

THE FOLK-LORE OF BRITISH PLANTS.

ARTICLE I.

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In Dublin University Magazine.

THERE are two ways of looking at plants. First of all, we may view them in relation to their structure, the peculiarities of their modes of existence and reproduction, and the places, in an orderly classification, to which they belong. Or they may be regarded in relation to their associations, for almost every plant, if one but took the trouble to find it out, is surrounded by a halo of human thought. When this halo is properly discerned, the commonest flowers and shrubs and trees assume new aspects, and become full of new interest. Fairies reside in them, they influence good fortune, they reveal the secrets of the future, they scare away witches, they preserve from evil, they are red with the blood of loving hearts, or bright with weird light from another world.

Now, it is this second mode of observing them that I propose to dwell on in this and the following articles. We shall look on the vegetable world, not as furnishing subjects to be dissected and peered at through microscopes, but as affording objects round which cluster the strange beliefs and practices of an almost by-gone age. Our subject, you observe by the title, is the Folk-lore of *British Plants*. Now, you ask, what, exactly, is Folk-lore? The word has not been long enough in use in this country for its meaning to have become very clearly defined, and it is as well, before going farther, to have a right understanding about it. Well, it means, generally, just such superstitious notions as those alluded to. But, to be more precise, let me quote a satisfactory definition given by Mr. Harland in his work on the superstitions of Lancashire. "Folk-lore," he says, "in its present signification . . . means the notions of the folk or people, from childhood upwards, especially their superstitious beliefs and practices, as these have been handed down from generation to generation, in popular tradition and tale, rhyme, proverb, or saying, and it is well termed Folk-lore, in contradistinction to book-lore or scholastic learning. It is the unlearned people's inheritance of tradition from their ancestors—the modern reflection of ancient faith and usage." This, then, is what we are to consider here, in connection however, solely with plants.

Of all times when the study of Folk-lore might be engaged in with profit, the present is, perhaps, the best. Our age is so practical, so utilitarian, so unbelieving, as a rule, that the mind, for health's sake, is the better for taking refuge, now and again, in the