

II.

SEDGE AND WOODRUSH.

Sitting here on the edge of the low wall that banks upon the meadow against Cannington Lane, I can pick, without stooping, half a dozen different kind of grassy-looking weeds, all within easy reach of my hand, in the field behind me. The sun is shining brightly through the horse-chestnut branches, the west wind is blowing gently over the valley, and the day is warm enough to tempt a little loitering under the scanty shade of the young foliage overhead; so I cannot do better than pick and examine a few of these unnoticed flowers, whose pale yellow spikelets are hardly conspicuous enough to attract the notice of any save a botanical eye. Grass, most people would call them; and indeed their leaves are grassy-looking blades enough; but a single close glance at their reedy stems and clustered flower-heads would suggest even to the unpracticed observer that their stalks and blossoms differed widely from the little scaly panicles of the true grasses.

To my thinking, there are few plants so pretty as all these small, insignificant-looking, unconsidered weeds, whose flowers need to be examined somewhat minutely before we can fully appreciate the real beauty of their form and arrangement. Anybody can see and admire at once a foxglove or an orchid, but not everybody can see and admire at once the delicate gracefulness of sparges and quakegrasses, of little waving sedges and tufted woodrushes. One feels that the beauty of the larger blossoms is something flaunting and meretricious—an Aphrodite Demosia tricked out in gaudy colors to please the most careless passer-by; whereas the tiny green and brown flowers of the fields and hedgerows appeal to a more esoteric circle—a select few who can sympathize with nature in her more sombre as well as in her brighter moods. L'Allegro is the world's

side of nature, but Il Penseroso is the poet's.

Look, for example, at this tall stalk of woodrush, its stem clasped by two or three drooping and pensile leaf-blades, and its top crowned by four or five thickly-clustered heads of small brown five-rayed flowers. At first sight you would say it was merely a bit of grass with a brownish top to it; but gaze a little closer and you will see that the heads consist each of half a dozen tiny regular blossoms of a very pretty, fantastic sort. Each blossom has six dry, brown petals, with silvery, thin, transparent edges; and in the middle, as many bright yellow stamens stand out delicately against the brown background of the corolla. Every one of them is like a sombre copy in miniature of a lily or an amaryllis, not very striking to a careless observer, but marvelously pretty and perfect when you look attentively into the tiny rosettes. And the history of these dry, brown flowers is in itself curious enough to make them well worth a moment's examination. For the woodrush is almost undoubtedly a faded and colorless descendant of some once colored and brilliant ancestor. You may be fairly sure of that from the mere look of the dry, brown petals. Every blossom with petals, however small or green or inconspicuous, has once been a bright and flaunting flower; for the sole object of petals is to attract the eyes of insects, and they are therefore found nowhere but among insect-fertilized plants or their degenerate descendants. Flowers which have always been fertilized by the wind never have any petals at all, brown, green, or otherwise; but flowers which are fertilized by insects have them red, white, blue or yellow, and flowers which have once been so fertilized and have afterwards relapsed almost always retain some memorial of their old estate in the shape of dwarfed and colorless petals, whose function is gone, while the rudimentary structure still survives. They point back, like the fasces of the By-