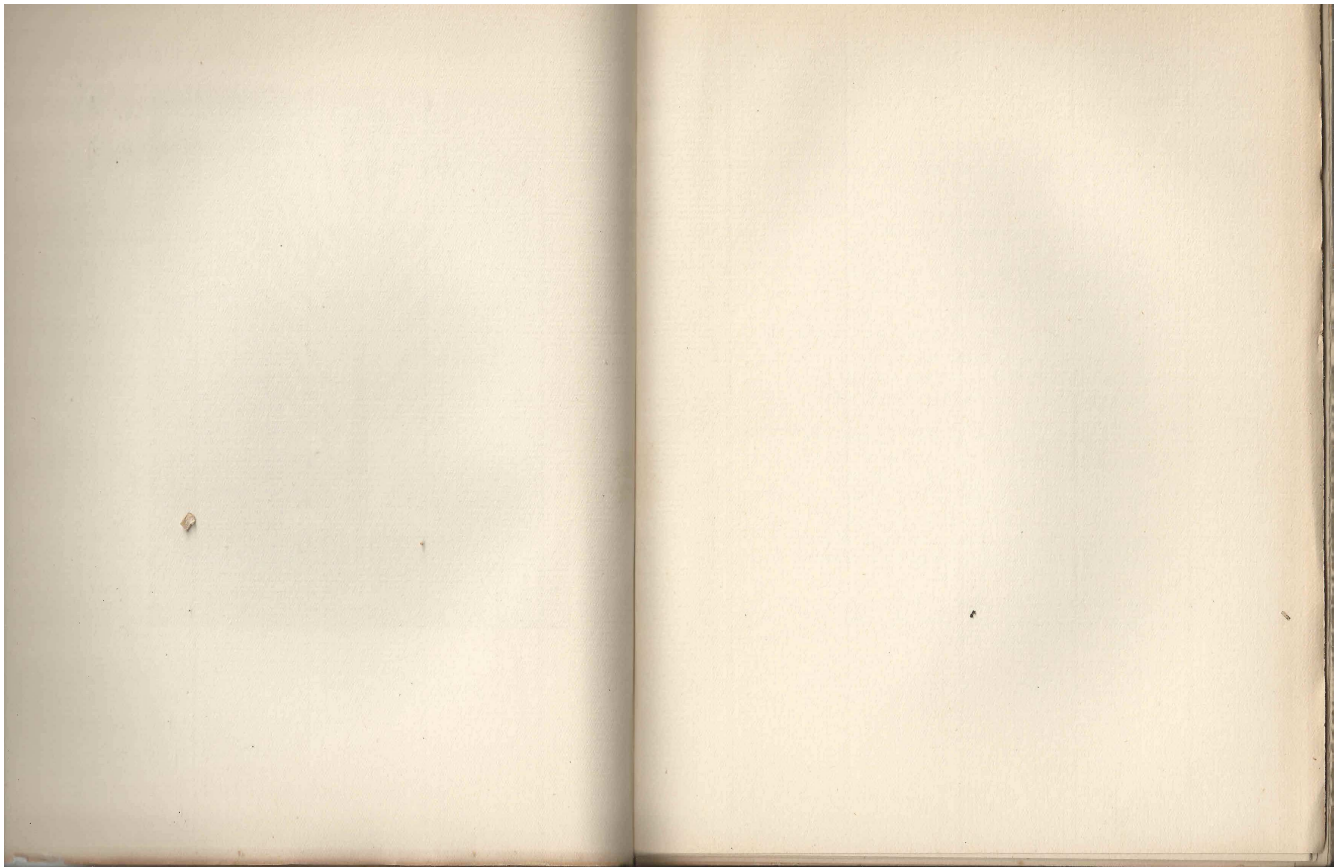


DAFFODIL



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FIERY princes of the empyrean rode daily to the palace of King Nuivray, to woo the Lady Daffodil, fairest of all the princesses of Heaven. On splendid steeds they came—the Chieftains of the Twelve Houses, with beautiful banners borne before them flaming along the Milky Way. Came the Knight of the Dawn, golden armoured and cloaked in scarlet; the Prince of Noon, panoplied in shining sapphire and the pennon of his lance a blue meteor trailing: Evening, an enchanter out of western heaven wrapped about in flame robes shell-pink and shell-blue; Night, a dark emperor of mysterious sovereignty and power. Many sultans came too, and paynim princes and sublimities: Aldebaran with the topaz-hilted scimitar, who is leader of all the armies of the firmament; white-turbanned diamonded Fomalhaut; Alpheratz and Achernar; Algol and Algenib and Alderamin. Came the great poets of the sky: the Pleiades ever beautiful and young, and Vega and his train, and Vindemiatrix; and the knightly-hearted brothers of Orion, who guard the Marches of Space. Came our Lord Martanda himself, gloriously singing and flaming in his car of flame.

No language known in heaven could tell the sweetness and the beauty of Lady Daffodil. The Pleiades knew well that with all their gift of song they could not declare it, nor the thousandth part of it; how then should one earth-born describe the aura of light about her head,



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citron-hued and saffron-hued, that shone more tenderly and beneficently yellow than even the breastplate of the Knight of Dawn, or even the golden crown of Aldebaran? How describe the gentle magical wisdom of her, her understanding of the antique transformations and transmigrations of things; or her profound unquenchable gaiety that kept merriment alive among the stars even on the days of the rebellions of hell? Not that you must think of her as meekly girlish; nor suppose her occupations merely such as spinning and embroidery, or playing upon zither or citole. She too had led armies through the mountains beyond Orion; and if she bore no sword herself, nor charged in scythed car, it was still her druid incantations on the peak, they said, that cleared the passes of invading hell. I will say that her presence was a light to heal sorrow, to exorcise or shame away evil; that an atmosphere breathed about her, quickening, spiritual and delicate, but very robust too, and with power to awaken souls. In the sapphire halls and galleries of her father's palace: in the gardens where gentian and larkspur and forget-me-not bloom: when she passed a rumour of delight ran trembling after and before her; the little asterisms that nested in the trees broke into trillings and warblings of joy. *Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful!* they sang; and *Delight, delight, delight!*

Now it fell that King Nuivray held court in Heaven at Eastertime, and all the suitors were present. It was thought that whoever should win most glory now, whether

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in the jousts of arms or in the contests of song, would have the hand of the Lady Daffodil for his prize. Splendidly they were enthroned on thrones most splendid; not one of them but belonged to the great winged and flaming hierarchies; not one but was embodied in essential flame; and there was mirth there, and high emulation; and even though rivalry, pleasant companionship and comradely love.

In the midst of the feasting one came into the hall, at whose coming all turned to look at him; and they shuddered and there was a moment's silence beneath the turquoise towers. He was one that should have been young, but was decrepit; that should have been handsome, but for the marks of vice on his face; that should have been noble of form and limb, but for evil living. From his two eyes two haunting demons looked forth: the one, fear or horror; the other, shameless boldness. Because his words were so insolent as he called for a high throne among the Gods, Rigel and Mintaka and Anilam and Betelgeux, the archers of Orion, reached for their bows; our Lord Marttanda grasped his sword of flame; Aldebaran arose drawing his scimitar: such rudeness was not to be tolerated there, in the very presence of the yellow-haired Lady of Heaven. They waited but a sign of permission from her——

But she, rising from the throne at her father's side, came down the hall and stood before the stranger, all graciously shining. He framed, I think, some ribaldry in his mind; but looking up at her, faltered; then,

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bowing low, took her hand and kissed it very humbly, after the manner of a loyal knight of Heaven.

'Please you, sir, to declare to us your name and rank,' said she.

'I am the Spirit of the Earth,' he answered.

The Lords of the Firmament looked down at him very pitifully; then hung their heads in sorrow; for he was the outcast, the scapegrace, the traitor of Heaven; he alone had broken the Law; he alone hobnobbed with and sheltered the hellions whom they, embodying the Eternal Will, fought eternally and drove back and back over the brink of things.

'A place and a royal robe for the Lord Spirit of Earth!' commanded the Lady Daffodil.

Then they strove to forget him, and the feasting went forward.

This one told of his imperial state; this of his high adventures; this of conquests won afar; this of the prowess of his bow; this of the daring and keen edge of his sword. Not boastingly they spoke, however, nor in any mood of self-exaltation: their words, like their deeds, were all a ceremonial of sacrifice, and worship paid to the Lonely Unknown. At the end King Nuivray turned to his daughter: 'Will you not make your choice now?' he said.

'Not yet,' she answered; 'there is still one knight that has neither spoken nor sung. Lord Spirit of the Earth,' she said, turning to that most unlovely being, 'tell you now your story.'



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Again the Princes of the Empyrean hung their heads, guessing they were to hear shame and sorrow. But the Spirit of the Earth rose and spoke.

‘Braggart knights,’ he said, ‘I am greater than all of you. I alone do what I please; worship myself, sin, and enjoy a million pleasures. You—who shall compare you with me? You go on your courses obedient, and are the slaves of Law; my law is my own will; my pleasures I choose for myself; in my realm was planted the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and I ate of the fruit of the tree, and am wise—I am wise.

‘Which one of you is equal unto me? Is it you, Lord Marttanda? All your splendour is squandered abroad; and as much as I desire of it falls upon me, and is mine to enjoy soft hours of it, and to turn away from it when I will;—but who ministers unto you, or who hath given you a gift at any time? Or is it ye, Knights of the Dawn and the Noon and the Evening? All your beauty is for me, for me. Is it ye, O poets of the Pleiades, who sing the songs it was ordained you should sing? Are ye not wearied yet of your singing? For me only is your music pleasant; because I listen when I will, and when I will, heed it no more, but turn to pleasures of my own.’

Here he laughed, and his laughter sickened Heaven.

‘Ye wage your wars in space, as it was predestined you should wage them: ye obey the Law in your warfare, going forth and returning according to a will not your own. Ye are light and know not darkness: in a shadowless



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monotony of splendour ye go forward to a destiny wherein is no prospect of change. What to you, O Lord Marttanda, is your splendid effulgence, that may not wax nor wane? What to you are your songs, O Pleiades?—they contain no grandeur of tragedy, nor sweet savour of sadness, nor fire of passion: neither hate nor love to give them life and power. Your glory and your music are a weariness to you; and a weariness, O Orion, is your watchful charge. That which ye are, ye shall be forever, O ye that know not the sweetness of sin!

‘But I care nothing for the glory of your wars, since I have the power to raise up wars within myself. Since my children come, millions against millions, and burn and ravish and slaughter; since my lands grow fruitful soaked with blood, and my seas are the abode of sudden treacherous slaughter, and even in my skies rides Death!

‘What are your tame delights, that I should envy them: since I go out after strange loves, and riot in strange sins, and take my fill of gorgeous pleasures of mine own devising, and——’

Then his eyes met those of the Lady Daffodil; and he faltered, dropped his head, and covered his face and groaned.

‘O Lords of the Firmament, help me!’ he cried. ‘You that have given me the light I pollute; you that of old endowed me with fire and soul; that are unfallen, and unhaunted by demons; that are not torn as I am torn, nor degraded as I am degraded! You whose souls are unsullied and unstained, a boon from you! Help from

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you! Come down into my house, some great warrior of you, that I be not destroyed by my own misdoings! One of you, beautiful Pleiades, come down and sing my miserable children into peace! Or you, Mintaka and Alnilam, keen-shafted! You, Lord Marttanda, come down, and drive away with your brightness the hellions that scourge and devour me! Sovereign Aldebaran, let the terrible edge of your scimitar cleave away the loathsome hosts of my sins!

‘For behold, I am of your own race, and am fallen; my soul, that was divine once and knightly, is passing away from me and ebbing into oblivion; sin and death and sorrow are my companions; I am Hell; I am Hell!’

He fell on his knees suppliant, and with bent head implored them, weeping.

‘What can I do for thee, brother?’ said our Lord Marttanda. ‘I send thee my beautiful beams, and they come back to me an offence; they breed carrion and pestilence in thee, of the millions that are slain in thy wars. If I came nearer to thee, thou wouldst perish.’

‘Alas, what can we do for thee, poor brother?’ said the Pleiades. ‘We have sung for thee, and of our singing thy poets have learned to sing; and with this sacred knowledge they have made war-songs and lust-songs and terrible songs of hate. What can we do for thee?’

‘We keep watch upon the marches against monstrous invasion from the deep,’ said Mintaka and Alnilam. ‘But thou—hast thou not brought in demons, and made our

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watching to be in vain? We can do nothing for thee; would that we could !'

'I can do nothing for thee,' said the Grand Seigneur Aldebaran—'I that am Lord of War, and leader of the Hosts of the Gods. For it was ordained of old that Light should break battle on darkness, and that this my War in Heaven should be. But thou hast stolen the secret of conflict from me, which was ordained to be a lovely thing ; and hast made it base, abhorrent and bloody. Thou hast not followed me to the eternal field in the ranks of thy brethren, but used the engine of God for thine own delight and destruction. Because of this, if I came nearer to thee, thy wars would destroy thee utterly. Thy children would riot down into madness and mutual slaughter, until none was left of them.'

So one by one the princes spoke. They could do nothing for the Spirit of the Earth. He had eaten the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil; his fate had been in his own hands, and he had elected to make it damnation.

Then King Nuivray, being their host, rose from his throne to pronounce their general judgment on him. 'Thou camest here with insolence on thy lips,' said he; 'and made boast in Heaven of thy foulness, polluting the beauty of the empyreal fields. Go forth; thy sins have damned thee; there is no hope for thee. There is none in Heaven that will go with thee, nor one that might save thee if he went.'

'Yes, there is one,' cried the Lady Daffodil. As she



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spoke, the turquoise towers were filled with sudden light and loveliness, such as none had beheld in them till then. 'Yes, there is one,' said she. 'Poor Spirit of the Earth, thou art to hope; I will go with thee.'

The Lord Marttanda veiled his splendour in sorrow. The Pleiades wept in silence, and thenceforth for seven ages there was sadness in their song. 'Not so!' cried Sultan Aldebaran; 'thou art to shine and flame upon our ensigns; for thy sake, O Daffodil, we are to sweep triumphant over the ramparts of hell!'

But the Spirit of the Earth raised his head and looked at her, and a wild hope rose in his eyes; and then forlorn but altogether noble despair.

'No!' he said, 'come not thou! Where hideous sin is, is no place for thee. Thou couldst not live in my dwelling-place; envious Death, that stalks there day and night, would shoot at thee at once, desiring thy beauty, for himself. I have no power against Death; I could not shield thee from his arrows. O Beautiful beyond all the beauty of Heaven, come not thou! Rather will I go forth alone to my condemnation, and perish utterly.'

'My father,' she said, very calmly. 'I invoke the truth from thee. I will hear destiny speak through thy lips. Can I, going with him, save the Spirit of the Earth?'

They all rose in their places, to hear destiny speak through the king.

'Thou canst not save him,' said he. 'There is no



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God in Heaven of us all that could save him. He hath eaten the fruit of the Tree, and none can save him but himself. Yet if thou wert to go, there would be hope for him; and possessing hope, at the last he might come to save himself. But in the kingdom of Death, thou too wouldst die.'

'Speak,' she said, 'what means this *die*?'

'We know not well,' said the king; 'we can but guess. I think it would be, to lose thyself, thy being; to become a very little and powerless thing; and without thought or knowledge, foresight or memory.'

'I will go with the Spirit of the Earth,' she said.

In the morning they rode forth together; and she talked to him by the way, uttering gentle druid wisdom, very powerful in its magic; so that he remembered all the hopes he had in his young time, and the beauty of his youthful dreams. Visions of beautiful victories rose before him. Inspired and strengthened by her shining companionship, he would purge his house of evil utterly; then ride out under the banners of Aldebaran and worship God in high deeds along the borders of space. And he loved her without thought of self; not as a man may love a woman, but as a poet may love a dream or a star; he vowed to himself that he would worship her for ever, and shield her from Death's arrows with his own body. So once more, as she rode with him through the blue empyrean, he was the Knight of Heaven going forth upon adventure: he knew himself for a God.

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They came into the realm of Evening, and looking down, the Lady Daffodil beheld the mountains of the Earth empurpled far below, and the lakes golden and roseate under the sunset, and valleys that seemed the abodes of quiet peace.

‘But thy kingdom is altogether lovely,’ said she.

‘Thou hast not seen the dwellings of men,’ he answered.

They rode on and down, and passed beneath the borders of the empire of Night.

‘What ails thee, Princess?’ said he, trembling.

‘I grow a little faint,’ she said. ‘There is one here——’

‘Ha, Earth, my gossip, what new light o’ love hast brought with thee?’

‘Back, thou Death!’ cried the Spirit of the Earth, leaping forward to take the arrow, if he might, in his own breast. But Death laughed at him as he shot, and went on his way jeering.

‘Never heed thou this, to be cast down by it,’ she whispered. ‘Bury me in the loveliest of thy valleys; find thou a grassy mound whereon there are stones of the Druids, and bury me beneath the grass there; to-morrow I shall put forth a sign that I am with thee always, and that thou art always to hope. So I bid thee no farewell. . . .’

He bore her body down into the loveliest of his valleys, and digged her a grave upon the mound, and watched beside the grave until morning. And when the sun had risen he found a flower blooming above the grave, lovelier

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than all the blossoms of his native Heaven. He bent down, and reverently kissed the yellow delight and glory of its bloom; and lo, the bloom had language for him, and whispered: 'While I flower thou shalt not perish; when thou seest me, thou art to think that beauty and hope still remain to thee; I am thy sign and assurance that thou shalt yet be among the greatest of the Princes of Heaven.'

And that morning the Druids found daffodils blooming about their sacred circle. 'Heaven hath won some sweeping victory over hell,' they said.