

# MAY DAY

**M**AY DAY was selected as a festival to be kept in commemoration of the solidarity and fraternity of the toiling masses everywhere throughout the countries wherein were affiliated organisations of the Second International, for the reason that from time immemorial this day had been regarded as a customary holiday amongst the agrarian population of Europe.

Consequently what was to be particularly a festival, an occasion of demonstrations and speeches for the urban proletariat had its origin in the habits and in the beliefs of the peasant masses. This in itself may account for the slowness with which May Day has come into favour with the workers of this essentially prosaic and industrialised country. It has needed many long years to become an event having significance for any but a small fraction of the British proletariat. It has not had the same power of attraction, the same suggestion as, for instance, the big galas held by the miners in certain of the colliery areas. These latter have had about them something of the nature of the country fair and of the camp meeting so much in favour with the local preachers and their following, who were often respectively trade union officials and trade union rank and file.

May Day has been, so far as the proletariat in the industrial areas was concerned, an importation of alien origin. It has been, at the most, a revival of an institutional holiday which the Puritan and latter-day Methodist nonconformist traditions, amidst which the workers have emerged from the country village to the industrial communities of to-day, had served almost completely to discredit.

Thus, despite the fact that in old England, in Merrie England, May Day was kept with jollification and with something ceremonial and religious in its celebration, May Day as we know it in the Labour Movement is an alien introduction. It has had to be imported to this country from lands into which the virus of individualism in production and individualism in belief had not so far penetrated as completely to disintegrate the customary life of the masses, either in the country or newly drafted into the towns and mining areas.

It is singularly appropriate that International Labour Day should be that day which from ages of the most remote antiquity had been held sacred, in joy and freedom, to the dwellers upon and cultivators of the soil of Europe. It is only fitting that the day selected to hail the new freedom which the workers in industry and agriculture alike should by their united action achieve should be this day when the toilers in the all-pervading and oldest of all branches of production had been wont to hold high festival.

May Day is one of those festivals which the Christian Church has done very little to corrupt with its blessing and which has, therefore, continued to belong to the rebel and untamed masses and, therefore, to be anything but a respectable occasion.

It has remained a communal festival without becoming an occasion for the Church dignitaries to thrust themselves into the foreground of the picture, claiming it as the feast day of some "father" or "mother" sanctified by themselves and so dedicated to lordships reaching down, like the rays of noon-day sun, from heaven to earth.

It belonged to the very earliest cycle of customary festivals, of ritual occasions whose modified and mutilated remnants have come down to us sometimes as Christian saint days and sometimes as public holidays. There are quite evidently three of these cycles and they are the more interesting in that they make manifest to us the influence of economics upon the ideas of mankind, showing quite clearly how religion has been generated by material factors imperfectly comprehended by the human mind. The first of these cycles was the one which we find to have prevailed amongst those people whose economy was based not upon the cultivation of the soil, but upon the grazing of their flocks, upon the nature grown herbage of the field, and who supplemented their food supply by the spontaneous bounty of the seasons.

These people had two principal occasions of communal cere-

monial intended for the purpose of propitiating the forces of nature as they knew them, the unseen beings or rather the mysterious personalities which they deemed to be inherent in natural objects and in natural forces. The first of these was the Beltaine or May Day festival at the beginning of May, celebrated at that season of the year when the foliage began to burst fully forth, the flowers and the blossom to show themselves in their glory and the grass to grow green and luscious. Beltaine, kept with the burning of fires upon hill-tops, in propitiation of the sun and earlier as a means to assist the sun with the strength giving flames of the artificial giver of warmth, the man-made fire, was a festival general throughout, at any rate, Northern, Western and Central Europe.

May Day was not only the occasion of these fires, lit by the manhood of the neighbourhood, partly to strengthen the sun, partly to keep at bay the fairies and the witches who, at this season, were deemed to be particularly malignant, but was, also, an occasion for the worship of the spirit of vegetation, the spirit of the trees, the force of increase in not alone inanimate but, also, in animate life, in animals and in the human species.

May Day, like other festivals of a similar, contemporary or later development, was celebrated by a number of rites, some belonging to one primitive belief and some to another. It was kept with fire-worship, was surrounded by a series of dark myths of the dead and of beings, some evil like the witches and others eerie and in some measure to be avoided like the fairies, and was made an occasion of joyous bringing forth from the wastes and woodlands into the homesteadings and community centres, the villages, of the trees gay with blossom and green with new life. It was likewise a season when youths and maidens similarly felt and indulged the instincts of the generation of new life. It was a season of lovemaking when it was deemed desirable and, indeed, essential that the factors, very tangible and very personal and in no sense abstract and ethereal to the primitive peoples, which made for increase of crops and herds and children should be induced to show favour, and all that made for illness, death and miscarriage should be either driven away or induced, by a bribe, to absent themselves.

The other festival, the other principal festival of this cycle was All Hallows, or All Souls, at Hallow E'en on the 31st of October—a night when the graves all opened and the ghosts flitted gibbering across the fields. This was the occasion when winter was realised to be upon the earth and the dread influences of death shadowed the minds of men and women, who kept close together, kept within doors and shouted and made all the commotion necessary to keep at bay the evil things that at that time possessed the earth and sought to win straying travellers to their dismal company.

Hallow E'en, also, survives amongst us—as the Fifth of November with its bonfires to burn Guy Fawkes in England and Hallow E'en with its fun for the children—sole devotees of fairy tales to-day when their enlightened elders have embraced the rarefied myths of the Christian religion.

With the evolution of a more highly developed economy dependent on the cultivation of the soil and the growing of crops, another cycle of festivals was super-imposed on that earlier one of which May Day, Hallow E'en and Candlemas—not to speak of the origins of August Bank Holiday—were the cardinal points. This cycle, still arising out of the objective realities of the economic life of the people—however fantastically misunderstood, had as its cardinal points, Mid-summer Day, Yule or Mid-Winter, Easter and Michaelmas. This cycle was fixed by the seasons of sowing, of harvest home and of the summer and winter solstices when the sun was at its height and at its utmost decline.

Upon this cycle and, to some extent upon the earlier, the Christian Church laid its hands, blessing some and exalting them to be high saint days and great festivals like Easter, Whitsun and Xmas, and debasing others to be tolerated subject to the paring of their “abuses.”

The Church found in these “saint” days, these great “feasts,” a means to the raising of a revenue, and the establishment of immense wealth and over-weening power.

It banished the more popular ways, accompanying the grosser rites of more primitive cults, belonging to a simpler social system and its pre-conditioning simpler economy, to the realms of evil. It made them impious. It denounced them as sorcery, witchcraft and Satanism.

Some it could neither banish nor corrupt by its favour. Amongst these was May Day.

Protestantism—that mockery of Christianity which successive sections of the bourgeoisie have made more tractable and less attractive—has to its credit (or debit) the elimination of all “these features of paganism” and the rationalising of religion as a system of ideas and behaviour calculated to increase production, to pacify the proletariat and to reflect in heaven the beatific countenance of the capitalist.

Pagan lord, Catholic cleric and Protestant employer each by turn has robbed the common people of some element of economic freedom and social justice and bound them to the car of bondage.

May Day—reconquered by and for the masses as International Labour Day—is destined to be the festival commemorative of the long road of proletarian emancipation, commemorative of the ultimate triumph and the linking hand in hand, in the light of social science and economic power, of the workers of the world.

J. T. WALTON NEWBOLD.