

Older and Newer Yule Customs of Pagan and Christian Times

THE CUSTOMS of Yule in every land are the most ancient and therefore the most interesting. The general observance of the season may have become too prosaic to allow any particular reference to the earlier customs, but America, with her vast assembly of people from every European country, in particular, should preserve intact for her children these ancient customs and relate them every year, for even the pagan contribution to these customs contains so much of wholesome mirth and sound philosophy of life, good and evil, that we do well in placing them in the foreground for the entertainment of the family circle and of our immediate friends.

A new departure in the earlier Yule customs is reported from England, where the Britishers are now feasting on turkey, the American Thanksgiving sacrifice which originated with the Pilgrims from Albion who offered God their thanks for all blessings of life and showed their gratitude to providence by feasting of the delicious meat of this well-known fowl from the farmyard. And so it has come to pass that in the baronial halls of Britony, where formerly the boar's head and the peacock were born aloft amid the Nobles of the assembled retainers of the Lord of the Manor, the American Thanksgiving fowl will from now on assist in providing the festal joy of the Yuletide.

Though the boar, the tusked and bewhiskered monarch of the forest, has been displaced by the prosaic farmyard bird, the ancient recipes for the preparation of the delicious viands which challenged the appetites of mighty trencher-men of old will probably not be replaced altogether, or the customs of Yule, odd and half forgotten, which are told around the Christmas boards in Merrie England, will not survive.

Let us forget the present Britisher with his turkey feast and go back into a little more ancient period and take a place of vantage in the old baronial castle or manor and live once more the observance of Yule among generations who knew less of Christmas and more of the pagan Yule with its mystical and mythological customs.

The bringing in of the boar's head was heralded by trumpets and accompanied by strains of minstrelsy. On a platter of gold or silver it was thus carried into the banquet hall by the sewer, as the chief household officers of those days were called, who had charge of the table service. At the head of a stately procession of nobles, knights and ladies, the sewer would chant:

Caput apri defero,
Reddens laudes Domino;
The boar's head in hand bring I
With garlands gay and rosemary;
I pray you all sing merrily,
Qui estis in convivio.
The boar's head, I understand,
Is the chief service in this land;
Look wherever it be found,
Servito cum cantico.
Be glad, both more and less,
For this hath ordained our steward
To cheer you all this Christmas —
The boar's head and mustard!
Caput apri defero
Reddens laudes Domino.

Setting the head of the brawler — a boar fattened for the table — before his lordship, this act would be accompanied by a chant to the following text:

Sweet rosemary and bays around it spread,
His foaming tusks with some large pippin graced;
Or 'midst those thundering spears an orange placed;
Sauce, like himself, offensive to his foes,
The roguish mustard, dangerous to the nose.

Mustard was in those days an indispensable requisite for the festal board. Proof of this is found in the following reference from an old table etiquette formula:

First set forth mustard with brawn: take your knife in your hand and cut brawn in the dish as it lieth, and lay on your sovereign's trencher, and, above all, see there be mustard.

A slice of the boar or the swine after it had been collared, boiled, pickled and pressed was called brawn. In his story of "Christmas Day" in "The Sketch Book," Washington Irving makes the following reference to the brawn:

After the dance was concluded the whole party was entertained with brawn and beef and stout home brewed.

The Puritans of old England were opposed to Christmas feasting and during the period when Oliver Cromwell was Lord Protector, an act of Parliament came so near being passed, forbidding the custom, that had it not been for the tallow cinders of London who rose in their might, protesting that there would be no sale for their mustard, because of the diminished sale of brawn, Christmas feasting would probably, for a time, have been relegated to the scrap heap of antiquated customs.

Parliament failed to suppress the holiday celebration, but it succeeded in suppressing the boar's head. The edict did not altogether make boar head prohibition stick for it is said that the bristling crest was held in pleasant memory and cherished, not only in the carols and songs of the people but in some of the nooks and corners of Old England, long after it had ceased to play the chief part at the festival tables. Many people were, long after the custom had been abolished by law, known to provide a boar's head for their guests at Yuletide. The lessee of the tithes of Horn Church in Essex provided a boar's head, dressed and garnished with bay, to be wrestled for by the parishioners in a field adjoining the church. Among the Oxonians it is said that the members of Queen's College observed the custom of serving the boar's head with an ancient carol which has kept alive in a song the memory of a valorous deed, a legend of which Queen's College is justly proud.

The following is the version of a popular ditty from those days of which the students still are very fond. It tells of a Queen's College student who was walking through Shotover Forest studying Aristotle. Suddenly he came into the presence of a wild boar which, with gnashing tusks, rushed madly at him. The scholar was so frightened that he stood transfixed, while the boar came closer and closer. Suddenly recovering the power of action and shouting: "Graecum est, graecum est", he thrust the philosopher's book of ethics down the throat of the boar and thereby choked it to death.

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