THE LITTLE GARDEN AROUND ‘OLD MUDDER BETHEL’: BY AGNES M. FOX

"This land that was desolate is become
Like the Garden of Eden."

My schoolroom windows overlook the side yard of
an African Methodist Episcopal church in the slum
district of one of our large cities. Because of its un-
sightliness this yard had been an eyesore to me for a
long time. One day the thought came, I’m sure an
inspired one, "Why not have a garden there?" The
proper consulting authorities, found after some diffi-
culty, cheerfully and without price turned the land over to us for the
experiment, but were skeptical as to its ever being a garden.

On the north side of this fourteen by ninety foot lot stands the
church "Mudder Bethel;" on the west side is the street, and on the
south and east sides are the back yards of a number of small houses.
The unoccupied stretch of church property had evidently been the
neighborhood dump, and our first work was to get rid of that. Dead
cats and bones were buried, papers, rags, and old shoes burned, and
broken bottles, tin cans, and such like matter, to the amount of ten
barrelfuls, were turned over to the ashman. Then with picks, for the
ground was too hard and stony to spade or hoe, we prepared a small
part near the street end, and in early November planted squills,
daffodils, hyacinths, and tulips.

The children of the school were delighted with the gardening thus
far, and throughout the winter the kindled fires of enthusiasm were
kept burning by botany lessons, the making of lists of seeds and plants
from garden books, and talks and plans for early spring days.

Before the middle of April the bulbs were blossoming,—blue,
yellow, purple, white, and red. How delighted we were! We were
still further heartened by a message from the trustees of the church,
"We sho’ lik’ dem brigh’ posies. We hope yo’ll go ahaid an’ mak’ de
yard of ole Mudder Bethel as purty as yo kin, an’ ma’ Gawd bles’ yer."

To prepare the ground for the spring planting was a tremendous
job. It had lain untillied beyond the memory of the oldest inhabitant.
To pick it all over was hard work, for we often struck patches of brick
and cement, the remnants of long ago burial vaults. A boy could
pick but a short time without being tired out, but we made it seem so
interesting and desirable a thing to do, like Tom Sawyer and the
whitewashing, that every one of the boys wanted to try a hand at it.
Even troublesome Bennie, our most reckless pupil, who deviled us all
day long in the class room, and pegged dirt and stones at us whenever
we worked in the garden, appeared one morning with an old rusty
broken garden rake over his shoulder. (We found later that he had
stolen it.)
THE GREAT GUARDIAN of the city's peace looked so humiliated and penitent that I felt sorry for him as he meekly said, "I didn't know, teacher, that the boys was yourn."
EVEN BENNIE, OUR MOST RECKLESS PUPIL, appeared one morning with a broken rake over his shoulder: "Teacher," said he, "ain't I never goin' to be let work on the farm?"
"MIN' YER ON BIZNES then, guess her duz no 'bout flowers."
From a Drawing by Isabel Lyndall.

"THANK YOU, but it's almost my suppertime and I'll wait."
OLD “MUDDER BETHEL’S” LITTLE GARDEN

“Teacher,” said he, “aint I never goin to be let work on the farm?”

“The very first day, Benjamin, that you behave well, you may work a very little while.”

Poor Ben sat all that day as if petrified, and after school experienced the joy of entering the promised land. He went to work with his old rake, and while energy lasted, was completely lost to view in the cloud of dust he raised.

To work on the “farm” became quite a ceremonial for not only the children of the neighborhood, but the men, women, and passers-by gathered outside the fence and watched. Not being overwise in garden lore, at first this somewhat embarrassed us, but the sentiment of those without was soon found to be so favorable and friendly that we cast away all fear.

Late one rainy afternoon I ran over to the garden to plant a clump of rudbeckia which had been sent me. I then stood, apron over head to keep my hair dry, taking a general survey of my surroundings. At the street end, leaning heavily against the fence, stood a colored woman. Our eyes met, and she raised an arm and beckoned to me.

“Black Olivia Liz,” I thought, and my heart sank.

She was the most notorious character in our part of the town, and was feared by man and woman, black or white, Jew or Gentile. I was afraid to go to her, but more afraid not to, and thankful for the fence which separated us, went slowly toward her. I noticed that she was much bedraggled as to skirt and was dirtier and uglier looking than I had ever seen her. It was raining hard, and except for my visitor the street was deserted. Somewhat beyond the stretch of her arms I stopped, and stood as composedly as I could, for her glare was terrifying. After a time she spoke.

“Teacher, Ah’s seen a sight Ah neber expected to see, and Ah’s fifty-two year ole.”

“You don’t look it,” I said; “never tell anybody, and you’ll pass for many years younger.”

I had touched the eternal feminine. She smiled, gave a gleeful little ki-yi, and drew from under her shawl a dark-colored bottle from which she took a long drink and then held it over the fence for me.

“Thank you, but it’s almost my supper time and I’ll wait,” I said. She tucked the bottle out of sight and continued, “Ah’s seen de white a workin’ fo’ de black.”

My fear of her gone, I replied very cheerfully, “Oh, yes, here in
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the garden we all work together, and later I hope there'll be lots of flowers for us all. Run home now, Miss Olivia, you're getting pretty wet, and come back some nice sunny day."

She thrust a big, wet, rough, dirty hand through the fence and I placed mine in it. She crushed it till I could hardly keep back a cry of pain; shook it vigorously, dropped it, turned and walked away. I watched till she reached the corner of her alley, where she stopped, took another long pull at her bottle, and disappeared around the corner.

THE fame of our garden spread and went beyond the immediate neighborhood. Fame brought friends all eager to help. Gifts of money, fertilizer, garden tools, plants, and seeds came to us. The Jewish morgue keeper and hearse driver delivered a push cart load of fertilizer from his stable in a nearby alley. The good missionary, who has a home in the country, brought a basketful of wildflower roots, and advised the making of a garden of wild flowers, as all children should know the common ones. Little Italian Joe presented a single well-dried garlic bulb. One day while we were at work in the garden, a pretty young woman, hatless, but rather well dressed, pushed her way through the crowd of watchers, and when close to the fence called out, "Will you plant some of my seeds in the garden?"

"Certainly, with pleasure. What kind have you?"

"Gum seeds," she replied; and after a good deal of fumbling in the little pocket of her blouse found and gave me five or six nasturtium seeds.

Whenever plants were put in the ground there was much rejoicing among the young farmers, but seed sowing, though the process was greatly enjoyed, aroused but little enthusiasm.

A small group of children who had put in an entire afternoon making drills and sowing seed, gathered in a shady corner to rest and cool off. As I worked among some plants nearby, I overheard a conversation carried on in low or whispered tones.

"What she makin' us knock in so many of them little hard seeds fer?"

"Her thinks they's plants."

"Plants nothin', she's kiddin' us."

"Her'll never see them ag'in."

"Ah 'spect her'll mak' uns spill wat'r on um ebry ev'ning too."

"Shut up, her'll hear yer."

Then in masterful tones spoke one whose voice so far had not been heard, " Didn't her tell youse in the bot'ny lessons that in ev'ry seed is a sleepin' plant, an' didn't youse see the bean plant cum
OLD "Mudder Bethel's" Little Garden

outer the bean, an' didn't youse see the plant cum outer the corn?"
The doubters seemed abashed and made no reply.

"Min' yer on biznes then," continued my defender, as he squared
his shoulders and doubled his fists as if for a fight; "guess her duz no
'bout flow'rs. Why, I seed her with a book of bot'ny's big's that."
(Stretching his arms wide apart.)

"Time to stop work for today, children," I called. They gath-
ered up the tools and a very quiet party left the garden.

After all the seeds were in the ground, we stayed away from the
garden for a while, for there seemed to be nothing particular to do.
But every morning when I came in sight of it I saw the space in front
of the fence packed with children, a few grouped and engaged in loud
discussion (which died out at my approach) but most of them silent
gazers at the bare brown stretch before them. When a week or ten
days had gone by, and not a sprout was to be seen, I felt that even the
firmest believer was on the eve of backsliding; but soon after this,
following a night of warm gentle rain, I was met in the morning by
a most hilarious crowd, which almost carried me to the garden, now
covered from end to end with delicate green.

One hot afternoon, about a half hour before the time for closing
school, I sent two of the best behaved and brightest boys of the class
to the garden, to pick up stray papers and tidy the walks. They had
been gone but a very little while, when a bareheaded unkempt urchin,
unknown to me, burst into the schoolroom and exclaimed, "Oh, teacher,
the new cop has pinched yer two farmers."

"What has he done with them?" I asked.

"Taken 'em to the __________ Street station."

"Run after that cop," I said to my biggest boy, "and tell him to
come to the school and bring the boys with him."

The alarmist and messenger bolted. The children sat like statues;
the clock ticked loudly. Soon the mothers of the two boys tore into
the room, both crying, both loudly upbraiding. Each bore a sleeping
child in her arms. I began to explain the matter to them, but they
were too excited to listen. My messenger and the policeman came
in, and I turned to the latter.

"Sir, did you arrest two of my boys a short time ago?"

The great guardian of the city's peace looked so humiliated and
penitent that I felt sorry for him, as he meekly said, "I didn't know,
teacher, that they was yourn. I seen 'em in the church yard and
thought they was trespassing."

It was nearly ten o'clock when I sat down to my dinner that
night, tired, but triumphant, for officers, matron, and magistrate
had all been sympathetic and helpful, and the boys were safe at home.
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The seeds must have been of good quality, for few failed, although the soil was very poor. We continued to add fertilizer which different neighbors sent us, and had the feeling that now we had but to sit back and watch the blade develop to ear and ear to full corn, but really our troubles had just begun. The sparrows gathered in flocks and greedily devoured the young tender shoots. The cats of the entire region made the garden their rendezvous and scratched and rolled to their hearts' content. They evidently mistook every plant for catnip, and every cat was a gourmand.

The frantic children shooed the birds and chased the cats, but the wholesale destruction continued. Often at great length I overheard them discussing these creatures in their relation to the garden, sometimes crediting one, sometimes the other with friendliness or unfriendliness.

One morning, Herman, a most zealous young gardener, met me squares from the school. He had been running and was much out of breath, but he looked happy and I felt was a bearer of good news.

"Oh, Miss Agnes," he gasped, "the cats are on our side."

"How do you know that, Herman?"

"Early this morning," he said, "I found a wounded sparrow in the garden, and I'm sure a cat bit it for pecking at our plants."

The earnest, trusting young face upturned to mine, touched me, "A faith so implicit" I thought, "must not be shaken;" so left unspoken my opinions of the ruthless old Tommies who were finding in our garden both vegetable and animal sustenance.

Two or three weeks later the plants which were not too badly gnawed were at the right stage for transplanting, and we occupied ourselves with that work for several days. Then just when needed a friend sent us a garden hose. The sexton of the church, seeing it offered his services.

"Ah'll water dem flow's ebry mornin' befor' sunup an' ebry ebenin' ef you'll let me use dat ere hose sometimes ter hosen de winders of de church."

I readily agreed to the plan.

He kept his word with a vengeance, for after the second or third watering, nearly every plant was uprooted by the amount and force of the water. We reset those which were not entirely washed away, and bought a sprinkler for the hose. Things then went better.

In front of the church and churchyard is an iron fence. Except when the big gate is open for services the only entrance to the garden is by means of a little gate at the far end of the yard, so removed from the garden end that except to the close observer, the only way
to get into the garden would be to climb the fence. While I was at work there one day, a boy fifteen or sixteen years of age stopped at the fence just in front of the garden. He stood there a good while, and thinking that perhaps he was specially interested I went over to speak to him. As I drew near, I saw that his eyes had a vacant look, his lower jaw hung loosely, and his whole body had a listless droop. I said to myself, "I fear my visitor is a bit daft." I made some very general remark about flowers to him, but he did not reply and looked at me in a puzzled, troubled way. After a little he slowly raised his sleepy eyes to the high church steeple and studied it for some time. Over and over his eyes roved from me to the steeple. Finally he fixed them on me and said with a drawl as he pointed upward, "You’re it what lives up there and comes down and makes the flowers grow."

"No," I said; "I don’t live in the church steeple."

He continued his foolish gaze from me to the steeple and repeated, "You’re it what lives up there and comes down and makes the flowers grow."

I went to the far end of the garden and continued my work, and after a little my visitor slouched away.

Weeks went by, and in spite of mistakes and mishaps, like Mary’s, our garden grew. Blossoms came as the crowning glory and reward. Our neighbors seeing the flowers began to want gardens and we gave them seeds and seedlings. In many cases ’twas but a starch box, tin can, or flowerpot garden, for there were but few yard spaces suitable for planting, but we were glad to have awakened an interest in horticulture, and so encouraged even the feeblest effort in that direction. It added much to our labor, however, for later we were called to go and inspect and admire each box, can, pot, and yard where any green thing grew, tell just when it would blossom, what color the flower would be, and how long it would last. How we secretly deplored our ignorance.

One dear little Jewish lady who had recently moved into our vicinity, asked us to go to her home and examine a plant in her yard. "Every morning," she said, "I for flowers look, but none I see. Do me favor, teacher, tell what the matter be."

We found there an old, old, lilac bush with scant, scattered unhealthy foliage and many dead branches, crowded in the corner of a small dark yard. Nothing short of a miracle would ever make it flower again. So we cut away the dead wood, spaded the earth about its roots, and set beneath it some shade-loving, blossoming perennials.

People in rather better conditioned sections of the city, quite remote from ours, attracted when passing by the bright blooms, tried
“MUDDER BETHEL’S” LITTLE GARDEN
to hire the sexton of the church to go to their homes and help start gardens. Flattered at first, he at length grew surly under the persistence. “Ah tells dem,” said he, “Ah’s de section of a church. Ah’s no farmer.”

One forenoon while we were all busy with classroom duties, this sexton appeared in the open doorway. Hat in hand and with every white tooth in his head showing behind the expansive smile, he stood waiting to be addressed. We all stopped work, for we knew something was coming.

“Well, Hank,” I said, “what is it?”

“Oh, Miss Agnes, de farm’s beginnin’ ter brought in money fer us. Ah jes’ sol’ a bunch of dem ere red posies ter a purty leddy in a kerrige fer her littl’ gurl. Ah was stanin’ by de fence when de kerrige stopp’ un de little’ gurl tole she’s moder her mus’ hab sum, an de modder show’d me a quarter, an so Ah sol’ em.”

“I think you might have given the little girl a bouquet, Hank.”

“Well, Ah thot de money would help pay our expenses,” he said, with the air of a partner who has just made a handsome deal for his firm. With another very broad smile he turned and tiptoed away.

No dividend has as yet been declared.

As I stood at my schoolroom window one beautiful spring morning in the second year of our gardening, and looked across at the “farm,” I felt a thrill of pleasure and satisfaction. In spite of the fact that my Hebrew neighbor, a father in Israel, in preparation for our good Mayor’s “clean-up” week, had thrown over the fence into our garden his eggshells, lemon and banana skins, and a goodly amount of other litter, that two tramp cats were sunning and sleeping beside my favorite rosebush, that a flock of sparrows was busy in the part just
planted with seeds, the glowing red and yellow tulips and the hazy pink and purple hyacinths made a pleasing picture. Then my mind traveled ahead to the hot midsummer days, the most trying time of all in the neglected parts of a big city, where the squalor and filth and thousand unpleasant odors make it unfit for human habitation, but here is a spot where the weary wayfarer may pause in the grateful shade cast by "ole Mudder Bethel," and if he will, feast his soul on the hollyhocks against the old unpainted fence, the honeysuckle and clematis veiling the broken plaster wall, the tiger lilies burning and glowing, the nasturtiums, sweet and spicy, and the mignonette with its delicious perfume.

A MEASURE OF HEAVEN

HEAVEN is no larger than Connecticut;
No larger than Fairfield County; no, no larger
Than the little Valley of the Silvermine
The white sun visits and the wandering showers.
For there is room enough for spring’s return,
For lilac evenings and the rising moon,
And time enough for autumn’s idle days,
When soul is ripe for immortality.
And then when winter comes with smouldering dusk
To kindle rosy flames upon the hearth,
And hang its starry belt upon the night,
One firelit room is large enough for heaven—
For all we know of wisdom and of love,
And eternal welfare of the heart.

Courtesy of Everybody’s Magazine.

Bliss Carman.