

A WALK IN JANUARY.

“Then came old Ianuary, wrapped well
In many weeds to keep the cold away;
Yet did he quake and quiver like to quell,
And blow his nayles to warme them if he may;
For they were numb’d with holding all the day
An hatchet keene, with which he felléd wood
And from the trees did lop the needless spray:
Upon an huge Earth-pot Steane he stood,
From whose wide mouth there flowed forth the Romane Flood.”

Spenser.

Spencer, in the *Mutabilitie* cantos of his *Faerie Queen*, represents each month as accompanied by the special implements of husbandry appropriate to the date, and also by its zodiacal sign: January, therefore, stands before us with his hatchet as “the man that bears the water-pot,” or “that pours the water out,” as another version gives it. The “many weeds” that enwrap him—the word still survives among us in the expression “widow’s weeds”—are powerless to protect his numb old hands, for cold is the prevailing characteristic of January. Now, even more than at Christmastide,

[sic] Fiercely flies
The blast of North and East, and ice
Makes daggers at the sharpen’d eaves.”

“As the day lengthens the cold strengthens” is a proverb familiar in various forms throughout most of Europe, and similarly a wild January is looked upon as a misfortune. Tusser tells us that

“A kindly and good Janivier
Freezeth the pot by the fier.”

whereas we know that

“In January if the sun appear,
March and April pay full dear.”

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Another rhyme has it that

“If the grass grow in Janivier
'Twill grow the worse for it all the year.”

As enwrapped, like the month, in “many weeds,” we step out briskly through the keen air, the January landscape appears even more wintry-looking than that of December, “the branches

plumed with snow," or bleak and bare against a grey or pale-blue sky, the streams hushed below their icy coverlets, the icy coverlet that is invaluable in keeping up the temperature of the water below, where the fish move sluggishly, and frogs, newts, and eels are safely ensconced in the mud at the bottom, hibernating till warmer days. Perhaps we surprise a Rabbit who has ventured out to nibble a little bark. Hares, too, for Mr. E. K. Robinson says "Sunny days in early January always give an impetus to the love-making of the hares. All of their courtship is comical; but the funniest part is when two of them are sedately browsing a few feet apart, and suddenly the happy thought that spring is coming seems to strike the male, who without any warning tosses himself several feet in the air and resumes his feeding. After a few seconds' interval he does the same thing again and again, until one of those unaccountable impulses to which hares are subject seizes his wife, and off she goes at a great pace, and he follows. After racing a hundred yards or so they both stop suddenly and continue their meal, which is diversified, as before, by the husband's intermittent acrobatics. He does not merely "jump up" as a dog might do, he is shot up as if from a catapult, and falls down again like a dead hare, sometimes even alighting on his back. It is an amazing performance; but you may see stolid rabbits do it too."

In January the birds begin to sing again after the silence of Autumn and early Winter. The Missel Thrush (*Turdus viscivorus*) is at his best during a storm of wind and rain, when, perched at the top of a tree, he carols joyously for several minutes, stops, and then begins anew. From this habit of singing before and during a storm the Missel Thrush is often called the Stormcock, the name *missel* thrush is an allusion to the mistletoe berries, said to form his favourite food. He is the largest of all British Thrushes, and during the autumn may be seen in little flocks of ten or twenty. In January these flocks disperse and the birds mate. The Robin Redbreast (*Erythaca rubecula*) is a winter songster, but indeed the cheery little fellow sings through-

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out the year, with the exception of his summer moulting time. "The Redbreast, sacred to the household gods," is widely distributed and a universal favourite. His scientific name *Erythaca* comes through the Latin from a confusion with the Greek *έρυθρός* red. Various are the legends accounting for that red breast. One of these describes how, as our Saviour hung on the Cross on Calvary, the bird worked with all its feeble strength to pull the thorns from His brow, piercing its soft breast and staining it with blood. "Blessed be thou," said the Lord, "thou sharer in My sufferings. Wherever thou goest happiness and joy shall follow thee; blue as the heavens shall be thy eggs, and from henceforth thou shalt be the bird of God, the bearer of good tidings."¹ A Welsh tradition gives a different origin; the breast is scorched by fire as the little Robin carries water drop by drop to the souls in purgatory.

"He brings cool dew in his little bill,
And lets it fall on the souls of sin,
You can see the marks on his red breast still
Of fires that scorch as he drops it in."

There is an old belief that “the Robin Redbreast, if he find a man or woman dead, will cover his or her face with moss; and some think that if the body should remain unburied he will cover the whole body.” Every child who has heard the story of the Babes in the Wood knows that

“Robin-red-breast piously
Did cover them with leaves.”

and Shakespeare alludes to this belief in *Cymbeline*.

“I’ll sweeten thy sad grave: thou shalt not lack
The flower that’s like thy face, pale primrose, nor
The azur’d hare-bell, like thy veins; no, nor
The leaf of eglantine, whom not to slander
Out-sweeten’d not thy breath; the ruddock would,
With charitable bill,—O bill, sore-shaming
Those rich-left heirs that let their fathers lie
Without a monument! bring thee all this;
Yea, and furr’d moss besides when flowers are none,
To winter-ground thy corpse. [sic]

(*Cymbeline*, Act IV., Sc. II.).

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Drayton and Webster also refer to this, the latter associating the Wren in the act of mercy, and we know that

“The robin redbreast and the wren
Are God Almighty’s cock and hen.”

The Wren (*Troglodytes europæus, parvulus, or vulgaris*) [sic] is the only member of its family in Europe. It is a very shy little bird with small powers of flight, but its voice, in spite of its size, is clear and powerful; it, too, is a winter singer. Like the Robins, Wrens retain their original haunts, and so much is this the case that Hudson says: “There is a proper Cornish Wren, even as there is a St. Kilda Wren, and as there is a native Wren or local race of *Troglodytes parvulus* in every county, in every village and farmhouse and wood and coppice and hedgerow in the United Kingdom. He is a home-keeping little bird, and when you find him, summer or winter, in town or country, you know that he is native, that his family is a very old one in that part, and was probably settled there before the advent of blue-eyed man and the dawn of a Bronze Age.”

How the Wren became the king of birds is told in Grimms’ *Popular Tales*. In this connection we note that the cruel sport of “hunting the wren” was practised at various dates in different localities; in the South of Ireland, Christmas or St. Stephen’s Day was the time selected, but the origin of the curious custom is unknown. Timbs, in his *Something for Everybody*, says in regard to this, “Its origin is thus traced by Aubrey in his *Miscellanies*:—The last battle fought in the North of Ireland, between the Protestants and the Papists, was in Glinsuly, near Letter-kenny, in the county of Donegal. Near the same place a party of the Protestants had been surprised, sleeping, by the Popish Irish, were it not for several wrens that

just wakened them by dancing and pecking on the drums as the enemy were approaching. For this reason the wild Irish mortally hate these birds to this day, calling them the Devil's servants, and killing them wherever they catch them; they teach their children to thrust them full of thorns: you will see sometimes on holidays a whole parish running, like madmen, from hedge to hedge, a wren-hunting."

By some authorities the antipathy of the Irish to the Wren is connected with the invasion of the Danes. Another explanation is that by the Druids it was esteemed to be the King of Birds, and it was the favourite bird of the augurs of old. The

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superstitious respect thus paid to it gave offence, it is said, "to our first Christian missionaries, and by their command the wren is still hunted and killed by the peasants on Christmas Day; and on the following (St. Stephen's Day), he is carried about, hung by the leg in the centre of two hoops crossing each other at right angles; and a procession is made in every village, of men, women, and children, singing an Irish catch, importing him to be the king of all birds."—(Col. Vallencey's *Collectanea de Rebus Hibernicus*). Timbs gives a song, beginning

"The Wren, the Wren,
The King of all Birds,
St. Stephen's Day,
He was caught in the furze."

but the origin suggested by the last explanation does not seem very probable.

The Hedge-Sparrow, Greater Titmouse, Thrush, Chaffinch, and Blackbird, may now be heard. Rooks return to their nests and flocks of Larks, Linnets, and Buntings may be seen. The Nuthatch (*Sitta cæsia*) will approach our houses in search of food, he earned his name by his habit of fixing nuts in the crevices of trees, then hammering with his beak—each blow delivered from the hip with full force—till the shell is broken. When nuts are unattainable he feeds on insects and seeds, and in pursuit of the former he will run about the bark of trees, poking into crevices and tearing off large pieces, and whereas the Woodpecker, whose note may be heard this month, always ascends a tree spirally, the Nuthatch runs freely in all directions with a mouse-like movement. Other names for this bird are Nutbreaker, Nuthacker, Nuttapper, Nutpecker, and Nutjobber.

In sheltered nooks under hedgerows young leaves are sprouting, and insects swarming; Gnats, especially, dance gaily whenever the weather is even moderately mild.

Spite of frosty nights January has a goodly list of blossoms, the Red and the White Dead-nettle, Groundsel, Common Furze, Butterbur, Chickweed, and Snowdrop, Bearsfoot and the Fetid Hellebore, Barren Strawberry, Shepherd's Purse, perhaps the Field Speedwell (*Veronica agrestis*) or a stray Dandelion, Daisy, or Primrose, the latter especially in the valleys of Devon and Cornwall, while in the garden we have the Christmas Rose (*Helleborus niger*), the Winter Aconite, the curiously scented Mezereon, the Yellow Jasmine, and perhaps a Wallflower, Stock, or Polyanthus.

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The little Red Dead-nettle is the first of the year's flowers, outdistancing the Snowdrop by a week or more. The leaves of both red (*Lamium purpureum*) and White (*L. album*) closely

resemble those of the Common Stinging Nettle, hence the name, but they are easily distinguished by their flowers, as also by the fact that the dead-nettles have *square* stems. The plants belong to totally different orders, the Stinging Nettle being a member of the Urticaceæ, having its green blossoms in long clusters, and allied to the Elm and Hop, whereas the Dead-nettles belong to the great Labiate order and are related to the various Mints, Woundworts, Germanders, Bugle, etc. The labiates are readily recognised by their flowers, which are usually divided into two lips, of which the lower lip is larger and three-lobed, the upper less distinctly two-lobed. They are a truly model family, for while no single member is injurious, many are most valuable on account of their volatile oil; menthol and patchouli are extracted from various species, and Lavender, Peppermint, Pennyroyal and Rosemary are well-known in pharmacy. The Rev. C. A. Johns in his *Flowers of the Field*, tells us that the last—Rosemary—“is one of the plants used in the preparation of Eau de Cologne and Hungary water, and the admired flavour of Narbonne honey is ascribed to the bees feeding on the flowers of this plant, as that of the honey of Hymettus is indebted for its flavour to Wild Thyme,” also a member of the labiatæ.

Like Robin Redbreast the Common Groundsel (*Senecio vulgaris*) is a year-long friend, for there is not a month in which we cannot find its little yellow blossoms. Both these and the leaves are a favourite food of small birds, and in former times the Groundsel was in great repute in medicine for poulticing. The name of the genus is from the Latin *senex*, an old man, in allusion to the hairy white pappus.

The curious Butterbur (*Petasites officinalis*) with its club-like head of flowers, belongs to the same genus as the Winter Heliotrope (*P. fragrans*) of our shrubberies, and like it is a most persistent weed, ousting all other plants in its vicinity. The flowers appear sometime in advance of the broad leaves, one to four feet in diameter, which have given the genus its botanical name, Greek πέτασος a sunshade, and also its English title, Butterbur or Butterdock, the foliage being employed in packing butter. Its similarity in leaf to another “dock,” the Burdock, is very strong, and in summer it is often mistaken for that plant.

The little Chickweed (*Stellaria media*) like the Groundsel

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is a favourite food of small birds, hence its name. There are three British species, of which the Common Chickweed is much the most abundant, flourishing by every way-side. Of this plant it has been said that it “has followed the Briton all over the world.” The other species are the Great Chickweed (*S. aquatica*) which, as its scientific name implies, grows in moist ground—it flowers in summer; and Perennial Chickweed (*S. umbrosa*).

The beautiful little Snowdrop (*Galanthus nivalis*) cannot, strictly speaking, be counted among wild flowers, though it may be found in woods in the West of England. It seems to have been originally imported from the continent by the various religious orders, who cultivated it in the abbey garden and employed its snowy blossoms in the service for the Purification of the Blessed Virgin (February 2nd). An old legend tells us that the first snowdrops sprang up to comfort Eve after she had forfeited Paradise. As she sat weeping amid the thick snow an angel approached and with consoling words caught and breathed upon a falling flake, which fell to earth as a flower. “This bud, Eve,” said he, “is an earnest that summer is not dead,” and when the angelic visitor returned to heaven

“Lo, where last his wings have swept the snow,
A quaintly-fashioned ring of milk-white snowdrops blow.”

and indeed the Snowdrop, with its message of Divine Love and Purity, has comforted and strengthened many sorrowful hearts since that day. The French call the Snowdrop *Perce-neige*, snow piercer, and the Germans, *Schneeglöckchen*, little Snowbell, the Spaniards know it as *Campanulla blanca*, and the Welsh as *Clockmaben*, Baby-bell.

Our next flowers, the Green Hellebore, or Bear’s-foot (*Helleborus viridis*) and Fetid Hellebore (*H. fætidus*) are sometimes found in thickets on chalky soil, usually near houses, but cannot be considered indigenous. The Fetid or Stinking Hellebore may be distinguished from the Green by the purple tips of its sepals. Another name for this plant is *Setterwort*.

The Shepherd’s Purse (*Bursa pastoris*) is readily distinguished by the heart-shaped seed-vessels which give it both its Latin and English name. It belongs to the *Cruciferae* or Cabbage family, as do the Wallflower, Stock, and various Cresses. The flowers of this order are easily recognised by the four petals, placed cross-wise. There are at least 1200 different species of [p 8]

Cruciferae, the greater number natives of the temperate zones, though Arctic vegetation is largely [sic] composed of them. None are poisonous, and the rich nitrogen and sulphur they contain render them invaluable as food and medicine. The cultivated Turnips, Radish, and Sea-kale are members of the same family as the humble little Shepherd’s Purse by the roadside.

The Barren Strawberry or Strawberry-leaved Cinquefoil (*Potentilla fragariastrum*) may be distinguished from the Wood Strawberry, which flowers later, by the hairiness of the under surface of its leaves, and by its notched petals, those of the Wood Strawberry being entire. Both plants belong to the *Rosaceae* but are of different genera.

It is still early for catkins, but we cannot fail to notice the yellow “lambs’ tails” of the Hazel, which, stiff and green throughout the last few months, are now flexible and ripe, shaking their powdery dust over our fingers as we gather a spray. The Hazel is fertilized by wind, not insects, and therefore like all wind fertilized trees, must produce a considerable quantity of pollen to allow for wastage. The small seed-bearing flowers are less conspicuous, but beautiful with their little crimson stigmas. They appear rather later than the catkins but both may be found before the end of the month.

¹ The eggs of the Robin are whitish in colour, marked with brownish-red, but those of the American Robin-redbreast, *Turdus migratorius*, a species of thrush, are blue. See Longfellow’s *Kéramos*:

“The blue eggs in the robin’s nest
Will soon have wings and beak and breast,
And flutter and fly away.”