

Riddles Wisely Expounded

CHILD NO. 1

THE first hint of an air for this ballad comes with the Restoration broadsides, which are directed to be sung to the tune of "Lay the bent to the bonny broom." There is no equally early copy of the tune itself, but we may suppose that it appears in D'Urfey in a form substantially unchanged. The words of the refrain, however, from which the tune gets its name, appear better suited to a ballad of pastoral character, and may probably have been borrowed, along with the melody, from some earlier song. Their "fa la" fashion seems late Elizabethan.

Doubtless also the suggestion, in the broadside text, of rival daughters is taken over from a context where it was once of some use: it will be noted that they are absent from the fifteenth-century text (Child's A*), and that they tend to drop out in later tradition. The knight was not originally of the marrying kind, and sounder tradition makes him out a fiend—even Clootie himself—to be checkmated, rather than confirmed in his election, by the maid's ability to guess his riddles. It is noteworthy that even A*, early as it is, is already confused, in that the fiend first offers the maid all the wisdom of the world if she will be his leman, and abruptly passes to riddles with the threat that she must answer them or belong to him. The contradiction demonstrates a still earlier life for the ballad, and arises from homiletic rehandling, out of memories of Christ's temptation. Yet, though inappropriately, the element is thus early introduced of amorous appeal, which was later to refashion the plot as in the broadsides. (Cf. also P. Barry's article in *BFSSE*, No. 10 [1935], pp. 8-10.) The earliest text unfortunately lacks a refrain, but it is in rhyming couplets which would admit, and generally do admit, of an interlaced refrain, and so of a four-phrased tune.

D'Urfey's tune, with its hint of Dorian modality, its narrow compass, and its almost complete avoidance of intervals wider than a single step of the scale, suggests an antiquity far higher than that of the accompanying verbal text. Its habit is even earlier than that of "The Three Ravens" (26), one of the first ballad-tunes to be recorded: but atavism is a common phenomenon in folk-music, and one cannot determine the age of an individual by fixing the era when his ancestors flourished. We can assert, however, that the tune is rooted in a common idiom with Gregorian Chant. And if specific parallels be demanded, they can be found in so familiar an example as the *Benedictus qui venit* from the *Sanctus* of the mass *Orbis Factor* (eleventh century). Note-for-note comparison is revealing:

Be - ne - dic - tus qui ve - nit
There was a lady from the north country

The image shows a musical score for the beginning of the Benedictus qui venit. It consists of four staves. The first two staves are for the Latin text: 'Be - ne - dic - tus qui ve - nit'. The second and fourth staves are for the English translation: 'There was a lady from the north country'. The music is written in a single melodic line on a treble clef staff, with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a common time signature (C). The melody is simple and rhythmic, consisting of eighth and quarter notes.

Or we may compare the *Agnus Dei* from the mass *Kyrie Magnae Deus Potentiae*; or, again, the ad libitum *Kyrie Salve*,

with cadences not greatly dissimilar to the more famous ones of the *Dies Irae*. (Cf. also *Western Folklore*, XI, pp. 236-38.)

After D'Urfey, tunes for the ballad appear in the record about once every half-century up to the present time, from scattered localities in England—Northumbria to Cornwall—and from the Appalachian region. Between all the English tunes it is possible to make out a tenuous thread of connection, but this appears to be broken in the Appalachian tradition.

Received from tradition, Miss Mason's Northumbrian tune (1878) in its first two phrases is a major form of the D'Urfey tune with altered rhythm. The second part of the refrain is related, both in words and notes, to a version of the ballad used by John O'Keefe and William Shield in their ballad-opera, *The Highland Reel*, printed c. 1790, oblong quarto, p. 14. Since the tune was here employed dialogue-wise, with text newly composed, little reliance can be placed on its conforming to tradition; but the refrain, with cadential resemblances to Mason, is "Twang Lango Tillo Lang Twango dillo day." It is a major tune, in $\frac{3}{4}$ time, and has no convincing relation to D'Urfey. It seems less likely that this rewritten piece, with words belonging to the opera and not to the ballad, should have contributed its refrain to tradition than that it should have preserved a piece of earlier tradition in the refrain. The soundness of the Mason variant is thus confirmed and carried well back into the preceding century. But the "dillo, dee" refrain is itself probably not much older than that era, when this style was much affected.

The Gilbert tune (1823), rhythmically, and melodically in its first and third phrases, is related to the Mason tune. But, in spite of its earlier date, it would appear to be more abraded by tradition, both because the second phrase has been attracted to the first, and because of the conventional ending.

Verbally, it derives from the broadside text through tradition, or from the tradition upon which that text was modeled; but substitutes a refrain with a different plant motif. Lucy Broadwood has argued interestingly that such "plant-burdens" are especially proper to riddling-ballads like the present, where they may be "the survival of an incantation used against the demon-suitor." (Cf. *JEFSS*, III, p. 14.) The bent and the broom are said to be potent against witchcraft; and juniper, gentle (i.e., hawthorne), and rosemary are similarly endowed with beneficent powers. But this style in ballad-refrains is not often favored before the beginning of the nineteenth century.

It would be very difficult to make out a connection between the Virginia tune and the foregoing airs. Up to this point, however, the melodic tradition for this ballad, so far as the scanty record reveals it, has been remarkably single-tracked for the span of time which it covers. If the tune was dropped overboard when the ballad came west, we might reasonably surmise that the ballad was transported on paper, rather than in the head, for the Bell Robertsons who remember only the words are black swans in balladry. It is possible, however, that the Davis tune represents an unrecorded, but genuine, tradition, for which the refrain may provide a clue. The connection of the ballad-text and refrain is not at all clear. The new air is of stuff familiar in the Appalachians, and perhaps the song was inundated by a more vigorous melodic tradition, such as that of "Barbara Allan" (84) or "Geordie" (209), both of which often

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begin similarly and have the characteristic feminine upward swing at the middle and final cadence. Such a case is doubtless of frequent occurrence, and probably one of the chief ways in which ballads acquire a new melodic direction. Nowhere today is the present ballad known to be strongly rooted.

There remains to be noticed the oddity found by Barry in Maine, in 1936, and printed in *BFSSNE*, No. 10 (1935), p. 8,

and No. 12 (1937), p. 8. The text of this version, as Barry demonstrates, is a traditional variant of Aytoun's translation of Herder's free translation into German of the D'Urfey text above. It is difficult to perceive in the tune anything more than an anomaly resulting from imperfect recollection or faulty rendition—*pace* the *rubato-parlando* habit of the singer.

LIST OF VARIANTS

GROUP A

1. "A Riddle Wittily Expounded." Thomas D'Urfey, *Wit and Mirth; or, Pills to Purge Melancholy*, 1719-20, IV, pp. 129-32.
- a. "Lay the bent to the bonny broom." William Chappell, *Popular Music of the Olden Time*, II [1859], p. 531. (Probably D'Urfey edited by Chappell.)
- b. "Lay the bent to the bonny broom." J. Collingwood Bruce and John Stokoe, *Northumbrian Minstrelsy*, 1882, pp. 76-78. ("The melody is from D'Urfey's words" . . . but not identical with the copy above.)
2. (Dialogue, words by O'Keefe) J. O'Keefe and William Shield, *The Highland Reel*, oblong quarto, engraved by Longman and Broderip, n.d. [c. 1790], p. 14.
3. "There was a Lady in the West." M. H. Mason, *Nursery Rhymes and Country Songs*, 1878, (reprinted 1908), p. 31. Also in Lucy E. Broadwood and J. A. Fuller Maitland, *English County Songs*, [1893], pp. 6-7.
4. "The Three Sisters." Davies Gilbert, *Some Ancient Christmas Carols*, 1823, pp. 65-67. Also in Francis James Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 1882-98, I, p.

4(B); and Sir Richard Terry, *Gilbert and Sandys' Christmas Carols*, 1931, p. xix.

GROUP B

5. "The Devil's Nine Questions." Arthur Kyle Davis, Jr., *Traditional Ballads of Virginia*, 1929, pp. 549 and 59-60.
- c. "The Devil's Questions." Richard Chase, *Songs of All Time*, 1946, p. 11. Also in Evelyn Kendrick Wells, *The Ballad Tree*, 1950, p. 169.
6. "The Devil's Nine Questions." Alan and Elizabeth Lomax, LC Archive of American Folk Song, Album I, rec. 4A1. (Mrs. Texas Gladden.)
- d. "The Devil's Ten Questions." John Jacob Niles, *Ballads, Carols, and Tragic Legends from the Southern Appalachian Mountains*, Schirmer's American Folk-Song Series, Set 18, 1937, pp. 2-3.

APPENDIX

7. "The Three Riddles." Phillips Barry and S. P. Bayard, *BFSSNE*, No. 10 (1935), p. 8, and No. 12 (1937), p. 8.

TUNES WITH TEXTS

GROUP A

1. [A Riddle Wittily Expounded]

D'Urfey, 1719-20, IV, pp. 129-32 (emended).

a D if e[♯] (but - VII)



D'Urfey prints the tune in C time throughout; Chappell, in his revision of it (II [1859], p. 531), regularizes in $\frac{3}{4}$, giving two beats to the last note of the first and third phrases, and changing the signature to G minor. Bruce and Stokoe (1882, pp. 76-78) profess to print from D'Urfey, but again in two flats, regularizing the timing in $\frac{3}{4}$, and with four alterations in notes: D for initial A, e raised to f in the third bar, the third d in the same bar lowered to c, and the first A in the penultimate bar raised to c.

1. There was a Lady in the North-Country,
Lay the Bent to the Bonny Broom,
And she had lovely Daughters three,
Fa, la la la, fa, la la ra re.
2. There was a Knight of Noble worth,
Lay the Bent, &c.
Which also lived in the North,
Fa, la, &c.

3. The Knight of Courage stout and brave,
Lay the Bent, &c.
A Wife he did desire to have,
Fa la, &c.
4. He knocked at the Lady's Gate,
Lay the Bent, &c.
One Evening when it was late,
Fa la, &c.
5. The youngest Sister let him in,
Lay the Bent, &c.
And pinn'd the Door with a Silver Pin,
Fa la, &c.
6. The second Sister she made his Bed,
Lay the Bent, &c.
And laid soft Pillows under his Head,
Fa la, &c.
7. The Youngest [Sister] that same Night,
Lay the Bent, &c.
She went to Bed to this young Knight,
Fa la, &c.
8. And in the Morning when it was Day,
Lay the Bent, &c.
These words unto him she did say,
Fa la, &c.

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9. Now you have had your will (quoth she)
Lay the Bent, &c.
 I pray Sir Knight you Marry me,
Fa la, &c.
10. The young brave Knight to her reply'd,
Lay the Bent, &c.
 Thy Suit, Fair Maid shall not be deny'd,
Fa la, &c.
11. If thou can'st answer me Questions three,
Lay the Bent, &c.
 This very Day I will Marry thee,
Fa la, &c.
12. Kind Sir, in Love, O then quoth she,
Lay the Bent, &c.
 Tell me what your three Questions be,
Fa la, &c.
13. O what is longer than the Way?
Lay the Bent, &c.
 Or what is deeper than the Sea?
Fa la, &c.
14. Or what is louder than a Horn?
Lay the Bent, &c.
 Or what is sharper than a Thorn?
Fa la, &c.
15. Or what is greener than the Grass?
Lay the Bent, &c.
 Or what is worse than a Woman was?
Fa la, &c.

The Damsel's Answer to the Three Questions

16. O Love is longer than the way,
Lay the Bent, &c.
 And Hell is deeper than the Sea,
Fa la, &c.
17. And Thunder's louder than the Horn,
Lay the Bent, &c.
 And Hunger's sharper than a Thorn,
Fa la, &c.
18. And Poyson's greener than the Grass,
Lay the Bent, &c.
 And the Devil's worse than the Woman was,
Fa la, &c.
19. When she these Questions answered had,
Lay the Bent, &c.
 The Knight became exceeding glad,
Fa la, &c.
20. And having truly try'd her Wit,
Lay the Bent, &c.
 He much commended her for it,
Fa la, &c.
21. And after as 'tis verifi'd,
Lay the Bent, &c.
 He made of her his lovely Bride,
Fa la, &c.

22. So now fair Maidens all adieu,
Lay the Bent, &c.
 This Song I dedicate to you,
Fa la, &c.
23. I wish that you may Constant prove,
Lay the Bent to the bonny Broom,
 Unto the Man that you do love,
Fa, la la la, fa, la la ra re.

2. [Dialogue, words by O'Keefe]

O'Keefe and Shield, *The Highland Reel*, n.d., p. 14. The play was produced in 1788, and the book was engraved by Longman and Broderip soon afterward.

p I



Twang Lang - o Til - lo Lang Twang-o dil lo day

This tune is admitted, partly on internal evidence, and partly by reason of its being identified as 'Lay the bent to the bonny broom' by Thomas Dibdin, who may have received the information from Shield or O'Keefe. Cf. Chappell, *Popular Music*, II [1859], p. 531. The last phrase carries the traditional refrain.

3. "There was a Lady in the West"

Mason, 1878, p. 31. Also in Broadwood and Maitland, 1893, pp. 6-7. Sung in Northumberland.

p I (but inflected IV)



Reprinted again in the 1908 ed. of Mason, where Miss Mason adds that the song was traditional in her mother's family, the Mitfords, of Mitford, Northumberland. As said above, the D'Urfey tune can be discerned behind the first half of this one.

1. There was a lady in the West,
 Lay the bank with the bonny broom,
 She had three daughters of the best,
 Fa lang the dillo,
 Fa lang the dillo, dillo, dee.
2. There came a stranger to the gate,
 Lay the bank with the bonny broom,
 And he three days and nights did wait,
 Fa lang the dillo,
 Fa lang the dillo, dillo, dee.

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3. The eldest daughter did ope the door,
Lay the bank, &c.
The second set him on the floor.
Fa lang, &c.

4. The third daughter she brought a chair,
Lay the bank, &c.
And placed it that he might sit there,
Fa lang, &c.

(To first daughter)

5. "Now answer me these questions three,"
Lay the bank, &c.
"Or you shall surely go with me."
Fa lang, &c.

(To second daughter)

6. "Now answer me these questions six,"
Lay the bank, &c.,
"Or you shall surely be Old Nick's."
Fa lang, &c.

(To all three)

7. "Now answer me these questions nine,"
Lay the bank, &c.,
"Or you shall surely all be mine."
Fa lang, &c.

8. "What is greener than the grass?"
Lay the bank, &c.
"What is smoother than crystal glass?"
Fa lang, &c.

9. "What is louder than a horn?"
Lay the bank, &c.
"What is sharper than a thorn?"
Fa lang, &c.

10. "What is brighter than the light?"
Lay the bank, &c.
"What is darker than the night?"
Fa lang, &c.

11. "What is keener than an axe?"
Lay the bank, &c.
"What is softer than melting wax?"
Fa lang, &c.

12. "What is rounder than a ring?"
Lay the bank, &c.
"To you we thus our answers bring."
Fa lang, &c.

13. "Envy is greener than the grass,"
Lay the bank, &c.,
"Flattery, smoother than crystal glass."
Fa lang, &c.

14. "Rumour is louder than a horn,"
Lay the bank, &c.
"Hunger is sharper than a thorn."
Fa lang, &c.

15. "Truth is brighter than the light,"
Lay the bank, &c.
"Falsehood is darker than the night."
Fa lang, &c.

16. "Revenge is keener than an axe,"
Lay the bank, &c.
"Love is softer than melting wax."
Fa lang, &c.

17. "The world is rounder than a ring,"
Lay the bank, &c.
"To you we thus our answers bring."
Fa lang, &c.

18. "Thus you have our answers nine,"
Lay the bank, &c.
"And we never shall be thine."
Fa lang, &c.

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4. [The Three Sisters]

Gilbert, 1823, pp. 65-67. From editor's recollection; Cornish tradition.

Also in Child, 1882-98, I, p. 4(B).

p I



The tune and first stanza are reproduced in facsimile in Sir Richard Terry, *Gilbert and Sandy's Christmas Carols*, 1931, p. xix. It may be observed that the first refrain-line appears under the notes as "Juniper Gentle and Rosemary," not as given in the text below.

1. There were three Sisters fair and bright,
Jennifer gentle and Rosemaree,
And they three loved one valiant Knight,
As the dew flies over the Mulberry tree.
2. The eldest Sister let him in,
Jennifer gentle and Rosemaree,
And barred the door with a silver pin,
As the dew flies over the Mulberry tree.
3. The second Sister made his bed,
Jennifer gentle and Rosemaree,
And placed soft pillows under his head,
As the dew flies over the Mulberry tree.
4. The youngest Sister fair and bright,
Jennifer gentle and Rosemaree,
Was resolved for to wed with this valiant Knight,
As the dew flies over the Mulberry tree.
5. And if you can answer questions three,
Jennifer gentle and Rosemaree,
Oh! then, fair Maid, I will marry with thee,
As the dew flies over the Mulberry tree.

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6. What is louder than an horn?
Jennifer gentle and Rosemarce,
And what is sharper than a thorn?
As the dew flies over the Mulberry tree.
7. Thunder is louder than an horn,
Jennifer gentle and Rosemarce,
And hunger is sharper than a thorn,
As the dew flies over the Mulberry tree.
8. What is broader than the way?
Jennifer gentle and Rosemarce,
And what is deeper than the sea?
As the dew flies over the Mulberry tree.
9. Love is broader than the way,
Jennifer gentle and Rosemarce,
And hell is deeper than the sea,
As the dew flies over the Mulberry tree.
10. Jennifer gentle and Rosemarce,
And now, fair Maid, I will marry with thee,
As the dew flies over the Mulberry tree.
6. "What is higher than a tree?
Sing ninety-nine and ninety;
What is deeper than the sea?
Sing I'm the weaver's bonny."
7. "Heaven's higher than a tree,
Sing ninety-nine and ninety;
And hell is deeper than the sea,
Sing I'm the weaver's bonny."
8. "What is innocenter than a lamb?
Sing ninety-nine and ninety;
What is worse than woman kind?
Say I'm the weaver's bonny."
9. "A babe is innocenter than a lamb,
Sing ninety-nine and ninety;
The devil's worse than woman kind,
Sing I'm the weaver's bonny."
10. "You have answered me questions nine,
Sing ninety-nine and ninety;
You are God's, you're not my own,
And you're the weaver's bonny."

GROUP B

5. "The Devil's Nine Questions"

Davis, 1929, p. 549; text, pp. 59-60. Sung by Mrs. Rill Martin, Giles County, Va., September 11, 1922; noted by Evelyn Rex. Collected by Alfreda M. Peel.

p π^1



1. "If you don't answer me questions nine,
Sing ninety-nine and ninety,
I'll take you off to hell alive,
And you are the weaver's bonny.
2. "What is whiter than milk?
Sing ninety-nine and ninety;
What is softer than silk?
Say you're the weaver's bonny."
3. "Snow is whiter than milk,
Sing ninety-nine and ninety;
Down is softer than silk,
And I'm the weaver's bonny."
4. "What is louder than a horn?
Sing ninety-nine and ninety;
What is sharper than a thorn?
Sing I am the weaver's bonny."
5. "Thunder's louder than a horn,
Sing ninety-nine and ninety;
Death is sharper than a thorn,
Sing I'm the weaver's bonny."

6. "The Devil's Nine Questions"

A. and E. Lomax, LC/AAFS, Album I, rec. 4A1. Sung by Mrs. Texas Gladden, Salem, Va., 1941.

p π^1



1. "Oh, you must answer my questions nine,
Sing, ninety-nine and ninety,
Or you're not God's, you're one of mine,
And you are the weaver's bonny."
2. "What is whiter than the milk?
Sing, ninety-nine and ninety,
And what is softer than the silk?
And you are the weaver's bonny."
3. "Snow is whiter than the milk,
Sing, ninety-nine and ninety,
And down is softer than the silk,
And I am the weaver's bonny."
4. "Oh what is higher than a tree?
And what is deeper than the sea?"
5. "Heaven's higher than a tree,
And Hell is deeper than the sea."
6. "What is louder than a horn?
And what is sharper than a thorn?"

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7. "Thunder's louder than a horn,
And death is sharper than a thorn."
8. "What's more innocent than a lamb?
And what is meaner than womankind?"
9. "A babe's more innocent than a lamb,
And the devil is meaner than womankind."
10. "O you have answered my questions nine,
And you are God's, you're none of mine."

APPENDIX

7. "The Three Riddles"

Barry and Bayard, *BFSSNE*, No. 10 (1935), p. 8, and No. 12 (1937), p. 8. Sung by Florence Mixer, Stonington, Maine, 1936; learned from her father.

Anomalous

If this be a genuine tune, and no mere singsong, it may bear some comparison with "Newmill" in the Greig MSS., Tune-book I, p. 91. As Barry explains, the text derives from Aytoun's translation of Herder's translation of D'Urfey's broadside version.

1. 'Twas of a gay young cavalier,
of honor and renown;
All for to seek a lady fair,
He rode from town to town.
2. 'Twas at a widow woman's door,
He drew his rein so free;
For by her side the knight espied
Her comely daughters three.
3. Small marvel if his gallant heart
Beat quick within his breast;
'Twas hard to choose, yet hard to lose,
Which might he wed the best.
4. "Come, maidens, pretty maidens,
Come read my riddles three;
And she who reads the best of all,
My loving bride shall be;
5. "Oh, tell me what is longer
Than the longest path there be;
And tell me what is deeper
Than is the deepest sea.
6. "And tell me what is louder
Than is the loudest horn;
And tell me what is sharper
Than is the sharpest thorn.
7. "And tell me what is greener
Than the grass on yonder hill,
And tell me what is crueller
Than a wicked woman's will."
8. The eldest and the second maid,
They sat and thought a while;
The youngest she looked up to him,
And said with a merry smile;
9. "Love, surely it is longer
Than the longest path there be;
And Hell, they say is deeper
Than is the deepest sea;
10. "Thunder, I know is louder
Than is the loudest horn;
And hunger it is sharper
Than is the sharpest thorn;
11. "I know a deadly poison, greener
Than the grass on yonder hill;
And a foul fiend is crueller
Than a wicked woman's will."
12. Now scarcely had she spoke those words,
When the youth was at her side;
'Twas all for what she answered him
He claimed her for his bride.
13. The eldest and the second maid,
They pondered and were dumb;
And they, perchance, are waiting yet,
Some other one to come.
14. Now maidens, pretty maidens,
Be neither coy nor shy
But always, when a lover speaks,
Look kindly and reply.