

MISTLETOE

MISTLETOE AS IT GROWS ON TREES IN CALIFORNIA

The Strange Parasitic Plant That Grows In Trees, Where It Is Planted By Birds, And The Lively Part It Has Played in History From Days Of The Roman Saturnalia Down to The Present Day Christmas KISS!

By John L. Cowan

HERE is no more interesting field for antiquarian research than that pertaining to the origin of popular customs, many of which survive with hardly a hint of their ancient significance. For example, few would suspect that the custom of hanging up a spray of mistletoe at the Christmas season is reminiscent of the pagan rites of the Druids of ancient Britain; and that the practice whereby a youth claims the forfeit of a kiss from the maiden found under the mistletoe is an innocent survival from the wild riot and license that prevailed in the feast of the Saturnalia in old Rome.

Our earliest information concerning the use of the mistletoe by the Druids is obtained from the writings of Pliny. He informs us that the sacred tree of the Druids was the oak, and when mistletoe was found growing upon an oak that particular tree was regarded as designated by the gods for religious uses, and the mistletoe itself was considered a direct gift from heaven.

As might be inferred from this high esteem in which mistletoe that grew upon an oak was held, it was very rarely that the plant grew upon that tree. The favorite host of the mistletoe, in England, is the apple tree, and, next to the oak, the apple was held in reverence by the Druids. It may have been for the purpose of facilitating the spread of mistletoe to the oaks that the Druids made a practice of planting apple trees close to the sacred groves of oaks. Even with this encouragement, it appears that mistletoe was not found upon the oaks often enough to suit the purposes of the priests. So they were accustomed to transplant the mystic shrub by stealth from the apple trees to the oaks.

So rare is the mistletoe upon oaks that it is said that at the present time there are not more than a half dozen oaks in all England thus distinguished. It was essential that the priests of each settled neighborhood should have a supply of the mystic shrub at least once each year, at the time of the winter solstice, when the sun halted on its journey southward. That season was a festival occasion throughout Europe, as indeed it was among many of the aboriginal tribes of America. So, when the natural supply of mistletoe, produced in the proper manner, and therefore of due sanctity, was not sufficient, it was quite in accord with human nature for the priests to resort to a pious fraud to supply the deficiency.

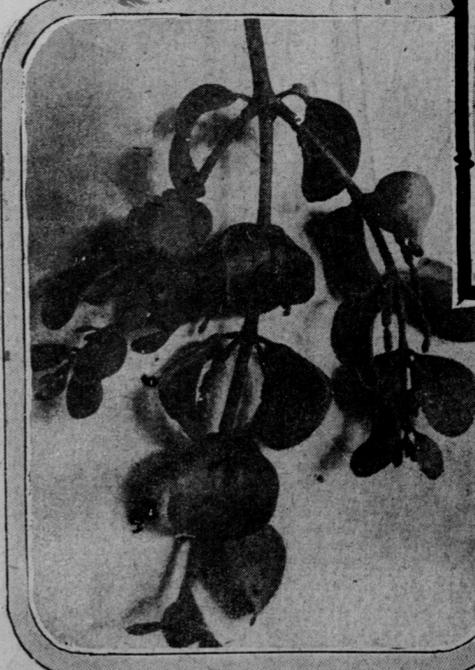
Five days after the new moon nearest the winter solstice, the great ceremony of cutting the mistletoe from the sacred oak took place. A grand procession was formed, led by the bard and priests and concluded by great crowds of people.

When the oak tree upon which the mistletoe was growing was reached, a herald climbed the tree, and with a golden scythe, or reaping hook, cut down the plant. Some of the inferior priests stood beneath the tree with a white mantle, in which they caught the sprays of mistletoe as they fell. Then two white bulls (or sometimes even human beings) were sacrificed to the gods, after which the mistletoe was divided into small fragments and distributed among the people. Each person took the small spray given by the priests and hung it above the entrance to his home, as a proffer of hospitality to the woodland gods during the season of cold.

These Druidical rites were continued in England throughout the period of Roman domination. The mistletoe was also employed in a symbolic way by the Romans; and it is not strange that the Druidical ceremonies became somewhat confused with the Saturnalian festivities. So the early church in Great Britain frowned upon the use of mistletoe, not only as an adjunct of the old pagan worship, but more particularly because it was regarded as suggestive of the licentiousness of the Saturnalia. At the instance of the church the holly was substituted for the mistletoe at the Christmas season, and the sacred plant of the Druids was relegated to the background.

However, antiquarians assure us that the mistletoe never lost its popularity among the poorer classes in England. It does not appear that Saturnalian license ever gained a deep or lasting foothold in Britain; but a suggestion of Roman freedom was found in the custom that grew up among the servants, whereby the man who caught a member of the opposite sex under the mistletoe that was always hung up in the kitchen at Christmas time was privileged to demand and take a kiss. It was considered bad luck for a girl to escape this salute, indicating that she would not be married for at least another year. In time the spray of mistletoe, with the accompanying privilege of a kiss, was promoted from the kitchen to the drawing room and parlor; and once more the mistletoe enjoyed a midwinter vogue almost as

great (although of an entirely different nature) as in the time of its employment in the Druidical ceremonies. By the ancient Britons the sacred mistletoe that grew upon the oak tree was regarded as a charm or antidote for poisons. Perhaps this explains the origin of the use of this plant for various medicinal purposes during the middle ages, when the practice of medicine was little more than a species of sorcery. Even in comparatively recent times it was used as a remedy for epilepsy and convulsions, and was considered beneficial for counteracting the effects of poison. It is now known that its medical virtues were wholly imaginary. The only economic use of the plant is for the making of bird lime. Surrounding the seeds is an extremely sticky substance, which is sometimes employed for the manufacture of that



with the all important fact that the mistletoe had been forgotten when all other animate and inanimate objects had been pledged to friendliness.

Then Loki fashioned an arrow from the wood of the mistletoe, gave it to the blind god Hoder and told him to shoot, as Baldur stood before him. Hoder obeyed and Baldur fell dead.

Every one is familiar with the song, "The Mistletoe Bough," written by Thomas Haynes Bayley, who died in 1829. The story is that Lord Lovel married the daughter of a baron, and on the wedding night the bride proposed to the assembled guests a game of hide and seek. The bride hid in an old oak chest. The lid closed upon her, fastening with a spring lock, and her distracted husband sought for her in vain. Years afterward the chest was sold. When opened the skeleton of the bride was found and thus her mysterious disappearance was explained at last.

So from many sources have legends and traditions gathered around the mistletoe. It seems unfortunate, then, that we must now consider it nothing but an unmitigated nuisance. It is a parasite, deriving its sustenance from the juices of the tree upon which it grows. When many bunches of mistletoe grow upon the same tree, the tree begins to decline and finally dies, being literally starved to death, the parasitic plants depriving it of the sap essential to its life and growth. Throughout the regions in which the plant flourishes there are numerous trees burdened with mistletoe, but almost or quite devoid of their natural foliage. Such trees are dead or dying. Investigations into the ravages wrought by the mistletoe in this country have been conducted under the direction of the department of agriculture; and it was stated by William L. Bray, forest pathologist, in an official report, that "there are localities in which mistletoe becomes so abundant upon the trees, and so harmful to them, as to make its control or extermination a serious practical question." It is found abundantly throughout the southern states—Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, Oregon and Washington.

There are a large number of species of mistletoe, some authorities claiming that there are at least 400. Several of these grow in America, differing to some extent from European species, but possessing the same habits and general characteristics. The American species, therefore, have fallen heir to many of the traditions of the old world varieties.

It is unnecessary to describe the mistletoe. Even in regions in which the plant does not grow its use as an adjunct of Christmas merry making has made the thick, fleshy leaves and translucent white berries familiar to all. In color the stems and foliage vary from almost yellow to dark green, the shade depending upon climatic conditions. In dry regions, like Arizona, New Mexico and west Texas, it is a golden green, darkening in moist localities, until in the swampy regions of Arkansas its foliage is one of the darkest colored forms of vegetation. The seeds are carried by birds, which eat the berries freely. So slightly do the seeds adhere to the birds' bills that it is amusing to watch the birds rub their bills again and again upon the bark of limbs and branches in the endeavor to rid themselves of the annoyance. It is by the birds that the seeds of the mistletoe are disseminated. Sometimes they are carried for long distances before the birds succeed in rubbing them off. When transferred to the bark of a tree they have just the conditions they require for germination, although the seeds of other plants would not grow at all in such a location. Soon tiny rootlets force their way through the bark and draw sustenance for the plant from the sap of the "host." The growth of the parasite is slow, so that it is said that it does not bear berries until 4 years old.

A similar substance is found under the bark of the holly, and it is often extracted and used for the same purpose.

In Scandinavian mythology the mistletoe figures rather discredibly as having supplied the material from which was made the arrow with which Baldur, the sun god, was slain. The tale is that when Baldur was born his mother, Frigg, invoked plants, animals and the elements of nature, and obtained from each a promise that it would do Baldur no harm. Only the mistletoe, on account of its insignificance, was overlooked.

When Baldur grew to the full stature of the gods and took his part in their rough combats all the powers of nature proved kind to him and the weapons of his foes and rivals did him no injury. Then his enemy, Loki, dressed himself as an old woman, gained the confidence of Frigg and from her learned the secret of her son's immunity, together

THE USE OF BLINKERS

It is said that the use of blinkers, or blinders, as they are called in this country, had its origin in the desire of certain fashionable folks for a convenient place to display the family crest. Of course, the common excuse is that they keep the horse from shying. "There is no reason why horses should wear blinkers," says a writer in the Bulletin of the S. P. C. A. "This is shown by the fact that there are tens of thousands of horses working satisfactorily without them, not only in private carriages, but in cabs, vans and omnibuses and in towns where the traffic is thickest. "No riding horse is ever seen with blinkers; they would be considered to look ridiculous with them; the draft

horses in the army do not wear them, and the large brewers and the chief railway companies have long ago dispensed with them. "We recently read in a German paper that their use had been done away with by the authorities in Berlin, Dusseldorf, Aachen, Koenigsberg and Cassel. In Darmstadt they are allowed only in special cases, and Hamburg has lately decreed that they shall be permitted only if they stand well away from the horse's eyes. "The difficulty of dispensing with blinkers in the case of horses which have been accustomed to them, even for years, is largely imaginary. We have known several cases where the change has been made and there has been no difficulty at all."