

***T. F. THISELTON-
DYER***



***THE FOLK-
LORE
OF PLANTS***

T. F. Thiselton-Dyer

The Folk-lore of Plants

EAN 8596547374145

DigiCat, 2022

Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info



TABLE OF CONTENTS

[CHAPTER I.](#)

[CHAPTER II.](#)

[CHAPTER III.](#)

[CHAPTER IV.](#)

[CHAPTER V.](#)

[CHAPTER VI.](#)

[CHAPTER VII.](#)

[CHAPTER VIII.](#)

[CHAPTER IX.](#)

[CHAPTER X.](#)

[CHAPTER XI](#)

[CHAPTER XII.](#)

[CHAPTER XIII.](#)

[CHAPTER XIV.](#)

[CHAPTER XV.](#)

[CHAPTER XVI.](#)

[CHAPTER XVII.](#)

[CHAPTER XVIII.](#)

[CHAPTER XIX.](#)

[CHAPTER XX.](#)

[CHAPTER XXI.](#)

[CHAPTER XXII.](#)

[CHAPTER XXIII.](#)

PREFACE.

Apart from botanical science, there is perhaps no subject of inquiry connected with plants of wider interest than that suggested by the study of folk-lore. This field of research has been largely worked of late years, and has obtained considerable popularity in this country, and on the Continent.

Much has already been written on the folk-lore of plants, a fact which has induced me to give, in the present volume, a brief systematic summary—with a few illustrations in each case—of the many branches into which the subject naturally subdivides itself. It is hoped, therefore, that this little work will serve as a useful handbook for those desirous of gaining some information, in a brief concise form, of the folk-lore which, in one form or another, has clustered round the vegetable kingdom.

T.F. THISELTON-DYER.

November 19, 1888.

I. PLANT LIFE

II. PRIMITIVE AND SAVAGE NOTIONS RESPECTING PLANTS

III. PLANT WORSHIP

IV. LIGHTNING PLANTS

V. PLANTS IN WITCHCRAFT

VI. PLANTS IN DEMONOLOGY

VII. PLANTS IN FAIRY-LORE

VIII. LOVE-CHARMS

IX. DREAM-PLANTS

X. PLANTS AND THE WEATHER

XI. PLANT PROVERBS

**XII. PLANTS AND THEIR CEREMONIAL
USE**

XIII. PLANT NAMES

XIV. PLANT LANGUAGE

XV. FABULOUS PLANTS

XVI. DOCTRINE OF SIGNATURES

XVII. PLANTS AND THE CALENDAR

**XVIII. CHILDREN'S RHYMES AND
GAMES**

XIX. SACRED PLANTS

XX. PLANT SUPERSTITIONS

XXI. PLANTS IN FOLK-MEDICINE

**XXII. PLANTS AND THEIR LEGENDARY
HISTORY**

XXIII. MYSTIC PLANTS

CHAPTER I.

[Table of Contents](#)

PLANT LIFE.

The fact that plants, in common with man and the lower animals, possess the phenomena of life and death, naturally suggested in primitive times the notion of their having a similar kind of existence. In both cases there is a gradual development which is only reached by certain progressive stages of growth, a circumstance which was not without its practical lessons to the early naturalist. This similarity, too, was held all the more striking when it was observed how the life of plants, like that of the higher organisms, was subject to disease, accident, and other hostile influences, and so liable at any moment to be cut off by an untimely end.[1] On this account a personality was ascribed to the products of the vegetable kingdom, survivals of which are still of frequent occurrence at the present day. It was partly this conception which invested trees with that mystic or sacred character whereby they were regarded with a superstitious fear which found expression in sundry acts of sacrifice and

worship. According to Mr. Tylor,[2] there is reason to believe that, "the doctrine of the spirits of plants lay deep in the intellectual history of South-east Asia, but was in great measure superseded under Buddhist influence. The Buddhist books show that in the early days of their religion it was matter of controversy whether trees had souls, and therefore whether they might lawfully be injured. Orthodox Buddhism decided against the tree souls, and consequently against the scruple to harm them, declaring trees to have no mind nor sentient principle, though admitting that certain dewas or spirits do reside in the body of trees, and speak from within them." Anyhow, the notion of its being wrong to injure or mutilate a tree for fear of putting it to unnecessary pain was a widespread belief. Thus, the Ojibways imagined that trees had souls, and seldom cut them down, thinking that if they did so they would hear "the wailing of the trees when they suffered in this way." [3] In Sumatra [4] certain trees have special honours paid to them as being the embodiment of the spirits of the woods, and the Fijians [5] believe that "if an animal or a plant die, its soul immediately goes to Bolotoo." The Dayaks of Borneo [6] assert that rice has a living principle or spirit, and hold feasts to retain its soul lest the crops should decay. And the Karens affirm, [7] too, that plants as well as men and animals have their "la" or spirit. The Iroquois acknowledge the existence of spirits in trees and plants, and say that the spirit of corn, the spirit of beans, and the spirit of squashes are supposed to have the forms of three beautiful maidens. According to a tradition current among the Miamis, one year when there was an unusual abundance of corn, the spirit of

the corn was very angry because the children had thrown corn-cobs at each other in play, pretending to have suffered serious bodily injury in consequence of their sport[8]. Similarly, when the wind blows the long grass or waving corn, the German peasant will say, "the Grass-wolf," or "the Corn-wolf" is abroad. According to Mr. Ralston, in some places, "the last sheaf of rye is left as a shelter to the *Roggenwolf* or Rye-wolf during the winter's cold, and in many a summer or autumn festive rite that being is represented by a rustic, who assumes a wolf-like appearance. The corn spirit was, however, often symbolised under a human form."

Indeed, under a variety of forms this animistic conception is found among the lower races, and in certain cases explains the strong prejudice to certain herbs as articles of food. The Society Islanders ascribed a "varua" or surviving soul to plants, and the negroes of Congo adored a sacred tree called "Mirrone," one being generally planted near the house, as if it were the tutelar god of the dwelling. It is customary, also, to place calabashes of palm wine at the feet of these trees, in case they should be thirsty. In modern folk-lore there are many curious survivals of this tree-soul doctrine. In Westphalia,[9] the peasantry announce formally to the nearest oak any death that may have occurred in the family, and occasionally this formula is employed—"The master is dead, the master is dead." Even recently, writes Sir John Lubbock[10], an oak copse at Loch Siant, in the Isle of Skye, was held so sacred that no persons would venture to cut the smallest branch from it. The Wallachians, "have a superstition that every flower has a soul, and that the water-

lily is the sinless and scentless flower of the lake, which blossoms at the gates of Paradise to judge the rest, and that she will inquire strictly what they have done with their odours." [11] It is noteworthy, also, that the Indian belief which describes the holes in trees as doors through which the special spirits of those trees pass, reappears in the German superstition that the holes in the oak are the pathways for elves; [12] and that various diseases may be cured by contact with these holes. Hence some trees are regarded with special veneration—particularly the lime and pine [13]—and persons of a superstitious turn of mind, "may often be seen carrying sickly children to a forest for the purpose of dragging them through such holes." This practice formerly prevailed in our own country, a well-known illustration of which we may quote from White's "History of Selborne:"

"In a farmyard near the middle of the village," he writes, "stands at this day a row of pollard ashes, which by the seams and long cicatrices down their sides, manifestly show that in former times they had been cleft asunder. These trees, when young and flexible, were severed and held open by wedges, while ruptured children, stripped naked, were pushed through the apertures." [14]

In Somersetshire the superstition still lingers on, and in Cornwall the ceremony to be of value must be performed before sunrise; but the practice does not seem to have been confined to any special locality. It should also be added, as Mr. Conway [15] has pointed out, that in all Saxon countries in the Middle Ages a hole formed by two branches of a tree growing together was esteemed of highly efficacious value.

On the other hand, we must not confound the spiritual vitality ascribed to trees with the animistic conception of their being inhabited by certain spirits, although, as Mr. Tylor[16] remarks, it is difficult at times to distinguish between the two notions. Instances of these tree spirits lie thickly scattered throughout the folk-lore of most countries, survivals of which remain even amongst cultured races. It is interesting, moreover, to trace the same idea in Greek and Roman mythology. Thus Ovid[17] tells a beautiful story of Erisichthon's impious attack on the grove of Ceres, and it may be remembered how the Greek dryads and hamadryads had their life linked to a tree, and, "as this withers and dies, they themselves fall away and cease to be; any injury to bough or twig is felt as a wound, and a wholesale hewing down puts an end to them at once—a cry of anguish escapes them when the cruel axe comes near."

In "Apollonius Rhodius" we find one of these hamadryads imploring a woodman to spare a tree to which her existence is attached:

"Loud through the air resounds the woodman's stroke,
When, lo! a voice breaks from the groaning oak,
'Spare, spare my life! a trembling virgin spare!
Oh, listen to the Hamadryad's prayer!
No longer let that fearful axe resound;
Preserve the tree to which my life is bound.
See, from the bark my blood in torrents flows;
I faint, I sink, I perish from your blows.'"

Aubrey, referring to this old superstition, says:

"I cannot omit taking notice of the great misfortune in the family of the Earl of Winchelsea, who at Eastwell, in

Kent, felled down a most curious grove of oaks, near his own noble seat, and gave the first blow with his own hands. Shortly after his countess died in her bed suddenly, and his eldest son, the Lord Maidstone, was killed at sea by a cannon bullet."

Modern European folk-lore still provides us with a curious variety of these spirit-haunted trees, and hence when the alder is hewn, "it bleeds, weeps, and begins to speak.[18]" An old tree in the Rugaard forest must not be felled for an elf dwells within, and another, on the Heinzenberg, near Zell, "uttered a complaint when the woodman cut it down, for in it was our Lady, whose chapel now stands upon the spot."[19]

An Austrian Märchen tells of a stately fir, in which there sits a fairy maiden waited on by dwarfs, rewarding the innocent and plaguing the guilty; and there is the German song of the maiden in the pine, whose bark the boy splits with a gold and silver horn. Stories again are circulated in Sweden, among the peasantry, of persons who by cutting a branch from a habitation tree have been struck with death. Such a tree was the "klinta tall" in Westmanland, under which a mermaid was said to dwell. To this tree might occasionally be seen snow-white cattle driven up from the neighbouring lake across the meadows. Another Swedish legend tells us how, when a man was on the point of cutting down a juniper tree in a wood, a voice was heard from the ground, saying, "friend, hew me not." But he gave another stroke, when to his horror blood gushed from the root[20]. Then there is the Danish tradition[21] relating to the lonely thorn, occasionally seen in a field, but which never grows

larger. Trees of this kind are always bewitched, and care should be taken not to approach them in the night time, "as there comes a fiery wheel forth from the bush, which, if a person cannot escape from, will destroy him."

In modern Greece certain trees have their "stichios," a being which has been described as a spectre, a wandering soul, a vague phantom, sometimes invisible, at others assuming the most widely varied forms. It is further added that when a tree is "stichimonious" it is dangerous for a man, "to sleep beneath its shade, and the woodcutters employed to cut it down will lie upon the ground and hide themselves, motionless, and holding their breath, at the moment when it is about to fall, dreading lest the stichio at whose life the blow is aimed with each stroke of the axe, should avenge itself at the precise moment when it is dislodged." [22]

Turning to primitive ideas on this subject, Mr. Schoolcraft mentions an Indian tradition of a hollow tree, from the recesses of which there issued on a calm day a sound like the voice of a spirit. Hence it was considered to be the residence of some powerful spirit, and was accordingly deemed sacred. Among rude tribes trees of this kind are held sacred, it being forbidden to cut them. Some of the Siamese in the same way offer cakes and rice to the trees before felling them, and the Talein of Burmah will pray to the spirit of the tree before they begin to cut the tree down [23]. Likewise in the Australian bush demons whistle in the branches, and in a variety of other eccentric ways make their presence manifest—reminding us of Ariel's imprisonment: [24]

"Into a cloven pine; within which rift
Imprison'd, thou didst painfully remain,
A dozen years; ...
... Where thou didst vent thy groans,
As fast as mill-wheels strike."

Similarly Miss Emerson, in her "Indian Myths" (1884, p. 134), quotes the story of "The Two Branches":

"One day there was a great noise in a tree under which Manabozho was taking a nap. It grew louder, and, at length exasperated, he leaped into the tree, caught the two branches whose war was the occasion of the din, and pulled them asunder. But with a spring on either hand, the two branches caught and pinioned Manabozho between them. Three days the god remained imprisoned, during which his outcries and lamentations were the subject of derision from every quarter—from the birds of the air, and from the animals of the woods and plains. To complete his sad case, the wolves ate the breakfast he had left beneath the tree. At length a good bear came to his rescue and released him, when the god disclosed his divine intuitions, for he returned home, and without delay beat his two wives."

Furthermore, we are told of the West Indian tribes, how, if any person going through a wood perceived a motion in the trees which he regarded as supernatural, frightened at the prodigy, he would address himself to that tree which shook the most. But such trees, however, did not condescend to converse, but ordered him to go to a boie, or priest, who would order him to sacrifice to their new deity.[25] From the same source we also learn[26] how among savage tribes

those plants that produce great terrors, excitement, or a lethargic state, are supposed to contain a supernatural being. Hence in Peru, tobacco is known as the sacred herb, and from its invigorating effect superstitious veneration is paid to the weed. Many other plants have similar respect shown to them, and are used as talismans. Poisonous plants, again, from their deadly properties, have been held in the same repute;[27] and it is a very common practice among American Indians to hang a small bag containing poisonous herbs around the neck of a child, "as a talisman against diseases or attacks from wild beasts." It is commonly supposed that a child so protected is proof against every hurtful influence, from the fact of its being under the protection of the special spirits associated with the plant it wears.

Again, closely allied to beliefs of this kind is the notion of plants as the habitation of the departing soul, founded on the old doctrine of transmigration. Hence, referring to bygone times, we are told by Empedocles that "there are two destinies for the souls of highest virtue —to pass either into trees or into the bodies of lions." [28] Amongst the numerous illustrations of this mythological conception may be noticed the story told by Ovid, [29] who relates how Baucis and Philemon were rewarded in this manner for their charity to Zeus, who came a poor wanderer to their home. It appears that they not only lived to an extreme old age, but at the last were transformed into trees. Ovid, also, tells how the gods listened to the prayer of penitent Myrrha, and eventually turned her into a tree. Although, as Mr. Keary remarks, "she has lost understanding with her former shape,

she still weeps, and the drops which fall from her bark (*i.e.*, the myrrh) preserve the story of their mistress, so that she will be forgotten in no age to come."

The sisters of Phaëthon, bewailing his death on the shores of Eridanus, were changed into poplars. We may, too, compare the story of Daphne and Syrinx, who, when they could no longer elude the pursuit of Apollo and Pan, change themselves into a laurel and a reed. In modern times, Tasso and Spenser have given us graphic pictures based on this primitive phase of belief; and it may be remembered how Dante passed through that leafless wood, in the bark of every tree of which was imprisoned a suicide. In German folk-lore[30] the soul is supposed to take the form of a flower, as a lily or white rose; and according to a popular belief, one of these flowers appears on the chairs of those about to die. In the same way, from the grave of one unjustly executed white lilies are said to spring as a token of the person's innocence; and from that of a maiden, three lilies which no one save her lover must gather. The sex, moreover, it may be noted, is kept up even in this species of metempsychosis[31]. Thus, in a Servian folk-song, there grows out of the youth's body a green fir, out of the maiden's a red rose, which entwine together. Amongst further instances quoted by Grimm, we are told how, "a child carries home a bud which the angel had given him in the wood, when the rose blooms the child is dead. The Lay of Eunnifal makes a blackthorn shoot out of the bodies of slain heathens, a white flower by the heads of fallen Christians."

It is to this notion that Shakespeare alludes in "Hamlet," where Laertes wishes that violets may spring from the grave of Ophelia (v. I):

"Lay her in the earth,
And from her fair and unpolluted flesh
May violets spring."

A passage which is almost identical to one in the "Satires" of Persius (i. 39):

"E tumulo fortunataque favilla,
Nascentur violae;"

And an idea, too, which Tennyson seems to have borrowed:

"And from his ashes may be made,
The violet of his native land."

Again, in the well-known story of "Tristram and Ysonde," a further reference occurs: "From his grave there grew an eglantine which twined about the statue, a marvel for all men to see; and though three times they cut it down, it grew again, and ever wound its arms about the image of the fair Ysonde[32]." In the Scottish ballad of "Fair Margaret and Sweet William," it is related—

"Out of her breast there sprang a rose,
And out of his a briar;
They grew till they grew unto the church top,
And there they tied in a true lovers' knot."

The same idea has prevailed to a large extent among savage races. Thus, some of the North-Western Indians believed that those who died a natural death would be compelled to dwell among the branches of tall trees. The Brazilians have a mythological character called Mani—a

child who died and was buried in the house of her mother. Soon a plant sprang out of the grave, which grew, flourished, and bore fruit. This plant, says Mr. Dorman,[33] was the Mandioca, named from *Mani*, and *Oca*, house. By the Mexicans marigolds are known as "death-flowers," from a legend that they sprang up on the ground stained by, "the life-blood of those who fell victims to the love of gold and cruelty of the early Spanish settlers in America."

Among the Virginian tribes, too, red clover was supposed to have sprung from and to be coloured by the blood of the red men slain in battle, with which may be compared the well-known legend connected with the lily of the valley formerly current in St. Leonard's Forest, Sussex. It is reported to have sprung from the blood of St. Leonard, who once encountered a mighty worm, or "fire-drake," in the forest, engaging with it for three successive days. Eventually the saint came off victorious, but not without being seriously wounded; and wherever his blood was shed there sprang up lilies of the valley in profusion. After the battle of Towton a certain kind of wild rose is reported to have sprung up in the field where the Yorkists and Lancastrians fell, only there to be found:

"There still wild roses growing,
Frail tokens of the fray;
And the hedgerow green bears witness
Of Towton field that day." [33]

In fact, there are numerous legends of this kind; and it may be remembered how Defoe, in his "Tour through Great Britain," speaks of a certain camp called Barrow Hill, adding, "they say this was a Danish camp, and everything

hereabout is attributed to the Danes, because of the neighbouring Daventry, which they suppose to be built by them. The road hereabouts too, being overgrown with Dane-weed, they fancy it sprung from the blood of Danes slain in battle, and that if cut upon a certain day in the year, it bleeds."[34]

Similarly, the red poppies which followed the ploughing of the field of Waterloo after the Duke of Wellington's victory were said to have sprung from the blood of the troops who fell during the engagement;[35] and the fruit of the mulberry, which was originally white, tradition tells us became empurpled through human blood, a notion which in Germany explains the colour of the heather. Once more, the mandrake, according to a superstition current in France and Germany, sprang up where the presence of a criminal had polluted the ground, and hence the old belief that it was generally found near a gallows. In Iceland it is commonly said that when innocent persons are put to death the sorb or mountain ash will spring up over their graves. Similar traditions cluster round numerous other plants, which, apart from being a revival of a very early primitive belief, form one of the prettiest chapters of our legendary tales. Although found under a variety of forms, and in some cases sadly corrupted from the dress they originally wore, yet in their main features they have not lost their individuality, but still retain their distinctive character.

In connection with the myths of plant life may be noticed that curious species of exotic plants, commonly known as "sensitive plants," and which have generally attracted considerable interest from their irritability when touched.

Shelley has immortalised this curious freak of plant life in his charming poem, wherein he relates how,

"The sensitive plant was the earliest,
Up-gathered into the bosom of rest;
A sweet child weary of its delight,
The feeblest and yet the favourite,
Cradled within the embrace of night."

Who can wonder, on gazing at one of these wonderful plants, that primitive and uncultured tribes should have regarded such mysterious and inexplicable movements as indications of a distinct personal life. Hence, as Darwin in his "Movements of Plants" remarks: "why a touch, slight pressure, or any other irritant, such as electricity, heat, or the absorption of animal matter, should modify the turgescence of the affected cells in such a manner as to cause movement, we do not know. But a touch acts in this manner so often, and on such widely distinct plants, that the tendency seems to be a very general one; and, if beneficial, it might be increased to any extent." If, therefore, one of the most eminent of recent scientific botanists confessed his inability to explain this strange peculiarity, we may excuse the savage if he regard it as another proof of a distinct personality in plant life. Thus, some years ago, a correspondent of the *Botanical Register*, describing the toad orchis (*Megaclinium bufo*), amusingly spoke as follows of its eccentric movements: "Let the reader imagine a green snake to be pressed flat like a dried flower, and then to have a road of toads, or some such speckled reptiles, drawn up along the middle in single file, their backs set up, their forelegs sprawling right and left, and their mouths wide

open, with a large purple tongue wagging about convulsively, and a pretty considerable approach will be gained to an idea of this plant, which, if Pythagoras had but known of it, would have rendered all arguments about the transmigration of souls superfluous." But, apart from the vein of jocularly running through these remarks, such striking vegetable phenomena are scientifically as great a puzzle to the botanist as their movements are to the savage, the latter regarding them as the outward visible expression of a real inward personal existence.

But, to quote another kind of sympathy between human beings and certain plants, the Cingalese have a notion that the cocoa-nut plant withers away when beyond the reach of a human voice, and that the vervain and borage will only thrive near man's dwellings. Once more, the South Sea Islanders affirm that the scent is the spirit of a flower, and that the dead may be sustained by their fragrance, they cover their newly-made graves with many a sweet smelling blossom.

Footnotes:

1. See Tylor's "Primitive Culture," 1873, i. 474-5; also Dorman's "Primitive Superstitions," 1881, p. 294.

2. "Primitive Culture," i. 476-7.

3. Jones's "Ojibways," p. 104.

4. Marsden's "History of Sumatra," p. 301.

5. Mariner's "Tonga Islands," ii. 137.

6. St. John, "Far East," i. 187.

7. See Tylor's "Primitive Culture," i. 475.
8. Dorman's "Primitive Superstitions," p. 294; also Schoolcraft's "Indian Tribes."
9. See Thorpe's "Northern Mythology," iii. 61.
10. "Origin of Civilisation," 1870, p. 192. See Leslie Forbes' "Early Races of Scotland," i. 171.
11. Folkard's "Plant-lore, Legends, and Lyrics," p. 463.
12. Conway's "Mystic Trees and Flowers," *Blackwood's Magazine*, 1870, p. 594.
13. Thorpe's "Northern Mythology," i. 212.
14. See Black's "Folk-Medicine."
15. "Mystic Trees and Flowers," p. 594.
16. "Primitive Culture," ii. 215.
17. Metam., viii. 742-839; also Grimm's Teut. Myth., 1883, ii. 953-4
18. Grimm's Teut. Myth., ii. 653.
19. Quoted in Tylor's "Primitive Culture," ii. 221.
20. Thorpe's "Northern Mythology," ii. 72, 73.
21. Ibid., p. 219.
22. "Superstitions of Modern Greece," by M. Le Baron d'Estournelles, in *Nineteenth Century*, April 1882, pp. 394, 395.
23. See Dorman's "Primitive Superstitions," p. 288.
24. "The Tempest," act i. sc. 2.
25. Dorman's "Primitive Superstitions," p. 288.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 295.
27. See chapter on Demonology.
28. See Keary's "Outlines of Primitive Belief," 1882, pp. 66-7.
29. Metam., viii. 714:—

"Frondere Philemona Baucis,
Baucida conspexit senior frondere Philemon.
... 'Valeque,
O conjux!' dixere simul, simul abdita textit
Ora frutex."

30. Thorpe's "Northern Mythology," i. 290, iii. 271.

31. Grimm's "Teut. Mythology," ii. 827.

32. Cox and Jones' "Popular Romances of the Middle Ages," 1880, p. 139

33. Smith's "Brazil," p. 586; "Primitive Superstitions," p. 293.

34. See Folkard's "Plant-lore, Legends, and Lyrics," p. 524.

35. See the *Gardeners' Chronicle*, 1875, p. 315.

36. According to another legend, forget-me-nots sprang up.

CHAPTER II.

[Table of Contents](#)

PRIMITIVE AND SAVAGE NOTIONS RESPECTING PLANTS

The descent of the human race from a tree—however whimsical such a notion may seem—was a belief once received as sober fact, and even now-a-days can be traced amongst the traditions of many races.[1] This primitive idea of man's creation probably originated in the myth of Yggdrasil, the Tree of the Universe,[2] around which so much legendary lore has clustered, and for a full explanation of which an immense amount of learning has been expended, although the student of mythology has never yet been able to arrive at any definite solution on this deeply intricate subject. Without entering into the many theories proposed in connection with this mythical tree, it no doubt represented the life-giving forces of nature. It is generally supposed to have been an ash tree, but, as Mr. Conway[3] points out, "there is reason to think that through the confluence of traditions other sacred trees blended with it. Thus, while the ash bears no fruit, the Eddas describe the stars as the fruit of Yggdrasil."

Mr. Thorpe,[4] again, considers it identical with the "Robur Jovis," or sacred oak of Geismar, destroyed by Boniface, and the Irminsul of the Saxons, the *Columna Universalis*, "the terrestrial tree of offerings, an emblem of the whole world." At any rate the tree of the world, and the greatest of all trees, has long been identified in the northern mythology as the ash tree,[5] a fact which accounts for the weird character assigned to it amongst all the Teutonic and Scandinavian nations, frequent illustrations of which will occur in the present volume. Referring to the descent of man from the tree, we may quote the Edda, according to which all mankind are descended from the ash and the elm. The story runs that as Odhinn and his two brothers were journeying over the earth they discovered these two stocks "void of future," and breathed into them the power of life[6]:

"Spirit they owned not,
Sense they had not,
Blood nor vigour,
Nor colour fair.
Spirit gave Odhinn,
Thought gave Hoenir,
Blood gave Lodr
And colour fair."

This notion of tree-descent appears to have been popularly believed in olden days in Italy and Greece, illustrations of which occur in the literature of that period. Thus Virgil writes in the *AEneid*[7]:

"These woods were first the seat of sylvan powers,
Of nymphs and fauns, and savage men who took
Their birth from trunks of trees and stubborn oak."

Romulus and Remus had been found under the famous *Ficus Ruminalis*, which seems to suggest a connection with a tree parentage. It is true, as Mr. Keary remarks,[8] that, "in the legend which we have received it is in this instance only a case of finding; but if we could go back to an earlier tradition, we should probably see that the relation between the mythical times and the tree had been more intimate."

Juvenal, it may be remembered, gives a further allusion to tree descent in his sixth satire[9]:

"For when the world was new, the race that broke
Unfathered, from the soil or opening oak,
Lived most unlike the men of later times."

In Greece the oak as well as the ash was accounted a tree whence men had sprung; hence in the "Odyssey," the disguised hero is asked to state his pedigree, since he must necessarily have one; "for," says the interrogator, "belike you are not come of the oak told of in old times, nor of the rock." [10] Hesiod tells us how Jove made the third or brazen race out of ash trees, and Hesychius speaks of "the fruit of the ash the race of men." Phoroneus, again, according to the Grecian legend, was born of the ash, and we know, too, how among the Greeks certain families kept up the idea of a tree parentage; the Pelopidae having been said to be descended from the plane. Among the Persians the Achaemenidae had the same tradition respecting the origin of their house.[11] From the numerous instances illustrative of tree-descent, it is evident, as Mr. Keary points out, that, "there was once a fuller meaning than metaphor in the language which spoke of the roots and branches of a family, or in such expressions as the pathetic "Ah, woe, beloved

shoot!" of Euripides."^[12] Furthermore, as he adds, "Even when the literal notion of the descent from a tree had been lost sight of, the close connection between the prosperity of the tribe and the life of its fetish was often strictly held. The village tree of the German races was originally a tribal tree, with whose existence the life of the village was involved; and when we read of Christian saints and confessors, that they made a point of cutting down these half idols, we cannot wonder at the rage they called forth, nor that they often paid the penalty of their courage."

Similarly we can understand the veneration bestowed on the forest tree from associations of this kind. Consequently, as it has been remarked,^[13] "At a time when rude beginnings were all that were of the builder's art, the human mind must have been roused to a higher devotion by the sight of lofty trees under an open sky, than it could feel inside the stunted structures reared by unskilled hands. When long afterwards the architecture peculiar to the Teutonic reached its perfection, did it not in its boldest creations still aim at reproducing the soaring trees of the forest? Would not the abortion of miserably carved or chiselled images lag far behind the form of the god which the youthful imagination of antiquity pictured to itself throned on the bowery summit of a sacred tree."

It has been asked whether the idea of the Yggdrasil and the tree-descent may not be connected with the "tree of life" of Genesis. Without, however, entering into a discussion on this complex point, it is worthy of note that in several of the primitive mythologies we find distinct counterparts of the biblical account of the tree of life; and it seems quite

possible that these corrupt forms of the Mosaic history of creation may, in a measure, have suggested the conception of the world tree, and the descent of mankind from a tree. On this subject the late Mr. R.J. King[14] has given us the following interesting remarks in his paper on "Sacred Trees and Flowers":

"How far the religious systems of the great nations of antiquity were affected by the record of the creation and fall preserved in the opening chapters of Genesis, it is not, perhaps, possible to determine. There are certain points of resemblance which are at least remarkable, but which we may assign, if we please, either to independent tradition, or to a natural development of the earliest or primeval period. The trees of life and of knowledge are at once suggested by the mysterious sacred tree which appears in the most ancient sculptures and paintings of Egypt and Assyria, and in those of the remoter East. In the symbolism of these nations the sacred tree sometimes figures as a type of the universe, and represents the whole system of created things, but more frequently as a tree of life, by whose fruit the votaries of the gods (and in some cases the gods themselves) are nourished with divine strength, and are prepared for the joys of immortality. The most ancient types of this mystical tree of life are the date palm, the fig, and the pine or cedar."

By way of illustration, it may be noted that the ancient Egyptians had their legend of the "Tree of Life". It is mentioned in their sacred books that Osiris ordered the names of souls to be written on this tree of life, the fruit of which made those who ate it become as gods.[15] Among

the most ancient traditions of the Hindoos is that of the tree of life—called Soma in Sanskrit—the juice of which imparted immortality; this marvellous tree being guarded by spirits. Coming down to later times, Virgil speaks of a sacred tree in a manner which Grimm[16] considers highly suggestive of the Yggdrasil:

"Jove's own tree,
High as his topmost boughs to heaven ascend,
So low his roots to hell's dominions tend."

As already mentioned, numerous legendary stories have become interwoven with the myth of the Yggdrasil, the following sacred one combining the idea of tree-descent. According to a *trouvere* of the thirteenth century,[17] "The tree of life was, a thousand years after the sin of the first man, transplanted from the Garden of Eden to the Garden of Abraham, and an angel came from heaven to tell the patriarch that upon this tree should hang the freedom of mankind. But first from the same tree of life Jesus should be born, and in the following wise. First was to be born a knight, Fanouel, who, through the scent merely of the flower of that living tree, should be engendered in the womb of a virgin; and this knight again, without knowing woman, should give birth to St. Anne, the mother of the Virgin Mary. Both these wonders fell out as they were foretold. A virgin bore Fanouel by smelling the tree; and Fanouel having once come unawares to that tree of life, and cut a fruit from it, wiped his knife against his thigh, in which he inflicted a slight wound, and thus let in some of the juice. Presently his thigh began to swell, and eventually St. Anne was born therefrom."

But turning to survivals of this form of animism among uncultured tribes, we may quote the Damaras, a South African race, with whom "a tree is supposed to be the universal progenitor, two of which divide the honour."[18] According to their creed, "In the beginning of things there was a tree, and out of this tree came Damaras, bushmen, oxen, and zebras. The Damaras lit a fire which frightened away the bushmen and the oxen, but the zebras remained."

Hence it is that bushmen and wild beasts live together in all sorts of inaccessible places, while the Damaras and oxen possess the land. The tree gave birth to everything else that lives. The natives of the Philippines, writes Mr. Marsden in his "History of Sumatra," have a curious tradition of tree-descent, and in accordance with their belief, "The world at first consisted only of sky and water, and between these two a glade; which, weary with flying about, and finding no place to rest, set the water at variance with the sky, which, in order to keep it in bounds, and that it should not get uppermost, loaded the water with a number of islands, in which the glade might settle and leave them at peace. Mankind, they said, sprang out of a large cane with two joints, that, floating about in the water, was at length thrown by the waves against the feet of the glade as it stood on shore, which opened it with its bill; the man came out of one joint, the woman out of the other. These were soon after married by the consent of their god, Bathala Meycapal, which caused the first trembling of the earth,[19] and from thence are descended the different nations of the world."