

VERBENA, THE HOLY HERB OF THE ROMANS.*¹

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Throughout our pasture lands and in level, wet places grows verbena, the holy herb of the Romans. The observer sees a rather broad-leafed plant averaging two and a half feet in height and topped by a spike of brilliant blue flowers. The taste of the leaves is bitter, and the stock pass warily by the warning blue spike. Human beings give it little notice except to comment on the color or, if well-informed, to apply it in cases of ivy poisoning. The plant may be used as an emetic, but there is slight demand for it as such.

This, then, is the unimpressive appearance of a plant which has been intimately connected with mythology, medicine, superstition, merriment and magic, and has been made an exception in Roman law. This plant which grows in our own temperate climate flourished in the mansion grounds and pastures of old Rome.

When a Roman wished to seek a parley it was the custom to pluck any plant from the environs of his house and carry it as an indication of his wish. The olive branch has been carried as a sign of peace. To-day we wave the white flag for surrender. The Roman carried his plant as a sign that he wished to come to terms. Gradually the particular plant now called verbena, Latin for *holy herb*, came to be used on such occasions. During times of battle, verbena was the protection of those wishing negotiations. In time the carrying of the symbol became the specific duty of one man who was given the name of *verbenarius*. Livius, in his "Histoire Romaine," also gives the name *fecial* to the verbena carrier. The fecial wore the plant as a wreath on his head and also wove it into his hair. However, carried or worn, the verbena was considered ennobling to the bearer. The act performed by the verbenarius or fecial was highly honorable. What wonder, then, if the elevated position gained by association in this act began to lead toward other uses for verbena? Through custom it was regarded as a sign of protection and of honor. Was it a far step from this to the position of good luck omen? And thence to medicine, a charm against disease? From this beginning the enhanced properties of verbena accumulated rapidly. It was a powerful magic, an aid in prayer and expiation. It brought many and various gifts to the user. It was used in rites of the rulers and in public ceremonies. Rules and rituals were built about commerce with it. In all Rome there was no plant which enjoyed such renown as the blue-spiked verbena—the holy herb.

The table of Jupiter was cleansed with verbena. With it houses were purified, and expiation was made. Strangely enough, after such worshipful uses, water in which verbena had been steeped was sprinkled on the banquet table to promote merriment and hilarity. The people employed the holy herb for soothsaying and prediction of future events. If they rubbed themselves with it they were sure to gain the object of their desires. With it they could ward off fever, conciliate friendship or cure numerous diseases. There was almost no limit to the usefulness of this potent spell-maker.

The power could be preserved only by proper care, the gatherer believed. Verbena must be plucked approximately at the rising of the Dog Star. The sun

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or moon must not shine upon it, and honey-comb and honey must first be presented to the earth by way of expiation.

At one time in Rome there was a law against selling public remedies, but, because of the use of verbena in public rites, it was exempt.

Pliny throws a historical light upon the plant. "Verbena," he states, "was thought to be one of the plants taken into the ark and therefore must be returned by raiders of a town."

Virgil, in Eclogue 8, pays tribute by putting these words into the mouth of a lover:

"The strongest frankincense, rich vervain, burn
That mighty magic may to madness turn
My perjured love."

Thus, the holy herb. After having been revered by the mighty and sought by the many, after a conquest colorful and vast, it blooms again, untouched in the flatlands, scarcely known and little sought. This highest holy and powerful magic has dwindled once more into a broad-leaved plant, topped by bright blue spikes and growing in any meadow it chances to find.

FIFTY AND FIFTY.

Following a complimentary banquet to Theodore Metcalf, Boston, March 29, 1887, celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of his entering Pharmacy, an invitation was extended to the company inviting the members to celebrate Mr. Metcalf's Centennial in 1937. He joined the AMERICAN PHARMACEUTICAL ASSOCIATION in 1857 and is no longer with us. On that occasion, among others who were prominent in their day, was Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, and reference is made to the occasion, partly because of his interesting remarks. He said, "I hung out my sign under the room directly over his shop, and there I was as ready to receive the smallest fevers as he was the smallest fees."

"There was never a more convenient and happy arrangement than that which brought us together. I wrote my prescriptions upstairs; the patient went down and they were filled downstairs. We could not always be fortunate. We deserved success, but we could not always command it. The excellent Martin Smith, the well-known sexton of the churchyard opposite, was always at hand to finish the work upon which we had entered."

Dr. Holmes spoke of the earlier Boston apothecaries, but quoting this would make a long story. Dr. Holmes said that he always had a great opinion of the medical advice of apothecaries, so when he himself was suffering from slight bodily inconveniences, instead of going to his professional brother, he quietly crept into the back room and asked Mr. Metcalf for advice. He concluded his remarks by drinking a toast to the health of his brother, Dr. Metcalf.



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