



"Ring a round a-roy."

## FOLK-LORE OF CHILDREN'S GAMES.

**T**HAT the old time ring and round games, such as children and, not so long ago, grown people, have played of summer evenings since human memory reaches, are gradually dying out, it is very generally acknowledged by every one who takes an interest in children's pastimes.

Twenty, or even ten years ago, our city streets and country greens were musical with voices of children in the refrains :

" As we go round the mulberry-bush,  
The mulberry bush, the mulberry-bush,  
As we go round the mulberry-bush,  
So early in the morning : "

OR

" Green grow the rushes, oh,  
Green grow the rushes, oh,  
He who will my true love be  
Come and sit by the side of me ; "

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and that other, so well known :

" Ring a round a rosy,  
A bottle full of posy,  
All the girls in our town  
Ring for little Josie. "

Nowadays, if we wish to hear these quaint, childish rhymes sung in play, we must go down to the poorer quarters of the city, where the shrill voices of the gamins still may be heard occasionally piping these fragments of songs, as they indulge in games which once amused kings and courtiers. But even the slum children are fast abandoning old-time plays, and the indications are that but a few years are needed for Time, like an auctioneer, to have cried out for the last time, " Going, going, gone ! " and, finding no bidder, ring down the curtain, and

pack away these abandoned games in one of oblivion's dark corners, where no children will ever think to look for them, and where only an occasional student of folk-lore will have the hardihood to bring them to light.

The regret with which most parents regard this gradual but inevitable change in children's plays comes, probably, largely from the tenacity with which most grown persons cling to the memories of their own childhood; but that the games form an important branch of folk-lore, to which their loss will be a serious one, is not generally realized.

The grown people who hear their children glibly "counting out:"

"Intery, mintery, cutery corn,  
Apple seed and brier thorn,  
Wire, brier, limber lock,  
Five mice in a flock,  
Catch him, Jack,  
Hold him, Tom,  
Blow the bellows,  
Old man out,"

or chanting the dolorous history of the unfortunate Miss Jennie O'Jones:

"I've come to see Miss Jennie O'Jones,  
Miss Jennie O'Jones, Miss Jennie O'Jones,

I've come to see Miss Jennie O'Jones,  
And how is she to-day?"

think as little as the children that these are the connecting threads to no one knows what historical or legendary or romantic lore of past ages. Even that simplest, and apparently silliest, of baby games, "Ring a round a rosy," is undoubtedly a survival of the old joyous May-dances, when all the world, not so dignified then as now, danced and sung around the May-pole or rose-tree, through whose French equivalent—*rosier*—comes the word used by the children of to-day.

The origin of these games is widely varied, but the song-words or formulas, when there are any, can almost always be traced to grown people. The games which our children are now discarding as too childish, were played, many of them, by Queen Elizabeth's maids of honor. Some are fragments of old ballads, dramatized; many are survivals of religious customs, and still others preserve primitive customs which have now died out.

For instance, the rude and romping game:



"Here come three ducks a-roving."





"near Jersey O Jones."

"Here come three ducks a-rov-ing,  
(or a-riding, or a-wooling)  
Roving, roving;  
Here come three ducks a-rov-ing,  
With the ransy, tansy, tea!  
Pretty fair maik, will you come out,  
Will you come out, will you come out,  
To join us in our dancing?"

with the coquetry of the scornful maid,  
who answers that she won't come out,  
and its rollicking refrain:

"Naughty girl, she won't come out,  
She won't come out, she won't come out,  
To join us in our dancing."

is a relic of the days when courtship  
was a solemn and public ceremony,  
often carried on by proxies, and the  
three ducks were, undoubtedly, original-  
ly three dukes, envoys for a still nobler  
suitor.

Carried down orally from generation  
to generation, and preserved from un-  
recognizable corruption by the well-  
known conservatism of children, who  
object to the alteration of a single  
word in a familiar rhyme or story,  
some of these games are as old as  
Virgil, and as widely differentiated  
as speech itself. Similar versions of  
the same rhyme or game appear in all

the Continental countries. Froissart  
speaks of partaking in the

"Games that children every one  
Love till twelve years old are done;"

and follows with a list of pastimes, of  
which fully one-half are played without  
substantial alteration by children to-  
day.

Who has not seen them playing that  
most ancient and popular of games,  
"London Bridge is falling down," with-  
out thought of its legendary significa-  
tion? Even the refrain, "Dance o'er  
my Lady Lee" (in some parts of the  
country altered to "so merrily"), hints  
at an old English legend—the building  
of the body of an offender into the  
foundation of a bridge, of which a  
nobleman named Leigh or Lee, a  
mayor of a country town, was once  
accused. As for the play itself, it is a  
representation of the strife between  
angels and devils for the passing soul  
as it crosses the bridge between this  
world and the next (familiarized in  
poetry as the "Brigg o' Dread"), sym-  
bolized in the "tug of war" with which  
the game concludes. The two keepers  
of the bridge, who catch one of the

passing train of children and (with us) command them to choose between "a gold angel" and something else, or between plum-cake and mince-pie, are in Germany called "the Angel" and "the Devil," and in Italy, "St. Peter" and "St. Paul." Here the game is called "Open the Gates"—of the Inferno and of Paradise—while in France it is "Heaven and Hell."

This game was familiar to Rabelais, and, doubtless, reaches much farther back into antiquity. It might well be a fragment of an old miracle play. The Florentine boys of the fourteenth century would ask the captive whether he chose to be "Guelf or Ghibelline?" Mediaeval tradition, as preserved in numerous legends, represents the newly built bridge as a special subject of interference or destruction by the devil, or, in some cases, of the "nix" or spirit of the stream it crosses. He is finally bought off by the promise that the first living creature passing over

the bridge shall be his, and the child captured in this game may well have represented the sacrifice.

The same idea of the struggle for souls between good and evil powers appears faintly in the exciting drama, "Old Witch," which is still played in front of "stoops" and alley-ways which afford a hiding-place for the old witch's stolen children. This game is one of the most interesting, because one of the oldest and most widely diffused in different countries, known to folk-lore. The wicked old witch is frequently represented as limping (as in the familiar game, "Old Mother Topsy-Toes"), as that is considered a demoniacal characteristic. France has a special game called "The Limping Devil." Quite a startling change of theory appears, however, in a German game which is played in exactly the same way, but is called "Getting Angels," and the witch appears as "Maria, Mother of God!"



"Hold fast to what I give you."

The same root of tradition is responsible for the game, familiar in its many variations, of the poor widow with daughters to marry, or the old woman with children to give away, who parts with them, one by one, as in

"Here comes an old woman from Barbary  
With all her children by her side;  
The one can sew, the other can bake,  
The other can make a lily-white cake;  
So please take one of my daughters."

The mention of "Barbary" may be a vague allusion to the already half-forgotten days of the Barbary slave-trade,

ively American "ring" game, played among the children, is the well known "March to Quebec," probably an echo of Revolutionary times:

"As we were marching to Quebec,  
The drums were loudly beating;  
The Americans have won the day,  
The British are retreating."

A curious instance of the presumably unsympathetic attitude of the Dutch-descended population of New York toward the Revolutionary patriots, appears in a sarcastic verse which was sung among them, whether separately



"Drop the Handkerchief."

when the kidnapping of white foreigners formed the foundation for many a romance.

The religious survival again appears in the familiar and slightly vulgar game known as "Rotten Egg," in which that uncomplimentary title is applied to the child who loses his hold on the two others who are swinging him back and forth in a "basket" formed of their interlaced hands. This was once an imitation of the scales of St. Michael, in which the soul was weighed to determine its worth, and, consequently, its eternal destination—to the uninitiated, anything but a spiritually suggestive game.

Notable, because the only approximately modern, and the only distinct-

or in connection with this game, is not clear, early in this century:

"Run, lads, the king's men are coming;  
Harness the wagons before the horses!"

This, it is not difficult to see, is a fling at the "Continental," for the wild haste and confusion with which they were supposed to retreat before King George's troops.

"Tag," which many little daughters of careful mothers are forbidden to play, as boisterous and unlady-like, was, according to the Elizabethan poets, the favorite pastime of Diana and her nymphs. This theory, and the fact that it was also a favorite amusement of Elizabeth's court, can be taken inter-



changeably as cause and effect. Here is the preservation of an old superstition. One of its most familiar forms, "Iron Tag," was originally the only form, and came from the ancient belief that iron was a sacred metal, and whoever touched it was safe from evil spirits. Thus the boy who to-day escapes from becoming "it"—mysterious word!—by touching a horse-shoe or iron post, is the apotheosis of the medieval believer, who, imagining himself pursued by the dreaded Fiend, bade him defiance by touching the charmed

an ancient and honorable order, but a corruption of what must have been an old ballad :

"All the fair maidens are arrayed to be seen."

Another old ballad is probably incorporated into the popular round game :

"Uncle John is very sick, what shall we send him?  
A piece of pie, a piece of cake, a piece of apple-dumpling.  
What shall we send it in? In a piece of paper,  
Paper is not fine enough; in a golden saucer."



"Open the gates as high as the sky."

metal. A curious piece of old-time snobbery is manifested in a magazine of 1738, where the writer gravely mentions this amusement as "having been altered in later times amongst children of quality, by touching of gold instead of iron."

"Green gravel, green gravel, the grass is so green;  
And all the Free Masons are ashamed to be seen;  
O Mary, O Mary, your true love is dead,  
The King sends you a letter to turn back your head."

as shrilly chanted by the children of our back streets and slums, is neither unmeaning gibberish nor a reflection on

After deciding on the gift, the question comes up :

"Who shall we send it by? By the king's daughter,  
Take her by the lily-white hand, and lead her over the water."

Garbled and imperfect as this is, a writer on folk-lore, Mr. W. W. Newell, sees in it "traces of ancient origin, possibly the last echo of the medieval song in which an imprisoned knight is saved from approaching death by the daughter of the king or sultan who keeps him in confinement."

In a Flemish town, a generation ago, when a young girl died, her body was carried to the church by maidens who



"London Bridge is falling down."

acted as pall-bearers. When the religious ceremony was over and the coffin deposited in the earth, all the young girls, holding in one hand the mortuary cloth, returned to the church chanting a curious refrain called the "Maiden's Dance." This gives an explanation of the possible historic foundation for the burial ceremonies which play an important part in that dismal favorite among song-games, "Miss Jennie O'Jones." The children dance, singing, around the grave, "under the apple-tree" where Miss Jennie, dressed in "white, that's for angels," is laid.

"I dreamt I saw a ghost last night,  
Ghost last night, ghost last night,  
I dreamt I saw a ghost last night,  
Under the apple-tree!"

After which song Miss Jennie O'Jones suddenly arises, when the ring breaks up, the children running shrieking away, and the one caught by the ghost is to next represent Miss Jennie O'Jones. Here is the Flemish "Maiden's Dance:"

"In heaven is a dance;  
Alleluia!  
There dance all the maids;  
Benedicamus Domino,  
Alleluia!"

It is for Amelia;  
Alleluia!  
We dance like the maids;  
Benedicamus Domino,  
Alleluia!"

Far older than Rabelais and Froissart, both of whom mention it, the familiar and pretty round,

"Oats, peas, beans, and barley grows,  
Oats, peas, beans, and barley grows,  
How; you, nor I, nor nobody knows,  
Oats, peas, beans, and barley grows;"

followed by the refrain, sung, with appropriate gestures:

"Thus the farmer sows the seed;  
Stands erect and takes his ease;  
Stamps his foot and claps his hands;  
And turns about to view his lands;"

is not improbably a survival of the rustic songs and dances with which the ancients were wont to implore the blessing of the gods on field and harvest. What more natural, when ignorance of nature's laws made the growth of the crops seem to depend on a god's caprice, when,

"You nor I nor nobody knows  
How oats, peas, beans, and barley grows;"

that such graceful recognition of the divinity's good services should have passed into a religious service, and, ultimately, into a secular game?

"Whistle, daughter, whistle," is a corruption of a fifteenth century round which makes merry at the expense of a nun who is enticed to dance by the offer, first of a sheep, then of a cow, and finally, and successfully, of a man. In the child's game, the daughter, after having

the first two inducements offered her in vain, is told,

"Whistle, daughter, whistle,  
And I'll give you a man!"

and the reply, accompanied by a shrill whistle, is,

"Mother, now I can!"

The pleasing terrors of

"Marlow, Marlow, Marlow bright,  
How many miles to Babylon?"

"Threescore and ten."

"Can I get there by candle light?"

"Yes, and back again—  
But take care that the witch don't catch you!"

have made it a favorite with others besides children. The maids and men of Elizabeth's court, who would certainly appear to have been a jolly set of young people, delighted in it under the name of "Barley Break," which, from the description, must have been played as a kissing-game. A suggestion that, like "London Bridge," it also hinged on the ever-interesting struggle of devils to obtain possession of human souls, is contained in Sidney's "Arcadia." Here the

central space, where, as now played, the "old gray witch" waits to catch the fugitive from one goal to the other, is spoken of as "hell," and the captives in turn become captors of those who run by, "that they, as well as they, Hell may supply."

An old-time round game now but seldom played, which undoubtedly originated from a historical romance of the twelfth century, is "King Arthur was King William's son." It is a kissing game, as suggested by the following portion of the refrain which is sung by the children:

"Down on the carpet you must kneel,  
As the grass grows on the field.  
Salute your bride and kiss her sweet,  
And rise again upon your feet."

This is, necessarily, but little more than a reference to perhaps the best-known, and most generally played, of the hundred or more children's games of ancient and historical origin that were once as familiar as household words almost the world over to young and old alike, but are now but seldom played, and almost utterly unknown to the large majority of children, and have



"Oats, peas, beans, and barley grows."



been forgotten forever by many of their elders.

Some very modern writers on children's games have thought fit to jubilate over the decadence of these old-time plays—speaking of them, doubtless, unthinkingly, as common, rude, silly, and boorish. But there are still left a few old-fashioned people who do not alto-

gether agree on this subject with the very modern writers on children, and who still hold to the belief that childhood, as well as folk-lore, will lose something when nobody goes "round the mulberry-bush," when there is no longer a "rose in the garden for you, young man," and when "London Bridge" has tumbled down once and forever.

*E. Leslie Gilliams.*



"Salute your bride and kiss her sweet."

#### DESERTED.

THE flowers are gone with Autumn's call,  
Lonely the vine yet stays,  
In summer green high on the wall,  
To cheer bleak winter days.

*George Getzendanner.*

*The Petersons' mass Nov 1895*