

AN ENGLISH MEADOW.

BY FRED MILLER.

Illustrated by the Author and VERNON STOKES.



HOSE who live in the country take Nature too much for granted. She is at their doors, just as the National Gallery is at the door of the Londoner, and there the matter ends. Kipling, in a recent poem, alluding to the Britisher over-seas, tells those who are at home—

Weed ye trample underfoot
floods *his* heart abrim,

and the meadows, the commonest sight to dwellers in the country would give ecstasy to a townsman.

But though I have of recent years been a countryman I had a long apprenticeship in town, and a man who has passed his childhood and youth environed by bricks and mortar—whose chief idea of the country was suggested by a very early acquaintance with Regent's Park and Primrose Hill, with occasional journeys to Hampstead and Epping Forest—brings with him senses sharpened to see what is around him, and is therefore able to appreciate an English meadow. Familiarity does not make me contemptuous.

A London friend who came to see me last spring, when the fields were looking so luscious—painted with a full palette, and opulent in their charms—said he should like to have a slab of meadow sent him weekly as his table decoration, and suggested that a company might be formed to export choice slabs of pasture with all their flora—and possibly some of their fauna—to those situated like himself where meadows were only given a local habitation in the mind's eye.

The time to see English meadows in perfection is from the middle of April onwards

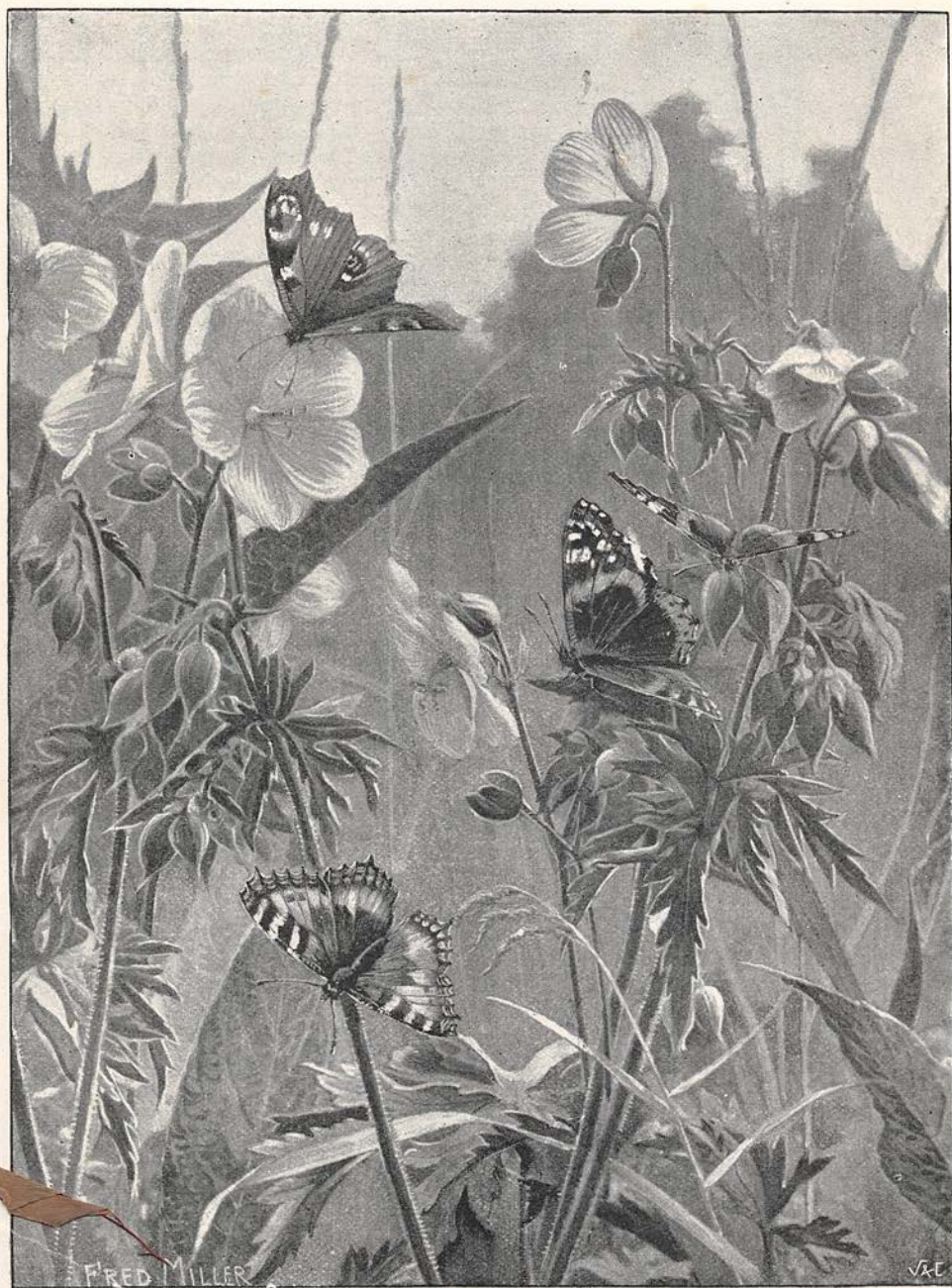
to June, for then you begin with the cowslips, king-cups, or golden-likes, as the children call them, about this upper Thames valley, and Shakspeare's lady-smocks all silver white, which, with the daisies pied and violets



blue, do paint the meadows with delight. You watch them become golden with buttercups, then silver with cowparsley, and after that like a ribstone pippin with the ripening grasses (which are all of a reddish or russet hue), and bright red sorrel.



The cowslips this year were not very plentiful, while some years our meadows are quite a pale primrose with them. Last winter was one of the mildest on record, but



BLUE MEADOW CRANE'S BILL.



there are certain climatic conditions, which we do not understand, against the development of particular plants; just as with butterflies some seasons will make the 'clouded yellow' plentiful, while for two or three years after very few are seen. Cowslip wine is still made by a few countrywomen, and very good it is if kept a few years; about here, too, the villagers make wine of dandelion flowers, which is reputed to have medicinal qualities; but for that matter nearly all homemade wines are stomachics, —cowslip in fevers, dandelion for the spring of the year, sicc for the bowel complaint. It certainly adds to the pleasure of a drink to be told that it is useful therapeutically, and to feel that it is palatable.

Culpepper, in his "Herbal," ascribes wonderful virtues to most of our familiar plants. The

smaller celandine, for instance, which Wordsworth celebrated more than once in verse, is, he says, "an herb of the sun, and under the celestial Lion, and is one of the best cures for the eyes; for all that know anything in astrology know that the eyes are subject to the luminaries. Let it be gathered when the sun is Leo and the moon Aries, applying to this time; let Leo arise, and then may you make it into an oil or ointment, which you please, to anoint your sore eyes with. I can prove it doth—both my own experience and the experience of those to whom I have taught it—that most desperate sore eyes have been cured by this only medicine."

I like the local names of flowers, and so have called the marsh-marigold, or king-cup, "golden loves," which is the only name it is known by hereabouts. The white alyssum, so often used as a spring bordering in gardens, is called "snow on the mountains."



MOON DAISIES AND GRASSES.



There are two flowers found in the meadows of the upper Thames which are very local. The fritillary is very plentiful in some meadows, particularly near Oxford. Matthew Arnold in "Thyrsis" speaks of them—

I know what white, what purple fritillaries
The grassy harvest of the river yields—
Above by Ensham, down by Sandford, yields—
And what sedg'd brooks are Thames' tributaries.

The white variety is not common; the usual colour is a laky-purple, with deeper purple patterning, which gives them their local name of snake's heads.

The snowflake is a variety of snowdrop, only many flowers are borne upon the flower-stalk instead of one. The flower and growth are alike graceful.

The moon or ox-eye daisy is not found until June, and I have seen some fields quite carpeted with them; but this often betokens a poor sandy soil. I number it among our most beautiful wild flowers. A yellow variety of it, and known as the corn marigold, is to be seen in cornfields in July and August.

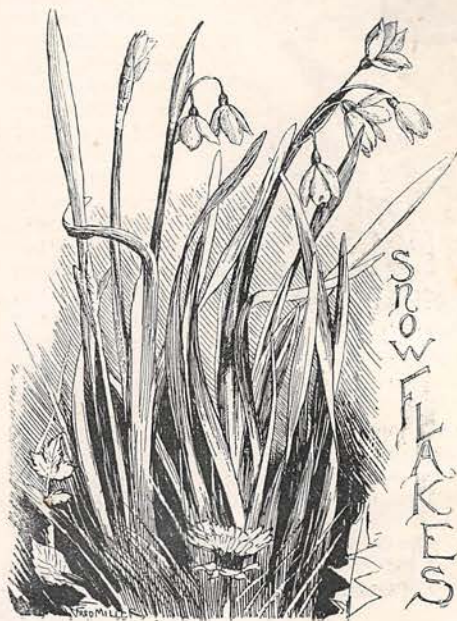
There is no more beautiful flower than

the blue meadow crane's bill. It is found all along the Thames. With its delicate hyacinthine blue flowers and laky flower-buds it is a lovely plant.

If you stop to analyse the beauty of an English meadow it will be found to consist of an enormous variety of plants, not all of equal interest or value in the "carpet," but all adding to the wonderful pattern. The grasses alone are very numerous, and it is an object-lesson to collect a specimen of each and realise how infinite is the variety of nature.

As one leisurely drops down the river glimpses of the inner life of a meadow are obtained where the bank is not too high, for then the eye looks into the grass and not merely over its surface. When the grasses gently bend under a southern wind the varying colour is very beautiful.

After the hay is cut the beauty of the meadows has gone, not to return until the following spring.



SNOWFLAKES