THE BALLAD IN LITERATURE

CHAPTER I

THE LITERARY FORM, CHARACTER AND SOURCES OF THE BALLAD

DANCE and music have an almost inseparable connection; and poetry has a close association with both. If the Darwinian hypothesis of man's origin be accepted, dancing of a kind most probably preceded definite articulate speech and anything that could properly be termed music. In the primeval world of man it may well have been associated with some sort of rude chant, before instrumental music—except such sounds as those of the tom-tom—was attempted; and whether song, or the germs of poetry, originally existed apart from the dance, rude chants have been used as dance music, and as a means of arousing dancing fervour, by tribes in what is now deemed a very primitive condition of civilization. Even in the early centuries of the Christian era, the deeds of heroes and the victories of great warriors were amongst European

peoples celebrated in dance songs, though contemporary with these dance songs were the *chansons de geste*, composed by the minstrel harper and sung in the tents of the warrior chiefs or in the halls of the great lords. Minstrels of a ruder kind as well as female dancers were also accustomed to accompany the army for the special delectation of the common soldiers, as is mentioned by Ethelred of the army of David II. of Scotland, at the battle of the Standard in 1138; and it was apparently to some such camp followers that we owe the naïve mocking chant preserved by Fabyan, celebrating the Scottish victory at Bannockburn :—

> "Maydens of Englonde, sore may ye morne,
> For your lemmans ye have lostë at Bannockisborne!
> With heue a lowe.
> What wenyth the Kynge of Englonde
> So soone to have wonne Scotland:
> With rumby lowe."

which song, we are told by Fabyan, "was after many dayes sungyn in dances, in carolles of ye maydens and mynstrellys of Scotlande."

The *carole* was the ancient circular dance with joined hands, accompanied by a song and sometimes instrumental music. The oldest form of the *carole* was, like that celebrating Bannockburn, in couplets sung by the chief singer, the chorus of

dancers repeating the refrain. Originally the refrain, as in the case of the Bannockburn song, was merely imitative of some kind of action, or of the sound of a musical instrument. Later they were exclamatory, and ultimately they formed a line or two lines riming together. The ballad or *ballada*, derived originally from the southern Italian *ballare*, to dance — a word probably of Greek origin — was originally used in Italy in the same general sense as the *carole* in France. Dante assigns it a lower place than the song proper and the sonnet on account of its dependence on the aid of the dancers; but as the *ballete* in France, the *ballada* in Provence, the *ballata*, *ballatetta* and *ballatina* in Italy, it was later used to signify a form of the *carole*, of which there were also various modifications, created by the introduction of an additional rhyme. The word *ballade* was thus ultimately employed by French poets to signify an artfully constructed lyric of three rhymes — *ab*, *ab*, *bc*, *bc*, including a refrain, the rhymes being identical throughout the three stanzas—and an envoy of four lines rhyming with the latter half of the octave. The *rondet*, the *virelai*, the *rondel* and the *rondeau* were also, originally, additional varieties of the *carole*. On these various forms of verse the dance has left its impress. It has had an important share in shaping the metrical forms of poetry, just as its influence has

done much to determine the metre or rhythm of music. But in Europe generally, lyrism has become dissociated from the dance, just as many forms of music have become independent of it or of song, or of both; though there are survivals of the old connection in certain communities and in certain species of comic songs and portions of comic opera.

Of this old world of dance songs, now known to us mainly by faint and vague records and by imperfect examples and fragmentary remains of its verse, there is still a kind of surviving microcosm—or rather a partial and modified renascence—in the Faroe Isles. There we have the double anomaly of a lack of instrumental music—or any trace of its existence—and the extraordinary predominance of the dance song. Although songs are sung on certain occasions without the accompaniment of the dance, the motions of the dancers are inspired and regulated not by instrumental music but by song; and the mediæval world of song and dance has in quite a wondrous fashion been partially preserved. Another striking thing is that the dance themes of the Faroe dance songs are derived from foreign sources, chiefly Norwegian and Icelandic, a favourite subject being that of the hero Sigurd. The prevailing form of dance is the old circle dance of France and of ancient Greece; but the songs do not resemble

the old French *caroles*; they are mainly lyric-epic. In addition to the old ballads of native origin, but derived mainly from Icelandic stories or legends, various Danish ballads in the Danish language, facetious or satirical songs and modern Norwegian and Danish songs are also included; while the fisher people have very rude dance songs of their own creation. None of the native Faroe ballads can be older than the fourteenth century: most are later; and the introduction of the Danish ballads is supposed to have begun in the sixteenth century. Other forms of the dance are had recourse to on special occasions, and there are also various kinds of dance plays. After the marriage feast the newly-married couple and the guests, with the pastor in his robes, dance a solemn dance, singing a nuptial song of a sacred character; and then follows a kind of saturnalia of feasting, singing and dancing, continued until the following morning and resumed again next day.

According to its derivation, the term ballad might apply to any of the Faroe forms of dance song; but the oldest forms of verse known in England as ballads are the lyric-epics, known in Spain as *romances*, in Germany as *volkslieder*, in Scandinavia as *folkeviser*, in Brittany as *gwerzou*, and included, without specific title, amongst the popular songs of France, Catalonia, Provence, North

Italy, etc. From a comparatively early period political songs—including those of a satirical character—were in England usually termed ballads; and since a good many Danish ballads deal with subjects of contemporary interest, it may be that there were old English ballads now lost which did so. The old Scots makaris wrote also a kind of narrative poem or song, termed a ballad, mostly, but not always, relating love experiences. A fine example is the *Robene and Makeyne* of Henryson, in the ballad stave of *Chevy Chase*. So is the anonymous poem, *The Mourning Maiden*, possibly, under the name *the levis greene*, referred to as a dance in *The Complaynt of Scotland* (*c.* 1548). Non-amatory specimens are *Allan-a-Maut*—the oldest of the *John Barleycorn* songs or ballads—and *The Ballad of Kynd Kittok* in the alliterative stave of the old romances. These latter look like a kind of parody of the serious lyric-epic, now known to us as the traditional ballad. This kind of ballad for its full effectiveness as a song or recital called in originally the aid of a chorus and, probably, of the dance. Its refrain nearly everywhere was originally that of the simpler French *carole*, a form especially suitable for this kind of narrative song. Its essential function is to tell a tale—not usually, as in the case of the *fabliau*, with a view to awaken mirth, though at a later period mirth and satire adopted the old

ballad forms—but to stir the deeper and more serious emotions, wonder, terror, sorrow, exultation. A species of the ballad is, also, somewhat allied to the old *chanson de geste*. Many Danish ballads are a kind of revival in a new form of the old heroic lays; the short episodic romances of Spain in eight-syllabled assonants are founded directly on the longer *cantares de gesta*; in the fifteenth and sixteenth century ballads of France and Northern Italy, contemporary events are also represented; and in Britain the Robin Hood ballads, the later Border ballads and other historical or semi-historical ballads have a certain similarity in tone to the older historic verse of the early minstrels. But while the scope of the ballad theme is much wider than that of the *chanson de geste*, it differs from purely epic verse in that, while it is confined to a single episode, it is concerned with the thing done or the event that happened rather than with the personality or personalities. Its aim, whether recited or sung, or sung and danced, is to tell a good story about anybody or anything, no matter what or whom. The personalities might almost be labelled in algebraic fashion; they are there mainly to develop a dramatic situation, to bring about an affecting dramatic climax. To develop the situation the device of the riddle is sometimes employed, just as Shakespeare in *The Merchant of Venice* employs

the device of the Caskets; but the ballad is not to be confounded with what are affirmed to be improvised riddle songs. Nor can mere coronachs or lyke-wake dirges be properly termed ballads; for they have no tale to tell.

While the ballad lacks the measured rhetoric, the stately movement and pomp of epic verse, this is no sufficient reason for assigning it a special artistic inferiority. Its aim and method are different; and the goodness or badness of art is not a matter of special aims and methods, but of the successful or non-successful application of a certain method to the accomplishment of a particular aim. The aim of the ballad was more restricted than that of epic verse, and its method more complex and more dramatic. It sought to impress by the vivid representation of a single event, to bring home to the hearer its wonder, its pathos, its fatefulness, or its horror. It did so aided by music, instrumental often as well as vocal, and it often added to the emotional impression by the device of the refrain sung by a chorus, and at one time probably danced as well as sung. Abstractly, there is no reason why verse with such an aim should be artistically inferior to the old epic verse, however less stately it might be—that it should be less poetical and more nearly allied to doggerel. This would depend on the poetic endowment and artistic

efficiency or inefficiency of the balladist; and the fact that doggerel has now largely triumphed in many traditional ballads is of course no proof that it was always there. The opinion of Professor Child, gathered from various statements in his ballad introductions, as summed up by Mr W. M. Hart—*Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* for 1906—is that the ballad is "at its best when it is early caught and fixed in print"; and since almost none of the earlier ballads have been so caught until centuries after they were first sung, we may fairly conclude that originally these early ballads were much superior to such mutilated and variegated specimens as now, for the most part, are all that we have to represent them. True, some, as we shall find, more than hint that the genuine ballad of tradition is, like good wine, mellowed rather than corrupted by age; but great as may have been the respect of Professor Child for folk tradition, he did not propose to endow it with such wonderful gifts as the more extreme communalists are disposed to claim for it.

The earliest Danish MSS. date from 1550; and there are no early MS. versions for Italian, French, Spanish or other continental ballads. In English a rhymed account in couplets of the treachery of Judas (23), classed by Professor Child as a ballad,

is found in a thirteenth century manuscript in Trinity College, Cambridge. However it may be classed, it is not a notable production; but it shows no signs of debasement either in language or rhyme. Similar remarks apply to *St Stephen and Herod* (22), in the Sloane MS., supposed to be in a hand-writing of the time of Henry VI. *Riddles Wisely Expounded* (1), in the Rawlinson MS. of 1450, if rather silly, is hardly debased, certainly not so much so as the black-letter variation with its "Lay the bent to the bonny broom," and its "La La la la la," etc., nor as the Motherwell traditional version—inspired without doubt by the black-letter—with its "Sing the Cather banks, the bonnie brume" and its "And ye may beguile a young maid sune."

The original of a *Thomas Rhymer* ballad (37) is evidently to be found in a fragmentary portion of the MS. romance of *Thomas of Erceldoune*, dating from about the beginning of the fifteenth century, but it is hardly possible to credit that the so-called traditional ballad is other than a comparatively modern concoction from the romance: that the romance fragment, which evidently was never danced, should be transformed into its later ballad shape by the gradual processes of folk tradition, will appear to most people a plain impossibility, though it has been pronounced "an entirely popular ballad as to style,"