

## Calendar of Customs and Festivals.

April 30.

**ROOD MASS. WALPURGIS NACHT.**—Believed to be one of the greater, if not the greatest, of the occasions on which a witches' Sabbat took place. According to one version, witches from all parts had to fly to the Sabbat on the Brocken, those arriving late being sacrificed to provide the ceremonial meal.

May 1.

**MAY DAY.**—Among European peoples the first day of summer is, or was until quite recently, marked by customs, practically everywhere identical, which can be traced back over a considerable period of time. Ceremonies which can be paralleled in every particular among recent observances, including the ceremonial contest between representatives of summer and winter, are recorded by Saxo Grammaticus.

On the eve of May Day, or in the early hours of May morning before sunrise, parties went out to collect green or flowering branches, and brought them back to place before the doors or hang them on either their own houses or those of others. The fetching of the May was an occasion for merrymaking, not always too decorous, and was accompanied by music and the blowing of horns welcoming the summer. The custom in olden days was common to all classes. In Malory, Queen Guinevere goes a-maying with all her knights, and so did Henry VIII. with his Queen Katherine.

At times a sapling or tree took the place of green boughs and was erected in the middle of the village with more or less ceremony, in some places being brought in by teams of gaily decked oxen. From this grew the custom of erecting a more or less permanent maypole, gaily coloured in stripes and decorated on the day with flags and streamers and sometimes a doll. Several such maypoles existed in London, the most frequently mentioned long standing in the Strand. The origin of the maypole, however, as the annual revival of vegetation, continued to be indicated by a bunch of fresh leaves or a garland fastened to the top. The garland, conventional in form, was similar to those carried by children, one or two small hoops or wreaths of flowers and leaves, if two in number fastened at right angles to one another. These the children carried at the end of a stick or wand from door to door, singing a May song, with the object of collecting pence.

The maypole was the centre of the day's rejoicing, which embraced various forms of sport and Morris dancing. The Morris dances invariably included a principal man, a female character, a fool, and often a hobbyhorse. The best-known example of the last named was the Padstow hobbyhorse with its special song. In England the characters of the May Day dances are usually Robin Hood, Maid Marian, and their traditional followers, Little John, Friar Tuck, and Scarlett. Maid Marian became a travesty as the character was taken by a male dancer. At the same time she originally represented the female principal of Nature, which found more graceful expression in the election of a May Queen. The May Queen sometimes held authority not for the day only, but in all assemblies of young people throughout the year. The male principle was represented not only by the chief male character, but was also expressed in the pole itself, which undoubtedly had a phallic significance similar to that of the *lingam* in the religious observances of India.

A figure in the May observances to which reference is frequently made is 'Jack in the Green'—a man disguised and completely hidden in a framework of greenery. A pyramidal garland, six feet high, carried

in the procession of the May Queen in Huntingdonshire, has clearly taken his place. The career of Jack in the Green sometimes ended by his being thrown into a pond or stream. Obviously he is a materialisation of the vegetation spirit and his end a rain charm.

The special virtue of the dew of May morning was recognised in the custom of dabbling the feet in the dew, and bathing the face and hands, the latter a beauty charm, but the whole observance originally a rite to secure fertility. A similar custom, to name an example, is the May Day evening practice of the women of the island of Syra in the Ægean, who go in parties to the seashore to bathe their feet, possibly as a tribute to ensure the blessing of fertility from the sea goddess Aphrodite.

**BEALTAINN OR BELTANE.**—In both Scotland and Ireland, May Day was celebrated by observances similar to those of England and other European countries. It was also the first day of summer—Beltane, in the Celtic calendar, being, however, not the first, but the middle day of the month Céitein, which included fourteen days of April and fourteen days of May.

Beltane was pre-eminently a fire festival among the Celtic peoples, and akin to the Easter fires previously mentioned and the midsummer fires. Indeed it has been explained as meaning the Fires of Bel or Baal. The meaning is obscure, and an alternative, the separation or parting of the seasons, has been suggested. It is a time of purification by fire from the evil influences of the past winter in preparation for the summer of fertility and growth. On May 1, whatever the weather, the cattle had to be driven out to the summer grazing grounds. Before this could be done they were purified by fumigation or by being driven through the flames of burning straw, as in the south of Ireland. Pennant records that the herdsmen of the Highlands of Scotland, while standing round a fire built on turf in a surrounding trench, first poured a libation of eggs, butter, oatmeal, and milk on the ground, and then threw offerings of oatmeal cake over their shoulders with a request for the protection of their flocks, herds, and horses from eagles, crows, and noxious animals. In a similar observance by boys in Perthshire, one of the number had to leap through the flames of the fire.

May 2.

**ST. HELEN'S DAY, ROWAN TREE DAY.**—In Yorkshire rowan tree branches were collected in a certain prescribed manner and planted over each door and window of the homestead as a protection against witches. Small pieces were carried in the pocket or purse with the same object. In Aberdeenshire the twigs were made into crosses and suspended at windows and doors. Witches and fairies were especially feared at this time, and in Scotland on May Day eve the cattle were protected by tar smeared behind the ear and on the root of the tail. A churning and a cheese made before sunrise protected the dairy produce against fairies in the coming year. If fire or rennet were given away on May Day, it gave the receiver power to take away the substance of the donor's milk.

May 3.

**THE DAY OF AVOIDANCE.**—In Scotland during the May Day week it was considered unlucky to undertake field operations, but the third day of summer was considered particularly unlucky for any undertaking. This may be connected with the fact that it was sometimes believed that the great witches' Sabbat took place on this day instead of on April 30.