



SPRING IN LANGUEDOC

What are the signs of the coming of Spring in the South? In the grey North it is easy to say; the sun returns, the flowers reappear, the hedgerows and trees clothe themselves in green, and the time of the singing of birds is come. But in Languedoc we have lacked none of these. Cypress and pine and olive have never shed their leaves, the sun has shone even when the icy mistral blew from the frozen gorges of the snow-clad Cevennes, and there has been no day on which we could not pull a handful of flowers. The yellow ragwort, the pink geranium, the dull grey green spikes of lavender, the red balls of the butcher's broom, the livid clusters of ivy berries, and the strange, beautiful, golden-green spurges have shone in every lane. Perhaps the morning on which a sleepy lizard looks out of a cranny in some wall is really the first of Spring. In a few days a hundred little bright-eyed heads may be counted in every wall, and Spring is upon us. Each day the little lane we know best has a fresh flower to show. The yellow flowers come first, then the white and blue, the delicate rich purple of the grape hyacinth, the little blue veronica and milk-wort, violets, and the star-flowers of the wild strawberry. And in a single night, as it seems, a miracle is wrought. Every hedgerow breaks out

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into blossom, white and pink, and the almond orchards cover the land with a flush of tender colour.

The narcissus is out at Lattes. How wonderful to find oneself in the long low meadows among them, the tall, sweet-scented blossoms which are scattered as thickly as daisies on an English sward! They edge the little watercourses, nestling round the roots of the stunted willows. The air is fragrant, the sky is cloudless, and the sunshine and the Spring day stir the blood like wine. To the South, hardly a league away, is the deep blue of the Mediterranean, glittering and gay. And dark on the shore rises the deserted abbey of Maguelone, grey and timeworn, keeping ward amid the barren dunes—Maguelone, greatly fallen, its good days done. No sign of Spring there save for the violet wall-flowers clinging among the grey stones. Life has ebbed away from it, and left it lonely with the great dead who sleep in its forsaken aisles. Thither no more come prince and bishop; no strangers pass that way save a very few. 'Sunt lacrymae rerum.' Even here among the sunny meadows, steeped though we be in the sensuous joy of the moment, interpreted to us by the heavy scent of the narcissus, comes a cry from the Everlasting Past, a rustle of the Wind of Death.

Nevertheless we shall not die but live. A new spirit is abroad in the world, and around us the whole land is breaking into song. Not Mistral only, but a host of lesser men, like a choir of singing birds, are making music because the world is young. These are the sons, spiritually begotten, of Troubadour and Minstrel: these keep alive the memory of the ancient glory of Languedoc and Provence, and of the days when their sweet rich speech was the courtliest tongue in Europe. It lives still on the lips of the folk, of the poet, of the scholar; it is quickening into a richer and fuller beauty, and a day may yet come when for our love-songs we turn once more to Provence. It is a snatch of Mistral that yonder lad is humming,

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O Magali, ma tant amado,
Mete la tèsto au fenestroun
Escouto un pau aquesto aubado
De tambourin e de viouloun.

O Magali, me fas de bèn ! . . .
Mai, tre te vèire,
Ve lis estello, O Magali,
Coume au pali!

What a simple, confident, lusty song! There is no hint of weariness, or disillusion or distrust in this new singing-time. This land is dear to the sun, and it is good to be alive therein. It is the land of fig and vine and olive, of love and wine and song. And so we hear anew the refrain of the oldest love-song we know, 'The fig-tree putteth forth her green figs, and the vines with the tender grape give a good smell. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.' Three thousand years have neither changed nor chastened the incorrigible heart of Spring.

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