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**THE MEANING OF MAY**

—By Donald Cameron—

Around the month of May there cluster more ancient usages, traditions, and superstitions than in the case with any other month of the year, except, perhaps, the month of December. When we search into the reason of this we find it due to the fact that May is the time of the year when the sun enters the sign of the zodiac known as Taurus, or the Bull. It is the time, therefore, when the earth, after having been quickened by the rains of April, bursts forth into new fertility.

So it is that almost all countries, while their calendars may not have this particular month in correspondence with ours, do, nevertheless, celebrate this season in honor of the renewed fertility of nature. The coming in of May seems to most of us an unimportant thing. We have a sort of literary tradition about May-poles and May-parties; and, even in our own country, the children of many a locality select a queen of the May and crown her with flowers and dance about her. This is only a pretty and childish custom now; but far back in antiquity it was differently conducted, and was viewed as of great importance by every one.

Thus, among the Phœnicians and Egyptians, whose days in May were given up to the worship of their gods, Moloch and Baal. These were the deities of the sun; and when the sun entered Taurus, Moloch and Baal received the frantic homage of vast throngs of worshippers. The rites which were performed were very different from the innocent customs of modern May-day. They are spoken of in the Old Testament as "the abomination of the Ammonites."

Great fires were kindled to symbolize the sun, and into their fierce flames were cast young children as acceptable sacrifices. Then the multitudes danced about a phallus—the origin of our May-pole. Acts of the grossest wantonness were permitted to both men and women, because these indicated the renewed fertility of the year.

It was the same in Rome where the games, known as the Floralia, were held during the first three days of May. At these games the spectators assembled in the great amphitheater and waited expectantly. At the sound of a trumpet a troop of women, cloaked from head to foot, moved in procession around the arena. Then the trumpet blew again, and the cloaks were dropped, revealing their wearers in a state of nature.

The rest of the games were in accordances with the beginning of them, and even many of the Romans themselves were shocked by the license which prevailed at this festival, whose name means simply "the feast of flowers."

In the northern part of Europe early May was noted by the Druids, who kindled immense fires at night in honor of their god Bel; and even to this day in Ireland, in Scottish Highlands, and in Cornwall the custom still continues, and is called in Celtic "Beltime," or "the day of Bel's fire."

Nothing could have been more magnificently startling than the scenes once enacted at Carnac, in the northwestern part of what is now France. Amid the gigantic pillars great flames arose, lighting up the country for miles around and gleaming far out into the sea which lay beneath. Amid the lurid gleams of these "bale-fires"—the name still remains in English—the Druids and Druidesses marched and counter-marched and chanted their weird songs.

It was, no doubt, from the Phœnicians that the Northern peoples learned this and other customs. Not long ago Dr. Walsh described a curious practice of the young men in certain parts of the Highlands. In each village they gathered together on May-day and proceeded to an open moor.

On its green expanse they cut an altar of sod, upon which they kindled a fire which they prepared a sort of custard, while they kneaded a cake of oatmeal, which was duly baked in the embers. After eating the custard they divided the cake into as many portions as there were young men present. One portion was blackened with charcoal; and then all of the pieces were thrown into a receptacle, from which each youth drew one without looking.

Whoever drew the blackened portion was obliged to leap three times through the flame of the fire. This is the harmless equivalent of a more ancient custom, according to which the one who drew the black portion was seized by his companions, stripped naked, and then burned to death upon the altar of sod.

May-poles go back farther than any one can remember. In England they were usually made of birch and covered with flowers and ribbon, while around them the young people danced. Perhaps it was the pagan origin of the May-pole which led the Puritans to condemn it so violently. During the time of Cromwell it was forbidden; but when King Charles II was enthroned, there was a mighty May-day celebration in London, directed by no less a person than the king's brother, the Duke of York, who was then Lord High Admiral of England.

His sailors set up a May-pole which was one hundred and thirty-four feet high. This was in 1661, and the pole was allowed to remain in the Strand for fifty-six years. In 1717, when it was taken down, it was bought by Sir Isaac Newton, who had it conveyed to Essex, where he used it as a support to a great telescope which had been presented to the Royal Society by the French astronomer, Hugon. This telescope was almost as long as the pole itself, for its length is reported to have been no less than one hundred and twenty-four feet.

bands of men, one band representing the forces of winter, and the other band the forces of spring. It is arranged that those who support winter shall be beaten, and then an effigy which represents winter is buried and the ashes from the bonfires are strewn over his grave.

In studying the peculiar customs of May-day it would seem as though two different superstitions had come to clash with one another. Since May symbolizes fertility, it is strange that the month should for centuries have been viewed, as an unlucky one in which to marry. Such, however, is the case. Twenty centuries ago the Roman poet Ovid wrote two lines, which may be roughly translated as follows:

If you will believe what the proverbs say,  
Only bad women marry in the month of May.

When Mary Queen of Scots made her ill-omened marriage with the Earl of Bothwell, some one nailed a paper inscribed with the last line upon the gates of Holyrood Palace. There is also an old English proverb which says:

Marry in May  
And rue the day.  
And another is in prose: "He who marries between the sickle and the scythe will never thrive."

The same superstition prevails also in many parts of France, and marriages there are quite infrequent in this beautiful month. It is not only the ignorant who are affected by this belief.

It is told of Sir Walter Scott that once while he was staying in London, his daughter's marriage was arranged to take place at her home in Scotland. Sir Walter had important business in London. If he remained there to complete it, he would not be able to reach Scotland until after the first of May, so that his daughter would then be married in the unlucky month. Scott's Highland superstition overcame him; so that he cut short his London visit and hurried post-haste to Abbotsford, arriving there just in time to arrange for the wedding in the last week of April.

The name "May" is Roman in its origin, being derived from the name "Mala," the mother of the god Mercury. In the oldest Roman calendar it is said to have been the second month of the year. Then it became the third month, and finally the fifth. The Anglo-Saxons called it Trimichi, because at that time of the year the grass was so rich and plentiful that their cows could be milked three times each day.

Altogether, May is a very interesting month. Its associations recall one of the darkest cults of paganism, and at the same time one of the most innocent and beautiful of modern festivals. The quaint embodiments of superstition and experience to be found in the mass of traditional weather lore and a considerable portion of influence to the month of May. If the ancient prognosticators, whose descendants no amount of ridicule has served to extinguish, were right in their judgments, the month is treacherous and fatal when it is brightest and most beautiful, and is only acceptable and full of good fruits when it appears cold and inhospitable.

The old English proverb, "Never cast a clout till May be out," is a doctrine expressed in many varied forms by the wise people of each passing generation. For once the proverb-maker has accuracy on his side. She who "casts a clout" and dons lighter raiment in honor of the return of the sun, will have occasion to shiver at the coldness of the evening.

Yet never will calm persuasion have its due effect while the sun shines so brightly on a May morning. The result is bluntly and grimly expressed in the proverb, "A hot May makes a fat churchyard." Let us be warned and be wise in time.

Charm the May sun never so wisely, blow the zephyrs never so softly, cast not the clout till the month be out, and its treacherous smiles give place to the more genuine joys of June.

Three days in it—apart from the first—are national holidays. The second of May is kept by Spaniards in honor of the great uprising in 1808 against the French, who had occupied the city of Madrid. Each year, therefore, that city now celebrates it with a gorgeous pageant, in which all the civic authorities take part. It is not unlike the American Decoration Day—which, by the way, falls upon the thirtieth of the same month—since the mayor of Madrid, escorted by a detachment of soldiers and saluted as a hero, goes in procession to a great obelisk which commemorates the heroic Spaniards who died in battle against the French invaders.

On May 19th, 1822, the Mexicans proclaimed the great military leader, Augustin de Iturbide, Emperor of Mexico, and he established the first independent government in the country, after it broke away from the sovereignty of Spain. His rule was short, since the Mexicans preferred a republic, but the date mentioned is an important one in the history of our neighboring republic.

The Argentine Republic celebrates its national anniversary on May 20th. It was on May 1st that Admiral Dewey won the battle of Manila in 1898. It was on May 13th that the first English settlement in America was made at Jamestown in 1607; and it was on May 20th that the first declaration of our independence from England was proclaimed at Mecklenburg, North Carolina, in 1775—more than a year before the great Declaration at Philadelphia.

When a man is beaten he admits it—but it is different with a woman.

Marriage may or may not be a failure. In either case there is a big bunch of indisputable evidence to the contrary.

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