

Shamrocks and Serpents

Natural History

The little green trefoil that shines on the lapel of every proud son of old Ireland today is one of the world's standing botanical riddles. Everybody knows and loves the shamrock, but nobody knows quite for sure just what a shamrock is. Send three Irishmen out into the Irish fields for shamrocks, and they might very easily bring back three entirely different plants.

The plant most commonly regarded as the shamrock is the ordinary white clover, which by an international perversity of nomenclature is often called the Dutch clover. In most parts of Ireland this white clover grows even more luxuriantly than it does in this country, because of the mild, moist, Gulf Stream climate.

But a second clover disputes the honor. This is the so-called black clover or nonesuch, also very abundant in Ireland. Its leaves are smaller and narrower than those of the white clover, and its flowers mark it as a relative of the sweet clovers and alfalfa.

The third claimant for recognition as the true shamrock is not a clover at all, though it has a trifoliate leaf. This is the wood sorrel, or oxalis. Like its two rivals, the oxalis grows in many other parts of the world besides Ireland, but finds the climate of that favored island very much to its liking. Perhaps because of its sharp, sour taste, the oxalis used to have wide use in folk-medicine, and some of the ancient herbals attributed almost miraculous curative powers to it.

The whole difficulty seems to have arisen out of the nomenclatural methods of ancient and medieval herbalists, who named plants not according to their flower-structure, as modern botanists do, but rather according to their leaves. They classified such unlike things as holly and live-oaks together, because both trees have hard, thick leaves. Thus any plant with a clover-like trifoliate leaf would be called a "three-leaf," which in ancient Erse is "seamrog," or modern "shamrock."

Though long celebrated as an Eden without a serpent, Erin cannot show absolute absence of snakes, according to Dr. Raymond L. Ditmars, of the New York Zoological Park.

"We have what appear to be actual records of the occasional occurrence of the common grass snake there," he says. "This snake is quite abundant in England, Scotland and continental Europe. It is a perfectly harmless species, which seldom grows more than 2½ feet in length, is grayish green in coloration, with a patch of yellow on each side of the head. Observers have told us that they have seen these snakes in the lake regions of Ireland, but that they are rare."

"The common viper, which is found over the greater part of England, Scotland and continental Europe, and is poisonous, does not appear to occur in Ireland. I have never heard of a record of its being found there."

The legend that St. Patrick drove the snakes out of Ireland seems to have arisen partly as an allegory of

his missionary activities in banishing the old pagan myths, and perhaps partly because of the natural tendency of peoples to embroider the real accomplishments of their heroes with still greater imaginary feats.

The probabilities are that the force that sent the snakes out of Ireland, never to return, was a hundred thousand years older than St. Patrick. Some paleontologists have conjectured that during the ice ages the climate of Ireland must have been much colder than it now is, perhaps more or less like that of the snakeless Iceland of today. And since Ireland has been geographically separated from England by a broad salt-water channel ever since the close of the ice age, no serpents have had a chance to migrate thither. The few grass snakes mentioned by Dr. Ditmars may be descendants of survivors of the glacial crisis, or may possibly have been carried into Ireland among the roots of transplanted bushes or trees, or in earth and stones used as ships' ballast.

One other island in the world can boast with Ireland of a complete freedom from venomous snakes. This is Madagascar, off the east coast of Africa. The absence of poisonous serpents in Madagascar is the more remarkable in that the African mainland swarms with them. But the fauna and flora of this equatorial Ireland are remarkable in many respects, and the island bears evidence of having been separated from the mainland for many ages, if indeed it was ever united to it.

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Flu Epidemic Unlikely

Medicine

The probabilities that the influenza epidemic now ravaging Japan will afflict this country are not great, in the estimation of public health officials. Until this disease appeared in Japan the world in recent months had been comparatively free from it. The epidemic is expected to die out with the coming of spring and the warmer weather that checks the respiratory diseases.

Fall and winter are the influenza seasons and, unless this tricky disease takes a new turn, health specialists consider a spring and summer epidemic unlikely. As the spring is now further advanced in Japan than in this country, reports of the subsidence of the epidemic are expected shortly.

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Voice Prints

Criminology

"Voice prints" are to be made of criminals by various police departments of the Southwest. The innovation was suggested by Charles Gunning, Chief of Detectives of Dallas. Detectives claim a phonographic record of a criminal's voice may be made while the man is engaged in an ordinary conversation and without his knowledge. The peculiarities of the man's voice often give policemen clues by which an unknown criminal may be identified.

When a library of voice records has been completed it will be possible for the victim of a hold-up to sit in a comfortable chair and listen to the voices of numerous suspected robbers in an attempt to identify the person who said "stick 'em up" to him.

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Melons Ripened with Gas

Botany

Casaba and honey-dew melons have been added to the list of fruits which can be given the color and texture of ripeness by treatment with ethylene gas, as a result of researches carried on by Dr. J. T. Rosa at the University Farm at Davis, Calif. Partly ripe melons, with rinds still green and flesh still hard, were subjected to the gas at a concentration of one part in 4,000. They assumed the orthodox "ripe" color, and their flesh became soft. The sugar content, however, was not raised by the treatment. For this reason the hastening gas treatment is not recommended for fruits picked before a fairly advanced stage of maturity.

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