

A GLANCE AT BRITISH WILD FLOWERS.



THE first flower I plucked in Britain was the daisy, in one of the parks in Glasgow. The sward had recently been mown, but the daisies dotted it as thickly as stars. It is a flower almost as common as the grass: find a square foot of greensward anywhere, and you are pretty sure to find a daisy, probably several of them. Bairnwort—child's flower—it is called in some parts; and its expression is truly infantile. It is the favorite of all the poets, and when one comes to see it he does not think it has been a bit overpraised. Some flowers please us by their intrinsic beauty of color and form; others by their expression of certain human qualities; the daisy has a modest, lowly, unobtrusive look that is very taking. A little white ring, its margin unevenly touched with crimson, it looks up at one like the eye of a child.

“Thou unassuming Commonplace
Of Nature, with that homely face,
And yet with something of a grace,
Which Love makes for thee!”

Not a little of its charm to an American is the unexpected contrast it presents with the rank, coarse ox-eye daisy so common in this country, and more or less abundant in Britain too. The Scotch call this latter “dog daisy.” I thought it even coarser and taller there than with us. Though the commonest of weeds, the “wee, modest, crimson-tipped flower” sticks close at home; it seems to have none of the wandering, devil-may-care, vagabond propensities of so many other weeds. I believe it has never yet



Fumitory



appeared upon our shores, though Wordsworth addressed it thus :

“Thou wander’st this wide world about,
Unchecked by pride or scrupulous doubt.”

The daisy is prettier in the bud than in the flower, as it then shows more crimson. It shuts up on the approach of foul weather; hence Tennyson says the daisy closes

“Her crimson fringes to the shower.”

At Alloway, whither I flitted from Glasgow, I first put my hand into the British nettle, and, I may add, took it out again as quickly as if I had put it into the fire. I little suspected that rank dark-green weed there amid the grass under the old apple-trees, where the blue speedwell and cockscombs grew, to be a nettle. But I soon learned that the one plant you can count on everywhere in England and Scotland is the nettle. It is the royal weed of Britain. It stands guard along every road-bank and hedge-row in the island. Put your hand to the ground after dark in any fence corner, or

under any hedge, or on the border of any field, and the chances are ten to one you will take it back again with surprising alacrity. And such a villainous fang as the plant has! it is like the sting of bees. Your hand burns and smarts for hours afterward. My little boy and I were eagerly gathering wild flowers on the banks of the Doon, when I heard him scream, a few yards from me. I had that moment jerked my stinging hand out of the grass as if I had put it into a hornet’s nest, and I knew what the youngster had found. We held our burning fingers in the water, which only aggravated the poison. It is a dark-green, rankly growing plant from one to two feet high, that asks no leave of anybody. It is the police that protects every flower in the hedge. “Out of this nettle, danger, we pluck this flower, safety,” is a figure of speech that has especial force in this island. Our nettle grows in the woods, is shy and delicate, is cropped by cattle, and its sting is mild. But apparently no cow’s tongue can stand the British nettle, though when cured as hay it is said to make good fodder. Even the pigs cannot eat it till it is boiled. In starvation times it is extensively used as a pot-herb, and, when dried, its fiber is said to be nearly equal to that of flax. Rough handling, I am told, disarms it, but I could not summon up courage to try the experiment. Ophelia made her garlands

“Of crow-flowers, daisies, nettles, and long purples.”

It would be interesting to know how she managed the nettles.

A Scotch farmer with whom I became acquainted took me on a Sunday afternoon stroll through his fields. I went to his kirk in the forenoon; in the afternoon he and his son went to mine, and liked the sermon as well as I did. These banks and braes of Doon, of a bright day in May, are eloquent enough for anybody. Our path led along the river-course for some distance. The globe-flower, like a large buttercup with the petals partly closed, nodded here and there. On a broad sloping semicircular bank, where a



WILD HYACINTH, OR BLUEBELL.



Woodruff.

level expanse of rich fields dropped down to a springy, rushy bottom near the river's edge, and which the Scotch call a brae, we reclined upon the grass and listened to the birds,—all but the lark new to me,—and discussed the flowers growing about. In a wet place the “gillyflower” was growing, suggesting our dentaria, or crinkle-root. This is said to be “the lady's smock all silver-white” of Shakspeare; but these were not white, rather a pale lilac. Near by upon the ground was the nest of the meadow pipit, a species of lark, which my friend would have me believe was the wood-lark, a bird I was on the lookout for. The nest contained six brown-speckled eggs,—a large number, I thought. But I found that this is the country in which to see birds' nests crowded with eggs, as well as human habitations thronged with children. A white umbelliferous plant, very much like wild carrot, dotted the turf here and there. This, my companion said, was pig-nut, or ground chestnut, and that there was a sweet, edible tuber at the root of it; and, to make his words good, he dug one up with his fingers, recalling Caliban's words in the “Tempest”:

“And I, with my long nails, will dig thee pig-nuts.”

The plant grows freely about England, but does not seem to be troublesome as a weed.

In a wooded slope beyond the brae I plucked my first woodruff, a little cluster of pure white flowers, much like those of our saxifrage, with a delicate perfume. Its stalk has a whorl of leaves like the gallium. As the plant dries its perfume increases, and a handful of it will scent a room.

The wild hyacinths, or bluebells, had begun to fade, but a few could yet be gathered here and there in the woods and in the edges of the fields. This is one of the plants of which Nature is very prodigal in Britain. In places it makes the underwoods as blue as the sky, and its rank perfume loads the air. Tennyson speaks of “sheets of hyacinths.” We have no wood flower in the Eastern States that grows in such profusion.

Our flowers, like our birds and wild creatures, are more shy and retiring than the British. They keep more to the woods, and are not sown so broadcast. Herb Robert is exclusively a wood plant with us, but in England it strays quite out into the open fields and by the roadside. Indeed, in England I found no so-called wood flower that could not be met with more or less in the fields and along the hedges. The main reason perhaps is that the need of shelter is never so great there, either winter or summer, as it is here, and the supply of moisture is more uniform and abundant. In dampness, coolness, and shadiness, the whole climate is woodsy, while the atmosphere of the woods themselves is almost subterranean in its dankness and chilliness. The plants come out for sun and warmth, and every seed they scatter in this moist and fruitful soil takes.

How many flowers we have which grow in the woods only, most of our choicest kinds being of sylvan birth, flowers that seem to vanish before the mere breath of cultivated fields, as wild as the partridge and

HAREBELL CAMPANULA,
OR BLUEBELL.



FOXGLOVE.

the first to the last of July the fields in Scotland and England were white with it. Every square inch of ground had its clover blossom. Such a harvest as there was for the honey-bee, unless the nectar was too much diluted with water in this rainy climate, which was probably the case. In traveling south from Scotland, the foxglove (*Digitalis*) traveled as fast as I did, and I found it just as abundant in the southern counties as in the northern. This is the most beautiful and conspicuous of all the wild flowers I saw—a spire of large purple bells rising above the ferns and copses and along the hedges everywhere. Among the copses of Surrey and Hants I saw it five feet high, and amid the rocks of North Wales still higher. We have no conspicuous wild flower that compares with it. It is so showy and abundant that the traveler on the express train cannot miss it, while the pedestrian finds it lining his way like rows of torches. The bloom creeps up the stalk gradually as the season advances, taking from a month to six weeks to go from the bottom to the top, making at all times a most pleasing gradation of color, and showing the plant each day with new flowers and a fresh, new look. It never looks shabby and spent, from first to last. The lower buds open the first week in June, and slowly the purple wave creeps upward; bell after bell swings to the bee and moth till the end of July, when you see the stalk waving in the wind with two or three flowers at the top, as perfect and vivid as those that opened first. I wonder the poets have not mentioned it oftener. Tennyson speaks of “the foxglove spire.” I note this allusion in Keats:

the beaver, like the yellow violet, the arbutus, medeola, dicentra, claytonia, the trilliums, many of the orchids, uvaria, dalibarda, and others. In England, probably, all these plants, if they grew there, would come out into the fields and opens. The wild strawberry, however, reverses this rule; it is more a wood plant in England than with us. Excepting the rarer variety (*F. vesca*), our strawberry thrives best in cultivated fields, and Shakspeare's reference to this fruit would not be apt:

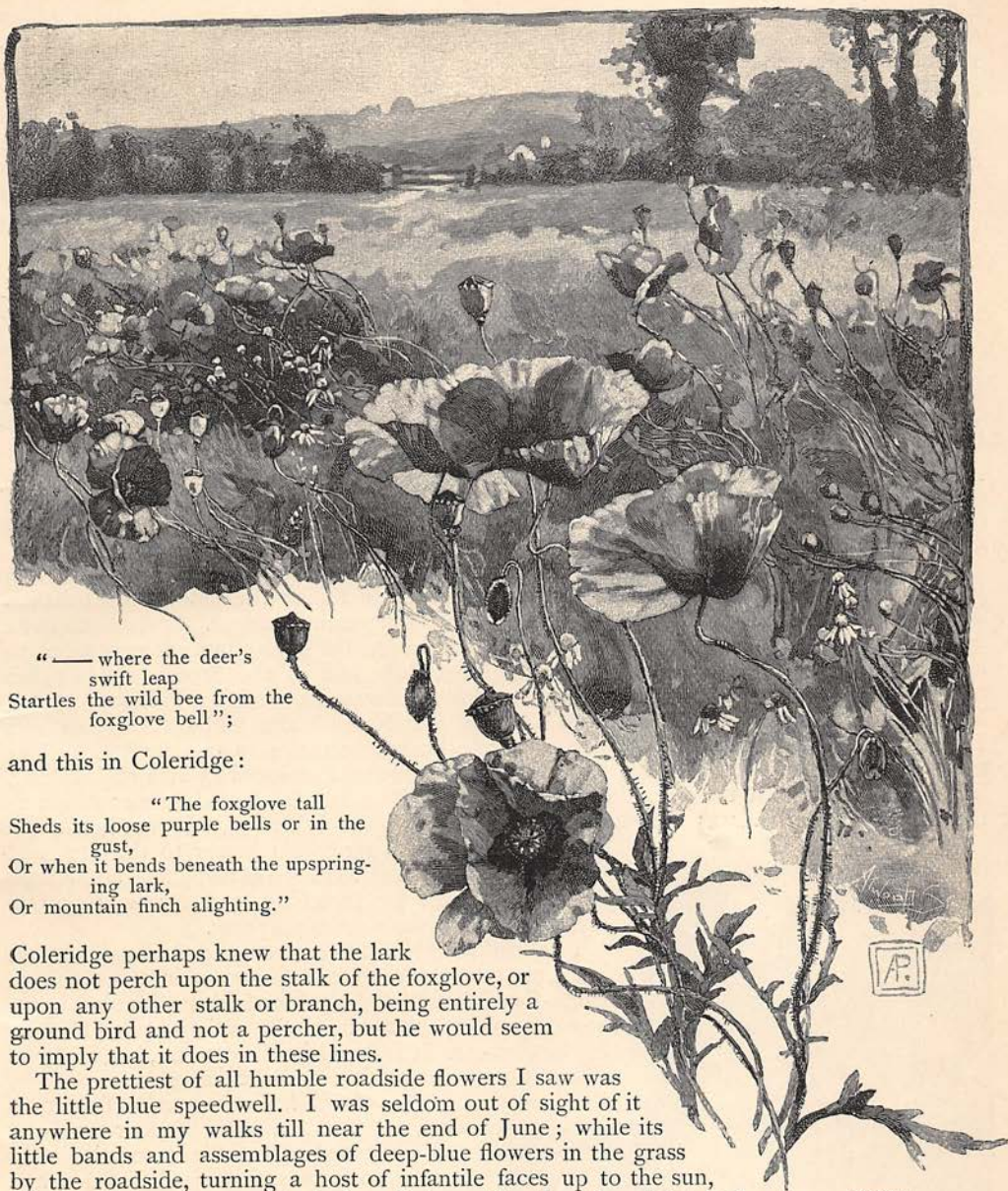
“The strawberry grows underneath the nettle;
And wholesome berries thrive and ripen best,
Neighbor'd by fruit of baser quality.”

The British strawberry is found exclusively, I believe, in woods and copses, and the ripened fruit has a pale-greenish look, not at all inviting.

Nature in this island is less versatile than with us, but more constant and uniform: with less variety and contrast in her works, and less capriciousness and reservation also. She is chary of new species, but multiplies the old ones endlessly. I did not observe so many varieties of wild flowers as at home, but a greater profusion of specimens; her lap is fuller, but the kinds are fewer. Where you find one of a kind, you will find ten thousand. Wordsworth saw “golden daffodils”

“Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,”

and one sees nearly all the common wild flowers in the same profusion. The buttercup, the dandelion, the ox-eye daisy, and other field flowers that have come to us from Europe, are samples of how lavishly Nature bestows her floral gifts upon the Old World. In July the scarlet poppies are thickly sprinkled over nearly every wheat and oat field in the kingdom. The green waving grain seems to have been spattered with blood. Other flowers are alike universal. Not a plant but seems to have sown itself from one end of the island to the other. Never before had I seen so much white clover. From



“— where the deer’s
swift leap
Startles the wild bee from the
foxglove bell”;

and this in Coleridge:

“The foxglove tall
Sheds its loose purple bells or in the
gust,
Or when it bends beneath the upspring-
ing lark,
Or mountain finch alighting.”

Coleridge perhaps knew that the lark does not perch upon the stalk of the foxglove, or upon any other stalk or branch, being entirely a ground bird and not a percher, but he would seem to imply that it does in these lines.

The prettiest of all humble roadside flowers I saw was the little blue speedwell. I was seldom out of sight of it anywhere in my walks till near the end of June; while its little bands and assemblages of deep-blue flowers in the grass by the roadside, turning a host of infantile faces up to the sun, often made me pause and admire. It is prettier than the violet, and larger and deeper-colored than our houstonia. It is a small and delicate edition of our hepatica, done in indigo-blue, and wonted to the grass in the fields and by the waysides.

“The little speedwell’s darling blue,”

sings Tennyson. It was very touching to see it blooming, as I did, upon the grave of Carlyle. The tender human and poetic element of this stern rocky nature was well expressed by it.

In the lake district I saw meadows purple with a species of wild geranium, probably *Geranium pratense*. It answered well to our wild geranium, which in May sometimes covers wettish meadows in the same manner, except that this English species was of a dark-blue purple. Prunella, I noticed, was of a much deeper purple there than at home. The purple orchids also were stronger-colored but less graceful and pleasing than our own. One species which I noticed in June, with habits similar to our purple-fringed orchis, perhaps

the pyramidal orchis, had quite a coarse, plebeian look. Probably the most striking blue and purple wild flowers we have are of European origin, as succory, blue-weed or bugloss, vervain, purple loosestrife, and harebell. These colors, except with the fall asters and gentians, seem rather unstable in our flora.

It has been observed by the Norwegian botanist Schübeler that plants and trees in the higher latitudes have larger leaves and larger flowers than further south, and that many flowers which are white in the south become violet in the far north. This agrees with my own observation. The feeble light necessitates more leaf surface, and the fewness of the insects necessitates larger and more showy flowers to attract them and secure cross fertilization. Blackberry blossoms, so white with us, are a decided pink in England. Our houstonia and hepatica would probably become a deep blue in that country.

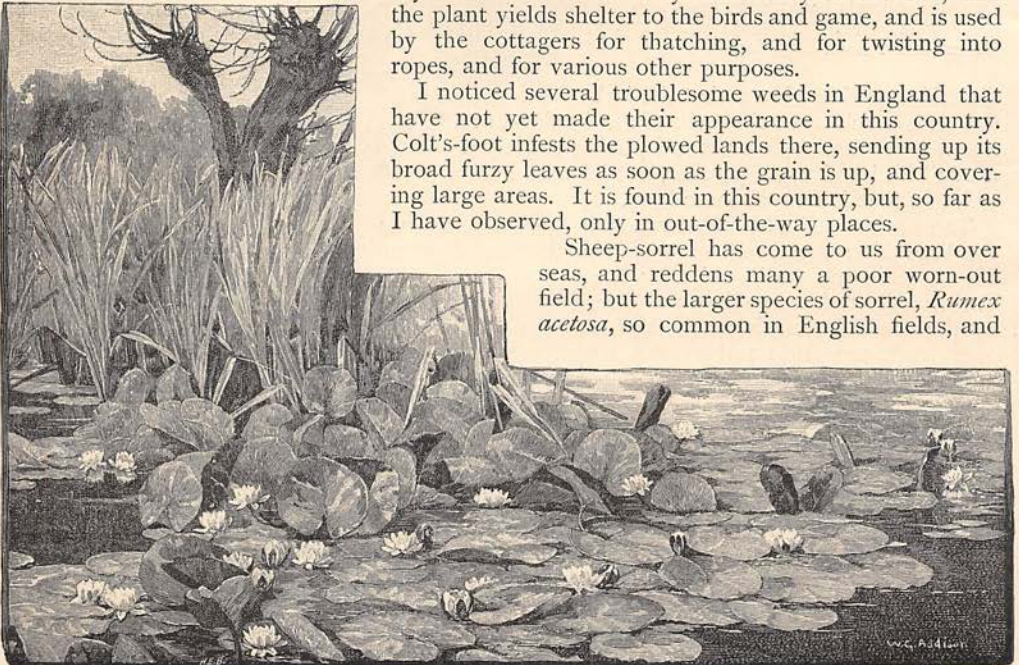
A flower which greets all rambles to moist fields and tranquil water-courses in midsummer is the meadow-sweet, called also queen of the meadows. It belongs to the *Spiræa* tribe, where our hardhack, nine-bark, meadow-sweet, queen of the prairie, and others belong, but surpasses all our species in being sweet-scented—a suggestion of almonds and cinnamon. I saw much of it about Stratford, and in rowing on the Avon plucked its large clusters of fine, creamy-white flowers from my boat. Arnold is felicitous in describing it as the “blond meadow-sweet.”

They cultivate a species of clover in England that gives a striking effect to a field when in bloom, *Trifolium incarnatum*, the long heads as red as blood. It is grown mostly for green fodder. The horse-bean or Winchester bean, sowed broadcast, is a new feature too, while its perfume, suggesting that of apple orchards, is the most agreeable to be met with.

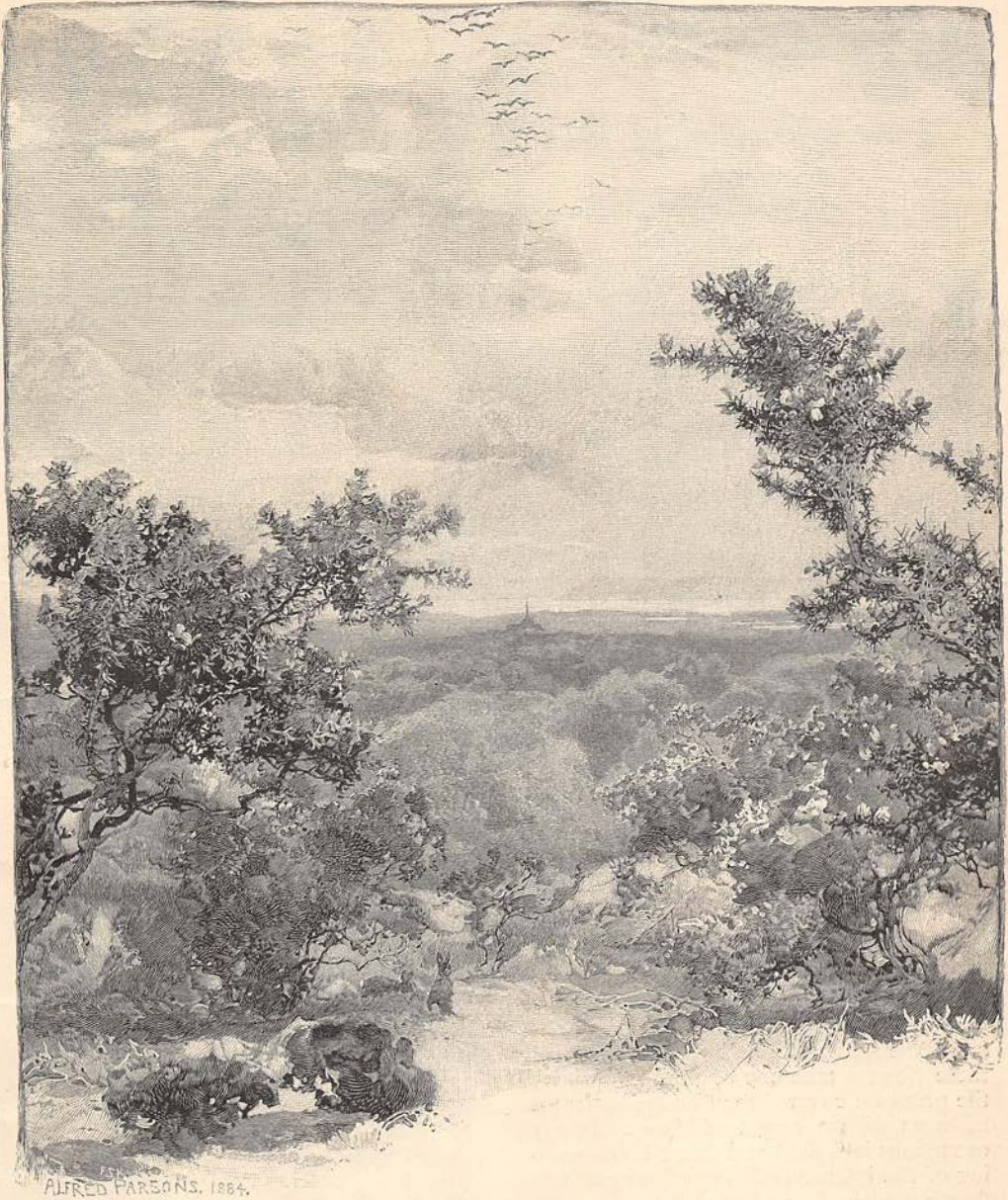
I was delighted with the furze, or whin, as the Scotch call it, with its multitude of rich yellow blossoms exhaling a perfume that reminded me of mingled cocoa-nut and peaches. It is a prickly, disagreeable shrub to the touch, like our ground juniper. It seems to mark everywhere the line of cultivation; where the furze begins the plow stops. It covers heaths and commons, and, with the heather, gives that dark hue to the Scotch and English uplands. The heather I did not see in all its glory. It was just coming into bloom when I left, the last of July; but the glimpses I had of it in North Wales, and again in northern Ireland, were most pleasing. It gave a purple border or fringe to the dark rocks (the rocks are never so lightly tinted in these islands as ours are) that was very rich and striking. The heather vies with the grass in its extent and uniformity. Until midsummer it covers the moors and uplands as with a dark-brown coat. When it blooms, this coat becomes a royal robe. The flower yields honey to the bee, and the plant yields shelter to the birds and game, and is used by the cottagers for thatching, and for twisting into ropes, and for various other purposes.

I noticed several troublesome weeds in England that have not yet made their appearance in this country. Colt's-foot infests the plowed lands there, sending up its broad furzy leaves as soon as the grain is up, and covering large areas. It is found in this country, but, so far as I have observed, only in out-of-the-way places.

Sheep-sorrel has come to us from over seas, and reddens many a poor worn-out field; but the larger species of sorrel, *Rumex acetosa*, so common in English fields, and



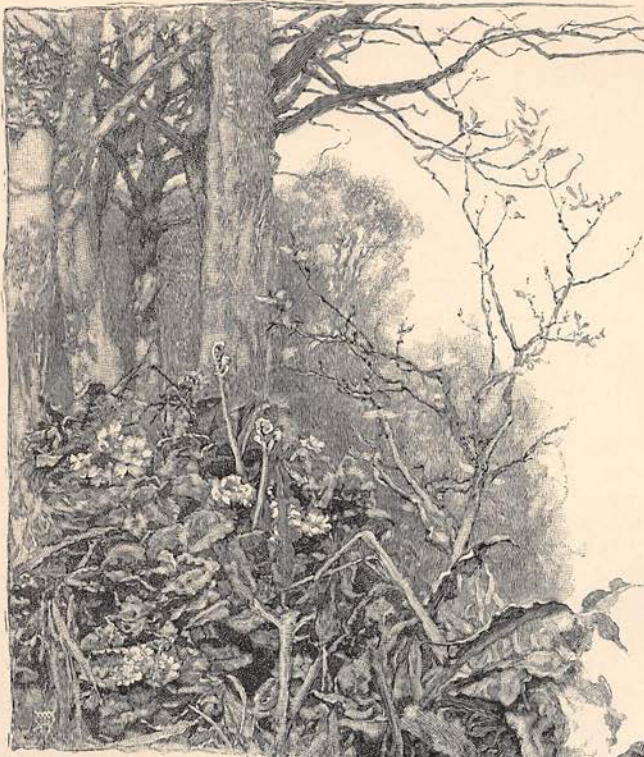
POND LILIES.



GORSE, FURZE, AND WHIN.

shooting up a stem two feet high, was quite new to me. Nearly all the related species, the various docks, are naturalized upon our shores.

On the whole, the place to see European weeds is in America. They run riot here. They are like boys out of school, leaping all bounds. They have the freedom of the whole broad land, and are allowed to take possession in a way that would astonish an English or Scotch farmer. The Scotch thistle is much rarer in Scotland than in New York or Massachusetts. I saw only one mullein by the roadside, and that was in Wales. I did not catch a glimpse of blue-weed, bouncing Bet, elecampane, live-for-ever, bladder-campion, and others, of which I see acres at home. They hunt the weeds mercilessly; they have no room for them. You see men and boys, women and girls in the meadows and pastures cutting them out. A species of wild mustard infests the best grain lands in June; when in bloom it



rue-anemone, the dicentra,—a beauty and delicacy that pertains only to wood forms,—contrasts with the more hardy, hairy, hedge-row look of their firstlings of the spring, like the primrose, the hyacinth, the wood spurge, the green hellebore, the hedge garlic, the moschatel, the daffodil, the celandine, and others. Most of these flowers take one by their multitude; the primrose covers broad hedge-banks for miles as with a carpet of bloom. In my excursions into field and forest I saw nothing of the intense brilliancy of our cardinal flower, which almost baffles the eye; nothing with the wild grace of our meadow or mountain lilies; no wood flower so taking to the eye as our painted trillium and lady's-slipper; no bog flower that compares with our calopogon and arethusa, so common in south-eastern New England; no brook-side flower that equals our jewel-weed; no rock flower before which one would pause with the same feeling of admiration as before our columbine; no violet as striking as our bird's-foot violet; no trailing flower that approaches our matchless arbutus; no fern as delicate as our maiden-hair; no flowering shrub as sweet as our azaleas. In fact, their flora presents a commoner type of beauty, very comely and pleasing,

PRIMROSES.



gives to the oat-fields a fresh canary yellow. Then men and boys walk carefully through the drilled grain and pull the mustard out, and carry it away, leaving not one blossom visible.

On the whole, I should say that the British wild flowers are less beautiful than our own, but more abundant and noticeable, and more closely associated with the country life of the people; just as their birds are more familiar, abundant, and vociferous than our songsters, but not so sweet-voiced and plaintively melodious. An agreeable coarseness and robustness characterize most of their flowers, and they more than make up in abundance where they lack in grace.

The surprising delicacy of our first spring flowers, of the hepatica, the spring beauty, the arbutus, the bloodroot, the



but not so exquisite and surprising as our own. The contrast is well shown in the flowering of the maples of the two countries—that of the European species being stiff and coarse compared with the fringe-like grace and delicacy of our maple. In like manner the silken tresses of our white pine contrast strongly with the coarser foliage of the European pines. But what they have, they have in greatest profusion. Few of their flowers waste their sweetness on the desert air; they throng the fields, lanes, and highways, and are known and seen of all. They bloom on the house-tops, and wave from the summits of castle walls. The spring meadows are carpeted with flowers, and the mid-summer grain-fields, from one end of the kingdom to the other, are spotted with fire and gold in the scarlet poppies and corn marigolds.

I plucked but one white pond lily, and that was in the Kew Gardens, where I suppose the plucking was a trespass. Its petals were slightly blunter than ours, and it had no perfume. Indeed, in the matter of sweet-scented flowers our flora shows by far the most varieties, the British flora seeming richer in this respect by reason of the abundance of specimens of any given kind.

England is, indeed, a flowery land; a kind of perpetual spring-time reigns there, a perennial freshness and bloom such as our fierce skies do not permit.

John Burroughs.

"AND THE MEADOW-SWEET SHOOK WITH LOVE."