

MARCH.—PRIMROSE AND PALM GATHERING.



O Spring! dear Spring! thou more dost bring
 Than birds, or bees, or flowers—
 The good old time, the holy prime
 Of Easter's solemn hours;
 Prayers offer'd up, and anthems rung,
 Beneath the grey church towers—*Fasts and Festivals.*

PALM-SUNDAY, was an old holiday which our ancestors kept with great reverence, in remembrance of Our Saviour's entrance into Jerusalem; and it is still a custom to ornament the houses in the country with the silvery buds of the willow (which are called palm) in the present day. These buds, which lie like great oval pearls upon the slender stems of the osiers, are the earliest heralds of spring, and often come out long before the hawthorn has put forth a single speck of green, and may frequently be seen in the cottage windows overtopping a border of sweet primroses, snowdrops, or violets, which have blown before the coming of Easter. Many a mild March day has seen us out with our youthful companions in the fields beside the river Trent, gathering the buds of the willow and the white blossoms of the blackthorn, which also hang upon the hedges, like a cloud of flowers, long before a green leaf, excepting that of the alder, has shot out of its wintry sheath. Although it was not the palm of Palestine we gathered, yet it was such as our forefathers had for centuries chosen as the emblem of those green branches which were scattered before Our Redeemer; and to us it brought back an old and holy

picture, carrying the imagination into that ancient city of the East, and bringing before the "mind's eye" one of those impressive scenes which are linked with the establishment of the Christian religion. It also calls up the figures of those pious pilgrims who wandered into the Holy Land and visited many a distant shrine, bearing the palm-branch in their hands—the acknowledged token of peace and prayer.

The abolition of these sacred emblems, which once adorned our churches, and were borne in our Easter processions, could be of no benefit to the progress of religion. They were the productions of Nature, not the work of man: they served to show that He who ruleth the seasons had again sent Spring with all her flowers; and with these were linked the memory of the Son of God, who rode not forth in regal purple, crowned with gold, but "meek, and sitting upon an ass." Such associations did the silver buds bring to the early Christians, and the custom of palm-gathering was kept up until the Reformation in England.

With what delight did we hail the first appearance of these pearl-like buds—

they told us that spring was near at hand; the sun also came to throw his light upon them two hours earlier than he did a few weeks ago, and in the budding hedges we had already discovered the sky-stained eggs of the hedge-sparrow. Well can we remember the woods where we gathered the first primroses, and which were soon to be green with lilies of the valley. What a refreshing smell there was about the earth we dug up to get at the moss-covered roots of those early primroses, for they were the first treasures which we transplanted to our little gardens, where, day by day, they lost that beautiful bloom which they only bear in the solitude of the wildwood. The sounds of youthful voices seem in accordance with the opening of this happy season, as they fall at intervals upon the ear, filling up the pauses which occur between the singing of the blackbird or the thrush, and wafting pleasant memories to the wanderer, telling him that eager eyes are already watching the opening beauties of the flowers.

I love to see the little goldfinch pluck
The groundsel's feather'd seed, and twitting, twit;
And soon in bower of apple-blossoms perch'd,
Trim his gay suit, and pay us with a song—HERDIS.

Above a thousand years ago, our Saxon forefathers had no other landmarks to distinguish the boundaries of their estates than the objects of Nature—a tree, a bush, or a water-course, served them instead of walls and hedges; and we can almost fancy that we are overlooking those old English landscapes while reading one of their ancient deeds of conveyance. One estate is mentioned in a deed, dated 886, as stretching along from Sheep-lea to the Broad Bramble, past the Old Gibbet-place and the Old Ford, along the Deep-dell, to the Thorn on the Mere, thence to the Red-cross, by the stream of Alders, up the Milk-valley by the Foresters' Mark, and along the Hay-meadow. Another goes from the Bridge by the Eel-ditch, past the Bourn and the Great Willow, from the Hoary Thorn to the Oak-tree, by the Three Hills and the Thorn Maple to the Three Trees, the Deep Brook and the Clear Pool, by the Black Willow, the Nettle Island, the Sedge Moor, past the Burrows, the Hillock, the Ship Oak, the Great Aspen, by the Reedy Slough, and onward to the Hoary Apple Tree beyond the Wolf-pit.

What an assemblage of old poetical names have we here: we can see the half-drained and half-cultivated country; we can picture it in miry March with its reedy meres and impassable sloughs—the rude wooden bridge by which the ploughman crossed over the quaking bog to get at the rich land which lay beyond. Yet amid these wilds and old forest-fastnesses the violets and primroses blowed as they do now, and the Saxon serf was cheered by the skylark's song while he laboured in those old hedgeless wastes. The bleating of young lambs was then heard upon the wold—the ice-fre'd brooks rolled merrily along; and though he fared hard by day, and at night had a block of wood for his pillow, Nature was still his comforter, and he found solace in the sights and sounds, that greeted his eye and ear, when he wandered along over the opening daisies.

Although the trees are leafless, there is something about a mild sunny day at the close of March which tells us that all the out-of-door world is alive—that the very air which seemed so silent in winter now murmurs with life, while a thousands insects are dancing about overhead, as if rejoicing that the time of flowers is so near at hand. The winding roads have on such days a dry, warm, summer look, and you can scarcely peer under any hedge without discovering on the sun-lit bank the silent progress that spring is making; for here and there the starchy celandine has thrown open its golden-rayed flower, and the furze hung out its burning blossoms, which shoot up like a thousand flames from a green chandelier. Now the first bee comes blundering abroad, and running his black head against everything, as if not yet thoroughly awake. You wonder where he has hidden himself all the long winter, for you see at a glance that he belongs to no hive, but has his home somewhere in the neighbouring wood. What a summer sound his booming gives to the air; depend upon it he knows where the broadest primroses and sweetest violets blow; but he has gone to ransack yonder furze-bush, and will soon be busy rifling the yellow blossoms;

While the ploughman, near at hand,
Whistles o'er the furrow'd land,

giving all the air a "countryed smell," as he turns up the sleeping furrows, and causing you to sigh as you think of badly-drained streets and ill-ventilated houses, which you are doomed to breathe amongst in the City, places which rosy Health rarely plants her foot upon, for if she alights there the bloom upon her cheek at once begins to fade, and unless she hurries back to the breezy hills and greenwood sides, she will be compelled to bow her head in wan consumption's sickly lap.

So conducive to health is the aroma arising from the newly-ploughed earth, that we have frequently seen an invalid seated in a chair, secured to a kind of truck which was attached to the horses, and dragged along behind the ploughman, whose labour was not at all impeded by his passenger, excepting that it required more care when turning round at each end of the field. What heavy masses of clay at times cling to the ploughman's boots. You wonder how he manages to get along with such a clog to his heels; every stride he takes, the man's accumulates; and when, after many shakes, he gets rid of it, there lies a clod weighing pounds upon the furrow, the upper part bearing the impression of every nail in his boot. His hands are hard as horn through holding the plough; and if he has followed the same labour for years, there is a peculiar roundness about the shoulders which tells that the continued grasping of those bright shafts is no easy work.

The roads have a different appearance now from what they had a few months ago; there are more moving figures in the landscape, especially when it is market-day—such a scene as we have attempted to describe in a little poem, where

Busy forms move o'er the landscape brown
In twos and threes, for it is market-day.
Beyond those hills stretches a little town,
And thitherward the rusties bend their way,
Crossing the scene in red, and blue, and grey,
Now by the hedge-rows, now by oak-trees old,
As they by stile or low-thatched cottage stray.
Peep through the rounded hand, then you'll behold
Such scenes as Merland drew in frames of sunny gold

A laden ass, a maid with wicker maun,
A shepherd's lad driving his lambs to sell;
Gaudily-dress'd girls move in the sunny dawn,
Women whose cloaks become the landscape well
Farmers whose thoughts on crops and prices dwell.
An old man with his cow and calf draws near.
Anon you hear the village carrier's bell;
Then doth his grey old tilted cart appear.
Moving so slow, you think he never will get there.

But "slow and sure" has been for years his motto; and he will not only get there in time for the market, but stop and bait at a little road-side house, the swing sign of which you can just distinguish by the white post that supports it, on the left at the foot of the hill.

Now in the ponds and ditches may be seen hundreds of little frogs, and tadpoles with their round heads and long tails, bearing, at present, no more resemblance to a frog, than an egg does to a living bird. They are devoured in millions by the fishes. If they miss the jaws of the funny tribe, there are the newts ready to prey upon them: if they escape the newts, there are no end of water-fowl on the look-out: the snakefeeds upon them as soon as they can leap: stoats and weasels dine of them, when nothing better can be had; and they can scarcely move anywhere without meeting with an enemy. On no account ought frogs to be driven out of gardens that are infested with slugs; for these are a favourite food; and wherever frogs are found, the slugs soon disappear. The way in which the frog seizes its prey is by throwing its tongue forward. The action is quick as thought—no sooner is the tongue out than the slug has vanished: it is almost impossible for the eye to detect the action, it is so momentary. In winter the frog buries itself in the mud, at the bottom of ponds and ditches, where it remains until spring, when it comes forth; and you may then see on the top of the water a number of black spots floating in a jelly-like substance. These are the spawn, or eggs, in which the tiny tadpoles are enclosed. They possess the power of breathing through the skin; and it is no easy task to either hang or drown them. It is now stale information to state that the toad is not venomous, but is as perfectly harmless as the frog, and equally useful in gardens. It is an unnecessary cruelty to destroy these inoffensive reptiles: they have sufficient enemies without man waging war against them; he, of all, ought to be their protector.

I have a great love for those little dirty and noisy vagrants, the sparrows; who hide, and build, and breed under the smoky eaves, and come out, sometimes, as black as soot. Wherever man rears his house, they follow. They are always ready with their "good morning" as soon as it is light. They take possession above, and the mice below; both are paupers that will have no "ray." If man can contrive to live, they are resolved to live with him. For ages they have been his constant companions. The sparrow hops down and breakfasts with the fowls, without needing an invitation. He takes possession of the corn-rick, and helps himself bountifully. In summer, he goes into the harvest field, if it is near at hand; nor is he very particular about waiting until the corn is ripe, before he commences his banquet. In vain does the farmer set a price upon his head; he contrives to live, and die, and leave a large family of sparrows behind him, who know how to pick up a living as well as he did. The sparrows, like the rooks, have their mode of punishment; and when any culprit has committed himself, they raise a clamour loud enough to alarm a whole neighbourhood. It begins in a moment—they all set to at once; and when they have had their say, they leave the offender to his own reflections. They are hasty, but it is soon over with them: nor do they ever put their victim to death; but having beaten him, and told him their minds, they treat him as kindly as before. In one instance, when the house sparrows had undergone a long persecution, they beat a retreat, and built their nests in some adjoining trees—a proof, that, when compelled by danger, they could change their habits; and, like other birds, build amongst the branches, instead of under the thatch or beneath the eaves.

One of the great pleasures which a lover of nature finds in a March ramble, is the arrival of the birds, which keep dropping in by twos and threes, we know not from whence. Nearly first comes the little wryneck, with its beautiful plumage, so richly marked, that it is almost impossible to describe its varied colours. You know it at a glance; for it is always twisting the dark-lined head and neck over the shoulders. Then we see the tiny willow-wren, whose chirp may be heard until September. It is also elegantly marked—yellow, brown, and white, and fond of frequenting the osier-beds. The titmouse and yellow-hammer also begin to sing; and together with the skylark, blackbird, throstle, woodlark, wren, and several others, there is already such a spring concert opened, as makes a lover of nature leave his chimney corner, and go forth to listen to their "sweet piping."

Sweet were the sounds which through the green vale flow'd:
The gentle lamb bleated all summer long;
The spotted heifer from the upland lowed;
The speckled thrush struck up its piping song;
A mournful "coo" the blue wood-pigeon made,
Now high, now low, now lost—just as the spring breeze played.

