

MONKSHOOD.

ALTHOUGH the natural history of plants is no longer confined to those who make the art of simpling their business, but has become a necessary branch of education, it is extraordinary how little people in general know about the flowers they love. It would surprise, and certainly (to use his own familiar expression) would *terrify* the cottager, to be told that the chief ornament of his little plot of garden, his tall, handsome, highly respectable-looking Monkshood is no other than the baleful Aconite, whose name is derived from a Greek word signifying *without a struggle*, and which the early writers say kills man, unless it can find in man something else to kill. Dr. Turner, the father of English botany, calls it "of all poysones the most hastie poysone;" and old Culpepper mentions it in his "British Herbal," simply as a poison, for which he recommends mulberry leaves as an antidote.

Three centuries ago the nature of aconite was accurately understood; and in much earlier days Pliny remarked that it exercises the same effect upon the body that the whetstone does upon the wedge of iron, being no sooner employed than its effects are felt.

Its use and dangers were well known to the ancients, and according to the fables of mythology, it was originally produced from the foam of the dog Cerberus, when dragged by Hercules from the infernal regions—for which reason it is still so remarkably abundant in the vicinity of Heraclea, in Pontus, a spot where is still pointed out the entrance to the shades below.

It is supposed to have been the principal ingredient in the poisonous cup mixed by Medea for Theseus. It was the poison employed in the island of *Æos*, to execute the barbarous law which condemned to death all who were no longer useful to the state, or were too feeble to defend themselves; whilst, if we descend to modern times, it will be remembered by those interested in the annals of crime, that tincture of aconite was the agent employed by Dr. Pritchard for the murder of his wife and mother-in-law, at Glasgow, in 1865.

In our own days poisoning by the root of aconite is unfortunately by no means infrequent. It has been eaten on several occasions in mistake for horse-radish, and death has usually ensued. All parts of the plant are poisonous, but the root is especially noxious, and when the leaves have fallen it appears to possess its greatest virulence. On chewing a very small portion of either the root or leaves, a sensation of numbness will, after a few minutes, be experienced in the lips and tongue, and will continue for some hours.

The symptoms produced by aconite poisoning are very striking

and sudden : burning and numbness of the lips, mouth, and throat—tremor, pain, and coldness of the limbs. The pulse becomes more and more irregular, and death soon puts an end to the patient's sufferings. The remedies (of which warmth and stimulants are the chief) are to be found in a very useful book just published, which should be ready on the table, or, better still, in the pocket of every medical man.*

Monkshood is only an introduced plant into Britain. It is a native of the Alpine forests of France, Switzerland, and Italy, but it may be found wild in some shady places in Western England and South Wales : it is called in Scotland the castaway of the garden.

Fragments of the root-stock will grow when accidentally thrown into waste places ; and Pliny thinks it derives its name from the circumstance of its growing on the naked rocks known as *Aconæ*, where there is not so much as dust about it to conduce to its nutriment. The root is perennial, tapering, or spindle-shaped. The flowering stems rise early in the spring, and every vigorous stem terminates in a large, erect, and handsome raceme of violet-purple flowers, irregular in form. The hood is really one of the sepals transformed, and with the nectaries is characteristic of the genus.

Phillips, in his "Vegetable Kingdom," a mine of wealth to the botanist as well as the student of *materia medica*, describes that even the odour thrown out, when the plant is in full bloom, acts injuriously upon susceptible constitutions, and sometimes causes loss of sight for a day or two. In other instances it has been known to induce fainting fits.

It is found in Sweden, Siberia, and Western Asia, as far as the Himalayas, and is much prescribed in every part of India, though it is said that the druggists, calculating on the ignorance of both practitioners and patients respecting the true drug, generally substitute some which they consider an equivalent. The celebrated Indian poison, emphatically called *Bish*, *the poison*, is the root of *aconite ferox*, which is brought down to the plains of India from the mountains where the plant is indigenous. In all native works, the *Bish* is represented as being a deadly poison, even in the smallest doses. It is described as being first sweetish, and then followed by a roughness on the tongue, or, as it is expressed in one Hindoo work, *seizing the throat*. It is regarded as equally fatal when taken internally and when applied to wounds : hence its use for poisoning arrows and killing wild animals. So frequent at one time was its employment as a poison, that its sale was prohibited in India, notwithstanding which, the Hindoo physicians, noted for the use of powerful drugs, do not hesitate to employ it.

Few remedies are of much more general utility in our own nineteenth century practice. In inflammatory fevers it not only abates the


* "What to Do in Cases of Poisoning." By William Murrell, M.D., M.R.C.P.

frequency of the heart's action, but quickly reduces the temperature. It is valuable in erysipelas, in muscular rheumatism, in gout, in quinsy, in every kind of bad sore throat: but it must be given in the early stage of inflammation, when its power is almost marvellous, and it must always be given alone. It is especially serviceable in that chilliness, aching of the limbs, hot dry skin, and quick pulse which distinguish one of the most trying of troubles, "*a bad cold all over.*"

The formidable poison has been reduced to so manageable a condition that those who have experienced its beneficent properties will gratefully echo the poet's comfortable reflection—

E'en the terror poison
Hath its plea for blooming:
Life it gives to reverend lips, tho' death to the presuming.

C. E. MEETKERKE.



SPRING.

By a thousand subtle signs,
Fading cloud and brightening blue,
By the beauty earth enshrines,
Leaf and grass, and—peeping through—
Flowers of dainty fashioning,
Hither comes the laughing Spring.

Now the birds begin their trill,
New-found joy in every note;
Now the nodding daffodil
Proudly dons his yellow coat,
Like a gallant courtier,
Bending low for love of her.

Slender vine and rugged tree
Smile beneath the touch of Spring;
Through the ice-bound Northern Sea
Runs a thrill of wakening;
And the world is all astir,
Jubilant for love of her.

Banish fear and vain regrets,
Else will life be little worth;
With the fragrant violets
Rouse thee, Hope and harmless Mirth;
All the bliss the year can bring
Hither follow laughing Spring.

SYDNEY GREY.