

'PODSNAPPERY' IN SONG

'I ADMIT,' said the Collector, 'that such absurd puritanical alterations make the offence more rank.'
The Musician was reminiscent.

'I remember, a little while ago, at a children's competition, where I was judging the singing, it was in the North of England – I remember that some local wiseacres had altered that delightful little song of Shakespeare's, "When daisies pied" – set by Dr. Arne – you know it?'

The Collector nodded.

'They had made the line:

And maidens bleach their summer smocks

into

And mermaids bleach their summer frocks.

Can you conceive it possible?'

The Collector laughed.

'I didn't know that mermaids wore frocks of any kind, winter or summer. I can cap the story, however, with another from the North of England. This Christmas, as I understand, a choir visited the local workhouse, and in order that they might not whet unlawful appetite for prohibited Christmas beer, instead of --

Bring me flesh and bring me wine,

in the carol 'Good King Wenceslas,' sang

Bring me cake and ginger wine!

'That recalls the curious alterations in "Wapping Old Stairs," in which the line -

Your trousers I'll wash, and your grog too I'll make --

was turned into--

Your waistcoat I'll wash, and cocoa I'll make.

'That reminds me,' said the Collector, going to his tightly-wedged shelves of shabby books, 'of James Plumptre.'

'Never heard of him.'

'Your ignorance, of course,' answered the Collector, returning with a thick 12mo volume in paper boards. 'I could tell you a great deal about the Rev. James Plumptre, Fellow of Clare Hall, Cambridge, but it is scarcely worth while spending time over such an ignoramus. This much I will say, that he devoted his leisure towards the reformation of the popular songs of his day, and his day, you must know, was in the first few years of the nineteenth century.

'With this end in view, he compiled *A Collection of Songs, moral, sentimental, instructive and amusing*. The words are stated to be "selected and revised" by the reverend gentleman, and the music was arranged by Dr. Charles Hague; the date of issue being 1805.

'We find a long introductory letter, stating the author's views and the views of Mrs. Hannah More, Mrs. Trimmer and others, regarding the perniciousness of a number of the songs of his day, which we of the twentieth century, no doubt hardened in vice, regard as blameless. He selects about one hundred and ten from the songs by Mr. Dibdin, which, he says, "with alterations, may be considered as excellent." These alterations he has made with a pen in copies lent to friends.'

'And what did, Mr. Dibdin say to such alterations ?'

'He appears to have accepted them with great good nature, for in a subsequent volume Mr. Plumptre says - "that far from producing any unpleasant altercation between that gentleman and myself, it led to a friendly correspondence, and afterwards to his contributing some of his compositions to my collections."'

'This subsequent book is the one I hold in my hand, and its abridged title runs:- *Letters to John Aiken, M.D.*, on his volume of Vocal Poetry and on his Essay on Song-writing, by James Plumptre, B.D., Fellow of Clare College, Cambridge, 1811; pp. 472.' '

'I am anxious to hear you expound.'

'Well, you must know that Dr. Aiken, of Warrington, was recognized by his circle, and a large circle it was, as a man of profound culture, and he distinguished himself by setting up as a critic of songs and the art of song-writing, being probably as ill-fitted to appreciate and judge light irresponsible lyric verse as a navvy is to handle a butterfly. Nevertheless, his judgement was held in great esteem, as was his book *Vocal Poetry and Essays on Song-Writing*, published at Warrington in 1772. A second edition followed in 1773 and a later one in 1810 - they are all there,' said the Collector, with a sweep of his hand and with conscious pride of possession.

'Dr. Aiken, however, moral as he was and exclusive in his selection, was no match for Mr. Plumptre, and the purport of the latter gentleman's four hundred and seventy pages is to show how lax the great critic and moralist really was. Take this for a specimen. Dr. Aiken in his latest edition had admitted Sir

Walter Scott's "Young Lochinvar"; this is what Mr. Plumptre says of that famous ballad: "However easy the versification of 'Lochinvar' may be, the story is not one to be related as if the conduct of young Lochinvar was not wrong in carrying off the bride of another man, even though he had first paid his addresses to the lady and been refused by the father. It does not appear that the father had forced the fair Ellen into this marriage, and even if he had, she was not at liberty to forsake him and go off with another."

'Another old favourite is next attacked, for Plumptre says:

"In your favourite ballad of 'Old Robin Gray,' Jenny, after she has married Robin against her own will, at the instigation of her parents, thinking her lover Jemmy is dead, when he returns, says, 'I darena think on Jemmy, for that would be a sin.' She is convinced that, being married to another, though her 'heart it said nay,' gives not only no licence to attend to her former lover but that thinking on him would be a sin ... The general moral of it is good, but Jenny gives way too much to her grief in wishing she were dead, and the wraith (or spirit) and ghost are mentioned as if there really were such things common amongst us.'

'We cannot attack Mr. Plumptre's morality, but certainly doubt as to his sense of humour. He is rather down upon ghosts, for he condemns this line of another song, "His ghost will glide over the green," as "serving food to this spirit of superstition." Of a line in a song by Shenstone:

I would hide with the beasts of the field,

Mr. Plumptre remarks it is 'certainly not a sentiment for a rational being, much less for a CHRISTIAN.'

'In the poem "Edwin and Emma," the author makes Emma speak of her lover's "angel face." This meets with Mr. Plumptre's strong disapproval. "The comparing human beings to angels I certainly do not approve."

'Rather hard upon a lover if he can't call his sweetheart an angel.'

'He must not even compare her to Venus,' said the Collector, 'for one of Mr. Plumptre's strong protests is against what he calls "heathenism." The song-writer must not enter into Olympia for

similes or invocation. Jove, Venus, Cupid and the rest of the myths, must remain such. Like Mrs. 'Arris, "there ain't no sich person!"

"That is rather singular, considering the age he lived in, when classical literature was such an essential feature of culture, and when scarcely an eighteenth-century song did not contain allusions from the Greek mythology.

We haven't time to go into one-fiftieth part of his objections to songs on this account, but I must tell you the fairies with him are equally taboo. He gives Dr. Aiken a sound rating for allowing a song to appear in his collection having a line mentioning the "fairy-footed hours."

'Some Irish poets of the present day would be literary-bankrupt if fairies were switched off,' said the Musician.

I need not tell you that Mr. Plumtre's sense of allowable poetic hyperbole is distinctly limited. We will close the book on this last example. You know Lord Lyttelton's delightful poem, "When Delia on the plain appears.' The verse:

*If she some other swain commend,
Tho' I was once his fondest friend,
His instant enemy I prove -
Tell me, my heart, if this be love?*

With indignation the rev. gentleman says: "The holding some other swain to be his enemy because she recommends him, I conceive to be unchristian!"

'Quite so; a very proper sentiment, a veritable Mr. Podsnap,' said the Musician, lighting a cigarette.

FRANK KIDSON.