

SOMETHING ABOUT MORRIS AND COUNTRY DANCES.

BY JULIET WILLIAMS.

I HAVE of late, been very much interested in getting to know about our own old English, Morris and Country Dances, and the good work that the Espérance Club has done in spreading the knowledge of them.

I was quite ignorant until a few years ago, that we English had our National Dances just as the Scotch and Irish have. I had to do with the junior part of the Band of Mercy when I was living at Hindhead. After teaching the members the maypole dance, we cast about for something else for them to learn for their "Show" in the summer. A year or so before, the Espérance Club had given a display of Morris dances at Haslemere, and we found that they had also taught there, and that we could get the services of an elementary school teacher who had learnt from them. She came, and we were absolutely delighted with the dances and their suitability for the occasion (they had to be danced on grass). At first the mothers didn't quite like their children giving up the time to learning them, but they soon came round and praised the dances, as they made those who learnt them with any zest, carry themselves better and walk well.

In 1912 I went to Shakespeare's England at Earl's Court, and saw again and again the perfectly charming entertainment given there by the Espérance Club. This consisted of Morris Dances and Jigs, Country Dances, and Sword Dances. Then with the help of a friend, I had the great pleasure of making the acquaintance of Miss Mary Neal, the Head of the Espérance Club and Guild, and the beginner of the Revival of Folk Dancing in England.

The Gaelic League, though its prime object is political, has done similar work in Ireland for some years: finding the old dances, making rules, deciding steps, setting up competitions, and teaching people who go about to teach the dances to the peasantry who didn't know them. Many of course knew them; but there too the young people had begun to cease learning them. I do not know if there is anything as organized as the
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Gaelic League in Scotland, but I am sure that dancing and piping competitions have never been given up there, and in consequence, Scottish dances too, are well known. When I was in Ireland two years ago, I saw a competition, and charming it was to see the young folk and children so intent on their stepping.

From Miss Neal I learnt of the beginnings of the movement in England. She had a Girls' Club in Cumberland Market for the working girls of the neighbourhood. As is usual in these Clubs they taught the members songs, and little things to act, etc., and at one time Miss Neal had them taught Scottish reels, flings and strathspeys, and at another Irish jigs and reels. Then as she had found the Club girls and boys so much enjoyed the English Folk Songs taught them by their Musical Director, she went to Mr. Cecil Sharp who had given her a volume of the songs he had collected, and asked him if he knew of any English Folk Dances as charming and as English as the songs. He put her on the track of some dancers, who still danced some old dances in Headington, a village close to Oxford. She sought them out and found that they were called Morris Dancers. She brought two of them to London, and they taught the members of the Club, who took to these new old dances like young ducks to water. They performed them at their Christmas Entertainment, and roused such enthusiasm in their audience that they soon afterwards repeated the performance with success in the Small Queen's Hall. Mr. Sharp helped for a time in writing tunes, but now, for about six

years, Miss Neal and the Espérance Club have worked without him, but with the help of several others who have collected dances and tunes for her all over the country. At the beginning of the Espérance Club Morris Books she thanks Mrs. Tuke, Mr. John Graham, Mr. Clive Carey, and Mr. Geoffrey Toye, for tunes and dances—Miss Lucy Broadwood, and Mr. Fuller Maitland for permission to use Folk songs collected by them, and Miss Alice Gillington for singing games. Mr. Carey has also collected many Folk songs and Sea shanties used by the Club.

Miss Neal has had over thirty traditional dancers up to the Club to teach new and different dances, for these dances, though they have a general likeness, differ a good deal in their details and tunes.

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From this Club and its enthusiastic members has gone forth all through the land a knowledge of our own old dances. Members of the Espérance Club have taught in every county in England, in Elementary, Secondary and High Schools, in Training Colleges and other Educational Institutions, Clubs, Bands of Hope, Froebel Centres, Settlements, Girls' Friendly Societies, to Girl Guides and Boy Scouts. I know they have taught at Cirencester, Birkenhead, Liverpool, Ipswich, Manchester, Oxford, Nottingham, Hull, Witney, Reading, Cambridge, Harptree, Minehead, Leith Hill, Dartford, Haslemere, and in many other places besides, and for some years Elementary School Teachers have been taught at the Club and in Holiday Schools at Littlehampton. Until this was done, the Espérance Club members were the only teachers. But the Elementary School Teachers had to be taught as soon as the Board of Education sanctioned Morris dances as a recognized thing that may be taught in the schools to the children of the people. They are part of their national inheritance which an unfortunate change of fashion had almost wrested from them, but which Miss Neal's happy idea is fast giving back to them.

Here I cannot help quoting a few paragraphs from Miss Neal herself in the Espérance Morris Book.

“Letters still come, not only from all parts of England, but from our colonies and foreign countries, Japan, Bulgaria, India and the Canary Isles. The effect which having something they are able to give has had upon those who are passing on these songs, games and dances is quite beautiful. The hospitality which they have enjoyed in the country, the hospitality which they have given to the country folk who have come to teach them, has been a great joy to both sides, and as time goes on and we discover more of these traditional dancers, we hope to make our Clubroom a centre to which those will come who not only wish to learn the old time steps and tunes, but who will enjoy seeing the traditional dancers face to face, and who in this way will catch the true and essential spirit of the almost lost art. As I write I am just arranging for another set of dancers only now discovered by me, to come and dance at the Espérance Club.

“From being merely a Working Girls' Club in an out of the way part of London, we have become part of a national movement and to-day in the oldest haymarket in London, which is Crown land and under the Commissioners of Woods and Forests, may be heard the fascinating strains of Shepherd's Hay, Maid o' the Mill, Constant Billy, and other old time melodies, the tinkle of the Morris Bells and the clap of the Morris sticks. This practice of folk dances and songs and games has had a splendid all-round effect on the general conduct and character of the Club

Members, as any movement which takes us out of our own little life and interest should do. It has added a certain dignity to the smallest thing we do.”

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In September, 1912, I was lucky enough to be with Miss Neal when she went to Bampton with Mr. Carey to perfect the notes of steps and tunes taken of the Bampton dances from a traditional dancer and the fiddler at the Espérance Club.

Morris Dances and Jigs have been danced at Bampton at Whitsuntide without a break from time immemorial, being handed down from generation to generation, steps and figures and never till the last few years put on to paper at all. Those who know about these things say that they are a survival of Pagan Dances, probably something to do with the worship of the Spring and Renewal of Life.

The set of dancers, or “side” as it is called, came to the Inn where we were staying and danced through the dances peculiar to their village. They were so engrossed in what they were doing they looked quite solemn but we could see they enjoyed it very much. In between the dances they walked quietly round and round in a ring, and then formed up again in their set of six in two rows of three for the dances. They have a fiddler who knows all their tunes (and the dances, too) and a Treasurer—an old man who used to lead the side—who carries (traditionally) a sword, decked at the top with flowers, and on which a large cake is spiked. This is believed to be a remnant of some sacrifice. At the end of the day of dancing it is cut in pieces and the team or side have some, and slices are sold to the crowd “for luck.” Belonging to the side is usually a “Fool” or “Squire,” who is comically dressed and carries a bladder or calves-tails on a stick.

Some of the things these country men said about their dancing were very quaint. We talked to one old man over ninety years old, who has given up dancing for the last few years because of rheumatism. He said in his young days he used to dance “till his toe-nails dropped off.” One dancer, now dead, was described as “the best pipe dancer that ever stepped in two shoes.” The pipe dance is a sort of a jig danced over crossed churchwarden clay pipes, and a good dancer does not break his pipes. One old Morris Dancer said he’d danced a Morris jig on the top of a barrel for a wager and then on the bottom of a quart pot to show what he *could* do if he wished. This means “wunnerful neat stepping.” Quite a number of the dances have a couplet attached which is sung to part of the tune. An old man said,

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“You must learn the words before you begin to dance,” and “You sing the words to get the steps in.” The words are mostly quite foolish—such as

“The lollipop man and his daughter Nan
Making lollipops all the day long,”

for The Lollipop Man Morris Dance and in Lumps of Plum Pudding you sing

“Lumps of plum pudding and pieces of pie
My mother gave me for telling a lie.”

But some of the words were refused to Miss Neal, the old dancer saying they were “too clumsy for girls.”

Seeing the real thing like this put the finishing touch to my admiration of the dances and I determined to learn them. So I joined the Espérance Guild, and I have been going to the Club in Cumberland Market on Friday evenings as often as I could—I have learnt about ten dances quite thoroughly and know something about a good many more and lately I have been spreading the knowledge gained and have been teaching the six mistresses of the villages of Sonning on Thames and its near neighbour Woodley. The teachers are so keen and are teaching them to the children, who love them.

I taught them first Morris dances from another part of Berkshire and also some country dances which I have collected myself from an old man in the alms houses in Sonning, my sister Ursula writing down the tunes for me from his whistling. Thus with me and the teachers as go betweens, the Berkshire children will learn some of the old dances which used to be familiar to their grandparents.

Now for a few words on the Morris Dances themselves. The “Dances” are always danced by six men—standing in two rows of three. The men always wear bells on their legs and the steps are mostly designed to make the bells ring well. There are several “figures” that occur in almost all of them, such as “back to back.” This is somewhat like the back to back part of Sir Roger, only done by the two facing each other not from corners. Then in “Hands across” those facing dance across to each others [sic] places and turn and back again. In “Half Hands” they dance out towards each other and back to places—but their hands do not touch at all. Then in a figure called “Gypsies” they dance round, something like back to back only facing each

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other and back to their places. Almost every Morris Dance contains at least one “Hey” in which the three on one side change their places and then return to their own again in a way that is fairly easy to show, but dreadfully difficult to describe in writing. The dances begin with a “shake up” as a rule, a sort of specimen of the step used throughout, danced facing the audience, and often end in something the same, but generally facing inwards in a circle called “shake in” or “all in.” In almost all there is one figure which in some way draws the dancers into a circle. There are all sorts of different steps used, but as a rule not more than two sorts in a dance. Many of the dances end in a shout.

So far I’ve told you of what is alike in the dances—now for some of the differences—some are danced with handkerchiefs, some with sticks and some without either. In most of the dances there comes in between the figures common to most, a special figure belonging to that dance only. A sort of skeleton Morris Dance might be written so

Shake up	Dance
Dance	Hey or Hay
Hand across	Dance
Dance	Shake in or all in
Back to Back	

The number and positions of the various figures differs greatly and the “Dance” comes very different indeed and is not always the same all through the same dance though sometimes it is.

The “Dance” or special figure consists of varying steps combined with clapping of hands or stamping feet or various wavings of handkerchiefs, or knocking of sticks, and complicated windings, etc., or two or more of these combined.

In Princess Royal, for instance, it includes a changed step [sic] two sets of claps, and a changing of places.

The Morris jigs are solo dances, but can be danced by several at a time. These use similar steps to the dances by sides and also always have bells on the legs, but the figures are sometimes very different and show off the skill of the individual dancer. They usually contain a figure called “Capers,” which more rarely occurs in the “side” dances. These are huge jumps in the air done in various ways, either in one place or round in a ring: when well done they look very splendid. There are

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sometimes other steps and generally arm movements with them. Jigs are sometimes done with handkerchiefs or bare hands, but seldom sticks. The only one I’ve seen with a stick is called the Fools Dance, where a short stick is used and dexterously passed under the dancer’s knee from hand to hand, as he prances.

Song and dance competitions have been got up all over the country of late years. The songs sung by the choirs are not always folk songs—but are very often. Sometimes a whole competition is given with the object of encouraging this art of the people, and such an one was held at Newbury, in April, 1913, and my sister and I went to see it. Teams of all ages competed for banners—one for children and one for grown-ups (*i.e.*, over sixteen). They did Folk Dances and sang Folk Songs, and performed dramatic sketches—original, if possible—and with and without words, and also original dances. The high level of the pantomimic acting among the children astonished us. The Morris Dances were charmingly done, and looked very well indeed done in masses. At one time I think there were quite eight “sides” doing the dances at the same time. The children’s “sides” were mostly from elementary schools. But the dances are so delightful that I think that it would be a good thing if they were taught in every school. They are quite as good exercise as many of the “Swedish Exercises” we used to do, and can be done in hall or playground as they are perfectly suitable for dancing out-of-doors, on road or lawn, or on any rough floor. This is natural, as they have been evolved out-of-doors and are thus suited to village gatherings of all sorts. The steps are none of them really complicated and are danced in stiff shoes, but all insist on good balance and vigour, so that they are health giving as well as enjoyable.

On May 1st, 1913, Miss Neal organized a matinée of English dance and song at the Globe Theatre, which was a huge success. The traditional dancers from Bampton came up and danced a set of Morris Dances and jigs, and had with them their Fool, their Fiddler, and their Cake and Sword Bearer, so all who were present could see the traditional form of the dances. Then the members of the Espérance Club danced selections of Morris Dances, Country Dances and jigs from all parts of the country—those taking part also coming from such wide apart places as

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Hull and Essex, as well as the London members. There were also represented Old English Dances, deciphered from *Playfords Dancing Master* (1665), by Miss Nellie Chaplin. Some members of the Espérance Club took part in these, and showed that a knowledge and practice of Morris Dances does certainly not spoil any one for the more courtly dances, such as Courante and Pavane, and helps in the learning and performing of more vigorous ones, such as The Glory of the West and Sir Simon the King.

On Whit Monday I went down to Bampton with Miss Neal in order to see the men dancing in their own village, on the real traditional day. Miss Neal had seen it before, of course. Unfortunately, the day was dull and wet, but that did not stop the dancing. We enquired where they were to be found, and were sent up the most charming “street” with cottages and a footpath on one side, and on the other side of a good wide road a broad strip

of grass and trees and then a path, and then cottages, tiled, thatched, tall, short, and all colours—some covered with clematis in flower, and many with the gayest of spring borders in front of them. On the road we found the “side” dancing away and the fool running with his little “pence-bag” beside a trap which was driving past. As soon as he caught sight of Miss Neal and Mr. Carey he came up beaming and the old Treasurer came across the road to us and as we approached the “side” they finished a dance, and off came all the gaily beribboned hats in a greeting to Miss Neal. There were about a dozen or so of their fellow villagers, and a little knot of five visitors looking on. The dancers all trooped off into a farmyard and we followed. There was a small enclosure round the farm door, paved with small cobbles. There they went through a set of their dances again, and were given drinks of sorts by the farm people who sat under their ample porch to watch. We stood in the yard watching over the little low wall of the enclosure, turning our backs to some splendid hay and corn ricks.

I discovered that yet another man goes with the “side.” He is called the “Ragman” and carries the coats of the dancers in a big pack on his back. They were all unpacked and put on quite often that day, as the rain was uncomfortably insistent. But they do not dance in their coats. The present Ragman is a man who has danced in the “side” and is father of two of the

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present Morris Dancers. He has only given up the last year or two, and he was one of those who danced for us in September. Neither he nor the Treasurer have beribboned hats, and the Treasurer was only in his “sunday best,” but the Ragman wore the white clothes that he used to dance in, sprinkled (his own particular taste) with many very large pearl buttons.

They danced again a little further down the street, and then went to a house where they usually dance on the lawn, but as it was raining the master of the house showed us all up into a fine big barn, which he had cleared for the purpose, and there they gave a fine display. Jigs and Morris Dances alternated. The fiddler (who was dressed in white and a white linen hat, but knickers, not trousers, and one blue and one green stocking), danced a jig, called *Flowers of Edinboro’*, playing for himself all the time, and at one point of the dance where he practically kneels first on one knee then on the other, he also sang! After more Morris Dances two of them danced the pipe dance. This is very delicate heel and toe business in between and over what should be two pipes, but were here two slim pieces of white wood. They might just as well have been pipes for they were never touched by the two who danced it, doing each figure one after the other.

They were a very picturesque sight. There was a good sharp light coming into the barn from the great high open doors, and in that danced these men, in white duck trousers and waistcoats and white shirts, bowler hats with at least three ribbons put round, one above the other, so that they showed, with tails about three-quarters of a yard long, and a bunch of artificial flowers in front. They have various coloured ribbons tied round each arm in two places and on their legs the “bells.” These are at first sight rather like little mats about nine inches square. They are really several straps between two which go round the leg, and on to each strap is fastened five or six bells. Then the whole thing is decorated with pieces of gaily coloured braid or strips of cloth, till the bells are nearly hidden, and the spaces between hardly show. One of the men was wearing “bells” which had descended to him from a great grandfather I understood. The Fool goes about among them and urges them to dance. “Now then you lazy rascals,” he calls, and bangs them with the bladder.

“One at a time all together” seems to be the stock joke. The Treasurer and Ragman stand and look

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on, and the former sometimes comes round among the onlookers. The cake is on the sword and is gaily decked with ribbons, and at the top of the sword a huge bunch of flowers. I cut myself a piece of cake “for luck” and dropped a coin into the Treasurer’s box. The contents of the box are divided by the team at the end of the day.

The Bampton Dances are all done with handkerchiefs or bare hands, and some of the arm gestures are very graceful: I did not see any done with sticks.

When the show in the barn was over we retired to an Inn for tea and to get our shoes dried, and soon after we saw the Morris Dancers scattering to their homes, vanquished by the rain. But one told us they meant to dance again on the Tuesday, at Bampton in the morning and at a neighbouring village in the afternoon, and judging by the weather here they had a better day.

There is another distinct dance which is quite English, and which is called a “Sword Dance.” I think it is mostly danced in the North of England, but is utterly different from the Scottish Sword Dance. It is danced by eight men, and they use long wooden swords which are an integral part of the dance, being jumped over, gone under, and at beginning and end interlocked into a star.

If anyone is interested by this little account, in the Revival of these really national dances, they can obtain all information from Miss Neal, Hon. Secretary, Espérance Club, 50, Cumberland Market, London, N.W., or if they want further information about the Folk Dances themselves, there is the book Miss Neal has done for the Cambridge University Press. It is called *English Folk Song and Folk Dance*, by Frank Kidson and Mary Neal.

And now let me beg anyone who reads this who knows of any village where Morris Dancing has been done within the memory of any old inhabitant, to communicate that fact at once, with, if possible, the name of the villager who remembers and the names of the dances to Miss Neal or to Mr. Clive Carey, 59, Beaufort Mansions, Chelsea, or to me at Oakley Studios, Chelsea, as the tradition of these dances is fast dying out, and the more we can collect as quickly as possible, the better.

(To be continued)