

THE LETTER "M"



Nowhere is Liliás's counsel concerning ministry spelled out more clearly, with characteristic wit and humor, than in The Letter "M," an open letter to missionaries, carried for eight consecutive issues in the in-house publication El Couffa (translated: open basket). While they reflect a particular time and place - and, throughout, a quaintness of illustration and turn of phrase - there is a universal quality to her advice that would profit any Christian worker - then and now. All eight editorials have been culled from these issues and printed in full.

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Chapter I Missionaries and Their Manners

We have all seen in England certain establishments in which over each bedroom is inscribed the name of a saint or of some virtue as an object of emulation to the inhabitant of that room. Would it be a good plan if we wrote over our door "No cats?" And in case you may not see at once the connection of ideas I hasten to remind you that at home, when anything goes wrong or is broken, it is apt to be attributed to the cat. Perhaps we ought to look to it that we do not keep in our "fort interieur" a little private kitty to whose charge we lay anything that has gone amiss between us and others.

There are different kinds of cats. One much in vogue is "the climate." I knew a lady who threw a leg of mutton at her husband, and I was told it was the effect of the climate. Don't let us throw even invisible cutlets at one another and say "the climate has such an unfortunate effect upon me." It is unfortunate, but it is not irremediable. We are here by the calling of God in this climate, under these circumstances, in this surrounding to be to all around us, European as well as native, unblotted epistles of Christ. It is a high calling – but He is able. So when that well-known voice within tells us that by word or manner we have given pain, let us not allow ourselves a single excuse. There is one fact that does away with all self-excuse: "I have sinned against the new commandment of my Lord."

There is another quite little kitty that we must not let creep in. It is called "Oh! It is a way I have." Once, years ago, there was somewhere a very good worker who had a way of not responding to the salutations of her fellow workers or of the natives. It seemed much a little thing, but the natives could not understand it, & when this worker spoke at meetings I am afraid that in the hearts of some of her hearers there was an echo "Yes! That was the one who did not answer when I salaamed her." So if we are conscious of having 'a way' however innocent, that rubs up our neighbours white or brown, let us give it up as St. Paul would have done. He says, "Let all that you do be done in love."

There is another cat, happily of a very rare species, called "she is the only one I can't get on with." Can't I? What a pity! That is just what the Arab women feel when they begin "douas" in their house. And we have come out here on purpose to show them how to be delivered from that as well as other sins – so we really cannot for very shame allow ourselves this excuse.

Often I find myself repeating Miss Procter's most true warning.

*"Judge not, the working of his brain
And of his heart thou canst not see;
What looks to thy dim eyes a stain
In God's pure light may only be
A scar brought from some well won field
Where thou wouldst only faint and yield."*

Missionaries & their manners! As I write a disagreeable question keeps posing itself before me as to whether I have always been as welcoming to the natives when their visit has been inconvenient as when it was convenient to me to receive them. And yet all was in God's Providence and ordering.

Chapter II Missionaries and Their Maidens

Some years ago there lived in Scotland two ladies, highly intelligent and very ferocious. When they were in good humour the flag on their castle turret would wave high, and neighbours knew that they could pay a very enjoyable visit: but when the dear ladies were in a bad temper the flag was only half mast high, and in all the country side there was not a soul who cared to brave the ill-humoured reception that awaited them.

There must have been something of the same spirit in the first maiden I heard of in Algiers, a young French girl. When she was in a bad temper, her whisk of hair was twisted into a defiant knot on the top of her head; as she felt gooder it gradually came lower & lower. On her best days it reposed on the nape of her neck.

After she left I joined my friends and our experiences were varied. Once we had nobody at all, and when the door bell rang we all three flew. What a pity we did not all three sit still and each one say, "I've been thinking that it is not my work to open doors." There was only one door but the plural is always more touching.

Then we had an old Arab woman & a Kabyle lad. They got on very well together, & they spent their evenings, she in relating & he in listening to interminable & impossible tales of the olden time.

After a while we had two Kabyle lads. They worked well but were of different tribes, so not only did they fight but their friends outside fought over their quarrels. When we heard it was arranged that a pitched battle was to take place in an unfrequented part between their adherents it seemed better that one of the lads should go. I think his name was Said, and after he left a deputation of boys of his tribe came to know why we had sent him away. For any fault? for stealing? or such like? They were quite satisfied when we said it was his own wish to return home.

He was rather lazy and felt deeply the injustice of having to pay more by train than by diligence! By the latter he could not travel, for the drivers had an uncomfortable habit of making the younger passengers walk up the hills, & as he mournfully remarked, "The son of Adam does not like to walk up hills." (Which reminds me that these young gentlemen being "sons of Adam" do not truthfully come under the title of "Maiden" - dear reader, please forgive!)

Later we had a dignified old Arab lady named Zehour. She was followed by a kind of kaleidoscope procession of Maidens, Swiss & French for the most part. One of the former was rather excitable and once "in anger wild" she desired to mount on the ballustrade round the gallery of Rue du Croissant - whether to address us from a superior height or not I cannot say - but as she was rather stout, and the ballustrade was, and is, rather rickety, we were glad when she was induced to abandon the idea.

I think it was another Swiss girl who had an extraordinary gift for Arab pronunciation, even of words whose meaning she did not know. One day she nearly got us into trouble with an old Arab gentleman who had come to complain of something and in reply to a voluble speech which she did not understand, she said to him what she had heard angry people say to one another in the street: "ouach andi fik," to his almost speechless indignation.

These are all little ups and downs that come to my memory as I write. But there comes to me also a sense of many acts of unselfish kindness and thoughtfulness and high-mindedness on the part of those who through all these years have come to help us in the house. Personally, I have very pleasant and grateful recollections of Missionary Maidens.

Chapter III Missionaries and Their Musings

How good and handy is a Couffa with its big mouth always wide open and ready to receive all that we want to put in. The only drawback is that some times things slip out for want of a top!

I remember long ago hearing of a nobleman who had an unfortunate habit of musing aloud. One of his beautiful properties was situated near a manufacturing town and he resolved to give a garden party to the neighboring magnates. Everything would have gone well if he had not walked among his guests saying "What a rum lot what a rum lot!"

On another occasion on leaving the House of Lords he was caught in a shower and a friend offered him a place in this carriage. He accepted but apparently repented for looking out of the window he said, "What a nuisance this fellow has taken me up. Now I must ask him to dinner." His friend fortunately entered into the humour of the situation and looking out of the other window said, "What a bore to have taken him up. Now he will ask me to dinner and he has such an abominable cook!" At once the visitor recognized that he had mused aloud and after a hearty laugh the friends compromised matters by dining at the club.

That was a very good ending to the story but unfortunately we, if we hurt some strangers feelings by musing aloud, cannot so easily tie over our misdeed. I have more than once seen a French gentleman look annoyed at some remark made at the supposition that no one present in the tram or the train understood English.

I should not like to dogmatize so, but somehow I think that trains bought with French money and run on French lines do in a measure belong to French people, and that perhaps they are within their rights if they happen to travel on the same day with ourselves and if they are the first in the carriage. It is *we* who are crowding them up!

But this is only the topmost strata of my subject. As one looks back one realizes how much time some of us have lost in fruitless aimless musing.

The Lord of Heaven and Earth has taken our hearts with their thoughts as well as their affections for His Portion. What dusty, vapid apples of Sodom He has found there instead of the mind that was - and is - in Christ Jesus.

Yet our musings could be so glad and high. There is a Russian story of a poet who was ill treated in this world - oppressed and cheated and misunderstood. He made his appeal to Jupiter who said - "I will not alter the circumstances round you but Heaven is always open to you. When you will, you can come up here." And the poet was satisfied. We too have an open Heaven above us into which we can ever enter, and in that Presence all unruly troublesome unworthy, all self-pitying criticising thoughts will be banished, and heart and spirit will be filled with the Vision of the Lord.

David must have had much to think of in the ordering of his Kingdom but it seems as if straight as an arrow his thoughts flew God-ward. "At midnight I will arise to give thanks unto Thee, because of Thy righteous judgments." Before the morning watch, - out of the depth -

"My meditation of Him shall be sweet."

Chapter IV Missionaries and Their Merits

“Little Jack Horner sat in a corner, he put in his thumb and he pulled out a plum, and said 'What a good boy am I!’”

What a little prig that young man was! I suppose we have never felt at all as he did under the same circumstances??

I remember years ago meeting a missionary, who has since stood on many a hard fought and often unrecognised battle field, and he said to me, “When I was in England I worked a good deal amongst the poor. It was what I liked best to do and it was infinitely more interesting than staying at home. Every body said I was leading a most devote life and I quite believed them but when I came here and had really hard work and often failed, I saw my life in a truer light.” Ah! Mr Horner, come out of your corner and pull out a thistle or a thorn sometimes and see if you have the same view of your merit.

Do we not some of us know it? In the early years of our missionary work when the pleasant fiction of “a devoted life” and its merits fade, and we feel that we are coming perilously near to being a failure, we make mistakes, we find ourselves ready to become shirkers, we think that our fellow missionaries are judging our want of progress in Arabic, our way of managing the children, our power of comradeship with the natives, our housekeeping, attainments. No more plums followed by pleasant reflections! What are we to do? Let us do what the men in this photograph are doing. Climb! We find them in a strenuous spot but we expect them to mount higher. We should have a sense of defeat if we heard that they had turned back before reaching the peak. Just because we too are in a strenuous pace in our life, let us make sure that we are climbing upward. These men having obtained their object must come back. The Christian – never. He is led on from strength to strength until he comes to the very mount of God.

And what cause we have to go forward with a glad confidence, no matter how low down we start. On the Swiss mountains many a guide has perished with those whom he sought to lead but our Guide has never failed the souls that, knowing Him as their Saviour have trusted Him as Guide and Strength to bring them to the Heavenly Places. He never leads downwards. We need not look at ourselves or worry over our merits or demerits. Only let us be sure that we are with Him and we may be certain that He is leading us ever and through all circumstances, upwards.

A missionary in India wrote to a young Hindu prince who was at the eve of his baptism “keep close to the Lord Jesus, brother, and all will be well.” Great and special difficulties must have beset that young life and yet we feel how truly all must be well with him if, through grace, he has kept close to the Lord.

For us, to be with Him on battle field or lonely out-post, in desert or storm or heat, or mental and physical exhaustion, in light or thick darkness, so long as He is near it is good for us to be there, better far than in some easier post elsewhere.

“With Him.” How every thought of praise or blame, merit or demerit, success or failure, sinks into nothing beside those two mighty words. Words that replace human sin with the very righteousness of God, human praise with the “well done good and faithful servant,” earthly failure with the crown of glory and the song of Moses and the Lamb.

Chapter V Missionaries and Their Mates

"First gave their own selves to the Lord and unto us by the Will of God." A beautiful description of Christian fellowship. Weymouth translates the Apostle's words a little differently and not less vividly: "First of all in the obedience to the Will of God they gave themselves to the will of God and to us."

Do we think as we ought of the Divine Gift of our personal friendships? All that is of God must of necessity have in it an element of nobility and largeness, not to say boundlessness: So large, so boundless that it has no room for littlenesses.

I have seen friendships which reminded me of the little gourbis one sees on the Chelif plain, each one surrounded with a hedge of thorns and for further protection against any possible intrusion each little gourbi has a very large dog, whose sole duty it is to bark wildly at any one who happens to stray near, as if they were thieves. The thorny hedge keeps in as well as keeps out, and what cramped and stunted lives are lived behind those hedges!

We have never known anything like this in our own friendships? No thorny exclusiveness, no tiny little dog even to growl quite low but not very pleasantly? OF COURSE NOT!

So let us rather turn to look at the lovely large description of the friendship that God gives.

First, we have given ourselves to Him never to take back any portion of our being under any circumstance for anybody - our God-given friend included. And then, it is blessed to think of it in obedience to Him we give ourselves to the friends His loving Providence has brought to us.

I write purposely of "friends", for it is very noticeable that the noblest friendships are those that are many-sided. We may indeed thank our Heavenly Father that even our poor human love is inexhaustible, like the Norse drinking cup of old that none could empty, for its base was open and reached to the sea. So the love we have to give to those among whom our Lord has placed us, if it is the true heavenly gift and not a shabby human imitation, is inexhaustible, for it too reaches a sea truly more "boundless than Ocean's tide."

*Where Thou art most
Beloved, is room for all! The heart grows wide
That holdeth Thee, a heaven where none doth press
Upon the other."*

Chapter VI Missionaries and Their Miseries

How many of us have said and sung with all our hearts "Anywhere with Jesus," but at the time we did not realize all that it meant for us. Indeed at home, and surrounded by all that home means we could not know. When the test comes we must not forget that "Anywhere" means for missionaries something different from life in England, and let us take very good care not to make a misery of anything that "anywhere" brings us.

To us in Algeria it must mean sometime or other, Arab food. Do we object to it? And mice, do we mind them? And mosquitos, do we think them dreadful? In some parts it means close contact with dirt and repulsive disease. Yet if Jesus is there what have we possibly to complain of? It means living among a stiff-necked and untrue people and struggling with a strange and difficult language. And yet let us evermore write over all our miseries, big, and for the most part very little, these transforming words "With Jesus." And then the very breath of Heaven will breathe upon our whole being and we shall be glad.

I remember reading somewhere a most beautiful passage on I Corinthians 7:20-24. The writer described the transfiguring power with which the Apostle words "With God" must have fallen on the ears of the poor Christians slaves whose case he had been considering. "Therein abide with God." "With God" in the midst of squalor and oppression and in justice, and sometimes cruelty unspeakable. "If thou mayst be made free, use it rather, not to escape discomfort but being the Lord's free man, but if thou are called being a slave care not for it, but slave or free let every man wherein he is called therein abide with God."

And what splendid examples of "Anywhere with Jesus" we meet with even in these earthworn days. How about that young married couple in China, who for six years never had a room not to say a house of their own but travelled constantly, and sometimes sleeping in an Inn with all the worse that that meant, sometimes sharing a room with the family of some poor adherent, often hunted out of a town with stones and jibes, but never faltering, always returning again & again to the hardest places until even their enemies were vanquished by their faith and patience.

What are our miseries? Shall we make a list of them and what shall we write opposite to them? Shall it be "this is very hard" or shall it be "with God?"

With Him in disappointments and troubled nights and much that perhaps we should shrink from if we had not meant it when we sang "Anywhere with Jesus."

"With God" - these are the wonderful words, this is the wonderful fact that changes earth's sordid surrounding into the heavenly places where we are seated with Him.

A friend told me that she knew an old charwoman who lived in a little garret in great poverty. One day speaking of returning to her room after a day's work she said, "And as I open the door I find the dear Lord waiting there for me, and I say to myself, "Can Heaven be better!"

Chapter VII

Missionaries and Their Muddles

In one of her racy books Am Carmichael remarks that for a missionary engaged in evangelistic work there are few things so good as a turn at the educational. And she goes on to explain her thought. I quote from memory, by saying that from the very elastic nature of evangelistic work a missionary is apt to grow intellectually slack, whereas in a native school five minutes of inattention on the part of the teacher brings the prompt and patent punishment of inattention and turbulence on the part of the pupils. The teacher realizes that for every moment of her work she must be "all there."

As we are commanded to love the Lord with all our mind, so we know we are to serve him with all that "mind" represents of thought and care and "gathered-up-ness."

Perhaps for want of noting what passages we have read to such a one, we read and re-read the same, until the poor woman comes to think that the stories of the blind man and Zacheus are all we have to tell her of the Will of the Father.

Or perhaps we mixup our Arab friends and make a muddle of their family histories, which is very hurtful to their feelings.

I remember a young missionary who was much loved by the people, and part of her attraction for them was her wonderful mastery of their names, brothers, sisters, aunts, cousins, children, maladies and everything that concerned them. I never knew her to make a mistake on any of these points.

And again, in the arrangement of our day I think we must try hard for "gathered-up-ness" and not leave the priceless moments just to the impulse of the moment.

There is a kind of amiable wandering round among the people which is not quite doing our service with all our mind, though it may well be with all our heart. Let us with prayer and thought seek to know where we are to go and what is to be our message, so that instead of "I thought I would just run around a minute" we may even be able to say "He that made me whole the same said unto me."

And again there are other matters in our lives depending really almost entirely on this service of "with all thy mind," as in the case of our room, arranging drawers and boxes so that we can lay our hand at once on any of our possessions without loss of time.

Our reports, have we not found that if we miss for a day noting numbers and visits, we find it quite difficult on the morrow to be sure that we are exact?

And our accounts! As I have been writing these lines I have felt that I ought to end each paragraph with "peccavi." Here I think I should begin and end with that salutary confession. Yet I have tried, and all the harder after hearing Mr. Smeeton's story of the trouble taken by hearing Mr. Hudson Taylor to rectify an error of a few pences in his yearly budget, for he felt a faulty report was not the perfect thing he wished to offer to his Lord.

Scientists tell us of many penetrating forces in this wonderful world but surely none is so penetrating as the service of our all-seeing Lord. "Not one poor moment escapes Thy Breast." Not the smallest action but comes under the command, "Let all things be done in order."

Conclusion
Missionaries and Their "Might have beens"

When I mentioned to a friend the title of this my last "M," she said: "Oh! What a sad subject." And there is indeed a sad side to it. It may be that during these weeks of rest the Holy Spirit has been so showing us what we might have been as to give new depth to the heart's cry: "Forgive us all that is past." But it is not of that side that I am going to speak except to quote some lines that I came across in Scotland.

*"Give strength for this stern drama, Lord of Lords.
Blast in each heart the craven wish to yield,
Aye, let us burnish new our battered shield
That it may lack no lustre to the hordes
Which stand opposing us with tireless swords;
Safe are we only while our arms we wield."*

The "Might have beens" which are in my thoughts just now, are the loss and misery and sin from which our Lord in His ever watchful love and grace has again and again saved us. Do we not know it? What would have happened to us but for His Upholding when we walked amid the precipices in the thick darkness when the enemy camp in upon us like a flood, and we well nigh sank under his buffetings? When the discouragement nearly made us yield; when the subtle poison of unbelief threatened to sap our true life? When the bitter word that might have wrought untold harm was on our lips; when we took up our pen to write a letter of cowardly complaint? In what ruin of our lives it might have ended, but for the restraining, guiding, upholding of our redeeming Lord.

And then, on the physical side - journeys, illnesses, fears - how different they might have been! Through all He has brought us body, soul, and spirit, so let us go forward into the new season of work with a glad trust.