

The Twelve Days of Christmas

I

(Christmas; Twelfth Night)

English traditional  
(arr. editors)

1. On the first day of Christ - mas my true love sent to me

par - tridge in a pear tree. 2. On the se - cond day of Christ - mas my

3. On the third day of Christ - mas my true love sent to me two tur - tle - doves, and a par - tridge in a pear tree.

4. On the fourth day of Christ - mas my true love sent to me three French hens,

5. On the fifth day of Christ - mas my true love sent to me four cal - ly - birds,

5. On the fifth day

four cal - ly - bir

6. On the sixth day  
7. On the seventh  
8. On the eighth  
9. On the ninth  
10. On the tenth  
11. On the eleventh  
12. On the twelfth

This song derives from a game that was played on Twelfth Night. The player would have named by the previous day. The game was probably of Gallic origin.

'Cally-' or 'colly-' perhaps a corruption of goldfinches) or 'g' 'French' has the meaning of 'partridge'. The origin of the 'partridge' in the 'pear tree' have been the Virgin Mary is believed that a girl who was named on Christmas Eve would have the image of her future husband. *Song Society*, vol.

(15)

5. On the fifth day of Christ-mas my true love sent to me five\_ gold\_ rings,

English traditional  
(arr. editors)

me a

pear tree

if Christ - mas my

pear tree

pear tree

ch hens,

al - ly-birds,

(20)

four cal-ly-birds, three French hens, two tur-tle-doves, and a par-tridge in a pear tree.

(Fine)

(24)

6. On the sixth day of Christ-mas my true love sent to me

7. On the seventh  
8. On the eighth  
9. On the ninth  
10. On the tenth  
11. On the eleventh  
12. On the twelfth

six geese a - lay - ing,  
seven swans a - swim-ming,  
eight maids a - milk - ing,  
nine la - dies dan - cing,  
ten lords a - leap - ing,  
eleven pi - pers pi - ping,  
twelve drum-mers drum-ming,

English traditional  
(Husk, 1864)

This song derives from a traditional forfeits game which was played on Twelfth Night (hence the twelve days). Each player would have to remember and recite the objects named by the previous players and then add one more. The game was probably universal, but the song seems to be of Gallic origin.

'Cally' or 'colly-birds' are blackbirds; the 'gold rings' are perhaps a corruption of 'goldspinks' (Scottish dialect for goldfinches) or 'gulderer' ('gulder-cock' is a turkey); 'French' has the meaning 'exotic' in some English dialects. The origin of the mysterious pear tree may simply be derived from the French for 'partridge'. However, the partridge and pear tree have been the subject of arcane speculation: the partridge as symbol of the devil, who reveals to Herod that the Virgin Mary is hiding behind a sheaf of corn; the folk belief that a girl who walks backwards towards a pear tree on Christmas Eve and walks round it thrice will see the image of her future husband; etc. (See *Journal of the Folk Song Society*, vol. 5, pp. 277-81, which has five variant

tunes and notes by Cecil Sharp, Annie Gilchrist, and Lucy Broadwood; two more are in Sharp and Marson, *Folk Songs from Somerset*, 1904-9; and see *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*, 1951, p. 122.)

The text appears in various forms in broadsides from the early eighteenth century onward. Version I is the now standard one, as printed by Husk 'for the first time in a collection of carols' (*Songs of the Nativity*, 1864). The tune is the usual modern one sung in England, with bars 18-19 dating only from Frederick Austen's 1909 arrangement. E is sometimes found for F as the seventh note, and the pause on 'rings' tends to lengthen from verse to verse.

Version II is the one still sung by the men of the Copper family from Sussex (Bob Copper, *Early to Rise*, 1976), who preserve an oral part-singing tradition (see also 'Shepherds, arise!', 147).

PERFORMANCE I, choir; II, voices.