

Lady Farmer's Lilies: Some Problems of a Church Flower Arranger

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It was a Saturday morning and we had assembled in the choir vestry before decorating the church for Whit-Sunday. It was the usual gathering, Winifred, Sister Blatt, Miss Enders, Miss Statham and one or two others. The only man present, apart from the clergy, was Jim Storry, a feeble-minded youth who made himself useful in harmless little ways and would sometimes arrange the wire frames on the window-sills for us or fill jam jars with water....

'Well, well, here we all are,' said Julian in a rather more clerical tone than usual. 'It's very good of you all to come along and help and I'm especially grateful to those who have brought flowers. Lady Farmer,' he mentioned the name of the only titled member remaining in our congregation, 'has most kindly sent these magnificent lilies from her country home.'...

We went into the church and began sorting out the flowers and deciding what should be used where. Winifred, as the vicar's sister, had usurped the privilege of a wife and always did the altar, but I must confess that it was not always very well done. I had graduated from a very humble window that nobody ever noticed to helping Sister Blatt with the screen, and we began laboriously fixing old potted-meat jars into place with wires so that they could be filled with flowers. Lady Farmer's lilies were of course to go on the altar. There was a good deal of chatter, and I was reminded of Trollope's description of Lily Dale and Grace Crawley, who were both accustomed to churches and 'almost as irreverent as though they were two curates'. For a time all went peacefully, each helper was busy with her particular corner, while Julian and Father Greatorex wandered round giving encouragement, though no practical help, to all.

'That's it!' said Julian as I placed a cluster of pinks into one of the potted-meat jars. 'Splendid!'

I did not feel that there was anything particularly splendid about what I was doing and Sister Blatt and I exchanged smiles as he passed on to Miss Statham and Miss Enders at the pulpit. It was at this point that I heard Winifred and Mrs Gray, who were both doing the altar, having what sounded like an argument.

'Oh, Winifred, why are you always so conventional!' came Mrs Gray's voice rather sharply. 'Just because you've always had lilies on the altar doesn't mean that you can never have anything else. I think these peonies and delphiniums would look much more striking. Then we can have the lilies in a great jar on the floor, at the side here. Don't you think that would look splendid?'

I could not hear Winifred's reply but it was obvious that the flowers were going to be arranged in the way Mrs Gray had suggested.

The church looked as beautiful as its Victorian interior would allow when we had finished decorating. The altar was striking and unusual and the lilies stood out very well, so that even if Lady Farmer had been present, which she was not, she would not have thought that they had been overlooked.

—Excellent Women

People's attitudes towards the flower festival were 'ambivalent', Emma thought, the jargon word coming into her mind. Everybody knew about it, of course, could hardly fail to, with notices plastered all over the village, but there had never been such a thing in the old days. Flower arrangement was a fashionable modern pastime for a certain type of woman – a hobby for the gentler sex, almost like the accomplishments of a Victorian young lady – and even though the art of arranging flowers may have originated in Japan, it was now an unmistakably English activity. The

chaste positioning of a single bloom or spray in the Oriental manner would be seen as totally inadequate in the present setting; much more would be expected....

[Christabel G. was directing operations at the church.] ‘Ah, Miss Hislop,’ she said, giving Emma the wrong name, ‘how kind, bringing flowers too. So *many* delphiniums, one hardly knows...’

What on earth to do with them, Emma thought, completing the sentence. She glanced beyond Christabel G. to where a group of women she did not at once recognise were doing things with flowers and even branches of trees. Then she saw that Miss Lee and Miss Grundy were among them, also Dr Shrubsole’s mother-in-law and even Mrs Dyer, though the last was just filling vases with water from the tap outside. Would she be allowed to participate in the actual arrangement? Emma wondered. And was the festival itself in some way connected with fertility, perhaps. Looking again at the assembled group of ladies, she doubted this interpretation. It was a mistake to suppose that every human activity was related to sex, whatever Freud might say....

‘Shall I do my usual window?’ [Daphne] asked, confronting Mrs G.

‘Your usual window....’ Mrs G., her arms full of lilies, spoke absently, as if she hardly remembered who Daphne was. It was hurtful, that kind of thing. Tears came into Daphne’s eyes as she stood there, waiting to be told what to do. ‘Oh, I think we’re going to do a bit more than our usual windows,’ Christabel said. ‘After all, it *is* a festival, isn’t it.’...

‘I wonder if this is all right?’ Magdalen Raven was asking Daphne’s opinion. ‘These tall branches keep falling over, but I don’t like to make them shorter. Mrs Gellibrand said she wanted the effect of *height* – I suppose I could put crumpled wire-netting in the bottom – that might do... It’s going to be *lovely*, isn’t it?’ Martin had suggest that she might like to go along and help at the church even though she wasn’t as yet on the flower-arranging rota, and she was really enjoying herself in spite of not being able to get the branches of beech leaves to stand up properly. ‘Do you remember?’ she wanted to say to Daphne, hoping to share a few more wartime memories, but before she could put her thoughts into words somebody had brought her a green plastic substance to prop up the branches and she had to get on with the business at hand.

It certainly did look lovely, Emma decided on the day of the festival, though not quite like a church. The arrangements were too elaborate, too much like the foyer of an advertising agency or an expensive block of flats or the decorations for a smart wedding. But what exactly *did* one want? Simple arrangements of cow-parsley and campion or bunches of drooping bluebells in jam jars? Perhaps not flowers at all, ancient grey stone set off by the austerity of Lent?– ***A Few Green Leaves***

These two readings describing church flower arranging are taken from *Excellent Women* and *A Few Green Leaves*, written some thirty years apart. Barbara Pym, like a good newspaper reporter, deftly fills in the pertinent details of who, what, when, where, and how. She is always at her best when describing fictional characters and situations that were based on her real-life observations and experiences, and her tales of Saturday mornings spent doing the church flowers all ring true. She gets the details exactly right, not because she did painstaking research, but because she herself had participated in the activities described, all the while observing carefully and taking mental notes. She wrote in her diary on 31 August 1974:

Our turn to do the flowers and brasses; if you forget and haven’t quite enough flowers, will it do to put some object (?a stuffed animal) on the pedestal usually adorned with a particularly splendid flower arrangement?

On the altar roses, carnations and little yellow chrysanthemums. Near the altar on a pedestal a sombre arrangement of Elisha’s Tears, on the pedestal facing the congregation an arrangement of small yellow chrysanthemums and white daisies and yarrow gathered in the churchyard and arranged by a pensioner (me).

Another entry, from 4 October 1975, says “At the church to check the flowers” and on 1 April 1978, the Saturday after Easter, she wrote:

This morning we went up to the church to revive the Easter flowers, taking out dead ones and filling up the vases, but the daffodils seemed to have lasted well in the chilly atmosphere.

And we know that it was one of her real-life neighbours in Finstock who was the source of Miss Grundy’s observation that the flowers in the church would ‘do another week, with a few more leaves. A few green leaves can make such a difference.’

While her diary entries from the 1970s make it clear that Pym was part of the flower rota at Holy Trinity church in Finstock after she retired, the insider details presented in *Excellent Women* and *Jane and Prudence* make it seem likely that she was helping with the church flowers back in the late 1940s, when she was a parishioner at St Gabriel’s Pimlico, and possibly before.

Who does the flowers is obvious – it is another task for excellent women. Jane Cleveland sees ‘two middle-aged ladies in tweed suits carrying bunches of dahlias’ enter the church and thinks, ‘An English scene... and a precious thing.’ Wilmet’s description of the Whitsunday preparations states explicitly that ‘The only man present, apart from the clergy, was Jim Storry, a feeble-minded youth who made himself useful in harmless little ways...’ As usual, the clergy don’t count as actual men, and they provide encouragement but absolutely no practical assistance. (I myself am exceedingly fortunate to have a Rector who not only provides encouragement and appreciation to the flower guild, but also goes to the wholesale market to pick up the flowers for us twice a month. Barbara would be astonished.)

Just as in Pym’s world there was something slightly irregular about a woman who couldn’t arrange flowers – Jane Cleveland, Sybil Forsyth, Esther Clovis – there was also something a bit odd about a man who did. Pym’s diary for 4 February 1960 notes, ‘Laurie Fleming stays at home with his mother – does the flowers beautifully – is it now the unmarried *son* who does this?’

It also bears mentioning that these were all devoted amateurs, trained on the job. That is still usually the case in the U.K., although in the U.S. now it is often done by a florist, and sadly the use of artificial flowers and plants is not at all unknown. There are still flower rotas in humble country churches and grand cathedrals all over England, and excellent women and men still turn up to do the flowers every Saturday morning (except, of course, during Lent) as their mothers and grandmothers did before them.

While it is obvious who does the work, it is not always so obvious who should be in charge. Usually the wife of a married vicar would be expected to take command, unless confronted by the likes of Miss Doggett, whose suggestion that Jane Cleveland might want to supervise the decorations for the harvest festival forced Miss Morrow to stifle a hoot of laughter:

Even Mrs Pritchard, the last vicar’s wife, who had been a forceful woman, had been unable to depose Miss Doggett from her position as head of the decorators. Mrs Cleveland, as far as one could see, looked as if she would be neither desirous nor capable of doing any such thing. (J&P)

Jessie Morrow is quite right in suspecting that Jane is ‘neither desirous nor capable’ of supervising the decorating; it is yet another way in which she falls short of being a satisfactory clerical wife. Jane admits,

‘It isn’t really much in my line. I’m not very good at arranging flowers at the best of times and I have had very little experience of fruit and vegetables.... Something made me slip away when I

saw everyone there in the church. I'm afraid it's a fault in me and a great disadvantage for a clergyman's wife, not to be naturally gregarious.' (J&P)

While Jane, with her typical objectivity, knew that she had no aptitude for flower arranging and had no desire to supervise or participate in the decorating, this was certainly not the case with other clerical wives. In the short story 'So, Some Tempestuous Morn' Miss Morrow 'supposed she would have to go into the garden and pick some flowers for the church and then stand by while the vicar's wife arranged them more tastelessly than one would have thought possible.' But Fate intervenes:

The vicar's wife had her back turned as Miss Morrow entered and nobody noticed her come in. On a sudden impulse she laid the flowers down in the corner with the others already there, and tiptoed away. She did not feel like decorating this morning, handing bits of greenery to the vicar's wife up in the pulpit or filling jam jars with water. (STM)

The situation is more complicated in churches with unmarried priests. The showdown between Winifred Malory and Allegra Gray leads Mildred to observe

I suppose it's really a question of whether a vicar's sister should take precedence over a vicar's widow. I don't imagine that books of etiquette deal with such refinements. (EW)

There was no such confusion in Tom Dagnall's church, as described in *A Few Green Leaves*. The indomitable Christabel G. – a worthy successor to Miss Doggett – was monarch of all she surveyed and left Tom's sister Daphne in tears, 'standing uselessly by a heap of greenery, waiting to be told what to do.' This leads us to the problem of umbrage, which is always lurking in the Church; Barbara Pym wrote to her friend Bob Smith that parishioners who had left her parish in Queen's Park 'had been removed by Rome, Death and Umbrage.... Umbrage of course removed the greatest number.' Dulcie and Viola in *No Fond Return of Love* stumbled upon this scene in Tavistock on Holy Saturday:

An indignant-looking lady – an obvious crank – had come up to [the vicar], holding a bunch of celandines.

'Your wife has seen fit to reject my humble offering,' she said. 'And yet one of our greatest English poets did not disdain to immortalise it. A *wild* flower it may be, but there are many in this church who could learn something from it. Now she said to me, "Miss Brewis, we do not usually have *wild* flowers – that is *not* our custom here"....'

Rather meanly, Dulcie felt, she and Viola moved away, leaving the vicar to deal with the celandine lady. (NFRL)

Finally, in the unpublished play *The Rectory*, the Rector is being assailed on all sides by troublesome parishioners. One of the women says in a querulous voice:

'I'm sorry to bother you, Rector, I know you must be busy, but I really must speak to you. I suppose it is nothing really – well, some people might think it nothing – but I've been doing the altar flowers for thirty years now, and nobody has ever found fault with my arrangements before, and I think I can say that I *do* know the correct liturgical colours, and red and white *is* the usual thing for Whitsuntide...'

This leads us to the question of **when** there would be flowers, and of what sort. In Pym's Anglo-Catholic tradition, church flowers were often far more than just a pair of simple altar vases; the floral decorations would range from none at all during Lent, to a few simple greens during Advent, to opulent decorations throughout the church on Easter and other major festivals. There would be no flowers in the church for a traditional Requiem Mass with black or purple vestments (although here modern sensibilities have sometimes led to changes in local

custom), while flowers are appropriate and expected at a funeral Mass of the Resurrection with white vestments. But the flowers at a funeral are primarily used to adorn the altar and Paschal candle, not the bier. (I did once arrange a floral lei around a funerary urn before a memorial service, but that was a unique and very Pymish occasion.)

High-church protocol also requires that Christmas decorations are up only for the twelve days of Christmas, not appearing until after the Fourth Sunday in Advent and remaining through the Feast of the Epiphany on 6 January, but no longer. Pym's diary for 10 January 1977 notes, 'Yesterday a small congregation for the First Sunday after Epiphany – and ought not the Christmas decorations to have been taken down? A lapsed Catholic is no good to man or beast.' The small, low-church parish in Finstock was obviously much more relaxed about such matters than an Anglo-catholic church would have been.

A month later, on 5 February, she mused,

Tomorrow is Septuagesima. The question is do we have flowers in the church? Perhaps a few evergreens, but one would have thought not daffodils etc. Suppose somebody had given unsuitable flowers and hothouse plants? Some titled person.

Septuagesima is the third Sunday before Lent, not yet a time of fasting and purple vestments when there would be no flowers of any kind, but subdued, and the flowers would follow suit. Later, after the austerity of Lent, Easter would see the entire church decorated with fresh flowers. Mildred mentions having 'graduated from a very humble window that nobody ever noticed to helping Sister Blatt with the screen', meaning the ornamental rood screen that separates the choir stalls and high altar from the rest of the church. One of the problems of a church flower arranger is that the decorations for Easter must all be put into place during the day on Holy Saturday; the church, completely bare on Good Friday, must be transformed into a glorious display of spring flowers in a matter of hours before the Easter Vigil service starts on Saturday evening.

Where in the church there would be flowers depends on local custom, the architectural setting, and the feast being observed. There would be flowers near the high altar, perhaps a pair of vases placed on a shelf just behind the altar table – but never directly on the fair linen that covers the consecrated altar stone – or a single large pedestal arrangement off to one side. Votive shrines might have a small arrangement or just a few flowers in a vase, and a Lady chapel or other side chapel might also have flowers. The screen, font, windows, and entrance porch would be decorated for Christmas and Easter and perhaps at other times, including weddings.

In *A Few Green Leaves* Christabel G. organises a flower festival. Emma observed that 'people's attitudes towards the flower festival were "ambivalent".... Everybody knew about it, of course, could hardly fail to, with notices plastered all over the village, but there had never been such a thing in the old days.' I think Barbara Pym was also at best ambivalent about the concept of a flower festival disconnected from the worship of the church. Just as people who never attend on a Sunday morning will gladly pay to go to a concert in a church on Friday night, hordes of people turn out for flower festivals in cathedrals and churches throughout the UK. (In the US we are more likely to have our flower festivals in art museums, where they are often called "Art in Bloom".)

Whether for a flower festival or for Easter, decorating the whole church takes a lot of flowers and foliage. In a country church the material could come from people's gardens, the churchyard, and the nearby hedgerows and fields. In 'So, Some Tempestuous Morn' Jessie Morrow goes into Miss Doggett's garden after a heavy rain to cut flowers from the herbaceous borders for the church:

The peonies, the ravished peonies, thought Miss Morrow, padding about among the wet plants in her galoshes. When she touched one all the petals fell off, but there were other flowers that would do quite well. She cut some syringa and irises. Purple, that was a Lenten colour, not really right for Whitsuntide. Still, they were lucky to get anything. (CTS)

Miss Morrow's concerns about the irises were well-founded:

'Irises on the pulpit!' said Miss Doggett at luncheon the next day. 'Most unsuitable. The colour is quite wrong for Whitsuntide. I thought the altar vases were very badly arranged ... did you do them, Miss Morrow?' (CTS)

Because of their larger scale and soaring gothic architecture, cathedrals and large Victorian churches require more and bigger flowers than a small country church, and in urban parishes people's gardens would be small or nonexistent, requiring the purchase of at least some of the flowers. Pym looked askance at this; flowers from a florist are often described as 'expensive' or 'extravagant', whether for use in the church or presented to a woman. In her diary for 31 August 1974 she wrote:

Talking of flower arrangements – the flower festival at Standlake was this same Saturday afternoon; so magnificent were the flowers all in the different colours, but they had cheated a little by buying carnations. We got all ours from our own garden.

In *Quartet in Autumn*, Edwin attends a memorial service and notes that

The church was still decorated for Christmas, with stiff-looking poinsettias and sprigs of holly on the window ledges, but an expensive florist's arrangement of white chrysanthemums had been placed at the side of the altar, as if to emphasize the dual purpose of the church's present function. (QIA)

And in *A Few Green Leaves*, the rector is quick to squash any hopes that the young florist Terry Skate might have had for drumming up some business:

'Flower festival – in your church? You don't say!... Your church would lend itself to something special in the way of flower arrangements,' said Terry hopefully.

'Oh, it will just be flowers from people's gardens,' said Tom quickly, fearing that Terry might expect to get an order for expensive florist's blooms. 'This time of year there ought to be plenty.' (AFGL)

Finally, there is the question of **how** the arrangements are made. Mildred speaks of potted the window sills to hold the flowers. Such devices, along with assorted vases filled with water and wire mesh, pebbles, or moss to hold the stems in place, were used for generations. The Victorians would sometimes make elaborate frames of wood lath and wire mesh to completely cover a reredos or choir screen, and then fill them with damp moss which held ferns and blossoms; it's no wonder that the high churches were described by wags as 'choral and floral'. The problem is that without water most flowers will wilt in a few hours, especially in warm weather or in a church with modern central heating, and stems in water can't be angled more than 30° or 45° from vertical. Everything changed in 1954 when a chemist in Akron, Ohio, invented Oasis® floral foam, which allows stems to be placed at any angle and which keeps flowers alive and fresh for days. It allows sprays of flowers to be placed on window ledges and pew ends, attached to ironwork, and hung on the walls, and facilitates the sweeping pedestal arrangements that have largely replaced the traditional small brass altar vases, which were originally intended to hold single sprays of lilies.

*Decorating the Screen
at the Church of the Advent (Episcopal)
Boston, Massachusetts
Easter 2012*



9:30 am Bars of floral foam attached to the screen



10:30 am Floral foam covered with foliage



12:30 pm Excellent Men and Women adding flowers



3:00 pm All done, ready for Easter vigil

Ever the traditionalist, Pym seemed to find the new style a bit ostentatious; we read in *An Academic Question*,

After tea my mother explained apologetically that it was her week to do the flowers in the church but that I needn't come along if I didn't want to.... My mother, who had not been much of a churchgoer until she went to live in the village, seemed much more at home, bustling about with the sheafs of flowers and branches which she began to put in the vases in the same sort of floral arrangement style I had noticed at Esther Clovis's memorial service.

Those funeral flowers are described as 'a striking arrangement of carnations and delphiniums, of the type often seen in the foyer of an expensive block of flats or an advertising agency.' Pym must have liked the simile, for she paraphrased it in *A Few Green Leaves*, where 'the arrangements [at the flower festival] were too elaborate, too much like the foyer of an advertising agency or an expensive block of flats or the decorations for a smart wedding.'

I don't know if Barbara would approve of the flowers in my church or would find them too elaborate and flashy for her taste, but certainly she would be happy to see a rota of devoted women and men doing the arranging. And I am quite confident that if she showed up some Saturday morning with an armload of delphiniums, she would fit right in.