



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, the rogue of the village, 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 old 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 in 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 austere. "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.

Then Master Danny trotted off to the schoolhouse, 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 when they'll be

seeing what a weak, ould crackpot of a voice is in 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 pretense 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. Toward 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.

Hommy-beg did not reach the church until the parson's sermon was almost over.

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-Thorn, 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 the 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 carol the rivals were about to sing contained some thirty verses. It was an ancient usage that after each verse the carol singers take a long stride toward 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.

"How romantic they're looking," whis-

pered 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 even 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 gurgools 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 oolley
Son v'ee da Adam ben.

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 toward the communion, when sudden! the laughter and shouting of the people ceased. All eyes had turned toward 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 specter had appeared, the consternation had scarcely been greater. Danny had been rolling in his pew with unconstrained laughter, but at sight of the Bishop his candle fell from his hand and sputtered on the hook 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.