

CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS.

“**C**USTOM must be indulged with custom, or custom will weep,” says a Manx proverb; and if custom fell a-weeping, poor wench, 'twere pity of our lives!

Therefore, let us begin Christmas Day with setting light to an ashen faggot to serve for the oak Yule log (if we be Devonshire born), and let our first meal be made of herrings, fresh or salted. Let us refrain from giving away either bread or salt all the day through, lest we give away our luck—mince-pies and a slice of Christmas - pudding are not under the embargo, so our hands need not be tied from all loving and giving ways; and let us not lend silver or pay gold away on this day of the days. Time enough for that on Boxing Day, as every house-master regretfully remembers, anticipating the clamorous open hands of turncock, postman, fireman, butcher, baker, and candlestick-maker that will knock on the morrow at his door. If it is beyond our “human possible” to uplift truthfully the cheery carol of “The boar’s head in hand bring I,” we will at least eat together of the roast beef of Old England, of plum-pudding and mince-pies, of apples and nuts and almonds, though the once familiar frumenty be forgotten on the bill of fare. “Rings and things and fine array” we will all put on, and we may do worse than copy the Danish custom which proclaims the Julafred or Yule Peace, and punishes any breach of it by a heavy fine. Even the Good People—the Gentle People, the Fairies know, and keep sacred this piece of Yule, for then—

No fairy takes or witch has power to charm
So hallowed and so gracious is the time.

Another quaint and lovely fashion that English Christmas-keepers would do well to borrow from their neighbours in the Netherlands and in Austria-Hungary is the custom of leaving the house-doors wide open just as the clock strikes midnight, that Mary and her Son may enter in and bless the merry companies. In other countries lighted candles are placed in every window, so that the Christ-child, passing by outside, may not miss His way in the dark.

Nor is there any reason why we should not hang up a sheaf of wheat, that the birds may find one meal sure on Christmas Day; nor need we doubt that the lucky man is he who is born on Christmas Day. Nor need we flinch from the pretty Cornish fancy that at midnight on Christmas night all water turns into wine, and in every stall and stable the horses and cattle receive human speech for an hour, while the bees sing the “Gloria” in their dark skeps outside. Why not, indeed? Wilder fancies may be devised, and stranger things have come to pass. Wise men took simplicity to them for their cleaving, and shod themselves with faith and followed a wandering star to a mean stable in a little Jewish town; and thousands still come reverently to the place where their bones lie in Köln city, and envy them their journey and their goal.

And why should not the bees and the cattle give thanks as well as we? All strange things and wild things and sweet things are made possible at Christmas; “so hallowed and so gracious is the time,” for a Child’s sake.

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