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SCIENCE: A Weekly Journal devoted to the Advancement of Science, edited by J. McKeen Cattell and published every Friday by

THE SCIENCE PRESS
New York City: Grand Central Terminal
Lancaster, Pa. Garrison, N. Y.

Annual Subscription, $6.00 Single Copies, 15 Cts.

SCIENCE is the official organ of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Information regarding membership in the Association may be secured from the office of the permanent secretary, in the Smithsonian Institution Building, Washington, D. C.

A BOTANICAL PROBLEM

By Professor MARGARET C. FERGUSON
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"Consider the lilies how they grow." Thus spake the great Master now just nineteen hundred years ago. And this statement from Him is prima facie evidence that the people of this period knew something of plants and of their growth. For it was the habit of this Teacher to base His lessons on the known and familiar. But we have evidence from many other sources that the study and observation of plants was at this time by no means new. When one searches the records for the beginnings of man's interest in and work with plants, one finds the story extending back not only to the earliest days of recorded history but far into those more remote times regarding which the archeologists have as yet found only the most fragmentary evidence, and then on into the mists of the past where conjecture alone can guide us. There is very general belief that the plants of the open plains and of the forests were one, doubtless the most potent one, of the factors influencing primitive man as he started on the long trail upward to civilization and his modern supremacy. We know that Neolithic man grew cereals, raised flax and cultivated plants bearing fruit and nuts. Moreover we find his grains such that they must have been the result of long ages of cultivation and improvement. With those still earlier practices, which must have antedated by many epochs those of Neolithic man, one's imagination may play at will.

Whatever the first abodes of man, whether caves or the sheltering branches of trees, the fact of a more or less fixed habitation, a pausing in his wanderings at some definite point, was undoubtedly a most significant step in that progress which led eventually to man's present estate. We know that two factors

1 Address of the retiring president of the Botanical Society of America, read at Cleveland, December 31, 1930.