

The Rural Pan

An April Essay

Through shady Throgmorton Street and about the vale of Cheapside the restless Mercury is flitting, with furtive eye and voice a little hoarse from bidding in the market. Further west, down classic Piccadilly, moves the young Apollo, the lord of the unerring (satin) bow; and nothing meaner than a frock-coat shall in these latter years float round his perfect limbs. But remote in other haunts than these the rural Pan is hiding, and piping the low, sweet strain that reaches only the ears of a chosen few. And now that the year wearily turns and stretches herself before the perfect waking, the god emboldened begins to blow a clearer note.

When the waking comes at last, and Summer is abroad, these deities will abroad too, each as his several attributes move him. Who is this that flieth up the reaches of the Thames in steam-launch hired for the day? Mercury is out -- some dozen or fifteen strong. The flower-gemmed banks crumble and slide down under the wash of his rampant screw; his wake is marked by a line of lobster-claws, gold-necked bottles, and fragments of veal-pie. Resplendent in blazer, he may even be seen to embrace the slim-waisted nymph, haunter of green (room) shades, in the full gaze of the shocked and scandalised sun. Apollo meantime reposes, passively beautiful, on the lawn of the Guards' Club at Maidenhead. Here, O Apollo, are haunts meet for thee. A deity

subjectively inclined, he is neither objective nor, it must be said for him, at all objectionable, like them of Mercury.

Meanwhile, nor launches nor lawns tempt him that pursueth the rural Pan. In the hushed recesses of Hurley backwater where the canoe may be paddled almost under the tumbling comb of the weir, he is to be looked for; there the god pipes with freest abandonment. Or under the great shadow of Streatley Hill, "annihilating all that's made to a green thought in a green shade"; or better yet, pushing an explorer's prow up the remote untravelled Thame, till Dorchester's stately roof broods over the quiet fields. In solitudes such as these Pan sits and dabbles, and all the air is full of the music of his piping.

Southwards, again, on the pleasant Surrey downs there is shouting and jostling; dust that is drouthy and language that is sultry. Thither comes the young Apollo, calmly confident as ever; and he meeteth certain Mercuries of the baser sort, who do him obeisance, call him captain and lord, and then proceed to skin him from head to foot as thoroughly as the god himself flayed Marsyas in days of yore, at a certain Spring Meeting in Phrygia: a good instance of Time's revenges. And yet Apollo returns to town and swears he has had a grand day. He does so every year. Out of hearing of all the clamour, the rural Pan may be found stretched on Ranmore Common, loitering under Abinger pines, or prone by the secluded stream of the sinuous Mole, abounding in friendly greetings for his foster-brothers the dab-chick and water-rat.

For a holiday, Mercury loveth the Pullman Express, and a short hour with a society paper; anon, brown boots on the pier, and the pleasant combination of Métropole and Monopole. Apollo for his part will urge the horses of the Sun: and, if he leaveth the society weekly to Mercury, yet he loveth well the Magazine. From which omphalos or hub of the universe he will direct his shining team even to the far Hesperides of Richmond or of Windsor. Both iron road and level highway are shunned by the rural Pan, who chooses rather to foot it along the sheep track on the limitless downs or the thwart-leading footpath through copse and spinney, not without pleasant fellowship with feather and fir. Nor does it follow from all this that the god is unsocial. Albeit shy of the company of his more showy brother-deities, he loveth the more unpretentious humankind, especially them that are *adscripti glebæ*, addicted to the kindly soil and to the working thereof: perfect in no way, only simple, cheery sinners. For he is only half a god after all, and the red earth in him is strong. When the pelting storm drives the wayfarers to the sheltering inn, among the little group on bench and settle Pan has been known to appear at times, in homely guise of hedger-and-ditcher or weather-beaten shepherd from the downs. Strange lore and quaint fancy he will then impart, in the musical Wessex or Mercian he has learned to speak so naturally; though it may not be till many a mile away that you begin to suspect that you have unwittingly talked with him who chased the flying Syrinx in Arcady and turned the tide of fight at Marathon.

Yes: to-day the iron horse has searched the country through -- east

and west, north and south -- bringing with it Commercialism, whose god is Jerry, and who studs the hills with stucco and garrotes the streams with the girder. Bringing, too, into every nook and corner fashion and chatter, the tailor-made gown and the eyeglass. Happily a great part is still spared -- how great these others fortunately do not know -- in which the rural Pan and his following may hide their heads for yet a little longer, until the growing tyranny has invaded the last common, spinney, and sheep-down, and driven the kindly god, the well-wisher to man -- whither?