

THE COLLECTOR ON 'THE BEGGAR'S OPERA'

OUR friend the Collector, of whom we have heard little lately, was busy with paste pot, scissors, and transparent paper. He was at work on an old folio of Vauxhall songs, mending the tears that impatient singers and harpsichord players had made by careless and quick turnings over.

The Musician, with cigarette in his mouth (he smokes too much, without doubt) was regarding the old man with amused tolerance. One good had come from the Musician's fondness for cigarettes; he supplied the Collector with just that particular kind of transparent paper (the lining of his boxes of cigarettes) that was so eminently suitable for mending torn music sheets.

'When dry,' explained the Collector, 'I shall rub this paper over with fine sandpaper, and you would hardly find a trace of a mend.' He chuckled over this, for it was one of his discoveries.

'You see, my friend, I have to be my own book-binder; and, in fact, I wouldn't trust any of my books into the hands of an ordinary book-binder, and the great ones - well, they are beyond my purse.'

The Musician admitted that he did very well, and thought the Collector's books were as well bound as such old-fashioned rubbish deserved.

'I see by the papers,' said the Musician, 'that there is a revival of *The Beggar's Opera*. That's something in your line, isn't it?'

The Collector pricked up his ears. 'Is that so? Well, that's good. I am glad to know you moderns are about to see what the early mid-Victorians thought good. *The Beggar's Opera* died when Sims Reeves left the stage. It had its vitality fully alive to the last - after a century and a half of life. You modern musicians will, for the first time, realise that simple melody has a charm which you have lost in the complexity of technique - a technique which has forgotten what it was invented for; a tail which is wagging the dog.'

The Musician smiled; he knew his friend and the bees that inhabited his bonnet. 'Tell me about *The Beggar's Opera*,' he said.

The Collector was in his element, for he had gathered together more copies of that little production than any reasonable man should, and he was nothing if not informative. He cleared his paste pot and mending materials away to give space for a proper display of his treasures, while the Musician lighted another cigarette to sustain him in the coming trial.

'This,' said the Collector, 'is the first edition of that immortal work,' and he produced a little shabby, badly printed, octavo pamphlet. 'It is printed by John Watts, with the date, 1728. The words are printed, and the airs are rudely engraved on eight leaves placed at the end of the book. The price in bookseller's catalogues,' continued the Collector impressively, 'ranges from six guineas to ten guineas - that is when they can get hold of a copy. I gave threepence for this copy,' said the Collector, with triumphant emphasis.

'Lucky dog!' interjected the Musician.

'The second edition,' continued our friend, now on his hobby horse of editions, 'is dated the same year, 1728, but the music is cut in wood and inserted in the text. The third edition,' said the Collector, producing a thin quarto, 'you see, is beautifully printed, with the music elegantly engraved on copper plates, inserted at the end. It is dated, as you see, 1729. Now this edition, dated 1765, printed for J. and R. Tonson, is ---'

'Well, well,' put in the Musician, 'let's take that as read.'

'Very well,' said the Collector, putting the book down. 'We will pass to the folios - oblong folios. Now here we have ---'

The Musician groaned.

'- a rather rare edition, called THE EXCELLENT CHOICE, being a Collection of the most favourite Old Song Tunes in 'The Beggar's Opera' set for 3 voices in the manner of catches. Ob. folio, published by John Walsh, about 1740-5.

'The title is appropriate, for Dr. Pepusch could not possibly have picked a more delightful set of sixty-nine tunes than those he chose for Gay's opera. Then here's another oblong folio - harmonised by Dr. Arne -'

'Also to be taken as read,' said the Musician, lighting another cigarette.

'So be it, we will let editions alone. Now why was it called the *Beggar's Opera*?'

'If it will gratify you to tell me, I am all ears.'

'Well, in the original and all early editions of the opera there is a preliminary 'scene' between a Beggar and a Player. The Beggar says that "This piece was originally writ for the celebrating the marriage of James Chanter and Moll Lay, two most excellent ballad singers, and I have introduced the similes that are in all your celebrated operas - the Swallow, the Moth, the Bee, the Ship, the Flower, etc. Besides I have a prison scene which the ladies always reckon charmingly pathetick. As to the parts, I have observed such nice impartiality to our two ladies that it is impossible for either of them to take offence." The Beggar tells us, further, that the piece "hath been frequently presented by ourselves in our great room at St. Giles." And so that mystery of the title *Beggar's Opera* is made plain. How Miss Fenton, who took Polly Peachum, married a title, and how Mr. Walker played Macheath we need not enter into. It is quite plain that the success of *The Beggar's Opera* was in a great measure due to the fine sturdy English tunes which made up the musical portion. If it pelted off the stage the pseudo-Italian operas of the day by "Lumps of Pudding" (the final tune in the opera), it was all to the good, for an unnatural growth was getting a fast root, and the management of the little theatre in Lincoln Inn's Fields was clever enough to see its possibilities. The opera was first produced on January 29th, 1727-8. The copyright was sold by Gay to John Watts, the printer, and Jacob Tonson, the bookseller, in the following February, for £94 10s. This included the Fables which Gay had written to amuse that nice young gentleman, William, Duke of Cumberland, afterwards called the *Butcher of Culloden*.'

'A pretty good bargain for Messrs. Watts and Tonson - a popular opera and an equally popular book for £94 10s.! It looks as if John Gay had asked the round sum of £100, and the two old foxes had beaten him down, guinea by guinea.'

'Publishers of the present day have a rather nasty trick of doing the same,' said the Musician.

'The picture of that particular life that *The Beggar's Opera* deals with is sordid enough, and Gay touches it in with the vigour of a Fielding. The "Jonathan Wild" of that author and Gay's masterpiece contain some of the strongest writing that the eighteenth century saw. But now I will tell you further of the ballad operas that followed the Beggar's, for there were shoals of them. First we will deal with Polly, the sequel, in which all the characters for their misdeeds are transported to the plantations. Now political influence kept this work from being performed -

'Thanks, old man, for your interesting discourse,' said the Musician rising, 'but I must be off. I've an engagement with a man. Ta ta,' and the Musician was gone.

'Whenever I get interested in my subject that young man always flies away.' And the Collector sadly put his books away and reached for his paste pot again.

FRANK KIDSON.