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ST. JOHN'S EVE

AN OLD ENGLISH IDYLL

FOR SOLI, CHORUS AND ORCHESTRA

THE POEM BY

JOSEPH BENNETT

THE MUSIC BY

FREDERIC H. COWEN.

PRICE TWO SHILLINGS AND SIXPENCE.
Paper boards, 3s. ; Cloth, gilt, 4s.

LONDON & NEW YORK
NOVELLO, EWER AND CO.

THE instrumentation of this work has been so arranged by the Author that it can be performed by a small Orchestra consisting of String Quintet, 1 Flute, 1 Oboe, 1 Clar., 1 Fag. and 2 Horns. If circumstances permit, these can be supplemented by any or all of the other instruments indicated in the Full Score.

ST. JOHN'S EVE.

PERSONS REPRESENTED.

NANCY (A Village Maiden)	..	..	..	..	<i>Soprano.</i>
ROBERT (A Young Villager)	..	..	..	..	<i>Baritone.</i>
MARGARET (An Ancient Dame)	..	..	..	..	<i>Contralto.</i>
THE YOUNG SQUIRE	..	..	..	..	<i>Tenor.</i>

INTRODUCTION.

SCENE I.

St. John's Eve. Villagers decorate their houses with flowers and foliage.

No. 1.—CHORUS.

Bring branches from forest and blossoms from mead,
With laurels and oak-leaves embower the door;
O searchers for motherwort, give ye good heed,
Nor pass the sweet vervain upon the green floor.
The wild rose must come from its home in the hedge,
The last of the violets leave its cool shade;
In nooks gather blue-bells, by streamlets the sedge,
With these shall the fairest of garlands be made.
By their might protected, when John's Feast is here,
From the bolt of the thunder our dwellings are free;
No plague can approach us, no terrors we fear,
All praise, great and holy Forerunner, to thee.

The Girls.

In the cups of the flowers,
'Mid the leaves of the bowers,
Good fairies will hide;
And when we are sleeping,
Through casement soft creeping,
Alight at our side.

Then dream we of lovers;
The dark veil that covers
The future is rent;
Each Sophie and Carrie,
The man she shall marry
Beholds with content.

Recitative (Margaret).

Ah! foolish girls, to talk of idle dreams,
Provok'd by wanton fairies, fresh from streams
And tangled woods, where they, with cunning wile,
Weave roseate visions, maidens to beguile.
Come, gather round, and I will straight unfold
How each her destined husband may behold.

The Girls.

Now listen all to Margaret's story,
Her tales are like her—old and hoary.

No. 2.—SCENA AND CHORUS (*Female Voices*).

Margaret.

You, Susan, when the midnight bell
Rings clear throughout the darkened land,
Take store of hempseed in your hand,
And o'er the garden scatter well;
Whispering low, "Hempseed I sow, Hempseed I hoe,
And he that is my true love come after me
and mow."
Then look behind thee, girl, and see
The man whose wife thou soon shalt be.

The Girls.

Not for the noblest in the land
'Neath midnight moon will Susan stand.
The hornèd snail would her alarm;
The toad a monster be to harm.
Ha, ha, ha, ha! Ha, ha, ha, ha!

Margaret.

You, Polly, in the hour of fear,
On table lay bread, cheese and ale;
Sit down to eat—now mark my tale,
Thy true love quickly will appear,
And join thee there,
The food to share.

The Girls.

The lover true should not delay
 For any charm upon his way,
 Lest table bare offend his sight.
 Our Polly hath good appetite.
 Ha, ha, ha, ha! Ha, ha, ha, ha!

Margaret.

You, Nancy, at the night's full noon,
 In silence to the garden creep,
 When all the flowers are asleep
 Beneath the pale light of the moon.

There pluck a dewy, blooming rose
 And hide it safe from mortal eye,
 Till feast of Christ's nativity—
 O well if then its colour glows!

Upon thy bosom let it rest,
 And he that shall thy husband be
 Will rob thee of it daringly,
 And lay thy head upon his breast.

No. 3.—SOLO AND CHORUS.

Robert.

That part will I play when the charmed Rose
 beams
 In the light of the Yule-log burning,
 For courage undaunted a lover beseems,
 He should do and should dare, not languish in
 dreams,
 And so true love's guerdon be earning.

Though Nancy upon me doth look with cold eye,
 And bid me my distance be keeping,
 I'll never from maiden's "No" turn with a sigh,
 But "Will you," and "Will you" repeatedly
 cry,
 Till "Yes" say the glad tears she's weeping.

So, Nancy, my dearest, the Rose pluck to-night,
 When the bird of love sweetly is singing,
 Thou'lt wear it, unfaded, by Christmas fire
 bright,
 I'll take it and win me a life of delight;
 Our wedding bells soon shall be ringing.

[*Nancy looks coldly upon Robert and
 turns away.*]

The Girls.

Thy wooing's vain,
 She doth disdain
 Such mastery.

See, home she goes,
 To pluck the rose,
 But not for thee.

Ha, ha! my bold lover,
 Thou soon wilt discover
 It is not for thee.

No. 4.—CHORUS.

Men (piling wood for St. John's bonfire).

Ho! good Saint John was a shining light,
 And prophets saw him from afar;
 Our bonfire bright
 Shall through the night
 Blaze o'er the land like the morning star;
 And distant hills will answering burn,
 Where'er our gladden'd eyes we turn.
 Ho! good Saint John prepared the way
 For our Lord Christ, Who blessed be;
 The bonfire's ray,
 Proclaims his day
 Swift as the arrows of light can flee;
 And blessings come to cot and hall
 Whereon the gleam of its flame shall fall.

Men and Women.

The torch now prepare, let the fire rise on high,
 And pale the bright moon in the midsummer
 sky.

Margaret (interposing).

What ye would do no tongue can tell!
 Know first must sound the midnight bell,
 Else plague and famine o'er the land
 Will horrid wander hand in hand.
 [*The church clock strikes twelve.*]

Chorus (Men and Women).

Whirl round the torch till it sputters and bursts
 into flame,
 Light to the faggots set quick in our holy
 Saint's name.
 See ye how the tongues of fire
 Lap the wood with fierce desire!
 Now they mount into the sky,
 Flashing, roaring merrily.

Brightly the glow is reflected from gable and
 tower,
 Out on the hill-tops the night gloom flies from
 its power,
 Blessed fire of good Saint John,
 Happy all it shines upon.

(Men.)

Round and round the pile now dance,
 While through flowers the maidens glance.
 [*Men and lads join hands and dance
 round the fire.*]

Blessed fire of good Saint John,
 Happy all it shines upon.

[*The Villagers take brands from the burning pile
 and disperse, singing as they go.*]

Homeward go we by its light,
 Neighbours dear, a sweet good night.

SCENE II.

The Garden of Nancy's Cottage. Midnight.

No. 5.—RECIT. AND AIR.

*[Nancy comes out of the house, and slowly moves towards the roses.]**Recit. (Nancy).*

O peaceful night! O time of holy calm!
 For wounded hearts the surely healing balm;
 In thy cool depths, if weary and distress'd,
 The soul may foretaste have of heav'n's own
 rest.

Now nightingale to silence gives a voice,
 And in the stillness running brooks rejoice;
 While over all, with solemn, steadfast eyes,
 The stars look down on human destinies.

O night and stars, and every blessèd power
 That sheds sweet influence at this witching hour,
 On ye I call to guide my trembling hand,
 As here, before the Rose of Fate, I stand.

*[She plucks a rose.]**Air.*

Say, what dost thou bear in the secret deep
 Of thy heart, my Rose?
 O loveliest flower, awake thee from sleep,
 And thine eyes uncloze;
 For fain would I read in their tender glow
 All my destiny.
 In sunshine rejoice? or in darkness weep?
 Rose, which shall be?
 As the years pass on with unceasing flow.
 Say, what dost thou whisper with fragrant
 breath,
 O my dainty bloom?
 Dost speak of life loveless—a living death—
 As my dreary doom?
 Or tell'st thou of days when the voice unknown,
 That flutters my heart
 With songs of true love from the flowery heath,
 Shall never depart,
 But sing at my side, and be all mine own.
 Live on, my sweet Rose, till the Christmas bells
 Fill earth and sky;
 In fadeless beauty, my heart foretells,
 Thou'lt meet his eye,
 Who surely is coming with words of fate,
 Thy lord and mine.
 O flower, dear flower, what might compels,
 What charm of thine,
 My lover to hasten, and not be late?

No. 6.—SONG (*Tenor*) AND CHORUS.*[A voice sings in the distance. Nancy stands listening. The light of St. John's fire falls upon her.]*

O Zephyr, stirring 'midst the leaves,
 Unto my darling's chamber hie,
 And through the open lattice fly
 So quietly;

The visions maiden fancy weaves
 Disturb not, lest they sudden pass,
 And she awake to find, alas!
 They shadows be.

Into the tissue of her dream
 My softly whispered name compel,
 And straight her captive hearing tell
 How I adore.

Say, as to river flows the stream,
 And as the river runs to sea,
 So I must seek her company
 For evermore.

If, moved, she out of slumber start,
 Then, gentle Zephyr, calm her fears,
 Soft urging that my sighs and tears
 For pity call.

From her pure shrine I'll ne'er depart,
 But, kneeling, ceaseless worship there,
 Till deep devotion melts the fair,
 And love wins all.

*[Nancy goes slowly into the house.]**Chorus (Villagers in the distance).*

Blessed fire of good Saint John!
 Happy all it shines upon,
 Homeward go we by its light,
 Neighbours dear, a sweet good night.

SCENE III.

The Squire's Hall. Christmas Day.

No. 7.—CAROL (SOLO AND CHORUS).

Margaret.

Three kings once lived in Eastern land,
 Full wise were they, as wise could be,
 And 'neath the midnight sky would stand,
 To read the stars most patiently.
 Then one unto the others said:
 A star unknown hath come in sight,
 It goeth East from overhead,
 And shineth like a meteor bright.

Chorus (The Villagers).

Star of Bethlehem, lead the way
 Through the night, till thy bright ray
 Paleth with the dawn of day.

Margaret.

Another cried: For that sweet sign
 Mine eyes have looked these many years,
 And prophets on its light divine
 Have longed to gaze, with sighs and tears.
 Then spake the third: O brothers twain,
 To follow let us now agree,
 The time is ripe, and Heaven doth deign
 To show a holy mystery.

The Villagers.

Star of Bethlehem, lead the way,
Thou art all our hope and stay,
Never veil thy light, we pray.

Margaret.

These kings they passed o'er countries wild,
Then came unto a stable poor,
And saw a little new-born child—
The star did rest above the door;
"O King of earth and heaven," they said,
"We worship at Thy manger-throne,
And crown with gifts Thy sacred Head,
For Thou art Lord, and Thou alone."

The Villagers.

Star of Bethlehem, rest where we
Our Lord Christ may also see,
And with Him for ever be.

No. 8.—CHORUS.

[*Nancy enters, wearing an unfaded rose.*]

See! see! on her breast gleams the rose,
As in summer it blows,
Like a ruby it glows!

Welcome, happy maid,
In this happy hour;
Love's bloom cannot fade,
But, all undismay'd,
Braves the winter's power.

Love thy guard shall be
Through the future years;
O sweet mystery
Of its potency—
Happy e'en thy tears!

No. 9.—SCENA AND CHORUS.

Robert.

A lover if bold doth the Fates compel
His bidding to do as he willeth;
But timid's the swain who lets blind Fortune tell
What hap shall be his when the loud wedding-
bell
Rings joyously out,—'tis sometimes a knell,
And sorrow the life-cup filleth.

A good thing I take with my strong right hand,
Where'er in the world I see it;
And never 'twixt doing and doubting stand,
But zealously follow my heart's command,
As now I go forward with love's demand—

[*Snatching the rose from Nancy.*]

O vain for the maiden to flee it.

The Villagers.

Strange things befall! 'tis Fate's decree
That Nancy Robert's bride shall be.

Nancy.

Then Fate's decree I here defy,
A maiden I will live and die.

Robert.

Forbear! the Rose's potent spell
To wed with me will thee compel.

Chorus.

Ah, true! Saint John's Rose cannot fail,
Resistance is of no avail.

Nancy.

In vain you seek to terrify;
A maiden I will live and die,
And pray all gentle powers that be
To aid me in extremity.

The Young Squire.

[*Singing as he enters.*]

From her pure shrine I'll ne'er depart,
But, kneeling, ceaseless worship there,
Till deep devotion melts the fair,
And love wins all.

Nancy.

The voice! alas, unhappy maid!
'Twas not for me its serenade;
And love has passed me idly by,
I dare not raise my thoughts so high.

The Young Squire.

Why stand ye here in such amaze?
Is't thus ye keep the best of days.

Robert.

Fair Sir, a Rose of good Saint John
This maiden's bosom gleamed upon;
I took it; she, 'gainst Fate's decree,
Now bears herself defiantly.

The Villagers.

What then? Saint John's Rose cannot fail,
Resistance is of no avail.

The Young Squire.

Good fellow, rest thee well content;
Th' unfaded rose by me was sent,
And secretly replaced the flower
Her fair hands plucked at midnight hour.
'Twas thus I gave the gentle dove
Sweet visions of a happy love.

The Villagers.

What all this means is hard to tell,
But Robert's foiled we see right well.

The Girls.

Thy wooing's vain,
She doth disdain
Such mastery.
Ha, ha! my bold lover,
Thou now must discover
She is not for thee.
Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!

[Robert rushes from the hall, pursued by the girls.]

No. 10.—DUET.

The Young Squire.

Fairest of roses, where roses bloom sweetest,
Tinted by sunbeams, and gemmed by the dew,
Seek I through all Nature's garden the meetest
For love and for worship? my dear one, 'tis
you.

Long I have watched thee with tender de-
votion,
Waiting and hoping to claim thee as mine;
Urging in song full of love's sweet emotion,
Thou hast my heart, dear, O bless me with
thine.

Nancy.

Upon my ear what music falleth?
What vision sweet my heart appalleth
With a joy that's pain?
Not for maiden poor and lowly,
Bliss so perfect, bliss so holy,
Yet I'd dream again.

The Young Squire.

No vision thou seest; in love's garden my
flower
Shall firmly be rooted, and bloom ever there;
Beauty and fragrance and sweetness her dower,
Devotion her guardian; her solace my care.

Both.

Love, that heart to heart now bringeth,
Love, whose praise the whole world singeth,
Take us; we are thine.
To thy mighty power we yield us,
By thy potent charm O shield us,
Till we life resign.

No. 11.—FINAL CHORUS.

Now joy shall be in cottage poor,
And joy shall be in hall,
For that, when Love the Mighty reigns,
Such wondrous things befall.
Before his power the barriers
That sever man from maid
Asunder break; in ruin crash;
And none may give them aid.

O sacred Yule, when heavenly love
Was born to all below,
When, from the fount of God's own grace,
Did plenteous blessing flow;
Thy benison on two fond hearts
We humbly now implore;
So Christ's sweet day and good Saint John
Be praised for evermore.

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