

TWELFTH DAY

by Hamish Hendry

The sixth day in each year is called Twelfth Day. That is a little odd is it not? Well, the reason is this: In very ancient times there was a great Christian Festival which began upon Christmas Day and lasted for twelve days. It was called the Feast of the Nativity, because it was held in honour of the coming of Christ to earth, and both the first day of the feast and the last day were held very sacred. On the last, or twelfth day, special honour was given to the Three Kings who are spoken of in the New Testament as the Three Wise Men who came from the east to Jerusalem, led by a star. The star guided these Three Kings to Bethlehem where they saw the young child Jesus and offered gifts to him of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

At first this feast, which we call Epiphany, was of a very solemn nature, but in the Middle Ages it lost a great deal of its sacred character. The festival of the Three Kings became noisy and frolicsome, and sometimes it was arranged in the form of a little play. In this play three friars or monks were dressed up like Kings, with crowns upon their heads, and a golden star was carried before them. Within the church, near the altar, a manger would be arranged with an ox and an ass, in imitation of the manger at Bethlehem. Here, also, was the child Christ and his mother. To them would enter the Three Kings, accompanied by a merry crowd, and gifts were offered to the Babe—gold, frankincense and myrrh. It was a pretty sight, perhaps, but not at all devout.

In later times still, Twelfth Day was almost wholly given up to frolic and feasting. Special plays were written to amuse the people, and it is probably for that reason we have Shakspeare's play called "Twelfth Night." The chief custom of this merry day was the election of a King of the Bean; sometimes there was also a Queen. No doubt this making of a King had its connection with the honour done to the Three Kings in the early festival; it may also be connected with an old Roman custom. Here is how the King was elected on Twelfth Day. A large cake, called Twelfth Cake, was baked for the day, and inside the cake a bean was placed. When all the company were gathered to the feast the cake was cut up, and the fortunate person who got the piece of cake with the bean in it was made King of the Bean, and had charge of the revels. Sometimes the names of the company were put in a bowl, and each one received a piece of the cake as his or her name was drawn by lot.

There was much fun and laughter, you may be sure, as the names were being drawn, the cake cut up, and the bean discovered. It is the kind of fun which you children would have enjoyed. For the Twelfth Cake, in the old days, was usually very large, baked into very queer shapes, and always very nice to eat. Nowadays, the cakes upon Twelfth Day have become much smaller, and in some households this merry day is forgotten altogether. You will agree with me, children, that this is a mistake. It is a mistake to forget the good old customs; and it is doubly a mistake when the custom is made cheerful with laughter and cake.

Source:

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