



THE origin of Christmas Carols is wrapped in obscurity, and the authors of the older ones are unknown. A carol is a sort of sacred ballad, or narrative song, based principally on St. Luke's account of the birth of Christ, which is practically versified in "While shepherds watched their flocks by night." The term Carol was originally applied to songs intermingled with dancing, and came afterwards to signify festive songs, such as were sung at Christmas. One powerful influence, which did much to shape the old Christmas Carol, is to be found in the mysteries or sacred dramas, which for centuries formed one of the most popular entertainments at the church festivals, particularly at Christmas. These mysteries are said to have been introduced about the end of the eleventh century; and although they present many Gospel scenes in confused form, they did much to spread religious thought and feeling. Those who have witnessed the wonderful realism of the Ober-Ammergau passion play can understand this. The Mystery Plays were, probably, accountable for the many curious traditions embodied in old Christmas Carols. Some of these can be traced to the Apocryphal Gospels; in other cases the source is lost. The old carol of "The Camel and the Crane," thirty stanzas long, abounds in incongruities and anachronisms, and is descriptive, among other things, of the Flight into Egypt. The maternal delight and affection of the mother of Christ for her Son is an unailing subject in old carols.

Most of the ordinary popular carols show by their style that they have at all events received their present form from the hands of less educated singers than those of the choir of the Chapel Royal. For many years it was the duty of this choir to produce a carol at Christmas, before the King or Queen went to supper; and it is probable that many of the higher class of carols owe their existence to this custom, or to a similar usage in houses of the nobility. Many carols were directly intended to be the means of obtaining gifts of money from wealthier neighbours. Sometimes they assumed a religious, sometimes a convivial tone.

Besides religious and legendary carols, there is a large miscellaneous class which treats rather of the accidental circumstances of the Christmas season than of the events which it commemorates. The cold, snow, boar's head, boar-hunt, holly and ivy, and the feasting and merrymaking, which have always belonged to the Christmas holidays, have all furnished matter for a variety of old Christmas carols. Numerical carols, too, are not uncommon. Besides "The Joys of Mary," which

are variously fixed at five, seven, and twelve in different versions, there is "A New Dyall," ending with "Twelve make our creed." "The dial's done," and others are to be met with during research.

The first printed collection of carols came from the press of Wynkyn de Worde in 1521. A unique fragment of it is still extant, containing the famous "Boar's Head Carol," which is still sung at Queen's College, Oxford, on Christmas Day. The Jovial Carols were issued in a small black-letter collection in 1642, another in 1661, and yet another in 1688. These are of the highest rarity, and contain curious specimens of the songs that were sung by shepherds and ploughmen at Christmas entertainments in farmhouses. The inmates never failed to regale the singers with plum-cake and hot spiced ale. The Puritans did their best to discourage carol singing, but the practice revived at the Restoration, and continues to the present day.

In France the singing of "Noëls" was common at an early date, and collections were published as early as the 16th century. Russian literature is very rich in carols and religious songs, many of the singers being beggars and lame people who wander about singing for charity. Many of the legends in these Russian carols are of great antiquity. The Isle of Man has a large store of carols, or "caroal," but very few are in print. Wales, too, has her "Book of Carols" containing quite a number.

For some time past it has been a growing practice to sing carols in churches instead of in the open air, as in bygone days, and the old fantastic carols are in consequence fast falling out of remembrance. The great obstacles to the general revival of really ancient carols are the obsolete and sometimes irreverent language, the irregularity of the versification, extreme length of many, and often the loss of the original tunes.

A very pleasant way of keeping up the old custom of carol-singing to some degree, is to form a party of friends of congenial tastes, possessed of good voices, who will meet for a few rehearsals when well-known favourite carols should be practised. Shortly before Christmas week appropriate notice-cards may be circulated among friends and acquaintances, announcing that the carol-singers purpose calling and singing a few carols, either in the cause of charity or of friendship. Substantial sums may be collected in this way for a good cause. If preferred, the party may organise a "Carol Concert" at a hall or house of a friend. The idea is capable of much variation, and may not only be made productive of help to the destitute, but may also afford pleasant opportunities of social intercourse among those who carry it out.