

Folk Music of the Jews.

By HENRY GIDEON.

Is there a Jewish folk song? What are the characteristics of this folk song, if it exists, and to what extent have the peoples who have wrought so mightily upon the destinies of the Jew influenced his music.

The Jews as a people have no folk music. The Jew in Germany has long since become a German, in England he is an Englishman, in America an American. And so he sings the songs of the country of his adoption, and his specifically Jewish contribution is lost forever. The only characteristic songs of the Jews are, first a few liturgical fragments in common use in the synagogue—cantillations which are probably closely akin to the chants of Biblical times but are not to be classed as folk music—and secondly, the Yiddish folk songs. (True, certain investigators, like the eminent Lazare Saminsky, find specimens of characteristic Jewish music in remote parts of the world. But for the present discussion these little known specimens of little known Jewish folk music must be ignored.) The Yiddish folk song is the musical expression of the Jew in Russia who lives a life apart from the rest of the world, thrust back upon himself, shut in with himself, forced to find in his own life the material of the songs he himself shall make and sing and perhaps himself alone shall hear.

These songs are seldom irresponsibly gay, though there are many cheerful and merry ones. Their keynote is rather that of a meditative 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. The Anglo-Saxon, seeing the flower lying by the wayside, picks it up without more ado; the Italian picks it up on a high B natural and puts it in his button-hole; but the Jew looking at the blossom lying in the dust, shakes his head sadly, and sings: "Little flower, thy name is Israel; like my race thou wilt be trodden in the earth and none will have pity on thee, though thou diest."

This grave and meditative turn runs through even those songs that one might expect to be the simplest and most unconscious. Mother sings her baby boy to sleep with a lullaby full of a fervent and touching hope that he may become wise, learned and pious. The child's trade is disposed of in a word—he is to barter almonds and raisins. But what is better than almonds and raisins? The Torah, the Holy Word of God, is the best possession. And Yankele shall study the Torah; he shall be learned, and shall walk in the way of wisdom—but, above all things, he shall remain a pious and faithful Jew forever. Of course, if the baby is a girl, such prayers and promises are not for her. But she, too, has her destiny to fulfil. "Go to sleep, my little bird, close your pretty eyes. You shall grow to be a lady; your clothes shall be of the finest; you shall have just such a little baby as yourself."

When the little boy is four or five years old he is sent to "Cheder," the Jewish school, where he will learn Hebrew, and study the Torah, as his mother promised him while he

was yet in the cradle. The little room is warm, the air drowsy; the teacher sits among the boys, teaching them their A B C. "Come sonny, pay attention. Learn your lesson well—I'll give a fine toy to the first boy among you who can read Hebrew! Come, now A, B, C—A, B, C."

The girl does not go to Cheder. Enough for her to help with the household tasks—and think about the important matter of a husband! She says in one of the songs: "Mother find a husband for me!"

"There's plenty of time for that yet, daughterkin."

"At least, mother dear, be thinking it over—don't put it off too long."

Or: "Rather than marry a rich man I'll take Herzl. He's poor, but he's so handsome, and he's a faithful worker; everything is worth while if I have him."

The traditional devotion to learning, so characteristic of the Jewish race, comes out again and again in the songs—even the song of the little girl in pigtailed and short frocks. Someone asks her:

"Will you marry a tailor?" "I won't marry a tailor—I don't belong to that kind of a family!" "A merchant?" "No." "A carpenter? A shoemaker? A musician?" "None of these—none of my people has been any of these things! But I'm very unhappy and very lonely—all the other girls are getting married and I'm left alone."

"Will you marry a scholar?"

At last! The very one she has wanted all along!

"Yes, indeed, I'll marry a scholar! O happy day! Now I'll go up and sit on the roof, and look around me and laugh for joy—all the girls are getting married and I'm as well off as they!"

The wedding songs are often—in fact, usually—humorous, and the wedding dance tunes, though sometimes mournful, are far more frequently lively in character. There is the song of the poor little old auntie, who comes uninvited to the wedding. The musicians are there. They came to play. They are not paid by the host—for he is the father of the bride, and he has enough on his hands since he is footing the bill for the ceremonies—and the supper! But if the fiddlers come they will get good things to eat, and, besides, every guest who wants to dance will drop a coin or two into the fiddlers' hands. Aunties comes into the room. She is poor; she has only a few pennies; she has not been invited. But who needs an invitation? Not she! It is her kinsfolks' wedding—and she will pay her way like anyone else. She gives the fiddlers a penny. They take it, you may be sure! "I told them the dance I wanted—no old Kasatsky, such as the Russians dance, but something up-to-date and stylish." They play. She dances till she is tired. "I'm only a poor old woman," she says, "but I'm still as sprightly as the best of you!"

Many are the jokes on the poor rabbi. "Something happened at the rabbi's house? What was it? Oh, dear; oh, dear! A robbery!"

"What did the thieves get?"

"Alas, alas! they took away seven splendid shirts, four with holes and three with patches. Ah, that was a robbery!"

"And what else did they take?"

"Worse and worse. Seven handsome candlesticks, that shone like stars; four of them had no feet to stand on, three had no cups to hold the candles—oh, dear; was there ever such a robbery?"

The soldier songs are often a pathetic expression of the trials of the Jew in Russia. They are always mournful—not because the Jew must fight; but because he must fight for a race, a religion, a country, in which he has no place or part. Even worse than this—if he must serve Russia he cannot serve Zion and Zion's God in the fashion of his fathers, but must violate his most sacred traditions and live in a fashion which is, according to his religion, infamous and impious. He cannot keep the feasts and fasts of his own faith, but, even on the high and holy days, must eat food which is to him unclean, ritually unfit for any but the heathen, in whose midst he must eat it. And when, after his three years of military service, he returns to his own people, only after long purification can he be again the clean and honoured Jew he was before, and his reproach pass from him.

It is this which moulds the Jew's thought of military service—not fear of death, not hatred, nor victory, nor glory. And to mother, wife, sweetheart of the Jew, what does military service mean? Possibly starvation—certainly bitter, lonely, unprotected struggle and heartbreak. The wife sings, "Things are not good any more. It was an evil day when they tore you from me to serve the Czar. Now what shall I do; what will become of me through such a long, weary time?" A young girl sings, "I stand by my window and a little bird comes flying to me. What does he bring me? A letter from my lover." She reads in the first line that her lover is lost; in the second that her lover is dead. She drops the letter and goes wailing to tell the bitter news abroad. "Come, everyone who has known a sorrow take mine, come and help me mourn." To be sure, there will be enough mourners and to spare, in that tiny village on the bitter, frozen Russian plains!

Nearly all the Yiddish songs are sung quietly and softly, for the enemy is at the gate. And they are nearly all in the minor mode, or in the old modes which we know to-day through the Gregorian chant and the church music of the middle ages. The open joyous major mode is little used in these songs. The major is the mode of a free people, singing aloud, walking without fear. "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"

In character, some of the music is unmistakably Germanic. More of it is evidently the assimilation of Russian folk songs with a certain orientalism super-added, and the line and colour of the melody remoulded to conform to the exigencies of the text. Few of these songs are more than three centuries old. They have arisen since the Jew has been dwelling in his latter-day Egypt.

They are the songs of exile.

Within the confines of the Russian ghetto, the Jew has sung these songs whether his own in substance or the transformed melodies of lands not his own. Always the words are his own, springing from his own life and thought, expressing himself deeply and truly. And still in these dark days the songs continue. Still the Jew treasures his race consciousness, which has endured for more than two thousand years.