

# *BRING A TORCH, JEANETTE, ISABELLA*

Traditional 14th c. French Provincial Dance Melody  
Fr. Lyrics, Émile Blémont, 1553; 18th c. Eng. trans. Edward C. Nunn

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The music for “*Bring a Torch, Jeannette, Isabella*” is very old, dating the 14th century. The song was not originally composed as sacred music at all, but as a lively court dance tune for the French nobility.

French lyrics were paired with this dance tune in the early 1500’s by Émile Blémont. The carol, with both words and music, first appeared in a French book of Christmas Carols published in 1553. In French, it is called, “*Un Flambeau, Jeanette, Isabelle*”. The text was translated into English in the 18th century by Edward Cuthbert Nunn. No biographical data was located for either Blémont or Nunn.

The lyrics tell the tale of the discovery of the birth of Christ and the journey to tell all the villagers and the ensuing celebration. As it turns out Jeanette Isabella are two people - Jeanette and Isabella. Two young girls who rush back to the village to tell the wonderful news. No one really knows for sure what the details might have been. Renowned French painter, Georges de La Tour, portrayed the story in a nativity painting. In the painting two young milk maids come to the stable to milk the cows, finding Baby Jesus. Filled with excitement, Jeanette and Isabella, the milk maids, light torches and rush back to their village to share the news.

Today in Province, France the children still dress as shepherds to carry torches and candles as they go to church for Midnight Mass while singing this and other carols.

~Tull