

**ALEX HELM
and
E.C.CAWTE**



SIX MUMMERS' ACTS



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The Introduction, Conclusion and the passages introducing each of the six plays, are by the Editors.

The drawing of the Stockport Mummer, *circa* 1880, on the title page, is based on a written description in E.H.: 'Manners and Customs of old Stockport. Peace egging' in *Advertiser Notes and Queries*, (1), Advertiser Office, Stockport, 1882, 103-4.

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"Do women ever take part in your play?" The old man recoiled in horror. "Nay, sir," he replied, "mumming don't be for the likes of them. There be plenty else for them that be flirty-like, but this here mumming be more like parson's work."

- R.R.Marett: 'Survival and Revival' in *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society*, 1, 2, The Society, London, 1933, 75.

Introduction

The old performer quoted above gave an answer in part to one of two questions frequently asked today. These are, should non-traditional performers present a mummers' play, and secondly, how should it be presented? The answer to the first question is simple. There is an ever-increasing number of people who find interest in the Play, either in performance or study; but as with the ceremonial dance, were it not presented by non-traditional performers here and there, it would soon exist only in the pages of books as an antiquarian curiosity. To those who wish to perform a Play the advice must be to go ahead with their present - ations, but to attempt to portray them in as traditional a manner as possible. Although achieving a performance 'more like parson's work' may be out of reach in a modern revival, if the traditional method is known, the play may be seen as what it really was, a primitive ceremony.

Although the word 'Play' has been used above, its use gives a false idea of the true nature of the custom. A Play suggests a theatrical performance complete with stage, scenery and actors. The traditional mummers had neither stage nor scenery, but performed in kitchens, halls of large houses, or in village streets and for the space of their appearance they became impersonal, disguised 'beings' whose recognition broke the 'luck' they set out to bring. Better words than 'Play' are 'Ceremony', 'Action', or 'Ritual' ('parson's work'), for the traditional performers did not set out to bring characterisation to the parts they played, and indeed, their anonymity made them for a brief spell, the 'medicine men' of the community.

For the most part they stood in a semi-circle: as needed, each stepped forward, uttered his lines in a loud voice with no inflexions, and stepped back. Only during the combat was there any lively action, and there is some reason to believe that this was a late modification designed to attract money. The same reason probably influenced the development of the cure into the comedy which now dominates it, but once these two parts were over, the performers returned to their semi-circle to make way for the characters of Beelzebub, Dairy Doubt, etc., to step forward and declaim their lines. There was no attempt at characterisation or acting except in the combat and cure, and indeed the slain champion might do nothing more than drop his head to show that he was 'slain'. This also protected his costume from muddy ground.

The disguise worn by the performers helped them to remain impersonal, and in many villages they really were unrecognisable. Although this has dwindled recently in some places to dressing in part, the costume of paper strips fastened over ordinary clothes can still be seen at Marsh - field in Gloucestershire and at Crookham in Hampshire. Almost everywhere the last part of the disguise to disappear is the headdress, because this is obviously the most effective

means of hiding identity. In 1966, the traditional performers in Tromogagh, Co. Fermanagh, wore modern leather jackets and winkle-picker shoes, but still retained streamers hanging from their peaked caps to hide their faces. This is a typical example of the old disguise and modern dress in one.

The theme of death and resurrection which is at the centre of this ceremony has always remained constant, but some change is inevitable as tradition adapts itself to modern times. It may be expressed in *ad lib.* comments on the National Health Service during the cure, new characters, e.g. Donald Duck, Nasser, Suffragette etc., modernising of costume, masks instead of ribbons, and the loss of ceremonial content other than the appearance at a special season of the year, and the attempt to preserve the disguise.

The texts presented here are exactly as taken down by the collectors: another collector going over the same ground later may find superficial differences, and indeed, should be prepared for them. Other detail collected with the texts is also given so that anyone who wishes to perform them has all the known detail at his disposal. Where this detail is missing, suggestions have been made based on similar ceremonies from the same area: but these should only be taken for guidance because although texts are similar, differences exist even in adjacent villages.

The editor would be glad to hear of any detail which readers can add to those given here, whether from the areas represented or elsewhere, since it is clear that much awaits collection from witnesses, former performers, newspaper columns and local histories.

The Derbyshire Guisers

Thirty-eight examples of the Play are known to have existed in Derbyshire, this particular example being one which was collected when Sir E.K.Chambers was studying material for *The English Folk Play*:* it is listed by him as No. 19 in his list of texts. The gangs with whom Mr Shipley came into contact considered themselves superior to the Morris Dancers and Old Tup teams: the former they described as 'wild zulus' and the latter were too rough and the sheep's head they carried with them too 'malodorous.'† It is difficult to believe that the guisers themselves were entirely blameless citizens.

The performers did not disguise themselves, but dressed like actors for the parts they had to play, as was common in Derbyshire. The King of Egypt's face was copper-coloured to look the part and not as a ritual disguise or the other performers would have done likewise. Probably the same is true of those with black faces.

All the following information on Brimington is reproduced unaltered from Mr Shipley's text.

Brimington, Derbyshire, Mummers' Play

Vaughan Williams Memorial Library: Collection

Collected by Mr R.W.Shipley in 1933 from two old men who had played Hector and Devil Doubt. The latter said that he first heard it in 1862 and took part during the next five or six years, after which the players were separated and the play discontinued.

* Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1933, 237.

† The performers in the Old Tup ceremonies carried with them a sheep's head, either a real skull or a wooden replica, on a pole. They sang the song 'The Derby Ram' and sometimes the Tup was 'killed' and a basin was carried 'to catch the blood'. Brimington lies near Chesterfield where the Old Tup ceremony was performed at Christmas in 1966.

The play was known locally as 'St. George' and the players as 'mummies'. It was usually performed in crowded rooms and the characters did not 'enter'. A circle was formed by the players in the middle of the room from which they stepped forward as required, falling back to place at the end of their lines. At the close of the play they linked arms together and sang a few lines. If they were well rewarded, other songs would be called for and they would sing for as long as it was worth while.

The performance was at Christmas to a settled chain of calling places. A Morris team was a serious competitor for rewards, and the Play was accordingly sometimes 'cropped short', i.e. six players took the eight parts, 'as it made more each in the share-out'.

Costume

Slasher	Tunic, trousers and hat as a sailor.
St. George	Tunic, trousers and belt All white.
Black Prince	Tunic, trousers and belt. All black, with white facings
Doctor	Long tailed coat and tall hat.
King of Egypt	Copper coloured face, crown, dark tunic and trousers.
Hector	Red tunic, belt and yellow trousers.
Beelzebub	Tunic, trousers All red.
Devil-Doubt	Tunic and trousers of flowered bizarre chintz.

All carried wooden swords "three feet long about". King of Egypt also carried a dagger. Black Prince, Beelzebub, Devil-Doubt all had black faces.

* * *

Slasher

A room, a room, a gallant room,
Give me room to recite
And repeat our merry rhyme.
Remember, sir, now it's Christmas time.
Time to cut up roast pork, mince pies and pork pies

And drink a glass of beer.
If you don't believe these words I say,
Step in, St. George, and clear the way.

St. George

I am St. George who from Old England sprung;
My famous name throughout the world hath rung,
Many deeds and wonders have I made known,
And made false tyrants tremble on their throne,
I followed a fair lady to the Giant's Gate,
Confined in dungeon to meet her fate,
When I resolved with my true nobility*
To burst the door and set the prisoner free.

Black Prince

I am Black Prince of Paradise, born of high renown,
Soon will I fetch St. George's lofty courage down.
Before I part from thee
I'll send thee to eternity.

St. George

Stand back, thou black Morocco dog,
Or by my sword I'm sure to break thy head.

Black Prince

How can'st thou break my head?
My head is made of iron,
My body made of steel,
My hands and feet are knuckle bone,
I challenge thee to feel.

They fight. Black Prince is slain.

King of Egypt

I am the King of Egypt as plainly doth appear,
Come to seek my son and only heir.
He is slain! Who did him slay? Who did him kill?

* The meaning of this word is not clear.

And on this ground his precious blood did spill?

St. George

I, please your liege, my honour to maintain;
If you'd been here you would have fared the same.

King strikes a blow with dagger at St. George, who grasps the King by the wrist.

King of Egypt

Hector! Hector! help me with speed!
For in my life I never stood more need.
Stand not there with sword in hand,
But rise and fight at my command.

Hector

Oh yes, my liege, I will obey,
And by my sword I hope to win the day.
I fought the fiery dragon, and brought him to slaughter,
And by this means I won the King of Egypt's daughter.

Hector and St. George fight. Hector is slain.

King of Egypt

A doctor, a doctor, ten pounds for a doctor!

Doctor

Here I am!

King of Egypt

How far have you travelled?

Doctor

From Italy, Spitaly, German France and Spain,
And now return to Old England once again.

King of Egypt

What can you cure?

Doctor

The hitch, the pitch, the palsy and the gout,
The pain within and the pain without.
If he has nineteen devils in his skull,
I can cast twenty of them out.

Hector

Oh, my back!

Doctor

What's amiss with thy back?

Hector

My back is wounded, my heart is confounded,
I was struck out of seven sins into fourscore.

Doctor

Take a drink out of my bottle,
And let it run down thy throttle,
If thou be not quite slain,
Rise up, Jack, and fight again.

Hector rises and speaks

Hector

I am a valiant knight and Hector is my name,
With my buckle and my sword I hope to win my fame.
I followed the fiery dragon to the slaughter,
And by that means I won the King of Egypt's daughter.

Beelzebub

In comes I, Beelzebub,
Over my shoulder I carry my club.
In my hand a dripping pan,
Thinks myself a jolly old man.
If you don't believe the words I say,
Step in little Devil-doubt and clear the way.

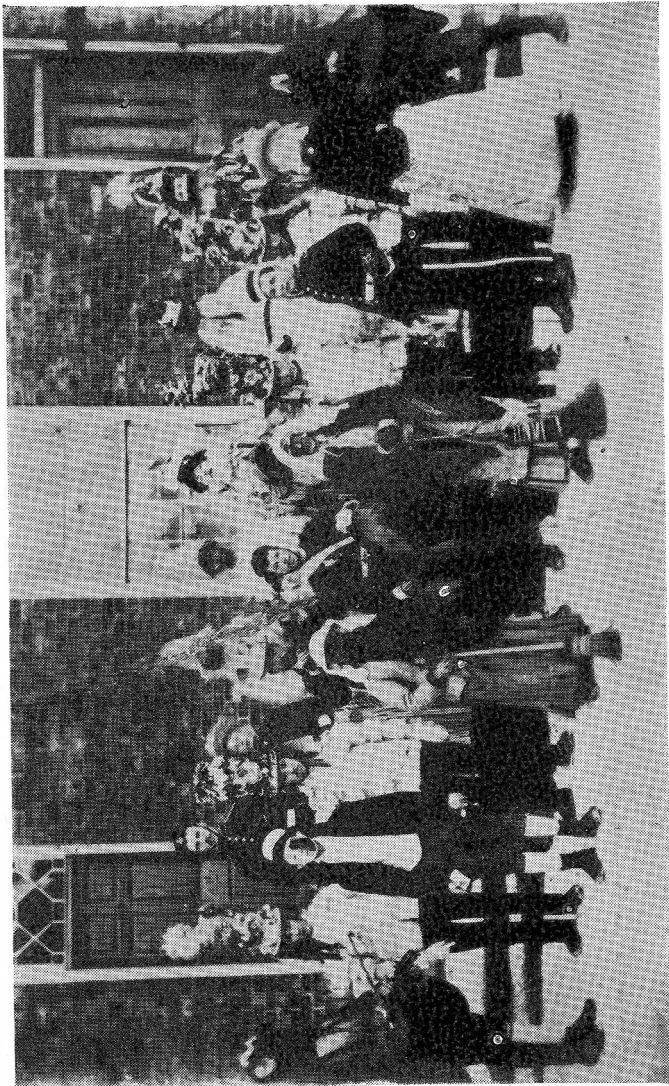


Plate 1. Alkborough, Lincolnshire, Plough Jags, c. 1899

Back Row: Sergeant, Lady, ?Beelzebub, ?Indian King, Unidentified, ?Beelzebub, Unidentified
Middle Row: Hobby Horse, Hatman, Hatman, Doctor, Drummer Boy, Hatman, Soldier, Hatman, Hobby Horse
Front Row: Tom Fool, Besom Bet, Besom Bet, Lady

Devil-doubt

In comes I little Devil-doubt,
If you don't give me money, I'll clear you all out.
Money I want and money I crave,
If you don't give me money,
I'll sweep you all to the grave.

All linked arms and sang



We'll go no more a-rushing maids in May, We'll



go no more a-rush-ing maids I pray, For



if you go a-rush-ing you're sure to get a brushing, So



gather up your rushes and come this way.

*Sometimes they made a ring with the Fool (Slasher) in the middle.
Then Hector sang. If they were well received they would keep on singing.*

Northamptonshire Mummers

Northamptonshire Mummers usually resemble those of the Cotswolds, and the text below is no exception. It has the familiar Cotswold features of Jack Finney with his insistence on being called 'Mr. Finney' and the tooth-drawing. The dancing round at the end of the performance is also found in other areas. With the passing of time this dancing had become a means of attracting contributions, but in Thame in 1853 and Islip in 1780, stage directions mention 'Morres dancers'. Thame was admittedly a most unusual play text but Islip, apart from a few unusual characters, is more akin to the texts now known. There was a Cotswold type Morris at Sulgrave, but there is no record of Cotswold Morris being performed with a play.

The text shows the typical rustic humour of the area. The tooth drawing is usually brought about by all the characters pulling together in a line each with his arms round the waist of the one in front, until eventually a tooth belonging to either a horse or a cow is exhibited. Jack Finney here performs the cure instead of being the doctor's unwilling assistant as is usual, and although the Doctor/Molly and Jack Finney/Molly dialogues read badly to a sophisticated eye, they are characteristic of the humour found in the plays all over the country. This is often expressed in topsey turvey lines such as the 'working binder' mentioned by Jack Finney, which can only be translated inversely as a 'constipative laxative'.

Although costume details are few, elsewhere in the area performers wore ribbons fastened to their ordinary clothes, tall dunce hats and occasionally patches of material sewn onto coats.

Sulgrave (SP5545) is 7 miles north-east of Banbury on the eastern edge of the Cotswold area. The text which follows was written down about 1921 for Mrs Brown who added the additional details in 1966 from her recollections of the performances she witnessed.

Sulgrave, Northamptonshire, Mummers' Play

Vaughan Williams Memorial Library: Collection

The text was written out for Mrs T.P.Brown by Mr (?)William Branson a performer who had taken part in the play at Christmas 1921. Other performers said there was more in the play than Mr Branson had written down, but they probably felt that he was the only one willing to set the text down on paper. Mrs Brown remembers that they were dressed very much like Morris Dancers, but without bells. Molly wore a sun bonnet and carried a broom, whilst Big Head had a real bladder with which to hit the other players. At the end of the performance the characters danced round in a ring to the music of a mouth organ, but no particular tune is given.

* * *

Enter Molly

Molly

A room, a room,
For me and my broom,
And all my brave company.
I'll sweep your house as clear as a berry
For very little money.
Come in, my foreman.

Enter Duke of Cumberland

Duke of Cumberland

In comes I the Duke of Cumberland
With my broad sword in my hand.
Where is a man who dare before me stand?
I would kill him, slay him, and cut him up as small as flies,
And send him to Jamaica to make mince pies.

Molly

You will? Stand back then.
Come in King George.

Enter King George

King George

In comes King George with sword in hand,
Where is that man who said he dare before me stand?

Duke of Cumberland

Here he is!

King George

You said you would kill me, slay me, and cut me up as small
as flies,
And send me to Jamaica to make mince pies.

Duke of Cumberland

And so I will.

Together

Mince pies hot, mince pies cold,
Mince pies in the pot nine days old.
A battle, a battle betwixt you and I,
To see which on the ground shall lie.

*A battle between King George and the Duke in which the Duke
knocks down King George.*

Molly

Stand back, stand back, you have killed the man!
Is there a good doctor in the land?

Enter Dr. Parr

Dr. Parr

Yes, there is a good doctor in the land.

Molly

Five thousand pounds for a good doctor to come.

Dr. Parr

Doctor won't come to no such money!

Molly

Ten thousand pounds for a good doctor to come!

Dr. Parr

Doctor will come, long way to come, and a ricketty old nag
to come on.

Doctor rides in on another man's back.

Dr. Parr

In comes I, old Doctor Parr,
And in my time I've travelled far.
I've travelled England, Scotland, Wales and Rome,
And yet I've never been far from home.

Molly

How do you make that out then?

Dr. Parr

Because I've always stayed at home.

Molly

What can you do now you have come?

Dr. Parr

I can cure the ip, the pip, the stitch, the palsy and the gout,
Pains within and pains without.
I can cure any old major or jay who can't cough for
laughing.

Molly

You had better set to work then.

Dr. Parr

I'll give him a drop of my medicine.

Molly

Don't choke the man!

Dr. Parr

I only gave him a tablespoonful!

Molly

A barushovelful?

Dr. Parr

A tablespoonful!

Molly

Cavinscuttleful?

Dr. Parr

No, a tablespoonful!

Molly

Oh! I see.

Dr. Parr

But no wonder the man lies here half dead,
He's got a big tooth in the back of his head,
And if it's not drawn he will soon be dead.

Molly

Better draw it then.

Dr. Parr

I shall want one or two of you camel-backed Irishmen to
help pull.

Duke of Cumberland

I'll make one!

Molly

I'll do a little.

Dr. Parr

Are you all ready? Pull!

Molly

Have you got it?

16

Dr. Parr

No, slipped off.
Are you all ready? Pull!

Molly

Have you got it?

Dr. Parr

Yes. No wonder the man lay here half dead,
To see this great tooth I've drawn from his head.

Molly

Better hand it round the company then.

Dr. Parr holds up a large tooth - horse's.

Molly

Is that all you can do then?

Dr. Parr

If any man in this company can do more than me,
You had better call him in and see.

Molly

Come in, Jack Finney.

Enter Jack Finney

Finney

My name is not Jack Finney, it is Mr. Finney, a man of
great pain
Who can bring this man or any other man to life again.

Molly

You had better set to work then.

Finney

I'll give him one of my pills, a working binder.

Molly

A selfbinder?

Finney

No, a working binder, guaranteed to go through him like a furze faggot, turn round in him like a wheelbarrow, and come out like a freewheel gig. This man reviveth.

Molly

Gone by with it,* not that he ain't fit for he lays here now.

Finney

This man reviveth.

Molly

Read the Bible, never in all his days!

Finney

This man reviveth.

Molly

Oh, I see.

Finney catching hold of man's feet

Finney

I'm sure this man is not dead,
So come, old fellow, rise up your head.

Molly

That ain't his head!

Finney

What is it then?

Molly

His stommicks!

Finney catching hold round man's waist.

Finney

I'm sure this man is not quite dead,

* The meaning of this phrase is not clear.

So come, old fellow, rise up your head.

Molly

That ain't his head!

Finney

What is it then?

Molly

His pantry!

Finney catching hold of man's head

Finney

This is the case I saw before!
Rise up King George, and fight no more.

Molly

Stand back! Stand back! I'll have no more fighting tonight!
Come in, Baalzebub!

Enter Baalzebub

Baalzebub

In comes I, Baalzebub.
On my shoulder I carry my club,
In my hand my dripping pan,
Don't you think I'm a funny old man?

Molly

Rather! Stand back then! Come in Bighead.

Enter Bighead.

Bighead

In comes I that's never been yet,
With my big head and little wit.
My head's so big, my wit so small,
I've come this night to please you all.
My father killed a great fat hog, so you can plainly see,

And my mother gave me this bladder, to be my hirdy-
girdy.

Lay down good dog and eat your bone and riggle it
through your ribs.

And now my lads and lasses,

Cock up your tails and give us a jig.

*Mummers all line up and then dance round the room, Big Head
playing the instrument.*

Guisers of North East England

In this part of the country the Play is usually short and need only last a few minutes. Most of the recorded examples are from children's performances and had become nothing more than a method of collecting money at Christmas. They dressed in any old clothes they could get from the home wardrobe, or could improvise, or sometimes turned their coats inside out and blackened their faces.

Holy Island, Northumberland

Holy Island is the name of a village and of an island as a whole, off the coast of Northumberland between Berwick and Bamburgh. For a few hours at low tide it can be reached on foot or by car across the sands and it remains an isolated community.

This text was collected by E.C. Cawte in February 1957 from a girl of eleven who performed in 1955, and it had been performed in 1956. It had also recently been performed in the B.B.C. programme 'Have a Go'. A woman aged 94 said it had not changed in her recollection and other people said the same. At one time the performers were men of 18 years, but recently it was performed by children aged about 9 to 11, boys and girls together, in ragged clothes and masks (or failing that, black faces). They visited houses on Christmas Day and collected money, fruit and cake. The following was recited in unison, no parts were taken and there was no action.

This custom is known as 'Redd sticks'. 'Redd' means 'prepare'. It is an extract from a characteristic Northumberland or Co. Durham play text, only remarkable for its brevity and the manner of performance. 'You sir, I sir ...' would be the fight if there was one, and the song gives evidence that there was a man cured. It is to be assumed that at one time a longer version was performed in parts,

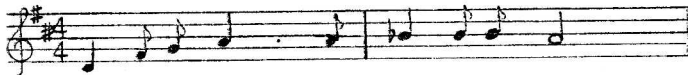
but this must have been more than 95 years ago.

* * *

Redd sticks, redd stools,
Here comes in a pack of fools,
A pack of fools behind the door.
Step in Slasher!
Slasher is my name.
Sword and pistol by my side
I hope to win the game.
You sir, I sir, take up your sword and try sir.

Crotchet equals about 100. Original key not noted.

♩ = 100



Once I was dead but now I'm a - live ,



Blessed be the doct - or that made me a - live . We'll



all shake hands and we'll never fight no more , We'll



be as kind as brothers as we've ever been before .

The Staffordshire Guisers

The ceremony was known in a large number of villages in Staffordshire and still takes place. The performers were sometimes called Guisers (as in Derbyshire), Molly Guisers, or Molly Dancers, though there was no morris dance as that expression is usually understood. One of Mr. Everett's informants in about 1954, attributed its decline to the performers having too much money and being able to buy their own beer: the same man thought that a trade slump would bring it to life again. The note on costume is brief, but there are records of performers elsewhere in the county being dressed in newspaper; whether this meant in strips or whole sheets is not clear. Others wore their coats inside out, and still others blacked their faces. As usual the final song has no relevance to the action which precedes it, and is nothing more than an attempt to promote generosity from the spectators.

Burntwood (SK0609) lies between the coal mining area of Cannock Chase and the industry of Walsall. Mr. Everett's enquiries showed that this area in particular had many plays at one time, and in about 1954, when he was collecting there, the ceremony was still alive. Enquiries now may still produce more examples than are known so far, but it would be expected that they would follow roughly the same pattern as the text below.

Burntwood, Staffordshire, Guisers' Play

Collected by Mr W.Everett from Mr Astley who had performed in the play at Christmas before the Second World War. The song was collected by Mr G.Mendham at the same time. The only information additional to the text is that the players went to great lengths to make their costumes as elaborate as possible.

* * *

Enter In

I open this door and enter in
The greatest favours fought to win.
Whether we rise, stand or fall
We do our duty to please you all.
Room, room, gallant room.
Pray give us room to rise.
We mean to show you Gia's act
Upon this Christmas time.
We are not of a ragged set
But of a loyal trim.
If you don't believe the words I say,
Step in Bold Guide, and clear the way.

Bold Guide

Here am I, Bold Guide's my name
To England's town I sprang again,
I've searched this wide world round and round,
To find King George, I'll give ten thousand pound.

Enter In

King George, King George stands at the door
And swears he will come in.
With sword and buckle by his side
He swears he'll tan thy skin.
Step in King George.

King George

Here am, I King George,
A noble champion bold.
With my bright sword in hand,
I've won three crowns of gold.

Bold Guide

What three crowns?

King George

Effia, Sheffia, amma roceo.
'Twas I who fought the fiery dragon

Through and through and brought it to the slaughter
By means of this and that (sword and buckle)
I won the King of Egypt's daughter.

Enter In

Stir up these bars and make a light
And watch these two jolly actors fight.
The hour has come, the clock has struck one.
It's time this battle had begun.

The fight

O King! O King! What hast thou done?
Thou hast fought and slain my only son.
Five pounds for a doctor!

Doctor (outside)

No doctor for five pounds.

Enter In

Ten pounds.

Doctor (enters)

Here am I a noble doctor.

Enter In

How came you to be a doctor?

Doctor

By my travels.

Enter In

How far are your travels?

Doctor

From the fireplace to the cupboard.

Enter In

Any farther?

Doctor

From the top of the stairs to the bottom.

Enter In

Cure me this man.

Doctor

Here, Jack, take a drop out of this bottle and let it run down thy throttle, and if thou feelest well, rise up and fight again.

Enter In

That's not cured the man.

Doctor

I have another bottle in my inside outside jacket waist-coat pocket, containing heathercome, smethercome, oakum, Spain, which brings dead men to life again. Here, Jack, take a drop out of this phial, open thy mouth and oil thy dial.

Bold Guide

Oh, my back!

Doctor

What ails thy back?

Bold Guide

My back is wounded, bad and sore,
I feel I cannot fight no more.
If you can't believe the words I say,
Step in Black Prince, and clear the way.

Black Prince

Here am I, black Prince of Paradise,
The Black Morocco King.
And all the woods I travel through,
I'm bound to make them ring.
If you cannot believe the words I say,
Step in, Old Girl, and clear the way.

Old Lady Be-elzebub

Here am I, Old Lady Be-elzebub,
Under my arm I carry my club,
Over my shoulder my dripping pan,
Don't you think I'm a jolly old girl.
Rink, jink, jink, and a sup more drink
Would make the old kettle cry clinkety clink.
Now Ladies and Gentlemen, if you are able,
Put your hands in your pockets
And think of the ladle.
The ladle is dumb, and never yet spake.
There's six so stout and six so bold
Could eat a plum pudding before it's half cold.
And if your plum pudding is chanced to be pale
We could drink a good jug of your old Christmas ale.
And if your old Christmas ale is chanced to be strong,
We accomodate you with a jolly good song.

All (sung as a round)



The cock sat up in the yew tree, the hen came cackling



by, I wish you a merr-y Christmas and a



big fat pig in the sty.

Fermanagh Straw Boys

Recent work being done by the Irish Folklore Commission, the Ulster Folk Museum Staff, and private collectors has greatly increased our knowledge of the Play in Ireland. All known examples are Hero-Combat texts, no Wooing or Sword Dance actions have come to light, and it is almost certain that none existed. The Play in Ireland is only found in areas of English or Scottish settlement, all are in English with no hint of Gaelic texts, and it is evident that the Play was taken to Ireland by settlers from Great Britain. There is some evidence of an earlier Irish ceremony which contained a death and resurrection. This could be an indigenous custom which was overlaid by the new importation. As in England, there is regional variation in texts and characters in the Irish ceremonies, and this example, typical of its county of origin, is reproduced from the collector's own manuscript, unaltered.

Belcoo, Co. Fermanagh, Mummers' Play

Collected by Mrs Jennifer Robinson 1965, from Mr Ted De Lacy, a performer in his youth. The play was performed regularly until about 1940, and Mr De Lacy thought that the Border situation finally killed it. Passes were not issued to troupes to move backwards and forwards over the Border, and the gangs of disguised men were not popular with the Royal Ulster Constabulary. The Mummers came out on or before December 26th for about a week and collected funds to celebrate on their big night, January 6th. There were several neighbouring teams and much rivalry as to who could 'do' a village first and get the most generous contributions. A good team would consist of anything up to eighteen players and possibly several musicians; extra characters used on occasion at Belcoo were Tommy Stout, Devil Dout and The Linnet, the last being the singer. Other

odd characters were invented if there were a lot of extras in some years, and they made up rhymes to fit their names. They came in at the end. Green Knight replaced Grand Turk in the team's later days.

Belcoo is on the Fermanagh/Cavan border and is fairly remote from any big town, the nearest being Enniskillen. The team toured as large an area as their legs or available transport could make it, and the men came from Belcoo and Boho, two neighbouring hamlets, the latter formerly having its own team.

Costume

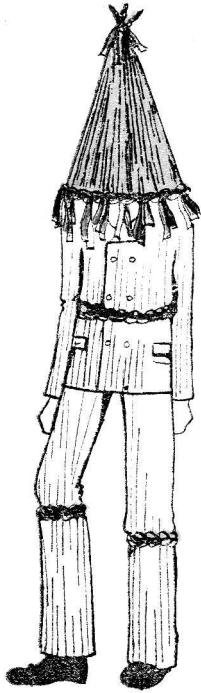
- Captain A bandolier, made from a flour bag or some such. An odd cap or hat, or a bigger version of the straw hat worn by the others with more horns on the top and more ribbons. Carried a staff to give three knocks on the door at each house.
- Doctor Hard (billycock) hat and black jacket. A beard (artificial) and blackened face.
- Jack Straw 'All over straw'.
- Biddy Funny Female clothes.
- Others As illustration, page 30. Prince George carried a wooden 'rapier' and Grand Turk a wooden 'long sword'.

The faces were either hidden under hats or disguised and the voices were disguised if possible. The hats and their horns on top were lengthened or shortened as required to make the men as far as possible the same height.

*Captain**

Room Room Gallant boys,
Give me room to Rhyme,
Till I relate some activities

* The text as written down by Mr De Lacy was in continuous prose, but is divided into verse here for convenience.



Belcoo Mummer, based on a drawing by Mrs Jennifer Robinson.

The straw costume worn by these performers is not as elaborate as in other examples from the same county, the straw being confined to the headdress, the belt, and knee ties. A correspondent to the Ulster Folk Museum gave a thumbnail sketch of a straw clad mummer, which showed that in the area of Drumquin, Co. Tyrone, the mummings wore straw costumes made like the elaborate paper fringes worn at Andover, Hampshire. Similar straw costumes were worn by the Biddy-Boys in Ireland, who appeared at weddings and danced with the Bride, but had no play text.

Of the Christmas Times.

Active young and active age,
The likes of this was never acted on any stage.
If you don't believe in what I say
Enter in Billsie Bub and he'll clear the way.

Billsie Bub

Here comes I, Billsie Bub,
And on my shoulder I carry a club,
And in my hand a frying pan,
I think myself a jolly wee man.
If you don't believe in what I say,
Call in Jack Straw and he'll clear the way.

Jack Straw

Here comes I, Jack Straw,
The funniest man you ever saw.
My father was straw and my mother was straw,
So why shouldn't I be straw too.
So if you don't believe in what I say,
Call in Grand Turk and he'll clear the way.

Grand Turk

Here comes I Grand Turk,
From Turkey land I came.
I came to fight the champion,
Prince George is his name.

Enter Prince George

(or in place of Grand Turk, Green Knight now takes his place

Here comes I, Green Knight,
With my sword and armour bright.
My body's made of iron,
My hands are made of steel,
My fists are made of knecklebone,
I am commanding of the field.)

Prince George

Here comes I, Prince George,
From England I have come.
Many battles have I fought in,
Many battles I have won.

Grand Turk

That's a lie, sir!

Prince George

Put up your sword and try it!
I will run my rusty rapier through your heart and let
you die away, sir!

Captain

Doctor! Doctor! Ten pounds for a doctor!

Doctor enters

Doctor

Here comes I, pure and good.

Captain

What can you cure, Doctor?

Doctor

I can cure the plague within, the plague without, the
palsy and the gout.

Captain

What medicine do you use, Doctor?

Doctor

The heart and liver of a creepy stool,
Put into a wren's blether
And stir it with a cat's feather.
Take that fourteen fortnights before day
And if that does not cure you I ask no pay.
So, Hokis pokis, ali come pain,
Rise up young man, and fight again.

Captain

Wonderful! Wonderful! The likes I have never seen
A man of seven senses driven into seventeen.
Whether be a wolf, whether be a bear,
For I am the only king's son and heir.

Enter Big Head

Big Head

Here comes I that didn't come yet,
Big Head and Little Wit.
Although my head is big and my body is small,
I will play you a tune that will please you all.

Two of the mummers dance, and sometimes songs, 'The Rose of Tralee', 'The Man who broke the Bank at Monte Carlo', 'The Boys of Armagh' and possibly 'Kitty of Coleraine' were sung.

Enter in Bidy Funny

Bidy Funny

Here comes I, Bidy Funny,
With my long black bag that carries the money.
Money I want and money I crave,
If you don't give me money
I will send you all to an early grave.

The East Midlands Wooing Texts

These plays differ fundamentally from the ones already given in that they include a wooing scene between a Lady and another character, often a ploughboy. She refuses him in favour of the Fool, and the ploughboy enlists in the army. In northern Lincolnshire the team usually included a hobby horse, a typical one from Scotter is shown on Plate O. Brattleby (SK9480) is further south, where the distinctive horse made from a seive is not recorded. The horse mentioned here was probably a rationalisation from the time when the horse was a normal means of transport.

Among the innumerable variations of the English Folk Play, there is no ploughboy at Brattleby, and it is the Recruiting Sergeant who is the rejected suitor. One gathers that the fool is successful, though the wooing is played down in this version and the notable incident of the Fool's rejection of his bastard child by Lane Jane is absent. The dialogue between the Lady and the Sergeant is usually sung: here the text is that of the well-known song "Oh No, John!", but no music is mentioned.

These Wooing Plays usually include a death and resurrection, but often (as here) there is no fight, and a player is merely knocked down. There are remarkable resemblances between these plays and fertility ceremonies recorded from Macedonia and Asia Minor.*

The costume was not noted at Brattleby, but the photograph of the Alkborough gang, Plate I, is typical of the county, though regional differences may exist. Alkborough again is in the north part of Lincolnshire.

* The relationship between the Balkan ceremonies and those of the British Isles is discussed in *English Ritual Drama* by the present editors and N. Peacock, now under publication by the Folk Lore Society. A full list of locations where the Play exists, or was known to exist, is also given, together with a complete bibliography.



Plate 2. The Hobby Horse at Scotter, Lincolnshire

The head and tail were fixed to a farm seive, which was hung from the man's shoulders by strings.

Note from Joseph Wright: *English Dialect Dictionary*, Henry Frowde, London, 1898-1903.

Ware out means 'look out'.

We can find no relevant meaning for *whig* and *loclc*. They may be corruptions, which are not uncommon in play texts.

Mardy is usually an adjective, but Wright gives it also as a verb, to spoil or indulge. In this passage it seems to mean "I will go away like a spoiled child." Iona and Peter Opie: *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1959, 177, say that the term is used "in Derbyshire, Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire, and areas adjoining, of a peevish or moody child, and, of a soft child or cry-baby."

Note on Song

It will be noticed that these words cannot be fitted to the tune of "God rest you merry". *The Oxford Book of Carols*, Oxford University Press, 1928, gives similar words as Carol No. 16, and the second tune for Carol 15 (which goes with it) starts very much like "God rest you merry". Possibly it was a variant of this tune which was wrongly identified by the transcriber. From Carol No. 16 it may be guessed that there is a line missing after "around the table go", which should be "And all your kin and kinsfolk, that dwell both far and near". This gives two stanzas of four lines. The last two lines were possibly spoken.

Brattleby, Lincolnshire, Mummers' Play

Mrs E. H. Rudkin: Collection

The words were noted by Alice Wright while the mummers still played in about 1894. They were preserved in a Family Scrap Album now belonging to the present vicar of Willoughton, Rev. Denzil Wright, whose father had

often seen the mummers and had described them to his son. Up to about 1905 there was a hobby horse on which the Sergeant rode. The Rev. Denzil Wright copied out the text for Mrs Rudkin in 1966.

* * *

Fool

Good evening, Ladies and Gentlemen. I have come to give you a bold call.

As Christmas is a merry time, I have come to see you all. I hope you will not be offended for what I have got to say. Presently there will be some more lads and lasses come tripping along this way.

Some can whistle and some can sing,
By your consent they will come in.
Hookam, Spookam, Spankam and Spain,
In comes the sergeant of the same.

Sergeant

In comes I the recruiting sergeant arriving here just now,

I have come to 'list all those who can follow horse, cart or plough.

Tinkers, tailors, pedlars, nailors, all at my advance.

Fool

Is there anything at your advance?

Sergeant

Yes, my advance is to see a fool dance,
Either dance, sing or play
Or I will shortly mardi* away.

Fool

One day I tried to stop a pig,
And what a lark we had, Sir,

* See page 35

The pig says "Umple" and away he went,
Right through my stunning legs, Sir.

Sergeant

Do you call that singing?

Fool

Yes, plenty good enough for a man like you are.

Sergeant

I can sing better than that myself.

Music Jack

In comes I, old Music Jack,
I'll give you a tune before I go back.

Indian King

Ware out* my lads, let me come in,
For I'm the chap they call Indian King.
They have been seeking me to slay,
But I'm here this very day.
I fought the fiery dragon, and brought it to the slaughter.
And by these means I won King George's daughter.

Sergeant

Slaughter, slaughter, no more to be said,
For in one instant I'll fetch off your head.

Indian King

How can'st thou fetch off my head?
My head is made of iron and my body of steel,
My limbs are made of knuckle bone,
I challenge thee to feel.

Sergeant

Slaughter!

Knocks down Indian King.

* See page 35

Fool

Five pounds for a doctor!

Sergeant

Ten to stop away!

Fool

Fifteen, he must come on a case like this.

Doctor

In comes the Doctor.

Fool

What pains can you cure?

Doctor

Ypsy, Pipsy, Palsy and Gout,
Pains within and pains without.
Heal the sick, cure the lame,
High raise the dead to life again.

Fool

Is them all the cures you can do?
How came you to be a Doctor?

Doctor

I travelled for it from bedside to fireside
And from fireside to my mother's cupboard.
That's where I get all my pork pies and sausages from.

Fool

But can you cure this man?

Doctor

Yes, certainly. Take hold of my bottle and stick,
While I feel this man's pulse. . .

Feels his stomach

Fool

Is that where a man's pulse lies?

Doctor

Yes, it is the strongest part of a man's body.
He is not dead but in a trance,
He's swallowed a cart and horse and can't get rid of the
wheels.
Jump up Jack, and we'll have a chance.

Sergeant

Come my lads, it's time for 'listing.
Listing. Do not be afraid.
You shall have all kinds of liquor,
Likewise kiss the pretty maid.

Lady

I am a lady bright and fair,
My fortune is my charms,
It's true that I have been borne away
Out of my dear lover's arms.
He promised for to marry me,
As you will understand,
He listed for a soldier,
And went into a foreign land.

Sergeant

Madam, I've got gold and silver!
Madam, I've got horse and land!
Madam, I've got world and treasure,
Everything at thy command.

Lady

What care I for gold and silver?
What care I for horse and land?
What care I for world and treasure?
All I want is a nice young man.

Bold Tom

In comes Bold Tom, a brisk and noble fellow.
Forty gallons of your best ale will make us nice and

mellow.

A piece of your pork pie for believing I'm telling no lie,
For we are all hungry as well as dry.

Lame Jane

In comes I, Lame Jane, with a neck as long as a crane.
Once I was a young maid, now I am a down old widow.
A Whig behind and a Whig* before,
Ware out my lads and I'll sweep the floor.

Fool

O I'm the nice young man you want Miss
Friends, I've come to invite you to me and my wife's wed-
ding,
And that which you like best, you'll have to bring with
you for we are going to have a leg of a louse and a locle*
fried, a barley chaff dumpling buttered with wool, and
those who can't nag it, will have to pull. The tail chine
of a cockerel and eighteen gallons of your best butter
milk to rinse all down.
Sing about lads, while I draw stakes.

*Last Song (tune-'God rest you merry, Gentlemen')**

Good master and good mistress, as you sit round your
fire,
Remember us poor plough lad boys who plough the muck
and mire.
The muck it is so nasty, the mire it is so near,
We thank you for your civility, and what you have given
us here.
Here's a health unto the master and to the mistress also,
Likewise the little children around the table go.
We wish you a merry Christmas and a Happy New Year,
Good Master and Good Mistress, you'll see our fool's
gone out,
We make it our ability to follow him about.

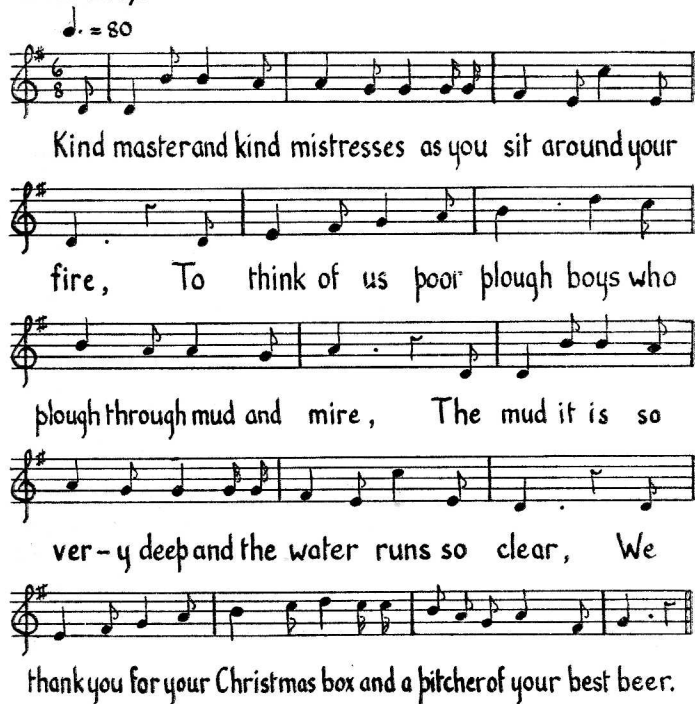
* See page 35

Ab Kettleby, Leicestershire, Ploughboys

E.C.Cawte: Collection, 1967

This village is on the slope bordering the flood plain of the Trent, like Brattleby, but further upstream, and is one of a group of Leicestershire villages which had a play similar to Brattleby. Complete details are not available at Ab Kettleby, but after the play ceased to be performed, youths with black faces visited houses on Plough Monday (which was the second Monday in January in this district) saying "Can you remember the ploughboys?" and singing the following song, which is offered as an example to compare with the final song at Brattleby. It is not certain that this song had been part of the play at Ab Kettleby, but it certainly was, with an almost identical tune, eight miles away at Sproxton, and much the same words were used in the play at Stonesby 6 miles away.

$\text{♩} = 80$



Kind master and kind mistresses as you sit around your
fire, To think of us poor plough boys who
plough through mud and mire, The mud it is so
ver-y deep and the water runs so clear, We
thank you for your Christmas box and a pitcher of your best beer.

Conclusion

The six texts presented here are all different and yet have a lot in common. There is a Doctor in every one, who can usually cure "the itch, the stitch, the palsy and the gout", as he can in many other places: Beelzebub appears in four with characteristic lines found in most parts of the British Isles. Old Lady Beelzebub, on page 27, seems to have changed sex only recently, for the rhyme requires "man" in place of "girl". The patient recovering to say "Oh my back," and the dialogue which follows, is recorded twice here and is familiar elsewhere: the same can be said of many other parts of the texts. Although costume details are few in the notes which accompanied the texts, the drawing of the Stockport mummer of *circa* 1880, shown on the title page, shows a headdress which is clearly of the same kind as that worn by the Hatmen at Alkborough (Plate I), though not so elaborate.

The versions also have obscurities some of which are explained by a study of dialect, but some are corruptions, for example on page 15 where Dr. Parr can cure "the ip, the pip.". This should be "the itch....", a standard term for scabies. The texts also have their differences. The Holy Island play has shrunk to a children's Christmas nominy, and they had another for New Year, though unrelated to the Play. The Brimington text owes much to the printed chap-books of the north west of England, and the Burntwood text owes a little to the same source. Sulgrave has Molly and Jack Finney, characteristic of the Cotswolds, while Jack Straw and the Grand Turk at Belcoo are familiar figures in Irish versions.

Two of the songs were clearly added on to the Play and were not part of it, suggesting that they were additional entertainment at the end. This is borne out by the statement on page 7 that the performers "would sing for as long as it was worth while." The choice of songs at Belcoo is further evidence in support, but Holy Island is typical of texts in

Northumberland and Durham in having part of the action of the play sung. This also occurs elsewhere, particularly in the East Midlands.

A point which has received little attention is the fight. In some versions it may have become something of a Hollywood duel, but in others it was only a rhythmical clashing of swords, which supports the idea that the "fight" is an attempt, late in time, to make sense of a ritual whose meaning was forgotten. Although it is not described, there may have been such a ritual clashing at Sulgrave (page 14), to judge by the text.

It is so easy to write down a play text that many have been noted by people unfamiliar with the needs of folk lore study, and details of music, action, dress and what impelled men to maintain the custom are often ignored. This explains the gaps in the accounts of these ceremonies. The performances were nearly always in winter time, and although our two photographs are not of the highest quality, they have the irreplaceable merit of being authentic photographs of traditional performers. They represent what was done, not what might be.

Finally, one cannot ignore modern influences on the texts. Although the basic theme of death and resurrection remains constant, the performers take the opportunity to introduce *ad lib.* comments, particularly at the end. On Boxing Day, 1965, the Swords, Dublin, team had lines at the end of their traditional version which show this influence clearly. The Doctor was good but

He can be a terrible crank

And he'll put a tiger in your tank.

whilst Tom Fool himself had brought

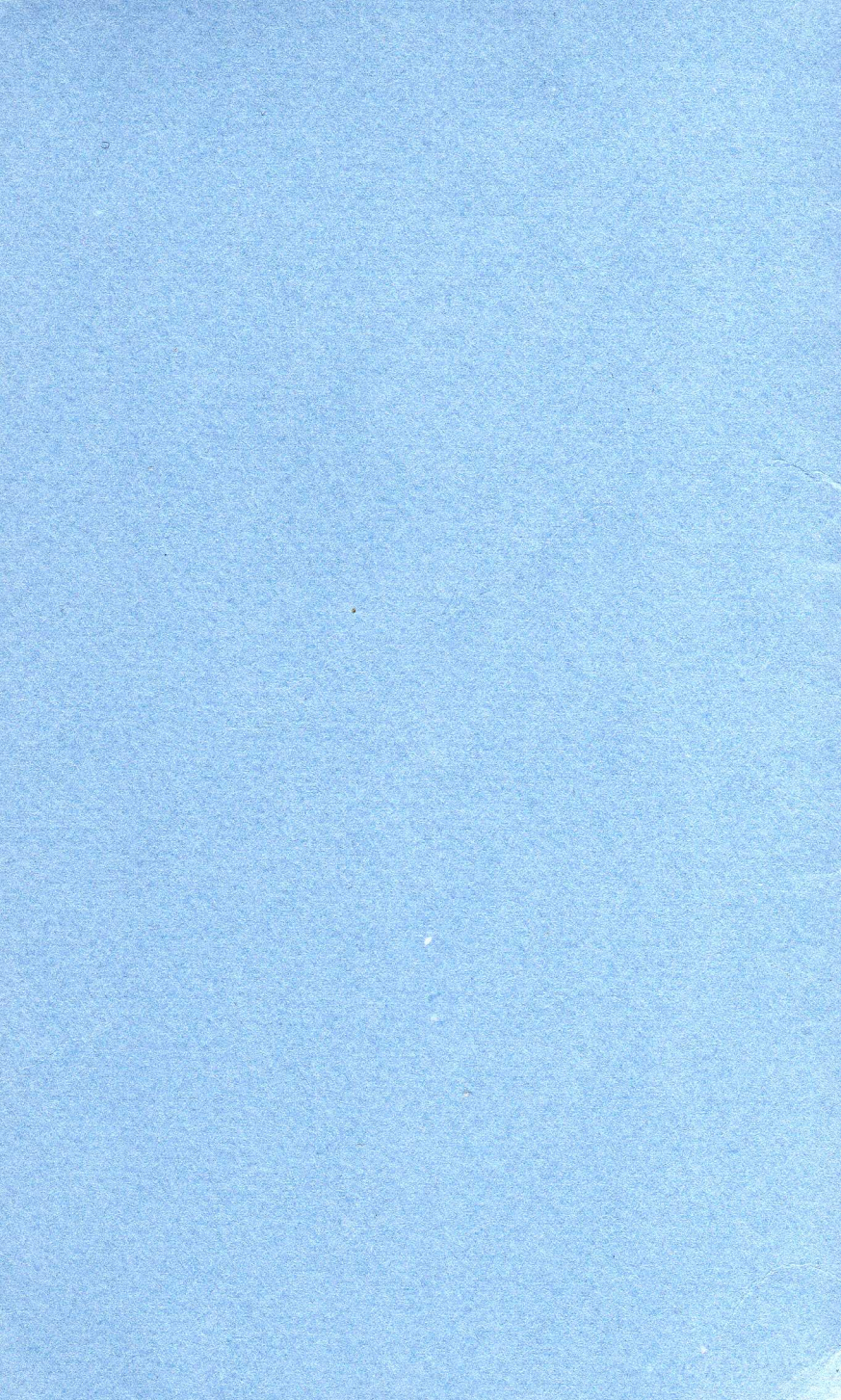
Some lovely Omo to wash your budgy down.

The same performers had a character called Handy Andy, unknown elsewhere, who may be derived from the household liquid cleaner advertised on television and used here for topicality. No doubt the same performers would vary the lines in subsequent years, and such variations could be ex-

pected to occur in most modern survivals. As the main purpose of the ritual disappears and the ceremonies dwindle into the cadging expeditions they have no doubt been for a very long time, there would be a need for entertainment to attract contributions. This need is expressed in the elaborate combats, the irrelevant songs, up-to-date comments and disguise far removed from the ribbons and patches worn by the earlier performers.

ERRATUM

Page 34. Line 6 of text.
For 'Plate 0' read 'Plate 2'



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