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Kissing Ritual

by Sho Botham

It's not Mayday, it's May Day. Mayday is the international distress call and May Day refers to the first of May and its associated celebrations. Some reckon May Day is the most important day of the year. It's certainly very colourful with all that dancing around the maypole. The dancers holding long ribbons attached to the top of the maypole would weave in and out of each other creating bright patterns of the intertwining ribbons. Flower celebrations became part of May Day with the Romans, I believe. They worshipped Flora, a Roman goddess of flowers and springtime. May Day is now one day of celebrations but in Roman times, it seemed to have been about five days of partying with flowers, brightly coloured clothing and games or performances of farces and mimes that might have included nudity.

The first of May is also when young girls would rush out into the garden to wash their faces in the early morning dew. The belief being on that morning the dew had magical properties that would give them a beautiful complexion throughout the whole year. I remember doing this year after year. I don't remember it making my complexion beautiful but that didn't stop me jumping out of bed, early on each first of May, rushing down stairs into the kitchen and out of the back door into the chilly air, to place my hands, palm-down on top of the dew-laden grass, moving them back and forth to get them fully wet with magical dew. Standing up I would cover my face with cold, wet hands, rubbing them all over my stinging rosy cheeks, forehead and chin. I continued doing this right up until I was an adult and was even known to sneak out into the garden occasionally on a first of May long after I should have known better.

I never understood why only girls performed this ritual on their faces. Boys didn't seem to need to try to make their complexion beautiful. It was acceptable for them to become rugged with weather beaten faces.

One of the benefits of the washing of faces, ritual, on the first of May, was that the magical properties were also deemed to give young women an opportunity to find themselves a partner. On the first of May between the hours of midday and midnight, young women who had applied the magical dew to their faces earlier that morning could choose a young man to kiss. If she chose well, the young man would kiss her back with a passion and the two of them would start courting that very day. Their partnership would last at least for the whole of that year. This ritual was apparently very successful and the catalyst of many a marriage between a young woman and the man she chose to kiss on the first of May.

Some believed that the magical properties given to women on this special day led them to love their chosen man to eternity. Ancient parish records show that women who met their husbands through the first of May kissing ritual never looked at another man even after their husband died. When this happened, the woman would wait as long as it took until she could re-join her husband. Funerals of such women tended to be more akin to May Day festivities as villagers celebrated the couple getting back together for eternity, rather than viewing it as a sad ending.