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Spring in the Woods

L. M. Montgomery

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The woods are so human that to know them we must live with them. An occasional saunter through them, keeping, it may be, to the well trodden paths, will never admit us to their intimacy. If we wish to be near friends we must seek them out and win them by frequent reverent visits at all hours, by morning, by noon, and by night, and at all seasons, in spring and in summer, in autumn and in winter. Otherwise, we can never really know them, and any pretence we can make to the contrary will never impose on them. They have their own effective way of keeping aliens at a distance and shutting their heart to mere casual sight-seers.

Believe me, it is of no use to seek the woods from any motive except sheer love of them; they will find us out at once and hide all their sweet, world-old secrets from us. But if they know we come to them because we love them they will be very kind to us and give us such treasure of beauty and delight as is not bought or sold in market nor even can be paid for in coin of earthly minting; for the woods when they give at all give unstintedly and hold nothing back from their true worshippers. We must go to them lovingly, humbly, patiently, watchfully, and we shall learn what poignant loveliness lurks in the wild places and silent intervals, lying under starshine and sunset, what cadences of unearthly music are harped on aged pine boughs or crooned in cosses of fir, what delicate savours exhale from mosses and ferns in sunny corners or on damp brooklands, what dreams and myths and legends of an older time haunt them, what unsuspected tintings glimmer in their dark demesnes and glow in their alluring by-ways; for it is the by-ways that lead to the heart of the woods, and we must not fail to follow them if we would know the forests and be known of them.

Spring is the best time to walk in the woods; at least, we think so in spring; but when summer comes it seems better still; and autumn woods are things quite incomparable in their splendour; and sometimes the winter woods, with their white reserve and fearlessly displayed nakedness, seem the rarest and finest of all. For it is with the forest as with a sweetheart of flesh and blood, in every changing mood and vesture she is still more adorable in her beloved's eyes.

But it is certain that there is more of frank friendliness in the woods in spring than at any other season. In summer they are very busy about their own concerns; in autumn they are so gorgeous and imperial that we feel they have no particular need of us, even though they may like us as well as ever; and in winter their chaste aloofness inspires us with more of the awe of a worshipper than the ardour of a lover.

But in the spring they have so much time before them, and are so well pleased with themselves and the exquisite things that are budding in and about their bailiwick,

that they take us into full companionship and make us free of all their crafts and mysteries, from the potent, unutterable charm of a dim spruce wood to the grace of flexile mountain ashes fringing a lonely glen.

The spring woods have a fashion of flowers, dainty, spirit-fine things, akin to the soul of the wilderness. Here is a westward sloping hill, lying under white drifts of cloud, feathered over with lispng young pines and firs that cup little hollows and corners where the sunshine gets in and never gets out again, but stays there and grows mellow, coaxing dear things to bloom long before they would dream of wakening up elsewhere. This is the spot for mayflowers; we are certain to find them here, on this little russet knoll for choice, where at first sight there is not a hint of blossom. Wait; the mayflowers never flaunt themselves; they must be sought and wooed as becomes them. See, we stoop, we pull aside the brown leathery leaves, and behold! The initials of spring's first lettering, trails and clusters of star-white and dawn-pink that have in them the very soul of all the springs that ever were, reincarnated in something which it seems gross to call perfume, so exquisite and spiritual will it prove to be.

Now that we have learned the art of finding mayflowers we can gather them all over this hill. It is the only place where they grow, for they do not like luxurious surroundings, they extract all their sweetness out of sandy, inhospitable soil, and offer it to the wet, leafless world before the forests have fairly begun to waken up and preen themselves.

After the mayflowers have gone the woods open eyes of blue violets. We find them almost everywhere; the thick spruce woods are the only places where we can venture fearlessly. Elsewhere we must walk most delicately, lest our feet crush the dear, sky-tinted things. Wherever a bit of grass finds sunshine enough on which to thrive there we find violets, along the lanes, and about the roots of slim birches, and in the dappled pasture corners overhung with beechen boughs; but to find the place where they grow most thickly we must wander into a tiny, sequestered valley of a western hill; beyond it there is a pool which is not known to summer days, but in spring is a glimmering green sheet of water on whose banks nymphs might dance as blithely as ever they did on Argive hill or in Cretan dale. Certes, they would have rare footing of it, for here violets grow so thickly that all the grass is enskied with them; and in just one corner we find the rarer white violets, tiny blossoms with purple pencillings in their little urns, which are filled with the most subtly distilled incense.

This pool is a witching spot near which to linger on spring evenings. Somewhere through the lissome willows and poplars that fringe it faint hues of rose and saffron from the far bourne of sunset steal across its pearly shimmer. It is unruffled by a

breath, and every leaf and branch is mirrored in it, to the very grasses that sway on its margin. The willows are decked with glossy silver catkins, the maples are mistily red-budded, and that cluster of white birches, a meet home for a dryad, is hung over with golden tassels.

When the violets begin to leave us we have the white garlands of the wild cherry flung out everywhere, against the dark of the spruces and in the hedges along the lanes; and will you please look at that young wild pear which has adorned herself after immemorial fashion as a bride for her husband, in a wedding veil of fine lace. The fingers of wood pixies must have woven it, for nothing like it ever came from an earthly loom. I vow the tree is conscious of its own loveliness; it is trembling and bridling before our very eyes, as if its beauty were not the most ephemeral thing in the woods, as it is the rarest and most exceeding, for to-day it is and to-morrow it is not. Every south wind purring gently through the boughs will winnow away a shower of slender petals. But what matter? To-day it is queen of the wild places, and it is always to-day in the woods, where there is neither past nor future but only the prescience of immortality.

Of course, there are dandelions in the woods, because there are dandelions everywhere. They have no sense of the fitness of things at all; they are a cheerful, self-satisfied folk, firmly believing that they are welcome wherever grass can grow and sunshine beckon. But they are alien to the ancient wood. They are too obvious and frank; they possess none of the mystery and reserve and allurements of the real wood flowers; in short, have no secrets. Still, nothing, not even the smug dandelion, can live long in or near the woods without some sort of psychic transformation coming over it; and presently all the obtrusive yellowness and complacency are gone, and we have instead misty, phantom-like globes that hover over the long grasses in full harmony with the traditions of the forests.

The open spaces in the woods, washed in a bath of tingling sunshine, visited of all the winds of heaven, with glimpses of faraway hills and home meadows where cloud shadows broaden and vanish, are dear to our hearts; and dearer still the place of hardwoods, hung with their mist of green, where elfin lights frolic; but dearest of all is the close wood, curtained with fine-spun purple gloom, through which only the most adventurous sunbeams may glide, looking pale as if with fear over their own daring. This is where the immortal heart of the wood will beat against ours and its subtle life will steal into our veins and make us its own forever, so that no matter where we go or how wide we wander in the noisy ways of cities or over lone paths of sea, we shall yet be drawn back to the forest to find our most enduring kinship.

Those who have followed a dim, winding, balsamic path to the unexpected

hollow where a wood spring lies, have found the rarest secret the woods can reveal. Here it is, under its pines, a crystal-clear thing, with lips un-kissed by so much as a stray sunbeam. It is easy to dream that it is one of the haunted springs of old romance, an enchanted spot where we must go softly and speak, if we dare speak at all, in the lowest of whispers, lest we disturb the rest of a white, wet naiad or break some spell that has cost long years of mystic weaving. Come, let us stoop down on the brink and ever so gently drink from our hollowed hands of the living water, for it must have some potent quality of magic in it, and all our future lives we shall have better understanding of the wood and its lore by reason of drinking from the cup it offers.

A brook steals away from the spring. At first it goes deeply and darkly and softly, as becomes its birth; but as soon as we follow it from that somewhat uncanny locality we see that, though born of the spring, it was begotten by the spirit of the wild, and is more its father's child than its mother's, becoming promptly what all brooks are, a gay, irresponsible vagabond of valley and wilderness. Let us take it for a boon companion and follow it in all its windings and doublings and tricky surprises. A brook is the most changeful, bewitching, lovable thing in God's good world. It is never in the same mind or mood two minutes. Here it creeps around the roots of the birches, with a plaintive little murmur and sigh, as if its heart were broken. We feel that we must sympathise with its old sorrow and nameless woe. But listen, a curve further on and the brook is laughing, a long, low gurgle of laughter, as if it were enjoying some capital joke all by itself; and so infectious is its mirth that we must laugh too and forget old sadness as the brook forgets.

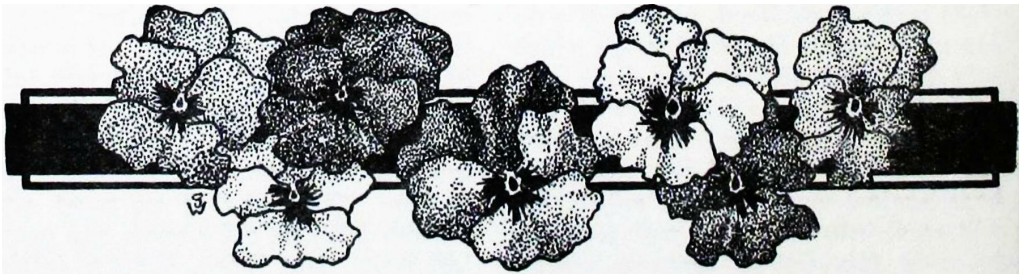
Here it makes a pool, dark and brooding and still, and thinks over its secrets with a reticence savouring of its maternity; but anon it grows communicative and gossips shallowly over a broken pebble bed, where there is a diamond-dance of sunbeams, and no minnow or troutling can glide through without being seen.

Sometimes its banks are high and steep, hung with slender ashes and birches; then they are mere low margins green with delicate mosses, shelving out of the wood. Here we come to a little precipice, the brook flings itself over undauntedly in an indignation of foam and gathers itself up rather dizzily among the mossy stones below. It is some time before it gets over its vexation; and it goes boiling and muttering along, fighting with the rotten logs that lie across it and making far more fuss than is necessary over every root that interferes with it. But the brook is sweet-tempered and cannot be angry long; and soon it is twinkling ever so good-naturedly in and out among the linked shadows, and presently it leads us out of the woods into the meadows.

It is a spring evening and the earth smells good. All the birds, which have been so busy nest-building through the day, have gone to sleep, except the robins, which are just beginning to whistle, clearly, melodiously, enchantingly, as they never whistle at any time save just after a spring sunset. "Horns of elfland" never sounded so sweetly around hoary castle and ruined tower as do the vesper calls of robins in a twilit wood of spruces and across dim green pastures lying under the pale radiance of a young moon.

The frogs sing us homeward. From every pool in the valleys and swamp in the forests come their "flute-throated voices." In that silvery, haunting chorus the music of all the springs that have been since the days of Eden finds its ever-renewed reincarnation.

Here the wood gives us a last sweet amazement for its guerdon. Before us is a young poplar, the very embodiment of youth and spring in its litheness and symmetry and grace and aspiration. Its little leaves are hanging tremulously, but are not yet so fully blown as to hide its delicate development of bough and twig, making poetry against the spiritual tints of a spring sunset. It is so beautiful that it hurts us, with the pain inseparable from all perfection. Why is it so? It is the pain of finality, the realisation that there can be nothing beyond but retrogression? Or is it the prisoned infinite in us calling out to its kindred infinite expressed in that visible perfection?



TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *Spring in the Woods* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]