

A WALK IN APRIL.

[sic] Next came fresh Aprill, full of lustyhed,
And wanton as a kid whose horne new buds:
Upon a Bull he rode, the same which led
Europa floting through th'Argolick fluds:
His hornes were gilden all with golden studs,
And garnished with garlonds goodly dight
Of all the fairest flowres and freshest buds
Which th'earth brings forth; and wet he seem'd in sight
With waves, through which he waded for his Love's delight."
—*Spenser*.

Wet indeed, for are not showery days characteristic of "April weather, rain and sunshine both together," yet "April showers bring milk and meal" and

"A growing April and a dry May
Are good for wheat, but bad for hay."

Yet cold and windy weather are also favourable, for

"A cold April
The barn will fill."

and

"When April blows his horn
It's good for both hay and corn."

while

"If it thunders on All Fool's day
It brings good crops of corn and hay."
"Averil le doux,
Quand il se fache le pire des tous,"

say the French, while to the Italians, April and May are the keys of the year; and the Spaniards have a proverb, "I will give you the whole world if you will give me April and May."

Now birds are singing, green things growing, insects humming, trees unfolding their tender leaves, copse and meadow

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garnished with "all the fairest flowers or freshest buds, which th'earth brings forth," for

"April, with his hack and his bill,

Plants a flower on every hill.”

and

“Groweth seed and bloweth meed,
And springeth the wde nu,
Sing cucca.”

German legend tells us that the Cuckoo was once a baker’s man who used to help himself to a share of the dough and call “gukuk, gukuk,” “look, look,” to distract attention when the loaves were drawn from the oven. For his dishonesty he was changed into a bird and condemned evermore to repeat his cry, hence his name of *Becker knecht*, and the white spots, as of flour, upon his feathers. According to Timbs “the cuckoo begins to sing early in the season with the interval of a minor third, the bird then proceeds to a major third, next to a fourth, then a fifth, after which his voice breaks without attaining a minor sixth ... from this bird has been derived the *minor scale* ... the cuckoo’s couplet being the *minor third* sung downwards. [sic] (*A Garland for the Year*). An old rhyme, date 1587, runs:

“In Aprill, the Koocoo can sing her song by rote,
In June, of tune she cannot sing a note;
At first, koocoo, koocoo, sing still can she do;
At last, kooke, kooke, kooke, six kookes to one koo.”

The “water-bubbling” note of the female Cuckoo, for it is usually, but not invariably, the male that calls, has been rendered as kwik-wik-wik by Brehm, and kwow-ow-ow-ow by Seebohm.

The Common Cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*) is a large bird, slightly over a foot in length and widely distributed in range. Its eggs are small in comparison to its size, and recent investigations show that it lays a large number, perhaps twenty, in a season. These are produced at intervals and at one time it was thought that they were carried in the mother’s beak to the nest of the foster-parents, only one egg being deposited in a nest, which is carefully chosen to correspond with that in which the bird itself was reared. The valuable investigations and photographic films of Mr. E. P. Chance have, however, demonstrated that in many cases, at least, the egg is actually laid in the nest, the cuckoo first removing one already there and holding it in her beak while laying her own. Afterwards she backs out of the nest, tail first, so leaving

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the front grass and foliage undisturbed. Then, flying to a distant tree, she adds insult to injury by devouring the stolen egg.

To turn one’s silver on first hearing the cuckoo is a very old custom, and it is lucky to have both money and a knife in one’s pocket on this occasion, for then we shall lack neither wealth nor sport throughout the year. Young girls demand of the bird the date of their marriage, each “cuckoo” signifying a year, and the time of one’s death is ascertained by older folk in the same way. This last custom is at any rate as old as the 13th century, for Caesarius (1222) tells us of a man who, on his way to enter a monastery, heard a cuckoo, and stopped to count the number of the calls—twenty-two. “Oh,” said the half-hearted would-be novice, “as I

have twenty-two years longer to live, why should I mortify myself in a monastery for all that time? I will go and live merrily for twenty years, and it will be quite time enough to betake me to the monastery for the other two.”

The Nightingale (*Erythacus luscinia*) also returns in April, but only east of the Exe and south of York, and indeed, its exquisitely liquid notes are rarely heard beyond the valley of the Trent. These notes, according to Milton,

“First heard before the shallow cuckoo’s bill
Portend success in love.”

The Nightingale belongs to the same genus as the Robin, and the young of both, like various members of the Turdidæ, have the spotted breast of the true Thrush.

The first of the Swallows to appear is the little brown Sand Martin (*Hirundo* or *Chelidon riparia*) which excavates a tunnel two or three feet long, generally in some sandy bank, in which it places its nest of grass and feathers; the tunnel is sloped upwards to prevent the entrance of moisture, and is used year after year. The House Martin (*H.* or *C. urbica*) is readily distinguished from the House or Chimney Swallow (*H.* or *C. rustica*) by the white patch on its back, pure white under parts, and square tail, whereas the slightly large [sic] Chimney Swallow has no patch, a long forked tail, and a black necklace above his chestnut throat. Everywhere the Swallows are welcome visitors, and most European countries have a variant of our own rhyme:

“Robinets and jenny-wrens
Are God Almighty’s friends;
The blackbirds and swallows
Are God Almighty’s scholars.”

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while

“The robin and the redbreast, the martin and the swallow,
If you take an egg o’ theirs, bad luck is sure to follow.”

Nevertheless, Continental folk-lore is uncomplimentary to the Swallows; they alone among birds chattered and flew about as usual during the dread hour of the Crucifixion, hence they must never rest, but seek their food in waste and desolate places. Again, a Swallow stole the spool of cotton and scissors with which the Blessed Virgin was working, and hid them, denying the theft, and for evermore the bird bears the evidence of its guilt, the white spool on the chest, the scissors in the forked tail.

Of very similar appearance to the Swallows, though really allied to the Humming-birds and Goat-suckers, is the Common Swift (*Micropus apus*). It arrives in April and May, and leaves in August. In flight it is swifter than any British bird, hence its name, and while flying it makes sudden rapid turns and twists more like a bat than a bird; these, in conjunction with its sickle-shaped wings and dusky body, serve to distinguish it from the Swallows. It is about seven inches long, and its note is a shrill short scream, whereas that of the Swallow is a soft twitter. Swifts never alight on ground or tree, even building their nests—in holes in walls, cliffs, etc., or under

the eaves of cottages—with straw and feathers caught on the wing.

The Blackcap (*Sylvia atricapilla*) in song second only to the Nightingale, and the pretty little Whitethroat (*S. rufa*), Peggy Whitethroat, are April arrivals, the latter builds its nest in a low bush or among nettles, etc., on the ground, hence its name of Nettle-creeper. Now the Meadow-pipit, also known as the Meadow or Titlark (*Anthus arboreus*) sings joyously as he rises towards the clouds, and the long-tailed Tit, Linnet, Chaffinch, and Stonechat are busy weaving grass, hair, moss, etc., into cosy nests; the Wren makes a domed structure in a bank or at the root of a tree, the Bullfinch uses twigs and fine roots, the Meadow-pipit builds under a tuft of grass, the Sheldrake and Redshank by the shore, the former in some sandy burrow, hence its name Burrow-duck, the latter under a tuft of grass or low shrub. The Great Crested Grebe and Lesser Grebe or Dabchick place their nests of matted leaves almost upon the water, and the Moor or Water-hen by the edge, while the Wild Swan is even now sitting on her “nest among the reeds.” Like all water-birds the young ones are covered with fluffy down and take to their native element with surprising rapidity.

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Now the caterpillars of the Magpie or Gooseberry Moth (*Abraxas grossulariata*) are found, the larvæ reproducing the white ground, speckled with black and yellow spots, of the adult insect, other caterpillars also and various moths, including the Quaker Moth, Light Underwing, Pine Beauty, Mullein, and Brindled Beauty Moths, also the Orange-tip and Azure or Holly Blue Butterfly.

Now the Sycamore or Great Maple, Hornbeam, Black and White Poplar, Beech and Oak, are unfolding their leaves, the Beech covered with drooping catkins like tiny balls, and the Oak with yellow-green tassels; the Ash, too, is expanding its curious dark flowers, and the Larch is beautiful with its “rosy plumelets.” The seeds will be scattered next Spring, but the cones remain on the tree for several years. The Larch, unlike other conifers, casts its leaves in the autumn, but it is interesting to notice that the young trees are partially evergreen for their first four years, evidently a survival of a former state. Most of the Willows, of which we have seventeen or eighteen British species, flower in April. Among them the Sallows are conspicuous by their golden Palms, a veritable treasure-house for hungry insects, especially bees, who store the honey, and employ the pollen for bee-bread. Like all Willows, the various species of Sallow are diœcious, the male tree bearing the staminate gold Palms, still worn in the North of England on “Palm Sunday,” and the female the pistillate silver Pussy-palms. The seed-vessels lengthen into pods which presently open, and the seeds, each enveloped in a covering of fluffy down, are driven in clouds before the wind.

“In Rome upon Palm Sunday,
They bear true Palms:
The Cardinals bow reverently,
And sing old psalms:
Elsewhere those Psalms are sung
’Mid Olive branches:
The Hollybough supplies their place
Among the avalanches:
More nothern [sic] climes must be content

With the sad Willow.”

The Yew, too, is, and was, an ecclesiastical palm, and this most probably accounts for the planting of the tree, as also the Willow, in churchyards. The White or Huntingdon Willow (*Salix alba*), with downy leaves, and the Crack Willow (*S. fragilis*) so called because its twigs break off with a clean snap, are often

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pollarded; the Almond-leaved, French or Brown Norfolk Willow (*S. triandra*) is frequently cut down and treated as an osier.

In the woods the Wild Service tree (*Pyrus torminalis*) is in flower, in some places the Wild Pear, the original of our cultivated Pear, also Wild Currant, Black and Red, the fore-runners of the garden varieties. Below, the ground is covered with Primroses, Violets, Wood Anemones, and the delicate bells of the Wood Sorrel, while

“The crumpled carpet of the dry leaves brown
Avails not to keep down the hyacinth blades.”

The Blue-bell or Wild Hyacinth (*Scilla festalis* or *nutans*) was formerly known as Harebell, and is so called in White’s *Naturalists’ Calendar* and in the appropriate rhyme, the flower being dedicated to the Saint,

“On St. George’s Day when blue is worn
The blue harebells the field adorn.”

On the other hand the Bluebell of Scotland is our present Harebell (*Campanula rotundifolia*). For the old custom of wearing a blue coat on St. George’s Day (April 23rd) the origin is unknown, but the practice is alluded to in an old play, *Ram Alley*,

“I will be knight,
Wear a blue coat on great St. George’s Day.”

The thick viscid juice of the Wild Hyacinth was formerly used for stiffening linen. The name was given in memory of the beautiful youth Hyacinthus, slain by the jealous Zephyr who diverted the heavy discus thrown by Apollo full against the head of the unfortunate youth. After vainly trying to restore him to life Apollo raised a beautiful flower from his blood, a flower bearing on its petals the mystic letters, *ai*, “alas” or “always.” Our English species being without such markings it is known as *Hyacinthus non-scriptus*, not written. Another species of the same genus, the Vernal Squill (*Scilla Verna*) grows on the sea coast, bearing clusters of starry blue flowers.

With the Hyacinths we shall probably find the Early Purple Orchis (*Orchis mascula*), the Male Fool’s Orchis of White’s *Calendar*; from its tuberous root was extracted the salep so popular in olden days. The Primrose (*Primula acaulis*) from the Latin *primus*, first, in allusion to its early appearance, gives its own name to its colour, which the Rev. C. A. Johns, in his *Flowers of the Field*, describes as “a pale yellow, or as artists often maintain, a delicate green.” Spenser

speaks of “the primrose greene”

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in his *Shepherd’s Calendar*. Chaucer writes of the “primerolle.” and Lydgate of “the froisshe prymerollys,” but it is uncertain which is the particular plant intended, for at one time the Daisy, and later the Cowslip, was the *Fiore di prima vera*, flower of early spring, contracted to “primaverola” and Frenchified to “Primverole.” Ben Jonson writes of “the primrose drop, the Spring’s own spouse,” and the flower was used in love divinations, while legend speaks of Paralisos, the son of Flora, who pined and died when separated from a loved nymph, and was transformed by his mother into a Primrose. Primrose Hill takes its name from the flowers that once grew there, and in the legend of Sir Owain we are told of the Paradise of the blest

“Faire were her erbers with flowers,
Rose and lili, divers couleurs,
Primros and parwink (periwinkle).”

The Dark Wood Violet (*Viola riviniana*) may be distinguished from the Pale (*V. silvestris*) not only by the colour, but because the former has many branching veins in the lowest petal, the latter only a few parallel ones. The spur of the Dog Violet (*V. canina* or *ericetorum*) is yellow, the Marsh Violet (*V. palustris*) is common on boggy ground, while the Hairy Violet (*V. hirta*) grows on chalky soil.

The delicate green leaves of the Wood Sorrel (*Oxalis acetosella*) are so sensitive to cold that they not only close at night but even during the day when the weather is bad. Gerarde describes them as

“Heart-shaped and triply-folded; and its root
Creeping like beaded coral.”

The Wood-Sorrel is also known as “Alleluia,” because its appearance coincides with the return of Alleluia at Easter, and it is most probably the original Shamrock plucked by St. Patrick to illustrate the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity. The scientific name is from the Greek οξύς acid; the well-known salt of lemon and salt of sorrel are prepared from this plant, which is also widely used on the Continent as salad.

Now, too,

“Daisies pied, and violets blue,
And lady-smocks all silver white,
And cuckoo buds of yellow hue,
Do paint the meadows with delight.”

This well known reference to cuckoo-buds is the only one in English literature, and it is supposed that Cowslips or Buttercups were the flowers intended. The Ladysmock, however,
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(*Cardamine pratensis*) is widely known as Cuckoo Flower, its other name was originally Our Lady's Smock, from the resemblance of the pale-coloured blossoms to linen spread out to dry.

In Yorkshire, Spring is said to have fully come when one can plant one's foot upon nine Daisies, "those pearled arcturi of the earth" the Saxon daeges ege, eye of day, Chaucer's "of all flouris the floure." The scientific name, *Bellis perennis*, is from the Latin *bellus*, pretty, and the plant was so known in the time of Pliny; to the Italians it is Pratolina, meadow flower, or Fiore di Primavera; to the French Marguerite, pearl; and to the Germans Gänselblumchen, little goose-flower, but also Tausendschönchen, a thousand prettinesses. Beloved by poets and children, to the Scots it is the Bairnswort, bairn's weed, and the Gowan of Burns and Hamilton. Sidney Dobell, in his charming *Chanted Calendar*, after likening the Primrose to a maiden watching a battle from a tower, and the Wind-flower to one wounded and dishevelled "with purple streaks of woe," says of the Daisies:

"Like a bannered show's advance
While the crowd runs by the way,
With ten thousand flowers about them
They came trooping through the fields.
As a happy people come,
So came they.
As a happy people come
When the war has rolled away,
With dance and tabor, pipe and drum,
And all make holiday.
[sic]
Then came the cowslip,
Like a dancer at the fair,
She spread her little mat of green,
And on it danced she.
With a fillet bound about her brow,
A fillet round her happy brow,
A golden fillet round her brow,
And rubies in her hair."

These rubies are the "fairy favours" spoken of by Puck, the gift of the fairy queen. A country name for the Cowslip is "Fairy Cups," and we know "When pattering raindrops begin to fall, tiny faces look wistfully through blades of grass for some friendly cowslip. In a moment little gossamer-robed forms are clambering up the stalks, rushing each one, into the nearest bell. Then comes a symphony of soft sweet voices, and he who listens may hear, perchance, a melody of Fairyland." The Cowslip (*Primula veris*) is the German Schlüsselblume, the Key-flower which admits into the Palace of Nature, also the Himmelschlüs-

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selchen, or Keys of Heaven, while an old name is St. Peter's Herb or Herb Peter, and in Holland and Sweden the flower is the Key of May. Old herbalists valued the plant as a remedy against palsy, and called it *herba paralysis*, and in some parts of England it is still known as Palsy-wort,

also Paigle, which possibly means “drooping.” Ben Jonson, in *Pan’s Anniversary*, speaks of

“Blue harebells, pagles, pansies, calaminth.”

Like the Cowslip, the Oxlip (*Primula elatior*) is a member of the Primrose family, the close connection between the three is easily apparent if we split a Primrose plant in two, when the flower-stalks will be seen to spring from a common stem, as do those of the Cowslip and Oxlip.

The Common Arum, Cuckoo-pint, or Wake Robin (*Arum maculatum*) belongs to the same family as the Trumpet-lily or Calla, and its pale-green spathe is unmistakable. Inside is the club-like spadix, purple or yellowish-white, surrounded at foot by the anthers and seed-vessels, the latter producing the rings of scarlet berries so conspicuous in autumn. It is uncertain whether the flies so often found within the spathe are imprisoned solely for purposes of fertilization, which in the Arum is most interesting and curious, or whether they are utilised as food. Children know this plant as “Lords and Ladies,” the purple spikes being the Lords, the pale-coloured ones the Ladies; it has been suggested that the name was originally Our Lord and Our Lady, and the plant is considered an Emblem of the Passion, representing the Column and the Scourge; the leaves, too, are spotted with Blood from the Cross, whence the Arum is known as “Passion Flower” and “Gethsemane”, the latter name is also given to the Early Purple Orchis, whose leaves are similarly marked. Though the Arum is highly poisonous, containing sharp needle-like crystals which effectually protect its leaves from cattle, etc., a kind of flour was formerly prepared from the root, and known as Portland arrowroot.

We must only briefly notice the remaining April flowers; the Greater Stitchwort (*Stella holostea*) also known as Satin-flower and Adder’s meat; Garlic Mustard, Jack-by-the-Hedge, or Sauce-alone (*Sisymbrium alliaria*) with white clustered flowers, heart-shaped, large-toothed leaves, and strong scent of garlic; the Wood or Wild Strawberry (*Fragaria vesca*), Goldilocks (*Ranunculus auricomus*), the handsome Yellow Dead Nettle (*Lamium galeobdolon*) called also Archangel and, more prosaically, Weasel-

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snout; the little Moschatel (*Adoxa Moschatellina*), the Rue-leaved or Three-fingered Saxifrage (*Saxifraga tridactylites*) and White Meadow Saxifrage (*S. granulata*), Dog’s Mercury (*Mercurialis perennis*), the Great Wood-Rush (*Juncoides silvaticum*), and the Broad-leaved Hairy Wood-Rush (*J. pilosum*), the Wild Beaked Parsley or Chervil (*Anthriscus Lepidium hirtum*), the Common Vetch (*Vicia sativa*) and the Herb Robert, Shining, and Soft or Dove’s Foot Cranesbills (*Geranium robertianum*) [sic], *G. lucidum* and *G. molle*), the various Speedwells of which Germander Speedwell (*Veronica officinalis*) known as Angel’s eyes, Blue Speedwell, Bird’s or Cat’s eye, is one of the most familiar. The genus, of which there are nineteen British species, is easily recognised by the fact that the lowest of the four petals is narrower than the other three, the name—an equivalent for “farewell,” refers to the fleeting nature of these petals, and in Norway the plant is known as “Man’s Faith.” Like the Cowslip and Anemone, the little Speedwell is a fairy flower.

The Common Wayside Mouse-ear Chickweed (*Cerastium triviale*) may be distinguished from the Broad-leaved or Clustered Mouse-ear Chickweed (*C. glomeratum*) by its straggling stems and clusters of flowers with lengthening stalks, the Clustered Mouse-ear Chickweed

having erect stems and short-stalked flowers. The flower stalks of the Yellow and Blue, or Particoloured Scorpion-grass (*Myosotis vericolor*) and of the Early Field Scorpion-grass (*M. collina*) curl up in serpent-like coils till the flower opens, hence the name. Both are of the Forget-me-not genus, the first bearing pale yellow flowers, turning later to blue; the second, a smaller plant, minute bright blue blossoms. Now we may find the pink waxy bells of the Whortle-berry, Bilberry or Whinberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*) and the brownish-purple blossoms of the Black Crow or Crake-berry (*Empetrum nigrum*) and in the cornfields the Mouse-tail (*Myosurus minimus*) the scientific name is the Greek equivalent for the English; the little plant is easily known by the resemblance of the upright spike of pale yellowish flowers to a mouse's tail. The Field Madder (*Sherardia arvensis*) grows on cultivated, and Alexanders (*Symrniium olusatrum*) on waste ground. The Wallflower (*Cheiranthus cheiri*) has been naturalised on old walls in the South of England; the Yellow Figwort (*Scrophularia vernalis*) is also a local plant; so is the Common Box-tree (*Buxus sempervirens*) found on chalky downs, and probably indigenous.

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Among uncommon and rare flowers are the Large-flowered Bitter Cress (*Cardamine amara*), the Spring Cinquefoil (*Potentilla verna*), the Spring Gentian (*Gentiana verna*)—wet limestone rocks in Northern counties and Ireland; Umbelliferous Jagged Chickweed (*Holosteum umbellatum*)—old walls in Norfolk and Suffolk, the Narrow-leaved Lungwort (*Pulmonaira angustifolia*)—woods in Dorsetshire, Isle of Wight and the New Forest. The Common Lungwort (*P. officinalis*) is sometimes found as a garden escape. The Speedwell-leaved Whitlow Grass (*Draba muralis*) grows on limestone hills in the West, the Purple Mountain Saxifrage (*Saxifraga oppositifolia*) on rocks in the North, the Tasteless Mountain Currant (*Ribes alpinum*), like the other two species, in Northern woods, while the Fritillary, or Snake's-head (*Fritillaria meleagris*) has its habitat in watery meadows in the South. The Spring Vetch (*Vicia lathyroides*) and Naked-stalked Teesdalia (*Teesdalia nudicaulis*) the only British species, prefer a dry situation, and the Wild Tulip (*Tulipa sylvestris*) is occasionally found in chalk pits, the Spider Orchis, too (*Pophrys aranifera*) on chalky soil, and the Toothed Medick (*Medicago denticulata*) on sandy ground. The Bulbiferous Coral-root (*Cardamine bulbifera*) grows in shady places, chiefly in the Eastern counties, and the Keeled-fruited Corn Salad (*Valerianella carinata*) is occasionally found on banks, but is not native.