

## Fasching in München

## So that's what "fasching" is!

It's called Mardi Gras in New Orleans; Carnival in Rio de Janeiro; but Germany, depending on the region and true to the saying that "beloved children have many names," celebrates "Karneval," "Fastnacht" or "Fasching." So if you have seen announcements of a Fasching Dance somewhere and are wondering about the significance of this strange madness that overtakes people at this — in the Northern Hemisphere at least — unlikely time of year, you might find the following tidbits of information of interest.

In Germany, the origins of the "Fasching" celebrations stem from the ancient heathen practice of driving out old man winter. On certain February days you can still see a strange masquerade in some Southern German villages: Devils, wizards and witches wielding brooms and pitchforks prance around trying to do just that. Of course, the success of their vigorous operations is not immediately apparent, as winter often hangs around for weeks or even months afterwards, but it does come eventually, when the snow melts and spring bursts forth. So the masquerades are always sure of a lusty cheer from shivering onlookers. This custom is called "Mummenschanz," as the German word "vermummt" can mean either to be bundled up against the cold or to go in disguise.

Later on in Christian times, the Church realized it was sound practice to permit people a period of hearty eating, drinking and general merrymaking as a release from tensions and frustrations pent up during the dreary days and long cold nights of winter, before they had to undergo the rigorous fasting imposed during the

seven weeks of Lent. Thus the "Mummenschanz" developed into "Fasching" or "Fastnacht," both words deriving from "fasting." So everyone who could afford it acquired or made fancy costumes and lived it up as much as possible prior to Lent.

During the last two centuries, the importance of this "safety valve" principle was not lost on monarchs, politicians and even dictators. During

the period of Fasching, the ordinary citizen was able to lampoon official malpractices, provided he was in disguise and clothed his criticism in the proper amount of wit, without having to fear for his life. I remember that even during Hitler's regime in the '30s, the Fasching parades in Cologne managed to get in quite a few sly digs at the government, which would normally have resulted in dire consequences for the authors.

Learned historians have written thick volumes on this fascinating subject of "Fasching," so I will restrict myself to describing just a few of the charming features of this period which I, as a Rhinelander, was able to observe and enjoy.

Every year, at 11 a.m. on the 11th day of the 11th month, the "Season" is declared officially open with a certain amount of pomp. Nothing very exciting seems to happen for some weeks after this proclamation, as November in Germany is the traditional period of mourning for the dead. However, people are quietly "beaver away," writing witty song lyrics, working on floats for their particular neighborhoods or clubs, or devising and making fanciful costumes for the numerous parties in January and February. These culminate in three highlights, traditionally named "drei tolle Tage." The German adjective "toll" can mean mad or insane, but it can also mean "splendid, fabulous, glorious." So let's call them the Three Glorious Days, shall we?

The first of these is "Altweiberfastnacht." On the Thursday before Lent at 11 a.m., women are allowed to "invade" government offices or their bosses' inner sanctums to "take over the reins" for a brief period. This consists of waltzing the available men around the floor and snipping off their neckties (symbols of male power?). Everyone then goes back to work none the worse for these pranks, the women being allowed to keep on their outlandish make-up. I remember a bank clerk in Cologne Station calmly and efficiently converting foreign currencies into Deutsche Mark while taking an occasional sip of wine, a bite from a hunk of sausage and blowing kisses

at her customers. She wore a green wig, a false nose and a Pierrot costume and everyone was delighted with her. Of course, the dances that evening are dominated by "Ladies' Choice;" men cannot refuse an invitation to the dance.

The next highlight is "Rose Saturday" two days later; grand hotel ballrooms, small dance halls, pubs and taverns are festooned with paper streamers and balloons; everyone who is able dons a costume and throws him or herself into the fray, dancing almost non-stop till the early hours of the morning and consuming a fair amount of wine and food during the proceedings.

All this is the overture to the final and most glorious highlight; "Rose Monday" with its splendid parades. Colorful floats depicting the human weaknesses of the mighty, and bands playing the many witty songs composed during the season, draw huge cheers from a multitude of onlookers as they make their way through the narrow streets of the old cities. Tons of candy are thrown into the crowds from the floats, and the children are very adept at catching these tasty morsels, believe me. The float of Prince Carnival is always the most resplendent and generous with showers of gifts or nosegays, consequently drawing the loudest roars of approval.

Wouldn't it be a terrible anti-climax to go home and put your feet up after witnessing such a glorious spectacle? So, while the municipal trucks clean up the litter of the parade, you go home, have a bite to eat and prepare yourself for yet another Fasching Dance lasting well into the night. Sleep is something to be postponed till Shrove Tuesday, after you have managed to survive the workday somehow, sustained by Alka Seltzer and headache pills!