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The language and poetry of flowers

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II.-Introduction; Flowers and Their Teachings.

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Introduction.

FLOWERS AND THEIR TEACHINGS.

—♦—
There's odour in the very name
Which to the thoughtful brain,
Comes with refreshing influence,
Like April's pleasant rain.
The rose that to the sun's warm kiss
Uplifts its blushing cheek,
Is but a rainbow-type of life
Departing while we speak.

AS we turn over the leaves of the great book of nature, and examine the bright-hued, gracefully-formed, and perfume-haunted characters inscribed thereon ; when we muse upon the beautiful and holy thoughts, the refined fancies, and the tender and pleasant memories associated therewith ; we cannot fail to acknowledge gratefully the wisdom and goodness of Him who has scattered them so plentifully over the face of the earth, for man's pleasure and instruction.

Well and truly has it been said that "stars are the flowers of heaven," even as "flowers are the stars of earth ;" and when those beautiful adorners of our terrestrial and transitory abiding-place are all withered and dead, then, as though to compensate for their loss, and to lift our hearts to the contemplation of higher and holier things than can be met with here, do the number and radiance seem to increase of those shining forms that sprinkle the expanse of that celestial realm where we are taught to look for our everlasting habitation.

It was only natural, that from an early period, and throughout all lands, flowers should have been chosen as emblems of thoughts and sentiments, and invested with a language of their own. Round many a flower beautiful thoughts cluster, and even He who was Lord of all, did not disdain, in the lessons He taught, to use as illustrations of great truths, the Lilies that toil

not, neither do they spin ; the Grape that cannot be gathered from the Thorn ; and the Wheat that shall be gathered in at the great harvest.

Among the many legends connected with the flower language, the following may be cited :

The Daisy is taken by old Geoffrey Chaucer as the type of beauty and admirable virtue, being the very flower into which the fair Queen Alceste—who sacrificed her own life to preserve that of her husband—was changed. No pilgrim, bending at the shrine of the saint whom he considered the most holy and worthy of adoration, ever offered more devout homage than did the “father of English poetry” to this little “Day’s Eye,” or “Eye of Day,” as he loved to call it.”

The Almond Tree has been made the emblem of hope and also of vigilance ; it belongs to the same family as the Peach ; it flourishes luxuriantly in Syria, and sacred writers frequently derive from it very striking metaphors. We are told in Numbers, that Aaron’s rod was taken from the Almond Tree. In Dryden’s “Virgil” it is made an emblem of promise.

Violets are historical flowers, and poetical legends innumerable are woven about them. Milton makes Echo dwell

“By slow Meander’s margent green
And in the Violet-embroider’d vale.”

Proserpine was gathering Violets as well as Narcissi, when seized by Pluto ; Ia, the daughter of Atlas, fleeing into the woods from the pursuit of Apollo, was changed into a Violet ; the nymphs, who waited on Endymion, in Keats’s beautiful legend,

“Rain’d Violets upon his sleeping eyes ;”

and in the floral ceremonies of the ancient Greeks, as well as Romans, this flower ever had a conspicuous place ; while among the comparatively modern French troubadours, a golden Violet was the prize of the successful competitor in the lists of song.

The Hawthorn is a tree around which many legends of flower language are woven. The young Athenian girls, we are told,

brought branches of it to decorate the altar of wedlock, and those who were about to plight their vows there. It was the emblem of Hope, too ; and surely that is a hopeful time, when the first vow of love is poured into the ear of the bashful, blushing, yet not unwilling maiden. Goldsmith describes

“The Hawthorn-bush, with seats beneath the shade,
For talking age and whispering lovers made.”

The Hyacinth has been made emblematical of play or game. There was an annual solemnity, called Hyacinthia, held at Anyclæ, in Laconia, which lasted three days. According to an ancient fable, the flower originated in the blood of Ajax, who stabbed himself because the arms of Achilles were given to Ulysses and not to him.

“As poets feigned, from Ajax’ streaming blood
Arose, with grief inscribed, a mournful flower.”

One of the most calumniated of plants is the Foxglove. As a poisonous plant, this is shunned and disliked by many who do not know or consider that it possesses very useful medicinal properties, teaching us that God hath made nothing but for some wise end. Miss Pardoe has attached a fine moral to this plant. She says : “The foxglove, springing from amid the rocky masses by the wayside, is like virtue struggling with adversity, and seeming doubly beautiful from the contrast.”

The pretty little Forget-me-not has been transplanted by Miss Strickland from the dubious light of legendary song into the broad sunshine of veritable history. She says : “This royal adventurer—the banished and aspiring (Henry of) Lancaster—appears to have been the person who gave the Forget-me-not its emblematical and poetical meaning, by uniting it, at the period of his exile, with the initial letters of his watchword, *Souveigne vous de moi* ; thus rendering it the symbol of remembrance, and, like the subsequent fatal roses of York and Lancaster, and Stuart, the lily of Bourbon, and the violet of Napoleon, an historical flower.” It is a beautiful and graceful little plant, with its slender stem, and oblong leaves of a pale semi-transparent

green, and its clusters of cerulean blossoms, each with an eye like a tiny gold stud set round with turquoises.

There is more than one version of the story which assigns the origin of the name Plantagenet to the Latin appellation of the common Broom—*Planta genista*. "The one most commonly believed," says Miss Pratt, in her charming little work, the "Wild Flowers of the Year," "is that the name was assumed by Geoffrey, Earl of Anjou, the husband of Matilda, the haughty Empress of Germany, who, having placed a sprig of the broom in his helmet on the day of battle, acquired the surname, and bequeathed it to his descendants. Perchance, before engaging in the contest, he had lain down among the fragrant broom, and had been struck by its beauty. Yet flowers seem ill suited to accompany the horrors of war."

Then we have the yellow Iris, or Flag-Sedge, called in Scotland Water-Skeggs, and in France *La Flambe aquatique*; and the purple *Fleur de Luce*, or, more properly, *Fleur de Louis*, deriving its name from having been chosen as the heraldic emblem of Louis VII., King of France, when setting out for the Holy Land.

In June, the Poppy now begins to flush the ocean of golden green corn-stalks, like the red coral seen through translucent, sun-lighted waters, but we shall not dwell upon that at present. The bright blue Succory, or Chicory, as it is very commonly called, is a beautiful object by the wayside and amid the bursting ears, that begin to bend with the weight of the swelling grain; and there, too, is the more deeply tinted Corn Blue-bottle, which the Scotch people term "Blue-bonnet"—not so formidable an object as those "blue-bonnets" which, in "the good (?) old times" were wont to appear, somewhat too suddenly and frequently for English comfort and safety, "over the border." And there, too, are the pink Scabious, and the purely white Bladder Campion, and the little creeping Fumitory, or, as our French neighbours say, *Fume de terre* (smoke of the earth), because it spreads like smoke over the face of the landscape. One of the popular names of this plant is "Bloody Man's Thumb," and

Shakespeare calls it "rank Fumiter," and places it among the weeds that Lear had crowned himself with in his madness. Miss Pratt tells us that "the beautiful Cotton-thistle, which grows by the Scottish highways," is generally regarded as that chosen for the national emblem, and that "its hard and sharp spines well accord with the proud defiant motto which accompanies it;" and she quotes, as a reason for its being so adopted, this tradition: On one occasion, when the Danes were invading the Scottish nation, and, according to their usual practice, attacking them during the period of sleep, one of them placed his naked foot on the spiny leaves of a Thistle, and instinctively uttered a cry, which aroused the slumbering warriors, and gave them timely notice of the approach of their foes, who were quickly defeated and driven from the spot. Many of the Thistles are truly noble plants, rising to a great height, with their crimson crowns, and spiny stalks, and large, glossy, serrated leaves; and perhaps the most stately of them is that variety which, from having its leaves beautifully veined with white, is called the Milk-thistle (*Carduus marianus*), which is very rare in Scotland, although common enough in many parts of England.

The Jessamine, however, beautiful and fragrant though it be, and common as it has become amongst us, is undoubtedly of foreign origin—a native of the sunny Orient—Persia, Arabia, and the islands of the Eastern Archipelago, being the countries in which it is principally known as a wild plant. It appears also to be very generally found as such in many parts of the south of Europe, where it was probably introduced by some of the early Crusaders.

The Arum is also called Wake-robin, Jack-in-a-box, and Starch-wort, the latter because the roots were formerly employed in making starch. Culpepper, with commendable candour says: "Authors have left large commendations of this herb, you see, but for my part, I have neither spoken with Dr. Reason nor Dr. Experience about it."

The Daisy was with Keats—poor Keats!—one of the last of earthly memories, associated with calm and peaceable rest—that

rest which he hoped to find in the grave. "I feel," he said to the friend who watched his dying moments—"I feel the daisies already growing over me;" and there, we are told, where death prematurely overtook him, and he was lapped in mother-earth beneath the walls of imperial Rome, do even grow all the winter long, violets and *daisies*, mingled with fresh herbage, and, in the words of Shelley, "making one in love with death to think that one should be buried in so sweet a place." The blossoms of the *Pyrola*, or Winter-green, so called because it keeps its foliage fresh and verdant through the winter, may also still be gathered in the woods of Kent and Yorkshire and other parts of England, although it is not at any time a flower to be frequently met with.

"I found within the pleasant wood
The lone *Pyrola* growing,"

sings Mary Howitt, alluding, no doubt, to the round-leaved Winter-Green, which blooms the latest, and has white spreading flowers. Upon sandy banks and dry pasture-lands may be gathered the Meadow-Pink, whose generic name, *Dianthus* (Flower of God), pertains to all the beautiful and fragrant Pinks and Carnations of the garden; this, however, is a very simple flower, with little or no scent, something in appearance like its relative, the yet rarer Castle-Pink, which is still blooming luxuriantly upon our garden walls, the seed having been procured from the lofty keep of Rochester Castle, one of the few spots in England where it is to be found.

Upwards of three thousand species of Ferns are known; our native species, which number about five hundred, are mostly herbaceous; they are most numerous in the southern counties of England, and the boggy tracts of Ireland. Many are found amid the romantic scenery of Wales. But Devonshire is perhaps their most favoured locality; this county has long been celebrated for its "ferny coombes," and these plants are found there in greater luxuriance and variety than in any other part of Britain.

Everywhere, and at all seasons, if we only look closely enough,

we may see Mosses, and among them we may discern many shapes of rare beauty ; they form miniature forests at the feet of ancient trees, amid which the bronze beetles and other small insects sport, as do the elephants and other huge creatures amid the gigantic vegetation of tropical countries ; they clothe the bare rocks, and rugged boles, and rough park-palings, and ruinous buildings, with grace and beauty, and form a couch soft as velvet, and a path elastic to the tread, for pleasant rambles, and for needful rest, amid the woods and forests hoary. They hang with many-coloured tapestry the sides of spring grottoes and resounding caves, and cluster about crags and precipices, and float upon the waters like the locks of Nereids, swaying idly hither and thither as the current flows, or the eddy turns :

“ For scarce my life with fancy played,
Before I dream'd that pleasant dream,
Still hither, thither, idly sway'd,
Like those long mosses in the stream.”

So sings the lover in Tennyson's ballad of the “ Miller's Daughter,” making use of a beautiful and natural image to express his own aimless and restless life, before it became steadied by the power of affection, and acquired a fixed aim and purpose.

“ The ferns loved the mountains, the mosses the moor,
The ferns were the rich, and the mosses the poor.”

So runs an old distich, and the legend says that formerly each of these plants kept to its own locality ; but the sun scorched the mosses, and dried the roots of the ferns, while the wind beat pitilessly upon both, and thus, by affliction, they were brought to a sense of their duty, and each agreed to help the other ; so the tall ferns shielded the mosses from the sun, and the mosses protected the roots of the ferns from the wind, and kept them moist. A fine lesson is here of mutual dependence.

From time immemorial it has been the custom to decorate the churches and houses at Christmas with wreaths and branches of evergreens ; and still at this festive season, when we meet to celebrate the birth of the Saviour of mankind, or to offer our devotions to the Most High,

“The cluster'd berries charm the eye,
O'er the bright Holly's gay green leaves.”

And still, when round the blazing yule log friends and kinsfolk meet, and old memories are renewed, and old affections awakened to new life; when the simple carol which tells the story of the blessed Babe of Bethlehem is sung, and the advent of the time of family reunion is hailed in words like these:

“Old Christmas, merry Christmas, thou art with us once again;
And thy laugh of free light-heartedness goes ringing o'er the plain;
Thy step is as the step of youth, which knoweth nought of care,
And Holly-berries, ruby red, are glowing 'mid thy hair.”

Then it is that the pale green Mistletoe, the sacred plant of the Druids—dedicated of old to Friga, the Scandinavian goddess of love—is hung up in hall and kitchen, and gives occasion for many a mirthful sally and pleasant stratagem.

The Holly, we are told, was dedicated to Saturn, and as the fêtes of that deity were celebrated in December, and the Romans were accustomed to decorate their houses with Holly, the early Christians did so too, while they celebrated their festival of Christmas, in order that they might escape observation.

Yes, the Holly is winter's tree, and a beautiful object it is, with its dark, glossy leaves and shining red berries, almost the only green thing which asserts the vitality of vegetation in this season of universal deadness.

True it is that in spring,

“From the vivid greens
That shine around, the Holly, winter's child,
Retires abash'd,”

as Gisborne tells us. But in the autumn it asserts its right to notice and admiration:

“What though yon Holly's cold unalter'd green,
That oak embosoming with contrast harsh,
Hath met the splendid foil that glows above!
Cinctured with reddening zones, the fertile spray,
Like Indian maiden girt with coral bands,
Blends with the sylvan monarch's gorgeous robe
Tints that his gorgeous robe will not disdain.”

But in winter it is that we appreciate most fully the beauty and value of this tree.

The Holly tree is one of the greatest ornaments of our gardens and shrubberies, and has been so for centuries, and we often see what Mason describes—

“ The Holly's prickly arms
Trimm'd into high arcades.”

It forms excellent hedges, impervious to man or beast. “ Is there,” says worthy John Evelyn in his “*Sylvia*,” “any more glorious sight and refreshing object of this kind than an impregnable hedge of about four hundred feet in length, nine feet high, and five in diameter, which I can still show in my ruined garden at Sayes Court (thanks to the Czar of Muscovy), any time of the year, glittering with its armed and variegated leaves, the taller standards, at ordinary distances, blushing with their natural coral? It mocks the rudest assaults of the weather, beasts, or hedge-breakers.”

To understand this allusion, we should remember that while the Czar Peter was in England, Sayes Court, the property of Evelyn, was rented by government for his use and residence.

The Holly and the Mistletoe were associates in most festive scenes incidental to Yuletide, as it was formerly called; then, in the feudal ages it was customary with our forefathers to go forth with great solemnity to gather the Mistletoe on Christmas eve, and to hang it up in the baron's hall with great rejoicings.

Archdeacon Nares mentions the custom to have prevailed in his time of hanging up a bush of Mistletoe, with the important *charm* attached to it, that the maid who was not kissed under it at Christmas would not be married that year.