

Calendar of Customs and Festivals.

June 24.

ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST. MIDSUMMER DAY.—A peculiar method of marriage divination recorded for England, in a locality not specified, was that an unmarried woman fasting should set out a table on the eve of St. John with bread, cheese, and ale, and then sit down as if to eat, leaving the street door open. Her future husband would then enter, bow to her, fill a glass of ale, and retire, leaving it on the table.

The sowing of hemp seed to secure the appearance of the lover, which was employed on the eve of St. Agnes, was also used at midsummer. Both processes point to the belief in the activities of spirits at this time, while the former recalls some of the north country wake ceremonies. Similarly, it was possible to foretell death by watching in the churchyard to see at midnight the spirits of those who were to die within the next twelve months. In Wales, if a St. John's wort were named for each person in the house and hung up, the first to wither would indicate who would be the first to die.

Certain herbs, if gathered on midsummer eve, had magical properties, or their magical properties were enhanced; for example, fernseed, which conferred invisibility, the rose, St. John's wort, vervain, trefoil, rue, mugwort, etc. They gave protection against disease or against spirits and witches. Orpine was set in clay on a slate or potsherd, and was called the 'midsummer man.' As the stalk was found next morning to set to right or left, it showed whether the lover would be true or false, a custom suggestive of phallic significance. Many of the customs which are superficially purely divinatory have certainly originated in practices intended to secure the fertility of those taking part. For example, in Greece there was formerly practised a method of divining the name of the future husband with the assistance of apples dropped in a vessel of water fetched by a boy from a spring on St. John's eve.

A closely related custom of Macedonia is called *ὁ κλήδονας* or *κλήδονα*, names of which the meaning is connected with 'omen,' but by the peasants, by an association of sound and from a certain feature in the observance, is connected with 'lock.' It, even more than the bonfire, is the most important observance of the feast of St. John. On the eve, plants are marked by the women for gathering next morning, and a brass vessel is prepared with flowers into which each casts a trinket. This is locked with a padlock after it has been filled with water by a boy after due observances at each of three fountains. The vessels are carried in procession through the village on the following day, each being guarded by young men with wooden swords. When the vessel is opened on the following evening, extempore verses prognosticate the fortune of the owners as each trinket is taken out. The frequently ribald character of these verses and the water ceremonial unmistakably point to a fertility rite, while a recent writer has pointed out the significant resemblance of the details to those of Rumanian marriage customs (Beza, "Paganism in Roumanian Folk-lore," p. 54 *sqq.*).

MIDSUMMER FIRES.—The most significant and important observance at midsummer is the survival of the fire festival. The practice of lighting fires on midsummer eve is of wide distribution and great antiquity. As on May Day and other occasions, when similar ceremonial fires are lighted, the people both jump through them themselves and send their cattle through them. King Manasseh, it is recorded

in the Old Testament, caused his children to pass through fires in the Valley of Hinnom, and Ovid ("Fasti," iv. 655) refers to the custom of leaping through the fire. Medieval writers speak of the rites of St. John's eve among the Teutonic and Scandinavian peoples, and ascribe to them a pagan origin and a connexion with the sun.

The lighting of midsummer fires, and the practices associated with them more or less common to all, are recorded of the peoples of eastern Europe, of every part of Germany, and Spain, Italy, and Sicily. In France, where in particular pagan customs have lingered side by side with the observances of the Christian Church, they are recorded from many localities, and in Brittany these fires are lit regularly as an accompaniment of the *pardons* which take place around about midsummer. Often the parish priest goes in procession with the crucifix and lights the bonfire with his own hands; otherwise it is usual for them to be lighted after the recital of prayers by an old man. In Upper Brittany the fires were built around a pole which was surmounted by a nosegay or garland supplied by a man named Jean or a woman named Jeanne. Flowers from these garlands were charms against disease, and brands from the fire were a protection against lightning and conflagrations. In some localities in Great Britain the records show that the bonfire was similarly built round a pole surmounted by a garland.

In both Great Britain and Ireland the midsummer fires continued down to recent times. The references of medieval writers show that the fire ritual consisted of three elements—the rolling down a hill of a wheel swathed in straw, to which a light was set; a procession with burning brands around the fields; and the bonfire itself. In the vale of Glamorgan, within living memory, if the wheel burned well until it reached the bottom it was held to foretell a plentiful harvest. In one record quoted by Frazer ("The Golden Bough," x. 103), the wheel was mounted on a pole projecting some three feet on each side, by which it was guided by young men. The aim was to roll the wheel, while it still blazed, into the waters of the Moselle, so as to secure an abundant vintage.

Further examples of the fire festivals in which these elements of the ritual appear have been collected by Frazer in "The Golden Bough," vol. x. From these instances, and more particularly from the form of the belief in the magical efficacy and purificatory powers of the midsummer fires which appears in Morocco, it would seem that the ceremonial is directed towards securing the prosperity of the crops and stocks, by protecting them against the evil influences potent at this period. This seems more probable than that it is a survival of sun worship, as was suggested to the older writers by the presence of the wheel, or than that it is an act of worship of Baal, as was indicated by the interpretation of Beltane as Baal or Bel's fire.

June 29.

ST. PETER'S DAY.—Similar observances to those of St. John's eve took place on the eve of St. Peter. In Scotland fires were lighted on the hill-tops, and processions with torches took place. According to an ancient record, the boatmen of Gisborough, in Yorkshire, used to keep festival on this day, decking their boats, painting their masts, and "sprinkling their prows with good liquor." In Wales girls tied a small key on each wrist, and when in bed repeated the sixteenth and seventeenth chapters of Ruth nine times. The future husband would appear to them in a dream, and then the keys fell from their wrists.