

MYSTIC LIGHT

Trees at Mount Ecclesia

*Today I have grown taller from walking
with trees.—W. Baker*

THERE IS LITTLE DOUBT that most, if not all, people at some period in their development have regarded the tree as the home, haunt, or embodiment of a spiritual essence, capable of more or less independent life and activity.

This belief has left innumerable traces in ancient art and literature, having largely shaped the legends of the folk imagination and impressed its influence on the ritual of almost all the primitive religions of mankind. There is, indeed, scarcely a country in the world where the tree has not at one time or another been approached with reverence or with fear, as being closely connected with some spiritual potency.

Of all primitive customs and beliefs, there is none which has left a deeper impact on the traditions and observances of mankind than the worship of the tree. From the time that history begins to speak, we find it already firmly established in the oldest civilized races. Long before he came to build temples, primitive man worshiped his gods in the open, on high places, and in forests.

What is probably the earliest record of tree worship is met with on the engraved cylinders of Chaldea, some of which date back to 4,000 B. C. In ancient Palestine the Tree of Life became the genealogical tree, the family tree, the tree of Jesse. The American Indians had a world tree. The Senal Indians of California believed that the earth was once a globe of fire, and that the element passing



*Of the 114 sizeable palms trees on Mount Ecclesia, 43 are Guadalupe Fan Palms (*Brahea edulis*), one of which is shown above; 68 are Canary Island Date Palms (*Phoenix canariensis*), some as high as 45 feet, with trunks 4 feet in diameter; two Queen Palms (*Syagrus roman-zoffiana*) flank the entrance to the Ecclesia or Healing Temple; and one Pindo Palm (*Butia capitata*) is near the Rose Cross (Founder's) Circle.*

up into the trees came out again when two pieces of wood were rubbed together.

Let us consider the place in religion and legend of some of the trees that grow on the grounds at Mt. Ecclesia.

PALM

On entering the grounds at Headquarters, one first notices the stately palms that border Ecclesia drive, planted in 1914. This tree was used by the Christians as a symbol of martyrdom, although it may easily have had a deeper meaning: the triumph of life over death.

“Palms,” as Corinne Heline notes in her seven-volume study of the Bible, “were planted around temples, for, as in Chaldea, these trees were called ‘Trees of Wisdom’ and represented the eternal life principle of man. They are the earthly representatives of the symbolic Tree of Life, an honor also shared by the cedar, pine, and fir, which like the palm are ever green.”

According to legend, one day in the springtime Prince Solomon was sitting under a palm tree in

the royal garden when a Man of God came to him, having a date in his hand. "Behold," he said, "what will become of this." Then he made a hole in the ground and covered it over. When he withdrew his hand the clods of earth opened and Solomon saw two small leaves coming forth. But scarcely had he beheld them when they joined together and became a stem; and the stem grew thicker and higher before his eyes.

Then the Man of God took water in the palm of his hand and sprinkled the small tree three times, and lo! branches unfurled into green fronds so that a cool shade spread above them and the air was filled with the perfume of flowers bursting and hanging in clusters.

Prince Solomon was about to speak but a gentle breeze scattered the petals around them. Scarcely had the falling flowers reached the ground when fruit hung beneath the leaves of the tree. The Man of God disappeared.

The prince was filled with amazement but he seemed to hear a voice saying: "Behold in thy father's gardens thou mayest see the unfolding of wonder trees. Doth not this same miracle happen to all growing trees? They spring from the earth, they put out branches and leaves, they flower, they fruit—not in a moment, perhaps, but in months and years. But canst thou tell the difference betwixt a minute, a month, or a year in the eyes of Him with whom one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as a day?"

ACACIA

This is a genus of trees and shrubs belonging to the pulse or pea family, which comprise a group of about 550 species widely distributed over warmed regions of the world. Several varieties of the acacia grow on Mt. Ecclesia, back of the Temple, near the Guest House, and in other locations, their fragrant yellow flowers giving forth a heavy, pleasing perfume each year in their season, usually beginning in early January. The *acacia senegal* of our southeastern United States has been introduced into India and southern Europe, where the odorous yellow blossoms are used in making perfume.

In Arabia there was a tree, the sacred acacia of Nakhla, the dwelling place of the goddess Al-Ozza, on which people of Mecca at an annual pil-

grimage hung weapons, garments, ostrich eggs, and other offerings. It is spoken of in the traditions of Mohammed by the vague name of a "tree to hang things on."

The acacia, according to occult lore, is a symbol of The Tree of Life; the wood was considered a "wood of life," and was sacred to the Sun-god in Egypt. In the Masonic Order a sprig of the acacia is placed on the casket of a departed brother, pointing to the time when man will be able to build for himself the perfected masculine-feminine vehicle that will know no death.

FIG

There have been various kinds of fig trees in the orchard at Mt. Ecclesia from the "pioneer days," their luscious fruit thoroughly enjoyed by the workers on the grounds.

From very early times the fig tree has been considered sacred, combining both masculine and feminine attributes. It was held in especial veneration as an emblem of life in all countries bordering on the southern shores of the Mediterranean. Its tri-lobed leaf, suggesting the spiritual trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), became the symbolic covering in statues of the nude, while the eating of the fruit of this tree was supposed to aid fecundity. In the Book of Genesis, after Adam and Eve (infant humanity, yet in the etheric region) had succumbed to the influence of the Lucifer Spirits and become aware of the Physical World (thus beginning their long pilgrimage into a material existence dominated by sensual desire), they "sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons."

In the Forum, the busy center of Roman life, the sacred fig tree of Romulus was worshiped down to the days of the empire, and the withering of its trunk was enough to spread consternation through the city. Although some have pictured it as the Banyan tree, it is the fig (*ficus religiosa*) usually represented as the one under which Gautama Buddha received *bodhi* or knowledge.

Most Christians are familiar with parables in the New Testament dealing with the fig tree as given in Matthew 21 and 24, Mark 11, Luke 13, and John 1. Christ Jesus used the fig as a symbol of generation, teaching His disciples the dire results of the abuse of the creative force by illustrating its

withering, destroying effect on man's body.

FIR

Modern as it is in its present form, the fir or Christmas tree epitomizes many ancient ideas. It is the meeting point of the old pagan belief in the virtues vested in the tree and of the quaint fancies of the middle ages, which loved to see spiritual truths embodied in material forms: Christ, the Tree of Life, blossoming at Christmas Eve; the fatal tree of Paradise whence sprung the cross, the instrument of man's salvation—that "fruit-bearing, heavenly nourished tree planted in the midst of redeemed man," so often represented in medieval art; the miracle of nature, so stirred by the wonder of the Nativity as to break forth into blossom in the midst of winter. All these ideas, so characteristic of medieval thought, became grafted together with observances derived from solstitial worship, upon the stock of the sacred tree, laden with offerings and decked with fillets. Indeed, the Christmas tree may be said to recapitulate the whole story of tree worship—the tree as the symbol and embodiment of Deity, and last but not least, the universal tree bearing the lights of heaven for its fruits, covering the world with its branches.

In modern times the festivities of Christmas have undergone change and development. The grosser features of the festival have been largely eliminated; the mummers of the lords of misrule have for the most part gone the way of the May king, but all the more graceful and orderly observances of the time have strengthened their hold on the popular favor.

Legend tells us that when the heathen lived in the forests of the ancient Northland, there grew a giant tree with limbs branching toward the sky. It was the Thunder Oak of the war lord Thor. To this tree under cover of night heathen priests were wont to bring their victims—both men and beasts—to slay them upon the altar of the thunder-god.

One white Christmas Eve, Thor's priests came to hold their winter rites beneath the Thunder Oak. Through the deep snow of the dense forest hastened throngs of people, all intent on keeping the mystic feast of the mighty Thor. In the hush of the night the folk gathered in the glade where the great tree stood. They pressed closely around the great

altar-stone under the overhanging boughs where stood the white-robed priests. The moonlight shone clearly down upon them.

Then from the altar flashed upward the sacrificial flames, casting their lurid glow upon the stained faces of the human victims awaiting the blow of the priest's knife. But the knife never fell, for from the silent avenues of the dark forest came Saint Winfred and his people.

"Hold!" cried Winfred, as he advanced upon the priests. "We come in the name of Christ Jesus who is greater than Thor! To prove this the Thunder Oak falls this night!" Swiftly the saint drew from his girdle a shining axe and fiercely smote the tree, hewing a deep gash in its trunk. And while the heathen folk gazed in horror and wonder, the bright chips flew far and wide from the deepening cut in the body of the tree.

Suddenly there came the sound of a mighty rushing wind. A whirling blast struck the tree and it fell backward, groaning, and split into four parts. But there, unharmed, stood a fair young fir tree, pointing its green spire to heaven.

Saint Winfred dropped his axe and spoke to the people, his voice ringing joyously through the crisp winter air: "This little tree, a young child of the forest, shall be your holy tree tonight. It is the tree of peace, for your houses are built of fir. It is the sign of endless life, for its leaves are forever green. See how it points upward to heaven! Let this be called the tree of the Christ Child. Gather about it not in the wild wood but in your own homes. There it will shelter no deeds of blood, but loving gifts and rites of kindness. So shall the peace of Christ reign in your hearts."

The people took up the little fir tree and with songs of joy bore it to the house of their chief, and there with goodwill and peace they kept the holy Christmas-tide.

HOLLY

*...when all the summer trees are seen
So bright and green,
The holly leaves their fadeless hues display
Less bright than they;
But when the bare and wintry woods we see,
What then so cheerful as the holly tree?*

—Robert Southey

The custom of using holly and other plants for decorative purposes at Christmas is one of considerable antiquity, and has been regarded as a survival of the usages of the Roman Saturnalia, or of the old Teutonic practice of hanging the interior of dwellings with evergreens as a refuge for sylvan spirits from the inclemency of winter. Several popular superstitions exist with respect to holly. In some places it was deemed unlucky to bring it into a house before Christmas Eve. In some English rural districts the prickly and non-prickly kinds are distinguished as “he” and “she” holly. In still other places the tradition obtains that according as the holly brought into a house at Christmas is smooth or rough, the wife or the husband will be master. American holly, very similar in appearance and use to the European holly, is a slow growing tree. It is the state tree of Delaware.

There are several holly trees at Mt. Ecclesia, but they are not large.

PINE

*Like two cathedrals towers these stately pines
Uplift their fretted summits tipped with cones;
The arch beneath them is not built with stones,
Not Art but Nature traced these lovely lines
And carved this graceful arabesque of vines;
No organ but the wind here sighs and moans,
No sepulcher conceals a martyr's bones,
No marble bishop on his tomb reclines.
Enter! the pavement, carpeted with leaves,
Gives back a softened echo to the tread.
Listen! the choir is singing; all the birds,
In leafy galleries beneath the eaves
Are singing! listen, ere the sound be fled,*

And learn there may be worship without words.

—H. W. Longfellow



The Norfolk Island Pine (Araucaria heterophylla), called the Star Pine by Mt. Ecclesia residents because from Heindel days it was decorated with Christmas ornaments, including a star on its top, is about 90 years old and at least 90 feet tall. Fan palms border Ecclesia Drive at the main entrance.

Among the Semites, the pine tree came to have a deep meaning, and like the *crux ansata* of the Egyptians, typified an existence united yet distinct, or the union of the positive and negative forces. The sacred Cone is found consistently on Assyrian monuments, on Etruscan sepulchral urns, and it was used also by the Greeks and Romans. The pine cone conventionalized and enlarged may still be seen on gateways in Italy as a talisman of abundance, fecundity, and good luck.

Seven states in the United States have chosen some variety of the pine

as their state tree.

The majestic Star Pine near the original entrance to Mt. Ecclesia has attained a height of about ninety feet. Each year during the Christmas season it is festooned with colored lights and surmounted by a cluster of white lights. This tree of stately beauty is visible for miles around. Its radiance lifts all hearts in gratitude to God for His loving gift of the Great Christ Spirit to all mankind.

The day of many of these legends, beliefs, and observances is past, but underlying them there is vital and still valid truth. To us, as to ancients, the tree is still the patron of fertility, as those have discovered, to their deep regret, who have stripped their land of its forests. With its persistent vigor the tree is nature's emblem of the life principle, intimating the eternal. Generations come and go, but the tree lives on, and every spring it puts forth new leaves, and every autumn it bears new seeds. Even to its last days the leaves are as green and the seeds as full of life as in the prime of its youth. □

—E. Louise Riggs