CHAPTER II

ENGLISH BALLADS

FIRST of all let us attempt to define what a ballad is. In different languages the word has not the same meaning. A French man of letters uses the word "ballad" in a much narrower sense than the German; and even the German does not always give to it the same breadth of meaning that the English poets attached to it. Furthermore, exact scholars give narrower interpretations to the name than do men of letters generally. But we cannot restrict the significance of the word as certain scholars would have us do, simply because all attempts to establish a sharp line between ballads proper and other forms of poetry closely resembling them, have proved futile. The best way for us to do will be to take the word "ballad" in its very largest English meaning, as signifying a short narrative story in simple verse. Although the majority of ballads take certain forms, many do not; and it would not be correct to say that a poem is not a ballad because it happens to be in one kind of verse rather than another. It has been among my own pupils a matter of difficulty sometimes to distinguish a long narrative poem or epic from a ballad; they have observed with good reason that certain English ballads are very long. But they are not so long as to be compared with other forms of narrative poetry; and in a general way it may be stated that a ballad tells one simple story or incident only. Epics, in some cases, not only tell a great many different stories related to each other, but form what we might call a romance or a novel in verse.

We may at once attempt to state what a ballad is not. It is not a romance, nor is it necessarily a complete story.

It deals rather with incidents than with complete or full narratives. When we have one great collection of ballads, possessing a fixed order, and all dealing with or relating to one subject, as in the English cycle of Robin Hood, or in the Persian cycle of Kurroglou, then we have what has been called a ballad-epic; but it is really an epic too. With this view of the case you might ask if the "Song of Roland" might not be called a ballad-epic. It is indeed divided into a number of distinct parts, each independent of the other, arranged for singing, and having a burden or chorus. Were the term ballad-epic really admissible, I should say yes; but for the sake of definiteness we had better say no — especially as the style and tone are a little too high for what we usually call a ballad.

A ballad is not to be confounded either with a song or with a lyric of any sort, although the line of demarcation may sometimes be hard to draw. A song does not necessarily do more than express an emotion, independent of any story or incident. A lyric is any poem expressing one single feeling or thought of an emotional kind, and not composed in any classic or severe form of verse.

Now let us consider the general characteristics of the ballad. The word itself gives some hint of the character of the composition. It is derived from the low Latin, from a verb signifying to dance. In the Italian *ballare*, Spanish *bailar* (both meaning to dance), the English word *ball*, a dancing party; and the English word, adopted from the French, ballet, meaning the artistic professional dances performed in theatres, — we have the survival in modified form of the ancient low Latin verb. Originally the ballad was a song accompanied with dancing. But do not let this derivation cause any confusion in the mind between song proper and the ballad. The earliest forms of song were necessarily religious or military; they celebrated incidents. They were not really lyrics. The history of the term carries us back to very primitive forms of poetical composition, made in the days before writing was known, and learned by heart generation after generation, each generation probably improving a little upon the oral text. It is even probable that all the great epics of all countries grew out of beginnings like this. Primitive races kept alive the memories of their traditions, of their glories and their sorrows, by song; and the songs were publicly sung on certain occasions, accompanied with religious or war-like or other dances. Not all the people would be equally capable of singing; there would be famous singers or professional singers, like what are called the *ondo-tori* in Japan. These would do the difficult part of the singing; but the people would join in the more familiar parts of the song. Later there would arise an orderly distinction between the parts to be sung by professional singers, and the shorter or more simple parts to be sung by the crowd. The part to be sung by the crowd eventually took in English the name of "burthen" (burden). The word "chorus," sometimes meaning the same thing, is from the Greek; but the Greek word is of dramatic origin, and strictly speaking means much more than a simple burthen. The word "refrain" (from the French) is a better equivalent for our English burthen.

Now the first characteristic of the true ballad, even in modern times, is the refrain or burthen. It may be quite impossible to sing, but it represents the survival of the ancient burthen. Nevertheless, remember that not all ballads have burthens,—though the burthen is the peculiar mark of such compositions. Furthermore, remember that many songs have a chorus or burthen, by which they very much resemble ballads, although they cannot always be classed as ballads.

A second characteristic of ballads is their simplicity. A perfect ballad ought always to be so simple that everybody, no matter how ignorant, can understand it; and its emotion ought to be of such a nature as to appeal to the heart of a child just as well as to the imagination of a man. Every approach to complexity or subtlety is a departure from the true nature of the ballad. Therefore many of the most beautiful lyrical compositions of the nineteenth century, although ballads in form, are not ballads in spirit; for they appeal only to the intelligence and aesthetic taste of very cultivated people.

Most of the world's famous ballads, as representing popular feeling and a very early form of composition, were naturally written in the speech of the people, not in the language of the educated classes. So we may say that a third general characteristic of ballad composition is the fact of its being in colloquial speech, or even in dialect. But here again you must remember that not all ballads are so written, and that we are looking only at the general indications.

With the spread of education and the many social changes which have sharpened men's minds, it could not but follow that ballad writing as an art should become extinct. But this does not mean that the art itself is vulgar. Quite the contrary. It only means that the effects of education and knowledge destroy that capacity for purely natural feeling and simple expression that characterizes ballads. Educate the peasant, and you take all the poetry out of his soul. If you could educate him to the highest point, he would obtain, of course, a new poetical feeling; but the necessities of civilization allow him time to learn only the simplest forms of education; and these are just sufficient to destroy much of pleasure that he formerly found in life. Anciently woods and streams were peopled for him with invisible beings; angels and demons walked at his side; the woods had their fairies, the mountains their goblins, the marshes their flitting spirits; and the dead came back to him at times to bear a message or to rebuke a fault. Also the ground that he trod upon, the plants growing in the field, the clouds above him, the lights of heaven, all were full of mystery and ghostliness. Educate him, and he becomes a good deal of a materialist; for his gods vanish, his fairies and ghosts cease to exist, and modern chemistry, which he is obliged to learn something about, teaches him that the virtues of plants and the qualities of the soil that bears them do not depend upon spiritual matters at all. Furthermore, industrialism impels him to seek the great cities and abandon nature whenever he can find the opportunity. He is thus gradually drawn away from everything that inspired in former times his simple verse. At school he learns to express his feelings and ideas in conventional language; should he speak like his fathers, he is laughed at as a countryman. Yet his fathers, who knew so little, were capable without effort of writing such poetry that the greatest of our modern poets can scarcely do anything equal to them. The change is inevitable, and cannot be helped. But it has been so much regretted that I doubt whether a single poet of the nineteenth century, of any real importance, has not tried, and tried in vain for the most part, to write as good a ballad as did the ignorant peasant of two or three hundred years ago. Even at random, one can name a number of such attempts made by Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Byron, Shelley, Sir Walter Scott, Tennyson, the two Brownings, Rossetti, Swinburne. It would be folly to protest, in the face of such evidence, that ballad-literature is not worthy of scholarly attention.

A curious fact is the persistence of ballad-compositions even into our own time, and after the true art was dead. I am not now speaking about the poets, but about the common people. During my own boyhood, in London, it was still the custom to compose ballads when any extraordinary event occurred that greatly stirred public emotion — an unhappy suicide, a peculiar murder, a political incident of some unusual description. These were written in the language of the lower classes—I might say in cockney English —printed upon large sheets of paper, and sold for a penny apiece by the composer, after he had gathered a crowd round him by singing them in the public streets. Of course, in these cases, the songs were really vulgar, and without any poetical interest whatever; but the spectacle of the ballad singer and his ballad was in the highest degree interesting, for these represented the survival of habits and customs that gave to English literature a great deal of true and noble verse.

Now a few words about the general structure of the old English ballads. They were mostly composed in two forms, the quatrain and the distich. But there were many other forms. The distich form, very common in northern Europe, was less popular in England than the quatrain. The quatrain was composed with only two rhymes — the second and fourth lines rhyming with each other,—so that it would be possible to print the quatrain verses in distich form, though the lines might be very long. Many of the ballads had burthens; and the usual form of the burthen was simple,—that is, it consisted of but one or two lines repeated over and over again with each verse. Most often the burthen was fitted into the quatrain so as to make a part of it. But this was not always the case. Those highly elaborate refrains in the ballads of Rossetti are imitations and combinations of forms that may be found scattered through our large collections of English ballads, with perhaps a few notions taken also from the ballads of other languages. Do not fail to observe that these few remarks which I am making about the English ballad would also apply, with some modifications, to the oral literature of all Europe. Except perhaps the Italian, there is no language which is not quite as rich in ballads as the English — some are even more so.

An example of double refrain is most common with the quatrain; and in this case the quatrain contains really only two lines of narration, the other two lines being refrains. For example, the second line might be

So fair upriseth the rim of the sun,

and the fourth,

So grey is the sea when the day is done.

In such a case the second and the fourth lines of every stanza from beginning to end would be the same, and in printing ballads we usually print the burthen in italics. Here you may be naturally inclined to ask what relation does the burthen bear to the meaning of ballad. In the old ballads it seldom bears any relation at all to the subject—has nothing to do with it. Then you may ask why not. There is only one explanation that I can give you, and it is this: new ballads were generally composed to be sung to the tune of older ballads, and although the main part of the older ballad in such a case would be forgotten as it ceased to be popular, the old refrain would be preserved by the liking of the people for it—having been accustomed to sing it in a great chorus, they would persist in singing it even with the new ballad. Then, again, popular song-writers, having observed this fact, would presently begin to compose new songs with old refrains, knowing that the old refrains would "catch the people." If you bear these possibilities in mind, you will easily perceive that there is nothing extraordinary about the fact of a refrain having nothing to do with its ballad. In my opinion most of our ballad burthens represent the only extant portions of hundreds of older compositions that have been for ever lost. And my theory is supported by the existence of a number of different ballads, undoubtedly written at different times and all having the same refrain, or a part of it. Yet in some cases we find that the refrain, as in modern ballads, is made to bear a relation to the story. Such is the case in the ballad of "The Twa Sisters," with its refrain treating of the locality where the tragedy took place—

There was twa sisters liv'd in a bower,
  Binnorie, O Binnorie!
There came a knight to be their wooer,
  By the bonny mill-dams o' Binnorie.

On the other hand, in the ballad of "The Cruel Mother" there is no connection at all between the burthen and the story. It is worth while for you to copy the text of the whole of this ballad as an example of the most striking qualities of such compositions, especially because you will not find this version in the ordinary collections.

She leaned her head against a thorn,
(*The sun shines fair on Carlisle wall!*)
And there she has her young babe born.
(*And the lion shall be lord of all!*)

"Smile not so sweet, my bonny babe,
(*The sun shines fair on Carlisle wall!*)
And ye smile so sweet, ye'll smile me dead."
(*And the lion shall be lord of all!*)

She's howket a grave by the light of the moon,
(*The sun shines fair on Carlisle wall!*)
And there she's buried her sweet babe in.
(*And the lion shall be lord of all!*)

As she was going to the church,
(*The sun shines fair on Carlisle wall!*)
She saw a sweet babe in the porch.
(*And the lion shall be lord of all!*)

"O bonny babe, an ye were mine,
(*The sun shines fair on Carlisle wall!*)
I'd clad ye in silk and sabelline."
(*And the lion shall be lord of all!*)

"O mother mine, when I was thine,
(*The sun shines fair on Carlisle wall!*)
To me ye were not half so kind.
(*And the lion shall be lord of all!*)

"But now I'm in the heavens hie,
(*The sun shines fair on Carlisle wall!*)
And ye have the pains of hell to dree."
(*And the lion shall be lord of all!*)

Here we have a story told in a few lines, but with extraordinary power, for once read, this ballad never can be forgotten. A young girl, to hide her shame, determines to kill her illegitimate child, but at the moment of the act, the child smiles in her face, and this almost prevents the crime. Nevertheless it is accomplished, the child is secretly buried; no one knows of the act; and the mother returns to her life in society as if nothing had happened. But one day as she is about to enter a church, she sees a child of such remarkable beauty that her natural affection is aroused, and she cannot help saying to the little creature, "Oh, how beautifully I should dress you if you were my boy." The child's answer immediately reveals to her that she is speaking to the ghost of the child she has murdered,—"O mother, when I was your boy, you were not so kind!" The great art of this poem — probably the composition of some peasant — is all in the second verse. This is intensely human, and terribly touching.

Sir Walter Scott, who heard this ballad sung to him by his nurse when he was a child, afterwards made an imitation of it, using the first half of the burthen, and in the second half substituting "Love" for "the lion." His imitation is very pretty and very touching in its way; but it lacks altogether the weird power of the old ballad.

This is the common form of double burthen. Triple burthens occur sometimes. The Quadruple are very rare. Generally speaking, the refrain is more frequent in the northern English or Scotch ballad than in the English ballads proper. A majority of our ballads have, indeed, no refrain at all. All those elaborate forms of burthen, such as you find in Rossetti and in Swinburne, are quite foreign to the spirit and simplicity of the old burthens, and must be regarded as of purely modern construction.

I need not go to any greater length on the subject of the refrain. The next thing to observe is that the bulk of English ballads are verses of eight syllables, this being euphonically the most natural form of English construction. Now, as regards the value of these compositions to you, a few words will be necessary. Although ballad-literature contains many beauties of an astonishing kind, you would make a great mistake in supposing that the general average of the compositions is high. Quite the contrary is the case. Our great collections of ballads, notably that of Professor Child, contain a very large amount of insignificant or vulgar material, quite useless to the man of letters. Nevertheless the man of letters must read them. The precious part of such literature exists only as gold exists in the natural state, mixed with various forms of sand or of hard rock. Sometimes we find an absolutely perfect ballad, just as a gold miner sometimes finds a lump or nugget of pure gold. But this is rare. The study of ballads requires great patience; and in your case especially so, because most of them, and nearly all the best, are in dialect, and cannot be properly studied without the help of a glossary. Furthermore, the worth of such study must depend entirely upon your individual capacity for poetical feeling; this is of nature, and if you have it not, it is of no use to occupy yourselves with the study at all. But, if on reading a few of the best of such compositions, you feel your heart moved by them, I should then by all means advise you to follow up the study; for it would certainly have a considerable effect upon your literary studies and tastes in other directions. Again, those of you who know French and German would do well to pay a corresponding attention to the French and German ballads, especially the German.

The influence of the ballads in modern poetry was perhaps more marked in Germany than in England, and the first publication of the English ballads by Bishop Percy had an immense effect upon German poetry. In the time of Percy, Dr. Johnson strongly attacked the new taste, from the classical point of view, but in spite of his opposition, the imitation of the ballad began even in his own time. Goldsmith, for example, with his ballad of "Edwin and Angelina," shows the influence; but the poem itself also shows how little Goldsmith really understood how much the ballad form depends for success upon its simplicity. Such lines as

To where yon taper cheers the vale,
With *hospitable* ray!

or

Where wilds *immeasurably* spread,
Seem *lengthening* as I go!

are in the pedantic taste of the time. No old ballad writer would have used such big words as "hospitable," "immeasurably," or even "lengthening." The old singers used words of two syllables only when they could not find a word of one to express their meaning. So Goldsmith's poem, although a ballad, is by no means a successful imitation. Burns was a song writer rather than a balladist; and before Sir Walter Scott we have scarcely any noteworthy imitations of the old ballad, except the magnificent composition of Hamilton of Bangour, "The Braes of Yarrow," beginning

Busk ye, busk ye, my bony bony bride.

The only criticism to be made of Hamilton's composition is that its rhyme and melody are too astonishingly perfect. We have no ancient ballad of so complicated a form. Coleridge's "Love" is open to the same objection as Goldsmith's composition, though in a lesser degree. It is obviously artificial. Wordsworth's ballads, some of them, come much nearer to the proper standard of simplicity. But Sir Walter Scott, who from childhood heard the old Scotch ballads sung by the people, and who knew the dialect as a mother tongue, was really the first to imitate the old ballad with a fair degree of success. The difficulty of the feat was not, perhaps, appreciated until a later day. Of great Victorian singers, very few have been able to do as well as Sir Walter Scott. The best examples of which I can think for the moment are Tennyson's "Lady Clare" and Rossetti's "Stratton Water." As a rule our best poets understand that it is almost impossible to repeat the feats of ancient balladists; and while they continue indeed to write ballads, these are compositions of an altogether artistic and very elaborate kind. The subject of the modern ballad proper belongs to lyrical poetry, and cannot be separately considered, because of the immense variety of the forms used, and the departure from all ancient rules.

And now it only remains for us to attempt some advice on the subject of choice in the study of the old ballads. I will offer only a few titles; because the reading of a few poems of this kind will be quite a sufficient test of your own taste in this direction. The two most important classes of ballad, in regard to emotional expression, are the fairy ballads, and the love ballads. Of the fairy ballads there are not many; but of the love ballads there is an enormous variety. Taking the fairy ballads first, I should remark to you that the most beautiful and most important of all is "Tam Lin," — and that the best version of this (because there are very great many versions) is that to be found in the "Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border." Next to this in importance is perhaps the very famous poem of "Thomas the Rhymer," to be found in the same book. Thirdly I would recommend "Kemp Owyne," and fourthly "The Earl of Mar's Daughter." The last mentioned, you would do well to read in the first volume of Child's collection.

Next about the love ballads. I think the most beautiful of all is "Child Waters,"—you will find it in Child's collection. Next in interest, perhaps, is the more fantastic ballad of "The Gay Goss-Hawk." And as the third, and as a tragical example, I should recommend that version of "Lord Thomas and Fair Annet" which you will find in the first volume of Child's.

Then everybody ought to know the ballad of "Sir Patrick Spens" (or Spence), and the story of "Glenkindie,"—about the harper who

Could harp the fish out o' the sea
  Or blood out of a stane,
Or milk out o' the maiden's breast
  That never bairns had nane.

If you want the horrible, there is nothing more horrible in ballad literature than the story of "Lady Maisry," which you will find in the first volume of Child; and if you want the heroic, there is no finer story in the same collection than that of "The Douglas Tragedy." The student also should certainly read some of Sir Walter Scott's imitations, the best of which are the terrible "Glenfinlas," "The Eve of Saint John," and "The Gray Brother,"—as well as some of his splendid translations of German ballads, which first gave him his reputation.

In conclusion, let us return again to the question of what is a ballad. We cannot make any better definition than this:—"A ballad is a short narrative poem composed for singing or reciting." In spite of all exceptions, remember that this is the important part of the definition, and that especial emphasis must be placed upon the word "narrative."

But you will very naturally ask, "How is it that a great many poems which do not fulfil this condition are called ballads by the great masters of poetry?" For instance, Wordsworth and Coleridge called their first work "Lyrical Ballads"; Tennyson published volumes under the name of ballads; Rossetti's first poems were issued under the title of "Ballads and Poems"; most of Swinburne's works, and a great deal of Browning's, has been given the same general name. Yet a great number of the compositions thus labelled are certainly not ballads in the old English sense, and this is particularly the case with the works of Swinburne. Here we have to reckon with the ambiguity of the word. What Swinburne usually means by a ballad is what French poets call *ballade,* a very complicated form of verse, which need not be a narrative poem at all, but simply a lyric. And the other great poets named sometimes used the English word in the same loose signification. Moreover, custom is now strengthening the ambiguity; and a new ballad-literature is growing which takes forms of the most elaborate lyrical description. However, please bear in mind this fact, that for you the study of ballad-literature will be most useful when it is made comparative and reduced to the simplest arrangement. I refer to the comparison between Japanese and European narrative poems of the simpler kind. The limits of this kind will become tolerably well established in your memory by the simple reading of those English ballads whose titles I have recommended.