

## On the Watchtower.

By JOSEPHUS.

Civilisation is largely a process of discovering the relations of life and reducing them to words. The reduction to words is even more important than the discovery. There are many obscure travellers who have made a voyage of discovery but have left no record of their exploits, and their potential contribution to civilisation has been lost. They may be those "mute inglorious Miltons," the poet speaks of, although a more advanced psychology of creative effort seems to think that conception and expression always go together, that the man who has ideas can express them, and that the man who cannot express them only believes he conceives them.

Be this as it may, civilisation as the process of reducing discoveries to words has the faults of its qualities. Modern civilisation has become a slave to words; we are the victims of our generalisations. We consider it the acme of culture to characterise a period or a people by some catchword which is supposed to sum it up with a scientific exactitude, and then we bandy those words about like coins of legal tender without worrying any more about the things they stand for. Thus we speak glibly of the Dark Ages and honestly believe that in those days people lived in a sort of eternal twilight and walked about wrapped in gloom and dejection in faithful anticipation of future generations which would describe them as the denizens of those Dark Ages. As a matter of history, people never enjoyed life so well as in those Dark Ages, and, curiously enough, it was in the monasteries that people enjoyed life with a vigour and intensity of which, alas, our jaded generation is hardly capable.

The Jewish people is also largely a victim of catchwords and *cliches* some of which are of its own making. Many words have the wrong emotional colouring. Thus we have become accustomed to look glum and dejected at the mere mention of the words Galuth and Ghetto. We have learned to regard people subject to those conditions as living in hourly pain. As a matter of fact the real Ghetto was a pleasanter place to live in than the emancipated lands in which we live to-day, and people in those ghettos lived a happier and healthier life than the life some of us lead in countries where we enjoy equal rights with other citizens.

It is not my object to sing a paean of praise about the ghetto but rather to criticise a habit of thought which prevails among us. I read recently in this journal an article about Jewish folk-song. The author is well-informed on the subject, but writes in a pessimistic strain. He admits that Jewish folk-songs sometimes cheerful and merry but they are seldom irresponsibly gay. "Their keynote is rather that of a medi-

tative gravity. One strange and significant thing is that there are no nature songs, no songs of hearty outdoor occupation, such as we find among other peoples. The whole trend of thought and expression is subjective rather than objective."

Now all this is hardly correct. The light-hearted, frivolous, irresponsible song abounds in the folk music of the Jews. Many of them are made of the same themes as those constituting the folk songs of other people. Indeed many of the latter are copied from Jewish models. Thus the nursery-rhyme "The House that Jack Built" has its twin in almost every country of the world. The Jewish twin is "Chad Gadja" sung in the family circle on Seder evening. There is a decidedly un-Jewish parallel in German "Ein Schweinchen Ein Schweinchen." Or take the following ditty which one often hears the children sing.

Ten little nigger boys standing in a line,  
One fell out and then there were nine;  
Nine little nigger boys hanging on a gate,  
One dropped off and then there were eight;  
Eight little nigger boys looking up to  
heaven,  
One fell over and then there were seven;  
etc.

The Jewish folksong that resembles it is about the ten brothers who dealt in flax, one died and there remained nine; the nine brothers dealt in freight, one died and there remained eight, etc. After each stanza comes the irrelevant and gayly irresponsible refrain invoking Yosel to play the fiddle and Tevya to play the bass. . . .

The allegation that in Jewish folk music "there are no nature songs, no songs of hearty outdoor occupation, such as we find among other peoples," is also unfounded. There is, for instance, the song which begins by asking "What is the most beautiful thing in the world?" The first answer is: "A beautiful forest." After the joyous refrain the second stanza asks: "What is more beautiful than the forest?" and answers "a beautiful tree," etc.

These songs of addition like the subtraction songs we quoted before are also to be found among other peoples. Closely parallel to the above Yiddish song is the song "Farmer in the Dell," which begins with the farmer and proceeds to his household thus: "The farmer choose the wife, the wife choose the child, the child choose the nurse, etc.

Full of fire and joyous exhilaration is the song of the Chosid. In his enthusiasm the Chosid frequently sings without even bothering about words, but accompanying his music by dancing and gesticulation. The music seems to tingle in his blood and inflames him to an ardour that carries him out of himself.

His song is essentially a merry one, for: "Der Rebbe hot gehaissen frailich sein."

Although there may be grave and morose songs in Jewish folk music, the burden of the Jew's song seems on the whole to be one of hope and faith. Take as an example the characteristic song:

Wer mir seinen, seinen mir;  
Ober Iden seinen mir.  
Was mir tuen, tuen mir;  
Ober Idishkeit halten mir.

Wer mir seinen, seinen mir;  
Ober Iden seinen mir.  
Wos mir tuen, tuen mir;  
Ober esrog bentchen mir; etc.

It is difficult to discover the pure state of the folk music of any people; the mutual indebtedness of Jewish and non-Jewish folk music is tremendous. Have not Heine's Lieder created the folksong of Germany? Have not the Hebrew Melodies inspired the muse of Byron? The German populace sings Heine's Lieder with a religious ardour, the Jew on the other hand seems to find only the negative side of his own song.

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