

## Outside the Gates.

### FLOWERS OF THE SEASON.

#### CHAPTER V.

#### MAY.

By Mrs. C. CARMICHAEL STOPES.

In "this flowery month" many of the species that we have seen in April bloom still in lush luxuriance. No wonder that the May Queens of old were adorned with flowers instead of artificial ornaments, for flowers are the true wealth of the season. The "May Day," however, of our ancestors was on the old "First of May," equivalent to our May 12th. This must not be forgotten, for there were twelve more bright days to ripen and bring out the blooms so often recorded by poets. Perhaps the flower most essentially belonging to the month is the Hawthorn, which has even gained the month's name as its own. Its pretty little white, rose-like flowers, with red or black stamens, grow in clusters on the branches of a round shrub or small tree. In five years it is very abundant. I once saw a large Hawthorn in the meadows of Oxfordshire so covered with flowers that from a little distance I saw no leaves at all, and it seemed a bush of snow. There is a rustic proverb that when haws are abundant in September it is going to be a hard winter, as Nature provides the food for the birds. I have noted this for many years, and have not personally discovered any ratio between the fertility of the Hawthorn and the cold of the following winter. The flowers of "the May" have a sweet scent, but some people hold it unlucky to bring them into a house. The wood of the Hawthorn is very hard, and its fruit is considered an astringent and good for stopping bleeding. The leaf has a pleasant bitterness, especially when young. In woods, hedgerows, pasture lands, or river banks (the Hawthorn is not particular as to its habitat) this tree is beloved of lovers in the spring. The Scotch Rose is the variety of wild rose that flowers in this month, generally white, seldom pink, and without odour.

The Valerian rejoices in wet meadows and bogs, but does not scorn railway banks or hillsides. Its small, clustering flowers are of a deep pink, sometimes dark crimson. Its variety, or Cat's Valerian, has been called "All-heal," so many were its supposed virtues. Hooker says that its rootstock is a well-known antispasmodic, but you hardly find any of the wonderful old compounds of herbs that were supposed to cure *everything* that did not contain some valerian. It was supposed to be an antidote to poisons and to the plague, and it was used even in cottage cookery, among broths and pottage. It was popularly called Setwall, and an old rhyme recalls its virtues:—

"They that would have their heal  
Must put setwall in their kail."

The leaves also were supposed to cure ulcerous affections. Sweetest of sweet flowers that grow in shady places is the Lily of the Valley, the emblem of purity and modesty. Its fairy, bell-like florets have a delicious odour. Its seeds (when they are allowed to ripen) are deep red. It is not common, especially near large towns. Old Gerard calls it "the May Lily," and says that "it grows in great abundance upon Hampstead Heath, four miles from London; near Lee, in Essex; upon Bushey Heath, thirteen miles from London, and many other places." Would

we not all be glad to find it so abundant now? Gerard says that May Lilies are "hot and dry of complexion," and also tells us that the flowers distilled in wine are good against palsy and apoplexy; that they are strengthening to the memory and good for the eyes. A companion often to the "May Lily" is the Woodruff, with its whorls of pointed leaves, and small, funnel-shaped white flowers. These seem to have no smell in the woods; but if you tie a bunch and hang it upside down to dry it exhales a sweet fragrance. It was supposed to tend to heat and dryness, and used to be put into wine "to make a man merrie," as it was good for the heart and the liver.

The Honeysuckle generally begins its bloom in May, which lasts all through the summer. It grows in woods or creeps over shrubs and hedges, and produces its groups of funnel-shaped, lipped flowers in various tints from dark yellow to light cream, sometimes dashed with crimson and brown streaks. Its scent is very sweet, and comes out stronger in the twilight; hence it is romantically associated with lovers meeting under the evening star. The seeds were supposed to help difficulty in breathing; a syrup made of the flowers to be good for the lung, throat, and uvula; and the flowers, steeped in oil and set in the sun, to be good to anoint a body suffering from numbness.

The Columbine thrives in Yorkshire, in Ireland, and some other places, generally of a bluish tint when wild, but sometimes pink or brown. It used to be called Calverwort. A syrup was sometimes made for children of the flowers, but it was said by Linnæus to be highly dangerous.

A common plant of the hedges, called "Lords and Ladies" by country people, is sometimes called Wake Robin or Cuckoo Pint. In May its green sheath opens and displays a spike of brownish-red. In the autumn the naked stalk is crowded with orange and scarlet berries. Starcli made from the roots was used for stiffening ruffs. This, sometimes dried in the sun, powdered, and, after repeated washings, dressed and sold under the name of "Portland Sago." From this is also made the well-known Parisian cosmetic called "Cypress Powder." The berries are highly dangerous for children. The symptoms of poisoning by this plant are swelling of the tongue, constriction of the muscles of the throat, tremor, rigidity of the limbs, and sometimes convulsions. The stomach-pump or emetics should be promptly used and simple antidotes sought. The fresh juice of the leaves will sometimes blister a delicate skin. Yet it used to be recommended as an antidote against the plague.

A more wholesome plant is the Hedge Mustard; and its variety Garlic Mustard, Sauce-alone, or Jack by the Hedge, both belonging to the Cruciferae, as also are the Black Mustard and the White Mustard, also the Sinapis, which, though natives, are cultivated for the valuable condiment and medicinal plaster! Space fails to tell of the Bugle, the Comfrey (an old styptic), the young leaves of which are sometimes cooked and eaten yet; the Hawkweed, the Leopard's Bane, and many others, such as the Avens, Orchis, Toothwort, Tormentil, Campion, Ragged Robin, and Burnet.

May is a flowering month for trees also; the Oak is in male bloom, the Beech is in flower, as also the Common Maple, the Barberry, the Walnut, Laburnum, Horse Chestnut, Medlar, Mountain Ash, Elder, Mulberry, Wild Service Tree, &c.

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)