

## THE FLOWERS OF MAY.

By ELSPETH BROOKS.



WE are once more in the month of May, the month of singing birds and budding flowers. We are again at the meeting-point between the two seasons of spring and summer, when the fresh, sweet beauties of the one are merged into the glowing charms of the other. The great leap which all nature takes at this season of the year, bursting out into life with a lavish profusion of flowers, has never failed to have its influence on the heart of the nation. There is a surging of strange hopes and aspirations, a yearning to be among the flowers, a great desire to be one in the new, sweet carnival of growth, that always seems to accompany the birth of this delicious month. At her approach all nature seems to be awakened from her winter's sleep, and waits with bursting heart for the coming glory that shall be. The wild hopes that stir the sap and swell the branches of the tall trees, as they sway in the gentle breeze, are beginning to be fulfilled; the rapture of the flowers makes the air sweet, as they laugh for very happiness at their new delightful life, though the spring keeps holding back, half-shy at the joy her coming brings, and only lets us hear the rustle of her wings as she whispers, "Patience, O waiting earth, I come with sure and willing feet." From every bush and spray the birds keep pouring into her maiden ear their welcome love-songs, and to each blithe note her young heart beats response.

"Oh, the merry May has pleasant hours,  
And dreamily they glide,  
As if they floated like the leaves  
Upon a silver tide.

"The trees are full of crimson buds,  
The woods are full of birds,  
And the waters flow to music,  
Like a tune with pleasant words."

The flowers that give to May her special charm are very numerous. First we have the cowslip, in whose sweet bell the poet's Ariel made his cradle, and there are few children who have not gathered its fragrant bunches to make the cowslip-ball. It grows as readily on the uncultured heath as it does in the cultivated garden, and is one of God's gifts to the little ones of the poor. The leaf is very like the primrose, though not so large, and of smoother texture. Then come the snowdrops, violets, primroses, bluebells, purple orchises, marsh marigolds, and the pretty white stitch-worts. The latter common little flower is a plant of great beauty, with leaves of the most delicate green tint, and is interesting from the circumstance of its having been the plant that Linnæus first obtained his idea of what he calls the sleep of plants. The flowers are only open for three hours in the day—from nine till twelve—though not even then do they unfold unless the sun be shining. In the evening the leaves approach each other in pairs, so as to enclose the tender buds.

Next, clustering on every bank in the richest luxuriance, we see the lovely blue hyacinth. With the Greeks it appears to have been used

both at marriage and funeral ceremonies, and, like most other flowers, has a mythological story attached to it, which runs thus:—Hyacinthus was a beautiful youth, beloved both by Apollo and Zephyr, but who, preferring the sun to the wind, created a jealousy in the breast of the latter god, which caused his destruction. Hyacinthus being at quoits with Apollo, Zephyr, unperceived, took the opportunity of revenging himself on his rival, by causing him to become the instrument of the death of their favourite, for whilst Apollo's quoit was in the air, Zephyr blew it from its course towards the head of the unfortunate youth, and killed him by the blow. But though Apollo cannot restore him to life, he can at least prevent his utter extinction, and preserve a lasting memorial of one whom he loved and lamented; therefore, as Ovid describes it:—

"His polished limbs, by strange enchantment's power,  
Shoot into buds and blossom into flower;  
His auburn locks in verdant foliage flow,  
And wreaths of azure flowerets shade his brow."

From this supposed circumstance, the hyacinth has been made emblematical of play or game, and in commemoration of the event there was an annual solemnity, called *Hyacinthia*, held at Amyclæ, in Laconia, which lasted three days. According to another fable, however, the flower originated in the blood of Ajax, who stabbed himself because the arms of Achilles were given to Ulysses and not to him; and we find many references in the poets to a flower bearing the name of hyacinth, which had traced upon its petals certain characters expressive of woe. Many trees and shrubs blossom in May, such as the oak, beech, maple, sycamore, barberry, laburnum, horse-chestnut, lilac, mountain ash, and Guelder rose; but what are any of these in comparison with the hawthorn, that sweet flower, which so especially belongs to this month? It is her own peculiar plant, bearing her name, and forming a conspicuous feature in all her garlands. The young Athenian girls brought branches of it to decorate the altar of wedlock, and those who were about to plight their troth there. The altar was also lighted with torches made of the wood of the tree, of which were likewise composed the flambeaux which illuminated the nuptial chamber, so that it was every way with them a hymeneal offering. It was the emblem of hope, too, where the first vows of love were so often made under its pleasant shade; and it was ever the trysting-tree of youthful lovers. Many a time its fragrance recalls to the grey-headed man or woman the whispered words which once sounded so sweetly on the ear in "the days of auld lang syne." "Meet me by the hawthorn this evening in the vale." It was there that Burns met his Highland Mary, and he could find no dearer name for her he loved than that of this plant. Beside it we may see the white Guelder rose—the snowball tree, as the Germans call it—beginning to show its white blossoms; and the carmine-tinted wild-apple bloom, glowing in its pure beauty. Yet of all the scented gems which adorn our "flowery May," the fairest in sweetness are assuredly the pearly lilies of the vale. The "May lilies," as they are called, are the emblems of modesty and simplicity, the types of humility. In the deep recesses of the woods, the pure snowy bells, hanging beneath the broad shadow of their green leaves, scatter odours of unrivalled perfume. This delicate little flower, the model

of the sculptor and the painter, boasts the botanical name of *Convallaria majalis*. The Germans call it *Mayen Blumen*; but the French—no wonder we grow indignant—call it *La Muguet* (a fop). Gleaming in the sunshine we now see the large blossoms of the white and yellow water lilies, next of kin to the Eastern lotus, so celebrated by the Oriental bards. They are the symbols of purity, because they contract no defilement, though often submerged in the muddy waters of their home.

We must not forget the wallflower, the yellow stock as it is sometimes called, the sign of fidelity in misfortune; it is also celebrated by the old English poets under the name of wall gilliflower. We are not disposed to quarrel with Langhorne when he says it is—

"The sweetest flower  
That decks the golden breast of May."

Nor must we fail to seek among the mosses, or near some brook, or in the shaded woods, for the pretty little wood-sorrel, which is a lovely and most delicate plant. Its trefoil leaves are of a brilliant emerald hue, tinted with crimson beneath, its stem and root of transparent carmine, and the stalks of both leaves and flowers of an extremely fragile character. The whole plant is strongly acid, and from its leaves the poison oxalic acid is drawn.

In the early part of this month we cannot help being struck by the peculiar beauty of the woods, only the pines look dim and dusty amid the lively hues of spring. It is indeed a scene of fairyland to stand beneath the giant trees and look up to the blue sky beyond, through the green array of leaves, while the fresh early youth of the year is bursting into life on every side.

God has many messengers when He has aught to say to the human heart. We stretch out our hands to an unresponsive void for an answer to our soul's passionate prayer, to our yearnings after the good and true, and the melody of the great trees comes swishing an answer in our ears, "Drink, drink to the full of the beauty of the earth, yet remember, that though the dreams of youth are the flowers, 'tis the deeds of manhood that make the fruit."

Even to the poor sufferer, at the gate of whose being pain keeps standing like a sentinel to prevent all joy of beauty from entering in, the spring time seems to whisper of courage and hope; and we hear the voices of the young rejoicing in their youth—the May of human existence—telling us that this season of light and beauty is but a transcript of the light and beauty which irradiates the lives of those where love and friendship have taken up their abode.

Yet in this world of ours the human heart is never at rest, knows no perfect quiet, has no counterpart in the stillness that nature seems to experience, as Shelley so truly says:—

"We look before and after,  
And pine for what is not,  
Our sincerest laughter  
With some pain is fraught,  
Our sweetest songs are those which tell of  
saddest thought."

And now, before this sweet May month is flown, let us bathe ourselves in its sunshine and its flowers; let us listen with the hearing ear to the glad singing of its feathered minstrels; let us, if but for once, have the large child heart that so quickly beats in unison with nature's jubilee.