

December

From a series of monthly meditational essays by Eugene Halliday

This month, named from the Latin "decem" *ten*, was the last month of the earliest Roman calendar, which had ten months and began in March. Its present length of thirty-one days was given to it either by the Emperor Augustus, or by Julius Caesar.

In December, called by Martial "the hoary month" and by Ovid "the frosty and smoky month", occurred the feast of the Saturnalia, which lasted from the seventeenth to the twenty fourth day.

During Saturnalia all schools were closed, all punishments were suspended, a free style of dress was allowed and the formal toga discarded. Class distinctions were ignored; masters and slaves feasted and joked together. Everywhere gifts were given and received without discrimination of rank.

From the festival of Saturnalia came many of the customs we find in our own Christmas celebrations. Our Christmas tree candles derive from the popular Roman wax tapers. Our fancy dress, games, jokes and general attitude of merrymaking all had their correspondences in the ancient Roman festival.

A winter festival was held by the northern peoples of Germany and Scandinavia. Their Yule festival, lasting twelve days, was held to celebrate the returning sun's victory over the dark forces of the winter. From this festival we derive our Yule logs which northern peoples kept burning to cheer the dark, cold winter nights, and to encourage the sun to climb again from its low position in the grey sky.

For twelve days the Norsemen feasted and made merry, decorating their houses with green branches to evoke a new springtime. The holly and the ivy cheered the grey days and dark nights. The fir tree, dedicated to Christ by a missionary from Germany, is the origin of our familiar Christmas tree.

Our mistletoe comes to us from the religious practices of the ancient Druids. All our Christmas festive things and practices have come to us from the ancient world's religious observances.

The twenty first day of December is the day of the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year. On this day the sun appears to stand at noon over the Tropic of Capricorn. The sign of Capricorn is symbolic of the Scapegoat, the goat on which were loaded the sins of the people in the ancient world, the goat which became more than a mere symbol when Christ was crucified.

Peoples of the remote past viewed the day of the winter solstice with great fear. From the day of the summer solstice, June the twenty first, the sun imperceptibly had begun to fall lower in the sky. By the autumn the sun was low enough to bring some apprehension to men. Each day the sun had sunk a little lower the day had become

shorter, the night longer.

Earliest, earth-bound man could not know the great cycle of the year, could not be sure that the sun would not sink finally and forever below the rim of the earth, leaving humanity and all earth life in an ever colder and darker night.

Everywhere men watched with anxious eyes the sun's passage through the grey sky. On the twenty first of December very great was the fear of mankind. Most anxiously the elected watchers of the sun observed the sun's altitude. As each day passed the tension of man's fear grew greater. But then just as despair seemed most justified, the eagerest-eyed watchers saw that the sun had not sunk any lower, had surely begun to rise again!

On the twenty fifth of December a great shout of joy broke out of the watchers' mouths. The sun had risen again. The victory of light and life was assured.

Thus on this day, light and life triumphed over darkness and death. The Saviour of the world, whose emblem is the sun, was born. No more appropriate day could have been chosen.

Long before the temporal appearance of Christ on earth, the ancient sun-worshippers of Persia had celebrated this same day as sacred to the sun, the Lord of light and life. Thus it was not unnatural, when Christ was born, that it was from Persia that the Magi, the wise men of the east, came to make obeisance to the living reality the sun symbolised.

In painting a picture, artists often apply a rule that says, "Place the darkest dark against the lightest light". By this device the lightest light is given its fullest value and significance.

So it is also in the history of the world. The darkest moments of history serve but to give value to the highest lights of the human mind. The sun stands still in Capricorn. All seems in danger of annihilation. Eternal darkness seems about to envelop the world.

But at this very same moment the Eternal Light is about to rise again! In the midst of the greatest darkness a light is born; the Christ-Child appears; the son of the Heavenly Sun stretches out His arms to embrace the anxious world.

True, He will have a hard journey to make on earth, this child, but it is His will to make it, He will tread the road He has laid for Himself. He understands His scapegoat Capricorn role. He knows what he must carry for mankind.

And He knows also what men must carry for each other, for no man's sins rest only on his own shoulders. "The sins of the fathers are upon the children", and not only on the children but on all mankind. And not only on mankind but on every being in the universe.

Earliest man watched with anxious eyes the winter sun, falling through a grey sky.

Twentieth century man also watches the sky apprehensively, not in fear that the sun will fall, but in terror that fire may rain down from above, not from some mysterious unknown force of Nature, but from some non-mysterious force generated by men whose minds and hearts have not opened themselves to the Light of Christ.

Yet the faithful, even in these dark days, do not lose their faith. The winter sun of the ancients did not fall below the horizon and vanish forever to leave the world in eternal darkness.

Nor shall the Spirit of Christ, the Sun of Heaven, fall under the dominion of dark-minded men. Here in December, at the time of great darkness, He has given us a sign. The Light cannot vanish from the world. At its lowest point it begins to rise again.