

who preceded them, few genuine remains have come down to us; although the tunes and modernized versions of many of the ballads which they sang have been preserved, such as the famous "Ballad of Chevy Chase," the mournful story of "Fair Rosamond," the adventures of the mythical "Robin Hood," who was not one but many, the doleful ballad of "The Babes in the Wood," a legend of unknown antiquity, of which it may be said that it has made the robin redbreast a sacred bird in England, and touched with compassion the heart of the roughest clothopper. The English boy will rob the nest of any bird that sings, or that cannot sing; but to disturb the nest of the robin, "the bold beggar with the glittering eye and scarlet bosom," is held, not only to be cruel and ungenerous, but unlucky. If the robin redbreasts could only but know how many of their lives have been spared for the sake of "an old song," and the pity which it has inspired, they would hover around the graves of poets as they did over the unburied bodies of the "children in the wood," and strew them with leaves in grateful remembrance of the power and tenderness of poetry.

In the days prior to the invention of printing, when the wealthy classes thought it no shame to be unable to read and write, the ballad-maker was a power in the State. Richard the First, the great Cœur-de-Lion (whose name is still invoked to frighten unruly children in Syria and Palestine) was unable to sign his name, but he was familiar with the poetry of the troubadours. He knew nothing of the songs of Celtic or Saxon Englishmen, but had committed to memory the choicest effusions of the Norman muse. And, indeed, if kings and other high personages, to say nothing of the gentry and trading classes, would not derive all their knowledge

of the affairs of this world from the priests, who possessed the keys of learning, or from actual observation with their own eyes, which was always difficult, and sometimes impossible, they were glad to gather information, combined with amusement, from the minstrels, who travelled all over the country, mixed with all classes, heard all the news, and learned all the opinion that was current. But the invention of printing gradually operated a change. The minstrels, who by this time had lost their original and honourable appellation, and were called "crowders," or "fiddlers," were thrown out of bread. They ceased, by degrees, to be the favourites of the wealthy, and found their only refuge among the poor and illiterate, and became of scarcely more repute than the mountebanks and merry-andrews of country fairs. An Act of Parliament of the thirtieth year of Queen Elizabeth classed them as "rogues, vagabonds, and sturdy vagrants," a legal definition which still applies in England to strolling actors and singers, and which might, with a little stretching, be applied to a *prima donna* on a provincial tour. King Henry the Eighth, notwithstanding the cares of State, his love-making, his wife-killing, and his quarrels with the pope, Cardinal Wolsey, and his great nobles, found time to write songs, one of which was entitled "Pastime with Good Company." In a MS. still in existence, and known to be of his reign, are two songs, in pure, though quaint, English, which may be quoted as among the earliest songs remaining in the language:—

Ah, my sweet sweeting
My little pretty sweeting,
My sweeting will I love, wherever I go.
She is so proper and pure,
Full steadfast, stable, and demure,
There is none such, you may be sure,
As my sweet sweeting.

The other, entitled "The Loyal Lover," is equally smooth and vocal:—