

# Julius Caesar at the Winter Solstice

BY FREDERIC STANLEY DUNN

**H**OW did Gaius Julius Caesar spend his Christmas Holidays? Absurd!—is the first reaction. The birth of Christ stands against a calendar date forty years subsequent to Caesar's assassination, while, as a matter of history, several centuries were yet to elapse before Christmases were formally so termed. Caesar must have ante-dated Christmas by 300 years or more. The anachronism, however, is only an apparent one, for, though they very evidently were not styled Christmases, there had been Christmases in effect beyond the memory of man, ever since the phenomenon of the Winter Solstice had been observable. We have only to substitute the Saturnalia, and the question as to how Caesar spent his holidays becomes, after all, a very pertinent one.

In comparison with our Christian festival, embellished as it is by the many bequests inherited from the nations, the Roman Saturnalia would at first thought seem tame indeed, in spite of its popularity as the very acme in a festive way. What Caesar *did not* and *could not* do, becomes a very lengthy list when reckoned in terms of certain features, apparently not then in vogue, but now distinguishing our latter day festival. The Christmas of today seems overwhelmingly Teutonic or Cymric or Slavonic or, at least barbaric.

But positive evidence is not always forthcoming when we are in quest of just what not was included in Rome's pre-Christian celebration of the Winter Solstice. The absence of reference on the part of our classic or patristic authors is not at all conclusive. The mass of Latin literature that perished under the vicissitudes of the ages, may have been rife with Saturnalian tid-bits. And, even so, casual reference is the most that could be expected outside of deliberate treatises that may have been essayed, such as were usual in the hands of encyclopaedists like Varro or Pliny, or of antiquarians like Gellius or Macrobius.

So it is unwise to declare that this or that custom did not prevail in Caesar's time simply because Livy says nothing about it or Catullus failed to think up a hendecasyllabic in commemoration of it. The presumption is rather the contrary, for customs are mightily tenacious and tribal inheritances deathless. It is much sounder reasoning to surmise that Rome's Saturnalia embraced forms of procedure corresponding in essential features to the most of the modern practices of Christianity today.

On the other hand there are most ample evidences of extraneous influences working upon the Roman and pre-Christian festival out of which was evolved the complex occasion we now know as Christmas. It is very certain, for example, that the boy Gaius Caesar never pinned up a stocking before the fireplace, not merely because there were neither stockings nor chimneys, to say nothing of pins, in his day, but really because it was many years before the good Bishop Nicholas made his little sacks of money the prototype of the later Christmas stocking. And yet who knows that we may not some day unearth evidence that the Romans *did* hang up little sacks before the altar of the Lares in anticipation of the gifts to be received on the morrow. In the event of such discovery we shall be forced to confess that Nicholas and his socks,—pardon me, Nicholas and his sacks, are but a Christian substitute to explain a pagan observance.

But, since Saint Nicholas was still so far in the future, we must surely deny to the little Caesar lad the high privilege enjoyed by modern boys with Nordic traditions, of lying awake to hear the tinkle of sleigh bells and the clatter of reindeer hoofs.

It would be rather drastic to make the pronouncement that Grandmother Marcia or Mother Aurelia or Aunt Julia did not light candles all about the Caesar home on the eve of the Saturnalia. Candles there surely were, and these too among the most common of Christmas gifts, though there could have been no such sweetly beautiful motive assigned to the custom, as that they were to light the Christ-Child on his way. It is quite believable that the Romans spent their Saturnalia in a blaze of light, that the *cerei* were the Latin counterpart of the Scandinavian Yule log, both being reminders of the old, perhaps long forgotten, Solar worship. The notable prevalence of lights at Christmas today would make it seem somewhat incredible that the Romans too were not heirs in their day of that same practice. The importance attached to candles in the Catholic service, it may safely be inferred, is in direct descent from the ceremonial usages of pre-Christian Rome.

These accompaniments of our Christmas Eve,—the stockings, Santa Claus and the reindeer, and the candles,—raise the query as to what really was the Roman equivalent of "the night before Christmas." The Saturnalia, like our own Christmas, was a one-day calendar event, though, as with us, the accompanying holiday comprised a week and more. While therefore it might be questioned whether, with such a wealth of holiday to follow, there could have been any marked tendency to feature "the evening before", it is on the other hand a human trait to be impatient of a coming holiday. The Romans were and are adepts in celebrating and it is a sound inference that there were pre-Saturnalian festivities.

On Christmas morning in pagan Rome, when the stars were still blinking, it is unlikely that Gaius Caesar was awakened by the carols of the waifs. "Good King Wenceslas" and his ilk were not yet come to give their names to the melodies that now glorify the Christmas-tide. And yet again, is it not possible that pagan carols may have ante-dated our own? "God Rest Ye, Merry Gentlemen" has a delightfully pagan ring. May it not have had a pagan ancestor, whose words were but slightly altered in conformity with the Christ sentiment?

No conjecture, however, is needed to conjure up the Roman equivalent of our joy-cries at Christmas time. All over the world, in all ages, the human race has had its Yule-tide greetings, ranging a fascinating gamut from the Osirian Greeting of Egypt to the "Noel" of modern France. We may imagine, then, young Caesar as joining boisterously in the "Io Saturnalia" and permitting no one to shout it louder.

When Gaius emerged from his *cubiculum* on the morning of the Saturnalia, no doubt in his tunic only and perhaps with only one sandal on, despite the protests of Gniphio or a possible dusky "mammy" named Sophonisba, there was no tinsel, be-starred tree in the atrium to greet his snapping eyes. That, unquestionably, is a Germanic element which we have adopted into our Christmas system,—one of the most recent of our acquisitions, though with a line of progeniture that carries us back to the Ygdrasil of Norse mythology, to the Druidic oaks, and perhaps even to the tree of the Babylonian Eden.

But Rome's very definite contribution to the festive conglomerate we call Christmas may be recognized in the Saturnalian gifts. Gaius, long before he was summoned to partake of his tentaculum, must have been parading the accumulation of remembrances from relatives and friends. The elder Caesar, with solid anticipation of his son's scholastic future, may have bestowed upon him a new set of wax tablets and a *stylus* with handle artistically carved with the likeness of a satyr. Aurelia, with sober domestic instinct, was the donor of a new pair of sandals, while Marcia had risked her grandmotherly life on the very last day of holiday purchasing to get her grandson a handsome new *praetexta*. And Cossutia's father, in order to keep the Julians reminded of the contemplated alliance between the two families, may have sent over, with his compliments, a box of hard-shelled almonds from his Sicilian estate.

All would have been well if grim old soldier uncle Marius had not bestowed upon the lad a miniature silver eagle and a diminutive *ballista* with clay marbles for ammunition. And climax of all, Aunt Julia had contributed a small *tuba*. All this

was enough to turn the Caesar household into a Roman camp with the whole Punic army stampeding at the gates.

Anyone who has been in Naples on the occasion of St. Joseph's Day, the festival of San Giuseppe, would never for one moment doubt that toys have been immemorial accompaniments of the human race,—that humans have never been anything else but children. Imagine Gaius's two sisters, then, comparing their new dolls and drawing acrimonious conclusions therefrom,—Julia Maior contending that her blonde baby from Massilia was far more intelligent looking than Julia Minor's brunette dancing-girl from Gades. And there would be some hair-pulling and high-pitched Roman expletives until their bullying brother would thrust himself between them, blowing such blasts in their faces from his *tuba* as to force both girls to clap hands to their ears and beg a truce.

Remembering our own childhood days, when gastronomic laws were not yet promulgated and our stockings were discovered on Christmas morning to be bulging with candies and nuts and animal crackers, which astoundingly indulgent parents permitted us to munch throughout the day,—did Gaius and his sisters have the equivalent of these? Yes, the candy perhaps excepted, the so-called *sigilla* fulfilling the province of our doughnut men or animal cookies. Their name is suggestive that they bore some mark or sign, perhaps corresponding to our Cross-buns of Good Friday.<sup>1</sup>

As the day progressed, young Caesar may have been the wondering witness of some freakish situations,—Xanthias, a rogue of a slave, reclining on the head couch, with a rollicking coterie of servants lolling luxuriously around him, but, strangest of all, his own father, the ex-judge, acting as cup-bearer and pouring out his finest brands for those thirsty rascals. And every one of those fellows had on his head the *pilleus*, the cap of freedom. Was the world upside down?

Bursting into his mother's apartments to apprise her of the unprecedented spectacle, he may have been further shocked to behold the sedate Aurelia smilingly, laughingly, spinning off a basket of wool, while a red-haired girl from up north somewhere was tapping her with a switch, calling out to her, "Hurry up there old slow-poke". And a ring of slave girls was capering and clapping hands and singing a ribald ditty. Surely, Saturn was a curious old god, if this was a sample of his storied Golden Age.

As Gaius grew older, had assumed the *roga virilis*, was now the betrothed of Cossutia, the "secret sorrow" of still others, and had been awarded further prominence as Flamen Dialis,—we

may well believe that naught in the Saturnalia passed him by without willing, lusty participation on his part. The consequences of dissipation were very likely as remote from his mind in those early days as, later in life, were his absolute indifference to danger and his dare-devil challenges to death. So, even though it might weaken his resistance to those epileptic tendencies of his, surely there could have been no madder mummer or wilder reveller at Saturnalia-time than Gaius Julius Caesar, — from the first slaying of the pig before the steps of Saturn's Temple in the morning to the "wee sma' hours" of the night when even Rome's *vigiles* may have forgotten their very names and not have recognized a fire alarm from a rain-storm.

On some of these wild parties, Caesar may have been elected *rex*, "king of the revels", as do we still on Twelfth Night, when we burn the holly and the mistletoe in formal recognition that the Christmas season has reached its calendar close. In this capacity Caesar, the later Emperor and Dictator, was the official prototype of that personage termed in old Scotland and England the "Lord of Misrule" or the "Abbot of Unreason". Who, then, could have led the "mumming" with better grace than Caesar when perhaps he and Sulpicia exchanged clothes and swaggered about in masks and led the Roman "Mardi Gras"?

That proverbial lavishness of his, which, in the earlier rounds of his official life, found him millions of sesterces in debt, very probably made Caesar a liberal gift-giver too, at the Saturnalia, especially when he still had *pater's* strong box or Aurelia's mother-heart to sponsor his extravagances. His generosity needed no such guide-book as Martialis afterward provided for a jaded Christmas public. Caesar's whims would have been impatient with an alphabetical list like Martial's, with a suitable "limerick" attached, or with suggestions such as are to be found in the Ladies Home Journal, on "What to Give the Postman" or "What'll I Give Her?" appearing in a recent issue of Collier's.

Fifty-six Saturnalia in all was Caesar privileged to count in his unfinished span of life if we accept Suetonius' figures, to which we must add two if we are inclined toward Mommsen's emendation, and of these a very considerable number was spent away from the City. Scarcely a province in the Empire that did not at some time find him overtaken there at the Winter Solstice by the exigencies of fate. Asia Minor, Gaul, Spain, Egypt, Africa, all in turn forced him to share their own local festivities. Once started upon his official and martial career, Rome saw less and less of him at Saturnalia-time. There were long periods of consecutive years, as during his governorship of Gaul or the intermittent campaigns of the Civil War, when the Saturnalia found Caesar in ever strange and alien

surroundings, an interested observer if not active participant in the varying forms which the solstitial festival owned in the varying climes.

While we have no clew to the period of his stay at the court of Nicomedes and his participation in the Mithridatic War, it is very probable that Caesar spent several Christmases under Asiatic auspices. The very name of the great arch-enemy of Rome is suggestive to us, as it must have been to Caesar, of the peculiar forms which Christmas rites may have taken over here in Bithynia, rites which later were to contend with those of the Christ for the supremacy of this very solstitial period. Very nearly did the soldiers of Mithras succeed in making of it a Mithra-mas instead of a Christmas.

When Caesar left to assume his pro-consulship in the north, little did he realize that never was he to join in Saturnalian revels in Rome. Mars thereafter denied him all further Christmases in the Eternal City.

During those nine long years as governor of Gaul, the majority of Caesar's Saturnalia were certainly spent at Ravenna, where Calpurnia could join him from Rome and cast a soberly, wifely dignity over his holidays. But there was one memorable Christmas the Pro-consul spent up in the wilds of Belgium. This was after that incorrigible insurgent Ambiorix had massacred a legion and a half and Quintus Cicero too had narrowly escaped death, and Caesar, not daring to risk farther disaster from the same source, abandoned all hopes of retiring to the Hither Province and remained all winter in camp at Samarobriva.

What a pity that there has come down to us but one-half of the fascinating correspondence between Cicero and that young lawyer, his protege, who became an eye-witness in Caesar's Gallic camp. If the letters of Trebatius had survived, we might have found in them a word-picture of this, the weirdest Saturnalia that Caesar ever spent,—Caesar not now the Beau Brummel as of his usual days, but a Caesar with shaggy beard and tangled hair, that is such hair as his baldness provided,—perhaps the only Christmas that Caesar ever spent without the luxury of a shave or the torture of having his beard plucked out. For Caesar, we are told, had sworn a vow not to let razor touch his cheeks or shears his hair until he had avenged the death of Sabinus and Cotta and his unfortunate men of the 14th and 15th.

Once again the Saturnalia overtook Caesar, an unwilling sojourner in Gallia Braccata,—the winter of 52 that followed the overthrow of Vercingetorix, when it seemed expedient not to leave the army. And on these occasions, the one at Amiens in

Belgium, the other at Autun, the Emperor may have had opportunity to observe, among friendly tribes, the old Nordic custom that later introduced the tree and the holly and the mistletoe into the Christmas of Christianity.

The strenuous activities of the Civil War must have made Caesar almost immune to any and all calendar demands, even through the Saturnalia. Caesar could never again be the mummer as in the days of his youth. The awful suspense that preceded the Rubicon episode found Caesar spending the last Saturnalia of his governorship at Ravenna,—this of course in terms of the old calendar as not yet reformed by Caesar himself. The Saturnalia of the following year was lost sight of in the worries of the crossing at Brundisium and in the lines at Dyrrhachium, while the next one found him besieged at Alexandria. Cleopatra may have presided over his Egyptian solstice, beguiling him to say "Osiris is found" in the stead of his Roman "Io Saturnalia", the while she told him the gruesome story of the Sun God's death and of the tears of Isis his wife.

Then came a Christmas spent in the African War, when Cato committed suicide at Utica, and still another in Spain when Munda very nearly ended it all. And, after that, the March Ides of 44, when all mumming ceased for C. Julius Caesar.