

— Science Notes. —

THE WHITE-THORN.

THE white-thorn, or hawthorn, is almost as much a national emblem as the rose. The origin of the observance of a May-day festival appears to be lost in antiquity, but we know that the observance was much more widely spread in this country during the middle ages than it is now. In some remote villages, we are told, the May-pole still stands, but is never decorated nor made the centre of a gay throng of youths and maidens as of yore. There are still places, it is said, where the farmer's boy, rises yet a little earlier on May-day than on other mornings, and fastens to the cottage doors branches of hawthorn, claiming as a reward, when the inmates are astir, a slice of bread and cream.

It is possible that the alteration of the calendar from the old style to the new, which was made in England in the year 1752, has had something to do with the discontinuance of the May-day festival. A branch of white-thorn was the proper ornament to surmount the May-pole, and the crown of the May-queen was of the same flower. Since the new style was introduced, the first of May has been eleven, and is now twelve, days earlier than it used to be, and the consequence of this change (according to different writers on field botany) is that it is always very doubtful whether the May-bush will be in bloom on May-day. There is little doubt, however, that the celebration of May-day had declined to a great extent even before the alteration of the calendar, for, during the great Rebellion, the Parliament ordered that "all and singular May-poles be taken down."

The name "White-thorn" was, it is believed, given to the tree in contradistinction to "Black-thorn," which is a synonym for the sloe or wild plum, probably due to the blackness of its bark. The blackthorn blossoms early in the spring while the north-east wind is usually blowing, and thus gives rise to the name "Black-thorn winter." The white-thorn, on the contrary, as one of its names implies, is not usually in bloom until May, and often not until the month is well advanced. It is almost a harbinger of summer, and seems to be thus regarded by Shelley in these lines:—

"When mild winds shake the elder-brake,
Then the wandering herdsmen know
That the white-thorn soon will blow.
Wisdom, justice, love, and peace,
When they struggle to increase,
Are to us, as soft winds be
To shepherd boys—a prophecy."

There is a tradition that the crown of thorns which the Roman soldiers placed on the head of the Saviour was of hawthorn, and chosen by them in the same spirit of derision as prompted the use of the purple robe, because hawthorn was, with the Romans, an emblem of hope and happiness, and was the material used for the torch in their bridal processions. There is a superstition still current among some of the French peasants that the hawthorn bushes utter sighs and groans on the evening of Good Friday.

In recording these superstitions, we are wandering far away from what should properly come under the title of "Science Notes." The Rev. C. A. Johns, in his book

on the "Forest Trees of Britain," says, the blossoms of the hawthorn are rarely fully expanded until the second week in May, and adds in a foot-note that he has seen them in Devonshire on the 29th of April, and that, in 1846, hawthorn blossom was gathered in Cornwall on the 18th of that month. In Gilbert White's "Calendar of Nature," the earliest time recorded for the blossoming of the hawthorn is April 20th, and the latest, June 10th.

It only remains to say that these few remarks were suggested by the presence of hawthorn blossom gathered in Kent on April the 20th, the earliest date given by Gilbert White, and that the Devonshire hedges were thick with blossom on the 23rd of April last year.

Notes on Art.

THE LOAN COLLECTION OF PICTURES,
GUILDHALL.

(Second Notice.)

WE considered last week Gallery No. 1 of this most interesting Exhibition. The pictures in Galleries 2 and 3 may be divided, roughly, between three kinds of Art—or rather, the art of looking at nature, and painting from it, in three entirely different ways. These are the three:—the Dutch Schools, the Early English School, and that of the votaries of the great revival which is called Pre-Raphaelitism. We will consider the last first:—

Some thirty or forty years ago, an earnest band of young artists, led by John Millais and Holman Hunt, resolved to return to the teaching of the early Italians who had tried to paint reverently, all they saw in nature, and, as Raphael was the first to depart from exact imitation of nature, and over-faithfulness to her called themselves pre-Raphaelites.

Mr. Ruskin has said, "pre-Raphaelitism has but one principle, that of absolute uncompromising truth in all that it does, obtained by working everything, down to the most minute detail, from nature and from nature only; where imagination is necessarily trusted to by this School, it always endeavoured to conceive a fact as it really was likely to have happened rather than as it most prettily might have happened. Every pre-Raphaelite landscape background is painted in the open air, from the thing itself. Every pre-Raphaelite figure, however studied in expression, is a true portrait of some living person; every minute accessory is painted in the same manner. This is the main pre-Raphaelite principle."

Let us now look at No. 114, *Isabella*, or *Lorenzo and Isabella*, painted by John Millais at the age of nineteen, exhibited in the Royal Academy in 1849. He has taken a subject from Keats' lovely poem:—

"Fair Isabel, poor simple Isabel!
Lorenzo, a young palmer in love's eye!
They could not in the self-same mansion dwell
Without some stir of heart, some malady;
They could not sit at meals, but feel how well
It soothed each to be the other by."

Here we see them sitting at the simple family meal. Lorenzo is offering Isabel a plate with a half-cut

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)