

CHAPTER VI.

MUSICAL EPIDEMICS IN LONDON.

THE Londoners, of all classes, in the early days of my adolescence and young manhood, were quite as fond of music as they are now, though music-halls were non-existent. Vauxhall Gardens supplied their place, to a great extent. At this favourite resort of pleasure-seekers, every popular vocalist, male and female, was, at one time or other, engaged during its long enjoyment of public favour. There were two or three other minor establishments, such as White Conduit House, where instrumental and vocal music was provided in the fine summer weather, when out-of-door recreation was possible. But for the greater part of the year the middle classes, the tradesmen, the clerks, and others, resorted for amusement, at the close of the day, to drink, and smoke, and gossip at their favourite public-houses. Great

numbers of publicans held "harmonic meetings" in their parlours, when songs were sung, sometimes by the guests and sometimes by professional singers engaged for the purpose. Sometimes, but not very generally, these parlours were provided with a piano-forte, but only in such establishments (and they were in a decided minority) as admitted ladies to the mysteries.

Among places of this kind which I particularly remember, were the *Coal Hole* in the Strand, and a well-frequented public-house in St. Martin's Lane, kept by Ben Caunt, the noted pugilist. There were many others in the purlieus of Leicester and Soho Squares, and other populous parts of London. Many of these were frequented by persons of a rank and position in life who, in the present day, would not think of showing themselves in such places, even if they existed. There were then no palatial club-houses, to offer superior accommodation and more eligible company; so that the upper strata of the trading and professional and middle-classes, who did not always choose to pass their idle evenings at home, put up perforce with the best substitutes that offered, and found them in taverns and respectable public-houses.

The harmonic meeting not only patronised the favourite airs of the newest opera, Italian or English—and English Opera was then alive—

though partially moribund—but the old English songs which Incedon, Braham, Mrs. Jordan, Mrs. Waylett, and Madame Vestris had rendered popular. The consequence was that to a greater extent than in the present day—when all the best known tunes are monopolised by the organ-grinders, who are among the greatest, if not the very greatest, plagues of London life—the people, in the evident and most ordinary acceptance of the term, did their best, or their worst, to show their love of music, and express their gaiety, or possibly their vacancy of mind, by shouting in the streets the songs of the day.

This class of men and boys had always some favourite song or tune, which reigned in undisputed possession of the popular ear, which haunted alike the aristocratic square and the plebeian alley, was whistled by butcher and errand boys, shouted by costermongers, howled by beggars, sniffled in parlours and tap-rooms, sung by “dandies” at evening parties, ground by pestiferous organs and hurdy-gurdies, until it became, by constant iteration in all places and at all times, the terror of the studious, the disgust of the cultivated and refined, and nothing less than a public calamity and nuisance.

The first of these favourites to which I am able to assign a date was “Cherry ripe, ripe I cry,” a pleasant melody by Charles E. Horn, a musical

composer of some celebrity in his day. The next was "The Sea, the Sea, the open Sea!" neither a bad song nor a bad tune, which reigned, I think, in the year 1833, or thereabouts. Prior to that time, I have a vague recollection that the town had been haunted by a succession of other favourites; but how long they severally reigned, or in what order they followed each other, I cannot recall. Among the number were "The Soldier's Tear," which, for its allotted period, was a heavy affliction; "I've been roaming where the meadow dew is sweet," which was a milder kind of nuisance; "I'd be a Butterfly," which was, perhaps, the most ridiculous and provoking of them all, when sung by some portly costermonger of anterior and posterior rotundity sufficient to come up to the popular idea of an alderman; "Meet me by Moonlight alone," which was very lackadaisical and absurd; and a very pathetic ditty, that took captive the hearts of the young ladies of that day (who, whatever their present ages may be, have, in all probability, sons and daughters older than they were then), and which was entitled, Oh, no! we never mention him," and which ran—

His name was never heard,
My lips are now forbid to speak
That once familiar word.

This sorrowful composition must have reigned for a twelvemonth at least, till it was dethroned either by "All round my hat I wear a green willow," or "Shades of evening, close not o'er us," I am not certain which, for I cannot speak of any of them in their due chronological order, but only by guess-work. But all these, whatever was their sequence as respects each other, were superseded, extinguished, thrown into oblivion, and rendered *rococo*, stale, and unfashionable by "The Sea, the Sea, the open Sea!" the lustiest musical nuisance that ever took possession of the town, and that swept everything else before it with remorseless and irresistible tyranny. The parodies that were made upon it must have been numerous enough to fill a volume; and the copies of it sold must have been quite a fortune to Barry Cornwall, the author, and the Chevalier Neukomm, the composer, unless they were foolish enough (which I have no doubt they were) to sell the copyright to a musical publisher, in which case they got all the honour, glory, and success, and he the solid pudding. The song threatened to be as eternal and as unchanging as its mighty subject; but, luckily, the world is a world of change. Trees cannot be always in blossom or in fruit, roses must fade, and tunes that are continually dinned into our ears, in season and out of season, must end by forfeiting our favour. So "The Sea, the Sea!"

was consigned to neglect, and "Some love to roam o'er the dark sea foam," a composition to which I plead guilty, reigned in its stead; and everybody—speaking in a musical sense—went chasing the deer over the mountain and through the forest, and singing a chorus of "Oho! and Oho!" in celebration of the joys of a life in the woods. This song carried on the musical war until 1835 or 1836, when it, too, yielded to the inevitable, and died of its own excess to make room for "Kate Kearney," who dwelt by the lakes of Killarney, and to "Jenny Jones," who dwelt in Llangollen, two rival fair ones, who greatly wearied the ears of the town by the iteration of their charms through all sorts of voices and instruments. But Saxon and Celtic music was growing effete. A great but not beneficial change was at hand. A dark shadow of impending calamity hung over the musical and the unmusical world; and the nigger mania broke out with a virulence that has never since wholly subsided.

The infection was brought from America, inoculated into the blood of Englishmen by an operator of the name of Rice, who blackened his face and dressed himself like a negro—I suppose from the cotton, the sugar, or rice plantations—and sang a very silly, if not utterly stupid song, which he called "Jim Crow," and of which the burden,

repeated at the end of every stanza, accompanied by a grotesque dance, was—

Turn about and wheel about,
And do just so;
Turn about and wheel about,
And jump Jim Crow.

Nothing like it was ever before seen or known in England. To use a common phrase, "it took like wildfire." The famous dancing mania of the Middle Ages cannot have been a worse epidemic than this was; and the small beggar-boys of the streets—some of whom, it is to be hoped, are by this time well-to-do citizens at the Antipodes—drove a flourishing trade by imitating the fashionable comedian of the Adelphi, and "jumping Jim Crow" in the public thoroughfares by day and by night. It became an indescribable nuisance. Many must have been the sermons, the poems, the plays, the leading articles, the forensic arguments, and the mathematical calculations that it spoiled by its horrible iteration under the windows of studious men! But, worst phase of all in its unhappy history, its popularity was so great that it became the first of a series, which has lasted—with an occasional oasis of something better—until the present day, to disgust and plague the real lovers of music, and put them out of humour with the divine art that can be perverted to such monstrous purposes. The thing must have been in

vigorous existence from 1836 to 1841, when two or three competitors of a similar kind, but somewhat better in quality, began to struggle for and obtain a hearing. These were "Old Dan Tucker," who was always told to get out of the way because he was too late for supper; "Buffalo Gals," who were entreated to come out and dance by the light of the moon; and "Sailing down the River on the Ohio"—all of which were sung to excellent but not very original melodies, with the composition of which niggers had as little to do as they have with the government of Kamtschatka.

People who would have been sorry to associate with negroes, acted (musically) as if they themselves had been negroes of the woolliest and blackest kind; and nothing was to be heard but their vulgar jargon, until Mr. Henry Russell, popular vocalist and composer, managed to stem the tide of niggerism in some small degree by introducing "The Ivy Green" and "I'm afloat, I'm afloat, on the dark rolling tide." These had a very considerable run, and all but extinguished the black minstrels for a short period.

But a greater triumph for anti-niggerism was at hand. Mr. Russell set to music a poem never intended for a song, which was entitled, "There's a good time coming, boys," sang it at his "Entertainments" in every part of the country, and hit upon the excellent idea of inducing the

overflowing audiences, who had paid their money to hear *him*, contribute to their own amusement by joining in the chorus :

There 's a good time coming, boys ;
Wait a little longer.

The phrase and the tune took the public fancy, and drove every other musical pest out of the streets. Nothing was to be heard for many months but that eternal refrain, the guilt of which still lies heavily on my conscience. It invaded the theatres, the concert-rooms, the music-halls, and the public-houses ; was parodied in all the pantomimes of the succeeding Christmas ; and was actually taken into the service of religion, and sung every Sunday at the celebrated George Dawson's chapel in Birmingham, with the single alteration of the word " boys " into " yet " :—

There 's a good time coming yet,
A good time coming ;
We may not live to see the day,
But earth shall glisten in the ray
Of the good time coming.

It had a long reign and a weary one ; and though I am informed, on the excellent authority of its author, that it did not put a farthing into his pocket, it put many hundreds of pounds into the pockets of the vocalist and composer, and of the

fortunate publishers. It sold, in various editions, upwards of four hundred thousand copies.

By perpetual iteration the phrase at last degenerated into slang, and was gradually dying out, when another song from the same source, entitled, "Cheer, boys, cheer"—a far better song, with an immeasurably better tune—was brought into popularity by the same means, and sent travelling over the length and breadth of the land, until it became almost as ubiquitous as the atmosphere. When our gallant soldiers embarked for the Crimea, the bands struck up that tune, to inspire them with hope and courage, as they left their native land. It shared with "Annie Laurie" the privilege of being the favourite of the camp during the long siege of Sebastopol; and, at a later period, the ruffian Nana Sahib found it of good effect in encouraging the revolted sepoys to the attack or the defence, and actually ordered the band to strike up the air while he martyred the unhappy English women in the well at Cawnpore. Since that melancholy incident was recorded, I have never cared to think of my composition with any pleasure, though it was rather the music than the poetry that found favour with the ruthless wretches who committed the murders. The tune still does duty at Liverpool and other ports on the departure of emigrant vessels to the United States and the Colonies, and seems likely

to survive. Its London popularity lasted for about three years, when two competitors for public favour appeared almost simultaneously, the one a very silly song indeed, called, "Pop goes the Weasel"—how a weasel could go "Pop!" was, and is, a mystery—and a very lugubriously funny ballad, called "The Ratcatcher's Daughter." Both of these were insufferably vulgar, but none the less suitable on that account for the favour of the unmusical but music-loving multitude, that cares nothing for wit, or sense, or feeling in a song, but is carried away (by the ears) by any flowing melody repeated often enough in public places to become familiar. These lasted on the barrel-organs till 1854 or 1855, when they were dethroned by "Old Dog Tray" and "Willie, we have missed you," good tunes in their way, but strikingly deficient in originality, and founded upon Scotch airs, well enough known to the grandfathers and grandmothers of the present generation, but not quite so well known to the fast men of to-day.

About this period a song called "My Name it is Sam Hall!" fascinated the town by its singular blending of the tragic and the comic, and the dramatic manner in which it was sung nightly to admiring audiences, that, as time wore on, and its fame extended, included some of the highest members of the aristocracy, in addition to the ordinary middle-class frequenters of what were

known as "Night Houses"—of which "Evans's," conducted by "Paddy Green," was the best known, and by far the most respectable.

For a time, Mr. Sims Reeves, by singing frequently the song entitled "Who shall be fairest?" introduced it to very considerable popularity; but the song was of too refined a character to be entirely acceptable to the admirers of the "Rat-catcher's Daughter" and the great London multitude. And although it reached the organ-grinders, and became, to that extent, more or less of a street nuisance, its fame was ultimately confined to the drawing-room.

Shortly afterwards, the nigger melodies broke out again with redoubled fury, and stormed the town, to the sore annoyance of everybody who had his bread to earn in London by the exercise of his intellect, unless, perchance, he had chambers in the Temple, where no organ-grinder or street-singer is allowed to enter. I make no objection to the "music of the million," for music, whether for the hundred or the million, is the soother and refiner of mankind, and a beneficent agent of the highest civilisation. If instrumental music were alone employed to attract customers for the beer, the alcohol, and the tobacco that are the main supports of the music-halls, those establishments (leaving out of consideration the question of temperance or intemperance) would be comparatively

harmless. Music in itself and by itself is of necessity pure. "Songs without words," or songs of which the melody is played upon a wind or a stringed instrument, without any aid from the voice, are always more or less beautiful. Every tune gives some degree of pleasure, and no tune or melody can of itself, without association with human speech, convey to the mind any ideas that are not innocent. Music can express joy, hope, love, tenderness, sorrow, martial ardour, and deep religious feeling; or, by a discordant note, it may possibly express fear or anger. But music cannot convey the idea of indecency, spite, malice, jealousy, hatred, falsehood, revenge, or any of the mean and wicked passions. All music, in fact, is sacred.

It is only when vulgar, silly, or indecent writers of verse associate tunes to their compositions that music becomes linked in the mind with unworthy ideas. Music, in the case last mentioned, is in the pitiable plight of a Venus Aphrodite dressed, against her will, in the dirty rags of a street virago. And this is the offence committed by the music-halls that infest our cities in the present day, and form so many academies or colleges where nothing is taught or learned but bad manners and low vulgarities, with a superadded flavour of vice. Time was when English lyrists wrote songs that were alike acceptable to the rich and poor, to the educated and uneducated—songs that inculcated the

noblest sentiments of honour, virtue, patriotism, love, and friendship, and that, if they ministered to mirth, did so without offence to delicacy or reason. But if the world is to judge by the popular lyrics of the music-halls of the present day, the meanest and most prosaic doggerel has superseded poetry.

The immense leap that has been made from the high standard of our fathers and grandfathers to the very low standard of the year 1886, may be measured by the distance which separates such a magnificent song as "Ye Mariners of England," by Thomas Campbell, from the ignoble drivel that now finds favour with the multitude:—

We don't want to fight,
But, by Jingo! if we do,
We've got the ships, we've got the men,
We've got the money too.

The patriotic songs do not monopolise the applause of the music-halls. If anyone will look through the advertising pages of the London journals, and note the titles of the comic songs especially written for the entertainment of the frequenters of these places, he will have reason to believe that these songs, mostly written in the coarsest vernacular, appeal to the fancy, if they have any fancy, or to the understanding, if they have any understanding, of the least educated of the classes that supply the community with shop-boys, housemaids, scullions,

costermongers, and other useful but not refined people. He will also find, that if these song-writers want to be more than usually comic, or, as they call it, funny, they go a grade lower, and borrow their language, their illustrations, and their imagery from thieves and beggars, as well as from the wholly illiterate vulgar. As examples of the first class may be cited: "There's Somebody minding the Shop," "We're about to have a Baby," "He knew how to do it" (announced by the publisher as having had a *terrific* success), "Take this Sausage to my Mother," "It's nice," "They all do it," "He always comes Home to Tea," "Oh, place a Mustard Plaister on my Chest," "Tiddly Wink the Barber," "When the pigs begin to fly," "The Girl in the Eelskin Dress," "The Chickaleery Cove," "Champagne Charlie," and other abominations which there is no necessity to mention. To apply any weaker epithet than "execrable" to compositions like these would be too merciful to their vast demerits. The songs and ballads of previous generations stirred the blood to patriotic or tender emotions. The songs of the music-halls, if they stir up anything, stir up the bile and provoke nausea.

And even when these inferior songs of the million are morally unobjectionable, they are too often contemptible in a literary sense for the ignorant misuse of the beautiful and copious English

language which their writers display. One of the least offensive of these effusions is entitled "When the hay is in the mow." If this were good English, why should it not be followed by such companion compositions as "When the corn is in the reap," "When the sheep are in the shear," or even "When the cows are in the milk"?

It was said by the French poet, Auguste Barbier, who wrote in 1830, and who wrote too little, when speaking of the profligate Parisian song-writers of that and a previous time—

Il s ne savent donc pas, ces vulgaires rimeurs,
Quelle force ont les arts pour démolir les mœurs.

The same may be said of the "vulgar rhymers" of London, who are doing their best, with the aid of the music halls, to "demolish the manners" of a large section of the people.
