

## SPRING MEMORIES.



As I look back and think of the spring of last year it seemed to have begun the moment that the late snow had melted, which did not come till mid-January. It came suddenly one morning with a feathery wreath of whiteness, so soft and plenteous and unlike the tinselly conventions of the Christmas cards. The darkest rooms in the house shone as with a second sunlight, and the trees looked thick and bushy as though with a polar summer of foliage. The air was very keen indeed that morning, and perhaps the tiny squirrel, with its reckless display of tail framing its long narrow body in a handsome bush, knew what was coming as it flashed restlessly across the path to disappear swiftly up a high tree where it rested safely out of reach of a too admiring crowd of small boys. Its pretty tail erect, high above its tiny head was a sight to delight in, as was the way it sprang from end to end of the copse in a mid-air progression, never missing aim as it threaded its way among the tree-tops.

In London February always seemed quite a winter month, but here, in the depths of the country, after the ice-bound days before it we have felt in it the stirrings of the sap and counted it with the spring. It is not that February is a month of colour or of wide-spread scents. It has none of the melting richness that goes with waning and decay, but the rare and pure hues of crocus and hepatica, snow-drop and aconite have the clear tone that tells of life and growth to come. The reds and purples of the berry-harvest have fed the hungry

birds and been stored in the hoards of the squirrels such as that one who is nibbling a hasty breakfast under the walnut-tree on the lawn. The hedges are still bare and bleak, but look lower down, and you will agree with me that February is the month for ditches. The cleaver or goose-grass clothes it in a fairy dress of freshest green, and the delicate baby-fingers go climbing up the moist bank until the black twigs above look as if the message of spring had sounded into their hearts. We can forgive the way it chokes our red anemones in the garden in May for its witchery now. Peep in to that catch-water under the fallows by the marsh road as we jog slowly past in the donkey-cart. How beautiful that great blue-green drooping clump of leafage is. I think it is the chervil, but it is hard to distinguish the umbelliferæ until you can look either at the flowers, the seeds, or the stalks. The hemlock tribe are a bewildering cousinship, but the seasons would be poor without them.

Another early hedge-grow friend is the ground-ivy with its sturdy little dark-green woolly leaves that push their way everywhere, "amongst which come forth the floures,

gaping like little hoods, not unlike those of germander, of a purplish blew colour," says Gerrard. "Mixed with a little ale and honey and strained it takes away the pinne and webbe, and any griefe in the eyes of horse and cow," he continues, with other minuter directions; "but I list not to be over eloquent among gentlewomen, to whom especially my works are most necessarie," and so we must not depart from his method towards "our girls" of to-day. Perhaps it was this use that gave the ground-ivy its other name of ale-hoofe. But a gayer sign in the hedge-bank to tell us that "sumer is a comen-in" is the shining celandine that flashes out suddenly and keeps a brave show among moist twigs and all the tokens of winter's departing train. The dark glossy leaves are as handsome as some of spring's gayest plants. Well may Wordsworth say—

"Ere a leaf is on the bush,  
In the time before the thrush  
Has a thought about her nest,  
Thou wilt come with half a call  
Spreading out thy glossy breast  
Like a careless prodigal;  
Telling tales about the sun  
When we've little warmth or none."

Partly its sudden arrival "about the kalends of March," as Gerrard says, and partly its own starchy profusion makes a warm glow of gratitude come in our hearts as we talk of it to each other going "home along" from the

daily walk which brings a fresh excitement every day in this early time.

Those spring weeks were a true revelation of English by-ways to the writer who sped swiftly past field and copse and hedge-row on the silent tyres, and drank in more beauty of English lanes than many years might have brought with slow feet as the only kind of pony. Look at that great pool with the thickly growing white water-flowers. That is scattered star-wort, and what a whiteness "such as no fuller on earth can whiten it," it spreads under the dark hedge. The marsh-marigolds and the cool primroses look so happy in these by-ways, where the children from the old thatched cottages and farms seem to have learned too much "behaviour" in the village school to tear them roughly up and strew them to wither as they do near the towns. That early winter cress has such a milky blossom that you can see its tiny flowers as you skim along, and wonder at the long green needles that shoot far above its head and guard it like a stalwart body-guard. The upper hedges are still leafless, but the blackthorn is hanging bridal wreaths for some half-mortal marriage among the black branches. No wonder that Tennyson's "May Queen" grieved to think that she would

"Never see  
The blossom on the blackthorn, the leaf  
upon the tree."

When green is only breathed like a breath here and there the blackthorn breaks forth and has a timid look about its transparent whiteness. It recalls bridal as does the later thick sweet may with its goodly scent, but the may tells of settled comfort as in Frith's "Village Wedding," and the blackthorn of some daring marriage between mortal and immortal, some "Margaret" who had to depart anon to "the little grey church by the windy shore," and leave behind "the red-gold throne in the heart of the sea." In the north they tell you of "the blackthorn winter," and truly it brings the cold with it and speaks of love among the thorns.

There is a strong fascination about the hardy flowers that venture out with no leaves to mother them. Hardy as they are, they are an ethereal tribe and have all the confidence of fine natures. While the garden is still bare enough but for crocus and aconite, the mezezon with its flower of downy pink bursts into blossom. You cannot tire of looking at it, but come nearer and smell its unearthly fragrance. I wonder what the materialists make of it. "There is no sense more akin to the soul than the sense of smell," Macdonald said, and indeed as I drink in the scent of the mezezon, I feel that what we know is the least part of what there is to know, that

"Ages past the soul existed,  
Here an age is resting merely  
And hence fleets again for ages."

In spite of the sweetness you feel that the little rosy cups are stubborn growths that cannot be easily quelled. A few weeks later while the flowers are still fresh, the tiniest spikes of green leaves break at the tips of the branches, and the whole has the effect of delicate Battersea enamel that Watteau or Boucher would surely have loved to paint. No wonder that Christina Rossetti sings—

"If I might see another spring  
I'd not plant summer flowers and wait:  
I'd have my crocuses at once  
My leafless pink mezezones,  
My chill-veined snow-drops, choicer yet  
My white or azure violet,  
Leaf-nested primrose; anything  
To blow at once, not late."

If I might see another spring  
 I'd listen to the daylight birds  
 That build their nests and pair and sing,  
 Nor wait for mateless nightingale;  
 I'd listen to the lusty herds,  
 The ewes with lambs as white as snow,  
 I'd find out music in the hail  
 And all the winds that blow."

Indeed this spring the winds blew up into a regular "whirly-wind" as the local eye-witnesses expressed it. We had been rejoicing in the giant elm in the park and leading the children under it, gathering the soft rosy blossoms that came before the leaves, and fancying dames in ruffs in Elizabeth's time talking of the Armada, and in the next century gentlemen in long ringlets whispering hair-breadth escapes from Sedgemoor fight that raged the other side of those far hills. But March had hardly shown her face when a hurricane arose and wind and water chased all but the boldest within doors. At 9 one morning anxious faces pressed against the panes watched a moment of unheard of fury in the blast and the giant elm thundered to the ground. Awe came over us as we watched the great root that stood thirteen or fourteen feet in the air and made a sheer wall above the pond which it had created as it was wrenched from the soil. It was pitiful to see the majestic boughs being lopt by degrees and carted away, and the little children climbing in and out of its patient branches, gathering wealth of fire-wood to last for many a long day. How well that it was too early for many little birds to be made homeless; I could find none but perhaps some shared the fate of the ravens in the tree in Losel's wood that White tells of in his *History of Selborne*, that would not be dislodged from their nest: "The tree nodded to its fall," he says, "but still the dam sat on. At last when it gave way the bird was flung from her nest, and, though her parental affection deserved a better fate, was whipped down by the twigs, which brought her dead to the ground."

Indeed, this hamlet, remote from railway trains, is a spot dear to shy birds and beasts as it is to the gipsies. How sure is the swoop of that great white owl that fans the air as it sails away down the field to the old canal and its rushes. It is soothing to a lover of odd and wild creatures to reflect that that bird with eyes like a lake has a young family in an unknown high part of our rambling home. There is no need for you to start with nightly terrors; that is not a poor deserted baby wailing in the night wind; it is the little owlets hooting weirdly to one another, and all unconscious that the baby's mother in the house below has never heard such curious talk before. We are not too instructed here for deep-set superstitions. The next village owns a witch, and I have heard talk in ours of the evil eye, and there is one gentle-hearted dame to whom, not so long ago either, the maids used to go for love philtres. If you looked into her mysterious, deep-set, kindly old eyes you would not wonder at her power. But spite of the spirit of the hamlet the boy there sleeps too soundly in rosy health for any boding owl or "black ewet" to disturb his mother's peace.

The country-folk themselves are shy of strange life. It does not win their confidence to protect that green snake which was sunning itself among the pea-stalks. It is a harmless one that could not hurt a child, and it only wriggles sinuously away, raising its pretty head and twitching its forked tongue in wrath

when you try to capture it, yet the villagers count it part of the devil's brood and meet only to be killed. The hedgehogs come sometimes in the lane below and are a choice meal for the gipsies, who tell me of them as they sit and rest in the kitchen before they take their babies down to be christened by a parson near here who has a knack of not frightening them away. Look at that gipsy with her bonny brown baby tied in a neat bundle at her waist; she is as like as a portrait to Fred Walker's vagrant, with her glorious eyes and waves of untamable, black, glossy hair, and all the unconscious freedom of one who has "never slept under a roof."

But before March is over, spite of late biting winds that have robbed us of our fruit harvest, spring herself is with us. The great elms and the little hedge-rows soon have their film of faintest green that clings so tenderly to the grave old branches. In the garden copse where the beeches were golden in late autumn, we can find the ground underfoot alive with loveliness that passes spontaneously from glory to glory. The great splashes of gold and white and purple crocuses are followed by blue and pink-white violets that lie on the turfy copse soil like a baby's hand on a ploughman's. Side by side with the primroses that cover the font on Easter Day and comfort the mothers who are reminded of their babies that died and are safe, grow great tufts of purple-red tulips that are cut to be the glory of the festival altar. In between the rock-work are the dark green leaves that soon have sweet-scented narcissus nesting in the middle or the earlier clumps that nod with daffodils

"That come before the swallow dares  
 And take the winds of March with beauty."

This happy family in the copse that comes up in such a hardy way and yet in such reckless profusion, letting the wild hyacinth of the woods with its blue bells and delicate fretted edges mix with the aristocratic purple columbine, folly's child, and the proud tulip be threaded in and out by the white flowers of the wild garlic, is a natural entrance to a garden meant to be the meeting-ground of the parish. But the primroses under the beeches are not quite as thick and tufted as these under the Scotch fir. What would the garden be without that tree? Every season seems to heighten its beauty. The grey green young spring shoots and the dark resinous cones make fresh notes in the green harmony of branches which droop and spray and cast flickering pencilled shadows on the rough red stem at noon: yet in all its grace the fir is never languid, and its scent has the same stimulating force to the mind as the scent of the chrysanthemum, and a puritan touch which steadies the intoxicating odours of the spring.

All beneath the fir and the ilex and the bay was a barren wilderness a year ago, but now it is a sheet of blue forget-me-not, among which the primroses are nested and the periwinkle trails her wreath. One day we harnessed the donkey and went with baskets to that far dingle on the side of the slope and dug carefully among the lovely moss and roots of the wood and carried home the "spikes of purple orchises" and the blue-bells and the violets and set them under the acacia and the leafy medlar just breaking into large crumpled innocent-faced blossoms; how full the branches are of great green leaves, and how they seem to stoop and stretch a morning shade for us on the sunny lawn; they are very tough and strong and do not break when the little girl

with yellow hair swings and dances upon them. In a few weeks tall foxgloves, white and pink and purple, peer out from this flowery nook at the carts and wagons and gipsy-vans that pass by to the great world. The dark stains on the pure colour inside the "glue of bells," give a cast of thought to these delicate flowers and a refinement of beauty that is all the more queenly for the simple setting. As Gerrard says, "foxglove groweth in barren sandy grounds and almost everywhere," and if you have despaired of any bed under the trees, see what can be done with some good foxglove seed.

But we need not look to gardens for beauty in this witching time when every blade of road-side grass is touched with magic, and the rain when it comes makes "even the cart-ruts beautiful."

How the sunlight revels in that great may-skirted meadow this warm afternoon, and gilds the buttercups and daisies and the clover-flower and every bit of canary and couch-grass, of hare's tail and meadow-fescue that bend together under the waves of shadow as only those wonderful grasses with their fairy bodies and merry tossing heads can. The butterflies are come, and down below

". . . above the daisy tree,  
 Through the grasses  
 High o'erhead the bumble bee  
 Hums and passes."

while up in the air the birds

"Make all the April woods  
 Merry with singing.  
 They shall go flying  
 With musical speeches  
 High overhead in the  
 Tops of the beeches.  
 In spite of our wisdom  
 And sensible talking,  
 We on our feet must go  
 Plodding and walking."

London folk think of grass in a lump, but you have only to watch the may meadows not to wonder at the thirty-seven heads under which Miss Plues describes them in her sweet, old-fashioned book on *Rambles in Search of Wild Flowers*.

Before we say good-bye to spring let us peep at that cluster of blue wind-flowers so very cool and fresh under the tall rose-bushes, all spotted with starry-white stamens and buried in dark green leaves. It grows wild in Wales, but it flourishes and comes up hardily in a shady garden-bed. It is a near cousin of the rare purple pasque anemone which Fitzgerald says grows wild on the Fleam-dyke, near Cambridge, and of which the old English folk believed that it grew only where Danish blood had been spilt.

"I sometimes think that never blows so red  
 The rose as where some buried Cæsar  
 bled;

That every hyacinth the garden wears  
 Dropt in her lap from some once lovely  
 head."

Is it because of Danish blood that our blue anemone has such a pure luxuriance? After you have toiled the five miles to our nearest station, the first place to which the train carries you is Athelney where Alfred burnt the cakes. Perhaps some long-forgotten battle raged in these quiet fields and the bones of Guthrun's fierce soldiers and their fair northern brides wait the eternal term deep down under our tender blue anemones.

CLOTILDA MARSON.

