

VI. THE JOLLY BEGGARS.—A CANTATA.

(Nos. 246–253.) *Poems ascribed to Robert Burns, 1801, 1*; Cromek's *Scottish Songs, 1810, ii. 233*. This remarkable composition was written about the end of 1785. Nowhere is the genius of Burns more displayed than in this description of the lowest stratum of human life, and the portraiture of the individuals composing the society of the most depraved Bohemians. One true function of art is to provoke sympathy with all animated nature, and Burns was the first poet of his century who cast aside the artificial *Damons* and *Celias* of song and the affectations of the rhymer; he stepped out into the field of nature, saw it with a clear open eye, gauged it with a sound mind, and depicted it with the feeling that he was a part of the great scheme. No poet before him—except Cowper—sang of the weeds, the flowers, and the lower animals as subjects of affectionate regard. Burns's *Deil* was a human spirit who spoke 'broad Scots,' with whom he could converse in familiar terms, and from whom he parted on the best of terms, hoping he 'will tak a thocht and mend.'

The Jolly Beggars is a sordid scene of the dregs of humanity. The ragged crew are spending their precarious earnings in the most reckless manner. The microscopic analysis of the company, and the humorous portraits of the individuals of the group, are so exquisitely real, that a sneaking kindness is felt for the social outcasts. How the poem originated may be briefly told. On a winter

night of 1785, Burns and two companions left the house of an innkeeper and brother rhymers—Johnie Dow—and made their way through Mauchline. They were passing the door of a small dingy public house, in a narrow street, kept by a Mrs. Gibson, better known as *Poosie Nansy*, noted for entertaining and lodging vagrants; her assistant in the business was a putative daughter known as *Racer Jess*, from her fleetness of foot and love of running. Sounds of merriment proceeded from the house as Burns and his companions passed; they ventured in and joined the company. They did not remain long, but quite long enough for Burns, who in a few days read to John Richmond—one of the three in the adventure—some verses on the subject, and shortly afterwards presented him with a portion of the manuscript. When finished the poem was given away, and so little did Burns think of it, that in a few years he had forgotten its existence. Only one reference to it is in his correspondence, and that in reply to an inquiry made in September, 1793, when George Thomson asked for a reading of the poem; he had heard of it casually, perhaps through Richmond, who was then resident in Edinburgh. Burns replied, ‘I have forgot the Cantata you allude to, as I kept no copy, and indeed did not know that it was in existence; however, I remember that none of the songs pleased myself, except the last, something about :—

‘Courts for cowards were erected,
Churches built to please the priest.’

Nothing more was heard of *The Jolly Beggars* during the poet’s life, nor until it appeared in a Glasgow *Chap-Book*, issued in 1799. The demand was so great, that the publisher reprinted it in 1801, in a thin octavo volume with other unpublished pieces, as ‘*Poems ascribed to Robert Burns the Ayrshire Poet*,’ &c. In this volume, with *The Jolly Beggars*, appeared for the first time *The Kirk’s Alarm*, *The two Herds*, *Holy Willie’s Prayer*, and some minor pieces. The extraordinary power displayed in these poems attracted the attention of Sir Walter Scott, who had the volume reprinted, and a few years later, in the *Quarterly Review*, castigated both Dr. Currie and Cromek for refusing to publish *The Jolly Beggars*. The latter defended himself on moral grounds—to protect the fame of Robert Burns, as he said—and to prove his sincerity in the cause of morality, he printed *The Jolly Beggars* in the appendix to his *Scottish Songs*! Our text is taken from the facsimile of Burns’s MS., published in 1823.

Burns appears to have got the idea of *The Jolly Beggars* from a song of seven stanzas in the fourth volume of the *Tea-Table Miscellany*, entitled *The merry Beggars*—of which there are six—a poet, a lawyer, a soldier, a courtier, a fiddler, and a preacher. Each of the characters sings a stanza. The fiddler as follows :—

‘I still am a merry gut-scraper,
My heart never yet felt a qualm;
Tho’ poor, I can frolic and vapour,
And sing any tune but a psalm.’

The verses are not devoid of merit. A copious assortment of canting and begging metrical literature are in the notes on the *Jolly Beggars*, in the ‘Centenary edition’ of Burns. From what has been said it is obvious that Burns never intended to publish *The Jolly Beggars*. He, however, copied most of the songs into his *Merry Muses*.

No. 246. I am a son of Mars. The tune *Soldier’s Joy* is in Joshua Campbell’s *Reels*, 1778, 56; M^cGlashan’s *Scots Measures*, 1781, 32; and in Aird’s *Airs*, 1782, i. No. 109. It is still reprinted in modern collections of popular music, and is a favourite with country fiddlers. I first heard the air played by a pitman in the parlour of a Northumbrian inn before I discovered it in print. One of the editors of Burns mistook the melody and brought

a charge of carelessness against the poet in writing for particular tunes. The charge does not hold good; for the verses, 'I am a son of Mars,' have not until now been printed with the proper melody, and it fits the verses exactly.

No. 247. **I once was a maid.** Tune, *Sodger Laddie*. The verses are in the *Merry Muses or Crochallan Song Book*. The music is in *Atkinson's MS.*, 1694, and *Sinkler's MS.*, 1710, entitled *Northland ladie*. A song in the *Tea-Table Miscellany*, partly by Ramsay, beginning, 'My soger laddie is over the sea,' was reprinted with music in *Watts's Musical Miscellany*, 1731, vi. 110, and copied into the *Orpheus Caledonius*, 1733, No. 27. The music is also in *Bremner's Reels*, 1757, 22. During the eighteenth century the tune was very popular in Scotland, and often reprinted. In *Stewart's Reels*, 1761, 15, it is entitled *Sailor laddie*. Burns made a song with this title for *The Jolly Beggars*; probably he may have got the idea from the title of the tune in Stewart. In the version printed by Cromek, the third line of the second stanza of the *Recitativo* to the bard's song, a 'sailor' instead of a fiddler is named.

No. 248. **Sir Wisdom's a fool when he's fou.** Tune, *Auld Sir Symon*. This English melody, assigned to the man of the cap and bells, is above three hundred years old, and is well known on both sides of the Border. Its title appears first in a Scottish collection with the song, *Come, here's to the nymph that I love*, in the *Tea-Table Miscellany*, 1724, and later in *Herd's Scots Songs*, 1769, 13, to *Some say that kissing's a sin*. It is the tune of the Elizabethan ballad *Ragged and torn*, and must necessarily be older than these verses. Ritson considered it one of the 'Ancient ballads' referred to by Laneham as being in the bundle of Captain Cox, the Coventry mason. In the seventeenth century, a large number of ballads were sung in London to *Old Symon the King*, and Chappell, in *Popular Music*, p. 262, quotes five different names by which it was known. It served moral, political, social, and bacchanalian songs, but chiefly the latter. 'Symon the King' is supposed to have been a noted tavern-keeper who kept good liquor, and sampled it often himself.

'Says Old Symon the King,
Says Old Symon the King,
With his ale-dropt hose, and his malmsey nose,
Sing hey ding, ding a ding ding.'

A political song with this chorus is in *Loyal Songs*, 1685, 149. The earliest copy of the music is in *Musick's Recreation*, 1652. The tune is also in *Durfey's Pills*, 1707, and in the 1719 edition, iii. 143, set to a ballad rather less coarse than usual for that remarkable collection. The music was published in a Scottish collection in *Oswald's Companion*, c. 1755, vii. 6, and in *McGibbon's Scots Tunes*, 1768, iv. 102. Two songs in the *Merry Muses* are directed to be sung to *Auld Sir Symon the King*.

No. 249. **A Highland lad my love was born.** Tune, *O, an ye were dead, guidman*. See note on Song No. 214. Stenhouse says he copied this tune from an old manuscript, which he does not, however, further specify. A song of the kind was popular in Scotland at the Reformation, for it is parodied in the *Gude and Godlie Ballads*, 1567, of which the following stanza is a specimen:—

'For our Gude-man in heaven dois ring,
In gloir and blis without ending,
Quhair Angellis singis ever Osan,
In laude and praise of our Gude-man.'

The first part of the tune resembles the second phrase of the *Duke of Buccleuch's Tune*, in the sixth edition of *Apollo's Banquet*, 1690, and complete in the *Dancing Master*, 1709. It is also in *Macfarlane's MS.*, 1741; in *Oswald's Companion*, 1752, iv. 24, and *McGlashan's Scots Measures*, 1781, 7, entitled *Watson's Scots Measure*.

No. 250. Let me ryke up to dight that tear. Tune, *Whistle owre the lave o't*. A copy of the minstrel's song is in the *Merry Muses*. See note on Song No. 209.

No. 251. My bonie lass, I work in brass. Tune, *Clout the Cauldron*. The earliest imprint of the title and subject in a Scottish collection, is that in the *Tea-Table Miscellany*, 1724, beginning:—

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| <p>'Have you any pots or pans, Or any broken chandlers? I am a tinkler to my trade, And newly come frae Flanders,</p> | <p>As scant of siller as of grace, Disbanded, we've a bad run, Gae tell the lady of the place, I'm come to clout her caldron.'</p> |
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But the original is much older. As *The Tinker* it was printed in the very rare collection, *Merry Drollery*, London, 1661, 134, in seventeen stanzas, beginning—'There was a lady in this land.' The third stanza will show the connexion with Ramsay's version:—

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| <p>'I am a Tinker, then quoth he, That worketh for my fee, If you have vessels for to mend, Then bring them unto me:</p> | <p>For I have brass within my bag, And target in my apron, And with my skill I can well clout, And mend a broken cauldron.'</p> |
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The following note is in the *Interleaved Museum*, but it is not written by Burns: 'I have met with another tradition that the old song to this tune, "Hae ye ony pots or pans or onie broken chanlers," was composed on one of the Kenmore family in the cavalier times. . . . The air is also known by the name of *The Blacksmith and his apron*.' The note is probably by Robert Riddell. The song in *Merry Drollery*, just quoted, is indisputably an English song. The Scottish version was printed for the first time with music in the *Orpheus Caledonius*, 1733, No. 25. The copy in the *Scots Musical Museum*, 1787, No. 23, is that in the text.

No. 252. I am a bard, of no regard. Tune, *For a' that, an' a' that*. The verses in the Cantata are far superior to the so-called variant-song, No. 68. The tune is noted in Song No. 309.

No. 253. See the smoking bowl before us. Tune, *Jolly mortals, fill your glasses*. There are two tunes of this name—both English—set to a drinking-song in three stanzas. One is the composition of John Ernest Galliard (1687–1749), a distinguished oboe player, and chamber musician to Prince George of Denmark. He had the gift of melody, and composed a number of good airs. The music is in *Calliope*, 1739, and Watts's *Musical Miscellany*, 1731, vi. 182. The other and older air in the text is from Ritson's *English Songs*, London, 1783, vol. iii. Galliard's tune as arranged in Watts does not fit Burns's song very well, and the other is probably that which Burns intended.