

The Oie'll Verree in poetry and prose



Culture
VANNIN

The Manx Ilvary¹

by Willian Kennish

From *Mona's Isle* (1844)

When dark December's dismal gloom
Came louring o'er the sky,
And snow-storms gather'd drear around,
And Christmas-feast was nigh,
With all its merry-making time
Of festival and glee,
Beginning with the good old rule,
The Parish *Ilvary*;

When each young rustic with his lass,
Dress'd in their best attire,
Trudged onwards to the Parish Church,
Oft o'er their shoes in mire;
But it was good old Christmas Eve,
At which time of the year
They pass'd each glen and haunted road
Without a spark of fear,

For many a merry-making laugh
Was heard along the moor,
Where meet in groups the neighb'ring swains
Around some cottage door,
Selected by majority
To be the starting post,
Through the good nature of the dame,
And drollery of the host

And daughters smart perchance they had,
Attractive too and fair,
While none seem'd happier than the dame
To see them, pair and pair,
Start off in all the pride of youth,
As she had done before,
On many a merry Christmas Eve,
From the same cottage door.

The parish bell rung merrily,
Indeed as well it might,

¹ The Service performed in the Church on Christmas Eve in the Island.

For through the year, save at that time
It never rung at night.
Group after group now fast arrived
From all the parish round,
While mirth and rural jollity
Did 'mongst the whole abound.

Some came across the mountain's side,
Some many weary miles
O'er hills, and lowland marshy fields,
O'er hedges, gates, and stiles;
But it was good old Christmas Eve,
Which comes but once a year,
Hail, rain, or snow, could not detain
Them from th' llvary cheer.

The lasses with their gowns tuck'd up,
And strongly pinn'd behind,
Were led by lads along the aisle,
Their landlord's seat to find,²
With candles formed in many a branch,³
The pew t' illuminate,
Fused in the *crescit*⁴ by young Peg,
And dipp'd by thrifty Kate.

Along the gallery and nave
Of the old church were seen
Festoons of many a holly-branch,
Relieved with *heben*⁵ green.
When in full light the sacred pile
Of many a year appear'd,
And the selected prayers were read,
The pastor homeward steer'd,

Leaving the delegated clerk
To rule the rustic train,
While each in turn his carol⁶ sang,
Celebrity to gain.
A veteran old, of many years'
Experience in song,

² As but few of the better-thinking sort of the community visited the church on this night, the rustics had free access to each of their landlord's seats.

³ It was customary for the females to manufacture candles formed into branches for this occasion.

⁴ A piece of a broken iron pot, commonly made use of for melting tallow for the purpose of dipping half-peeled rushes in the grease, and so making "rush-lights" of them.

⁵ Ivy

⁶ The custom was for one or two men to stand up at a time, and sing their carols to the audience, after the church service was over; and the church door was kept open until a late hour for that purpose.

Was still the first each Ilvary
Amongst the rustic throng,

To draw the time-worn sheet from out
His leathern breeches' fob,
In creases deep by dint of years,
But plain enough for Rob,
For he had learnt it all by heart,
As the old saying goes,
But to be thought he could not read
In writing, rhyme or prose,

Was a dishonour to his fame,
Such as he could not brook,
Tho' he had never learn'd the use
Of letters or a book;
But, to be candid, perhaps he might,
If educated well,
Have been a Milton, or a Pope,
A Johnson, or Boswell;

But here we had him as he was,
An honest Manxman bred,
With all the marvels yet extant
Well hammer'd in his head;
And with self-consequential air
He'd lean out o'er the pew,
And tune his quav'ring annual note
As if each year 't were new;

While at the end of every verse
The wags around the door
Would loudly cry, with mock applause,
"Well done, Rob-Jack! — encore!"
But he was proof alike to scorn,
And flattery's magic spell,
His own so oft-tried power of song
He knew himself full well,

And that he could his voice command
O'er all their "hems" and "haws,"
Knew where to lay the emphasis
On words, and where to pause;
Yet notwithstanding all his powers,
Few did appreciate
His music or his eloquence,
Saving his old wife, Kate,

Who would, with great pretension too
To St. Cecelia's art,
Chime in to help him through each verse
Towards the latter part.
The next whose customary turn
Was to perform, stood up, —
And being stimulated well
By famed old Nelly's cup, —

Commenced his diatribe against
The cassock and the gown —
Each bishoprick and vicarage
He would that night cry down;⁷
The curate too came 'neath his lash
As did the easy clerk,
Whom he would view with look askance
At every shrewd remark;

For many a home-directed stroke
Was drawn in metaphor,
In this his yearly tilt against
The episcopal lore.
When those two yearly champions
Had finish'd each his song,
The one so fraught with satire keen,
The other dry and long,

The youthful band the moment hail'd
With many a smiling face,
For now the time for shutting up
Was drawing on apace,
Now went each joke, and shrewd remark,
Around from pew to pew,
And maids their stock of parched pease
Amongst the rustics threw:

By custom taught for ages back,
The lasses brought their pease,
In pockets full each Ilvary,
The bachelors to tease,
By taking opportunity
When they were least aware,

⁷ This person, whose farm lay next to the glebe-land of the parsonage, conceiving that the parson had encroached on his forefather's land-mark, or boundary, composed a Christmas carol from that part of the Apocrypha which treats on the priests of Baal, who robbed the Temple each night of the food that was supposed to be devoured by the Idol, and thus he gave vent to his supposed injured feelings each Christmas eve in song.

To throw their pulse artillery
And make the rustics stare.

Now when each chanting candidate
Had done his best to please,⁸
And lasses tired of the sport
Created by the pease,
They'd all agree with one accord
To take the dreary road,
Re-passing through each haunted glen
Ere all reach'd their abode;

But on that merry-making eve
There is no cause to fear
Nor ghosts, nor witches, for 'tis said
They dare not then appear:
Upon each road a half-way house
Was ready to receive
Each courting pair, on their return
From church on Christmas Eve:

A noted one amongst the rest,
The far-famed *Brumish Veg*,⁹
Well stock'd with home-brew'd beverage
Fresh frothing from the keg;
And blithely on that jovial night
Each toast and jest went round,
And with their rustic merriment
Did *Brumish Veg* resound!

The ale was season'd to the taste
In each full foaming pot,
Not with ground ginger mix'd with spice,
But good black-pepper hot;
And junks of wheaten-flour bread,
So seldom used in Man,
After being toasted on the turf,
Would hiss within the can.

Such was the fare at *Brumish Veg*
As flow'd the mirthful tide,
And many a youthful pair, whose home
Was on the mountain's side,
Sat down to quaff the barleycorn's
Most stimulating juice,

⁸ There was considerable rivalry on these occasions, in displaying their vocal abilities.

⁹ A well-known public-house, situate on the banks of the river Corna, in Kirk Maughold.

And in their turn another sort
Of songs would introduce

From those which they had sung at church
An hour or two before,
While they would pass the jug about,
Regardless of the score,
Until each lass, persuasively,
Would hint the way was long
They had to go, which would give rise
Unto the parting song.

The parting verse they sang that night
I well remember yet,
It aye reminds me of those scenes
I never can forget;
Though many years have pass'd away
Since last I heard that strain,
Its tones oft o'er my memory steal,
And bring home back again.¹⁰

After the parting verse was sung,
And *jough yer dorrays*¹¹ drank,
And the large Christmas candle had
Within the socket sank,
They of the host of *Brumish Veg*
Then took a parting leave,
And thus the merry rustics all
Closed that auspicious eve.

Each lad would see his lass safe home
Whose parents would invite
Him in, and sanction his request
To stop with her the night,
While they would go unto their bed
And leave them by themselves,
With a good fire upon the hearth

¹⁰ The "Parting Verse" —

"Te traá goll thie da goll da lhie
Te tarn dys traá ny lhiabbagh,
Ta'en stoyl ta foin grainagh shin roin
Te'er signal dooin da gleasagh."

Which may be rendered thus —

Now we'll to our homes, lads,
'Tis time to go to bed;
Each rocking-stool a warning gives —
The fire's flame hath fled!

¹¹ The stirrup-cup.

And plenty on the shelves.

Thus they would pass the happy night,
Still daring not to stride
O'er Hymen's bound'ry, or attempt
What virtue has denied,
Observing the old adage still
Which they were wont to say, —
"To keep the feast strictly preserved
Until the festal day."

The Deemster

by Hall Caine

Chapter VII, *Danny, The Madcap* (1887)

It was an old Manx custom that on Christmas Eve the church should be given up to the people for the singing of their native carols or carvals. The curious service was known as Oiel Verree (the eve of Mary), and at every such service for the last twenty years Hommy-beg, the gardener, and Mr. James Quirk, the schoolmaster, had officiated as singers in the strange Manx ritual. Great had hitherto been the rivalry between these musical celebrities, but word had gone round the town that at length their efforts were to be combined in a carol which they were to sing together. Dan had effected this extraordinary combination of talent by a plot which was expected to add largely to the amusement of the listeners.

Hommy-beg could not read a syllable, yet he never would sing his carol without having the printed copy of it in his hand. Of course, Mr. Quirk, the schoolmaster, could read, but, as we have seen, he resembled Hommy-beg in being almost stone-deaf. Each could hear himself sing, but neither could hear another.

And now for the plot. Master Dan called on the gardener at his cottage on the Brew on the morning of the day before Christmas day, and "Hommy," said he, "it's morthal strange the way a man of your common sense can't see that you'd wallop that squeaking ould Jemmy Quirk in a jiffy if you'd only consent to sing a ballad along of him. Bless me, man alive, it's then they'd be seeing what a weak, ould cracked pot of a voice is at him."

Hommy-beg's face began to wear a smile of benevolent condescension. Observing his advantage, the young rascal continued, "Do it at the Oiel Verree to-night, Hommy. He'll sing his treble, and you'll sing seconds to him."

It was an unlucky remark. The gardener frowned austerely. "Me sing seconds to the craythur? No; never!"

Dan explained to Hommy-beg, with a world of abject apologies, that there was a sense in which seconds meant firsts, and at length the gardener was mollified, and consented to the proposal; but one idea was firmly rooted in his mind-namely, that if he was to sing a carol with the schoolmaster, he must take the best of care to sing his loudest, in order to drown at once the voice of his rival, and the bare notion that it was he who was singing seconds to such a poor creature as that.

Then Master Danny trotted off to the school-house, where he was now no longer a scholar, and consequently enjoyed an old boy's privilege of approaching the master on equal terms, and "Jemmy," he said, "it's morthal strange the way a man of your common sense can't see that you'd wallop that squeaking old Hommy-beg in a jiffy if you'd only consent to sing a ballad along of him. Do it at the Oiel Verree to-night, Jemmy, and bless me! that's the time they'll be seeing what a weak, ould crackpot of a voice is at the craythur."

The schoolmaster fell even an easier prey to the plot than the gardener had been. A carol was selected; it was to be the ancient Manx carol on the bad women mentioned in the Bible as having (from Eve downward) brought evil on mankind.

Now, Hommy-beg kept his carols pinned against the walls of his cottage. The "Bad Women" was the carol which was pinned above the mantelpiece just under the pendulum of the clock with the facetious face. It resembled the other prints in being worn, crumpled, and dirty; but Hommy-beg knew it by its position, and he could distinguish every other carol by its place on his walls.

Danny had somehow got a "skute" into this literary mystery, and after arranging with the schoolmaster the carol that was to be sung, he watched Hommy-beg out of his cottage, and then went into it under pretence of a friendly call upon blind Kerry. Before he left the cottage he had taken down the carol that had been pinned above the mantelpiece and fixed up another in place of it from the opposite side of the room. The substituted carol happened, oddly enough, to be a second copy of the carol on "Bad Women," with this radical difference: the copy taken from under the clock was the version of the carol in English, and the copy put up was the version in Manx. Towards ten o'clock that night the church bells began to ring, and Hommy-beg looked at the clock, took the carol from under the pendulum, put on his best petticoat, and went off to church.

Now, there were to be seasonable rejoicings at the Court on the morrow, and Kerry had gone over to help at the Christmas preparations. Ewan and Mona had always spent their Christmas at Bishop's Court since the day when they left it as children. That night they had arrived as usual, and after they had spent some hours with Danny in dressing the house in a green and red garment of hibbin and hollin, the Bishop had turned them off to bed. Danny's bedroom was the little crib over the library, and Ewan's was the room over that. All three bade the Bishop good night and went into their rooms. But Danny did not go to bed; he listened until he heard the Bishop in the library twisting his chair and stirring the peats, and then he whipped off his boots and crept upstairs to Ewan's room. There in bated breath he told of the great sport that was to come off at the Oiel Verree, announced his intention of going, and urged Ewan to go with him. They could just jump through the little window of his room and light on the soft grass by the library wall, and get in again by the same easy means. No one would know that they had been out, and what high jinks they must have! But no, Ewan was not to be persuaded, and Danny set off alone.

Hommy-beg did not reach the church until the parson's sermon was almost over. Prayers had been said in a thin congregation, but no sooner were they done than crowds of young men and maidens trooped down the aisles. The young women went up into the gallery, and from that elevation they shot down at their bachelor friends large handfuls of peas. To what ancient spirit of usage, beyond the ancient spirit of mischief, the strange practice was due, we must be content to leave, as a solemn problem, to the learned and curious antiquaries. Nearly everybody carried a candle, and the candles of the young women were adorned with a red ribbon or rosette.

In passing out of the church the parson came face to face with Hommy-beg, who was pushing his way up the aisle. The expression on his face was not at the moment one of peculiar grace, and he stopped the gardener and said sharply in his ear, "Mind you see that all is done in decency and order, and that you close my church before midnight."

"Aw, but the church is the people's, I'm thinkin'," said Hommy-beg, with a shake of his tousled head.

"The people are as ignorant as goats," said the parson angrily.

"Aw, well, and you're their shepherd, so just make sheeps of them," said Hommy-beg, and he pushed on.

Danny was there by this time, and, with a face of mighty solemnity, he sat on the right of Hommy-beg, and held a candle in his left hand. When everything was understood to be ready, and Will-as-Thom, the clerk, had taken his station inside the communion-rail, the business of the Oiel Verree began. First one man got up and sang a carol in English; then another sang a Manx carol. But the great event of the night was to be the carol sung by the sworn enemies and rivals, Hommy-beg and Mr. James Quirk.

At last the time came for these worthies. They rose from opposite sides of the church, eyed each other with severe looks, stepped out of their pews and walked down the aisle to the door of the porch. Then they turned about in silence, and, standing side by side, faced the communion.

The tittering in the gallery and whispering in the body were audible to all except the persons who were the cause of both. "Hush, hush, man alive, that's him, that's him." "Bless me, look at Hommy-beg and the petticoat, and the handkercher pinnin' round his throat."

"Aw, dear, it's what he's used of." "A regular Punch and Judy."

Danny was exerting himself at that moment to keep order and silence. "Hush, man, let them make a start for all."

The carol the rivals were about to sing contained some thirty verses. It was an ancient usage that after each verse the carol-singers should take a long stride towards the communion. By the time the carol of "Bad Women" came to an end the carol-singers must, therefore, be at the opposite end of the church.

There was now a sublime scorn printed on the features of Mr. Quirk. As for Hommy-beg, he looked, at this last instant, like a man who was rather sorry than otherwise for his rash adversary.

"The ertainic they're looking," whispered a girl in the gallery to the giggling companion beside her.

Expectation was at its highest when Hommy-beg thrust his hand into his pocket and brought out the printed copy of the carol. Hommy unfolded it, glanced at it with the air of a conductor taking a final look at his score, nodded his head at it as if in approval, and then, with a magnanimous gesture, held it between himself and Mr. Quirk. The schoolmaster in turn

glanced at it, glanced again, glanced a third time at the paper, and up into the face of Hommy-beg.

Anxiety was now on tiptoe. "Hush, d'ye hear, hush," whispered Danny from his pew; "hush, man, or it's spoiling it all you'll be, for sure."

At the moment when Mr. Quirk glanced into the face of Hommy-beg there was a smile on that countenance. Mr. Quirk mistook that smile. He imagined he saw a trick. The schoolmaster could read, and he perceived that the carol which the gardener held out to him was not the carol for which he had been told by Master Danny to prepare. They were, by arrangement, to have sung the English version of "Bad Women." This was the Manx version, and though the metre was the same, it was always sung to a different tune. Ah! Mr. Quirk understood it all! The monster wanted to show that he, James Quirk, schoolmaster, could only sing one carol; but, as sure as his name was Jemmy, he would be equal with him! He could sing this Manx version, and he would. It was now Mr. Quirk's turn to smile.

"Aw, look at them – the two of them grinnin' together like a pair of old gurgoils on the steeple!"

At a motion of the gardener's hand, intended to beat the time, the singers began. Hommy-beg sang the carol agreed upon – the English version of "Bad Women." Mr. Quirk sang the carol they held in their hands – the Manx version of "Bad Women." Neither heard the other, and to dispel the bare notion that either was singing seconds, each bawled at the utmost reach of his lung power. To one tune Hommy-beg sang –

"Thus from the days of Adam Her mischief you may trace." And to another Mr. Quirk sang – "She ish va'n voir ain ooilley Son v'ee da Adam hen."

Such laughter! How the young women in the gallery lay back in their seats with hysterical shrieks! How the young fellows in the body made the sacred edifice ring with guffaws! But the singers, with eyes steadfastly fixed on the paper, heard nothing but each his own voice.

Three verses had been sung, and three strides made towards the communion, when suddenly the laughter and shouting of the people ceased. All eyes had turned towards the porch. There the Bishop stood, with blank amazement printed on his face, his head bare, and one hand on the half-opened door.

If a spectre had appeared the consternation had scarcely been greater. Danny had been rolling in his pew with unconstrained laughter, but at the sight of the Bishop his candle fell from his hand and sputtered on the book-rail. The Bishop turned about, and before the people had recovered from their surprise he was gone. At the next moment everybody got up without a word and left the church. In two minutes more not a soul remained except Hommy-beg and Mr. Jemmy Quirk, who, with eyes riveted on the printed carol in their hands, still sang lustily, oblivious of the fact that they had no audience.

The Little Manx Nation

by Hall Caine

Manx Carols (1891)

[...] The carols, called Carvals in Manx, serve in Man, as in other countries, the purpose of celebrating the birth of Jesus, but we have one ancient custom attached to them which we can certainly claim for our own, so Manx is it, so quaint, so grimly serious, and withal so howlingly ludicrous. It is called the service of Oiel Verree, probably a corruption of Feaill Vorrey, literally the Feast of Mary, and it is held in the parish church near to midnight on Christmas Eve. Scott describes it in "Peveril of the Peak," but without personal knowledge.

Services are still held in many churches on Christmas Eve; and I think they are called Oiel Verree, but the true Oiel Verree, the real, pure, savage, ridiculous, sacrilegious old Oiel Verree, is gone. I myself just came in time for it; I saw the last of it, nevertheless I saw it at its prime, for I saw it when it was so strong that it could not live any longer. Let me tell you what it was.

The story carries me back to early boyish years, when, from the lonely school-house on the bleak top of Maughold Head, I was taken in secret, one Christmas Eve, between nine and ten o'clock, to the old church of Kirk Maughold, a parish which longer than any other upheld the rougher traditions. My companion was what is called an original. His name was Billy Corkill. We were great chums. I would be thirteen, he was about sixty. Billy lived alone in a little cottage on the highroad, and worked in the fields. He had only one coat all the years I knew him. It seemed to have been blue to begin with, but when it had got torn Billy had patched it with anything that was handy, from green cloth to red flannel. He called it his Joseph's coat of many colours. Billy was a poet and a musical composer. He could not read a word, but he would rather have died than confess his ignorance. He kept books and newspapers always about him, and when he read out of them, he usually held them upside down. If anyone remarked on that, he said he could read them any way up — that was where his scholarship came in. Billy was a great carol singer. He did not know a note, but he never sang except from music. His tunes were wild harmonies that no human ear ever heard before. It will be clear to you that old Billy was a man of genius.

Such was my comrade on that Christmas Eve long ago. It had been a bitter winter in the Isle of Man, and the ground was covered with snow. But the church bells rang merrily over the dark moorland, for Oiel Verree was peculiarly the people's service, and the ringers were ringing in the one service of the year at which the parishioners supplanted the Vicar, and appropriated the old parish church. In spite of the weather, the church was crowded with a motley throng, chiefly of young folks, the young men being in the nave, and the girls (if I remember rightly) in the little loft at the west end. Most of the men carried tallow dips, tied about with bits of ribbon in the shape of rosettes, duly lighted, and guttering grease at intervals on to the book-ledge or the tawny fingers of them that held them. It appeared that there had been an ordinary service before we arrived, and the Vicar was still within the rails of the communion. From there he addressed some parting words of solemn warning to the noisy throng of candle-carriers. As

nearly as I can remember, the address was this: "My good people, you are about to celebrate an old custom. For my part, I have no sympathy with such customs, but since the hearts of my parishioners seem to be set on this one, I have no wish to suppress it. But tumultuous and disgraceful scenes have occurred on similar occasions in previous years, and I beg you to remember that you are in God's house," &c. &c. The grave injunction was listened to in silence, and when it ended, the Vicar, a worthy but not very popular man, walked towards the vestry. To do so, he passed the pew where I sat under the left arm of my companion, and he stopped before him, for Billy had long been a notorious transgressor at Oiel Verree.

"See that you do not disgrace my church tonight," said the Vicar. But Billy had a biting tongue.

"Aw, well," said he, "I'm thinking the church is the people's."

"The people are as ignorant as goats," said the Vicar.

"Aw, then," said Billy, "you are the shepherd, so just make sheeps of them."

At that the Vicar gave us the light of his countenance no more. The last glimpse of his robe going through the vestry door was the signal for a buzz of low gossip, and straightway the business of Oiel Verree began.

It must have been now approaching eleven o'clock, and two old greybeards with tousled heads placed themselves abreast at the door of the west porch. There they struck up a carol in a somewhat lofty key. It was a most doleful ditty. Certainly I have never since heard the like of it. I remember that it told the story of the Crucifixion in startling language, full of realism that must have been horribly ghastly, if it had not been so comic. At the end of each verse the singers made one stride towards the communion. There were some thirty verses, and every mortal verse did these zealous carollers give us. They came to an end at length, and then another old fellow rose in his pew and sang a ditty in Manx. It told of the loss of the herring-fleet in Douglas Bay in the last century. After that there was yet another and another carol — some that might be called sacred, others that would not be badly wronged with the name of profane. As I recall them now, they were full of a burning earnestness, and pictured the dangers of the sinner and the punishment of the damned. They said nothing about the joys of heaven, or the pleasures of life. Wherever these old songs came from they must have dated from some period of religious revival. The Manxman may have appropriated them, but if he did so he was in a deadly earnest mood. It must have been like stealing a hat-band.

My comrade had been silent all this time, but in response to various winks, nods, and nudges, he rose to his feet. Now, in prospect of Oiel Verree I had written the old man a brand new carol. It was a mighty achievement in the sentimental vein. I can remember only one of its couplets

Hold your souls in still communion,
Blend them in a holy union.

I am not very sure what this may mean, and Billy must have been in the same uncertainty. Shall I ever forget what happened? Billy standing in the pew with my paper in his hand the wrong way up. Myself by his side holding a candle to him. Then he began to sing. It was an awful tune

— I think he called it sevens — but he made common-sense of my doggerel by one alarming emendation. When he came to the couplet I have given you, what do you think he sang

“Hold your souls in still communion,
Blend them in — a hollow onion!”

Billy must have been a humorist. He is long dead, poor old Billy. God rest him!

Oie'll Voirrey

by Cushag (Josephine Kermode)

From *Poems by Cushag* (1907)

D'you min' them oul' Oie'll Voirreys with the hollan all in berries
An' the carvels goin' a singin' on the night?
An' Tommy Danny Quilliam an' quare oul' Juan Illiam
With cannles in their fisses for the light?

An' marchin' up the aisle, singin' sollum all the while
With all the parish listenin' to them there?
An' Pazan smilin' cheerful, but watchin' very keerful,
To keep the wans reminded where they were?

There was teens of cannles blazin' an' all the people gazin',
With Pazon's wans so studdy in the pew.
An' Church all titivated an' tasty decorated,
An' tossed up middlin' stylish at them too.

An' Billy Boyde the Bithig an' Johnny Bob the Kithag,
Them wans was good thremendjus for the chune.
Pretendin' at a loss, jus' to give the choir a toss,
But sthrampin' to be at it very soon.

Wan time that I was workin' away at Cooil-ny-Eairkan,
Gettin' holly with the res' for the day;
So beat I was with slumber, an' carvels such a number,
That down upon the flure I slipped, an' lay.

When I wakened by an' by, the moon was in the sky,
An' all had gone an' lef me on the flure!
The freckened urrov massy! I swealed like any lassie,
Nor dursn't move an inch to rache the dhure!

For everywhere behoul' ye, black shaddas were aroun' me,
Till I was jus' gone fainted with the fear,
An' thru as I am talkin' I saw them shaddas walkin'
Like keepin' time with chunes I couldn't hear.

Though bein' Christmas mornin', or near enough the dawnin',
I might have knew they couldn't harm at all.

For isn't that night Holy, that brought the babe so lowly,
The very bases doin' obedience in their stall?

But there I lay the freckened! Till one big shadda beckened,
Aw, then I cleant like lightning urrov that!
An' comin' up the aisle, was Pazon, with a smile —
“Dear me,” said he, “I had forgot me hat.”

The Master of Man

by Hall Caine

Third Book: *The Consequence*, Chapter 19 (1921)

Christmas had come. It was Christmas Eve. The Manx people call it Oie'l Verry (the Eve of Mary), and during the last hour before midnight they take possession of their parish churches, over the heads of their clergy, for the singing of their ancient Manx carvals (carols). The old Miss Browns were to keep Oie'l Verry at their church in Castletown. They had always done so, and this time Bessie was to go with them.

It was a clear cold winter's night with crisp snow underfoot, and overhead a world of piercing stars.

As the two old maids in their long black boas, and Bessie in a fur-lined coat which Gell had sent as a Christmas present, crossed the foot-bridge over the harbour and walked under the blind walls of the dark castle, the great clock in the square tower was striking eleven. But it was bright enough in the market place, with the light from the church windows on the white ground, and people hurrying to church at a quick trot and stamping the snow off their boots at the door.

It was brighter still inside, for the altar and pulpit had been decorated with ivy and holly, and, though the church was lit by gas, most of the worshippers, according to ancient custom, had brought candles also.

The church was very full, but the old Miss Browns, with Bessie behind them, walked up the aisle to the pew under the reading-desk which they had always rented. The congregation about them was a strangely mixed one, and the atmosphere was half solemn and half hilarious.

The gallery was occupied by farm lads and fisher-lads chiefly, and they were craning their necks to catch glimpses of the girls in the pews below, while the girls themselves (as often as they could do so without being observed by their elders) were glancing up with gleaming eyes. In the body of the church there were middle-aged folks with soberer faces, and in the front seats sat old people, with slower and duller eyes and cheeks scored deep with wrinkles the mysterious hieroglyphics of life's troubled story, sickness and death, husbands lost at half-tide and children gone before them.

An opening hymn had just been sung, the last notes of the organ were dying down, the clergyman, in his surplice, was sitting by the Bide of the altar, and the first of the carol singers had risen in his pew, candle in hand, to sing his carval.

He was a rugged old man from the mountains of Rushen, half landsman and half seaman, and Ms carol (which he sang in the Manx, while the tallow guttered down on his discoloured fingers) was a catalogue of all the bad women mentioned in the Bible, from Eve, the mother of mankind, who brought evil into the world, to "that graceless wench, Salome."

After that came similar carols, sung by similar carol-singers and received by the boys in the gallery with gusts of laughter which the Clerk tried in vain to suppress. But at last there came a carval sung in chorus by twelve young girls with sweet young voices and faces that were chaste and pure and full of joy all carrying their candles as they walked slowly up the aisle from the western end of the church to the altar steps.

Their carol was an account of the Nativity, scarcely less crude than the carols that had gone before it, though the singers seemed to know nothing of that how Joseph, being a just man, had espoused a virgin, and finding she was with child before he married her, he had wished to put her away, but the angel of the Lord had appeared to him and told him not to, and how at last he had carried his wife and child away into the land of Egypt, out of reach of the wrath of Herod the King, who was trying to disgrace and destroy them.

A little before midnight the clergyman rose and asked for silence. And then, while all heads were bowed and there was a solemn hush within, the great clock of the Castle struck twelve in the darkness outside. After that the organ pealed out "Hark, the herald angels sing," and everybody who had a candle extinguished it, and all stood up and sang.

The bells were ringing joyfully as the congregation trooped out of the church, but for some while longer they moved about on the crinkling snow in front of it, saluting and shaking hands, everybody with everybody.

"A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to you."

"Same to you, and many of them."

They saluted and shook hands with Bessie also.

Then the Verger put out the lights in the church behind them, and in the sudden darkness the crowd broke up, one more Oie'l Verry over, and under the slow descent of the starlight the cheerful voices and crinkling footsteps went their various ways home.



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