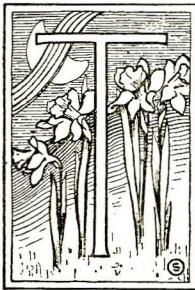




‘GERMINAL, FLOREAL, PRAIRIAL’



THESE were names given to the Spring months at a famous time, some hundred years ago, when men in the April folly of their hearts dreamed that they could make all things new. But the new names, which are not without merit, have passed away with many other things; the old names remain, and they are well enough. For is not March a month of warring, of elemental strife, when the sun gains his well-assured annual victory; and is not April indeed the month of opening? The earth opens and the seedlings lift their heads, drowsily nodding; the buds open, and the leaves unfold; the flowers open, and the newly-awakened insects visit them: it is the time of opening—of eggs and of the womb, of the song of birds and of the heart of man. Nature's optimism is too strong for man's pessimism, as the sun for the frost: the Springtide is irresistible. They bound Dionysus fast, but as well try to stop the rush of sap in the vine. Zagreon they cut in pieces, but he had to be put together again. Gloomy Dis robbed Demeter of that charming girl Proserpina, but she was too good to lose, she had to come again out of Hades. Baldur the beautiful was slain with the wintry mistletoe, but if he did not come to life again, he was at least well avenged by another of his inexhaustible race.

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Our favourite Dornröschen was pierced by a cold spindle, but she slept and did not die, and the Prince kissed her awake. Likewise, in the torrid zone, where the winter conquers by heat, the Phœnix was consumed, only to rise triumphant from the ashes of his burning. The Gospel of the Resurrection is irresistible. The corn of wheat that seems to die brings forth much fruit.

Demeter has for long been mourning in our midst—a Mater Dolorosa—seeking her lost child, often angry and terrible, often plaintive and tearful, veiling her lost beauty without hiding her deep agony. Yet all the while she has shown the strong virtue of maternity. For without food or drink, explain it who will, she has nursed the tender life of Keleos, and the youth flourishes bravely. The rise of temperature has quickened the seeds, the ferments have dissolved the hard stores into soft foods, the very minions of Death—the Bacteria—have helped to loose the bands of birth, and the seedlings are rising from the ground. For now the anger of Demeter is stayed, Proserpina has returned from the kingdom of the dead, mother and daughter rejoice together. And in a world where all is so wonderful, 'so full of death, so bordering upon Heaven,' is there anything so wonderful as this meeting of life and death, as this raising of what we call dead into what we call living, as this power that plants have to win the sun's aid that they may by secret alchemy transmute the beggarly elements of water, soil, and air into the rich wine of life? We can understand the dying Keats saying that of all things the most beautiful was the growing of the flowers.

Pan, the warm spring breeze, is with us again; and everywhere we hear his merry pipes. Now he is among the rustling withered reeds, quickening them to leafage, and setting the birds a-singing; now he is over the rippling lake, swifter than the swallow. Yesterday we heard him in the glen, good-humouredly carrying a naughty cuckoo's tidings to one of her many lovers; to-day he roams by the lake-side, and sets the

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daffodils dancing. But his pipes are not always merry, for he sighs through the gorge and among the crags, where Boreas, last winter, so ruthlessly slew Pitys, whom Pan loved. See the God: who ever did? But do we not catch in these floating spring-webs the fringe of his flowing robe, as men saw it of old time when they called it Godsamer.

With the piper-major has come all his retinue. For the myths are all mixed as is the medley of voices; now it is Pan, and again it is the Pied Piper who gathers life in his train; now it is Zephyrus playing with Chloris, and again it is Orpheus whom none can resist. But the fact at least is plain, and that is what concerns us; the birds, who went forth wailing, have returned rejoicing, and whether it be the naughty cuckoo, who has hoaxed all the poets, or the dove who is morally not much better, or the stork on the roof-trees, or the nightingale melodious, or the lark at Heaven's gate—everywhere from the orchestra which weekly gathers strength, we hear but one motif, 'Hither, my love, here; here I am, here; the winter is over and gone; arise, my love, my fair one, arise and come away.'

Dornröschen, the Sleeping Beauty, has been kissed awake again. One after another had striven in vain to win a way through the barriers which encircled the place of her sleeping, but at length the Prince and Master came, to whom all was easy—the Sunshine of the first Spring day. And as he kissed the Beauty, all the buglers blew, both high and low, the cawing rooks on the trees, and the croaking frogs by the pond, each according to his strength and skill. All through the palace there was re-awakening: of the men-at-arms, whether bears or hedgehogs; of the night-watchmen, known to us as bats; even of the carpet-sweepers, like dormice and hamsters—all were re-awakened. The messengers went forth, the dragon-flies like living flashes of light, the bustling humble-bees refreshing themselves at the willow-catkins by the way, and the moths flying softly by night. I fancy that even the scullery-boy got

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his long-delayed box on the ear, for I saw the snail draw in his horns as the Cook awoke.

These are the days of youth—of seedlings, buds, and young blossom, of tadpoles, nestlings, and young lambs. Of which, as of children, there are two thoughts which one cannot help thinking.

The first is a thought of Easter, of the forgiveness of Nature, of its infinite power of making a fresh start. We saw the vine robbed of all its leaves—transfigured in their dying—and hard-bound by the frost; but Dionysus smiled at his captors, and now the tender vines put forth a sweet smell. We saw the sloe in winter, bare as a bleached skeleton in the desert; but now it is covered with white blossom, which we almost mistake for snow still unmelted on the hills. We saw the hedger strip the hawthorn till it was pitiful in its nakedness, but now it is covered with bursting buds, and it will soon be the time of May-blossom. From amid the withered leaves the wood-anemones are rocking like foam-balls on a wreck-strewn sea; and from the ditches, lately black and empty, the marsh marigolds have raised their golden cups to be filled with sunshine. We wished the birds farewell in Autumn, and now they are gathering to us again, and every lark that rises voices forth a promise. We saw the butterflies fade away with the withering flowers, but once more they suck the blossoms; the shore-pools and the pond-pools were but a little while ago empty of apparent life or thickly frozen over, and now each is beginning to be like a busy city. For as surely as the old things pass away, so all things are made new; and from what seemed a sealed tomb life has arisen indeed.

But, if we can express the second thought, it will be seen that there is a deeper sense in which these are the days of new things. It is the time of marrying, pairing, and mating; it is the time of giving birth to new lives; or it is the time when new lives, begun long since, indeed begin to be. In all these young lives there is what is new; no one of them is quite like

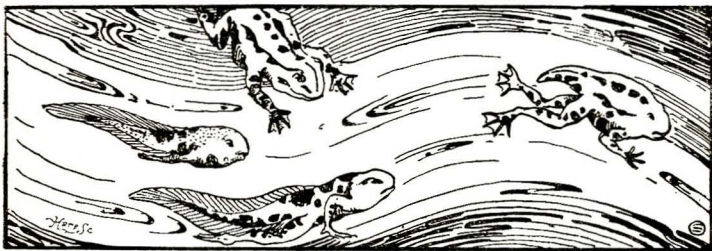
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its parents, but each carries with it the promise of better or worse: in the phrase of the biologists, this is the time of variations. It may be, indeed, that the newness is simply that what was of evil in the parents has been forgiven in their children; but sometimes it is that the little child leads the race, as was said long ago. It may be, too, that the promise is never fulfilled, for the playful lamb grows into a very stolid sheep (man has the way of making young things stolid); the active-minded chick becomes a very matter-of-fact hen; the 'promising' young anthropoid, a care-worn, 'abruti,' and rather cross-grained ape. Need we draw the moral? The fact—at once hopeful and tragic—is that the young life is often ahead of its race. If the promise be fulfilled, then the world makes progress, and this is Spring.

But come, let us light the Beltane fires and keep the Floralia! for while Biology is well, to enjoy the Spring is better; and, as was said by one who knew no winter in his year, or at least betrayed none,

'To make this earth our hermitage
A cheerful and a changeful page,
God's bright and intricate device
Of days and seasons doth suffice.'

J. ARTHUR THOMSON.



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