The language and poetry of flowers

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Thoughts on the Poetry of Flowers.

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THOUGHTS ON THE

POETRY OF FLOWERS;

The Months and their Floral Gifts.

A many-tinted garland will we twine
Of trumpet-flowers, and bugle blooms divine,
And cups and chalices ; all shapes that are
Most chastely beautiful, and rich, and fair ;
With crisp fresh petals, like hyperian curls
Besprent with dewdrops bright as orient pearls.

IF, as Keats says—and who shall doubt it?—"a thing of beauty is a joy for ever," then, most assuredly, must

"Queen lilies, and the painted populace
That dwell in fields, and lead ambrosial lives,"

be sources of great and abiding, as they are of pure and innocent, enjoyment to the contemplative mind. Frail and perishable as they are, yet do they typify and foreshadow things which are imp rishabe, and give to those who look upon them aright, a foretaste, as it were, of a better state of existence. They speak a language, eloquent though mute, to the outward sense, and tell of stedfast *faith*, and *hope*, and patient *submission*, and neverdying *love*, and *praise*, and *adoration*, and of all feelings, emotions, and passions, which are holiest and most sublime. But this is a branch of our subject on which volumes might be written —volumes which Horace Smith has compressed into his beautiful "Hymn to the Flowers"—that pure and perfect chrysolite of poetry, of which we can only quote a couple of verses :—

"Your voiceless lips, O flowers, are living preachers;
Each cup a pulpit, every leaf a book,
Supplying to the fancy numerous teachers
From loneliest nook.

"Floral apostles ! that in dewy splendour
Weep without woe and blush without a crime,
Oh ! may I deeply learn, and ne'er surrender
Your lore sublime !"

Then there is another American poet, N. P. Willis, who describes

"Mild Sirius, touch'd with dewy violet,
Set like a flower upon the breast of eve,"

reminding us of Wordsworth's exquisite simile—

"A violet by a mossy stone
Half-hidden from the eye,
Fair as a star, when only one
Is shining in the sky."

Listen, too, how Dr. Darwin addresses the stars—

"*Flowers of the sky !* ye, too, to time must yield,
Frail as your silken sisters of the field."

And the German poet, Rampach, what says he?—

"The stars show fairly in the darksome night ;
They *gem* like flowers the carpet of the sky."

And he is not the only one, by many, who have likened both stars and flowers to gems. The former have often been called the "jewellery of heaven," and the old pastoral poet, William Browne, describes a bevy of maidens gathering flowers, as engaged

"In plucking off the *gems* from Tellus' hair."

If Lord Byron might with truth exclaim—

"Ye stars, which are the poetry of heaven !"

so, with equal truth, might we say—

"Ye flowers, which are the poetry of earth !"

For what the stars are to the concave above us, such are the flowers to the earth beneath ; both are equally suggestive of pure and ennobling thoughts, and of lovely images and pleasant associations.

January, amid snow, sleet, and cold rain, yet brings some pledges of the opening year, to gladden the eye and warm the

heart of the poet, and to make him burst forth into song. Foremost among these is seen the Hellebore, or Christmas Rose, a medicinal herb, in whose virtues the Egyptian and Greek physicians of old believed ; though the moderns set small store by it. Darwin speaks of it thus :—

"Bright as the silvery plume or pearly shell,
The snow-white Rose, or Lily's virgin bell,
The fair *Helleborus* attractive shone,
Warm'd every sage, and every shepherd won."

And Chambers, too, describes it as—

"Triumphant over winter's power,
And sweetly opening to the sight ;
'Midst chilling snows, with blossoms fair
Of pure and spotless white."

Then, too, we may twine in our January wreath a slender branch or two of the Laurustinus, which is yet gay with its load of clustering blossoms, seeming, as Phillips tells us, to say, "I'll tarry with you till your friends return, and cheer the scene with my pale pink buds and pure white petals."

Other flowers, that belong to the rough opening month of the year, are the sweet-scented Coltsfoot (*Tussilago fragrans*), the "Heliotrope of the gardens," with its delicate lilac-tinted flowers, of which the poet sings—

"Tussilago, then 'tis sweet
To inhale thy soft perfume,
And thy lilac blooms to greet
'Mid surrounding gloom."

And the hardy little yellow Aconite,—and the Rosemary, formerly considered an emblem of fidelity in lovers, and worn at weddings and funerals. And here we may notice Kirke White's ode commencing—

"Sweet scented flower, who art wont to bloom
On January's front severe,
And o'er the wintry season drear
To waft thy sweet perfume !
Come, thou shalt form my nosegay now,
And I will bind thee round my brow."

A graceful ode it is, and a mournful, seeming in its melancholy strain to prefigure the early death of the gifted songster.

February, the dreary month of thaw, and hail, and deluged plains, has well been personified by Spenser as sitting

"In an old waggon, for he could not ride,
Drawn of two fishes, for the season fitting,
Which through the flood before did softly slide,
And swim away."

But let us not be discouraged; for ever and anon the clouds open, and glimpses of the blue sky are seen, and gleams of sunshine break out, and mild airs play around, on which are wafted the odour of the coming spring-flowers; and here we have a whole group of blossoms of the

"Primrose, first-born child of Ver,
Merry spring-time's harbinger."

And, look! some Violets, too,

"Like reflected stains
From cathedral panes."

And here,

"Like pendent flakes of vegetating snow,"

as Mrs. Barbauld hath it, swing gracefully to the play of the rude winds, the pure white blossoms of the Snowdrop (*Galanthus nivalis*), that old favourite of the poets, the *Pianterella* of the Italians—the *Schneegloeckchen* (little Snow-bell of the Germans—the *Perce-neige* of the French—the Fair Maid of February of our ancestors—the emblem of purity—the flower whose botanical name, *Galanthus*, is derived from two Greek words which signify milk and flower. It is so touchingly, winningly beautiful, that all who look upon it must love it. Barry Cornwall describes it as—

"The frail Snowdrop,
Born of the breath of winter, and on his brow
Fix'd like a pale and solitary star."

Thomson says—

"Fair-handed spring unbosoms every grace,
Throws out the Snowdrop and the Crocus first."

With the Snowdrop the Crocus is here associated ; and rightly, for the two fair flowers, "those pretty orphans," the Crocuses and Snowdrops, those foundlings that belong neither to winter nor spring, show their modest faces scarcely an inch beyond the dark earth.

"Beside the garden path, the Crocus now
Puts forth his head to woo the genial breeze,
And finds the Snowdrop, hardier visitant,
Already basking in the solar ray."

March brings us the little pretty Daisy, worthily sung by the poets, from the time of old Chaucer downwards. The father of English poetry describes himself as going forth from his study to admire and rejoice in his favourite flower. For does he not say :—

"Of all the floures in the mede,
Then love I most those floures white and rede,
Such as men call Daisies in our town"?

And again :—

"And in special one called *eye* of the *daie*,
The Daisie—a flower white and rede,
And in French called *la Bel Margarete*—
A commendable floure and most in mind."

Nor shall we readily forget the tribute paid by Burns to the

"Wee, modest, crimson-tipped flower,"

that his ploughshare so ruthlessly overthrew. With the Italians, too, it is *Fiore di Primavera*—the springtide flower—suggestive and emblematical of all things fair, and fresh, and joyous. And next we have the flower sung by Horace Smith, and by many another poet—

"The coy Anemone, that ne'er uncloses
Her lips until they're blown on by the wind."

This was the wind-flower of the ancient Greeks, as its name indicates, being derived from *anemos*, wind. The French term this flower *l'Herbe au Vent*, and many of our own poets allude to it under this and similar titles, as Elliot, who exclaims—

"Courageous Wind-flower, loveliest of the frail!"

And, missing it from his daily walks, asks—

"Where is the Wind-flower with its modest cheek?"

Bidlake calls it the "child of the wind;" and Thomson, describing the indications of spring, speaks of Anemones

"On the soft wing of vernal breezes shed."

Shakespeare speaks of the Daffodil

"That comes before the swallow dares, and takes
The winds of March with beauty."

Milton makes it a funeral flower, and in his beautiful lament for Lycidas, says—

"And Daffodillies fill their cups with tears,
To strew the laureate hearse where Lycid lies."

With Spenser it is a summer flower, for he speaks of

"The summer proude, with Daffodillies dight."

But the favourite and emblematical flower is the Primrose.

"The Primrose, tenant of the glade,
Emblem of virtue in the shade,"

according to John Mayne, the *Primavera*, as it is called in the soft language of Italy—the true spring-tide flower—the *Primula* (from *primus*, first) of the Latin.

"Primroses, the spring may love them,
Summer knows but little of them,"

sings Wordsworth; and L. E. L. calls them

"Primroses, pale gems of spring,"—

that season when all things are so fresh and so fair, when the year is in its youthful prime, and the earth is so gladsome that

"A Primrose shower from her green lap she throws,"

as Mason assures us; while the Northamptonshire peasant sings—

"Oh, who can speak the joys of spring's young morn,
When wood and pasture open on his view,
When tender green buds blush upon the thorn,
And the first Primrose dips its leaves in dew?"

which reminds us of Herrick's exquisite little poem—

"To Primroses filled with morning dew;

Nor can we by any means forget Shakespeare's

"Pale Primroses
That are unmarried, ere they can behold
Bright Phœbus in his strength;"

and again Shakespeare makes the shepherd, in "Cymbeline," say to the dead Fidele—

"Thou shalt not lack
The flower that's like thy face, the pale Primrose."

Now, too, we have the Mezereon, the *Daphne* of the woods, which may be found alike in cold and temperate regions, and in some so plentifully as to be used for brooms, as in certain islands in the Levant, where it is called the Broom Plant; this is, however, a silver-leaved variety, and is therefore not exactly like our

"Mezereon gay, with crimson-tinctured bush,"

that, as Evans says,

"Again revives coy Daphne's maiden blush."

April and May bring us the Cowslip; and the Cowslip has always been a favourite flower of the poets.

"From calyx pale the freckled Cowslip's born,
Receive in jasper cups the fragrant dews of morn,"

it Charlotte Smith is to be believed; and sure enough, there they are, in bunches and clusters, those

"Bowing adorers of the gale,"

as Clare calls them, studding the bank, and even creeping out into the open sunshine of the field beyond; and, to use the words of L. E. L.,

"Ringing, with golden bells, that fragrant peal
Which the bees love so."

The *freckled* Cowslip!—this is the term rendered patent by Shakespeare. Those little red spots which we observe towards

the bottom of the amber cup—what think ye they are? Let the delicate Ariel reply—

"Those be rubies, fairy favours;
In those freckles live their savours."

Especially is it honoured by those of the Elizabethan era. Milton frequently alludes to it, and no pastoral poet of our own day but notices, like John Graham,—

"The golden Cowslip, who, with fairy bell,
Rings in the wild bee to his wonted thrift."

And the Violet, too, what shall we say about that? We have enough transcribed, original and otherwise, to fill a goodly-sized volume about it. The Violet—

"Whose leaves,
Thick in their azure beauty fill the air
With most voluptuous breathings,"

according to L. E. L. Nor must we forget the beautiful Hawthorn.

The Rose is generally considered, par excellence, the flower of June—*the* summer flower—as she is almost universally acknowledged to be the queen of flowers. According to Millhouse—

"Oh! there's a *wild* Rose in yon rugged dell,
Fragrant as that which blooms the garden's pride;
And there's a sympathy no tongue can tell
Breathed from the linnet chanting by its side."

Another of those flowers to which an historical interest is attached, is "the Broom, the bonny Broom," so celebrated in Scottish song. Listen to Burns:—

"Their groves of sweet Myrtle let foreign lands reckon,
Where bright-beaming summers exalt the perfume;
Far dearer to me is yon glen o' lone breckan,
With the burn stealing down through the lang yellow Broom."

Crabbe, that close observer of nature, has furnished us, in a few graphic and characteristic lines, with a description of several flowers, which we must certainly entwine in our June wreath.

"Here Thistles stretch their prickly arms afar,
And to the ragged infant threaten war;
Here Poppies, nodding, mock the hopes of toil;
Here the tall Bugloss paints the sterile soil;
Hardy and high above the slender sheaf
The shining Mallow waves her silky leaf;
O'er the young shoot the Charlock throws a shade;
And clasping Tares cling round the sickly blade."

The fresh and lively green, the delicate perfume, and bracing airs of Spring, give place to the more luxuriant verdure and em bowering shade, the brighter sunshine, and the softer gales of Summer; and these, in turn, to the mellower tints, the yet more fervent heat, and luscious perfumes of Autumn; which again fade, and die away, and merge into the universal deadness and desolation of winter, the sepulchre of the year.

With July the year is half over, of which we are reminded by the resplendent St. John's Wort—

"*Hypericum*, all bloom, so thick a swarm
Of flowers, like flies clothing her slender rods,
That scarce a leaf appears,"

as Cowper tells us.

Now we have also the Harebell, declared to be beloved of the fairies, and most certainly beloved of the poets. Scott, in the "Lady of the Lake," says, alluding to this flower,—

"A foot more light, a step more true,
Ne'er from the heath-flower dash'd the dew;
E'en the slight Harebell raised its head,
Elastic from her airy tread."

Then there is the wild Thyme and the wild Marjoram, both possessing a fragrance peculiar to themselves, the one keeping close to the earth, and having blossoms of a purple hue, the other rising from one to two feet above it, with flowers of a chocolate colour, powdered, as it seems, with grey. In reference to the love of the bee for the blossoming Thyme, here is an extract from Claudian's poem of "Proserpine:"—

"Meanwhile, dispersed around, the roving maids
Throng in each various path, as when a swarm

Of bees, led from their waxen citadel,
Built in some hollow oak, following their queen
O'er beds of Thyme, cluster with pleasing hum."

The French poet, Belleau, invites us to wander where

"Streak'd Pink, and Lily-cup, and Rose,
And Thyme, and Marjoram are spreading."

In August commences what Keats poetically terms "the season of mists and mellow fruitfulness," and before the month is over, in the more southern parts of Europe, the corn, which lately rustled to every passing breeze, and glorified the landscape with its rich golden hue, will be cut down, and stacked or gathered into the barn, for the sustenance of man. Now is the time which Tennyson describes, when he speaks of

"Youngest autumn in a bower
Grape-thicken'd from the light and blinded,
With many a drep-hued bell-like flower
Of fragrant trailers."

Tennyson, in his description of "youngest autumn," speaks of "fragrant trailers;" and one of these, the Clematis, is now in full flower, festooning the hedges in every direction. The poets have variously called it "Traveller's Joy," and "Virgin's Bower," and no description of a sylvan retreat, or a trysting-place for lovers, would be at all perfect without this elegant creeper. Look what a glorious bower Keats builds up for the moon-loved Endymion :—

"Above his head
Four Lily stalks did their white honours wed,
To make a coronal, and round him grew
All tendrils green, of every bloom and hue,
Together intertwined and trammell'd fresh:
The vine of glossy sprout—the ivy mesh,
Shading its Ethiop berries—and woodbine,
Of velvet leaves and bugle blooms divine—
Convolvulus in streakèd vases blush—
The creeper mellowing for an autumn flush—
And *Virgin's bower* trailing airily,
With others of the sisterhood."

Then there is the wild Mignonette, or Dyer's Weed, as it is popularly called, pushing up its spike of pale yellow flowers amid the nettles and long grasses of every hedgerow; and on the river's brink may be seen the tall Hemp Agrimony, with its flesh-coloured clusters of blossoms, close by where the Reed Mace, or Cat's Tail, gives its long streamer-like catkins and grey-green leaves to the wind. If you go to the marsh lands you will most likely find the Sea Southernwood putting forth its blossoms of a verdant tint; and the little glossy Sandworts, with their white flowers; and the Seaside Convolvulus, with its rose-coloured bells; and Thrift, or Sea Pink, giving a delicate flush to the face of the marsh; and the Horned Poppy, strewing its frail yellow petals upon every gale.

Who hath not seen, within her Saffron bed,

"The morning's goddess"?

says Drummond, alluding to the autumnal Crocus or Meadow Saffron, with its violet-tinged cups.

To September also belong the tall and handsome Golden Rod, and the little Cudweed, or everlasting flower. Well does Professor Henslow write, of the Everlasting Flower, or Immortelle:—"Some plants force us, as it were, to read their meaning. Who can look upon the Everlasting Flower without seeing in it a type of the immortal nature of our spirits? Its enduring property has occasioned its use as a token of remembrance by the friends of the departed."

Nature is glorious even in decay, and at no period of the year, perhaps, does she put on such rich attire, and assume such a magnificent appearance, as in October, when all things which are most bright and beautiful are fast fading and withering, and when the chilling influence of approaching winter is beginning to be felt and recognised on every hand. Professor Henslow says—"Name but the Ivy, and some beautiful remnant of the grandeur, taste, or piety of former days (over which Time, as he mars its fair proportions, gently throws a mantle of Ivy to supply a new grace),

"Will flash upon the inward eye,
Which is the bliss of solitude;"

and he compares the Ivy to *friendship*, as do also Phillips and many other writers.

The "fall of the leaf" is an expressive name given to the November season. During the last two months the leaves have been gradually changing from green to yellow, red, and russet-brown, and lately they have come wavering down at every breath of air, until now they strew the country walks and ways, giving occasion for the poetic moralist to say—

"Like leaves on trees the race of man is found,
Now green in youth, now withering on the ground;
Another race the following spring supplies,
They fall successive, and successive rise.
So generations in their course decay;
So flourish these when those are past away."

Very graceful and beautiful are the Flowering Ferns. Of the five hundred British species of these plants, not more than about twenty can be called common, and the most common of all is the Brake, or Bracken, which grows most plentifully on stony or sandy land, and may be found on heaths and commons, as well as in woods and parks, where it forms an excellent covert for game and shelter for deer, whose bell-like cry is often heard issuing from amid the waving fronds, where, as the poet says,

"The wild buck bells from the ferny brake."

"December must be expressed with a horrid and fearful aspect, clad in an Irish rug, or coarse frieze girt upon him; instead of a garland upon his head, three or four nightcaps, with a Turkish turban over them. His nose red, his mouth and beard clogged with icicles; at his back a bunch of Holly, Ivy, or Mistletoe; holding in furred mittens the sign of Capricornus."