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THE THRESHOLD OF SPRING: BY ALICE LOUNSBERRY

HEN winter, after its fling of cold, biting winds, ice and snow, succumbs to the warmth of spring, the tiny flower buds strewn along the branches of the great forest trees, proclaim the story widely. For as these flower buds burst their scales they send forth myriads of elfinlike, exquisite little blossoms which hang over the heads of people like the bells and dangles of fairyland.

Often it is only those looking upward into the trees, where the outburst of spring is more evident than on the surface of the earth, who hail the advent of March, usually regarded as the unsympathetic month of the year. Then the tree blossoms begin their festival. In forward seasons the last days of February sometimes find them in bloom, nothing daunted by the uncertainty of the weather. Some years the festival is very brief, in others it lasts until May, rarely extending into June.

The very early tree blossoms, those which first of all show delight over the passage of winter, give to all who look upon them a veritable thrill. Youth with its innocence and gaiety, its buoyant sweetness appears to have transformed the great trees, which gaunt
and grim have stood for so long shorn of all verdure. Maples, oaks, beeches, ashes, elms, willows, birches, locusts, chestnuts and every variety of tree that grows, inspired by the return of spring, bloom as systematically and spontaneously as if they were gorgeous sunflowers. The tree blossoms, while calling for admiration less strongly than do many of the flowers of shrubs and plants, give to the first days of spring a subtle distinction, changing completely the look of the earth. At no time of the year is nature more appealing than in the evanescent days that mark the passing of winter into spring.

In late February a change comes over the earth in the expression of details. It matters not how wild the wind, how low the temperature, beneath the surface of the earth growth is stirring, sap is ready to run up the stems of the trees, color is perceptibly returning to the twigs and the crust of the earth is breaking. Yet against the horizon the uninitiated notice that the trunks and branches of the deciduous trees are still bare of leaf, their skeletonlike frameworks unchanged in appearance.

Poets have sung the return of greenness to the earth, philosophers have
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STAMINATE AND PISTILLATE CATKINS OF THE CONSTANTINOPLE HAZEL. THE STAMINATE GROUPS OF FLOWERS BEING READILY DETERMINED BY THEIR LARGER SIZE AND GREATER ABUNDANCE.

learned lessons from it, scientists have explained year after year it recurs, eternal in its beauty. In truth spring is the sections of the earth where growth is suspended during the winter season. Tropical regions do not pass through seasons, and for this reason many regard life in them as more monotonous than in places where the seasons exhibit, as they change, a certain excitement, often a haste and personal determination not unlike that associated with human beings.

The first breaking of the crust of winter in the northeastern States is due to the skunk cabbage, which pushes its spikes of green up through the earth and gradually unfolds them until they take the curious shapes of spathes, protecting from wind and cold the tiny flowerets. Mr. Hamilton Gibson was so fortunate as to find the skunk cabbage on one twenty-fourth of February. The season, needless to relate, was forward. Every year, however, it breaks through the crust of the earth at the same time that the pussy-willows bloom in the moist places, along the roadways, in meadows and in the corners of woods.

The close relation of pussy-willows to the spring is well known to every country girl and boy as well as to those who recognize Nature to commercialize her. At present these shrubs are vanishing before the tread of man. In the greater number of their chosen haunts they are no longer found. Even in places far distant from cities they have succumbed to the ruthless way in which they have been cut and slaughtered for sale and are now only to be seen in a maimed and dwarfed condition pitiable to behold. The great
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willows in lowlands and near streams lose in earliest spring the dull look that possessed them during the winter, and with sap in their twigs turn to a bright shade of yellow, transforming them to mammoth golden balls upon the landscape.

Simultaneously occurs the bloom of the red or swamp maples. From the sides of their bare boughs hang an infinite number of tiny bells deep maroon and crimson tinted. These blossoms burst out from the bare wood of the trees in such numbers as to defy calculation, yet exquisite as they are, they are only known to those who take them from the trees and examine them closely. They cover the boughs, the larger and smaller branches of the red maples, when the leaves are yet unfolded; before they have passed from blossoms into samaras, the so-called fruit of the maples, tiny baby leaves have appeared that suggest pieces of crinkled tissue paper. The color of these blossoms, turning the red maples to bold expressions of brilliant maroon, and the golden tints of the willow trees are the two most striking features of early spring and those responsible for its opalescent beauty. This spring blooming of the trees should be watched carefully, for it is most steady and systematic in habit. It seems to be controlled even more by the calendar than by the thermometer, simply for the reason that trees are inexpressibly eager to bloom and a few consecutive warm days even in late winter may so burst their flower scales that it is only with difficulty their movements are followed.

Some years when the spring is thrust back every few days into the arms of winter the trees have a hard time to keep their blossoms from suffering. They do not cease growing, however, although their doing so is inconspicuous; simply they bide their time. Then when a few warm days pass over their heads, they bloom as it were, in the twinkling of an eye, putting gray hairs into the heads of artists who wish to paint them and causing furrows in the brows of scientists eager to study them. They wait for no one. Such work as they have to do they do rapidly, then pass, giving place to the leaves of the trees which frequently unfold gently at first, then quickly until verdure is again established and the pink and golden days of early spring are over.

The familiar hard or sugar maples follow their red relatives in time of bloom and send out dangling bunches of long pedicelled flowers. But they are green and unfold at the same time as the leaves of the trees. The peculiarities to observe in connection with tree blossoms are that some unfold before the leaf buds, others at the same time, again others wait until the trees are in splendid leaf before sending out their frailest offerings.

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THE BLOOM OF THE LOCUST TREE, WIS- TARI ALIKE IN OUTLINE, MILKY WHITE IN COLOR, AND CASTING FORTH AS ITS MOST SEDUCTIVE CHARM A WONDROUSLY SWEET FRAGRANCE WHICH CARRIES FAR ON THE WARM AIR OF MAY AND JUNE; THE FLEECY FOLIAGE OF THE LOCUST AND THE IMMENSE SIZE TO WHICH IT GROWS MAKES IT FURTHERMORE ONE OF THE BEST KNOWN OF FOREST TREES, OCCURRING GENERALLY THROUGHOUT THE MIDDLE STATES SOUTHWARD TO GEORGIA AND WESTWARD.

A LIFE-SIZE BLOSSOM OF THE TULIP TREE, A GIANT OF THE FOREST WHICH WAITS UNTIL IT IS OF GOOD SIZE AND WELL ALONG IN YEARS BEFORE COVERING ITSELF WITH ITS FAIREST TREASURES.
THE PICTURE ABOVE SHOWS A BRANCH OF AN OAK PROLIFIC IN CATKINS IN WHICH ARE GROUPED MYRIADS OF STAMINATE FLOWERS, THEIR PURPOSE BEING TO DEVELOP AND SCATTER LAVISHLY THEIR POLLEN OR GOLDEN DUST: THE PISTILLATE FLOWERS GROW IN PAIRS VERY CLOSELY TO THE TWIGS AND DEVELOP, AS SOON AS FERTILIZED BY THEIR GAY COMPANIONS, INTO THE ACORNS ASSOCIATED WITH THIS CONSPICUOUS FAMILY OF TREES.

THE AMERICAN LINDEN UNIQUE IN ITS HABIT OF SUSPENDING ITS FRAGRANT LITTLE FLOWERS FROM BRACTS GROWN ON THE UNDER SIDES OF THE LEAVES, SUGGESTING THEREBY THAT IT WISHES TO HIDE THEM FROM THE IDLE AND CURIOUS.
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All trees do not, like the maples, produce exquisite bunches of flowers, every one perfectly formed as if it grew in a garden. The majority of the forest trees produce their flowers in long, slender clusters, called catkins or aments, which to the uninitiated appear like string tassels hanging from the branches. The little flowers so produced are without petals, but they have the organs necessary for the formation of seed which after all is the purpose in life of all trees.

The family of oaks bloom prolifically and mostly in the form of catkins. In comparison with the great size and imposing personality of these trees their bloom is inconspicuous, yet were it seen on some small shrub or garden plant it would hold its own among numbers of others. The oaks care for practicability in their bloom rather than beauty, choosing green and buff tones in which to appear instead of vivid hues which might call them quickly to the notice of the passerby. It is only when they are examined closely that the fineness of their design is seen. In general, oaks set free their blossoms at the same time as the leaves, the latter, especially of the white oak, unfolding first in velvety texture and softest shades of pink. Like many other trees the oaks bear their staminate and their pistillate, popularly if erroneously called male and female, blossoms, in different fashion. On examining an oak tree in early spring it will be seen that the pistillate flowers are tiny, almost imperceptible formations, two usually growing together, and that above and about them sway gaily the staminate catkins. The wisdom of Nature in this arrangement is comprehensible. As the little pistillate blossoms unfold, opening themselves to the warm air and sunshine, they remain immovable in their places, while the staminate catkins hanging about them shed freely their pollen or golden dust. This as it touches the center of the little pistillate flowers quickens them into life and the acorn is in its beginning. As soon as their work is accomplished the staminate catkins fall to the ground and die.

On trees like the poplars and birches the staminate and pistillate catkins are different from each other in appearance, the latter being the smaller of the two. Among the most interesting to watch are those of the poplars. Their staminate catkins are long and very handsome, and when a branch of them is placed in water they unfold with magic quickness and shed their golden pollen in a reckless, lavish way, which is Nature's own. The pistillate catkins of these trees are recognized since they are shorter and stouter than their companions. Their habit is to form seeds that can fly on the wind—winged seeds as they are called. But the poplar family attaches
to its seeds a white fluff appearing like unspun cotton and which as soon as well developed transforms the catkins into objects as soft and fluffy as young ducklings. The wind takes these seeds into its arms, scatters them to its four corners, enabling them to settle and germinate in spots far removed from the parent tree. On the early bloom of the trees, therefore, exquisite and colorful, yet unseen by the multitude, the forestration of the earth is dependent.

As the season advances many tree blossoms become conspicuous, more like those of the plants in gardens. The magnolias are famous the world over for the glory of their bloom. In the mountainous region of the Appalachians magnolias are as much forest trees as the hemlocks which line with them the banks of many ravines. The habitat of the magnolia family, however, is largely controlled by climatic conditions, and on this account their distribution is far from general. The bloom of these trees as seen in a wild state is mostly known to the inhabitants of the southern United States.

Tulip trees have a wide distribution and are the most stately members of the American forests, besides being possessed of great adaptability for specimen trees on lawns and in parks or to form shade for avenues. Their flowers are as beautiful as many tulips and not unlike them in formation. But like the early bloom of the
red maples they are unknown to the rank and file of humanity. One reason for this is the remarkable height of the trees, another that the outer leaves of the blossoms are green, hiding them well among the foliage. In the hand, however, it is seen that their green petals are wonderfully marked with an orange color intense and rich in tone. Furthermore, these tulip tree blooms cast out a fragrance sweet and alluring to insect lovers, on whom they rely, rather than on the wind, for cross-fertilization. The odor of flowers is often the surest means of drawing to them the attention of the insect world.

Locust trees vie in stateliness and tree grandeur with tulip trees as conspicuous members of the forest, and at no time of the year are they as beautiful as when hung with their long wistaria-like bunches of bloom, delicate in color, intensely fragrant. An avenue planted to these trees will in June cast fragrance to a great distance, making it appear like a bride’s way. Blossoms of such trees as the tulip and locust have lost every element of inconspicuousness. Every child knows them with the same degree of certainty that he knows the flowers of the horse chestnut, since none shows the subtle timidity of the earlier blooms unfolding shyly as if afraid to be seen, yet having the hardiness to brave the unreliableness of March.

Catalpa blossoms usually await July before unfolding, when each one is as perfectly formed and remarkably spotted as if it were an orchid, the treasure of some prince. Indeed, the over-world of spring and early summer is strewn with beauty appealing to the eye of the ardent and the imagination of the poet to look upward and drink to the full its message.

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CATKINS AND YOUNG LEAVES OF THE WHITE OAK, UNFOLDING TOGETHER IN EARLY SPRING; THIS ILLUSTRATION AS WELL AS THE OTHERS THROUGHOUT THIS ARTICLE ARE FROM PHOTOGRAPHS TAKEN BY NATHAN R. GRAVES.