

CHAPTER XXIII

ON FLOWERS IN ENGLISH POETRY

LAST year I gave a lecture upon the English poetry of trees, and promised afterwards a lecture upon the poetry of flowers. The subjects are, of course, quite distinct. Although the word "flower" is sometimes loosely used in English prose to signify "plant," I am using it only in the signification of "blossom," which is the right meaning.

You probably know that poems upon this subject exist in every literature of the world—even in the oral, or unwritten, songs of barbarous peoples, and that it is a very large subject. In English alone the poetical literature of flowers would form an immense book. We cannot hope to cover the whole topic; and that will be of no use. We shall only attempt to study selections from the most beautiful poems about flowers; and, in doing this, I think we shall find it difficult to arrange the subject according to Western, not according to Eastern, ways. For the flowers which are loved in the West and in the East are not the same,—nor are they admired or celebrated for exactly the same reasons, nor are they associated with the same class of aesthetic ideas. Moreover, it may be said, in a general way, that in the East the natural or wild flowers are commonly admired by poets rather than the artificial variety—notwithstanding some exceptions. In Western countries, and especially in England, the flowers described by poets have been for the most part garden-flowers,—artificial flowers. Again there are exceptions here, but I think we can state with tolerable accuracy, that the English poetry of wild flowers is nearly all modern—belongs to the period of the nature sentiment in poetry, which began with Thomson. Before Thomson

there was some sentiment on the subject, but it was not representative of any general feeling. One thing more, I hope that you will not think the interest in artificial flowers more really aesthetic than that in wild flowers. In this case we know through the science of botany that wild flowers are incomparably more interesting than cultivated flowers. The modern tendency to prefer the wild flower as a poetical subject is a current tendency. The cultivated flower, however beautiful it may seem, is really a kind of monster;—and the proof is that cultivated flowers very quickly return to the state of wild flowers unless they are constantly cared for by the gardener.

According to Western ideas the rose would be first in rank among poetical flower subjects—and this preference England shares with India and with Persia as well as with the rest of Europe. Perhaps we may say that the lily ranks next to the rose in poetry—a fact partially explained by the religious association of the flower. It has almost as much symbolic value in the West as the lotus in the East—almost, but not altogether. The third place we should give to the violet. Taking these three flowers first, we will find much interest in matters about them in relation to Western idealism.

And not only in relation to poetry proper, but to aesthetic ideas in general. For example you know that in all countries it is a custom to name girls after beautiful things. Sometimes the beauty expressed in a name is only physical; but more generally it is moral;—and I think that in Europe, as well as in Japan, most of the aesthetic names given to women were originally given for moral rather than aesthetic reasons. With the passing of time the aesthetic signification of a name became more obvious than the moral one; but I think that the history of aesthetic names in the East and West is very much the same. Flowers signify virtues as well as colours and perfume. The lily has long been an emblem of purity and innocence; the violet an emblem of modesty; the sun flower an emblem of loving fidelity. The moral significations are meant and a large number of these

significations certainly appear in the flower names given to English girls, as well as in the similar use of certain plant names.

But all names are not so easily explained. The use of the flower name Rose is considerably older than existing English moral symbolism. We can trace it back to the old Greek civilization, when it meant only the Rosy-cheek. Also the female name Violet is very deceiving. The meaning appears so obvious to-day!—yet, curiously enough, before Christianity the violet flower was sacred to the Scandinavian God Týr,—and was placed in the hands of the bride upon her marriage table, for reasons having nothing to do with timid modesty. So we must not jump at conclusions about the meaning of flowers as symbols, without carefully looking at the history of each. Suffice it to say that in our own time the signification of flower names is both moral and aesthetic—whatever it may have been in times past.

And now we shall begin with the literature of the rose.

The relation of the rose to poetry is very largely owing to the decorative and social usage of the flower. Of course the rose is the artificial—not the wild rose. This flower has been especially cultivated for the usage to which it has been put. And it is decorative in use, not for its colour—not because it is red: on the contrary white roses and yellow roses and roses of many different colours are in vogue and have been so for centuries. Except blue roses (which are regarded as impossible to produce) there is scarcely any colour which cannot be found in English roses. The charm of the flower to English taste is especially in the form and the perfume. Therefore women use it as an ornament,—wearing it sometimes in the hair, sometimes in the bosom of the girl; and I need scarcely say that for these reasons it especially interests love-poets. So universal is the Western custom of wearing flowers in the hair that I remember a case in which one learned foreign traveller could not be made to believe that flowers were not thus used by Japanese women. He had seen pictures, he said, of Japanese girls

with beautiful flowers in their hair. On being told that these were artificial flowers, not natural ones, he appeared to think that his informants were stating something absurd, because if artificial flowers were used why not flowers from the garden? And coming to think it over, the gentleman's opinion was reasonable enough. Really it is hard to understand why living flowers have not been more used in this country as ornaments for the hair.

Now you know that since flowers are thus used throughout Europe, presents of beautiful flowers have naturally become gifts of etiquette. Present her with garden flowers of a particular kind; and she may find better use for them than merely putting them into a glass of water. She may make them a part of her toilette. It is the custom also that a lady should sometimes favour her admirer (of course there are rules to be observed) with a present of one flower that she has worn in her hair or upon her dress. Such a gift is a proof of trust and esteem—sometimes it may be a proof of affection. Two beautiful poems which I am going to quote for you will illustrate both usages of the rose as a gift. The first poem is about a rose which the gentleman is sending to the lady that he loves, but who does not love him in return. The poem is about three hundred years old, but it is as fresh in its beauty as a flower but just plucked from the garden. The author is Edmund Waller.

Go, lovely Rose!
Tell her that wastes her time and me,
That now she knows,
When I resemble her to thee,
How sweet and fair she seems to be.

Tell her that's young,
And shuns to have her graces spy'd,
That hadst thou sprung
In deserts where no men abide,
Thou must have uncommended died.

Small is the worth
Of beauty from the light retired:

Bid her come forth,
Suffer herself to be desired,
And not blush so to be admired.

Then die! that she
The common fate of all things rare
May read in thee,—
How small a part of time they share
That are so wondrous sweet and fair.

The little story is plain. The young girl is either too shy to give her lover any hope, or she does not care for him. Then he sends her the gift of a rose, accompanied by the poem which may be paraphrased thus:—

“Go to her now, my beautiful rose. She is wasting her own pleasant time for you and she is also wasting mine, because she will not say either yes or no. She does not know how much I love her;—but you can speak to her for me, and when she sees how beautiful you are, and when she hears that I compare her to you—then she will be able to imagine how fair and sweet I think her.

“She is very young—perhaps that is why she is so much ashamed to hear of admiration, or to meet admiring eyes. But tell her that if you, my rose, had grown in the solitude of the desert, where no man lives, then you would have died without ever hearing a word of praise.

“Tell her that the beauty which no one sees must be even as if it had no value. Tell her to come out from her chamber, into the light and life of society,—and let men honorably seek her,—to conquer her needless shame of being justly admired.

“And then die—in order that she may be reminded by you, by your death, of the impermanency of all beauty of an unstable character, of everything precious and exquisite. Remind her that the most charming thing, the most wonderful thing, can exist only for a very little time—whether beautiful maidens or beautiful blossoms.”

They appeal in the spirit of the old Roman poets who told their sweethearts that life was short, and that it was

waste of time to delay the happiness possible through union. That was also the fashion of the age of Elizabeth, but the sentiment as expressed by Waller is very delicately hinted, and in this he resembles Shakespeare as a love-poet. There are one or two old-fashioned words only. In the fourth line of the first stanza the word "resemble" means compare; the verb "resemble" in a transitive sense is now obsolete. In the second line of the last stanza the word "common" has a larger meaning than we usually give it now—the sense of universality. Wordsworth, however, uses the same meaning of the word when he speaks of the "common life," i.e. the universal radius, of the song.

The rose of the second poem is perhaps the flower that had been worn in the hair or on the bosom. It is by Mrs. Browning; and perhaps there is not any poem about a rose more beautiful than this. You may often see in English books some pathetic references to withered flowers—old love gifts, or memories of dead promises. Such flowers are commonly kept pressed between the leaves of a book—indeed, this is almost the only way of preserving them:—

A DEAD ROSE

O Rose! who dares to name thee?
 No longer roseate now, nor soft, nor sweet;
 But pale, and hard, and dry, as stubble-wheat,—
 Kept seven years in a drawer—thy titles shame thee.

The breeze that used to blow thee
 Between the hedge-row thorns, and take away
 An odour up the lane to last all day,—
 If breathing now,—unsweeten'd would forego thee.

The sun that used to smite thee,
 And mix his glory in thy gorgeous urn,
 Till beam appear'd to bloom, and flower to burn,—
 If shining now,—with not a hue would light thee.

The dew that used to wet thee,
 And, white first, grow incarnadined, because

It lay upon thee when the crimson was,—
 If dropping now,—would darken where it met thee.

The fly that lit upon thee,
 To stretch the tendrils of its tiny feet,
 Along thy leaf's pure edges, after heat,—
 If lighting now,—would coldly overrun thee.

The bee that once did suck thee,
 And build thy perfumed ambers up his hive,
 And swoon in thee for joy, till scarce alive,—
 If passing now,—would blindly overlook thee.

The heart doth recognize thee,
 Alone, alone! The heart doth smell thee sweet,
 Doth view thee fair, doth judge thee most complete,—
 Though seeing now those changes that disguise thee.

In this poem the red rose is meant—but if any other flower were used in place of the rose the poem would be just as beautiful. Translate it, if you like, into Japanese prose—and still it will be only a little less beautiful, because there are English words for you which could scarcely be reproduced in any other language. The thought is this:—

“O my dead rose—given to me so many years ago! How can I ever dare to call you a rose again! You are only a dry, colourless, hard, shapeless thing,—ugly and dead as the stubble in the field;—you have no colour now, nor softness, nor perfume, nor any of those charms belonging to a beautiful flower. That is because you have been kept seven years in a drawer. Ah! to think of your titles now!—for people call you Queen of Flowers, Empress of Gardens, Flower of Beauty! Indeed you now disgrace those titles.

“Long ago you grew in a hedge surrounding a garden; and when the wind blew through the hedge in summer-time it became perfumed by touching you,—and as it went up the shaded road, it carried with it that perfume, and made a sweet smell all along the way in the warm summer afternoon. But if that wind were to blow upon you now, I think

that it would try very soon to avoid you again.

“Long ago the sun shone upon you:—and when his light poured into your flower cup, it took such colour therein that it seemed as if the light had turned into blossom and the blossom into light. Which was rose, which sun, none could tell. But if the sun were now to shine upon you, never could he give you any colour.

“Long ago the dew used to fall upon you; and when it fell upon you it became like drops of blood, because of the crimson of your leaves. But if that dew were now to fall upon you, it would become black.

“Little insects used to rest upon you—used to cool themselves and rest themselves and shadow themselves among your beautiful leaves. But to-day no insect would take the slightest notice of you.

“Long ago bees went into your heart to look for honey. There they found and sucked sweetness and obtained pollen for the amber wax of their combs,—and almost fainted for delight because of your perfume and your sweetness. But no bee would even look at you now.

“My heart, and only my heart still finds you beautiful—still recognizes you and loves you as of old. To my heart your dead perfume continues as sweet as ever; to me you are still as beautiful as in former times; to me there is no ugliness, no death, no loss. With my lives indeed I see that there have been changes—but far, far beyond them—the crimson love-gift of long ago.”

I might give you a hundred poems about the rose; but I think that I must content myself with two more; for we cannot spare too much space to one flower. Here is a little song by the present poet laureate, Alfred Austin. I think I have told you before that he is not a great poet—in spite of being poet laureate: indeed he has written scarcely anything of real value. Nevertheless, you ought to know that one of the very few good things which he did write happens to be about a rose. He is addressing somebody as Wild Rose—a common name for an English

girl and he plays very prettily with the fancy.

A WILD ROSE

The first wild rose in wayside hedge,
 This year I wandering see,
 I pluck, and send it as a pledge,
 My own Wild Rose, to thee.

For when my gaze first met thy gaze,
 We were knee-deep in June:
 The nights were only dreamier days,
 And all the hours in tune.

I found thee, like the eglantine,
 Sweet, simple, and apart;
 And, from that hour, thy smile hath been
 The flower that scents my heart.

And, ever since, when tendrils grace
 Young copse or weathered bole
 With rosebuds, straight I see thy face,
 And gaze into thy soul.

A natural bud of love thou art,
 Where, gazing down, I view,
 Deep hidden in thy fragrant heart,
 A drop of heavenly dew.

Go, wild rose, to my Wild Rose dear;
 Bid her come swift and soon.
 O would that She were always here!
 It then were always June.

There is a pretty play upon the word "wild" in the fourth line of the first stanza and in the first line of the last stanza. "Wild" is often used in the sense of "playfully mischievous;" when speaking of children and young girls, it is used in a caressing sense, as I think the Japanese word for "mischievous" can be, on occasion. In the second line of the second stanza the phrase "knee-deep in June" means really "standing up to our knees in the grass and flowers of midsummer." June, in England, is particularly the month of

roses—at least of the red rose. When the poet sees the wild rose blowing by the roadside he thinks immediately of his first meeting with the woman to whom the poem is addressed. When he says that the nights were only “dreamier days,” he means that those nights of midsummer long ago were so bright with moonlight and starlight that they seem not real nights, but only sleepy-looking days. “All the hours in tune” means that all the time was happy because of the harmony of feeling between the lovers. You know the wild rose, or eglantine, is a creeping plant—not a strong bush, and it climbs round trees. “Weathered bole” means storm-beaten, or weather-beaten, trunk of the tree. Whenever the poet sees a wild rose in the country, climbing above a tree, he remembers the face of the girl, and he seems to be looking again into her eyes, delighted by the innocence and frankness of her gaze. “You are indeed like a rose,” he exclaims; “and in your heart, like the dew in a rose, there is the clearness and beauty of heavenly grace.” It is a pretty poem, though not great: only a great poet can do great things with flowers. Now Keats was a great poet. A friend sent him some roses one day; and he sent in return to this friend, whose name was Wells, a little poem which as poetry is much finer than the verses of Alfred Austin—though the subject is far less interesting:—

TO A FRIEND WHO SENT ME SOME ROSES

As late I rambled in the happy fields,
 What time the sky-lark shakes the tremulous dew
 From his lush clover covert;—when anew
 Adventurous knights take up their dinted shields:
 I saw the sweetest flower wild nature yields,
 A fresh-blown musk-rose; 'twas the first that threw
 Its sweets upon the summer: graceful it grew
 As is the wand that queen Titania wields.
 And, as I feasted on its fragrancy,
 I thought the garden-rose it far excell'd:
 But when, O Wells! thy roses came to me
 My sense with their deliciousness was spell'd:

Soft voices had they, that with tender plea
Whisper'd of peace, and truth, and friendliness unquell'd.

Paraphrased:—

“As I was walking alone in the pleasant fields early in the morning just at the time when the lark first wakens and shakes the dew from the clover leaves hiding its nest; just at the time when in ancient stories of chivalry, good knights used to wake up and take their shields and spears in hand to prepare for noble deeds,—just about that time I saw a beautiful flower. It was indeed the sweetest flower that blooms—a musk-rose, a wild musk-rose,—and the first of the season. It looked to me as beautiful as the magical flower wand of the fairy queen Titania;—and I thought to myself that such a wild flower was indeed much sweeter and more beautiful than our artificial flower. But when your roses came to me, dear friend, they completely enchanted me—and in another way. For they spoke to me, with very small sweet voices, spoke to me very tenderly, begging me not to forget you,—and reminding me of the happy quiet and the open-heartedness and the never changing strength of your affection for me.”

There are a few hard words in this sonnet. In the third line from the bottom, the word “spell'd” means enchanted—laid under a spell. You know that the word “spell” is often used as a noun in the sense of charm, witchcraft; but it is scarcely ever used as a verb: only a daring poet like Keats could use it with success. In the third line from the top, notice the words “lush” and “covert.” Lush—a word powerfully used by Tennyson in “A Dream of Fair Women”—means growing richly and strongly, showing vigour or rankness of vegetable life:—

And at the root thro' lush green grasses burn'd
The red anemone.*

“Lush green” or “lush clover” means clover strongly and

* Lines 71-2

vigorously growing. "Covert" means hiding place—the word is used chiefly in reference to animals and birds. Lastly, I may remind you, Titania is the name of the Queen of the Fairies in the beautiful fairy play of Shakespeare, "A Midsummer Night's Dream." The charm of this sonnet by Keats is principally in the last two lines; suggesting the way that the simplest gift seems to speak to the heart with a little fairy voice of his own.

Now I am going to speak of other flowers. I should like to talk to you about mystical poems on roses. There is an astonishing one by Robert Browning entitled "Women and Roses." There are two by an Irish poet called Yeats—one entitled "The Rose of Peace" and the other "The Rose of the World." I quoted one last year—in a lecture on love poems. But these compositions are a little too difficult for the general class; they would require days of explanation. However, I shall say something about the Rose of Heaven at the conclusion of this lecture.


For the present let us talk about lilies and violets.

As the rose is especially a flower of love, the lily is especially a flower of virtue;—and among the virtues is particularly represented chastity in the symbolism of the middle ages. So "the Mother of God," Mary the Virgin, was called a white lily—as in the charming verse of Rossetti:—

An angel-watered lily, that near God
Grows and is quiet.*

She was also called the "Mystical Rose;"—but the angels and the saints and the virgins in pictures of heaven are commonly represented with lilies, not with roses. Altogether we may say that the lily is the most religious of Western flowers—particularly the white lily; and that is why many girls are called by the name of that flower. But there are lilies and lilies. You have heard of the "White Lilies of France." Do you know that in old French time the banners of France bore white lilies? They represented the royal

* *Mary's Girlhood*

power and state. Did you ever notice the shape of those lilies in the pictures? The French lilies were not like the lilies in religious art, not exactly. They rather resembled a figure like this . Now this heraldic lily reminds us not of the garden lilies, having a cup-shaped flower; but it does look something like a Japanese iris—a plant that is very beautiful and whose blossoming forms one of the flower seeing sights of Tokyo. In a certain sense it is a kind of lily: all true lilies belong to the great family of grasses. The French Royal Lily was really an ideal iris—though always known by the name fleur-de-lis, i.e. lily-flower. The word was corrupted into the name “flower-de-luce.” I have no doubt that a stranger visiting the great iris display at Tokyo and not knowing the Japanese name of the beautiful plants exhibited would call them off hand by this name. We have one very fine poem on this flower, by Longfellow—and it is perhaps the best on the subject in the English tongue. It is worth quoting in full.

FLOWER-DE-LUCE

Beautiful lily, dwelling by still rivers,
 Or solitary mere,
 Or where the sluggish meadow-brook delivers
 Its waters to the weir!

Thou laughest at the mill, the whir and worry
 Of spindle and of loom,
 And the great wheel that toils amid the hurry
 And rushing of the flume.

Born in the purple, born to joy and pleasance,
 Thou dost not toil nor spin,
 But makest glad and radiant with thy presence
 The meadow and the lin.

The wind blows, and uplifts thy drooping banner,
 And round thee throng and run
 The rushes, the green yeomen of thy manor,
 The outlaws of the sun.

The burnished dragon-fly is thine attendant,
 And tilts against the field,

And down the listed sunbeam rides resplendent
With steel-blue mail and shield.

Thou art the Iris, fair among the fairest,
Who, armed with golden rod
And winged with the celestial azure, bearest
The message of some God.

Thou art the Muse, who far from crowded cities
Hauntest the sylvan streams,
Playing on pipes of reed the artless ditties
That come to us as dreams.

O flower-de-luce, bloom on, and let the river
Linger to kiss thy feet!
O flower of song, bloom on, and make forever
The world more fair and sweet.

This poem, though not requiring much explanation, contains a few unfamiliar words. The word "weir" in the fourth line of the first stanza is one of these;—it simply means a dam, to confine the water used by a mill, or for irrigation purposes. The word "flume," in the last line in the second stanza means an artificial water-channel. The word "lin" in the last line of the third stanza is a very old word. There are no less than three different meanings for "lin"—one is a waterfall, one is a great pool or pond, and the third is a cliff, or steep place: meanings having no relation whatever each to the other. But the meaning here is certainly a pond or pool. So much for the hard words—now for other references. The reference in the third stanza to the scriptural text in which we are told that "Solomon in all his glory" was not so beautifully arrayed as the lilies of the field, that do not toil or spin,—is probably familiar to most of you.* But the allusion in the fourth stanza to the "green yeomen" and the "outlaw" is perhaps less plain. It is a suggestion of the old story of Robin Hood,—the knightly outlaw of the middle ages, who dressed his men in Lincoln green. Most of his men were really of the class of yeomen according to the tradition, though many other ranks

* See *S. Matthew*, vi. 27

were represented among them. The yeomen were of the agricultural class, with the privileges of the military class: we might call them soldier-farmers—and you know that there was a class like this in feudal Japan. The poet compares the green rushes with their spear-like leaves, surrounding the water-lily, to a band of Robin Hood's men escorting and protecting some fair lady. Next we have a wonderful stanza about the dragon-fly, in which most of the words are taken from the language in which the chivalrous sports of the middle ages are generally described. All is a suggestion of armour and of tournaments;—the dragon-fly is described like a knight in full armour; and I think you will remember that Tennyson does nearly the same thing in description, when he speaks of the “sapphire mail”* of the dragon-fly. The participial adjective “burnished” reminds us of armour rubbed bright. The expression “tilts against the field” has a double meaning; for though we are told only about a dragon-fly rushing to and fro over a field, the expression “to tilt against a field” in feudal times, meant to hold the field against all comers, i.e. to anybody.

Observe also the beautiful expression “listed sunbeam.” You know that the place within which tournaments were held used to be called the “lists”; and that quaint word signifies especially the fence of barrier surrounding the fighting place. The long beams of sloping sunlight, as they pass through the leaves of the trees overhanging the water, are compared to the golden lists, or tournament barriers. Longfellow speaks of steel-blue mail, and Tennyson of sapphire mail; probably different kinds of dragon-fly were in the minds of the poets; but some kinds of sapphire are steel-blue—so the description is not very different. You all know that the Goddess Iris, the goddess of the rainbow, whose name lives in the name of the lily, was also the messenger of heaven—so the next stanza we need not explain. But the reference in the seventh stanza to the “Muse” playing on pipes of reeds is inspired by the old Greek poets, who de-

* *The Two Voices*, l. 12

scribe their sylvan gods as amusing themselves by playing upon musical instruments made out of hollow reeds, and wandering all alone on the banks of some streams. "Artless ditties" are simple melodies and songs, such as Theocritus tells us about in his "Idyl."

Poems about lilies of this standard are very few; and most of the fine things which English poets have written about lilies, are not to be found in single poems—not, at least, in poems upon a single thing. But when we come to speak of poetry about flowers in general we shall find other beautiful references. For the time being let us speak about violets.

In European child-schools as in Japanese child-schools, children are taught to sing or repeat various little poems about flowers and birds, to some of which poems or songs moral meanings are attached. The violet is a common subject; and I suppose that every English and American child thus first learned that the violet is the symbol of humility and modesty. I need not quote to you any of the child poetry; but you will do well to remember the symbolizing flower, for some reference to that symbolism is to be found in almost all English poems about violets. I will quote for you one only—but the best, in spite of its simplicity. It is by Herrick who loved flowers and wrote little songs about almost every kind of flower. Few of them, however, are so pretty as this.

TO VIOLETS

Welcome, maids-of-honour,
 You do bring
 In the spring,
And wait upon her.

She has virgins many,
 Fresh and fair;
 Yet you are
More sweet than any.

You're the maiden posies,
 And so grac'd

To be plac'd
 'Fore damask roses.
 Yet, though thus respected,
 By-and-by
 Ye do lie,
 Poor girls, neglected.

As pretty as the words—though the words are few. In the first stanza the phrase “to bring in” means to introduce or to conduct: it is colloquial English and we still say, “Bring him in” or “Bring her in”—in the sense of “Please conduct the person into the room.” The poet tells us that the violets are like the maids-of-honour that wait upon the spring; and you know that the term “maid-of-honour” is used of the attendant upon a queen or empress. He calls them the sweetest of all the flowers of Spring, and much more really beautiful than damask roses. But there are no roses early in the spring, at the time when the violets come; and when the roses do appear we ungratefully forget the violets. In this Herrick is right;—it requires a finer taste to appreciate a violet than to admire a rose.

No doubt the beauty and grace of the violet together with the fact that it is such a very small flower and seems to prefer shady places—would account for its association in popular fancy with girlish modesty, amiability, and innocence.

The sunflower, I have already said, is the symbol of fidelity in love. We may go back to old Greek mythology for the origin of the symbolism. In Greek mythology a maiden beloved by the God of the Sun lost his favour through her own jealousy, and was turned away and changed into the flower. And that flower always turns its face to the sun from his rising to his setting, as if following with a loving look. A very famous modern English song, or at least Irish song, which is about the same thing, contains a fine verse in allusion to this legend:—

It is not while beauty and youth are thine own,
 And thy cheeks unprofaned by a tear,

That the fervour and faith of a soul can be known,
 To which time will but make thee more dear;
 No, the heart that has truly loved never forgets,
 But as truly loves on to the close,
 As the sunflower turns on to her god, when he sets
 The same look which she turned when he rose.

It was written by Moore,* and exemplified the symbolism of which I spoke very effectively. But some poets have dared a higher symbolism than this, in speaking of the sunflower. Blake is an example. Among the finest of his mystic poems is the following:—

Ah, Sunflower, weary of time,
 Who countest the steps of the sun;
 Seeking after that sweet golden clime
 Where the traveller's journey is done;

 Where the Youth pined away with desire,
 And the pale virgin shrouded in snow,
 Arise from their graves, and aspire
 Where my Sunflower wishes to go!

The suggestion here is on a divine and not a human love. The first part of the poem is merely explanatory. The reference to "the pale virgin shrouded in snow" implies, of course, a maiden who died of love—but why should she be spoken of as shrouded in snow?—it means that her shroud is white like snow, or that her grave is covered with snow, or that she is buried under the snow. It might be anything of this kind, and we need not try to find exactly what the poet meant in the material sense, because we know very well what he meant in the spiritual sense. Snow is a symbol of chastity and moral perfection. The suggestion in the second stanza is that even the sufferings of disappointed love in this state of existence may be aspirations after death to the love of higher things.

We need not remain longer with the violets, but consider

* In his *Irish Melodies*:—"Believe me, if all those endearing young charms" &c.

the relation of Wordsworth to the literature of flowers. Wordsworth wrote as much about flowers as Herrick did, but not at all in the same way. Herrick, although a clergyman, was in heart an old-fashioned pagan and he wrote about flowers joyously and delightfully and humanly—almost like a Greek would have written about them. But Wordsworth in spite of all his famous poems on flowers did not very much care for flowers in themselves. It was not the beauty of the flower that he studied but the effect produced by the flowers upon the imagination of himself. Sometimes the study of this effect would lead him further and deeper,—lead him to consider the flower symbolically, all the relation of nature to human life as expressed in the beauty of her flowers. His best things about flowers are, therefore, of a meditative and sometimes of a semi-religious kind, as you might suppose, and the more religious the poem the less its value as poetry. Wordsworth is best when meditative; but he is not at his best when he is religious—there is a great difference.

Perhaps some of you might be inclined to say, “You have just quoted for us a religious poem; and nevertheless you speak slightingly of religious poetry.” A mystical poem is not a religious poem in the sense that I mean. By religion I mean dogma, fixed beliefs. Mystical poetry arises above dogma notwithstanding that it may contain the deepest possible reverential feeling. And the proof of this distinction which I mean you can find in the fact that a really good mystical poem can be equally appreciated by persons of other creeds and rendered into the language of any form of religious philosophy. For example the little poem by Blake that we have read could be rendered into an Indian or an Arabic or a Persian or a Chinese version without losing its original value. I should not go so far as the celebrated thinker, who using the word religion in the dogmatic sense, declares that all religious literature is rubbish; but I should certainly take this position that it is likely to be the less valuable the more of dogmatic belief that it contains.

Now Wordsworth, meditatively, is at his best when he describes the influence of nature upon his heart and upon his sentiments of humanity and kindness. Perhaps you remember the beautiful little poem about the daffodils which I quoted to you last year in another connection. The poet was walking along the river and saw the flowers nodding and dancing in the sun, as currents moved their slender stalks, and after he got home he still saw them in memory,—and the memory made him glad,—and he told us that he felt his heart dancing with the daffodils. That is an example of the proper study of natural beauty in relation to our own feelings. At other times we find him more reflective—for instance, in his poems of the daisy, the celandine, etc. We cannot quote extensively; but we may quote illustratively.

TO THE DAISY

Bright flower, whose home is everywhere!
 A Pilgrim bold in Nature's care,
 And oft, the long year through, the heir
 Of joy or sorrow;
 Methinks that there abides in thee
 Some concord with humanity,
 Given to no other flowers I see
 The forest through!

And wherefore? Man is soon deprest;
 A thoughtless Thing! who, once unblest,
 Does little on his memory rest,
 Or on his reason;
 But Thou would'st teach him how to find
 A shelter under every wind,
 A hope for times that are unkind
 And every season.

It is not very deep, but it is impressive. Put in plain prose it signifies about this:—

“The daisy grows everywhere—robustly, cared for, not by men, but by Nature only. It grows by the roadside on the river banks, in the fields. Cows and horses and men trample it under foot; wheels pass over it; frosts try to kill it; snow

and hail fall upon its place of rest. But whatever happens it comes up again, in the flowering season. To some extent it reminds us of mankind. Human beings also grow everywhere and they have to bear millions of misfortunes, innumerable sufferings, countless forms of pain and death. How many millions of people every year die before their time—by sickness, accident, war, famine, conflagration! After all the lot of man and of the daisy is not so very different in the universal struggle of Nature. But men make a great fuss about their pains and their troubles. They are very easily depressed by little misfortunes, very easily discouraged by some apparent obstacle in the way of their foolish wishes. The daisies are not discouraged at all. When the sun shines on them and the rain refreshes them, they show their gladness by looking cheerful and when their fate is to be crushed or killed, they have nothing to complain of. They accept their fate. Would it not be better if men could do the same?"

Now perhaps you will say, "What a silly poem!—the plants do not complain because they have no lips to complain with and no hearts to hope with." But that is not all the meaning of the poem: Wordsworth saw deeper than that. He is really suggesting the universal law of life—the great necessity of bearing the struggle patiently. And if his poem reminds us of it, he has imparted a teaching not to be despised.

He has other and longer poems about the daisy; though we cannot cite them all. I may quote a bit here and there to show how much the common flower charmed him into the utterance of pretty things:

In shoals and bands, a morrice train,
Thou greet'st the traveller in the lane,
Pleased at his greeting thee again;
 Yet nothing daunted,
Nor grieved, if thou be set at nought:
And oft alone in nooks remote
We meet thee, like a pleasant thought,
 When such are wanted.

The last line but one is a gem: Wordsworth often surprises us like that. What could be prettier as a comparison than the appearance of a pretty flower to a pleasant thought? And here is another stanza from the same composition.

A hundred times, by rock or bower,
Ere thus I have lain couched an hour,
Have I derived from thy sweet power
Some apprehension;
Some steady love; some brief delight;
Some memory that had taken flight;
Some chime of fancy wrong or right;
Or stray invention.

Why? Because he tells us in the earlier part of the poem that in every place where he had played or walked about the time of childhood he had seen daisies—that their pretty little pink and white faces had become associated in his memory with all the happiness of his past and with all its sorrow. So, even to-day as a man, the moment he happens to see daisies in a strange place they remind him of all the joy and grief that he ever knew—as well as of the necessity for brave patience.

The celandine is another flower about which Wordsworth wrote many songs. A part of the best of his poems on this flower I will quote to show you the same method of treatment in another aspect. It is really now recognized to be the best of all methods. I mean the art of studying natural things in their relation to our psychological life, rather than in themselves. In olden times men were taught to try to describe landscapes or flowers objectively—very much as we would try to paint a picture. This method of Wordsworth was carried to great perfection in modern literature, yet we must recognize that it is not the best method. Really we cannot describe a flower in verse so as to picture it—much less a landscape. But we can describe what goes on in our hearts while looking at the landscape or the picture.

THE SMALL CELANDINE

There is a Flower, the Lesser Celandine,
That shrinks, like many more, from cold and rain;
And, the first moment that the sun may shine,
Bright as the sun itself, 'tis out again!

When hailstones have been falling, swarm on swarm,
Or blasts the green field and the trees distressed,
Oft have I seen it muffled up from harm,
In close self-shelter, like a Thing at rest.

But lately, one rough day, this Flower I passed
And recognised it, though an altered form,
Now standing forth and offering to the blast,
And buffeted at will by rain and storm.

I stopped, and said with inly-muttered voice,
"It doth not love the shower, nor seek the cold:
This neither is its courage nor its choice,
But its necessity in being old.

"The sunshine may not cheer it, nor the dew;
It cannot help itself in its decay;
Stiff in its members, withered, changed of hue."
And, in my spleen, I smiled that it was grey.

To be a Prodigal's Favourite—then, worse truth,
A Miser's Pensioner—behold our lot!
O Man, that from thy fair and shining youth
Age might but take the things Youth needed not!

Only the last stanza is a little difficult,—even when you know what the poet means in the preceding verses. We shall explain it presently.

The poet has seen a celandine, and has noticed that, whenever the weather is cold or disagreeable, the flower shuts itself up, as if asleep. And therefore it makes him think of a young man of rich family, who is enabled through his wealth to pass through life without any struggle at all. The world is full of pain and effort; but this happy person knows nothing about the pain or the effort—he can remain quietly at home and have his own pleasure undisturbed.

But another day the poet sees the same flower wide open, in a time of cold wind and storm;—so he is surprised and stops to look at it and perceives that it is dying. The only reason that it does not shut itself up as before, is because it has not the strength to do so. Now it has to bear the cold and the wet, whether it likes or not. And therefore it makes him think of an old man, once very wealthy and very exclusive, but now very poor and miserable, unaccustomed to hardship of any kind, and yet now obliged to bear every kind of hardship, at an age when the body is no longer strong enough to endure pain easily. And, thinking to himself how very much like the end of the wicked and selfish man's life is the condition of the flower, the poet cannot help feeling a little cruel pleasure in observing its forlorn aspect.

But presently, more kindly thoughts come into his mind. After all, he thinks, old age is a sorrowful state for those who have not been trained in youth to bear sorrow and to make strong effort. Wealth itself may be a great misfortune to many. Then comes that last stanza, which I told you is a little hard; let us paraphrase it:—

“The destiny of many men is to be, in the time of their youth, greatly favoured by fortune. But fortune is a great prodigal—a spendthrift. Wealth may easily be robbed. Those who in their youth were the favourites of fortune, in this sense may afterwards become very poor. Now old age is not much pitied. It may be helped by charity; but the amount of that charity is very small—scarcely more than a miser would give as a pension to the servant who has attended him for many years. In another sense all of us are fortunate in the time of youth, because we have strength and hope; and all of us have reason to wish when we get old, that we had made better use of the time when we were young and that we could now have but some of the power, physical and moral, which we set no value upon when we were young.”

So in this flower, Wordsworth could see a symbol of

human life—the life of a civilized man.

The beautiful poem about the daffodils is not so deep as this; but it is perhaps the most perfect of Wordsworth's flower pieces. Now to find anything quite so fine as Wordsworth's daffodils one must go to Tennyson. There is one poem by Tennyson about violets, (it might as well be about almost any spring flower), with which you are not perhaps familiar—because it happens to be buried away in the splendid treasure house of reflective poetry: "In Memoriam." As it is very short and extremely beautiful and reflects the spirit of Wordsworth in a new way I shall quote it:—

Now fades the last long streak of snow,
 Now burgeons every maze of quick
 About the flowering squares, and thick
 By ashen roots the violets blow.

Now rings the woodland loud and long,
 The distance takes a lovelier hue,
 And drown'd in yonder living blue
 The lark becomes a sightless song.

Now dance the lights on lawn and lea,
 The flocks are whiter down the vale,
 And milkier every milky sail
 On winding stream or distant sea;

Where now the seamew pipes, or dives
 In yonder greening gleam, and fly
 The happy birds, that change their sky
 To build and brood; that live their lives

From land to land; and in my breast
 Spring wakens too; and my regret
 Becomes an April violet,
 And buds and blossoms with the rest.*

This is or might be called Wordsworth perfected and enlarged. Wordsworth could not have written that; his grasp of words was not equal to Tennyson's; but he would

* *In Memoriam*, CXV

have thought like that. Let us say a Wordsworthian thought more artistically expressed than was possible in Wordsworth's day. The thought is this:—

“Now the beautiful spring awakens, with its flowers; and the sight of its luminous beauty reminds me of the loveliness of other springs, long ago;—and therefore remembering, I cannot help thinking of the day;—and regret is aroused in my heart. To what flower of spring shall I compare the awakening regret in my heart? Surely to the violet—because it is an humble personal regret and shy. To the violet also, because, though painful, the memory is sweet,—sweet as the perfume of that delicate little flower.”

That is all the thought, but what pictures! By the word “quick” in the second line of the first stanza the poet means living and budding plants—probably such plants as boxwood or others of which hedges and garden borders are made. The reference to the “ringing” of the woodland may refer to the songs of returning birds. The description of the effect of spring mist might be Japanese as well as English—even more so. Very lovely are the lines about the lark, “drowned in the living blue and becoming a sightless song”—that is disappearing in the great sea of blue light, but still heard very plainly. “Living” is a fine word to qualify that blue air, which indeed is life to all breathing things, vegetable or animal. The rest is very plain as to sense, but not less exquisite in painting. Here again you have the fine example of what I told you about the highest art in description—not a description merely of nature as seen, but of nature as felt,—the expression of the emotions and memories that it awakens in our heart as the light and warmth of spring awakens the violets. Well, Tennyson or Wordsworth often combined both kinds of description; and the psychological method is the highest. But the other is not to be despised, when the hand that paints is the hand of a true artist. For instance—here is a little bit, which in the book has no name, but which I shall call—

WHITE SPRING LIGHT

Spring goeth all in white,
Crowned with 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 snow around.

That is by Robert Bridges—a very excellent minor poet is Robert Bridges, and he never writes anything which is not good. He is still alive, and writing; and he is one of the very few English poets who, in spite of the romantic movement, still keeps to classical traditions. Now that is like a Japanese water-colour print of the last century, or still older: you can see what is described. You have not the May flower here, perhaps, but you have other flowers that make up for it. The English have not your cherry trees, but they have other cherry trees which have beautiful blossoms in spring and a pear or apple tree, for a short time, does look almost as beautiful as the Japanese cherry and plum tree. I say almost as beautiful, because in England the flower do not come before the leaves; and therefore the effect of pure white or pure pink like a cloud is a little broken. Still this picture in most simple words pleases us almost as much as Tennyson's highly elaborate verses on the blossoming of the same season. The only reason that we must give Bridges' poem an inferior place is that it does not touch our emotion: it only speaks to our eyes, not to our hearts. We must think of it just as we think of a spring flower, or a single peep through some window at a beautiful landscape.

I am now going to say something about poetry—floral poetry—of a more general character; poetry that speaks not of some one flower in particular but of flowers in general. The last two poems naturally led up to this subject. About

flowers in general we have many philosophical, symbolical, and religious poems. But I am not sure that many of them are worth studying. A considerable number represent nothing more than moral commonplaces in commonplace verse. Even Wordsworth has been guilty of being tiresome in this direction. However, long before his day English poets sometimes preached about flowers and set the example. Any man has a right to preach if he feels a natural impulse in that direction and has ability enough to say something beautiful and original. If he be by profession a clergyman—so much the better. One of the best poems about flowers in general is by a preacher, who had something to say and could say it very well. He was a bishop in England about four hundred years ago, and he is remembered in literature by the name of Henry King. I am going to quote his little sermon in verse, because I think that you will like it.

A CONTEMPLATION UPON FLOWERS

Brave flowers—that I could gallant it like you,
 And be as little vain!
 You come abroad, and make a harmless show,
 And to your beds of earth again.
 You are not proud: you know your birth:
 For your embroider'd garments are from earth.
 You do obey your months and times, but I
 Would have it ever Spring:
 My fate would know no Winter, never die,
 Nor think of such a thing.
 O that I could my bed of earth but view
 And smile, and look as cheerfully as you!
 O teach me to see Death and not to fear,
 But rather to take truce!
 How often have I seen you at a bier,
 And there look fresh and spruce!
 You fragrant flowers! then teach me, that my breath
 Like yours may sweeten and perfume my death.

If you look for the dates of Henry King you will find

that he was born in 1592—yet how very modern the English of the poem looks and sounds! Unless you have a very keen eye for quaint English you cannot see where the old fashioned language is. Of course if you have been accustomed from childhood, you could see the difference between the bishop's English and modern English, but not by the eye. The very word with which the poem opens is not the same word as the modern "brave"—though the meaning is even larger. It is rather identical with the Scotch word "braw" used in the same way that we find it used in the ballad of "Proud Masie:"—

‘Tell me, thou bonny bird,
When shall I marry me?’
—‘When six braw gentlemen
Kirkward shall carry ye.’

I think you will remember the story—how the proud girl asks the robin when she will be married, and the bird answers her with the sinister answer, "When six braw gentlemen will carry you toward the church" (which might mean "take you to the church to your wedding," but really does mean, "take you to the church for your funeral"). Now in that little ballad by Sir Walter Scott, the word "braw" might best be rendered into Japanese, I think, by the expression *kôdaina*—which means stately or grand in appearance, rather than handsome. And that is the old English meaning of the word "brave" as Bishop King used it—noble looking, stately, dignified, grand—sometimes also fine. The expression "to gallant it" is also very quaint, as the use of the "it" ought to show. The phrase means only to act "gallantly"—but "gallantly" has also changed in meaning a little. It now signifies "in a courtly and manly way," but the old meaning was rather that of "knightly brave." So the two words above commented on, have actually exchanged meaning. This is what the poet says:—

“O you handsome flowers, you noble-looking flowers!
How much I wish that I could act as bravely and look as

nobly as you do, and nevertheless remain, like you, modest and unassuming. You come to the world and show your beauty without trying to injure anybody—and then you go back again to the ground, out of which you grew, and make no complaint. You are not proud, you know your real place in the world, and the humbleness of your origin—and you do not try to imagine yourselves any better than you are. Mankind is not thus wise and humble. Men, indeed, come out of the dust of the earth, like you do, and they must go back again to the dust of the earth as you do;—but men are proud, and foolish and try to hurt one another.

“And you beautiful flowers, you come always at the proper season, and then go away again, uncomplainingly, when it is time to die. We men are not so obedient to the laws of Heaven—no: we want our own pleasure, always to have pleasant weather and good fortune, never to have any suffering and never to die. We want to live for ever—although that is impossible. Little flowers, you stand above your own grave and smile—I wish that I could do the same. We men standing upon the ground, are afraid to think that we are standing upon our own grave—that the earth must swallow us all.

“Teach me, little flowers, to look at Death in the face without being afraid—teach me to think of death only as a period of rest from life (you must read the word “truce” here in the sense of rest or pause). Teach me to remember that for men as for flowers there is winter, called death; but we both must rise again when the winter shall have passed. How oft have I seen you, pretty flowers, on the coffin of a dead man; and there you continued to look as fresh and beautiful as when you were in the garden. Instruct me how to speak so that my breath of words may, like your breath of perfume, help to make happy and beautiful the hour of my own death.”

Except for the last two lines regarding the religious value of conduct in speech, there is nothing in the poem of an especially religious kind; and there is nothing at all to

show that a bishop wrote it. It is one of those flower poems that would mean the same thing in the language of any civilized country.

It is not always the ecclesiastics who are the most religious in their verses. Sometimes we find outsiders, "laymen" as the Church would call them, who wrote far more ecclesiastically than the clergymen. Miss Rossetti, though the greatest of English female poets, produced a good deal of devotional poetry, and a few of them was about flowers. But as she was at all times a fine artist, even her religious poetry on this subject is worth quoting here; her devotion could not spoil it; at least the following example is a good proof of the fact:—

CONSIDER THE LILIES OF THE FIELD

Flowers preach to us if we will hear:—
 The rose saith in the dewy morn,
 I am most fair;
 Yet all my loveliness is born
 Upon a thorn.
 The poppy saith amid the corn:
 Let but my scarlet head appear
 And I am held in scorn;
 Yet juice of subtle virtue lies
 Within my cup of curious dyes.
 The lilies say: Behold how we
 Preach without words of purity.
 The violets whisper from the shade
 Which their own leaves have made:
 Men scent our fragrance on the air,
 Yet take no heed
 Of humble lessons we would read.

In these few lines you have a summary of what I already told you about the symbolism of three flowers—the rose, the lily and the violet. But the reference to the poppy will seem new. There are several kinds of poppies, but Miss Rossetti was referring particularly to the scarlet poppy, which grows a great deal in English corn fields, somewhat to the vexa-

tion of the farmers. This is the same flower referred to by Tennyson, in "The Princess," where the Princess is described as "More crumpled than a poppy from the sheath."*

When the flower first opens its petals, they are crumpled in a most extraordinary way. The illusions to the "subtle virtues" of the poppy reminds us that opium is obtained from its seeds, and as this drug is used a great deal in medicine, the poet is quite right in speaking of it as beneficent in its action.

Among other poems on flowers, in general, which the student should not allow himself to forget is the famous description of flower beauty embodied in Shelley's "Sensitive Plant." All of this poem is by no means equal in merit; and the subject proper of the poem, being a plant rather than a flower, does not exactly come within the range of the lecture. But the description of flowers in the beginning of it is one of the beautiful things of English literature, and I must quote a few stanzas:—

And the Naiad-like lily of the vale,
Whom youth makes so fair and passion so pale
That the light of its tremulous bells is seen
Through their pavilions of tender green.

It is true that this beautiful flower, the so-called lily of the valley, is so delicately formed, that you can see the white of its bell-shaped blossoms actually shining through the leaves. The poet compares it to a maiden consumed by lovers, and made beautiful by her passionate paleness. I think you know that a Naiad means a river goddess or nymph; the Greeks believed in such female divinities.

And the rose like a nymph to the bath addrest,
Which unveiled the depth of her glowing breast,
Till, fold after fold, to the fainting air
The soul of her beauty and love lay bare:

And the wand-like lily, which lifted up,
As a Mænad, its moonlight-coloured cup,

* *The Princess*, V. 29

Till the fiery star, which is its eye,
Gazed through clear dew on the tender sky.

Many other flowers are referred to:—but these are the most famous stanzas. In describing the second kind of lily—the garden lily—which has a much larger flower, the poet likens it to a Mænad. A Mænad was a woman—whether maiden or wife—who followed the Greek divinity of wine and song, Dionysus,—dancing and brandishing various emblems in honour of God. It is said that these female dancers became madly excited, and that, in their sacred frenzy, they would sometimes seize men, or even wild beasts, and tear them to pieces with their hands. You may wonder why Shelley should compare the beautiful garden flower to one of these furious dancers. Probably he was not thinking about the darker side of the tradition, but about some beautiful naked figure of a Mænad which he had seen engraved upon a Greek gem. Some of these gem-prints, cut in pure white upon a dark ground, are extraordinarily beautiful, with a peculiar slender kind of beauty that would fully justify the poet in comparing the figure to that of a beautiful lily.

In Tennyson the most remarkable description of flowers in general will be found in the wonderful song in “Maud,” now known wherever the English language is spoken, for it has been set to very fine music. I need cite only one stanza of it, to remind you of the whole. That is—

Queen rose of the rosebud garden of girls,
Come hither, the dances are done,
In gloss of satin and glimmer of pearls,
Queen lily and rose in one;
Shine out, little head, sunning over with curls,
To the flowers, and be their sun.*

These words are addressed to a girl; but they illustrate admirably that symbolism of which I spoke at the beginning of this lecture. All girls are compared to rosebuds; but the beloved one to a queen rose; and she is called both lily and

* *Maud*, Part I. xxii. 9

rose, by way of illustrating the lover's certitude of the moral as well as the physical beauty. And there is in the close of a stanza, just a suggestion of a sunflower, emblem of faithful affection. But the whole song is full of beautiful conceit about flowers, with such lines as—

The soul of the rose went into my blood,

or—

Whenever a March-wind sighs
He sets the jewel-print of your feet
In violets blue as your eyes.

And Tennyson never forgot the symbolism of the song, in which the lover declares that, if he were dead and buried, and that girl happened to walk over his grave, his heart would change into a flower and rise up through the ground to blossom before her feet. The fancy is not altogether new; old Arabic poets sang something very like it centuries before Mahommed was born;—but it was never said so beautifully before in a modern poem.

Another famous line of Tennyson's is that about

That maiden in the tale,
Whom Gwydion made by glamour out of flowers.*

The story alluded to is in "The Mabinogion," a famous old Welsh book, in which the oldest stories about King Arthur may be found. In this story we are told of a hero, who was cursed by a jealous witch, with a curse that rendered it impossible for him to marry any mortal woman. But the young hero had a friend who was a very great magician, named Gwydion; and Gwydion made for him a beautiful girl out of flowers; and he married her. Unfortunately the maiden made out of flowers, although more beautiful than any other being in the world, was not of a good heart; and she acted so badly that her husband had to punish her by turning her into an owl. However, the story reminds us how very old must be the poetical relation be-

* *Idyls of the King: The Marriage of Geraint*, 743-4

tween the beauty of women and the beauty of flowers.

Speaking of Tennyson I should remind you that the nearest approach which he has made to a mystical poem of a short kind is the little piece beginning "Flower in the crannied wall." I need not quote it for you; you can read it* for yourselves. The use of the term "flower" in the poem illustrates what I told you at the beginning of this lecture,—namely that the word "flower" is loosely used in English to mean the whole plant as well as the blossom. Here it means everything—blossom, leaves, stem and root. The poet says: "O flower, you are so small that I can hold you root and all in my hand—yet I cannot tell what you are. If I could tell—if I could know the secret of the life that is in you,—then I could know the whole great mystery of God and man and the Universe."

In this little composition Tennyson comes very close to some of the old Japanese poets, who also in two or three lines of verse, could express or suggest a thought worthy of the attention of the deepest thinker.

As I have mentioned mystical poetry and symbolic poetry, I must not forget to remind you that Rossetti has written two poems belonging to this class. One is called "The Woodspurge;" the other "The Honeysuckle." As I have already quoted these poems in other lectures,† I need not do so now, but since the titles may be new to some of you, I shall explain the subjects. The woodspurge is a small wild flower of a peculiar shape. One day the poet is in great sorrow, great despair; and he goes out alone into the woods, and sits down. While mourning there alone he observes the blossom of a woodspurge before him, and he notices that it has a form like that of three cups placed one above

* Flower in the crannied wall,
I pluck you out of the crannies,
I hold you here, root and all, in my hand,
Little flower—but *if* I could understand
What you are, root and all, and all in all,
I should know what God and man is.

† Cf. L. Hearn: "On Poets," p. 10 ff.

another :—

From perfect grief there need not be
Wisdom or even memory:
One thing then learnt remains to me,—
The woodspurge has a cup of three.

The other piece, "The Honeysuckle," tells us about a man who, while walking along a country road, sees in a hedge by the wayside, a beautiful honeysuckle flower. He tries to get it; but, in order to get it, he has to cross a dirty ditch, and to force a way through thorny plants—when he does get the flower his clothes are all covered with mud and his hands are bleeding. Going on a little further, he comes to the garden of a rich man, where hundreds of much finer honeysuckles are growing. He looks at them in great admiration, and throws away the poor flowers which gave him so much pain to get. But he cannot, or does not, pluck any of the others. The suggestion here is of a man who, in his young days, took the pains to win the love of some poor and pretty country girl. It gave him a great deal of trouble to win her. But, later on in life, becoming rich or famous, he finds it in his power to obtain in marriage a very much finer or more beautiful woman. And he ungratefully casts away the simple love that he had such trouble in former days to get. Nevertheless he does not or cannot make another happy union.

Not only are women commonly associated with flowers throughout the history of English poetry; they are often also associated with birds. Terms of affection bestowed upon them often take the form of birds' names—indeed this poetical custom is as old as "The Song of Solomon" (perhaps older), for we find there the impassioned verse beginning, "O my dove, that art in the clefts of the rock, in the secret hiding places of the stairs, let me hear thy voice."* But perhaps you don't know that it was at one time in England a popular and poetical custom to call women birds. The old ballads are

* *The Song of Solomon*, ii, 14

full of names to which the term "bird" is prefixed; and the unmarried woman is said to be "bird-alone," or "without a bird." Of course the custom needs no explanation. Now in modern poetry treating of flowers in general, we sometimes find women, flowers and birds all brought together as a thing of beauty and tenderness. I have chosen a little song to illustrate this triple grouping, because the song is sweet and strange. It is by Arthur O'Shaughnessy.

SONG

Now I am on the earth,
 What sweet things love me?
 Summer, that gave me birth,
 And glows on still above me;
 The bird I loved a little while;
 The rose I planted;
 The woman in whose golden smile
 Life seems enchanted.

Now I am in the grave,
 What sweet things mourn me?
 Summer, that all joys gave,
 Whence death, alas! hath torn me;
 One bird that sang to me; one rose
 Whose beauty moved me;
 One changeless woman; yea, all those
 That living loved me.

It is very light poetry and just vague enough to leave a dreamy feeling in the mind. But I quoted only as an illustration of the grouping which I told you about. Now I am going to speak of narrative poems about flowers—not long Romances, like the "Romance of the Rose;" but only that class of lyrical poetry to which this lecture must be confined.

Of course there are a considerable number of such narrative poems; and we have only room and time for about two. The most curious one that I know of in modern English literature is a poem by the son of the famous novelist, Bulwer-Lytton. You know that Bulwer-Lytton's son

became a great figure both in the world of statesmanship and of polite letters; he was Viceroy of India and known as a poet by the name of "Owen Meredith." He wrote a curious romance or rather romantic ballad—partly ironical, partly sentimental—which properly belongs to our subject because of its treatment of a certain jasmine flower. The jasmine flower is particularly esteemed for its perfume which is very rich and penetrating, though the flower itself is not large. Single buds of jasmine, like a single rose bud, are often worn at balls and even palaces by ladies in full dress. It is to the perfume of the flowers in such an association that the poet eloquently refers; that is why I am going to quote him. But I need not quote the whole poem because it is too long and because I quoted some parts of it last year in another connection.* If you want to read it all, you will find a good revised version of it in "The Victorian Anthology" under the title "Aux Italiens" (i.e. in the Italian Opera House). In the older editions of the poet's work, it was called "Resurrection." The story is this:—a rich young man had been betrothed to a young lady of great rank and beauty. They quarrel; the engagement is broken. Then the young girl dies and is buried. Her former lover now attaches himself to another lady—a handsome young widow, immensely wealthy, and it is agreed that they shall marry. With the new betrothed the young man visits the theatre in Paris, to listen to an Italian opera; and he suddenly smells the sweet smell of jasmine-flower, that made him remember the beautiful girl that is dead, that used to wear that flower—and then he begins to think how very foolish he was after all, to quarrel with her. Really she was much more worthy of affection than she whom he is now going to marry, and who is very proud and cold. When he is thinking thus the perfume of the flower seems to become stronger and sweeter all about him in the strangest way;—and he looks about and actually sees the dead girl sitting before him, at the opposite side of the theatre, with that

* Cf. L. Hearn: "On Poets," p. 264 ff.

flower in her breast. Love has brought her back from the grave to him—to be forgiven and caressed. It is a queer story—and admirably told, though told in a mocking way. You will be able to guess the character of the whole composition by the following extract:—

Meanwhile, I was thinking of my first love,
 As I had not been thinking of aught for years,
 Till over mine eyes there began to move
 Something that felt like tears.

I thought of the dress that she wore last time,
 When we stood, 'neath the cypress trees, together,
 In that lost land, in her own soft clime,
 In the crimson evening weather,

By the broken wall, on the brown grass plot;
 And her warm white neck in its golden chain:
 And her full, soft hair, wound into a knot,
 And falling loose again:

And the jasmine-flower in her fair young breast,
 (O the faint sweet smell of that jasmine-flower!)
 And the last bird singing alone to his nest,
 And the first star over the tower.

* * * *

And I swear, as I thought of her thus, in that hour,
 And of how, after all, old things were best,
 That I smelt the smell of that jasmine-flower,
 Which she used to wear in her breast.

It smelt so faint, and it smelt so sweet,
 It made me creep, and it made me cold!
 Like the scent that steals from the crumbling sheet
 Where a mummy is half unroll'd.

And I turn'd and look'd. She was sitting there
 In a dim box over the stage; and drest
 In the dress that I knew,—with that full soft hair,
 And that jasmine in her breast.

The reference to the mummy is one of the weirdest comparisons that I know of in modern English poetry,—but

certainly one of the best. You know that Egyptian mummies are now kept in most of the museums of the world—dried bodies of men or women who, many thousand years ago, long before the time of European civilization, were buried embalmed with aromatic preparations, in underground vaults or stone tombs. Each body was wrapped from head to foot in long linen bandages—so long that it requires considerable time to unroll a mummy. And as the bandages are taken off, the perfume of the aromatics, by which the body has been preserved from decay, fills all the chamber where the mummy is. When you remember that you will see how effective is the comparison in the poem.

Another celebrated flower poem of narrative kind is a piece from "Miss Blanche Says." It was written by Bret Harte, and it was one of the best things in verse which he did. Moreover it is founded on fact—a story of the American Civil War. Regiments going to battle and passing through Northern towns on their way were very kindly treated by the citizens if they had time to stop. Very often there was no time to stop, they had to march right through. But in such cases women threw flowers at them and men cheered them and little presents were thrown to them as they passed by. This is the story about a rose so thrown to a passing soldier. I shall not quote the whole—only enough to interest you. It is the woman who threw the rose that tells the story.

She complains that, during the time of which she speaks, there was nothing for a woman to do, in the way of helping the nation, except attending fairs for the benefit of the soldiers and there was nothing to hear but the sound of drums and bugles—

Still it was stupid. Rata-tat-tat!

Those were the sounds of that battle summer,
Till the earth seemed a parchment round and flat,
And every footfall the tap of a drummer;
And day by day down the Avenue went
Cavalry, infantry, all together,

Till my pitying angel one day sent
My fate in the shape of a regiment,
That halted, just as the day was spent,
Here at our door in the bright June weather.

None of your dandy warriors they,—
Men from the West, but where I know not;
Haggard and travel-stained, worn and gray,
With never a ribbon or lace or bow-knot:
And I opened the window, and, leaning there,
I felt in their presence the free winds blowing.
My neck and shoulders and arms were bare,—
I did not dream they might think me fair,
But I had some flowers that night in my hair,
And here, on my bosom, a red rose glowing.

And I looked from the window along the line,
Dusty and dirty and grim and solemn,
Till an eye like a bayonet flash met mine,
And a dark face shone from the darkening column,
And a quick flame leaped to my eyes and hair,
Till cheeks and shoulders burned all together,
And the next I found myself standing there
With my eyelids wet and my cheeks less fair,
And the rose from my bosom tossed high in air,
Like a blood-drop falling on plume and feather.

Then I drew back quickly: there came a cheer,
A rush of figures, a noise of tussle,
And then it was over, and high and clear
My red rose bloomed on his gun's black muzzle.
Then far in the darkness a sharp voice cried,
And slowly and steadily, all together,
Shoulder to shoulder and side to side,
Rising and falling and swaying wide,
But bearing above them the rose, my pride,
They marched away in the twilight weather.

And I leaned from my window and watched my rose
Tossed on the waves of the surging column,
Warmed from above in the sunset glows,
Borne from below by an impulse solemn.

Then I shut the window. I heard no more
 Of my soldier friend, nor my flower neither,
 But lived my life as I did before.
 I did not go as a nurse to the war,—
 Sick folks to me are a dreadful bore,—
 So I did n't go to the hospital either.

And that was why she was never married. It is an old woman who tells the story now. But it is not quite finished—

I know your answer. I 'm not yet through.
 Look at this photograph,—“In the Trenches”!
 That dead man in the coat of blue
 Holds a withered rose in his hand. That clenches
 Nothing!—except that the sun paints true,
 And a woman is sometimes prophetic-minded.
 And that 's my romance. And, poet, you
 Take it and mould it to suit your view;
 And who knows but you may find it too
 Come to your heart once more, as mine did.

This is not great poetry and the sentiment is merely popular. But it is true and sincere and there is a fine swing to the verses describing the movements of the men. A military critic might say that European soldiers are not supposed to march in so loose a way. But American soldiers are not supposed or even allowed to move stiffly—a free swagger motion from the hips is a characteristic of their infantry marching; and when you become accustomed to see it, you begin to think that it is, after all, a great deal better than the more mechanical parade march of European troops.

There is another department of flower poetry—the merely phantastic—and I ought to attempt some illustration of that also. An American poet, Edgar Fawcett, has furnished one very dainty fancy of this kind. The poem is about a toad among the flowers in a garden. I am not sure whether any of you have seen this poem; it is one of those small things which are likely to outlive thousands of longer compositions by American poets—for it is a true bit of poetical art:—

TO A TOAD

Gray dusk, that brings the dewy hours,
 Brings thee, of graceless form in sooth!
 Dark stumbler at the roots of flowers,
 Flaccid, inert, uncouth!

Right ill can human wonder guess
 Thy meaning or thy mission here,
 Gray lump of mottled clamminess,
 With that preposterous leer!

But when I see thy dull bulk where
 Luxurious roses bend and turn,
 Or some slim lily lifts to air
 Her frail and fragrant urn,—

Of these, among the garden ways,
 So grim a watcher dost thou seem,
 That I, with meditative gaze,
 Look down on thee, and dream

Of thick-lipped slaves with ebon sin,
 That squat in hideous dumb repose,
 And guard the drowsy ladies in
 Their still seraglios.

(In the first edition of the above poem, the first word in the third line of the second stanza was "thou;" and in the second edition this was changed into the word "blue," being also substituted as the first word of the first stanza.)

The comparison which the poet makes is that of black eunuchs guarding the door of the women's apartments in the palace of some Sultan. African slaves have usually been employed, and a special class of dumb eunuchs, who have had their tongues cut out in early childhood, and whom travellers and historians usually called "mutes," are especially esteemed. The word "seraglio" is used particularly of the quarters of the women in Turkey; but the term is often used in speaking of the same thing in any Mohammedan country. All the words chosen in this poem have been most artistically chosen. Take for example the term "flaccid,"

which gives one the idea of something soft and bag-like. "Inert," signifying either inactive, or disinclined to activity, also very well describes the lazy appearance of a toad. "Uncouth"—a word of which the very sound is clumsy—means both ugly and clumsy; and such is the motion of the toad. Again we have the term, "lump of mottled clamminess," and lump is just the word to fit the apparent shapelessness of the creature in certain attitudes. I need not explain the value of "mottled," nor of "clamminess," but will call your attention to the grotesque exactitude of "preposterous leer." "Leer" especially means a side-long and impudent stare; and the stare of a toad is the most striking characteristic of the creature. "Preposterous" is the very strongest word possible to use in the sense of both "absurd and unexpected." Those are the little touches of art to which I wanted to call your attention; the rest explains itself.

I haven't yet said anything about patriotic poems on flowers—at least nothing in particular. One such poem at least ought to be given by way of illustration. Tennyson's "Daisy" is rather disappointing, for it is, nearly all of it, only a splendid description of foreign flowers; and the reference to the daisy appears only at the end of the poem. I prefer therefore to quote to you the most noteworthy contemporary composition on the subject—Rudyard Kipling's "Flowers." This poem was evoked by a criticism in *The Athenæum**—alleging that however much Mr. Kipling might praise foreign flowers, the English never could be interested in them or think that any other flowers were so beautiful as English flowers. The poetical reply which takes the form of a song is both pretty and touching:—

*"To our private taste, there is always something a little exotic, almost artificial, in songs which, under an English aspect and dress, are yet so manifestly the product of other skies. They affect us like translations; the very fauna and flora are alien, remote; the dog's-tooth violet is but an ill substitute for the rathe primrose, nor can we ever believe that the wood-robin sings as sweetly in April as the English thrush"
—*The Athenæum*.

Buy my English posies! —
 You that scorn them may
 Won't you greet a friend from home
 Half the world away?
 Green against the draggled drift,
 Faint and frail and first—
 Buy my Northern blood-root
 And I'll know where you were nursed!
 Robin down the logging-road whistles, "Come
 to me,"
 Spring has found the maple-grove, the sap is run-
 ning free;
 All the winds o' Canada call the ploughing-
 rain.
 Take the flower and turn the hour, and kiss your
 love again!

Buy my English posies!—
 You that will not turn,
 Buy my hot-wood clematis,
 Buy a frond o' fern
 Gathered where the Erskine leaps
 Down the road to Lorne—
 Buy my Christmas creeper
 And I'll say where you were born!
 West away from Melbourne dust holidays begin—
 They that mock at Paradise woo at Cora Lynn—
 Through the great South Otway gums sings the
 great South Main—
 Take the flower and turn the hour, and kiss your
 love again!

Buy my English posies! —
 Here's your choice unsold!
 Buy a blood-red myrtle-bloom,
 Buy the kowhai's gold
 Flung for gift on Taupo's face
 Sign that spring is come —
 Buy my clinging myrtle
 And I'll give you back your home!

Broom behind the windy town; pollen o' the
 pine—
 Bell-bird in the leafy deep where the *ratas*
 twine—
 Fern above the saddle-bow, flax upon the plain—
 Take the flower and turn the hour, and kiss your
 love again!

Buy my English posies!
 Ye that have your own
 Buy them for a brother's sake
 Overseas, alone.
 Weed ye trample underfoot
 Flood his heart abrim—
 Bird ye never heeded,
 Oh, she calls his dead to him!
 Far and far our homes are set round the Seven Seas.
 Woe for us if we forget, we that hold by these!
 Unto each his mother-beach, bloom and bird and
 land—
 Masters of the Seven Seas, oh, love and under-
 stand!

I have not quoted the whole: you will see the appeal of the writer clearly enough from these stanzas. His argument is that flowers are dear to us primarily because of their association with home; therefore wherever men live, the flowers of that place must seem dear and beautiful to them. Then he makes a series of little suggestive word pictures of the season of flowers in Canada—the season of flowers in New Zealand—the season of flowers in Australia—the season of flowers in North India. In all of these places Englishmen live and die—in all these places they love the flowers of the land. Why, then, should their brethren in England refuse to be interested in the flowers of an English colony far away? There could be but one answer—want of true affection for their own blood and kin.

The above is written in the style of flower-girl's style and the singer is comparing his literary expression to nose-

gay or bouquet as they are more usually called in those years.

The mention of the name of foreign flowers reminds me of a poem by Browning entitled "The Flower's Name;" you may notice that I have quoted very little of Browning in the course of this lecture, although he has written beautiful things about flowers, but the reason is that Browning seldom or never writes about flowers except in connection with some other subjects, and by way of illustration. All the beautiful things about flowers, even except perhaps the piece of "Women and Roses" which I quoted to you, are to be found in fragments of verse only—three or four lines long. And even the poem on the flower's name is not quite suited to our subject, for it is a love poem only,—and the flower is mentioned only in relation to a woman. But one stanza of it has become so very famous that I must quote it:—

This flower she stopped at, finger on lip,
 Stooped over, in doubt, as settling its claim;
 Till she gave me, with pride to make no slip,
 Its soft meandering Spanish name:
 What a name! Was it love or praise?
 Speech half-asleep or song half-awake?
 I must learn Spanish, one of these days,
 Only for that slow sweet name's sake.

The use of the word "meandering" has made especially famous the fourth line: that is the adjective which we use especially to describe the winding motion of a slow and gentle stream. It is quite true that some of the most beautiful folk-names of flowers in any language are in Spanish; and it is true also that Spanish, especially as spoken by women, is a very sweet language. It is not quite as soft as Italian; but it is very musical with a vowel-music peculiarly its own.

And now, in conclusion, I must quote one bit of religious poetry about flowers. At least I might call it religious

poetry, since it is taken from the greatest of all European poems, and deals with a vision of heaven. But it is religious in the mystical sense chiefly; and you cannot but feel impressed by the splendour of the imagination. I am referring of course to the great poem of Dante; and Dante is not an English poet. But Dante's poem as translated into the English by Longfellow—notwithstanding a great deal of stupid modern criticism, has become an English gem, and its merit is acknowledged at least by the best contemporary judges. So, in one way, I think my quotation really belongs to English literature. The subject is the White Rose of Paradise.

When Dante, in his vision, attained to the Tenth or Highest Heaven, he beheld afar off, in an immeasurable depth, what appeared to him a vast rose of winding light. So dazzling was the center of the Rose that mortal eye might not behold it—only Dante's eyes had been washed with celestial water so that he might have strength to see. Really the heart of the Rose is God himself. But as Dante approaches, he begins to see more clearly the petals of the rose; and those innumerable petals proved to be formed entirely of white souls of millions and millions of human beings. And he sees in the immeasurable distance, what appears to him to be fiery bees or butterflies entering the heart of the flower. But, approaching still more, he perceives that these are angels of light, visiting the souls. Now for the quotation:—

In fashion then as of a snow-white rose
Displayed itself to me the saintly host,
Whom Christ in his own blood had made his bride,
But the other host, that lying sees and sings
The glory of Him who doth enamour it,
And the goodness that created it so noble,
Even as a swarm of bees, that sinks in flowers
One moment, and the next returns again
To where its labour is to sweetness turned,
Sank into the great flower, that is adorned

With leaves so many, and thence reascended
 To where its love abideth evermore.
 Their faces had they all of living flame,
 And wings of gold, and all the rest so white
 No snow unto that limit doth attain.*

Assuredly there is nothing in all Western literature about flowers comparable to this tremendous fancy of a rose composed of countless millions of spirits, with God for the heart of it, and the angels of fire for its bees. Critics believed that Dante was inspired with this grand fancy by the sight of a certain very splendid Gothic window of stained glass, actually representing a rose of one thousand petals. The best way, however, to appreciate the glorious fancy is to look at Dore's illustrations to the "Paradise." There you will see the vision of the Rose as Dante must have imagined it. Viewed from a little distance the picture really seems only the picture of the phantom rose, high in heaven. But when you look more closely, you see that every part of the flower is formed of innumerable little white figures.

Here we may leave this subject of flowers. I have been obliged to treat it rather briefly. But you will see from what we have been able to do, how great a place this subject has in English poetry, and how many aspects. But after all these manifold aspects can be resolved under a very few heads. Flower poetry may be generally classed—

- I. As poetry relating to women and love;
- II. Poetry relating to memory, especially memory of the gentle and melancholy kind;
- III. Poetry of a symbolic, emblematic, or mystical kind.

* *Paradiso*, Canto XXXI