A FAMOUS FESTIVAL.

That a Large Portion of the Christian World Are Joyously Celebrating Today.

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Today is "Whit Sunday" or "Whitsuntide," which in the calendar of the Roman Catholic, Episcopalian and Lutheran churches is proclaimed the greatest, most important and most joyous religious festival of the entire year, with the exception of Christmas and Easter. Throughout Great Britain and the whole continent of Europe it is quite as generally and elaborately celebrated by all classes and ranks, from the highest to the lowest, as are these two other great festivals with which it is compact. In our sense it is even greater and its celebration even more general than that of Christmas or Easter, for it is not only a Christian festival but a Jewish one as well, the event which it commemorates in the Christian church having occurred on the Hebrew Day of Pentecost. That Christian event was the descent of the Holy Ghost on the Apostles when "they were all with one accord in one place," after the ascension of our Lord, as which it is said they received the gift of tongues or different languages that they might impart the Gospel to foreign nations. In our own country at the present time the day is specially celebrated by all our citizens of foreign birth, the German element of our population, especially, devoting great attention to it and keeping as a holiday not only Whit Sunday but the following day, Whit Monday. In all the Episcopalian, Catholic and Lutheran churches special services appropriate to the occasion are held.

Along the shores of Hudson our Whit Sunday, which was their day of Pentecost, was a season of harvest home. It was calculated from the second day of the Passover, the sixteenth of Nisan.

General and joyous as is the celebration of Whit Sunday among such an immense majority of the whole Christian world, both in our own and all foreign lands, it is almost impossible to find any one outside of the clergy, who knows or can tell anything of its origin, history and true significance, though it is richer in quaint old folklore, peculiar customs, sports, superstitions, legends and traditions than any other day—in fact in fact for twelve the whole twelve months. Jewish children, young men and women are much better posted on this subject than those of the Christian faith. They will tell you that the Hebrew law prescribed that a beginning be kept from the Sabbath of the Passover to the morrow after the seventh of the seventh week, which would, of course, be the fiftieth day after the Passover.

This period included the Hebrew grain harvest which commenced with the first sheaf of barley gathered at the Passover and ended with the making, on the day of Pentecost, of two loaves of leavened bread in the finest wheat flour of the new crop. Thus in the Whit Sunday of the Christian church we see another instance of the substitution of a Christian for a Jewish festival as in the case of the replacing of the Hebrew Passover with the Christian Easter. Yet we in the new with many holy days of the Christian Church, it is generally thought by antiquarians that our Whitsuntide was also identified with one of the great summer festivals of the Pagans of Western Europe.

Among the English peasantry from the earliest Christian times down to the present day, the most elaborate folk ceremonies of the whole year have been performed on Whit Sunday. Among the most notable of these was what is called the Wakean ale. Ale was so universally a drink among the early English that by its association with various festivals it has added some than one new word to our language—notably "bridal," a contraction of "bride-ale," which was a term applied to ale of a peculiar quality and strength, specially brewed in honor of the title at a wedding. The ale used at Whitsuntide, or the Wakean ale, was remarkable for its strength and was consumed by an assemblage of the whole parish usually held in some barn near the church. The ale was dispensed to those present by the church wardens, and the profits arising from its sale were devoted to a fund for the repair of the church. Two persons, previously chosen, were designated as lord and lady of the ale, a sort of throne was erected for them at one end of the barn, and they were attended by their steward, sword-bearer and other officials. The persons filling these offices were frequently paid small sums for their services, and in the old church wardens' accounts in the English parish churches there frequently occurred such entries as "Payde to her that was lady of the ale at Whitsuntide, by consent, 5s."

But of all the old English sports at Whitsuntide the greatest favorite was the Morris dance. This is believed to have been derived from Spain through Gib Moors, and its name to regarded as a corruption of the Spanish Moriscos, a Moor. Originally danced by five performers, it at length seemed necessary to have it performed either by a single individual or as many as cared to participate in it. There was finally grafted on it some features of an old English country dance performed at certain periods in honor of Robin Hood and his outlaws, from which circumstance a female participating in it was called a "Maid Marian," after one of Robin Hood's sweethearts. One of the most distinctive features of the Morris dance was a pair of geyers hung with bells and worn by each of the dancers.

In 1609 William Kemp, a celebrated comedian of the reign of Queen Elizabeth, danced the Morris all the way from London to Norwich. This feat at the time of its performance was considered one of the most remarkable ever attempted. Kemp published a most interesting and curious pamphlet giving a full account of his adventures on this, and his wonderful exploit continued to be a subject of popular discussion for many years afterward. All along the way the country people turned out to greet the dancer in such crowds that at times he was with great difficulty he could make his way through them. He was entertained by the nobility and gentry during his progress, and on his arrival at Norwich was publicly honored by the mayor with great honor.

One of the most amusing passages in Kemp's curious book—one of the rarest and most valuable in my collection of wonders—is where he tells how a sturdy butcher—one of those gigantic butchers of beef cattle who seem to have a wonderful power of absorbing the essence and instincts of the great animals in which they deal—undertook to dance the morris with him from Sandbury to Bury, but became completely exhausted and was very reluctantly obliged to give up before they had danced half a mile. Kemp then goes on to say, in his quaint style: "As he and I were parting, a lusty country lass being among the people, called him faint-hearted but, saying, 'If I had begun to dance I would have held out one mile than he.' It had not lain on my life,' as which words many laughed. 'Nay,' saith she, 'if the dancer will lend me a lease of his land I will venture to trace one mile with him myself.' I looked upon her, saw mirth in her eyes, heard boldness in her words, and lastly her ready tripping up her coats, perceived it. I did her up with bellies, a smiled at her merry taking, garnished her thick short legs with, and with a season trow made the tabrer begin. The drum struck, forward merrily I with my merry Maydo Marian, who smoke her for ever and coted it merrily to Melford, being a long style. I take her action, and, by my faith, sir, she had a good ear, dance truly, and we parted friends."

Dancing of almost any kind is said to be among the healthiest and most conducive to longevity of all exercises, but Morris dancing would seem entitled to the palm in these respects if we are to believe a couplet published during the reign of James I, which states that the united ages of ten rustic Morris dancers then living in Herefordshire amounted to 1200 years, while of eight others the youngest was seventy-nine and the oldest 108 years, Morris dancing continued to be a favorite Whitsuntide diversion in England down to the early years of the present century, and was publicly danced in Goswell street Road, London, as late as 1826.

Down in the middle of the seventeenth century the representation of "mysteries" and "miracle plays" always took place on Whitsuntide throughout Great Britain and in many countries of continental Europe. They were dramatic spectacles devised during the middle ages—when the Bible was an interdicted book—to instruct the people in sacred story. The "mysteries" represented the narratives of the Old and New Testaments, while the "miracle plays" delineated the lives of the saints. Originally written and acted by monks, they continued a popular Whitsuntide diversion for nearly two centuries after the reformation, for they were strongly condemned by some churchmen—among them being Wycliffe and his followers—as a profane treatment of sacred subjects, yet Luther gave them his sanction, saying that in his opinion "such spectacles also do more good and produce more impression than sermons."

These religious dramas were usually performed in churches, though frequently in cemeteries, market places and public squares as well. Three stages were usually erected—one for the actors. Upon the highest was a representation of the Creator and His angels, and upon the next lower of the saints, while the action of the drama took place upon the lowest. Upon one side of the last named there was a representation of the mouth of hell, whence came fire and smoke and the cries of the lost. Demons also issued from it, their coarse jests and horse play forming the low comedy part of the entertainment and affording infinite amusement to the audience.

It was my good fortune, while sojourning in Naples some years ago, to participate in the elaborate rites at Monte Vergine, which the Neapolitans annually celebrate on Whit Sunday and during the two succeeding days. The principal features of the celebration take place at a church erected upon a mountain near Avellino, a day's journey on foot from Naples, and the pilgrimage, most interesting part of the ceremony is the long train of carriages, wagons, carriages and all sorts of wonderful, incredibly ancient vehicles gaily decorated with flowers, ribbons and garlands—as are also the horses, oxen and asses drawing them—which winds from the city along picturesque roads to the summit of the mountains, attended by great crowds of merry makers on foot, singing and dancing unceasingly and bearing sticks which support brightly colored pictures of Madonnas.

In St. Petersburgh in 1875, I witnessed what was perhaps the last observance of a Whit Sunday custom which though once slightly popular had long been gradually dying out. It was a show of marriageable women and girls desirous of obtaining husbands, and took place on Whit Sunday afternoon in the "Summer Garden," a place of popular resort. The positions were attended by their parents or some other elderly relative through whom, if a young man was smitten with a maid, he conducted his negotiations for her hand.

It is, of course, needless to say that this usage was confined to the lower and middle classes.

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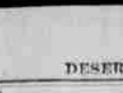

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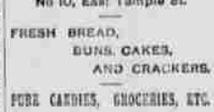

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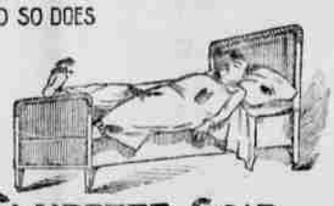

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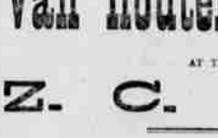

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