

WHY NOT A NEW CHILDERMAS?

A Suggestion for a Children's Festival on the First of April

(By A. M. Cowan, London, England)

Appreciation of art in any recognisable form is one of the characteristics of the age we live in, and there is no lack of artistic quality in some of the May Day revels that are being revived with more or less success in various parts of the kingdom. But nothing of the kind can be said for April-fooling; it has in it nothing of that extraordinarily vital essence that ensured length of days for so many of the old pagan festivals, so that they received baptism, as it were, and were actually admitted to the Calendar of the Saints when the old gods gave place in the fulness of time to the Christian religion. Hunting the gowk is a pastime that Dame Reason long looked at askance and has now swept into limbo with a flourish of her broom. Here and there one still finds traces of it, just as the old gods long held out in depths of the primeval forest, but its day is past. And so it comes about that All Fools' Day, like St. Valentine's, is represented at the Round Table of the year by a vacant chair.

The origin of April-fooling has been much obscured by tradition. Attempts have been made with doubtful success, but with no little erudition and ingenuity, to trace it back to the religious mummeries of the Middle Ages, the sacred festivals of the Hindoos, the Crucifixion of Our Lord, the fabled quest of Ceres for her ravished daughter and even to the dove that fluttered forth from Noah's Ark. The reader will doubtless expect to find the truth in a much less picturesque setting, and indeed it is quite a simple story after all.

In olden times New Year's Day was celebrated on the 25th of March. The festivities lasted eight days, culminating on the 1st of April in a general feast of unreason in which practical joking played a conspicuous part. When the new calendar was adopted, January took over from March the duty of opening the year, but the fooling was left where it was, separated from the New Year festivities altogether. The reason might perhaps be expressed after this fashion: The men of science were free to start the year in Janwar blasts if they chose, seeing that they must doubtless be guided by the stars in their courses; but the impulses and emotions of human nature could not be expected to follow the signs of the zodiac. The joyous spirit of the spring was the very essence of the whole business and so the practical jokers' day in the calendar remained unaltered.

But this judicial separation was fatal. At the tail end of the festivities that celebrated the birth of a New Year, practical joking was harmless enough, but it could not stand alone. Perhaps if it had been clever fooling, the occasion might have developed into an anniversary of wit and humor that would have made the 1st of April a joy forever. But wit and humor were conspicuously absent from the gowk business. The thing grew more and more monotonous. Even the children got tired and at last it expired from sheer lack of public interest.

That a sacred origin should be claimed for such a custom is not the least curious episode in its history. The date of the Crucifixion is a subject on which, as everybody knows, the authorities have never been able to agree, opinion being divided between the 18th of March, in the year 29 A. D., and the 3rd of April in 33 A. D. Roughly speaking, it all depends on when the Jewish Passover was held, and that again turns upon the phases of the moon 2000 years ago.

In support of the claim that All Fools Day commemorates the judicial mockery of Our Lord's trial, we are re-

minded how He was sent from Annas to Caiaphas, from Caiaphas to Pilate, from Pilate to Herod, from Herod back to Pilate. It is all very ingenious, but in the phrase of Lord Jeffrey, this will never do. There is far more to be said for the alleged derivation from the mediaeval mummeries of Innocents Day, otherwise known as Childermas.

The word Childermas has a right good Saxon ring about it to begin with. It was the feast in honour of the very first martyrs of the church, the innocent babes, who were massacred by Herod's frenzied order, in the hope that the infant Christ would surely be amongst them. In the Middle Ages Childermas was the children's day of days; parental authority was suspended and from their specially chosen Boy Bishop downwards, the bairns were allowed to do very much as they liked. Apparently the license was not confined to the children, for the day came to be known everywhere as the Feast of Fools and practical joking was always very much in evidence. Consequently there is at least a semblance of reason for this particular claim.

In the Huli festival a far older Feast of Fools is still celebrated annually in India, finishing on the 31st of March with a general outburst of fooling and particularly that form of it which we call hunting the gowk. But this has never been divorced from its context and the festival has kept it alive. It is distinctly curious that the gowk business is common to Europe and Asia; it is quite possible, as some believe, that we got it from the Hindoos rather than from the Romans.

The Romans kept their great Saturnalia in December; its main characteristic was topsey-turveydom, as when the master waited upon his reclining slave. In early Christian times the Feast of Saturn was converted into the Feast of Fools and a new feature was introduced in the shape of the ass. In the pageant it stood beside the manger at Bethlehem, bore the Virgin and Child into Egypt, and carried the Lord to Jerusalem. Here we have the *fons et origo* of those Miracle Plays that had such a vogue in the Middle Ages, until unreason was carried to absurdity and discredit fell on the whole performance.

In dismissing the congregation, the priest was enjoined by the rubric to bray like an ass three times, the people responding after the same amazing fashion. Then the ass was led towards the altar, the people singing a hymn that began with this stanza, the original of course being in late Latin.

From the regions of the East,
Blessings on the bonny beast,
Came the donkey, stout and strong,
With our packs to pace along.
Bray, Sir Donkey, bray!

Then the whole congregation would bray in solemn chorus three times. After this the April-fooling must have seemed quite an intellectual exercise. At any rate it was a popular pastime when Burns was writing his *Twa Brigs* with its line, "Conceited gowk, puffed up wi' windy pride." A hundred years later the game was still kept up after a fashion. Lovers were, of course, favorite victims. As Romeo appeared below Juliet's window in response to a bogus invitation from the lady, a chorus of voices would be heard singing this glee from a safe distance:

"Tis the first day of Aprile,
Hunt the gowk another mile."

Hundreds of Londoners, the victims of a joker's postcard, once flocked to the Tower of London on a Sunday to witness "the ancient ceremony of washing the white lions." That hoax is still remembered by the Tower warders. The