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Strange But True

By F. H. MacArthur

In reading over the songs that were sung by our English grandfathers, it is interesting to note that many of them bordered on the obscene. Yet they lacked the coarseness and downright nonsensical stuff which in our day passes as "your favorite songs." First in favor among the old ballads was "Cheve Chase," and any one who has heard it rendered by a good male voice, must admit its popularity was not undeserved. I recall having heard "Cheve Chase" sung by a man at a country dance at North River when I was about 12 years old. "Margaret's ghost" was a runner up for tops in those days. This number tells us, in the long-winded space of 17 verses, how the ghost of the deserted Margaret visited the faithless William somebody in the dead of night, and bawled him out for his cruel treatment, and how William, the next morning eaten up by remorse, flung himself on Margaret's grave: "And thrice he called on Margaret's name, And thrice he wept full sore; Then laid his cheek to the cold grave, And word spake never more."

It is in this ballad that we read "And clay cold was her lily-hand That held her sable shroud." I have read and written a number of ghostly tales myself but this is the only case I've run into where a ghost appeared in a sable shroud. Maybe I am forgetting, however, that in those days ghosts could and did appear in the most unexpected places, wearing all manner of dress from mist suits to sable shrouds.

Then, as now, love songs formed the great theme of the poet's songs, and one is forced to the conclusion that, however unfortunate these bards may have been in other respects, they were especially fond of possessing the best looking of the female sex to love and cherish, and further, that "handsomest young gals" were as numerous then as handsomest babies are in this generation. What is there in the soft passion that allies it to poetry? Men who never penned a love ditty either before or after, have been guilty of putting into daggered verse the charms of their first love. Fortunately, for the world in general, much of this stuff has gone up in smoke long ago. Still enough remains to prevent our complaining of any scarcity. How many pairs of lips have been compared to cherries, or sets of teeth to pearls. How many eyes have been bluer than the skies, and how many red heads have been turned into golden tresses by the magic touch of a lover's pen. One lover who seems to have been deeply touched by cupid's dart tells us:

"Alas! when charming Sylvia's

gone,
I sigh and think myself undone;
But when the lovely nymph is here
I'm pleased, yet grieved with hope and fear."

A little further along in the song we read that after dying with grief after she leaves him, he revives at her return, while, all in some space of time, he smiles, freezes, becomes breathless and burns, whatever, that means.

Another love-smitten swain of those days sings:
"Enchanted by your voice and face,
In pleasing dreams I fainting lie."

I bleed fair nymph, I bleed, apace,
And, oh! I languish! Oh! I die!"

And now, we come to a sugar coated pill handed to a certain Selinda by her boy friend:
"As near a fountain's flowery side
The bright Selinda lay,
Her looks increased the summer's pride,
Her eyes the Blaze of day.
The roses blush'd with deeper red,
To see themselves outdone:
The lilies shrunk into their beds,
To find this fairer one."

One can't help wondering whether these particular offerings to their affinites, if they had affinites in those days, ceased soon after the wedding ceremonies were performed because many of those released afterward carry an entirely different tune and tone. Thus:

"Once in our lives, let us drink to our wives,
Tho' their members be but small:
Heaven take the best, and this Devil the rest,
And so we shall be rid of them all."

Another guy after reminding the gods how thankful he was when they gave him a wife later bemoans his fate in these lines:

"But if your providence divine
For greater bliss design her,
To obey your will at any time
I am ready to resign her."

Very few of these old ballads survive but several comic songs of that period have lived and are quite generally known and sung today. "Sally in our Alley," "Happy Dieky," "With a whole family of Derry Downs," are among these, not to forget that rollicking number, "Dolly Gray." Among the lyrics mentioned we might add the dialectic songs of Wales, Ireland, and Scotland, all of which seems to have played a role in pioneer days.

Welsh-English is almost always rib ticklers. As a specimen I give you a couple of verses of that famous song, "Of Noble Race Was Shinken."

Of noble race was Shinken,
Of the line of Owen Tudor,
But hur renown is fled and gone,
Since cruel love pursu'd hur."
Here is what "hur" was before "cruel love pursu'd hur":
"Hur was the prettiest fellow
At foot-ball or at cricket,
At hunting, chance, or prison-base,
Catspuit how hur could kick it!"

It is almost needless to say that one could go on and on praising or finding fault with the lyrics our grandfathers used to sing. It is not my purpose to do either, but to give readers of this column a chance to read a few of the old, old songs that have long since given up the ghost.

FIRE SOON OUT

HALIFAX (CP)—Fire broke out in the north-end plant of Irving Oil Company here Tuesday but was quickly brought under control. There were no immediate details on the cause of the blaze or extent of damage. The flames did not reach any fuel storage tanks.

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