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DANCES OF MERRIE ENGLAND



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HELEN BRADSHAW

**A** CENTURY ago, in England, village life was delighted and enriched by many seasonal and traditional festivals, or celebrations. Among these were popular songs, in memory of local events, gay or heroic, comic or tragic; popular participation in what we know as Country dances; and Sword and Morris dances offered by local "teams" on set

occasions, such as Whitsuntide and Christmas.

In spite of the strong tendency of the century to depopulate the village and wither folk customs, these songs and dances have maintained to a surprising degree their vigor and technical exactness, and can be seen in fair truth to the old tradition in Derbyshire, Warwickshire, Devonshire, Somerset, and Surrey, as well as some parts of Scotland, and in the remote districts of the Appalachian Mountains in the United States.

About forty years ago, an Englishman, Cecil Sharp, noting the effect upon tradition of the exodus from village to city, and seeing in it a danger to such social observances as these songs and dances, feared a genuine and impoverishing loss to English traditions. From that time his life was devoted to capturing and recording the words and music of the songs, and the steps, figures, and customs of the dances. Due to the inspired interest of Mr. Sharp his records have not become archeological curiosities, but have been the source of a literal rejuvenation of these joyous community frolics in England and America.

It is to his publications we are indebted for such information as we have. His observations of existing dances enabled him to interpret the complicated notations in Playford's "The English Dancing Master," published nearly three hundred years ago, and to make available the dances of the age of Queen Elizabeth.

Out of his work has come a great resurgence of interest and enjoyment in these folk treasures. He has had enthusiastic cooperation from intelligent and progressive educators. The coordination of arms and feet, and the sincere, unaffected, and even imper-

sonal style of the dances, has been found invaluable in the development of poise, both of mind and body. And the joyous quality, for instance, of the Tideswell Professional, reaches onlookers as well as participants and contributes a distinct note such as comes from stirring leaves in spring, or the sweet murmur of a mountain stream. The fluttering handkerchiefs, the lightly leaping figures, the happy circling of the couples, the note of joy carried by a little forward kick, seem a natural expression of youth and energy. The sex element enters these dances so slightly that they have been termed Platonic.





The Morris Dancers from Headington leap high in "Blue Eyed Stranger"

They are however a source of great delight to young and old who have once succumbed to the charm of the pattern, the exhilaration of the exercise and lift of the music.

The Sword Dance is probably the original of all these dances, being conceivably a nature dance closely associated with earliest rituals of nature worship, and of animal and even human sacrifice. Certain of the sword dances are led by

one carrying a lamb, bedecked, sword and lamb no doubt representing instrument and victim, both sacrificial. The form of the dance varies according to local tradition, but is always an intricate weaving step restricted in its freedom by the mounting complications of the maneuvers of the swords, ending in the final "lock," sometimes called the "rose" or the "nut." This "lock" startling and dramatic in its sudden perfection and

including every sword, is held triumphantly aloft during a sort of bachanal circling of the dancers, and is finally placed over the neck of the "fool" or captain. When the swords are drawn simultaneously and suddenly, the victim falling, the impression is very realistic, and it is not hard to believe this figure sprang from a sacrificial ceremony of remote date.

Of earlier English accounts the most important is that given by Sir Walter Scott in "The Pirates:"

"In the last scene, the rapiers are united round the neck of a person kneeling in the centre, and when they are suddenly withdrawn, the victim falls to the ground; he is afterwards carried out, and a mock funeral is performed with pomp and solemn strains."

Another reference tells us that the chief character (the victim), did not dance, but generally wore a fox's skin on his head, and the brush hanging down his back. This is so evidently a trait of primitive religion similar to that still found in the ritual costumes of the Pueblo Indians of the United States that we need have no hesitation in seeing here a mock sacrifice. And as for the modifications now in use, we may fairly argue that, the meaning of the ceremony once forgotten, spectacular considerations might easily account for these changes. So out of the debris of ancient

"Hands across" from the country dance "Butterfly"

cult and faith have issued forms of folk art, living and growing, as local changes keep them alive and interesting to this day.

In the Morris we have a dance of grace and dignity, instinct with emotion gravely restrained in a manner not unsuggestive of its older significance, and full of complex coordinated rhythms of hand and foot, demanding the perfection of unstrained muscular control. The Morris is an exhibition dance, always guarded by rigorous tradition and performed in vigorous masculine spirit. There is an amusing account of a wager made by Kempe, one of the comedians of Shakespeare's Old Globe Theatre, that he could Morris Dance from London to Norwich; he took some six





"Gathering Peascods" is one of the oldest of May day dances and contains figures reminiscent of tree worship



The lock or "nut" formed of eight dancers' swords in the Flamborough sword dance

weeks to the feat, and was toasted and entertained all along the way. He wrote a pamphlet called "The Nine Daies Wonder" recounting his experiences; and a play called, "John Kempe's Wager," by the poet Robert Graves, was recently built in quaint form upon the escapade.

The Morris seems undoubtedly to be an offshoot of the Sword. The sticks used in some dances are possibly fairly modern substitutes for the swords. Bells are worn which jingle and emphasize the step, perhaps to awaken earth spirits, as the Hopi Earth Drum is used, to signal to Mother Nature as represented by the Earth.

The handkerchiefs used by the Morris Dancers, are not easily accounted for unless one follows a possible degeneration of the use of the sword, to the spectacular use of the knotted handkerchief as a release from some of the more confining patterns of the Sword, and so developing again a folk change in an old ritual the meaning of which had been forgotten. The stiff connecting link between the dancers giving way to a more flexible one; eventually all pretense is dropped and the dancers simply part company and maintain the fluttering symbol. However the handkerchief does more than flutter. Dexterously flung by a supple wrist movement, the arms raised, elbows bent, it accents so cleanly the beat of the music, that it often seems the source of the movement, lifting the dancer clear of the ground in those astounding springs, often with crossed ankles, known as "capers." The Morris being a spec-

tacular, not a social dance, was performed on special occasions only. The usual custom was for the dancers to rehearse one or more nights a week between Easter and Whit Sunday, when the older men polished up their own steps and instructed new members of the team in the mysteries of the art. On Whit Monday the dancers stayed in their own village or in the neighborhood, while on the remaining days of the week they went further afield and visited the chief villages and towns within reach. This was their annual holiday, and they made the most of it. Old dancers are never tired of talking about their adventures on these occasions, the money they spent, how often their shirts were washed, and so forth, usually concluding with the remark that they did it all "for sport, not for money."

There is a tradition at Castleton of a Garland Processional around the town with halts at the public houses for a longways country dance. The procession, which is preceded by a man with a "besom" to sweep the way clear, consisted of a King and Queen or "man" and "woman" on horseback and a troupe of Morris dancers, headed by the village band. The King wore a garland over his head and shoulders, a large conical structure, made of wicker covered with flowers and surmounted by a nosegay. This when placed

Two partners do the "Clap high" in "Lads a Bunchum," a stick tapping Morris dance from Adderbury

over his head, reached down to his waist and when fully decorated with flowers weighed as much as twelve stone.

The Morris dancers carried either small pieces of oak, which they tossed in the air from one hand to the other as they danced, or boughs, and running forward on a diagonal, partners changed sides as the boughs were tossed. Immediately the dance was over the King rode into the churchyard and stationed himself by the tower. The nosegay was then removed from the apex of his garland, and the garland itself hauled

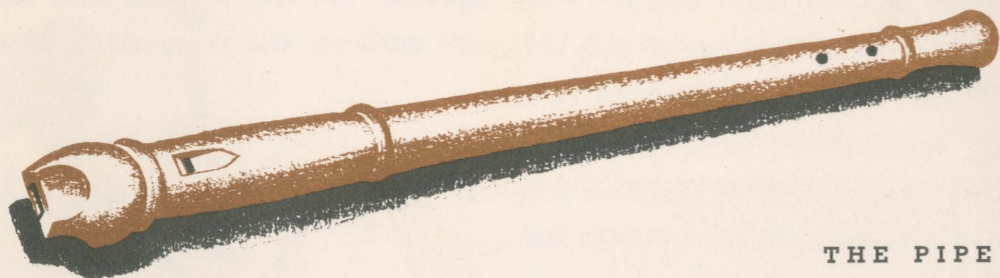


by means of ropes to the top of the tower, and placed on one of the pinnacles. This garland may be the original form of Jack-in-Green.

In some villages the first dance in Whitsun week was danced on the top of the Church Tower. This is very significant, because it is well known that in the early days of Christianity the priests allowed many of the pagan rites to be performed in the Churches. In New Mexico, in the church at San Felipi, an Indian pueblo, mass by the

nature worship. In the ceremonial dance around the Maypole, or in the Country dance, "Gathering Peascods" we detect an act of worship of the tree, as representing the grandest product of the vegetable world, a tribute to the principle of fertilization symbolized by the fresh flowers with which the pole is garlanded.

The names by which the dances are known are as quaint and romantic as the names of Colonial coverlet patterns, and the notation nearly



THE PIPE

Franciscan Fathers is followed on Christmas and the Saints day, by dances before the shrine; and in the Balearic Islands, at the present day, dancers closely resembling English Morris men dance every year at the Patronal Festival, in the chancel of the church before the high altar during celebration of mass. Some such practice may possibly have obtained in pre-Reformation England, the dancers in later days being relegated from chancel to tower.

The Country Dance is purely social, though bearing still strongly both color and pattern traceable back through Morris to Sword, and to

as charming. Sellenger's Round or the Beginning of the World, Put on thy Smock on a Monday, Jenny come tie my Cravat, Oranges and Lemons, Parson's Farewell, The Black Nag, and Nonesuch, are well known among dozens of others as intriguing, among the Country Dances. Among the Morris perhaps the most beloved is Blue Eyed Stranger, with Princess Royal and Bonnets so Blue, close seconds. The sword dances are frequently known by the locale where they are traditional, as the Earsdon Sword Dance, and the Abbots Bromley Horn Dance.

The pipe and tabor were at one time the tradi-



"Legs Over," a remnant figure of a very old Morris dance done at Wyresdale to the English tune "Greensleeves"

tional instruments of England, and until recently were almost invariably used to accompany the Morris dance. The pipe, often called the "whittle" "whistle" or "fife" is a small wooden, cylindrical flageolet, about thirteen inches long and of small diameter. At the upper end it is fitted with a whistle attachment, the tongue of which is usually made of metal; while at the lower end it is pierced with three holes, two in front, to be stopped by the first and second fingers, and one at the back for the thumb. The pipe can therefore be held and played with the fingers of one hand, the

left, leaving the other at liberty to "dub" the tabor, which is suspended from the left wrist by means of a leathern thong. Many Morris men say they gave up dancing when the pipe and tabor were superseded by the fiddle, because they found it impossible to dance to the latter instrument. Probably they missed the rhythmic support of the drum notes. The sound of the pipe and tabor is so distinctive that one can well understand that those who had never heard other instruments might find it difficult to become reconciled to the harmonies of the violin.

The Hobby Horse, a traditional figure seldom missing from the old English May day summer festivals



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