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James Ellis

Just over a century ago a young London journalist, drama critic, comic artist, and author of theatrical burlesques selected forty-four comic poems he had contributed to *Fun*, the best of many rivals to *Punch*, and arranged with John Camden Hotten, a man known to take risks, to publish them as *The "Bab" Ballads*.[1] In his "Preface," dated 26 October 1868, W. S. Gilbert made a modest claim:

> I have some reason to believe that the Ballads, which now appear for the first time in a collected form, have achieved a certain whimsical popularity among a special class of readers. I hope to gather, from their publication in a separate volume, whether that popularity (such as it is) is a thing to be gratified with. With respect to the Ballads themselves, I do not know that I have anything very definite to say about them, except that they are not, as a rule, founded upon fact.

Thirty-four of the poems were embellished by the author with grotesque little figures signed "Bab," Gilbert's nickname when a baby, or babby. For these he had even less hope:

> I have ventured to publish the illustrations with them because, while they are certainly quite as bad as the Ballads, I suppose they are not much worse. If, therefore, the Ballads are worthy of publication in a collected form, the little pictures would have a right to complain if they were omitted. I do not know that they would avail themselves of that right, but I should, nevertheless, have it on my conscience that I had been guilty of partiality. If, on the other hand, the Ballads should unfortunately be condemned as wholly unworthy of the dignity with which Mr. Hotten has invested them, they will have the satisfaction of feeling that they have companions in misfortune in the rather clumsy sketches that accompany them.

The ballads were not condemned as wholly unworthy, and were followed in 1873 by a second collection, published by Routledge, and

[1] *The "Bab" Ballads: Much Sound and Little Sense* (London: John Camden Hotten, 1869).

in 1877, 1882, and 1898 by other editions.[2] In 1904 Macmillan took over the sixth edition of the "Babs" and has reprinted them twenty times since, or on an average of every three years. Gilbert, who once told a correspondent, "I fancy posterity will know as little of me as I shall of posterity,"[3] would be astounded by this persistence of the public in its folly.

No edition of the ballads published during the author's lifetime contained more than eighty poems, and no later collection more than eighty-six, whereas one hundred and thirty-six poems can be located.[4] Furthermore, in 1898 Gilbert vandalized his own property by replacing a majority of the insect-like creatures infesting the poems with sweet, amiable imposters. Since then it has been these latter-day saints who have greeted most readers of the "Babs," but their good manners and refined lines are quite out of place in that bold, bad world. To get an accurate picture of Gilbert as Bab in the sixties, before his triumphs as dramatist and librettist began, one must examine some of the fifty-six poems he never collected and some of the hundreds of illustrations he either consigned to the certain oblivion of penny journalism or abandoned before ushering his comic verse into the twentieth century.

After an initial attempt to publish a poem entitled "Satisfied Isaiah Jones," which did not satisfy the editor of *Once a Week* though he found it "clever and amusing,"[5] Gilbert tried his luck as comic artist and journalist with a magazine as untried as he:

> In 1861 *Fun* was started, under the editorship of Mr. H. J. Byron. With much labour I turned out an article three-quarters of a column long, and sent it to the editor, together with a half-page drawing on wood. A day or two later the printer of the paper called upon me, with Mr. Byron's compliments, and staggered me with a request to contribute a column of "copy" and a half-page

[2] *More "Bab" Ballads* (London: George Routledge & Sons, [1873]); *Fifty "Bab" Ballads* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1877); *The "Bab" Ballads* (Complete edition; London: George Routledge & Sons, [1882]); *The Bab Ballads with which are included Songs of a Savoyard* (London & New York: George Routledge & Sons, Ltd., 1898).

[3] H. Rowland Brown and Rowland Grey, "The W. S. Gilbert of His Own Letters," *Cornhill Magazine*, n.s., LII (February 1922), 160.

[4] *Plays & Poems of W. S. Gilbert* (New York: Random House, 1932), with a preface by Deems Taylor, includes in addition to the eighty poems of the 1898 edition the six "Lost Babs" appended to Sidney Dark and Rowland Grey's *W. S. Gilbert: His Life and Letters* (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1923), pp. 241–260.

[5] Edith A. Browne, *W. S. Gilbert* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1907), p. 18.

drawing every week for the term of my natural life. I hardly knew how to treat that offer, for it seemed to me that into that short article I had poured all I knew. I was empty. I had exhausted myself: I didn't know any more. However, the printer encouraged me (with Mr. Byron's compliments), and I said I would try. I did try, and I found to my surprise that there *was* a little left, and enough indeed to enable me to contribute some hundreds of columns to the periodical throughout his editorship, and that of his successor, poor Tom Hood! [6]

Gilbert's contributions to the old series of *Fun* (21 September 1861 — 20 May 1865) cannot be identified easily, as all pieces were unsigned and no record of authorship survives.[7] By accident one of his early poems, "The Advent of Spring" (1 February 1862), was published in slightly altered form in *Punch* years later, with predictable results. In his diary, *Punch*'s editor Shirley Brooks explained the "mull" he got himself into: "I inserted some verse sent me by Emily Leith, overlooking her distinct statement that she had copied them. So down come letters from Gilbert, who wrote them in *Fun* 10 years ago, Tom Hood and Burnand. Made the *amende* and wrote Gilbert. *Mea culpa*, and nobody else's." [8] Brooks's fault is our fortune, leading us back to one of Gilbert's earliest efforts and his only attempt at sustained nonsense writing.

THE ADVENT OF SPRING

Under the beechful eye,
  When causeless brandlings bring,
Let the froddering crooner cry,
  And the braddled sapster sing.
For never and never again
  Will the tottering bauble bray,
For bratticed wrackers are singing aloud,
  And the throngers croon in May!

[5] "William Schwenck Gilbert: An Autobiography," *Theatre*, n.s., I (2 April 1883), 218.

[7] Fortunately the proprietors' files of the new series, edited by Tom Hood and his successors, identifying each contributor and the sum he was paid each week, have been preserved and are now in the Henry E. Huntington Library. Dark and Grey refer to a set of *Fun* in Gilbert's possession, with his penciled indications of authorship, but it has disappeared.

[8] George Somes Layard, *A Great "Punch" Editor: Being the Life, Letters, and Diaries of Shirley Brooks* (London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, Ltd., 1907), p. 542. The poem appeared in *Punch* on 26 April 1873, with the title "Sing for the Garish Eye." F. C. Burnand, later to become editor of *Punch*, was a *Fun* "regular" in the sixties.

The wracking globe unstrung,
  Unstrung in the frittering light
Of a moon that knows no day!
  Of a day that knows no night!
Diving away in the crowd
  Of sparkling frets of spray,
The bratticed wrackers are singing aloud,
  And the throngers croon in May!

Hasten, O hapful blue,
  Blue of the thimmering brow,
Hasten to meet your crew,
  They'll clamour to pelt thee now!
For never again shall a cloud
  Out-thribble the babbling day,
When bratticed wrackers are singing aloud,
And the throngers croon in May!

Although sometimes classified with Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, Gilbert never wrote nonsense like theirs except for this poem, a mechanical set of one-stanza descriptions entitled "Something Like Nonsense Verses," and a few lines in such ballads as "The Story of Prince Agib." There are no little birds bathing crocodiles in cream, no living in crockery-jars, no Jabberwocky. The brave Alum Bey, however perverse the application of Turkish words in his ballad, would not dream of going to sea in a sieve; he carefully dons cork jacket and trousers so that when the boat sinks with all hands he bobs safely and smugly on the surface.

The only other poems from the old series of *Fun* that can be ascribed to Gilbert are five accompanied by closely related, initialed drawings known to be his.[9] The earliest, "The Cattle Show (12 December 1863) describes conventionally if vividly the annual livestock exhibition in Islington. A week later a poem with the same title and subject appeared in another of H. J. Byron's journals, *The Comic News*. Per-

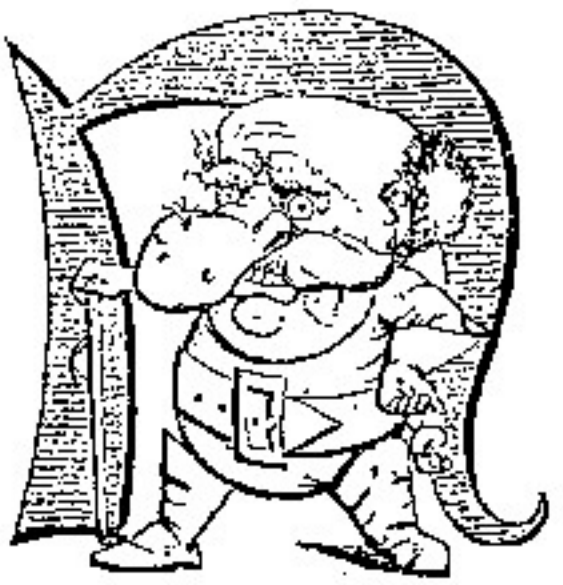
[9] Except for a full-page cartoon with the familiar "Bab" in the eighth issue of *Fun*, Gilbert's early drawings are signed with his initials. It is tempting but unwise to label any piece accompanied by "W.S.G." illustrations as Gilbert's. Several poems have been wrongly attributed to him in this way, most notably "The Lie of a Lifetime," an inordinately tedious polemic aimed at Napoleon III that ran for sixteen installments in *Fun* in 1864. Gilbert provided illustrations for the first six rounds of this dreary tract but assured a correspondent later that "the absurd verses were not written by me." (Letter, dated 29 January 1885, in the Reginald Allen collection, Pierpont Morgan Library.)

haps this too was by Gilbert, who was always economical, ready to re-use a joke, an idea, an experience. His name is listed among the fourteen contributors to this short-lived paper; furthermore, the last of his poems in the old series of *Fun*, "Down to the Derby" (28 May 1864), employs the same unusual stanza as does the second cattle-show poem. A poor thing, that poem, but probably Gilbert's own.[10]

The Derby poem, a galloping description of the trip to Epsom and back at Derby Week, has refrains brimful of Gilbert's (possibly all comic versifiers') favorite foot, the dactyl, sorted out into rhyming pairs of which he could avail himself for the rest of his career:

> Twiggery, swiggery, shinery, finery, laughery, chaffery, pokery, jokery. . . .
> Drinkery, winkery, palery alery, laughery, chaffery, crash along, dash along — . . .
> Cantering, bantering, cheering 'em, nearing 'em, spy away, fly away, dothery, bothery — . . .
> [etera cetera.]

By far the longest, most abundantly illustrated of Gilbert's poems, and the first to hint at the narrative technique of the later ballads, is "The Baron Klopfzetterheim; or, The Beautiful Bertha and the Big Bad Brothers of Bonn" (19, 26 March; 2, 9, 16 April 1864). An extraordinary facility with lines, poetic and artistic, is evident in each of the five "Fyttes" into which this exuberant descendant of the *Ingoldsby Legends* is divided. Here is the first:



NEAR the town of St. Goar,
On the bleak Rhenish shore,

[10] The peculiar stanza was not Gilbert's or any other *Comic News* poet's invention, for it was derived from the song "When a Man Marries," by J. W. Safe.

Dwelt a terrible baron — a certain
KLOPFZETTERHEIM.
I've not got it pat,
But it sounded like that,
Though whether it's properly
spelt to the letter, I'm
Not at all sure; I
Confess for this story
To memory (second-rate) only a
debtor I'm.
Indulgence I claim,
It's a high-sounding name,
And a name, too, to which one
can easily set a rhyme.
A growling and gruff 'un,
A ruthless and rough 'un,
A tyrant, a Tartar, a toothless and tough 'un;
His skull was as bald as the palm of my hand,
And surrounding its base was a silvery band
Of curly grey hair, and he brushed it well up
From ear round to ear,
So it looked, from the rear,
Like a very smooth egg in a very white cup.
He'd bricks, and he'd mortar;
He'd wood, and he'd water;
Sheep, oxen, and poultry, calves, pigs, and — a daughter;
Whom, though generally such points rather lax on, he
Swore was the loveliest woman in Saxony.

The Baron was wealthy, but horribly stealthy;
He'd jewels from Ingy, but still he was stingy;
Though rich from a babby, unbearably shabby;
Though steeped to his eyes, sir, in wealth, yet a miser;
From boyhood a dunce, always trying to shirk "*hic, hoc, Hæc*," he was stupid and proud as a turkey-cock.

Stealthy and stingy and shabby and miserly,
Every morning his wont was to rise early;
Search out each inch of his rocky dominions,
Count all the eggs and the apples and inions,
Listen at keyholes for candid opinions
Propounded by uncomplimentary minions,
In syllables hated,
For so was he hated
By all his dependents, for reasons just stated.

Superior far,
To her horrid papa,
Was Bertha. The daughters of barons oft are.
Her hair was fair,
And a flaxen rare;
In the fine land called Rhineland, the best, I declare;
Its charms, in a single comparison summing,
It looked like a "nimbus," but far more becoming;
Besides, you could brush it, and alter the sit of it,
Play with its folds (did decorum permit of it),
Tickle your cheek with a stray ray or so;
Now you can't do all that with a "nimbus," you know.
Flaxen, I said — I recant — not a bit of it;
A glorified hue
(You find it on few),
Gold mingled with brown — now I'm sadly put to
For an elegant noun
(It must be gold and brown)
To which I can liken this natural crown;
But commonplace thoughts prove effectual stoppers,
And I can't think of any but sovereigns and coppers.

In length it was ample, as you may suppose,
For when BERTHA so fair
Let down her back hair,
It rippled away till it reached to her toes.
She'd have made (had necessity ventured to drive her)
A *really* respectable LADY GODIVA.
It was long, it was silky, and wavy, and mellow,
And about as much "flaxen" as sunbeams are yellow.

Then her eyes!
Their size!
Their glorious blue!
I am sure it's a hue
That was solely invented our trials to leaven —
You'll find it alone in girls' eyes and in heaven!
When nobody hailed them,
She quietly veiled them,
Humanely declining
To send you, by needlessly flashing their light at you,
Hopelessly pining;
But when you addressed her she always looked right at you —
Right in your face,
With a maidenly grace,
That spoke to the truth and sincerity there,
And misconstrue that innocent gaze if you dare!

Now the Baron's old seneschal,
Finding the Rhenish all
Swallowed, he hied
For some more to the *marchand de vin*, who replied,
"Friend, never of Rhenish the worth of a penny shall
E'er again aid in his lordship's digestion,
Unless he first pays down the penny in question.
The Baron must think me as green as an olive! Hence he
Ne'er will get more without cash down. At all events he
Couldn't suppose I would act with such folly, ven, see"
(Opening his books
With disheartening looks),
"I am tottering just on the brink of insolvency."
So the seneschal thought
It was time to report
To his master the crisis to which he was brought.

Gilbert would never be more voluptuous in word and picture than he is here with the beautiful Bertha. In 1864 he was still an unknown,

unsung, unmarried Bohemian, a frequenter of Evans' and of the Savage Club, and host to carefree bachelors' parties in his chambers in Gray's Inn. Later all this was to change, as would his estimate of his youthful excesses as artist and poet, but not yet.

For two years (June of 1864 to May of 1866) Gilbert illustrated no poems in *Fun*, although he presumably wrote more in the old series and definitely contributed twenty-three to the new. In many of these he contented himself with commonplace situations treated with little distinction in conception or style. A young man sweltering through a hot summer bemoans the sartorial demands of the day ("Ode to My Clothes"); another glances with indifference at letters from creditors and a former sweetheart ("Tempora Mutantur," the earliest poem Gilbert chose to collect); still another compares the France of his recent holiday with the London to which he has returned ("Back Again"). An article in the Marseilles *Publicité* on "la grève des célibataires" forms the basis of one poem ("The Bachelors' Strike"); a letter to the *Times* about "Nature's grand atmospheric disinfectant," another ("Ozone"); and even a new system of publishing law reports, a third ("The Bar and Its Moaning").

One long anapestic monologue, "A Bad Night of It," offers some novelty and, to the Savoyard, something more:

A BAD NIGHT OF IT

"What, about to leave town?" Yes, we've got to go down to the THOMPSONS'
at Weybridge, in Surrey,
For a week at the least, and the wind's in the east, and I'm ill and I'm wheezy,
and Weybridge is breezy, and awfully slow, and I don't want to go, but
my wife did it all in a hurry;
But THOMPSON is rich, and a bachelor, which is important to me, for his brother,
you see, married POLLY'S mamma (he may swear at his star, for her ma is
a dame whom I podgy call),
So JACK THOMPSON'S her aunt — no, her uncle. I can't in such weather as this,
when you steam and you hiss like an engine, be genealogical.
And I'm thinking with dread of that awful spare bed; for you can't sleep a
wink, but you lie and you think, when you're stopping in rooms that are
new to you,
And to ask you to go to a place you don't know, and lay down your poor head
in an unexplored bed, when the weather is hot and unpleasant, is *not* what
a good sort of fellow would do to you.
You kick and you plunge, and you roll and you lunge, and you shake off the
bed-clothes that cover you,

With a terrible tickling, torturing, trickling, tingling feeling all over you;
You curse and you swear at the garment you wear, and you do all you can to get colder;
And then sick of despairing, and cursing and swearing, the sleeves you are wearing you roll away up to the shoulder;
Then the moon, which you know half-an-hour ago seemed the veriest ghost of a crescent,
Is blazing away, turning night into day, and quite round, and extremely unpleasant;
So you make up your mind just to draw down the blind, as a step that may lead to your snoring,
And you jump out of bed, and you damage your head, and you hollo with dread as you find that you tread on a terrible tack in the flooring;
And you look at the clock, and you see with a shock that the night has all gone, and you're far on to dawn, and you're ready to weep, for you've not had a sleep all the while, and it now will be soon light;
Then you rattle the shins of your tottering pins (they're as feeble as lath) on the edge of the bath, which, you then are aware, is the only thing there which is not lighted up by the moonlight.
Once again into bed, but this time with your head where your feet ought to rest, and your quick-throbbing chest all exposed to such air as there may be;
But that move no sleep charms, and you fling out your arms till a faint little shriek (shrill enough, though it's weak), from a fat little dot in a neighbouring cot, proclaims you've assaulted the baby,
Which awakens your spouse, and you then count five thousand to send you to sleep, but a vigil you keep for a half-hour's rout, for she ups and lets out in a way that would frighten a Gorgon;
But still you go through "eighty-one, eighty-two, eighty-three, eighty-four," and so through many more, while she's talking away till it's far into day, for her mouth's an unwearying organ.
So now you will know why I don't want to go to the THOMPSON's at Weybridge, in Surrey;
For old THOMPSON's a beast, and the wind's in the east, and I'm ill and I'm wheezy, and Weybridge is breezy and awfully slow, and I don't want to go, but my wife did it all in a hurry.

When Gilbert was casting about for a patter song for his sleepless Lord Chancellor in *Iolanthe*, it was to this poem, written seventeen years before, that he turned for the idea, meter, and language of that tongue-twisting "Nightmare Song."

The poems of 1866 show a sudden and welcome shift from the inanities and topicalities of the previous year, or rather the inane and

the topical are being used differently, whimsically, distinctively, as the serious stuff of impossible worlds made probable. A bishop who hypocritically prevents his priests from "joining harmless social jollity" is haunted by a curate fiend whenever he dances the Sir Roger de Coverley or plays croquet. A policeman arresting a felonious female describes Pentonville Prison to her as "A fairy grot, / Where mortal eye / Can rarely pry." A young man named Ferdinando, who admits matter-of-factly that he has "always been distinguished for a strong poetic feeling," begins a tale of romance and adventure with this couplet that was soon to be repeated all over London:

> At a pleasant evening party I had taken down to supper
> One whom I shall call ELVIRA, and we talked of love and TUPPER.

"Ferdinando and Elvira" (17 February 1866) was Gilbert's first popular success, and was shortly followed by what was perhaps his greatest, "The Yarn of the 'Nancy Bell'" (3 March 1866), a poem originally offered to *Punch* but refused by Mark Lemon on the grounds that it was "too cannibalistic for his readers' tastes." [11]

Both these poems were deservedly included in the first collection of "Babs" in 1869, but "The Story of Gentle Archibald, Who Wanted to be a Clown" (19 May 1866) was inexcusably ignored, even though the superb drawings and fanciful tale of Archy and his pantomimic dream might qualify it as the first true and complete "Bab" ballad.[12]

THE STORY OF GENTLE ARCHIBALD

WHO WANTED TO BE A CLOWN

My children, once I knew a boy
(His name was ARCHIBALD MOLLOY),
Whose kind papa, one Christmas time,
Took him to see a pantomime.
He was a mild, delightful boy,
Who hated jokes that caused annoy;
And none who knew him could complain
That ARCHY ever gave them pain.
But don't suppose he was a sad,
Or serious, solemn kind of lad;

[11] "Preface" to *Fifty "Bab" Ballads* (1877).

[12] Technically the first "Bab" ballad, that is, the earliest of Gilbert's poems to be accompanied by a drawing signed "Bab," is the one poem he published in *Punch*, "To My Absent Husband," on 14 October 1865.

Indeed, he was a cheerful son,
Renowned for mild, respectful fun.

But, oh, it was a rueful day
When he was taken to the play;
The Christmas Pantomime that night
Destroyed his gentle nature quite;
And as they walked along the road
That led to his papa's abode,
As on they trudged through muck and mire,
He said, "Papa, if you desire
My fondest hopes and joys to crown,
Allow me to become a clown!"
I will not here attempt to show
The bitter agony and woe,
The sorrow and depression dire,
Of ARCHY's old and feeble sire.

"Oh, ARCHIBALD," said he, "my boy,
My darling ARCHIBALD MOLLOY!
Attention for one moment lend —
You cannot seriously intend
To spend a roving life in town,
As vulgar, base, dishonest clown;
And leave your father in the lurch,

Who always meant you for the Church,
And nightly dreams he sees his boy
The Reverend Archibald Molloy?"

That night, as Archy lay awake,
Thinking of all he'd break and take,
If he but had his heart's desire,
The room seemed filled with crimson fire;
The wall expanded by degrees,
Disclosing shells and golden trees,
Revolving round, and round, and round:
Red coral strewn upon the ground;
And on the trees, in tasty green,
The loveliest fairies ever seen;
But one, more fair than all the rest,
Came from a lovely golden nest,
And said to the astonished boy,
"Oh, Master Archibald Molloy,
I know the object of your heart —
Tomorrow morning you shall start
Upon your rambles through the town
As merry, mischief-making clown!"

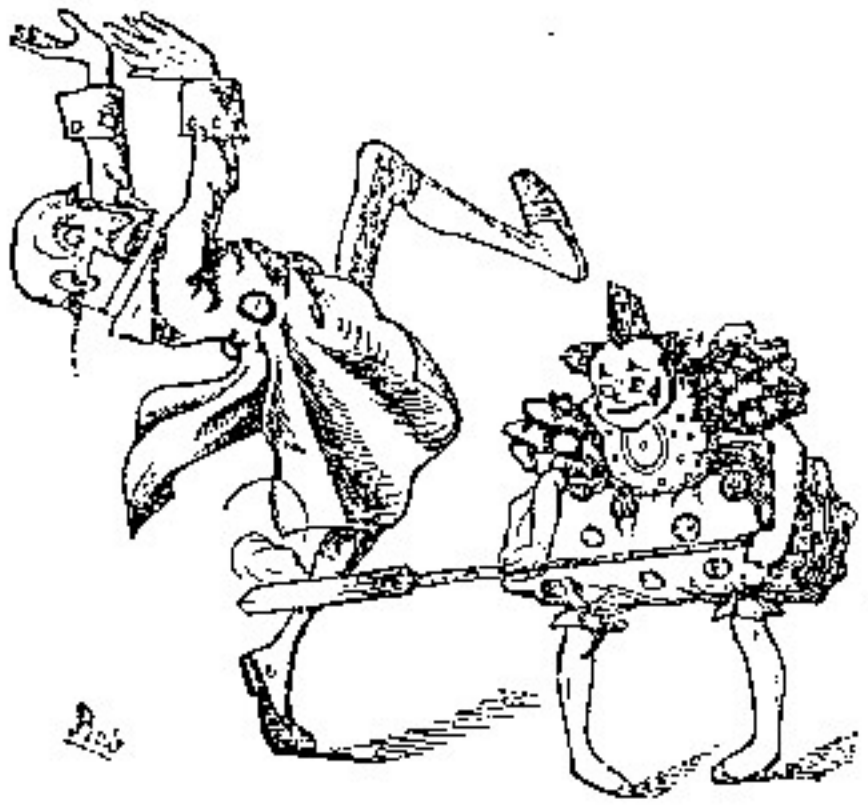
* * * * * *

Next day, when nurse Amelia called,
To wash and dress her Archibald,
She opened both her aged eyes,
With unmistakable surprise,
To find that Archy, in the night,
Had turned all red, and blue, and white,
Of healthy colour not a trace —

Red patches on his little face,
Black horsehair wig, round rolling eyes,
Short trousers of prodigious size,
White legs and arms, with spots of blue,
And spots upon his body, too!
Said she, "Why, what is this, my boy?
My gentle ARCHIBALD MOLLOY!
Your good papa I'll go and tell,
You must be dreadfully unwell,
Although I know of no disease
With any symptoms such as these."

The good old lady turned to go
And fetch his good papa, when lo!
With irresistible attack
He jumped upon her aged back,
Pulled off the poor old lady's front,
And thrashed her, while she tried to grunt,
"Oh, ARCHIBALD, what have you done?
Is this your mild, respectful fun,
You bad, ungentlemanly boy?
Fie on you, ARCHIBALD MOLLOY!"
Some dreadful power unseen, but near,
Still urged him on his wild career,
And made him burn, and steal, and kill,
Against his gentlemanly will.
The change had really turned his brain;
He boiled his little sister JANE;
He painted blue his aged mother;
Sat down upon his little brother;
Tripped up his cousins with his hoop;
Put pussy in his father's soup;
Placed beetles in his uncle's shoe;
Cut a policeman right in two;
Spread devastation round, — and, ah,
He red-hot-pokered his papa!

Be sure, this highly reckless course
Brought ARCHIBALD sincere remorse;
He liked a joke, and loved a laugh,
But was too well-behaved by half —
With too much justice and good sense —
To laugh at other folks' expense.
The gentle boy could never sleep,
But used to lie awake and weep,



To think of all the ill he'd done.
"Is this," said he, "respectful fun?
Oh, fairy, fairy, I would fain
That you should change me back again;
Some dreadful power I can't resist
Directs my once respectful fist;
Change, and I'll never once complain,
Or wish to be a clown again!"

He spoke, and lo! the wretched boy
Once more was ARCHIBALD MOLLOY;
He gave a wild, delighted scream,
And woke — for, lo, it was a dream!

Many of the "Babs" that were to follow this poem retain a quality akin to the pantomime's, complete with the practical and often brutal jokes of the harlequinade and the surprises of the transformation scene. Not by coincidence did the ballads appear in the decade in which Christmas pantomime, however debased it may have seemed to old-timers recollecting Grimaldi, enjoyed its greatest popularity.[12]

If he had discovered the magic formula for the Bab ballads, Gilbert did not realize it at once, or was perhaps too busy applying the formula elsewhere. In the twelve months following Archy's story, only five of Gilbert's poems were published in *Fun*, and only one, "King Borria Bungalee Boo," had much merit. Gilbert meanwhile was learning

[12] See A. E. Wilson, *Pantomime Pageant* (London: Stanley Paul & Co. Ltd., [1946]), p. 30.

about pantomime and burlesque more directly, by writing them, and was rewarded for his efforts on Boxing Night, 1866, when his first pantomime (*Hush-a-Bye Baby*, co-authored by Charles Millward) opened at Astley's and his first extravaganza (*Dulcamara*) at the St. James's. In *Fun* he was perfecting his skill at drawing and describing characters in a prose series entitled "Men We Meet: By the Comic Physiognomist." Here he fashioned a great assortment of weirdly constructed toy figures; all that remained was to animate them with metrical narrative. *Fun* was soon to offer its readers a Boxing Night almost every week, a special occasion to turn child again and watch the merry antics of clowns, policemen, and nursemaids.

With "General John" (1 June 1867), a ballad whose changeling plot was used again in *H.M.S. Pinafore*, Gilbert fixed the design which had emerged a year earlier, and in a five-month stretch from August through December he wrote twenty more of the very best of the "Babs," including "The Bishop and the Busman," "Babette's Love," "Sir Macklin," "Ben Allah Achmet," "Joe Golightly," "The Rival Curates," "The Bishop of Rum-ti-Foo," "The Precocious Baby," and "A Discontented Sugar Broker." This phenomenal accomplishment was the more remarkable because at the same time he was wooing and wedding Lucy Agnes Turner, then taking her to France on a honeymoon. The story that he wrote one of the ballads on the train to Folkestone with his bride almost has to be true.

Not many of the poems of this productive period were denied a place in the 1869 collection, but one, "A. and B.; or, The Sensation Twins," was perhaps considered too gruesome in drawing and conceit even by the Gilbert of those years, and may serve as the litmus of appreciation of the gleeful cruelty in many of the "Babs."

A. AND B.

OR, THE SENSATION TWINS

Once, under Spain's enfeebling sun,
  Twin brothers lived with me,
And, personality to shun,
  I call them A. and B.

They loved each other — that they did,
  'Twas rumoured near and far,
But from the time each was a kid
  Were most dissimilar.

A. had a pair of monstrous eyes,
  B.'s eyes were awful small;
B.'s nose attained a fearful size,
  A. had no nose at all.

A.'s hair reached, when he shook it out,
  The middle of his leg;
B.'s little head was just about
  As bald as any egg.

B. had a thin and taper waist,
  A. had no waist at all;
A. was too short for proper taste,
  B. just as much too tall.

And for his benefit, I say,
  Who further knowledge seeks,
The one had Civil Service pay,
  The other wrote critiques.

They meekly bore their painful lots —
  Men shunned them as a cuss,
And little tiny todding tots
  Would babble at them thus:

"We don't believe you're human kind —
  We would not on your oath —
So unconceivably designed,
  Exaggerations both!"

And A.'d reply, "It's very true
That I am much too short;
And B., I must admit that you
Too tall by half are thought.

"But why this taunt from every curb,
In bold defiance hurled?
The average we don't disturb —
We wouldn't for the world!

"If you complain we're badly planned,
Why all you've got to do,
Is add us both together and
Divide the sum by two!"

The notion pleased the simple lad,
He thought it quaintly rare;
It soon became his favourite fad
To sing it everywhere.

"Divide us, please!" they would exclaim,
With unabated noise,
A mania it at length became
With these afflicted boys.

A Turk there was — BEN OUSEFF named,
An armourer by trade
(He was the maker of the famed
"One shilling Damask blade").

These lads their little joke would shout
At peaceful OUSEFF's side,
And took delight in screaming out,
"Divide us — pray, divide!"

The quaint conceit amused him much,
He'd laugh, and would declare
With all his honest heart, that such
A jest was passing rare!

Encouraged in their mirthful play
They'd scream and yell and shout,
"Divide us, please!" till he would say,
"Enough, my friends — get out."

But still they screamed and would not list,
"Divide us, monstrous men!"
"Well, since upon it you insist,
I will," said honest BEN.

"Your joke is getting stale and trite,
You shan't offend again."
And then he smote a mighty smite,
And cleft them into twain!

They shammed no meretricious glee
At OUSEFF's handiwork;
A. felt it very much, and he
Said sternly to the Turk:

"This is a quibble, sir, and what
Sharp practice people call —"
"It's what you asked for!" "No, it's not —
By no means — not at all!"

* * * * * *

I often wish I knew how they
Drain their unpleasant cup:
I only know that B. and A.
Were terribly cut up.

Perhaps they lived in severed bliss —
Perhaps they groaned and died —
Perhaps they joined themselves like this,
And gave their legs a ride.

Later, in refined and more wholly symbolic form, Gilbert would utilize the twins' little joke and its consequences in *The Gondoliers*, where Marco and Giuseppe, ruling as one individual, find themselves in such a muddle over who is married to whom that they are reduced to "vulgar fractions," at which point "excellent husbands are bisected,

/ Wives are divisible into three." Both *The Mikado* and *The Yeomen of the Guard* have ax-wielding executioners and some jokes about decapitation, but only in the ballads are characters so "terribly cut up."

Of the twenty uncollected poems of the years 1868–1869 (sixteen of which were published in *Fun*, three in *Tom Hood's Comic Annual*, and one in the *Belgravia Annual*), "The Three Bohemian Ones" deserves attention because of its quasi-autobiographical features.

THE THREE BOHEMIAN ONES

A worthy man in every way
Was Mr. Jasper Porklebay:
He was a merchant of renown
(The firm was Porklebay and Brown).

Three sons he had — and only three —
But they were bad as bad could be;
They spurned their father's righteous ways,
And went to races, balls, and plays.

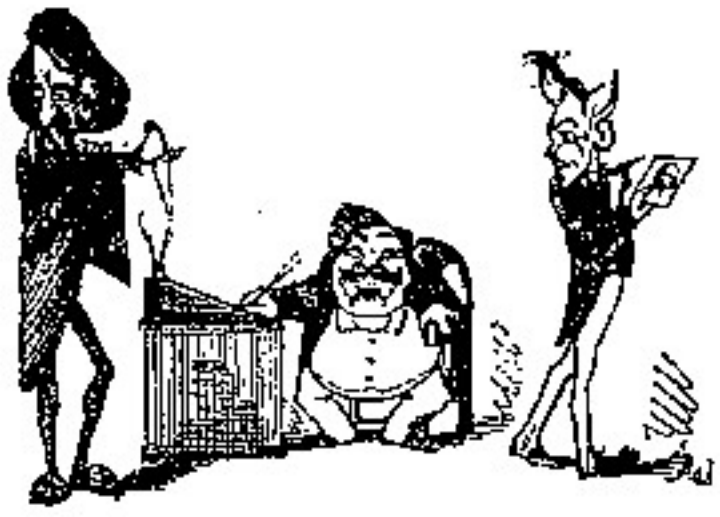
On Sundays they would laugh and joke,
I've heard them bet — I've known them smoke.
At Whist they'd sometimes take a hand.
These vices Jasper couldn't stand.

At length the eldest son, called Dan,
Became a stock tragedian,
And earned his bread by ranting through
Shakespearian parts, as others do.

The second (Donald) would insist
On starting as a journalist,
And wrote amusing tales and scenes
In all the monthly magazines.

The youngest (Singleton his name)

A comic artist he became,
And made an income fairly good
By drawing funny heads on wood.



And as they trod these fearful ways
(Those three misguided PORKLEBAYS),
They drew not on their father's hoard —
For JASPER threw them overboard.

Yes, JASPER — grieving at their fall —
Renounced them one — renounced them all;
And lived alone, so good and wise,
At Zion Villa, Clapham Rise.

By dint of work and skilful plan
Our JASPER grew a wealthy man;
And people said, in slangy form,
That JASPER P. would "cut up warm."

He had no relative at all
To whom his property could fall,
Except, of course, his wicked sons,
Those three depraved Bohemian ones!

So he determined he would fain
Bequeath his wealth (despite Mortmain),
Freeholds, debenture stock, and all,
To some deserving hospital.

When his intent was known abroad,
Excitement reigned in every ward;
And with the well-experienced throng
Of operators, all went wrong.

St. George's, Charing Cross, and Guy's,
And little Westminster likewise,
And Lying-In, and Middlesex,
Combined old JASPER to perplex.

House-surgeons, spite of patients' hints,
Bound headaches up in fracture-splints;
In measles, strapped the spots that come,
With strips of plain diachylum.

Rare leeches, skilled at fever beds,
For toothache shaved their patients' heads;
And always cut their fingers off
If they complained of whooping cough.

Their zeal grew greater day by day,
And each did all that with him lay
To prove his own pet hospital
The most deserving of them all.

Though JASPER P. could not but feel
Delighted at this show of zeal,
When each in zeal excels the rest,
One can't determine which is best.

Interea, his reckless boys
Indulged in low Bohemian joys;
They sometimes smoked till all was blue,
And danced at evening parties, too.

The hospitals, conflicting sore,
Perplexed poor JASPER more and more,
But, ah! ere JASPER could decide,
Poor charitable man, he died!

And DONALD, SINGLETON, and DAN,
Now roll in wealth, despite his plan;
So DONALD, DAN, and SINGLETON,
By dint of accident have won.

Vice triumphs here, but, if you please,
'Tis by exceptions such as these
(From probability removed)
That every standing rule is proved.

By strange exceptions Virtue deigns
To prove how paramount she reigns;
A standing rule I do not know
That's been more oft established so.

Like these three depraved youths, Gilbert was making a living from journalism, comic art, and the theatre (albeit as dramatist rather than actor). As he found the drama more rewarding than comic journalism with its low pay and frequent deadlines, he turned more and more to the theatre. In 1870 he wrote only a handful of poems, and almost as many plays, including *The Palace of Truth*, his first dramatic triumph. In January of 1871 he made his final bow as Bab balladeer in *Fun* with "Old Paul and Old Tim," a harsh and almost humorless indictment of Frenchmen who fled to London to avoid serving in the Franco-Prussian War; in December of that year he took his first bow as collaborator with Arthur Sullivan, when John Hollingshead produced *Thespis* at the Gaiety.

From this time on, despite Gilbert's continuance in a "vile" profession, those three Bohemian ones who had served him jointly as comic muse were gradually displaced by, of all improbable figures, someone very like their sober father, Jasper Porklebay, with all his righteous ways. Gilbert published only three more poems, and none with the spirit of "Bab." In April 1872, in *The Dark Blue*, appeared "Eheu! Fugaces," the last and most excessive of his occasional, near-disastrous

plunges into serious verse. The first and last stanzas are, perhaps, enough:

"EHEU! FUGACES"

An old man sitting in church, and praying with all his breath.
An old man waiting alone for the life that comes of death;
As the parson tells the well-worn tale of heaven and earth:
Of the life that is only death — of the death that is only birth!

* * *

In every silent page he finds a parable now;
In the plough that furrows the land — in the seed that follows the plough —
In the snow that covers the grass, and crackles under his tread —
In the grass that covers the mould — in the mould that covers the dead.

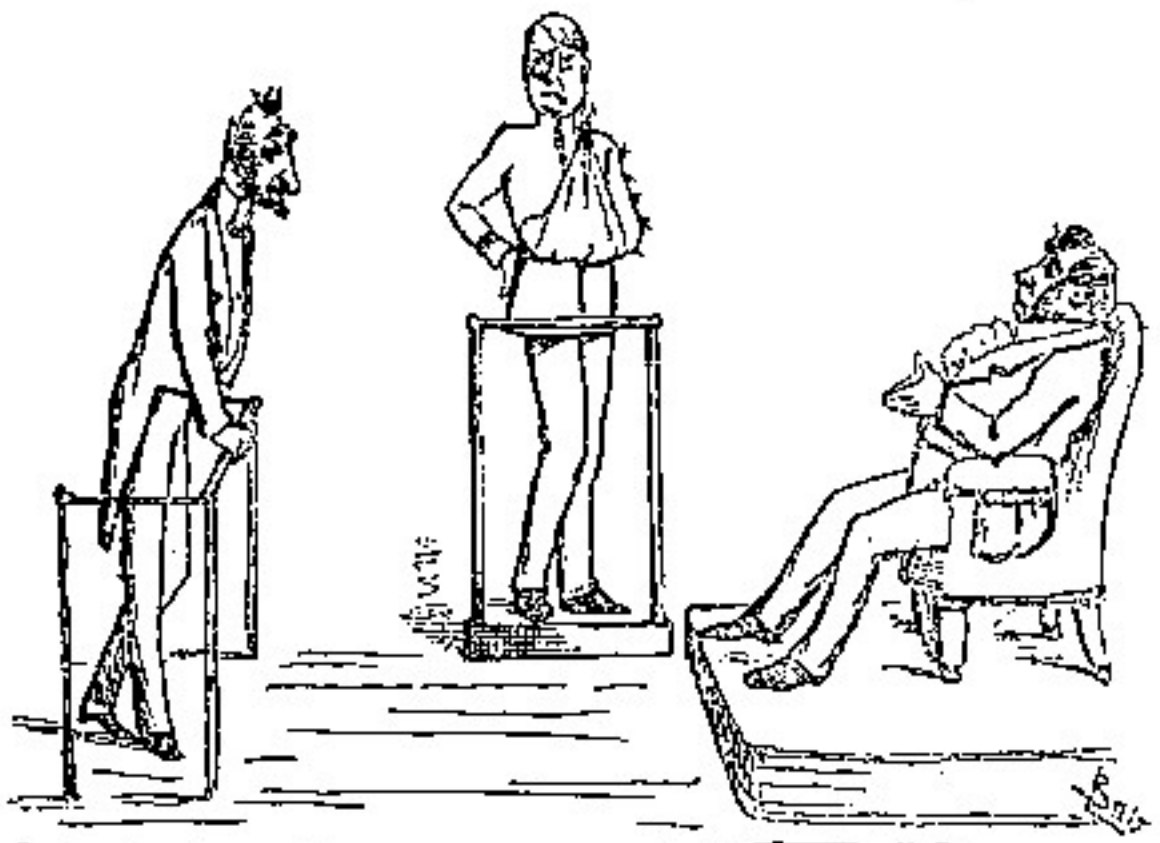
One might have expected, even hoped, that "Bab" would lie buried after that, but in 1879, when Edmund Yates founded *Time: A Monthly Miscellany of Interesting and Amusing Literature*, Gilbert agreed to attempt a "New Series" of ballads for his old friend and former colleague. He kept his word for only two issues, which was just as well, for in one poem, "Jester James," he had become too plausible for the reader to feel comfortable about leaving poor James at the bottom of a well, and in the other, "The Policeman's Story," he had become too indignant with courtroom injustice to have fun.

THE POLICEMAN'S STORY

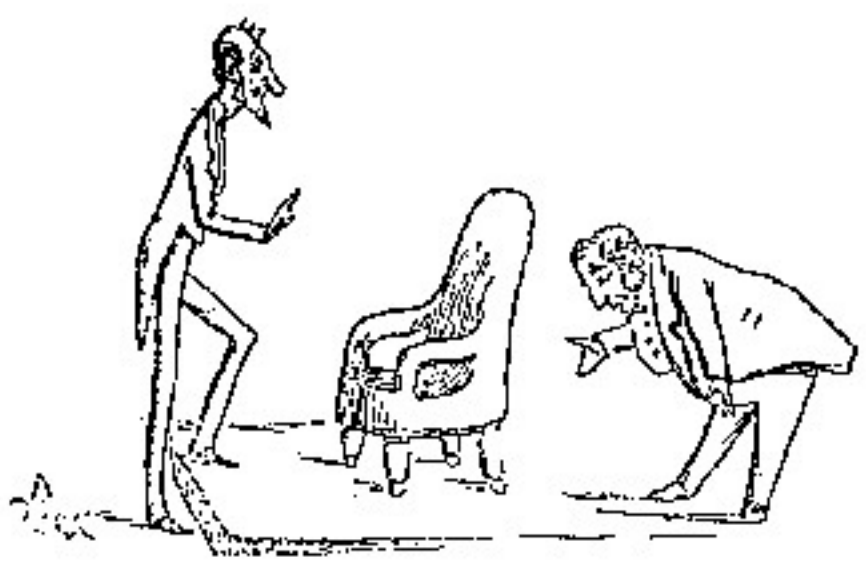
Some time ago I met a Duke as tipsy as could be;
And when I urged him home to go, he rounded onto me;
He hit me in the eye, which caused considerable pain;
He knocked me down, and picked me up, and knocked me down again.
So I took him into custody, and knew no fear;
For there's but one law for the peasant and the peer.

The magistrate he says, "To such assaults I do assign
A month's imprisonment, without the option of a fine.
A man of education too! What is his name, I pray?"
And I says, "So please your worship, it's the noble DUKE OF A."
And I didn't care a rap; for it seems quite clear
That there's but one law for the peasant and the peer.

The worthy beak he hummed and hawed, and looked extremely blank,
And said, "I didn't know you were a gentleman of rank.



To see you standing in the dock gives me a moral wrench;
Pray take your seat with me upon the magisterial bench.
You'll see more plainly, if you'll step up here,
That there's but one law for the peasant and the peer."



My evidence I gave in my uneducated way.
The beak remarks, "Your grace has heard this poor policeman's say;
I needn't say how kind 'twould be, if you should think it right,
On his Boeotian words to throw a little ducal light.
You'll pardon me, I'm sure; when I sit up here,
I've but one law for the peasant and the peer."

The Duke he up and says, says he, "I haven't any doubt
I most unmercifully banged that officer about.
I had been dining very free on port and sherry-wine,
And richly I deserve to suffer in a heavy fine;

And I beg to say I rejoice to hear
That there's but one law for the peasant and the peer."

The beak replies, "I'll measure even justice to your grace.
I hold the magistrate who would deal hardly with a case
Because the prisoner's a Duke would not be worth his salt.
That you're the DUKE OF A. is your misfortune — not your fault.
And I don't see why I should be severe
Because you're not a peasant, but a first-class peer.

"Your grace's noble conduct in consenting to a fine
Reflects the brightest lustre on your proud ancestral line.
The two assaults at less than half-a-crown I cannot fix;
The summons is two shillings — and the total's one and six.
And I trust your grace won't think it dear —
There's but one law for the peasant and the peer."

And the Duke did wed the daughter of that beak — a girl of charms.
And, on the strength of it, the beak did buy a coat-of-arms;
And as he had to choose a crest, the whole affair to clench,
It was a Flunkey *Rampant* on a Magisterial Bench,
With the pregnant motto, on a scroll, "Up here
There is but one law for the peasant and the peer."

The illustrations to these last poems have changed at least as radically as the humor, and if appropriately bland, restrained, and realistic here, the style would hardly do for the "Babs" of a decade before. Yet as early as 1875 Gilbert's dissatisfaction with his "rather clumsy sketches" was revealed in a letter to Tinsley Brothers: "I propose to

publish a new edition of the 'Bab Ballads' — selecting the most popular pieces from the First and Second Series, and illustrating them with new and carefully executed drawings by myself. It occurred to me that you might possibly feel disposed to undertake the work." [14] Tinsleys were not so disposed, however, and even when Routledge agreed to publish *Fifty "Bab" Ballads* (1877) the illustrations were not changed; nor were they for the complete edition of 1882, despite Gilbert's suggestion: "Perhaps it would be as well to draw the blocks again and return the originals to the Dalziels? I could improve considerably on the original sketches." [15]

Finally Gilbert had his way, avenging himself upon defenseless "Bab." In the "Author's Note" (dated 4 December 1897) to *The Bab Ballads with which are included Songs of a Savoyard*, he offers this extraordinary explanation of his massacre:

> I have always felt that many of the original illustrations to "The Bab Ballads" erred gravely in the direction of unnecessary extravagance. This defect I have endeavoured to correct through the medium of the two hundred new drawings which I have designed for this volume. I am afraid I cannot claim for them any other recommendation.[16]

Of course the illustrations erred in the direction of unnecessary ex-

[14] Hesketh Pearson, *Gilbert: His Life and Strife* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1957), p. 23.

[15] Philip James, "A Note on Gilbert as Illustrator," *Selected Bab Ballads* (Oxford: privately printed, 1955), p. 120. James argues, wrongly I think, that the extravagance of the original figures was due to the engraving of the Dalziels, not to Gilbert's drawing. He offers as further proof the similarity of Gilbert's work to Tenniel's illustrations for *Alice in Wonderland*, also engraved by the Dalziels and at about the same time, but an inspection reveals a great difference between the "Alice" pictures and the "Babs." Since the Dalziels did *all* the engraving for *Fun*, one would expect to find *all* the pictorial work very much in the same style if the engraver is the dominant influence, but the illustrations are not all alike, and Gilbert's figures can be spotted instantly.

[16] The original drawings from which the plates for the new figures were made were given to the British Museum by Gilbert's adopted daughter, Nancy McIntosh, shortly after the death of Lady Gilbert in 1936. Not all the ballads received new illustrations: twenty-one poems were left unchanged, twenty-two received partial replacements, and ten poems previously unillustrated were given "Bab" drawings for the first time. Of the 258 drawings accompanying the poems, 148 are totally new, eleven have been modified, and ninety-nine remain as they were in *Fun*. The copy of the ballads which Gilbert marked to indicate to Routledge which cuts should stay and which be replaced is in the Pierpont Morgan Library, a gift to Reginald Allen from Nancy McIntosh.

travagance. But, as Max Beerbohm said, "So did the 'Bab Ballads.' " [17] Gilbert had been blessed with two ideal collaborators in his career, Arthur Sullivan and W. S. Gilbert, and had managed to quarrel with both of them. Just as the operas survive because of the perfect mating of Gilbert's talents with Sullivan's, so the "Babs" are dependent upon their inimitable "funny heads on wood." The little creatures form a race all their own, with their bulging faces and figures and tiny limbs. "Bodies like eggs and mouths like frogs' and little legs like dancing insects'," was Chesterton's description. What makes for the real fun, though, and is another aspect of the masquerade, is that these odd bodies have been crammed into carefully drawn costumes of convincing and authentic design. These weird specimens are dressed exactly like sailors, curates, and attorneys, yet no one is deceived for a moment — they have come from another realm to play at our life and reveal its ridiculous side. The new drawings have none of this effect; they are delicate, charming, a trifle simpering, but — fortunately — the ballads are not. One example must stand for dozens more; here is "Gentle Alice Brown," accompanied by old and new illustrations. The reader may be the judge.

GENTLE ALICE BROWN

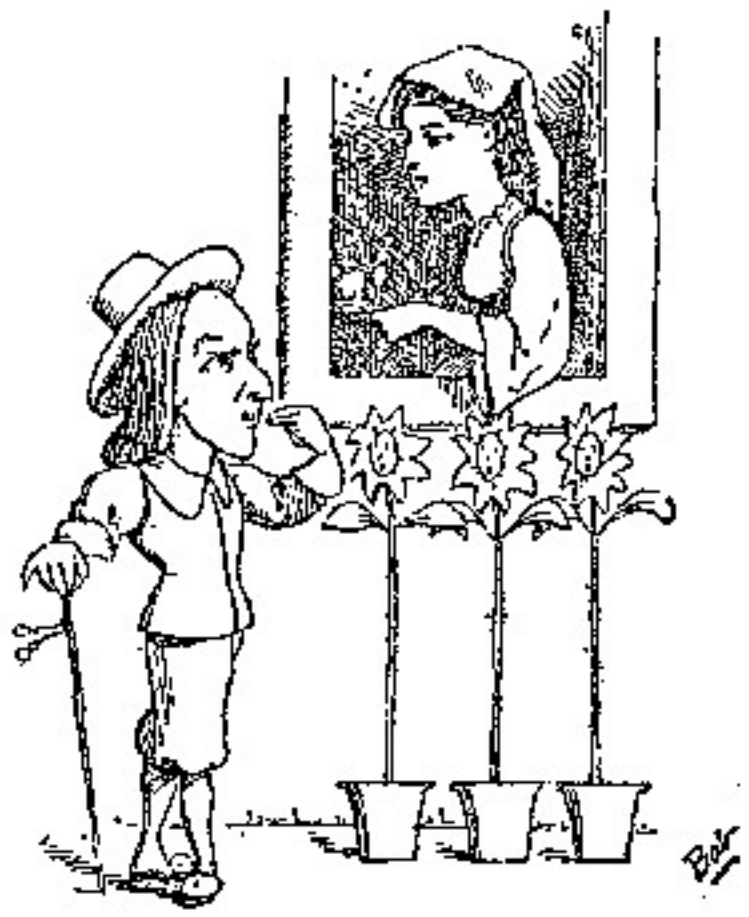
It was a robber's daughter, and her name was Alice Brown,
Her father was the terror of a small Italian town;
Her mother was a foolish, weak, but amiable old thing;
But it isn't of her parents that I'm going for to sing.

As Alice was a-sitting at her window-sill one day
A beautiful young gentleman he chanced to pass that way;
She cast her eyes upon him, and he looked so good and true,
That she thought, "I could be happy with a gentleman like you!"

And every morning passed her house that cream of gentlemen,
She knew she might expect him at a quarter unto ten,
A sorter in the Custom-house, it was his daily road
(The Custom-house was fifteen minutes' walk from her abode).

But Alice was a pious girl, who knew it wasn't wise
To look at strange young sorters with expressive purple eyes;

[17] "A Classic in Humour," *Saturday Review*, XCIX (27 May 1905), 697.



So she sought the village priest to whom her family confessed —
The priest by whom their little sins were carefully assessed.

"Oh, holy father," ALICE said, " 'twould grieve you, would it not?
To discover that I was a most disreputable lot!
Of all unhappy sinners I'm the most unhappy one!'
The padre said, "Whatever have you been and gone and done?"

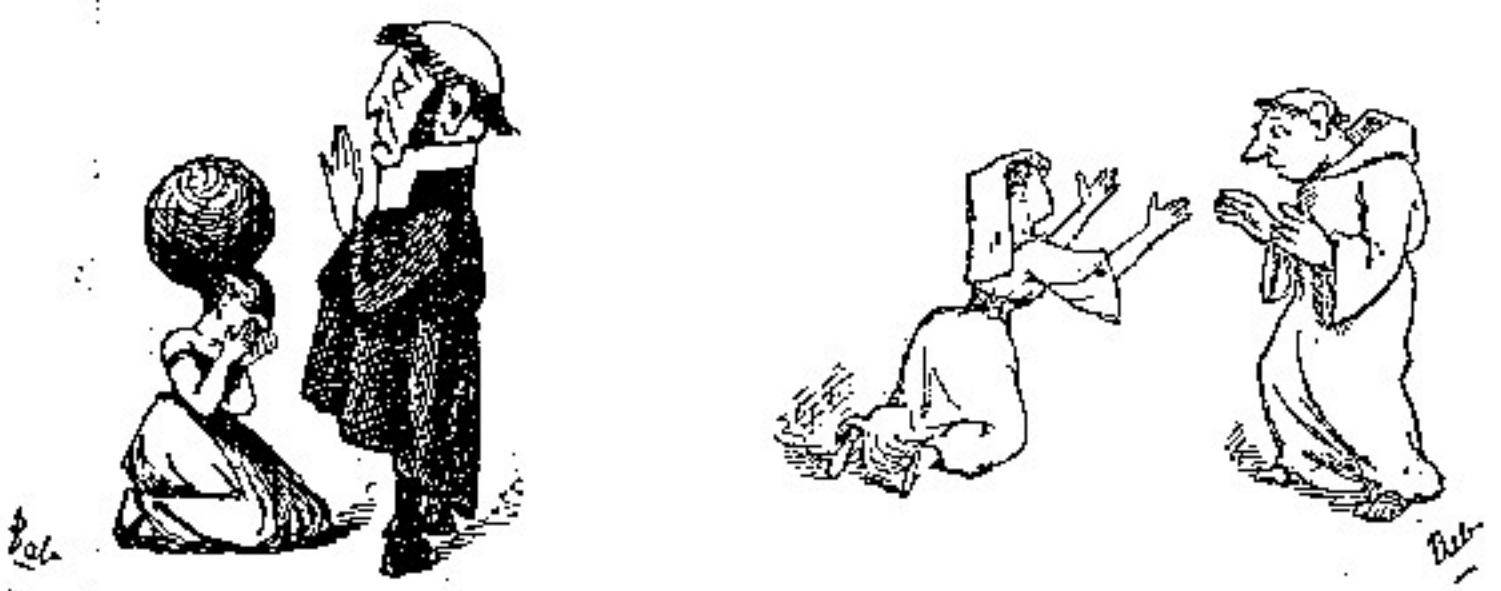
"I have helped mamma to steal a little kiddy from its dad,
I've assisted dear papa in cutting up a little lad.
I've planned a little burglary and forged a little cheque,
And slain a little baby for the coral on its neck!"

The worthy pastor heaved a sigh, and dropped a silent tear —
And said, "You mustn't judge yourself too heavily, my dear —
It's wrong to murder babies, little corals for to fleece;
But sins like these one expiates at half-a-crown apiece.

"Girls will be girls — you're very young, and flighty in your mind;
Old heads upon young shoulders we must not expect to find:
We mustn't be too hard upon these little girlish tricks —
Let's see — five crimes at half-a-crown — exactly twelve-and-six."

"Oh, father," little ALICE cried, "your kindness makes me weep,
You do these little things for me so singularly cheap —
Your thoughtful liberality I never can forget;
But oh, there is another crime I haven't mentioned yet!

"A pleasant-looking gentleman, with pretty purple eyes, —
I've noticed at my window, as I've sat a-catching flies;
He passes by it every day as certain as can be —
I blush to say I've winked at him, and he has winked at me!"



"For shame," said Father Paul, "my erring daughter! On my word
This is the most distressing news that I have ever heard.
Why, naughty girl, your excellent papa has pledged your hand
To a promising young robber, the lieutenant of his band!

"This dreadful piece of news will pain your worthy parents so!
They are the most remunerative customers I know;
For many many years they've kept starvation from my doors,
I never knew so criminal a family as yours!

"The common country folk in this insipid neighbourhood
Have nothing to confess, they're so ridiculously good;
And if you marry any one respectable at all,
Why, you'll reform, and what will then become of Father Paul?"

The worthy priest, he up and drew his cowl upon his crown,
And started off in haste to tell the news to Robber Brown;
To tell him how his daughter, who was now for marriage fit,
Had winked upon a sorter, who reciprocated it.

Good Robber Brown he muffled up his anger pretty well,
He said, "I have a notion, and that notion I will tell;
I will nab this gay young sorter, terrify him into fits,
And get my gentle wife to chop him into little bits.

"I've studied human nature, and I know a thing or two;
Though a girl may fondly love a living gent, as many do,
A feeling of disgust upon her senses there will fall
When she looks upon his body chopped particularly small."

He traced that gallant sorter to a still suburban square;
He watched his opportunity and seized him unaware;
He took a life-preserver and he hit him on the head,
And Mrs. Brown dissected him before she went to bed.

And pretty little Alice grew more settled in her mind,
She never more was guilty of a weakness of the kind,
Until at length good Robber Brown bestowed her pretty hand
On the promising young robber, the lieutenant of his band.

When Gilbert informed a correspondent in 1885 that he considered his Bab Ballads "but indifferent trifling,"[18] he probably meant it, for he was often a poor judge of his own work. His easy dismissal

[18] Letter, dated 29 January 1885, in the Pierpont Morgan Library.

of his poems, and to some extent even of his operas, fits the pattern that emerges from almost everything we know about his life and personality — he was not one man, but two. He was a bully and a martinet who adored children and animals. He was a respected officer in the Aberdeenshire Militia for fourteen years who admitted to being unable to kill any creature whatsoever. He was an unconscionable flirt who was a devoted and honorable husband ("I'm too true to be good," he would say). Known for strong language and unprintable jokes at his clubs, he spent much of his professional life trying to rid the London stage of French indecencies. Litigious enough to go to court if cheated of a penny, he was generous enough to subscribe anonymously to numerous charities. He had made his reputation from comic verse and his fortune from comic opera, yet thought of himself primarily as a serious writer. He who had contrived some of the most whimsical lords of misrule in all literature lived scrupulously by the rule himself, and demanded that others do so too. He who had placed so many insubstantial fairy realms upon the stage lived himself in a world of strict business and high finance, in which he amassed a fortune and prided himself upon his houses, his yachts, his art collection, his telephones, and his automobiles. He was a trenchant public caricaturist who from some remote part of his being saw only through the blur of sympathetic tears. He was a remarkable humorist with little or no sense of humor.

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