

FLAX AND HEMP.

FLAX. (*Linum Usitatissimum*.)

"Flax and hemp," says Olivier de Serres, "are of extremest value to man, both in sickness and in health, in life, and even in death." The Scriptures make the flaxen fibre the type of the short and ephemeral duration of all human joys and sorrows. "A bruised reed shall he not break, and smoking flax shall he not quench." (Matt. xii. 20.) That is, he will forbear to extinguish so brief a light as that of flax already smoking and half burnt out.

To innumerable individuals of the great human family does flax supply the various items of clothing, writing material, bedding, fuel, medicine, external as well as internal; manure, material to aid the painter's art, and, indirectly, animal food of the highest nutritive qualities; and when properly managed, it affords that inestimable blessing to a population,—a constant source of remunerative employment.

The flax plant belongs to the natural family of Linaceæ, so named from the botanical name (*Linum*) of the genus to which it belongs. The species are found chiefly in temperate parts of the world, with a few in tropical regions; most are remarkable for the tenacity of the fibre of their inner bark. The native country of the flax plant is unknown; but as it was cultivated by the earliest civilized nations, it is probably a native of oriental regions, from which it has travelled into other countries.

Description of Plant.—It is an annual, with long and slender but fibrous roots, which penetrate to a considerable distance into the soil, where this is loose and friable. The stem is smooth, simple and erect; branched, or, as usually cultivated, branching only towards the top; from one and a half to three feet in height. It consists of a pith and woody part, with the layer of best fibres covered with cuticle on the outside.

The leaves are alternate, sessile, linear-lanceolate, and smooth. The flowers, of a blue color, are arranged in a corymbose panicle. The sepals, or green outer leaflets of the flower are five in number, ovate acute, slightly ciliated, nearly equal to the capsule in length. The petals, blue in color and five in number, are obscurely crenate, comparatively large, and deciduous. The stamens are equal in number to the petals and alternate with them, having their filaments united together near their bases into a kind of ring. The ovary, or young seed-vessel, is divided into five cells, and is surmounted by five stigmata. Capsule, or *boll*, roundish, but rather pointed at the apex, divided into five perfect cells, each of which is again subdivided by an