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Lo, now is come our joyful'st time,
 Let every man be jolly;
 Each room with Ivy leaves is dress'd,
 And every post with Holly.
 Without the door let Sorrow lie,
 And if for cold he hap to die,
 We'll bury him in a Christmas Pye,
 And evermore be merry.

A LL of the evergreen plants have long been considered symbolic of immortality, of rebirth. Hence they, and they alone, are appropriate decorations for the Christmas season, which was originally a celebration, under the disguise of various national religious forms, of the turning of the sun at the winter solstice, and the consequent renewal of life on the earth. When Constantine was converted, he seized upon every underlying likeness, however remote, between the old faith and the new. Every familiar symbol that might be stretched to fit the strange faith; every old custom that would help to reconcile his lately, and sometimes forcibly, converted people to their unaccustomed belief, was adopted and re-explained. And the return of the sun, bringing life and light to the winter-bound earth, became the prototype of the coming of the Son of Man, bringing life and light to the soul of the sun-bound world. So that at first all the heathen observances were retained as far as possible, and merely given a new meaning.

At the Christmas festival, the ivy and holly still made a summer screen of the stone walls, as in ancient Germany they had turned the huge halls at mid-winter, to bowers of greenery, wherein the sylvan sprites, who dwelt in summer among the forest trees, might pass the frozen months without too much discomfort. An echo from Scandinavia is still heard in the saying current among the peasants of the old world that if any bit of holiday decoration is left in the house after Candlemas day (February 2), a troop of little devils will enter and sit, one on each withered leaf, every one bringing its own small curse upon the house. These little devils are merely the old forest sprites, detained against their will by their undestroyed winter refuge and fretting to return to the awakening woods of spring.

The churches were still green with Christmas garlands in those early days, and ablaze with candles, as the temples of Saturn had always been during the corresponding Roman festival of the Saturnalia. But, as Polydore Vergil remarks, "Trymmyng the temples with hangynys, floures, boughes and garlandes, was taken of the heathen people, which decked their idols and houses in such an array." And as time went on, and it became no more necessary to make concessions that would help to reconcile the people to their changed faith, these "heathen" customs became distasteful to the church. One of the early councils forbids men longer "to deck up their houses with lawrell, yvie, and greene boughes, as we used to doe at the Christmasse season."

This command was observed in the temples, but in the baronial halls the old customs lived on; lived down their questionable past; won again the toleration of the priests who had sternly banished them, and to-day all the evergreens again are admitted to the strictest church, so that we again can say at Christmas,

"Now with bright Holly all the temples strow
 With Ivy green, and sacred Mistletoe."

The "Early Calendar of English Flowers," an old poem wherein each month is recognized by its appropriate plant symbol, ends with these lines:

Soon the evergreen Laurel alone is green,
 When Catherine crowns all learned menne.

The Ivie and Holly berries are seen,
 And Yule log and Wassalle come round agen.

The laurel is used not at all, and the

Ivy but little, in American decorations at Christmas, since both plants are exceedingly rare here. But in England the use of the ivy at least is universal, and the references to it in Christmas song and story alone would fill a small volume.

Besides its claim to appropriateness for the Christmas season which it holds in common with other evergreens, it has two especially strong recommendations of its own. On account of its habit of clinging strongly to its supporting tree or wall, it is a popular symbol of friendship and fidelity, and as such, an excellent decoration for the season of good will and universal brotherhood. And it was, in Roman days, sacred to Bacchus, who, when a baby, was hidden by his aunt, Ino, among its leaves, to save him from Juno's destructive wrath. Prune says:

At Christmas men do always Ivy get.
 And in each corner of the house it set;
 But why do they then use that Bacchus
 weed?

Because they mean then Bacchus-like to feed.

This satirical explanation was but too true in the earlier days, when Christmas lasted for weeks, and was given over to a revelry almost wholly heathen in character.

To-day, in America, the Christmas decorations almost exclusively are of holly, which, for all its popularity, is less consecrated by legend than any other holiday greenery. To be sure we make a sparing use of the mistletoe, which, from the ancient Druidical meaning of purity given to its wax-white berries, and from its use by them in the marriage rite, has come to give a charter for kissing as "broad as the wind." And we have added the bitter-sweet, which has no traditional signification whatever, is not an evergreen, and is to be tolerated merely for its beauty's sake, and for the slight suggestion it gives of the holly berry.

Our American holly is said to be less beautiful than the European plant, having leaves of a duller green. But, making all allowances for possible disadvantages, it still is a remarkably beautiful tree. And as a symbol of the immortality which it is the season's special mission to teach, it surely has no rival. The leaves remain on the branches for three years, losing their hold only when they are plucked off at last by the growing buds of spring.

Throughout England, so little is its supremacy disputed, that it is popularly known as "Christmas" just as the hawthorn is called "May."

Its name has been a matter of considerable interest. Theophrastus and Greek authors named the plant Agraria; that is, wild, or of the fields. The Romans derived from this the word Agrifolium and called it also Aquifolium, from actum, sharp, and folium, a leaf. Bauhin and Loureiro first named it Ilex, from the resemblance of its leaves to those of the Quercus Ilex, a species of oak which was the true Ilex of Virgil. Linnaeus adopted the name Ilex for the genus, and preserved the name Aquifolium for the most anciently known species.

Our popular name, holly, probably is a corruption of the word holy, as Turner in his herbal calls it holy, and the tree the thorny foliage, and the berries like drops of bright blood, could scarcely fail to remind a Christian of the crown of thorns, and this, together with the universal use of the plant in the churches at Christmas easily would account for the name.

In Germany it is known as Christdorn. The Danish name is Christorn and the Swedish Christorn. The same name, Christ's thorn, is found in some parts of England. But as no legend connects the holly with the crown of thorns, this name, universal among the Germanic peoples, must be merely the result of its appearance and of its Christmas popularity, as before suggested.



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