

The Balladry and Folk-Ways Of Kentucky Mountaineers

In "Devil's Ditties" an Interesting Collection of Survivals From Another World

DEVIL'S DITTIES. Stories of Kentucky Mountain People Told by Jean Thomas. Also Songs They Sing. Harmonizations by Philip Gordon. Drawings by Cyril Mullen. 178 pp. Chicago: W. Wilbur Hatfield. \$2.50.

By PERCY HUTCHISON

THE "short-writer the Judge fatched in" for one of his terms on the bench in Morehead, county seat of Rowan County, Ky., happened to be a young woman, Jean Thomas, with a deeper interest in balladry than in court reporting. Or, if she did not come to Morehead with balladry first in mind, her attention was soon aroused by an old fiddler, playing and singing beneath a tree, a group of mountain folk around him. On inquiry she was told that this was one Jilson Setters, "Blind Jilson," who had been seen there on court days for more years than most could remember. Miss Thomas expressed the wish that she might hear all of his songs, one easily granted, for court was to sit for ten days, and Jilson was "almin' to sot hit out." The resulting collection is now placed before the reader. The first part of the book gives the mountain setting—lively and faithful word-pictures of mountaineer gatherings at wedding or funeral, or the more intimate duet of courting; the second portion of the volume is a compilation of some three-score songs and ballads, with harmonization.

The first description is that of the "infare-wedding" (one will note at once the Anglo-Saxon here) of Ephraim and Drusilla. There is music and frolic and dancing. And fortunately Granny notices in time that something is amiss, something that bodes the young couple ill if not at once corrected.

"Scrouged up agin" the old jam rock were the old woman, a-suckin' her pipe, and all of a suddint, didn't Granny drap her pipe an' let out a screech worsern if she'd been bewitched. "Hit'll fotch ye haynts and sorry luck," whinned Granny; "ye darsen sot the foot contrarious to the cracks o' the floor. Ye got a bound to stand the way the floor-logs is a runnin'."

On such things does the future depend in the Kentucky mountains, where young men in tattered jeans and young women in print frocks, the bride with her "waiters," sway and balance and turn to the scraping of the fiddler's bow. The nature of the songs sung as they dance will show at once that the new rhythms and the new steps have not yet ascended the Appalachian slopes. This will be the first stave:

*There lived an old man by the Northern Sea;
Bow and bend to me.*

Then this by the men, the young women replying,

Bow and balance to me.

The girls, however, have not yet advanced, but are still in line, back to the wall. Finally the young men come forward, with

I'll be true to my love if my love'll be true to me.

Eventually the two lines meet, and each swain swings the damsel of his choice, all chorusing as follows, and all couples fulfilling the demand made.

*Now you have one of your own choosing,
Be in a hurry, no time for losing;
Join your right hands, this broom step over,
And kiss the lips of your true lover.*

In the mountains the crooning of lullabys is called singing to "the least uns," but one will find under this heading in Jean Thomas's book nothing that indicates any great effort to appreciate either the child's taste or his capacity to understand.

The subject of "courtin'" among

the mountaineers should, perhaps, be of even greater interest to the antiquarian than any other, for its traditions stem without a break from the days of the cavaliers and from the troubadours of old Provence. However, pursuing the matter into the Appalachians, it is true, as Miss Thomas sagely admits, that "the mountain swain, courtly and gallant though he might be, could not well pour out his love beside a windowless cabin on the mountainside." Instead, then, he sings his love, not so directly to the girl, as to the hills and streams amid which both he and she have their dwelling. And it is not improbable, as the love-stricken young man pours out his heart to nature, that the bashful maiden will be listening behind some tree or shrub.

Since the collector of these songs has placed it first, it would seem likely that "The Brisk Young Farmer" is, perhaps, the favorite. The piece will not, however, make great appeal to the folklorist, for while there is evidence of an ultimate source in the border ballads, modern corruptions have pretty well obscured the original purity, as will be seen from the first stanza.

*I will tell of a brisk young farmer,
He is a credit to any man;
He courted a fair and handsome lady,
She did dwell in a western town.*

But somewhat further on come two lines which will reassure the reader of the ballad origin of the mountaineer's madrigal.

*He dressed himself in scarlet red,
His waiters all in green.*

A favorite ballad of the love-lorn is "Barbara Ellen," of which mention will again be made before the close; and songs of a like despairing nature, whether old or new, or part new and part old, fill a considerable part of the lover's repertory.

Court Day and the annual county fair have their appropriate songs and ballads; and in Rowan County

From a Drawing by Cyril Mullen for "Devil's Ditties."



the first seems to gain honor from the story of the Tolliver-Martin feud. This is a purely local composition, running to more than twenty verses, by one who "kept good friends" with both sides. It should be of interest to the student of Americana especially. "Funeralizin'" is taken scarcely more seriously than marrying, and

this is not because death is not regarded with concern; it is because the mountaineer takes everything so seriously that he is capable of little distinction. "When I'm come to die" is the mountaineer's admonition, "I'm a-wantin' Brother Jonathan to preach my funeral. He talks so pretty of them that is tuck and makes them as is left be-

hint sorrow for their fisteyness and orneryness. And I'm a-wantin' the worst way a fine big funeral occasion." However, he does not forget to add the qualification, "when the time is right."

This reviewer found the ballad collection somewhat disappointing

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but the quarrel is, perhaps, less with Miss Thomas than with the mountaineers. It may be that the hills of Rowan County have experienced an influx of "furriners" or have otherwise come under the influence of corrupting outside forces. Such songs as "Canada," "Frog Went a-Courting" and "Sauerkraut," to say nothing of other pieces in this collection, are neither indigenous to the region nor modifications of the noble or affecting ballads brought by mountaineer ancestors from England and Scotland. Of the ancient ballads, "Barbara Ellen" will be recognized at once as "Bonny Barbara Allen"; nor will one be surprised to find the final stanzas brought over from another time-honored favorite. Miss Thomas closes with:

*So they buried her in the lower
churchyard,*

*They buried him in the square;
And out of hers grew a red, red
rose,
And out of his a brier.*

*So they grew to the church
steeple tops*

*And there they could grow no
higher;
And there they twined in a true
lovers' knot,
The rose and the green brier.*

More nearly in their original form, and surely more nearly in their proper context, these stanzas will be found in the Child collection as rounding off the tale of "Fair Margaret and Sweet William." Almost in its pristine loveliness is Miss Thomas's "Lord Thomas and Fair Ellen," Professor Child's "Lord Thomas and Fair Annet," one of the finest products of border minstrelsy. We hope that when Jean Thomas goes again into the hills for "short writing" she will find more of the ancient pieces.