

Christmas Customs = and Superstitions

—By
—Elizabeth Ferguson Scott,
—In Lippincott's Magazine.

"'Twas Christmas broached the mightiest ale,
'Twas Christmas told the merriest tale!
A Christmas gambol oft could cheer
The poor man's heart through half the year."
—SCOTT.

CROWDING in the train of Old Christmas are customs and superstitions that have endured since the pagan Briton worshipped under his oak tree, and the hardy Saxon feasted in honor of Thor, or the Roman broke forth in wildest orgies during the Saturnalia.

The Yule-tide transports us to the cherished feast of the Teutonic races, when Freyer, or Fro, the sun-god, awoke and lighted up his wheel once more.

Our Anglo-Saxon ancestors sang to the Christmas boar-head, just as did the valiant Norsemen. Just why the boar's head was the dish of honour at this midwinter feast is hard to determine; might it not be because it was a boar that drew Freyer's ship, Skidbladnir, over the woods and meadows, making light all the dark places by his golden bristles?

The Romans held a feast at this season in honour of the birth of Mithras and the return of the sun with life-giving rays.

The Saxons called their midwinter feast Mother Night, parent of all other nights, also Yule. The midwinter feast, wherever celebrated, was distinguished by excessive revelry, feasting, etc.

The Christianization of the pagan resulted in the engrafting of his customs on the Christian celebration, frequently quite obscuring its holier significance.

When Pope Gregory sent Saint Augustine to convert Saxon England, he directed him to accommodate, as far as possible, Christian to heathen ceremonies, that the people might not be startled, and in particular he advised him to allow them on certain festivals to kill and eat a great number of oxen to the glory of God the Father, as they had formerly done in honor of the devil.

On the Christmas next after his arrival he baptized many thousands, and permitted the usual celebration, only prohibiting the intermingling of Christians and pagans in the dances. From these early pagan-Christian ceremonies are derived many English holiday customs.

The custom of decorating the houses with evergreens is very ancient. The Jews practised it in the Feast of Tabernacles, a feast very like our Christmas.

The world-tree, Yggdrasil, of the Scandinavians, was an evergreen, stretching its branches to the uttermost parts of the earth, its topmost boughs to heaven, its roots to hell.

The green of the pagan and ancient Jewish festivals seems most appropriate at the feast in honour of "the one whose name is the Branch."

The favourite evergreens of the Saxons were ivy, holly, bays.

"Whosoever against holly do cry
In a rope shall be hung full high,
Allelulia!

Get ivy and hull (holly), woman, deck up thine house."

Aubrey cites a curious custom of Oxfordshire. The maid-servant was wont to ask the man for ivy to trim the house, and if he refused,

or neglected it, a pair of his breeches were stolen and nailed upon the gateway.

The holly was the most prized of all the evergreens. Dr. Turner calls it holy and holy-tree.

The mistletoe also belongs to Christmas. Its very mention carries one back past the Druids to Æneas, who could descend to Avernus only if he bore to Proserpine the "golden-rayed plant." With what eagerness he sought its hiding-place "among the dark foliage of the two-fold tree!" With what joy he plucked it, his open sesame to the infernal regions!

What pictures it recalls of ancient Druids going in solemn procession for the annual cutting on the sixth day of the moon nearest the New Year, the officiating priest, clad in white robes, bearing a golden sickle with which to detach the plant, which was reverently received on a white cloth. To add to the solemnity, bulls, and even human victims, were offered in its honour.

It was supposed to keep away the witches, and the people accordingly paid the Druids handsomely for a bit of the precious plant to hang about the neck for a charm. There is an old superstition that holding the mistletoe in the hand will not only enable a person to see ghosts, but will force them to speak to him. Vallance says it was held sacred because its berries grew in clusters of three. It has changed its mystic power with respect to witches, for one standing to-day under its golden green has drawn to her kisses, one for every leaf.

It has not been a great number of years since one might have seen, in certain sections of the United States, children and young people circling about the hearthstone where the mistletoe was to tell somebody's fortune. Two leaves were placed upon the stone in front of the blazing fire, and any one desiring to know if he or she was loved had but to name the leaves for himself and his beloved. This he might do privately, and thus spare his feelings if the fortune was adverse. When the leaves began to shrivel under the influence of the heat, they moved or "jumped" as chanced, either farther apart or nearer together. Then it was the old story of the marguerites over again, "He loves me, he loves me not."

Kissing beneath the mistletoe dates from the Druids. According to tradition, the maid not kissed beneath the mistletoe at Christmas goes husbandless another year.

One of the most delightful and important of the Christmas ceremonies was the bringing in of the Yule-log. According to an English writer, this was a massive piece of wood, frequently the rugged and grotesquely marked root of a tree.

A pleasant picture this of the Yule-log being drawn through the forest with shouting and laughter, while each wayfarer reverently salutes it, since he knows it to be full of good promises and that in its flames will be burnt out old wrongs and heartburnings. As it comes into the great hall, the living-room of the old castle, each member of the family sits upon or salutes it in turn, and sings a Yule-song, after which all drink to a Merry Christmas and a Happy

New Year. A favourite Yule-song began with,—

"Welcome be ye that are here,
Welcome all and make good cheer,
Welcome all, another year,
Welcome yule."

Those tending the Yule-log were careful to bear in mind,—

"Pat must be kept wherewith to teende
The Christmas log next yeare,
And where 'tis safely kept, the fiend
Can do no mischief there."

The chief crown of the festival was the was-sail bowl. There is a story that the first wassail in England was offered by Rowena, daughter of Hengist, to the British king Vortigern, with the salute, "Lord King, wassheil" to which he responded, "Drinc heil," and saluted her. The sequel to this story is the marriage of Rowena to the British king.

The worshippers of Thor and Odin drank largely to their gods, and when converted drank as generously to the Virgin, apostles, and saints, by and by honouring in their potations one another: thus drinking healths originated.

Mention is made in Shakespeare's plays of "wassel." In Hamlet, the king "takes his rouse, keeps wassail, and the swaggering upspring reels,"—a custom which, Hamlet scornfully observes, is "more honoured in the breach than the observance."

The Britons were justly celebrated both for their capacity for drinks and for their skill in originating them. The early drinks were wine, mead, cider, ale, pigment, clarre, and hippocras. Ale was especially esteemed.

"The nut-brown ale, the nut-brown ale,
Puts down all drinks when it is stale."

The jolly, wandering musicians confidently expected a black-jack of ale and a Christmas pie

A remnant of the English wassail seems to have drifted to us in the Christmas eggnog. Not more than two decades ago, the mistress of many an American and Canadian home was wont to rise before daybreak and with the help of her maids prepare a huge bowl of eggnog, of which each member of the family drank, servants as well, and to which each chance guest of the Christmas morn was invited.

Not many years ago, the entire Christmas week was generally considered a period of feasting and revelry in many parts of the country, although never extending to Twelfth Night, as in England since the days of King Alfred.

There are many superstitions connected with the coming of Christmas itself. To the cock has, from time immemorial, been attributed unwonted energy and sagacity at that season. Even now it is common to hear one say, when he is heard crowing in the stillness of the November and December nights, "The cock is crowing for Christmas." He is supposed to do this for the purpose of scaring off the evil spirits from the holy season.

The bees were said to sing, the cattle to kneel, in honour of the manger, and the sheep to go in procession in commemoration of the visit of the angel to the shepherds.

Howison, in his Sketches of Upper Canada, relates that on one moonlit Christmas eve he saw an Indian creeping cautiously through the woods. In response to an inquiry, he said, "Me watch to see deer kneel. Christmas night all deer kneel and look up to Great Spirit."

An English writer says that two countrymen who watched the cattle in the barns reported that two only knelt, but they fell upon their knees with a groan almost human. They were much angered that he received this story with incredulity.

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