

'Cannibalistic' flora —

The Pitcher Plant

(And Other So-Called 'Cannibal Plants')

ELIZABETH BACHMANN

From "The Conservation Volunteer"

Sarracenia purpurea displays discriminating taste when it comes to choosing its habitat. In cool, wet, sphagnum places from Labrador to Florida and in the Great Lakes region it appears in the most idyllic locations.

Besides the inky black waters of the quiet lagoon linking Sawbill Lake and the small lake-of-no-name rimmed round about with water lilies, the pitcher-plant (which is *Sarracenia's* common name) grows and holds erect its beet-red, nodding flowers. Its pitcher-shaped leaves are all but hidden by the pale-green grasses which border the water.

In the dim swamp north of the Itasca Park boundary it grows beside the showy pink and white lady's slipper. The few rays of sunlight which penetrate the dimness and filter through the canopy overhead glint on the shining red petals of the flower held high above the bog.

A dozen miles east of the little village of Effie is a tamarack swamp spangled with the "small fry" of the orchid family, ladies' tresses, the pyrolas, the buckbean, as well as the showy lady's slipper. There too the pitcher-plant grows in abundance.

A quaking bog on tiny Mott Island which lies like a chip off Isle Royale in Lake Superior is also the home of the pitcher-plant or "side-saddle flower," as it is sometimes called. Its leaves have the grace and symmetry of a Grecian urn and the lovely lines of a French curve. The dozen-or-so leaves radiate outward from a central point and curve upward with the sweep of a hunter's horn. Each has a broad wing extending to the open end of the "pitcher," the inside of which is lined with fine hairs extending downward. From the center of the whorl of leaves rise the strangely formed flowers on their tall green stems which are a foot or two in height.

Each flower has five sepals with three or four bracts at the base. Its five red petals are fiddle-shaped. In

the center is the style which is expanded at the top into quite a broad, petal-like, five-angled, five-rayed, umbrella-shaped form, the five delicate rays ending underneath in five little hooked stigmas. Intricately designed, the flower is exactly the right type to harmonize with the strangely formed leaves. Long after the deep red petals drop, the sepals and the style retain their fresh greenness and present a striking geometric design.

It derives its name from that of Dr. Michel Sarracin, who was a physician in Quebec early in the eighteenth century. Evidently a botanist as well, it was he who sent our northern species to Europe and introduced it there.

"Huntsman's cup" is another name for it. The urn-shaped leaves are usually half filled with water and a number of drowned insects. The general belief has been that the unsuspecting insects are lured to the plant by a honeyed liquid on the rim and inside the pitcher, or by the ruddy coloration which it attains in the fall, and once inside the cavity they are prevented by the hairs from climbing out and finally drowned. It has been maintained that the plant feeds on the decaying bodies of these luckless insects, and so it has been called a cannibal plant. For pitcher-plants in terrariums, it has even been suggested that a few dead bugs be fed them from time to time.

A new theory has sprung up which dispels the stigma of such cannibalism from the good name of this interesting plant. Now, instead of the plant feeding on the drowned insects, their dead bodies are presumed to furnish the food for the larvae of a fly which is instrumental in the pollination of the flowers, a necessary procedure since the plant is propagated by seed. It would seem, therefore, that its purpose in capturing insects (which, by the way, enter of their own free will and are not trapped as the tropical Venus fly-trap captures its prey), is not for its own preserva-

tion but for the perpetuation of its kind, and thereby refutes the contention that it is a "wolf plant in sheep's clothing."

In the regions where the pitcher-plant thrives you will also come upon the little sundew (*Drosera rotundifolia*) whose flower opens only in the sunshine and whose ray-like leaves give off drops of a clear, sticky fluid which glitter like dewdrops. The entire plant is reddish in color, and only a few inches tall.

The pitcher-plant and the sundew, although very unlike each other in appearance, have one characteristic in common, and that is the ability to catch insects. Any little insect that comes in contact with the sticky dewdrops of the sundew is promptly clutched by the ray-like leaves. Another flower which has the power to ensnare insects is the butterwort (*Pinguicula caudata*.) This violet colored flower has soft, fleshy, broad leaves of a yellowish-green, quite greasy to the touch. Small insects alighting on them stick to the leaves as they would to flypaper. It grows on the North Shore of Lake Superior, in crevices in the rock just below Father Baraga's granite cross erected near the mouth of the Cross River, and in a few other sheltered rocky spots protected from buffeting winds and eager hands alike.

Executive Meeting (from Page 6)

Alberta and Manitoba, and maybe even for local societies in Saskatchewan.

The question of enlarging our membership and strengthening our organization was still left open for further discussion. Should we join with Natural History Societies in Manitoba and Alberta? This would mean that the Blue Jay would then be published by the Natural History Societies of the Prairie Provinces. One member from British Columbia has asked: "Why not include British Columbia too?" This question will require much study, so please send in your ideas.

The first executive meeting also discussed the desirability of having membership cards. Do you want membership cards, or are you willing to continue to use the Blue Jay as the symbol of your membership in the society?

Dirt Hills in Winter

Dorothy Durr, Bromhead, Sask.

Along the line of snowy hills
The frozen prairie lies,
And all along the silver plain
The wind, a spectre, sighs.

Small paths upon the virgin white
Are tracks where rabbits run.
They sit in frozen form all day,
But moonlight nights are fun.

A trodden yard beside a slough,
A pilfered stack of hay
Show where White-tailed Deer have
been
By night, and too, by day.

Once when land settlement was new,
These hills were filled with life
Homesteaders all a new life sought
Whose hearts with hope were rife.

These hills are left to nature now,
A hunter's paradise
Across whose silent, frosty cold,
The wind, a spectre sighs.

Friendly Birds

By Vernier Rondeau, D.D.S., Rouleau

Last summer, we became intimately acquainted with a pair of Arkansas Kingbirds. In the thirty-five years that I have resided at Rouleau I never had birds to nest so close to our door. It was very interesting to see the pair raising their family of four. I used to imitate the plaintive notes of the father bird and he could not figure out where that other bird was. Those birds certainly destroyed a lot of moths.

Some time ago I decided to send one of my bird houses to Queen Elizabeth's children. It is a Wren house and I hope that it will be hung and that wrens will occupy it.

These last few years I have sent to the Department of Resources and Development at Ottawa for copies of "Bird Houses and their Occupants" and "Attracting Birds with Food and Water". These I have passed on to my young patients, to Normalites, etc. I have also made bird houses which I donated to school, to encourage children and others to build bird houses and to attract birds.