THE GROUND-ASH

Mary Russell Mitford

Amongst the many pleasant circumstances attendant on a love of flowers—that sort of love which leads us into the woods for the earliest primrose, or to the river side for the latest forget-me-not, and carries us to the parching heath or the watery mere to procure for the cultivated, or, if I may use the expression, the *tame* beauties of the parterre, the soil that they love; amongst the many gratifications which such pursuits bring with them, such as seeing in the seasons in which it shows best, the prettiest, coyest, most unhackneyed scenery, and taking, with just motive enough for stimulus and for reward, drives and walks which approach to fatigue, without being fatiguing; amongst all the delights consequent on a love of flowers, I know none greater than the half unconscious and wholly unintended manner in which such expeditions make us acquainted with the peasant children of remote and out-of-the-way regions, the inhabitants of the wild woodlands and still wilder commons of the hilly part of the north of Hampshire, which forms so strong a contrast with this sunny and populous county of Berks, whose very fields are gay and neat as gardens, and whose roads are as level and even as a gravel-walk.

Two of the most interesting of these flower-formed acquaintances, were my little friends Harry and Bessy Leigh.

Every year I go to the Everley woods to gather wild lilies of the valley. It is one of the delights that May—the charming, ay, and the merry month of May, which I love as fondly as ever that bright and joyous season was loved by our older poets—regularly brings in her train; one of those rational pleasures in which (and it is the great point of superiority over pleasures that are artificial and worldly) there is no disappointment About four years ago, I made such a visit. The day was glorious, and we had driven through lanes perfumed by the fresh green birch, with its bark silvery and many-tinted, and over commons where the very air was loaded with the heavy fragrance of the furze, an odour resembling in richness its golden blossoms, just as the scent of the birch is cool, refreshing, and penetrating, like the exquisite colour of its young leaves, until we reached the top of the hill, where, on one side, the enclosed wood, where the lilies grow, sank gradually, in an amphitheatre of natural terraces, to a piece of water at the bottom; whilst on the other, the wild open heath formed a sort of promontory overhanging a steep ravine, through which a slow and sluggish stream crept along amongst stunted alders, until it was lost in the deep recesses of Lidhurst Forest, over the tall trees of which we literally looked down. We had come without a servant; and on arriving at the gate of the wood with neither human figure nor human habitation in sight, and a high-blooded and high-spirited horse in the phaeton, we began to feel all the awkwardness of our situation. My companion, however, at length espied a thin wreath of smoke issuing from a small clay-built hut thatched with furze, built against the steepest part of the hill, of which it seemed a mere excrescence, about half way down the declivity; and, on calling aloud, two children, who had been picking up dry stumps of heath and gorse, and collecting them in a heap for fuel at the door of their hovel, first

carefully deposited their little load, and then came running to know what we wanted.

If we had wondered to see human beings living in a habitation, which, both for space and appearance, would have been despised by a pig of any pretension, as too small and too mean for his accommodation, so we were again surprised at the strange union of poverty and content evinced by the apparel and countenances of its young inmates. The children, bareheaded and barefooted, and with little more clothing than one shabby-looking garment, were yet as fine, sturdy, hardy, ruddy, sunburnt urchins, as one should see on a summer day. They were clean, too: the stunted bit of raiment was patched, but not ragged; and when the girl, (for, although it was rather difficult to distinguish between the brother and sister, the pair were of different sexes,) when the bright-eyed, square-made, upright little damsel clasped her two brown hands together, on the top of her head, pressed down her thick curls, looking at us and listening to us with an air of the most intelligent attention that returned our curiosity with interest; and when the boy, in answer to our inquiry if he could hold a horse, clutched the reins with his small fingers, and planted himself beside our high-mettled steed with an air of firm determination, that seemed to say, "I'm your master! Run awry if you dare!" we both of us felt that they were subjects for a picture, and that, though Sir Joshua might not have painted them, Gainsborough and our own Collins would.

But besides their exceeding picturesqueness, the evident content, and helpfulness, and industry of these little creatures, was delightful to look at and to think of. In conversation they were at once very civil and respectful (Bessy dropping her little curtsy, and Harry putting his hand to the lock of hair where the hat should have been, at every sentence they uttered) and perfectly frank and unfearing. In answer to our questions, they told us that "Father was a broom-maker, from the low country; that he had come to these parts and married mother, and built their cottage, because houses were so scarce hereabouts, and because of its convenience to the heath; that they had done very well till the last winter, when poor father had had the fever for five months, and they had had much ado to get on; but that father was brave again now, and was building *another house* (house!!) larger and finer, upon Squire Benson's lands: the squire had promised them a garden from the waste, and mother hoped to keep a pig. They were trying to get all the money they could to buy the pig; and what his honour had promised them for holding the horse, was all to be given to mother for that purpose."

It was impossible not to be charmed with these children. We went again and again to the Everley wood, partly to gather lilies, partly to rejoice in the trees with their young leaves so beautiful in texture as well as in colour, but chiefly to indulge ourselves in the pleasure of talking to the children, of adding something to their scanty stock of clothing, (Bessy ran as fast as her feet could carry her to the clear pool at the bottom of the wood, to look at herself in her new bonnet,) and of assisting in the accumulations of the Grand Pig Savings' Bank, by engaging Harry to hold the horse, and Bessy to help fill the lily basket.

This employment, by showing that the lilies had a money value, put a new branch of traffic into the heads of these thoughtful children, already accustomed to gather heath for their father's brooms, and to collect the dead furze which served as

fuel to the family. After gaining permission of the farmer who rented the wood, and ascertaining that we had no objection, they set about making nosegays of the flowers, and collecting the roots for sale, and actually stood two Saturdays in Belford market (the smallest merchants of a surety that ever appeared in that rural Exchange) to dispose of their wares; having obtained a cast in a waggon there and back, and carrying home faithfully every penny of their gainings, to deposit in the common stock.

The next year we lost sight of them. No smoke issued from the small chimney by the hill-side. The hut itself was half demolished by wind and weather; its tenants had emigrated to the new house on Squire Benson's land; and after two or three attempts to understand and to follow the directions as to the spot given us by the good farmer at Everley, we were forced to give up the search.

Accident, the great discoverer and recoverer of lost goods, at last restored to us these good little children. It happened as follows:—

In new potting some large hydrangeas, we were seized with a desire to give the blue tinge to the petals, which so greatly improves the beauty of that fine bold flower, and which is so desirable when they are placed, as these were destined to be, in the midst of red and pink blossoms, fuchsias, salvias, and geraniums. Accordingly, we sallied forth to a place called the Moss, a wild tract of moorland lying about a mile to the right of the road to Everley, and famous for the red bog, produced, I presume, by chalybeate springs, which, when mixed with the fine Bagshot silver sand, is so effectual in changing the colour of flowers.

It was a bleak gusty day in February, raining by fits, but not with sufficient violence to deter me from an expedition to which I had taken a fancy. Putting up, therefore, the head and apron of the phaeton, and followed by one lad (the shrewd boy Dick) on horseback, and another (John, the steady gardening youth) in a cart laden with tubs and sacks, spades and watering-pots, to procure and contain the bog mould, (for we were prudently determined to provide for all emergencies, and to carry with us fit receptacles to receive our treasure, whether it presented itself in the form of red earth or of red mud,) our little procession set forth early in the afternoon, towards the wildest and most dreary piece of scenery that I have ever met with in this part of the country.

Wild and dreary of a truth was the Moss, and the stormy sky, the moaning wind, and the occasional gushes of driving rain, suited well with the dark and cheerless region into which we had entered by a road, if a rude cart-track may be so called, such as shall seldom be encountered in this land of Macadamisation. And yet, partly perhaps from their novelty, the wild day and the wild scenery had for me a strange and thrilling charm. The ground, covered with the sea-green moss, whence it derived its name, mingled in the higher parts with brown patches of heather, and dark bushes of stunted furze, was broken with deep hollows full of stagnant water; some almost black, others covered with the rusty scum which denoted the presence of the powerful mineral, upon whose agency we relied for performing that strange piece of natural magic which may almost be called the transmutation of flowers.

Towards the ruddiest of these pools, situated in a deep glen, our active coadjutors, leaving phaeton, cart, and horses, on the brow of the hill, began rolling and tossing the several tubs, buckets, watering-pots, sacks, and spades, which were

destined for the removal and conveyance of the much coveted-bog; we followed, amused and pleased, as, in certain moods, physical and mental, people are pleased and amused at self-imposed difficulties, down the abrupt and broken descent; and for some time the process of digging among the mould at the edge of the bank went steadily on.

In a few minutes, however, Dick, whose quick and restless eye was never long bent on any single object, most of all when that object presented itself in the form of work, exclaimed to his comrade, "Look at those children wandering about amongst the firs, like the babes in the wood in the old ballad. What can they be about?" And looking in the direction to which he pointed, we saw, amidst the gloomy fir plantations, which formed a dark and massive border nearly round the Moss, our old friends Harry and Bessy Leigh, collecting, as it seemed, the fir cones with which the ground was strewed, and depositing them carefully in a large basket.

A manful shout from my companion soon brought the children to our side—good, busy, cheerful, and healthy-looking as ever, and marvellously improved in the matter of equipment Harry had been promoted to a cap, which added the grace of a flourish to his bow; Bessy had added the luxury of a pinafore to her nondescript garments; and both pairs of little feet were advanced to the certain dignity, although somewhat equivocal comfort, of shoes and stockings.

The world had gone well with them, and with their parents. The house was built. Upon remounting the hill, and advancing a little farther into the centre of the Moss, we saw the comfortable low-browed cottage, full of light and shadow, of juttings out, and corners and angles of every sort and description, with a garden stretching along the side, backed and sheltered by the tall impenetrable plantation, a wall of trees, against whose dark masses a wreath of light smoke was curling, whose fragrance seemed really to perfume the winter air. The pig had been bought, fatted, and killed; but other pigs were inhabiting the sty, almost as large as their former dwelling, which stood at the end of their garden; and the children told with honest joy how all this prosperity had come about. Their father, taking some brooms to my kind friend Lady Denys, had seen some of the ornamental baskets used for flowers upon a lawn, and had been struck with the fancy of trying to make some, decorated with fir cones; and he had been so successful in this profitable manufacture, that he had more orders than he could execute. Lady Denys had also, with characteristic benevolence, put the children to her Sunday-school. One misfortune had a little overshadowed the sunshine. Squire Benson had died, and the consent to the erection of the cottage being only verbal, the attorney who managed for the infant heir, a ward in Chancery, had claimed the property. But the matter had been compromised upon the payment of such a rent as the present prospects of the family would fairly allow. Besides collecting fir cones for the baskets, they picked up all they could in that pine forest, (for it was little less,) and sold such as were discoloured, or otherwise unfit for working up, to Lady Denys and other persons who liked the fine aromatic odour of these the pleasantest of pastilles, in their dressing-room or drawing-room fires. "Did I like the smell? We had a cart there—might they bring us a hamper-ful?" And it was with great difficulty that a trifling present (for we did not think of offering money *as*

payment) could be forced upon the grateful children. "We," they said, "had been their first friends." For what very small assistance the poor are often deeply, permanently thankful! Well says the great poet—

"I've heard of hearts unkind, good deeds
With ill deeds still returning;
Alas, the gratitude of man
Hath oftener left me mourning!"
Wordsworth.

Again for above a year we lost sight of our little favourites, for such they were with both of us; though absence, indisposition, business, company—engagements, in short, of many sorts—combined to keep us from the Moss for upwards of a twelvemonth. Early in the succeeding April, however, it happened that, discussing with some morning visiters the course of a beautiful winding brook, (one of the tributaries to the Loddon, which bright and brimming river has nearly as many sources as the Nile,) one of them observed that the well-head was in Lanton Wood, and that it was a bit of scenery more like the burns of the North Countrie (my visiter was a Northumbrian) than anything he had seen in the south. Surely I had seen it? I was half ashamed to confess that I had not—(how often are we obliged to confess that we have not seen the beauties which lie close to our doors, too near for observation!)—and the next day proving fine, I determined to repair my omission.

It was a soft and balmy April morning, just at that point of the flowery spring when violets and primroses are lingering under the northern hedgerows, and cowslips and orchises peeping out upon the sunny banks. My driver was the clever, shrewd, arch boy Dick; and the first part of our way lay along the green winding lanes which lead to Everley; we then turned to the left, and putting up our phaeton at a small farmhouse, where my attendant (who found acquaintances everywhere) was intimate, we proceeded to the wood; Dick accompanying me, carrying my flower-basket, opening the gates, and taking care of my dog Dash, a very beautiful thorough-bred Old English spaniel, who was a little apt, when he got into a wood, to run after the game, and forget to come out again.

I have seldom seen anything in woodland scenery more picturesque and attractive than the old coppice of Lanton, on that soft and balmy April morning. The underwood was nearly cut, and bundles of long split poles for hooping barrels were piled together against the tall oak trees, bursting with their sap; whilst piles of faggots were built up in other parts of the copse, and one or two saw-pits, with light open sheds erected over them, whence issued the measured sound of the saw and the occasional voices of the workmen, almost concealed by their subterranean position, were placed in the hollows. At the far side of the coppice, the operation of hewing down the underwood was still proceeding, and the sharp strokes of the axe and the bill, softened by distance, came across the monotonous jar of the never-ceasing saw. The surface of the ground was prettily tumbled about, comprehending as pleasant a variety of hill and dale as could well be comprised in some thirty acres. It declined, however, generally speaking, towards the centre of the coppice, along which a small, very small rivulet, scarcely more than a runlet, wound its way in a thousand graceful meanders. Tracking upward the course of the little stream, we soon arrived at that which had been the ostensible object of our drive—the spot whence it sprung.

It was a steep irregular acclivity on the highest side of the wood, a mound, I had almost said a rock, of earth, cloven in two about the middle, but with so narrow a fissure that the brushwood which grew on either side nearly filled up the opening, so that the source of the spring still remained concealed, although the rapid gushing of the water made a pleasant music in that pleasant place; and here and there a sunbeam, striking upon the sparkling stream, shone with a bright and glancing light amidst the dark ivies, and brambles, and mossy stumps of trees, that grew around.

This mound had apparently been cut a year or two ago, so that it presented an appearance of mingled wildness and gaiety, that contrasted very agreeably with the rest of the coppice; whose trodden-down flowers I had grieved over, even whilst admiring the picturesque effect of the woodcutters and their several operations. Here, however, reigned the flowery spring in all her glory. Violets, pansies, orchises, oxslips, the elegant woodsorrel, the delicate wood anemone, and the enamelled wild hyacinth, were sprinkled profusely amongst the mosses, and lichens, and dead leaves, which formed so rich a carpet beneath our feet. Primroses, above all, were there of almost every hue, from the rare and pearly white, to the deepest pinkish purple, coloured by some diversity of soil, the pretty freak of nature's gardening; whilst the common yellow blossom—commonest and prettiest of all—peeped out from amongst the boughs in the stump of an old willow, like (to borrow the simile of a dear friend, now no more) a canary bird from its cage. The wild geranium was already showing its pink stem and scarlet-edged leaves, themselves almost gorgeous enough to pass for flowers; the periwinkle, with its wreaths of shining foliage, was hanging in garlands over the precipitous descent; and the lily of the valley, the fragrant woodroof, and the silvery wild garlick, were just peeping from the earth in the most sheltered nooks. Charmed to find myself surrounded by so much beauty, I had scrambled, with much ado, to the top of the woody cliff, (no other word can convey an idea of its precipitous abruptness,) and was vainly attempting to trace by my eye the actual course of the spring, which was, by the clearest evidence of sound, gushing from the fount many feet below me; when a peculiar whistle of delight, (for whistling was to Dick, although no ordinary proficient in our common tongue, another language,) and a tremendous scrambling amongst the bushes, gave token that my faithful attendant had met with something as agreeable to his fancy, as the primroses and orchises had proved to mine.

Guided by a repetition of the whistle, I soon saw my trusty adherent spanning the chasm like a Colossus, one foot on one bank, the other on the opposite—each of which appeared to me to be resting, so to say, on nothing—tugging away at a long twig that grew on the brink of the precipice, and exceedingly likely to resolve the inquiry as to the source of the Loddon, by plumping souse into the fountain-head. I, of course, called out to warn him; and he equally, of course, went on with his labour, without paying the slightest attention to my caution. On the contrary, having possessed himself of one straight slender twig, which, to my great astonishment, he wound round his fingers, and deposited in his pocket, as one should do by a bit of pack-thread, he apparently, during the operation, caught sight of another. Testifying his delight by a second whistle, which, having his knife in his mouth, one wonders how he could accomplish; and scrambling with the

fearless daring of a monkey up the perpendicular bank, supported by strings of ivy, or ledges of roots, and clinging by hand and foot to the frail bramble or the slippery moss, leaping like a squirrel from bough to bough, and yet, by happy boldness, escaping all danger, he attained his object as easily as if he had been upon level ground. Three, four, five times was the knowing, joyous, triumphant whistle sounded, and every time with a fresh peril and a fresh escape. At last, the young gentleman, panting and breathless, stood at my side, and I began to question him as to the treasure he had been pursuing.

"It's the ground-ash, ma'am," responded master Dick, taking one of the coils from his pocket; "the best riding-switch in the world. All the whips that ever were made are nothing to it. Only see how strong it is, how light, and how supple! You may twist it a thousand ways without breaking. It won't break, do what you will. Each of these, now, is worth half-a-crown or three shillings, for they are the scarcest things possible. They grow up at a little distance from the root of an old tree, like a sucker from a rose-bush. Great luck, indeed!" continued Dick, putting up his treasure with another joyful whistle; "it was but t'other day that Jack Barlow offered me half-a-guinea for four, if I could but come by them. I shall certainly keep the best, though, for myself—unless, ma'am, you would be pleased to accept it for the purpose of whipping Dash." Whipping Dash!!! Well have I said that Dick was as saucy as a lady's page or a king's jester. Talk of whipping Dash! Why, the young gentleman knew perfectly well that I had rather be whipt myself twenty times over. The very sound seemed a profanation. Whip my Dash! Of course I read master Dick a lecture for this irreverent mention of my pet, who, poor fellow, hearing his name called in question, came up in all innocence to fondle me; to which grave remonstrance the hopeful youth replied by another whistle, half of penitence, half of amusement.

These discourses brought us to the bottom of the mound, and turning round a clump of hawthorn and holly, we espied a little damsel with a basket at her side, and a large knife in her hand, carefully digging up a large root of white primroses, and immediately recognised my old acquaintance, Bessy Leigh.

She was, as before, clean, and healthy, and tidy, and unaffectedly glad to see me; but the joyousness and buoyancy which had made so much of her original charm, were greatly diminished. It was clear that poor Bessy had suffered worse griefs than those of cold and hunger; and upon questioning her, so it turned out.

Her father had died, and her mother had been ill, and the long hard winter had been hard to get through; and then the rent had come upon her, and the steward (for the young gentleman himself was a minor) had threatened to turn them out if it were not paid to a day—the very next day after that on which we were speaking; and her mother had been afraid they must go to the workhouse, which would have been a sad thing, because now she had got so much washing to do, and Harry was so clever at basket-making, that there was every chance, this rent once paid, of their getting on comfortably. "And the rent will be paid now, ma'am, thank Ood!" added Bessy, her sweet face brightening; "for we want only a guinea of the whole sum, and Lady Denys has employed me to get scarce wild-flowers for her wood, and has promised me half-a-guinea for what I have carried her, and this last parcel, which I am to take to the lodge to-night; and Mr. John Barlow, her groom, has

offered Harry twelve and sixpence for five ground-ashes that Harry has been so lucky as to find by the spring, and Harry is gone to cut them: so that now we shall get on bravely, and mother need not fret any longer. I hope no harm will befal Harry in getting the ground-ash, though, for it's a noted dangerous place. But he's a careful boy."

Just at this point of her little speech, poor Bessy was interrupted by her brother, who ran down the declivity exclaiming, "They're gone, Bessy!—they're gone! somebody has taken them! the ground-ashes are gone!"

Dick put his hand irresolutely to his pocket, and then, uttering a dismal whistle, pulled it resolutely out again, with a hardness, or an affectation of hardness, common to all lads, from the prince to the stable-boy.

I also put my hand into my pocket, and found, with the deep disappointment which often punishes such carelessness, that I had left my purse at home. All that I could do, therefore, was to bid the poor children be comforted, and ascertain at what time Bessy intended to take her roots, which in the midst of her distress she continued to dig up, to my excellent friend Lady Denys. I then, exhorting them to hope the best, made my way quickly out of the wood.

Arriving at the gate, I missed my attendant Before, however, I had reached the farm at which we had left our phaeton, I heard his gayest and most triumphant whistle behind me. Thinking of the poor children, it jarred upon my feelings. "Where have you been loitering, Sir?" I asked, in a sterner voice than he had probably ever heard from me before.

"Where have I been?" replied he; "giving little Harry the ground-ashes, to be sure: I felt just as if I had stolen them. And now, I do believe," continued he, with a prodigious burst of whistling, which seemed to me as melodious as the song of the nightingale, "I do believe," quoth Dick, "that I am happier than they are. I would not have kept those ground-ashes, no, not for fifty pounds!"