

Myths, Customs and Superstitions of New Year's Day

BY
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IN ANY attempt to trace the origin of the innumerable myths, customs and superstitions connected with the fetes and festivals of the calendar, the student is confronted with two problems: The strong probability of their having been primarily of religious significance, and thus the potsherds, as it were, of cults long forgotten, and the possibility of their having become garbled or altered in being handed down through the centuries. Pausanias 17 hundred years ago evidently realized this difficulty to the full when he wrote in his "Description of Greece:" "As to these fables of the Greeks I considered them childish when I began this work, but when I get as far as this book I formed this view: That those who were reckoned wise among the Greeks spoke of old in riddles and not directly, so I imagine the fables about Chronos to be Greek wisdom, of the traditions therefore about the gods I shall state such as I meet with."

Plutarch also warned us against approaching these studies in the spirit of skepticism and does not leave us in the dark as to his attitude of steering a middle path between absolute unbelief and blind trust. "In regard to legendary lore," he says, "I stand in the position of one who neither altogether believes nor altogether disbelieves. There are indeed some slender and obscure particles of truth scattered about in the mythology of the



INSURE A GOOD CROP BY WASSAILING THE ORCHARD

Egyptians, but they require a clever man to hunt them out, a man capable of getting great results from small data."

At the period when these two authors wrote, all learning and science were confined to a very narrow circle of initiates. The common folks were kept in strict ignorance of the true meaning of their festivals; the mysteries were a hidden book as to their true significance, and only the outward and visible sign of the celebrations came within their ken. How far the secrets were kept by these initiates—a combination compared with which our steel and sugar trusts sink into mere insignificance—is too well known to every student. Thus in many cases it is impossible to trace definitely the actual basis of these ancient myths and customs and any attempts, therefore, must necessarily remain much in the nature of a patchwork quilt. A scrap gathered here and there from the ancient writings helps to work up the quilt, but the ultimate stage has a somewhat crazy appearance.

It is all the more exasperating, because many of these early writers, such as Herodotus, Plutarch and others have stopped short in their screeds just when a few extra words would have eased the knots that now prevent us from unraveling the skein. They were initiates and thus sworn to silence. Their oaths, however, did not prevent them whetting our curiosity and leaving us in a position where, as Plutarch cynically remarks, it would indeed be a clever task to get "great results from small data."

Athenaens, another of the old Greek gossipers, in speaking of the policy of the Romans in adopting the customs of peoples whom they had conquered says: "For it is the conduct of prudent men to abide by those ancient institutions under which they and their ancestors have lived, and made war upon and subdued the rest of the world; and yet at the same time, if there were any useful or honorable institutions among the peoples whom they have subdued, those they take for their imitation at the same time as they take their prisoners. And this was the conduct of the Romans in olden time; for they, maintaining their national customs, at the same time introduced from the nations whom they had subdued every relic of desirable practices which they found." This, in a measure, was the policy of the early fathers in adapting heathen feasts and sacrifices to the festivals of the church. With them, however, it was rather a case of adaptation than of adoption, believing that the new order of things would come easier to the converts to the Christian religion if the changes were not made too sweeping nor too harsh. Thus it is that so many of the customs connected with our festivals have come down to us from time long prior to the birth of the Saviour.

Unlike the many customs connected with the celebration of Christmas, those of the beginning of the New Year seem to bear more of the stamp of paganism. At the same time such customs show a rather close resemblance, due in a large measure to the fact that both can be traced to the celebrations round the ancient festival of the Saturnalia and winter solstice, when the old year went out and the new came in; a period of general rejoicing, and it must be admitted of a great degree of rowdiness, noise and license which all the fulminations of church councils in the Middle Ages and city ordinances and orders of chiefs of police in these later days have been unable to suppress. The youngster of to-day with his horn is just as prominent in creating a racket as was his prototype of a couple of thousand years ago.

Of late years this period of noise has been largely restricted to the eves of Christmas and New Year, but formerly the period closely following Christmas day was one of continuous jollification. Mummers perambulated the streets of the towns and villages, and the Lord of Misrule, the Abbot of Unreason or the Abbas Stultorum held sway. The "Fete of Fools" was celebrated on the three days following Christmas, culminating on Holy Innocents day in a general jamboree, in which not even the churches were spared. Young people dressed themselves up as the great dignitaries of the church, and even the very officers seem to have been paraded and dances held in the churches. The second canon of the Council of Cognac, held in 1269, put under pain of excommunication all such as masqueraded as bishops, etc. At the councils held at Nantes in 1431, and at Bourges in 1438, fulminations were hurled against the "Fete of Fools," while as early as 1212 the celebration was abolished by the council held at Paris. Yet the custom of masquerading on the days following Christmas is not yet extinct in many districts of France and elsewhere, but the celebration has been shorn of much of its picturesqueness and at the same time of its extreme licentiousness.



THE BIBLE WAS TAKEN TO BED ON THE EVE OF NEW YEAR



THE MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE PRESENTED HER HUSBAND WITH A PAIR OF TROUSERS

The Lord of Misrule had jurisdiction in both the great English universities from Christmas to Twelfth day. He regulated the celebrations and directed the plays acted at this period, for which he received a regular stipend, but from the records of his rule that have been handed down to us it would rather seem that he himself was sadly in need of being regulated and disciplined. Each city had its similar functionary, and his jurisdiction was not limited to this festive season; he had the regulation of all the festivals of the year. The reign of the Lord of Misrule may be said to have ended when Cromwell and his "crop-eared" Puritans took charge of the government, and while there was some attempt to revive his lordship after the restoration of Charles II., the bones had become too dried and the flesh shriveled up—he was a mere mummy of his former self. In Scotland the Abbot of Unreason was suppressed much earlier—1555—by the legislature, but whether such strong action was due to the spread of Puritanism or to the unbridled scenes of disorder is a question. Under Henry VIII., (1540) the procession of children on Childermas, or Innocents day, was forbidden in England by proclamation. There are, however, still a few traces of the Lord of Misrule. The English Christmas pantomimes open on December 26—Boxing day—and have now become as much of an established institution as ever the Lord of Misrule was in his palmy days. Of recent years the institution has found favor on this side of the Atlantic. The masquerading on the streets of the Lord of Misrule and his followers has been merely transferred to the boards of the theater. In many parts of France masquerading by children is still in vogue during the three days following Christmas, and in most countries something analogous is to be found. Sometimes the feature is kept up until Twelfth day, while in some sections the fun does not commence until New Year's day.

These first three days have been specially consecrated to the memory of saints and martyrs—St. Stephen on the 26th, St. John the Evangelist on the 27th, and holy innocents or Childermas on the 28th.

The fact that the day next after Christmas was dedicated to St. Stephen, the protomartyr, shows with what veneration he was held by the early church. On this day, in many parts of Ireland, and in the Isle of Man, it is still the custom of the boys to hunt the wren. The origin of this curious but cruel custom is hidden in the mist of ages and thus offers another difficulty of "getting great results from small data." One legend current in Ireland, and told by Lady Wilde, is to the effect that on one occasion, when the Irish troops were approaching to attack a portion of Cromwell's army, the wrens came and perched on the Irish drums, and by their tapping and noise aroused the English soldiers, who fell on the Irish soldiers and killed them all. This tale is a close analogue to that in which the cackling of geese is said to have saved Rome from capture, which even the staid Roman historian, Livy, seems to treat with a show of belief. The custom, however, dates back much further than Cromwell and his Ironsides. In County Leitrim the dead birds are carried from house to house tied to a pole or bunch of furze, covered with ribbons, etc., the boys chanting:

The wren, the wren, the king of all birds,
On St. Stephen's Day he was caught in the furze;
Although he is little his family is great,
So rise up mistress and give us a treat.

The mistress has to turn in a few pence to the boys, the "jackpot" thus created being opened by the boys at the end of the day.

In the Isle of Man the boys give a feather of the wren to each good wife who contributes the necessary coin, and it can well be imagined that by the end of the day the appearance of the bird is somewhat dilapidated. It is then buried on the sea shore with certain mock ceremonies. In former years the interment was made in the churchyard.

It was and is still the custom in many parts of England to bleed the horses on St. Stephen's day. The efficacy of this treatment on this particular day, as a preventive of all equine ailments, was thought to be undoubted, but even old Tusser seems to have had his doubts on the

subject when he says in his "Five Points of Husbandry:"

For Christmas be passed, let horses be let blood;
For manie a purpose it dooth them much good;
The day of St. Steeven old fathers did use;
If that do mislike thee, some other day chuse.

The commonsense reason for bleeding the horses on this day was that both man and beast had the three days following Christmas day as a holiday. In parts of Bohemia and elsewhere among the Slavic peoples of Europe the master of the house gets no work out of his servants from Christmas to Innocents day, and in many sections the holiday and general suspension of work is kept up until Twelfth day—Epiphany. Among the Valaks there is a very significant custom. On the morning of St. Stephen's day the mistress of the house presents her husband with a pair of trousers in token of her obedience during the ensuing year. Evidently the suffragette campaign has not reached into these remote Slavic regions.

Holy Innocents' day, or Childermas (December 28), commemorates the massacre of the children in Bethlehem, under Herod. This in itself is sufficient to explain its early recognition by the church. The superstition that the day is an unlucky one—"dies nefastus"—is not only widely spread all over Europe, but is deeply rooted and can be traced back many hundreds of years.

The superstition was strong all through the middle ages. In England, in the fifteenth century, it was thought so inauspicious that the day set for the coronation of Edward IV. (Sunday), happening to be Childermas, the ceremony was postponed until the following day. In the County of Suffolk at this day the superstition is carried even further, and on whatever day of the week Childermas may happen to fall, that day is held to be unlucky throughout the year. The commencement of any new task is thought to be certain to be followed by failure. Addison gives an instance of this belief in the Spectator of March 1, 1710-'11. "Thursday," says she, "No, child, if it please God! You shall not begin upon Childermas day. Tell your writing master that Friday will be soon enough."

The custom of whipping the children as a reminder of the event commemorated by Childermas was common in France, and some parts of Normandy to-day there is still a remnant existing among the country folks, but the religious significance has been partly lost. This method of assisting the memory of the luckless urchin by scoring his epidermis was formerly in vogue on other occasions than Holy Innocents' day. In England it was formerly a common practice during the riding of the boundaries of parishes and manors on Ascension day to whip the youngsters at every important or disputed point. This "Christening in the days of his youth" was remembered ever afterward, and the particular stone, cairn or streamlet marking the metes and bounds between adjoining parishes was thus indelibly mapped on his gray matter—a proceeding quite as efficacious as a survey.

Although the festivities connected more closely with the celebration of Christmas day have completely overshadowed those of the New Year, still there are not a few corners in Christendom wherein the latter season is held in much greater repute. In Scotland, in particular, it is the great holiday of the year, and on the eve and the day of New Year the canny Scot lets himself out with a vim. It would seem as if his spirits, pent up for a whole twelvemonth, find vent at this particular season.

In France, Roman law and custom have impressed themselves perhaps more strongly than elsewhere in Europe, not even excepting Italy itself, and the close political friendship which existed between Scotland and France previous to the ascension of James VI. to the throne still finds expression in the country to the north of the Tweed in a much stronger fashion than is generally believed. Many of the lowland terms of to-day are merely French in a Scottish guise. It is perhaps more to this close political entente than to the spread of the Puritan doctrines—doctrines which held everything in abomination, that smacked in the slightest degree of church festivals—that so many of the customs and superstitions now current among the canny Scots so closely resemble those of France. Christmas at one time was almost as much of a festival in Scotland as to the south of the border, and it seems that in the cities, at least, it is again showing recrudescence. But among the rank and file of the people, with the "Man in the Street," it is the New Year that holds his heart and at the same time disturbs his digestion and addles his brain. Any one who has been in the "Canny Toun o' Edinbro' or Glasgow on a New Year's eve realizes the spirit of good-will that reigns even if his ears be split by the pandemonium of noise and his eyes suffer by the reek of the torches, and it is rarely that the Scot in all his jollification at this period construes liberty as license. The custom of welcoming in the New Year has, however, on occasions,



THE FARMER OF NORTH WESTERN FRANCE SEEMS TO FIND THE MONTH THE PRICE OF WHEAT WILL BE THE HIGHEST

been marked by unpleasant features. On the eve of New Year, 1812, the hoodlums of Edinburgh took advantage of the festival to rob unsuspecting citizens. Two of the citizens died from the effects of the maltreatment at the hands of these rowdies, of whom three were executed as an example. This unfortunate incident threatened to put an end to the celebrations.

With the Scots, the eve of New Year is known particularly as "Hogmanay." Throughout the northeastern counties of England it is known as "Hagmaney," but in many districts of the latter it is the entire week preceding the New Year, rather than the last day of the year. There have been many attempts by philologists to get at the derivation of the term, and it has even been suggested that it is a corruption of two Greek words, signifying "the holy moon or month." Opinion, however, leans toward its French origin—"Au gui l'an menez" (bring in the mistletoe), and "Au gui l'an neuf" (to the mistletoe the New Year), both in allusion to the ceremonial gathering of the plant by the Druids. In almost every district in France we find the term in a more or less corrupted or dialectal form. The Scottish custom of the children going from house to house singing a short verse and begging the "guid wife" for a small present is identically the same as that known all over France.

Get up, guid wife, and shake yere feathers,
An' dinna think that we are beggars,
For we're yere bairns come out the day,
So rise and gie's oor Hogmanay.

chants the little Scotch kiddie, and the analogue of the doggerel can be found in every village of France. As the Scottish versetel shows, the "hogmanay" applies to the presents to the children, and has not the custom of giving presents at this season endured for centuries? Ovid, in his Fasti, alludes to the custom among the Romans of his day. Then the presents do not seem to have been at all costly and were more symbolical than otherwise. The palm-date and dried fig with the jar of honey and the small coin were the gifts, and it does not need any great stretch of imagination to guess their symbolic meaning. The cakes, fruit and luck-penny are still given the children—they are their "hogmanay."

The superstition that the first person entering the house on New Year's morning, or the first one met during the day, presages good or bad luck during the ensuing year is almost universal. The first to cross the threshold or "first foot" has thus a peculiar significance and many are the precautions taken that he be of the lucky variety. We mention "he" for except in a very few isolated instances the superstition that should a woman be the "first-foot" ill-luck will follow is almost universal. Moreover, he must be a dark man—a red-headed man is anathema. A splay-footed, a pigeon-toed, squint-eyed or an individual whose eyebrows closely approximate, in fact any bodily or mental deformation carries bad luck with it. Yet even here we find a few exceptions which rather tend to disturb our belief in the infallibility of the rule. In the Bradwell District of Northumberland a light-haired and splay-footed individual is preferred. In parts of Lancashire and Yorkshire a blonde "first foot" is reckoned quite lucky, while in the Maritime Alpine districts a hump-backed visitor on New Year's day is held to bring in great luck with him. In Scotland the prejudice against a red-haired "first foot" is very strong and in the Isle of Man and all through Ireland it is quite as pronounced.

The superstition of ill-luck being attached to red hair is very ancient. Among the ancient Egyptians and Jewish people it was known. Typhon is said to have had this particular color to his "thatch," and red-haired men were abused at certain festivals, as Plutarch tells us in his "Moralia." Cain and Judas Iscariot are both said to have had the crimson topknot, while a well-known legend current among the Jews says that this peculiar tint was the effect of falling down and worshipping the golden calf. In Norse and Gaelic legend we find that the hero is warned against a "ginger-headed" individual.