

# Bygone Sileby



FOLKLORE 1.

No. 17

## FOLKLORE OF ROMANCE AND MARRIAGE

During the reign of Queen Victoria, when people still lived in small communities and few could read or write, mothers entertained their children in the evenings telling them old traditional beliefs and tales they had heard from their mothers and grandmothers. In this way, the bulk of folklore was handed down from one generation to another.

In the folklore of romance and marriage, the spinster is found eagerly seeking a husband, fearing that she might be "left on the shelf."

Women had little opportunity to advance themselves, and the unmarried woman had the bleak alternatives of keeping house for her parents, becoming a maid-servant to a prosperous family, or working twelve hours a day at a hosiery knitting machine. Little wonder that the average spinster was ever watchful for a man. Marriage provided not only a sense of fulfilment, but an escape from the stigma of being "an old maid."

There were two qualities they desired in a man. First, he should be a good living person, and secondly, he should be handsome. A man with riches is rarely mentioned in folklore. In former times there were sharp class distinctions, and children were brought up to "know their place" in life. Wealth brought with it education, property, fine clothes, accomplishments and a place in society. The ordinary village girl had little or no education and felt "out of place" in the presence of persons above her station in life, and readily accepted them as her "betters." Although many a servant girl in a wealthy household lived with the vain hope of becoming the bride of the son of the family, it rarely happened. Parents who suspected that servants were making amorous advances to male members of the family, soon got rid of them. Most people married within their own class, but occasionally love overcame the barriers. The man or woman who married beneath their station in life were criticised and often abandoned by relatives and friends.

From the point of view of folklore, it would seem that most young females were so obsessed with the idea of finding a marriage partner they thought of little else, and looked everywhere to find signs and omens which would predict if and when they would become brides.

### A CALENDAR OF ROMANCE

There were a number of special days in the year which were associated with spinsters looking for a husband, when by the aid of prayers, incantations and certain rites, they hoped to take a step nearer to marriage.

#### St. Agnes' Eve

The evening before the 21st January was a special night of divination for unmarried young women. By the assistance of a rhyme and ritual, they hoped to see a vision of the future spouse.

On the Eve of St. Agnes, a girl would walk alone in a dark garden sprinkling grains of corn, and saying :

" Agnes, sweet Agnes fair,  
Hither, hither, now repair,  
Bonny Agnes, let me see  
The lad who will marry me."

#### St. Valentine's Day

On the 14th February, St. Valentine's Day, when the spinster went out of the house, she believed that if the first person she saw was a man, she would be married within the next twelve weeks, but if she saw a woman, she would have to wait twelve months. A lot of women must have glared resentfully at each other that morning.

#### Shrove Tuesday

At midday on Shrove Tuesday, the spinster gave a pancake to the cockerel, and the number of hens which came to join him, foretold the number of years she must wait to become a bride.

#### St. Mark's Eve.

On the night of the 24th April, an unmarried woman recited:

" On St. Mark's Eve at twelve o'clock,  
The fair maid will watch her smock  
To find a husband in the dark,  
By praying to the good St. Mark."

#### May Day

The young lady went to the well at noon on the first day of May, carrying a hand mirror. She reflected the sun down on to the water, and if she saw there the face of a man, she was destined to be a wife, but if no face appeared, she would remain a spinster.

#### Midsummer Eve.

If a girl went into a dark churchyard on the 23rd June, scattering hemp seed as the church clock struck midnight, and spoke the words :

" Hemp seed, hemp seed, here I sow,  
Let my lover come after me and mow."

She was then supposed to see a vision of her future husband. Nowadays, she would be arrested for sowing Cannabis !

Midsummer Day

On the 24th June, St. John the Baptist's Day, a spinster would pick a rosebud, and wrap it in white paper. The following Christmas Day, she would open the paper, and if the bud was still fresh, she wore it to go to church. There, she believed that she would meet a man who would ask her for the flower, and later, ask for her hand in marriage.

A girl who wished to attract the attention of some man she liked, took the shoulder blade-bone of a sheep, and as the clock struck midnight on Midsummer Day, pricked it with a needle, saying :

" It is not this bone I wish to prick,  
But my love's heart I wish to prick."

She then slept with the bone under her pillow, hoping the spell would work.

St. Luke's Day

This Saint, described in the Bible as "the beloved physician," pays particular attention to women in his Gospel. On the night of the 18th October, spinsters hoped to see a vision of their future husbands by the little prayer :

" St. Luke, St. Luke, be kind to me,  
In my dreams let me my true love see."

All Souls' Day

Even young girls in their street games followed the idea of looking for a husband. On the 2nd November, they selected one to be "mother," who recited :

"Here comes a man who wants a wife,  
Who wants a wife, who wants a wife,  
Which will he choose to be his wife  
Out of you all, my daughters ? "

St. Catherine's Day

St. Catherine, the Patron Saint of wheelwrights, lace-makers and haberdashers, was remembered each year on the 25th November, as she was believed to take a special interest in spinsters.

On this day, young women went to church before breakfast, and offered the following prayer :

" A husband, St.Catherine,  
A handsome husband, St.Catherine,  
A nice one St.Catherine,  
And SOON St.Catherine."

This Saint was Egyptian. She was tortured for her faith at Alexandria, in the year 307 A.D., on the orders of the Emperor Maximian. According to an ancient story, she was tied to four spiked wheels which were to tear her to pieces, but there came a flash of lightning which destroyed the machine and set the wheels on fire. This is the idea behind the firework known as a " Catherine Wheel."

### S I G N S   O F   R O M A N C E   F R O M   N A T U R E

#### The Cuckoo

An unattached young lady would listen carefully for the first cuckoo in spring. The number of calls it made revealed the number of years must wait before she was led to the altar.

#### Bird's Nests

Birds were associated with romance, mating and making a home for their families. If a girl found a bird's nest in the garden, it was taken as a favourable sign that she would marry. The number of eggs it contained predicted the years she would wait before the happy day.

#### Bees

The last thing young women liked to see was a swarm of bees on the roof of the house. It was regarded as an omen that the daughters there would never get married.

#### Peas

When shelling peas, if the spinster found a pod which contained nine perfect peas, she hastened to fasten it over the backdoor, in the belief that the first eligible bachelor who pass under it, would ask her to be his wife.

Clover

It was considered to be very lucky for a girl to find a four leaf clover. She would place it in her right shoe, then sett off for a walk. It was believed that the first man she met would be her future husband.

Apple

A spinster would peel an apple in a continuous ribbon without breaking the skin. She would then throw the peel over her left shoulder, where it was supposed to fall in the shape of the initial of her future husband's Christian name.

There was a saying about the initials of the future bridegroom's surname, which the girls used to quote:

" Change the name, but not the letter,  
A change for worse, and not for better."

Stars

The young woman who counted seven stars on seven successive nights, hoped that on the eighth night, she would meet the man who would eventually marry her.

New Moon

The first new moon in the year had to be reflected in a bucket of water, and see through a silk handkerchief. The number of new moons she saw, gave the number of new moons which would appear before her wedding day.

S I G N S   O F   R O M A N C E   I N   T H E   H O U S E

Shoes

A girl who wished to win the affection of a young man, would place her shoes by the side of the bed in the sign of the Cross, and say:

" When I my true love want to see,  
I put my shoes in the form of a T."

She was then supposed to see him in her dreams that night.

The Last Slice

At meal times, it was regarded as unlucky for a spinster to take the last slice of bread from a plate; the woman who did so was doomed to be an old maid. However, this fate could be removed by someone at the table saying, "Go on, take it, and a handsome husband and all."

Soap

The girl scratched the initials of her boy friend in a bar of soap as she sat in the bath-tub in front of the living room fire. If the initials were still visible after the bath, it meant that he would soon propose to her. This was probably invented by mothers to ensure that the girls did not waste the soap!

Dreams

Unattached females eagerly sought the gift of a piece of wedding cake, which was then concealed under her pillow to bring her a dream about the man she would marry. When cake was not available, she would carefully cut her finger nails and put the parings in a piece of paper, and place it under her pillow to induce a dream about her husband to be.

Omens

Two forks placed in error by the side of a plate, foretold a marriage. The same thing applied to two spoons in a saucer. Other signs that a wedding would take place were: a butterfly entering the house, a live coal falling from the fire, stumbling when climbing the stairs, and two crows circling over the house.

If a girl got her clothes wet when doing the washing, it was a sign that she would have a drunken husband, and similarly with spilling tea in a saucer and upsetting flour when baking. This is probably another piece of lore created by mothers to make their daughters careful about the house.

Burning ears were believed to be caused by the thoughts of others. There was a saying, "Left for love, and right for spite."

When a girl's apron strings came untied, it meant that her lover was thinking about her. There was also a saying about garters:

"If a garter tightens, love heightens,  
If a garter slackens, love backens."

In plum and cheery pies, the stones were used by girls to discover things about boy friends and future husbands. Stones were placed round the edge of the plate with the words, "he loves me, he loves me not." If the last one fell on "he loves me not," she would begin again so that the last one would be, "he loves me."

The stones were also used to inquire about the man she would marry, with the words:

"Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief."

Lost Love

A young woman feared that she would lose her lover if she lost a hairpin, or a garter, or wrote a letter to him after the sun had set. She was likely to lose his affection if she put sugar in tea before the milk, hence the saying, "Milk before sugar, brings forth a true lover."

If the boy friend lost interest in her, the girl made up a mixture of the resin called Dragon's Blood and some quicksilver, and threw it on the fire at midnight, making the wish that her would return to her. Others put salt on the fire for seven successive mornings, in the hope that at the end of the week he would come back into her life. Another little ritual was to throw twelve pins into the fire at midnight, and recite the words :

"It is not these pins I wish to burn,  
But his heart I wish to turn.  
May he neither sleep nor rest  
Until he has granted my request."

The Language of Flowers

In olden days, courting couples made use of the language of flowers, where most of the commonly known blooms, and herbs had a meaning. Those who were familiar with the language could pass messages to each other by a single flower, or in a bouquet.

A girl who was given an iris and a tulip, would read them as meaning, "I have a message for you. I declare my love to you." If she gave in return, a garden daisy, it meant, "I share your sentiments." If she offered a pansy, it signified, "You occupy my thoughts." When a flower was presented to someone in reverse, it indicated that the opposite of the real meaning was intended.

When a girl received a flower and saw its meaning, she would reply "yes," by putting it to her lips. If she wished to convey "no," she pulled off a petal, then threw the flower to the ground.

Some Flowers and their Meaning

Forget-me-not, true love	Red Rose, beauty
Willow, forsaken	Sweet William, a smile
Snapdragon, presumption	Fern, sincerity
White Clover, think of me	Poppy, consolation
Birch Leaf, meekness	Ivy, friendship
Violet, faithful love	Golden Rod, be careful
Rosemary, dear remembrance	Holly, am I forgotten?
Wallflower, faithful in misfortune	Foxglove, a wish
Wisteria, welcome fair stranger	Dahlia, instability

An open rose placed over two buds signified "secrecy."



### The Engagement Ring

In Tudor times, the Betrothal Ring was a circle of gold, with two hands clasped.

If a woman lost her engagement ring it was regarded as a bad omen, predicting a termination of some kind in her life. It was usually the departure of the angry young man, who had lost his hard earned money!

Damage to an engagement ring was also thought to be a forerunner of heartache for the girl.

### Banns

When Banns were read early, that is to say, nearly three months before the ceremony, the girl was said to be "hanging on the bellropes."

If the engagement was broken after the Banns had been published, it was said that bad luck would follow both parties as they went their separate ways.

### T H E W E D D I N G D A Y

Nowadays, a couple can get married on any day in the year, but in former times, Parliament and the Church prohibited marriages during certain seasons. This is explained in a 300 year old rhyme :

" Advent, marriage doth deny, but Hilary gives thee liberty.  
 Septuagesima sayeth thee nay, eight days from Easter, ye may.  
 Rogation bids thee to contain, but Trinity sets thee free again."

Lent was avoided because of its solemnity, and in Sileby, not a single Lent wedding appears in the Registers until about the year 1800. the month of May was not favoured by brides, and there was a saying, "only wantons marry in May." The majority of Sileby weddings took place in August and September, which coincided with the end of the harvest and the village Wakes.

There were superstitions about the choice of day for the wedding:  
 " Monday, for health; Tuesday, for health; Wednesday, best day of all;  
 Thursday, for losses; Friday, for crosses and Saturday, no luck at all."  
 Sunday is not mentioned in the rhyme, but it was considered to bring a great blessing on the couple.

### The Wedding Dress

It was unlucky for a bride to make her own wedding dress. In the past various colours of silk material were used, sometimes white, but often dove grey, brown or blue and white was chosen. There was some superstition about colour. Few ever married in black, as this suggested mourning. There was a saying, "a bride wearing green is not fit to be seen," and, "after wearing green comes black," - early widowhood.

Yellow was disliked as it symbolised jealousy. Blue represented truthfulness. Yet, there were sayings about colours:

" If you are married in blue, the day you will rue. "

" If you marry in grey, you will rue the day. "

It was safer to wear white, which symbolised virginity and purity.

On the wedding day, every garment had to be put on properly. If the bride happened to put on a garment inside out, it was unlucky to change it, so she wore it as it was.

It was necessary to wear "Something old, something new, something borrowed and something blue. "

When dressing, it was considered important for the bride to avoid certain things - she must not see the bridegroom before the service, she must not look in a mirror before leaving the house, and she must not see herself in the mirror looking through her veil.

In former times, the veil was known as a "wreath and fall. " The wreath, which was placed on the head, was made of wax orange blossom, to which was attached the veil, or fall.

### Flowers

In Shakespeare's time, both the bride and bridegroom carried betrothal flowers, a kind of pink, called " Sops -in-the-Wind. " Until the 1920's, the bride and her mother carried flowers at the wedding. The most popular flower for the bride was the Madonna lily, which meant " sweet innocence. "

### Leaving the House

The bride and her father left the house by the front door, which was always closed by someone who was not a member of the family. Many brides "walked on silver" by having a sixpenny piece in each shoe. It was regarded as unlucky for the bride to return, or even to look back at the house after she had left it. It was usual for the bride and bridegroom to walk to the Parish Church, so they planned their routes so that they did not meet on the way. When the bride entered the church, she stepped inside with her right foot, which was known as "getting off on the right foot. " Earlier, she had made certain that she had put her right shoe on first when dressing. A bride liked to be a moment or two late on reaching the church, to show that she was not over eager.

### The Ring

The golden wedding ring was the symbol of something precious, and being a circle, represented love without end. It was placed on the fourth finger of the bride's left hand. In ancient times it was believed that a special vein ran from this finger directly to the heart. Once it had been placed on the finger, it was considered unlucky to remove it. A lost ring brought many tears. It was a bad omen if the bestman or bridegroom dropped it during the ceremony. A wedding ring was said to have curative properties for a sty on the eye, by gentle rubbing.

### Leaving the Church

There were two sayings about the weather:

" Happy is the bride the sun shines on. "

" Lucky is the bride the rain falls on. "

It was said to be lucky if the couple saw a chimney-sweep when they came out of the church, and especially if the sweep came forward to kiss the bride. A dog passing between the bride and groom was an ill omen, but a black cat crossing their path predicted good fortune.

Confetti is a modern invention. In Sibley, rice was always used to throw over the pair as they left the church. It was all cleared away by the birds.

### Returning to the Bride's Home

The reception was held at the bride's home. The couple entered by the backdoor, so that the bride had kept up the old tradition of going out at one door, and coming in by another. Home made wine and cake was consumed, and copper coins thrown to children who always waited outside the house for this customary scramble. In some parts of the county, it was a custom to put finely chopped rosemary into the wedding cake mixture. It was supposed to bring health and good fortune to all those who received a piece of the cake.

### The New Home

After the reception, the bride and bridegroom walked to their new home in the village. In those days, there were always a number of empty houses available at a reasonable rent.

On arriving at the house, the bridegroom picked up his bride and carried her over the threshold. It was believed in ancient times that wicked spirits lurked outside the house, and especially near the entrance, where they hoped to slip in. The bride was carried over the front doorstep, as the back doorstep was the more dangerous.

The couple would ensure that a bundle of rowan twigs was hung by the back door to ward off bad luck while they settled in their new abode.

A horse shoe was nailed over the back door to attract good luck, but it had to be fastened in the form of a " U " because if it were put up inverted, their luck would run out.

Having taken care of all the current superstitions, the couple began their new married life, and we hope, lived happily ever after.