

FLOWERS AS EVANGELS

By Phebe Westcott Humphreys

THE thought is pleasant and inspiring that in many of our large cities flower missions are being established, and that as the good work is extended those who have heretofore given the subject little thought are gradually becoming interested in the influences for good which the dainty blossoms are exerting. Flowers do much more than simply beautify the world; their mission is to refine and purify, and no matter where they are grown their wide and helpful influences are felt. It is only when we try to imagine what the world would be without flowers that we can appreciate their value. A well-known writer has said:

"Not a tree,
A plant, a leaf, a blossom but contains
A folio blossom. One may read and read,
And read again, and still find something new;
Something to please and something to instruct
E'en in the noisome weed."

Is it true, "a folio" in every leaf and blossom? If so, how very few of the volumes one can read in a lifetime, and how few read "earth's floral page" aright. They tell so many lessons of the Fatherhood of God—His infinite wisdom, His wondrous power, His great love for all. Happy, indeed, is he,

"Who hath power
To gather wisdom from a flower,
And wake his heart in every hour
To pleasant gratitude."

Another poet has called flowers:

"Sweet letters of the angel tongue,
I've loved ye long and well,
And never have failed in your fragrance sweet
To find some secret spell.
A charm that has bound me with witching power—
For mine is the old belief
That, midst your sweets and midst your bloom
There's a soul in every leaf!"

The question naturally arises, "How can I help to extend this mission work?" Perhaps a hint of what is being done may offer some suggestions to those who have neglected this work, not so much from want of opportunity, but because their attention has not been called to the good results of a little effort in this direction.

HORTICULTURAL societies have sprung up in all parts of the country during the past few years. We are constantly reading of the spring and fall "shows," the "Rose exhibits," "Carnation exhibits," "Chrysanthemum exhibits," etc., and the pleasant rivalry of the competitors has given an increased interest to certain branches of floriculture, which must be very gratifying to those interested. But a much nobler work is accomplished when societies are started with another end in view—that of interesting the poorer classes in the wonders of "God's messengers," the blossoms. One who is especially interested in this missionary gardening has said: "Horticultural societies are sometimes as nearly missionary in their purposes and in their results as are the societies that send missionaries to the heathen." I felt so one day when I attended a little exhibition of plants grown in the windows of their homes by the children of a residence part of the city of Boston, far removed from Beacon Street, or the Back Bay.

For several years the Massachusetts Horticultural Society has offered prizes for the best plants in pots raised by children, and exhibitions of these plants have met with the most gratifying results. The exhibition which I attended was held in a schoolroom in Boston's "North End." Out from the homes there came women and children with pots and boxes of plants in their hands, carrying them to the schoolroom near by for exhibition. Many of the plants exhibited had been grown by little girls of ten and twelve years, and it was touching to see their pride and pleasure in the result of their loving care.

Every exhibitor was given a set of seven or eight beautiful floral picture cards, while the prize winners were presented with botanical books. The general purpose of the society in arranging for and encouraging these exhibitions is missionary in spirit, and a work of helpfulness to both the souls and the bodies of these children of the poor. The love of flowers is inherent in every child, no matter how wretched may be the surroundings in which the pitiful atom of humanity has been born and reared; and if this love of the beautiful can be encouraged and developed, if only by the influence of one treasured plant, there is great reason to hope that that life will not stray far from the right no matter what temptations may come, for this love for flowers will constantly shed about him its influence for good, although he may be utterly unconscious of the fact.

A PROMINENT horticultural society that has been especially interested in reaching out a helping hand to those whose lives are seemingly barren and hopeless dates the beginning of its efforts in this direction as far back as the year 1872. At a meeting held in March of that year the president read a communication in which the desire was expressed that the society should offer plants for window gardening among the poorer classes, conduct all the business of advertising, awarding prizes, etc., and that whatever money was required for the purpose would be furnished. The plan was adopted, and during the year plants were distributed by several churches, and from that small beginning the movement has grown until now it takes a special committee to look after the matter of window gardening. In January following the committee issued a circular requesting all the churches which had been in the habit of giving the children a bunch of flowers on Easter Sunday to give potted plants instead. The following Easter the plan was followed by many churches, and with most excellent results. But a point arose that the committee had not foreseen, and that was that after the children had received a plant they immediately began to ask questions regarding its growth: "How shall I care for it?" "Can I make it grow?" "How often shall I water it?" etc., etc., which not only showed the interest taken in window gardening, but made it necessary for instruction to be given on the cultivation of the plants. To meet this want the window garden committee published a pamphlet on the cultivation of house plants. The following year over five thousand potted plants were given out by the committee, and several thousand of these pamphlets.

AN enthusiastic little woman, a member of one of the churches which had made special efforts in this work of plant distribution, resolved that special efforts should be made to reach the homes of those who seemed just beyond the limits of the work accomplished by the societies and churches. As she had a beautiful home in the suburbs, with every opportunity to become personally interested in floriculture, and as her bright, helpful, consecrated life preached its own little sermon of hopefulness, helpfulness and peace, it was an easy matter for her to convince several influential friends that this work was well worth their special attention, and soon a small circle with a special committee was doing the work in the mission Sunday-schools, prompted thereto by one woman's interest in humanity.

THE editors of a prominent magazine, roused to the spirit of this noble work, decided to extend it in still another direction. Accordingly they offered to send seeds free of charge to those who would promise to plant and cultivate them for the purpose of distributing the flowers among the poor, the sick and the helpless, and each one who received the seeds was requested to give an account, at the close of the season, of their success with the plants and the good accomplished by the distribution of the flowers. At the close of the third year of this effort for good the editors announced that the results surpassed all their expectations. Figures tell but little of the story, but it is interesting to note that about four thousand packets of seeds were sent out, in every case a response to a special request, the writer of which, tacitly or otherwise, agreed to the conditions of the gift—that is, that the flowers should be raised and given away solely to the poor and sick. To say that ten plants were raised from each packet (a single variety containing two or three hundred seeds) is an extremely low estimate; even more moderate is the computation of ten blossoms to a plant. By these figures it will be seen that during the summer at least four hundred thousand blossoms must have been given away by the mission gardeners. It is probable that the real number was nearer twice that. Although the work of the mission was so far-reaching it was not advertised, the originators preferring that it should be carried on quietly "In His Name." Who can tell how many eyes brightened at the sight of the fresh, sweet blossoms which had been grown solely for them? How many weary tasks in the hot, stifling rooms of the poor were lightened by the dewy messages of love; into how many chambers of suffering the tiny nosegays brought new life and hope; to how many tired, discouraged ones they spoke, not only of the kindly givers, but of Him who considered the Lilies of the field.

WHILE untold good is being accomplished by these societies, and the other special efforts that are being made in this connection, who can tell of the wondrous results of individual efforts of the consecrated lives whose helpfulness and kindness are not made public? There is no necessity for discouragement on the part of those whose means and opportunities for doing good seem meagre. We have only to look about us, no matter how narrowed our sphere of usefulness, and we will be surprised at the opportunities springing up on every hand. One instance comes to mind: She was a hard-working, overburdened creature, our washerwoman, with a good-for-nothing husband and a large family of unruly children. It would seem that all love for the beautiful must have been crushed out of her nature, but I had often noticed the rapt expression that would steal over her face as she would pause in her work to look at a plant covered with magnificent bloom which occupied a conspicuous place in our conservatory. I was often tempted to give her this plant, but selfishness always suggested the gift of a commoner one—indeed, it seemed hard to think of parting with any of my plants. It was not pleasant to think of the squalid surroundings which might await them in her shiftless home, but conscience whispered: "You ought to do it; this lovely plant blooming so constantly with so little care may accomplish much." After much indecision selfishness was conquered, and at the close of an unusually hard day's work, when the poor woman had seemed completely discouraged, and had revealed some of her troubles, I resolved not to hesitate any longer.

"And where am I to carry it, misses?" she inquired when I offered her the plant, and prepared to remove it from its place of honor in the conservatory.

"It is for you to keep," I answered. "For me!" she gasped. "Not that—not the very purtiest one in the hull lot! Oh, I'd love to have a bloomin' plant, but I can't take yer purtiest!" But when I convinced her that I really wanted her to have it she clasped it in her arms, and said in a whisper: "And I've been so wicked all day, I was almost doubtin' if there was a lovin' God watchin' over us all, and I was so clean discouraged I was thinkin' there wa'n't no use in tryin' to do right, for the women in our street who drink and steal seem to have a better time than me, and their childer ain't no worse 'an mine, but I won't give up now; it will be easier with this to help me. I don't know how to thank ye, ma'am," and again she struggled to keep back the tears as she gave a queer little courtesy and walked rapidly away. A week passed by, and again she came to do the weekly washing, but that discouraged expression in her face had gone, and her first greeting was: "Oh, misses, I can't tell you how much it's done for us all. The children is keeping the winder clean so's it can git the sunshine, and they's shamed to have the room look dirty with them blessed blossoms lookin' on." Another week she exclaimed with beaming eyes: "The old man don't have the room full of smokin' men no more; he's 'fraid the smoke will hurt them flowers; and he stays home now, and when the room gits straightened up he draws his chair close to the plant, and works at his trade just like he used to before he got to drinkin'." Every week brought fresh messages of joy and thankfulness, until I wondered how I ever could have hesitated for a moment about allowing the plant to accomplish its mission.

BUT not the poorer classes alone are influenced by this floral missionary work; the flowers are evangelists, just as truly when they are the means of awakening one of society's thoughtless, petted favorites to the realities of life, as she notes the unexpected influence for good caused by a flower that has been carelessly dropped or thoughtlessly offered to one in need.

We have all doubtless known of families where work is ever the order of the day. They may have abundant means, and every opportunity to enjoy life, and to help others in this enjoyment, but they are seemingly blind to this fact. Daily comforts and pleasures are crowded out, and life is made a hard, stern fact, with work, work, work throughout each day and all the year round, until there seems to be little within the home to make life glad and beautiful and worth the living. But by some strange fatality flowers find their way into this home—only by degrees, perhaps: a blossom is offered to one of the children, a potted plant follows, and the children, becoming interested, start a small flower bed for the summer, and pot their treasures in old tin cans, etc., for winter blooming. The father and mother may object at first, and complain of the waste of time, assuring the children that it is foolish to take so much trouble when there is "no money in it." But soon it is noticed that little home courtesies are taking the place of harsh, unloving expressions, and as the fragrant blossoms continue their silent, sweet, persuasive influences the home life is brightened in numberless ways. The inmates of the home no longer simply exist, they have commenced to live.