

Notes on the Sword Dancers' Song and Interlude

By John Stokoe

With the advent of Christmas each year there comes a revival of some of the quaint and curious customs which marked the Yule Tide of our forefathers, and which are now only slowly dying out. The play or interlude of the Sword Dancers (or guizards), which is still exhibited at this season in the streets and towns of the Wear and Tyne, is of ancient origin, and has been practised and played in all parts of Great Britain, from Cornwall to the remotest islets of Shetland; and it is curious to find one play with unimportant variations preserved traditionally in parts of the island so distant from each other and in many respects so different.

Of the origin of this antique custom little is known. One antiquary (Wallis) thinks the Sword Dance is the Antic Dance or Chorus Armatus of the Romans. Brand supposes that it is a composition made up of the gleanings of several obsolete customs anciently followed in England and other countries. The Germans still practise the Sword Dance at Easter; and Sir Walter Scott gives an account of a similar play, in notes to his novel of "The Pirate," as performed in Shetland.

The performance in Northumberland and Durham is chiefly undertaken by pitmen, who, during the holidays, in parties of a dozen or more, each with a sword by his side, and clad in white shirts profusely decorated with ribbons of various colours, resort to the towns to perform this play, accompanied by song and music. The Captain of the band, who usually wears a cocked hat and peacock's feathers in it by way of cockade, is attended by a Clown, or Bessy, who acts as treasurer and collects the money.

The Captain forms a circle, round which he walks; the Bessy opens the proceedings by singing the first verse, the Captain following by introducing the various characters personified in singing the succeeding verses. The fiddler accompanies the song in unison with the voice, repeating the air at the end of each stanza, forming an interlude between the

verses, during which the characters as introduced by the singer make their bow, walk round, and join the circle.

The Bessy chants:-

Good gentlemen, all, to our Captain take heed,
And hear what he's going for to sing;
He's lived among music this forty long year,
And drunk of the elegant spring

Andantino.

Six ac - tors I have brought, who were
ne'er on a stage be - fore; But they will do their
best, And the best can do no more. *Sym:*

The Captain then proceeds with the
SWORD DANCERS' SONG

Six actors I have brought who were ne'er on stage before,
But they will do their best, and their best can do no more.

The first that I call in, he is a squire's son;
He's like to lose his sweetheart, because he is too young;
Although he is too young, he has money for to rove,
And he will freely spend it all before he'll lose his love.

The next that I call in, he is a tailor fine;
What think you of his work? He made this coat of mine.
So comes good Master Snip his best respects to pay;
He joins us in our trip to drive dull care away.

The next that I call in, he is a soldier bold;
He's come though to poverty by spending of his gold;
But though all he has spent, again he'll plough the main,
With heart both light and brave, to fight both France and Spain.

Next comes a keelman bold; he'll do his part right weel;
A clever blade, I'm told, as ever puoyed a keel;
He is a bonny lad, as you must understand;
It's he can dance on deck, and you'll see him dance on land.

To join us in this play here comes a jolly dog
Who's sober all the day when he can get no grog;
But though he likes his grog, as all his friends do
say,
He always likes it best when he has nowt to pay.

Last I come in myself, the leader of this crew,
And if you'd like to know my name, my name it is
True Blue.

The Bessy now gives and account of him-
self:-

My mother was burnt for a witch;
My father was hanged on a tree,
And it's because I'm a fool
There's nobody meddled wi' me.

The dance then commences. It is an ingen-
ious performance, and the swords of the per-
formers are placed in a variety of graceful
positions so as to form stars, hearts, squares,
circles, &c. The dance is so elaborate that the
performers require frequent rehearsals, a
quick eye, and a strict adherence to time and
tune. Before it concludes the actors become
disorderly, and are seen fighting. One charac-
ter, who rushes in to make peace, receives his
death blow, and is laid on the ground, while
the others walk round singing the following
verses in slow time:-

Alas! Our Parson's dead, and on the ground is
laid;
Some of us will suffer for't, young men, I'm sore
afraid.

I'm sure 'twas none of me, I'm clear of that crime;
'Twas him that follows me that drew his sword so
fine.

I'm sure it was not me, I'm clear of the fact;
'Twas him that follows me that did this dreadful
act.

The Bessy sings:-

Cheer up, cheer up, my bonny lads, and be of
courage brave;
We'll take him to the church, and bury him in his
grave.

Captain:- Oh! For a doctor, a right good doctor – a
ten pound doctor, oh!

Doctor:- Here am I!

Captain:- Doctor, what's your fee?

Doctor:- Ten pounds is my fee;
But nine pounds, nineteen shillings and
elevenpence three farthings
Will I take from thee.

Doctor (sings):-

See here – see here – a doctor rare,
Who travels much at home;

Come, take my pills, they cure all ills,
Past, present, and to come.

The plague, the palsy and the gout,
The devil within and the devil without–
Everything but a love-sick maid
And consumption in the pocket.

Take a little of my nif-naf,
Put it on your tif-taf;
Parson, rise and fight again,
The doctor says you are not slain.

The Parson gradually recovers, which is the
signal for general rejoicing and congratulation.

Captain (sings):-

You've seen them all called in, you've seen them
all go round,
Wait but a little time, some pastime will be found.

Coxgreen's a bonny place, where water washes
clean;
And Painshaw on the hill, where we have merry
been.

Then fiddler, change thy tune, play us a merry jig;
Before I will be beat, I'll pawn both hat and wig.

Our play is at an end, and now we'll taste your
cheer.
We wish you a merry Christmas, and a happy New
Year.

The Bessy–

And your pockets full of brass,
And your cellars full of beer.

The ceremony concludes with a general
dance to the tune of "Kitty Bo-Bo." Our ver-
sion is collated with Topliff's and with that of
Sir Cuthbert Sharp's "Bishoprick Garland,"
and the music is from the "Northumbrian
Minstrelsy" published by the Newcastle Society
of Antiquaries in 1882.

KITTY BO-BO.

The version given below is one now commonly sung by the pitmen from Earsdon, who have for above thirty years been accustomed to visit Alnwick Castle at Christmas. The rhythm of the verses requires a different tune to the one anciently used, and is not incidental to the song.

Good peo-ple, give ear to my sto-ry, I've
called in to see you by chance; Five
lads I have brought, blythe and mer-ry, In-
tend-ing to give you a dance.
Ears-don is our hab-it-a-tion, The
place we were all born and bred; There are
not fin-er lads in the na-tion, And
none shall be gal-lant-er led.

'Tis not for your gold or your silver,
Nor for the gain of your gear
But we we come just to take a week's pleasure,
To welcome the incoming year.
My lads they are all fit for action,
With spirits and courage so bold;
They are born of a noble extraction,
Their fathers were heroes of old.

Now this is the son of brave Elliott,
The first youth that enters the ring;
So proudly rejoice I to tell it,
He fought for his country and king.
When the Spaniards besieged Gibraltar,
Bold Elliott defended the place,
Soon caused them their plans for to alter;
Some died – others fell in disgrace.

Now my next handsome youth that does enter
Is a boy there are very few such;
His father beat the great De Winter,
And defeated the fleet of the Dutch.
His father was the great Lord Duncan,
Who played the Dutch such a prank,
That they from their harbours ran funkin',
And they fled to the great Dogger Bank.

This one is the son of Lord Nelson,
The hero that fought at the Nile;
Few men with such courage and talent,
The Frenchmen he did them beguile.

The Frenchmen they nearly decoyed him,
But the battle he managed so well,
In their fortress he wholly destroyed them,
Scarce one got off home for to tell.

Now my next handsome youth that does enter
Is a boy of ability bright;
Five thousand guineas I'd venture
That he, like his father, would fight.
At Waterloo and Tarryvary,*
Lord Wellington made the French fly;
You scarcely can find such another,
He'd conquer or else he would die.

Now my next handsome youth that does enter,
Is a boy that is both straight and tall;
He is the son of the great Buonaparte,
The hero that cracked the whole all.
He went over the Lowlands like thunder,
Made nations to quiver and quake
Many thousands stood gazing in wonder
At the havoc he always did make.

Now you see all my five noble heroes,
My five noble heroes by birth,
And they each bear as good a character
As any five heroes on earth;
If they be as good as their fathers,
Their deeds are deserving records.
It is all the company desires,
To see how they handle their swords.

The Sword Dance then follows as in the older version, usually to a tune in 6-8 time, selected from the fiddler's repository.

* *Query*: Torres Vedras [or Talavera. J.A.]

Monthly Chronicle of North Country Lore and Legend, volume 1, number 10, December 1887, pp.462-465.