

THOUGHTAUDIO



WILD FLOWERS OF THE ASPHALT

From Literature and Life — Short Stories and Essays

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WILD FLOWERS OF THE ASPHALT

Looking through Mrs. Caroline A. Creevey's charming book on the Flowers of Field, Hill, and Swamp, the other day, I was very forcibly reminded of the number of these pretty, wilding growths which I had been finding all the season long among the streets of asphalt and the sidewalks of artificial stone in this city; and I am quite sure that any one who has been kept in New York, as I have been this year, beyond the natural time of going into the country, can have as real a pleasure in this sylvan invasion as mine, if he will but give himself up to a sense of it.

I.

Of course it is altogether too late, now, to look for any of the early spring flowers, but I can recall the exquisite effect of the tender blue hepatica fringing the centre rail of the grip-cars, all up and down Broadway, and apparently springing from the hollow beneath, where the cable ran with such a brooklike gurgle that any damp-living plant must find itself at home there. The water-pimpernel may now be seen, by any sympathetic eye, blowing delicately along the track, in the breeze of the passing cabs, and elastically lifting itself from the rush of the cars. The reader can easily verify it by the picture in Mrs. Creevey's book. He knows it by its other name of brook weed; and he will have my delight, I am sure, in the cardinal-flower which will be with us in August.

It is a shy flower, loving the more sequestered nooks, and may be sought along the shady stretches of Third Avenue, where the Elevated Road overhead forms a shelter as of interlacing boughs. The arrow-head likes such swampy expanses as the converging surface roads form at Dead Man's Curve and the corners of Twenty third Street. This is in flower now, and will be till September; and St.-John's-wort, which some call the false goldenrod, is already here. You may find it in any moist, low ground, but the gutters of Wall Street, or even the banks of the Stock Exchange, are not too dry for it. The real

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golden-rod is not much in evidence with us, for it comes only when summer is on the wane. The other night, however, on the promenade of the Madison Square Roof Garden, I was delighted to see it growing all over the oblong dome of the auditorium, in response to the cry of a homesick cricket which found itself in exile there at the base of a potted ever green. This lonely insect had no sooner sounded its winter-boding note than the fond flower began sympathetically to wave and droop along those tarry slopes, as I have seen it on how many hill-side pastures! But this may have been only a transitory response to the cricket, and I cannot promise the visitor to the Roof Garden that he will find golden-rod there every night. I believe there is always Golden Seal, but it is the kind that comes in bottles, and not in the gloom of "deep, cool, moist woods," where Mrs. Creevey describes it as growing, along with other wildings of such sweet names or quaint as Celandine, and Dwarf Larkspur, and Squirrel-corn, and Dutchman's breeches, and Pearlwort, and Wood-sorrel, and Bishop's--cap, and Wintergreen, and Indian-pipe, and Snowberry, and Adder's-tongue, and Wakerobin, and Dragon-root, and Adam-and-Eve, and twenty more, which must have got their names from some fairy of genius. I should say it was a female fairy of genius who called them so, and that she had her own sex among mortals in mind when she invented their nomenclature, and was thinking of little girls, and slim, pretty maids, and happy young wives.

The author tells how they all look, with a fine sense of their charm in her words, but one would know how they looked from their names; and when you call them over they at once transplant themselves to the depths of the dells between our sky-scrapers, and find a brief sojourn in the cavernous excavations whence other sky-scrapers are to rise.

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II.

That night on the Roof Garden, when the cricket's cry flowered the dome with golden-rod, the tall stems of rye growing among the orchestra sloped all one way at times, just like the bows of violins, in the half-dollar gale that always blows over the city at that height. But as one turns the leaves of Mrs. Creevey's magic book--perhaps one ought to say turns its petals--the forests and the fields come and make themselves at home in the city everywhere. By virtue of it I have been more in the country in a half-hour than if I had lived all June there. When I lift my eyes from its pictures or its letter-press my vision prints the eidolons of wild flowers everywhere, as it prints the image of the sun against the air after dwelling on his brightness. The rose-mallow flaunts along Fifth Avenue and the golden threads of the dodder embroider the house fronts on the principal cross streets; and I might think at times that it was all mere fancy, it has so much the quality of a pleasing illusion.

Yet Mrs. Creevey's book is not one to lend itself to such a deceit by any of the ordinary arts. It is rather matter of fact in form and manner, and largely owes what magic it has to the inherent charm of its subject. One feels this in merely glancing at the index, and reading such titles of chapters as "Wet Meadows and Low Grounds"; "Dry Fields--Waste Places --Waysides"; "Hills and Rocky Woods, Open Woods"; and "Deep, Cool, Moist Woods"; each a poem in itself, lyric or pastoral, and of a surpassing opulence of suggestion.

The spring and, summer months pass in stately processional through the book, each with her fillet inscribed with the names of her characteristic flowers or blossoms, and brightened with the blooms themselves.

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They are plucked from where nature bade them grow in the wild places, or their own wayward wills led them astray. A singularly fascinating chapter is that called "Escaped from Gardens," in which some of these pretty runagates are catalogued. I supposed in my liberal ignorance that the Bouncing Bet was the only one of these, but I have learned that the Pansy and the Sweet Violet love to gad, and that the Caraway, the Snapdragon, the Prince's Feather, the Summer Savory, the Star of Bethlehem, the Day-Lily, and the Tiger-Lily, and even the sluggish Stone Crop are of the vagrant, fragrant company. One is not surprised to meet the Tiger-Lily in it; that must always have had the jungle in its heart; but that the Baby's Breath should be found wandering by the road-sides from Massachusetts and Virginia to Ohio, gives one a tender pang as for a lost child. Perhaps the poor human tramps, who sleep in barns and feed at back doors along those dusty ways, are mindful of the Baby's Breath, and keep a kindly eye out for the little truant.

III.

As I was writing those homely names I felt again how fit and lovely they were, how much more fit and lovely than the scientific names of the flowers. Mrs. Creevey will make a botanist of you if you will let her, and I fancy a very good botanist, though I cannot speak from experience, but she will make a poet of you in spite of yourself, as I very well know; and she will do this simply by giving you first the familiar name of the flowers she loves to write of.

I am not saying that the Day-Lily would not smell as sweet by her title of 'Hemerocallis Fulva', or that the homely, hearty Bouncing Bet would not kiss as deliciously in her scholar's cap and gown of 'Saponaria Officinalis'; but merely that their college degrees do not lend themselves so willingly to verse, or even melodious prose, which is what the poet is often after nowadays. So I like best to hail the flowers by the names that the

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fairies gave them, and the children know them by, especially when my longing for them makes them grow here in the city streets. I have a fancy that they would all vanish away if I saluted them in botanical terms.

As long as I talk of cat-tail rushes, the homeless grimalkins of the areas and the back fences help me to a vision of the swamps thickly studded with their stiff spears; but if I called them 'Typha Latifolia', or even 'Typha Angustifolia', there is not the hardiest and fiercest prowler of the roof and the fire-escape but would fly the sound of my voice and leave me forlorn amid the withered foliage of my dream. The street sparrows, pestiferous and persistent as they are, would forsake my sylvan pageant if I spoke of the Bird-foot Violet as the 'Viola Pedata'; and the commonest cur would run howling if he heard the gentle Poison Dogwood maligned as the 'Rhus Venenata'. The very milk-cans would turn to their native pumps in disgust from my attempt to invoke our simple American Cowslip as the 'Dodecatheon Meadia'.

IV

Yet I do not deny that such scientific nomenclature has its uses; and I should be far from undervaluing this side of Mrs. Creevey's book. In fact, I secretly respect it the more for its botanical lore, and if ever I get into the woods or fields again I mean to go up to some of the humblest flowers, such as I can feel myself on easy terms with, and tell them what they are in Latin.

I think it will surprise them, and I dare say they will some of them like it, and will want their initials inscribed on their leaves, like those signatures which the medicinal plants bear, or are supposed to bear. But as long as I am engaged in their culture amid this stone and iron and asphalt, I find it best to invite their presence by their familiar names, and I hope they will not think them too familiar. I should like to get them all naturalized here,

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so that the thousands of poor city children, who never saw them growing in their native places, might have some notion of how bountifully the world is equipped with beauty, and how it is governed by many laws which are not enforced by policemen. I think that would interest them very much, and I shall not mind their plucking my Barmecide blossoms, and carrying them home by the armfuls. When good-will costs nothing we ought to practise it even with the tramps, and these are very welcome, in their wanderings over the city pave, to rest their weary limbs in any of my pleached bowers they come to.

THE END