



The Romance of Plant Life: Interesting Descriptions of the Strange and Curious in the Plant World

George Francis Scott-Elliot

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WHEN we remember either the general appearance or the way in which a cabbage or a turnip appears to exist, it does not seem possible to call them active. It is difficult to imagine anything less lively than an ordinary vegetable. They seem to us the very model of dullness, stupidity, and slowness; they cannot move even from one field to the next; they are "fast rooted in the soil"; "they languidly adjust their vapid vegetable loves" like Tennyson's Oak. In fact one usually speaks of vegetating when anybody is living a particularly dull, unexciting kind of life in one particular place. And it even seems as if the books, which are supposed to give us the best information about the study of plants, and which are not very attractive little books, quite agree with the ordinary views of the subject. For one finds in them that plants differ from animals in being "incapable of motion." This, of course, just means that an animal, or rather most animals, can walk, swim, or fly about, whilst plants have roots and do not move from one spot to another. But it is not true to say that plants cannot move, for most plants grow, which means that they move, and in some few cases, we find that plants behave very much in the same way as animals do when they are touched or excited in any way. We shall have to speak about tendrils, roots, and insect-catching plants later on. But it is perhaps the Sensitive Plant which shows most distinctly that it can shrink back or shrink together when it is bruised or roughly handled. It will be described in its place, but just to show that this plant can move of its own accord, it is only necessary to hold a lighted or burning match about an inch or so below the end of a long leaf. If one does this then all the little leaflets begin to fold up, and finally the main stalk droops; soon afterwards other leaves higher up the stalk begin to be affected in the same way, and fall limply down one after the other. It is supposed that this movement frightens a grazing animal, who will imagine there is something uncanny about the plant and leave it alone. There are many respects in which this reaction of the Sensitive Plant resembles that found in animals. It does not take place if the plant is chloroformed or treated with ether; the leaves also get "fatigued" if too often handled, and refuse to rise up again. There are, however, only a very few plants in which an immediate, visible answer to a stimulus can be detected. But all plants are at work; they have periods of rest which correspond to our sleep, but during their ordinary working hours they never slacken off, but continue vigorously active.

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