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A BEAST-DANCE IN SCYROS.

BY J. C. LAWSON.

THE strict Lenten fast of the Greek Church is preceded by a carnival of a fortnight's duration. The week from Septuagesima Sunday to Sexagesima is celebrated with feasting and merriment subject to no religious restrictions ; in the second week, although similar festivities continue, heightened rather than abated, no meat may be eaten ; and on the morrow of Quinquagesima (for Monday is the first day of the Greek Lent), the full regulations as to fasting come into operation, not only meat, but fish, eggs, milk, cheese and oil being almost universally prohibited. None the less a free use of wine makes the Monday the climax of the carnival. This whole period from Septuagesima to the first day of Lent, both inclusive, is popularly and loosely spoken of as *ἡ ἀπόκρεαις* (*ἡμέραις*), the days of abstinence from meat, as opposed to *σαρακοστή* (the forty days of Lent) during which further abstinences are imposed and observed. Thus the week from Sexagesima to Quinquagesima has extended its proper name both to the preceding week, when as a matter of fact there is no restriction upon the use of meat, and to the first day of Lent, on which additional restrictions come into force. In popular usage *ἀπόκρεως* means "carnival."

Happening to be in Scyros during this carnival time in the spring of the present year, I was witness of a curious spectacle, enacted as a matter of course on each of the three Sundays and, by those who feel so disposed, on any of the intervening weekdays. The young men of the town array themselves in large goat-skin capes, reaching to the hips or lower, and provided with holes for the arms. Some of these capes are made with

hoods of the same material which cover the whole head and face, small holes being cut for the eyes, but none for purposes of respiration. In other cases the cape covers the shoulders only, leaving the head free, and the young man contents himself with the blue and white kerchief, which forms the usual headgear in Scyros, and a roughly-made domino, or, thanks to the steadily increasing influx of Western culture during the last few years, an "Ally Sloper" mask. A third variety of cape is provided with a hood to cover the back of the head, while the mask for the face is made of the skin of some small animal such as a weasel, of which the hind legs and tail are attached to the hood, while the head and forelegs hang down on the breast of the wearer. Eyeholes are cut in this as in the other forms of mask. This last is the most elaborate and costly dress worn for the carnival, a weasel-skin being worth two or three goat-skins. The capes, of whatever variety, are girt tightly about the waist with a stout cord or thong, from which are suspended, all round the body if possible, but in any case in lieu of a tail, a number of bronze goat-bells, of the ordinary shape but of extraordinary dimensions, measuring anything from two to ten inches for the greatest diameter. The method by which these bells are attached to the waist-belt is cleverly designed to permit a large number of bells to be worn without their being in any way muffled by contact with the cape. Each bell is fastened to the end of a curved and pliant stick of about a foot in length, and the other ends of the sticks are inserted behind the belt from above, the curve and elasticity of the stick thus allowing the bell to hang at some few inches distance from the body, free to clash and to clang with every motion of the dancer. Some sixty or seventy bells of various sizes are worn by the best-equipped, and the weight of such a number was estimated by the people of the place as approximately an hundredweight, no easy load with which to dance over steep, narrow, roughly-paved alleys where even a mule will stumble.

But such as lack either the prowess or the full accoutrements to share in the most glorious and resonant merrymaking, do not abstain altogether from the festivities. Each does his best according to his lights and his means to look like a goat. Even the small boys beg, borrow or steal a goat-bell and affix it to the hinder part of their person as a tail to tinkle cheerfully in their wake ; or, at the worst, make good the caudal deficiency by the mute inglorious appendage of a branch from the nearest tree.

Thus in various grades of hirsute jingling grandeur, the young men and

boys traverse the town, stopping here and there, where the steep and tortuous paths offer a wider and more level space, to leap and to dance, or again at some friendly door, to imbibe spirituous encouragement to further efforts.

In the dancing itself there is nothing peculiar to this festival. The long swinging amble, which is the mode of progression of the more heavily equipped, is dictated by the burden of bells and the roughness of roads. The purpose of the leaping and dancing is solely to evoke as much noise as possible from the bells ; and in this the dancers attain their own highest hopes of din and tumult of sound, and painfully surpass the visitor's expectations ; for the interior of a belfry with a peal being rung would be peace and quiet after the jar and jangle of hundreds of those goat-bells, when the troupe of dancers wheel suddenly round some corner and pour past down the rugged slippery road, or at the end of the dance leap together into the air and come down together with a crash which in those narrow alleys threatens to dislodge the very houses from the great rocky pinnacle to whose abrupt sides they cling.

Of the origin of this custom, or of any idea involved in it, the island-folk offer no explanation. They regard it simply as a time-honoured and enjoyable festivity. Nor can its antiquity well be questioned. The vast quantity of special attire reserved exclusively for its celebration is a sure sign that the carnival is no modern fancy that has lightly attracted the popular mind, but a genuine old custom with a claim to observance more firmly established than its present observers are aware.

Whether this custom may be a survival of Bacchic or other orgies ; whether the season of festive fast in which it occurs has any special appropriateness, and whether the mask made of the skin of a small animal with the head hanging down to the wearer's breast bears more than an accidental resemblance to the *aegis* of Athena, are questions which I do not propose here to discuss. My intention has been simply to place on record, for the use of students of folklore, a custom which by a fortunately-timed visit to Scyros I was able to witness.