

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 willows by the marsh road as we jog slowly past in the donkey-car. How beautiful that great blue-green drooping clump of leafage is. I think it is the chervil, but it is hard to distinguish the umbelliferae 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-row friend is the ground-ivy with its sturdy little dark-green woolly leaves that push their way everywhere, "amongst which come forth the flowers, 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 "summer 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 starry 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 mezerion 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 mezerion, 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 mezerions,

My chill-veined snow-drops, choicer yet

My white or azure violet,

Leaf-nested primrose; anything

To blow at once, not late.