

Calendar of Customs and Festivals.

February 14.

ST. VALENTINE'S DAY.—St. Valentine, priest and martyr at Rome under Claudius II., the patron saint of lovers and more particularly of girls, for no reason which is very apparent from his legend. Traditionally he is characterised by the attribute of chastity. The most noteworthy event in his life is the restoration of her sight to the blind daughter of the Roman official Asterius, in whose house he was confined, which led to the conversion of the whole household. They were afterwards martyred with him. The obscure and indeed almost incongruous coupling of the saint with lovers has been explained as a substitution by the church of his festival for one observed at about this time by the Romans, more specifically said to be a feast of Juno Februata, in which boys and girls pledged themselves to one another. It is doubtful how far this explanation has the warrant of antiquity. St. Francis de Sales is said to have forbidden the custom of valentines, that is of giving boys in writing the names of girls to be waited on and admired by them, and substituted billets with the names of certain saints to be honoured and imitated. Another tradition bases the association on the fact that the saint's martyrdom took place at the time of the great Roman festival of purification, on Feb. 15—the Lupercalia. The legendary connexion with Roman observances associated with the spirit world is also indicated in the belief, noted in the old Romish calendar quoted by Brand, that ghosts walk on the night of Feb. 14.

In popular custom, the traditional observances of the day go back to at least medieval times. The custom of choosing valentines obtained in the fifteenth century, as is shown by one of the Paston letters, and there are references to it in the poems of Charles of Orleans, written while he was captive in England, and in Lydgate, Chaucer, and Gower, and frequently in poets of later days. In the poets, as in rustic tradition, the day is also associated with the pairing of birds. Similar customs were noted in France, and, though scarcely relevant, mention may be made of a belief embodied in a quatrain in a French almanack for 1672 on the virtues of blood-letting on St. Valentine's Day.

The pledging of lovers on St. Valentine's Day might be by chance, the first member of the opposite sex seen on the morning of Feb. 14 being the Valentine, or it might be a matter of deliberate choice. The most widely prevalent early form of the custom, however, was by lot, each member of a party—first the boys, then the girls—drawing a slip of paper on which the name of a member of the opposite sex was written. The difficulty of the double lot was overcome by preference or by the lot drawn by the boy prevailing. In its less sophisticated form the lot of the valentine was regarded as a good omen of the pair becoming man and wife. The choice of a valentine, whether deliberate or fortuitous, entailed some obligation on the man to confer gifts on his valentine—an obligation which in Scotland was reciprocal, and perhaps originally was so universally. The gifts were sometimes of considerable value, such as the jewel of the value of £800 given to Miss Stewart by James, Duke of York, at the Court of Charles II. Pepys, who mentions the drawing of valentines on several occasions, also dwells on the expense to which he was put by the presents involved. The custom of sending presents to the valentine survived well into the nineteenth century. Pepys also records the drawing of mottoes for the valentine in addition. This is one of the earliest references to the literary form of valentines, which

later came to be sent anonymously, and from being poetical degenerated into the comic or even the obscene, before it practically died out, at any rate as a generally observed custom, in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

Young people greeting their parents and others with "Good morrow, valentine," the first thing in the morning, before themselves addressed, were said to 'catch' their valentine. A present followed. In Norfolk the 'catch' had to be effected before sunrise; otherwise the would-be catcher was 'sun-burned.'

Other customs associated with St. Valentine's Day are of some significance. Its connexion with the pairing of lovers made it a time especially suitable for divination in connexion with love affairs. Various methods were practised, such as a triple drawing of lots, or by the number of objects seen through a keyhole, or by casting various names on paper wrapped in clay pellets into water. A ritual not dissimilar from that enjoined on the eve of St. Agnes, including the eating of an egg which had been stuffed with salt, was observed in order to obtain a vision of the future consort. Girls were told to pray, with their legs crossed, to St. Valentine on this day for good luck. Another method of divination practised on the eve of St. Valentine was to scatter hempseed on the way home, after a vigil in the church porch, while reciting a charm. This evoked the image of the future mate raking up the hempseed into a winding-sheet. Here, as often, divination is close to the spell.

In some parts of the country the children roamed from house to house singing a valentine song for coppers. In Herefordshire they decorated themselves with wreaths and lovers' knots thrown to them from the house first visited; but one of their number, the youngest and a boy, was decked out more gaily than the rest. This brings the valentine into touch with the central figure of spring festival processions.

A Derbyshire custom was 'sweeping the girls.' If any girl were not kissed or visited by her sweetheart early in the morning, it was because she was 'dusty.' She was then swept with a broom and well kissed by the young men in the house or from the neighbourhood.

Finally, a curious custom from the west of England may be noted. Three single young men went out together at daylight with a clap net to catch an owl and two sparrows in a neighbouring barn. If they were successful, and could bring the birds to the house before the women had risen, they were entitled to three pots of purl in honour of St. Valentine.

The obvious difficulty in attempting to associate St. Valentine in any way with the popular customs and beliefs observed on his day and the character of the observances themselves, notwithstanding their sophistication in many respects, point not only to a pagan but also to a very remote origin. It is obviously a pairing custom; but scarcely to be related, as an anticipation, to the strict observance of the ecclesiastical fast of Lent, when marriage or a formal betrothal could not be solemnised; nor does it appear cognate to the carnival, though it may have a common fore-runner with that period of license. The fortuitous mating, which was sometimes thought to portend, and often did lead to, a wedding, the divination, and especially the triple lot, the interchange of gifts, which probably at one stage represented a forfeit for non-compliance with custom, suggest a derivation from a ceremonial period of unrestricted and universally imposed sexual intercourse such as is found among primitive peoples at stated seasons as part of a religious ritual for the promotion of fertility in the animal and vegetable world.