

THE GLEE MAIDENS.

By J. F. ROWBOTHAM, Author of "The History of Music."



OWARDS the close of the eleventh century the First Crusade had come to an end, but the taste which it engendered for a wandering life was still fresh in the minds of the people of Europe. The highroads of France, Germany, and Austria, and, to some extent, of England, swarmed with itinerants of all sorts. There were travellers who roamed the country for the sake of sightseeing; craftsmen who wandered from town to town in search of employment; tramps, mendicants, mountebanks; merchants bent on business,

yet ever willing to be on the move; wandering minstrels, with hat and feather, whose avocation was to sing at every hostelry for a chance dole of money or food; and last, not least, glee maidens, whose bright dress and slender figures among the homelier and more uncouth wayfarers rendered them easily conspicuous from afar. These were the days when ladies did not shrink, when occasion demanded, from wielding a sword or even a lance on horseback, and riding to the battle in defence of their lands and rights. In the Crusades there were many female warriors and female adventurers, and in a gentler sphere of life the same disposition to knight-errantry made itself felt. Young girls, in those days, who had a remarkable passion for music, had no means of gratifying their tastes unless they went to far-distant cities for instruction. A few of the chief towns in Europe boasted the possession of eminent players and singers, but the vast mass of the country was completely rude and uncultivated so far as music was concerned. An ambitious girl who desired to attain proficiency in music had no means of doing so by lingering in the purlieus of her native village. Her only course to adopt was to bid good-bye to her parents, and take a long journey, often consisting of hundreds of miles, to one of the great towns of Europe, there to study her art under some master of repute. The almost certain result of this long wandering to the place of her instruction, and of the efforts made to attain proficiency, was the desire to adopt music as a profession—a natural and a creditable design, but which, in the Middle Ages, could be achieved in no other way than by becoming a pilgrim of Europe. To settle down in a certain place and teach music for a livelihood, as is so often done at present, was impossible then, for nobody desired to learn. To find occupation in public performances, such as concerts, was equally out of the question, for these were rare. But one course was open for the maiden, who, having well considered the question, felt that she must follow music as her occupation in life: this was, to swing her lute round her shoulder and prepare to travel over all the roads of Europe on foot, giving exhibitions of her skill wherever there was likelihood of a crowd assembling, and receiving, in return for her performances, those donations from the

listeners which were far more freely given in those days than at present. They were more liberally bestowed on itinerant minstrels, because such minstrels constituted, in the Middle Ages, the entire musical population. Nowadays we are apt to look down with contempt upon itinerant musicians as vagrants and mendicants, and perhaps by no class in the community is this feeling more heartily entertained than by musicians themselves. In the Middle Ages, the wandering minstrels, male and female—or, to give them their ordinary name, the jongleurs and the glee maidens—were often of gentle blood, sometimes of noble family; and even when of inferior extraction, invariably sound and cultivated musicians, and the best representatives of the art then existent in Europe.

It may seem a strange life, and it was indeed an extraordinary one, for a young maiden to lead—to wander about, as if in the days of romance, like the ladies in Spenser's poetry, hither and thither through the country, on a journey of knight-errantry for the cause of art. Yet the glee maidens remained safe in the midst of dangers, and were treated with respect by all classes of the community. As a rule, they did not travel in parties or in pairs, but individually. The reason of this is obvious, for, where public patronage of music was so slender, it was not advisable that more than one applicant for its bounty should appear at once. A glee maiden was easily known by her dress, which was unique and peculiar. She wore a blue jacket embroidered with silver, sitting close to her figure; sometimes this jacket was adorned with spangles, in addition to the silver embroidery, and often decorated at the shoulders with rosettes of ribbons. A striped skirt, which scarcely reached to her ankles, in order to facilitate walking, completed her costume, together with scarlet stockings, and buskins of Spanish leather. On her head she wore a broad hat adorned with gaudy ribbons, and round her neck a silver chain, which was often not of the genuine metal, in order not to excite the cupidity of robbers; for, assured as was the glee maiden of respect and courteous treatment from all honest people who came in contact with her, she was no more secure than anyone else against the avarice of desperadoes. Wandering in this way alone about the country, many a girl, in order to enliven her solitude, took a dumb companion with her, sometimes a dog, sometimes a goat, the former of which served as a valuable protector in case of need. The goat she would generally lead by a string, and, when she sang before a crowd of people, the animal was trained to go round from one to the other, holding a basket or bag suspended round its neck, and making motions to persuade them to drop money in the satchel.

The instruments which the glee maidens played were various. The violin was their favourite instrument, but they likewise played the lute, the bells, the tabor, the flute, the rebeck, and the guitar. A glee maiden, as a rule, could play all these instruments named here, and one or two more beside, reserving one special instrument as her favourite, on which she cultivated her execution to the highest point of skill. If we follow her through a day of her strangely romantic life, we shall see her emerge from the hostelry in the early morning where she has passed the night, and ere the dew has left the glittering grass, trip joyfully along the road, brushing off the globules on the roadside, and attended by

her dog or her goat, who looks gravely at her as she laughs and sings. She is up early and off early on her travels this morning, partly because the town whither she is wending is at a great distance, and partly in order to escape the crowds of masculine wayfarers who will begin to dot the road when day fairly sets in. By the time they make their appearance she will have commenced a tortuous career of by-paths and cross-roads, so as to avoid them, and pursue her journey in retirement to the town whither she is bound. Here, in due course, she arrives. It is midday; the townspeople are enjoying an hour's leisure in the interval of their work, and in goodly knots gather round the glee maiden, until a large circle is formed. She, in the middle, mounting an extemporised platform—perhaps a table borrowed from the inn, or the frame of an old cart—commences to play her violin, and sing, in her sweetest voice, a *chanson* which goes home to the hearts of all around her. There is as good behaviour in the motley crowd around as among the audience of a modern concert. As she sings song after song, the varying mood of the sentiment is reflected in the countenances and behaviour of the crowd. At times they are all smiles and hilarity; at other times there is not a dry eye among them. The entertainment is artistic, the appreciation of it is unbounded. After the townspeople have dispersed, the liberal donations which they have poured upon her suffice to provide a meal at the hostel, and to line her purse against any less successful day in her strange life. As she sits making her frugal repast at the hostel, perhaps a message may come from the seigneur of the neighbouring castle, who, hearing that a glee maiden is in the town, sends for her to make music for the knights and ladies on the ramparts after dinner. This is an occasion on which her talents find their most congenial scope, for she is sure of the warmest appreciation of her efforts. She can now display her most artistic style of song and playing, and need not stoop to those tricks of style which she is compelled to adopt when performing before a mixed audience. The testimony of the courtly poets of the time tells us explicitly how charming were those performances of the glee maidens, and how those romantic minstrels impressed the hearts of the knights and kindled the emulation of the ladies.

The glee maiden departs at length from the baronial castle. It is late in the afternoon as she pursues her solitary way along the high road, and ere she has proceeded many miles the shades of evening have fallen around her. Her lot would be an unenviable one, were it not for the twinkling lights of a monastery perched on a gentle acclivity near the roadside. She knows the place well, having heard it described by other glee maidens, and hither, in fact, she has been wending her way designedly. Besides being a monastery, like all buildings of the kind, it acts as a hostelry for weary wayfarers, who are supplied, without payment, with food and shelter. The glee maiden knocks at the colossal gate, and is admitted; she passes over the courtyard, and is soon seated at a cheerful fire, where other travellers, including some of her own sex, are accommodated already on wooden benches while supper is preparing. The monks, who occasionally enter the room, regard her, with looks askance, as an emblem of worldly profanity, because she represents the art of secular music, which in those days received the reprehension of the Church; yet they do not refuse

to listen to her melodious songs, which, when the meal is over, she sings for the amusement of the company. Next morning, after a good night's rest at the hospitable convent, she starts on her journeys again. And such is a specimen of the life which she, and all glee maidens like her, led during the Middle Ages.

In winter time, what were they to do? The employments which we have described were those of summer; but in winter country people were not inclined to listen to music, and it was too cold for lords and ladies to promenade on the ramparts overlooking the moat, and loiter about while the glee girl sang. Most of the glee maidens contrived so to arrange their wanderings that by the approach of winter-time they should be near the houses

of their parents or relatives, in which friendly domicile they spent the time till spring began again. But those who were not so fortunate as to have either parents or friends were forced to strange expedients to profitably pass the time, the favourite one being to take about dancing bears from village to village, and so earn a pittance until they could resume their proper employment when the winter passed into spring. An old Latin poem of the time describes very graphically the visit of a party of glee maidens to a village, accompanied by bears. After various remarks upon the singularity of the exhibition, it proceeds:—"Some of the glee maidens touched their instruments, and immediately the bears reared themselves up to dance. They marked the time with

their feet, springing very high at times, often feigning to come to blows with one another, and doing other antics while the music lasted. Then the bears would dance with the glee maidens, who sang the song of the dance with most melodious voices. The bears danced most gravely with the girls, putting their great paws in their pretty hands, and footing step for step the measure of the dance, growling contentedly the while." To such shifts as these were the glee maidens at times reduced; but when the winter passed away, and bespangled spring came, they renewed that life of music and romance which we have recently described, which has had no parallel in any history of the past, and probably will have no repetition in the future.



AGNES CHISHOLM; OR, COUNTRY LIFE.

A STORY IN FIVE CHAPTERS.

By E. H. ASHWIN.

CHAPTER III.

WAS it true, or was it a dream? So thought Agnes Chisholm, as the next morning she opened her eyes in the pretty bedroom of Hope Cottage. Her mother, she saw with satisfaction, was still calmly sleeping, and the little clock on the mantelpiece only pointed to half-past five. What was it she had been told to remember? Ah! it came back to her now.

"You are to hang the door-key out of your window by six o'clock, and our servant shall come across and light the fire for you, as it is the first morning, and you will be tired after your journey." So had spoken the hospitable Mrs. Durham on saying good-bye the evening before, and Agnes smiled to herself as she recollected the scorn with which her mild suggestion of robbers if the key should hang out before its time had been received.

"Robbers, my dear! What do you mean? It is reported that some tramps once stole some ducks at Winton, and that a very poor woman used occasionally to help herself to a fire from her neighbours' wood-stacks; but that was years ago. Now we pride ourselves on being specially and peculiarly honest, if nothing else; so hang out your key without a fear."

Gently rising, therefore, and opening the little casement, Agnes obeyed orders, returning to her bed, however, it must be confessed, with ears very much on the alert. Soon she heard the gate swing back, and a footstep on the path; a minute after the key turned in the lock, and the subsequent clattering of fire-irons, etc., convincing her that all was right, she gave her mind to the contemplation of the room in which she found herself; for on the

previous night she had been too tired and anxious, and too much occupied with her mother, to notice anything. This is what she saw. Walls distempered a deep terra-cotta, the floor stained round, the centre covered with a felt square to match the colour of the walls, pretty chintz curtains at the two windows, two small bedsteads, a chest of drawers, dressing-table, washstand, large cane arm-chair and two small ones, and across one corner a curtain, which puzzled her, till, on examination, she found it was intended to serve as a wardrobe, pegs for dresses being placed round the wall within, and a board across the lower part of the front making a convenient receptacle for bags, small boxes, etc.

Her curiosity roused by this inspection, she quickly dressed without disturbing her sleeping mother, and slipped out of her room into the next, which was furnished in a similar manner, but with one bedstead and no arm-chair; their luggage being placed in the third bedroom, which was very tiny, and otherwise unfurnished. Of course the ground floor next claimed her attention, and she ran lightly down the steep, narrow staircase, which seemed really the chief defect in the dwelling, to find the rectory servant had disappeared, leaving a cosy little fire, and the table covered with a dainty, simple breakfast.

The tiny kitchen, with its table, chairs, and dresser, above which hung a set of shelves for plates and dishes, and a corner cupboard filled with a little china and glass, looked charming; but when she opened the door of the parlour, she exclaimed with delight. The floor was covered with plain, brown linoleum, a bright rug here and there; warm coloured curtains shaded the two windows, beneath one of

which stood a comfortable, chintz-covered couch, looking positively luxurious with its innumerable cushions; the walls were hung with a cheerful-looking paper, and further enlivened with several pictures and a few brackets; some inexpensive lounging and other chairs, a table or two, hanging bookshelves, and a wire flower-stand filled with blossoming plants completed the category. But the air of refinement and the unmistakable signs of kindly thought and work, gave a double charm to the simple room, and the girl's eyes filled with happy tears as she minutely examined every corner of her new abode, including the well-filled little larder, and the coal-hole under the stairs. Everything had been thought of and provided, and as she sat by the kitchen fire over her solitary breakfast, she decided that they should be very happy. A faint call from above startled her at last from her meditations, and she hastened back to her mother.

"It is charming, perfectly charming, mother dear!" she exclaimed as she re-entered the bedroom, and satisfied herself that the invalid was no worse; "but I shall tell you nothing till you have had your breakfast, which is ready for you, and only wants fetching." And while the said breakfast was being eaten with (so Agnes affirmed) far more appetite than when in a town, she chattered gaily, giving such delightful descriptions that Mrs. Chisholm declared she must get up to see how much was fact and how much fable.

So it happened that afternoon, when Mrs. Durham called, she found the elder lady comfortably established with book and knitting on the couch, the kitchen in perfect order, and the tea-kettle singing its cheery song on the