he shook his wig, he almost cursed and swore.
'Good morning,' said the Parson; &c.

As he refuses this pig, the farmer begs the parson to step into the sty, and choose for himself. Accordingly the parson goes into the sty, but at once the old sow attacks him, the little pigs as well fall upon him, and the unfortunate man only escapes by the assistance of the farmer.

“ Away the Parson scampered home, as fast as legs could run,
 His wife was standing at the door, expecting his return.
 But when she saw him in this mess
 She fainted flat away.
 ‘ Alas, alas !’ the Parson said, ‘ I bitter rue this day.
 Good morning,’ said the Parson, &c.

“ Go fetch me down a suit of clothes, and sponge and soap I pray,
 And bring me, too, my greasy wig, and rub me down with hay.
 Another time I won’t be nice,
 When gathering my dues.
 Another time in sucking pigs, I will not pick and choose.
 Good morning,’ said the Parson, ‘ Good morning, sirs, to you,
 I will not pick a sucking pig. I leave the choice to you.’”

Another song then sung was relative to the last will of a miller. He was taken ill and was like to die, and had no time to write his testament, accordingly he made what is technically called a nuncupative will. He had three sons, and he called them up “ by two and one ” then to the eldest he says—

“ My glass is almost run,
 If I to thee the mill should give,
 Tell me, what toll thou’dst take to live ?”

The eldest replies that out of every sack he will appropriate a peck as his due.

“ ‘ Thou art a fool,’ the old man said,
 ‘ Thou hast not half learned out thy trade,
 My mill to thee I will not give,
 For, by such toll, no man can live !’ ”

The second son says that of every bushel he will take a half, and the father says that he is also not to have the mill.

The third son is wiser in his generation.

“ ‘ Father, I am your youngest boy,
 In taking toll is all my joy,
 Before that I’ll good living lack,
 I’ll take the whole—forswear the sack.’
 “ ‘ Thou art the boy ;’ the old man said ;
 ‘ For thou hast wholly learned the trade.
 The mill is thine,’ the old man cried,
 He laughed, gave up the ghost, and died.”

Of quite Elizabethan character is the following delicate little ditty, sung by an old moor man now dead—

“ A farmer’s son so sweet,
 Was tending of his sheep
 So careless, fell asleep
 All in a hawthorn shade.
 A pretty lady gay
 Came walking down that way,
 And did her footsteps stay
 To see the lambkins strayed.

“ Then she shepherd spied,
 And stealing to his side,
 Stooped, kissed his lips, and sighed,
 The thrushes singing by.
 He, waking in surprise,
 And looking in her eyes,
 Said, ‘ Surely in Paradise,
 In Paradise I am ?’ ”

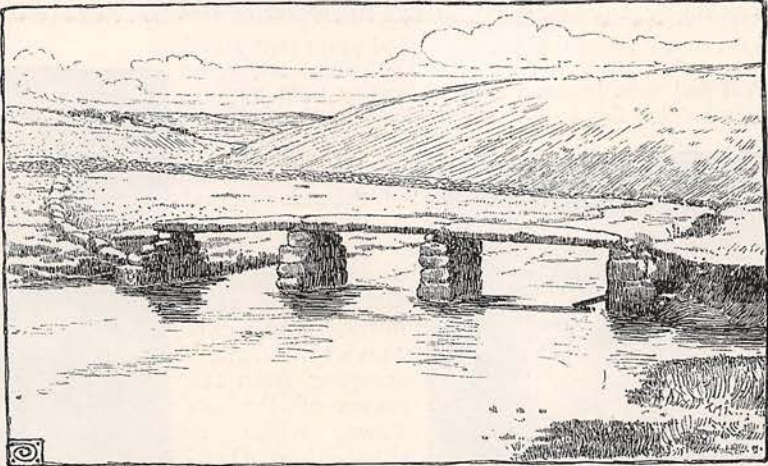
In the heart of Dartmoor, eleven hundred feet above the sea is a hamlet called Post-Bridge. It lies in the bottom of a basin among the moors, which surround it on all sides rising more than a thousand feet above it. Owing to its being in comparative shelter, a few stunted beech trees live there. A few moor farms are scattered about it, and near it are some promising rather than rendering tin-mines. A little chapel has been erected there, and there is an inn, open only in the summer, when it is pretty full of fishermen. The spot is very wild, desolate and picturesque. The hills around are strewn with pre-historic relics. To the north, a paved road, for the most part buried in turf, the growth of ages, can be traced across the moor, it is the equator of Dartmoor—all north of it is regarded as the Northern hemisphere, all south as the Southern. Whence this road started, or to what it led, no one knows. Strewn over the slopes

are pre-historic villages, walled round originally against wolves; within these circular walls are the foundations of the old huts of the aboriginal inhabitants, also circular, with the doors invariably to the south, constructed of two granite uprights, and a lintel of granite. To enter their habitations the old inhabitants must have crawled.

Over the East Dart which here forms into one river gathering into one a thousand streams that flow from the tors all round into the basin, is a rude cyclopean bridge, which may or may not be British. It is composed of three openings. The piers are rude piles of granite blocks, set one on another, uncemented by any kind of mortar, and the roadway is carried over them on slabs of granite. Rowe, in his *Perambulations of Dartmoor* in 1848, thus describes it:—"The piers consist of six layers of granite slabs above the foundation. The superincumbent stones are singularly adapted for the purpose to which they are applied. The centre opening is narrower than the

side openings; the impost here were two; one of these by accident or design has been displaced, and lies in the bed of the river.

These stones in general are about fifteen feet long and six wide, and thus a roadway was made over which even the scythed chariot of the Damnonian warrior might pass the river in safety."



CYCLOPEAN BRIDGE, DARTMOOR.

Hard by is a kistvaen or stone tomb of pre-historic age, of course rifled of its contents, and not far off is a sacred circle of upright standing granite stones. But three miles distant is Crockern Tor, where the Stannary Parliament met *sub dio* till the middle of the last century, among piles of granite rocks in the very heart of the vast barren waste.

About half a mile across bog and moor—there is no road, not even a pathway to it—stands Ring Hill, a granite cottage near a plantation of stunted trees that stand in the midst of and occupy an old fortified village of those mysterious people who once lived in vast numbers at Dartmoor.

In this little old cottage was (he is dead now) a blind man, aged eighty-eight, named Jonas Coaker, who is called the Poet of the Moor. I found him very feeble, lying in bed the greater part of the day, but able to come down and sit by his peat fire for a couple of hours at noon.

We will not say too much about Jonas Coaker's own compositions, there is at all events rhyme of a kind in them, and among village poets rhyme is thought to be all that is needed to make a poem. But the old man himself, with his intelligent face, in his high-backed chair, by the rude granite chimney-piece, crouching over the smouldering peat fire there, brightening up, as old remembrances come back, waving his arms and reciting ancient songs that fired his imagination as, in his darkness, he recalled them—he himself was at once a poem and a picture.

That an old poet should exhibit a marked predilection for his own compositions is not to be wondered at, but with a little persuasion he was drawn from them to the recitations of traditional ballads.

One very interesting song I obtained from him. It was clearly composed at the time of the Puritan *régime*, when organs and singing were put down in England. The song is called "Brixham Town" and relates how that—

"There came a man to our town
A man of office, and in gown,
Strove to put singing down,
Which most adore."

And the song goes on to call the attention of those who object to minstrelsy that their action is unscriptural.

"Go, search the Holy Writ
And you will read in it
How that it is most fit
To praise the Lord,

"On cymbal and on flute,
With organ and with lute,
And voices sweet that suit
All in concord.

"In Samuel you may read
How one was troublèd,
Was troublèd indeed,
Who sceptre bore.

"An evil spirit, it doth say,
Haunted him night and day
And would not go away,
But grieved him sore."

Thereupon one tells the king of David, the son of Jesse, and the poet relates how the harper, David, came and struck his instrument, and how that, at the sound of sweet music, the evil spirit, unable to endure minstrelsy, fled far away.

"So now my friends adieu,
I trust that all of you
Will pull most just and true,
In serving the Lord.

"God grant that all of we
With angels will agree,
Singing right merrily
All in concord."



HELMORE, THE MILLER.

The melody is fresh and delicious, of the same period as the words.

In the most desolate portion of Dartmoor, Foxtomires, the only convict who, after escaping from the prison of Prince's Town, which is situated on Dartmoor, has not eventually been retaken, is believed to lie engulfed. He was last seen making in the direction of the terrible bogs there, and he was never seen again. Ages before, another man lost his life there,



HARD, THE STONEBREAKER.

Childe, the Hunter, in Saxon times, who was chasing on the Moor, when he lost his way, and night fell. Snow began to drive over the waste, and in the cold and darkness, Childe, so says tradition, cut open his horse; and crept inside for warmth. But at last, feeling that he must expire, he dipped his finger in blood, and wrote on a granite block near—

"He who finds and brings me to my grave,
The lands of Plymstock he shall have."

The monks of Plymstock, hearing of this, made haste to recover his body, but the monks of Tavistock were before them. Then the Plymstock men beset the fords of the Tavy to prevent the Tavistock monks from carrying the corpse over it, but the latter were too clever to be thus stayed, they constructed a hasty bridge of wood across the river, and carried Childe to his grave over that, and the bridge is called Guile-Bridge "even unto this day." On the spot where Childe died a cross was erected, and there was also shown his tomb—in contravention of this tradition which says he was guilefully carried to Tavistock.

The tomb and cross were in part destroyed in 1812, but sufficient of the former remains to show that it is a large kistvaen, situated on a small mound originally surrounded by a circle of stones; but differing from similar monuments on the moor

in that the stones have been rudely shaped. Fragments of what is believed to be the cross remain, but it is hoped that they will shortly be collected and Childe's cross be re-erected. Another cross erect stands on the edge of the same marsh. That Childe lived and died before the Norman Conquest appears from the fact, that in *Domesday Book*, the lands in Plymstock are given as belonging to the Abbey of Tavistock.

In a copy of rude verses on Dartmoor, written by Jonas Coaker, appear—in ballad metre—portions of the story of Childe, and on my questioning him he admitted having adapted a ballad and incorporated it into his "poem." He was able to repeat the greater part of the original ballad, which tells the whole story, in true ballad style; and I have since heard that the same ballad to the same melody was sung thirty years ago by another old man named Lillycrap, at Shaw.

Another of my song-men is a blacksmith, and from him a series of songs came of



Helmore's Mill . South Brent

a different character from the rest collected; through him a distinct vein is reached. His story explains this. He was one of sixteen children, and was given at the age of four to his grandmother, who kept him with her till he was ten years old. At ten she died, and he returned to his father, but ran away from home when he was aged fourteen and has lived independently ever since. His songs he learned from his grandmother, between the ages of four and ten, and they are such as old goodies sang, quite different from those sung in taverns.

One of the songs he learned from his grandmother is "Green Broom."

"There was an old man lived out in the West,
His trade was the cutting of broom—green broom.
He had but one son, and a lazy boy Jack,
And he'd lie in his bed till 'twas noon—bright noon.

"One morning he rose, and he slipped on his clothes
And he swore he would fire the room—that room.
If Jack would not arise, and shake sleep from his eyes,
And away to the woods, to cut broom—green broom."

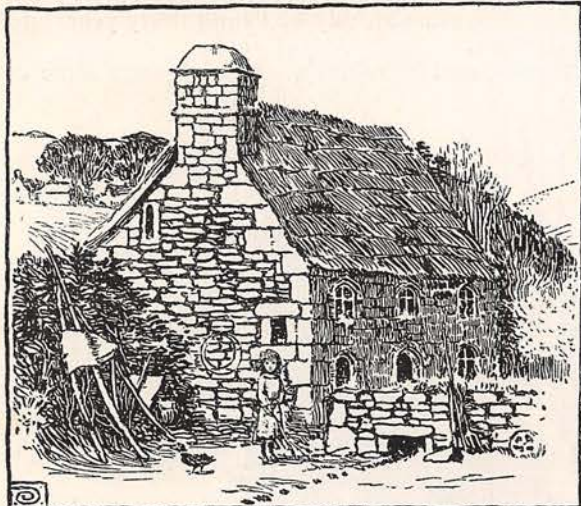
Alarmed at this threat Jack leaves his bed, and starts with his reaping hook; on his way he passes a lady's house, and she from her window high sees Jack, and she sends her maid to him.

"When Johnny came into the lady's fine house,
And into the lady's fine room—fine room;
'Young Johnny,' she said, 'will you give up your trade
And marry a lady in bloom—full bloom?'

"Johnny gave his consent, and to church they both went,
And he married the lady in bloom—full bloom.
At market and fair, all folks now declare,
There's none like the lad that cut broom—green broom."

Here is a curious song that has reference to a long-forgotten custom of hanging the wreaths borne before virgins to their graves in the church as memorials:—

"I am a maiden sad and lonely,
Courtèd I was by a squire's son.
Early and late he waited only,
Until my innocent heart he won.



COTTAGE OF JONAS COAKER.

"Easterly winds why do they whistle,
And tear the green leaves from the
tree?

The lily, rose, and e'en the thistle,
Are bruised and bent and broke
like me.

"O, hearken to the cocks a-crowing,
The daylight pale will soon appear;
But I in grave shall be unknowing
If it be day or darkness drear.

"A garland bind of silver laces,
Of rosemary and camomile,
Of mint and rue and watercresses,
And hang, in the church's aisle.

"O, when my love o' Sunday morning
Doth come to worship in his pew,
He'll think on me with thoughts of
mourning,
That he was false, but I was true."

It is singular that Elizabethan
pastoral songs, so utterly false
and artificial as they are, should

hold their own among these old song-men, and yet it is the case. Here is a specimen :

"By chance it was I met my love,
It did me much surprise,
Down by a shady myrtle grove,
Just as the sun did rise.

"The birds they sang right gloriously,
And pleasant was the air,
And there was none, save she and I,
Among the flowers fair."

They wander hand in hand down into the myrtle vale to look after the tender lambs and ewes.

"And as we wended down the road,
I said to her, 'Sweet maid,
Three years I in my place abode,
And three more must be stayed.
The three that I am bound so fast,
O fairest wait for me.
And when the weary years are past,
Then married we will be.'

"Three years are long, three times too long,
Too great is the delay.'
O then I answered in my song,
'Hope makes them waste away.
When love is fast and firm to last
And knoweth no decay,
Then nimbly fleet the seasons past,
Accounted as a day!'"

In former times, it was customary for lads on May Day or Midsummer's Day at early dawn to go with bunches of flowers to the doors of the maids they loved, and to sing a carol:—

"'Twas early I walked on a midsummer morning,
The fields and the meadows were deckèd and gay,
The small birds were singing, the woodlands a ringing,
It was early in the morning, at breaking of day.
I will play on my pipes, I will sing thee my lay,
It is early in the morning, at breaking of day."

And the carol ends :

"Arise, love, arise! in song and in story,
To rival thy beauty was never a may,
I will play thee a tune on my pipes of ivory,
It is early in the morning, at breaking of day.
I will play on my pipes, I will sing thee my lay!
It is early in the morning, at breaking of day."

Alas! now it is only old and toothless men who can sing this, and the playing on the ivory pipes is long gone out—has yielded to the detestable concertina.

A very curious Jacobite song was taken down from a tanner at Liskeard. James Butler, Duke of Ormond, landed in Devonshire with twenty men in 1714, expecting the west countrymen to rise for the Chevalier of St. George. Not a single adherent joined his standard, and after waiting a very few days, he returned to France. Ormond was a poor creature. However a ballad that is a sort of proclamation to the men of the West remains traditionally, sung to a remarkable old melody.

“I am Ormond the Brave,
Did you never hear of me?
Driven 'cross the salt-sea wave
From my own countrie.
They tried me, condemned me,
They seized my estate,
For so loyal I proved to be
To Queen Anne the Great.

“I am Queen Anne, her darling,
I'm old England's delight.
Of the Church I am the friend too,
In Presbyterian despite.
I lead my men to victory,
I vanquish every foe,
Some call me Jemmy Butler,
But I'm Ormond, you know.”

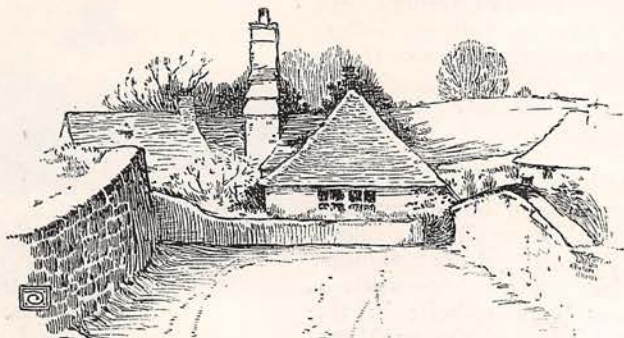
There are more verses of this curious doggerel. It is odd that such a contemptible figure as the Duke of Ormond should have left the remembrance of himself in song. But this is not the only ballad sung of him. Another concerns his attempt, not remarkably successful, in Vigo Bay, in 1703.

Some of the most yielding sources are old men who can neither read nor write. It is amazing what memories they have, and how correct they often are. One told me, and I believe he spoke the truth, that in the old days when he sang in the taverns he knew over a hundred songs, and his father could tell the titles of two hundred, which he could sing. I have collected thirty from this man. He sits in a settle by my hall fire, turns up his eyes, crosses his hands on his breast, and sings. Then I sing after him, and he is most particular that I should have all the turns right. “You mun give thickey [that] a bit stronger,” he says—and by stronger he means take a tone or semitone higher. He will not allow the smallest deviation from what he has to impart.

“It's just no use at all,” says he, “my singing to you if you won't follow correct. Thickey turn came out of your head, not mine!” Then I must go back again till I have got the tune exact. “I be maister, and you be scholar,” he says, “and a scholar mun larn what he be taught; and larn it right.”

Curious old tunes in the minor key many of them are, certainly not later than the fifteenth century. Others of exquisite delicacy, modulate from minor to major and then back again.

“I reckon that's the beautifullest tune as ever were sung anywhere,” says my master of some specially archaic air. And I notice that he appreciates the old minor tunes much more than those in majors. Then he heaves a sigh. “I ha'n't sung *he*”—by “*he*” he means the song—“I reckon for five and twenty years till to-night. Lor' bless y', the world be going that wicked the young chaps don't care for my songs. I reckon the end o' the world can't be over far off according-ly.”



Helmors Mill. South Brent