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Flowers of the Plaster Rock By John Erskine It is one of the surprises of Nova Scotia to emerge from dark spruce forest or from the yellow-green of grassland and to be faced by low white escarpments like minia? tures of the chalk cliffs of Dover. Yet one may meet them over half the province, a long interrupted belt that extends from Amherst and Hantsport to Cheticamp and Dingwall in northern Cape Breton. They must have been recognized early as valua? ble deposits, for they are gnawed by the quarryings of many ages, surface-pits con? nected by cart-tracks to river banks, long cuts served by light railways, and, the most recent, great devastated areas which roads or railways link to the sea. The gypsum is far commoner than meets the eye, for in wide areas it is hidden by an overburden of glacial clay which becomes forest or farming land. Then the underly? ing plaster rock is revealed only by springs with a sulphurous smell and a bor? der of red-stemmed dogwood-bushes. Today the quarrymen prefer this deep unweathered gypsum, which is often greyish-blue in col? our. Bulldozers scrape the surface free of soil; dynamite blasts explode in long lines; steam-shovels load endless files of trucks along the facie of the cut, and the hill moves off piecemeal towards the sea. The white weathered gypsum on the surface is now of little value and remains un? touched. At its edge, too, farming stops, for the surface is sculptured into a gigan? tic honeycomb of vertical caves through which rainwater seeps down towards sea-lev? el, and in the roughest areas even cattle cannot graze, for the vegetation is scanty and the danger great. These few small ar? eas remain almost unchanged by man, and in them one glimpses a native vegetation which has been driven wholly from the rich? er lands. The Flowers of the Gypsum It is in early spring that the flowers of the gypsum are at their best, for the hu? mus is thin and the plaster rock holds up little water. Before the gypsum "chimneys" become parched, some early flowers live out a few brilliant weeks. Fringing the top of the cliffs is a golden border of small ragwort (1) which will have withered to dry stems above perennial crowns before its relatives have come into bloom. The crumbling cliff-faces carry patches of a tiny blue primrose (2), a rare small sedge (3); and clumps of fleabane (4) like flim? sy lavender daisies; and the sulphurous pools below are jewelled with the floating golden flowers of Pursh's buttercup (5). In the shade of hardwood trees rich clumps of leafy-stemmed violets (6) lift constel? lations of sky-blue flowers, and among pin? cushions of rare mosses grow masses of yel? low lady's-slippers (7). In a month all these herbs will have vanished, but a few hardy shrubs will wring a living even from the bare cliffs which glare, blinding white as snow, in the sun of summer. Al- (45)