

The Black Degree (The Black Decree)

The musical score is written on a single treble clef staff. It begins with a 4/4 time signature. The melody consists of quarter and eighth notes, with some rests. The lyrics are printed below the staff, aligned with the notes. The score includes a key signature change to one sharp (F#) and a time signature change to 5/4, then back to 4/4. The piece ends with a double bar line.

The black de - - gree spread all the count - ry round to
kill all young child - - - ren in their turn They
tore poor child - - - ren from their
moth - er's breast think - - ing to find Christ a mong the rest.

1. Let Christians all with one accord rejoice,
And praises sing, with heart as well as voice,
To God on high, for glorious things He's done,
In sending to us His beloved Son.
2. That blessed Babe and holy Child of love
Came down from heaven that we may reign above:
The happy news was brought on angels' wings,
Of our redemption by the King of kings.
3. An earthly wonder not to be denied
Born of a Virgin mother and a bride;
Not like a prince, in worldly pomp and state,
But poor and low, to make us heavenly great.
4. The night before that happy day of grace
The Virgin mother had no resting place:
She and her pious Joseph were so low
They knew not whither or which way to go.
5. For they were forced to wander up and down,
And could not find a lodging in the town;
But in an ox's stall where beasts are fed
The mother of our Lord was brought to bed.
6. No costly silks, no robes of rich attire,
Nor gaudy show, which rich ones do admire;
But in a manger the great Lord of life
Was nourished by a mother, maid, and wife.

7. Three wise-men by a star were thither brought,
And found the blessed Babe they long had sought
The best of spices and rich costly things
They humbly offered to the King of kings.
8. And rather than the Lord of life betray
They worshipped Him and went another way:
Which so enraged the wicked Herod then,
(A Jewish king, but very worse of men).
9. He caused young harmless infants to be killed;
All under two years old, their blood was spilled;
Sad cries and groans were heard in every street,
With mangled bodies, bleeding hands and feet.
10. Young tender babes with limbs in pieces torn,
On soldiers' spears with spite and horror borne:
Dear parents' tears could not their rage prevent,
Nor pity move the tyrant to repent.
11. The Black Decree went all the country round,
To kill and murder children sick and sound:
They tore young children from their mothers' breast,
Thinking to murder Christ among the rest.
12. But God above, Who knew what would be done,
Had sent to Egypt His beloved Son;
Where with His earthly parents He was fed,
Until the bloody tyrant he was dead.
13. What pains and labours did not Christ endure,²
To save our souls, and happiness secure!
Was always doing good, to let us see
By His example, what we ought to be.
14. He made the blind to see, the lame to go,
He raised the dead, which none but He could do;
He cured the lepers of injected evils,
And by His mighty power cast out devils.
15. He honoured marriage with a heavenly sign,
By turning water to the best of wine;
Five thousand hungry souls by Him were fed,
With two small fishes and five loaves of bread.
16. Sufficient plenty and a welcome treat
The wondering guests with thanks and praises eat,
Who gathering up the fragments of the feast,
Their wonder, like the loaves, was much increased.

17. Twelve baskets full, not half so much before,
Instead of wasting, still increasing more!
But yet for all the wonders that He wrought,
Ungrateful Jews still His destruction sought:
18. And, that their wicked purpose might not miss,
Bribed Judas, who betrayed Him with a kiss;
Which being done, away they took Him then,
And used Him as the very worse of men.
19. Spit in His face, and with reproachful scorn,
They put upon His head a crown of thorn:
Cried with one voice, and would not be denied,
To Pilate that He should be crucified.
20. This wicked judge, with base injustice now,
To please the crowd, did their request allow,
Against his conscience, he, to end the strife,
Condemned to death the blessed Lord of life.
21. Then to a cross the Saviour of mankind
Was led, a harmless Lamb, as was designed:
To save our souls, condemned by Adam's fall,
Without His death we had been ruined all.
22. His blessed hands and feet, with bitter pain,
Were nailed to the cross, with sad disdain;
With hateful spear they pierced His tender skin,
And let out blood to wash away our sin.
23. Thus blessed Jesus freely did resign
His precious soul to save both thine and mine;
Then let us all His mercies highly prize,
Who for our sins was made sacrifice.

Source: Sung by Charley Williams, Bream. Collected by Bob Patten and Andrew Taylor 19 November 1977.
Mr Williams only knew one verse of this song, equivalent to verse 11. The text above is from a broadside