

## *The Herbs of Good St. John* 609

collection puts a different interpretation on a like occurrence :

Whilst holy prayers to Heaven were made,  
One soon was heard and answered too :  
*Save us from sudden death*, was said,  
And straight from church Sir John withdrew.

I am tempted to quote further from the note-books, but Leisure gives me a warning nudge, and tells me I have quoted more than enough already. By your leave, good Leisure, one more indiscretion, and I have done. The sword of Sir John Talbot, afterwards Earl of Shrewsbury, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in the fifteenth century, was found in the river Dordogne and sold to an armourer of Bordeaux. It bore an inscription, couched in questionable Latin. "Pardon the Latin," says Fuller, "for it was not his, but his camping chaplain's. It was a sword with bad Latin upon it, but good steel within it." And so with this miscellany ; the running commentary, which is faulty, is its discoverer's ; the right metal, if you are pleased to find any, is Leisure's own.

H. C. MINCHIN.

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THROUGHOUT Europe from very early times certain plants have been associated with the festival of St. John the Baptist, or Midsummer, when, to this day, bonfires blaze on the hills in Ireland, France, Spain, Germany and other countries, in honour, as the peasants imagine, of that "burning and shining light" who came as the forerunner of Christ, though they are in reality relics of the fire-worship of our heathen ancestors at this feast of the Summer Solstice.

Those who have seen Irish people leaping over the burning piles of turf, brushwood, and bracken, kindled at sunset on the green hills, and leading the children

solemnly between two fires, or through the embers, as the blaze sinks low, can hardly fail to be reminded of that "passing through the fire to Moloch," which the Israelites copied from the Phœnicians or Assyrians. The cattle, too, are driven round the fires, in the red heart of which certain herbs and branches are burned—"red rowan," hazel, elder, and dog-rose, bound with green withes or rushes, bracken, yarrow, St. John's wort, and mugwort, all of which are deemed efficacious in averting witchcraft.

The so-called "herbs of St. John" were connected with these rites long before the introduction of Christianity. The Eastern and Latin races assigned special plants to their sun-deities, a practice also of the Celts, and the Northern nations seem to have dedicated certain trees, and white or golden flowers, whose shape or hue resembled the luminary, such as the ox-eye daisy and the St. John's wort to

Balder the Beautiful,  
God of the Summer sun.

The whole tribe of Hypericums were dedicated to Balder, and later to "Good St. John," but the species specially connected with both was the perforated St. John's wort (*H. perforatum*) whose leaves are marked with a number of tiny pellucid dots, said to be holes made by the devil with a needle! The root is spotted with red, and consequently in Norway it is known as "Balder's blood," or "St. John's blood." Formerly this plant was called "hundred holes" from these dots, and "balm for the warrior's wound," from its fancied virtues as a vulnerary, for, according to the Doctrine of Signatures, a plant thus pierced and torn, whose foliage in autumn assumed a blood-red hue, must necessarily heal wounds and staunch blood. The "tutsan"—a corruption of *toute-saine*—also used as a styptic, is *H. androsæmum*, and is employed by country-folk in the concoction of a balsam or salve, deemed highly efficacious for wounds and sores, chiefly because the juice turns oils and spirits to a bright

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red hue, though the Hypericums have, as a fact, certain medicinal virtues. This salve seems to be almost the same as that described by Gerarde, who tells us that: "The leves, floures, & seedes stamped & put into a glasse with oile olive, & set in the sunne for certain weekes, doth make an oile of the colour of blood, which is a most pretious remedy for deep woundes." Culpeper, too, praised the St. John's wort as "a singular wound-herb," and extolled the virtues of this

herb of war,  
Pierced through with wounds,  
And marked with many a scar,

as an excellent application for sores, swellings, wounds, and the bites of venomous creatures. It was also thought efficacious against evil spells, and was, therefore, known as *fuga dæmonum*, for witches and demons were said to fly from the house where the pretty golden flowers were hung up on Midsummer Eve. It was one of the plants with which our ancestors adorned their dwellings on this night, when, as Stow tells us in his "Survey of London," "every man's door being shadowed with green birch, long fennel, St. John's wort, or pine, white lilies, and such like, garnished upon with garlands of beautiful flowers, had also lamps of glass, with oil burning in them all night. Some hung out branches of iron, curiously wrought, containing hundreds of lamps lighted at once." Countrymen brought in green boughs and flowers from "Biscopis-wode" that the citizens of London might "make therewith her houses gay, into remembraunce of Seint Johan Baptist, & of this, that it was prophecied of him that many shulden joie in his birthe" (Bishop Pecock).

Pots of gay blossoms—especially roses, lilies, and orpine, or "Midsummer Men"—hung from the windows and balconies, which were decked with tapestries and banners, and filled with richly-dressed ladies, who were eager to see the procession of the City Watch, accompanied by the Lord Mayor on horseback, his retinue, the

waits or musicians of the City, lancers, gunners, archers, and halberdiers, pikemen, the Constable of the Watch, morris-dancers, and hundreds of torch-bearers, the gleam of whose cressets rivalled the glow of the many bonfires lighted throughout the City.

In remote parts of England, Scotland and Wales, the St. John's wort, mingled with birch-boughs and ferns, is still hung up on Midsummer Eve. In the North Country it was formerly worn to keep off witches and warlocks. Irish "colleens" gather the mystic herb, with yarrow, and the pink or purplish blossoms of the marsh-orchis, in order to weave love-spells and compound philtres on Midsummer Eve. It is one of "the seven herbs of power," of the Irish fairy-man or herb-doctor; the others are yarrow, speedwell, vervain, eye-bright, mallow, and self-help (*Prunella*). Plucked at noon on Midsummer Day or Eve, they have extra virtues.

A belief in love-potions lingers to a great extent, even in these days of schools and motor-cars, in parts of our isles where the Celtic element remains, and young folk continue to resort to these time-honoured expedients for winning the affections of hard-hearted lads and lasses. In such places girls hang up St. John's wort from the ceiling or walls on Midsummer Eve, usually naming one sprig for themselves and another for their lovers. If the plants bend towards each other during the night, the pair will be married before next Midsummer; if they turn aside, estrangement will follow, and if they are withered when the dawn drives away the brief dusk of the Midsummer night, the person represented by the faded flower will be dead before St. John brings round his fiery wheel again.

In Scandinavia, Germany, and other Continental countries, girls use the "herb of St. John" in similar fashion. On the Continent the four chief *herbes de St. Jean*, or *Johannis-kräuter*, are mullein, mugwort, vervain, and St. John's wort, and they are hung over the doors on Midsummer Eve to keep off witches and lightning. Danish

girls place two sprigs of St. John's wort under the beams of the roof, naming them after themselves and their lovers. If the plants turn towards each other, it is a sure sign of the speedy marriage of the pair.

Swedish maidens pluck nine flowers in nine different spots—St. John's wort and "Balder's Brow" (ox-eye daisy) must be among them—and put the nosegay under the pillow to dream on. Artemisia, or mugwort, known in Germany as *Bei-fuss*, *Johannis-gürtel* and *Sonnenwend-gürtel*, is connected with mystic rites. It is said that the devil cannot plague a house where it is on St. John's Eve, that it makes lovers faithful, and if a traveller puts a piece in his shoes, he will never be weary. German peasants say the festival is so great that the sun stands still for three hours, and *Johannis-kräuter* gathered during that time are powerful against sorcery. Some of the herbs are burned in the Midsummer fires with the branches of pine and nut-trees. In Denmark it is said that all herbs, good and bad, grow out of the grass on Midsummer Eve endowed with special powers, beneficent or the reverse, so people are cautious about stepping on the green-sward, lest they should tread on a poisonous or fairy-herb, but the holy plants of "Sanct Hans" are brought indoors.

A belief lingers in most parts of Europe regarding the virtues of fern-seed gathered on Midsummer Eve. Our ancestors thought it could only be found on that night, and said that, as it was so small as to be almost imperceptible, it gave the power of becoming invisible, a superstition mentioned by Shakespeare and other Elizabethan dramatists. For instance, Beaumont and Fletcher, in *The Fair Maid of the Inn*, mention "the herb that gives invisibility." The custom of going to gather fern-seed at midnight on Midsummer Eve is not quite extinct yet in some parts of our Isles, but nowadays it is rather observed as a bit of fun than from any faith in its mystic powers. Those who go to seek the seed are to start alone, and time themselves so as to arrive at the ferns by twelve

o'clock. They must on no account turn their heads, no matter what they may see or hear *en route*, and the spirits of the wood and heath were formerly said to do all in their power to induce them to turn, placing obstacles in their path, and whisking round their heads, as Aubrey asserted that the elves did to a person who went to gather fern-seed in the West Country in his time. Reaching the cluster of fronds from which they mean to gather the seed, they should hold a white napkin, paper, plate or box, under the fronds till midnight tolls out from the village belfry, and at that moment the seed is said to fall of its own accord into the plate or cloth, but the frond must not be shaken or even touched. On the way home the fairies will try to throw the bold mortal down, so that the treasure may be lost. And often when he has reached home in safety, it has been found that the packet was empty—not very surprising, when we think how minute the fern-seed is!

One story is that, precisely at midnight on Midsummer Eve, the ferns put forth a blue flower, which ripens at once into the magic seed, and the mortal who sees this event may obtain his heart's desire, and have the power of finding buried treasure and precious minerals. In the Tyrol fern seed is said to shine like gold on St. John's Eve, and those who gather it can discover treasure by scattering the seed on the ground, when fiery lines will mark the spot where the precious ore lies. In Russia, too, people go on St. John's Eve to look for the azure blossom of the *Paparôt*, or fern, for the finder can ever afterwards do exactly as he likes. Grimm says that at Thiers the fern gathered at midnight on St. John's Eve is thought to bring luck at play, a superstition connected in Ireland with a four-leaved shamrock gathered on St. Patrick's Day. In England, Wales, and the Isle of Man the fern which produced this marvellous seed was said to be the common male or shield fern, but in the Green Isle the magic species is "the fairy-fern," the pretty *asplenium tricomanes*, which is thought to be a special favourite with "the good people."

Some of the country-folk are rather afraid to gather it, except at Midsummer, but if it is brought into a garden, and flourishes there, good luck will attend the owner ; and if any one is ill, the fairy-fern is sometimes brought indoors, and set in clay or water in a saucer. If it is fresh next morning the patient will recover, but if it fades, the illness will have a fatal termination.

The stiff purplish-pink blossoms of the *sedum*, variously known as "orpine," "live-long," and "Midsummer Men," may be found in many parts of England, but pretty maidens nowadays may inquire in vain :

Who will make me a Midsummer Man ?

for few people ever dream, in these days, of setting them up in pairs in clay upon slates or in saucers. The plants were named after young people in the neighbourhood, and if the two sprigs bent towards each other, an early marriage might be expected. Sometimes they were called "Midsummer Men and Women," and in some cases girls merely stuck up a single sprig, drawing omens from the turning of the leaves to the left or the right whether the lover was true or false. "The orpine growing still" is so tenacious of life that it was regarded as an emblem of fidelity. In January 1801 a clergyman named Bacon found a small gold ring in a ploughed field near Cawood, Yorkshire, which had engraved upon it two orpine plants joined by a true-lover's knot, with this motto above them : *Ma fiancé velt* (My sweetheart wishes). The stalks were bent towards each other, to show that the pair represented were to be married. The motto beneath was *Joye l'amour feu*. The form of the letters showed that it was made in the fifteenth century.

Young women used to search for a wonderful coal which was said to be found on Midsummer Eve under the roots of the mugwort, as Lupton tells us in his "Notable Things" :

It is certainly and constantly affirmed that on Midsummer Eve there is found under the roots of mugwort a coal which saves and keeps

them safe from the plague, carbuncle, lightning, the quartan ague, and from burning, that bear the same about them: and Mizaldus, the writer thereof, saith that he doth hear that is to be found the same day under the root of plantane, which I know to be of truth, for I have found them the same day under the root of plantane, which is especially and chiefly to be had at noon.

Aubrey mentions seeing a number of young women at twelve o'clock "on the day of St. John Baptist (1694) in the pasture behind Montague House, on their knees very busie, as if they had been weeding." A man told him that they were looking for a coal under the roots of a plantain, to put under their head that night to dream on.

Doubtless this wonderful coal was merely the old blackened roots of the mugwort and plantain, and was only found at Midsummer because it was never looked for at any other season. To this day the Irish peasantry believe mugwort to be a cure for fever and ague, and that plantain roots are a remedy for dog-bites.

Another "herb of St. John" is the mullein, or "Adam's flannel," called by the French *bouillon-blanc*, and by the Germans *woll-kraut*, almost identical with our "flannel flower." In olden times this plant was also named "high taper" or "long-taper," and its golden flame of bloom was supposed to be lighted for the Baptist, like the scarlet glow of the lychnis, still termed "St. John's candlestick." In many parts of Germany this plant, with larkspur, St. John's wort, mugwort and *Eisen-kraut*, or vervain, is thrown into the Midsummer-fire, with the wish, "May my ill-luck burn and vanish with the weeds!" At Aix and Marseilles country folk bring *des herbes de St. Jean* into the towns on Midsummer morning, and every one buys them to deck the houses and throw in the fires for luck, but they must be plucked before sunrise, while the dew is upon them, for the Midsummer dew, like the May dew, is credited with numerous virtues. In Normandy it is thought a splendid cosmetic, in Brittany it is supposed to cure fevers, and the Italians consider it a specific for baldness. In Spain the dew from myrtle boughs and ferns is thought particularly good.



Girls work charms in that sunny land with ferns, roses, myrtles, reeds and bulrushes on this festival.

In the south and west of Ireland many spells are worked with the yarrow or milfoil, the "herb of seven cures" of the fairy-women. Girls dance round the plants, singing :

Yarrow, yarrow, yarrow,  
I give the good-morrow !  
And tell me before to-morrow  
Who my true-love will be, oh !

Then the plant is pulled up and brought home to dream on. Another spell, worked in Galway at Midsummer and All Hallow Eve, begins with seeking for a nine-leaved sprig of yarrow. This is pulled up with the left hand, cut into pieces with silver, thrown over the left shoulder, picked up, and put under the pillow at night. The marsh orchis, or "merry little dog," is also used not only in spells but as an ingredient of love-potions. Perhaps this is the species of orchis called "Satyrion" by old writers, and used for this purpose. Centaury, rue, basil, tormentil, henbane, mandrake and the pansy—Puck's "little western flower"—were all used in the Midsummer rites of bygone days, and perhaps it is a pity that these innocent if somewhat foolish customs are dying out so rapidly.

MAUD E. SARGENT.

## *The Refuge*

THE waste of futile kisses over-past ;  
The holding arms withdrawn ; the cruel recoil  
Of heart whence Love has followed Love in  
vain :

Then we, like children spent, must turn at last  
To Love's Sole Refuge, past this life's turmoil,  
Where holy shadows from Thy Wings are cast.

JESSIE ANNIE ANDERSON.