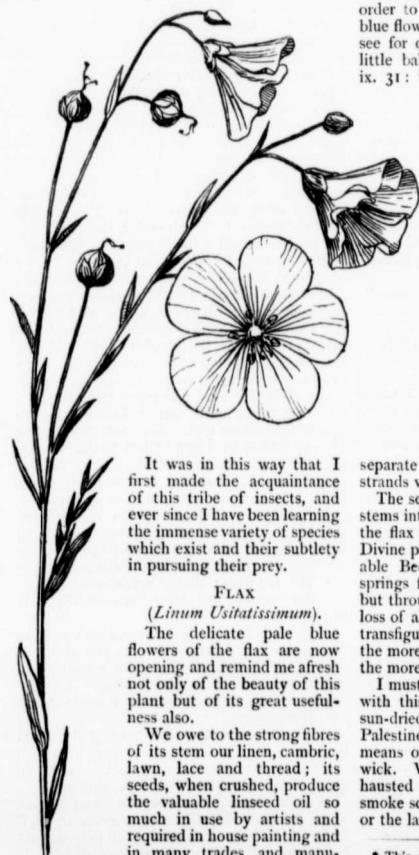


sizes, ranging from a minute creature like a small gnat up to the one figured in the illustration. When we consider that almost every insect has one or more enemy of this kind we may imagine that Ichneumons abound in our gardens and, when once our attention has been called to them, we shall quickly know them by sight. They are peculiarly restless insects, always prying into flowers, and running up and down the leaves in a never-ending search for their prey. They are doubtless of great use in keeping down the hosts of caterpillars that feed upon our vegetables, and all through the spring and summer months this secret warfare is going on.

The Ichneumon fly is furnished with a long thin ovipositor which enables it to pierce the skin of the caterpillar and deposit a number of eggs in its body; these hatch into minute grubs, which feed upon the internal organs of the caterpillar. The victim does not appear to suffer; it goes on consuming its food and growing until the Ichneumon grubs are nearly mature. They then attack its vital organs until the caterpillar dies, and the grubs, after turning into chrysalides, hatch into the perfect insect.

I well remember my surprise and disappointment some years ago when a caterpillar, from which I expected to rear a very beautiful moth, instead of turning into a chrysalis suddenly became covered with small yellow cocoons, which, I need not say, presently turned into an unwelcome swarm of Ichneumon flies.



FLAX.

It was in this way that I first made the acquaintance of this tribe of insects, and ever since I have been learning the immense variety of species which exist and their subtlety in pursuing their prey.

FLAX

(*Linum Usitatissimum*).

The delicate pale blue flowers of the flax are now opening and remind me afresh not only of the beauty of this plant but of its great usefulness also.

We owe to the strong fibres of its stem our linen, cambric, lawn, lace and thread; its seeds, when crushed, produce the valuable linseed oil so much in use by artists and required in house painting and in many trades and manufactures.

We all know the remedial effects of linseed-tea and the value of the ground meal which forms soothing poultices: to relieve inflammatory pain, and finally when the oil has been pressed out of the seeds the mass of husk which remains is made into cakes which form an excellent and fattening food for cattle.

Surely we ought to look upon such a plant as this with admiring gratitude as we remember its many uses.

Those who possess a garden or even a few pots upon a window ledge can easily grow their own flax plants by sowing a pinch of the seed in May.



SNAKE-FLY AND LARVA.

Snake-fly, five times nat. size.
Larva, six times nat. size.

It only needs good soil and watering in order to produce an abundance of its delicate blue flowers, and when they are over we can see for ourselves the round seed capsules, like little balls, which are alluded to in Exodus ix. 31: "The barley was in the ear and the flax was balled," that is swollen.*

This leads us to reflect upon the great antiquity of this plant and its frequent mention in Scripture.

It is believed that flax has been cultivated in Egypt for five thousand years, and great quantities of it must therefore have been grown to supply the immense demand for mummy cloth, as it was invariably made of linen either fine or coarse.

From a reference in Ezekiel xxvii. 7, we learn that sails for ships were made of linen, which again shows that the fibre could be woven, either into the finest cambric or a cloth of the coarsest and most durable nature.

When the stems are mature they are dried and split, then steeped in water and afterwards hackled into threads by means of a comb to

separate the coarser fibres and leave the fine strands which are fit for weaving purposes.

The severe processes required to make the stems into material for the loom have led to the flax plant being used as an emblem of the Divine purposes of earthly trials. The Venerable Bede thus speaks of it. "The flax springs from the earth green and flourishing; but through much rough usage and with the loss of all its native sap and verdure is at last transfigured into raiment white as snow; thus the more that true holiness is tried and afflicted the more brightly does its beauty come forth."

I must add one other thought in connection with this plant. The simple little lamp of sun-dried clay, used by the village people in Palestine is filled with olive oil and burns by means of a few fibres of flax inserted as a wick. When the supply of oil becomes exhausted this flax-wick gives out a pungent smoke so that either more oil must be added or the lamp extinguished.

* This derivation is taken from Professor Skeats' *Etymological English Dictionary*.

In Isaiah xlii. 3 we find the promise, "The smoking flax shall He not quench," referring to the infinite mercy of the Saviour who will cherish the least spark of grace in the human heart and foster it until the dimness passes into a shining light.

The flax of commerce is extensively grown in Ireland to supply material for the manufacture of linen; it is also cultivated in some parts of Scotland and may be found growing wild in fields and waste places in England, but is not truly indigenous.

Our only British species of flax is *Linum catharticum* or white flax. A graceful little

plant growing about five inches high with small drooping white flowers. It is said to be violently poisonous.

THE SNAKE-FLY (*Raphidia Ophiopsis*).

The hot weather we have lately had has driven quantities of different kinds of flies indoors.

Certain passage windows on the north side of this house are full of interest for me, as I find there quite an assortment of winged creatures, not the common house-fly, but large and small Ichneumons with their ever-quivering antennae, minute gall-flies, brilliant green and golden sun-flies and a host of others whose names and life-histories are as yet unknown to me.

One very remarkable four-winged fly appeared amongst the throng about ten days ago. It struck me as being rather rare, so I placed it in a glass globe in order that I might become more intimately acquainted with its habits and manners.

After some little searching amongst my books I found that I had captured a snake-fly, a most appropriate name for a creature with a long slender neck and a flattened, vicious-looking head which at once suggests the idea of a viper.

This fly is a highly sensitive little creature, it is on the alert the moment it sees or hears anything unusual, lifting up its little serpentine head and glancing from side to side with much intelligence; full of courage, also, for it will try to seize a small twig or anything held near it.

Although its natural food consists of small insects, I find the snake-fly will eagerly accept little morsels of raw meat upon which it fastens its powerful mandibles, and with a lens I can watch it evidently enjoying a hearty meal.

Almost all flies are fond of sugar and honey, so I offer these dainties, as well as meat, and they appear to be highly approved.

The larva of this fly lives under the bark of trees, where it, as well as the fly, feeds on minute insects.

My specimen possesses a long ovipositor which gives it a rather formidable appearance, but I do not imagine that this organ could ever be used as a weapon of offence or