

THE LANGUAGE OF FLOWERS

During the early Victorian revival of chivalry the Language of Flowers had some considerable vogue. The Romeo of the mutton-chop whiskers was expected to keep this delicate symbolism in view, and even to display his wit by some dainty conceits in it. An ignorance of the code was fraught with innumerable dangers. A sprig of lilac was a suggestion, a moss-rosebud pushed the matter, was indeed evidence to go to court upon; and unless Charlotte parried with white poplar--a by no means accessible flower--or apricot blossom, or failing these dabbed a cooling dock-leaf at the fellow, he was at her with tulip, heliotrope, and honeysuckle, peach-blossom, white jonquil, and pink, and a really overpowering and suffocating host of attentions. I suppose he got at last to three-cornered notes in the vernacular; and meanwhile what could a poor girl do? There was no downright "No!" in the language of flowers, nothing equivalent to "Go away, please," no flower for "Idiot!" The only possible defence was something in this way: "Your cruelty causes me sorrow," "Your absence is a pleasure." For this, according to the code of Mr. Thomas Miller (third edition, 1841, with elegantly coloured plates) you would have to get a sweet-pea blossom for Pleasure, wormwood for Absence, and indicate Sorrow by the yew, and Cruelty by the stinging-nettle. There is always a little risk of mixing your predicates in this kind of communication, and he might, for instance, read that his Absence caused you Sorrow, but he could scarcely miss the point of the stinging-nettle. That and the gorse carefully concealed were about the

only gleams of humour possible in the language. But then it was the appointed tongue of lovers, and while their sickness is upon them they have neither humour nor wit.

This Mr. Thomas Miller wrote abundant flowers of language in his book, and the plates were coloured by hand. By the bye, what a blessed thing colour-printing is! These hand-tinted plates, to an imaginative person, are about as distressing as any plates can very well be. Whenever I look at these triumphs of art over the beauties of nature, with all their weary dabs of crimson, green, blue, and yellow, I think of wretched, anæmic girls fading their youth away in some dismal attic over a publisher's, toiling through the whole edition tint by tint, and being mocked the while by Mr. Miller's alliterative erotics. And they are erotics! In one place he writes, "Beautiful art thou, O Broom! on the breezy bosom of the bee-haunted heath"; and throughout he buds and blossoms into similar delights. He wallows in doves and coy toyings and modest blushes, and bowers and meads. He always adds, "Wonderful boy!" to Chatterton's name as if it were a university degree (W.B.), and he invariably refers to Moore as the Bard of Erin, and to Milton as the Bard of Paradise--though Bard of the Bottomless Pit would be more appropriate. However, we are not concerned with Mr. Miller's language so much as with a very fruitful suggestion he throws out, that "it is surely worth while to trace a resemblance between the flower and the emblem it represents" (a turn like that is nothing to Mr. Miller) "which shall at least have some show of reason in it."

Come to think of it, there is something singularly unreasonable about almost all floral symbolism. There is your forget-me-not, pink in the bud, and sapphire in the flower, with a fruit that breaks up into four, the very picture of inconstancy and discursiveness. Yet your lover, with a singular blindness, presents this to his lady when they part. Then the white water-lily is supposed to represent purity of heart, and, mark you, it is white without and its centre is all set about with innumerable golden stamens, while in the middle lies, to quote the words of that distinguished botanist, Mr. Oliver, "a fleshy disc." Could there be a better type of sordid and mercenary deliberation maintaining a fair appearance? The tender apple-blossom, rather than Pretence, is surely a reminder of Eden and the fall of love's devotion into inflated worldliness. The poppy which flaunts its violent colours athwart the bearded corn, and which frets and withers like the Second Mrs. Tanqueray so soon as you bring it to the shelter of a decent home, is made the symbol of Repose. One might almost think Aimé Martin and the other great authorities on this subject wrote in a mood of irony.

The daisy, too, presents you Innocence, "companion of the milk-white lamb," Mr. Miller calls it. I am sorry for the milk-white lamb. It was one of the earliest discoveries of systematic botany that the daisy is a fraud, a complicated impostor. The daisy is not a flower at all. It is a favourite trap in botanical examinations, a snare for artless young men entering the medical profession. Each of the little yellow things in the centre of the daisy is a flower in itself,--if you look at one with a lens you will find it not unlike a cowslip flower,--and the white rays

outside are a great deal more than the petals they ought to be if the Innocence theory is to hold good. There is no such thing as an innocent flower; they are all so many deliberate advertisements to catch the eye of the undecided bee, but any flower almost is simpler than this one. We would make it the emblem of artistic deception, and the confidence trick expert should wear it as his crest.

The violet, again, is a greatly overrated exemplar. It stimulates a certain bashfulness, hangs its head, and passed as modest among our simple grandparents. Its special merit is its perfume, and it pretends to wish to hide that from every eye. But, withal, the fragrance is as far-reaching as any I know. It droops ingenuously. "How could you come to me," it seems to say, "when all these really brilliant flowers invite you?" Mere fishing for compliments. All the while it is being sweet, to the very best of its undeniable ability. Then it comes, too, in early spring, without a chaperon, and catches our hearts fresh before they are jaded with the crowded beauties of May. A really modest flower would wait for the other flowers to come first. A subtle affectation is surely a different thing from modesty. The violet is simply artful, the young widow among flowers, and to hold up such a flower as an example is not doing one's duty by the young. For true modesty commend me to the agave, which flowers once only in half a hundred years, as one may see for oneself at the Royal Botanical Gardens.

Enough has been said to show what scope there is for revision of this sentimental Volapuk. Mr. Martin himself scarcely goes so far as I have

done, though I have merely worked out his suggestion. His only revolutionary proposal is to displace the wind star by the "rathe primrose" for Forsaken, on the strength of a quotation familiar to every reader of Mason's little text-book on the English language. For the rest he followed his authorities, and has followed them now to the remote recesses of the literary lumber-room and into the twopenny book-box. From that receptacle one copy of him was disinterred only a day or so ago; a hundred and seventy pages of prose, chiefly alliterative, several coloured plates, enthusiastic pencil-marking of a vanished somebody, and, besides, an early Victorian flavour of dust and a dim vision of a silent conversation in a sunlit flower garden--altogether I think very cheap at twopence. The fashion has changed altogether now. In these days we season our love-making with talk about heredity, philanthropy, and sanitation, and present one another with Fabian publications instead of wild flowers. But in the end, I fancy, the business comes to very much the same thing.

THE LITERARY REGIMEN

At the risk of offending the young beginner's illusions, he must be reminded of one or two homely but important facts bearing upon literary production. Homely as they are, they explain much that is at first