



MORRIS DANCERS, AS DEPICTED IN AN OLD STAINED GLASS WINDOW
IN A HOUSE AT BETLEY, STAFFORDSHIRE.

THE MORRIS BOOK

A HISTORY OF MORRIS DANCING

WITH

A DESCRIPTION OF

ELEVEN DANCES

AS PERFORMED BY

THE MORRIS-MEN

OF

ENGLAND

BY

CECIL J. SHARP

AND

HERBERT C. MACILWAINE.

LONDON
NOVELLO AND COMPANY, LTD.

1907.

GRQ35

3207



*This Book is issued in connection with "Morris Dance Tunes,"
by the same Authors.*

(Sets I. and II., price 2/- each.)

LONDON: NOVELLO AND COMPANY, LTD.

TO OUR FRIENDS AND PUPILS

The Members of the Espérance Girls' Club,

CUMBERLAND MARKET, N.W.

PREFACE.

BESIDES other friends, too numerous for individual mention, who have given us able and willing help in the writing of this book, we desire to tender especial thanks to the following: To the Lady Isabel Margesson, by means of whose kind assistance we were enabled to note certain of the dances herein described; to Miss Florence Warren, whose help was simply invaluable; and to the Rev. S. Baring Gould, for permission to reproduce in our text the old woodcut of the historic Kemp, who danced the Morris steps all the way from London to Norwich.

INTRODUCTION.

THE original edition of this book was written in July, 1906, when the movement for the revival of folk-dancing was in its infancy, within, to be precise, three months of the first exhibition of Morris-dancing given in London under our direction.

Our book, representing, as we believe it did, the first attempt to give a technical account of the Morris-dance, was frankly an experiment, and one which we made with some diffidence and certainly not without a full realisation of the difficulties before us. This hesitation, however, did not weaken our faith in the future of the revival. We believed then, as our Introduction bears witness, no less confidently than we believe now, in its permanence, and felt assured that we were helping to restore "a means and method of self-expression in movement, native and sincere, such as is offered by no other form of dancing known to us."

That this confidence was not unfounded the events of the last six years have proved up to the hilt, even if the progress of the movement has not, artistically, always been exactly as we should have wished.

Since the original publication of this book we have pursued our investigations without pause, and have thus added very considerably to our knowledge of the subject. Instead, for instance, of the dozen dances or so which were all that we had then collected, we have now upwards of 150 in our notebooks. It is, therefore, only natural that we should wish to revise and overhaul our original work.

It will be found that in the process of revision we have (1) made extensive alterations in the technical descriptions of

the steps, figures, &c.; (2) omitted three of the old dances and added six new ones; and (3) completely re-cast the historical section.

Chorography, the science of dance-notation, is not a fixed and complete system like, for instance, musical notation. It is a principle, or rather a bundle of principles, which, in practice, must be adapted to the particular type of dance which it is proposed to transcribe. Now, in the treatment of the more elaborate dances in the later volumes of the Morris Book it became necessary to expand and, to some extent, change the method of description which we originally and tentatively adopted. It is this enlarged and modified scheme which, for the sake of clearness and uniformity, we are now introducing into Part I.

We have omitted the three Bidford dances, "Shepherds' Hey," "Bluff King Hal," and "Morris Off," because, on further investigation, we found that the traditional authority upon which they rested was less trustworthy than we had believed it to be; and we feel, now that our choice of dances is less restricted, that it would be a pity to publish any that were open to suspicion in this respect. Morris-dancing at Bidford was revived in 1886 by Mr. d'Arcy de Ferrars, after a lapse of several years. Although Mr. de Ferrars directed the revival with great care and skill, we have satisfied ourselves that neither "Shepherds' Hey" nor "Morris Off" is an authentic example of the traditional dance. The former we have replaced with an Ilmington variant of the same dance. The difference between the two is not very great, but as we have reason to believe that the Bidford men originally derived their dance from Ilmington, we thought it better and safer in every way to give the dance in what we may here call its original form.

"Bluff King Hal" we omit with some reluctance. It is a dance of great interest and quite unlike any other that we have collected. It has, however, many points in common with certain Country-dances in Playford's

"English Dancing Master"—"Goddesses," for example—and this suggests that it is a Country-dance rather than a Morris. This alone, entirely apart from the question of authority, is reason enough for excluding it from this collection.

The new dances we introduce are "The Maid of the Mill," "Shepherds' Hey," "The Old Woman Tossed Up," "The Cuckoo's Nest" and "The Black Joke," from Ilmington (Warwickshire); and "The Processional Morris," from Tideswell (Derbyshire). As the Ilmington dances are all fairly simple and not altogether unlike those from Headington, their natural place is in the same volume. The "Tideswell Processional Dance" is a very interesting example of one of the many processional forms which have survived in places where the more elaborate stationary dances have fallen into disuse.

The Headington dances have all been retained, although in several cases we have added variants of the steps, figures, &c., and in one or two places made some slight corrections.

The discovery of the Sword-dances and a closer study and better understanding of the significance of the traditional customs associated with the Morris have led us to change very materially our views on the history and origin of the dance.

The arguments which induced us to accept the popular and prevalent theory that the Morris-dance was of Moorish origin were these:—

- (1) The accepted derivation of "Morris" from "Morisco";
- (2) The fact that the dance is to be found to this day on both sides of the Franco-Spanish border, and in a form remarkably like that with which we are familiar in England;
- (3) The custom observed by many Morris men of blackening their faces, a practice which still obtains in Worcestershire, Herefordshire, and other parts of England, and has been traced in France, the Netherlands, and in Germany.

These considerations, taken together, undoubtedly make a formidable *prima-facie* case in favour of the theory we originally propounded. Nevertheless, as we have since found, this explanation, plausible as it looks, will not bear examination. In the first place, the Morris-dance, in various forms, is found very widely distributed—pretty nearly all over Europe. If, therefore, we ascribe to the English dance a Moorish origin, we must, to be consistent, attribute a like source to all the similar dances found in this extended area. Then, again, we have this significant fact, that, wherever it is found, the Morris is nearly always associated with certain strange customs which are apparently quite independent of the dance itself and contribute little or nothing to the fun or beauty of it. These customs, moreover, are found in England and elsewhere either separately or attached to ceremonies and pastimes other than the Morris-dance, notably the Sword-dance and Mummers'-play.

Now, it is just conceivable that the Morris, on its own merits, might have spread from Spain over the whole of Europe, but it is extremely improbable that those who were attracted by the dance would have also appropriated in every case customs which had no obvious connection with it. The position is briefly, this: Either we must assume that European customs have been contaminated very generally by Moorish influence, or that the Morris dance is a development of a pan-European, or even more widely extended custom. The latter hypothesis is, we believe, the true one, as it is also the one generally accepted by folk-lorists.

There still remains the question of the word Morris. But even here we can accept the received derivation without binding ourselves to deduce therefrom proof of Moorish origin. As we have noticed, Morris-dancers sometimes, and in the past perhaps very frequently, blackened their faces. This would at the present day lead to the dance being called a "nigger dance." To our forefathers, for whom the typical black man was the Moor, not the nigger, the natural

equivalent would have been a "Moorish" or "Morris" dance. In other words, as Mr. E. K. Chambers has it, "the faces were not blackened because the dancers represented Moors, but rather the dancers were thought to represent Moors because their faces were blackened."

There is no need to pursue this question any further. The highest authorities reject the Moorish hypothesis, and see in the Morris the survival of some primitive religious ceremonial.

For a fairly full account of the nature and purpose of this ceremonial the reader is referred to the Introduction of "The Sword Dances of Northern England," where the question is discussed at some length.

Shortly, however, we may explain that it was one of the seasonal pagan observances prevalent amongst primitive communities, and associated in some occult way with the fertilization of all living things, animal and vegetable. The central act of the ceremony was the slaughter of a sacred animal to provide a solemn sacramental feast. The primitive mind did not draw any clear line between its dimly-conceived clan-deity, the human members of the clan, and the sacred animals of the clan-herd. All were of one kindred, and the object of the sacrifice of the holy animal and the subsequent feast was to cement the bond between the god and the members of the clan.*

Particulars will be given later on (*see* pp. 25, 26) of the survival in two Oxfordshire villages, within living memory, of ceremonies, closely associated with the Morris-dance, in which an animal was killed and afterwards eaten. The following passage from T. Blount's "Ancient Tenures," ed. 1679, p. 149, quoted by Mr. Percy Manning ("Folk-lore," viii., 1897, p. 315), shows the way in which a similar rite

* It is now maintained that in the most primitive form of sacrament no conception of divinity was present. The parties in the rite were two; the group of eaters and the eaten. The former were manipulating for their own advantage the mysterious virtue of the latter. The idea of deity was a further, and psychologically subsequent "projection" of the group-emotion of the eaters. See J. E. Harrison. "Themis," p. 136.

was observed more than 200 years ago in another part of the same county:—"At *Kidlington* in *Oxfordshire* the Custom is, That on Monday after Whitson week, there is a fat live Lamb provided, and the Maids of the Town having their thumbs ty'd behind them, run after it, and she that with her mouth takes and holds the Lamb, is declared Lady of the Lamb, which, being dress'd with the skin hanging on, is carried on a long Pole before the Lady and her Companions to the Green, attended with Music and a *Morisco Dance* of Men, and another of Women, where the rest of the day is spent in dancing, mirth and merry glee. The next day the Lamb is part bak'd, boyl'd, and rost, for the Ladies feast, where she sits majestically at the upper end of the Table, and her Companions with her with music and other attendants, which ends the solemnity."

The cake, impaled on a sword, carried before the Morris-dancers and afterwards eaten "for luck," may possibly be the survival of a cognate ceremony, a cereal instead of an animal sacrifice.

In the light of the foregoing remarks the significance of many of the customs described in the following pages becomes self-evident. In the Whit-hunt at Field Town, the Lamb Ale at Kirtlington, the ox-horns, chalice and sword at Abingdon, it is easy to discern traces of the animal sacrifice and the sacramental feast that followed it; in the cake and sword borne before the Morris-dancers at Sherborne, Ducklington, Ascott and elsewhere, we have the vestiges of a similar sacrifice and feast of the products of the vegetable world; in the character of the Fool, significantly called the Squire—*i.e.*, leader,—we may perhaps, strange as it seems, see the semi-divine leader of a group of worshippers; in the ceremonial dance round the Maypole, "for luck," at Ducklington, we may detect an act of worship of the tree, as representing the grandest product of the vegetable world, a tribute to the principle of fertilization, symbolized by the fresh flowers with which the pole was garlanded; while in the serpentine and

circular character of the figures in "Green Garters," the Hey and Rounds, may be seen characteristic movements that are to be found in nearly all dances of a religious type, Again of fertility mating was the obvious symbol. Hence, perhaps, the presence of the Lord and Lady at Kirtlington, the King and Queen at Winster, and the Squire and Moll at Brailes and other places.

There is reason to believe that the Mumming-play and the Sword-dance are no more than survivals of different aspects of the same primitive rite; and the fact that both are often called by the country people "Morris-dances" is, perhaps, evidence that the tradition of this common origin still lingers in the minds of the country people. Little more than a cursory examination is needed to see that the same central idea permeates all three of them. Originally expressions of religious belief, in which the idea was as essential as the form, they have passed by various stages and along devious paths into the inspiring dances and quaint dramas with which we are familiar. That the human instinct of play should draw on these ceremonies, as their meaning waned, for its material, is natural enough, seeing that in them it found, ready to hand, a vehicle of expression easily adapted to its purpose. Out of the debris of ancient faith and cult have issued three forms of folk-art. In the Morris-dance proper we have a dance of grace and dignity, instinct with emotion gravely restrained in a manner not unsuggestive of its older significance; full of complex co-ordinated rhythms of hand and foot, demanding the perfection of unstrained muscular control. In the Mummings'-play the feeling for drama, the world-old love of personification, has been the determining factor; while in the Sword-dance, with its elaborate dexterity of evolution, its dramatic accompaniments of song and interlude, we find drama and dance combined.

Now the central act of the original rite, the killing, may be clearly traced in the Mummings'-play and in the Sword-dance, of both of which it is the chief incident and climax. No trace, however, of this is to be found in the Morris-dance.

From the character of the figures of the latter we might, perhaps, conjecture that the dance was religious in origin, but of the nature of that religious observance no inference can be drawn from the dance itself. It is only in the customs and the supernumerary characters, that is, in things that are outside and separate from the dance, that this can be discerned, and the link between the Morris-dance, the Sword-dance and Mummers'-play established. We must, therefore, conclude either that the Morris is an off-shoot of the Sword-dance, or that it has for some unexplained reason suffered more severely from the ravages of time. We are inclined to favour the former hypothesis. The sticks used in the Morris-dance are, for instance, comparatively modern substitutes for swords. In Johnson's Dictionary (1775) the Morris is defined "as a dance in which bells are jingled or staves or swords clashed," and Miss Burne in "Shropshire Folk-lore" (p. 478) records that "some call the staves wooden swords," and prints a document (1652) in which mention is made of a "morrice-daunce . . . with six sword-bearers," one of whom, Thomas Lee, "was most abusive."

But what of the handkerchiefs? What is their derivation? This, we confess, has always puzzled us. Artistically, their purpose is obvious: they serve to emphasize the hand-movements which play so important a part in the Morris-dance. But it would be extremely improbable that they were arbitrarily introduced into the dance purely for artistic reasons. Rather should we expect to find in them, as we find in everything else connected with the dance, the survival of something which had originally an organic connection with the religious rite from which the dance is derived; just as in the sticks, for instance, we see the modern equivalent of the sword, the sacrificial instrument; in the comic fool, a modern development of a character who originally played a very serious and important rôle; in the bells, now used to emphasize the rhythm of the steps, a mere noise with which to awaken the earth sprite or perhaps frighten and drive away evil spirits.

So far as we know, no one has as yet offered any satisfactory solution of this problem. And we ourselves should have no suggestion to offer had not Mr. E. Phillips Barker called our attention to the description of a so-called Morris-dance contained in "Letters from Lusitania" (Anon.: Windsor, 1876), quoted in "The Folk-lore Journal" (vol. iv., 1886), and suggested the argument which we have developed below. The passage occurs in an account of a visit which the anonymous author paid to a small Spanish town. After alluding to a procession of priests with relics, &c., he says: "We entered upon a tour of observation, and it was not long before our trouble was rewarded, and our curiosity gratified, with the sight of a dance, performed by six men, each of whom held one of the knotted ends of a coloured handkerchief, the other knot being held by another dancer. To the horridly monotonous whifflings of two reed-pipes, and the sound of a species of tom-tom, they curveted round and round, or changed places, and, in doing so, altered the variegated pattern formed by handkerchiefs—six in all—ever held head-high, and kept twining and intertwining in multiform ways. The tom-tom consisted of an earthen bowl, over the mouth of which a bladder was tightly strained. Through the centre of the skin a stout quill, plucked from a turkey, was thrust, and this being drawn out and pushed in again produced a horrid monotone, not unlike the booming of a bull frog. It was a strangely unique performance."

At first sight this looks very much like the description, in non-technical language, of an ordinary Morris-dance, such as we are familiar with in England, with its six men, handkerchiefs, a form of pipe and tabor, &c. But there are two features of the narrative which make us pause before accepting this conclusion: (1) the fact that the dancers were *linked* together by means of knotted handkerchiefs, and (2) that "they curveted round and round, or changed places, and, in doing so, altered the variegated pattern formed by the handkerchiefs—six in all—ever held head-high, and kept twining and intertwining in multiform ways."

A careful consideration of these two points makes it clear that the dance is not an ordinary Morris-dance at all, but a Sword-dance in which the swords have been eliminated in favour of handkerchiefs held taut above the head. It can only be classed as a Morris-dance in so far as the Morris- and Sword-dance may be regarded as divergent off-shoots from the same source. The movements as above described are clearly the same as, or very similar to, those executed in the Earsdon or Swalwell rapper-dances, where, it will be remembered, the dancers are linked together by means of short and very flexible swords. May we not see here a possible link between sword, stick, and handkerchief?

If we suppose that the Sword-dance always contained both circular and file formations, as in the Flamborough, Grenoside and Sleights dances, we might well argue that after the sword in peaceful and rustic districts had fallen out of the dance and some loss of skill in the circular movements had intervened, a mere link between the dancers might be thought all that was necessary; a kerchief would do. But with the vanishing of a stiff connecting link between the dancers, what remained of the circular twinings would rapidly become more disorderly and degenerate. Finally all pretence is dropped; the dancers simply part company (naturally adopting two handkerchiefs in the process) and dance round in a ring and back again as in Half-rounds. Meanwhile the file thrives wonderfully by the loss of the stiff connecting-rod, and finally of any connection at all between the dancers; it is set free; what is death to the circular twistings is life to it; it perhaps sucks in fresh figures from more popular sources, develops elaboration of step and becomes the Morris, more or less as we know it. The stick, meanwhile, in some districts, has preserved an existence alongside the handkerchief, though, perhaps because the art of tying the Nut is lost, it does not keep the circular evolutions alive to any greater extent than the handkerchief.

All this, of course, is theory based on analysis and resemblances which need other links to bring them into proved relation. But there can be little doubt that the Spanish dance described in "Letters from Lusitania" is a curious and highly significant survival of Sword-dance evolutions in which the handkerchief has ousted the sword as a link between the dancers.

Now, in the course of our investigations we had often heard of linked-handkerchief dances in Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire, but until a few months ago had never been able to secure an example. In the Ilmington "Maid of the Mill," however, we have at last found one. If the reader will examine the movements in this dance and compare them with those used in Sword-dances he will find in the Hey a close approximation to the "Roll" and "No Man's Jig" of, respectively, the Grenoside and Sleights dances; in the "Spin"* almost an exact reproduction of the "Spin" in the Flamborough and Sleights dances, albeit with a single instead of a double link; and in the turning outward with upraised arm, a movement which occurs over and over again in Rapper-dances, *e.g.*, in the tying and untying of the Nut. In the similarity of these movements may perhaps be seen additional evidence of the close connection between Morris- and Sword-dance.

Indeed, we may go a step further and point out that the Hey of the "Maid of the Mill," and its prototype, the "Roll" of the Sword-dances, occur in Grimstock, Trenchmore and other Country-dances in Playford's "English Dancing Master," the performers linking by joining both hands. Indeed, if we except the progressive movement and the movements of courtesy—*e.g.*, the Honour—almost every representative figure of the Country-dance can be traced to its origin in the Morris- or Sword-dance. This seems to indicate that the Country-dance has been derived from the more ancient religious dances, the figures of which have been simplified and adapted to the requirements of the amateur social dance of the country people.

* We ourselves are responsible for applying the Sword-dance term "Spin" to the very similar circular movement in the second figure of "The Maid of the Mill." The Ilmington men had no name for it.