

THE COLLECTOR ON HYMN-TUNES

THE Collector had been raking together his many old psalm- and hymn-tune books. On the whole they were, it must be confessed, rather a shabby lot - so far as condition went; but they at least showed the godliness of our ancestors by their dilapidated condition, for they spoke of hard and constant usage.

There were one or two editions of old John Playford's *Whole Book of Psalms*, a work so great a favourite that from 1677 to 1757 no less than twenty editions were issued. The frontispiece of King David playing on the harp was a survival from Saxon days, for few Saxon manuscript psalters were without a similar decoration. There was George Sandys' *Paraphrase upon the Psalms*, with music by Henry Lawes - the early edition, 1648. A nice copy of *Harmonia Sacra*, published by Henry Playford; the 1714 edition, two volumes. Also in folio Weldon's *Divine Harmony* (1720), William Hine's *Harmonia Sacra Glocestriensis* (1731-2). In octavo and small oblong the Collector's treasures were numerous. Among them were several of Tansur's quaint publications, as *Heaven on Earth, or the Beauty of Holiness*, 1738. *A Compleat Melody or Harmony of Sion* (1738), and *Melody of the Heart* (1737). Another scarce oblong was Michael Beesley's *Psalmody*, and a similar book; William Anchor's *Psalm-Tunes* (1720), *David's Harp New Tuned*, Green's *Book of Psalmody*, Street's *Book of Anthems* (1746), the collections of Knapp (1747), Knibb (1765), and Ashworth, while many scarce local psalm and hymn-tune books from the York and Leeds presses, and a hundred more of greater and lesser importance were lying in a heap around our friend.

To him entered the Musician with a book under his arm.

'Well, old fellow, grubbing among your old stuff as usual?'

The Collector looked up. 'I don't like your flippant way of expressing yourself, and I'm not exactly "grubbing," as you denominate, but I grant that I am having what my dear old friend Taphouse used to call "a book fuddle."''

'I've brought the *English Hymnal* to add to your collection, if it isn't too new a work.'

'Thanks; I don't despise new works, if they are good. I've already gone through it.'

'I should like to know your opinion of it.'

'My opinion is perhaps a little mixed; I scarcely know what to think. It is a good collection, and there are many fine tunes among the 656 there given.'

'You see,' said the Musician, 'the chief point that strikes me is the reckless way in which it breaks through all traditions of the compilation of a book of hymn-tunes.'

'The editors, while printing any amount of good, sterling, sacred melodies, have boldly taken tunes which have never before been associated with sacred words. How do you feel regarding that?'

'As I said before, I am rather puzzled. One cannot say it is not legitimate; the thing has been done over and over again from goodness only knows what remote period. In fact, many secular tunes have got so wedded to sacred words, that it seems profanation to sing the original verses to the airs.'

'Examples, please.'

'Well,' said the Collector, 'take the instance of the German drinking-song, "Crambambuli," which few English people know except as the Sunday-school hymn, "The Mothers of Salem." In Germany the song is, I fancy, quite popular, and it appears in most collections of *volkslieder*. Another instance is the hymn "There is a Happy Land." The melody is said to be an Indian one, and probably correctly so. The writer of this hymn has, without doubt, found his original suggestion in R. A. Smith's *Select Melodies*, published at Edinburgh in 1827, where there is a version of the tune marked as "Hindoo," with some verses by William Kennedy. They are named "The Dancing Girl's Song," and begin:

*I have come from a happy land,
Where care is unknown.
I have parted a merry band
To make thee my own.
Haste, haste, fly with me,
Where love's banquet waits for thee;
Thine, thine its sweets shall be,
Thine, thine alone*

Then the beautiful hymn-tune "Stella" is deliberately taken from a song-tune of which the words tell of the woes of a young lady whose charms are not appreciated to the extent of a proposal. The song begins:

*My name it is Jean, and my age is fifteen,
My father's a farmer, he lives on the plain.
Of money he's plenty, which makes ma sae braw,
Yet there's nae bonnie laddie will tak me awa.*

It was published by James Maidment in his *Scottish Songs and Ballads* (1859), without music, and later in R. Ford's *Vagabond Songs of Scotland* (1901). Part of the song survives as a children's ring-game; I have often heard them sing it. The adapter named the tune after the village of Stella, in Durham, where he first heard it sung. Look at James Lightwood's book *Hymn-tunes and their Story*, for particulars.'

'Give me more examples, my learned antiquarian friend. Your discourses, like your cigarettes - which latter, by the way, I see you haven't yet produced - are excellent.'

The Collector remedied his fault, and the Musician, with a sigh of relief, sank back in his chair amid a cloud of soothing smoke.

'To continue, then,' said the Collector. 'I suppose you have heard of *Ane Compendious Booke of Godlie and Spiritual Songs*, printed at Edinburgh in 1590, and again in 1621. These songs were "collectit out of sundrie parts of the Scripture, with sundrie of other ballates changed out of prophane songs for avoyding of sinne and harlotrie." That is to say, in more modern phraseology, popular songs of the day were taken, rewritten, using as much of the old words as possible, and given a religious tone, while the secular air to each was retained. In most cases the effect is startling.'

'That reminds me,' chimed in the Musician, 'of an awful parody which, I am informed, is sung by a Liverpool religious body, in all earnestness. There was current a little while ago a music-hall song telling about a lady who played on the guitar so persistently, that when her lover proposed marriage, the only answer he could get was "ting-a-ling, ting-a-ling tay."'

*She only answered 'ting-a-ling;'
To all that I could say;
She seemed to live on ting-a-ling,
By night as well as day.
I asked her would she marry me,
And all that she would say
Was ting-a-ling-a-ling, ting-a-ling-a-ling,
Ting-a-ling-a-ling, ting-tay.*

'Now how do you think this religious body turned it to their use? Please don't be disgusted; they mean it in all sincerity:

*The bells of Hell go ting-a-ling
For you, but not for me.
On high they all sing ting-a-ling,*

*That's where I mean to be.
Oh grave, where is thy victory?
Oh death, where is thy sting?
For me the angels sing-a-ling-a-ting,
For me there is no ding.*

The air is, of course, one of the liveliest.'

'That is terrible,' said the Collector. I remember, he continued, my friend the late Miss Wakefield used to tell how the Salvation Army had appropriated her once popular lyric "No, sir!" and made the refrain, "Yes, Lord!" Therefore, my dear fellow, we cannot blame the editors of the *English Hymnal* as setting a new fashion. I see,' went on the Collector, turning over the leaves, 'that the new element in the *English Hymnal* is the introduction of traditional folk melodies, chiefly those recently collected by one of the editors and some of the members of the Folk-song Society. I must confess there are some very beautiful airs among these, but one doesn't feel quite easy about them being set to hymns. After all, perhaps it is something of sentiment, or is it our limited view?'

'Well, look here,' broke in the Musician; 'here's a Welsh air which, when I was a boy, had the refrain "Poor Mary Ann." One doesn't quite take kindly to mentally singing "Poor Mary Ann" as a refrain (No. 268).'

'That is an objection, perhaps, that applies to all hymn-tunes where you are familiar with the secular words. But I fancy the editors have a little ground to stand on in this particular instance. The Welsh air is "Ar hyd y nos," meaning "All through the night"; frequently translated as "The livelong night," and you will notice that Heber's hymn, which is put to the tune, ends with that phrase, and appears to have been written to this melody. Mrs. Opie's song, "Poor Mary Ann," was written to "Ar hyd y nos" at the beginning of the nineteenth century. I can give you more examples of secular tunes wedded to hymns.'

'I am at your mercy; but let me at least have one of your best Turkish as a narcotic.'

'Well, there is a tale going, which I don't believe, however, that John Wesley used to stand outside tavern doors listening to the singing with a view to using any good tune he heard for his hymns. He said, "It was a pity the Devil should have all the good tunes." The fact remains that the eighteenth-century hymn-writers made no bones about taking any secular tune they fancied for their hymns, sometimes from rather unexpected places. For example, the airs which had become popular by reason of their inclusion in the ballad operas of the day were many a time turned to sacred use. Dr. Arne's operas *Eliza* and his more famous *Artaxerxes*, were rifled in this way. "Water parted from the sea" was one of these robberies, and the very beautiful movement in three-four time that occurs in the overture to the last-named opera was used and named "Arlington" in the eighteenth century. "Lovely Nancy," a very favourite eighteenth-century song, has been used for "I love Jesus," and we might go on multiplying examples to show that compilers of tune-books have had no hesitation in using any popular melody which fitted a hymn they wanted to include. Also, this factor has come in. Where a small body of religious men has wished to enlist among their band a type of people - I hate to use the word - of the lower class, they are wise enough to use a popular air that everybody knows, and they feel they raise the melody from worldly usage by fitting sacred words to it. The Salvation Army thoroughly agrees with this method.'

'You perhaps are not old enough to remember the great wave of enthusiasm which greeted the Moody and Sankey hymns when they first came to England in the seventies. I can assure you they came as a revelation. Of course, musicians ridiculed them, and spoke of them as cheap American music - or rather, did not dignify them even as music; but if there is any holiness to be gained by singing hymns that must have been got in plenty, for everybody sang them - except the superfine - and I must confess that I am stupid enough to think that one of the most popular of the early ones, "Hold the Fort," is a bit of sterling melody.'

'Oh, dear!' sighed the Musician.

'Well, anyhow, to revert back to secular tunes used for hymns, you will find any amount of them chronicled in Lightwood's *Hymntunes and their Story*, so I can't think that the editors of the English Hymnal have gone so much astray after all. Time, which mellows all crudities, will settle the matter in its own way, and the folk melodies which appear to have got on your chest will either survive as hymn-tunes or they won't. But have another cigarette, and let's talk about something else.'

FRANK KIDSON.