

## THE MONTHS OF THE YEAR.

THE time taken by the moon in making its revolution of the earth gave rise to the division of the year into months, though the lunar year is divided into thirteen, and the calendar year into but twelve, months. The sun measures time for us, and has done so for thousands of years, since the first Chaldean shepherd measured the morning and the evening shadows on the sand, and first dreamt of time by observing the sun by day, and the stars by night. The French Revolutionists of 1793, in their hurry to change all things, made their year begin when ours arrives at its fruition, their Vendemaire or Vintage month being coincident with our September 22nd. We, following the rule of ages and the Roman Calendar, make January, from Janus, the two-faced deity, looking both into the past and present year, begin in the mid-winter of our days.

To quote the admirable calendar of months, by Spenser, which will never grow old, so true is its description:—

First came old January, wrapped well  
In many weeds to keep the cold away;  
Yet he did quake and quiver, like to quell,  
And blow his nails, to warm them if he may.

Aquarius is the zodiacal sign of this, the coldest month in the year. In ancient pictures, January is represented as a wood-cutter, with a little wood under his arm, blowing his fingers to warm them; and standing near him, the figure of Aquarius, or Water-bearer, because the sun enters this sign in the heavens on the 19th of this month.

Cold February sat in an old waggon, for he could not ride. This waggon was a sort of boat, which two fishes drew through the waters. By his side he had his plough and harness, and he had also his pruning-knife for the trees before the leaves appeared. The name February is derived from the circumstances, that during this month occurred the Roman festival called the Lupercalia, and also Februalia, from *februare*, to purify. Pisces is the sign for February, because on the eighteenth of the month the sun enters the sign Pisces in the zodiacal belt. It is an appropriate emblem, because fish multiply more than any other created beings, one hundred thousand young being a small family for a big fish; and so it aptly indicates the approach of spring, when all nature is about to burst forth into new life. The Saxons used to represent this month as a vine-dresser, pruning trees, or, in some instances, warming his hands, by beating them across the body, thus picturing the coldness of the early year.

When in the zodiac the fish wheel round,  
They loose the floods and irrigate the ground;  
Then husbandmen resume their wonted toil,  
Yoke their strong steers, and plough the yielding soil;  
Then prudent gardeners seize the happy time  
To dig and trench, and prune for shoots to climb,  
Inspect their borders, mark the silent birth  
Of plants, successive, from the teeming earth,  
Watch the young nurslings with paternal care,  
And hope for "growing weather" all the year.  
Yet February's suns uncertain shine,  
For rain and frost alternately combine  
To stop the plough, with sudden wintry storms—  
And often violence the month deforms.

Sturdy March rode upon a ram, strongly armed. His stern brows were bent, but he was kinder than he seemed to be. As we say, his bark was worse than his bite, for he held in his hand, not a sword but a spade; and he had with him a bag full of all sorts of seeds, and as he rode on the ram, he took handfuls out and strewed them on the earth. March, dedicated by Romulus to Mars, the god of war, was the first month of the Roman year, which had at first but ten months. Numa, the second Roman King, added January and February to the calendar, thus making twelve. Until the change of style in 1752, it was considered as the first month of the year in England, and the legal year was reckoned from March 25th.

Aries is the celestial sign for the month of March, as the sun enters that sign in the zodiac on the twentieth of the month. Perhaps this emblem was chosen because, in ancient times, the increasing power of the sun's rays was expressed by the horns of animals. In old paintings March is portrayed as a man of a tawny colour and fierce aspect, with a helmet on his head—a type of Mars; but in order to make the emblem appropriate to the season, and the labours of the farmer, he is made leaning on a spade, holding blossoms in one hand and a basket of seeds on his arm. March has been well described as Nature's Old Forester, going through the woods and dotting the trees with green, to mark out the spots where the future leaves are to be hung. The Anglo-Saxons called it "Hlyd-monath," stormy month, and "Hraed-monath," rugged month, also "Lenet-monath," length month, in reference to the lengthening of the day at this season—the origin of the term Lent. There is an old proverb, still used by the English and Scotch rustics, which represents March as borrowing three days from April; and in the *Complaynt of Scotland* they are thus described:—

The first it shall be wind and weat,  
The next it shall be snow and sleet;  
The third it shall be sic a freeze  
Shall gar the birds stick to the trees.

But it is disputed whether these "borrowed days" are the last three of March, or the first three of April.

Fresh April, wet with showers, came riding on a bull, whose horns were gilt with golden studs, and garnished with garlands of all the fairest flowers and freshest buds the earth produces. Whether the name of the month comes from *aperire*, to open, being the month of opening and unfolding buds; or whether the name is in some way akin to Aphrodite, seeing that the Romans dedicated the month to Venus, the goddess of the reproductive powers

of nature—is a question to which there seems to be no certain answer. The Anglo-Saxons called it "Eastre-monath," but whether from a Saxon goddess "Eostre," or from an old Teutonic word, "urstan," to rise, appears again to be uncertain. By the Dutch, it was called "Grass-month." The custom of sending one upon a bootless errand on the first day of the month is perhaps a travesty of the sending hither and thither of the Saviour from Annas to Caiaphas and from Pilate to Herod, because during the Middle Ages this scene in Christ's life was made the subject of a miracle-play at Easter, which occurs in the month of April. It is possible, however, that it may be a relic of some old heathen festival. The customs attached to April Fool's day appear to be universal throughout Europe. In France, a victim of the custom is called *un poisson d'Avril*; in Scotland, a "gowk." It is curious that the Hindoos practise precisely similar tricks on the 31st of March, when they hold what is called the Huli festival.

Fair May followed, the fairest maid to be seen anywhere, decked with dainties and throwing flowers out of her cap. She sat on the shoulders of twins; and at sight of her, all creatures laughed, leaped and danced. The common notion that this month was named *Maius* by the Romans in honour of Maia, the mother of Mercury, is quite erroneous, for the name was in use among them long before they knew anything of Mercury or his mother. The name is derived from the Latin word *maius*, a contraction of *magius*, from a root *mag*, to grow, May being the season of growth. The outbreak into new life and beauty, which marks nature at this time, instinctively excites feelings of gladness and delight; hence it is not wonderful that the event should have at all times been celebrated. The Romans held their *floralia*, or floral games in this month, while the first of May—May-day—was the chief festival both in ancient and more modern times.

The zodiacal sign for May is Gemini, and it is this figure among the heavenly bodies that the sun enters on the twentieth of the month. Coming just between spring and summer, May is held as an emblem of the early or joyous part of life, and so in ancient times was pictured as a youth with a lovely countenance clothed in a robe of white and green, embroidered with hawthorn and daffodils. On his head was a garland of roses, in one hand he held a lute, and on the forefinger of the other sat a nightingale. The Saxons used to call the month "Tri-milki," or "Tri-michi," because the juices of the young spring grass in the meads were so nutritious that the cows yielded milk three times a day.

After May, in the words of Spenser, came jolly June, arrayed in green leaves, and riding on a crab, which bore him up, and waddled on in an uncouth manner, with crooked crawling legs. June was named by the Romans from their goddess Juno, the Queen of the heavens, to whom the month was dedicated. She bore the same relation to women that Jupiter did to men. Like the Greek Hera, she took a special interest in marriage, whence her name of *Juga* or *Jugatis*, the yoke-maker; but she was also a kind of female providence, protecting the sex from the cradle to the grave. Her epithets, *Virginialis* and *Matrona*, indicate this. Her month was considered the most propitious for fruitful marriages; and even yet after eighteen centuries of Christianity, this old Roman faith lingers superstitiously in the popular mind.

The zodiacal sign of June is Cancer, which the sun enters on the twenty-second, just when that orb appears to remain for a time stationary, and before it begins to recede; this backward motion of the sun is typified by the sign of the Crab, whose motions are always sideways or even backwards. The ancients represented this month by a young man clothed in a mantle of dark green, having his head ornamented with a coronet of beets, king-cobs, and maiden-hair, bearing on his arm a basket of summer fruits, and holding in his left hand an eagle. The Anglo-Saxons called this month "Sear-monath," or dry month, and "Mid-summer-monath," and before that "Wend-monath," because their cattle then went to "wend in the meadows."

Hot July succeeded jolly June. So hot was he that he had cast away all his garments. He rode on a lion raging with anger, but he ruled the wild beast by his own strong will. Behind July's back was a scythe, and under his belt he had thrust a sickle big and keen. This month is the hottest in the year, and ordinarily brings summer to the full. It owes its name to Julius Cæsar, after whom it was named by Marc Antony, Cæsar's birthday occurring on the twelfth of this month; prior to this the month was known as *Quintilis*. July is usually depicted as a strong robust man, with a swarthy, sunburnt face, nose and hand, eating cherries or other fruit, and clothed in a light yellow jacket, at the girdle of which hangs a bottle; a garland of thyme encircled his head. On his shoulder he carries a scythe; and at his side stands Leo, the zodiacal sign for July, and which the sun entered on the twenty-third of the month, during which the heat is generally more violent than at any other season. By the Anglo-Saxons it was called "Maed-monath," or mead-month, and "Litha-aeftera," or after-mild-month, also "Hen-monath," or foliage-month, and "Hey-monath," or hay-month, because it was their usual hay harvest season.

August was dressed in golden garments, which swept the meadow grass. He did not ride, but led by the hand a lovely maid, who was crowned with ears of corn, and whose hands were full. She was the righteous lady who used to live in this world in the good old time before wrong entered in, and when plenty abounded everywhere. August, originally called *Sextilis*, received its name from the Emperor

Cæsar Augustus, on account of several of the most fortunate events of his life having occurred during this month. On this month he was first admitted to the consulate, and thrice entered the city in triumph. On the same month, the legions from the Janiculum placed themselves under his auspices, Egypt was brought under the authority of the Roman people, and an end put to the civil wars. The Anglo-Saxons called it "Arn-monath," or "Barn-monath," in allusion to the filling of the barns with corn. It is thus the harvest-month; and in the drawings found in Saxon calendars still in existence, August is pictured as a carter standing near a loaded cart of corn. In later times, mowers with scythes were emblems of the month, and nearer still to our own times August was drawn as a young man, with fierce countenance and flowing garments, crowned with a coronet of wheat, and bearing a sacrifice, whilst a sickle hung from his girdle. In England, when a man has been successful, it is by no means uncommon to hear said of him "He has made his harvest," but in France the expression is, "He has made his August." The zodiacal sign is Virgo, which the sun enters on the twenty-third of the month.

September came next, also on foot. He laboured under his heavy burden of harvest riches, with which he had been bountifully supplied by the earth. In one hand he held a knife-hook, and in the other a pair of weights. The seventh month in the Roman calendar, though the ninth in ours, it has still preserved its original name. The Anglo-Saxons called it "Gerst-monath," because they then gathered in "gerst," or barley; it was also known as harvest-month until that title was given to August, and then September was represented as a vintager—a man with a purple robe, adorned with a coronet of white and purple grapes, in his left hand a small bundle of oats, and in his right a cornucopia of pomegranates and other fruits. The zodiacal sign is Libra, which the sun enters on the twenty-third of the month. It is altogether a month of plenty:

The feast is such as Earth, the general mother,  
Pours from her fairest bosom, when she smiles  
In the embrace of Autumn.

October followed—a fellow full of merry glee, but somewhat unsteady, owing to the new wine he was making, and frolicsome from the taste of joyous oil. He rode on a dreadful scorpion, and by his side he had his ploughshare ready for the autumn seed-time.

October was the eighth month of the so-called "year of Romulus," but became the tenth when Numa changed the commencement of the year to the first of January. Despite the attempts made by the Roman Senate, and the Emperors Commodus and Domitian, who substituted for a time the terms *Faustinus*, *Invictus*, *Domitianus*, the ancient name has yet been retained. Many Roman and Greek festivals fell to be celebrated in this month, the most remarkable of which was the sacrifice at Rome of a horse—called October—to the god Mars. Amongst the Anglo-Saxons of olden time October was called "Wyn-monath," or wine-month; and in some old Saxon calendars October is pictured as a husbandman carrying a sack on his shoulders, and sowing corn—expressive of the season being the proper time for that work. In more modern pictures he is a man clothed in a robe of the colour of withering leaves, with a garland of oak branches and acorns on his head. In his left hand is a basket of chestnuts, medlars, and other autumnal fruits; and in his right the zodiacal sign, Scorpio, which the sun enters on the twenty-third of the month. The scorpion is a venomous reptile that infests hot countries, in form much like a lobster, which carries a deadly sting within its tail, and which it has been known to turn against itself.

November came next, a very fat man, filled with lard, for he was a feeder of hogs; and, though the season had become chill and bitter, his brow was wet with perspiration. He was also greatly taken up with planting trees; when he passed by he was also riding on a centaur.

November was one of the most important months in connection with religious ritual of the Romans, and continues in the same position though for other reasons, in the Roman Catholic ritual. It was known among the Anglo-Saxons as "Blot-monath," blood-monk, on account of the general slaughter of cattle at this time for winter provision—known for a long time afterwards as "Martinmas beef"—and for sacrifice. It was also called "Wint-monath," wind-month; and an old writer says that it was the custom of the shipmen, meaning sailors, to give over seafaring until March had bid them look for favouring winds. In old pictures, November is represented as a man clothed in a robe of changeable green and black, his head adorned with a garland of olive branches and fruit. In his left hand he holds winter vegetables, and in his right hand the sign Sagittarius, which sign of zodiacal belt the sun enters on the twenty-second of the month.

December, chill December, came at last. But what with so much merry feasting, and so many great bonfires, he did not trouble about the cold; and, moreover, his mind was gladdened by the birth of our Saviour. He rode a shaggy, bearded goat, and in his hand he carried a broad and deep bowl, from which he drank heartily the health of all his fellow-months. This month has its name from being the tenth and last in the Alban calendar. Our Saxon ancestors called it "mid-winter-month" and "Yule month," whilst it was also known as "Haligh-monath," holy month, because we celebrate then our Lord's nativity. In ancient pictures he is represented as an old man, with a grim countenance, clothed with furs, wearing several caps on his head, and having a very red nose and beard from which hang icicles. On his back is a bundle of holly and ivy, and in one of his hands, which are in furred gloves,