

I Saw Three Ships NOTES

Sandys' Notes (1833):

"Ritson (Introduction to Scotch Songs, vol. i. p. civ.) gives the following lines as sung during the Christmas holidays about the middle of the 16th century, which bear a similarity to this carol.

All sons of Adam, rise up with me,
Go praise the Blessed Trinitie, &c.
Then spake the Archangel Gabriel, said, Ave, Marie mild,
The Lord of Lords is with thee, now shall you go with child.
 Ecce ancilla domini.
Then said the virgin, as thou hast said, so mat it be,
 Welcome be heavens King.
There comes a ship far sailing then,
Saint Michael was the stieres-man;
 Saint John sate in the horn:
Our Lord harped, our Lady sang,
And all the bells of heaven they rang,
 On Christ's sonday at morn, &c.

"There is also a printed broadside carol, very similar to this, of which the last verse is rather quaint. -- Joseph and his "fair lady" being in the ships,

O he did whistle, and she did sing,
And all the bells on earth did ring,
For joy that our Saviour he was born
On Christmas-day in the morning.

[Sandys is referring to As I Sat On A Sunny Bank - Version 1. Ed.]

Joshua Sylvester, A Garland of Christmas Carols, Ancient and Modern (London: John Camden Hotten, 1861):

This carol is sometimes known as Christmas Day in the Morning. Hone gives it this title in his list [See: Christmas Carols now annually Printed]. It has always been a great favorite with the illiterate, and from its quaintness will be found not displeasing to the more refined. Ritson, in his "Introduction to Scotch songs," vol. I, gives the following lines as sung during the Christmas holidays about the middle of the sixteenth century, which bear a similarity to this carol:

"All sones of Adam, rise up with me,
Go praise the blessed Trinitie, etc.,
Then spake the Archangel Gabriel, said, Ave Mary mild,

The Lord of Lords is with thee, now shall you go with child.

Ecce ancilla domini.

Then said the virgin, as thou hast said, so mat it be,
Welcome be heavens King.
There comes a ship far sailing then,
Saint Michael was the stieres-man;
Saint John sate in the horn:
Our Lord harped, our Lady sang,
And all the bells of heaven they rang,
On Christ's sonday at morn, &c.

There is another version of this carol common amongst the people which beings:

As I Sat On A Sunny Bank,
A sunny bank, a sunny bank,
As I sat on a sunny bank
On Christmas Day in the morning.

and finishes with this singular verse -- Joseph and his "fair lady" being in the ships:

O he did whistle, and she did sing,
And all the bells on earth did ring,
For joy that our Saviour he was born
On Christmas-day in the morning.

Note that Hugh Keyte, an editor of *The New Oxford Book of Carols* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) believes that "Joshua Sylvester" is a pseudonym for a collaboration between William Sandys (1792-1874) and William Henry Husk (1814-1887). See Appendix 4.

William Henry Husk, *Songs of the Nativity*. London: John Camden Hotten, 1868.:

This carol enjoys a very extensive popularity. It is found, under various forms, in nearly every collection of sheet carols. One of the most frequently printed versions is entitled. "The Sunny Bank." This is said to be of Warwickshire or Staffordshire origin; but its use is not confined to those, or the neighbouring, countries, as it is printed both in the North and West of England.

The entire carol, omitting the repetitions, which occur precisely as in the carol, "On Christmas Day in the morning," is comprised in the following words: --

" As I sat on a sunny bank
On Christmas day in the morning,

I spied three ships come sailing by.
And who should be with those three ships
 But Joseph and his fair lady.
O he did whistle and she did sing,
And all the bells on earth did ring
For joy that our Saviour He was born
 On Christmas day in the morning."

There is also a Kentish version which runs thus: -- the repetitions being omitted as in the above: --

"As I sat under a sycamore tree,
I looked me out upon the sea
 On Christmas day in the morning.
I saw three ships a sailing there,
The Virgin Mary and Christ they bare.
He did whistle and she did sing,
And all the bells on earth did ring.
And now we hope to taste your cheer,
And wish you all a happy New Year
 On Christmas Day in the morning."

For an explanation of how the two holy persons named in these carols contrived to occupy three ships we must refer either to the expounders of miracles, or to the Court Newsman, who was wont to tell the public that the Queen went in six carriages to the theatre, or elsewhere.

Ritson the antiquary, in the Introduction to his collection of Scottish Songs, gives some lines sung during the Christmas holidays about the middle of the sixteenth century, in which the following stanza occurs: --

"There comes a ship far sailing then,
Saint Michael was the stieres-man;
 Saint John sate in the horn:
Our Lord harped, and Lady sang.
And all the bells of heaven they rang,
 On Christ's Sondag at morn."

This may be the original of the three ships of our carol.

Notes on the three versions from Cecil J. Sharp, *English-Folk Carols* (London: Novello & Co., Ltd., 1911):

The first version was sung to me by a whilom resident of Wootton-under-Edge (Gloucestershire) as it was performed by the children of that village many years ago. The words are given without alteration.

The second and third versions were sung, respectively, by Mrs. Beachy and Mr. Grimmet at Shipston-on-Stour (Worcestershire). Mr. Grimmet's words are printed exactly as he sang them; one small change has been made in Mrs. Beechy's words "were" for "was" in the third stanza.

The tune of the second version will be recognised as a variant of the well known "Nancy Dawson" air. Mr. Grimmet, having presumably forgotten the proper air, sang his words to the hymn tune "Sun of my Soul".

The words of the second version are almost exactly the same as those printed on a broadside by Wadsworth of Birmingham. The text of the third version is different from all the published versions that I have seen.

The carol is very widely known. Traditional versions with tunes may be seen in Sandys [Table of Contents], Bramley and Stainer [Table of Contents], English County Songs [Broadwood and Maitland, 1893], and elsewhere.

Ritson in his *Scotch Songs* (I, p. civ) quotes the following lines, and says that they were sung during the Christmas holidays about the middle of the sixteenth century

There comes a ship far sailing then,
Saint Michel was the stieres-man
Saint John sat in the horn:
Our Lord harped, our Lady sang,
And all the bells of heaven they rang,
On Christ's sonday at morn.

Also found in William Sandys, *Christmas-tide, Its History, Festivities and Carols, With Their Music* (London: John Russell Smith, 1852)

Also found in A. H. Bullen, *A Christmas Garland* (London: John C. Nimmo, 1885), p. 23, which contains *As I Sat Under A Sycamore Tree* (p. 25).

Also found in Edith Rickert, *Ancient English Christmas Carols: 1400-1700* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1914), p. 213. Which also contains *As I Sat Under A Sycamore Tree* (p. 255).

Additional Notes:

The legend about sailing into landlocked Bethlehem can be traced back to the 12th century when three ships brought the relics of the purported Wise Men to Koln, Germany. From this story evolved the English folk carol "I Saw Three Ships," which, it is thought, comes from the 15th century. The "three ships" refers to the belief that there were three Wise Men which comes from the number of gifts, although the

number of Wise Men has been estimated from two to twelve over the centuries. Over the passage of time, the Holy Family was substituted for the Magi. Ian Bradley gives a version from Kent-Sussex which mentions sitting under a holly tree and two travelers ♦ Mary and Joseph ♦ journeying to Bethlehem to pay taxes.

And, over the passage of time, as the text moved from village to village, and from country to country, the song acquired numerous different variations in texts and tunes (as seen above). According to Keyte and Parrott, editors of *The New Oxford Book of Carols*, the earliest printed text is from 1666 (John Forbes' *Cantus*, 2nd. ed.).

Sources In Addition To The Above:

Ian Bradley, *The Penguin Book of Carols*. London: Penguin, 1999.

Dearmer, Percy., R. Vaughan Williams, Martin Shaw, eds., *The Oxford Book of Carols*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928.

Earthly Delights: Xmas Carols

Hugh Keyte and Andrew Parrott, eds., *The New Oxford Book of Carols*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

William L. Simon, ed., *The Reader's Digest Merry Christmas Songbook*. Pleasantville, NY: Readers Digest Association, revised 2003.

William Studwell, *The Christmas Carol Reader*. New York: Harrington Park Press, 1995.