

Rise and Fall of the May-Pole.

THE winter is now past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers have appeared in our land, and—May is here, this sweet, flush maiden of '97. She has come, this beautiful daughter of Main the goddess of growth, bringing with her blue skies, sunny days, laughing streams, leafy groves and flowery nooks, that give the fair promise of a glorious summer.

In these prosaic days she confers more favors than she receives; but the time was, when her advent was hailed with much external pomp and ceremony, especially in England. But that was when England was 'merrie England'—a long time ago, when her coming infused into 'lasses and lads' the spirit of a frolicsome madness, which evidenced itself in their heads, in their hearts and in their limbs. Then she was worshipped as the goddess of youth, beauty, joyousness and poetry.

With poets, sweet May has ever been a favorite theme. Chaucer and Tennyson, and all the greatest bards between, have recorded themselves amongst the number of her most devout worshippers, and, but that space forbids, it would be interesting to review all the pretty sayings they have made about her,—more than enough to turn the head of a less modest and lovely maiden.

With the gay, old Father of English verse she was always a prime favorite, he says:

'May pricketh every gentle heart,
And maketh him out of his sleep to start,
And saith Arise, and do thine observance.'

About Chaucer's time the 'observance' of May was similar to what it is now in Canada, more of the heart than in the head. Maidens, in their maying, gathered May-flowers, and wove them into chaplets gay to deck their bonny hair.

But, as Tennyson wisely says,

'In the spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love';

and this simple custom of the maidens enhancing their looks with the spoils of May, bye and bye, wrought sad havoc in the hearts of the young men, who, too weak to withstand the temptation, sought about for an excuse to make a closer acquaintance with beauty. Guided by the same spirit of 'doing their observance,' they banded together, betook themselves to the grove, and cut down a fine, straight sapling. This, with much bashful ceremony,—for the wenches were looking on—they set upon the village green as an offering to sweet May, who, being mightily pleased, favored the designs of the ardent swains. Of course, the tender twigs drooped, and the May-tree soon assumed a most forlorn and bedraggled appearance, altogether at variance with the bright season of foliage and flowers.

The nymphs sighed, and the swains scratched their puzzled noddles, so that the gentle heart of May was moved to compassion. She, therefore, in a dream of course, put it into the mind of a sly, esthetic nymph to clear the mournful sapling of its branches, and to decorate it with a crown and festoons of flowers, which could be replaced at will. And so, between the nymphs and the swains, it was done, and the first May-pole ap-

peared, and took its place in the 'merrie' land.

Then a strange thing happened.

These nymphs and swains stood round their newly-erected trophy, like a ring of worshippers round a shrine, surveying their handiwork, and they saw that it was good. Now, whether Jack sought Jill or Jill sought Jack will never be known, but this circle, hand clasped in hand, in less than half an hour, began to revolve, at first in silence and with blushes, then with much laughter and less blushing, and finally with singing which led to dancing, and the first May-pole revel was an accomplished fact.

But dancing is tiring work under any conditions. The lads grew thirsty and the lasses giddy, which led to the erection of booths and arbors, where they could refresh themselves and rest. Then the government made May Day a public holiday, and in time the festival assumed the character and proportions of a fair.

It was not to be expected that such a display of feminine charm and grace could long continue without arousing rivalries and petty jealousies, which, for the sake of peace and order, led to the election of a 'Queen of the May.'

To such a height of perfection, then, had the May festivities arrived in the reign of Queen Bess, who appears to have been just as wild after pageants and mummings and spectacles as any of her subjects.

Now, all this seems harmless enough compared, let us say, with skirt-dancing, sea-bathing at fashionable resorts, bicycle bloomers, and one or two other fashions that have not as yet won universal approval, but humanity does not change much as the ages glide by. Consequently May-pole dances were regarded as the inspiration and antics of the evil one and his imps by a certain class of persons, who were deemed by Queen Bess too critical and over-zealous for the age in which they lived. These were the Puritans, one of whom, a man of the name of Stubbs, paid the penalty of his temerity in openly condemning the May-pole dances and other national revels with the loss of his right hand.

Mr. Stubbs, however, managed to leave on record his unchanged opinion on the subject of the May-pole, 'that foul idol,' which, he tells us, 'they are wont to bring home with twenty yoke of oxen, each ox having its horns tipped with a sweet nose-gay of flowers. And the May-pole, bound also with flowers and fluttering ribbons, being reared in the ground, they bind green boughs about it; they set up their summer halls and arbors, and then they fall to feasting and leaping and dancing round about it.'

But Mr. Stubbs had his revenge on the May-pole afterwards, though he was not there to see; for, in the turmoil of revolution, it was swept out of existence by an imperious decree of the Commonwealth, which was, as every student of English history knows, a very unwise decree—for the Commonwealth. It is a marvel how a genius like Oliver Cromwell could know so much, and yet so little about the inherent spirit of his own countrymen

—but he beat the Dutch, and made England a terror on the seas.

It is bad policy on the part of a revolutionist to meddle with the ancient customs, pastimes and pleasures of the people, before he is prepared to offer something better in lieu of them. The rigid, rueful regime of the Commonwealth was sufficient to fill a score of Commonwealths in England; for the English are essentially a joyous and sanguine people. Their silent but vigorous protest against being forced to take their pleasures sadly quickly grew into a desire for the return of the second Charles.

With the restoration of royalty came the restoration of the May-pole pastimes, and the introduction of many others of a more questionable character. To remind the people of the time of the interdict, rustic poets were wont to make sarcastic allusion to it, as may be plainly discerned in the following lines:

'Come, lasses and lads, get leave o' your dads,
And away to the May-pole hie;
For every fair has a sweet-heart there,
And the fiddler standing by.'

The May pole dance flourished for many a long year after the Restoration, and many a gay 'little Alice' sang:

'To-morrow 'ill be of all the year the maddest,
merriest day,
For I'm to be Queen o' the May, mother, I'm to be
Queen o' the May;'

though we trust none lived to lament the day so piteously as Tennyson's 'little Alice' did.

'Last May we made a crown of flowers: we had a merry day;

Beneath the hawthorn on the green they made me Queen of May;

And we danced about the May-pole and in the hazel copse,

Till Charles's Wain came out above the tall white chimney-tops.'

But times and customs change. The May-pole in England is practically a thing of the past, though it is still the practice—also a waning one—in many parts of the country to deck the horses on May day with ribbons and rosettes.

Alas, how the roses fade! But they leave the perfect remembrance of the sweetness of a time.

It is a sweet and tender warning—that of Longfellow's:—

'Maiden that read'st this simple rhyme
Enjoy thy youth—it will not stay;
Enjoy the fragrance of thy prime,
For, oh! it is not always May.'

—THOS. SWIFT.

MAN.

ALL men have run the race of life,
But what have all men won?
Most have gained nothing by the strife,—
Most men have nothing done.

But those who still in mem'ry live
Are cherished for their works;
There is no good that man can give,
But in which labor lurks.

Man is not made by face or hands,
Or muscles great to lift,
Nor is he made by wealth or lands;
God's spirit is the gift.

GEORGE ALLAN

