

THE EASTER HARE

by Katharine Hillard

For more seasons than one cares to count, the Easter egg has been the familiar symbol of the great spring festival; but of late years, owing probably to the immense increase of our foreign population, another emblem has begun to dispute its supremacy in the confectioners' shops, and for some time the hares at Easter have been almost as numerous as the eggs. The hares are quite as often rabbits, delicate distinctions in zoology not being the province of confectioners; but in this case they cannot go far out of the way in confounding the two, because in symbology the animals are identical, and, moreover, to the American eye the rabbit is the more familiar form.

But why either? What has the "innocent rodent," as George Eliot would say, "with its small nibbling pleasures," to do with the great festival of the Resurrection?

To solve this enigma and trace out the meaning of the symbol, we must go like a crab backwards, through the history of Easter itself, even at the risk of repeating by the way many things that everybody knows already.

The egg-symbol, which naturally suggests the bursting into life of a buried germ, is easily understood, though it is a question whether many of the boys who amuse themselves by breaking each other's Easter eggs know that they do so to celebrate the opening of the year. The giving of eggs at the Easter season can be traced back to the remotest antiquity, and belongs to all the Eastern nations, who used the symbol both to signify the universe and to represent the revival of life at the vernal equinox.

Easter, though apparently a solar festival in its connection with the equinox, in reality, and even as ordered by the Christian Church, belongs of right to the moon. As early as the second century the Western churches began to object to the contemporaneous celebration of Easter with the Jewish Passover, and in 325 A. D. the Council of Nice decided that it should be held in future upon the first Sunday after the first full moon upon or after the vernal equinox; and if said full moon fell upon Sunday, then Easter should be the Sunday after. (This full moon, by the way, is the imaginary moon of the calendar, and neither the real moon nor the mean moon of astronomers.) In spite of the precautions of the Council of Nice, however, from the fact that the Jewish Passover depends upon the first full moon of spring, Easter and the Passover have occurred together twice in this century, and will do so three times in the next.

Easter is derived from the name of the Saxon goddess Eostre, whose festival was held in April, and who was undoubtedly identical with Astarte, the Phoenician goddess of the moon. Now the moon was the earliest measurer of time, and we are told by Max Müller (in his first Lecture on the Science of Language) that her Sanskrit name, *mās*, is clearly derived from the root *mā*, to measure. The moon was masculine in Sanskrit, as she was in Anglo-Saxon, and indeed in all the Teutonic languages, and as she is in German still. This confusion of sex, as it seems to us who are accustomed to think of her as a "goddess excellently bright," probably arose from the fact that the deities of the earliest mythologies were androgynous, and that sex was a question of relation, and depended upon their personification in an active or a passive form. Even in the Greek mythology we find frequent instances of this double aspect; Dionysus, or Bacchus, for instance, being worshiped both as male and as female. The moon, as the measurer or lord of time, was considered as an active element, and personified as masculine.

Why the moon should have been chosen as the measurer of our days rather than the sun is very clearly explained in *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. i. p. 389. In outline this explanation is as follows: When the earliest races of mankind wished to mark off periods of time, some cycle that belonged equally to the starry spheres and to humanity would naturally be that upon which their choice would fall. Such a cycle was found in the physiological phenomena connected with the life of the mother and her child. The lunar

month of twenty-eight days (or four weeks of seven days each) gave thirteen periods in three hundred and sixty-four days; equivalent to the solar-week year of fifty-two weeks. The old Egyptians and Hebrews both calculated the calendar by the three hundred and sixty-four or three hundred and sixty-five days of the lunar year. Thus came the method of measures by lunar time, and through lunar, of solar time.

The moon, as we have already seen, varied in sex according to circumstances. As the new moon, with her brilliant horns and her increasing strength, or as the full moon, in the plenitude of her power, she represented the active element, and was personified as masculine; she was the Lord of Light, the sign of new life, the messenger of immortality. But the waning moon was passive, or feminine, and typified darkness, death, and, in the Egyptian mythology, Typhon, or the Evil Principle, who had the supremacy during his fourteen days' rule, when he tore Osiris (the sun) into fourteen pieces. But with the new moon Osiris came back to life, and at its full the Egyptians sacrificed a black pig (representing the now conquered Typhon) to Osiris. In the planisphere of Denderah, the god Khunsee is seen offering the pig by the leg in the disc of the full moon, and in some parts of England a leg of pig is still eaten on Easter Monday,—a curious survival of this sacrifice.

In ancient symbolism, again, the light half of the moon was masculine; the dark, feminine. There was also another dualism connected with the moon, as the prototype of the Virgin Mother, which may explain a very singular old English Easter custom which has always been a mystery to antiquarians. The Virgin Mother was represented by the British Druids as *two*: the sisters Kreirwy and Llywy (the British Proserpine and Ceres), the Virgin *and* the Mother.

Proclus speaks of “the vivific goddesses” as the elder and the younger. The same idea runs through Polynesian mythology, and corresponds with Isis and Nephthys in Egyptian, and “the two wives of Jacob that builded the house of Israel” in Biblical, lore. Pausanias describes a temple of two stories (the only one he knew) dedicated to Aphrodite; the lower story consecrated to the armed goddess, the upper to Aphrodite Morpho, veiled and with bound feet, —the fetters signifying gestation. One of the legends of the Mahabharata describes the two wives of Kacyapas, Kaden and Vinatâ, the mother of breath, who bears the egg whence issues the serpent.

Now there is an endowment in the parish of Biddenden, Kent, of old but unknown date, which provides for the distribution of six hundred cakes among the poor upon the afternoon of Easter Sunday. These cakes bear a very curious “three-quarters” representation of two female figures joined at the shoulders and hips. The style is decidedly what in art parlance would be called “archaic,” and the origin of the design has never been satisfactorily explained. Max Müller long since wrote of that interesting process of human thought by which elaborate myths grow from the seed-germ of a wish to account for some accepted fact, as in the case of the famous barnacle geese, who were described and painted as issuing from the barnacles of ships, through a popular misunderstanding of the name, which really came from the markings like spectacles (or *barnacles*) round the eyes of the geese. So, in the case of the Biddenden cakes, a legend was invented that the endowment was made by two unfortunate women who lived joined together in this impossible fashion, *a là* Siamese twins. The hot cross-buns of Good Friday are readily traced back to the pagan worship of the sun; and I am inclined to believe that these two conjoined female figures represent the Virgin and Mother of the British Druids, the double Aphrodite of Pausanias, or the dual aspect of the moon. For in the oldest myths the goddesses, like the gods, are but one; and Artemis and Aphrodite, Here and Pallas, but representations of the varying phases of the *ewige Weiblichkeit*.

Having thus traced some of the connections of the moon with Easter, we have still to run down the mythical hare; and him we find directly as a type of the moon itself, across whose disc endless numbers of Hindu and Japanese artists have painted him, while their Chinese brethren represent the moon as a rabbit pounding rice in a mortar. The hare was identical with the moon in symbology, for reasons that shall presently be explained; but having been drawn “in the moon,” two different versions of one story arose to

explain his presence there, as in the case of the barnacle geese.

One was that Buddha once took the shape of a hare that he might feed a hungry fellow-creature, and was translated in that form to the moon, where he evermore abides. But this is a very inferior version of the beautiful story of the starving tigress and her cubs, whom Buddha fed with his mortal body; and the second myth, as told by De Gubernatis in his *Zoölogical Mythology*, seems more likely to be the genuine one. This legend says that when Indra, disguised as a famishing pilgrim, was praying for food, the hare, having nothing else to give him, threw itself into the fire, that it might be roasted for his benefit, and the grateful Indra translated the animal to the moon.

In Sanskrit, the *çaças*, literally *the leaping one*, means not only the hare and the rabbit, but the spots on the moon supposed to depict the hare of the above myth. There are several other Hindu myths connecting the hare and the moon, notably one in the first story of the *Pañcatantram*, where the hares dwell upon the shores of the lake of the moon, and their king, Vigayadattas (the funereal god), has for his palace the lunar disc. The hare is often represented in popular sayings as the enemy of the lion (or the sun), as in the Latin proverb, *Mortuo leoni lepores insultant* (or *saltant*), the equivalent of another saying, "The moon leaps up when the sun dies." Mary Stuart, in the days of her captivity, adopted for her device a netted lion with hares leaping over him, with the motto, *Et lepores devicto insultant leone*. (See also *King John*, Act II. Sc. 1.)

There were several reasons why the hare was chosen to symbolize the moon. One was that it is a nocturnal animal, and comes out at night to feed; another, that the female carries her young for a month, thus representing the lunar cycle; another, that the hare was thought by the ancients to be able to change its sex, like the moon. Sir Thomas Browne says that this was affirmed by Archelaus, Plutarch, Philostratus, and many others. Pliny, who is not mentioned by Sir Thomas, gives it the weight of his authority in his *Natural History*. The historian of *Vulgar Errors* devotes a chapter to the subject, but is extremely cautious in his dealing with it, considering it quite possible that such a change might take place, but in exceptional instances only, and certainly not annually, as the ancients asserted.

Beaumont and Fletcher allude to the notion several times, especially in the *Faithful Shepherdess*, Act III. Sc. 1, in the incantation of the Sullen Shepherd:—

"Hares that yearly sexes change,
Proteus altering oft and strange,
Hecate with shapes three,
Let this maiden changed be."

Here we have the hare in close connection with Hecate, or the moon. And the same idea may be found in *Hudibras*, II. 2, v. 705.

But a more important reason for the identification of the hare with the moon lay in the fact that its young are born with their eyes open, unlike rabbits, which are born blind. The name of the hare in Egyptian was *un*, which means *open*, *to open*, *the opener*. Now the moon was the open-eyed watcher of the skies at night, and the hare, born with open eyes, was fabled never to close them: hence the old Latin expression, *somnus leporinus*, and the identification of the open-eyed hare with the full moon. The old principle of cure by "sympathies" led to the prescription, in the early English folk-lore, of the brain and eyes of the hare as a cure for somnolency.

The Egyptian word *un* not only meant *hare* and *open*, but also *period*, and for this reason (as well as for the one already given as to its time of gestation) the hare became the type of periodicity, both human and lunar, and in its character of "opener" was associated with the opening of the new year at Easter, as well as with the beginning of a new life in the youth and maiden. Hence the hare became connected in the popular mind with the paschal eggs, broken to signify the opening of the year. So close has this

association become with some peoples, that in Swabia for instance, the little children are sent out to look for *hares' eggs* at Easter. In Saxony, they say that the Easter hare brings the Easter egg, and even in America we may see in the confectioners' windows the hare wheeling his barrowful of eggs, or drawing one large one as a sort of triumphal chariot. In some parts of Europe, the Easter eggs are made up into cakes in the shape of hares, and the little children are told that babies are found in the hare's "form." The moon, in her character of the goddess Lucina, presided over childbirth, and the hare is constantly identified with her in this connection in the folk-lore of many peoples, both ancient and modern. Pausanias describes the moon-goddess as instructing the exiles who would found a new nation to build their city in that myrtle-grove wherein they should see a hare take refuge. In Russia, if a hare meet the bridal car (as an omen thus *opposing* it), it bodes evil to the wedding, and to the bride and groom. If the hare be run over by the car, it is a bad presage, not only for the bridal couple, but for all mankind; being held as equivalent to an eclipse, always a sinister omen in popular superstition. In Swabia, the children are forbidden to indulge in the favorite childish amusement of making shadow-pictures of rabbits on the wall, because it is considered *a sin against the moon*.

Among English popular customs celebrating Easter, the only trace of the hare seems to be found in Warwickshire, where at Coleshill, if the young men of the parish can catch a hare and bring it to the parson before ten o'clock in the morning of Easter Monday (the *moon-day*), he is bound to give them a calf's head, one hundred eggs, and a goat; the calf's head being probably a survival of the worship of Baal, or the sun, as the golden calf.

The hare-myth has come over to America not only in the shape of the confectioners' Easter hares, but also in the very curious superstition among the negroes as to the efficacy as a talisman of the *left hind-foot of a graveyard rabbit killed in the dark of the moon*. In an article by Mr. Gerald Massey [*Lucifer*, Vol. 1, p.6. See also his *Natural Genesis*] (to whom I gratefully acknowledge my obligations) on the subject of such a talisman, said to have been presented by an old negro to President Cleveland during his electioneering tour of 1888, Mr. Massey very plainly shows that the two myths have the same origin. The rabbit, identical with the hare in symbolism, is here equivalent to the Lord of Light and Conqueror of Darkness, in, or as, the new moon. In the hieroglyphics, the *khepsh*, leg or hind-quarter, is the ideographic also of Typhon, or personified evil; the *left* side intensifying the idea. Therefore the left hind-foot of the graveyard rabbit stood for the last quarter or end of the moon, a symbol of the conquered Typhon, or Principle of Evil, to be worn in triumph, like a fox's brush, as a token of resurrection, or renewal, or general good fortune. The killing in the dark of the moon is simply a duplication of the victory over evil and death, a sort of symbolological tautology, as it were. As a type of renewal, it was especially suitable as a gift to a President seeking reelection, but in this case, as in the proverbial "dry time," all signs appeared to fail. It is a singular coincidence, and shows the universality of ancient symbols, that in England the luckiest of all lucky horseshoes, says Mr. Massey, is the shoe from the *left hind-foot of a mare*.

So we have hunted our Easter hare (or rabbit, as you choose) through America and England and Germany, all the way back through ancient Egypt and India, till we have run him into his original "form," the moon. That silent, silver-shining planet is the fountain-head of many a myth and the origin of many a mystery, and not half of "the fairytales of science" of which she is the heroine have yet been told.

Whether the proverbially "mad" March hare has anything to do with the moon and Easter I do not know. It has been suggested that this "madness" in March is probably only the access of liveliness that pervades the animal creation in the spring; but the fact that the hare was a proverbially melancholy beast indicates a different kind of madness, perhaps dependent on the "lunacy" of the moon. Prince Henry suggests the hare to Falstaff as a type of melancholy rather superior to the "gibcat" or the "lugged bear." The eating of its flesh was said by Galen to produce melancholy (perhaps as a sequence of indigestion!), and Nares thinks the long sitting of the hare in its form may have caused it to be considered a melancholy animal. If this condition be equivalent to madness, as the gentle optimist would have it, then we have the madness

of the March hare sufficiently accounted for; otherwise we may hunt him through whole libraries of proverbs and popular sayings, and Archaic Dictionaries, and Glossaries, etc., only to find him mentioned as “well known” as far back as 1542. Only this and nothing more. Indeed, he is said to have made his first appearance in the pages of Skelton’s Replycation to the Scoler, in 1520. A hare crossing a person's path was supposed to disorder his wits, as the moon’s beams falling upon the face were supposed to do; and, upon the whole, the weight of evidence is in favor of the hare's madness being a species of “lunacy” rather than the jollity of spring.

Perhaps the reader, weary of the subject, may feel inclined to agree with the profound genius who dismissed the question of the similarly proverbial madness of batters in these simple words: —

“Why hatters as a race are mad
I do not know, nor does it matter! ”

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