

SHANKS-NAIGIE.

“O, mickle is the powerful grace that lies
In herbs, plants, stones, and their true qualities.”
—*Shakespeare.*



SOME say that the earth gives an herb for every ill that flesh is heir to, but that the treatment and application is to a great extent a sealed art. The herbalist who walks the shires on foot, plucking the stems and flowers, and digging the rootlets of wayside weeds, believes that this is an unconfuted fact. No man knows the countryside better, from a botanical point of view, than does this collector of herbs. Few can discourse with deeper earnestness on the virtues of the flowers of the field. He knows little of bird-life outside the fact that some of them feed on groundsel. When walking, bent in body and hands full of hemlock and dandelion, he often starts a company of finches by the roadway, and presently observes a long strip of groundsel running by the base of the feal dyke. This herb he formerly sold as a remedy against chickenpox, but in modern times the town's folk seem to be somewhat suspicious of its virtues, and prefer the shop-prescriptions. Woodruff and ash-bark essence, tones the disordered stomach, while woodbine works a certain cure on the liver when sluggish and feeble. It is well known that the juice of the dandelion is good for the blood, but it is also a help in many external troubles. The herbalist will carry marsh-mallows home for his patients vexed by gravel disorders, and the pimpernel for restoring impaired eyesight and such delicate purposes.

Long ago dropsy was said to give way under the influence of the foxglove cure, but the herbalist affirms that the proper manipulation of the plant was only known to a few. Many of our older matrons still apply hemlock poultices to stiff joints and rheumatic portions of the human body. In such cases as influenza and diseases of the lungs great benefit may be gained from the common coltsfoot weed. Those facts I learned from this wanderer, this searcher after the medicinal properties of vegetation.

The herb-gatherer is more than a mere collector of plants for financial gain. How much of tradition and legend can be traced backwards from the old man searching the footpaths and byeways? How much of the modern physician's art dates from a worm-eaten herbal, that can only be found now in some cottage remote from civilization? But medicine goes beyond the issue of that herbal, and the botanist, riding his shanks-naigie through the countrysides, is but a remnant of an older reign of things. What of the old lady's lotion as an eyecure, the old gardener's secret ointment for cuts and bruises, and the schoolboy's dockleaves rubbed on the blisters from a stinging nettle? That is older than herbalist and herbal. One thinks of goat's milk and wine, saffron, rosewater and fine herbs, when the renowned spring—down the scaur—exactly thirteen paces from the kirk-door, was as the pool of Siloam. The sages, seers, and rulers of the middle ages possessed wonderful knowledge, and judging them as they stand afar off, we confess to their comparatively deep understanding. There was no lack of imaginative genius, while the penetrative vision was intensely acute. Yet in our modern day we shun them if we could; we despise the men who struggled with things and thoughts in primitive times. We even distrust the weed-gatherer to-day. Yet we know not why. Granted he may in some instances be wrong in his contentions regarding the curative properties of his favourite flowers, yet we should do him the justice that he is honest in his intentions.

In one of his antique books on herbs there is this romantic myth: "Pluck up lettuce with the left hand before the sunrising and lay it under the covering of a sick man's bed, he not knowing thereof, to cause him to sleep." But the herbalist of to-day does not give credence to the old world adage. His faith is pinned to modern science, and he worships the human frame as the very groundwork of his studies.

His predecessors had no books to guide them, no newspaper jottings to cut and present in fresher robes, no halls wherein they might sit and listen to the wisdom of the hour. Their sole reliance was self, and their individual sympathies were drawn out towards the weeds and grasses. They culled their lessons by the ditch-side and upon the hill-face—alone. They looked for no reward save the cure of human disease and the heart-healing that was their own.

We do not accord the herbalist the credit due unto his name. Ask a gamekeeper, a farmer, a forester, a gardener, or any toiler in

the fields, about the flora of their districts, and it will be found the knowledge is not in them. The farmer will likely say his grandmother had a queer notion of gathering some herb by the burnside for some ideal remedy, but he forgets the name of the flower and the ailment too. The gardener sees the kine plucking the alder leaves, and he eats the hawthorn in a disinterested fashion himself. The haymakers suck the lower portions of the grasses, and the reapers nibble at the wheat-stems. Yet there is no thought flashing through the brain that the act is beneficial even in the smallest degree. The man who passes down the fields, climbing the palings and peering into the corners of the woods, bent on herb-gathering, draws a handful of sorrel leaves, and, chewing them, realises the medicinal value instantly. There is thought in the latter—the brain is idle in the former. Many a rural dweller would imagine it a form of insanity to speak of the disused lime-kiln being the nursery of a weed that a city pharmacist would gloat over. A lime-kiln is simply a vast heap of stones built into the hill-side but the weeds on the mound and the ferns in the riven walls have no special attraction to the ploughman. If you reach his level and conjecture why a lime-kiln should be placed in such a desolate region, far from quarry and railway, his brain immediately acts. There has been labour involved, carts have gone down the slope, men have sat at dinner-time to eat their bread and bannocks and drink their flaskfuls of milk. There has been human life once—human hands—wages earned. This grasp of the subject comes readily to the labourer. The ploughman uses shanks-naigie more than any individual in the shires, and yet, generally speaking, he sees less of actual beauty than the weaver on a brief rural holiday. Strange although it seems, I can point to men of outstanding ability as rearers of stock, contractors, and the like, who have spent sixty years outside village, town, and city, yet who would decline to take any interest in a beautiful bud fallen from an over-hanging branch. Their world is an iron-bound one—stern and real and all-important. They don't walk like the herbalist up the ditch-sides and through the woods. Life cannot be wasted by such frivolous strolls and country walks. They rush down the turnpikes, from farm to farm to markets and trysts, with a golden image seen dimly in the distant haze. The herbalist need not tell them that licorice-root chewed, will relieve their heart-burn. Perhaps they would try its effect with a stoical distrust. If they do, it is taken merely to enable

them to get away from an irritating trouble and allow their minds to grapple more freely with the problems of commerce. There is no halting, no considering, no analysing of the herb with hopes of future relief to themselves and others. It is no matter to them whether sages praised almonds, figs, horehound, ivy, lavender, or apples. Custom furnishes their tables, and they regulate their stomachs—not from Nature, but from the code written in the latest work on culinary art. Many people keep an apple and a biscuit in their pockets when out for a lengthened time. It is the ordinary thing to do. Apples are easily thrown in the pocket with a biscuit, and if they are not needed they can be given to a herd-boy. Few stop to reason the matter out like the herbalist. They know that existence is based on passing a certain amount of nourishing food into the body, and they have heard that apples are a good lunch, but they are densely ignorant of the craving wants of muscular life, or the balms spread over the surface of the earth. They might believe you, but as readily not, that astringent, sourish pippins will cool an over-heated stomach. They simply devour them because they are hungry, and when hunger is upon them apples are as good as anything else.

The majority of Scotsmen do not value leeks, lettuce, watercress, mushrooms, and other growths, as they might with advantage to bodily health. There is much more in vegetarianism than people imagine. It is not considered on its merits—indeed, it is the want of this consideration that makes us a highly carnivorous nation. Look on the bright side of nature, where the sun shines. Renew the blood with a freshness from the juice of the lettuce. Find sound sleep under the influence of the tonic, and keep the mind open in the broad acres of the shires. Worry kills the internal machinery, damages the brain, and wrecks the nervous system. It kills thousands, but work cannot slay. The herbalist strives hard five-and-a-half days a week to earn a living: the other portions of the week are free and given over to contemplation on his shanks-naigie. The healing balm of his leisure hours covers the sores and cuts of a week's toil. Yet when he dismounts his nag he will have done more actual, lasting service to his kind than many a man who later will have honours cut upon his tombstone. He lives a life of pleasure, and works every waking moment of his existence. He is not killed by worry, hates, jealousies, and fears. Work only chisels out its years upon his brow to mark the time breathes.

Strolling weekly through the fields, he lives a life of health. The bloom of his cheek is vigorous, painted by nature with the blood-tints of sturdy manhood. It is over a score of years since I saw this man, but he is as present to me now as he was when I conversed with him by the roadside. I can walk down a lane, sit down at the dyke-side, and write its life-history. Twenty years will make no difference. In my sketches I have rewritten what I can rewrite to-day. A moving figure, a bairn paddling in the burn, a beggar, a landscape—all and everything I have seen comes to me fresh and fair as on the day I looked at it. I have no memory, either. I would forget to buy a bootlace, but I see that old weed-gatherer that gave me the notes on medicinal flowers. I loved the flowers then, and I do so still, but no matter how much I write about them, I feel I have failed to paint the primrose in ink. That is it! A primrose is soft yellow, clear as the outward rays of early morn. Ink is dark, and is so patent in its realness. A flower sways on its stalk, but it will not bend although painted in oils. The sun forms an oasis of beauty round the mayflower, and there is the stamp of originality instantly. I look upon it and it wastes its loveliness again and again, but I cannot say in earthly language where the loveliness exists. It blooms there as I repass, but in a different mood, for the hour is when the sun is sinking. There is an inexpressible delicacy about the flowers that leaves much to be written or painted. Write a year, and it will remain unsaid. Paint a lifetime, and the feebleness of the representation will be in the signature, if not on the broader canvas. It is undeniable. Man cannot move the heavens, nor find out the magic secret of earth. There is so much—the space is so wide—it is boundless on either side, beneath and above. The whole universe, working diligently from the hour of birth until death, would not record the simple outline of one field. Thus it is I write and write, and must too, for the spirit moves me, and with my love-pen scroll petals only—seeds merely—in the vast plain. I have birds and beasts and human beings moving before me. My mind is fixed upon a countryside, and I see in the shadow of my hand, under the lamp-light, the lovely insects on the grass-stems, the swallows high in the clear noon-sky, the rooks and the heron by the wood. I see them all and many more, and could write on and on until the shadows ceased their march and the morning streaks again cut up the landscape in light. My hero the herb-gatherer I see moving

over the further hill, a dim mark upon the distant grass-lands. I can call him back to life and speak with him again, but he will not answer. The notes I got then are the only items he will favour me with, but still I know his gait, his face, the garments he wore, and the man's individuality. He is before me until I drop this sheet upon the floor to dry. When it floats and settles, my mind leaves the herbalist whom the boys nicknamed "Shanks-naigie." My mind draws a screen between, and looks again upon that may-flower in the ditch.

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