

**BALLADS WEIRD  
AND WONDERFUL**

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Ballads weird and wonderful by Richard Pearse Chope

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**RICHARD PEARSE CHOPE**

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WEIRD·AND·WONDERFUL

WITH 25 DRAWINGS BY  
VERNON HILL



JOHN LANE LONDON·THE BODLEY HEAD·  
JOHN LANE COMPANY·NEW YORK MDCCCXII

## PREFACE

THE scope of this book is sufficiently indicated by its title. The quality of the illustrations is not so patent, and for this reason I venture to claim attention from readers and critics in this introductory note.

Naturally, this is not a general collection of legendary ballads, and the slightly hackneyed themes of love and romance, so well known to us all, have not been touched upon in a volume intended only to deal with the weird and wonderful. Elves and fairies, demons and witches run riot through these pages and dance through the pictures. Here we have a revel of the bizarre, the whimsical, the extraordinary. Ballads of this type have a peculiar flavour of their own, which can be neither defined nor imitated, and they are, therefore, easily separable from the others. The subjects, moreover, are so strictly limited in number that it

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is thought the present collection contains typical specimens of all the best ballads of this character. They have not been taken from any single source, but many different versions have been consulted, and it is hoped that the resulting compilation gives the best obtainable.

Such a selection, it is believed, has not previously been published, but it was suggested as being peculiarly adapted to the genius of the artist of *The Arcadian Calendar* and *The New Inferno*. The result has more than justified the editor's expectations.

An artist who is not limited to the actual things of life, whose fancy is not confined within the limits of a green field or a marble column—who, indeed, can see visions—whose inner life is not of our life but of a strange occult devising, is impelled irresistibly towards the supernatural (though the word supernatural in connection with art should not be held only as indicating conditions above or below nature, but completely outside of and distinct from nature). Perhaps it is a lack of recognition of these several circumstances that causes us to



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condemn as morbid and decadent things which we are not in a position to judge. The word decadent is at once the most misused and the most overworked word in the English language. Any design that is not conventional, any picture that does not make an instant appeal by its prettiness—and that mere obvious prettiness the eye can take in completely at a glance—is liable to be misrepresented as decadent.

Mr. Hill's extraordinary art is neither conventional nor imitative. This is its great drawback. The desire to give every artist a professional pedigree confounds and irritates the mind that is accustomed to adjudicate in, and from, compartments: the mind that with a littleness of understanding is confused from its inability popularly to classify the subject criticised. In the same way there is a habit, proceeding from a mental obsession as much as from a spiritual blindness, to place every new poet as a legitimate or illegitimate descendant of Tennyson, Browning, or Wordsworth. And a new humourist is usually patted on the shoulder as a relative, though poor, of Thackeray, or Dickens,

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or Mark Twain. Mr. Hill is in this position : I have indicated rather than described it. There is in his work a suggestion of Blake, of Beardsley, and of Flaxman. There is something, perhaps, of Blake in the conception of Mr. Hill; there may be a touch of Flaxman in the execution; and possibly a trace of the exquisite delicate line of Beardsley in the symphonious whole. But what artist would deliberately choose to follow Blake, that most erratic genius? The Flaxman influence is even less significant. And Beardsley is dragged in more because Mr. Hill challenges Beardsley than that he follows him. But in any case it is no small compliment to an artist that he should be compared with three men of such talent. He is fortunately opposed to the gospel of the obvious—not in the flimsy manner of the post-impressionists, but with the lavish decoration of the master hand. These designs for *Ballads Weird and Wonderful* are indeed not only illustrations but decorations : they touch the soul with pity and with terror; they have the quality, the peculiar quality, of forming in

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the mind a permanent picture, long after the merely beautiful becomes an evanescent memory. Mr. Hill's work is such stuff as dreams are made of.

That Mr. Hill has been criticised for a certain morbid tendency is not altogether surprising. But it is impossible to produce designs for such a book without introducing a quality of grotesque, inverted melancholy. (This was most noticeable in Mr. Hill's very remarkable illustrations to *The New Inferno* of Mr. Stephen Phillips). I am strongly inclined to the belief that adverse criticism, on account of supposed morbidity, is usually produced by the modern habit of expressing a judgment of one thing in terms of another. Mendelssohn is condemned that his music does not noise like Wagner's; Mr. Abercrombie that his poetry has not Tennyson's smoothness; and it will never surprise me to see a book on political economy condemned as painfully deficient in humour! Even if one is unable to analyse the dexterities and attainments of certain people and several things, it is at least easy to evade the points at issue by demonstrating