

MIDSUMMER'S EVE

by Hamish Hendry

Midsummer Day is the 24th June; this is also the day upon which the birth of St. John the Baptist is celebrated by the Christian Church. During the Middle Ages it was a joyous time of feast and merry-making, for in these old times, as you must have gathered from this little book, people did not work and worry so much as they do nowadays. But here is a curious thing: nearly all the ceremonies connected with this holiday were performed the night previous—variously called Midsummer's Eve, or St. John's Eve. These customs and ceremonies were observed in various forms throughout Christendom, and some of them were very strange. I have often had to tell you that many of our holiday practices and usages were founded upon ancient heathen rites and ceremonies; this is perhaps more observable in connection with Midsummer Eve than upon any other holiday occasion.

Flowers and fire were two things that became of great importance on Midsummer's Eve. Nearly every town and village had its bonfire lit in the market-place, and at one time these fires were formally blessed by the priests of the church. One practice connected with these fires, a practice that carries us far back into heathen times, was the way in which the boys and girls leaped through and over the flames. It was also customary to fling flowers and garlands into the fires, while the people, young and old, circled round the blaze with merry antics and gleeful songs. Great processions were also formed to visit the woods and bring back green boughs wherewith to decorate the houses on St. John's Eve. The boughs were hung round doors and windows with joyful shoutings, in recognition of the prophecy that many would rejoice at the birth of John the Baptist.

Midsummer's Eve was regarded as a time when the strangest things might easily happen. That is probably the reason why Shakspeare called his play "A Midsummer Day's Dream," and make Puck and the other fairies play such pranks with the mortals that they found wandering out-of-doors. It used to be a common belief in Ireland, and the superstition still lingers, that on this night the souls of all sleeping people left their bodies, and went wandering into strange places, sometimes never to return. To avoid this dangerous possibility it was usual to keep awake during that night. But to keep watch did not always prevent the watcher from having gruesome experiences. In England it was quite a prevalent opinion that if you sat in the church porch all St. John's Eve you would see the spirits of those who were soon to die in the parish come and knock at the church door.

There were various other superstitious practices and beliefs associated with Midsummer's Eve—most of them weird and heathenish—which you will read about when you grow older. They belong to a time when people were very ignorant, and therefore very credulous. Happily, we are forgetting all these foolish beliefs; and for my part I find Midsummer's Eve interesting and beautiful because the light is slow to fade from the sky, because the wild roses make a pleasant scent in the lanes, and because the nightingale from the copsewood brims the darkness with melodious joy.

Source:

Hendry, Hamish. "Midsummer's Eve". *Holidays & Happy Days*. London: Grant Richards, 1901. 72 – 75. Electronic.

ST. SWITHIN'S DAY

by Hamish Hendry

In Europe there are various saints who are supposed to have had some influence upon the weather; France has its St. Médard, and England has its St. Swithin. Our actual knowledge of this old English saint is very scanty, and the grounds upon which he has been associated with dry and wet weather are of dubious origin. We are told that St. Swithin was a monk in the Old Abbey of Winchester, and that because of his zeal he became prior and then bishop of that See. We are told, also, that he erected numerous churches, while his piety and learning were such that Egbert, King of Wessex, gave him his son and successor to educate. As was usual with good men in those days, many miraculous deeds were attributed to St. Swithin, and finally he died in the year 862 A.D. He was buried in the churchyard at Winchester, in a humble spot of his own selection.

More than a hundred years afterwards the clergy of the diocese of Winchester thought that the Saint deserved more honour than a grave under the dripping eaves of the Cathedral. Accordingly, they arranged to remove the body inside with great ceremony, and the date selected for this event was the 15th July. Thereafter this day was regarded as St. Swithin's Day because, if we are to believe popular legend, he objected to have his body removed from the humble place in the graveyard chosen by himself. In order to give outward and visible sign of his displeasure violent rains descended on that 15th of July, and the torrent continued for forty days, so that the ceremony of removing the Saint's body was delayed, while the clergy of the diocese were thus rebuked for their presumption. Hence there grew up the popular belief which finds expression in the old rhyme:

St. Swithin's Day, if thou dost rain,
For forty days it will remain:
St. Swithin's Day, if thou be fair,
For forty days 'twill rain nae mair.

There is, of course, no truth in this old adage, although there are some people who still profess to believe in it. The men whose business it is to watch the weather day by day and write down all they observe, will tell you that it does not matter in the least, as far as the rain of the following forty days is concerned, whether it is wet or dry on the 15th July. It is even very doubtful whether the ceremony of removing the Saint's body was marked by any special downpour of rain; the fact is not mentioned by the chroniclers of that time. Like many other things connected with holidays and holy days this legend regarding St. Swithin has its origin, probably in the heathen times that preceded Christianity. That would account, at least, for the curious fact that there are several rainy Saints in Europe.

Source:

Hendry, Hamish. "St. Swithin's Day". *Holidays & Happy Days*. London: Grant Richards, 1901. 76 – 81. Electronic.