

November

From a series of monthly meditational essays by Eugene Halliday

November takes its name from the Latin "Novem", *nine*, for it was the ninth month of the Roman year, which began in March.

On November the eleventh winter was supposed to begin. Certainly this month is a month of leaden skies, violent winds and cold rain, and fogs descend over our cities, making this the most miserable month of the year. Summer has gone and the festivities of Christmas have not yet begun. In the ancient world November's approach was viewed with dark suspicion. The summer sun had fallen and hung low and forbiddingly red in the gray sky.

The ancient Saxons, from the violent gales tearing the forests at this time, called November "Windmonath", *Wind Month*, and from the slaughtering of great numbers of cattle to supply salted food for the winter months to come, they called it "Blodmonath", *Blood Month*.

Everywhere in November the animals look forward with apprehension. Those small animals that can hibernate do so, their carefully collected food stores, nuts, acorns, berries and seeds being their only guarantee of survival through the long, dark, cold months to come.

Cattle huddle in the field face to face to share each other's warm breath. The bird songs of summer are heard no more. Hedgehogs, squirrels and dormice sleep in their winter retreats. Violent winds tear the leaves from every tree that is not evergreen. A strange smell of dead leaves hangs in the air.

Yet even in the midst of this gloomiest month there is an indicator of the possibility of a re-birth. In the cold night sky when there is no fog the stars shine with a peculiarly reassuring light, and on the twenty second day of the month the sun enters the star group we call Sagittarius, the Archer whose arrows carry a very important symbolism.

Here, in this most miserable month, when death seems to walk the darkening earth, when the human soul is at its unhappiest, and depressions bring a general darkening of a man's mental world, a message comes from the stars to tell man that heaven has not totally forgotten him. The starry arrows of the heavenly Archer strike deep into the dark, cold earth to plant there the mysterious seeds of new forms which the spring sun will vivify and resurrect.

On November the first falls the festival of All Saints. This festival takes its name from the seventh century conversion of the Roman Pantheon into a place of Christian worship. The Pope, Boniface the Fourth, dedicated this building to the Blessed Virgin and to all martyrs, the event being first celebrated on the first of May, and later on the first of November. In this dedication, a building that had been devoted to the worship of

all the ancient gods of the pagan world, was made a fit place of worship for the spirit of the one true God, not a mere personification of human ideal characteristics but the Supreme Spirit of eternity itself.

On November the second falls All Souls Day, the day of the commemoration of the faithful departed.

In the year 1290 King Edward the First commanded that all Jews should on penalty of death leave England before November the first, a black decision for the beginning of this darkest of months. Fifteen thousand thousand Jews of all ages were banished, the King hoping to profit by their expulsion.

English commerce, then only in its infancy, received a severe shock. And not only commerce suffered, for with the banished Jews went some of the country's finest minds, one of whom, Nicolaus de Lyra, wrote a commentary on the Old and New Testaments, a work which prepared ground for the Reformation.

Luther and Wyclif confessed the value of this work to them. "If Lyra had not piped, Luther would not have danced", and Christianity in Europe might still be under the older unenlightened Roman dominion.

The expulsion of the Jews, a strategical error of the King's, lasted till the Commonwealth, though some Jews had moved in court circles as physicians and foreign agents.

In the year 1656 Cromwell as Protector summoned a council of all parties and with lawyers, clergymen and merchants began to consider the advisability of allowing the Jews to re-enter England. The lawyers could find no law to exclude the Jews, but clergymen feared for their effect on Christianity, unaware of the tremendous power of Christ's sacrifice. Merchants were afraid for their trade. After four days of debate the council had come to no conclusion, and at last Cromwell closed it, declaring that it had been convened to consider a simple question and had but made it seem intricate.

Now Cromwell decided to take guidance from Providence, and after a few days' meditation, announced to Parliament that Providence had decreed that the Jews could return to England.

In 1656, in May and June, a number of Jews arrived in London, where their first public act was to build a synagogue and lay out a burial ground, the first to be interred there being a man named Issac Britto.

Thus here we have, in this expulsion and return of the Jews another illustration of the Great Law of Death and Resurrection. If King Edward had understood it more thoroughly, it would have saved him one of his worst political and commercial errors.

Another dark work which failed in its intent we are, of course, familiar with as the famous Gunpowder Plot which we celebrate on the fifth of November.

This plan to overthrow the government was the brain-child of Robert Catesby, a well-born gentleman of an ancient line. Once a Protestant, his reconversion to Roman Catholicism fired him with enormous zeal to prove himself, a zeal we often see in those who easily change sides.

Catesby gave his plan to destroy the King, the Lords and the Commons to Thomas Winter, a Roman Catholic of Worcestershire, who, though at first shocked, later enlisted the fanatic Guy Fawkes to develop and execute the plan.

Others joined and all gathered secretly in a house at Lambeth where they received Communion from Father Gerard, a Jesuit, he presumably being unaware of the plot. Thomas Percy, a relation of the Earl of Northumberland, undertook to hire a house adjoining the Parliament Building, the plan being to carry the explosives through the wall. But, as we know, the plot failed. The conspirators fell into disagreement. Some betrayed their dark intent.

November, no matter how dark and miserable, is too near Christmas to leave mankind totally without hope.