

FEBRUARY.—VALENTINE DAY.



'Twas on the morn of Valentia, when birds begin to prafe,  
 Dame Durdon's servaat-maids and men, d'd each betake a mate.  
 There was Moll and Bet, and Doll and Tot, and Dorothy draggie tail,  
 And Kate who was a charming girl to carry the milking-pail.

*Old Song, entitled " Dame Durdon.*

FEBRUARY brings with it Valentine Day. It is the month of billing and cooing when youthful lovers have a most mysterious affection for hearts and darts, wings and rings, Cupids and altars, and no end of nameless emblems surrounded with lace-edged paper, and borders of flowers in all kinds of unnatural colours, which hang temptingly in the windows, and greatly bewilder the senses of both youth and maiden, while they gaze. What a fluttering there is amongst young hearts, what a trembling bashfulness do the fairer purchasers display if the vendor of these cherished love-tokens chances to be a handsome young shopman, assuring him, should he request permission to write the address, that they have only purchased it to please a young friend, and that on no account should they themselves think of sending such nonsensical trifles. "Oh, dear, no! on no account." But St. Valentine's is a day of little harmless deceptions; it seems to have been dedicated to disguised handwritings and false signatures; when letters that are only sent to the next door are posted a mile or two away, yet, strange ending of all, each fond lover hopes to be detected through this thin disguise. What a knowing and important look does the postman assume on the morning of Valentine Day, especially in the country, where almost every rustic maiden is known

to him personally, and where he is as confident as if he had opened and read the missive, that it is not the only messenger of love that has been sent, but he can give a shrewd guess as to whence and from whom the little packet has been despatched. The country barmaid seems rather more demure on such a morning; and even hard-handed and red-armed Betty looks brighter about the eyes than the tin and copper utensils which she daily scours—coming to the door ever and anon—peeping down the road, and wondering whatever it is that makes John, the postman, so late. Then the ostler has a struggle with Betty in the kitchen, endeavouring to get a peep at her Valentine; while the postboy looks with eyes askance upon Jane, the barmaid, on whom he is, as they say in the country, "rather sweet." He finds more to do than usual in the stable amongst his horses, whistles a great deal to himself, and when asked by the pretty flirt what is the matter, answers "Oh, nothing at all!" wondering all the while to himself who can have had the impudence to write to Jane, and only wishing that he knew. She, perhaps, to make him a little jealous, has bought and posted the Valentine, and addressed it to herself, for such manoeuvres are occasionally practised by the maidens when they wish to bring a distant lover to the point at

issue. Another picture which we have seen of Valentine Day would have looked well in the minute painting of a Wilkie. The fond old mother, with her spectacles on, reading the Valentine to her husband, who smiled as he listened attentively to every line, which said

The rose is red, the violet's blue,  
Carnation's sweet, and so is you.  
The ring is round and has no end,  
So is my love to Mary, my friend.  
First we cast lots, and then we drew,  
Kind fortune said it must be you.

While the pretty daughter to whom these old-fashioned lines were directed sat with her hands clasped together on her knees, looking thoughtfully in the fire and wondering to herself whether or not William really meant what he had written, and if he loved her truly, as much as he pretended to do. Then when she had retired to rest, the old people would sit down and think over what they could spare Mary towards housekeeping, when she married, and they would enumerate nearly everything they possessed, and deprive themselves of many little necessary articles, to add to the comforts of Mary, for ten to one they knew William's mind much better than she did: as the lover and the intended father-in-law, had often met on a Saturday evening at the Plough, where, over a pint and a pipe, they had discussed the whole affair even down to what they should provide for dinner on the wedding-day.

Many antiquarians have endeavoured in vain to unravel the origin and mystery of Valentine Day, but their labours have hitherto been in vain; if discovered, it would likely enough be as unmeaning as the source from whence so many of our old customs have sprung, and not worth the labour wanted. Our ancestors were pretty close observers of nature, and there is but little doubt that, as they noticed the birds, which first begin to build and pair at this period, when the weather is favourable, so natural an occurrence might lead to youths and maidens imitating the custom by selecting lovers, glad of any amusement after the dark mid-winter had passed, and that Valentine Day had no other origin. As far back as we have been enabled to trace this love-making day, we find it linked with the mating of birds, which seems inseparable from St. Valentine; and we are at a loss to imagine how the worthy bishop, whose name is associated with it, first fell into such company.

The earliest Valentines were nothing more than slips of paper, on which the names of both sexes were written: they were placed apart, the men drawing from the pile on which the women's names were endorsed, and they again taking the first they touched from the opposite heap. These names were worn for a number of days—sometimes inside the coat, waistcoat, or bodice—sometimes only on the sleeve, just as the feigned or real lover intended to express his passion; and there is no doubt but that such a game, begun in jest, ended at times in earnest, and that by this means many of our forefathers won their fair brides.

Even in our own day (and in the country the harmless superstition still exists), the first maiden we met on this auspicious morning was considered our Valentine, and as such was hailed; and no little trouble do the rustic lovers put themselves to occasionally, to meet the one on whom their choice has before been fixed. We can remember ourselves in the hey-day of youth being foolish enough to walk two miles in the snow and darkness, and waiting until the cottage door opened, to claim a cherry-cheeked farmer's daughter for our Valentine. Too poor, perhaps, to purchase the printed epistle, with Cupid's altar, hearts, and doves, we presented the original, and thereby saved both paper and postage. Gay, in his "Shepherd's Week," thus describes this old superstition:—

Last Valentine, the day when birds of kind  
Their paramours with mutual chirpings find,  
I early rose, just at the break of day,  
Before the sun had chased the stars away.  
A-field I went, amid the morning dew,  
To milk my kine (for so should housewives do)  
The first I spied: and the first swain we see,  
In spite of fortune, shall our true-love be.

We have in our possession, framed and glazed, a Valentine, which was sent to a dear old lady we well know, more than half a century ago. It must have taken many hours to have cut out the hearts and diamonds in scissor-work, and printed the border which surrounds the unsailor-like looking gentleman, who is standing under a tree, and pointing to his ship. Both Chaucer and Lydgate make mention of Valentine Day, for the "Morning Star of Poetry" says—

Blessed be Saint Valentine,  
For on his day I chose you to be mine—  
Without repenting, my heart sweet.

—proof that five hundred years ago it was celebrated in England.

Towards the close of the month, if the weather is fine, the gardeners begin to bestir themselves. You see the little children out beside the cottages, with their tiny spades, assisting to clear away the withered boughs, and delighted at the fire that is kindled to burn up the rubbish, into which they thrust almost everything they can lay hold of that will burn. Days are longer, and they remain out to the very last minute, it is light, to play in the village street. Such a picture have we now before us. The scene is a rough-hewn wall dividing a church-yard from the high-road: on the opposite ascent stand a row of little cottages, which overlook the low stony barrier, and command a view of the resting-places of the dead. A plot of grass, that already wears a green spring look, slopes down to the edge of the high-road; beside which a clear water-course goes tinkling into the distant valley, then empties itself into a deep sluice, which goes murmuring along through the dark flood-gates that open into a neighbouring river. The stream is crossed by a strong plank, which leads to the cottages. Some of the children are throwing stones and bits of sticks into the stream; others are watching them float away, and anxious that this boat, as they call it, should beat the other. Cold as it still is, a little boy and girl are sitting on the sloping greensward: their mother, who stands sewing at the cottage-door, has twice warned them that they will take cold unless they get up; but they pay no regard to her. Two others are sitting astride the low church-wall; a third is jerking stones into the brook. Lower down another group are running after each other. Beyond these you see the light from the blacksmith's shop falling faintly across the road. Most of the cottage doors are open, for, although only as yet February, the air is as mild as if it were April. An artist might sketch such a scene for a summer evening, were it not that the trees are still leafless; for the little green on the elders beside the brook, and the tiny buds on the gooseberry-bushes, are as yet the only heralds that proclaim the coming of Spring.

The cloudy brow  
Of winter smooth'd, up from her orient couch  
She springs, and like a maid betroth'd, puts on  
Her bridal suit, and with an ardent smile  
Comes forth to greet her lover. Gracious 'tis,  
Ay, passing sweet, to mark the cautious paces  
Of slow-returning spring, e'en from the time

When first the matted apricot unfolds  
Its tender bloom, till the fall orchard glows.—HURDIS.

In our description of February last year we only made slight mention of the rooks. We will now endeavour to do more justice to the habits of these dusky gentlemen, who go marching over field and furrow as if they were alone the sole proprietors of the land. Like many other social communities, they are made up of good and bad, and, in spite of a tolerably vigilant police, are not free from the depredations of their own light-fingered gentry, who do not hesitate to carry away the whole of a neighbour's house when his back is turned; or sometimes instead of removing it, they take possession, and although generally turned out in the end, they have been seen to maintain their ground with a spirit worthy of a better cause. Sometimes a young married couple having laid a good solid foundation for their future home, return with a couple of rafters in their beaks, which, after a careful survey, they have borne over hill and valley, with weary wings, an immense distance; when, lo! instead of finding the half-finished house as they left it, the very foundation is gone, and nothing but the naked fork of the branch on which it was laid remains. Well may they bob their heads and caw to one another, and wonder what impudent thieves have been so busy during their absence. They set out on the search, and find on the next tree every stick and stake twisted into another nest, on which one of the plunderers is resting, while the other robber, a down-looking dark-faced rascal, is perched on the branch beside his companion. After exchanging a word or two of a sort on each side, the battle commences: the whole neighbourhood is alarmed; the police interfere; and being beaten the culprits are driven out—transported to some solitary tree—and not allowed during that season to return to the rookery.

Your rooks are not a proud people, who refuse to mingle with strangers, for they will frequently allow the noisy Jackdaws to build beside them, and are not above dining with the starlings in winter, so long as they conduct themselves respectfully. Every one who has rambled out in spring or summer must have noticed the hundreds of small caterpillars which are often seen suspended by their own threads from the trees, especially the oak, the beautiful foliage of which they soon destroy. Here the rooks find a rich repast; and instead of waiting until the insects have spun their way to the ground, these birds alight upon the trees, and, fluttering their great black wings, send down the caterpillars in thousands, and having strewn the greensward with a plentiful banquet, the rooks then descend and eat their fill.

Although the hooded crows do not live and build together in common like the rooks, but in pairs, and generally at some distance, yet they hold what naturalists have called a Crow-Court. For two or three days may they be seen assembling together on some particular hill or field; and Dr. Edmonson, in his work on the "Shetland Islands," describes them as delaying the trial for a day or two, until sufficient numbers have arrived to form the court. Whether the prisoners are driven thither by force, or come to defend themselves, are found guilty by witnesses, or what, cannot be known, though it is an undoubted fact, that the whole assembly are heard to croak as if in argument; that this lasts for some time—when the court rises like one *crow*, and begins to peck and beat the prisoners to death. Sometimes three or four of these victims are left dead on the floor of the court; and when the execution is over, the whole tribe disperse, betaking themselves in couples to their solitary trees, nor ever assembling together again in numbers until the next great court is summoned.

The swallow and the martin, if the weather is very favourable, often arrive by the end of this month, and we hear the old familiar twittering under the eaves in the early morning.

"The nest of a bird," says Mr. Crouch, "is so interesting an object, so curiously and admirably contrived for an evident purpose, of materials apparently so little calculated for the formation of such a structure, and its form and position are so varied according to the aptitude for comfort of its inhabitants, combined with security from discovery and danger, that it has ever been contemplated as a surprising manifestation of skill and intelligence in the little beings engaged in its fabrication."

Some to the holly hedge  
Nestling repair, and to the thicket some;  
Some to the rude protection of the thorn  
Commit their feeble offspring.—TROMSON.

