The Last of the Troubadours

Carl Michael Bellman
1740 - 1795

his Life and his Music
by Hender William van Knoll
and Grace Castagnetta
Troubadour

Sweden's greatest song writer was Carl Michael Bellman (1740-95). To Swedes Bellman's ballads are as familiar as Stephen Foster's are in the U. S. Years ago Hendrik Willem van Loon, literary journeyman, heard some, resolved to investigate the "Anacreon of the North," the "Last of the Troubadours." Last year van Loon and pianist Grace Castagnetta spent five months in Sweden, acquainting themselves with Bellman's background and with the Swedish language which, in his songs, is almost untranslatably idiomatic. This week they published the result: 20 songs, with piano accompaniment arranged by Miss Castagnetta; translation, drawings, decorations and an introduction by van Loon.*

Carl Bellman was an amiable, unpractical tosspot who spent most of his life in government sinecures, under the patronage of art-loving, fun-loving King Gustavus III. When the King was murdered. Bellman lost his last job, was put in debtors' prison, got out just in time for a last party before he died. Bellman played the lute, consciously or unconsciously drew upon Bach, Mozart, Scarlatti for melodies. He seldom wrote a song down, let his friends transcribe, collect and publish part of his output. The "Last of the Troubadours" sang of tavern life, of trips to the country, of a ludicrous funeral procession, of his friends Movitz the painter, Mollberg the soldier, Ulla Winblad the kindly tart. A typical song, in minuet tempo, is Movitz Paints Mrs. Bergstrom, which takes two verses to reach a description of its subject:

. . . Bosom cov'red with flowers gay,
On her arm the dog holds sway.
Earrings fella! Silk umbrella!
Movitz! What a mademoiselle!

I shall die yet, laughing at
Her face 'neath a shepherd's hat. . . .
Cause for braggin'! See the saggin'
Of that double chin the dragon! . . .

In Joachim of Babylon, Bellman compressed an apochryphal Biblical story into a few lines:

Joachim of Babylon,
Had a wife Susanna,
Sing Hosanna! Sing Hosanna!
Toast this paragon!
Joachim was a man for honor renowned.
Equally honest was his wife, it was found.
Oh Susanna! Oh Susanna!
Hear our praise resound! . . .
Best premature review of the collection: "... I think the book is one which no household should lack." — Eleanor Roosevelt in her “My Day” newspaper column.

— Time Magazine
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* THE LAST OF THE TROUBADOURS — Simon & Schuster ($2.50).