

The Christmas Carol



Pleasant Festival of An Old-Time Custom

THE FIRST NOWELL

The first Nowell the Angels did say
Was to certain poor shepherds in fields
As they lay;
In fields where they lay keeping their sheep
On a cold winter's night that was so deep.

Chorus.
Nowell, Nowell, Nowell, Nowell,
Born is the King of Israel!

Then let us all with one accord,
Sing praises to our Heavenly Lord,
That hath made Heaven and earth of nought,
And with His Blood mankind hath bought.

Chorus.
Nowell, Nowell, Nowell, Nowell,
Born is the King of Israel!

By JOHN DICKINSON SHERMAN

IN THE Christmas Carol coming back to its own as a time-honored feature of the Christmas Tide? It looks so. And it is to be hoped that it is so. For the singing of Christmas Carols will help to popularize the religious observance of the day—which is losing ground year by year in this material age.

Probably there is no room in our Twentieth Century civilization for carol-singing after the old way. But carol-singing on a large scale is admirable—as many American cities abundantly proved in 1924. It was made a community service. Many singers were enlisted and trained. Carols were sung in hospitals, orphanages and other institutions. The message of home was carried to the traveler in hotels and railroad stations. Mass-singing in municipal auditoriums was received with popular acclaim. This community service was strangely reminiscent of the old-time "Waits"—street musicians who were an established institution of English cities, wearing "Waits badges," with the town arms.

The singing of carols is much older than Christmas, just as the midwinter festival of good cheer long antedates the celebration of Christmas as the anniversary of the birth of Christ. The pagan Britons celebrated this midwinter festival; so did the Romans and many European peoples. It was not until the Fourth Century that this festival became identified with the church festival of Christmas—"Christ-mass."

Have you discovered that it's very easy indeed to dance to some of the Christmas Carols? Well, it is. And that's because "Carol" was originally a term for a dance—or for songs intermingled with dancing. It was a long time before the word came to be applied strictly to a religious Christmas song.

Primitive man makes merry, you know, in song and dance and boisterous play. It is not hard to see in the Christmas of modern times plain evidence of the pagan origin of midwinter festivities. The "Yule Log" undoubtedly spread from the ancient Lithuanians and Letts, whose "Christmas Eve" was "Log Evening." The

Silent Night

Michael Haydn

All hark! The bells—no sweet or sad choir,
All hark! The bells—no sweet or sad choir,
All hark! The bells—no sweet or sad choir,
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All hark! The bells—no sweet or sad choir,
All hark! The bells—no sweet or sad choir,

God rest you merry Gentlemen

1. In Bethlehem, in Jewry,
This blessed Babe was born,
And laid in a manger,
Till He was found again,
The which His Mother Mary,
Did suckle unto this day.

2. From God our Heavenly Father,
A blessed Angel came,
And unto certain Shepherds
Brought tidings of the same:
How that in Bethlehem was born
The Son of God by Name.

3. "Fear not this," said the Angel,
"For nothing to you afraid,
This day is born a Saviour,
Of a pure Virgin made;
To feed all those who love Him
From sin's power and wrath."

4. The shepherds of those villages
Rejoiced much to find
That their Babe was a Saviour,
In manger born and laid,
And went to Bethlehem straightway
The Son of God to find.

5. And when they came to Bethlehem,
Where our dear Saviour,
They found Him in a manger,
Where now we kneel and pray,
His Mother Mary kneeling down,
Cries the Lamb did say.

6. Now to the Lord sing praises,
All ye within this place,
And with your voice and instrument,
Each other here rejoice:
The holy Babe of Christmas,
All other Bells doth.

"Lords of Mistle" of England was a leftover from the Roman Saturnalia. The Christmas Carol goes back a long way into early English life. The first printed collection came in 1521 from the press of Wynkin de Worde. This early master-printer was probably born in Lorraine and went to London to be assistant to Caxton, whom he succeeded in 1491. It is interesting to know that a fragment of this edition is still extant and contains the famous "Boar's Head Carol," which is still sung on Christmas Day in Queen's College, Oxford—whether the serving of the boar's head on a silver platter in the big dining hall still obtains, one is not prepared to say. In the old days the serving of the boar's head, with much pomp and ceremony and minstrelsy and song was the feature of the Christmas feast in the homes of the wealthy and great. The authentic wording of this carol is as follows:

The boar's head in hand bear I,
Bedeck'd with hays and rosemary;
And I pray you, my masters, be merry,
Quot estis in convivio,
Caput apri defero,
Reddens laudes Domino.

The boar's head, as I understand,
Is the rarest dish in all this land,
Which thus bedeck'd with a gay garland
Let us servare cantico
Caput apri defero, etc.

Our steward hath provided this
In honor of the King of Bliss,
Which on this day to be served is
In Regimena Atria,
Caput apri defero, etc.

At the time Wynkin de Worde published the first collection of Christmas Carols in 1521 carol-singing was a universal practice in England. In 1525, when Henry VIII lay ill, there was an edict specifically prohibiting "carols, bells or merry-making." In 1526 a license was issued to Thomas Trysdale to print, "Certayne goodly Carowles to be songe to the Glory of God."

The Puritans endeavored to put a stop to carol-singing and practically succeeded. Parliament, it will be remembered, ordered the abolition of Christmas Day and to show that it had been abolished sat in session December 25, 1652—"commonly called Christmas Day."

But Christmas day came back with the Restoration—and so did the Christmas Carol. In 1661 appeared a volume with the title, "The New Carols for the Merry Time of Christmas, to Sunday Pleasent Tunes."

In France also the Christmas Carol is very old. The French word for the Christmas Carol is Noel. The Breton word is "Koroll," which means a dance. Noel originally meant "birthday." In

time it came to mean the "Birthday of Jesus." Still later it was a song about His birthday. Nowadays a Frenchman wishing anyone "Merry Christmas," says, "Joyeux Noel!"

Now the title, "The First Nowell," of the English Christmas Carol, from which quotation has been made in the foregoing, throws a sidelight on history. This carol is probably more than 500 years old, although it did not appear in print until 1833. The Norman conquest of England was responsible for the "Noel" in its title. And this in turn was changed to "Nowell" to make it look English and to insure its pronunciation in two syllables.

"Silent Night" is probably one of the most popular of all the Christmas Carols. It seems to have been first published in Leipzig as a "Tyrolese Song." Before that it had been in the repertoire of a family of strolling Tyrolese players. Its origin was then unknown and it was said to be old. In time it was credited to Michael Haydn. A few years ago Ludwig Erk made a thorough investigation and reported that "Silent Night" was written and composed in 1818 at Oberndorf, Germany; that Joseph Mohr, assistant priest, wrote the words; that Franz Gruber, a schoolmaster, wrote the music. According to Erk, the carol was produced Christmas Eve in the church, the poet, a tenor, singing the melody, and the composer singing bass. A chorus of young women sang the refrain. The church organ was out of repair and the accompaniment was played on a guitar.

"God Rest You Merry Gentlemen" is believed to date back to the Seventeenth Century. It certainly is as familiar to the English-speaking world as any. One version has the first line, "God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen"—one does not know whether or not the use of the comma is authorized.

It will be noted that the Christmas Carols in general have a common characteristic—which is especially prominent among the older ones: They are set to pleasing and not difficult music; they are simple in form and picturesque; they are often childlike in their naïveté. In short, they are real bits of folklore.

Yet men famous in the world of letters have not disdained to try their hands at the Christmas Carol. For example, "O Little Town of Bethlehem," deservedly popular, was written by the Boston divine, Phillips Brooks. It was intended for Sunday schools only. Several composers have written music for it. These include Joseph Barnaby, the Englishman, and Louis H. Redner, the American.

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