

NORTHERN SPRINGTIME



HERE comes a day towards the end of winter when the clear sunlight floods the world and we tramp along feeling a tranquil joy in its glory. We catch, though perchance but half consciously as yet, the first vague hint of a coming time of which the world itself is still unaware. The spring we fain would stir in our steps meets with no answering resilience from the unyielding earth. The gnarled crust of the world lies unperturbed and irresponsible.

A fortnight later a new day dawns. The sun shines with no added brilliance and the earth is still hard. But now in the sun's rays there is a graciousness, a penetrating charm to which the world also must needs yield. The callous mask is lifted, and there are signs of a responsive outward stir. The whin flowers are no longer mere cold spots of gold in a dark setting, but become significant, like eyes of some uncouth being struggling to express a welcome.

But the harsh winds and the sleet showers return, and the withered edges of the tender green buds are the record of their visit ; telling also of premature endeavours and ungarnered hopes, of young lives cut off in their beginnings, or doomed to a continuity of imperfection.

Then once more comes a reassurance that other days are even now approaching. Yet still each fresh beginning, each brave dash for life and vigour, is in turn checked by the night-frost or chilled by the cold wind, until the promise that brought the earlier expansion ceases to encourage or even to console. The few flashes of colour gradually recede and are lost again in the sombre monochrome of the earth.

But the stirring sense of uplifting grows with the lengthening days, and with the shortening nights the power of cold and darkness wanes. The earth's crust softens, though hardness

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endures beneath the lush surface. The openness of summer soil through which the fresh air passes freely is a later achievement, to which this superficial mingling of earth and water is a passage and a promise.

The nascent vegetation has little individuality of form or of colour. All the little soft cones, pushing from out their scaly or woolly wrappings, have an embryonic likeness to one another, and all are flushed with the same indefinite hue. Even yet, many an early bud, pressing forward into a life too strenuous for its quality, is blighted: so Nature rebukes precocity. But day by day Spring advances and the leaves slowly separate from one another as they are carried further into the airy world by the lengthening branch between; and presently they unfold and expand into their perfect shape, each becoming its proper self. Their colour, too—at first neither green nor red nor yellow, but strangely potential of any of these—becomes sharpened and defined. The glow common to all the tender shoots concentrates only in the youngest. These, growing conscious of their distinction, clothe themselves in gracefulest shapes and deck them in the gayest hues. Each turns to the sun to absorb contentedly its quickening radiance, taking it, no doubt, as surely meant for itself, and seeing in its own marvellous development the regeneration of a world.

Spring in the North is a history of hopes often dashed—sometimes, indeed, crushed immediately, but oftener rising again with renewed vigour and concentrated purpose. So we have learned to cherish hope until it seems hopeless, when suddenly a new ray stirs us, only in its turn to be overcast. But again and again it comes, until the gathering force of the seasonal benediction augments and accumulates and we behold Spring at last realised everywhere around us. Then we can wait with assurance—'with fair hopes,' as the Greeks would have said—for the serene fulness of Summer, and for Autumn that garners all the blessings of the year.

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