

## THE RETURN

For Winter's rains and ruins are over,  
And all the season of snows and sins ;  
The days dividing lover and lover,  
The light that loses, the night that wins ;  
And time remembered is grief forgotten,  
And frosts are slain and flowers begotten,  
And in green underwood and cover  
Blossom by blossom the Spring begins.

ATALANTA IN CALYDON.

**S**PRING was late in coming, and the flowers, with hidden heads, wondered sadly if he had forgotten. Slowly they matured in the gloom of their coverings, lamenting the days usurped from their short lives in sight of the sun. Already some impatient blossoms, betrayed by a fleeting noon-day warmth, had ventured forth, but had died with the sunset. Human folk, too, were faint and fain for change and southern breezes. Winter had come early and long outstayed his doubtful welcome. Last Summer seemed weary years away, and all its sunny memories soiled and dim. The unkind season held man and beast in joyless case, bound all with cold and tortured many with the pincers of famine. The merciless north wind scourged the land, and wrung from men's hearts a sinister confusion of cries and threatenings, which he caught up as he passed and carried abroad. It seemed as if there might be worse things yet than outcry, and rulers speculated uneasily on

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the insanity of hungry men. On a sudden the suspense was broken, the crisis averted; for Spring the Deliverer came over the horizon, bringing gladness to Nature and awaking the good that was in men's hearts. Warm winds spread themselves over sea and shore, and routed the loitering fog from cellar and garret, from wood and glen and airy hill-top. The flowers burst forth with a little cry of joy that was heard and repeated by all the friends who lived with and understood them—by bird and bee and tree and fountain. The battle of the year had again been won after a stern fight which had been in secret progress for many weeks. No one had been aware of the fluctuations of the struggle, the advance, the repulse, the force of the succourer waxing steadily unperceived; of anything but the declaratory success. 'Spring has come in a day,' they said.

Who could resist the rare influence of the first Spring morning? Not Dives nor Lazarus; not the invalid who cannot stir nor the careless school-boy who cannot rest; not the city clerk who, strangely dissatisfied with his favourite literature, throws the paper out o' window and enjoys his railway rush and the unpolluted air; not the loafer who neglects his vocation and saunters about the roadway with a sudden pleasure in living and moving, astonishing to himself; not the 'bus-driver who has a flower in his button-hole; nor the ploughman who, seeing so many flowers, might again be inspired to music and poetry, as ploughmen have been, ere now, on a like provocation; not even pale-faced Agnes, who has been in the habit of not noticing things much for a long while now. But this morning there was an unremarked magic in the air which made her smile at herself—a little sadly still—in the glass, and brought her forth from her room singing.

'You are so gay this morning, Agnes!' said her mother by and by, with a small tremor that was partly joy and partly solicitude—and altogether love. Her daughter was tying on a rather old-fashioned hat with dark green ribbons.

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'Yes, mother,' said the girl, 'I suppose it is because 'tis such a gay morning. Do you know, I believe the Spring has actually come for good. So I shall first water these hyacinths, and then off to the fields to look for primroses—for you.'

So Agnes tended the plants, which must have loved her; for they filled that cottage with more amazing perfume than the rarest of their kind thought it worth while to give forth in the King's palace. Then she tripped upstairs for a packet—a very tiny packet—of crumpled letters, which she hid in her dress. This, to be sure, was very foolish; but many of the letters in that packet were terribly tear-stained, which perhaps accounts for it. She also brought back with her a shawl, a wonderfully gay shawl, which she substituted for the faded brown one round her mother's shoulders, artfully, without that smiling old lady being aware of her own transformation. As she set out, she asked her heart what had lightened it so, and her heart smiled and said nothing, but insensibly led her to be at one with everything around. The sparrows were having the first and most luxurious dust bath of the season, and she understood and sympathised with their enjoyment. She called back to the robins, clapped her hands at the singing of the larks, and strained her hearing to catch the distant cooing of the wood pigeons. She examined the buds on either hand, and her walk was a zigzag from hedge to hedge. She had just discovered a primrose hiding beneath a mossy stone, and was stooping over it with delight, when suddenly she jerked herself upright with a little gasp, and with a look in her eyes that may have been fear, and may have been hope, but was more probably both. For the postman had entered the lane leading to the cottage. She thought to turn and fly; but instead, she walked slowly towards him, in a mist of memories. He put a letter in her hand. She scarcely noticed it for a moment, then, with a little cry, carried it to her lips and bounded back with the speed of gladness.

All this while a train, that had left the city in early morning,

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was shrieking rapturously through wood and across meadow. In one compartment was seated a pale young man about whom there seemed to float a certain atmosphere, an atmosphere of Cheapside accountantry, the most artificial—therefore the most clinging. He was nervous and could not rest; the smart literature he had brought in such baleful abundance to lessen the tedium of the journey wearied and even disgusted him. Something kept prompting him to throw aside his rugs and papers, and to open both windows to the friendly air without: but he resisted. Through the first hour he sat unmindful of the potent influence at work on the world and within him. He smoked doggedly at cigarettes for which he had little relish, and glanced over paragraphs of deformed and mirthless humour, while through his mind there passed, by way of commentary thereon, choice phrases from the unwritten handbook of wit and epigram, which all aspiring Londoners must master, if they would live in the estimation of their fellows. Gradually he thought more and more frequently of the object of his travel, and his mind was filled with reflections that kept him grave and still. All at once a bit of landscape awakened a dear memory in his heart, and he opened the window and leaned out. Spring caught him in the act, and metamorphosed him. As they passed through a copse of young trees a fresh green twig just managed to caress his cheek. He thrilled as from a kiss. Larger branches overhead sprinkled him with dew. He felt it as a baptism. The City behind him now began to appear to be something happily far away—a black blot on a pleasant country. It was only a year since it had absorbed him, but that year stretched in his memory as broad as ten. He felt as if he had never heard a bird or smelt a flower all that time; never seen the sky!

All his apathy was gone. He was impatient to walk upon the grass, and passed restlessly from window to window, trampling heedlessly upon his books and papers; which by and by he kicked under the seat. A strange timidity, which increased as

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he neared his destination, plainly assailed him, and at last he began a feverish search which resulted in the discovery of two photographs. One pictured a young woman, beautiful but loveless, and a little bold; the other a maiden, fresh-looking as the dawn, with frank true eyes, and hair like sunshine. The first he looked at a long time curiously, then tore and flung out of window, muttering to himself, 'Thank God!' On the second was written, 'From your own sweetheart Agnes,' and he kissed the writing: which is a thing, mark you, that very intelligent young men will do: and his eyes grew soft. His mind went back to the days of his early homesickness in the great City. He remembered the fretful letter which had won from Agnes her portrait with its frank superscription, and he divined with what hesitating fondness it had been written, as something rather forward and unmaidenly. He considered his cruel silences that had steadily lengthened, and the expression of self-contempt on his face told what he thought of it all now—the weakness and the folly. Soon afterwards he alighted, and, as he walked along the fragrant country road, some colour from pink blossoms began to steal upon his pale cheeks, some of the glorious yellow sunlight sparkled in his eyes, and his soul re-echoed the music of thrush and merle. He was hastening to meet Agnes who, with glowing cheeks and hair that would not be confined, seemed trying to outstrip the early swallows. A robin who had been fitting playfully before her, as robins will, was kept continually on the wing, and abandoned the pastime as too fatiguing. She walked three steps, ran ten, and sometimes stood still as if to think; then started off again. He, on his part, though almost as spasmodic in the order of his thoughts, commanded a less tell-tale demeanour. He walked slowly, full of gratitude that Nature should make friends again so warmly. But sometimes he broke into a quicker pace, so that the glittering highway went past him like a dream, and he felt that he was participating with all the world in his first hour of unselfish revelry. Sometimes, indeed,

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he questioned for a moment how Agnes would receive him ; but he held forward steadily, through doubt and confidence.

They met at the entrance to a wooded dell. Their greeting was shy, even awkward, but happiness was moist in their eyes. From the bright sunlit places astir with busy life—the whirr of wings, the bleat of lambs, the low of kine, the continuous hum of insect traffickers, which brought a curious lightning vision of Fleet Street to the young man's mind—the leafy entrance to the wood looked like the archway of some sylvan chapel. By a natural impulse they joined hands and silently turned thither. Sweet-scented hawthorn, charm against witches, waved them a welcome. Everywhere the bright yellow florets of the whin sparkled like tapers. Pale primrose and modest violet were scattered richly over the soft green carpet of the moss. The wood anemones lay like stars among the shadowy grass, above which the hyacinth lifted its clusters of azure bells, and the daisy gleamed at the foot of the giant oaks.

'Philip,' said Agnes presently, laying her head against his shoulder, 'last year was long and dreary, but it is lost out of my life,—gone and forgotten now.'

And so there was no more to be said. Instead of trying to excuse his cruel silence during the delirium of his first contagion with crowds and folly, Philip led her gently to the old stone beside the spring among the ferns.

'Agnes,' he said, 'something to-day has happened to me. I seem to have awakened and found myself. . . . Do you remember last Spring?' He knelt at her feet. 'It was here . . . and I——'

'Hush!' whispered Agnes, passing her hand gently through his hair, 'I remember, I know, I understand. Why should we talk about unhappy things? The future is all ours.'

The tender sunshine shone upon the lovers, and youth was all around. Young trees showered sweet petals on their heads, flowers smiled to them, birds sang to them, and the Spirit of

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the Springtime gave them her blessing. The hours sped by. And when, with radiant faces, they reluctantly left their bower, they both by one impulse turned to look back. A starling alighted with a blithe cry upon the stone seat they had just quitted. 'Now I wonder,' exclaimed Philip, 'if that is the same little chap who spoke to us exactly a year ago!' 'Yes,' answered the happy girl. 'It is the same dear friend who called his good wishes after us—yesterday.'

J. J. HENDERSON.

