

## THE COLLECTOR ON COUNTRY DANCES

THE young lady who was ushered into the presence of the Collector was one who showed a determination to get at the root of things.

She mentioned, as an introduction, the name of a dear friend of the Collector's, who had told her to apply for the information she sought from the one who could so well supply it. He had told her that the Collector's hoard of old dance books, from seventeenth century Playfords, down to the Victorian ballroom dances, was such as no public or private library could boast; save perhaps the British Museum, and he ran that close, she was informed. Now the Collector was not a dancing man, but lookers-on see most of the game, and from the reign of Charles the Second to that of our late Queen Victoria, the Collector could furnish you with every popular dance measure you desired.

The Collector received the lady with that old-world courtesy for which he was noted. For certain reasons, professional and otherwise, the lady was wishful to know all about those country dances and folk-dances that were so popular just now. Could the Collector tell her something about them, and their history?

The Collector could, and was quite willing to give the benefit of his knowledge and the run of his library to so earnest a student. He led her to a shelf full of small, oblong-shaped books - the shape of cheque books - and proceeded to expound. This particular shape, he assured her, was used as a convenience to the old dancing-masters who, travelling from house to house, or school to school, placed the dance-book in one tail coat pocket, and his kit (a small violin, which he played as he danced) in the other.

This form, he told her, was used from 1650 to at least 1839, and, pulling out a seventeenth-century edition of *The Dancing Master*, and a dance book of the last-named year, showed how this shape had survived.

It was the Playford family - Henry (or perhaps even old John) - who instituted the practice of issuing twenty-four country dances in the autumn of each year, and every publisher of any note issued his set, generally binding them up into volumes of two hundred at certain intervals. As of course you already know, it was John Playford, Clerk to the Temple Church, who first issued books of country dances, even in Puritan times, and his work was continued down to 1728 by his son and successors until the original issue, with many changes of contents, had swelled into three volumes containing over a thousand country dance tunes, with different dancing directions to each dance. Here the Collector, to illuminate his remarks, showed her the different editions of *The Dancing Master* which he possessed.

'But,' said the young lady, 'are not these the survivals of prehistoric rites? I have been told so.'

The Collector laughed.

'My dear young lady, there are certain people who cannot take interest in a subject unless it is belarded with fictitious nonsense ---antiquarian mares'-nests, I call 'em. And unfortunately the subject of folk dances is one of those things which has got surrounded with a peculiar mumbo-jumbo for which there is little or no foundation. What do you, I, or anybody know about the prehistoric rites that are asserted to have survived in our traditional or printed dances? We can easily conjecture that prehistoric man danced as wildly and as gaily as the present-day people who frequent jazz balls, but that is not to say that there is any definite survival - no more than the fact that primitive man ate his dinner when he could get it, and enjoyed it as much as the man of to-day. Believe me that the dances and their tunes are both very delightful to watch and to perform, and there is quite sufficient delight in them as they stand, without finding fictitious romance of a prehistoric origin. If children of to-day "go round the mulberry bush," or play other games by dancing round in a ring, it is not, as some maintain, a survival of some early rite, but merely an

instinct that has belonged to all races of men of all times; the same instinct that makes young kittens run round after their tails.'

The lady began to perceive that perhaps there might be something in the Collector's theory, though it was hard to part with the fascinating thought that had been so diligently drilled into her that in dancing these country dances she was indulging in bygone pagan rites.

The Collector, having got his breath, still continued the attack. Taking from the shelf one of the Playford *Dancing Masters*, he began to read several of the directions, in which, for example, 'The first man sets to the second woman and the first woman turns to the second man,' etc., and so forth, with endless similar directions.

When John Playford, in 1650, published his first edition –

*The English Dancing Master* of a hundred and four dances, he must have employed some dancing master to invent dance-figures suitable for private schools where young gentlewomen were instructed in the art. Playford's wife kept a boarding school for young ladies, where all elegant arts were taught. That Playford intended his work for the use of dancing masters is indicated by its title. He had no antiquarian bias in the matter. What might have been suitable for villagers on a green was not always what might be taught to young gentlewomen. Therefore the chances are the dances would be either directly invented by the man whom Playford employed (and of whom in his 1665 edition he speaks as 'a knowing friend'), or they would be such as were commonly danced in the schools. Playford gives on the title-page of his book an engraving of a 'Dancing Schoole.' That country dancing was an art taught to, and practised by, the fashionable world, all through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and even going further back, or forward, is sufficiently well known, and the names of famous dancing masters have survived. There was Josias Priest, a stage dancer, who kept a dancing school in Leicester Fields, and later at Chelsea, for whom Purcell composed *Dido and Aeneas*. Another was John Weaver (c., 1720), and Kellom Tomlinson also belongs to the same period.

The Collector reached down an engraving of this latter gentleman in a heavy wig, also showing his visitor the original oil painting from which the engraving had been taken. There was also a Mr. Isaacs. Any or each of these gentlemen may have invented the dancing figures for the different editions of Playford's *Dancing Master*.

'So pray,' concluded the Collector, 'my dear young lady, dismiss from your mind any idea of a prehistoric ritual in connexion with these pretty dances, and take them for what they are. Another thing,' he continued, 'although each dance had a different set of "figures" (or dancing directions), I do not think for a moment they were generally followed. There would be certain evolutions that were well known to dancers, and the chances are that the complex directions would be ignored and these employed instead.

'Now having finished with the Playford dances, let me show you my collection of Thompson, Rutherford, Waylett, and the other eighteenth-century dances. I can preach quite a long sermon on each.'

But the young lady, perhaps saddened at her romance of prehistoric rites being shattered, remembered that she had to meet a friend at a particular time, just then nearly due and so they parted.

FRANK KIDSON.