

Calendar of Customs and Festivals.

ADDENDA. December 24.

A rite practised on Christmas Eve as well as on New Year's Eve in many parts of Great Britain, but especially in the south and west, was that of wassailing the fruit trees. A bowl of cider and a cake from the ritual meal of Christmas Eve or New Year's Eve was taken to the orchard; the cake was placed on a branch of the tree and the cider poured over the trunk. This ensured the fertility of the tree in the coming year. In Sussex a doggerel set of verses—the relic of a charm—was sometimes said as the cider was poured out, while the line, "Give earth and she'll not fail," which occurs in the Hampshire song, clearly shows the intention of the rite.

An interesting example of a blending of pagan and Christian is seen in the Cornish belief that on Christmas Eve the 'little people' (fairies) gathered at the bottom of a mine and celebrated a midnight mass.

December 25.

On Christmas Day a branch of the flowering thorn at Glastonbury was brought to London for presentation to the king and queen. This thorn was the staff of Joseph of Arimathea, who, on arriving at Glastonbury, thrust it into the ground on Dec. 25, when straightway it budded, bloomed, and withered. Henceforth on every Christmas Day it burst into bloom.

Owing to the change in the calendar, some confusion arose in the popular mind as to the date on which the festival of Christmas should be celebrated. This is still seen in the observation of Old Christmas Day on Jan. 6. In Yorkshire, to solve the difficulty, it was customary to listen at the hives of bees, as they began to buzz at the very hour on which Christ was born.

December 31.

NEW YEAR'S EVE.—A number of customs practised on Christmas Eve also appear on New Year's Eve. Such is the custom of 'wassailing,' when children or sometimes young girls go from house to house carrying a wassail bowl decked with ribbons and evergreens, which they offer to the inmates, as they sing a wassail song. Sometimes the wassail bowl was celebrated in the household, when the head of the family prepared a bowl of spiced ale from which he drank the health of the family and then passed it to each member, who did likewise. In Derbyshire this was combined with a form of divination. A cold posset was brewed of milk, ale, currants, eggs, and spice, in which was placed the wedding ring of the hostess. Each one present laddled up the posset. The one fortunate enough to 'catch' the ring would marry within the year.

HOGMANAY.—In Scotland it was customary on the last day of the year, known as Hogmanay, for children to go from door to door to receive gifts. In remoter parts a sheet was worn, doubled up in front to serve as a pocket in which the doles of oaten bread were placed. On coming to each door the children cried 'Hogmanay,' and sometimes a hogmanay song was sung.

The derivation and meaning of the word hogmanay is uncertain. It is recorded that it was an ancient custom in Franconia for the youth of both sexes to go about for two or three days before Christmas singing carols and wishing a happy New Year, for which they received gifts of pears, apples, nuts, and money. It has therefore been suggested that the name of the similar practice in Scotland and the north of England has been derived from a French greeting to the mistletoe, *Au guy l'an neuf*, itself to be traced to the Druids. In France on New Year's Eve bands of young people

of both sexes roamed the country in fantastic dress, collecting money for "the lady in the straw," under a leader known as Rollet Follet. As they disturbed the vigils they were forbidden to visit the churches in 1598, and were finally suppressed owing to their disorderly conduct in 1668. Their cry, *Au gui menez tiré liré maint du blanc et point du bis*, has been suggested as the origin of the Scottish "Hogmanay trololay, gi' us o' your white bread and none o' your grey." More learned derivations from the Greek and Hebrew are even less convincing.

Apart from the derivation of its name, the meaning of the custom is clear. It is one of the communal processional customs in which the gift ensures prosperity to the donor, similar to the wassail and the St. Stephen's day procession of the wren. In the Highlands the Hogmanay custom included a sacrificial victim. A man was dressed in the hide of a bull, and was attended by young men, each armed with a staff on which was a piece of raw hide. They ran three times round each house in the direction of the sun, the young men beating the hide of the bull, and at the same time striking the walls of the house. This ensured the incidence of good luck. When they entered the house they uttered a blessing on it, and then singeing the piece of raw hide attached to their staves in the fire, they held it under the nose of each individual and each animal in the house, thus ensuring freedom from misfortune, disease, and witchcraft.

In addition to the hogmanay, *guisarts*—boys with blackened faces and in fantastic dress—performed plays, similar to the English mumming plays, including a combat and the death and resuscitation of a principal character. This custom was suppressed by the influence of the Scottish church.

In the north of Ireland, children ensured good luck by going round and throwing twisted wisps of straw in at each door, a custom which may be connected with St. Brigid.

FIRE CUSTOMS.—At Biggar, in Lanarkshire, the old year was 'burnt out.' The day was spent in collecting brushwood and other combustible materials, which were lighted at the 'cross' at nine o'clock at night. Fires were also lighted on the adjacent hills. Everyone present threw some additional material on the flames when the fire had been lighted. The fire was made big enough to last until New Year's morning, so that anyone whose domestic fire had gone out could relight it from the embers, as no one would give a light for a fire on New Year's Day for fear of bad luck.

An even more interesting custom was that of the 'clavie' at Burghead, on the Moray Firth, when a fire of tar and wood was made in a barrel fitted on to a stone pole. It was first lit on the shore, and then, when burning freely, was carried around the bounds of the town. At one time all the fishing-boats were visited. The 'clavie' was then carried to an artificial eminence on a promontory and placed in a hollow in the centre of a pile of stones. After a few minutes the 'clavie' was cut down and the burning embers scattered among the crowd, who snatched them up and carried them home as a protection against witchcraft. With this last act may be compared the custom of preserving a part of the Yule log as a good-luck charm.

In the Isle of Man it was customary for the housewife to rake the ashes of the fire smoothly over the floor of the kitchen before retiring. If in the morning the ashes showed the footstep of a fairy pointing towards the door, it portended a death, but if the heel was in that direction, it betokened an addition to the family.