AN OLD SONG

MOST people must have heard at some time or other that interesting folk-song, *I'll sing you one-o* (perhaps better known as *Green grow the rushes-o*), with its simple, fascinating melody and somewhat obscure wording. They may have set themselves to unravel its meaning, but they could scarcely have suspected that it is, in the form of a song or a story, one of the oldest and most wide-spread traditions of its kind in the world. The words of the common English version are as follows :

I'll sing you one-o.
Green grow the rushes-o.
What is your one-o?
One is One and all alone,
and ever more shall be so.

I'll sing you two-o.
Green grow the rushes-o.
What is your two-o?
Two, two, lily-white boys
clothèd all in green-o.
One is One and all alone,
and ever more shall be so.

I'll sing you three-o.
Green grow the rushes-o.
What is your three-o?
Three, three, the Rivals.
Two, two, lily-white boys
clothèd all in green-o.
One is One and all alone,
and ever more shall be so.

I'll sing you four-o.
Green grow the rushes-o.
What is your four-o?
Four for the Gospel-makers.
Three, three, the Rivals, etc., etc.

And so the song continues until twelve is reached, all the former numbers being repeated inversely each time. The remaining numbers are as follows :

> Five for the symbols at your door.
> Six for the six proud walkers.
> Seven for the seven stars in the sky.
> Eight for the April rainers.
> Nine for the nine bright shiners.
> Ten for the ten Commandments.
> Eleven for the eleven who went to Heaven.
> Twelve for the twelve Apostles.

The history of this song is most interesting. Versions of what is undoubtedly the same theme are to be found in practically all European and many Asiatic countries, some of them containing only the numbers and their explanations, which in the more modern versions are nearly always repeated backwards, and others with the addition of a little story. One of the best examples of this latter kind is a Spanish one from the oral tradition of Cuenca. The story as related by the peasantry is this :

> A poor old man was walking on his way when the Evil One appeared to him and said :
> ' Tell me the twelve words that go backwards : '
> And the poor old man answered :
> ' I do not know them.' The Evil One then said :
> ' Well if you do not know them by twelve o'clock I shall take you away with me.'
> The Evil One then disappeared, and the poor old man continued on his way in great distress. And he came across a little old man, and this was St. Joseph, who said :
> ' Come with me and let us sup together, and afterwards we can sleep in some barn.'
> And the old man was unwilling, and St. Joseph asked :
> ' What ails you? Why so sad? '
> But the old man sighed and was silent. Then finally he said : ' I am sad because a gentleman appeared to me and told me that I have to recite the twelve words that go backwards, and I do not know them. And if I do not know them by twelve o'clock he takes me away with him.'

Thereupon St. Joseph said :

' Well, there is no need to worry. Let us eat first and then sleep, and do not on any account become agitated.'

So they prepared the supper, ate, and went to lie down. And the old man fell asleep, and at twelve o'clock the Devil arrived and said :

' Do you know them now? '

And St. Joseph, who was lying beside the old man, answered ' Yes.'

' Well, let's hear them,' said the Devil.

And St. Joseph recited the twelve words that go backwards and the poor old man was saved.

' Of the twelve words that go backwards tell me the first.'

' The first, the sun and the moon.'

' Of the twelve words that go backwards tell me the second.'

' The second, the two little tables of Moses on which Jesus Christ stepped to get into the holy house of Jerusalem. The first, the sun and the moon.'

' Of the twelve words that go backwards tell me the third.'

' The third, the three Maries. The second the two little tables of Moses . . . .'

And so the questions continue, and St. Joseph gives the following answers, each time repeating the previous numbers backwards :

' The fourth, the four Evangelists . . . .
The fifth, the five wounds . . . .
The sixth, the six candle-sticks . . . .
The seventh, the seven choirs . . . .
The eighth, the eight joys . . . .
The ninth, the nine months . . . .
The tenth, the ten Commandments . . . .
The eleventh, the eleven thousand virgins . . . .
The twelfth, the twelve Apostles . . . .'

After the recital of the whole twelve backwards the story finishes thus : ' Twelve I have said, now wait for the thirteenth : Blow up, you thief, for St. Joseph will have his revenge on you !'

This Spanish story is typical of the complete European version, though in some cases a pact with the devil is added. Numerous examples abound in all languages, of which about a hundred have been collected and printed. Five of these are in Latin, twenty in Italian, twenty-one in Spanish (ten of these being from South and Central America), ten in Portuguese, ten in French, six in German and Flemish, four in English (two from America), four in Roumanian, two in Greek, and one in Russian, the others being in various Indian languages and dialects. Many of the European versions date from the early Middle Ages, and the Indian ones are even older.

The distinguished Italian scholar, Stanislao Prati, was the first to collect and study most of these known versions.[1] But he was at fault in failing to realize the fundamentally religious character of the tale, and he came to the rather strange conclusion that it originated in the story of Oedipus and the Sphinx, with which it has very little in common. Reinhold Köhler was the first to suggest that it owed its origin to the East,[2] and to the ancient Pahlavi story of *Gôsht-i Fryânô*, which dates from before the Sassanian Dynasty of the neo-Persian Empire, therefore earlier than 200 A.D. This theory has now been resurrected and further developed by Señor Aurelio Espinosa,[3] who offers a most interesting comparative study of all the known versions, though he unfortunately neglects the English ones, which are unique in their variations from the general European traditions. According to him, the story passed from Persia to the Jews and the Arabs, and so on to Western Europe.

[1] In vols x-xv of the *Archivio per lo studio delle tradizioni popolari*, Palermo-Torino, 1882-1903.

[2] *Kleinere Schriften*, 1898-1900, vol iii, pp. 365-371.

[3] *Revista de Filologia Española*, vol. xvii, pp. 390-415.

The Pahlavi story tells of a certain magician named Akhan, who visits the city of the unravellers of riddles and enigmas, and threatens with death all those who cannot guess his questions. Among them there is one named Gôsht-i Fryânô, who is famed for his ability to answer all riddles. He finds the correct answers for the thirty-three put to him by Akhan, and asks the magician three in his turn, and he is forced to consult the Chief Devil, who is, however, unable to provide the solutions. On his returning disconsolately from Hell, Akhan is killed by Gôsht-i Fryânô. Sr. Espinosa would have us see in this the origin of the devil's questioning in the European versions, and the origin of the actual numbers in the thirteenth riddle set by Akhan. In this he asks : ' What is one ? ' ' What is two ? ' etc., up to ten; the answers being : (1) the sun that makes the whole world bright; (2) inhaling and exhaling; (3) good thoughts, good words, and good deeds; (4) water, earth, trees and animals; (5) five early Persian rulers; (6) the six feasts of the Gâhanbârs; (7) the Archangels; (8) the good legends; (9) parts of the body; and (10) the fingers.

The religious character of the answers is obvious, and shows Zoroastrian doctrines. A later Buddhist version shows Buddhist answers. Here the first question is : ' What is the beginning of life ? ' and the answer is food; two is ' essence and form,' and the remainder are the ' three sensations,' the ' four great truths of Buddhism,' the ' five elements of existence,' the ' six organs of sense,' the ' seven branches of learning,' the ' eight-fold path of Nirvana,' the ' nine habitations of rational beings,' and the ' ten forms of sanctity.'

After a short stay with the Buddhists the tradition is then supposed to travel westwards, until, arriving among the Mohammedans, it is altered to conform with their beliefs. Here it is also preceded by a little

story in which Aesrät Ali is asked ten questions by an unbeliever, which he must answer under pain of death. He does so successfully, and himself asks three in return. The unbeliever provides suitable answers, and, no doubt elated at his success, embraces the law of the Prophet on the spot. The questions are here put in this way : ' What is one and not two? What do I mean? ' The answers are : God, the sun and moon, the *oturashyp*, four Caliphs, the five prayers with their ablutions, the six words of God's *imam*, the seven hells, the eight paradises, the nine sons of the Prophet and ten months.

The Jewish version forms part of the Paschal rites and is found in the Rabbinic work *Sepher Haggadah*. It is said to have been added to the ritual by the German Jews in the seventeenth century, though this would not imply that the questions and answers themselves are not older. It begins as follows :

' One. Who knows? '
' One. I know : One is our God of Heaven and Earth.'

The others are : the two tables of the Law; the three Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the four mothers of Israel, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Lia; the five books of Moses; the six books of Mishnah; the seven days of the week; the eight days of the circumcision; the nine months of pregnancy; the ten commandments; the eleven stars of Joseph; the twelve tribes of Israel; and the thirteen attributes of God.

The numbers have increased to thirteen. All the Christian renderings to which we now pass finish at twelve. It would be useless to enumerate all the variants to each number that are to be found in these Christian versions. It will be more interesting to give typical examples. Thus the typical early medieval Latin version is this : *Unus est Deus, duo sunt testa-*

menta, tres sunt Patriarchae, quattuor Evangelistae, quinque libri Moysis, sex sunt hidriae positae in Cana Galileae, septem sacramenta, octo beatitudines, novem angelorum chori, decem mandata Dei, undecim stellae a Iosepho visae, duodecim Apostoli. The similarity with the Jewish version is obvious, but these Jewish elements tend to disappear in the later vernacular versions in favour of purely Catholic devotions. These have as their commonest forms : (1) God or Our Lady; (2) the Tables of Moses, or the Old and New Testaments; (3) the Trinity; (4) the Evangelists; (5) the Wounds of Our Lord; (6) the wine-pots of the marriage feast of Cana, or the six candles ' beside the Body of Christ '; (7) the Sacraments or the Gifts of the Holy Ghost; (8) the Beatitudes, or the eight ' Just Souls '; (9) the Choirs of Angels; (10) the Commandments; (11) the ' eleven thousand virgins '; and (12) the Apostles.

Most of these have rarer variants, all more or less obscure, doubtless owing their origin to local traditions or superstitions. These are the strictly Catholic varieties; among them those that diverge most from this common type are some of the Spanish which contain more references to Our Lady, and also, as we might expect, Arabic and Jewish influences. The German versions, through being for the most part Protestant, differ from the average Catholic example, approaching nearer to the Jewish and early Latin, by substituting as a rule the three Patriarchs for the Trinity, the Pentateuch for the Five Wounds, and the six water-pots of Cana for the altar candles. It is in this change of religion that we must look for the curious and unique alterations in our English version. All references to Catholic devotion and practice have been omitted or strangely obscured, and new examples have been added which have apparently no religious connection whatever.

The first is, of course, God. The second is probably a charming reference to the Infant Jesus and St. John the Baptist. The ' Rivals ' appears a strange substitution for the Trinity or the Patriarchs. The ' five symbols at your door ' is undoubtedly the most obscure, and the ' six proud walkers ' is also not generally understood : it probably denotes the six planets (Greek, a wanderer), this being before the discovery of Uranus which made seven. This is all the more probable as a few European versions have ' the six stars.' The ' seven stars in the sky ' will obviously be the Pleiades, and the eight 'April rainers ' are also usually supposed to have some connection with the heavens. The ' nine bright shiners ' are also taken to be astronomical, but obviously they are the older nine choirs of Angels. The ' eleven who went to Heaven ' may possibly refer to the Apostles without Judas.

It seems to me to be a slightly forced scholarship that would see the sole origin of such a widely scattered tradition in the story of *Gôsht-i Fryânô*, merely because it happens to be the earliest known recorded example, and a wasted, however meritorious, enthusiasm that sees fit to trace step by step its passage westwards. Rather does it appear to me to be the kind of instinctive human reaction before the mystery of numbers that would occur to all races, provided they had attained a sufficient degree of civilization to be able to count. And this, as all other primary instincts, would take on a symbolical significance inevitably connected with religion. All creeds as well as all superstitions have ' mystic numbers,' and many a philosopher of old was moved to search for the ' perfect number.' A number must mean something, it must be considered as the symbol of something religious ; and thus it is that we have these little religious formulae fixing themselves round the early numbers

in most religions. And superstitious and simple minds would almost certainly bestow on these formulae sufficient power to counteract the devil's wiles, which alone is enough to explain the connection of these symbolical numbers with the story of the devil's threats. Further, if looked at from another angle, the origin of the tradition might be sought in popular magic, for the importance of numbers in such superstitions is well known. The form of questions and answers is also the most natural one in which such a formula would be memorized, for it would be in that way that mothers would teach their little ones the symbolical meaning and importance of numbers. In fact, it would not be going too far to look upon our little song as a very primitive type of popular catechism!

Scholars sometimes miss all that is best in living traditions by making them obey the rigid rules of scientific development. It often appears inconceivable to them that several people should think of the same thing independently of each other. Do they not in that way tend to misunderstand the nature of culture and the force of tradition by overlooking the possibility of spontaneity in human thought? However that may be, and however our delightful little song originated, whether in Persia or Greenland, we should always sing it—and it is well worth singing—with some measure of reverence, as befitting the descendant of a fertile, time-honoured and world-wide tradition. We should sing it with the same spirit of awesome delight which we feel when we watch children playing 'cat's cradles' and stop to consider that the little Australian aborigines have also been playing that game from time immemorial. Alas! that these traditions find it hard to survive in our modern civilization, and that it is left to scholars to preserve them!

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