

RAMBLES WITH NATURE STUDENTS.

By MRS. BRIGHTWEN, Author of "Wild Nature Won by Kindness," etc.

ST. MARK'S FLY (*Bibio Marci*).

ST. MARK'S fly, so-called because it generally appears about the time of the Saint's day, has come late this year, but I see it now resting on various flowers, or else flying in its own very peculiar way with its long hairy legs hanging down like a bunch of black threads.

The male fly has clear wings, those of the female are dusky; the former has eyes double the size of those of the latter; both the insects are jet black and very sluggish in their movements, so by these characteristics they may be easily identified.

The female lays about one hundred and fifty eggs at a time in grass roots or decayed vegetable matter, upon which the grubs feed. These remain in the ground throughout the winter, and when full-grown the larvæ become chrysalides, and in a few weeks' time the perfect flies emerge.

Another fly belonging to the same genus (*Bibio Johannis*) is called St. John's fly, as it is to be seen about the latter end of June when St. John the Baptist's day is observed.

I am not familiar with its appearance, but I imagine from its scientific description it must be very similar to the St Mark's fly.

These two insects are, I believe, quite harmless, but some of their near relations are grievous torments to horses and cattle in the various countries where they are found.

In Servia a minute fly so irritates the flocks and herds by its intolerable stings, that hundreds of sheep and oxen are driven mad and perish in consequence of its attacks.

In India there are flies that can even pierce the elephant's hide, and in Florida, cows, horses, and mules are almost eaten alive by voracious fat-bodied flies, which give them no peace during the summer months. It is rather



ST. MARK'S FLY.

a consolation to know that an insect called the "coachman fly" preys in its turn upon these tormentors,* and "will sit through a long drive on the collar or some other part of the harness, or even on the steed itself, in order to pounce upon the insects as they settle. The curious thing is that the horses seem to know the difference, for directly a horse-fly comes, even if it does not sting, they become restless, tossing their heads and lashing

with their tails; but the 'coachman' may rest on any part of them for any length of time and never be interfered with or driven off."

The tsetse fly of Africa is perhaps the most formidable of these insect plagues; its bite is fatal to horses, oxen and dogs. Dr. Livingstone was constantly hindered in his missionary journeys by this apparently insignificant enemy, for in one short journey, although he scarcely saw more than twenty of the flies, yet forty-three of his valuable draught oxen died from their attacks.

The tsetse fly is scarcely so large as a blue-bottle, of a brown colour, with yellow markings and a long proboscis; fortunately its bite is harmless to man, but travellers may well dread its peculiar buzz, as it may portend the death of their horses and cattle, by means of which alone they can journey across the African deserts.

THE DEATH'S HEAD MOTH
(*Acherontia Atropos*).

I had a surprise this morning (last April)! A splendid specimen of the death's head moth (*Acherontia atropos*) has come out of its chrysalis, and is reposing upon a small branch I had placed for its convenience.

For seven months I have tended this said chrysalis, keeping the moss on which it rested sufficiently damp and yet not too wet, as either extreme would have been fatal to the insect.

Never having seen a living specimen of this, one of the largest of our native sphinxes, I gazed with delight at the varied markings on the body and wings, a rich intermingling of brown, blue, fawn and velvety black.

The antennæ are black and end in a white hooked bristle.

The legs are barred with black and white and thickly clothed with fawn-coloured masses of furry down. With bright orange under wings and a portly body of pale blue and orange, my readers can believe my new acquisition is indeed a rich piece of colouring.

The singular mark upon the thorax from which the moth derives its name, indistinctly resembles a human skull; an unfortunate fact for the insect itself, as in olden days it was looked upon as a weird forerunner of all kinds of evil, and its also possessing the power of emitting a low squeaking sound was sufficient to raise up a host of superstitious fears in the minds of ignorant people who persecuted and killed it without mercy. The Rev. J. G. Wood* relates an amusing incident where "A whole circle of village people were standing around a death's head moth that had by some mischance got into the churchyard. Not one of them dared touch it, and at last it was killed by the village blacksmith, who courageously took a long jump and came down on the unfortunate moth with his iron-shod boots."

I hoped to feed and tame this curious sphinx, but it would not partake of any kind of food, not even honey, which is said to be so attractive to this species of moth as to lead it to force its way into



DEATH'S HEAD MOTH AND LARVÆ.

* Royal Nat. History, vol. vi., p. 59.

* *Insects at Home*, Rev. J. G. Wood.