

The Monthly Journal of the Society for International Folk Dancing.

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## FIRST PRINCIPLES XI: ST. VITUS AND FRIENDS

In previous articles vague references have been made to "goings on", and the obscene and orgiastic behaviour often attendant upon dancing. While it is not our intention to subvert this Journal into any sort of horror-cum-sex comic, we feel that the time has come to take the wraps off, or partly off, this aspect of our study - acting on the principle that knowledge is better than half-knowledge or murky imaginings (the same principle which avowedly activates the yellower sections of the national press). It could be, too, that a little dirt, well dished up, from time to time might increase our readership if not our membership!

In any case, we have now reached the point in our little history where Christianity impinges on pagan rites and customs, songs and dances. Obviously the first Christians could hardly have been shocked by spectacles like the Saturnalia - they had grown up with them - no matter how much they might have disapproved. Indeed many of the early leaders of the Church, being realists, knew full well that their new converts could hardly be expected to break completely with the old ways, and, to begin with, many of the old festivals with their appropriate dances were retained to some extent and even encouraged among the newly converted on the educational notion known to-day as "gilding the pill". Inevitably situations of extreme incongruousness occurred. Curt Sachs cites a case from Anglo-Saxon England, where a Christian priest, in Easter Week, "had the little girls perform a dance in which a priapic symbol was carried in front". There is also recorded the case of another priest in Scotland who, in addition to his normal priestly duties, also took it upon himself to lead his parishioners in naked and obscene rites and dances on the occasion of the old pagan festivals. Undoubtedly this character saw no harm in having friends in both camps.

But the dances and dance forms which degenerated into licence among more civilised types like the Greeks and Romans were undoubtedly first performed in all good faith and with perfect seriousness. Sir George Frazer points out that it is highly probable that the coupling of man and woman was "an essential part" of those spring and summer rites which, through imitative magic, attempted to stimulate the growth of trees and plants. Our European ancestors believed that the symbolic marriage of trees and plants "could not be fertile without the real union of the human sexes". This belief was, and in some places possibly still is, held by peoples all over the world. Certain Central American tribesmen kept away from their wives for four days prior to the first sowing "in order that on the night before planting they might indulge their passions to the fullest extent". This, in fact, was the law and crops could not be planted if this ritual was omitted. In parts of New Guinea and Northern Australia the central figures of the fertility drama are the Sun (male) and the Earth (female): once a year, at the coming of the rains, Mr. Sun descends to fertilise the earth. After many animal sacrifices "men and women alike indulge in Saturnalia; and the mystic union of the sun and the earth is dramatically represented in public, amid songs and dances, by the real union of the sexes under the trees". And Europe had similar rites if some of the watered-down survivals are taken into account. As has been said, the primitive rites degenerated into sheer debauchery and it was in this form that they ran foul of the Church. It was not long before the Church made the most strenuous efforts to root out all obscenity from dancing and, when those attempts failed, to ban dancing altogether, especially since many

such dances were performed in either church or churchyard. But every attempt failed. And nowhere was the Church more powerless than in the case of the ecstatic dances which first made their appearance in the eleventh and twelfth centuries - in the churchyard. At Christian festivals or at funerals "men and women begin suddenly and irresistibly to sing and dance in the churchyard, disturb divine service, refuse to stop at the priest's bidding". This madness or possession, or what have you, often led to the dancers being cursed to dance for the whole year. Some say that in the churchyards the dancers "sought communion with their dead" - literally the danse macabre (from the Arabic word "Makabr" meaning churchyards).

In 1373 there was written the following report: "Persons of both sexes publicly and in private houses suddenly broke out into a dance and, holding each other by the hand, danced with great violence till they fell down nearly exhausted". This same year 1373 was the year of the outbreak of the Black Death, and certain authorities see in these frenzied and uncontrollable dances attempts to avert the plague. The description given above is doubtless one of the first eyewitness accounts of chorea major or St. Vitus's dance. Sachs, in a gripping paragraph describes what happened:

"Harried by plague, long wars and endless misfortunes, and stirred to the depths of their beings, hosts of distracted people roll westwards from place to place. Singly or hand in hand they circle and jump in hideously distorted choral dances - for hours at a time, until they collapse foaming at the mouth. And wherever they rave, the hysterical psychosis lays hold on the spectators, so that, quivering and grimacing, they enter the circle and under a fearful compulsion join in the dance. The evil lasted for months; physicians and priests were powerless".

There are accounts which indicate that St. Vitus's Dance was not stamped out until well into the seventeenth century.

Even longer-lived was the Italian phenomenon of tarantism from which the dance forms we now know as tarantellas originated. The bite of the Apulian tarantula apparently afflicted the victim with a deep melancholia from which he attempted to find relief in the wild jumping and frenzied movements of the tarantella. Here again spectators found themselves irresistibly drawn into the dance. Tarantism lasted until the 18th century. The tarantella is still with us, but in somewhat subdued form - to read descriptions of the early tarantellas convinces us that they would well fit into the series on Dances We'll Never Demonstrate! They are described as "demoniacal", "primitive", "invented by nymphs and satyrs", and they lasted anything from ten to thirty-six hours!

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#### MEMBERSHIP COMPETITION

It must be confessed that, in terms of quantity, the entry has been most disappointing. In fact only two entries were received and, since both contained much of value and interest, it was felt that the best solution was to divide the prize between the two entrants: Mary Love and Irene Fyffe, who will each receive a book-token worth half a guinea.

We print below the two entries:

From Mary Love, St. Austell, Cornwall:

One of the reasons why the S.I.F.D. has not a larger membership might be lack of publicity. Advertising can be expensive, certainly, but in the end it usually pays dividends. Also, if members were allowed for a limited time to introduce new members at a reduced sub it might be worthwhile. Two for the price of one, or three for the price of two? A summer festival

outside London would be about the best booster and would surely widen our public. Couldn't we start a film unit? Showing films is a grand form of shop window, and some films of the S.I.F.D. in action would really be something to show. It would cost very little except the actual film stock. I have the camera and projector. Who would like to make the first film?

From Irene Fyffe, London, S.E.3:

1. Basic step and beginners' classes could and should be compulsory.
2. There should be a continuity of about 4 weeks in classes of each nationality.
3. The M.C. should adapt his programme to suit the capabilities of the dancers present. "Many people attempt to learn dancing by attending balls and being pulled through the formations. This is inexpressibly painful". (Etiquette of the dance, 1888).
4. A wallflower is usually an unwilling one.
5. It is as important to dance with an 'unattached' advanced dancer as with a newcomer. Too often these stalwarts are left standing all the evening - I know, I've stood!
6. A beginner, struggling with a polka is not funny to himself. Laughter should be reserved.
7. A room could be reserved at Carlyle School for evenings of the following types:-
  1. Photographic.
  2. Travel.
  3. Records.
  4. Costume making.
  5. Folk lore.
  6. History of the dance.
  7. Origin of the dance.

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CORRESPONDENCE

Sir,  
We are glad that Marilyn Paine has written regarding the unfriendly attitude of S.I.F.D. members, both male and female, and we entirely agree with her letter in the January News Sheet.

Although we have been attending Wednesday classes fairly regularly for nearly a year, the majority of S.I.F.D. members continue to treat us as newcomers. Unless we try to learn the dances among ourselves, - that is, dancing with each other and practising them with each other (and we wonder what happens to those who go alone without a friend) - we would probably be left to watch most of the time because older members, with very few exceptions, hardly find it worth their while to teach the inexperienced. Perhaps some arrangement could be made, not only to spare old members from the dullness of having to teach new ones, but also to give the latter a better chance of learning and thereby increasing their enthusiasm for the Society.

Yours, etc.

Rosemary Daniel  
Ann Bamford  
Dagmar Klein

(London)

The charge of passive unfriendliness laid against the older members of the Society would seem to be well founded. If memory serves aright these

are not the only two occasions when this subject has been aired in these columns. It is also implicit in Irene Fyffe's Competition entry. From our Secretary, Marie Le Fort, comes a request that we draw attention to "members helping much more at dances, especially at Cecil Sharp House, the beginners and newcomers. I came up against this last Saturday when taking a class Evening Institute teachers. I discovered two had been members (of the S.I.F.D.) in the past but had not re-joined because they felt that the Society was not showing a friendly spirit. There may be others lost in this manner and we should try to do better". This is not the sort of thing upon which the Committee can take action, nor can M.Cs. do very much about it. It is up to the individual advanced dancer. Perhaps if every one of these made a point of asking one beginner or newcomer for at least one dance per evening we might get somewhere?

#### GREETINGS

Christmas Greetings to the Society have been received from Penny and Ron Garland in Cyprus.

Heinz and Ilse Striegel write: "We have received so many greetings and good wishes from members of whom we have no address. Please be kind enough to convey our thanks and best wishes for the coming year to all friends."

#### DEPARTMENT OF SWEET WORDS AND LONG SENTENCES

We are happy to offer our congratulations to members Irene Weller and Ken Fyffe who were married on New Year's Eve.

#### COMING EVENTS

February 3rd next, 7.30 p.m. at Wigmore Hall. Victoria Kingsley will present a programme of folk songs from England, Scotland, France and Germany. In particular she is featuring Brazilian Negro Ritual chants (with drums) which she has collected herself.

March 26th next, 7.30 p.m. at the Royal Albert Hall. The third edition of "See How They Dance". Rehearsals are now in full swing.

FEBRUARY PROGRAMME

Classes at Carlyle School, Hortensia Road, Chelsea, S.W.10.

Time: 7.30 - 9.30 p.m.

Admission: Tuesdays Dances and  
and Rehearsals 1/-  
Fridays\* Classes 1/6  
Wednesdays:  
Members 1/-  
Non-members 1/6

Tuesdays:	Feb. 1	Members' Dance	M.C. Bert Price
	8	Balkan Class	Phillip Thornton
	15	Ukranian Rehearsal	Irene Fyfe
	22	Balkan Class	Phillip Thornton
Wednesdays:	Feb. 2	Swedish Class	Dr. Cyriax
		(Swedish Schottische)	M.C. Ken Ward
	9	Swedish Class	Dr. Cyriax
		(Fyrmanne Dans Hambo)	M.C. Bob Symes
	16	Ukranian Class	Irene Fyfe
	23	(Moonshine, Karapyet)	M.C. Jack Richardson
	23	Ukranian Class	Irene Fyfe
		(Russian Waltz)	M.C. Peter Van Der Linde
Fridays:	Feb. 4	Austrian Class	Heinz & Ilse
	11	Hungarian Class	John Ungar
	18	Swedish Class	Dr. Cyriax
	25	Estonian Class	Aily Eistrat

\*Invited members only

Sunday Rehearsals at Baker Street School of Dancing, 97 Baker St., W.1.

Time: 4.0 p.m.

Feb. 6	Austrian
13	Hungarian
20	Ukranian
27	Austrian

Sunday Dances at Queen Alexandra's House, Kensington Gore, S.W.7.

Time:

Music: Mourie Pfeffer

Feb. 6	General Dance	M.C. Les Hutchins
13	" "	M.C. Gordon Stacey
20	" "	M.C. Roland Minton

General Dance at Cecil Sharp House, Regents Park Road, N.W.1.

Time: 6.30 - 9.30 p.m.

Music: Wallace Collection

Sunday, February 27th M.C. Margery Latham

Scottish Classes by Marie le Fort are held every Sunday afternoon from 3.30 - 5.30 p.m. at Churchill Gardens Estate, Pimlico. Admission 2/-.

SATURDAY DANCE

The Harrow Green Folk Dance Group are holding another Saturday night dance on the 26th February at Trumpington School, Ramsay Road, Forest Gate, E.7. Nearest Station Leyton. Amongst others, Jim Titheridge will supply the music from 7.0 to 10.30 p.m.

Harrow Green Programme

Wednesday:	2nd February	M.C. Ron Coultrup	Hopak
Monday:	7th February	Albert Hall Rehearsal	
Wednesday:	9th February	M.C. Les Norris	Swedish
Monday:	14th February	Walthamstow Festival	
Wednesday:	16th February	M.C. Les Hutchins	Italian
Monday:	21st February	Albert Hall Rehearsal	
Wednesday:	23rd February	M.C. Eileen McGrath	Krakowiak
Monday:	28th February	Ilse & Heinz Streigal	Austrian
Wednesaay:	2nd March	M.C. Ruth Sharp	Lithuanian
Monday:	7th March	Albert Hall Rehearsal	

Except for the Albert Hall Rehearsal, Members and non-members are equally welcome.