Charivari Once Common In Area

By HILDA GALLASSERO

Another institution in Louisiana which nearly matched the great Mardi Gras in fun and frolic and overall horseplay was the charivari. It was once common in the backlands and bayou areas and may still survive in sections of the state. This custom belonged to matters of inequality or lack of balance in marriages. For instance, a widower of 40 takes a bride of 20. Ah-ha! That calls for a charivari, mon ami! But if an old widow and an old widower wed, and their status was nearly equal, there was no call for a charivari. But if an older widow, with perhaps several children, wed a gay young blade of 25 — that was cause for a charivari.

In this old custom, the noisemakers could use anything. They could rig up any gimmick they might think of to create a sensation. Buckets, pans, dishpans, horns — anything. The noise continued until the new bride and groom made an appearance. The crowd would be reconvened the next day and offered food and drink. If the wedded couple did not make an appearance, the crowd would simply return on another night. Once a charivari was run on an older widower, who had a white beard and mustache, and it took several weeks to die down.

The Fais Do Do

Chances are, you may never actually see a real fais-do-do — to goodness, grasshopper! There are street dances that are called fais-do-do — but they are not the real thing. A real old-time fais-do-do was a dance held in somebody's home where whole families attended. There was a room (or two) in the home where all the furniture had been removed, allowing for dancing. A few chairs and benches lined the walls. A space was provided for the musicians — local people who played everything from guitar, fiddle and accordion to spoons and washboards. Incidentally there was a ting-a-ling triangle.

Another room had been set aside with beds, pallets, blankets and rocking chairs to accommodate the small fry. A few old women were in charge. As the night wore on, an old woman would quietly pull out a rocker, picked up a fretful child and sang: “fais-do-do, mon chere ...” making up appropriate words as she went along. And that is where the fais-do-do (literally translated: to go sleep) got its name. That was a real fais-do-do.

Musical Ear

The Cajun has an amazing ear for music and it is quite customary for children of six and seven to play the guitar or the accordion without any aid whatsoever of formal instruction.

At every oldtime fais-do-do, you would also find older women sitting about keeping watchful eyes on the “jeunes filles.” These watchful ones were often referred to in the songs. One rendition implores: “Come dance, Colinda. Come dance to make the old women angry.”

In another very old song, the Cajuns sang about the notorious Louisiana mosquitoes. Translated into English the words were: “The mosquitoes ate up my sweetheart. They left nothing but the two big knees and so-and-so took these to make corks for his bottles.” The natives have a great sense of humor, M’sieu.

Louisiana Ghosts

Nearly everybody is superstitious to some degree. There is the bride who wears the blue garter; there are the kids who like to carry a rabbit's foot. There are those who will not begin a new project on a certain day. There are people who will not light three cigarettes on a single match. Many women will not open an umbrella indoors. Some folks refuse to make the gift of a knife to a friend. Some folks admit they are superstitious, others just trust to luck. But you have to decide which is the same thing, more or less.

As a rule folk in these parts do not appreciate outsiders making light of their signs and beliefs. But they do possess a sense of humor and will laugh right along with you over such curios as non-existent hawk gizzards for eye trouble and a dab of goat butter (which can't be made) to cure the croup.

It isn't wise for a "foreigner" to go splitting his sides in laughter over the little superstitions, however. For instance, if someone dies in a certain house — don't go openings the door or all the bad luck will descend upon you. And if you are viewing a dead man, it is always best to reach out and touch him or death will soon overtake some member of your family. And if you are planning a double wedding, do not be the latter of the two to be pronounced man and wife. It is bad luck and the marriage will fail. Don't go laughing at the little idiosyncrasies of the natives. You will "angry 'em up" and someone might put a gris-gris on someone or the very least they could sic a ghost on you.

If you should become haunted by a ghost, I hope it is one of the more simple kind. Like maybe just a quiet booger who has no place special to go and will only spend his time roaming around. Mostly he is just a little lonely and only looking for some live company.

But if you happen to become haunted by the exasperating kind of ghost who is addicted to chain rattling and clumping up and down stairways, moaning and groaning with both of his head and dripping blood on everything, then you got troubles. Or maybe you'll draw a zombie — who knows? A zombie is a spook with something on his mind — none of it good.

And if someone becomes angry enough to cast a gris-gris on you, let us hope it is the mild type. Like for instance, not light three cigarettes on a single match. Many women will not open an umbrella indoors. Some folks refuse to make the gift of a knife to a friend. Some folks admit they are superstitious, others just trust to luck. But you have to decide which is the same thing, more or less.

Don't go trying to tell us that a ball of fire is only a bit of marsh gas that gets lit up and goes bouncing about the marshy places. We aren't impressed by all that superior knowledge.

And, besides, how do you know it won't burn your house down or even hung around long enough to find out?

NEXT: Voodoo In Louisiana.