

Calendar of Customs and Festivals.

January 1.

FEAST OF THE CIRCUMCISION.—New Year's Day, marked in the Christian Calendar as the Feast of the Circumcision, being the eighth day after the day fixed by the early Church as the birthday of Christ, which coincides with the great winter festivals of paganism. The ceremony of circumcision, usually, though not invariably, a puberty or initiatory ceremony among races practising the rite, was performed by the Jews on the eighth day after birth. Circumcision was an essential condition of participation in the Passover and was enjoined on every male member of each household, including slaves, and on proselytes. In the case of the latter, however, it became later a subject of acute controversy. A widespread custom among modern peoples, especially in Africa, its origin and purpose are obscure. It was practised by the ancient Egyptians, but probably was not originally a Hebrew or even a Semitic rite, although the use of a stone to circumcise the son of Moses, as is usual when an obsolete instrument or material is used ceremonially, is an indication of high antiquity. The attribution of its practice to Abraham may be taken as a mythical explanation of its significance in Jewish ritual as a mark of the right of admission to or a condition of participation in the most important of Hebrew ceremonial observances.

NEW YEAR'S DAY.—Although the entry upon a New Year has not always and everywhere taken place upon Jan. 1, its proximity to the winter solstice, when the sun turns to an upward path, made this a peculiarly acceptable date to peoples of the northern hemisphere, where there is a marked difference between winter and summer. Among other seasons which have served for the beginning of a new annual period are early spring or late autumn, at about the time of what is now All Souls, coinciding respectively with the awakening and the closing of the activity of vegetation—the turning points of the Celtic year—the rising of the Pleiades or the end of the harvest, while the ancient Egyptians, in theory, regulated their year by the heliacal rising of Sirius.

Whatever the period of the year adopted, the practice common to many peoples is to prepare for the new era as the old year draws to a close by a period of ceremonial purification which drives out evils and especially the spirits and ghosts of the dead, this being followed by a time of rejoicing, just as in the English Church the peal of bells welcomes the New Year after the solemn vigil of the Watch Night. In the Andamans at the end of the monsoon, the spirits which haunt the village are collected in leaves which are thrown into the sea. The pagan tribes of Borneo send the spirits of evil floating away in little boats.

In Great Britain there are still traces of this desire to be rid of the influences of the past. Sometimes old clothes are burned on New Year's Eve. New clothes, or at least some one piece of new clothing, must be worn or no good luck will follow. A significant custom of the Strathdown Highlander in Scotland enjoined the drinking of water from the "dead and living ford," an aspersion, and a fire of juniper branches gathered for the purpose on New Year's Eve and put to dry all night, which made a stifling smoke in all the house, as a necessary preparation for the rejoicings of New Year's Day. Horses and cattle were also fumigated.

Many primitive peoples practise the ceremony of the scape-goat at the New Year, the sins and ills of the community being borne away by the animal, goat or other, when it is driven out. Possibly the same idea lies far behind the custom once followed in

Cumberland and Westmoreland of riding on the 'stang,' a piece of timber, all who refused to contribute to the merrymaking expenses of the party 'carrying the stang.'

Most modern New Year's customs, while involving the element of merrymaking, in their relation to belief—religious in a broad anthropological sense—are originally connected with omens, forecasting fortune in the coming year, the omen becoming, as often, by intentional performance an ensurance of good luck. A man, not a woman, and dark and not fair, should be the first to cross the threshold on New Year's morning. Something should be brought into the house, even if only a piece of coal, before anything is taken out; some new garment should be worn. Hence the custom of 'first footing'—the house-to-house visits after twelve o'clock of parties headed by a dark man bearing food and drink, thus ensuring prosperity to the house during the coming year. The custom of New Year gifts, now more common perhaps on the Continent than in England, goes back to the Romans and beyond—a custom in which the early Christians were forbidden to join. The ceremonial cutting and distribution of the mistletoe by the Druids in the New Year, a practice now transferred to Christmas, was intended to ensure the same prosperity among the worshippers throughout the year.

January 6.

EPIPHANY. TWELFTH NIGHT. OLD CHRISTMAS DAY.—Twelfth Night marks the end of the celebration of the Christmas or winter festival, though there is evidence for a period of twenty days which was sometimes prolonged until Candlemas. It is especially associated with honour to the Three Magi or kings who brought gifts to our Lord, in memory of whom royalty used to make offerings of gold, frankincense, or myrrh on this day.

The customs of Twelfth Night fall into at least three groups. The best known were connected with the feast, with a regular ceremonial, which for long was observed by all from royalty downward in England, France, Germany, and other countries, though when celebrated by Mary Queen of Scots it was recorded as a French custom. This ceremonial included the election of a king, known as the 'King of the Bean,' and sometimes a queen, and a ceremonial cutting of the Twelfth Night cake, in which was included a bean or coin, allotting the office of king, and sometimes other gifts, foretelling varying fortune for those who obtained them. In Herefordshire a holed cake was made which was placed on the horn of an ox in the stable, and according as he tossed it in the direction of the bailiff or the mistress, it became the perquisite of either.

The election of a king or 'Lord of Misrule' points to that frequent subversion of law and order in certain types of festival such as the Saturnalia and the Carnival, which derives from the primitive abandonment of all social regulation and the prevalence of complete sexual licence at certain stated seasons for the magical promotion of fertility in Nature. In the west of England it was the custom to light fires in the fields or on the hill tops. In Gloucestershire thirteen fires represented our Lord and the twelve apostles, and in Brough in Westmoreland holly bushes with torches attached were carried round the town. These customs are comparable with the ceremonial bonfires at midsummer and other times of the year.

A fertility ceremonial is also recorded. In Cornwall, Devon, and Herefordshire, it was the custom to visit the orchard, and after firing a gun, which would drive away the spirits of evil, to pour a libation of cider over the apple trees, while a verse—a charm to secure a good crop—was recited.