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SYMBOLS OF EASTER

For days the shop windows have spoken eloquently though mutely of the advent of the great spring festival which in some form or other the classes and masses of the people are observing. Easter lilies and tulips, violets and hyacinths all have spoken of the birth of a new year, of the springing forth of buds and blossoms, of the thrilling of bird songs, of the breaking of ice-bound waters, of the passing of winter, and of the return of the sun bringing with it seedtime, and the birth of new hopes and desires, symbolized in the celebration of Easter.

And everywhere the egg, symbolic of the universe and of life, of the springing forth from the germ of new forces and powers, has been in evidence.

The Egyptians, the Jews, the Persians and Hindus, the Syrians, the Burmese, the Chinese, the Australians, the Hawaiians—all have connected the egg with the creation or renewal of life.

The fire worshipers of Persia, worshipping Zoroaster as a prophet, believed in a first great spirit from whom came two brothers, Ormuzd and Ahri-man. Ahri-man, showing jealousy of his brother, Ormuzd, was condemned to darkness for thousands of years. Angered, he longed for revenge, and when Ormuzd made an egg containing good genii Ahri-man made another full of evil spirits, and broke the two together, so that from the beginning good and evil were mixed. In memory of this legend of creation, the Persians at the festival of the solar new year, held in March, exchanged colored eggs as gifts.

The Chinese have a story that the first man, Poo Koo Wong, came from an egg, and that having been born he used the upper part of the shell to make the heavens, while the lower part became the earth.

The Burmese tell that the first man and woman, their Adam and Eve, were hatched from a single egg.

The Syrians say that their gods from whom they were descended were hatched from eggs.

The Australians believe the earth was darkened space until one of their race threw up an egg, which exploded and became the sun.

Hawaii, the islanders declare, was a great egg which some mammoth bird dropped as it passed over the seas.

The Egyptians regarded the egg as a sacred emblem of the renovation of mankind after the flood, and the Jews used it as a type of their departure from the land of the Egyptians, and with the Paschal lamb it was a part of the Passover feast.

The early Christians were, of course, Jewish, and when they began to observe Easter as a

Christian feast gave to the egg as a part of the ceremonial of the season a new significance, that of the resurrection from the dead. Eggs were forbidden during Lent, and so naturally accumulated, as the hens did not stop laying. Eating them on Easter day signified that fasting time was over and feasting begun, so they were connected with joy as were the bells which, hushed during the period preceding Easter day, broke into joyous pealing at its dawn.

The name for Easter in the romance languages—paques in French, pasqua in Italian, and pascua in Spanish—comes through the Latin pascha, from the Chaldean form of the Hebrew name for the Passover festival. Hence the eggs are pace, pashe, paschal, or pasque eggs, as well as Easter eggs.

When the early Christians began to observe Easter as a Christian festival a controversy as to the time of its observance, known as the Paschal controversy, and extending from the second to the fourth centuries, arose. The Eastern churches kept it at the same time as the Jewish Passover, the 14th day of the Jewish lunar month of Nisan, which most often corresponds to our month of April, though sometimes synchronous with March. The Western churches thought it should be identified with Sunday, and observed it on Sunday following the 14th day of Nisan. At the beginning of the fourth century, the Emperor Constantine succeeded in having a canon passed by the ecumenical council of Nice, fixing and making uniform the date of its observance, though as the rules laid down by this council for the date of its observance made it necessary to reconcile three periods, with no common measure, namely, the week, the lunar month and the solar year, the determination of Easter was for a long time a matter requiring great nicety of calculation, and so, as the Egyptians were skilled in astronomical matters, this was left for a long time to the Alexandrian see to decide.

The rules decreed that the 21st of March should be regarded as the vernal equinox.

The full moon happening upon or next after the 21st of March should be regarded as the full moon of the month of Nisan.

The first Lord's day after that full moon should be observed as Easter day.

If the full moon chanced to fall on Sunday, the next Sunday should be Easter day.

As all the movable feasts and fasts depended on Easter, uniformity of time in its observance was an important matter. The rule adopted by the Nicene council makes it possible for it to fall upon any Sunday of five weeks, commencing with March 22 and ending with April 25.

The name Easter is derived from the name of the Saxon goddess of spring, Eostre, Eastre, Oстера, and may be traced back to the Phoenician moon goddess, Astarte, so often associated with the hare in Eastern myths. Hence, perhaps, the use of the hare in connection with the Easter eggs, which it is said to lay.

Some think the name comes from the word oster, which means rising, and to Christians it, of course, is commemorative of the rising of Christ from the dead.

The month dedicated to the spring goddess of the Saxons was the fourth month, which answers to our April, and her festival was held in honor of the opening of the natural year, to commemorate the setting free of the natural forces of germination and growth which the winter had chilled and crucified.

Each nation has had its own Easter customs, but many of them can be traced back to the ancient spring festivals welcoming the return of the sun. In the church it is one of the three great Christian feasts, and has been known as the Queen of Festivals and the Lord of Days. It is ushered in by vigil and fasting, but is, itself, a time of rejoicing. In the olden days a relic of the fire worshipping time could be found in the kindling of new and pure fires, after the old ones had been extinguished, from the Paschal candle, the great and sacred candle which often weighed hundreds of pounds. The washing of feet of others by high dignitaries of church and state was, of course, done in memory of Christ's washing the feet of the apostles.

Music, candies, bonfires, flowers, miracle plays, the pealing of bells, the exchange of gifts, the liberation of prisoners, the setting free of slaves, the giving of alms or maunds, the playing of games, some of them rude and rough enough indeed, during Easter week—these set apart the season from others.

Certain articles of food, such as tansy cake, typifying the "bitter herbs," and hot cross buns and custards were eaten in England. In Ireland the peasants rose early to see the sun dance, which we may do by looking in a stream of water, as they did.

Most of the ruder sports have died out, but the note of gladness in its observance still dominates, though sounded in gentler fashion.

And the solemn observance of the church, made beautiful by an impressive ritual invested with all that light and color and sound can add to a ceremony, inspire the faithful with the thought that once again light and life have triumphed over death and darkness.