

THE COLLECTOR ON ENGLISH BALLAD OPERAS *

'I SAY, old chappie, I want to ask you ---' said the Musician, in breathless haste, as he burst into the Collector's sanctum.

Without letting his friend finish the sentence, the Collector, by a dexterous movement, placed his chair by the door, thus blocking the exit.

'Over my body!' he exclaimed in a tragic tone. 'The window won't open, the joiner hasn't yet been about it, so now we will enact a little bit of the "Ancient Mariner." You escaped me last time you were here with a bogus tale of an engagement. We will now continue the story of English ballad operas.'

The Musician groaned as he saw the look of determination on the Collector's face, and sank into a chair. 'Only three,' he murmured as he regarded the contents of his cigarette case. 'I wish you'd let me off this time, old fellow. I really have an engagement---well, it's with Miss---. I promised I'd---'

'You probably hear the loud bassoon,' said the Collector grimly, 'but I'm as obdurate as my ancient prototype.'

'Do your worst,' sighed the Musician, lighting one of his cigarettes.

'Well,' commenced the Collector, 'we've finished with *The Beggar's Opera*. Gay wrote a sequel called *Polly*, but political influence stepped in, and its performance was prohibited, though the play was published.

The scene was laid in America, for many of the characters had been transported to the plantations. Polly was there, and Mrs. Trapes; but Captain Macheath, a character that had a great deal to do with the success of *The Beggar's Opera*, is absent. The dialogue is stilted and heavy. *Polly* was published in 1729, but Thomas Walker, who had taken the part of Macheath, and having finished his performances in Gay's opera, was not going to let his impersonation of criminal characters lapse. He hastily put together an opera much on the lines of the "'Beggars," which was entitled *The Quaker's Opera*, and acted at Lee and Harper's great booth in Bartholomew Fair in 1728.

The chief character was Jack Shepherd, while Jonathan Wile [Wild], Hempseed, Coaxthief, with other rogues, a Welsh lawyer, and the Watch help in the plot, which was farcical enough to please a Bartholomew audience. Then the flood-gates were open, and ballad operas took the stage, to the discomfiture of more serious efforts. *The Village Opera* appeared in 1729, and from it was taken the more famous *Love in a Village* of 1762. Another popular ballad opera of the early period was *Momus turn'd Fabulist*, acted at Lincoln's Inn Theatre in 1729. This breaks the ice in a different pond, as it is a pseudo-classic affair, and Jupiter, Venus and the rest of Olympus take part. *The Cobbler's Opera* was in 1729 acted at Lincoln's Inn Theatre, which favoured the class of production, though afterwards Drury Lane took part.

'I'll give you a few of the titles of the first section of English ballad operas---' The Musician groaned, and comforted himself with another cigarette.

'Well,' continued the Collector, there was *The Female Parson, or Beau in the Sudds*, 1730; *The Lover's Opera*, 1729; *The Fashionable Lady*, 1730; *The Highland Fair*, 1730; *The Boarding School*, 1732; *Achilles*, 1733; *Silvia or the Country Burial*, 1731; *The Generous Freemason*, 1731; and *The Jovial Crew*, 1731, taken from Richard Broome's comedy, 1641. There were many others, mostly produced about this time, but I don't want to weary you with a dry list of titles.'

'How kind of you,' murmured the Musician, closing his eyes.

'But I must tell you of *The Devil to Pay*, first acted in 1731. This with the "Beggars," was the only one of the ballad operas that survived, for it formed a stock after-piece well into the early years of the nineteenth century. Charles Coffey, an Irishman, was the author of this, and the best of the

ballad operas of his day. *The Devil to Pay*, with the sub-title *or Wives Metamorphosed*, depicts a cobbler, Jobson, married to Nell, who is bullied by her husband. This is contrasted with a Sir John Loverule, an amiable gentleman, who is suffering under a termagant wife.

'A "cunning man," or wizard, appears on the scene, and changes the wives, and each husband is astonished at the different behaviour of his mate. The dialogue is brisk, and its original cast included Miss Raftor, afterwards Mrs. Clive, who made her first success as Nell. The comedian Harper and the singer Beard took parts, as did Mrs. Pritchard.

'It is full of broad humour, and owes a good deal of its plot to a piece - *The Devil of a Wife* - acted in 1693.

'I could name many more of these early ballad operas of the early 'thirties of the eighteenth century, after which the taste for them appeared to die out for a time; but what I have named will give you an idea of the rest. Their value, to modern people, is in the fact that they have preserved for us a great number of English popular tunes which otherwise would have disappeared. We have to thank John Watts, the masterprinter, of Wild Court, Lincoln's Inn, for printing the plays with the music inserted in the text - rudely cut (it must be confessed), on wood blocks. It was with John Watts that Benjamin Franklin worked on his first coming to London.'

'Would any of these bear modern revival?' asked the Musician, beginning to betray a little interest.

'I don't think so,' replied the Collector. 'The humour of them is scarcely suited to present-day ethics - not that the stage of today is very squeamish in regard to bedroom scenes and the like - and none has the wit of the original *Beggar's Opera*.

'Now we may begin to deal with the second period of ballad operas.'

The Musician gave a great sigh. 'And I've no more cigarettes!' he whispered.

'Here,' continued the Collector, disregarding his friend, and apparently addressing his remarks to a long row of red-backed oblong folios which comprised his fine collection of English operas: 'Here we have a better chance, *Love in a Village*, founded, as I have already told you, upon the earlier *Village Opera*, by Charles Johnson (which, by the way, was acted only four nights), had its day - or rather, its many days, for it was acted and reacted during a lengthy period with great success and might, with a little pruning, be revived. It was originally produced at Covent Garden in 1762, and is full of tuneful numbers selected from popular airs. Dr. Arne had a good deal to do with this selection, and the whole musical arrangement. His tune "Since Hodge proves ungrateful" is among his best work.

'This second range of ballad opera extended from 1762 up to the time when Bishop came to the front with his many operas. You see here,' said the Collector with pride, 'as extensive a lot of English ballad operas as could well be got together by an ordinary collector, but there are a great number still lacking. While *Love in a Village* had its popularity, *Rosina*, another pastoral, had, twenty years later, an equal run, and this also might bear revival. It is by Mrs. Brooke, and some of its songs selected or composed by William Shield, were favourites up to my young days. It was acted at Covent Garden in 1782.

The Poor Soldier is another inoffensive ballad opera, short enough, but full of charming old Irish airs. It was originally *The Shamrock*, but its author, John O'Keeffe, converted it into *The Poor Soldier*, which, acted in its revised form in 1798, had great vogue. Johnstone, the great singer of Irish songs - he sang Irish ditties in nearly every ballad opera of his time - took the part of "Dermot."

'But I mustn't forget the earlier successful operas of *Midas*, 1764; and *The Golden Pippin*, 1773, both by Kane O'Hara, and both having the heathen gods and goddesses for comic characters. In the first, the famous "Pray Goody please to moderate the rancour of your tongue" appears, and in *The Golden Pippin*, Miss Catley sings "Guardian Angels," which as "Helmsley," figures in hymnology.

I know how you modern musicians look upon such a tuneful composer as William Shield, but let me tell you, sir, he is not to be ignored, and many of his tunes which he wrote for his operas are not to be despised as specimens of pure English melody. His opera, *The Woodman*, 1791, contains a rich selection. It includes "The Streamlet," which when sung by Charles Incedon, took the town by storm, and, judging by the number of sheet copies of it in my library, and by the references one comes across, shows that every amateur had it in his repertory. Its range in compass is great, but as everybody in those days didn't hesitate to sing falsetto, that didn't debar any one from tackling it. It has been enthusiastically classed as one of the finest of our English songs.

'And now, my dear young friend, you must come again, and I will enlighten you further. You are always welcome. You have been very patient. We will open the door, and you can make your escape. Come, rouse up! You can't sleep here, you know.'

The Musician with a yawn stretched himself, and remarked: 'Thanks, old fellow. I've enjoyed it so much.' Whether this referred to his doze or to the Collector's discourse, he did not explain.

FRANK KIDSON.

* *See July number.*