

## PLANT NAMES.

The titles given by our ancestors to distinguish one plant from another—before they were marshaled by Linnæus into battalions of orders and species, distinguished by the number of their stamens and construction of pistils, or arranged into more natural families by Lindley and the later botanists—are often extremely poetic. There is a wealth of imagery and fanciful allusions, “playing with words and idle smiles,” in them, which is something very interesting to trace out. Some plants are named, like the “Eye-bright,” according to the “doctrine of signatures”—*i.e.*, the notion that the appearance of a plant indicated the disease which it was intended to cure: “The black-purple spot on the corolla proved it to be good for the eyes,” said the medical science of the day. Next comes the similitudes.

“The Day’s-eye,” whose leaves spread,  
Shuts when Titan goes to bed.

The “Hell’s-weed” (the dodder), which strangles the plant to which it attaches itself. The “Columbine,” so called because in reversing the flower the curved nectaries look like the heads of doves (*colombes*) sitting close together in a nest. There is a whole garden full of plants sacred to the Virgin Mary, generally because they flower at some period connected with “Our Lady’s” days—the Visitation, the Assumption, the Birth, the Baptism, Purification—such as the “Lady’s Smock,” “Lady’s Mantle,” “Lady’s Fingers,” “Lady’s Slipper,” “Lady’s Tresses,” the pretty little green Ophrys with a twisted stem. The “Virgin’s Bower” begins to blossom in July, when the Feast and Visitation occur, and is in the fullest flower at the Assumption in August. The “Lady’s Bed-straw” belongs to no particular month, but has a very particular story for its name. The different plants were summoned to come and form a litter for the Virgin and Child in the stable at Bethlehem. They all made excuses, one after the other: some were so busy, some declared themselves too insignificant, some too great, or it was too early or too late for appearing. At last this pretty little white star offered herself, humbly, for the place; and she was afterwards rewarded for her virtue by her flowers being turned to a golden yellow. “St. John’s Wort,” “St. Peter’s Wort,” flower about the time of their respective saints’ days. The “Star of Bethlehem,” “Rose of Sharon,” “Joseph’s Walking-stick,” “Jacob’s Ladder” (the beautiful Solomon’s seal), are apparently incidental fancies. The “Holy Ghost Flower” (the Peony) flowers, of course, at Whitsuntide. A series of traditions connected some peculiarity in a plant with an event in Bible-history. The “Knot-grass,” *polygonum persicum*, has a large black spot on its smooth leaves, caused by a drop of blood falling from our Saviour, at the time of the cru-