

ON CAROLS

BY R. L. G.

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SCHOLARS assign as the date of the first Christmas carols the year 1225, when they were sung at the setting up of the Christmas Crib at Greccio by St. Francis of Assisi. Now, of course, the word 'carol' means literally a singing dance, a singing game. The idea of 'the music of the spheres' is that the universe itself ceaselessly executes a carol.

The carol-maker's point of view can be shown at once by an illustration. Let us take the old Cornish carol, 'To-morrow shall be My dancing day':—

To-morrow shall be My dancing day.

I would My true love did so chance

To see the legend of My play

To call My true love to the dance.

Sing oh! My love, My love, My love,

This have I done for My true love.

Then I was born of a Virgin pure,

Of her I took fleshly substance;

Thus was I knit to man's nature

To call My true love to the dance.

Then on the Cross hangèd I was

Where a spear My heart did glance;

There issued forth both water and blood

To call My true love to the dance.

Then down to Hell I took My way

For My true love's deliverance,

And rose again on the third day

Up to My true love and the dance.

Here, no less than the Creation and the being of the world, the Incarnation and the Redemption are thought of as a singing, dancing game.

It is needless to say that rhyme is the very spirit and essence of the carol. The idea of rhyme is that of correspondence. The invention of rhyme

seems to have been extraordinarily long in coming. I suspect it had a subterranean existence long before the books announce the date of its appearance. Anything so natural, so vital, so spontaneous, would be disliked by the pedants and academicians. They would no doubt contrive to keep it underground for centuries. The wonder is there was not an earlier flowering of it in the Church. The hymns of St. Ambrose and Prudentius—things like *Vexilla Regis prodeunt*—are unrhymed. St. Bernard wrote a rhymed sequence in the year 1152, and later in the twelfth century these holy rhymes became common.

The great rhymer, perhaps the greatest of all rhymers, was the twelfth-century monk of Paris, Adam of St. Victor. Rhyme so seizes and expresses the essential spirit of Christianity that one is tempted to the theory that it is a purely Christian invention. I suspect that the holy rhymes of Adam of St. Victor were an adaptation of a form—depressed and unrecognized by 'them that were the heads'—in which tavern songs, for instance, had been made and sung all the time. Rhyme is essentially popular—in the good sense, vulgar. As such it would be despised by the *odii profanum vulgus* people, and it would be considered that though it would do well enough for bawdy songs, its place was outside the temple. With Adam of St. Victor the Church borrowed the popular form, but rhyme came into its own with the Franciscan movement. The Christmas carols sung around the

Greccio Crib were not sequences made by monks, but true folk-songs. The people began to use their own form of expression for things that before had been thought too high and holy for it.

The philosophy of the carols asserted the final significance and value of visible things.

Perhaps from some quaint mediæval German house, fields, lanes, gardens, deep in snow — snow capping the tourelles, snow embroidering the steps of the great central Cross, *snow continually sliding down the steep, sharp pitch of the roof of the chapel* — you get that prayer we have said in this little Oratory to-night.

The snow slipping down the steep, sharp pitch of the roof of the chapel of a twelfth-century German religious house has an ultimate importance, so to speak, an eternal existence. Or take such a verse as this, not much in itself, perhaps: —

O'er the hill and o'er the dale
 Three Kings came together,
 Caring naught for snow and hail,
 Wind and storm and weather;
 Now on Persia's sandy plain,
 Now where Tigris swells with rain,
 They their camels tether.

After two thousand years we see the rains that swell the Tigris. How delightful, too, to hear such a line as 'They their camels tether' sung in church!

The patristic doctrine, one may be permitted to say in the saturnalia of Christmas time, as the Tractarians excavated it, has all sorts of liberal and humane implications. Take one of numberless illustrations which may be drawn from the practice of the Church. In St. Peter's at Rome, on the Feast of the Epiphany, Mass is said simultaneously at three altars by three priests, one of whom is always a negro. The humanity is always implicit in the doctrine, but the official Church has not always drawn it out. It is there, so to

speak, in spite of its guardians. But the people is always humane, always humanitarian; and in the carols, the Christian folk-songs, it has completely expressed its feeling.

On one point, notably in the position assigned to animals in the carols, it has enlarged the Christian doctrine. It has added territory to the fair domain. Not to speak of the Ox and Ass of the Manger, the shrill midnight Cock, the Lamb brought by the shepherds, their sheep-dog Melampo, the Ass of the Flight into Egypt, whose feast was kept at Beauvais, take such an example as this from the carol called 'The Carnal and the Crane.' The 'carnal' is, I suppose, the *corneille* — the crow (I have emended the second line of the second verse quoted): —

As I passed by a river-side,
 And as I there did rein,
 In argument I chanced to hear
 A carnal and a crane.

The carnal said unto the crane,
 'A new time is begun;
 Before we had the Father,
 But now we have the Son.'

In answer to the inquiries of the crane the carnal goes on to expound the Christian mysteries like a Doctor of the Church. The same feeling is extended to trees, and, indeed, to all natural objects. Witness the canonization of the holly in all Christmas carols. 'Its leaves are sweet with our Savior's name.'

The old carols one likes to think of as made by nobody in particular, as the work of the whole people. Modern carols of great beauty have been written by William Morris, A. C. Swinburne, Christina Rossetti, J. M. Neale, R. S. Hawker, and Katharine Tynan.

The most beautiful of all carols — to my mind, one of the most beautiful of all poems — is that by William Morris: —

O ye shepherds, what have ye seen
 (The snow in the street and the wind at the door)
 To slay your sorrow and heal your teen?
 (Minstrels and maids, stand forth on the floor.)

The suggestion of the dance makes this literally a perfect carol.

But there is living at the present day a greater *noëliste* than any of those mentioned — the Belgian poet, Emile Cammaerts. Listen to this: —

Le Christ est né
Le givre brille,
Là-bas un agneau a bélé.
Le Christ est né,
Le feu pétille,
Il gèle à fendre les pavés.
Le Christ est né
Le criquet crie . . .

So it goes on. What can one say? One is speechless; one shivers with delight!

DULLNESS: A LIVELY DISSERTATION

BY GEORGE SAINTSBURY

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THERE is of course no foolish intention here of vying in prose with Pope in verse, though the learned will be aware that Pope's friends used our title as an earlier one for the *Dunciad*. It is only desired to say a little of the quality or qualities, real or imaginary, which may provoke, or seem to provoke, especially at the present time, the verdict 'Dull' on works of literature.

I say 'especially' because it would not be fair to attribute the frequent use of this degrading epithet to the twentieth century only. 'Pretty' has become an epithet of obloquy rather than praise. But 'dull,' which has absorbed 'dry,' flourishes like the opposite of a green bay-tree. In life and in literature the most abominable thing to find, the most fatal fault to attribute, seems to be Dullness. It can hardly, therefore, be entirely lost labor to consider a little what this Dullness is, or perhaps (to put the matter with a more philosophical exactitude) what people really mean when they use the word 'dull.'

One cannot well proceed in such an inquiry without examples, and it so happens that two of them — one quite recent and the other fairly so — are present to the writer's mind, both having struck him at the time of their occurrence as interesting in a representative manner — as themselves by no means 'dull.' In one case it was the *Paston Letters* which were ticketed with this label; in the other Carlyle received it. One could of course pick out others from almost any page of any periodical dealing with matters in which the condemnation was in any way appropriate; and a person who much frequented clubs, drawing-rooms, and other places where they talk, would hardly pass a day without hearing the word. (Its use, indeed, is characteristic of that odd concentration on self which distinguishes our day. Anything that does not at once provide the indispensable and sacred 'good time' deserves contemptuous condemnation and gets it.) But these two, space being valuable,