

ST. JOHN'S FIRES IN FRANCE.

EVEN in these days of change and progress towards the useful, rather than clinging to the picturesque, some old customs still survive and seem to be so firmly rooted as to defy the ages to come as they have triumphed through the centuries of the past.

The traveller who on the Eve of St. John Baptist's day should find himself in Brittany, Gascony or Poitou would doubtless be surprised at the spectacle presented to his gaze.

As the last rays of the setting sun sink beneath the horizon and one by one the stars gem the firmament, innumerable lights appear on the hills and in the plain, flaming brightly in the gathering darkness and throwing showers of sparks upward into the night. They are St. John's bonfires.

The origin of this custom of lighting memorial fires can be traced far back in antiquity, notably among the Persians, Hebrews and other Eastern nations, and later, among the Greeks and Romans. In still later times the observance was adopted by Christian peoples, and the eve of the Feast of St. John Baptist was chosen as the time of its celebration in continuation of the old Pagan tradition. The Chaldeans, Persians, and later on, the Egyptians, celebrated in various ways the return of the summer solstice, that is to say the season when the sun pouring down his beneficent rays upon the growing crops, gave promise of an abundant harvest. During this festival large bonfires were built up, faint symbols of the life-giving luminary. The Christians adopted this, as they did so many Pagan customs and symbols, attaching to them a new significance, and they still kept the festival at the same time of the year, about the 24th of June, the Feast of St. John Baptist, which was held in peculiar veneration in the early church. What proves more clearly the Pagan origin of this custom is the fact that the Feast of St. John was not chosen universally for its celebration, the Feast of St. Peter being substituted in some localities, so that we may conclude that the Pagan tradition was at first kept up without any idea of special devotion to any particular saint, and only later were attached to the Feast of St. John or St. Peter according as one other saint was the object of a special devotion in the locality.

The methods of observing this custom varied infinitely. In most cases the bonfires were simply stacks of wood, which were blessed by a priest and then set light to, but in some parts this primitive celebration was accompanied by certain superstitious rites. Thus a very ancient custom much practised in the eleventh and twelfth centuries was to collect the bones of animals and throw them into the fire in order that the smoke which rose might keep off all animals hurtful to man and evil spirits bringing disease. This custom, at first confined to St. John's Eve, became a common one, and the bones of animals were

burnt in every field and especially in the neighbourhood of wells and fountains.

With the invention of gunpowder the use of fireworks was added to the bonfires, or in some cases substituted for them. The principal towns of Italy, especially Florence, Genoa, and Rome were the first to make use of the new invention, and the Feasts of St. John and of the Assumption were honoured by a marvellous display of pyrotechny. A peculiar feature of these celebrations was the practice of jumping through the flames; and this still survives in some parts of England, only the modern performer jumps over the fire. If the origin of these memorial fires does not quite go back to the flood it falls very little short of it, for in the most ancient rites we see children passed through fire that they might be thereby purified, and the Romans themselves did not disdain to practise this means of purification. But it is specially during the first ages of Christianity

solemnity, and two young men set it off from the heights and kept it rolling till it fell into the Meuse.

In Paris this festival of the bonfires was celebrated with as much rejoicing as in the smallest villages. Each quarter of the city had its own fire, and the parish clergy came in great pomp to bless them. The most important was that of Place de Grève, which for several years enjoyed the honour of being lighted by the hand of the king. Failing this royal condescension, this duty devolved on the principal magistrate.

In the sixteenth century the cruel spirit of the age added a terrible accompaniment to the old rites. A number of cats were confined in sacks and thrown on to the blazing pile, the agonised cries of the wretched animals adding to the amusement of the brutal crowd. On one occasion, in honour of Charles IX., a fox was included among the victims, and performed his part in the inhuman exhibition to

the entire satisfaction of his pitiless tormentors. It is said that on this occasion twelve thousand cats were thus barbarously sacrificed.

Sauval in his *Antiquités de Paris* gives us a curious account of the expenses incurred in the year 1572 in providing for the celebration of this ancient custom with due solemnity. The following are some of his entries. "To Jacques Hemon, the younger, and Claude Bouchandon, master players of instruments, as much for them as for their companions, also players of instruments, seven livres, for having, by themselves, and their said companions, played their instruments in the usual manner at the solemnity of the fire kindled on the Place de Grève on the Eve of St. John."

"To Claude Lambert, widow of Nicolas

Chaumery, florist of the town of Paris, forty-four livres for having supplied bouquets and scarves to the said town on Tuesday the 23rd of June, 1573, the Eve of St. John Baptist."

In Paris, St. John's bonfires were followed by others in honour of St. Peter, which, during a long period, were kindled in the courtyard of the palace. It was the duty of the children belonging to the choir of the Sainte Chapelle to do this, which proves that the custom was not an ancient one.

Another of much earlier date was the bonfire of the Rue aux Ours. This celebration took place on the 3rd of July each year, and the circumstances to which it owed its origin were clearly stated in an inscription traced at the foot of an image of the Virgin, which, for long, stood at the corner of the Rue aux Ours and the Rue Salle au Comte.

This inscription ran as follows:—

"In the year 1418, on the eve of the translation of St. Martin, a soldier came out of a tavern in the Rue aux Ours; desperate at having lost all he possessed at play, and swearing and blaspheming God, he aimed a furious thrust with his knife at the image of the blessed Virgin, and from the wound blood



ST. JOHN'S EVE, HARDANGER, NORWAY, 1895. (From photograph taken at 11 p.m.)

that the dread of everlasting fire tended to make this custom general. Men, women and children seized this opportunity of purging their souls from sin, according to the superstitious belief then prevalent, and it was a common thing for people to pass several times across the blazing mass in which they believed all taint of sin was consumed. Those whom illness prevented from jumping through the fire had to content themselves with walking round it, making up by their good intention for their inability to perform the rite more fully.

At the present time this jumping over the bonfires or the lighted candles of St. John's or All Hallows' Eve is simply in most cases an amusement mingled with a little latter-day superstition as to luck, but as has been seen, it was not always so.

Another ancient custom in this connection was the rolling for some distance a flaming wheel, but this was confined to certain provinces, and principally Lorraine. In the village of Thionville, for instance, an immense wheel made of straw twisted on laths was manufactured each year on the Eve of St. John. The mayor set light to it with great

issued in abundance. The wretched man was instantly arrested and taken before Henri le Merle, Chancellor of France, and by a decree of the Parliament he was taken to the scene of his crime and there bound to a stake in front of the said image; he was scourged till his flesh was cut from him, then his tongue was pierced with a red-hot iron and he was burnt alive." Such was the cruelty of those times.

Every year on the same day and at the same place the worthy inhabitants of the Rue aux Ours provide a display of fireworks, and this custom has been uninterrupted during three hundred years, in expiation of the outrage offered to the said image, and to preserve

the memory of the miracle then performed by God.

A society had been founded to organise the celebrating in a suitable manner the expiation of the sacrilege. It was known as the "Society of the Inhabitants or Society of the Virgin of the Rue aux Ours."

This society caused to be erected each year in front of the houses in that part of the Rue aux Ours which faced the Rue Salle au Comte a kind of square boarding, on the sides of which was written in doggerel rhymes an account of the soldier's crime and its punishment, and under this erection was placed a figure representing the guilty man. In 1743

the fireworks were suppressed from fear of fire, and the popular demonstration of the Rue aux Ours was kept up simply as a religious ceremony combined with a solemn burning of the dummy soldier, until the great Revolution, which swept away so many ancient customs.

But among these the bonfires of St. John's Eve, though abandoned for a time, were restored and continued during the First Empire and the Restoration. At the present time, however, this celebration has been given up in populous towns, and is confined to the heart of the country.

GEORGES DE DUBOR.

THE CALLING OF THE WEIR.

By FREDERICK LANGBRIDGE, Author of "Miss Honoria," "The Dreams of Dania," "Sent Back by the Angels," etc.

CHAPTER XVIII.



THAT evening at half-past six the whole family of Weir Bend was assembled at tea. Mr. Haydn had come in half an hour earlier, looking indeed weary and depressed, but showing no symptoms of extraordinary disorder. Evidently the news, which was the

common property of the local gossips, had not yet reached him. Mary, realising this, and feeling that the blow would fall soon

enough, could not find it in her heart to abridge the brief bliss of his ignorance. He had made some little forlorn attempt at cheerfulness, and then had asked to have a cup of tea as soon as it could be got ready. Not long after the other members of the household had assembled for the meal, Edgar had come in. He had been away the whole day, and Mary, therefore, had found no opportunity of telling him what she had discovered. He either really was in high spirits or counterfeited them very successfully. Mary's indignant wonder would not permit her speaking to him. She tried to throw into her eyes a little of her contempt and disgust, but Edgar seemed to be serenely unconscious of her glance. He ate and drank with excellent appetite, and once or twice made Mr. Haydn and Hildegard laugh at an account of the costume of a certain Mrs. O'Grady who imparted her coschumes from Pa'is.

It was in the midst of quite a little peal of laughter that Mrs. Mack entered.

"If you please," she said, "Mr. Keogh is waiting in the kitchen, and would he get a word with the master?"

"Oh," said Mrs. Haydn, "perhaps Mary will do as well. Didn't you say that his little girl had a sore throat? I daresay he wants a little black-currant jam."

"'Tis the master he does be wanting," answered Mrs. Mack.

Then the policeman's great voice spoke from the kitchen:

"Quick, sir, if you please. 'Tis very important."

"Oh," said Mr. Haydn; "then I'll come at once."

He looked round the table as he rose, and was struck by the expression of two faces. Edgar had grown pale, and Mary's eyes were large and strained.

"Mother, give me a cup of tea," said Edgar, as his father walked to the door. "It's nothing, you may be sure." Then he added, "I don't know what you think, Mary, but I was always told it was confounded bad manners to stare."

"Hush," said Hildegard; and they all listened.

"Well, constable," said the voice of Mr. Haydn, in a would-be easy tone, "what's up, eh?"

"Come to the door, your honour," answered the constable; "I couldn't speak to you here."

They heard the steps retire—Mr. Haydn's uncertain shuffle and the policeman's heavy tread—and then a whisper came back.

"There's a warrant out against you. There isn't a moment to lose. For God's sake, Mr. Haydn, don't look like that! I have a boat on the river beyond the bridge. You'll aisy get to Lorrha Station, and there's a train at nine to Waterford. Leave me to throw them off the scent. Don't be trifling now, or 'twill be too late entirely!"

"God bless you, Keogh," cried Hildegard, "for what you have risked to-night! But my father will stay and face this out. There is some miserable blunder."

"Edgar," said Mary, "will you speak now or must I?"

"Hold your tongue!" snarled Edgar. "You must be mad!" Then he turned round and pointed to Mrs. Haydn. "Can't you see," he said, "that mother has fainted?"

It was even so. With one hand pressed against her side, the poor wife lay back, white and unconscious.

Then, while Mary supported her mother's head and held a bottle of salts to her nostrils, she saw Hildegard lead her father in. His look was scared and wandering, and his step was the step of a child.

"I can't tell," he muttered to himself; "I have had wicked thoughts and wicked dreams."

"Father," said Mary, "you are as innocent as a baby. You commit a forgery! You couldn't do anything dishonourable if you tried. Don't be afraid, darling; I will take care of you."

The old man shook off Hildegard's hand and tottered up to Mary. She reached out to him and drew him close. Then, while he looked uneasily into the face of his wife, where the colour was beginning to re-appear, and muttered to himself, "I cannot remember, I cannot remember," Mary turned to Edgar again.

"Edgar," she began, "I was in your room this morning—"

At that moment there was a loud knock at the door. Mary broke off, and again there was an intent silence. During that silence, a voice was heard inquiring for Mr. Haydn, and steps came along the hall. And, still in that silence, two policemen entered the dining-room.

"Mr. Haydn," said the sergeant, "I'm here on a very unpleasant message. I have a warrant to arrest you."

Her father, on the entrance of the officers, had loosed Mary's hand, and had stepped back a few paces.

Turning towards him a gaze of fascination, Mary was aware of a singular change in the old man's bearing. He stood erect and dignified, and the vacuous wandering glance had become quick and keen.

"What is the charge against me?" he asked.

"Forgery," said the sergeant, "and mind, sir, anything that you say may be used as evidence against you."

"I know that," said Mr. Haydn, "and this is what I say."

Mary knew what was coming; a denial of guilt, straight and indignant; the kind of denial that almost convinces even a case-hardened professional sceptic.

But at that moment Mary saw her father's gaze turn aside quickly and rest upon the face of Edgar. Her gaze followed his, and she saw that the young man's face was green like the face of one suffering from deadly nausea. She