

NATURE NOW

Plant Life Hastens Hiding Earth Scars

By LYDIA KING FREHSE
Special Writer for The Birmingham Ecceentric

Today, following a shaded woodland path, I came upon a little circle about a foot and a half in diameter where someone had emptied a panful of wood ashes.

All unknown to himself, he had created a miniature laboratory where nature is demonstrating anew how plants behave when they colonize a bare spot. She is repeating in a small way, the stages which she followed millions of years ago when first clothing the bare and lifeless earth with greenery.

Nature is deliberate in her ways. Yet it is surprising to see how many and varied are the plants which have gained a foothold on this little mound in what may

interwoven that I must take a tweezers to extricate a single plant of the most conspicuous variety. The entire plant, when I have laid it out on a piece of white paper is no more than an inch in length. It belongs to the species "Leptobryum" whose index is a tiny pear-shaped capsule. This is born on a slender orange-brown stalk and in it the microscopic spores ripen. Always as I examine it I am thrilled by its perfect shape, as it hangs pendant, like an ancient vase. The plant itself is a tiny green tuft of sharply pointed hair-like leaves. It takes thousands of these minutiae to cover my small mound.

THE ABOVE primitive plants are the amphibians of the plant world. Although they are land dwellers most of their kind must yet live in moist and shady places remembering their ancient and watery lineage. They cover sterile and newly-cut soil with a protective

blanket where higher plants like grasses could not gain a foothold. They fill up acres of swamps and bogs and line the margins of shaded streams and ponds. Their simple tissues enable them to absorb large amounts of water which is gradually released as it is needed.

Two other spore-bearing plants—an equisetum or horsetail and a fern of the species *Cystopteris*—have also gained a foothold on my small mound. These represent important plant families whose ancestors grew to tree-like proportions in the Coal Age swamps. Now they are dwarfed to mere remnants, although they retain their essential structure.

hold at a foot's distance from the mother plant. A blackberry seedling has already developed thorns forbidding to my touch. I can also make out the identity of two wild flower plants, a miterwort and a jewel weed. In some such fashion plants work night and day to colonize the land. In response to nature's unfulfilling law only the fittest of these will survive. If he who emptied his ashcan could make an annual pilgrimage to this spot he would see a succession of ever-changing plant inhabitants, as each species struggles for a permanent foothold. It is possible that in 50 years' time one of the cedar saplings will have grown to tree-like proportions while most of its companions will have been crowded out. Near to infinity is the pattern of life. There comes a day when suddenly there is so much to learn that even a life-time is too brief to divine its meaning or to savor its joys.

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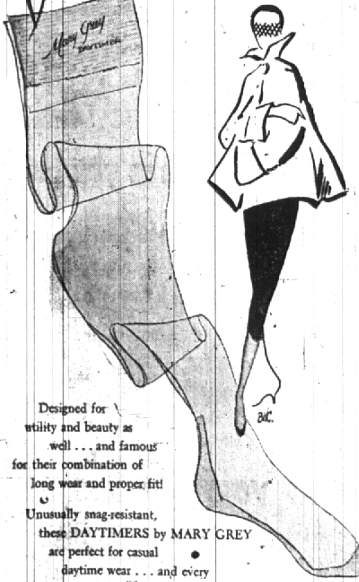
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Mrs. Frehse All unnoticed it carries a diverse cargo of microscopic spores. These it sifts over the earth's surface at every moment of the day and night. When they find suitable growing conditions, life quickens and the plant blanket begins to form.

THE WHOLE process begins much as it must have begun some 400 million years ago when the first land plants were established. As I strive to examine the green mound I see, first of all, a single pale white shoot smaller than the tiniest of birthday candles. It belongs to that family of those plants called fungi and its name is "Clavaria fusiformis." These primitive plants are regarded by scientists to be degenerate algae which have lost their green coloring matter and thereby the power to make their own food. There was no man abroad to record the behavior of these primitive Silurian plants, but they are thought to have been among the first to leave their watery home to colonize the land. Now they spring up overnight from the plant mycelium hidden underground, drinking up with their rudimentary tissues the already prepared food which they find.

NEXT I TAKE note of a little patch, no bigger than the palm of my hand, which is covered by a flat green plant. It is called "Marchantia" and it is one of the common liverworts. This plant gets its name from its fancied resemblance to the liver of men and animals. You will see it often at the edge of shaded ponds and streams for it has never weaned itself from its water-loving ways. Devoid of roots, stems and leaves, its body sprawls over the soil in a series of forked branches. Its nappy thin tissues are held to earth by little anchors called rhizoids. If you come upon this liverwort in August it is likely to be decorated with two kinds of tiny umbrella-like structures, one male and one female upon whose underparts microscopic spores ripen. These come to rest and finally unite in a tiny cup on the surface of the plant tissue. Here grow certain bud-like bodies called gemmae which are capable of reproducing the plant.

THE LARGEST amount of living room on my small woodland laboratory is taken up by another group of primitive plants, the mosses. I can distinguish a half dozen kinds growing in a mat so tightly

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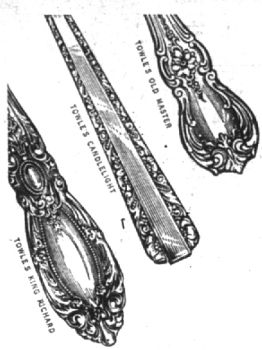
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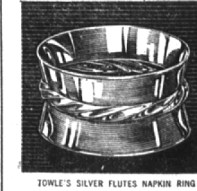
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