VICTORIAN VIEWS OF THE MUMMERS


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CHRISTMAS MUMMERS.

"True ancient spirit is not dead." Old customs, in a sense, are never old, but always new. Cakes and ale, for all that fastidious Malcolms may ray to the contrary, are still pleasant to the mirth-abhorred; ay, and ginger is still hot in the month." Rose beef and plum-pudding are still substantial powers and variable influences. They have a moral as well as a material life, and are immortal.

The season of Christmas was, in the days of old, the season of masques and revelries, and the taste for both is quick and active yet in many rural places. "All men and women are merry players," says Shakespeare; and Christmas is the time when they have the license to demonstrate this great truth in the clearest manner.

Then it is that the Mummer shows his day of his glory has arrived, and he is heartily determined to make the most of it. There is little doubt that this is characteristic of the representative antiquity. Etymologyally the name by which he is known is the Greek Moros. And why should we object to the derivation? Morris 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 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, Saint George and the Dragon, and other romances, or burlesques on them, which may be made into scenes of pastimes at the jays and yet sacred Christmas-tide.

Romance, 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—no in a nameless forest and the other at Wansley town. Guy Fawcet 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 when embellish the revel 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 maidens are disposed to enjoy the pageant. One of these holds a candle, that she may regard it in a better light; and another treatment the thrifty Drummer with a mug of ale, which he well deserves. He and his wife come to that Hall for Jerrins, 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 liquor, will empty the flagons.

On the other side we have the peasantry, in their shock-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 carefully. He has reason to be frightened if he has read the ballad of "The Dragon of Wansley," and supposes that he now stands in presence of the monster. For what says that various narrative of the terror of Wansley?

Have you not heard how the Trojan horse

Hid seven men in his body?

This dragon was not quite so big,

But very near, I'll tell ye;

Deformed he passed through the trees,

That could not reach his grapple;

And at one end 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 were he would

Devour up by degrees;

For houses and churches were to him gree and turkeys;

He ate all, and left none behind.

But come stonies, see Jack, that he could not crack,

Which on the little toad fell.

We cannot describe the dragon 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. Each is the bane of two old and arming arms made in his praise which may be found in the Percy Collection. The first thus begins:

Why do ye seek King Arthur and his Knights,

Knowing well how they have escaped fights?

For beside King Arthur, and Lancelot du Lake,

Or Sir Tristan de Lamenac, that fought for ladies sake,

Read in old histories, and there you shall see

How Sir George, Sir George the dragon, came to see.

St. George was for England; St. Denis was for France.

Shri, I'll tell ye what I mean, ye see.

And then the ballet proceeds to celebrate numerous other heroes: Abraham, David, Jephthah, Gilgames, Hannibal, Scipio, Orlando Furioso, Bruno and Rosmers, Alphonse Chabas, the Dane, Bevis, the Earl of Warwick, Richard Coeur de Lion, and many others of lesser or greater note; but each of these, in turn, is subordinated to St. George. Then the same vein is reopened in the later songs, which was written by John Creymb, M.A., of Christ Church, Oxford, whereas 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 advertising to the present.
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 mumme, or Dutch mumme—disguise in a mask or the picture of faces. We can trace the Lord of Misrule or master of merrymakers 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 feast, and the roystering in the highways and byways: princes, peers, and peasants 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, parading of Christmas cheer, and making merry with them in disguise. Mr. Sandys, in his ingenious "Christmas" remark, 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 gents or gipsy 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 jest, 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 1589 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 90 tunics of various colours; 42 veils, 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 disguises frequently exhibited at Court in the succeeding reigns, and especially in the reign of Henry VIII., were not forgotten in Miss Charles Keane's getting-up of Shakespeare's "Henry VIII." at the Princess's 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-mask worn in the opening of pantomimes in the present day. The performance as a whole was performed in the presence of the King, and the mummers were usually attended by the minstrels, playing upon different kinds of musical instruments.

Now describes a remarkable mummery in 1377, made by the citizens of London for the departure of the young Prince Richard, son to the Black Prince. They rode, disguised and well harnessed, 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 jollity being ended, they were made to drink," &c. Henry IV., in the second year of his reign, kept his Christmas at Eathan, whither "twelve Aldermen of London and their sons 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 morays 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 hills a band of bedizened actors perform the whole of the ancient drama. This famous mummy 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." He says, in his "Every-day Book," given 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. At Wakefield." In a scarce work, written in 1577, we find this record of "St. George":—

England's Hero—Saint George for England—At Christmas are (or at least very lately were) follow'd went to go about from house to house in Exeter, a mumming; one of whom, in a (borrowed) Holland shirt, more gorgeously bespangled over his woolens, &c., furnishing a facionion very gallantly, entertains the admiring spectators thus:—

Oh! here comes I, Saint George, a man of courage bold,

And with my spear I vanish three quarter of gold.

I slew the dragon, and brought him to his slaughter,

And by that very means I married fair, the beauteous King of Egypt's daughter.

All the versions have evidently sprung from one original. Cubbirt Bade gives the Worcestershire mumming, as played by boys. The Valiant 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 beard, and a bladder; with the bladder he thrashed the performer whose turn it was to speak. Beslesbub is identical with Old Father Christmas, who sings,

In comes I, old Father Beslesebub;

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. Brockley 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 Woodhall, Esq., Thanford. The characters were Beslesbub, Activity, Age on the Stag, Doctor, Doctor's Horse, Jon 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 to assist Activity; the finale is the Fool playing the hurdy-gurdy and knocking them all down; and the whole concludes with a general scourching on the floor. The mummers are most frequently disguised with discoloured 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 his story of war; the mummers are in full gear, 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 early coteries since.
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 on it. The boys, with their arm-hair drawn nearer to the cracking fire of fire-logs, are initiating them into the mysteries of Christ Church with a compost on 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 shinning 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 lane of avenue of trees that leads up from the high road, and presently the trembling echoes clear and crisp over the frozen gravel until it abruptly dies away behind the barrel bushes on the path leading to the stables and the back of the house.

"Who can it be, grandpa?" says a little maiden in an awe-struck 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-muffled bowling 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 patrician voice—

"The Mummies, 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 Mummies have to show, and so, before very long, we go out to the old brick-faced 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 Mummies have finished their supper, and are about to begin their performance, and then they file slowly in and resume their stations, with the soft muffled whispering in a huddled knot near the door. At last, with many elbow-thrusts, and a "Goo on now," a sturdy youth is ejected from the group, and stands, looking very much as if he had been caught potato-picking, 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 hang revealed. His head and face are smeared 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 clasches a long staff, and, standing sideways, with his eyes fixed on the ground, he commences, in a hoarse and monotone manner—

"Here comes 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 latest ambition is to be a carter's boy and ride on the shafts of a wagon, has penetrated the disguise, and shouts, "Why it's Jack 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 Mummies, whence he is thrust forth in a manner that admits of no denial, and is once more placed in the centre of the black flute to his great and evident discomfort. This time he gets through without any interruption, and concludes his harangue in a relieved gaiety.

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

Thus summoned, the potential takes the place of Father Christmas. His Sunday coat is adorned with many bunches of portico-bound ribbons, so that he looks like a recruiting-eagame run to seed, and, on his head, he wears a porticoed helmet, that betrays through its flaps of ribbons a suspicious likeness to an old top hat with the brim cut off. He bows round in a circle, hanging the tip of his wooden staff against the brick floor, and recounts, in the monotonous song affected by all these performers, his difficulties with the Dragon. He concludes by calling out, "George of Merry England, get up, and retire behind his fellows to dust his casque and mop his forehead with a large red pocket-handkerchief.

St. George is evidently the "star" actor of the company, and no other "stars" seems fully aware of the fact. He sets fire 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?"

To do St. George justice it would be a very dead dragon who could not hear these 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 couples, and at last break into the broadest comedy song 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 live nor these days—"

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 knows better. Father Christmas, having got rid of some of his shyness by this time, comes forward and inquires:

"Now is there any Doctor to be found Already high on land?"

"To cure the deep and deadly wound, And make the dragon stand!"

The Doctor, from top to toe a cracking 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 ailments,
The cure, physic, and cure;
If the devil's in it I'll kick him out."

Father Christmas next asks what the fee is, and the Doctor replies ten pounds; but, for such a "vile" 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, explaining:

"I've got a little bottle ofalconceme;
Here, Jack, take a little of my flip-flap,
Pour it down thy tipsy,
Rise up and fight again."

Thus familiarly adjured, the Dragon reneweth 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 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 interval, the Dragon gets up and regains his companions, finally coming in with the rest, when little Johnny Jack has finished, and supporting Father Christmas, who delivers the tag, which never fails, at the performance:

"Now, ladies and gentlemen, your sport is at an end, So pass round the hat which is highly commended, The hat that it would speak if it had lips— So throw in your money and think it is 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 a long post-bed-time, and I even for the actors the hour is rather a disputed one. So with a liberal reward for their entertainment, and a parting horn of ale to keep them warm, they clatter down the flag-stoned passage and into the chill and silent night. But to the little ones the Mummies play a more real and living interest than any performance at the London theatre, for they know the Mummies in private life.
"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."