

LONDON FLOWER-GIRLS AFTER THE GREAT FROST.



WHAT will rank in history as the Great Frost of 1895, and as one of the most severe visitations of the kind during the present century, had the effect of almost clearing the London streets of flower-girls for the time. There were flowers in the market, but the price advanced to such an unusual figure that they were quite out of the reach of the *bouquetières* who depend on effecting their sales to casual customers in our main thoroughfares. Even if they could have purchased such stock-in-trade, however, snow, frost, and keen withering winds would probably have caused the posies to droop and die before they could have been sold. There is no one trading in London, in the most humble way, who so greatly values soft breezes and a sunny sky as the *bonâ fide* flower-girl, who makes a brave endeavour to keep to her calling in all kinds of weather. The reason is that to her a famine of flowers in Covent Garden means an empty cupboard and a fireless grate at home, notwithstanding that there may be ten, fifteen, or even twenty degrees of frost in the air. The almost phenomenal cold of last February was probably as severe an affliction as the flower-girl ever passed through; and she will remember the dark days as vividly as Evelyn remembered the old-fashioned winter of 1683, which split his oaks and blasted or "burnt" his evergreens. The flower-girls, as a body, came as near to actual destitution as ever their friends knew them to do, although at their best, and when flowers are plentiful and the warm sun is shining, they live hard, or from hand to mouth. While the frost held on there were many moving or affecting scenes to be witnessed. At Covent Garden the Flower Girls' Mission—of which Mr. John A. Groom is the secretary, and which has its headquarters

at Clerkenwell Close—maintains a club or breakfast-room, cocoa and bread-and-butter being supplied free, while a convenient and warm haven is provided where the girls and women can arrange the stock in their baskets for the day.

When the frost, fog, and darkness were at their worst, despair seemed to chill the hearts of the flower-sellers, the outlook was one of cold and hunger, unrelieved by any ray of hope, and the agents of the mission just referred to were brought directly into contact with over two thousand of this poorest class of street-traders, who were hardly removed from actual starvation. At such a time the more well-to-do people can have no conception of the hardship or suffering endured by that very large section of the population which ranks as the poorest of the poor.

Flowers as ornaments have become one of the characteristics of our modern life, so that flower-girls, who were hardly known to Londoners of a generation ago, have now become one of the chief phenomena of our streets. They are a large and ever increasing class, which may well be the case if it be true, as stated, that a sum of £5000 is daily expended in London alone on cut flowers. We have to admit that the flower-girls, in their humble way, at least do something to make our somewhat sombre thoroughfares a little more picturesque than would otherwise be the case. Probably the station most coveted is in front of the Royal Exchange, but there are other centres more or less coveted which may really be almost as advantageous. Spots where the great tide of traffic enters or leaves the City, railway stations, tramway termini, and omnibus stands, are equally favourable from the flower-sellers' standpoint. The "button-hole" or nosegay is in high favour with large numbers, especially when it is to be had for the popular price of one penny. Then while the rich expend large sums on flowers, in order to add charms to their tables, or to turn a house into a fairy-palace during an evening reception, a love of flowers has also taken possession of the poor. Window-gardening gratifies the taste of the poorer people in one direction, but they will also expend a small amount in cut flowers. This taste is spreading, and it is a good symptom in our social life. The day of days in the flower-sellers' calendar seems to be April 19, or Primrose Day, when, if the weather be fine, the outlook might lead one to infer that the whole crop of the late Lord Beaconsfield's favourite, grown in the suburbs and outlying country, had been poured into the London thoroughfares.

Though there may be some romance in flowers, there is certainly no romance in the flower-seller's lot. A wave of adverse weather may bring famine, and may even threaten the woman and her dependents with death. Under the most favourable conditions her working day extends from very early morning until late in the evening, her earnings not amounting to more than a sorry pittance, not sufficient to get all of the common-place necessities of life. Many of the sisterhood are Irish girls who have come to England in the hope of earning more than could be got in Ireland; but in the main only to be disappointed.

In the annals of disaster, the early weeks of 1895 have established a record; the severity of the distress was almost without a parallel, the effects being felt until the present hour, when hundreds of poor girls are looking wistfully towards friends who may help to restart them in their calling. The worst of such a trial is that, when it is supposed to be over,

the flower-sellers find themselves thoroughly exhausted, all their resources being gone, even to the last available garment or article of furniture on which money could be obtained. They are also physically weakened by the privation to which they have been exposed. Hence, for them the sun shines, and the flowers reappear in vain, unless by some means a little capital can be obtained to enable the girl or woman to recommence her humble traffic. With a view of befriending such a class at such a crisis, the late Earl of Shaftesbury established the Emily Fund as a memorial of his wife, the object being to lend small sums free of interest to female street traders; but this does not altogether meet the needs of the case. A few shillings have to be given, or there is no way out of the difficulty. Many a poor despairing heart must have despaired still if a door of hope had not been opened by the Flower-Girl's Brigade at Clerkenwell Close. As surely as spring comes round, this business of reinstating the most humble of street-traders, whose occupation has been ruined by wintry weather, has to be undertaken, so that persons who wish to confer some benefit on the flower-girl sisterhood as a class, cannot do better than strengthen the hands of those who do the thing systematically, and who know that they are assisting deserving characters. One may want a new basket; another who has a basket may lack even the two or three shillings which will procure the flowers to stock it; a third may find herself without either basket or flowers; but whatever the need, a brave or even chivalrous endeavour is made to meet it. Those who rank as *bonâ fide* flower-girls are those who keep at the work all the year round; the interlopers are those who appear on the scenes in spring or summer, but who retreat before the discomforts of winter. It is these latter who oftentimes bring discredit on the sisterhood by their improper behaviour; and this is why those who are more fully acquainted with the subject tell us to discriminate, because there are flower-girls and flower-girls.

The friends of these humble, and on the whole, deserving folk, are striving to exercise a Christian influence among them, and not without success. Mr. John A. Groom, secretary of the Flower-girls' Mission, has succeeded in establishing stations of the Flower-sellers' Association in all of the four quarters of London, the members of which enjoy a number of distinct advantages. There are religious meetings, and to attend these, one here and another there—a goodly number in the aggregate—will leave their work for an hour and then stealthily return, all the better for having heard a serious address, attended a Bible-class, a mothers' meeting, or an industrial lesson. There are sterling Christian characters among the flower-sellers, girls and women who are never ashamed of their colours on any occasion. As a rule, it is desirable for young girls as well as others, who are mere children, to be removed altogether from the dangerous surroundings of the streets. About nine hundred have passed through the Girl's Brigade into desirable situations, while about ninety little girls—waifs of the street—have been rescued from surroundings too bad for description, and are now being reared in suitable homes. It may be that better times are coming on for the poor flower-girls of London; but in any case, they will remember the great frost of 1895 as a season of severest trial; and now that spring has come, their more well-to-do sisters may like to accord them such aid as comes of Christian sympathy.