

Calendar of Customs and Festivals.

December 13.

PICROUS DAY.—The second Thursday before Christmas Day was observed by the miners in the Blackmore district of Cornwall as a feast celebrating the discovery or first smelting of tin by a man named Picrous. It was the occasion of a merry-making, to which the owner of the tin stream made a contribution of one shilling per man.

December 17.

SOW DAY, at one time observed in Scotland and so called from the custom of every family killing a sow on this day—one of several customs round about Christmas suggesting the sacrificial meal, of which the pig was the victim, sacrificed to the sun or one of the deities of the Nordic pantheon.

SATURNALIA.—This, the most widely known and frequently mentioned feast of Roman antiquity, took place on Dec. 17–23. It commemorated the reign of Saturn over Italy, who, as god of sowing and of husbandry, settled mankind on the land, taught them husbandry, brought them to live in peace, and made the earth bring forth abundantly. The festival was supposed to reproduce the conditions of his reign—the Golden Age. Feasts and revelry prevailed, all regulations were abrogated, and schools were closed. Most remarkable of all its features and most frequent subject of comment among ancient writers was the licence allowed the slave population. All distinctions between free and servile were temporarily abolished. Not only was the slave free to behave with the utmost freedom, and even with insolence, towards his master and to sit at his table, but also the master actually served the slave at table and waited until he was fed before satisfying his own needs. In each household the slaves held the high offices of State, consul, prætor, and the like, in a mock republic. Among the freemen a mock king was elected by lot, who issued playful or ridiculous orders to his subjects.

Sir James Frazer has suggested that in the mock king and his derivatives, the lords of misrule, abbots of unreason, and similar offices, we have a survival of the primitive ruler who was sacrificed periodically for the promotion of fertility as a representative of the vegetation spirit, and that winter festivals, of which the Saturnalia was one, reproduced in modified form the spirit and ritual of these occasions. He bases this view of the Saturnalia on a life of St. Dasius, who suffered martyrdom at Durostorum on Nov. 24, A.D. 303. According to this narrative, it was the custom of the Roman soldiers on the Danube under Maximian to elect one of their number to act as King Saturn. After thirty days' complete licence in every form of indulgence, he cut his throat on the altar of Saturn at the time of the Saturnalia. The parallel with primitive custom elsewhere, for example, Mexico, is exact (see Frazer's "Golden Bough," Abridged Edition, pp. 583-4). Both theological and antiquarian writers in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth century commented on the similarity between the Saturnalia and the celebrations at Christmas, while some also derived the ancient Feast of Yule of the north from the Roman festival. The comparison was supported by the recognised licence sometimes granted persons of low life, such as that in the official proclamation which permitted card players, prostitutes, and others to frequent the city of York during the period of twelve days' holiday.

December 21.

ST. THOMAS.—A method of divination was practised by girls with 'St. Thomas Onion.' An onion was

peeled and wrapped in a clean handkerchief and placed under the head. After appropriate verses had been repeated, the inquirer slept lying on her back.

St. Thomas's Day is especially associated with the practice of 'thomasing' or 'gooding'—a custom which was not necessarily confined to this day, as it was usually kept up until Christmas, and in some localities began in some form, though not necessarily under this name, so early as Martinmas. Women called from house to house collecting gifts in kind, flour, corn, or wheat, later often commuted for a money gift. When the gifts were in kind, the material thus collected was saved up until Christmas time, when it was made into a cake. This was marked with one or more crosses, and it was ceremonially cut on Christmas Eve, and everyone entering the house during the Christmas celebrations was required to partake. Sometimes the cake was marked with crosses with a knife at the time of cutting.

In Warwickshire the custom was known as 'going a clorning,' and in Herefordshire as 'mumping.' It was usual for a sprig of holly or mistletoe to be given in return to the donors. At Biddenham, in Bedfordshire, an annual payment of £5 from an estate formerly belonging to the family of Boteler was made to the overseers of the poor for the purchase of a bull to be killed and the flesh distributed among the poor on this day. At Wokingham, in Berkshire, bull-baiting used to take place on St. Thomas's Day, the flesh here also being distributed among the poor. This custom continued down to 1821. The bull was purchased out of the proceeds of a bequest of 1661. For many years after the abolition of the bull-baiting, attempts were made by the people to revive it. The bulls continued to be purchased for the distribution of the meat, the offal being sold to buy boots for women and children, and the tongues—for by this time the money was sufficient to buy two bulls—being reserved for clerk and aldermen.

Similar endowments existed in other parts of Great Britain, though some have been transferred to Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. At Farnfield the interest on £50 was divided among poor old men and women who could repeat the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Commandments before the vicar or his representative, and at Arundel and Nevern, in Pembrokeshire, there were doles of a similar character; while at Tainton, in Oxfordshire, a quarter of barley was provided annually to be made into small loaves called 'cobbs,' which at one time were distributed in the church to the poor children of Burford. However pious or philanthropic the aims of the founders of these charitable gifts, in common with other Christmas doles, they are derived ultimately from the communal sacrificial meal.

A custom is said once to have existed in York, which was instituted to commemorate the betrayal of the city by two friars when it was besieged by William the Conqueror. On St. Thomas's Day a friar of St. Peter's should ride through the city with his face to the tail of his horse, holding in one hand a rope, in the other a shoulder of mutton, a cake hanging at his back and another on his breast, and his face painted like a Jew. He was to be preceded by the officers of the city proclaiming that on this day the city was betrayed, and followed by the youth of the city shouting 'youl, youl.' After the dissolution of the monasteries, the custom was kept up by artisans.

In the Isle of Man the people used to go to the mountains on St. Thomas's Day to catch ducks and sheep for Christmas, and in the evening light a fire on every 'fingan' or cliff. At the time of cutting turves, a large one was always laid aside for 'Fingan's Eve' (see St. Finnan, Dec. 12).