

WILDFLOWERS

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A fir-tree is not a flower, and yet it is associated in my mind with primroses. There was a narrow lane leading into a wood, where I used to go almost every day in the early months of the year, and at one corner it was overlooked by three spruce firs. The rugged lane there began to ascend the hill, and I paused a moment to look back. Immediately the high fir-trees guided the eye upwards, and from their tops to the deep azure of the March sky over, but a step from the tree to the heavens. So it has ever been to me, by day or by night, summer or winter, beneath trees the heart feels nearer to that depth of life the far sky means. The rest of spirit found only in beauty, ideal and pure, comes there because the distance seems within touch of thought. To the heaven thought can reach lifted by the strong arms of the oak, carried up by the ascent of the flame-shaped fir. Round the spruce top the blue was deepened, concentrated by the fixed point; the memory of that spot, as it were, of the sky is still fresh - I can see it distinctly - still beautiful and full of meaning. It is painted in bright colour in my mind, colour thrice laid, and indelible; as one passes a shrine and bows the head to the Madonna, so I recall the picture and stoop in spirit to the aspiration it yet arouses. For there is no saint like the sky, sunlight shining from its face.

The fir-tree flowered thus before the primroses - the first of all to give me a bloom, beyond reach but visible, while even the hawthorn buds hesitated to open. Primroses were late there, a high district and thin soil; you could read of them as found elsewhere in January; they rarely came much before March, and but sparingly then. On the warm red sand (red, at least, to look at, but green by geological courtesy, I think) of Sussex, round about Hurst of the Pierre-points, primroses are seen soon after the year has turned. In the lanes about that curious old mansion, with its windows reaching from floor to roof, that stands at the base of Wolstanbury Hill, they grow early, and ferns linger in sheltered overhung banks. The South Down range, like a great wall, shuts off the sea, and has a different climate on either hand; south by the sea - hard, harsh, flowerless, almost grassless, bitter, and cold; on the north side, just over the hill - warm, soft, with primroses and fern, willows budding and birds already busy. It is a double England there, two countries side by side.

On a summer's day Wolstanbury Hill is an island in sunshine; you may lie on the grassy rampart, high up in the most delicate air- Grecian air, pellucid - alone, among the butterflies and humming bees at the thyme, alone and isolated; endless masses of hills on three sides, endless weald or valley on

the fourth; all warmly lit with sunshine, deep under liquid sunshine like the sands under the liquid sea, no harshness of man-made sound to break the insulation amid nature, on an island in a far Pacific of sunshine. Some people would hesitate to walk down the staircase cut in the turf to the beech-trees beneath; the woods look so small beneath, so far down and steep, and no handrail. Many go to the Dyke, but none to Wolstanbury Hill. To come over the range reminds one of what travellers say of coming over the Alps into Italy; from harsh sea-slopes, made dry with salt as they sow salt on razed cities that naught may grow, to warm plains rich in all things, and with great hills as pictures hung on a wall to gaze at. Where there are beech-trees the land is always beautiful; beech-trees at the foot of this hill, beech-trees at Arundel in that lovely park which the Duke of Norfolk, to his glory, leaves open to all the world, and where the anemones flourish in unusual size and number; beech-trees in Marlborough Forest; beech-trees at the summit to which the lane leads that was spoken of just now. Beech and beautiful scenery go together.

But the primroses by that lane did not appear till late; they covered the banks under the thousand thousand ash-poles; foxes slipped along there frequently, whose friends in scarlet coats could not endure the pale flowers, for they might chink their spurs homewards. In one meadow near primroses were thicker than the grass, with gorse interspersed, and the rabbits that came out fed among flowers. The primroses last on to the celandines and cowslips, through the time of the bluebells, past the violets -one dies but passes on the life to another, one sets light to the next, till the ruddy oaks and singing cuckoos call up the tall mowing grass to fringe summer.

Before I had any conscious thought it was a delight to me to find wild flowers, just to see them. It was a pleasure to gather them and to take them home; a pleasure to show them to others - to keep them as long as they would live, to decorate the room with them, to arrange them carelessly with grasses, green sprays, tree-bloom - large branches of chestnut snapped off, and set by a picture perhaps. Without conscious thought of seasons and the advancing hours to light on the white wild violet, the meadow orchis, the blue veronica, the blue meadow cranesbill; feeling the warmth and delight of the increasing sun-rays, but not recognising whence or why it was joy. All the world is young to a boy, and thought has not entered into it; even the old men with grey hair do not seem old; different but not aged, the idea of age has not been mastered. A boy has to frown and study, and then does not grasp what long years mean. The various hues of the petals pleased without any knowledge of colour-contrasts, no note even of colour except that it was bright, and the mind was made happy without consideration of those ideals and hopes afterwards associated with the azure sky above the fir-tree. A fresh footpath, a fresh flower, a fresh delight. The reeds, the grasses, the rushes - unknown and new things at every step - something always to find; no barren spot anywhere, or sameness. Every day the grass painted anew, and its green seen for the first time; not the old green, but a novel hue and spectacle, like the first view of the sea.

If we had never before looked upon the earth, but suddenly came to it man or woman grown, set down in the midst of a summer mead, would it not seem to us a radiant vision? The hues, the shapes, the song and life of birds, above all the sunlight, the breath of heaven, resting on it; the mind would be filled with its glory, unable to grasp it, hardly believing that such things could be mere matter and no more. Like a dream of some spirit-land it would appear, scarce fit to be touched lest it should fall to pieces, too beautiful to be long watched lest it should fade away. So it seemed to me as a boy, sweet and new like this each morning; and even now, after the years that have passed, and the lines they have worn in the forehead, the summer mead shines as bright and fresh as when my foot first touched the grass. It has another meaning now; the sunshine and the flowers speak differently, for a heart that has once known sorrow reads behind the page, and sees sadness in joy. But the freshness is still there, the dew washes the colours before dawn. Unconscious happiness in finding wild flowers - unconscious and unquestioning, and therefore unbounded.

I used to stand by the mower and follow the scythe sweeping down thousands of the broad-flowered daisies, the knotted knapweeds, the blue scabious, the yellow rattles, sweeping so close and true that nothing escaped; and, yet although I had seen so many hundreds of each, although I had lifted armfuls day after day, still they were fresh. They never lost their newness, and even now each time I gather a wild flower it feels a new thing. The greenfinches came to the fallen swathe so near to us they seemed to have no fear; but I remember the yellowhammers most, whose colour, like that of the wild flowers and the sky, has never faded from my memory. The greenfinches sank into the fallen swathe, the loose grass gave under their weight and let them bathe in flowers.

One yellowhammer sat on a branch of ash the livelong morning, still singing in the sun; his bright head, his clean bright yellow, gaudy as Spain, was drawn like a brush charged heavily with colour across the retina, painting it deeply, for there on the eye's memory it endures, though that was boyhood and this is manhood, still unchanged. The field - Stewart's Mash - the very tree, young ash timber, the branch projecting over the sward, I could make a map of them. Sometimes I think sun-painted colours are brighter to me than to many, and more strongly affect the nerves of the eye. Straw going by the road on a dusky winter's day seems so pleasantly golden, the sheaves lying aslant at the top, and these bundles of yellow tubes thrown up against the dark ivy on the opposite wall. Tiles, red burned, or orange coated, the sea sometimes cleanly definite, the shadows of trees in a thin wood where there is room for shadows to form and fall; some such shadows are sharper than light, and have a faint blue tint. Not only in summer but in cold winter, and not only romantic things but plain matter-of-fact things, as a waggon freshly painted red beside the wright's shop, stand out as if wet with colour and delicately pencilled at the edges. It must be out of doors; nothing indoors looks like this.

Pictures are very dull and gloomy to it, and very contrasted colours like those the French use are necessary to fix the attention. Their dashes of pink and scarlet bring the faint shadow of the sun into the room. As for our painters, their works are hung behind a curtain, and we have to peer patiently through the dusk of evening to see what they mean. Out-of-door colours do not need to be gaudy - a mere dull stake of wood thrust in the ground often stands out sharper than the pink flashes of the French studio; a faggot; the outline of a leaf; low tints without reflecting power strike the eye as a bell the ear. To me they are intensely clear, and the clearer the greater the pleasure. It is often too great, for it takes me away from solid pursuits merely to receive the impression, as water is still to reflect the trees. To me it is very painful when illness blots the definition of outdoor things, so wearisome not to see them rightly, and more oppressive than actual pain. I feel as if I was struggling to wake up with dim, half-opened lids and heavy mind. This one yellowhammer still sits on the ash branch in Stewart's Mash over the sward, singing in the sun, his feathers freshly wet with colour, the same sun-song, and will sing to me so long as the heart shall beat.

The first conscious thought about wild flowers was to find out their names - the first conscious pleasure - and then I began to see so many that I had not previously noticed. Once you wish to identify them there is nothing escapes, down to the little white chickweed of the path and the moss of the wall. I put my hand on the bridge across the brook to lean over and look down into the water. Are there any fish? The bricks of the pier are covered with green, like a wall-painting to the surface of the stream, mosses along the lines of the mortar, and among the moss little plants - what are these? In the dry sunlit lane I look up to the top of the great wall about some domain, where the green figs look over upright on their stalks; there are dry plants on the coping - what are these? Some growing thus, high in the air, on stone, and in the chinks of the tower, suspended in dry air and sunshine; some low down under the arch of the bridge over the brook, out of sight utterly, unless you stoop by the brink of the water and project yourself forward to examine under. The kingfisher sees them as he shoots through the barrel of the culvert.

There the sun direct never shines upon them, but the sunlight thrown up by the ripples runs all day in bright bars along the vault of the arch, playing on them. The stream arranges the sand in the shallow in bars, minute fixed undulations; the stream arranges the sunshine in successive flashes, undulating as if the sun, drowsy in the heat, were idly closing and unclosing his eyelids for sleep.

Plants everywhere, hiding behind every tree, under the leaves, in the shady places, behind the dry furrows of the field; they are only just behind something, hidden openly. The instant you look for them they multiply a hundredfold; if you sit on the beach and begin to count the pebbles by you, their number instantly increases to infinity by virtue of that conscious act.

The bird's-foot lotus was the first. The boy must have seen it, must have trodden on it in the bare woodland pastures, certainly run about on it, with wet naked feet from the bathing; but the boy was not conscious of it. This was the first, when the desire came to identify and to know, fixing upon it by means of a pale and feeble picture. In the largest pasture there were different soils and climates; it was so large it seemed a little country of itself then - the more so because the ground rose and fell, making a ridge to divide the view and enlarge by uncertainty. The high sandy soil on the ridge where the rabbits had their warren; the rocky soil of the quarry; the long grass by the elms where the rooks built, under whose nests there were vast unpalatable Mushrooms - the true mushrooms with salmon gills grew nearer the warren; the slope towards the nut-tree hedge and spring. Several climates in one field: the wintry ridge over which leaves were always driving in all four seasons of the year; the level sunny plain and fallen cromlech still tall enough for a gnomon and to cast its shadow in the treeless drought; the moist, warm, grassy depression; the lotus-grown slope, warm and dry.

If you have been living in one house in the country for some time, and then go on a visit to another, though hardly half a mile distant, you will find a change in the air, the feeling, and tone of the place. It is close by, but it is not the same. To discover these minute differences, which make one locality healthy and home happy, and the next adjoining unhealthy, the Chinese have invented the science of Feng-shui, spying about with cabalistic mystery, casting the horoscope of an acre. There is something in all superstitions; they are often the foundation of science. Superstition having made the discovery, science composes a lecture on the reason why, and claims the credit. Bird's-foot lotus means a fortunate spot, dry, warm - so far as soil is concerned. If you were going to live out of doors, you might safely build your khibitka where you found it. Wandering with the pictured flower-book, just purchased, over the windy ridge where last year's skeleton leaves, blown out from the alder copse below, came on with grasshopper motion - lifted and laid down by the wind, lifted and laid down - I sat on the sward of the sheltered slope, and instantly recognised the orange-red claws of the flower beside me. That was the first; and this very morning, I dread to consider how many years afterwards, I found a plant on a wall which I do not know. I shall have to trace out its genealogy and emblazon its shield. So many years and still only at the beginning - the beginning, too, of the beginning - for as yet I have not thought of the garden or conservatory flowers (which are wild flowers somewhere), or of the tropics, or the prairies.

The great stone of the fallen cromlech, crouching down afar off in the plain behind me, cast its shadow in the sunny morn as it had done, so many summers, for centuries - for thousands of years: worn white by the endless sunbeams - the ceaseless flood of light - the sunbeams of centuries, the impalpable beams polishing and grinding like rushing water: silent, yet witnessing of the Past; shadowing the Present on the dial of the field: a mere dull stone; but what is it the mind will not employ to express to itself its own thoughts?

There was a hollow near in which hundreds of skeleton leaves had settled, a stage on their journey from the alder copse, so thick as to cover the thin grass, and at the side of the hollow a wasp's nest had been torn out by a badger. On the soft and spreading sand thrown out from his burrow the print of his foot looked as large as an elephant might make. The wild animals of our fields are so small that the badger's foot seemed foreign in its size, calling up thought of the great game of distant forests. He was a bold badger to make his burrow there in the open warren, unprotected by park walls or preserve laws, where every one might see who chose. I never saw him by daylight: that they do get about in daytime is, however, certain, for one was shot in Surrey recently by sportsmen; they say he weighed forty pounds.

In the mind all things are written in pictures - there is no alphabetical combination of letters and words; all things are pictures and symbols. The bird's-foot lotus is the picture to me of sunshine and summer, and of that summer in the heart which is known only in youth, and then not alone. No words could write that feeling: the bird's-foot lotus writes it.

When the efforts to photograph began, the difficulty was to fix the scene thrown by the lens upon the plate. There the view appeared perfect to the least of details, worked out by the sun, and made as complete in miniature as that he shone upon in nature. But it faded like the shadows as the summer sun declines. Have you watched them in the fields among the flowers? - the deep strong mark of the noonday shadow of a tree such as the pen makes drawn heavily on the paper; gradually it loses its darkness and becomes paler and thinner at the edge as it lengthens and spreads, till shadow and grass mingle together. Image after image faded from the plates, no more to be fixed than the reflection in water of the trees by the shore. Memory, like the sun, paints to me bright pictures of the golden summer time of lotus; I can see them, but how shall I fix them for you? By no process can that be accomplished. It is like a story that cannot be told because he who knows it is tongue-tied and dumb. Motions of hands, wavings and gestures, rudely convey the framework, but the finish is not there.

To-day, and day after day, fresh pictures are coloured instantaneously in the retina as bright and perfect in detail and hue. This very power is often, I think, the cause of pain to me. To see so clearly is to value so highly and to feel too deeply. The smallest of the pencilled branches of the bare ash-tree drawn distinctly against the winter sky, waving lines one within the other, yet following and partly parallel, reproducing in the curve of the twig the curve of the great trunk; is it not a pleasure to trace each to its ending? The raindrops as they slide from leaf to leaf in June, the balmy shower that reperfumes each wild flower and green thing, drops lit with the sun, and falling to the chorus of the refreshed birds; is not this beautiful to see? On the grasses tall and heavy the purplish blue pollen, a shimmering dust, sown broadcast over the ripening meadow from July's warm hand - the bluish pollen, the lilac pollen of the grasses, a delicate mist of blue floating on the surface, has always been an especial delight to me. Finches shake it

from the stalks as they rise. No day, no hour of summer, no step but brings new mazes - there is no word to express design without plan, and these designs of flower and leaf and colours of the sun cannot be reduced to set order. The eye is for ever drawn onward and finds no end. To see these always so sharply, wet and fresh, is almost too much sometimes for the wearied yet insatiate eye. I am obliged to turn away - to shut my eyes and say I will not see, I will not observe; I will concentrate my mind on my own little path of life, and steadily gaze downwards. In vain. Who can do so? who can care alone for his or her petty trifles of existence, that has once entered amongst the wild flowers? How shall I shut out the sun? Shall I deny the constellations of the night? They are there; the Mystery is for ever about us - the question, the hope, the aspiration cannot be put out. So that it is almost a pain not to be able to cease observing and tracing the untraceable maze of beauty.

Blue veronica was the next identified, sometimes called germander speedwell, sometimes bird's-eye, whose leaves are so plain and petals so blue. Many names increase the trouble of identification, and confusion is made certain by the use of various systems of classification. The flower itself I knew, its name I could not be sure of - not even from the illustration, which was incorrectly coloured; the central white spot of the flower was reddish in the plate. This incorrect colouring spoils much of the flower-picturing done; pictures of flowers and birds are rarely accurate unless hand-painted. Any one else, however, would have been quite satisfied that the identification was right. I was too desirous to be correct, too conscientious, and thus a summer went by with little progress. If you really wish to identify with certainty, and have no botanist friend and no *magnum opus* of Sowerby to refer to, it is very difficult indeed to be quite sure. There was no Sowerby, no Bentham, no botanist friend - no one even to give the common country names; for it is a curious fact that the country people of the time rarely know the names put down as the vernacular for flowers in the books.

No one there could tell me the name of the marsh-marigold which grew thickly in the water-meadows - "A sort of big buttercup," that was all they knew. Commonest of common plants is the "sauce alone" - in every hedge, on every bank, the whitish-green leaf is found - yet *I* could not make certain of it. If some one tells you a plant, you know it at once and never forget it, but to learn it from a book is another matter; it does not at once take root in the mind, it has to be seen several times before you are satisfied - you waver in your convictions. The leaves were described as large and heart-shaped, and to remain green (at the ground) through the winter; but the colour of the flower was omitted, though it was stated that the petals of the hedge-mustard were yellow. The plant that seemed to me to be probably "sauce alone" had leaves somewhat heart-shaped, but so confusing is *partial* description that I began to think I had hit on "ramsons" instead of "sauce alone," especially as ramsons was said to be a very common plant. So it is in some counties, but, as I afterwards found, there was not a plant of ramsons, or garlic, throughout the whole of that district. When, some years

afterwards, I saw a white-flowered plant with leaves like the lily of the valley, smelling of garlic, in the woods of Somerset, I recognised it immediately. The plants that are really common - common everywhere - are not numerous, and if you are studying you must be careful to understand that word locally. My "sauce alone" identification was right; to be right and not certain is still unsatisfactory.

There shone on the banks white stars among the grass. Petals delicately white in a whorl of rays - light that had started radiating from a centre and become fixed - shining among the flowerless green. The slender stem had grown so fast it had drawn its own root partly out of the ground, and when I tried to gather it, flower, stem and root came away together. The wheat was springing, the soft air full of the growth and moisture, blackbirds whistling, wood-pigeons nesting, young oak-leaves out; a sense of swelling, sunny fulness in the atmosphere. The plain road was made beautiful by the advanced boughs that overhung and cast their shadows on the dust - boughs of ash-green, shadows that lay still, listening to the nightingale. A place of enchantment in the mornings where was felt the power of some subtle influence working behind bough and grass and bird-song. The orange-golden dandelion in the sward was deeply laden with colour brought to it anew again and again by the ships of the flowers, the humble-bees - to their quays they come, unlading priceless essences of sweet odours brought from the East over the green seas of wheat, unlading priceless colours on the broad dandelion disks, bartering these things for honey and pollen. Slowly tacking aslant, the pollen ship hums in the south wind. The little brown wren finds her way through the great thicket of hawthorn. How does she know her path, hidden by a thousand thousand leaves? Tangled and crushed together by their own growth, a crown of thorns hangs over the thrush's nest; thorns for the mother, hope for the young. Is there a crown of thorns over your heart? A spike has gone deep enough into mine. The stile looks farther away because boughs have pushed forward and made it smaller. The willow scarce holds the sap that tightens the bark and would burst it if it did not enlarge to the pressure.

Two things can go through the solid oak; the lightning of the clouds that rends the iron timber, the lightning of the spring - the electricity of the sunbeams forcing him to stretch forth and lengthen his arms with joy. Bathed in buttercups to the dewlap, the roan cows standing in the golden lake watched the hours with calm frontlet; watched the light descending, the meadows filling, with knowledge of long months of succulent clover. On their broad brows the year falls gently; their great, beautiful eyes, which need but a tear or a smile to make them human - without these, such eyes, so large and full, seem above human life, eyes of the immortals enduring without passion - in these eyes, as a mirror, nature is reflected.

I came every day to walk slowly up and down the plain road, by the starry flowers under the ash-green boughs; ash is the coolest, softest green. The bees went drifting over by my head; as they cleared the hedges they passed by my ears, the wind singing in their shrill wings. White tent-walls of cloud -

a warm white, being full to overflowing of sunshine - stretched across from ash-top to ash-top, a cloud-canvas roof, a tent-palace of the delicious air. For of all things there is none so sweet as sweet air - one great flower it is, drawn round about, over, and enclosing, like Aphrodite's arms; as if the dome of the sky were a bell-flower drooping down over us, and the magical essence of it filling all the room of the earth. Sweetest of all things is wild-flower air. Full of their ideal the starry flowers strained upwards on the bank, striving to keep above the rude grasses that pushed by them; genius has ever had such a struggle. The plain road was made beautiful by the many thoughts it gave. I came every morning to stay by the starlit bank.

A friend said, "Why do you go the same road every day? Why not have a change and walk somewhere else sometimes? Why keep on up and down the same place?" I could not answer; till then it had not occurred to me that I did always go one way; as for the reason of it I could not tell; I continued in my old mind while the summers went away. Not till years afterwards was I able to see why I went the same round and did not care for change. I do not want change: I want the same old and loved things, the same wild-flowers, the same trees and soft ash-green; the turtle-doves, the blackbirds, the coloured yellowhammer sing, sing, singing so long as there is light to cast a shadow on the dial, for such is the measure of his song, and I want them in the same place. Let me find them morning after morning, the starry-white petals radiating, striving upwards to their ideal. Let me see the idle shadows resting on the white dust; let me hear the humble-bees, and stay to look down on the rich dandelion disk. Let me see the very thistles opening their great crowns - I should miss the thistles; the reed-grasses hiding the moorhen; the bryony bine, at first crudely ambitious and lifted by force of youthful sap straight above the hedgerow to sink of its own weight presently and progress with crafty tendrils; swifts shot through the air with outstretched wings like crescent-headed shaftless arrows darted from the clouds; the chaffinch with a feather in her bill; all the living staircase of the spring, step by step, upwards to the great gallery of the summer - let me watch the same succession year by year.

Why, I knew the very dates of them all--the reddening elm, the arum, the hawthorn leaf, the celandine, the may; the yellow iris of the waters, the heath of the hillside. The time of the nightingale - the place to hear the first note; onwards to the drooping fern and the time of the redwing - the place of his first note, so welcome to the sportsman as the acorn ripens and the pheasant, come to the age of manhood, feeds himself; onwards to the shadowless days - the long shadowless winter, for in winter it is the shadows we miss as much as the light. They lie over the summer sward, design upon design, dark lace on green and gold; they glorify the sunlight: they repose on the distant hills like gods upon Olympus; without shadow, what even is the sun? At the foot of the great cliffs by the sea you may know this, it is dry glare; mighty ocean is dearer as the shadows of the clouds sweep over as they sweep over the green corn. Past the shadowless winter, when it is all shade, and therefore no shadow; onwards to the first coltsfoot and on to the seed-time again; I knew the dates of all of them. I did not want

change; I wanted the same flowers to return on the same day, the titlark to rise soaring from the same oak to fetch down love with a song from heaven to his mate on the nest beneath. No change, no new thing; if I found a fresh wild-flower in a fresh place, still it wove at once into the old garland. In vain, the very next year was different even in the same place - *that* had been a year of rain, and the flag flowers were wonderful to see; *this* was a dry year, and the flags not half the height, the gold of the flower not so deep; next year the fatal billhook came and swept away a slow-grown hedge that had given me crab-blossom in cuckoo-time and hazelnuts in harvest. Never again the same, even in the same place.

A little feather droops downwards to the ground - a swallow's feather fuller of miracle than the Pentateuch - how shall that feather be placed again in the breast where it grew? Nothing twice. Time changes the places that knew us, and if we go back in after years, still even then it is not the old spot; the gate swings differently, new thatch has been put on the old gables, the road has been widened, and the sward the driven sheep lingered on is gone. Who dares to think then? For faces fade as flowers, and there is no consolation. So now I am sure I was right in always walking the same way by the starry flowers striving upwards on a slender ancestry of stem; I would follow the plain old road to-day if I could. Let change be far from me; that irresistible change must come is bitter indeed. Give me the old road, the same flowers - they were only stitchwort - the old succession of days and garland, ever weaving into it fresh wild-flowers from far and near. Fetch them from distant mountains, discover them on decaying walls, in unsuspected corners; though never seen before, still they are the same: there has been a place in the heart waiting for them.