

THE BRIDGWATER CAROL

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HOW great is the child's joy discovering a small silver trinket in his slice of the plum-pudding, or on bringing up from the depths of the bran-tub some insignificant toy! The rapture of discovery! Lost piece of money, lost sheep—"Rejoice with me!" No matter how trifling that which has been lost and recovered, nor how simple the more or less rare thing that has been found. It is the joy that matters.

Many years ago I was wandering through a beech wood on the Cotswold hills. Suddenly I lighted on a clump of bright glossy flowers shining through the brown fallen beech leaves. They were new to me. They were bird's-nest orchids. Nothing much, you will say. But I have never forgotten the thrill.

"Then felt I like some watcher of the skies,
When a new planet swims into his ken,
Or like stout Cortez, when with eagle eyes
He stared at the Pacific."

Great occasion, small occasion, the rate of vibration may vary. But the thrill is in the same medium.

And so it is with him who carries on research among old musty documents. Many hours may give comparatively negative results, and then, suddenly, the treasure is found, he lights upon a gem. and the happy discoverer experiences the thrill.

More than sixty years ago when H. T. Riley, on behalf of the Historical Manuscripts Commission, was examining the rich store of archives belonging to the Bridgwater Corporation, he must, I think, have had a share in the joy of finding.

He came across a small, stiff piece of parchment nearly three inches and a half wide, and just three times as long. The business side of the manuscript was occupied with matter ordinary enough. It was a lease, and Riley had turned over many legal instruments of that sort in the course of his investigations. But it was the lease of a church, and that a Welsh church, a fact to which we shall return presently. The date of the lease is 1471.

AN INTERESTING FIND.

On the back was the unexpected treasure. Two hymns were there, written one above the other in mediaeval English. The upper we may call a Doomsday hymn and it does not concern us further here. But the other was a genuine ancient Christmas carol a carol of the right order—of Mary and the Child and the star.

It is founded on a Latin hymn for the feast of the Purification, which is to be seen in the Sarum Breviary. The Latin words or phrases which follow each in turn of the five three-lined stanzas have their origin there. So, too, has the introductory Latin verse which precedes the English stanzas. Let us look at the substance of the carol. *Letabundus exultet fidelys*

chorus. Alleluia!" — which may be freely rendered "Let the faithful choir rejoice and exult. Alleluia!"

"Now well may we myrthys make For Jhu
mankynd hath take Of a mayden withoutyn make.
Gaudeamus."

This may be thus modernised:
Now well may we make merry since Jesu has taken
on him human form from a virgin without mate. Let
us rejoice!

" A Kyng of kynges now forth ys browghth Off a
maydyn that synnyd nowght Nether in ded nether in
thowgnt.

Res miranda."

" A King of kings is now born of a virgin that sinned
not —neither in deed nor in thought. A wondrous
thing! "

" An angell of counsell now ys bore off a mayde as
y sayd before To saw ail that was lor lore.

Sol de stella."

The second line is weak. The writer needed a rhyme.
"An angel of counsel now is born of a virgin, as said
before. to save all that was lost (forlorn). The sun
(risen) from a star."

" That sonne hath never downe goyng And thys
lygnt no tyme lesyng, Thys stere ys ever more
sceyning

Semper clara."

"Ryght as the stere browght forght a beme, Oute of
the wych comyghtn mervelose streme, So dua that
mayde withoutyn weme,

Para jorma."

" Para " should read "pari." " Just as the star
brought forth a beam out of which cometh a
marvellous stream, so did that virgin without
blemish, Of lovely form."

Such is the text. Two letters, now obsolete, are
used in the original for "th" and "gn," and with these
have not troubled the printer nor my reader, but have
substituted the modern equivalents. The sense is
hope, clear.

A PUZZLE SOLVED.

Now there is one more feature of this carol which I
have kept to the last and which has long been a
puzzle to scholars It is this. At the head oi the verses
are written the words Holy. holy, holy holy holy &
yify yffy." The five holies and the short "and" are
enclosed in an oblong. At the foot of the carol again
we have " holy holy & yfy yffy holy yify Holi."

The word "holy" presented no difficulty. It seemed
to be used here just as we find it in the *Te Deum*. " Holy,
holy, holy, Lord God of Sabaoth." But "yffy" was indeed
an enigma. The question was submitted to one scholar
after another But no authority on mediaeval church
music, no professor of literature (though one wrote an
admirable completion of the carol), no Welsh linguist—
for was not the lease a Welsh lease?—was able to
furnish a satisfactory answer. The best suggestion.
emanating from three

independent sources, was that it might be a musical direction, like the stage "flourish of trumpets." and similar to "Selah," with which we meet in the authorised version of the Psalms.

At last came the solution. Dr. Richard L. Greene, of Princeton University, U.S.A., came over to this country to spend a year in research at Oxford. Cambridge, the British Museum and elsewhere in the subject of ancient carols. He knew of the Bridgwater carol, for Riley had published it in the appendix of the Third Report of the Hist. MSS. Commission, and he came down to Bridgwater to see it. I had told him of the "yffy" trouble, and the first thing he did on arriving at my house was to give me his full explanation, backed by examples containing the same theme, which he had selected from his collection, at that time numbering some 500 carols.

"Holy," he told me, was simply "holly." "Iffy" was nothing other than "ivy." And so our carol belonged to the holly-and-ivy group. The spelling might be due to a Welsh scribe, for did he not say "whateffer" for "what-ever"? But this I do not press. Spelling was far from uniform in the fifteenth century.

And what are we to understand by these words when we meet them in a carol? And what is the history of it all?

HOLLY AND IVY.

We have to go a very long way back indeed to find answers to our questions.

It is common knowledge that when Christianity spread slowly over the countries of Europe, the missionaries found they had to cope with the difficulty of destroying long established, deep-rooted pagan customs.

They were wise. They solved the difficulties by going round them. They found spirit-guarded wells which they could not destroy. They put each under the wardenship of a Christian saint and the cult of the well continued. It may be seen in Derbyshire to this day They found huge stones, sacred in pagan eyes.

They carved on them the sign of the cross, for it was impossible to hew them all in pieces.

The found seasonal feasts in spring, at midsummer, in winter They consecrated them as Easter, as at John's-eve, as Christmas.

Carols originally dance-songs, sometimes a rather obscene kind. Christianity converted them into what we still love and sing to-day. Here and there are to be found traces of pagan elements.

"Holy" means the men - "iffy" means the women - holly-and-ivy theme in one of them

One of the games of the winter feast has as a feature the turning out of all women from the common hall into the winter night, while the men remained in the warmth and glow of the Yule log till it pleased them to admit the poor chillblained ivy in again

Appendix

Text of the carol, from the report of Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, 1872

Hay, hay, take goode hede wat you say,
 A doum's day we schull y see,
 Fadere and Sone in Trinite,
 With grete powere and magisti,
 And angelys in grete aray. }
 And angels with a trumpet shall blow,
 That all the worlde schall yt know.
 They that beyne in y3rthe soo low,
 They schull a ryse all off þe clay;
 They that byne in soo deppe,
 They schull to thys trumpat take heede,
 And a ryse and full sorre wyppe,
 That euer they wer to yentst to say.
 God hymselfe, suuer hyt ys,
 That schall eue the dome, I wys.
 And therfore owys hym þt hath ido amys.
 Ffore there they schull reherse here pay,
 Holy, holy, holy, holy, yffy, yffy.
 Letabundus exultet fidelis chorus Alleluia.
 Now well may we myrthys make }
 Ffor Jesu mankynde hathi take } gaudeamus.
 Off a mayden with outyn make [mate].
 A kyng of kynges now forthe ys brow3t
 Off a maydyne þt synnyd nowght,
 Nether in dede nether in thow3ht. | res.miranda
 An angell of counseil now ys bore
 Off a mayd, as y sayd be fore, | sol de stella.
 To saw [save] all þt was for lore.
 That sonne hath neuer downe goyng,
 And thys lyghte no tyme lesyng
 þys stere ye euermore schemyng, } semper clara.
 Ryght as þestere brow3ht forght a beme,
 Oute of the wyche commy3th a marvelous streme,
 So dude þt mayde withowtyn wene | deipara forma.
 Holy, holy, and yfy, yfly, holy, yffy, holi.

Editorial note:

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