



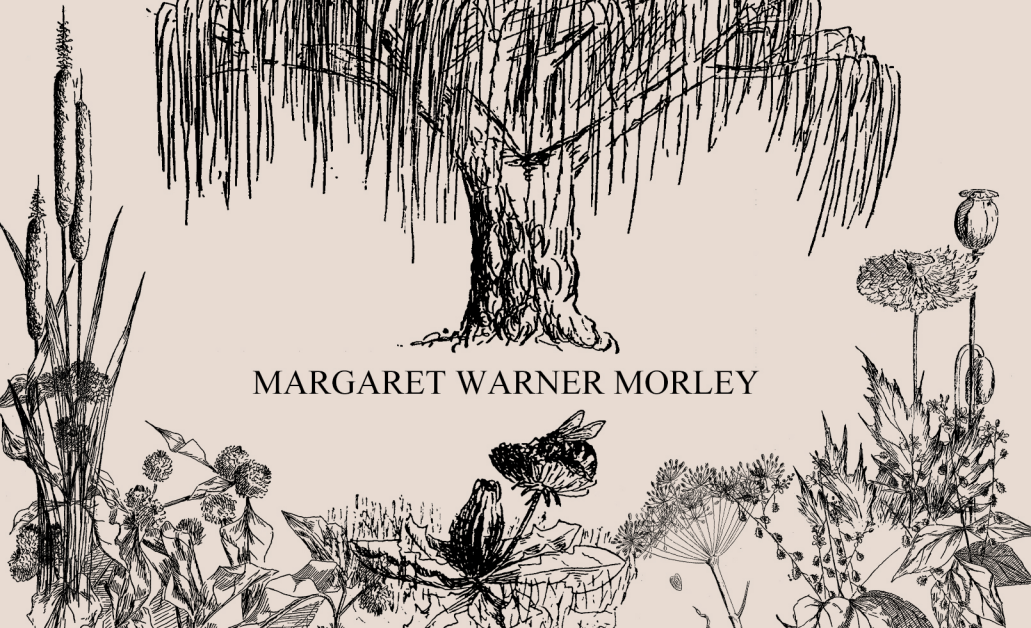
Nature Lessons for Young Explorers

LITTLE WANDERERS

FROM PLUMES TO BURRS:
NATURE'S CLEVER WAYS TO ROAM



MARGARET WARNER MORLEY



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by

MARGARET WARNER MORLEY



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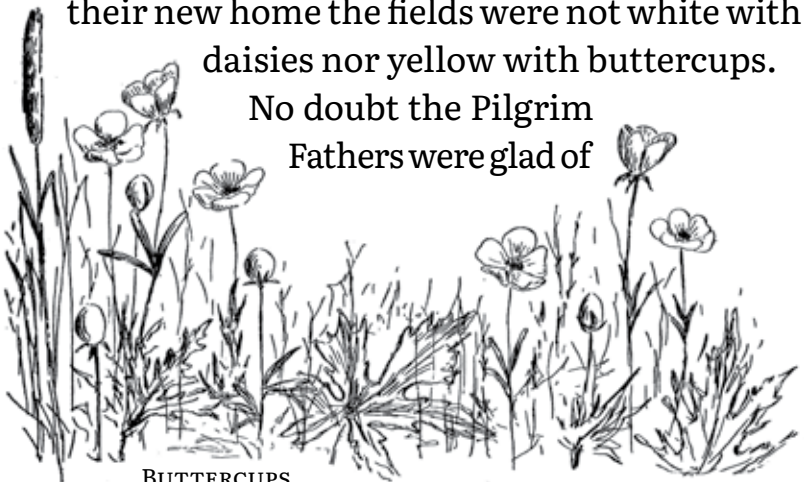
WHY PLANTS TRAVEL

PLANTS ARE great travelers; they often wander far and wide. Sometimes they even cross the ocean and take up their abode in a new land.

The oxeye daisy, our common meadow buttercup, and the little Canada thistle, now so abundant everywhere, are not native Americans, but came here from Europe.

Very likely they sailed in the ships with the early settlers and took possession of the New World with them. They are so much at home now that most people think they always grew here. But they did not, and when the Pilgrim Fathers looked over their new home the fields were not white with daisies nor yellow with buttercups.

No doubt the Pilgrim
Fathers were glad of



BUTTERCUPS.

this, for daisies and buttercups often cover the fields and spoil the hay, and while “daisies in the meadow” seem very lovely to the city people who go to the country for the summer, daisies in the hay are another matter, and the farmers do not think them lovely at all.

It is not the grown-up plants that travel, as a rule, though some of them do. For you must know the plant world is a topsy-turvy kind of place where the parents stand still at home and the children wander about.

Of course the children are the seeds, and they are free, but when they once settle down and begin to grow their wandering days are over.

Plants with roots are great home-bodies; nothing short of actual violence can make them move from the spot they have chosen. Frequently it happens that they die if moved.

Not so with the seeds, however.

They wander about, and their parents often take great pains to send them out into the world.

For the children of the plants are very apt to die if they remain at home too long. They need to find a place in which to settle down and grow, and it is often better for them to do this at a distance from their parents.

Plants eat what is in the soil, and each kind of plant needs some particular earth food. When plants of one kind are crowded too closely in a place the earth

is often impoverished, and the plant might die out if it were not able to find a fresh growing place. Then, again, if the seeds always fell close to the parent plant, the earth would soon become too crowded to support more than a very few new plants.

So for these and other reasons it is best for the seeds to go while they are able and find a place for themselves.

Nearly all seeds are provided with some way of moving about, and while some of them go very short distances others go very long ones.

They travel for their profit, and why may we not say for their pleasure? For if a plant is able to feel and enjoy at all,—and I for one believe it is,—then the dandelion seeds must feel very joyous sailing before the wind in the early summer, and later the thistle-down and the milkweed seeds, scudding before the breeze.



SOME HAPPY WANDERERS.

THOSE THAT FLY WITH PLUMES OR DOWN

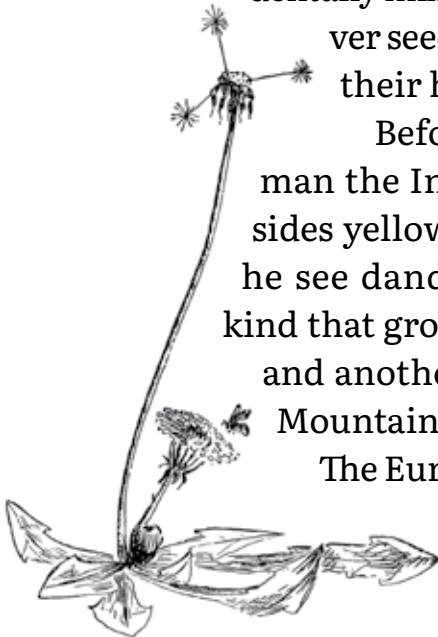
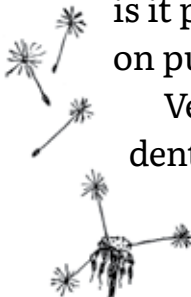
DANDELIONS.

EVERYBODY IS well acquainted with the dandelion, but not everybody knows that it was brought to this country from Europe. It is not probable that a dandelion seed could come on the wings of the wind three thousand miles across the ocean, nor is it probable that people would bring it on purpose.

Very likely dandelion seeds were accidentally mixed in with the grass and clover seeds the settlers brought from their homes in the Old World.

Before the coming of the white man the Indian did not see the roadsides yellow with dandelions, nor did he see dandelions at all, excepting a kind that grows sparingly way up north and another that grows in the Rocky Mountains.

The European dandelions liked the New World and when they



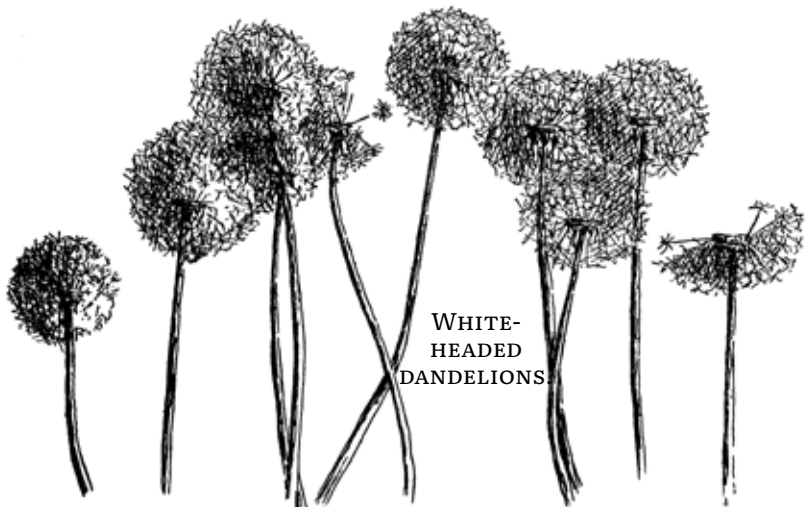
had the chance spread very fast, so that now they are everywhere—at least in the East.

The reason they were able to spread so is that the dandelion seeds were able to fly.

If they had not flown away but had dropped down close to the parent plant and grown there, they would not have been allowed to spread much; for people do not like dandelions in their fields and lawns, and try hard to root them out.

This would be easy if the dandelions kept together in patches. But they seem to say “catch me if you can” as they fly on the wings of the wind, dropping down here, there, and everywhere, striking root and merrily growing.

The parent dandelion takes very good care of its seed children, and plans for their future success by





SEED CASE
AND PLUME
MAGNIFIED.

giving each one a little plume by which it can be blown about by the wind.

Everybody knows the pretty, fluffy, white-headed dandelions that come after the yellow flowers.

Children often blow on them “to see what time it is.” If all the seeds fly away but one, they say it is one o’clock; if two remain, they say it is two o’clock, and

so on.

They also blow on them to see if “mother wants me,” as every child knows.

Each little silky part that flies away is a seed case and its plume.

If you look carefully at the part of the dandelion that flies about, you will see the little brown seed case at one end, shaped something like a tiny cucumber, and with little teeth near its top.

Out of its top grows a silky white stalk, and at the end of this is a tuft of soft little hairs by means of which the seed case can float in the air.

Each dandelion seed case contains one little seed, but the case fits the seed so closely that most people speak of the whole thing—seed case and seed together—as the seed. The proper name for such

a seed case and its seed is akene¹. Not all akenes have plumes.

The top of the dandelion stem is a flat cushion, and the little akenes, when the seeds are ripe, stand on it, pointing out in different directions so there may be room for every one with its spread-out plume.



THE FLAT CUSHION WITH
A FEW SEEDS ATTACHED.

The plumes do not open out until the seed is ready to be blown away, and the akenes do not stand pointing out in all directions until the time to fly has come. Before that they are all packed closely together.



BEFORE
THE PLUME
OPENS OUT.

Because the little akene is so light and feathery the breeze bears it along, sometimes for quite a distance, but at last it drops down to the earth or else is blown among the grasses or weeds or stones and lodges there, and when the right time comes the seed that is in the little brown



ALL CLOSELY
PACKED
TOGETHER

seed case sprouts.

1 à-kên'

Sometimes the air seems to be full of dandelion akenes floating about.

Although the dandelion is so bright and pretty, people do not like it in their lawns.

Excepting when in bloom or when it is “white-headed,” it is not as pretty as grass. It does not make a beautiful velvety carpet to the earth, but its leaves look ragged and uneven and spoil the appearance of the lawn.

It is from its leaves that the dandelion gets its name, for “dandelion” means “tooth of a lion”; and if you look at a well-grown dandelion leaf you will understand why it came to have such a fierce name.



A WELL-GROWN DANDELION LEAF.

Dandelions are very fond of growing in lawns. They like to be taken care of, and they seem to like to have their heads cut off.

Anyway the lawn mower does not trouble them in the least.

Their leaves grow close to the ground, in the shape of a rosette, and when the lawn mower

passes over, only the large outer leaves are harmed; the young ones towards the center of the rosette remain unhurt and have more light and air and space to grow in; so our dandelion flourishes in spite of its pruning.

When a dandelion once gets its roots started it does not make so very much difference if it has its flowers cut off, for it does not die when winter comes. Only its leaves die. Its root continues alive in the earth, and in the spring wakes up and puts out new leaves.

So cutting off the flowers does not destroy the dandelion, it merely prevents seeds from forming, and more dandelions from starting.



Dandelion roots kill the grass by pushing it aside and taking the earth-food for themselves.

So if dandelions get started in a lawn they will soon kill out the grass, and then there will be a dandelion lawn instead of a grass lawn!

A dandelion lawn is very beautiful for a little while in the early summer. Sometimes it looks like a carpet of gold, the yellow flowers are so thick and fine. But when



1. A CLUSTER OF FLOWERS.
2. ONE FLOWER (MAGNIFIED).

they are done blossoming the lawn is a sorry looking sight.

Dandelions do not trouble the hay fields, for where the grass is allowed to grow tall it soon smothers them.

Boys are often hired to dig dandelion roots out of lawns, and near large cities poor women may often be seen digging them out for the sake of the young leaves

which, when they first come up in the spring, make very good “greens.” These people sell them or eat them instead of spinach. Tender young dandelion leaves are very good indeed, and some people like them better than spinach.

Dandelion plants have a wise way of protecting their seed children until the time for flight.

The flower buds come out of the center of the leaf rosette, close to the ground. They have very short stems and seem to sit right on the rosette.

There are a great many flowers in one dandelion head. Each little yellow part of the dandelion flower head is a separate blossom, and each separate blossom has one seed case with a seed inside growing to the bottom of it.

All of these blossoms are shut up at first in a case of green, leaf-like parts, and form the bud.

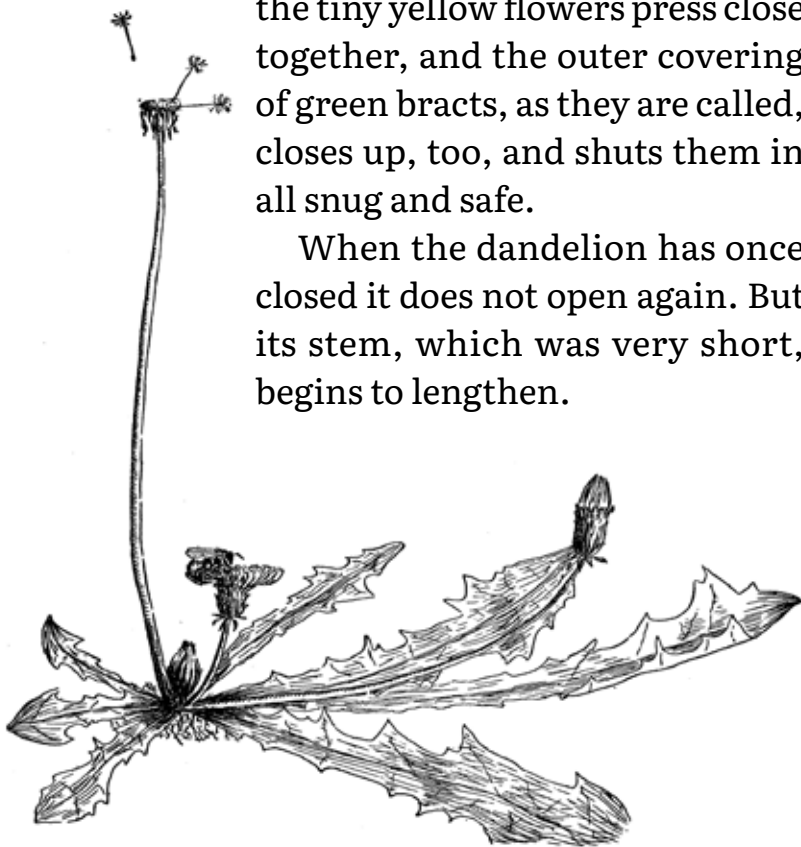


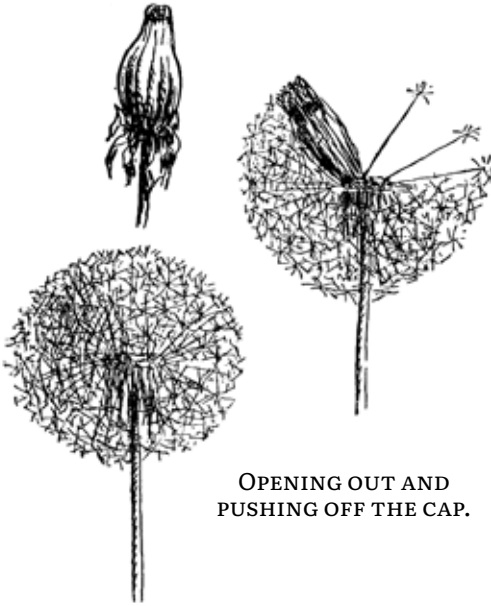
THE BUD.

As the bud grows older its stem lengthens a little, as you can see in the picture on page 9—unless it is on a lawn. Then it does not lengthen; it seems to know the lawn mower will come along and take off its head if it grows taller, so it stays close to the ground. After a while the green bud opens, the many little yellow flowers push their way out, and the dandelion is in bloom.

Towards night the dandelion shuts up again; the tiny yellow flowers press close together, and the outer covering of green bracts, as they are called, closes up, too, and shuts them in all snug and safe.

When the dandelion has once closed it does not open again. But its stem, which was very short, begins to lengthen.





OPENING OUT AND
PUSHING OFF THE CAP.

It is a hollow stem, as you know, and has a bitter, milky juice.

Longer and longer grows the stem with the closed-up flower cluster at its top. But this wise stem does not stand up. Oh, no, indeed! it lies down or leans

over, concealed by the grass and weeds, unless it grows on a lawn. Then the wise stem does not lengthen much; it is afraid of that lawn mower.

If the dandelion is growing among tall grass, the stem will grow very long indeed; if among short grass it will not grow so long.

By this time you can guess why.

When the seeds are ripe and the silky plumes all nicely formed that stem stands up!

It stands straight up and looks over the tops of the grasses. Then the green bracts on the outside turn back, and the silky tufts spread out and pull themselves free from the remains of the tiny flowers which have withered and are no longer yellow.

They do not fall off when the flower first closes, but make a little cap to protect the growing akenes, and when these get ready to open out the cap is pushed off by them.

The hollow stem stands up, and its lovely silky head of plumed akenes shines in the sunlight.

There is nothing much prettier in the plant world than this head of fairy dandelion akenes all ready to fly away.

They stand and shine until a breeze comes along that is strong enough to dislodge them, then all in a moment they are off sailing through the air.

The parent plant is not sorry to have them go, for this is what it has worked so hard to accomplish; and as they float away, if it thinks at all, it no doubt hopes that each little shining wanderer will alight at last in a beautiful home of its own with plenty of space and sunlight and food for its growth.

If there is not breeze enough to carry away the dandelion akenes, when night approaches or a storm gathers the careful parent plant does not allow these silky treasures to become soaked and spoiled by moisture.

Each little plume shuts up again! The silky tufts no longer spread out, and the green bracts, too, turn up and cover them safely as before. They go to sleep, hoping, no doubt, for better luck next day.

There is no better fun than to watch the dandelions do these things.

When children blow the heads of dandelions away, that is just what the dandelions want, for it sets all the akenes flying about in the air above the earth.

The main thing for a dandelion seed is to get started. If it can get up in the air free from the weeds and grasses, it will be sure to take quite a journey and will doubtless settle in a new home.

The bitter milky juice of the dandelion very likely protects it from being eaten by various plant-eating creatures.

This juice is familiar to country children who pick the long stems of the dandelions, split them, and “curl” the parts in their mouths.

These pretty stems make very long and fine curls, as every little country girl knows.



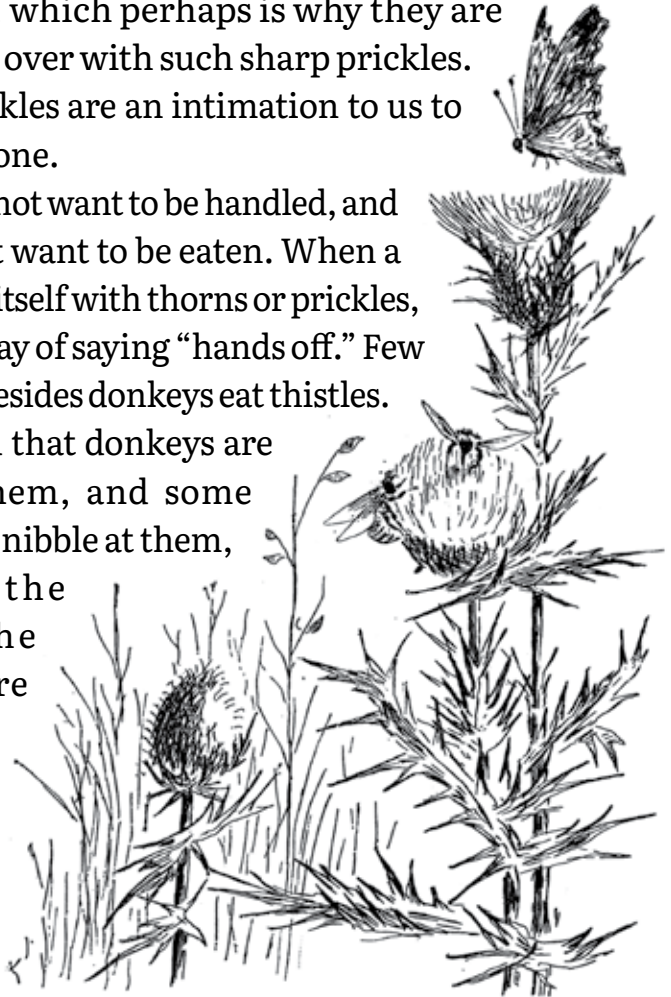
THISTLES.

NOBODY CAN help liking thistles—that is, to look at. We do not care to handle them, nor do they care to have us, which perhaps is why they are covered all over with such sharp prickles.

The prickles are an intimation to us to let them alone.

They do not want to be handled, and they do not want to be eaten. When a plant arms itself with thorns or prickles, that is its way of saying “hands off.” Few creatures besides donkeys eat thistles.

It is said that donkeys are fond of them, and some horses will nibble at them, but on the whole the thistles are let alone, excepting by the farmer, who digs them up.





Thistles are much more troublesome than dandelions, for they get into the hay and grain, and if let alone some kinds will kill out all other plants and occupy the land themselves.

There are many kinds of thistles. Our large native ones that bear beautiful showy

purple, or pink, or white heads are not, as a rule, very troublesome to the farmer.

The little Canada thistle is the pest he dreads. That, like the dandelion, came from Europe. No doubt its seeds were first brought over—a very few of them—with other seeds from the Old World. But all the little emigrant asked was to get started.

Once across the sea, it was able to conquer the plants of America and get a place for itself, for its seeds fly, like those of the dandelion, and in very much the same way.

The Canada thistle spreads by running roots that

live through the winter, as well as by seeds, so no wonder it quickly found its way far and wide.

It is for this reason sometimes called the creeping thistle, and because it is so troublesome it is also named the Cursed thistle.

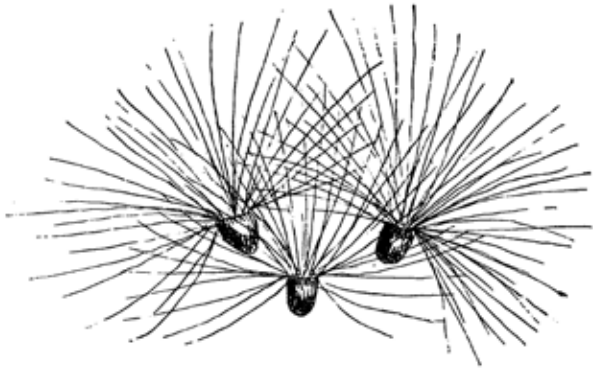
There is a thistle in Europe which bears a light yellow flower head and is called the Blessed thistle or the Holy thistle. It has its name because people used to believe it had power to counteract poison. This thistle has been brought over from Europe, and is sometimes to be found in the southern part of the United States, where it has run wild.

Thistle heads are often very large and handsome. Like the dandelion flower clusters, they are made up of a large number of small blossoms.

Bees and blossoms are very fond of thistle honey, and they can almost always be found on the blossoms, sucking out the drop of honey which is to be found in each little flower of the cluster.

At the bottom of each little flower, as in the dandelion, is an akene. An akene, we remember, is a tight-fitting seed case containing one seed. The thistle akene also has a plume to fly with.

The thistle plume has no stalk, but grows right from the top of the akene. The plumed akenes are packed tightly away beneath the scaly bracts that surround them.



These bracts in the thistle are generally covered with sharp prickles. So, although one likes to look at a thistle

and inhale its fragrance, it is not a pleasant flower to handle.

When the thistle seeds are ripe, the prickly covering loosens, and the akenes come trooping out in a soft, fluffy mass. Away they fly, one by one, as the breeze dislodges them and carries them off. They are much more showy than the dandelion akenes, for the plumes are much larger.

Away they go, this way and that, and after a while the wind blows them against a tree branch, or a fence rail, or a stone. Then the akene thus stopped drops off from the plume to the ground. The akene, in this case, is done sailing about. It has come to rest and very likely will lie until the next spring before it sprouts.



The plume is not harmed at all when the akene lets go, but at the next gust of wind flies on, lighter than ever.

One often sees these seedless plumes sailing about in the summer and fall.

People sometimes gather the heads of large thistles before the seeds are ripe, pull out the pink part of the flowers, carefully pull off the prickly bracts, and hang the rest up to dry. The akenes do not then fall off, but the plummy part fluffs out and makes a pretty pompon with which the children's hats can be trimmed.

