The Balladry and Folk-Ways
Of Kentucky Mountaineers

In "Devil's Ditties" an Interesting Collection of Survivals
From Another World

DEVIL'S DITTIES. Stories of Kentuck".

KY Mountaineers. People Told by

Jean Thomas. Also Songs They
Sing. Harmonizations by Philip
Gordon. Drawings by Cyril Mul
er. 176 pp. Chicago: W. Wil
er-Carfield. $2.50.

By PERRY HUTCHISON

The "short-writer the Judge
pitched in" for one of his
terms on the bench in More-
head, county seat of Rowan
County, Ky., happened to be
a young woman, Jean Thomas, with
a deeper interest in balladry than in
court reporting. Or, if she did not
come to Morehead with ballad-
ry first in mind, her attention was
soon attracted by an old fiddler, play-
ing and singing beneath a tree, a
group of mountaineers around
him. On inquiry she was told that this
was one Jilson Setters, "Blind Jil-
s," who had been seen there on
court days for more years than most
could remember. Miss Thomas
expressed the wish that she might
hear all of his songs, one easily
granted for court was to sit for ten
days, and Jilson was "ainin' to not
hit out." The resulting collection is
now placed before the reader. The
first part of the book gives the
mountain setting—lively and faith-
hful word-pictures of mountaineer
gatherings at wedding or funeral,
or the more intimate scene of court-
ing; the second portion of the vol-
ume is a compilation of some three-
hundred songs and ballads, with har-
narmonisations.

The first description is of the
"infere-wedding" (one will note at
once the Anglo-Saxon here) of
Ephraim and Drusilla. There is
music and frolic and dancing. And
fortunately Granny notices in time
that the fiddler is none, something
that bodes the young couple ill if
she at once corrected.

"I'm dancin' again!" the old jam
rock was the old woman, a-suck-
kin' her pipe, and all of a sudden,
didn't Granny drop her pipe an'
looked around to see what had
been bewitched. "He'll fetch ye
beauty and som' new luck," whispered
Granny. "ye d'envin got the foot
contrarious to the cracks o' the
floor. Ye got a bound to stand
the way the floor-ligs is a run-
in'."

On such things does the future
depend in the Kentucky mountains,
where young men in tailored jeans
and young women in print frocks,
the bride with her "wist responsibly
away and balance and turn to the scrap-
ing of the fiddler's bow. The na-
ture of the songs sung as they dance
will show at once that the new
rhythm moves and the new steps have not
yet ascended the Appalachian slopes.
This will be the first stave:

There lived an old man by the
Northern Sea,
Now and tend to me.
Then this by the men, the young
women replying.

Bow and balance to me.
The girls, however, have not yet
advanced, but are still in line, back
to the wall. Finally the young men
come forward, with

I'll be true to my love if my love'll
be true to me.

Eventually the two lines meet, and
each swan sings the dazeal of
his choice, all the prancing as follows,
and all coupletts fulfilling the demand
made.

Now you have one of your own
choosing.
Be in a hurry, no time for losing; Join your right hands, this brooks
step over,
And kiss the lips of your true

In the mountains the crowning of
tulibees is called singing to
"the least una," but one will
find under this heading in Jean Thomas's
book, "wishing." It is perhaps the
great effort to appreciate either
the child's taste or his capacity to

The subject of "courtin'" among
the mountaineers should, perhaps,
be of even greater interest to the
antiquarian than any other, for
its traditional strain without break
from the days of the cavalier and
from the troubadours of old
France. However, pursuing the mat-
ter into the Appalachians, it is true,
as Miss Thomas ably admits, that
"the mountain man, courtly and
gallant though he might be, could
not well pour out his love beside
a windowless cabin on the mountain-
side." Instead, then, he sings his
love, not so directly to the girl,as
to the hills and streams amid which
both he and she have their dwelling.
And it is not improbable, as the
love-stricken young man pours out
his heart to nature, that the bash-
ful maiden will be listening behind
some tree or shrub.

Since the collection of these songs
has placed it first, it would seem
likely that "The Brisk Young
Farmer" is, perhaps, the favorite.
The piece will not, however, make
great appeal to the folklorist, for
while there is evidence of an ultu-
mate source in the border ballads,
modern corruptions have pretty well
obscured the original purity, as will
be seen from the first stanza.

I sold a black young farmer,
He is a credit to any man;
His coat is of a fair and handsome
Gally,
She did dace in a western town.

But somewhat further on come
some lines which will reassure the
reader of the ballad origin of the
mountaineer's madrigal:

He dressed him in scarlet red,
His whiskers all in green.

A favorite ballad of the love-born
is "Barbara Ellen," of which men-
tion will again be made before the
close; and songs of a like despair-
ing nature, whether old or new, or
part new and part old, fill a con-
siderable part of the lover's repert-
ory.

Court Day and the annual county fair have their appropriate songs
and ballads; and in Rowan County
the first seems to gain honor from
the story of the Tulliver-Martin
feud. This is a purely local com-
petition, running to more than
twentv verses, by one who "kept
good friends" with both sides. It
should be of interest to the student
of Americans especially.

"Funeralizing" is taken scarcely
more seriously than marrying, and
this is not because death is not re-
garded with concern; it is because
the mountaineer takes everything
so seriously that he is capable of
little distinction. "When I come
to die" is the mountaineer's ad-
vertisement, "I'm a-wantin' Brother
Jonathan to preach my funeral. He

talks so pretty of them that is
tuck and makes them as is left be-
hint sorrow for their fineness and
earnestness. And I'm a-wantin' the
worst way a fine big funeral occa-
sions."

This reviewer found the ballad
collection somewhat disappointing

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but the quarrel is, perhaps, less with Miss Thomas than with the mountainfolk. It may be that the hills of Rowan County have experienced an influx of "furriners" or have otherwise come under the influence of corrupting outside forces. Such songs as "Canada," "Frog Went a-Courting" and "Sauer-kraut." to say nothing of other pieces in this collection, are neither indigenous to the region nor modifications of the noble or affecting ballads brought by mountaineer ancestors from England and Scotland. Of the ancient ballads, "Barbara Ellen" will be recognized at once as "Bonny Barbara Allen"; nor will one be surprised to find the final stanzas brought over from another time-honored favorite. Miss Thomas closes with:

So they buried her in the lower churchyard,
They buried him in the square;
And out of hers grew a red, red rose,
And out of his a brier.

So they grew to the church steeple tops
And there they could grow no higher;
And there they twined in a true lovers' knot,
The rose and the green brier.

More nearly in their original form, and surely more nearly in their proper context, these stanzas will be found in the Child collection as rounding off the tale of "Fair Margaret and Sweet William." Almost in its pristine loveliness is Miss Thomas's "Lord Thomas and Fair Ellen," Professor Child's "Lord Thomas and Fair Annet," one of the finest products of border minstrelsy. We hope that when Jean Thomas goes again into the hills for "short writing" she will find more of the ancient pieces.