

# THE JEWESS MAIDEN. A "BLOOD LIBEL" LACE TELL.

By Brian Lemin Dec 2010

Writers note: This a bit heavy going unless you are very interested in the subject!

## INTRODUCTION:

By chance I came across a bobbin with the name of Levi Makepeace inscribed upon it. Whilst the name Levi is a Biblical name it did trigger in me a memory of a "Jewess Tell" recorded in Wright. "The Romance of the Lace Pillow" (p184) [Personally I doubt the name Levi Makepeace is the name of a Jewish person]

Wright tells us that it was taken down in Weston Underwood and that some 50 years ago (about 1870) it was sung at Haddenham (Bucks)

Here is the text of the Tell as sung by the lace makers.

### *THE JEWESS MAIDEN.*

*There was a Jewess maiden, or so my story states,  
Who beckoned to a little boy who peeped between her gates.  
An apple so red, a plum so sweet, she gave him from her  
tree;  
She dazzled his eyes with a garry I gold ring that was so  
fair to see.  
And when she got him in the gates she laughed, he knew  
not why,  
And uttered many wicked words and told him he must die.  
She laid him on the dresser board, no mercy then she  
showed,  
But stabbed him with a knife and stabbed until the lifeblood  
flowed.*

## THE ORIGINS.

Firstly the term "blood libel" should be explained. The following is taken from Wikipedia.

**Blood libel** (also **blood accusation**) refers to a false accusation or claim that religious minorities, almost always [Jews](#), murder children to use their [blood](#) in certain aspects of their [religious rituals](#) and [holidays](#). Historically, these claims have—alongside those of [well poisoning](#) and [host desecration](#)—been a major theme in European persecution of Jews.

The libels typically allege that Jews require human blood for the baking of [matzos](#) for [Passover](#). The accusations often assert that the blood of [Christian](#) children is especially coveted, and historically blood libel claims have often been made to account for otherwise unexplained deaths of children. In some cases, the alleged victim of [human sacrifice](#) has become venerated as a [martyr](#), a holy figure around whom a martyr cult might arise. A few of these have been even [canonized](#) as [saints](#).

Again from Wikipedia we learn that:

**Hugh of Lincoln** (1246 – 27 August 1255) is a folk-figure, an [English](#) boy, whose death prompted a [blood libel](#) with ramifications that reach until today. Hugh is known as **Little Saint Hugh** to distinguish him from Saint Hugh, otherwise [Hugh of Lincoln](#). The style is often corrupted to **Little Sir Hugh**. The boy disappeared on 31 July and his body was discovered in a well on 29 August.

Shortly after his disappearance, a local [Jew](#) named Copin (or Jopin), under torture, admitted to killing the child. In his confession Copin stated that it was the custom of the Jews to crucify a Christian child every year. Copin was executed, and the story would have ended there were it not for a series of events that coincided with the disappearance.

Some six months earlier, King [Henry III](#) had sold his rights to tax the Jews to his brother, [Richard, Earl of Cornwall](#). Having lost this source of income, he decided that he was eligible for the Jews' money if they were convicted of crimes. As a result, some ninety Jews were arrested and held in the [Tower of London](#), while they were charged with involvement in the ritual murder. Eighteen of them were hanged for refusing to participate in the proceedings and refusing to throw themselves on the verdict of a Christian jury. It was the first time ever that the civil government handed out a death sentence for [ritual murder](#), and King Henry was able to take over their property. The remainder were pardoned and set free, most likely because Richard, who saw a potential threat to his own source of income, intervened on their behalf with his brother.

So much for the history, but how does such a gory rhyme get into the repertoire of Tells in lace making?

NURSERY RHYMES AND FOLKLORE.

Fortunately for us there was a great movement during the 17<sup>th</sup> century to record our Traditional ballads from all over the United Kingdom. Foremost amongst these were Cecil Sharp.

He arrived in [Adelaide](#) in November 1882 and early in 1883 obtained a position as a clerk in the Commercial Bank of South Australia. He read some law, and in April 1884 became associate to the chief justice, [Sir Samuel James Way](#). He held this position until 1889 when he resigned and gave his whole time to music. He had become assistant organist at St Peter's cathedral soon after he arrived, and had been conductor of the government house choral society and the cathedral choral society. Later on he became conductor of the Adelaide Philharmonic, and in 1889 entered into partnership with I. G. Reimann as joint director of the Adelaide school of music. He was very successful as a lecturer but about the middle of 1891 the partnership was dissolved. The school was continued under Reimann, and in 1898 developed into the Elder conservatorium of music in connexion with the university. Sharp had made many friends and an address with over 300 signatures asked him to continue his work at Adelaide, but he decided to return to England and arrived there in January 1892.

It was after his return to the UK that he began to collect and publish what is probably the greatest source of Folk songs ever written.

The following is recorded about this ballad:

The tune 'as sung by the late Mrs. Sheridan' may be found in John Stafford Smith's *Musica Antiqua* (1812), vol. i. p. 65, and Motherwell's *Minstrelsy*, tune No. 7.

### **HUGH OF LINCOLN.**

He tossed the ball so high, so high,  
He tossed the ball so low;  
He tossed the ball in the Jew's garden,  
And the Jews were all below.

Oh, then out came the Jew's daughter,  
She was dressed all in green;  
Come hither, come hither, my sweet pretty fellow,  
And fetch your ball again.

There are many versions of this ballad recorded, the most modern being a song by Steely Span (I can't find the reference to that I am afraid, so I may be wrong!)

Most of us realize that children rather like to be "scared". The popularity of Grimm's Fairy tales can attest to that; children's stories that to us adults are really scary! So this rhyme is not different. However, Wright records that it was recognized that some of these songs were a bit frightening for the

young lace makers and that when this was recognized one of the girls would strike up with "Come Lasses and Lads", which would immediately calm the tensions of those effected by the gory tale.

MORE GRISSLY TELLS.

On page 185 Wright titillates us by mentioning another "gruesome ditty". This ended with

Shall I be so when I am dead?  
and the answer comes in sepulchral tones:  
Yes, you'll be so when you are dead;

This made me immediately search my nursery rhyme books and I came up with the following possibility for the tell.

### **There Was a Lady All Skin and Bone**

There was a lady all skin and bone,  
sure such a lady was never known:  
It happened upon a certain day,  
this lady went to church to pray.

When she came to the church stile,  
there she did rest a little while;  
when she came to the church yard,  
there the bells so loud she heard.

When she came to the church door,  
she stopped to rest a little more;  
when she came to the church within,  
the parson prayed 'gainst pride and sin.

On looking up, on looking down,  
she saw a dead man on the ground;  
and from his nose unto his chin,  
the worms crawled out, the worms crawled in.\*

Then she unto the parson said,  
Shall I be so when I am dead?  
O yes! O yes! The parson said,  
you will be so when you are dead.

One version I read had every other line "OOOOOOooooooooOOOOOOOO" I liked that idea! ☺

Whether they sung the full version or not I have no idea, but that is a gruesome tale if anything is.

The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes quotes its first version in print being 1810 in *Gammer Gurton's Garland*, and later version appears in 1842, which brings us about to the time about which we are discussing. So I am thinking that this is probably the rhyme he is talking about.

There appears to be a children's game associated with one or the other of these rhymes and particularly around the time of Halloween.

CONCLUSION:

I leave the conclusion to Thomas Wright and certain Mr. Shakespeare. On page 179 he writes the following.

That the practice of singing songs at the pillow was common even III Shakespeare's day is evident from the remark of the Duke in *Twelfth Night*:'

"O fellow, come, the song we had last night  
Mark it, Cesario, it is old and plain.  
The spinsters and the knitters in the SUD,  
And the free maids that weave their threads with bones  
Do use to sing it."  
1 Act II., Scene 4.

And then the clown breaks out into that pathetic and exquisite dirge beginning:

**"Come away, come away, Death!"**

Doubtless Shakespeare, who knew Buckinghamshire so well, founded these jeweled lines upon some uncouth ditty which he had actually heard sung at some Stony Stratford or Grendon Underwood pillow.

As might be expected the Buckinghamshire tells are similar in character to those with which Shakespeare' was evidently acquainted. Of artistry they are innocent, but coming from an impressionable people they abound in allusions to coffins, shrouds, corpses, bones, lightning flashes, sardonic laughter, hyena-like cries, and other lurid, gruesome, clammy or grizzly terrors:

**The ravens hoarse, the mandrake's hollow groan;**

## The shrieking owls which fly in the night alone.

*Tough girls, these young lace makers! ☺*

Here is one version of the full text of the Jewess Maiden.

### Traditional Ballads

#### 18. Hugh of Lincoln

FOUR and twenty bonny boys  
Were playing at the ba, [1](#)  
And by it came him sweet Sir Hugh,  
And he playd oer them a'.

He kicked the ba with his right foot, 5  
And catchd it wi his knee,  
And through-and-thro the Jew's window  
He gard the bonny ba flee.

He's doen him to the Jew's castell, 10  
And walkd it round about;  
And there he saw the Jew's daughter,  
At the window looking out.

"Throw down the ba, ye Jew's daughter,  
Throw down the ba to me!"  
"Never a bit," says the Jew's daughter, 15  
"Till up to me come ye."

"How will I come up? How can I come up?  
How can I come to thee?  
For as ye did to my auld father,  
The same ye'll do me." 20

She's gane till her father's garden,  
And pu'd an apple red and green;  
'Twas a' to wyle [2](#) him sweet Sir Hugh,  
And to entice him in.

She's led him in through ae dark door, 25  
And sae has she thro nine;  
She's laid him on a dressing-table,  
And stickit him like a swine.

And first came out the thick, thick blood,  
And syne came out the thin, 30  
And syne came out the bonny heart's blood;  
There was nae mair within.

She's rowd [3](#) him in a cake o lead,  
Bade him lie still and sleep;  
She's thrown him in Our Lady's draw-well, 35  
Was fifty fathom deep.

When bells were rung, and mass was sung,  
And a' the bairns came hame,  
When every lady gat hame her son,  
The Lady Maisry gat nane. 40

She's taen her mantle her about,  
Her coffer by the hand,  
And she's gane out to seek her son,  
And wanderd oer the land.

She's doen her to the Jew's castell, 45  
Where a' were fast asleep:  
"Gin ye be there, my sweet Sir Hugh,  
I pray you to me speak."

She's doen [4](#) her to the Jew's garden,  
Thought he had been gathering fruit: 50  
"Gin [5](#) ye be there, my sweet Sir Hugh,  
I pray you to me speak."

She heard Our Lady's deep draw-well,  
Was fifty fathom deep:  
"Whareer ye be, my sweet Sir Hugh, 55  
I pray you to me speak."

"Gae hame, gae hame, my mither dear,  
Prepare my winding sheet,  
And at the back o merry Lincoln

The morn I will you meet." 60

Now Lady Maisry is gane hame,  
Made him a winding sheet,  
And at the back o merry Lincoln  
The dead corpse did her meet.

And a' the bells o merry Lincoln 65

Without men's hands were rung,  
And a' the books o merry Lincoln  
Were read without man's tongue,  
And neer was such a burial  
Sin Adam's days begun. 70

**Note 1.** Entice. [[back](#)]

**Note 2.** Rolled. [[back](#)]

**Note 3.** Gone. [[back](#)]

**Note 4.** If. [[back](#)]

**Note 5.** Hole. [[back](#)]