

A WALK IN MARCH.

“First, sturdy March, with brows full sternly bent
And armed strongly, rode upon a Ram,
The same which over Hellespontus swam;
Yet in his hand a spade he also hent,
And in a bag all sorts of seeds ysame,
Which on the earth he strowed as he went.”
(*Spenser*).

“MARCH many weathers,” “comes in like a lion and goes out like a lamb,” though sometimes the process is reversed and as the Scotch proverb warns us, “The wast blast comes on the borrowing days.” These borrowing or borrowed days are the last three of the month, which tradition tells us were borrowed from April. A tradition which is not peculiar to Britain, for we find a similar belief in France and Spain, and in every case the explanation, though it varies slightly in detail, has the same foundation—the attempt of the month to kill certain beasts. In the Spanish version a shepherd promised a lamb to March if March, in return, would give fine weather for the flock. The contract was honourably kept by March, but when he requested his lamb towards the end of the month the shepherd, whose flock were in prime condition, and who reflected that only three days remained, refused to pay his debt. Said March, in just indignation, “You won’t give me my rights, then know this, that in the three days I have left, and in three more that my gossip April will lend me, all your sheep shall die,” and this threat, during the terrible six days that followed, was fulfilled. In France a rich man boasted on the 30th of the month:

“J’ai passé Mars, et Marsillon
Sans qu’il m’en ai coûté ni vache ni taurillon.”

March, overhearing, suggested to April

“Avril, prête m’en un (jour) prête m’en deux prête m’en trois,
Et un que j’ai ça fera quatre, et nous meterons tout son bétail aux abois”

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while the *Complaynt of Scotland* gives the British version

“March said to Aprill,
I see three hogs¹ upon a hill;
And if you’ll lend me dayes three,
I’ll be bound to gar them dee:
The first it sal be wind and weet;
The next it sal be snow and sleet;
The third it sal be sic a freeze
Sal gar the birds stick to the trees.
But when the borrowed days were gane,

The three silly hogs came hirplin hame.”

“Silly,” presumably, being either the later equivalent of the old “seely” happy, fortunate, or “innocent, guileless;” as Suffolk was named “silly Suffolk” in reference to the piety of its inhabitants witnessed by the number of the churches in the county, and in the sense in which Matthew Arnold employs it in *Thyrsis*, who

“Could not keep ...
Here with the shepherds and the silly sheep,”

Next to the cawing of the rooks in the Elms and Sycamores, what more distinctive sign of Spring than the same silly Sheep with their long-legged curly-coated lambkins besides them? The white fleeces dotted over the green sward under the bright blue sky, similarly dotted with soft cumulus clouds, make a perfect presentment of Springtide, especially a few weeks later when Hawthorn and Crab-apple expand their snowy petals among the fresh green of the hedgerow, for

“Spring goeth all in white,
Clad in milk-white may:
In fleecy flocks of light
O’er heaven the white clouds stray:
White butterflies in the air;
White daisies prank the ground:
The cherry and hoary pear
Scatter their snows around.”

At present, however, we have barely said good-bye to the winter snows, and the keen winds of March effectually frustrate too early blossoming, while, at the same time, they dry and pulverize the soil, fitting it for the reception of those seeds

“Which on the earth he strowed as he went.”

That is why “A peck of March dust is worth a king’s ransom,” and “A March without water dowers the hind’s daughter,” but thunder in March brings sorrow, and, as the *Book of Knowledge* informs us “signifieth that same year great winds, plenty of corn and debate among people.”

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In hedgerow and garden, birds are busy over their nests. The Thrush and Blackbird, both early builders, place a protecting layer of mud inside the outer wall. In the case of the Thrush this mud is mixed with moss, rotten wood, etc., and spread into a smooth lining; the Blackbird covers the mud with a second lining of very fine grass and horsehair. Both birds bring up two, or even three, broods a year, and the older thrushes will sometimes assist in the feeding of the younger family. The pretty blue-green eggs of the Hedge-sparrow give their own name to the tint—hedge sparrow blue. The little bird (*Accentor modularis*) is no relation to the House-

sparrow, which it resembles in colouring, it is a member of the Warbler family, which includes the Blackcap, Whitethroat, Garden, Reed, and Sedge Warblers, all insect-eating birds, with slender bills and feet. Besides the difference in beak and figure the Hedge-sparrow may be distinguished from its namesake by its curious little habit of suddenly shaking out its wings, hence its country name of "Shuffle-wing."

Other nest-builders just now are the Robin, Magpie, and Wild Duck. The Magpie (*Pica rustica*) is easily recognised by his piebald plumage and long black tail. No good comes to him who takes a Magpie's nest, and the bird itself is a bird of evil omen connected with witches and, at any rate in Sweden, under the patronage of the very Devil himself. Hence no Magpie may be killed in Sweden, North Germany, or Brittany, except in Thuringia² during the month of March, and in Sweden during the twelve days of Christmas. Our English Tusser advises us in March to

"Kill crow, pie, and cadow, rook, buzzard and raven,
Or else go desire them to seek a new haven."

(A cadow or caddow is a chough or jackdaw.)

To see a solitary Magpie, Piet or Pyot, as it is variously called, is a sure sign of misfortune, but to see two or more may be quite another matter. A North Country rhyme tells [sic] us

"One is sorrow, two is mirth,
Three a wedding, four a birth,
Five heaven, six hell,
Seven the deil's ain sel."

or

"Five shows you will shortly be in a great company."

or as I learnt it in childhood

"Five's the sign of silver, six the sign of gold,
Seven's the sign of something dreadful
That never shall be told."

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evidently some covert allusion to the Satanic power aforesaid. In Britain, where the Magpie is held in check by the game-keepers, its nest is usually placed on a high tree in the woods, but in other countries bushes and trees near dwellings are frequently selected, nests have been found on the poles in front of a mandarin's house and in the crown of a cocoa-nut palm. The nest is ingeniously woven of twigs and mud, and lined with fine roots. It is roofed with a dome of sticks, a small hole being left in the side for the bird to go in and out, and the entire structure is protected by sharp thorns.

Now the Pheasant crows in the woods, fluffy ducklings and goslings appear in the farm-yards, the Field-fare and other winter visitors return to the Continent, and the Wheatear and Wryneck arrive; perhaps, too, the earliest Martin.

The Wheat-ear (*Saxiola œnathe*) [sic] is a frequenter of open ground—moors, sheep-farms, ploughed fields, and coast are his favourite haunts; a heap of stones, a rabbit hole, or a loose heap of dried peats the chosen sites for nests. The Wheat-ear may readily be identified by the white tail coverts and under parts, and the black streak from ear to beak, “some bird blackened its eye for going away,” say the boys. His song is sweet but slight, consisting only of a few notes, which are usually uttered while flying.

The Wryneck (*lyngidæ torquilla*) is known as the Cuckoo’s mate, from the time of his appearance, shortly before that bird, and the Snake-bird from its curious habit of elongating its neck, spreading out the feathers of its head and hissing vigorously when an intruder approaches its nest, at the same time it darts its tongue in and out in a snake-like manner. Only four species are known, of which one inhabits Europe and Asia, and the other three are confined to Africa. It is thought that the European species (*I. torquilla*) winters in Northern Africa, its range extending to Abyssinia on the east and Senegambia on the west. Its eggs are laid on the soft wood at the bottom of a hole in a tree, its flexible tongue is specially suitable for catching ants, its chief food.

Besides Ants, the Humble-bees are awake, and various caterpillars may be found, especially those of the Silver-washed Fritillary, the large White Butterfly, the Broad-bordered Underwing, and the Tiger Moth, the latter furry creature familiar to all as the Woolly Bear. Now the Ringed or Grass Snake appears,

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the Mole throws up little heaps of soil, Squirrels run nimbly from bough to bough, the Hedgehog hunts on warm evenings, while

“the cautious fish

That all the wintry months have hid themselves
Deep in the weedy streams, to the surface rise,
Wooed by the balmy influence of the sun,
In keen pursuit of various gnats and flies
That hover o’er the surface.”

The Water Vole or Rat (*Arvicola amphibius*) swims quickly across the ditch to the snug nest in the bank where his mate and babies lie. The Otter, too, in his den or “holt” near the water, beneath the roots of an overhanging tree or in a rocky cleft, has a cosy nest of grass and herbage in which the young, born in March or April, are carefully guarded by the mother. The Otter (*Lutra vulgaris*) a nocturnal, non-hibernating animal, belongs to the same family as the Badger and Weasel. It is rapidly being exterminated on account of its fish-eating habits. Izaak Walton, after the description of an Otter hunt, tells us that the “fish-beast will walk upon land sometimes five or six, or ten miles in a night,” that “he devours much fish, and kills and spoils many more,” and that “his skin is worth ten shillings to make gloves.” The beautiful fur, which now-a-days is chiefly used for trimmings, is of fine quality, the undergrowth soft and of a greyish colour tipped with brown, interspersed with long thick hairs of a rich chestnut, while

the underparts of the body are white. The ears are small, the feet both webbed and clawed, and the nostrils so formed that they may be closed when the creature dives. As a water animal the Otter was reckoned a fish, and its flesh, which is said to be very palatable, was allowed on fast days.

Under the increasing warmth of the sunshine the Alder, Maple, Birch, and Lime are rapidly expanding their leaves. Horse Chestnut buds are swelling; the Elm is covered with tiny pink blossoms; the Wych or Witch Elm, sometimes called the Wych Hazel (*Ulmus montana*) is also in flower; and the various Poplars hang out their catkins, those of the Black Poplar (*Populus nigra*) much resembling early red caterpillars as they lie on the ground after a high wind. The slender leaf-stalk of the Aspen (*P. tremula*) in conjunction with the width of the leaf, causes the constant quivering motion, alluded to in its scientific name, and accounted for in popular fancy by the idea that the wood of the Cross was made from this tree, but a less well-known legend [p 22]

is as follows:—“At the awful hour of the Passion, from the loftiest tree to the lowliest flower all felt a sudden thrill, and trembling bowed their heads—all excepting the proud and obdurate Aspen, which said, ‘Why should we weep and tremble? we trees and plants and flowers are pure, and never sinned!’ Ere it ceased to speak, an involuntary trembling seized its every leaf, and the word went forth that it should never cease, but tremble on to the day of judgement.”

The blossoms of the Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*) are something like those of the Hawthorn, though larger and not so cup-shaped; they are, however, easily distinguished from these inasmuch as with the Blackthorn the flowers appear before the tree is in leaf. The name black refers to the colour of the bark as distinct from that of the lighter Whitehorn or Hawthorn. The Wood Anemone, Violet, Daffodil, Marsh Marigold, Ground Ivy, Lesser Periwinkle, Yellow Star of Bethlehem, Ivy-leaved Speedwell, Wood Spurge, Golden Saxifrage, also the Alternate-leaved Saxifrage, Hairy Bitter Cress, and the little Field Woodrush swell our flower list, and among local plants are the Spring Snowflake (*Leucojum vernum*)—Dorsetshire; Bristol Rock Cress (*Arabis stricta*)—Bristol and Cheddar; Yellow Alpine Whitlow Grass (*Draba aizoides*)—rocks by Pennard Castle, near Swansea: Mistletoe, in the South of England; and the rare Rock Hutchinsia (*Hutchinsia petræa*) named after Miss Hutchins, an Irish botanist, on limestone rocks, chiefly in Western counties.

The Wood Anemone (*Anemone nemorosa*) takes its name from the Greek ἀνεμος wind, it is said because of the exposed situations in which it grows, though legend speaks of the favourite nymph of Chloris, beloved by Zephyr, and metamorphosed into the flower that bears her name. There are two versions of the story, in both Zephyr is the beloved of Anemone, but in one he abandons her to his brother Boreas, “who unable to win her love, blights by the rude roughness of his embrace her but half-unfolded charms.” Still another old legend tells us that the flower was raised by Venus from the blood of Adonis, and yet another, that as the mourning goddess wandered through the woodlands, Zephyr, pitying her distress, changed her tears into flowers—

“Wind flowers, we since these blossoms call,
So very fair are they,
Tear-drop from Venus’ eye let fall,
Our wood anemone.”

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The Germans name the flower Windröschen, little wind rose, and the Dutch, Paschbloem, Easter flower. Our own Pasque flower (*Anemone pulsatilla*) is a rare species of Anemone with lilac blossoms, growing on high pasture lands. Two other species, the Yellow Anemone (*A. ranunculoides*) and the blue Apennine Anemone (*A. apennina*) are sometimes found, but only as escapes from cultivation. Anemones possess no petals, the large coloured sepals forming the flower, and beneath the flower are three leafy bracts. The plant, having a trifoliate leaf, is a symbol of the Holy Trinity, and known as Herba Trinitatis; it is also a fairy flower, and the purple markings ascribed to fairy fingers, while at night and during bad weather the tiny elf is said to nestle cosily in the bell-shaped tent. An old superstition [sic] recommends the preservation of the first Anemone seen that year as a charm against disease, for which reason

“The first spring-blown anemone
She in his doublet wove,
To keep him safe from pestilence,
Wherever he should rove.”

The scarlet Anemone, known as the Blood Drops of Christ, and one of the glories of Palestine in Spring, is said to have grown at the foot of the Cross, hence it was dyed in the sacred Blood.

The Violet (*Viola odorata*) is the flower of both love and death. Milton tells us that in Adam and Eve’s Bower in Paradise

“under foot the violet,
Crocus and hyacinth with rich inlay
Broidered the ground, more coloured than with stone
Of costliest emblem.”³

while for the hearse of Lycidas he requests “the glowing violet.” Spenser gives “the violet blue” as one of the blossoms forming “the bridegroom’s posie,” and Shakespeare’s Marina brings violets to hang on her nurse’s grave (*Pericles, Act IV., Sc. 1.*) while who can forget poor Ophelia’s touching reference (*Hamlet Act IV. Sc. 5*). Both Greeks and Romans held the plant in high esteem, Mohammed considered that it excelled all other flowers; among Norsemen it was the flower of Tyr, the god of war, and it was the favourite emblem of both Frederick I. of Germany, and of Napoleon, who was known to his adherents as Pere de

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Violette, the pass-word being “Aimez-vous la violette?” and the answer “Eh, bien.” Pliny recommends a garland of violets as a preventive and cure for headache, and they are still employed in medicine and confectionery.

The Daffodil (*Narcissus pseudo-narcissus*) belongs, like the Snowdrop, to the Amaryllis family. The scientific name is from the Greek νάρκη, torpor, in allusion to the narcotic qualities of the plant, which, according to Homer, “delights heaven and earth by its beauty, yet at the

same time it produces stupidity, madness, and even death." Like the Anemone and Crocus, it has a legendary explanation of its name in the story of a fair Bœotian youth whom [sic] Nemesis caused to fall in love with his own reflection, on which, gazing, he fell in the water and was drowned. It is unknown which particular species the classical writers intended, or which exactly was the flower which Prosperina let "fall

From Dis's wagon,"

but "daffodil" is the Greek ἀσφοδελος, asphodel, corrupted into affodil, daffodil, daffadowndilly, etc., as in the children's rhyme

"Daffadowndilly has come to town."

Lent Lily is another popular name, and in France the flower is known as Jeanette jaune, yellow Jenny, and Narcisse des prés. Like the Violet, the Daffodil is a funereal flower, and Milton bids

"daffodillies fill their cups with tears
To strew the laureate hearse where Lycid lies,"

and Herrick promises

"as we sing thy dirge, we will
The daffodil
And other flowers lay upon
The altar of our love, thy stone."

The Marsh Marigold (*Caltha palustris*) Shakespeare's "winking Mary buds," is so called from the original Marigold (*Calendula officinalis*) Mary's gold, because that flower is in bloom at the various festivals of the Blessed Virgin, who is said to have worn it on her breast. The botanical name is from the Greek κάλαθος a cup, in allusion to the shape of the blossom which, like that of the Anemone, is without petals, the golden cups being formed by the brightly coloured sepals. Other names are May blob, Goul, Goulan, Water-dragon, Horse-blob, etc., [sic] In Germany it is the Dotterblume, yolk of egg flower; in Italy Fiorrancio, orange coloured flower; in Holland Goudbloem, gold flower; in Spain, Yerba centella; in France, Caltha des marais, marsh

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caltha or cup; while it is the Cowslip of the United States. It is said that if the Marsh Marigold has not opened its flowers by seven o'clock in the morning rain or thunder may be expected. The green unopened buds are sometimes used as a substitute for capers.

The Ground Ivy (*Nepeta glechoma*) is abundant in every hedgerow, and is thus described by Bishop Mant

"And there upon the sod below

Ground Ivy's purple blossoms show,
Like helmet of Crusader knight,
Its anther's cross-like form of white."

The plant, which belongs to the same genus as the Catmint, has a strong aromatic odour, and was formerly used instead of hops, hence its old name of Ale-hoof and Tun-hoof, probably from Anglo-Saxon *hege*, a hedge, and *hofs*, ivy [sic]

The Lesser Periwinkle (*Vinca minor*) has no connection with the well-known shell-fish, the name being derived from the Latin *vincio*, to bind, from the long trailing stems. The Greater Periwinkle (*V. major*) is a naturalized species.

The Golden Saxifrage (*Chrysosplenium oppositifolium*) is a small plant from two to six inches in height, with yellowish green flowers in flat-topped clusters. It, like the Alternate-leaved Golden Saxifrage (*C. alternifolium*) grows in damp situations; the different arrangement of the leaves, opposite in one, alternate in the other, will serve to distinguish the species. Another humble plant is the Hairy Bitter Cress (*Cardamine hirsuta*) whose tiny white flowers are common everywhere, it varies from six to eighteen inches, and may be known by its long seed-pods, which curl up and scatter the seeds to a considerable distance. The little Field Woodrush (*Juncoides campestre*) is also known as Good Friday Grass and Chimney Sweeps, the bunches of tiny brown and black flowers being reminiscent of a sweep's brush; the leaves are narrow and hairy. One would fain linger among the rarer plants, but like the silly hogs must hirple hame, only pausing a moment to admire in our own or some neighbour's garden

"So delicate, so airy,
The almond on the tree,
Pink flowers that some good fairy
Has made for you and me.

A little cloud of roses.
All in a world of grey,
The almond flower uncloses,
Upon the wild March day."

¹ Young sheep.

² Now Land Thuringen.

³ He probably took his choice of flowers from Homer's *Iliad*, Book XIV

"Thick new-born violets a soft carpet spread,
And clustering lotus swell'd the rising bed,
And sudden violets the turf bestrow,
And flamy crocus made the mountain glow."