

ROOMER

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Drama Research Group.
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VICTORIAN VIEWS OF THE MUMMERS

The items contained in this issue have been brought to our attention by Roy Judge and extend the range of images of mummies presented by Paul Smith in 'Applied Mumping', *Roomer* 2:3 (1982), p.20-21 and Sandra Billington in 'The New Burlesque', *Roomer* 3:4 (1983), p.21-24.

Please Note - The original illustration reproduced in *Roomer* 2:3 (1982), p.21 was from *The Graphic - Christmas Number* (25 Dec. 1871) and not 1891 as stated.

CHRISTMAS MUMMERS.

"The ancient spirit is not dead." Old customs, in a sense, are never old, but always new. Cakes and ale, for all that fastidious Malvolios may say to the contrary, are still pleasant to the mirth-disposed; ay, "and ginger is still hot in the mouth." Roast beef and plum-pudding are still substantial powers and veritable influences. They have a moral as well as a material life, and are immortal.

The reason of Christmas was, in the days of old, the season of masques and revels, and the taste for both is quick and active yet in many rural places. "All men and women are merely players," says Shakespeare; and Christmas is the time when they like to demonstrate this great truth in the clearest manner. Then it is that the Mummer feels the day of his glory has arrived, and he wisely determines to make the most of it. There is little doubt that our friend is of respectable antiquity. Etymologists ally the name by which he is known with the Greek Momus. And why should we object to the derivation? Momus was a merry god, and the Mummer is a merry mortal who can venerate the divinity in a corresponding vein. He, moreover, is of a class not too high for good-fellowship, nor too low for self-respect. He is generally of the middle order, for your noble is too proud to mingle in such merely popular sports, and your peasant is too unlearned to take a share in them. The Mummer has to play a part in a scene, and must understand its meaning. He must be partially acquainted with legendary lore, and know something about St. George and the Dragon, as also about More of More Hall and the Dragon of Wantley, and other romances, or burlesques on them, which may fitly be made the theme of pastime at the joyous and yet sacred Christmas-tide.

Romances, or their burlesques? Ay, in the free-and-easy manner in which mummeries are exhibited it matters little whether we interpret the scene of St. George or of More of More Hall. Each had his dragon—one in a nameless forest and the other at Wantley town. Guy Faux will serve the turn as well as Guy Earl of Warwick. Let every looker-on have his fancy and see in it what may best please him. The motive of the mummer's procession is to please: the end obtained, why embitter the relish with intrusive criticism? To the people of the Hall it is welcome after a fashion. The Squire and his lady are interested, but the aristocratic youth regard it rather superciliously, as something to be tolerated; while the menials are disposed to enjoy the pageant. One of these holds a candle, that she may regard it in a

better light; and another treats the thirsty Drummer with a mug of ale, which he well deserves. He and his suite come to that Hall for largess, and they shall not be disappointed. Nor may their merits be questioned, for they bring their own Trumpeter with them, who, after the Drummer has drunk his quantum, will empty the flogon.

On the other side we have the peasantry, in their smock-frocks, staring with wonder, and anxious to find matter for mirth in the passing incidents. The Dragon is an object of much interest; for the child is frightened at the monster, and the dog barks at it, while the mother encourages her boy to approach it nearer. He has reason to be frightened if he has read the ballad of "The Dragon of Wantley," and supposes that he now stands in presence of the monster. For what says that voracious narrative of the terror of Wantley?—

Have you not heard how the Trojan horse
Held seventy men in his belly!
This dragon was not quite so big,
But very near, I'll tell ye:
Devoured he poor children three,
That could not wick him grapple;
And at one sup he ate them up,
As one would eat an apple.

All sorts of cattle this dragon did eat,
Some say he ate up trees;
And that the forests sure he would
Devour up by degrees:
For houses and churches were to him geese and turkeys;
He ate all, and left none behind
But some stones, dear Jack, that he could not crack,
Which on the hills you will find.

We cannot describe the fight that More of More Hall had with him for several reasons; but it is our duty to be more respectful to St. George, who was for England what St. Denis was for France. Such is the burden of two old and rambling songs made in his praise which may be found in the Percy Collection. The first thus begins:—

Why do ye boast of Arthur and his Knights,
Knowing well how many men have endured fights?
For besides King Arthur, and Lancelot du Lake,
Or Sir Tristram de Lionel, that fought for ladies' sake,
Read in old histories, and there you shall see
How St. George, St. George the dragon made to flee,
St. George he was for England; St. Denis was for France;
Sing, "Bon soit quitz mal y pense."

And then the ballad proceeds to celebrate numerous other heroes: Abraham, David, Jephthah, Gideon, Hannibal, Scipio, Orlando Furioso, Remus and Romulus, Alphonso, Outlaw the Dane, Bevis, the Earl of Warwick, Richard Cœur de Lion, and many others of less or greater note; but each of these, in turn, is subordinated to St. George. The same vein is reopened in the later song, which was written by John Grubb, M.A., of Christ Church, Oxford, wherein we are told how superior St. George was to all other conquerors. The stanzas are full of wit and humour, but would be out of place in a sketch like this. Our purpose is attained if we have enabled the reader to enter into the spirit of Mr. Hunt's picture, which is full of interesting details that sufficiently explain themselves, and of suggestions that conduct the mind to the past and future while adverting to the present. H.



'The Christmas Mummers', drawn by A. Hunt, Illustrated London News (21 Dec. 1861), p.639. (For text see previous page).

CHRISTMAS MUMMERS IN THE OLDEN TIME.

ONE of the most lasting things in the world is custom. Here are we celebrating Christmas with *mumming*, which our ancestors borrowed from the Roman Saturnalia; and its name from the Danish *monne*, or Dutch *monne*—disguise in a mask or the painting of faces. We can trace the Lord of Misrule or master of merry disports from the King's house to the house of every nobleman of honour or good worship, spiritual or temporal, down to the Mayors' and Sheriffs' feast, to the farmer's fireside, and the roystering in the highways and byways: prince, peer, and peasant have for ages commemorated our great festival by the same merry means.

The ancient mumming, however, took this strange turn:—It consisted in changing clothes between men and women, who were dressed in each other's habits, went from one neighbour's house to another, partaking of Christmas cheer, and making merry with them in disguise. Mr. Sandys, in his ingenious "Christmastide," remarks that "the mummeries or disguises were known here as early as the time of Henry II., if not sooner. (The Illustration is of this period.) They were not confined to the diversions of the King and his nobles; but a ruder class was in vogue among the inferior orders, where, no doubt, abuses were occasionally introduced in consequence. Even now, our country geese or guise dancers are a remnant of the same custom; and in some places a horse's head still accompanies these mummers."

A more rational phase of mumming was the *ludi*, or plays, exhibited at Court in the Christmas holidays, to be traced back as far as the reign of Edward III., though they are thought to be much older. The dresses appropriated in 1348 to one of these plays show that they were mummeries, and not theatrical diversions. The King then kept his Christmas at his castle at Guildford, the keep of which remains to this day. The dresses consisted of 80 tunics of buckram, of various colours; 42 vizors, 14 faces of women, 14 of men, and 14 heads of angels, made with silver; 28 crests; 14 mantles, embroidered with heads of dragons; 14 white tunics wrought with the heads and wings of peacocks; 14 with the heads and wings of swans; 14 tunics painted with the eyes of peacocks; 14 tunics of English linen, painted; and 14 other tunics embroidered with stars of gold. The magnificent pageants and disguisings frequently exhibited at Court in the succeeding reigns, and especially in the reign of Henry VIII., were mummeries destitute of character and humour, their chief aim being to surprise the spectators "by the ridiculous and exaggerated oddity of the vizors, and by the singularity and splendour of the dresses—everything was out of nature and propriety." Such a strange scene will be remembered in Mr. Charles Kean's getting-up of Shakspeare's "Henry VIII." at the Princess' Theatre, upon which much research was expended.

In a beautiful manuscript in the Bodleian Library, written and illuminated in the reign of Edward III., are some spirited figures of mummers wearing the heads of animals, among which the stag, with branching horns, is most prominent. Some of the heads are very grotesque, and remind one of the strange head-masks worn in the opening of pantomimes in the present day. The olden performance seems to have consisted chiefly in dancing, and the mummers were usually attended by the minstrels, playing upon different kinds of musical instruments.

Stow describes a remarkable mummary in 1377, made by the citizens of London for the disport of the young Prince Richard, son to the Black Prince. They rode, disguised and well horsed, 130 in number, with minstrels and torchlights of wax, to Kennington, beside Lambeth, where the young Prince remained with his mother. These maskers alighted, entered the palace-hall, and set to the Prince and his mother and lords cups and rings of gold, which they won at a cast; after which they feasted, and the Prince and lords danced with the mummers, "which jollitie being ended, they were made to drink," &c. Henry IV., in the second year of his reign, kept his Christmas at Eltham, whither "twelve Aldermen of London and their sonnes rode a-mumming, and had great thanks."

The Cornish miracle plays, which were not performed in churches, but in an earthen amphitheatre in some open field, continued to be exhibited long after the abolition of the miracles and moralities in other parts of the kingdom. Accordingly, we find them lingering in Cornwall to our time; and in Cornwall, Devon, and Staffordshire the old spirit of Christmas is kept up more earnestly than in most other counties. In Cornwall they exhibit the old dance of St. George and the Dragon; and in the Staffordshire halls a band of bedizened actors perform the whole of the ancient drama. This famous mummary is imagined to refer to the time of the Crusades, and to have been invented by the warriors of the Cross on their return from Palestine. Mr. Sandys gives this Christmas Play "as represented in the West of England." Hone, in his "Every-day Book," gives an extended version of "St. George," under the title of "Alexander and the King of Egypt, a Mock Play, as it is acted by the Mummers every Christmas: Whitehaven." In a scarce work, written in 1737, we find this record of "St. George":—

England's Heroe—Saint George for England—At Christmas are (or at least very lately were) fellows went to go about from house to house in Exeter, a-mumming; one of whom, in a (borrow'd) Holland shirt, more gorgeously beribboned over his waistcoat, &c., flourishing a faulchion very valiantly, entertains the admiring spectators thus:—

Oh! here comes I, Saint George, a man of courage bold,
And with my spear I winn'd three crowns of gold.
I slew the Dragon, and brought him to the slaughter,
And by that very means I married Sabra, the beautiful King
of Egypt's daughter.

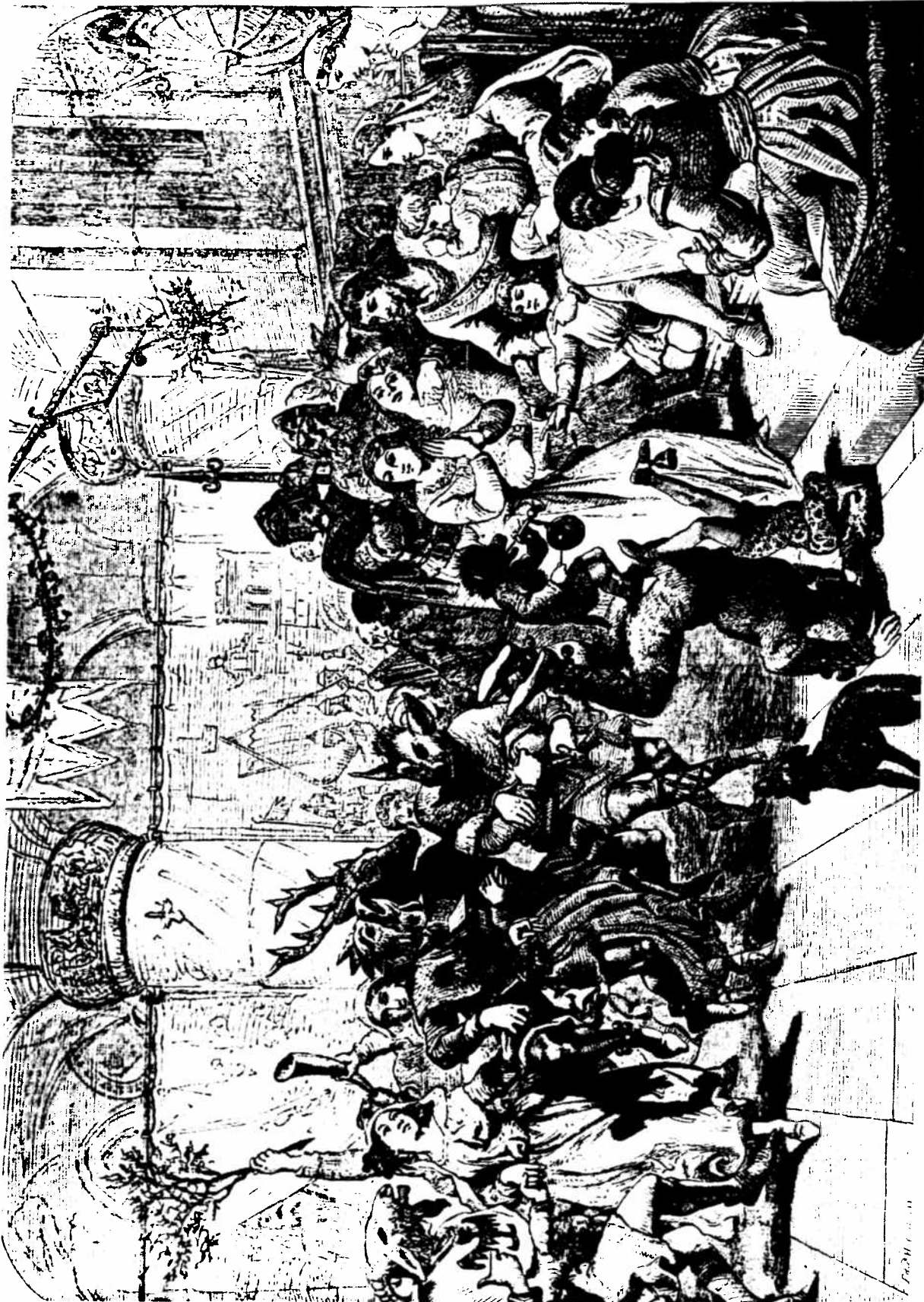
All the versions have evidently sprung from one original. Cuthbert Bede gives the Worcestershire mumming, as played by boys. The Vallant Soldier wore a real soldier's coat; Old Father Christmas carried holly; the Turkish Knight had a turban; and all of them were decked out with ribbons and scarves, and had their faces painted. Little Devil Doubt had a black face, and carried a money-box, a basin, and a bladder; with the bladder he thwacked the performer whose turn it was to speak. Beelzebub is identical with Old Father Christmas, who sings

In comes I, old Father Beelzebub;
And on my shoulder I carry a club,
And in my hand I carry a can,
Don't you think I'm jolly old man?

As jolly as I am, Christmas comes but once a year;
Now's the time for roast beef, plum-pudding, mince-pies, and strong beer.

Miss Baker, in her "Glossary," published in 1854, describes the mummers as young men, generally six or eight, who, during the Christmas holidays, commencing on St. Thomas's Eve, go about in the rural districts of Northamptonshire, disguised, personating different characters, and performing a burlesque tragedy at such houses as they think will recompense them for their entertainment. Brackley is the only market-town where Miss Baker heard of the custom being observed. Some years since she witnessed the representation of a mock play by eight mummers, all masked, at the seat of Michael Woodhull, Esq., Thenford. The characters were Beelzebub, Activity, Age on the Stage, Doctor, Doctor's Horse, Jem Jacks, the Doctor's Man, Fool, and Treasurer, who carried a box for contributions. The fight is between Age and Activity; the Doctor is called in to assist Activity; the finale is the Fool playing the hurdy-gurdy and knocking them all down; and the whole concludes with a general scuffle on the floor. The mummers are most frequently disguised with discolourations of red, white, and black on their faces, and any grotesque attire they can procure.

The accompanying Illustration pictures the mummers of old. The lord and his family are seated in the ancestral hall, which is hung with tapestry, with its story of war; the mummers are in full glee, with bells and dance, and tabor and pipe, with holly garnish and sounding horn. Such was the boisterous merriment of the mumming at the Christmas festivities of seven centuries since.



'Christmas Mummings in the Olden Time', drawn by E. H. Corbould, Illustrated London News (22 Dec. 1866), p.617. (For text see previous page).

 THE MUMMERS

THE cloth has been removed, and the glasses sparkle in the light of the wax candles, and are reflected in the deep polish of the old mahogany table which almost seems to have a layer of plate-glass above the wood, so brilliant is the gloss which more than a century of polishing has produced upon its re-brown surface.

The children in all the glory of full-dress have come down to dessert, and are clustered open-eyed round the old Squire who, with his arm-chair drawn nearer to the crackling fire of fir-logs, is initiating them into the mysteries of Christ Church punch as compounded at Oxford in the days when the Battle of Waterloo was news in the land.

Outside, beyond those closely shuttered and heavily curtained windows, a pale cold moon is shining through the leafless beeches on the lawn over a frozen landscape lying mute in its winter's sleep. But before the punch has been long made the quick ears of the children detect a sound of feet that breaks the stillness in the long avenue of firs that leads up from the high road, and presently the trampling echoes clear and crisp over the frozen gravel until it abruptly dies away behind the laurel bushes on the path leading to the stables and the back of the house.

"Who can it be, grandpapa?" says a little maiden in an awestruck whisper, with reminiscences of fairy tales and ghost stories crowding her childish brain.

"Ah, who can it be, I wonder?" echoes the old Squire, his keen blue eyes twinkling with suppressed amusement; "Robbers, perhaps," he adds, as the sound of deep-mouthed baying floats over the trees from the stable-yard.

The little faces lengthen at the thought; but all further speculation is rendered unnecessary by the entrance of the butler, who announces, in his soft fat voice—

"The Mummers, sir."

"Very good; give them some supper, and then, I daresay, one or two of us will come out and see them."

For once the children hardly do justice to the dessert, so anxious are they to behold the marvels that the Mummers have to show, and so, before very long, we go out to the old brick-floored kitchen, which the cook has plentifully adorned with holly in honour of the season.

Presently a subdued shuffling and whispering outside the door tells us that the Mummers have finished their supper, and are about to begin their performance, and then they file slowly in and resume their shuffling and whispering in a huddled knot near the door. At last, with many elbow-thrusts, and a "Goo now," a sturdy youth is ejected from the group, and stands, looking very much as if he had been caught poaching, in the centre of the kitchen. He is dressed in a smock-frock covered all over with white ribbons and strips of paper, beneath which his thick boots and the bottoms of his corduroy trousers stand revealed. His head and face are smothered in an arrangement in wool, which does duty for hair and beard, and the edifice is crowned with a chaplet of holly. In his right hand he clutches a fir tree, and, standing sideways, with his eyes fixed on the ground, he commences, in a hoarse and monotonous manner—

"Here comes I, Old Father Christmas,
Welcome or welcome not—"

He has got so far when a shrill small voice interrupts him. Master Tom, aged seven, who is on terms of intimate acquaintance with all the farm labourers, and whose loftiest ambition is to be a carter's boy and ride on the shafts of a waggon, has penetrated the disguise, and shouts, "Why it's Jabez Parfit!"

This is too much for Father Christmas. He stops dead, casts a startled look at the audience, and bolts for safety behind his brother Mummers, whence he is thrust forth in a manner that admits of no denial, and is once more placed in the centre of the brick floor to his great and evident discomfort. This time he gets through without any interruption, and concludes his harangue in a relieved gallop.

"And now, masters, I've said my say,
So come on, King of Egypt, and clear the way."

Thus summoned, the potentate takes the place of Father Christmas. His Sunday coat is adorned with many bunches of particoloured ribbons, so that he looks like a recruiting-sergeant (un to see), and on his head he wears a portentous helmet, that betrays through its forest of ribbons a suspicious likeness to an old top hat with the brim cut off. He slouches round in a circle, banging the tip of his wooden sabre against the brick floor, and recounts, in the monotonous sing-song affected by all these per-

sonages, his difficulties with the Dragon. He concludes by calling on St. George of Merry England for aid, and retires behind his fellows to doff his casque and mop his forehead with a large red pocket-handkerchief.

St. George is evidently the "star" actor of the company, and like other "stars" seems fully aware of the fact. He striles forward, a rustling mass of red ribbons, with a Royal Standard from a Christmas tree adorning his helmet, and at the top of his voice begins to insult the Dragon.

"Where is the Dragon bold who dares St. George defy?
I'll cut him full of holes, and make his buttons fly."

To do St. George justice it would be a very deaf dragon who could not hear this defiance at the very furthest recesses of his cave, and so the monster comes forward, the very counterpart of the King of Egypt, save and except that his ribbons are of a scaly green, which, as everybody knows, is the natural colour of dragons. The knight and the monster then begin to prowl round one another firing off couplets, and at last break into the broadsword combat so dear to sailors of the dead and gone melodrama. Presently the dragon receives a dig in the ribs that brings him wounded to his knees, and he humbly asks for pardon and mercy from his conqueror:

"No pardon shalt thou have while I before thee stand;
So rise up again, and fight out sword in hand."

replies the obdurate Saint, and the combat recommences, only to end by the Dragon being stretched lifeless on the cold bricks. This would seem a good finish for the play; but the old dramatist knew better. Father Christmas, having got rid of some of his shyness by this time, comes forward and inquires:

"Now is there ne'er a Doctor to be found
Already nigh to hand,
To cure the deep and deadly wound,
And make the Dragon stand?"

The Doctor, from top to toe a crackling mass of black-paper streamers, steps forward and announces that he can work the cure. "What can you cure?" says Father Christmas; and the Doctor replies:

"Whatever you please;
All sorts of diseases—
The colic, rheumatic, and gout;
If the devil's in I'll kick him out."

Father Christmas next asks what the fee is, and the Doctor replies ten pounds; but, for such a "vule" as Father Christmas, he will only charge half-a-crown. And so the bargain is struck. The Doctor forces the neck of a bottle between the jaws of the recumbent Dragon, exclaiming:

"I've got a little bottle of alicampine;
Here, Jack, take a little of my flip-flop,
Pour it down thy tip-top;
Rise up and fight again."

Thus familiarly adjured, the Dragon renews the combat, but the result is the same, and he goes and dies in a corner out of the way of the other actors. His place is taken by the smallest of the company, who has a bundle of dolls on his back. He introduces himself—

"Here comes I, little Johnny Jack,
With my wife and family on my back."

He then informs the audience that he is not rich, and that he has had a long journey to come. During this recitation, the Dragon gets up and rejoins his companions, finally coming forward with the rest, when little Johnny Jack has finished, and supporting Father Christmas, who delivers the tag, which never varies at these performances—

"Now, ladies and gemmen, your sport is most ended,
So pass round the hat, which is highly commended,
The hat it could speak if it had e'er a tongue,
So throw in your money and think it no wrong!"

All is over. The Christmas play, the words of which are handed down from generation to generation in the West country, is finished, much to the children's regret. But it is long past bed-time, and even for the actors the hour is rather a dissipated one. So with a liberal reward for their entertainment, and a parting horn of ale to keep them warm, they clatter down the flagged passage and into the still and silent night. But to the little ones the Mummers' play has a more real and living interest than any pantomime at the London theatres, for they know the Mummers in private life.

J. W. P.

EFFECTS OF MASKING - TWO CHILDREN TERRIFIED TO DEATH

From Illustrated London News 21st December 1850, p.471.

"About three weeks since, two children, belonging to a man named Brown, formerly a waiter at the Globe Hotel, Exmouth, the one four and the other a few years older, were sent by the mother, who keeps a mangle, after a basket of clothes, and were met on the way by some boys, one of whom had on a most hideous-looking mask. The boy, seeing the children frightened, ran after them, repeating some gibberish, which frightened them more: and having followed them until they turned the corner of the street, transferred the mask to another boy, who managed again to come in contact with the poor children, who returned home instantly, when their parents, seeing them so pale and trembling very much, inquired what the matter was, which they explained as well as they could. The shock, however, was so great that they never recovered it: their health declined daily. The one died three weeks after, and the other died on Wednesday week. Each of them in his illness often exclaimed "He is coming", "I see him", "There he is", with other like expressions. The father and mother have been most unfortunate, having had one son, who was a great assistance to them, drowned, and themselves so afflicted as latterly to be almost dependant on the parish for support.

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Research in any field is, as often as not, hampered by the lack of communication between individual researchers, and Traditional Drama is no exception. We are acutely aware that there are many people doing valuable work who have little or no contact with others in this field and, consequently, no opportunity to compare notes or air their views.

ROOMER then is designed to fill this gap by providing an informal forum. It includes notes and queries, details of publications, out-of-the-way texts, information on work in progress, in fact anything that may be of interest to those working in the field of Traditional Drama. As such it relies heavily on participation by subscribers. Therefore, if you have any potential contributions we would be most grateful to receive them.

Back volumes of the newsletter are currently available at the cost of the annual subscription. For further information regarding ROOMER and the work of the TRADITIONAL DRAMA RESEARCH GROUP contact:

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