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White, J. P.

# Our Sisters in Egypt

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*Egypt Series*

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*Women's General Missionary Society  
United Presbyterian Church  
of North America.*

# Our Sisters in Egypt

MRS. J. P. WHITE

In the flowery language of the Arab, there are many terms of endearment used in the common conversation of the people. Some of these grow meaningless because of common usage, yet some always seem to have a deep significance. As I went from home to home, in Egypt, and looked into the dusky faces of the Egyptian women, whose lives had little joy in them, my heart grew warm when they kissed my cheeks, pressed my hands, and exclaimed "Oh, my sister, we are so glad to see you!" Sisters we are, indeed. The whole world is akin; "For God hath made of one blood all nations." And yet in a very special way are the women of Egypt our sisters. God, in His providence, has given the land of Egypt into the hands of our United Presbyterian Church to evangelize. This responsibility we have for their souls ought to draw us very close to them. In order to sympathize with them, to pray for them, to give to them, and to love them, we need definite intelligent ideas of their conditions.

I wish I could make you understand the poverty, the suffering, and the vice and ignorance of these poor women who are our sisters. I wish I could picture to you the forlorn hope which lies before every Mohammedan woman. As a babe she is unwelcome; as a child, untaught; as a wife, unloved; as a mother, unhonored; in old age uncared for, and when her miserable, dark and dreary life is ended, she is unmourned by those whom she has served. There is no Paradise for her, unless her husband choose to have her there. Perhaps the greatest foes to her peace of mind and happiness

are the customs of polygamy and divorce. The prophet Mohammed gave his followers the privilege of having four wives at once. He, himself, was the first to break the rule, taking nine, and many of his followers have far exceeded that number. Indeed, Ismail Pasha, a former Khedive, is said to have had thirteen hundred women in his harem.

The Mohammedan who finds a wife a burden has only to say "I divorce thee," and she is forced to go. He may repeat those words to her, and yet in a few days, if he repent, he can take her back again. But if he say, "I divorce thee by the triple divorce," he cannot take her back, according to the law of Islam, until she has first been married to another man, and been divorced by him. Sometimes he may hire a servant to marry her and divorce her, in order that he may bring her back immediately.

Many of the women live in constant dread of their husbands. As one poor woman said, "You never know what a husband will say the next time he comes into the house. Perhaps he will say, 'you are divorced,' so it is best to get out of him all you can."

Frequently a man sitting at a cafe gets into a controversy with his companions. He excitedly exclaims, "If what I say is not true, I will divorce my wife!" If proven wrong, he is in honor bound to divorce the innocent wife, who has perhaps for years served him as faithfully as she knew how. Not in the least of the trials of our sisters in that benighted land are the abuses they suffer from the men of the house. For a trifling offense a woman is severely beaten by father, husband, brother or son. This custom is so common that even the women themselves expect a whipping occasionally. Once when I had just heard of a desperate case, I expressed my views on the subject in emphatic terms. One of the women present

said, "Oh, my lady, you do not understand the Egyptian women; they will not walk straight unless they are beaten!"

These women are ignorant beyond description; they are miserable and wretched, I care not in what station in life you find them. The poorest women have the greatest freedom. They may go about unveiled, and speak with the men whom they meet; but their lot is a hard one. Those who live in the villages labor in the fields from early morn until late at night, while those who live in the cities are often employed as hod carriers for the masons.

Frequently have I seen a farmer riding on a donkey, while his wife ran along behind giving the animal a prod at the proper moment that he might maintain a pace suitable to the taste of the rider. He would be riding with his hands free, while she would be carrying a burden on her head. I have been told that often the rider would require his attendant to repeat rhymes and stories for his amusement as he rode along.

The middle and upper class women, if they go out, must be closely veiled, but thousands are never allowed to go out of the house. Servants are employed to do their work for them, and there is little for the women to do but sit on the floor and gossip. Think of women spending a lifetime in that way, never reading, nor knowing anything outside the neighborhood gossip. Among titled people of Egypt the women of the harem are usually Circassians, who are bought and paid for as chattels. The one who costs the most never fails to remind the others of her value.

American travelers often meet Beys and Pashas at the large hotels in Cairo. They ask, "Are your women contented and happy in the harems?" The men wisely answer, "Certainly; our women are the happiest women in the

world. They have jewelry and beautiful dresses, and servants to look after every want. Our women prefer the seclusion of the harems to the life which Western women lead."

Strange to say, there are found American men—yes, and women, who believe this infamous falsehood. And yet I ask—How can any woman of sober judgment believe her sister, of whatever nation or color, to be happy, when she is sharing the affection of her husband with a dozen other wives? To know their suffering one need to hear only once the story of misery from the lips of one of these unfortunate women.

A girl of my acquaintance was the seventh wife of a rich man. He divorced five wives, retaining the first and last. One day she whispered her sorrows in my ear. "I am afraid," she said, "that my husband will divorce me, and I am afraid if he does not that other woman will kill me!" She turned in nervous fear and dread to see if, perchance, even then, "that other woman" might be listening to her words. "Among the women in harems," Mrs. Bishop has rightly said, "all the worst passions of human nature, such as jealousy, envy, murderous hate and intrigue, are stimulated and developed to a fearful degree."

Into these homes, the Bible women and missionaries are entering with the light. Follow them in their daily rounds and visits and see if it is not a happy, blessed privilege to carry to those in darkness the gospel which alone can transform their minds, and hearts, and homes.

In every missionary center, a great work is being done for the women of Egypt by the lay missionaries and the Bible women under their direction. They enter the homes of the poor, and they enter the homes of the rich, teaching the women to read the Word which will make them wise unto salvation.

Were this work considered from an educational point alone, it might not be thought highly successful. Many women take lessons a long time and never get beyond the primer, yet they and their families and their neighbors hear the gospel time after time. On the other hand the teacher finds many apt pupils, and in spite of the fact that women are taught from infancy that they are donkeys, and have no minds, many learn to read after they are married and are encumbered with family cares. The method of conducting this work is simple. The Bible teacher, with primer and Bible in hand, goes from house to house, giving simple lessons in reading, explaining the Word, and at opportune times praying with her pupils. Occasionally the missionary goes with her in her rounds, to see how she is doing the work, and to give encouragement and cheer to the pupils. Let us follow them for a little and see what conditions they meet.

They wend their way through narrow, ill-smelling streets for a long distance. A knock at the door of an humble house brings a cordial greeting. The mother makes apology for the condition of the house, explaining that they have not yet finished the morning work. The floor is mother earth; the furniture a piece of matting in one corner, which serves as a place to sit by day, and a place to sleep by night. The children are dirty and suffering from sore eyes. They wear girdles or charms about their waists, and have charms of something that appears to be beeswax appended to the locks of uncombed hair, to keep off the "evil eye."

There is hope even among people in such squalid dwellings. The mother and daughter bring their books and spell or read the words of the appointed lesson. A few neighbors gather in to hear this great wonder—women reading, and they beg the teacher to come to their houses

also. The missionary then asks if they would like to hear a few words from the Holy Book. They listen with wide open eyes. "What a sweet story!" they exclaim. Then the teacher leads in prayer, asking that the Great Teacher will bring them into the light. Coffee is brought, and after a short talk, usually on religious topics, the teachers go on to another house.

As they go in they see the young mother crying. She holds an infant in her arms and several small children cling to her. Older women try to comfort her, but to no avail. "What's the matter?" the visitors ask. Then the young mother breaks forth in piteous weeping. Between the sobs she tells them that her husband went off in a rage that morning declaring he would divorce her, because she was the mother of five daughters and no sons. They talk with her to comfort her, and go away trusting that God will hear their prayers for this troubled one and change the heart and purposes of her tyrannical husband.

The next house is so cheerful. A dear little Christian woman who had had no opportunity to go to school in childhood, welcomes her dear sisters to her home. She reads her lesson cheerfully. She has learned with amazing rapidity. She has read almost the entire Bible through in a few months. She asks one question after another about the Word, and begs her visitors to prolong their stay. They drink coffee with her, and as they go away she reminds them that she will see them at the prayer meeting in the afternoon. Such a home as this, transformed in every way, gives courage and hope to labor for others also.

At the next house the ladies are met by a servant, who ushers them into a beautiful room which is furnished luxuriously. He calls the lady of the house, who comes after a long, long

time, bedecked with jewelry and dressed in a loose silk gown. She looks sad even in her finery. She reads her lesson in the Bible, asks a few questions, then becomes silent. After a while she is led to talk about herself. She reminds one of a caged bird pining for green trees and blue skies, beating its wings against the door in vain hope for release. This woman's husband had forbidden her ever going out of the house. She grew restless and rebellious and went out the day before for a stroll in the garden, which was surrounded by a high wall. O luckless hour! What should happen but the return of her husband at this time most unexpected. He misjudged her; would listen to no words of explanation and whipped her unmercifully. The only bright spots in her life are the visits of the Bible teachers, two or three times a week. She gains comfort from talks and prayers, and, as her visitors go away, she promises to be as gentle and sweet and obedient as possible in order to win her husband to the Christian faith, which is her only joy and comfort.

As these two Christian workers walk along, they talk over the sad life of the one they have just left.

Drawing near to the next house they realize they are coming to another sad scene. On each side of the street are seats covered with carpet to accommodate the men who have come to offer sympathy to their friends. They pass on into the house, not to give a lesson, but to speak a few words of comfort. The house is crowded with women, who are drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes. Hired mourners are there beating their breasts and screaming to keep the friends excited. It is hard for one looking on to distinguish the real mourners from the artificial. The teachers go to their friends, whisper a few words of consolation, and

go away, commending them to the Great Comforter.

In the next house they find a bride—yes, a bride eleven years of age. She stands speechless in the august presence of her mother-in-law. This child-wife had been a bright school girl. Her parents had a good opportunity to marry her and this they did without consulting her wishes in the matter. She begged to be allowed to take lessons at home, which privilege was granted. Her mother-in-law is cruel and unsympathetic with all the new notions of female education; but in this young heart has already sprung up a desire for knowledge of heavenly things and a love for God's Word. Even though not permitted to go to God's house, she will, in her humble home, as she has learned Christ, so walk in Him.

We could follow these workers around to other homes where we would see other phases of life in Egypt, but perhaps these are enough to show that every day they meet with women who are bowed in sorrow and suffering; women who are longing for just such words of comfort as they can give.

In these house-to-house visitations the missionaries get very near to the people. They rejoice with them in their joys and sympathize with them in hours of darkest trial and sorest bereavement.

The results of the harem work are not seen as closely as those of other departments of our mission work, and yet the missionaries are cheered by seeing some souls brought to accept Christ and some homes elevated by this agency.

While in the whole of Egypt only six women per thousand can read—in our Protestant community over two hundred women per thousand can read.

There has been an increase in the attendance at our women's meetings. There is a great hunger and thirsting for the Word of Life all over the land. There are hundreds of women who are willing and anxious for the teachers to come to them. They are calling them; they are pleading for their help; they are crying, "O give us the light."

The missionaries refuse them—not because they care not, for their hearts are aching for those who must be turned away. They have to refuse to give them the Gospel light, because Christians compel them to do so. How can we stand guiltless before God when we have spent our gold and our silver for luxuries and turned a deaf ear to our sisters in Egypt who are crying for the Bread of Life?

If we could realize that they are our own sisters we would strain every nerve to send help, we would make any sacrifice to save them. They are our sisters who are dying; they are our own sisters who are being turned away from the true light because we do not give enough to keep them there; they are our sisters who are begging to be told again and again the sweetest story they ever heard.

Shall not the women of our church say, as did David, "Neither will I offer unto the Lord my God of that which cost me nothing," and then plan to make some sacrifice for God's work in Egypt?

With this spirit of sacrifice and with our prayers uniting daily at the mercy-seat, we have the sweet assurance that great blessings will be bestowed upon our sisters in Egypt.

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