

## **A Sixteenth-Century Christmas**

*By Charles A. Murdock*

From the book, St. Nicholas Books of Plays and Operettas

### **INTRODUCTORY:**

*The purpose of this entertainment is to reproduce a Christmas scene of Shakespeare's time, both for its own sake and as an attractive setting for the delightful old Christmas carols which never can wear out.*

*It is especially adapted to a church choral society, or to the older pupils of a Sunday-school or an academy, and it also brings in a good number of the younger children.*

*It admits of any desired changes as to the music designated, though the quaint old carols should be adhered to. The Waits, if possible, should be a well-trained male quartet.*

*The costumes should be carefully consistent, and pains must be taken to secure effective grouping of the company. The picture will be finer if the gentlemen generally stand; and the short benches on which most of the ladies may sit should be of varied heights.*

*Sir Tristram and Lady Geraldine should occupy antique chairs on a dais at the side of the stage, and the Jester, while moving freely around, will be in place near their feet.*

*The company should move about as opportunity offers, rising to sing, and avoiding stiffness and indifference to what is going on.*

*The "Lord of Misrule" and his followers must be very spirited, making a whirlwind of fun and noise during their brief appearance.*

### **CHARACTERS:**

*Sir Tristram- an English gentleman*

*Lady Geraldine- his wife*

*Lady Beatrice- a guest, who sings*

*Little Eddith- the grandchild*

*Master Rivers- another tuneful guest*

*A Jester*

*Gregory- a servant*

*Hugo- a servant*

*Waits, ladies and gentlemen, the "Lord of Misrule" and his merry band, children, etc.*

### **SCENE- An Old English Hall**

*(Curtain rises, discovering two servants and a jester.)*

**GREGORY:** By the mass, this is the merriest Christmas I e'er did see. Didst ever know such goings on? Such eating, and drinking, and frolicking? What a dinner had we the day! And odsbody, what a pudding was that! They perforce left enough for us to feast withal.

**HUGO:** Ay, that they did, and right royally. I tell thee, Gregory, we do well to live in these days of good Queen Bess, when there's plenty to eat and drink. I warrant thee those knavish knights we hear of oft went hungry.

GREGORY: The more fools they. i care not for glory. AS the merry play-actor saith, "I am one that am nourished by my victuals, and would fain have meat." Ah, Hugo, that's a rare play; it maketh one to laugh mightily. The master goeth oft to see it, and he delighteth in that merry Launce. Marry, thou shalt see anon how pat I'll do 't; the master saith, Christmas or no Christmas, I shall present Launce and his dog.

HUGO: The feasters soon shall come, I trow. 'T is eight o' the clock. How now, fool? Why art thou drowsy? Whence these doleful dumps? Awake and give us a taste of thy drollery.

JESTER: Oh, give o'er, I prithee. 'T is sad enough to show folly to the wise. My pearls are not for swine.

HUGO: *Swine!* Thou unmannerly knave! We'll whack thee soundly an thou mind'st not.

JESTER: Nay; an thou canst not be civil, I'll take myself away. I'd fain be still. I'm grinding at my mill 'gainst the Yule-tide.

GREGORY: What mean'st thou, boy?

JESTER: Dost think we men of mind can forthwith do our task as ye can lift a trencher? Aforetime must we store the jest that seemeth struck like flash of steel. Even now I'm sitting on the jokes I'll hatch anon.

GREGORY: Ho, ho! Thou art *rare*, Sir Fool.

JESTER: Then leave me lest I be *well done* with such a scurvy fire as you would give.

GREGORY: My life, but thou art quick. I would I had your wit.

JESTER: Oh, covet it not, good Gregory. Thou art fool enough without it.

HUGO: He hath thee "on the hip," as saith the Jew. Hark! I hear the steps of the gentles. Let us to our posts.

*(Enter the Christmas company.)*

SIR TRISTRAM: This way, good friends. I pray you be merry and at ease; make our home your own. My sweet wife, here, and my chicks will look to 't that a Christmas in old England shall not see you want for anything. In our simple English way we bid you welcome to Yule-tide.

LADY GERALDINE: Find seats, dear hearts. We'd have such a Christmas Eve as would drive all thoughts but happy ones far from you. 'T is a blessed time, for the good will the angels sang of yore gains apace, and in this fair land, far from those lonely heights where the shepherds watched their sheep, we gather to praise Christ's name, and show each to each the love we bear.

SIR T.: Ay, she speaketh well. I own 't is true; but I fear me ye may not be *merry*. My wife is *unco guid*, as the canny Scots would say, but

I'm yet a sinner

Who loveth dinner,  
And fain would see you gay;  
I fear not folly,  
I'd e'er be jolly,  
Nor work when I can play.

JESTER: Oh, nuncle, thou mak'st me weary.

SIR T.: How now, gentle Jester, why dost repine?

JESTER: It is my sweet privilege to play the fool, and it likes me not when you begin.

SIR T.: You rascally lout, what mean you?

JESTER: Know you not there is a time for all things? The mistress would have us gay, but she hath sense to know that they only can be truly happy who are truly good.

You, my wicked lord, nor I, nor no man  
E'er can happy be as noble woman.

WOMEN: Hear, hear! Good for the Jester.

MEN: (*Derisively.*) Oh, oh!

SIR T.: Ah, you sly dog, you know how to make friends where friends are worth the having.

LADY G: Thank you, boy. None need have fear we shall be too serious. And now, to begin, let us sing "The First Nowel."

SIR T.: One moment, an it please you. (*To Jester.*) Boy, come hither! (*Whispers to Jester, who runs out.*) I hope it is no offense, but at the last Yule-tide the words of these same Christmas carols slipped so villainously from our minds that we sang but illy, --and it is no marvel, for we sing them but once the year,--so I bethought me to send to London, and Master Evans hath sent me here the words, in good fair type, that all may read, and, not fearing to slip, may sing right lustily. Boys, give out the songs. Now will we sing "The First Nowel."

(*They sing.*)

JESTER: Nuncle, that is a goodly song. It refresheth my spirits. If you had a soul, I think it would do it good.

SIR T.: *If* I had a soul, blockhead! And why have I not?

JESTER: I give it up. I know not why.

SIR T.: But what proof hast thou that I have not?

JESTER: Art a philosopher and askest me to prove a negative? It resteth for thee to prove that thou hast.

SIR T.: And how can it be done, my pretty knave?

JESTER: Marry--(*Sings.*)  
Now, mark me! *Do?*  
But show a *ray*  
Of love for *me*,  
It goeth far  
To prove thy *soul*.  
Now, say not *la!*  
But let us *see*  
Your cake's not *dough*.

SIR T.: Good, fool! By all the saints, this is admirable nonsense. Thou hast earned the cross, and shalt bear it. (*Giving money.*)

JESTER: Oh, no; I'm not musical for nothing. I cannot draw silver music from a heart of flint. Not I, forsooth. 'T is the caitiff wretch that bideth round the corner.

SIR T.: Now, let the frolic begin. Ho, Gregory! Hugo! Go bid my hinds bring hither the Yule log. (*Exeunt Gregory and Hugo.*) Now, friends, bethink you that care 's an enemy of life. As saith young Hamlet: "What should a man do but be merry?" Master Shakespeare giveth us another good text in "Richard II". "Be merry, for our time of stay is short." Let us all stand up and shout for Yule-tide joy. (*All stand and hurrah. Ladies wave handkerchiefs. Log brought in.*)

Come, bring with a noise,  
My merry, merry boys,  
The Christmas log to the firing,  
While my good dame she  
Bids ye all be free  
And drink to your health's desiring.

LADY G.: Let us raise our voices in the grand old carol, "From Far Away."

SIR T.: Ah, goodwife, thou chooseth well. I love that same old song.

LADY G.: Be seated, all. Frame your minds to mirth and merriment, for now 't is seasonable.

SIR T.: Boy, cannot you sing? Too much carol maketh me sad. I fain would have a stirring ditty--or a rollicking ballad.

JESTER: Ah, master, Heaven is not so partial to any mortal as to make him beautiful and wise, and then to gild him with the power of song. I'm no nightingale, nor be I a lark (though perchance at times I aid one--but that is apart.)

LADIES: Oh, sing, sweet youth.

JESTER: It ill beseemeth me to say you nay. To decline mayhap were more inglorious than to fail, but i' faith I cannot. I'm coltish to-night.

SIR T.: Coltish? What mean'st thou?

JESTER: Why, a little hoarse. An it please you ask Master Rivers to sing. He hath a marvelous flue voice, and knoweth a ballad 't would make ye merry to hear.

LADY G: Thou speakest well. Good Master Rivers, favor us, an thou wilt, with thine antique song.

MASTER RIVERS: An it please you, my lady, I'll sing from now till Michaelmas.

JESTER: Oh, not so long, good master. Be brief, if you would win our love.

*(Master River sings, "The Leather Bottle." from "Pan Pipes." All clap hands and cry "Good!")*

SIR T.: My thanks, good friend. The performance doth thee credit. I would I had thy voice--and thy years. Well, sweet wife, 't is thy choice next. What wilt thou offer to our guests and the general joy?

LADY G: Good my lord, our little grandchild, Edith, hath a verse. Brief is it, but beautiful. 'T was writ by Master George Herbert, and "Love-joy" calls he it. Come hither, Edith. Now, sweet child, say thy little lines.

EDITH: *(Recites.)*

As on a window late I cast my  
eye,  
I saw a vine drop grapes  
with J and C  
Anneal'd on every bunch.  
One standing by  
Ask'd what it meant. I (who  
am never loath  
To spend my judgement) said:  
"It seem'd to me  
To be the body and the letters both  
Of Joy and Charity." "Sir, you have not  
missed,"  
The man replied. "it figures Jesus Christ."

SIR T.: "Sweet invocation of a child, most pretty and most pathetic." Now will we have a bit from a bright play. My servant, Gregory, is no Burbage, but he doth something smack; he hath a kind of taste for the player's art, and will now give you the speech of Launce, from "The Two Gentlemen of Verona." The dog you see not. 'T is "in his mind's eye." Sirrah, stand forth.

*(Gregory recites Act II, Scene 3. Applause. Singing without: "Good Rest Thee, Merry Gentleman.")*

LADY G: 'T is the Waits singing from door to door. When they have done we will bid them enter. *(Waits conclude carol.)* Good my lord, may we not call them in to share our festivity?

SIR T.: Marry, will we. Jester, bid you the minstrels to come in and sing for us again. They discourse most excellent music.

*(Waits enter and sing again: "The Boar's Head Carol," or some carol for male voices.)*

SIR T.: 'T is well; 't is very well. Perchance the Waits are dry. Belike you all may be, for so in sooth am I. Hugo, bring hither the loving-cup. Break this respectful stillness. You have been staid too long.

*(General talk, very brisk and voluble. Loving-cup passed.)*

SIR T.: *(Resuming seat.)* Now, neighbors all, again let quiet reign. We'll have another Christmas song.

*(Waits sing "What Maid was This?" from "Christmas Carols Old and New.")*

JESTER: Sir Twistem, methinks that song was e'en as good as the other one.

SIR T.: No more, my sweet fool. Thou need'st not think to match thy crossed shilling.

JESTER: Ah, good my lord, think not I care for thy silver; 't was the winning gave me joy. But I love music; my soul longeth for it. I suck sweet melancholy from a song as thou suckest a dull brain from thy potatoes.

SIR T.: Sirrah, thou abusest thy privilege. I care not for ale, nor is my brain befogged.

JESTER: Then, speaking of silver, canst thou tell me why a boxed rat is like a man becoming short of money?

SIR T.: Beshrew me, boy, I cannot answer.

JESTER: Because, look you, it will be *a-gnawing* to get out.

SIR T.: Go to! *Annoying*. A villainous jest, i' faith.

JESTER: Nuncle, where hadst thou this fine ale?

SIR T.: Of Master Davenant at the Crown Inn, sirrah.

JESTER: Of Master Davenant! Then why is the Crown Inn like Jacob's Well?

SIR T.: I know not that, either.

JESTER: Because, hark ye, *he brews drink* there.

SIR T.: *Go to*, thou art too subtle for me. *He brews drink!* 'T is passing good! *(Wipes tears.) Hebrews drink--*to be sure. I wonder not that the melancholy Jacques would fain wear motley. By the way--that same sad man reminds me--*(Addresses Waits.)* My good friends, could ye sing for us that fine song the huntsmen sing in the forests of Arden, as 't is done at the Curtain Theater?

WAITS: Ay, good my lord, that can we.

SIR T.: We must have a little spice withal, or the carols will pall upon our taste.

*(Waits sing, "What Shall He Have who Kills the Deer?" from the Boosey collection. The bystanders in the scene applaud.)*

LADY G.: Lady Beatrice, wilt thou not sing for us that quaint old ballad that I love so well?

LADY B.: If it is thy pleasure, I cannot decline. (*Sings "O Mistress Mine" or "Phillida Flouts Me," from "Pan Pipes." Noise without.*)

LADY G.: Good my lord, what noise is this without?

SIR T.: It must e'en be those merry roisterers who follow the Lord of Misrule. Fear them not; they are but somewhat rude. They'll do no ill. Some there are, poor souls, who know no way to show their joy but by making a monstrous noise.

*(Enter the Lord of the Misrule and followers, with music, hobby-horse, etc. They dance and distribute papers, for which they receive pennies. A poor child comes with a Christmas box.)*

LADY G.: Ah! Dear little mouse. Bring hither thy Christmas box. Soon may't be full.

*(Roisterers exeunt.)*

JESTER: (*Yawning.*) I have an exposition of sleep come upon me, nuncle. Is to-day to-morrow or yesterday? If too full we fill one day, 't will spill and spoil the next. I fain would niggard with a little rest. Christmas joys are well, but

A surfeit of the sweetest things  
The deepest loathing to the stomach brings.

SIR T.: Thou art not altogether a fool. The time draws near, "so I regret the daintiest last to make the end most sweet." Dear heart, what shall be the final act in this our Yule-tide play?

LADY G.: Glad are our hearts. Peace, plenty, and joy smile upon all. Let our last act on the birthday of our Lord be the union of our voices in praising his name. Let us sing "Gloria in Excelsis."

*(All sing.)*

## CURTAIN

*(Note. - Almost all the songs named in the text can be obtained by ordering through music-dealers, and most of the waits and carols are to be found in the "English Melodies" and "Sacred Series" of the collection called the "Choralist." Of course, when necessary, other old songs and carols may be substituted at will for those mentioned here.)*