

Flowers Re-Tell Old Fairy Tales

By FRANK THONE

Fairy-tales belong to youth. Whoever can listen to fairy-tales with pleasure has not quite lost his childhood, and whoever can tell them to a child without wearying has not yet grown old.

Thus it is that not the least part in our paradoxical feeling that we are younger in April than we were in the preceding March and February comes from the sight of the lovely fairy-tales we see published all about us in the bright flowers of the woods. And in her unwearied repetition of these tales, spring after spring, our mother the earth, whom we are accustomed to call ancient, informs us with a dash of coquetry that she isn't old yet.

The story that comes most readily to mind, of course, is the Sleeping Beauty. The evil magician is the cold north wind in the fall, the hundred years are the hundred days of winter, the enchanted wood is any wood at all, the beautiful princess is a spring beauty or trillium or bloodroot or any white flower you choose, and the ardent young prince whose kiss ends the enchantment is the warm spring sun.

Or you may reverse the characters and consider the sun in the feminine, as the Germans do; and lo, you have Beauty and the Beast. For the wooing of the gentle sunshine does break the bonds of the rough, bare earth, clothing the hills gallantly in green, and changing the woods from a thrusting mass of savage, bristling branches into the strong noble being that a forest properly is. Or with the sun again as the Prince, we have the story of Cinderella, the immortal theme of the lifting up of the lowly that has been sung ever since ancient Egypt, and even finds its place in our highest religious poetry, such as the chant of the Magnificat.

The fairy tales of spring found their way into the religion of classic Greece and Rome, too, as in the immortal story of Persephone, who was carried off from her mortal spouse by the covetous lord of the Lower World. The bereaved husband, Orpheus, sought her in the gloomy kingdom over which she had been forced to reign, only to lose her again when he almost had her back to the sunlight. Finally through the intercession of her mother, a compromise was affected, by which she was permitted to live on earth half the time but had to return to the realm of Dis for six months of

each year. This myth of winter and spring is so plainly an allegory that it is doubtful whether any but the most simple-minded of the ancients believed that the characters in it were anybody but the flowers, their enemy the black frosts of winter, and their natural lover the sun.

But finding the shining people of the fairy-tale and classic myth is not the only magic that spring makes possible in the forest. Whoever is so fortunate as to live in or near a bit of woodland is given, during the round of each year, a long ride on a magic carpet as marvelous as any that the tales of the Arabian Nights can tell of.

Every wood is an enchanted wood. In summer, when we go camping and become temporary gypsies and Indians, the familiar forest is its proper self, giving right housing for gypsies and hiding for Indians. But as fall comes on it changes—changes as completely as though its roots were grown into a magic carpet that had moved it hundreds of leagues to the westward, into the dry desert. Only the toughest-leaved trees remain green; the rest let go their foliage and become, for all practical purposes, dead trees, and might as well be cancelled out of the account. A tree without its leaves does less actual living than a clump of grass a hundredth of its size. In this desert-forest of the fall there are still many green things; and interest-

ingly enough these autumn flowers and weeds belong predominantly to botanical families that are common in deserts. Then comes winter, and the magic carpet gives the forest another long trip, this time to the frozen north. All the trees are cancelled now, for even the dark evergreens do very little living in the winter, and the desert-cousined plants of the autumn undergrowth are dead and cancelled, too. Only down among the dead leaves and the mosses we find the small creeping things of the tundras and glacier-fronts; bearberry and wintergreen and twinflower and shinleaf. These vegetable Eskimos know how to endure the cold, and can take advantage of the earliest thaws to do a little growing. In winter the forest is again a desert, but it is a tundra desert.

But early spring is a time of shriven sins, and resurrections, and hopes of life everlasting. And spring, anywhere north of the tropics, is surprisingly alike everywhere, whether in eastern forest or western desert or northern tundra. Spring travels as a wave, starting in March in the dry chapparral of northern Mexico and arriving even in the Arctic islands by late June or July. But as the wave moves, it brings the same blessings everywhere: a quickening sun, thawed snows, warm rains and drying breezes. Even in the desert, spring brings rain,

(Just turn the page)



FLOWERING DOGWOOD is perhaps the finest of native American flowering shrubs. It fills the open woodland with what seems to be a snowstorm hung motionless in midair.



DOG-TOOTH VIOLETS are among the loveliest of spring flowers, but would be better called by a less-known name, "fawn lilies," suggested by their mottled leaves.

Flowers

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and the rain brings flowers of a delicacy that makes them a never-ending surprise, so little would one expect such things among the cacti and the harsh, gnarled stems of the bushes of the chapparral.

So also spring brings its most dainty and delicate flowers first to our forests; brings them when the trees and underbushes are of a nakedness and harshness hardly rivalled by the chapparral of the desert. The magic carpet has moved again, and the forest is returning by the same path it took in departing; coming home by way of the West. The early spring flowers of forest are surprisingly like the early flowers of the desert spring in their general appearance of a fragility unsuited to the rough world into which they have been born, as well as in their brief and fugitive life-span. None of

the flowers that blossom among the chapparral stems are more completely gone by summer than are the spring-beauty and the bloodroot.

But it is not only the tender herbs of the forest and desert floors that resemble each other in their spring-time behavior. Many of the forest trees and bushes also burst into bloom in the early spring, some of them before they have any trace of leaves, and others while the leaves are still uncurling from the buds. The splendid flowers of the desert ocotillo, turning the rigid, savage rods of the bush into a living flame, come not forth on branches more naked than those that are graced by the flowers of the wild plum, red-bud, spice-bush, and the less showy blossoms of the maples, beloved of bees. And the crabapple and flowering dogwood are shedding showers of pink or pearly snow before their leaves can be fairly seen as leaves.

This desert-behavior of our forests may seem at first blush to be irrational and outlandish. It is possible of understanding that there should be a tundra-stage in winter, when we have a small-scale return of the glacial epoch; but why should there be this springtime similarity between the forest and the desert? The causes are as yet by no means well understood, but at least one plausible explanation may be hazarded: the life-conditions in forest and desert in early spring are really very much alike. In both, in early spring, there is an abundance of water: in the desert from the spring rains, in the forest from the spring thaws. In both there is a warm and genial sun, for the forest has not yet developed its thick roof of leaves that will later shut off the bright day and turn the woods into a great green tent. In both there are freely wandering breezes, not yet hindered in the forest by the same thick growth of leaves; and where there is breeze there is rapid evaporation of water. Rapid evaporation of water is really half of the making of a desert; we commonly think of a scanty water supply as the sole cause of desert conditions, but the rate of its removal is quite as important as the rate of its supply. So that though the springtime woods are well supplied with rain and melted snow, the sun and wind are demanding heavy hourly toll, and we have, beneath the naked boughs, some simulation of a desert climate.

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