



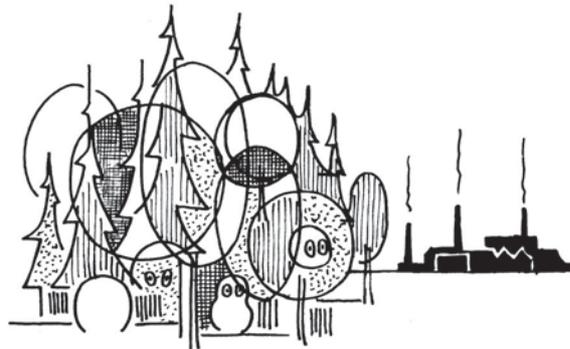
SWEDISH TRADITIONS

The Swedish way of living of today is of course characterized by the lifestyle of a highly industrialized and urbanized society. This modern and well-organized society was once a peasant culture mystified by legends and folk beliefs and livened up by the festivals and traditions of the year.

Traditions had a much greater impact on everyday life in older times than they have nowadays. However, we still keep up some rituals from times past during the great festivals of the year, even though sometimes the original significance of the traditions has been lost.

Some old customs and beliefs have had to give way to influences from abroad; i.e. the Swedish Christmas goat had to yield for our modern Santa Claus, but our Santa got his Swedish name from the old "tomte" - a supernatural being, who according to folklore dwelled near the farm. We still put out the Christmas sheaf for the birds, but in their approach to the sheaf we no longer read good or bad omens for the next crop. Our celebration of Lucia was preceded by our forefathers primitive rituals on the darkest day of the year to entice the sun to return once more. Our young Easter witches of today can feel completely safe, however frightful they may look, as the terrible custom of burning "witches" at the stake mercifully died out some hundred years ago.

In our modern times when technology controls nature and science has replaced the old folklore of the peasant culture, there still exists in the Swedish nature and deep in the "folk soul" a world of mystery and enchantment - interpreted by poets and made alive in folk music.



Swedish letters
Å å here written as aa, pronounced as in 'Aukland'
Ä ä here written as ae, pronounced as in 'apple' but broader
Ö ö here written as oe, pronounced as in 'eastern' but with kissing lips





THE VASA RACE

On the first Sunday of March the longest and toughest of all the world's skiing competitions - the Vasa race - takes place in the northern part of the province of Dalarna.

The origin of the Vasa race is a political event which took place in the 16th century. A chronicle runs in short as follows:



Now it so happened that Sweden was at war with Denmark. The Danish king, Christian the Tyrant, and his army had invaded the south of Sweden. In particular among the peasant farmers of central Sweden and Dalarna feelings ran high against the Danish king. A young nobleman, Gustav Vasa, determined to do his utmost to free Sweden from its foreign yoke. Gustav addressed the peasant farmers at Mora in Dalarna but the men would not give him any promise to take up arms. Despairing of the faint-hearted attitude of these men of Dalarna, Gustav Vasa decided to flee to Norway. Wearing snow-shoes or perhaps on a pair of short broad skis, Gustav Vasa made his way through the deep forests towards the Norwegian border. Meanwhile, fresh news of the Danish king's cruelty reached the men of Dalarna and they had a change of heart. Quickly, a group of skiers were ordered to try to persuade Gustav Vasa to turn back. They caught up with him near the border and he listened to their plea and agreed to return with them to Mora. In the course

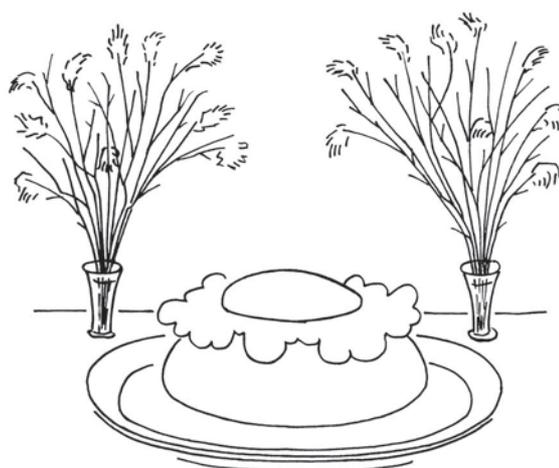
of time he was recognized as the liberator of Sweden and was proclaimed king.

Four hundred years later (1922) the first Vasa race was run in memory of Gustav Vasa, the Liberator. The skiers were 119 in number. Today about 12000 skiers participate in the Vasa race and a further 8500 skiers participate in the 'Open track' which takes place the days before the real Vasa race.

EASTER SPRIGS AND SHROVE TUESDAY BUNS

Through the centuries, we have had our special way of hastening springs' advance. In the market-places the housewife buys a bunch of birch twigs with fluffy and gaily-coloured chicken feathers. Taking home her Easter birch twigs (påskris), she puts them into a vase and very soon - forced by the spring sunshine and the central heating of the house - the sprigs burst into tender green.

Few people nowadays recall the origin of this custom - or that it is connected with Good Friday - which in Sweden is called "Long Friday". It is said that the sprigs symbolized the scourging of Christ. In times past, people used to get up early on Good Friday and start whipping each other with birch twigs. - Luckily, this rough custom has died out.





But the custom of eating "fettisdagsbullar", or Shrove Tuesday buns, has not. Tuesdays in Lent, and Shrove Tuesday in particular, are the right days on which to eat them.

Shrove Tuesday buns are sliced and filled with almond paste and whipped cream and sprinkled with powdered sugar. They are preferably served in soup plates of hot milk.



EASTER WITCHES

The genuine Easter Witch should have a copper kettle, as well as a broomstick and a black cat. The throngs of little witches who nowadays appear about the streets on the Saturday before Easter usually content themselves with a copper kettle, and, of course, mothers' old summer skirt, reaching right down to the ground, a shawl, and an apron. The Easter witches are a survival of an old belief. For it was once thought that witches flew off to Blaakulla in order to celebrate Easter there. - Nowadays, they just return home to mother and preparations for the Easter meal.

LAST OF APRIL

Who cares if a chilly wind is blowing, or if the earth is still cold and covered with snow. The day is the last of April, (or "Valborgsmaesso=afton"> and by tradition the break between the cold and dark winter and the warm and light summer.

In the dark evening grown-ups and children gather around the huge bonfires. Choirs welcome spring, and inspired speakers talk about brotherhood and the future. The first outdoor dancing of the season takes place. And the evening culminates in a firework display.

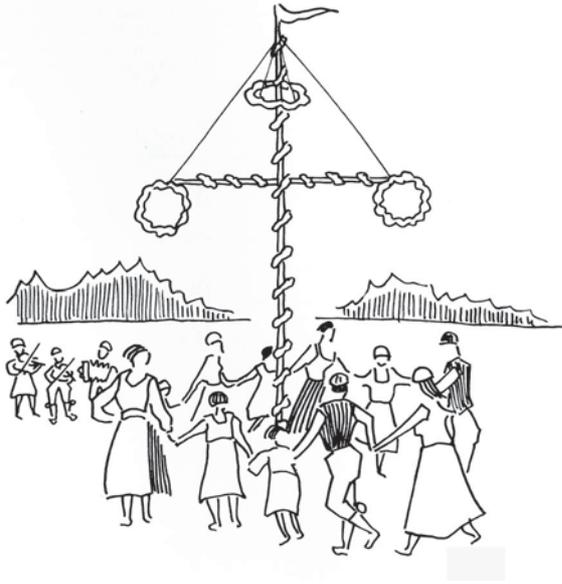
In former days this celebration was also something more than a rousing welcome to spring. Winter had finally fled, and it was time to start the outdoor work and turn the cattle out to pasture. Before doing this, it was important to eliminate all dangers lurking in nature. Therefore the huge bonfires were preferably placed on hills to be seen from far away, and by shooting, banging on drums and pot-lids, blowing in horns, etc., a deafening noise was made - all this to frighten away wild animals and perhaps also evil powers.

FIRST OF MAY

Flags and banners, solemn speakers, brass bands and the International, the day is the first of May and a public holiday. And the demonstration parade is marching on.

The first of May is also something else than parades. It is the first day of spring - the day when the young girl by tradition puts on her new spring coat for a stroll in the sunshine - her heavy winter clothes having been carefully put in plastic wrapping and hung up for the next winter.





MIDSUMMER EVE

Slowly the days grow longer and brighter until about the 24th of June when they come to their peak - Midsummer Eve - the day that never ends. Wherever you go in the countryside or city parks, people are celebrating because this is the true climax of the year in the hearts of a sunstarved nation.

Out in a field, a tall pole is being decorated with leafy branches and wild flowers around it and two wreaths of flowers on its cross-bar. Then, in the afternoon, the entire village gathers; quite a few of the villagers wear the colourful dresses that are traditional in the parish. The fiddler and accordionist strike up a tune, and the gigantic midsummer pole goes up, pushed by strong arms until it is firmly wedged upright. And - led by the fiddlers - everybody joins hands and dance around the decorated pole. Later in the evening, the dancing continues in a field, an outdoor pavilion or out on a jetty. Everywhere couples are whirling to music that belongs particularly to the Swedish midsummer - waltzes, schottisches, polkas and hambo.

And inexhaustibly the dancing goes on in the undying twilight.

There is magic in the air at Midsummer. The young girl who goes out in the meadow and, under unbroken silence, picks seven different kinds of flowers and tucks them under her pillow, will dream of the man she will marry.

FERMENTED HERRING

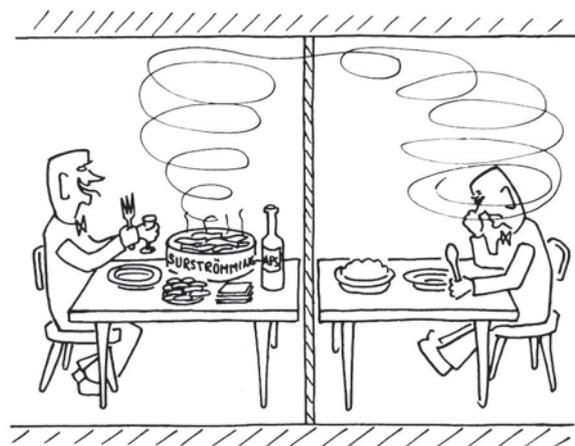
The day a ghastly smell almost knocks you down, you'll know that your neighbour is having a party. And the reason for the party is the cause of the smell.

The cause is small enough, being no more than a young Baltic herring which has been salted and then fermented. Sometimes so fermented that the flat round tins in which it is sold bulge out beyond all the known laws of the Food Act. And be careful when opening the tin, or fermenting fish will explode all over you!

Once the "surströmming" was easy to avoid if you just stayed clear of Northern Sweden. But the little fermented herring has found its way southwards, and now makes its smelly presence felt in many parts of the country.

Wherever it is served, it is taken with raw onions, almond potatoes, and the special northern thin bread, though the true gormandizer eats it directly from the tin.

Of course, people will assure you that the smell of "surstroemming" no longer bothers you once the party is in full swing. However, notice how the devotee not unusually braces himself with a good stiff drink of "schnaps" before coming to close quarters with the main dish. The most painless way is to grasp the fish by its tail and gulp it down, immediately followed by a large bite of bread. You only prolong the agony by dissecting it into small mouthfuls. If you manage three or four, it is something to feel proud of. What you won't manage is to get rid of the smell, for it will cling stubbornly to your clothes for days. As to the taste, there are only two ways - to loathe it, or love it.



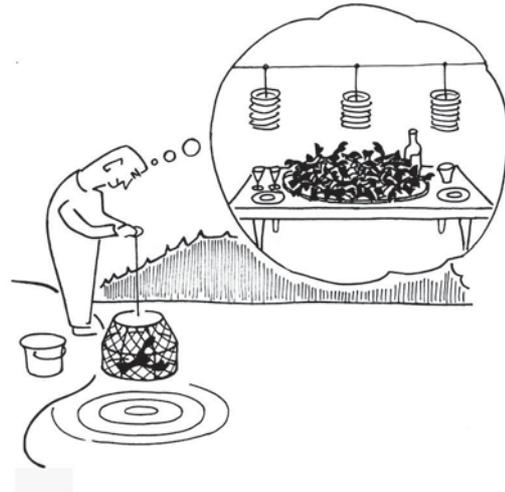


CRAY FISH

All night before the starting day of the crayfish season, there is not a stream in Sweden where someone is not hopefully laying down traps for this Swedish delicacy. These traps are cages, covered with fishnet, and constructed for one-way traffic. It is easy for the freshwater shellfish to get in, impossible for them to get out.

As the clear August night passes on and early dawn brightens the sky, the silhouettes of the ardent fishers become more distinct. A scrabbling sound from claws against the metal of the bucket can be heard where there is a successful fisher, the small grey lobster-like creatures flounder awkwardly, clambering about on top of one another.

Crayfish time! A paper tablecloth is spread out on the table. Above it there are colourful paper lanterns hanging and in the centre of the lights the red crayfish are heaped up on a big dish. Around them clings the smell of dill. The best way of getting at the delicate meat is to suck it, after opening the shells. Your mouth becomes full of cold water seasoned with salt and dill and something else - the something else is the crayfish.

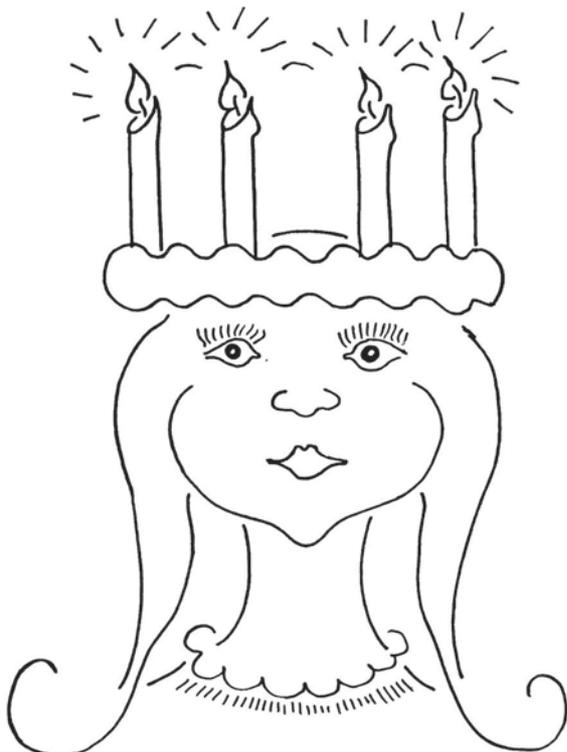


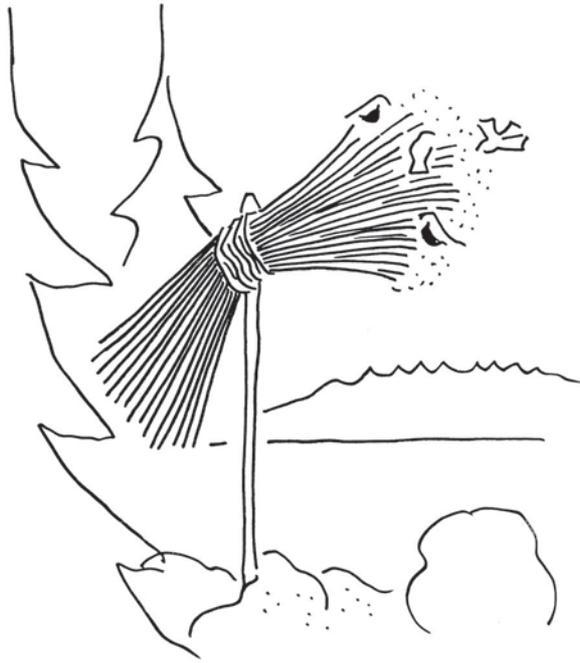
LUCIA

Early in the dark morning of the 13th of December she comes. Already before she is visible, the Lucia song is heard at a distance, coming closer, and then she appears in a long white robe and with a crown of candles on her head. She is escorted by girls also in long white robes and by "star boys" with tall hats, and she brings with her a tray with coffee, Lucia bread ("Lussekatte"), and ginger cookies.

Originally, Lucia came to Sweden from Syracuse, where she was a saint in the days of the Christian persecutions. She appeared for the first time in Västergötland at the beginning of the 19th century. Nowadays, she appears in the whole of Sweden; in the family circle, at the office, at school, in the hospitals and in a public parade through the town.

The Lucia day is the 13th of December, because in the old times this day was thought to be the midwinter solstice. And probably the ceremony of Lucia is preceded by some primitive rituals performed by our forefathers on the darkest and shortest day of the year to entice the sun to return once more to the earth.





THE CHRISTMAS SHEAF

A Christmas sheaf for the birds is one of the small things deriving from the old peasant-culture, which makes Christmas so rich in traditions. The sheaf was a manifestation of mens' generosity during the Christmas festivities reaching as far as the small birds. Sometimes the last sheaf of the harvest was saved for this purpose. Also good or bad omens could be interpreted from the feeding of the birds. If the birds appeared at once to eat, the next year was to be meager and hard, but if they took their time before approaching the sheaf, a good year would follow.



THE SWEDISH 'TOMTE'

It's afternoon on Christmas Eve, and there is tense expectation in every home where there are children. At last, there he comes - Santa Claus - red-clad, white-bearded and with a heavy sack over his shoulder. To his question, whether there are any good children, they all shout 'yes in unison, and Santa Claus opens his sack and takes up the Christmas presents one by one. Everyone gets his presents, and at the end there is a pile of presents on the floor for Daddy - who happens to be out.



In spite of his imposing beard Santa Claus, or "Jultomten", is not an old phenomenon of the Swedish Christmas. But he has got a predecessor. In the world of folk beliefs there existed a "tomte" since time immemorial. He was dressed in grey and was 45 inches high. He had supernatural powers and his working time was the night. If well treated, he made himself useful around the house. But if he was neglected or maltreated, he went away from the house, and things would start to go wrong. On Christmas, it was particularly important to be on a friendly footing with him, because magic powers were then prevailing. This idea goes as far back in the past as to the celebrations at Midwinter during heathen times. And the proper thing to do at Christmas was to put out a bowl of porridge for "tomten"

