

## A WALK IN FEBRUARY.

“And lastly came cold February, sitting  
    In an old wagon, for he could not ride,  
Drawn by two Fishes for the season fitting,  
    Which through the flood before did softly slyde  
And swim away; yet had he by his side  
    His plough and harnesse fit to till the ground,  
And tooles to prune the trees, before the pride  
    Of hasting Prime did make them burgein round.”  
—*Spenser*.

OUR quotation reminds us that till the change of the calendar in 1752, “the year of the Lord in that part of Britain called England began on the 25th day of March.” February, therefore, was the closing month, as December is now, though the latter still bears the trace of its original position as the tenth month in its name, *decem*, ten, as November was the ninth, *novem*, and October the eighth. It is supposed that originally the Roman year consisted of ten months only, January and February being added later. The name of the latter is derived from the Roman festival of purification and expiation, *Februa*, which was celebrated this month, and Longfellow alludes to this in his *Poet’s Calendar*.

“I am lustration and the sea is mine.  
    I wash the sands and headlands with my tide;  
My brow is crowned with branches of the pine;  
    Before my chariot wheels the fishes glide,  
By me all things unclean are purified;  
    By me the souls of men washed white again.  
E’en the unlovely tombs of those who died  
    Without a dirge, I cleanse from every stain.”

Saxon names for this month were Sol-monat (sun-month), in allusion to the increasing light and heat, and Sprout kale, the kale or cabbage being an even more important plant in olden

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days than now, for, as Verstegan tells us, “by kale is meant the kel wurt, which we now call cole wurt, the greatest pot wurt in times long passed that our ancestors used; and the broth made therewith was thereof also called kele, for before we borrowed from the French the name of pottage and the name of herbe, the one in our own language was called kele and the other wurt; and, as this kele wurt, or pottage herbe, was the chief winter wurt for the sustenance of the husbandman, so was it the first herbe that in this month began to yield out wholesome young sprouts, and consequently gave thereunto the name of Sprout-kele. This herbe was not only of our old ancestors held to be very good, both for sustenance and for healthe, but the ancient Romans had also such an opinion thereof, that during the six hundred years that Rome was without Phisitians, the people used to plant great stores of these wurts, which they accounted both meat and medicine, for as they did eat the wurt for sustenance, so did they

drinke the water wherein it was boyled as a thing souveraigne in all kinds of sicknesse.” We read in the *Battle of Otterbourne*

“But there is neither bread not [sic] kale,  
To fend<sup>1</sup> my men and me,”

and the word “cabbage” is literally “headed cole,” or kale, the word kale being properly restricted to those members of the cabbage family which neither form compact heads, as in the ordinary Cabbage, or yield fleshy flowers, as Cauliflower, or Broccoli; but broadly speaking, kale is any species of cabbage, and by extension, as in the verse above quoted, any kind of soup, or even dinner as a whole, as we group both eatables and beverage under the name of “tea.”

The old saw exhorts February to

“fill the dyke  
Either with black or white;  
But if it be white  
It’s the better to like.”

for the white snow is thought by farmers to bring ever greater blessings than the rain, better crops may be expected after a top-dressing of snow. The inhabitants of Normandy have the proverb, “Fevrier qui donne neige, belle été nous pléige.”

“February fill-dyke” may sound puzzling to a dweller in the South of England, where a dyke, as in Holland, means a bank or mound or earth, but in the North the word retains its original

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meaning, and the ditches dug by farmers to drain their fields are everywhere known as dykes. Tennyson speaks of the fish in “the crystal dykes of Camelot” (*Geraint and Enid*).

In the French Republican calendar, the days between January 20th and February 18th were grouped under the name of Pluviose (rainy), and the succeeding month, February 19th to March 20th, was Ventose (windy). February, as January, must keep up its reputation for wintry weather, for

“All the months in the year  
Curse a fair Februeer,”

and

“If in February there be no rain  
It is neither good for hay nor grain.”

while

“The hind had as lief see his wife on the bier,  
As that Candlemas-day should be pleasant and clear,”

for

“If Candlemas be fair and clear  
There will be two winters in one year,”

or, as the Scots put it,

“If Candlemas day be dry and fair,  
The half o’ winter’s to come and mair;  
If Candlemas day be wet and foul,  
The half of winter’s gone at Yule.”

Sir Thomas Brown, in his *Vulgar Errors*, gives the equivalent Latin rhyme;

“Si sol splendescat Maria purificante  
Major erit glacies post festum quam fuit ante,”

and still another distich warns us,

“As far as the sun shines in on Candlemas Day,  
So far will the snow blow in afore May,”

On the Eve of Candlemas the winds contend for the mastery, with the result that

“Where the wind is on Candlemas Day,  
There it will stick to the end of May,”

unless the east wind is the victor; in that case, fortunately, it will only blow to the 2nd of May. We are told that as long as the birds sing before Candlemas, “as long will they cry after it,” and the French say, “A la Chandeleur toutes les bêtes sont en horreur.” On this day, we are told, the Bear turns over for another nap and the Badger peeps out of his hole. If the sun is shining, he draws back again, but if he finds snow, he rouses

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himself and comes out for a walk, for winter will then soon be over.

The said Badger, or Brock, the old Anglo-Saxon name (*Meles taxus* or *vulgaris*), is common on the Continent, but rarely seen in England. This, Mr. J. E. Harding tells us, is not because, as many people think, the animal is very scarce, if not actually extinct, for, as a matter of fact, “In many parts of the country the badger is still not at all uncommon, and in certain districts which might be named it is even on the increase, owing to the protection afforded it. The reason for its supposed scarcity arises from two causes, firstly, the nature of its haunts, which are generally in the deep recesses of large woods, fox-covers, and quarries; and secondly, the nature of its habits, which are shy and retiring, and chiefly nocturnal.” The peculiarity of the Badger is the interlocking of the lower jaw with the skull, which enables it to give a most

powerful grip, thus rendering the animal a formidable antagonist. Badger-baiting, or “drawing the badger,” was prohibited by Act of Parliament in 1850. In this sport (?) the animal, kept in a barrel for the purpose, was attacked by terriers, when it would fight fiercely till, overcome by superiority of numbers, it was dragged from its shelter, to which, however, it was at once restored, to rest and recover, ready for the next performance. Every lower-class public-house kept its badger, and the expression to “draw a badger,” and “badger” a person testify to the popularity of the sport, as the names Brockenhurst, Brockley, etc., recall the former presence of the animal in these localities.

The Badger is not the only hibernating animal who ventures forth this month. The Dormouse and Bat are seen; the Brimstone or Sulphur Butterfly, perhaps the Peacock or Tortoise-shell, sun themselves on mild days; the Drone-fly and Common House-fly are awake, and with them that foe of the careful housewife, the little Clothes Moth. Caterpillars, too, that have slept through the winter, rouse themselves and begin to feed. Snails and Slugs leave their winter haunts, the Field Cricket, Centipede, and Wood louse are awake, the Earthworms that through the frosty days lay curled up in their holes below-ground, are now active, Bees busy themselves in the open cups of the Crocus, the pretty little Lady-bird appears, the Spider hangs out her gossamer web, the Smooth Newt leaves its sleeping place, the Water Boatman balances himself upon the surface of the water, and towards the end of the month the ponds are noisy with the croak of Toad and

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Frog. If we are lucky, perhaps some would say unlucky, we may come across a Viper, curled up on some sunny rock. The Viper, or Adder (*Vipera* or *Pelias berus*) is less common than the Grass or Ringed Snake (*Tropedonotus natrix*) and may easily be distinguished by the row of black squares, set diagonally edge to edge, that runs down the centre of its back, whereas the Grass Snake is marked with irregular spots. The head, too, is a different shape, triangular in the Viper, and lacking the white patches on the neck that have given the Ringed Snake its name. The Viper is much smaller than the Ringed Snake, rarely exceeding a foot and a half in length, and is very timid. The name Adder is the Anglo-Saxon *nœdre*, *nœddre*, which written “an adder” by mistake for “a nadder,” gives the present title.

Toad-spawn is found in shallow ponds about a fortnight earlier than Frog-spawn, and whereas the eggs of a Frog are deposited in jelly-like masses which float on the surface of the water, those of a toad form a gelatinous string which is twisted among the water weeds. The little black yolks are arranged in couples, which gives the string the appearance of a necklace.

On St. Valentine’s Day, according to tradition, the birds choose their mates, the cocks displaying all the splendour of their new plumage to dazzle the ladies of their choice. The Chaffinch is gay in blue crest, rosy breast, and white-barred wings, the Starling chatters cheerfully in sheeny green and purple—the green-headed birds are native species, the purple and green heads are Starlings from Central Europe, and the all-purple-headed birds denote the Siberian Starling, an alien which is gradually establishing itself in Britain. Besides the notes of Chaffinch and Greenfinch, the song of the Goldfinch is now heard, the Marsh Titmouse gives his two harsh notes, the Yellow-hammer requests his “little-bit-of bread-and-no-cheese,” or, as a less known version has it, “kiss-me-quick-and-go-please”; the first note being repeated several times, the last, which is a little lower in pitch, is sounded more slowly. It is impossible to

reproduce the liquid notes of the Thrush, but the following prosaic version of his song will enable a tyro to recognise it at once:

Knee deep, knee deep, knee deep.  
Cheery du, cheery du, cheery du,  
White hat, white hat,  
Pretty Joey, pretty Joey.

Jackdaws and Rooks are busy among their old nests, spite of  
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Katharine Tynan Hinkson's *Gardener Sage*, who tells us that it is

“Upon the first of March  
The crow goes house-building  
In the elm and in the larch.  
And be it shine or snow,  
Though many winds carouse,  
That day the artful crow  
Begins to build his house.

But then the wonder's big!—  
*If Sunday fell that day,*  
*Nor straw, nor scraw, nor twig,*  
*Till Monday would he lay.*  
His black wings to his side,  
He'd drone upon his perch,  
Subdued and holy-eyed  
As though he were at church.”

Our own observation, however, fails to corroborate the old gardener's statement, at any rate, as far as English Rooks are concerned, probably his were Scottish Crows. The nest of the Rook (*Corvus frugileus*) is made of twigs most cunningly interlaced, lined with roots and grass, and balanced so perfectly among the branches that it will retain its place through the fiercest storm. The Rook may frequently be seen, at this time, tugging at a growing twig with its strong beak, and working it backwards and forwards, till it succeeds in detaching it. Meanwhile the mate sits at home to guard the nest, for the dusky builders will filch each other's material unscrupulously. The Jackdaw (*C. monedula*) is a smaller edition of the Rook, from which it may be known by the grey patch at the back of the head and neck. Jackdaws, like Rooks, are gregarious and nest in companies; rocky cliffs and buildings such as church belfries, ruined towers, and chimneys, are favourite sites. Sometimes, as in the last situation, twigs are dropped down, stick by stick, till they catch and rest securely, and on this foundation the nest is built, and lined with wool, hair, and feathers. The eggs, four to six in number, are pale greeny-blue, spotted with grey and brown. The Raven (*C. corax*) is the largest of the Crow family, but is now somewhat rare in Britain. It builds a solitary nest on cliff or tree, and if, as sometimes happens, the eggs are

chilled by rain or driving sleet, for nest-building often begins in January, the birds will repair to another haunt and build a second.

February's flower-list is similar to that of January, the flower  
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of the month being the Snowdrop, the Fair Maid of February, as our ancestors affectionately named it. Some say the title was suggested by its resemblance to the young girls, clad in white, who walked two and two in procession at the service of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin (February 2nd), others because it flowers about the time of that Festival, for, as an early Church Calendar tells us,

“The snowdrop in purest white arraie  
First rears her hedde on Candlemas daie.”

It is interesting to notice the change of position as the flower develops; the bud upright in line with the stem, but as soon as the blossom is expanded the head droops, suspended by a tiny flower-stalk. The reason for this, as for the same habit in the Daffodil and the closing of its petals by the daisy and other flowers, is to protect the pollen from cold and damp. The Colt's-foot (*Tussilago farfara*) and Lesser Celandine usually appear within a day or two of each other. The Colt's-foot takes its name from the shape of its leaves, which do not appear till the flowers are withered. At first sight the blossom looks rather like a small Dandelion, but it can readily be recognized by the bracts enveloping the stalk, whereas that of the Dandelion is smooth and bare; moreover, the flower of the Dandelion has no disc, while the Colt's-foot has both disc and ray florets; the latter, much smaller than the corresponding rays of the Dandelion, surrounding the disc like a frill. As soon as the flower is withered, and while the seeds are ripening, the head droops, but when the fluffy “clock” is ready to disperse its seeds with every wind, it is upreared once more. The scientific name is from the Latin *tussis*, a cough, the leaves having been employed in medicine from early ages.

Wordsworth's beloved “little, humble Celandine” (*Ranunculus [sic] ficaria*), the “Herald of a mighty band,” is the first of the Buttercups to open its burnished petals, and its tiny stars brighten every hedge-bank.

“On the moor, and in the wood,  
In the lane—there's not a place,  
Howsoever mean it be,  
But 'tis good enough for thee.”

The name of the genus is the Latin *ranunculus*, a little frog, most of the species being found in marshy situations; some, as the Water Crowfoots, actually flowering on the surface of the water, like miniature Water-lilies. All members of the family

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contain an acrid, sometimes poisonous juice, for which reason they are avoided by cattle.

Two interesting shrubs, the Spurge Laurel and Butcher's Broom, are now in flower. The Spurge Laurel (*Daphne laureola*) belongs to the same genus as the Daphne Mezereon and Japonica of our gardens, and like the Daphne Mezereon, is occasionally found wild in woods. It

is a low shrub, about two feet high, with erect smooth stems, each bearing a bunch of evergreen leaves at the summit. The green flowers hang in clusters, and have a pleasant scent in mild weather; they are succeeded by black ovoid berries.

The Butcher's Broom (*Ruscus aculeatus*) is so called because it was formerly used by butchers for sweeping their blocks; it is the only British species. Its appearance is peculiar, as the flower appears to grow out of the centre of the leaf; really what looks like a leaf is a flattened branch, (botanically known as a cladode) and this terminates in a sharp spine. The real leaves are minute scales enclosing the branches, they are deciduous. The tiny greenish-white flowers are succeeded by scarlet berries about the size of a marble; other names for the plant are Knee-holly, and Jew's or Shepherd's-myrtle. It is found in woods in the South of England, and like the Spurge laurel, is uncommon.

The Sallow now opens its broad scaly buds, revealing a glimpse of the soft "pussy" fur that will develop later into a golden "palm," the Holly and Spindle tree drop their dead leaves, and the Honeysuckle sprouts in the hedges. Yew, Alder, and Birch ripen their catkins, and the Elder breaks into leaf. In the garden the Crocus, the beloved friend of Smilax, metamorphosed by the gods into a flower, spreads purple, white, or golden petals to the sunshine, and the Hepatica

"opens her wrap, and smiling, shows  
Her dainty lavender gown.

The children laugh as they pick the flowers,  
And the happy robins sing;  
For, blooming in chill and leafless bowers.  
Hepatica means the spring."

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<sup>1</sup> Support, maintain.