

NOTES

Proper Names

One of the signs of the low standard of education provided by the State Schools of New Zealand is the absence of general culture revealed by the crass ignorance prevailing concerning the pronunciation of names which ought to be familiar to every person who pretends to the thinnest veneer of general knowledge. Listen on a racecourse, or in a train, to the conversation about horses. Many horses' names are taken from standard works of literature and from classical mythology. And to hear how our people call them is appalling as a revelation of our national ignorance. Michaela (properly Micaela) ought to be pronounced as it ought to be spelled, but it is generally called something like "mishayla." Chimaera, which is of course a Greek word and ought to be pronounced Keemayra, is in New Zealand Greek "shimmerer"! The common French word Lingerie is usually called linger-ee. Once we heard the name of a great English sire mentioned as Kissero, in proof of our familiarity with so common a name as that of the great Roman orator. Instances of a similar kind might be multiplied without end. Let us conclude the note by mentioning that some time ago a New Zealand Minister of Education gave a lecture during which he spoke brazenly and unabashed of what he called hyperbowl! After that what could one expect?

Demeter and Persephone

Talking about Greek names and mythology reminds one of the beautiful legend of Demeter and Persephone, recollection of which is appropriate in this season of springtime. Persephone, the daughter of Demeter and Jove, was seized by Pluto among the flowering meadows along the banks of the bright streams of the plains of Enna. Despite her frantic cries Pluto carried her to Hades with him, the waters of Lake Cyane parting to allow his chariot to pass. Demeter mourned the loss of her daughter, and in the Earth-Mother's wailing we have the sorrow of winter:

My quick tears killed the flower, my ravings hushed
The bird, and lost in utter grief I failed
To send my life thro' olive-yard and vine,
And golden grain, my gist to helpless man.
Rain-rotten died the wheat, the barley-spears
Were hollow-husked, the leaf fell, and the sun,
Pale at my grief drew down before his time.

At last Demeter finds out that her daughter has been carried off by Pluto and obtains from Jove permission for Persephone to return to her for "nine white moons of each whole year."

The Welcome

Demeter prepares to welcome her child from the Under World. Once more she sends life into the dormant seeds and buds, and the whole earth is stirring at the approach of Persephone.

Faint as a climate-changing bird that flies
All night across the darkness, and at dawn
Falls on the threshold of her native land,
And can no more, thou camest. O my child,
Led upwards by the god of ghosts and dreams,
Who laid thee at Eleusis, dazed and dumb
With passing thro' at once from state to state. . . .
So in this pleasant vale we stand again,
The field of Enna, now once more ablaze
With flowers that brighten as thy footstep falls. . . .
For see, thy foot has touched it; all the space
Of blank earth-baldness clothes itself afresh,
And breaks into the crocus-purple hour
That saw thee vanish.

The Seasons

Through this lovely ancient legend runs the cycle of the seasons. In the Earth-Mother's welcome to Persephone we have the coming of spring with its flowers and its zephyrs, renewing the face of the earth and banishing darkness from water, wood, and valley. Persephone comes with spring, and lo! the winter has passed and

"The winds are sleeping,
And through a thin-wove veil of silver-grey
The sun is like a timid lover peeping.
Where hope in her own garden stands and sings,
And gazing upwards hears the skylark chiming
Wild responses to her song—"

The death-sleep is over and the earth awakes trembling;
the "wanton lapwing gets himself another crest; a
brighter crimson burns upon the robin's breast; a
brighter iris glows upon the burnished dove; the ash-
buds are black and bursting; the catkins sway from
the branches; and every copse becomes a mist of tender
green. Later, all the flowers and leaves are in full
bloom, and the warm sun shines high in the heavens,
and the nights are like velvet:

"'Tis time to sing! of youth
Pluming the woods, and the first rose appears,
And summer from the chambers of the south
Is coming up to wipe away all tears!"

The gardens are ablaze with color, and the wild flowers,
so fair and so fragrant, spread their beautiful carpet
under the white feet of Persephone. The moons wane
and the summer passes. The trees are touched with
that ineffable beauty that precedes decay; golden and
rosy, the fruit that bends the boughs gleams amid the
leaves; and the waving tresses of the cornfields fall
before the reapers. The wonderful autumn sunsets
burnish the woods which are now clothed in royal
purple and gold. A little while the loveliest season
of all the year lingers. It is drenched with sadness
for the time is at hand when the Earth-Mother must
lose her daughter again. The moons wane. Per-
sephone goes to the Under World. There is a flutter-
ing of falling leaves; the woods begin to look cold and
bare. Pathos is in the landscape everywhere:

Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,
Tears from the depth of some divine despair
Rise in the heart and gather to the eyes,
In looking on the happy autumn fields,
And thinking of the days that are no more.

Sadly autumn dies, and winter comes again. There
are watery sunsets and angry skies. The winds lose
their softness and grow shrill and sharp:

Through the gaunt woods the winds are shrilling cold,
Down from the rifled wrack the sunbeam pours.

The nights grow long and cold. Frost appears and
binds the earth in its cruel embrace. There are occa-
sional clear, starry nights, and storms pass to leave
short radiant days and silver nights. Now and then
leaden clouds throng on the horizon, and like muffled
bells the snow-flakes come trembling down, covering
the earth with a pure mantle and making all things
beautiful and spotless for a little while. There is
rain and wind, and in the wailing gales we hear the
Earth-Mother moaning in the dark nights:

"Where is my loved one? Wherefor do ye wail?"
And out from all the night an answer shrilled,
"We know not, and we know not why we wail."

The winter moons are long; but all things pass. The
death of the year will be followed by rebirth, and
Persephone will come with joy once more in the spring
days. Thus, through this tender legend of maternal
love, is traced the allegory of the changing seasons.