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The Stories of the Months and Days

By Reginald C. Couzens

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THE STORIES OF THE MONTHS AND DAYS

BY REGINALD C. COUZENS

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THE STORIES OF THE MONTHS AND DAYS

INTRODUCTION

Our Divisions of Time

How familiar to us are the names of the months, and the days of the week, and yet how few of us know to whom we owe these names or what a wealth of meaning they possess. They have come to us from the past, from the time when people worshiped many gods and explained the wonders of nature in their own simple way. But before listening to the stories which these names can tell us, we ought first of all to remind ourselves of the way in which our divisions of time came into being.

We all know that the earth turns round on its own axis, giving us periods of light and darkness, which we call day and night. The word " day", which comes from a very, very old word meaning "to shine", really means, of course, the time during which the earth is lit up by the sun, but it has also come to mean the time which the earth takes to revolve, as from sunrise to sunrise, sunset to sunset, midday to midday. The Greeks measured the day from sunset to sunset, the Romans from midnight to midnight, the Babylonians from sunrise to sunrise. The day, in this sense, became the first measurement of time.

The day, however, is a very short period, so another measurement was taken for a longer space of time, and this measurement was suggested by the changes in the moon. It was noticed that the moon altered in shape, beginning with the new moon, waxing to the full moon and then gradually waning. So the space of time from one new moon to the next--about 29-1/2 days--was called a month or month, afterwards known as the lunar month (lunar, from Latin; Luna = moon).

The next measurement of time, the year, was suggested by the seasons. People noticed that there was a period of heat and a period of cold, a time when the trees and plants put forth their buds, and a time when all Nature seemed to die, and these periods became known as the Seasons--Spring, the time when plants spring up; Summer, the mild or gentle season; Autumn, the season of increase, when the fruits of the earth are gathered in; Winter, the windy or cold season.

It was found that the time from one Spring to the next, or from one Winter to the next, was about twelve lunar months, and these twelve months were known as a year. The change of season is, of course, due to the movement of the earth round the sun, and the exact time

taken by the earth is 365 days, 5 hours, 49 minutes. Now, a year of twelve lunar months is only 354 days, and the result of this difference was that the months got ahead of the seasons, and in a year or two, when, according to the Calendar, the Spring months had come, it was really still Winter. In order to put this right, the lunar year (moon year) was made longer by having an extra month put in every now and then. In this way the lunar year was made to correspond more nearly to the solar year (sun year), that is, the year of 365 days. The Jews put in a month seven times in every nineteen years, and the Greeks a month three times in every eight years. The Romans had first of all a year of only ten months, beginning with March. Then they added two months, making a year of 355 days.

But even now the number of days was short, and to make up for the loss, days were added from time to time. These extra days, however, were added in such a way that they led to great confusion, and the Roman Dictator, Julius Caesar, in order to do away with this confusion, decreed that the year 46 B.C. should consist of 445 days, and fixed the length of future years at 365 days. But since the earth's journey takes 365 days, 5 hours, 49 minutes, a quarter of a day was still lost each year, so Caesar ordered an extra day to be put on to February every fourth year, making that year what we call Leap Year, because the Calendar makes a "leap" of one day. This new Calendar is called the Julian Calendar, after Julius Caesar.

The lunar year, that is, the year of twelve months, seemed at last to be of the right length, but even now there was a very tiny mistake. You will have noticed that 5 hours, 49 minutes was taken as a quarter of a day, but it is short of 6 hours by 11 minutes. A very small difference you will say; but after several hundred years it amounted to ten days, so that the lunar year was now too long. In 1582 Pope Gregory ordered that ten days should be left out in that year, and the day after the 4th of October was called the 15th.

The change was not made in England until 1751, when eleven days were dropped, and it led to a great deal of discontent among uneducated people, who thought that these days had been stolen from them! In order to prevent the mistake occurring again, it was arranged that instead of every fourth year being a leap year, the years which end in 00, as 1700, 1800, 1900, should not be leap years.

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CHAPTER I

January--The Month of Janus

The first month was called Januarius by the Romans, after Janus, the god of doors and gates. We see the same word in janua, the Latin for a gate or opening. From the idea that a door is a way in, an entrance, it became a custom among the Romans to pray to Janus whenever they undertook a new work. He was also the god of the beginning of the day, and it was only natural that when a new month was added at the beginning of the year it should be named after him. During this month offerings to the god were made of meal, frankincense, and wine, each of which had to be quite new.

Since a gate opens both ways, Janus was thought to be able to see back into the past, and forward into the future, and he was usually represented in pictures as having a double head that looked both ways. On the earliest Roman coins he is drawn with two bearded faces, with a staff in one hand, and a key in the other, He was also the protector of trade and shipping, and on some coins his head is shown with the prow of a ship. When people wished to picture him as the god of the year, they drew him holding the number 300 in one hand, and 65 in the other.

Janus was worshiped on the Janiculum (Hill of Janus), one of the seven hills on which Rome was built. Since he was the God of Gates, all the gates of Rome were under his care, especially the archway through which the army marched to war, and by which it returned. This archway was afterwards replaced by a temple which was called Janus Quadrifrons--that is, four-sided--because it was square. On each side of the building there were three windows and one door, making twelve windows and four doors, which represented the twelve months and the four seasons. In times of war the temple gates were kept wide open since people were continually making offerings to the god, but whenever there came a time of peace, the gates were at once closed. As we know the Romans were continually fighting, it does not surprise us to find that the gates of the temple were closed only three times in seven hundred years.

Janus was said to be the son of Apollo, the God of the Sun, whose daily task it was to drive across the sky in his chariot of fire. Each morning when Aurora, the Goddess of the Dawn, had opened the gates of the East, Apollo set forth, and when, his task accomplished, he reached the Western Ocean, he returned to his palace in the East.

"And the gilded car of day

His glowing axle doth allay
In the steep Atlantic stream:
And the slope sun his upward beam
Shoots against the dusky pole,
Pacing toward the other goal
Of his chamber in the East."

MILTON--Comus.

Apollo had another son, named Phaeton, who one day persuaded his father to allow him to drive the sun chariot. All went well for a time, and then Phaeton, being a reckless boy, began to drive too fast. He soon lost control of the horses, which plunged madly along and bore the chariot far from its track. It went so close to the earth that the fields were scorched, the rivers were dried up, and even the people were turned black--and they are black to this day! The cries of the terrified people attracted the attention of Jupiter, the king of the gods, who became enraged when he caught sight of the daring boy in the chariot of the sun. Taking up one of his thunderbolts, he hurled it at Phaeton, who, scorched by its fire, fell headlong to the earth.

Another sad story told of Apollo is that of his friendship with a youth named Hyacinthus, to talk with whom Apollo used often to come down to the earth. Zephyrus, the God of the South Wind, was very fond of Hyacinthus too, and one day as Apollo and Hyacinthus were playing a game of quoits, Zephyrus came by. Filled with jealousy at the sight of Apollo and his friend, he blew Apollo's quoit aside so that it struck Hyacinthus and killed him. Apollo was greatly distressed at his friend's death, and in order that he might never be forgotten, changed the fallen blood-drops into clusters of flowers, which we still call Hyacinths.

"For so Apollo, with unweeting hand,
Whilom did slay his dearly loved mate,
Young Hyacinth born on Enrotas' strand,
Young Hyacinth the pride of Spartanland,
But then transformed him to a purple flower."

MILTON.

Another flower which should always remind us of Apollo is the sunflower. A story says that there once lived a girl named Clytie, and that each day, with eyes full of love for the fair sun god, she watched him journey across the sky: but Apollo, knowing nothing of her love, took no heed of her as he passed. Clytie watched for him day after day on a river bank, and her heart sank as each evening she saw his chariot dip down into the West. She would not leave the river bank, but stayed all through the cold night, anxiously waiting for the first flash of the sun's rays from the glowing East. At last the gods took pity on her, and changed her into a sunflower. Her green dress became green leaves, and her golden hair became yellow petals. Now was she happy indeed, for she knew that she could always see Apollo, and you will find that to this day the sunflower turns its head towards the sun as it moves across the sky.

Aurora, the Goddess of the Dawn, whom we have mentioned as opening the gates of the East for the sun god Apollo, married a mortal, Tithonus, a prince of Troy. In order that their happiness might know no end, Aurora begged Jupiter to grant Tithonus immortality. The wish was granted, but in her anxiety that Tithonus should never be taken from her by death, Aurora forgot to ask also for the gift of eternal youth. As the years went on Tithonus grew old and weak and became only a burden to her. At length, tired of his shrill voice and constant complaints, she turned him into a grasshopper, whose shrill complaining note is known to all.

The name for this month among the Angles and Saxons was Wulfmonath (Wolf month), since it was the time of year when the wolves were unable to find food, and their hunger made them bold enough to come into the villages.

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CHAPTER II

February--The Month of Purification

This month did not always hold its present position, but was originally the last month in the year. The name is taken from a Latin word, februare, meaning "to make pure".

In the Palatine Hill, another of the seven hills of Rome, was a cave dug in the rock, and in it stood an image of the god Lupercus covered with a goat's skin. Lupercus was the God of Fertility or springing into life, and on the 15th of February a great festival was held in his honour. Sacrifices of goats and dogs were made; then the priests cut up the skins of the goats, twisted the pieces into thongs, and ran through the city striking all who came in their way. As in the very earliest times it was the shepherds who held this festival, it is thought that this running about with thongs meant the purifying of the land. The idea of the whole festival seems to have been one of purifying, of a new life, so the name chosen for the month in which it was held was one formed from a word meaning "to make pure".

There are some who think that Lupercus was the same as Pan, the God of the Shepherds. Pan was said to have been a son of Mercury, but he was not like the other gods; his body was covered with goat's hair, and his feet and ears were also like those of a goat. He was very fond of music and dancing, and spent most of his time in the forests playing with the wood nymphs--beautiful girls who lived among the trees. One day he saw a wood nymph, named Syrinx, with whom he fell in love, but she was frightened and ran away from him, and when Pan pursued her she prayed to the gods for help. She was at once changed into a clump of reeds, and Pan, in his disappointment, broke off seven pieces of the reed, bound them together, and so made an instrument of music, which was called the Syrinx after the beautiful wood nymph.

The invention of the Syrinx by Pan has been wonderfully described by Elizabeth Barrett Browning in a poem which begins:

"What was he doing, the great god Pan,
Down in the reeds by the river?
Spreading ruin and scattering ban,
Splashing and paddling with hoofs of a goat
And breaking the golden lilies afloat
With the dragon-fly on the river."

This story of Pan and Syrinx reminds us that the Greeks and the Romans imagined the mountains, the valleys, the woods, and the rivers to be peopled with lesser gods and goddesses, whose task of caring for the trees, the flowers, and the grass was appointed them by Jupiter. The woodland gods were known as Satyrs, and like their leader, Pan, were half man and half goat. Another famous satyr was Silenus, who was put in charge of Bacchus, one of Jupiter's sons, and the God of Wine. Silenus taught Bacchus, and accompanied him on his travels on the earth. The God of Wine rode in a chariot drawn by wild beasts, Silenus following him on an ass, and with them a merry company of nymphs and satyrs crowned with ivy leaves, who danced and sang and made music in praise of Bacchus.

"And as I sat, over the light blue hills
There came a noise of revellers; the rills
Into the wide stream came of purple hue--
 'T was Bacchus and his crew!
The earnest trumpet spake, and silver thrills
From kissing cymbals made a merry din--
 'T was Bacchus and his kin!
Within his car, aloft, young Bacchus stood
Trifling his ivy-dart, in dancing mood,
 With sidelong laughing."
 KEATS--Endymion.

Many stories are told of the wood nymphs, as the Goddesses of the Woods were called. One of the most famous is that of the nymph Echo, who fell deeply in love with the beautiful Narcissus, whom she met hunting in the forest. Narcissus, however, took but little notice of her, and Echo's love soon turned to hatred and anger. She prayed to Venus, the Goddess of Love, that Narcissus might be punished for his hard-heartedness, and then sorrowfully hiding herself among the mountains, pined away until only her voice remained, and in lonely places the voice of Echo still answers those who call.

Meanwhile Venus sought an opportunity for punishing Narcissus by making him suffer in the same way as Echo had done. One day Narcissus, hot and thirsty with hunting, came to a shaded pool, and, as he stooped to drink, saw in the clear water the face, as he thought, of a water nymph. So beautiful was she that Narcissus was filled with love for her, and eagerly stretched out his arms; but no sooner did his hands touch the water than she vanished. He drew back in surprise and waited anxiously till the ruffled water became smooth, when again he saw the beautiful nymph. He spoke to her, and her lips answered him, though he heard no sound; he slowly put out his hands towards her, and her hands came to meet his. Sure now of her love, he tried a second time to clasp her in his arms, but, as before, she vanished. Again and again he strove to seize the nymph, but, each time she escaped his grasp. Amazed, Narcissus sank down by the pool and gazed upon that lovely face, which seemed to mock him, and yet held him there. Apollo and his chariot sank into the Western sea, but the Goddess of the Moon shone on the water and showed the nymph still answering his words and holding

out her arms to him. The days passed, and Narcissus, unable to tear himself away, grew pale and weak, watching the face, which also grew pale with despairing love. Thus was Echo avenged, for Narcissus slowly starved himself to death through love for his own image! The gods, however, took pity on him and changed his body into a cluster of flowers, which have ever since borne his name.

We have associated Pan, the God of the Shepherds, with this month, and his name is found in a very familiar word in our language. He took a great delight in frightening travellers by creeping up behind them in the dark, and the fear with which he filled them was called "Panic".

It is interesting to note that just as the Romans held a ceremony of purification during the month of February, so the Christian Church holds the feast of the Purification of the Virgin Mary on the second day of the month. The feast is called by Roman Catholics, Candlemas, because it is the custom to have a procession in which candles are carried, and it is on this occasion that the candles to be used in the church during the year are consecrated.

The weather at Candlemas is said to show what the weather will be like during the year, and an old proverb says:

"If Candlemas is fair and clear,
There'll be twa winters in the year".

The Old English name for February was Sprout-Kale, since the cabbage begins to sprout at this time of the year. It was later changed to Solmonath--sun month--because it is the time when the sun rises higher in the sky and begins to drive away the chill of winter with its glowing rays.

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CHAPTER III

March--The Month of Mars

This month, originally the first in the year, is named after Mars, the God of War. He was the son of Jupiter and Juno, the king and queen of the gods, and was generally represented in a shining suit of armour, with a plumed helmet on his head, a spear in one hand, and a shield in the other. His chariot was driven by the Goddess of War, Bellona, who also watched over his safety in battle; for the gods often took part in the battles which were constantly raging on the earth. During the great fight between the gods and the giants to decide who was to rule the world, Mars was captured by two of the giants, who bound him with iron chains and kept watch over him day and night. After over a year of captivity he was freed by the clever god Mercury, who succeeded in loosening the chains so silently that the giants heard no sound. Mars also took part in the Trojan War, when he was actually wounded.

Mars was loved by Venus, the Goddess of Beauty, but wishing to keep their love a secret from the other gods, they met only during the night, and Mars appointed his servant Alectryon to keep watch and to call him before the sun rose as he did not wish Apollo, the Sun God, to see them. One night Alectryon fell asleep, and so was too late to warn Mars of the sun's approach. Apollo saw them from his chariot as he drove across the sky, and told Vulcan, the God of Fire, who caught them in a net of steel, and thus held them prisoner, while the other gods made fun of them. As soon as he was set free, Mars, who was filled with anger against Alectryon for failing in his duty, changed him into a cock, and driving him into a farmyard, condemned him to give warning every day of the sun's rising--a fanciful explanation why

"the cock with lively din,
Scatters the rear of darkness thin".

MILTON--L'Allegro.

The gods, though they themselves were immortal--that is, could never die, nor even grow old--yet sometimes married mortal, the men or women whom they found on the earth, and Mars fell in love with a beautiful girl named Ilia, who had given up her life to serve in the temple of Vesta, the Goddess of Fire. It was the duty of these priestesses of Vesta to guard the fire which continually burned on the altar of the goddess, for the safety of the people was thought to depend on this sacred flame. No Vestal, as these priestesses were called, was allowed to marry, under penalty of death. Ilia, however, in spite of her solemn promise, consented to marry Mars, and keeping her marriage a secret, continued to live in the temple. In course of time she had two sons, Romulus and Remus. Her father and mother, hearing that she had

broken her vow, ordered the full punishment of her crime to be carried out; the mother was buried alive, and the children were left in the forest to be killed by the wild beasts.

Thus Ilia perished, but the children were wonderfully saved, so the story tells us, by a wolf, who cared for them as if they had been her own young. They were soon after found by a shepherd, who took them to his home, where they grew up to be strong and brave men. As soon as they had reached manhood they left their home and went out into the world to seek their fortune. Coming to a beautiful country of hills and valleys, they decided to build a great city; but before they had even finished the outer walls, they quarrelled about the name which was to be given to it when it was built. Romulus lost his temper and struck his brother Remus, so that he fell dead to the ground. With the help of a band of wicked and cruel men like himself, Romulus at last succeeded in building a city, which, called Rome, after its founder's name, was to become one of the most famous cities the world has ever known.

Romulus became the first king of Rome, but he ruled so harshly that the senators, the chief men of the city, determined to rid themselves of him. During an eclipse of the sun, which darkened the city just at the time when Romulus and the senators were assembled in the marketplace, the senators fell on the king with their swords and slew him. They then cut his body into small pieces, which they hid beneath their cloaks. When the light returned and the people found that their king had disappeared, the senators told them that Romulus had been carried off by the gods to Mount Olympus, and ordered a temple to be built in his honour on one of the seven hills of Rome.

Mars took the city of Rome under his special protection, and is said to have sent a shield from heaven, during a time of plague, as a sign that he would always watch over the city. The Romans, afraid lest the shield should be stolen, had eleven other shields made, so like the first that only the priests who guarded them in the temple of Mars could tell which was the one sent from heaven. These priests were called Salii, the Leapers, because they danced war dances when, during the month of March, the shields were carried in a procession through the streets of Rome.

To Mars, as the God of War, the Romans naturally turned for help in war-time, and a Roman general, before setting out, went into the temple of Mars and, touching the sacred shield with the point of his spear, cried "Mars, watch over us!"

The training-ground of the Roman soldiers was called Campus Martius (the Field of Mars), in honour of the God of War, and it was commonly believed that Mars himself led their army into battle and helped to give them the victory. March was named after Mars because of its rough and boisterous weather, and we find the same idea in the minds of the Angles and Saxons, who called it Hlythmonath--the loud or stormy month. Another name for it was Lenctenmonath, the lengthening month, because it is during March that the days rapidly become longer.

[Next: Chapter IV. April--The Month of Venus](#)



CHAPTER IV

April--The Month of Venus

This month of April has only thirty days, which is the number said to have been given to it by Romulus. The king who came after him gave it only twenty-nine, but Caesar, when he altered the calendar, gave it thirty again.

The name April comes from the Latin word *aperire*, which means "to open", and the month was no doubt so named because it is during April that the earth, which has been bound by the sharp frosts of winter, once again opens beneath the warm rays of the sun; the withered sheaths fall away from the ripened buds, which, opening out, disclose to our eyes their long hidden treasures of beautiful colour.

We find that the month was sacred to Venus, the Roman Goddess of Beauty, and some people think for this reason that the name April comes not from *aperire*, but from *Aphrilis*, which in turn comes from *Aphrodite*, the name given to the Goddess of Beauty by the Greeks.

Venus is said to have sprung from the foam of the sea, and to have made her way to Mount Olympus, the home of the gods, where, because of her wonderful beauty and grace, she was welcomed as the Goddess of Love and Beauty. All the gods fell in love with her, but she scorned them all, and Jupiter, to punish her for her pride, ordered her to marry Vulcan, the God of Fire, who was deformed and very rough in his manner. He had been thrown from the top of Mount Olympus by Jupiter in a fit of anger. Had he not been a god, he would, of course, have been killed by the fall, but he escaped with a broken leg which made him lame for the rest of his life. He now lived on the earth, and spent his time at the forge making many wonderful and useful things from the metals which he found buried in the mountains. He built gorgeous palaces of gold for the gods, which he decorated with precious stones, forged the terrible thunderbolts used by Jupiter, and also made the arrows used by Venus's son, Cupid. Vulcan was naturally worshiped by all blacksmiths and workers in metal, and a great festival called the *Vulcanalia* was held in his honour.

Cupid, whom we have just mentioned, was the God of Love; he never grew up, but remained a little chubby boy, with beautiful wings. He always carried a bow, and with his arrows pierced the hearts of young men and maidens in order to make them fall in love with one another.

Another son of Venus was Aeneas, the great hero who was supposed to have been the founder of the Roman race. He escaped from Troy, when at the end of ten years' siege it fell

into the hands of the Greeks, and after many adventures reached a part of Italy, called Latium, where in later times his descendants, Romulus and Remus, founded the city of Rome.

The story of Aeneas has been wonderfully told by the Roman poet Virgil in his great work called the Aeneid. In this book Virgil wishes to show that Augustus, the emperor of his time, being a descendant of Aeneas, was also descended from the gods, since Aeneas was said to be the son of Venus.

Part of the story of Troy, or Ilium, is told in the Iliad of Homer, the great Greek poet. We read there of the fierce struggles which took place before the walls of the city, of deeds of strength and valour, and particularly of the final combat between the great heroes Hector the Trojan and Achilles the Greek, in which the Trojan was killed. In spite of many successes in the field, the Greeks were unable to gain an entry into the city, nor were the Trojans able to drive the Greeks from the shore, and it seemed as if neither side would ever secure the victory.

At last Ulysses, a Greek prince who was renowned for his cunning, formed a plan for entering the city and thus finally bringing to an end the war that had lasted for ten years. The Greeks built a wooden horse of such size that a number of men could be hidden within its hollow sides. This horse, filled with fighting men led by Ulysses, was left on the shore, while the army embarked in their ships and sailed away as if tired of the endless struggle. The Greeks also left behind a cunning slave, named Sinon, who was to play an important part in the plot. The Trojans, overjoyed at the departure of the Greeks, flocked down to the shore and crowded round the enormous wooden horse, full of wonderment at its strangeness. Many wished to drag it into the city at once, while some were filled with suspicion and urged their companions to distrust anything made by their enemies. Sinon, when questioned by the Trojans, pretended that he had been ill-treated by the Greeks, and spoke with hatred and anger against them. He explained that the horse was an offering to the sea god, Neptune, whose help the Greeks would need on their journey home, and he advised the Trojans to seize it and take it into the city. In spite even of those who suggested that armed men might be hidden in the horse, the Trojans dragged it into the city with great triumph, pulling down part of the wall to admit it, since it was too large to go through the gates.

Then followed a night of feast and revelry; the Trojans in their excitement laid aside their armour and their weapons, and gave themselves up to wild merrymaking. The smoky flare of the torches lit up a scene of mad delight. Suddenly shouts of alarm arose on every side, followed by the clash of weapons. Armed men poured in on the astonished Trojans, and in a short time Troy was in the hands of the Greeks. Under cover of the darkness and the noise Ulysses and his companions had crept from their hiding-place, had overpowered the careless sentries, and opened the gates for the Greek army, whose ships had returned in the night. Thus, through the help of the clever Ulysses, the Greeks overcame the army that had so often beaten them in the field, and by a trick brought to a victorious end the great Trojan war, for which the Goddess Venus had been responsible, as we shall read in a later chapter.

The Old English name for the month of April was Oster-monath or Easter-monath, because it was the month sacred to Eastre, or Ostara, the Goddess of Spring; the same name is still kept by the Germans, who call it Ostermonath. The time of year known as Easter is named after this goddess, and though Easter is now a Christian festival, it was in the first place a feast held by the Saxons in honour of their goddess Eastre. It was the custom for the people to give one another presents of coloured eggs, because the egg is supposed to represent the beginning of life, and the feast was held in the spring-time, when Nature awakes to a new life from the death of winter. The custom, which we still have, of sending Easter eggs to our friends, is therefore a very, very old one indeed.

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CHAPTER V

May--The Month of Maia

This month is named after the goddess Maia, to whom the Romans sacrificed on the first day of the month. Maia was one of the Pleiades, the seven daughters of Atlas and Pleione. They were all transformed into pigeons that they might escape from the great hunter Orion, and flying up into the sky were changed into seven stars, which form the constellation known as the Pleiades. On any clear night you may see these stars clustered closely together, but they are not very bright, one of them being very faint indeed. A story says that at first they shone brightly, but after the capture of Troy by the Greeks they grew pale with sorrow. Another story says that all but one were married to gods, and that when they became stars the one who had married a mortal did not shine so brightly as her sisters.

Maia was the Goddess of the Plains and mother of Mercury, the messenger of the gods. In order that he might perform his duties as messenger more swiftly, Mercury was given by Jupiter wings for his feet, and a winged cap for his head. He is said to have invented the lyre, or harp, and to have given it to the Sun-god Apollo, who gave him in return a magic wand called Caduceus, which had the power of making enemies become friends. Mercury, in order to test its power, put it between two fighting snakes, and they at once wound themselves round it. Mercury ordered them to stay on the wand, and, in statues and pictures, the god is nearly always holding in his hand this wand with the snakes twisted round it.

Mercury was not only the messenger of the gods, but was also the God of Rain and Wind, and the protector of travellers, shepherds, and thieves. Festivals were held every year in Rome in his honour during the month of May.

Atlas, the father of the Pleiades, was a giant who lived in Africa and held up the sky on his shoulders. The great Hercules, when seeking for the Golden Apples of the Hesperides (daughters of the Evening Star), came to Atlas to ask him where he could find the apples. Atlas offered to get them for Hercules if he would take his place while he was away, so Hercules took the heavens on his shoulders, and Atlas set off to fetch the golden fruit. But on his return he told Hercules that he must stay where he was, while he himself would take the apples to the king, who had set Hercules the task of finding them. Hercules, as you may imagine, had no wish to spend the rest of his life holding up the sky, and, by a trick, succeeded in getting Atlas back to his place, and so was able to set out on his homeward journey.

The last story of Atlas we read in the account of the great hero Perseus, who, after slaying the Gorgon Medusa, passed Atlas on his way home. Now the face of the Gorgon turned to stone all who looked on it, and Atlas, worn out by the terrible burden he had to bear, persuaded Perseus to show him the Gorgon's head. "Eagerly he gazed for a moment on the changeless countenance, but in an instant the straining eyes were stiff and cold; and it seemed to Perseus, as he rose again into the pale yellow air, that the grey hairs which streamed from the giant's head were like the snow which rests upon the peak of a great mountain, and that, in place of the trembling limbs, he saw only the rents and clefts on a rough hill-side."

Thus Atlas was changed into the mountains which bear his name, and are to be found in the north-west of Africa.

Hercules, whom we have mentioned in this story of Atlas, is one of the best known of the Greek heroes, and to this day we often speak of an especially strong man as a Hercules, and we also have the expression "a Herculean task". Hercules was a son of Jupiter, and devoted his life to ridding the country of the fierce beasts which brought death and destruction to many of his people. But through the hatred of the goddess Juno, Hercules knew much sorrow, and underwent great trials. To atone for crimes committed in a fit of madness sent upon him by Juno, he was condemned by the gods to become for a year the slave of the King of Argos, who set him twelve labours. The first of these labours was to slay a lion known as the Nemean lion. In spite of the attempts of many brave men to kill this fierce animal, it still continued to carry off men and women, and steal cattle and sheep. Hercules at once set out, and, tracking the lion to its den, seized it by the throat and crushed out its life. He then tore off the lion's skin and made it into a covering which he always wore.

The second task was also to destroy a monster--a seven-headed serpent, known as the Hydra. Hercules attacked the serpent with a sword and cut off one of its heads, but was horrified to see seven new heads spring from the wound. Thereupon the hero called to his help his friend Iolaus, who seared the wounds with a lighted torch and thus prevented the new heads from growing. In this way Hercules finally slew the cruel Hydra.

Another task set the hero was to capture and tame the horses of the King of Thrace. These horses were fed on human flesh, and the king had ordered all strangers who entered his kingdom to be executed and given as food to the horses. Hercules succeeded in securing these animals, and, after throwing the king to his own horses as a punishment for his cruelty, led them to his master, the King of Argos.

Of the remaining labours, one was the fetching of the Golden Apples of the Hesperides, which we have mentioned; but the most famous was the cleaning of the Augean stables. King Augeas possessed enormous herds of cattle, and their stables had not been cleaned for many years. Hercules might well have lost heart at the sight of such a task, but he very cleverly overcame the difficulty. Near by the stables ran a swift river; this Hercules dammed and

turned from its course, making it run through the stables, which in time it washed perfectly clean. Then, his task accomplished, Hercules led the river back to its course.

After a life of trial and labour, Hercules finally met a tragic death. By a trick he was persuaded to put on a robe which had been stained with poison. The poison ate into his flesh, and all the hero's attempts to tear off the robe were in vain, so at last he resolved to die. He built an enormous funeral pyre by tearing up oak trees by the roots, and then laid himself on the pyre, to which one of his friends put a torch. In a short time roaring flames rose up to the sky and consumed the great Hercules, the man of might.

The Angles and Saxons seemed to have called this month of May "Tri-milchi", meaning that, owing to the fresh grass of spring, they were able to milk their cows three times a day.

[Next: Chapter VI. June--The Month of Juno](#)



CHAPTER VI

June--The Month of Juno

The month of June is probably named after Juno, the wife of Jupiter, and queen of the gods. It was held sacred to her, and was thought by the Romans to be the luckiest month for marriage, since Juno was the Goddess of Marriage. Wherever the goddess went she was attended by her messenger Iris (the Rainbow), who journeyed so quickly through the air that she was seldom seen, but after she had passed there was often left in the sky the radiant trail of her highly-coloured robe.

Juno is always represented as a tall, beautiful woman, wearing a crown and bearing a sceptre in her hand, and often she is shown with a peacock at her side, since that bird was sacred to her.

A story is told of one of her servants, Argus, who had a hundred eyes, only a few of which he closed at a time. Juno set him to watch over a cow which Jupiter wished to steal, for it was really a beautiful girl named Io, whom Jupiter had transformed. Mercury was sent by Jupiter to carry off Io, and by telling long and wearisome stories to Argus at last succeeded in lulling him into so deep a sleep that he closed all his eyes. The god then seized Argus's own sword and cut off his head. Juno was very sad at the loss of her servant, and gathering up his hundred eyes scattered them over the tail of the peacock, her favourite bird.

Juno was of a very jealous disposition, and when angered brought all the misfortune she possibly could on the one who had offended her. At a wedding-feast at which the gods and goddesses were present, Eris, the Goddess of Discord, or Quarrelling, suddenly appeared. She had not been invited because of her evil nature, and in order to have her revenge, she threw on to the table a golden apple bearing the inscription, "To the fairest". A quarrel at once arose as to whom the apple should be given, for it was claimed by Juno, the Queen of Heaven, Minerva, the Goddess of Wisdom, and Venus, the Goddess of Beauty. Being unable to decide among themselves, they determined to appoint as judge a shepherd named Paris, who was really the son of the King of Troy. The three goddesses appeared before him on a mountain top, and each in turn tried to persuade him by the promise of a great reward. Minerva offered him wisdom and knowledge, Juno offered him wealth and power, while Venus

"drawing nigh,
Half-whispered in his ear, 'I promise thee
The fairest and most loving wife in Greece'".

Paris at once gave the apple to Venus, and thus angered Juno and Minerva, who determined to punish him whenever all opportunity occurred. This they were soon able to do, for Paris, prompted by Venus, carried off Helen, the most beautiful woman in all Greece, and brought her to his own city of Troy. This led to the Trojan War, which we have mentioned. The Trojans who made their escape from the city were persecuted by Juno, who brought them into many terrible dangers.

Juno, though jealous and unforgiving, gave ungrudging help to those whom she favoured, and an example of this is seen in the story of Jason and the Golden Fleece. When Jason was a child, his father Aeson, had been driven from his kingdom by his brother Pelias, and Jason, as soon as he reached manhood, determined to avenge his father. Accordingly he set out for the court of Pelias, and soon came to a stream much swollen by floods. Knowing no fear, he was about to try to ford the stream, when he saw an old woman on the bank gazing in despair at the foaming waters. He at once offered to help her by taking her on his back, and in spite of the swift stream and his heavy load, succeeded in getting safely across. He lowered the old woman gently to the ground, and was greatly annoyed to find that he had lost one of his sandals in the stream. He turned to bid farewell to the old woman, when she was suddenly transformed into the goddess Juno. Jason begged for her help and protection, which Juno at once promised, and the goddess then vanished. Jason then resumed his journey in all haste, and entering his native city, found Pelias in a temple sacrificing to the gods. He pressed forward through the crowd until he stood close to Pelias, who at length caught sight of this stranger who seemed anxious to speak to him. Fear at once filled his heart, for he remembered that it had been foretold that he should be overthrown by a man who came to him wearing only one sandal. Jason stepped forward and boldly claimed the throne for his father, and Pelias, disguising his fear and anger, invited him to his palace, where they could decide the matter. During the banquet which followed, Jason heard the story of Phrixus and Helle, two children who had escaped from their cruel stepmother on a winged ram with a golden fleece, which bore them far away from their home. As they passed over the sea, the girl Helle fell from the ram's back into a part of the sea ever since known as the Hellespont (now the Dardanelles). Phrixus reached Colchis, at the eastern end of the Black Sea, in safety, and there sacrificed the ram to the gods and hung its golden fleece on a tree which stood in a poisonous wood and was guarded by a serpent. The cunning Pelias dared Jason to try to win the Golden Fleece, hoping that thus he would be rid of him for ever. Jason in his excitement forgot the crime which he had come to avenge, and recklessly promised to bring the fleece to Pelias. With the help of Juno, he gathered together a number of heroes, and this famous band, called the Argonauts from the name of their ship the Argo, set out for Colchis. Arriving there after many adventures, they sought the king and told him of their errand. The king, however, was unwilling to part with the fleece, and said that Jason must first catch two wild bulls, which breathed fire and had hoofs of brass, harness them to a plough, and make them plough a field; then he was to sow the field with serpents' teeth, from which would spring up armed men whom he must conquer, and finally he was to kill the serpent which guarded the fleece. Jason did not lose heart when he heard these terrible conditions, but returned to his

ship to think out how he might, fulfil them. On his way to the shore he met the king's daughter Medea, who possessed magic powers. She had fallen in love with Jason, and she told him how he could perform the tasks her father had set. The next day Jason, relying on Medea's help, faced the bulls without fear, seized them by the horns, and, after a great struggle, harnessed them to a plough. As soon as he had ploughed the field he sowed the serpents' teeth, and when the armed men sprang up on all sides he threw his helmet amongst them. The warriors thought that they had been struck by one of their own number, with the result that they fell upon each other and fought until they all lay dead on the ground. Medea then led Jason to the tree to which the fleece was fastened, and soothing the terrible serpent by her magic, enabled Jason to cut off its head. He quickly snatched the Golden Fleece from the tree, and with Medea hastened to the shore, whence they set sail in triumph. They wandered far and suffered many misfortunes, but through Juno's help they at last reached their native land. Jason compelled Pelias to give up the kingdom to Aeson, who was now an old man. Medea, however, in some strange way was able to restore Aeson to his youth and strength, and Pelias' daughters, when they heard of this, asked her how they might do the same for their father. Medea, seeing her opportunity, gave them false instructions, which they followed, only to find that instead of making their father young again they had killed him.

This month of June was called by the Angles and Saxons the "dry month", and sometimes the "earlier mild month"--July being the second mild month.

[Next: Chapter VII. July--The Month of Julius Caesar](#)



CHAPTER VII

July--The Month of Julius Caesar

This month was first called Quintilis, that is, the fifth month, which shows that the year began with March. In the year 44 B.C. the name was changed to Julius in honour of Julius Caesar, the founder of the Roman Empire. The month Quintilis was chosen as the one to be named after the Emperor Julius because his birthday was on the twelfth of that month. After his death, the name Caesar became a title of the Roman Emperors, and we still have the word in the titles Kaiser of Germany, Czar (or Tsar) of Russia, and Kaiser-i-Hind (Emperor of India), one of the titles of our own king.

Julius Caesar was a very great soldier, and it was by skill as a general that he became the first emperor the Romans had. Until his time they had no supreme ruler, the chief office being that of consul. There were two consuls who had to be elected, and who only served for a certain length of time. The Romans hated the name of king, and Caesar, who seemed to have really wished for the title, was afraid to take it, in case it should turn the people against him. In 44 B. C. at the feast of the Lupercalia, held, as we have said, in February, the crown was actually offered to him by Marcus Antonius, a great Roman noble.

"You all did see that on the Lupercal
I thrice presented him a kingly crown,
Which he did thrice refuse."

SHAKESPEARE--Julius Caesar.

Caesar made himself master of all Italy, conquered the whole of Gaul (i.e. France) and Spain, and won great victories in Greece, Egypt, and Africa. But he is famous not only as a soldier; he was a great statesman, a great orator, and a clever writer and historian. He formed several plans for the improvement of Roman life, and took a great interest in the building of public works. He reformed the calendar, as we have seen, and he wished to have the Roman law set out in a clear way, so that it could be easily understood; he had plans for draining marsh land near Rome in order to make the country more healthy, for enlarging the harbour of Ostia, a very important port near Rome, and for making a canal through the Isthmus of Corinth in Greece.

In the year 44 B.C., before he could carry out any of these very useful plans, he was killed in Rome by men who had once been his friends, but were now jealous of his power. Shakespeare describes this tragedy in his play Julius Caesar, and makes Marcus Antonius,

when looking upon the murdered Caesar, say:

"Thou art the ruins of the noblest man
That ever lived in the tide of times".

Caesar is particularly interesting to us because he came to our island in the days of the Ancient Britons. In one of his books he tells us that there were great numbers of people, many buildings, and much cattle. There were trees of every kind, as in Gaul, except the beech and the fir.

"The hare, the hen, and the goose they do not think it right to eat, but they keep them for amusement and pleasure. Most of those living inland do not sow corn, but live on milk and flesh, and are clothed in skins. All stain themselves with woad, which gives a blue colour, and makes them of more hideous appearance in battle. They have long hair, but shave every part of their body except the head and upper lip."

At the time of Caesar's invasion London was a stronghold of the Britons, and was very probably attacked and captured by Caesar. The first mention of London in history is in a book by a Roman historian named Tacitus, who, in describing what happened in the year A.D. 61, tells us that the Roman general leading the army here in Britain was unable to hold the town at the time of Boadicea's revolt. London was then very largely destroyed, but the Romans rebuilt it and gave it a new name, Augusta, in honour of their Emperor Augustus. This shows that it was a place of great importance even in those early days.

The days from 3rd July to 11th August, 'the hottest part of the year, were called by the Romans, "dog-days", because they thought the great heat was due to Sirius, the dog-star. Sirius was a dog belonging to the giant Orion, who was a great hunter. Diana, the Goddess of the Moon, was also the Goddess of Hunting, and after she had driven her chariot with its white horses across the starlit sky, she spent the day hunting in the forests. Here she often met Orion, and soon fell in love with him. This angered her brother Apollo, the sun-god, who determined to put an end to their friendship. One day he called Diana to him, and began to talk about her skill as an archer. Pretending that he wished to test her skill, he asked her to shoot at a dark speck which could be seen floating far out at sea. Diana, all unsuspecting, at once drew her bow, and so strong and true was her aim that she hit the object, which disappeared beneath the waves. She then found that the dark speck was the head of Orion, who had been cooling himself in the sea after his hunting. She was filled with grief at his death, and vowed never to forget him, placed him and his dog Sirius in the sky. The constellation Orion can easily be found on a clear for the stars forming his belt and sword are unmistakable. Following behind the giant is the very bright star Sirius--"the scorching flames of fierce Orion's hound". Virgil in his Aeneid describes one of the heroes of Latium as being "as great as Orion, who, walking on foot through the deep waters of the very middle of the sea, making himself a path, yet rises above the billows with his shoulders; or carrying down an

ancient ash from the summit of the mountains, has his feet on the earth, his head shrouded by the clouds of heaven".

The Angles and Saxons had two names for this month of July: Hegmonath, the hay-month, and Maedmonath, the mead-month. A third name was sometimes given to it--the "latter mild month", that is, the second warm month.

[Next: Chapter VIII. August--The Month of Augustus](#)



CHAPTER VIII

August--The Month of Augustus

This month is also named after a great Roman emperor, Augustus Caesar, but was first called Sextilis, the sixth month. Augustus, whose full name was Caius Julius Caesar Octavianus--Augustus (the Majestic) being a title given him after he became emperor--was a young man at the time of Caesar's murder. Julius, who had no son of his own, adopted Augustus as his son and heir, in order that when he died Augustus should become emperor in his place. The nobles who had killed Julius, however, did not wish Augustus to become emperor, and it was not until he had fought and won many battles that he became the head of the Roman Empire. As soon as he had conquered all his enemies, he returned to Rome, and, closing the temple of Janus, proclaimed peace throughout the Empire. During his reign there lived the greatest poets and writers that Rome ever had, of whom the best known are Virgil, Horace, Ovid, and Livy; just as in the reign of our Queen Elizabeth there lived some of England's greatest poets and writers--in fact the time from Spenser and Sidney in Elizabeth's reign, passing beyond Shakespeare to Milton in Charles II's reign, is spoken of as the "Augustan Age" of English Literature.

The month known as Sextilis was chosen as the one to be named after Augustus, because it was during that month that the most fortunate events of his life had happened. In that month he had first become consul, the most important man in Rome; he had three times entered the city in triumph after his great victories; he had conquered Egypt and had ended the civil wars. As the month had only thirty days, and the one named after Julius Caesar had thirty-one, a day was taken from February in order to make them equal.

We have more than once mentioned the poet Virgil's most famous work, the in which he describes the wanderings of Aeneas, who gathered together all that was left of the Trojan army and escaped from the fallen city, carrying his father Anchises on his back, since he was old and weak and unable to walk. The fugitives reached the shore in safety and sailed away from their ruined country. But the goddess Juno, not satisfied by the death of Paris and the disaster which had fallen on the Trojans, pursued Aeneas and his followers with her hatred, and again and again brought them into misfortune. They wandered from country to country for many years, seeking a spot where they might settle down in peace and safety, but Juno gave them no rest. She brought sickness upon them so that many died, and sent fierce storms which scattered their fleet and destroyed many of their ships. At last they reached a harbour on the coast of Africa, and made their way to a city which they found to be Carthage. Aeneas was welcomed by Dido, the queen of the city, who listened eagerly to the story of his

adventures. Now, Aeneas had been destined by the gods to found a new kingdom, when his wanderings finally came to an end, but the time was not yet. The goddess Venus caused Dido to fall in love with Aeneas, and the hero, happy in her love and the pleasant life of her court, lingered on. A year passed, and the gods at length sent Mercury to remind Aeneas of his destiny. Aeneas' heart sank at the thought of leaving the beautiful Dido, and afraid of her anger, he secretly set sail one dark night while the queen was sleeping. When Dido discovered her loss she was filled with grief. She ordered her servants to make a funeral pyre on which was placed an effigy of her lover, and then setting fire to the pyre with her own hand, she sprang into the flames and perished.

Aeneas and his companions sailed on till they reached the Island of Sicily, where they took refuge from a storm. During a festival which the men then held in honour of Anchises, Aeneas' father, who had died just a year before, Juno stirred up the women to revolt against their hard life. Tired of their perilous wanderings, they gathered on the shore and set fire to the ships. Aeneas, when he heard of this new disaster, rushed down to the shore, and cried to Jupiter for help. In answer to the prayer, the King of the Gods sent a storm of rain, which put out the destroying flames. The Trojans then left Sicily, and, coming to Italy, to the mouth of the River Tiber, they followed the river until they reached the country of Latium. Here they were well received by the king, Latinus, who offered to Aeneas the hand of his daughter Lavinia. Lavinia, however, had many suitors, the chief of whom was Turnus, the prince of a neighbouring country, and Juno once again interfered by stirring up the people of Latium against Aeneas, with the result that Latinus made war on his former friend. Turnus led the army against the Trojans, and performed great deeds of valour, which were only matched by those of Aeneas. While Juno was assisting Turnus in every possible way, Venus was not forgetful of her son Aeneas, and she obtained from Vulcan, the God of Fire, a wonderful suit of armour, which enabled Aeneas to do even mightier deeds. Turnus and Aeneas at length met in single combat, and, after a fierce encounter, Turnus was killed. Peace was made with Latinus, and Aeneas married Lavinia. He founded a city, which he called Lavinia, and his descendants reigned in Latium for many years. It was one of his race, the Vestal Ilia, who married Mars and became the mother of Romulus and Remus, the founders of Rome.

One of the famous passages in the Aeneid is the description of the shield given to Aeneas by the goddess Venus. On this shield Vulcan, knowing the future, had depicted the history of the descendants of Aeneas, and had foretold the glory of Rome. He showed the wolf nursing the two sons of Mars and Ilia, the wars which followed the founding of Rome, and the brave Horatius, who defended the bridge over the Tiber against the army of Tarquin. With wonderful skill he pictured the sacred geese giving warning to the Romans of the approach of the Gauls in the dead of night. "Manlius stood before the temple and kept the lofty Capitol; a silver goose flitting through arches of gold gave warning with its cries that the Gauls were on the threshold; the Gauls were drawing near through the bushes, and were grasping the Citadel, protected by the darkness and the favour of a gloomy night. Their hair is golden and their dress of gold, their cloaks are striped, their milk-white necks are encircled with bands of gold; each brandishes in his hand two Alpine javelins, and their bodies are protected by their long

shields." In the middle of the shield Vulcan had depicted the famous sea-battle of Actium, in which the Emperor Augustus overthrew his enemies, and finally he showed the emperor seated at the entrance to the Temple of Apollo, and receiving the offerings of the conquered nations of the great Roman Empire.

The Old-English name for August was Hlaf-maesse, that is, Loaf Mass, or Loaf Feast, because during the month was held a feast of thanksgiving for the first fruits of the corn, August being the time when harvesting begins. The first day is sometimes called Lammass Day, lammas being a slightly altered form of the word hlaf-maesse.

[Next: Chapter IX. September--The Seventh Month](#)



CHAPTER IX

September--The Seventh Month

The name of this month means simply "seventh", and so suggests to us neither god nor hero. We find, however, that there were several festivals held in the month, and not the least important of these was one held on the second of the month, and known as the Actian Games. On this day, in the year 31 B.C., was fought the great sea battle, off Actium in Greece, in which Augustus defeated Marcus Antonius and the Egyptian queen Cleopatra. On the promontory of Actium stood a temple to Apollo, and from that time onward games in honour of Apollo were held on each anniversary of the victory. It was a common custom among the Greeks and Romans to hold games or sports in honour of a god, and the most famous of all, the Olympic Games were held every four years in Greece in honour of Zeus, the Roman Jupiter. These games lasted for five days, and consisted of foot-races, chariot-races, wrestling, boxing, throwing the quoit and the javelin. The first prize was usually a wreath made from the laurel tree, the favourite tree of Apollo. A story says that Apollo fell in love with Daphne, a beautiful wood-nymph and daughter of a river-god. Daphne, however, did not return Apollo's love, and on one occasion ran away from him. The sun-god pursued her, calling to her that he meant no harm, but just as he was within reach of her she prayed to her father for help. She at once became rooted to the ground, and found that her limbs were rapidly changing into branches and her hair into leaves. When Apollo stretched out his hands to catch her, he found nothing in his grasp but the trunk of a tree. The river-god had changed his daughter into a laurel. From that time onward Apollo took the laurel for his favourite tree, and said that prizes given to poets and musicians--for Apollo was also god of music and poetry--should be wreaths made from the leaves of that tree. Thus the laurel wreath came to be more eagerly sought after than gold or silver.

The Olympic Games which we have mentioned are the origin of the Olympic Games which have been held in Europe and America every fourth year for some years past. They are held at the capital of each of the great countries in turn, and they were held in London at the Shepherd's Bush Exhibition in 1908. The chief event is the Marathon Race, which in 1908 was run from Windsor to the Stadium at the Exhibition, a distance of 25 miles. This race has its origin in an historical event of the year 490 B.C. In that year was fought the great battle of Marathon between the Greeks and the invading Persians. In spite of the far greater numbers of the Persian army, the Greeks won a glorious victory. Now, in the ranks of the Greek army was a famous runner named Pheidippides, who had won many a prize in the Games. When the Persians had been put to flight, the Greek general sent for Pheidippides and bade him run with the news of the victory to Athens (the capital of Greece), distant nearly 25 miles, where

all those unable to fight were awaiting anxiously the result of the battle. Pheidippides, although tired by his share in the battle, at once set off on his long journey. In time the strain of the task began to tell upon him, and it was only by a great effort that he was able to continue his course. At last, with aching limbs and faltering step, he came in sight of the city. The Athenians, seeing him in the distance, ran eagerly to meet him; falling into the arms of the foremost of them, the runner with his last breath gasped, "Rejoice, we conquer". Even as the joyful words left his lips, Pheidippides sank lifeless in the arms that held him, and his brave spirit went forth on its last journey to meet the Heroes of the Past.

"So, when Persia was dust, all cried, 'To Akropolis!
Run, Pheidippides, one race more! the meed is thy due!
'Athens is saved, thank Pan,' go shout!' He flung down his shield
Ran like fire once more: and the space 'twixt the Fennel-field
And Athens was stubble again, a field which a fire runs through,
Till in he broke: 'Rejoice, we conquer!' Like wine through clay,
Joy in his blood bursting his heart, he died--the bliss!"
ROBERT BROWNING--Pheidippides.

Famous among the very old stories of the Greeks is that of the swift-footed Atalanta, the daughter of the King of Arcadia. This king had longed for a son who might succeed him, and on the birth of Atalanta was filled with anger and disappointment. He ordered her to be taken away while she was still a baby, and left on a mountain top at the mercy of the wild beasts. Here she was found by some hunters, who took pity on her and carried her to their home. As she grew up, they taught her to hunt, and in time she became more skilled in running and in the chase than they all. She took part with some of the great heroes in a famous hunt for a wild boar, which she finally helped to kill. Her father, hearing of her skill, welcomed her back, and since he still had no son, urged her to marry one of the many suitors who came to the court. Atalanta, however, had no desire to marry, and knowing that she could run more swiftly than any of those who sought her hand in marriage, she declared that she would only marry the man who could outrun her. She also decreed that every one who failed to win should pay for his defeat with his life. In spite of these cruel conditions, many eager youths tried to win her, but she outran them all, and their heads were exposed on the race-course in order to frighten others who might wish to marry her.

At last there came to the court of the King of Arcadia a young man named Milanion, who was determined to win Atalanta for his wife. He had previously sought the help and protection of Venus, and in answer to his prayer the goddess had given him three golden apples. The proud Atalanta accepted Milanion's challenge, and once again the course was thronged with people eager to see the daring youth. The signal was given, and the runners darted forward. Atalanta soon passed Milanion, who then threw at her feet one of his golden apples. She paused a moment, tempted by the glittering object, then stooping, she quickly snatched it up and raced after Milanion, who was by this time ahead of her. She soon overtook him, when he throw down a second golden apple, and again she stopped to pick it up. A third time the swift

maiden passed the youth, once more to be tempted by the golden fruit. Sure of her skill, she paused to seize the third golden apple, but before she could overtake Milanion he had reached the goal. Atalanta, bound by her promise, consented to marry the victorious Milanion, and their wedding was celebrated amid great rejoicing.

The Old-English name for September was "Gerstmonath", which means "barley month", since during September the barley crop was usually harvested.

[Next: Chapter X. October--The Eighth Month](#)



CHAPTER X

October--The Eighth Month

In this, the "eighth" month, was held a great festival at Eleusis, a town twelve miles from Athens, in honour of the Greek goddess Demeter. The Roman name for Demeter was Ceres, and she was worshiped as the Goddess of Agriculture, since the fields and their crops were thought to be under her special care. The Greek name Demeter means "Earth Mother", and the name Ceres has given us the word "cereals", a general name for wheat, barley, rye, and oats.

Ceres had a daughter, Persephone, who spent a great part of her time wandering with her companions on the slopes and plains of Sicily. One day, as Persephone and her maidens were plucking flowers and weaving them into garlands, Pluto, the God of the Underworld, rode by in his dark chariot drawn by four black horses. Attracted by Persephone's beauty, he determined to carry her off and make her his queen.

One story says that he caused a most wonderful flower to spring up, and Persephone, seeing it in the distance and wishing to gather it, was thus separated from her companions. As she stooped to pluck the flower the earth opened, and Pluto in his chariot came up from the Underworld and, seizing Persephone, carried her down to his dark and gloomy home.

Another story says that as soon as he saw Persephone he walked quickly towards her, and before she could guess his intention, caught her up and, carrying her in spite of her struggles to his chariot, drove away at topmost speed. He at length reached a river, whose roaring torrent it was impossible to cross. Afraid to turn back lest he should meet Ceres, he struck the earth such a blow with the two-pronged fork which he always carried as the emblem of his power, that the ground opened beneath him, and thus he was able to reach his dark kingdom of Hades in safety. This Hades, the Underworld to which Pluto had brought Persephone, was the home of the dead, the place to which came the spirits of those who had died, there to receive a fitting reward for their deeds on earth.

From Pluto's throne flowed five rivers:

1. Styx (the Hateful), a sacred river, and one by which the gods "fear to swear, and not keep their oath". It was also the river which had to be crossed by the spirits before they could reach the throne. They were ferried across by an old boatman named Charon, who charged them an obol, about ½d. of our money. It was the custom, when a man died, for his relations to put

an obol under his tongue, so that he might have no difficulty in crossing the Styx. Those who came without their obol had to wait a hundred years, after which time Charon would take them across free of charge.

2. Acheron (Pain), a dark and very deep river that also had to be crossed by the spirits.
3. Lethe (Forgetfulness), which had the power of making all those who drank of its waters forget the past.
4. Phlegethon (Blazing), a river of fire which surrounded Tartarus, that part of the Underworld to which were sent the spirits of evil-doers, in order that they might suffer punishment for their wicked deeds.
5. Cocytus (Wailing), a river of salt water, the tears of those condemned to the torments of Tartarus.

In a distant part of Hades, far removed from the place of torment, were the Elysian Fields. Here dwelt the great and the good, in perpetual day, and amid the ever-blooming flowers of an eternal spring.

While the frightened Persephone was thus, against her will, made queen of this sunless kingdom of the dead, Ceres, with many tears, was seeking her daughter in the flower-strewn meadows, but all in vain. After many wanderings in Italy, and even in Greece, where she visited the city of Eleusis mentioned above, Ceres at last learnt of Persephone's fate, but her joy at finding that she was safe was turned to grief by the thought that Pluto would never allow her to come back to the happiness of the sun-lit earth.

Meanwhile the goddess had neglected all her duties; the flowers withered away, the trees shed their leaves, the fruit was fast falling from the branches, and the crops could not ripen. The time of harvest was quickly passing, and the people, threatened with famine, and finding that their prayers to the goddess were unheeded, appealed to Jupiter to save them from starvation and death by allowing Persephone to return to the upper world. Jupiter at last consented, and said that Pluto must give up Persephone, provided that she had not eaten anything since the time when she had been carried off. Unfortunately that very day she had tasted a pomegranate which Pluto had given her, and she was compelled to stay with her husband one month for each of the six seeds she had eaten. So for six months she has to live in the Underworld, and there in the thick gloom, never pierced by a ray of sunshine, she waits for the time when she may return to the sun-kissed hills and plains of her favourite land, where, happy in her mother's smile, she dances with her companions amid the flowers.

"Persephone to Ceres has returned
From that dark god who stole her for his bride,

And bids the Earth, that for her coming yearned,
Its sombre garb of mourning lay aside.
The sun o'ertops the clouds with wonted speed,
And so to give the goddess honour due,
O'er hill and dale, o'er mountain-side and mead,
Now scatters flowers of many a wondrous hue.
The trees that shed their leaves, each leaf a tear,
Now deck themselves again in bright array,
And Man delights to see the Winter drear
Yield place to Spring, and Night to gladsome Day."

At length comes the time when once more Persephone must return to her desolate home, and with heavy heart she leaves the sorrowing Ceres.

"Persephone is called away,
And Ceres weeps
That she must go; while o'er the Earth
Now slowly creeps
The gloom of death; fled is that smile
Of love that made
All Nature waken into life,
And all things fade."

The Old-English name for October was "Winterfylleth", that is, "winter full moon", because winter was supposed to begin at the October full moon.

[Next: Chapter XI. November--The Ninth Month](#)



CHAPTER XI

November--The Ninth Month

On the thirteenth of this "ninth" month the Romans held a feast in honour of Jupiter, the ruler of gods and men. From the clouded top of Mount Olympus he held sway over the whole world, and even the gods had to bow to his supreme will. Terrible indeed was it to anger any of the gods, but no punishment was more swift and sure than that sent by Jupiter when he was enraged. We have seen how with his thunderbolt he slew the proud and reckless Phaeton, and we have another example in the story of Bellerophon. This hero, who was staying at the court of a Grecian king, was set the task of killing the Chimaera, a terrible monster with a lion's head, a goat's body, a dragon's tail, and breath of fire. While sorrowfully wondering how he could possibly perform so difficult a task, Bellerophon suddenly found before him the goddess Minerva, who asked him the cause of his trouble. As soon as she had learnt of his task she promised to help him, and, giving him a golden bridle, told him to bridle the horse Pegasus.

Now Pegasus was a winged horse which the sea-god Neptune had made from the drops of blood that fell into the sea from the head of the Gorgon Medusa, slain by Perseus. He was perfectly white and of great speed, and, as Bellerophon well knew, came down to earth to drink at a certain spring. Bellerophon waited in hiding by this spring, and taking Pegasus by surprise, jumped upon his back. The winged horse at once flew up to a great height, trying to unseat Bellerophon; but the hero succeeded in putting on Minerva's golden bridle, when Pegasus at once became gentle. Bellerophon then set off on his task, and suddenly swooping down from the sky upon the Chimaera, overcame and killed the dreadful monster. His task accomplished, he might now have lived in happiness, but he became filled with pride because of the wonderful flights he had made on Pegasus. One day, as he soared up higher and higher, he began to think himself equal to the gods, and wished to join them on Mount Olympus. This angered Jupiter, who sent a gadfly which stung Pegasus. Suddenly rearing up, the winged horse threw the proud Bellerophon far down to the earth beneath.

The goddess, Minerva, who appeared to Bellerophon, was a daughter of Jupiter, but she was born in a very strange way, for she sprang out of her father's head, clothed in bright armour, and with a spear in her hand. She became the Goddess of Wisdom (as we have seen in the story of Paris), of the arts and the sciences, and of spinning and weaving. Her skill in weaving is shown by the following story.

There once lived in Greece a girl named Arachne, who was so clever at needlework that at last in her pride she boasted that she could weave more skilfully than Minerva herself. Minerva,

angered by these words, one day came down to Arachne's home, and accepted the challenge which she had so rashly made. The story is thus told by the poet Spenser in "The Fate of the Butterflie":

"Minerva did the challenge not refuse,
But deigned with her the paragon to make;
So to their work they sit, and each doth choose
What story she will for her tapet take".

Arachne pictured the story of Jupiter when, disguised as a white bull, he carried off Europa to the land which afterwards bore the name Europe. Minerva chose for her work the story of her own contest with the sea-god Neptune as to which of them should have the honour of naming a new city that had been built in Greece. Jupiter had said that the honour would be given to the one who gave the most useful gift to man, and he called all the gods together to judge the contest. Neptune struck the ground with his trident and there sprang forth a horse. The gods were filled with wonder at the sight of the noble animal, and when Neptune explained how useful it would be to man, they all thought that the victory would be his. Minerva then produced an olive tree; at this all the gods laughed with scorn, but when the goddess, heedless of their laughter, had explained how all its parts--the wood, the fruit, and the leaves--could be used by man, how it was the sign of peace while the horse was the symbol of war, they decided that Minerva had won, and since her name among the Greeks was Athene, she gave to the city the name of Athens.

All this the goddess wove in her tapestry:
"Then sets she forth, how with her weapon dread
She smote the ground, the which straight forth did yield
A fruitful Olive tree, with berries spread,
That all the gods admired: then all the story
She compassed with a wreath of Olives hoary.
Amongst the leaves she made a Butterfly,
With excellent device and wondrous sleight,
Flutt'ring among the Olives wantonly,
That seemed to live, so like it was in sight;
The velvet nap which on his wings doth lie,
The silken down with which his back is dight,
His broad outstretched horns, his hairy thighs,
His glorious colours, and his glistening eyes.
Which when Arachne saw, as overlaid
And mastered with workmanship so rare,
She stood astonied long, nor ought gainsaid;
And with fast-fixed eyes on her did stare,
And by her silence, sugn of one dismayed,
The victory did yield her as her share."

Then in anger and despair, the unhappy girl hanged herself, and Minerva turned her dangling body into a spider, and bade her for ever spin and weave.

The Angles and Saxons had two names for this month of November: "Windmonath", that is, "wind month", and "Blodmonath", that is, "blood month". The latter name arose from the fact that during this month they slaughtered large numbers of cattle to last them through the cold and dreary winter.

[Next: Chapter XII. December--The Tenth Month](#)



CHAPTER XII

December--The Tenth Month

The chief festival of this "tenth" and last month of the Roman year was the Saturnalia, held on the seventeenth of the month in honour of Saturn, the father of Jupiter. Saturn, or Cronos, as the Greeks called him, was one of the Titans, the six giant sons of Uranus (Heaven) and Gaia (Earth). Uranus ruled before the days of Man, but he was overthrown by his son Saturn, who became for a time the supreme ruler of the universe. Uranus, however, prophesied that Saturn would one day himself be overthrown by his children, and in order to avoid this, Saturn, when his first child was born, immediately swallowed him! As other children were born, he swallowed each of them until at last Rhea, his wife, succeeded in hiding her youngest son, Jupiter, and deceived Saturn by giving him a stone wrapped in swaddling clothes, which, in his haste, he swallowed without realizing the trick played upon him. Jupiter was thus saved, and when he grew up he overthrew his father, as Uranus had foretold. Saturn, having lost his power, took refuge on the Earth, and became king of a part of Italy, which, as Virgil tells us in the eighth book of his Aeneid, he called Latium, since it was there that he lay hid (Latin: lateo= to lie hidden). "Saturn was the first to come from heavenly Olympus, fleeing the arms of Jupiter, an exile deprived of his kingdom. He it was who made into a nation a people untaught and scattered on the mountain tops, and gave them laws, and chose that the land should be called 'Latium' because in safety he had lain hidden in this region."

Jupiter's rule was very soon threatened by the Titans, who refused to bow to his will, but after a long and terrible struggle, the giants were overthrown by Jupiter's thunderbolts. One of the giants was imprisoned under Mount Aetna, where, breathing out fire and smoke, he still struggles to free himself, thus causing earthquakes and volcanic eruptions.

Another of the Titans, Iapetus, had two sons, Prometheus (Forethought) and Epimetheus (Afterthought). To these two gods fell the task of making man, who was to rule over all living creatures. Prometheus was very anxious to give to the race of men that he had fashioned a power that would make them supreme on the earth, and nearer to the gods themselves. The way in which he could best bestow this power upon them was by the gift of fire, for fire belonged only to the gods and was jealously guarded by them. In spite of the terrible punishment which he knew awaited him should he be discovered, Prometheus determined to steal fire from heaven, and during one dark night he brought down to the earth a burning stick from the home of the gods on Mount Olympus. Jupiter, seeing an unaccustomed light on the earth, discovered the theft, and his rage knew no bounds. He seized Prometheus, carried him off to the Caucasus Mountains, and there bound him with chains to a huge rock. Then he

sent a vulture that, day after day, might feed upon his liver, which grew again during the night so that the terrible torture of the god should have no end. After hundreds of years of this ghastly pain and suffering, Prometheus was rescued by Hercules, who came to him to ask him where he might find the Golden Apples of the Hesperides. Hercules killed the vulture, broke Prometheus' chains, and released the tortured god, who in return advised Hercules to go to the giant Atlas, who knew where the apples were, as we have seen in the story of Atlas' daughter, Maia.

Prometheus' brother, Epimetheus, married the beautiful Pandora, and at first lived with her in great happiness, for in those early days the earth was free from pain, sickness, and ills of every kind. One evening they saw Mercury, the messenger of the gods, coming towards them and bearing on his shoulder a huge box which seemed to be of great weight. Tired out with his burden, Mercury begged permission to leave the box to their care, promising to return for it in a short time. Pandora and Epimetheus readily granted permission, and Mercury placed the box in their house and hastily departed. Pandora was at once filled with great curiosity as to what the box might contain, and suggested to Epimetheus that, they should just peep inside. Epimetheus was shocked by Pandora's lack of good manners, and, replying that they must not think of such a thing, he went out, calling to Pandora to follow him. But Pandora's curiosity was now thoroughly aroused, and the temptation overcame her when she found herself alone. Quickly she undid the cord which bound the box, and, thinking she heard sounds in the box, she put her ear close to the lid. To her surprise she heard voices calling, "Let us out! let us out!" Pandora, filled with excitement, slowly raised the lid a little, just for a peep, as she said to herself. But no sooner was the box opened than out flew little winged creatures, some of which settled on Pandora and Epimetheus, who had now returned, and stung them so that they knew pain for the first time. Then escaping into the world, these insects, Evil, Sickness, Unhappiness, and all the little troubles of life, became a cause of endless pain and suffering to men and women. Poor Pandora was broken hearted, and her eyes filled with tears at the thought of the harm she had done. Then again she was startled to hear a voice still calling from the box. It sounded so kind and gentle and pleaded so sweetly to be let out, that Pandora raised the lid a second time, and out flew Hope, who had been shut in with the cruel insects, and now fluttered busily over the earth, healing the wounds made by her evil companions.

This cheery little creature, Hope, may well be associated with the winter month December, when Ceres and her trees and flowers mourn for the smiling Persephone, yet cling to the hope of her return. It is Hope who bids us say with the poet, "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?"

On December 25th, the Romans held a festival of the winter solstice, the turning point of winter, when the days begin to grow longer. It was called Dies Natalis Solis Invicti (the Birthday of the Unconquered Sun), and it is very probable that for this reason the Christians chose the 25th of December for the birthday of Christ. In early times Christmas (the Mass or Feast of Christ) was kept at different times in the year, but it was finally fixed on December

25th, since on that day there was already held this heathen festival to the sun, which had a meaning in some way similar to that of our Christmas. It was an easy thing to make the Birthday of the Unconquered Sun, which wakes all nature from its winter sleep, into the Birthday of the Unconquered Son of God, who brought new life and hope to the world.

The same thing took place among the northern races of Europe and in our own islands. The first Christian missionaries found that, at the time of year we now call Christmas, the Northmen kept a festival called Yule, the greatest feast in the year. "Yule" means "wheel", and the festival was so named because the sun was thought to be like a wheel revolving swiftly across the sky. It used at one time to be a custom in England and Germany for the people to gather each year on a hill-top, to set fire to a huge wooden wheel bound with straw, and to send it rolling down the hill. The Christians made this festival into a Christian festival, and we still speak of Christmas as Yuletide. The origin of Santa Claus is St. Nicholas, who was the patron saint of Russia. He was famous for his kindness and generosity, and a festival was held in his honour on the 6th of December.

The custom of giving "Christmas boxes" comes from the Romans, and in later days these gifts came to be called "boxes", because at Christmas time boxes were hung up in the churches in which people might put money, for the poor. On the day after Christmas Day these boxes were opened, and the day was thus known as "Boxing Day". Another custom which comes from the Romans is that of having a Christmas tree hung with toys--a custom which dates back to the Saturnalia. Virgil, in his book called *The Georgics*, describes how the farmers, when holding a festival in honour of Bacchus, God of Wine, "hang from the tall pine tiny waving masks" of the god.

December also had two names among the Angles and Saxons: "Wintermonath", and "Heligmonath", that is, "holy month", from the fact that Christmas falls in this month.

[Next: Chapter XIII. Stories of the Days](#)



CHAPTER XIII

Stories of the Days

The days of the week are as full of story as the months, but they take us away from the sunlit countries of Greece and Rome to the cold and stormy lands of the Northmen. They are really of greater interest to us, because four of these days are named after gods worshiped by the Angles and Saxons. Sunday and Monday are named after the sun and the moon, which have been worshiped from the beginning of time in all lands and by all peoples, but Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday remind us of the great gods who reigned in the lands across the North Sea, lands of biting frost and freezing winds. Our ancestors were a brave and hardy race, and not even the dangers of the stormy seas could check their eagerness for adventure, as we know. They were great fighters, and even thought it a disgrace to die what they called a "straw death", that is, to die in their beds of straw instead of on the field of battle. As we should expect, their gods were great fighters too, and many stirring tales are told of the gods and of the great heroes among men. Songs of the gods and their creation of the world, and songs of the deeds of the heroes were composed in very early times by poets and handed down by word of mouth. These songs, known as Eddas and Sagas, were eventually written down, the earliest of them in the thirteenth century. In these poems we find a description of the gods and goddesses of the Northmen and of their enemies the frost giants, an account of the creation of the world, and stories of the adventures that befell both gods and giants. The following chapters contain the stories which are suggested by the names Tiu, Woden, Thor, and Freya, after whom Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday are named, while Saturday suggests to us the great day of Ragnarok, the downfall of the gods, when the gods were overthrown by the powers of evil and the earth was destroyed, and new gods and a new earth rose in their place.

[Next: Chapter XIV. Sunday--The Day of the Sun](#)



CHAPTER XIV

Sunday--The Day of the Sun

Among all peoples in early times the sun was an object of wonder. It was to them a mystery, but although they could never understand it, they imagined many explanations of it. When we remember that in those long-ago days nothing was known of the rotation of the earth or of its movement round the sun, we can readily see how very real the movement of the sun must have seemed. But if it moved across the sky it must be a chariot, for it was in chariots that all men travelled quickly, while none but a god could ride across the sky.

The nature of the sun may have been difficult to understand, but the comforts and the benefits which it brought to men were plain to all. It was a kindly god who gave the earth warmth and light, who ripened the crops and the fruit and made them serviceable to man, who clothed the trees with leaves and scattered the fields with flowers. It is little wonder then that in all parts of the world men worshiped the sun, and the god whom they pictured in their imagination was all the more real to them because of the great work he performed.

We have seen how the Greeks and Romans worshiped the sun as Apollo, the god who set out each day when the Gates of the East had been opened by the Goddess of the Dawn, and, driving his chariot across the sky, dipped down into the ocean, where a boat awaited him to bring him back. Apollo was the most beautiful of the gods, as befitted the giver of light and happiness, and was worshiped throughout those sunny lands of the South. On the Island of Rhodes, off the coast of Asia Minor, stood one of the Seven Wonders of the World, a statue of Apollo. It was known as the Colossus of Rhodes on account of its size, for it was 100 feet high, the fingers of the god being as long as a man. It was placed at the entrance to a harbour, and remained in position for nearly sixty years, and was then (224 B.C.) overthrown by an earthquake.

The principal temples of Apollo were in the Island of Delos, and at Delphi in Greece, and it was at this town of Delphi that the great Pythian Games were held every four years in honour of the god. The games were so called because Apollo was believed to have slain at Delphi a dragon called Python.

The sun's daily journey, his contest with the darkness, and his final victory at the dawn of the new day are ideas which have led to endless stories, and we find these stories are very similar among different peoples. Ra, the great sun-god of Egypt, was pictured as travelling by day in a ship across the waters of the sky, and returning during the night through the kingdom of the

dead. To the Egyptians Ra was a symbol of life, death, and a new birth or resurrection. Through the night Ra fought with the lord of the powers of darkness, a huge serpent, who awaited the sun in the west with a band of demons, and whom he overcame at the approach of dawn. Ra was always represented either as a hawk or as a man with a hawk's head, with the sun on his head. The hawk was chosen as his symbol, because it was said to fly towards the sun.

In India the sun was worshiped as the god Agni, who rode in a shining chariot drawn by blood-red horses. He was golden-haired, and had a double face, seven tongues, and seven arms.

Among the gods of the early British who were driven into Ireland was the sun-god Nudd, or Ludd, as he was sometimes called. His name appears in Ludgate, and it is thought that his temple stood on what is now Ludgate Hill in London. At a town called Lydney, in Gloucestershire, the remains of a temple to Ludd have been found, with many inscriptions containing his name.

The Angles and Saxons imagined the sun to be carried in a chariot driven by a maiden named Sol, as we shall read later. They had no god whom we can describe exactly as a sun-god, but several of their gods were like the sun in many ways, particularly Frey, whose sword sent out rays of light like the sun, and who caused the crops to ripen, and Balder the Beautiful, the God of Light, who was the favourite son of Odin, father of the gods, and was, as his name shows, the most handsome of the gods, ever happy and light-hearted. His golden hair and his bright, clear eyes shone like the sun, and his radiant smile warmed the hearts of all who met him. He knew no thought of evil, but was "good and pure, and bright, was loved by all, as all love light".

In spite of his lovable nature, however, Balder was destined to misfortune through his twin brother, Hodur, the God of Darkness, who was the exact opposite of his brother, for he was gloomy and silent, and suffered from blindness. Odin, through his great wisdom, knew that disaster was to come to Balder, and spared no effort to stave off the evil day, by making all things in creation swear that they would never harm the God of Light. This they were only too ready to do, and all made a solemn vow, with the one exception of a shoot of mistletoe, which was passed over as being too slight a thing ever to cause harm to anyone. Balder being now free from all possibility of hurt, the gods one day amused themselves by shooting and throwing at him, laughing gaily as the objects they threw fell short or turned aside. Now Loki, the God of Fire, was bitterly jealous of the God of Light, and, as he watched the sport, his evil nature prompted him to a cruel and cowardly deed. Having discovered that the mistletoe alone of all created things had made no promise, Loki hastened to the gate of Valhalla, where the mistletoe was growing and plucking it, by the help of his magical power quickly fashioned from it an arrow. He then returned and sought out Hodur, who, because of his blindness, was standing idly aside and taking no part in the sport. Loki pretended to take pity on him, and fitting the arrow to a bow which he placed in Hodur's hands, he offered to aim the shaft for the blind god. Aided by Loki, Hodur let fly the fatal arrow, and, to the horror and amazement

of the gods, Balder fell dead. The anger of the gods against Hodur knew no bounds, and they would have killed him had it not been for their own law, which forbade the shedding of blood in Asgard, the home of the gods. All Asgard was plunged in the deepest grief, and Hermod, the messenger of the gods, was sent to Hel, the Goddess of the Underworld, praying her to restore Balder to life. Hel consented to do so, on condition that all created things should weep for Balder. Messengers were at once sent out over all the world to bid all things weep for Balder. Living creatures, trees, and flowers, and even the stones shed tears for the god they had loved so well; but at last a giantess was found whose only reply to the messengers was "Let Hel keep what she has". Thus the evil Loki, for he it was in the disguise of a giantess, showed once again his cruel hatred of Balder, and caused the whole earth to mourn the loss of the radiant God of Light.

The gods now prepared for the burial of Balder. As was the custom among the Northmen, fuel was piled on the deck of Balder's ship Ringhorn, and the body was then laid on the funeral pyre. The sides of the ship were decorated with rich cloth and garlands of flowers, and swords, armour, drinking-vessels, and many other things which the gods valued, were placed beside the hero. A torch was then put to the fuel, and the ship was launched. The funeral pyre floated slowly towards the west, the rising flames lighting up sea and sky, until at last, like the sun itself, it sank slowly into the sea, and all light faded from the sky.

Balder's Funeral Pyre

But when the gods and heroes heard, they brought
 The wood to Balder's ship, and built a pile,
 Full the deck's breadth, and lofty; then the corpse
 Of Balder on the highest top they laid.
 And they set jars of wine and oil to lean
 Against the bodies, and stuck torches near,
 Splinters of pine-wood, soak'd with turpentine,
 And brought his arms and gold, and all his stuff,
 And slew the dogs who at his table fed,
 And his horse--Balder's horse--whom most he loved,
 And placed them on the pyre, and Odin threw
 A last choice gift thereon, his golden ring.
 The mast they fixt, and hoisted up the sails,
 Then they put fire to the wood; and Thor
 Set his stout shoulder hard against the stern
 To push the ship through the thick sands;--sparks flew
 From the deep trench she plough'd, so strong a god
 Furrow'd it; and the water gurgled in.
 And the ship floated on the waves, and rock'd.
 But in the hills a strong east wind arose,
 And came down moaning to the sea; first squalls
 Ran black o'er the sea's face, then steady rush'd

The breeze, and fill'd the sails, and blew the fire.
And wreathed in smoke the ship stood out to sea.
Soon with a roaring rose the mighty fire,
And the pile crackled; and between the logs
Sharp, quivering tongues of flame shot out, and leapt,
Curling and darting, higher, until they lick'd
The summit of the pile, the dead, the mast,
And ate the shrivelling sails; but still the ship
Drove on, ablaze above her hull with fire.
And the gods stood upon the beach, and gazed.
And while they gazed, the sun went lurid down
Into the smoke-wrapt sea, and night came on.
Then the wind fell with night, and there was calm;
But through the dark they watch'd the burning ship
Still carried o'er the distant waters on,
Farther and farther, like an eye of fire.
And long, in the far dark, blazed Balder's pile;
But fainter, as the stars rose high, it flared,
The bodies were consumed, ash choked the pile.
And as, in a decaying winter-fire,
A charr'd log, falling, makes a shower of sparks--
So with a shower of sparks the pile fell in,
Reddening the sea around; and all was dark.
MATTHEW ARNOLD--Balder Dead.

[Next: Chapter XV. Monday--The Day of the Moon](#)



CHAPTER XV

Monday--The Day of the Moon

The moon, like the sun, was an object of wonder in the days of old, and was worshiped almost everywhere in some form or other, but it does not play quite so important a part in story as the sun. Since the moon is paler than the sun and its light soft and gentle, it was often regarded as being a chariot driven by a woman, but the course of the moon-goddess across the sky was similar to that of the sun-god.

Diana, the moon-goddess of the Greeks and Romans, known also as Cynthia, Phoebe, and Arterms, was the twin-sister of Apollo, and drove a golden chariot drawn by milk-white horses. Diana and Apollo were children of Jupiter, and were born in the Island of Delos, where a temple to Apollo was afterwards built. Another of the Seven Wonders of the World was the temple to Diana at Ephesus, on the west coast of Asia Minor. The worship of Diana at Ephesus is mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles: "And when the town clerk had quieted the multitude, he saith, 'Ye men of Ephesus, what man is there who knoweth not how that the city of the Ephesians is temple-keeper of the great Diana and of the image which fell down from Jupiter?'" The temple was destroyed in the year A.D. 263, but remains of it may still be seen.

Diana was also the Goddess of Hunting; she was a skilled archer, and spent the day in huuting, as we have seen in the story of Orion.

The most famous story of Diana is that of her love for Endymion, a young shepherd--a story which has been told by the poets many times. One evening as the moon-goddess was driving silently across the sky, she saw sleeping on a hillside a handsome youth, his resting flock scattered over the gentle slope. Attracted by his beauty, Diana stepped from her chariot and gazed long at his face; then softly stooping, she kissed him lightly on the lips. Endymion, half wakened by her touch, caught a fleeting vision of the fair goddess as she hastened to her chariot. Filled with wonder at the sight, he rose quickly and rubbed his eyes, but all he saw was the bright moon floating across the dark sky, and he thought that he had been dreaming. The next night the goddess came to him again, and again he saw her with his half closed eyes. Each night when the bright rays of the moon fell on his upturned face he dreamed this wonderful dream, but he was always sleeping when the goddess came, and nevr saw her in her full and dazzling beauty. The days now seemed long and dreary to Endymion, and he waited anxiously for the night that he might see again the glorious vision.

Diana was filled with dread at the thought that the beautiful youth would lose his beauty as

the years went by, and at last she cast a spell over him while he slept, so that he should never wake again, and carried him away to a cave in a mountain-side known only to herself. There the loving Diana paused each night in her journey across the sky, and gazed on the face of the fair Endymion.

Diana, when hunting in the forest, was attended by a band of wood-nymphs who were her faithful followers. One of these nymphs, Arethusa, was one day cooling herself after the chase on the banks of the River Alpheus, when suddenly the God of the River appeared. The startled nymph ran quickly into the woods, but the god Alpheus pursued her, telling her that he loved her and that she need fear no harm. Arethusa was too frightened to listen to the god, and ran on, till at last, worn out, she prayed to Diana for help. The moon-goddess was ever ready to help her faithful nymphs, and in answer to the prayer transformed the girl into a fountain, which she hid in a thick mist. Alpheus, suddenly losing sight of the nymph, wandered sorrowfully about, calling out her name in his distress. Arethusa now thought that she was safe, but the wind-god, Zephyrus, blew aside the mist, and Alpheus saw a fountain where there had not been one before, and guessed what had happened. He quickly changed himself into a river and rushed towards the fountain, but Arethusa sprang from the rocks and hastened away over the stones and grass. Diana now saw her fresh danger, and made an opening in the ground, through which Arethusa slipped, to find herself in the kingdom of Pluto, the God of the Underworld. Here she wandered until she found another opening, by which she escaped once again into the sunshine on the plain of Sicily. Alpheus, however, at last made his way across the sea to Sicily, where he found Arethusa and won her love. The Greeks believed that flowers cast into the River Alpheus in Greece were carried by the river as gifts to his lover, and appeared later in the fountain of Arethusa in Sicily!

Among the Egyptians the moon was regarded as a god, who was named Thoth (The Measurer). He was also the God of Wisdom, Invention, Writing, and Magic. He was one of the earliest of the Egyptian gods, having come into being at the same time as Ra, the sun-god, and it was he who was said to have created the world. The Romans compared him with Mercury because, like Mercury, he invented writing. As the God of the Moon, he was represented as wearing a crescent moon on his head, and holding in his hand a stylus, a pointed instrument used by the Egyptians for writing on their wax tablets.

The Babylonian moon-god was Sin, the Lord of Wisdom. He was the father of the sun-god, and was one of the greatest of the gods, owing to the fact that the Babylonians regulated their calendar by the moon.

The Angles and Saxons believed that the moon was driven across the sky by Mani, the son of a giant, in a golden chariot drawn by a horse named the All Swift. As in the case of the sun, our ancestors had no distinct goddess of the moon; but we shall read of Mani again in a later chapter.

Hymn to Diana

Queen and huntress, chaste and fair,
Now the sun is laid to sleep,
Seated in thy silver chair,
State in wonted manner keep:
Hesperus entreats thy light,
Goddess excellently bright.
Earth, let not thy envious shade
Dare itself to interpose;
Cynthia's shining orb was made
Heaven to clear when day did close;
Bless us then with wished sight,
Goddess excellently bright.
Lay thy bow of pearl apart,
And thy crystal shining quiver;
Give unto the flying hart
Space to breathe, how short soever,
Thou that mak'st a day of night,
Goddess excellently bright.
BEN JONSON--Cynthia's Revels.

[Next: Chapter XVI. Tuesday--The Day of Tiu](#)



CHAPTER XVI

Tuesday--The Day of Tiu

Tuesday is the first day of the week which is named after a god of the Angles and Saxons--Tiu, the God of War. The Angles and Saxons, like the Greeks and Romans, worshiped many gods, and though these gods were in a great number of ways similar to those of the Greeks and Romans, we also find very great differences. These differences are due to the fact that the Angles and Saxons lived in a very different kind of country, led a very different kind of life, and consequently had different ideas. Their chief enemies were frost and cold, and they imagined the freezing winds to be caused by frost-giants who lived in a land of ice and waged continual warfare with the gods who befriended man and protected him as far as they could against the frost-giants and all the suffering which they caused. The chief of these gods was Woden or Odin, the All-father, of whom we read in the following chapter, and next to him in importance came Thor, the God of Thunder, the bitterest enemy of the giants. The god after whom Tuesday is named was known as Tiu among the Angles and Saxons, and as Tyr among the Norsemen. He was the God of War, and corresponds to Mars among the Romans, whose name for this day was Dies Martis, the day of Mars. The French have kept the Roman name in the form mardi.

Tiu was a great fighter and knew no fear, and was naturally always called upon in time of battle. He was usually represented as having no right hand, owing to a misfortune which befell him in the following way. From his lofty throne Odin, the chief of the gods, one day saw in the land of the giants three terrible monsters, which grew so rapidly that he was filled with fear lest they should invade the home of the gods. Accordingly he determined to get rid of them before they became any stronger. One Hel, an enormous giantess, he flung into the Underworld, where, as the Goddess of Death, she ruled over the kingdom of the dead. Another, Iormungandr, a serpent, he cast into the sea, where it grew so huge that it encircled the whole earth. The third was Fenrir, a wolf, whom Odin brought to Asgard, the home of the gods, hoping that he might eventually tame him. Fenrir, however, grew stronger and fiercer each day, until the gods, of whom Tiu alone was brave enough to go near him, decided at last to bind him in such a way that he could do no harm. A very strong chain was obtained, and the gods suggested to Fenrir, who often boasted of his great strength, that he should allow himself to be bound with it in order to prove whether he was really as strong as he claimed to be. Fenrir agreed, and then by merely stretching himself easily broke his bonds. Again the gods put him to the test with a still stronger chain, but as before he succeeded in breaking it. Seeing that no ordinary chain would be strong enough to bind Fenrir, the gods sent one of their servants to the home of the dwarfs, a race of little people who lived underground, and

who were very clever workers in metal. They also possessed great powers of magic, as we shall see in a later story. At the bidding of the gods, the dwarfs made a silken rope out of the voice of fishes, a woman's beard, the roots of a mountain, and the footsteps of a cat, which was so strong that no power could break it! A third time the gods challenged Fenrir to show his strength by allowing himself to be bound with this new cord, but Fenrir became suspicious, and at last consented only on condition that one of the gods should put his hand in his mouth, and hold it there as a pledge that the gods were not deceiving him. This condition greatly alarmed the gods, who began to fear that their trick was not going to succeed, but the bold war-god Tiu stepped forward and, without any hesitation, placed his right hand in the wolf's mouth. The gods at once bound Fenrir with the magic cord made by the dwarfs, and, in spite of all his struggles, the wolf was unable to free himself. Great was the delight of the gods at their success, a delight shared by all but Tiu, who had little cause to be pleased with the result of the trick, for Fenrir, finding he was trapped, immediately bit off the hand of the god. Thus Tiu was deprived of his sword hand, but so clever was he that he wielded his sword equally well with his left hand, and still remained invincible in battle.

On one occasion Tiu and Thor, the God of Thunder, set out for the land of the giants to obtain an enormous kettle, which the gods required for a feast. They came at last to the home of a giant, Hymir, who possessed a kettle a mile deep and a mile wide, and were hospitably received by the giant's wife. When she learned the errand on which they had come, she warned them that her husband was very fierce and hot-tempered, and advised them to hide themselves when Hymir returned, lest he should kill them with a glance. No sooner had the gods taken refuge behind some kettles, which were kept on a beam at the end of the hall, than Hymir came in. When he heard that visitors had called, he flashed his eyes round the hall so fiercely that, as his glance lighted on the gods' hiding-place, the beam split in two, the kettles came crashing to the ground, and Tiu and Thor were discovered. Hymir, however, was persuaded by his wife to receive the gods kindly; he prepared a meal of three oxen in their honour, but was astonished and dismayed to see Thor eat two of them himself. The next day the gods gave the giant many proofs of their great strength and skill, and Hymir consented to give them the kettle they were seeking. Tiu at once tried to lift it but failed; then Thor, after a mighty struggle, raised it from the ground, and, as he gave the final pull, his feet broke through the floor of the giant's house. As soon as the gods had departed, Thor carrying the kettle on his head, Hymir called his brothers together, and pursued after them. Thor, however, attacked them with his famous hammer, and killed them one by one. Tiu and Thor then continued their journey, and brought the huge kettle safely to their own land.

There are few stories told of Tiu, yet he held a high place among the gods, as the name Tuesday shows. He is most famous for his share in the binding of Fenrir, whereby was put off the dreaded Ragnarok, the day of the final battle between the gods and the giants.

[Next: Chapter XVII. Wednesday--The Day of Woden](#)



CHAPTER XVII

Wednesday--The Day of Woden

Woden, or Odin as the Norsemen called him, was the chief of the gods of our ancestors, and corresponds to the Jupiter of the Romans. Also, for reasons which we shall read later, he was similar to Mercury, and his name was given to the Roman Dies Mercurii, day of Mercury, which still survives in the French mercredi.

As in the case of Jupiter and the Titans, Odin led the Northern gods in a gigantic struggle with the giants of ice and frost, and finally overthrew them. With the help of the gods, he then fashioned the world from the body of the chief of the giants. From the flesh he made the earth, known as Midgard (middle garden), and from his blood the sea, while from his bones he made the mountains, from his teeth the cliffs, and from his hair the trees. The giant's skull was then fixed over the earth to form the vault of the sky, and was held in place at the four corners by four dwarfs, Nordri, Sudri, Austri, and Westri, from whom we have obtained the names North, South, East, and West. Next the gods made the sun and moon, which were placed in golden chariots driven by Sol and Mani, the daughter and son of a giant who had named his children after the newly-created sun and moon. The Northmen thought that they could see on the moon the outline of two children carrying a pail, and the story goes that Mani, while travelling across the sky, one night caught up two children, Hiuki and Bil, who were compelled by their cruel father to carry water all night. Hiuki and Bil are still known to us in the familiar story of Jack and Jill. The sun and moon were said to be pursued continually by two fierce wolves, whose shapes could be seen in the clouds, and who, if they caught them up, would swallow them and plunge the world in darkness. Sometimes they nearly succeeded, and thus caused the eclipses.

Having completed the earth and peopled it with men and women, the gods, led by Odin, built magnificent palaces for themselves in Asgard, their home. The most famous of these was Valhalla, to which the bravest and mightiest of the mortals who fell in battle were summoned at their death. The walls of Valhalla were made of spears, and golden shields formed the roof. In the hall stood long tables, at which the dead heroes feasted.

The Northmen honoured a great fighter above all men, and they even thought it a disgrace for him to die in any other way than sword in hand. The great ambition of every fighting man was to be called to Valhalla after his death, there to spend his time in fighting and feasting. The fortunate ones were chosen from among the slain on the battle-fields by the Valkyries, Odin's battle-maidens, whose horses carried them through the air and over the sea. They rode

among the storm-clouds, and the flash of their spears was seen in the lightning.

Odin was often pictured as sitting on a throne from which he could see the whole world, and wearing a suit of armour, covered with a blue mantle, which represented the sky. In his hand he held a famous spear, Gungnir, which never missed its mark. On his shoulders sat two ravens, Thought and Memory, which he sent out into the world every day to obtain news of all that happened. Like Tiu, the God of War, Odin suffered from a disfigurement, having lost one of his eyes. This loss is explained in the following story.

After the creation of the world, Odin wished to obtain great wisdom which would place him far above the other gods. This he could only procure from Mimir's spring, in whose clear waters the future was mirrored. Odin, therefore, visited Mimir and begged a draught of the wonderful water, but Mimir would only grant the request in return for one of Odin's eyes. The god was willing to make even this sacrifice for the great knowledge the water would give him, and accordingly he plucked out one of his eyes and gave it to Mimir, who sank it deep in the spring where it could always be seen shining. Odin then drank deep of the water, and thus gained the wisdom for which he was always famous.

All the life of the world, including even the lives of the gods, was said to depend on an enormous ash tree, Yggdrasil, the Tree of Life. This tree was created by Odin, and had three roots, one in the Underworld, another in Midgard, near Mimir's spring, and the third in Asgard. It grew to such a height that it overtopped the whole world, and in its topmost branches sat an eagle with a falcon between its eyes. The falcon could see all three kingdoms, and reported all that happened in them to the gods. In the Underworld was a dragon, which continually gnawed the roots of Yggdrasil in order to destroy it and so bring about the downfall of the gods. To prevent this disaster, the tree was daily watered from a fountain in Asgard, whose magic waters kept it continually green.

Joining Asgard and the earth was a bridge made of fire, earth, and water, whose colours were those of the rainbow. This bridge was guarded against the giants by a god named Heimdall, whose sight and hearing were so keen that he could see a hundred leagues by night as well as by day, and could hear the grass growing on the earth and the wool on the sheep's back! He was armed with a flashing sword, and carried a horn with which he was to give warning when the giants should come against Asgard.

Odin was the inventor of Runes, the first alphabet of the Northmen. The letters consisted almost entirely of straight lines placed in different groups and positions, and were thought at first to have a magical meaning. Each god had a special rune or sign, and the use of the sign was supposed to bring help from the god. Thus all fighters carved the rune of Tiu on their swords in order that they might have his aid in battle. Runes were afterwards used in the ordinary way for writing, and very old runes have been found carved on stones in Scandinavia and in England. As the inventor of runes, Odin is like Mercury, who was supposed to have

given the Romans their alphabet.

In addition to being the wisest of the gods, the inventor of runes, and the God of Eloquence, Odin was also the God of Poetry. The gift of poetry was guarded very jealously by the gods, and was only granted to mortals in special cases. Odin obtained the gift for himself and the other gods only with great difficulty. Hidden away in a hollow mountain, and carefully watched over by a giantess, were three vessels containing a magic fluid, which gave to anyone who drank of it the gift of poetry and song. Odin, knowing of this magic drink, determined to obtain it. Accordingly he set out for the land of the giants, dressed as a mortal, and wearing a broad-brimmed hat to hide the fact that he had only one eye. He hired himself as a servant to Baugi, the brother of the giant Suttung, to whom the vessels belonged, and asked as payment for his labour one draught of the magic fluid. As soon as his work was finished, Odin demanded payment, but Baugi was afraid to ask his brother for the drink, and suggested they should win it for themselves by trickery. They came to the mountain where the vessels were hidden, and bored a hole right through to the cave inside. Odin then changed himself into a snake and wriggled through the hole, just in time to escape the giant, who tried to kill him as he entered the hole. Having found his way into the cave, Odin again took on the form of a god, and begged the giantess who watched over the vessels to allow him just a sip of the magic drink. The giantess at last consented, but Odin, instead of taking a sip, quickly emptied all the vessels, and then, making his way out of the cave transformed himself into an eagle and flew swiftly towards Asgard. He soon discovered, however, that the giant Suttung was pursuing him, also in the form of an eagle. As he neared Asgard the gods caught sight of him, and, seeing that the giant was gaining on Odin, they gathered together a great quantity of fuel and piled it on the palace walls. Immediately Odin had passed over the wall the gods set fire to the fuel, and the flames rose so high that the wings of the pursuing giant were scorched, and he fell into the fire and was burnt.

Odin seldom used this precious gift of poetry himself, but imparted it to his son Bragi, who became the minstrel of the gods and sang many songs in honour of the gods and the great heroes in Valhalla. All the singers among men, the bards, or scalds, as they were sometimes called, were thought to have received the gift from Odin, and were greatly honoured for that reason.

The Creation of the World

In the beginning, ere the Gods were born,
Before the Heavens were builded, thou didst slay
The giant Ymir, whom the abyss brought forth,
Thou and thy brethren fierce, the sons of Bor,
And cast his trunk to choke the abysmal void.
But of his flesh and members thou didst build
The earth and ocean, and above them Heaven.
And from the flaming world, where Muspel reigns,
Thou sent'st and fetched'st fire, and madest lights,

Sun, moon, and stars, which thou hast hung in Heaven,
Dividing clear the paths of night and day.
And Asgard thou didst build, and Midgard fort.
MATTHEW ARNOLD--Balder Dead

The Heroes of Valhalla

And all the Gods, and all the Heroes, woke.
And from their beds the Heroes rose, and donn'd
Their arms, and led their horses from the stall,
And mounted them, and in Valhalla's court,
Were ranged; and then the daily fray began.
And all day long they there are hack'd and hewn,
'Mid dust, and groans, and limbs lopp'd off, and blood;
But all at night returned to Odin's hall,
Woundless and fresh; such lot is theirs in heaven.
And the Valkyries on their steeds went forth
Tow'rd earth and fights of men; and at their side
Skulda, the youngest of the Normes, rode;
And over Bifrost, where is Heimdall's watch,
Past Midgard fortress, down to earth they came;
There through some battle-field, where men fall fast,
Their horses fetlock-deep in blood, they ride,
And pick the bravest warriors out for death,
Whom they bring back with them at night to heaven
To glad the Gods, and feast in Odin's hall.
MATTHEW ARNOLD--Balder Dead.

[Next: Chapter XVIII. Thursday--The Day of Thor](#)



CHAPTER XVIII

Thursday--The Day of Thor

Thor, the Thunderer, is perhaps the most famous of the gods of the Northmen, and was considered by some to be greater even than Odin. He was the God of the Peasants--the poor people, while Odin was thought more of by the rich people and the great fighters. Thor usually rode in a chariot of brass, drawn by two goats, Tooth-cracker and Tooth-gnasher, and it was this chariot which was supposed to make the thunder; hence Thor's name. Thor, alone of all the gods, was never allowed to cross the bridge joining Asgard and the earth, lest this chariot should break it down.

As the Thunderer, Thor corresponded to Jupiter, who, as we have read, hurled thunderbolts when enraged, and for this reason Thor's name was given to the Roman Dies Jovis, the day of Jupiter, the modern French jeudi.

Thor was of very great strength, like Hercules among the Greeks and Romans, and possessed a wonderful hammer called Miolnir, the Crusher, which always returned to his hand when he had thrown it at an enemy. He also wore a magic belt which increased his strength the more he pulled it in. The way in which Miolnir came to be made is told in a story of Thor's wife Sif, who was very proud of her golden hair, which reached down to her feet. One morning Thor woke to find that Sif's hair had been cruelly cut off during the night. Filled with anger, he set out to find the culprit, whom he rightly guessed to be Loki, the God of Fire. Loki was the spirit of evil and mischief, and was always playing cruel tricks on the gods, who frequently punished him. Thor soon caught Loki, and would have strangled him had he not promised to bring Sif a new head of hair as beautiful as the first. Thor then released Loki, who quickly went to the home of the dwarfs, who lived underground. There he found a dwarf who agreed to make the hair for Loki, and also presents for Odin and Frey, the God of the Fields, whom Loki was afraid would be angry with him. The dwarf made a head of hair of the finest gold thread, which he said would grow on Sif's head as soon as it touched it. Then he made the spear Gungnir which, as we have seen, Odin always carried with him; while for Frey he made a ship which could sail through the air as well as on the water, and could be folded up like a cloth. Loki was of course delighted with the skill of this clever little smith, and declared that no other dwarf could be as clever. This led to a challenge from another dwarf, who claimed that he could make three still more wonderful things. This dwarf in his turn made a wild boar with golden bristles, which travelled through the air, and gave out a bright light as it passed; a magic ring, out of which came eight more rings exactly like it every ninth night; and lastly an iron hammer, Miolnir, which no one could resist. Loki and the dwarf then gave their presents to the

gods: the spear and the ring to Odin, the ship and the golden boar to Frey, and the hair and the hammer to Thor. The gods decided that the contest had been won by the second dwarf, because Mjolnir would be of such great use against the frost-giants, with whom the gods were continually fighting.

Thor often journeyed to the land of the giants, and on one occasion, having set out with Loki, he reached the desolate giant-country at nightfall. A thick mist covered the ground, and, after struggling on with some difficulty, the gods came to what seemed to be a house with an open doorway which took up all one side of the building. The gods entered the house, which was cold and dark, and, tired with their journey, lay down to sleep. Their rest, however, was soon disturbed by a loud noise and the trembling of the ground, and, fearing the roof of the house might fall on them, Thor and his companion moved into a smaller room which led out of the main building, and there slept till dawn. On going out into the open the next morning, Thor saw lying near an enormous giant, whose snores shook the ground, and was thus able to account for the noise and the trembling of the earth which had disturbed his sleep. But imagine the astonishment of the gods when the giant woke and picked up the house they had slept in--they had passed the night in the thumb of his glove! Thor and his companion then continued their journey, accompanied now by the giant, whose name was Skrymir. When evening came, they rested beneath a tree, and the giant, before going to sleep, offered them the food which he carried in his wallet. Thor, however, was unable to undo the straps of the huge wallet, so the gods had to go hungry. Angry at this, Thor dealt the giant, who was now asleep, three terrible blows on the head with his hammer Mjolnir. But the only effect this had on the giant was to cause him to wake up and complain that three times a leaf or a twig had fallen on his head. The next morning Skrymir showed the gods the way to the castle of Utgard-loki, the giant king, and then left them. Arriving at the palace, the gods entered and presented themselves to the king, who recognized them and asked them to show him their powers of which he had heard so much. Loki, who was very hungry, offered to eat more than anyone, and the king's cook was matched against him. They each stood at the end of a wooden trough full of meat, and though Loki soon reached the middle of the trough, leaving nothing but bones behind, he found that the giant had eaten the bones and the trough as well. Loki's defeat made Thor even more anxious to show his powers, and he offered to empty the largest drinking-horn in the palace. A huge drinking-horn was at once brought in, and Thor drank so deep and so long that it seemed as if he would never stop, only to find, however, when he could drink no more, that the horn was still almost full. Nothing daunted by his failure, Thor now offered to show his strength, but when he tried to lift Utgard-loki's cat, he only succeeded in raising one paw from the ground. Thor tried yet again to show his skill, this time in wrestling, but he was easily beaten by Utgard-loki's old nurse. The gods were then entertained by the giants till the following day, when they returned. Before they left, however, Utgard-loki explained that he was the giant Skrymir, and that he had used magic against the gods in all their contests. By magic he had placed a mountain between his head and Thor's hammer and thus saved his life, for the blows had made three huge clefts in the mountain. The cook who had beaten Loki was really Wild Fire; the end of the drinking-horn which Thor had failed to empty had been placed in the sea, which had sunk lower after Thor's enormous draughts; the

cat was really the huge snake Iormungandr, which encircled the earth, and which Thor had nearly lifted out of the sea; the nurse was really Old Age, whom, of course, no one could possibly overcome.

Thor seldom lost an opportunity of making war on the giants, and on a famous occasion challenged to single combat the giant Hrungrir, whose head and heart were of stone. Hrungrir one day matched his horse Golden Mane against Odin's steed, Sleipnir, and, in the excitement of the race, followed Odin right to the gates of Valhalla. Though, of course, the presence of a giant in Asgard could not be allowed, the gods had no wish to take advantage of Hrungrir's mistake, and offered him meat and drink in their banqueting hall. Hrungrir, however, drank too freely of the mead of the gods, and began to speak proud words and boast one day that he would overthrow Asgard and kill all the gods. This so enraged Thor that he raised his hammer to kill Hrungrir, but the gods would not allow him to shed blood within their home. He then challenged the giant to a duel, which was arranged to take place three days later on the boundary of Hrungrir's kingdom. At the appointed time the giant was on the chosen spot awaiting his enemy, and, feeling the earth shaking beneath him, he stood on his shield of stone, lest Thor should come up from the ground. But no sooner had he done this than Thor suddenly came in sight and hurled his hammer straight at the giant's head. Hrungrir, having no shield, tried to ward off the hammer with his stone club, which was shattered to pieces, thus scattering flint stones over the whole earth, where they may still be found. One piece entered Thor's forehead, and he dropped fainting to the ground, but as he fell his hammer struck Hrungrir on the head and killed him. Thor was pinned to the ground by one of the giant's legs, and, after each of the gods had tried in vain to free him, he was at last rescued by Magni, his little son of three, who easily raised the giant's leg and released his father, receiving as a reward Hrungrir's horse, Golden Mane. Magni was one of the few gods destined to survive the terrible Ragnarok, the day of destruction, when, as we shall see, Thor, the Thunderer, fell in mortal combat with the sea-monster Iormungandr.

The Challenge of Thor
I am the God Thor,
I am the War God,
I am the Thunderer!
Here in my Northland,
My fastness and fortress,
Reign I for ever!
Here amid ice-bergs
Rule I the nations;
This is my hammer,
Mjolner the mighty;
Giants and sorcerers
Cannot withstand it!
These are the gauntlets
Wherewith I wield it,

And hurl it afar off;
This is my girdle;
Whenever I brace it,
Strength is redoubled!
The light thou beholdest
Stream through the heavens,
In flashes of crimson,
Is but my red beard
Blown by the night-wind,
Affrighting the nations.
Jove is my brother;
Mine eyes are the lightning;
The wheels of my chariot
Roll in the thunder,
The blows of my hammer
Ring in the earthquake!
Force rules the world still,
Has ruled it, shall rule it;
Meekness is weakness,
Strength is triumphant,
Over the whole earth,
Still is it Thor's-day!
LONGFELLOW--The Saga of King Olaf.

[Next: Chapter XIX. Friday--The Day of Freya](#)



CHAPTER XIX

Friday--The Day of Freya

In the stories of the gods and goddesses of the Angles and Saxons we find two goddesses, Frigga, the wife of Odin and queen of the gods, and Freya, the Goddess of Love. Some people think that Friday was named after Frigga, and others that it was Freya's day. Since very similar stories are told of each of them, it is quite probable that they were really the same person. The Roman name for the day was Dies Veneris, the day of Venus, who, it will be remembered, was the Goddess of Love, and so corresponded to Freya. The modern French name is taken from the Latin and is vendredi.

Frigga was the Goddess of the Clouds, and, when she was not with her husband Odin, spent her time in spinning clouds. Her spinning-wheel was studded with jewels, and at night could be seen in the sky as the constellation to which the Romans gave the name of Orion's Belt, as we have seen in the story of Orion.

Frigga was also the Goddess of Spring, and as such was known as Eastre, whom we have already mentioned as giving us the word Easter.

Freya, the Goddess of Love and Beauty, like the Venus of the Romans, received a great welcome when she came to the home of the gods, and was given a special kingdom called Folk Meadow, where was a vast hall known as the Hall of Many Seats. Here she received half of those slain in battle, the other half being entertained by Odin, as we have seen.

Freya is depicted as having blue eyes and golden hair, and often as wearing a robe of feathers, which enabled her to fly through the air like a bird.

The goddess is said to have married Odur, who was probably Odin under another name. Odur once had occasion to leave Freya and travel over the world, and the goddess was broken-hearted at his departure. Her tears fell among the rocks and were changed to gold, while some which fell into the sea were transformed into amber. All nature mourned with her: the trees shed their leaves, the grass withered, and the flowers drooped their heads. At last Freya in her distress set out to find her husband, and, passing through many lands, where her golden tears were afterwards found, came to the sunny south, and there overtook the wandering Odur. As the lovers returned, the fields and the flowers rejoiced with them. The frost and snow fled before them, and the earth became green again as they passed.

"And Freya next came nigh, with golden tears;
The loveliest Goddess she in Heaven, by all
Most honour'd after Freya, Odin's wife.
Her long ago the wandering Odur took
To mate, but left her to roam distant lands;
Since then she seeks him, and weeps tears of gold."
MATTHEW ARNOLD--Balder Dead.

This story, of course, reminds us of Ceres and Persephone, and is only another fanciful explanation of summer and winter.

Freya was the proud possessor of a dazzling necklace of gold, which had been made by the dwarfs, and which she wore night and day. On one occasion only did she lend the necklace, when Thor, disguised as Freya, went to the land of the giants to recover his hammer, which had been stolen by the Giant Thrym. Loki, by borrowing Freya's robe of feathers and flying over the country of the giants, had discovered the thief, but had also found that Thrym would only return the hammer on condition that Freya would become his wife. When Freya heard of the giant's presumption, she became greatly enraged, and vowed that she would never leave her beloved Odur and go to live in that dreary and desolate land of cold. Heimdall, the guardian of the bridge Bifrost, then suggested that Thor should go to Thrym disguised as Freya, in company with Loki disguised as Freya's attendant. The gods at last allowed themselves to be persuaded, and Thor, having borrowed Freya's clothes and necklace and wearing a thick veil, set out with Loki, who was dressed as a handmaiden. On reaching the giant's palace, they were welcomed by Thrym, who was delighted at the success of his plan, and who led them to the banqueting hall, where a great feast was held. At the end of the feast, Thrym ordered the famous hammer to be brought in, and he himself laid it in his bride's lap as a marriage gift. Thor's hand immediately closed over the hammer, and in a few moments Thrym and all the guests invited to the wedding feast lay dead.

Freya was greatly relieved to have her necklace returned in safety, but the evil Loki, attracted by its wonderful beauty, determined to steal it. One night the god, by changing himself into a fly, succeeded in entering Freya's palace. He then resumed his own shape, and, creeping stealthily to Freya's bed, gently removed the necklace from the goddess's neck. The watchful Heimdall, however, had heard Loki's footsteps, and, looking in the direction of the Folk Meadow, became a witness of the theft. He at once set off in pursuit of Loki, and, overtaking him, drew his sword and was about to kill the thief, when Loki changed himself into a flame. Heimdall immediately changed himself into a cloud, and sent down a shower of rain to put out the fire. Loki then took the form of a bear, and opened his mouth to catch the water. Heimdall also took the form of a bear and attacked Loki, who, finding that he was being overpowered, changed himself yet again, into a seal. Heimdall followed suit, and fought again with Loki, and at length compelled him to give up the necklace, which was returned to Freya.

On another occasion Freya was sought by one of the giants, and it was only by the cunning of

Loki and by an act of bad faith on the part of the gods that she was saved. The gods, ever anxious lest the giants should invade Asgard, decided to build a stronghold which would prove impregnable. They received an offer from a stranger, who was willing to undertake the work in return for the sun, the moon, and the goddess Freya. By Loki's advice they accepted the offer on condition that he should complete the work in one winter, aided only by his horse. To the surprise of the gods the stranger agreed to these conditions, and with the help of his horse, which could haul the heaviest stone, set to work. The gods, who at first felt sure that their conditions had made the task impossible, were alarmed to find as time went on that the stranger was working so quickly that it seemed certain that he would be able to keep his promise. The gods on their side had no intention whatever of keeping their promise, since they could not possibly part with the sun and the moon and the Goddess of Love, and they angrily pointed out to Loki that since it was he who had got them into this difficulty, he must find some way out of it. Loki replied that the gods need have no fear, for with his usual cunning he had thought of a plan whereby the stranger might be made to forfeit his reward. On the last day, when only one stone remained to be dragged into position, Loki changed himself into a horse, and, trotting out from the forest, neighed loudly to attract the attention of the stranger's horse. Tired of his continual labour and longing for freedom and rest, the horse broke free from its load and galloped after Loki. The stranger, after pursuing it vainly through the forest, at last made his way to Asgard, and, full of anger at the trick which had been played upon him, took on his real shape, for he was a frost-giant, and was about to attack the gods when Thor hurled his hammer at him and killed him.

Frey, the god mentioned in the story of Loki and Sif's golden hair, was Freya's brother. He was the God of the Fields, and sacrifices were made to him for the crops. In the early spring his wooden image was driven in a chariot through the countryside, in order that he might bless the fields and bring a fruitful harvest: Frey, as we have seen, became the possessor of a ship which could travel over land and sea, and though large enough to contain all the gods, yet could be folded up like a cloth, and he also possessed a boar with golden bristles. The god often rode on this boar, which was swifter than a horse, and was no doubt a symbol of the sun, which ripened the crops. We find the same idea of sunshine in Frey's flashing sword, which fought of its own accord as soon as it was drawn from its sheath.

The month of the Angles and Saxons which begins just before our Christmas was sacred to both Frey and Thor, and it was customary at that time, as we have already mentioned, to bind a huge wooden wheel with straw, and, setting fire to it, to roll it down a hill. The wheel was a symbol of the sun, which at that time began to chase away the winter. At this time, too, was held a great feast to all the gods, and the chief meat eaten was a boar's head, in honour of Frey. The missionaries who first brought Christianity to the Northmen, finding this feast was of great importance and was celebrated by all the people, did not try to do away with it. Instead, they changed it from a heathen to a Christian festival by putting Christ in the place of the Norse gods, and calling it the Feast or Mass of Christ. A similar change was made, it will be remembered, in the case of the Easter festival, held in honour of Eastre or Frigga, the wife of Odin.

[Next: Chapter XX. Saturday--The Day of Saturn](#)



CHAPTER XX

Saturday--The Day of Saturn

In the Roman calendar, Saturday was called Dies Saturni in honour of the god Saturn, whom we have already mentioned. He was the father of Jupiter, who finally overthrew him. He then made his way to the earth, and reigned over a kingdom in Italy called Latium. A great festival was held in his honour in December, as we have seen.

The Old-English name Saeter-daeg, from which the word Saturday comes, seems to be a translation of the Latin name, and so suggests no god of the Angles and Saxons to us, as do the days Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. We find, however, that the day was sacred to Loki, the God of Fire, and there are some who think that

"Saeter-daeg" means "the day of Saetere", another name for Loki. The stories told of Loki show him to have been a mixture of good and evil. While willing to help the gods in their difficulties, he also played dangerous tricks on them, and more than once led them into harm. As time went on, he seems to have become the spirit of evil only, and the gods at last banished him from Asgard, and condemned him to a terrible punishment. He was chained to the side of a cave, and a snake was fastened over his head in such a way that the poison from its fangs dropped on his face. His wife, however, remained faithful to him; she made her way to the cave where Loki was imprisoned, and stayed by his side, holding up a cup to catch the poison which fell from the snake, and only leaving him in order to empty the cup when it was full. The poison which fell on Loki's face while she was absent caused him to twist and writhe with pain till he shook the earth, and thus produced earthquakes.

This punishment of Loki reminds us of the story of Prometheus, but it will be remembered that the latter suffered because he had been a friend to man, and not like Loki a source of evil. As Prometheus was rescued at last by Hercules, so Loki was destined to escape on the great day of Ragnarok, and to appear in his true colours on the side of the giants, soon afterwards meeting his death at the hands of Heimdall. The Northmen, unlike the Greeks and Romans, regarded their gods as mortal, and believed that their rule would one day come to an end. They pictured a final struggle between the gods, the forces of good, and the forces of evil represented by Loki, the frost-giants, and all the terrible monsters which they had created. Odin, in his great wisdom, knew what the future would eventually bring, and spared no effort to prolong his rule and prepare for the fateful day. For this reason he welcomed the great heroes to Valhalla, and kept the tree of life, Yggdrasil, nourished with the water of the sacred spring; for this reason the giants tried to steal Thor's hammer, the weapon they most

dreaded. Many things pointed to the approach of Ragnarok. First the earth suffered from six successive winters more severe and prolonged than had ever been known before. Snow fell without ceasing, freezing winds blew from the north, and the whole earth was covered with ice. In their struggle to live under these terrible conditions, men lost their faith in the gods, and gave themselves up to evil and wrong-doing. Sin and crime were found everywhere, and as the evil-doers passed into the Underworld, they became food for the wolves which were continually pursuing the sun and moon, and endeavouring to swallow them. As their food became more plentiful, the wolves increased in strength and speed, until at last the day came when Sol and Mani found the wolves rapidly gaining on them. In spite of all their efforts, the wolves continued to overtake them, and at length seized them in their enormous jaws, and plunged the earth into darkness. The foundations of the earth shook, the stars fell from the sky, and the mountains came crashing down. As if this were a signal, Loki and the fierce wolf Fenrir put forth new strength and burst their chains, for their day of revenge had come. The dragon which lay at the foot of Yggdrasil gnawed through the root of the sacred tree. The Midgard serpent, Iormungandr, lashed and writhed till the sea rose in mighty waves, and at last breaking its bonds, the terrible monster crawled to the land. Heimdall, the keeper of the bridge, realizing that the twilight of the gods was at hand, blew a blast on his horn that was heard in every corner of the world. The gods hastily donned their armour, and marshalled the army of heroes. Now indeed Odin regretted the loss of his eye, Tiu that he had sacrificed his right hand, and Frey that he had lent his sword to his servant, who was away in the lands of the North.

Meanwhile the followers of the goddess Hel were led by Loki to the plain of Vigrid, the scene of the great battle. Here they were joined by Hel herself, Garm, the fierce dog who guarded the entrance to the Underworld, and Fenrir, the monster wolf. From the misty land of the North came the army of the frost-giants, while out of the South, with a burst of light, there dashed on to the plain Surtr, the giant of the Flaming Sword.

Terrible indeed were the forces arrayed against the gods, but they, like the Northmen themselves, knew no fear on the day of battle, and assembled their armies on the plain of Vigrid, prepared to resist the powers of evil to the last.

With shouts and cries, amid fire and smoke, the armies meet. Odin and the wolf Fenrir come together with a crash, which echoes through the whole world, but not even the mighty Odin can withstand this terrible enemy. Fenrir, now fiercer and stronger than ever before, opens his vast jaws till they stretch from heaven to earth, and overwhelms the leader of gods and men. But Odin's death is quickly avenged. His son Vidar, wearing the iron shoe, which had been kept for this day, now falls upon Fenrir, and, as had been foretold, places his iron-shod foot on the monster's lower jaw, and then seizing the upper jaw, with a mighty wrench tears Fenrir asunder.

Meanwhile Tiu grapples with Garm, and after a fierce struggle slays him, only to fall dead beside him. Frey attacks the fire-giant Surtr, but soon falls before his flaming onslaught.

Heimdall and Loki once again meet in deadly conflict, and this time Heimdall overcomes the God of Evil, but, like Tiu, falls mortally wounded by his enemy. Thor, with his hammer Mjolnir, advances against the huge Midgard serpent. The struggle is long and terrible; with a mighty blow of his hammer Thor at last kills the monster, and then, as he staggers back, is overwhelmed by the flood of poison which it outpours. The heroes of Valhalla are all overthrown by the giants and followers of Hel, and there is no longer anyone of Odin's vast host to withstand the powers of evil.

Surtr then flings his fire over the world, Asgard is consumed in roaring flames, and the earth, scorched and blackened, sinks into a boiling sea. Ragnarok has come, and the old gods have passed away.

But in the minds of the Northmen evil could have no lasting victory. The very flames which had destroyed the home of the gods and had overwhelmed the earth had purged the world of evil. A new earth rose from the sea, lit by a new sun, the daughter of Sol, and life, drawn forth by its warm rays, once more spread over the earth. Trees clothed themselves anew with leaves, and the fields became fair with flowers. From the depth of the forest, where Mimir's spring had bubbled forth, came Lifthrasir (Desire of Life) and his wife Lif (Life), who in course of time became the rulers of a new race. To the field of Ida, where the gods had been wont to hold their games, came the survivors of the gods: two sons of Odin, Vidar, the slayer of Fenrir, and his brother Vali, who had killed Hodur to avenge the death of Balder; two sons of Thor, Magni (Strength) and Modi (Courage), who had rescued Mjolnir from the battle-field and now wielded it in place of their father; and finally, Balder and Hodur, who had been set free from Hel, and who now lived together as brothers, forgetful of the past.

It seems strange to us that the Northmen should have pictured the destruction of their gods, and it is possible that the writers of the wonderful poems from which we obtain these stories knew something of Christianity, and had begun to turn from their heathen beliefs. We find, however, that many heathen peoples had similar beliefs. The idea of eternity was impossible to them; they felt that there must be an end to everything. Accordingly they imagined their gods, after a long period of peace and good rule, being overthrown by the powers of evil and destruction, and being replaced by a new heaven and earth, which in turn would also be destroyed and renewed. Among no other people do we find so complete a description of this world catastrophe as in our ancestors' story of Ragnarok, the Twilight of the Gods.

The Day of Ragnarok

The generations pass, the ages grow,
And bring us nearer to the final day
When from the south shall march the fiery band,
And cross the bridge of heaven, with Lok for guide,
And Fenrir at his heel with broken chain;
While from the east the giant Rymer steers

His ship, and the great serpent makes to land;
And all are marshall'd in one flaming square
Against the Gods, upon the plains of Heaven.

* * * * *

Far to the south, beyond the blue, there spreads
Another Heaven, the boundless--no one yet
Hath reach'd it; there hereafter shall arise
The second Asgard, with another name.
Thither, when o'er this present earth and Heavens
The tempest of the latter days hath swept,
And they from sight have disappear'd, and sunk,
Shall a small remnant of the Gods repair;
There re-assembling we shall see emerge
From the bright Ocean at our feet an earth
More fresh, more verdant than the last, with fruits
Self-springing, and a seed of man preserved,
Who then shall live in peace, as now in war.
But we in Heaven shall find again with joy
The ruin'd palaces of Odin, seats
Familiar, halls where we have supp'd of old;
Re-enter them with wonder, never fill
Our eyes with gazing, and rebuild with tears.
And we shall tread once more the well-known plain
Of Ida, and among the grass shall find
The golden dice wherewith we played of yore;
And that will bring to mind the former life
And pastime of the Gods, the wise discourse
Of Odin, the delights of other days.

MATTHEW ARNOLD--Balder Dead.

[Next: Chapter XXI. The Meaning of the Ancient Myths](#)



CHAPTER XXI

The Meaning of the Ancient Myths

It is perhaps difficult for us to realize that the wonderful gods and goddesses of whom we have been reading were once very real to the people who invented them, but the fact that they are commemorated for all time in the names of our months and days shows how real they were. Some of the stories may seem childish to us, and the ideas which they contain are certainly very different from the ideas of God we have to-day, But it must always be remembered that very nearly all that we know about the marvellous world in which we live has been discovered since the days of the Romans and Northmen. They did not have the opportunity of learning what we have learnt, and if their belief seems childish to us, it is because in some ways the people were childish, when we compare them with ourselves. Grown-up people, however, do not make fun of the wonderful stories which children invent, and many of the myths, as these stories of the gods are called, are very clever and very beautiful.

The earth and the sea, the sun and the moon and the stars, the seasons, the rain and the snow, the trees and the flowers were all difficult to understand, and those early peoples explained them as best they could. Most of these explanations seem fanciful to us now, but, after all, they were very natural explanations. We shall see this better if we compare the gods and goddesses of the Greeks and Romans with those of the Northmen. They are very similar in many ways, and many of the stories are similar too.

Jupiter, before he became the ruler of the gods, had to overthrow the Titans, and in the same way Odin had to conquer the frost-giants. The Roman gods had their home on Mount Olympus, from which Jupiter could look down over the earth, while Odin from his palace in Asgard could also see all heaven and earth. Hel, the Goddess of the Underworld, reigned over a dark kingdom, to which came those who died, in the same way as Pluto ruled the underground kingdom of Hades. The Underworlds, too, were very similar; the good among the dead were divided off from the evil, who suffered terrible punishments for their crimes; the entrance in each case was guarded by a fierce dog, Garm in the kingdom of Hel, and the three-headed Cerberus in Hades.

We have already noticed the way in which the Romans and the Northmen explained summer and winter, and the likeness between the punishments of Prometheus and Loki.

In the sun-myths there is much confusion, for although the Greeks and the Romans had a sun-

god, Apollo, and the Northmen a god of light, Balder the Beautiful, we find in some stories that the sun is represented by other gods, and even mortals. Frey is really the sun, for it is he who makes the crops grow in the fields, and light like the sun's rays flashes from his sword and from his golden-bristled boar. Juno is the light of heaven, and in the story of Argus, the Hundred-eyed, gives Io, who represents the moon, into the keeping of Argus, the starry sky, but the light of the stars is slowly put out by Mercury, the God of Wind and Rain. The burning of the earth by Phaeton means a drought which is brought to an end by a thunder-storm, the thunderbolt hurled at Phaeton by Jupiter.

In the story of Diana and Endymion, Endymion is a symbol of the setting sun which Diana watches as she mounts the sky. Hercules, too, probably represents the sun. His conquest of the many-headed serpent is the victory of the sun over the darkness, as is Apollo's slaying of Python. The twelve labours of Hercules may represent the twelve constellations in the zodiac, or possibly twelve hours of daylight. Hercules' funeral pyre, which reddens the whole sky like the setting sun, is seen again in the burning of Balder and his ship Ringhorn.

Thor is like Hercules, through his great strength, and just as he put on a woman's dress in order to recover his hammer from the giants, so Hercules on one occasion was forced to dress like a woman. Thor's wife, Sif, represents the earth, while her golden hair is the vegetation. When Loki steals the hair, he brings the same misfortune on the earth as Pluto causes by seizing Persephone. Loki has to visit the dwarfs underground in order to obtain the golden hair, and Mercury seeks Persephone in Hades. Persephone's eating of the pomegranate seeds, which keeps her in the Underworld, is like the refusal of the giantess to weep for Balder.

Another sun-myth is the story of Jason, who obtains the Golden Fleece (the rays of the sun) by killing the dragon, which represents either darkness or drought. Phryxus and Helle represent clouds, as probably do the Argo and the magic ship of Frey. Bellerophon, too, is the sun, who, mounted on Pegasus, the clouds, slays the dragon of drought, and at last, when struck by Jupiter's thunderbolt, falls from the sky into darkness.

We see then that all these myths were attempts to explain or describe what we call Nature--the earth and the sky, the sun, the moon, and so on. As Christianity spread, belief in the myths passed away, but many interesting and curious stories have been left behind which cannot be forgotten as long as we keep the names of our months and days. These names will always remind us of gods and heroes, of stirring deeds and bold adventures, all of which have been preserved too in the writings of the great poets of all times and lands.

[Next: Chapter XXII. Notes on Certain Days](#)

CHAPTER XXII

Notes on Certain Days

Sabbath Day.--The word sabbath comes from a Hebrew word meaning "to cease from labour" and the Sabbath Day, as we know from the Bible, was the seventh day of the week and a day of rest. It is owing to this custom of the Jews that our Sunday is a holiday. The word "holiday" means, of course, "holy day", and we owe all our holidays in the first place to the custom of keeping certain Saint's Days as days of rest from work, in order that festivities might be held in honour of the saint of the day.

Black Monday.--This name is given nowadays to any Monday on which a great disaster happens, but it originated in 1360, when a terrible storm did great damage in England on the Easter Monday of that year. Shakespeare refers to this Black Monday in his play *The Merchant of Venice*, Act II, Scene 5.

Shrove Tuesday.--The day before Ash Wednesday, and so named because on that day people were expected to "shrive", that is, confess their sins to the priest. After the confession was over, the people made merry, and the pancakes connected with Shrove Tuesday are all that is left to us of the old feasting and merry-making.

Ash Wednesday.--The time from this day to Easter Day (forty days) is called "Lent" (from Old-English *lencten*: Spring, the time when the days grow longer), and it was once a general custom among Christians to fast during this period. Ash Wednesday is so called from a service of the Roman Catholic Church which is held on that day, and in the course of which the priests place ashes of burnt palm on the foreheads of penitents.

Maundy Thursday.--The Thursday before Good Friday. On this day was held the ceremony of washing the feet of poor people in memory of Christ's washing of His disciples' feet. This ceremony was called "Maundy", so the day became known as Maundy Thursday. Maundy comes from the Latin word *mandatum*, the first word of the service sung during the ceremony. Gifts were also made to the poor at the same time, and this custom still continues. Every Maundy Thursday money known as "Maundy money" is given to a certain number of poor people, the distribution of the money taking place in Westminster Abbey. This money includes the old fourpenny-piece and twopenny and one penny pieces in silver.

Lady Day.--The 25th of March, and the day dedicated by the Church to the Virgin Mary (Our Lady). The first of the four Quarter Days.

Martinmas.--The 11th of November, the day held by Roman Catholics as sacred to St. Martin, Bishop of Tours, a town in France. He served in the army for a number of years before entering the Church, and many interesting tales are told of him. He was born in A.D. 316, and died in 400. Martinmas is the fourth of the Scotch Quarter Days, the others being Candlemas, Whitsunday, and Lammas.

Michaelmas Day.--The 29th of September, the day on which the Mass or Feast of St. Michael is held. St. Michael is described in the Book of Daniel as being one of the chief of the angels. Michaelmas is the third Quarter Day, the second and fourth being Midsummer and Christmas.

Primrose Day.--The 19th of April, the day on which Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield, died. He was one of the Prime Ministers of Queen Victoria's reign. The primrose was reputed to be his favourite flower, and his statue in Parliament Square is decorated with primroses each year on the anniversary of his death.

St. Swithin's Day.--St. Swithin lived in the reign of King Egbert. He was the Bishop of Winchester, and died in A. D. 852. He was buried outside the church at Winchester, and in 971, when the new cathedral had been built, the monks decided to place his body inside the cathedral. They were prevented from doing so, however, by rain, which fell without ceasing for forty days. This gave rise to the common belief that if it rains on St. Swithin's Day (15th July) it will rain for forty days.

St. Valentine's Day.--St. Valentine was a Christian bishop who was beheaded in Rome about the year A.D. 270. His martyrdom is commemorated on the 14th. of February. The custom of sending "valentines" on that day has really no connection with St. Valentine, but is probably an ancient Roman custom arising out of the worship of Juno.

Greek, Roman, and Old-English Gods

GREEK.	ROMAN.	OLD-ENGLISH.
Zeus.	Jupiter (King).	Woden.
Hera.	Juno (Queen).	Frigga.
Aphrodite.	Venus(Love).	Freya.
Ares.	Mars (War).	Tiu.
Hermes.	Mercury (Messenger).	Hermod.
Helios.	Apollo (Sun).	Frey, Balder.
Artemis.	Diana (Moon).	--
Athene.	Minerva (Wisdom).	--
Hepheastus.	Vulcan (Fire).	--
Poseidon.	Neptune (Sea).	--
Dionysius.	Bacchus (Wine).	--
--	--	Thor.
--	--	Loki.

Names of the Days

The French Revolutionary Calendar

Each month consisted of thirty days, and five extra days, dedicated to Virtue, Genius, Labour, Opinion, and Rewards, were put in as holidays to make up three hundred and sixty-five days. Every fourth year an extra day was added, known as Revolution Day. The Calendar dated from 22nd September, 1792, and was in force till the year 1806.

END.