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Letter from December 10-17, 1888 - transcript

Lavinia Coombs

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December 10-17, 1888
Midnapore, India

I

My Dear Nellie,

I didn't think t'would be so long before answering your letter but-this is the first chance I've got, aside from answering those that seemed to demand attention first. You wrote shortly after getting back from Ocean Park and now when you get this t'will be nearly mid-winter and a great deal has happened during this time both of public and private interest. We are made happy by the news we get from your house, Harrison is elected and the missionaries have sailed. We are full of pleasant anticipation of their coming both because of themselves and because of what they will bring us as tokens of love and good.

...well of the dear ones far away. I doubt if they get here in time for Christmas, but the dolls and bags and other things will keep for another year. Our yearly meeting is to be held in Midnapore in January and they will surly be here by that time-if no accident happens. We shall be so glad to be all together and to welcome the newcomers, but our gladness will not be unalloyed for Mr. & Mrs. Burkholder and Hattie Phillips are to leave for home shortly after this meeting and though we know they need and deserve a vacation we know their work must suffer. If we could go on and on indefinitely without wearing out-or getting tired, how fine that would be. If I could keep as well as I have been these six years I wouldn't need to go home for twenty years yet and then by that time I wouldn't care to go at all, for everybody and everything would be so changed that the joy would all be taken out of it. The longer I stay the more I think I shall not go home at the end of ten years unless I'm obliged to but confess that for the last few days I have felt like sighing "for a lodge in some vast wilderness" or for "wings like a dove that I might fly away and be at rest" just for a little while for my mind has been so burdened with the inequities of our own Christian people that I couldn't be happy. I think it will do no harm to write you of our trials occasionally and to let home friends see the dark side sometimes.

We had one Christian teacher in the Industrial School here and two Hindu teachers. We had tried before to put a Christian teacher and he bitterly disappointed us, but this one had been doing beautifully, and we were congratulating ourselves on the good influence brought to bear on the pupils, when lo! one day the truth comes out that he is a vile fellow who has seduced a married woman-another Christian, and they were both missing.

The woman is one who has been brought up right among us and has been living an exemplary life all along-a teacher in one of the Ragged Schools-and now this the outcome of it all. Isn't it discouraging! But then I think of the stories we hear from Christian lands with all that civilization and Christianity is supposed to have done in the line of heredity and this doesn't seem so awful; for this land is full of wickedness and evil and has reigned so long that it is no easy matter to break away from it. Of course I believe in the power of God to save and keep a person here just as well as in America but very few comparatively of our Christians I fear, realize the full meaning of the Christian faith.

Our religion is so different from the religions of this land that it is hard for them to grasp the idea for an entire change of heart.

December 15th

11: p.m.

We are in the midst of another experience of a different kind. I am sitting with Mrs. Burkholder while she watches by her little boy Jamie who is hovering between life and death.

They [Mr. & Mrs. Burkholder and 10 children] were on a preaching tour and enjoying it very much when this little boy was taken so suddenly and seriously ill with dysentery. They hurried home to Blimpore and sent a messenger to Dr. Harry Bachelor who went out immediately. He was there two days but Jamie didn't improve as he had hoped but as his own baby was not well ...

December 16th

I had to get up just then for little thing to help Mrs. Burkholder and didn't find the chance or heart to sit down to write again before Miss Butts came to relieve me and I went off to lie down. The mother would not leave her boy for any rest, though she has been watching with him for several nights and had just taken the long drive of twenty miles from Blimpore [sic] holding him in her arms. Dr. Bachelor had come back from the first summons and then the next day came another messenger with a note saying they feared their little boy wouldn't live 'till morning and would he come out again if possible. He hurried right off -that was yesterday-Saturday- morning and though he found him a little better than when the messenger was sent, yet they all thought it best to bring him here as they could have other medical advice and better advantages. They got here about dark and the little fellow was so exhausted he seemed to be in a dying condition then but he rallied a little later and we were very hopeful 'till after midnight and then he soon began to show signs of sinking and passed away about four o'clock. He was a beautiful boy and the pet of the family. How often that very one seems to be chosen to go. This is the second child she has lost, but she bears it like the true Christian she is.

Monday-17th

This must go today. I began it a week ago hoping to send it then but couldn't finish it in time. I will speak of some things suggested in your letter. The Ocean Park meetings. *The Star* and *the Programme* sent and your letter, and Clara's gave me a very good idea of them and there seems to be a growing interest in them. I wish more of our brothers and sisters could get to them.....those from the south and west, but of course it is a long way for them and a big expense to be borne.

I was as surprised as you at the impression made on you by Mrs. Phillips. She is very intense in her way of working and very strong in her convictions but she is a power for good. I only wish she was here. We hear that Dr. Phillips has had a call from to this country from the Union Church at Sinula (sic). The call was telegraphed to him and we hear that he was accepted, but even if he does come we shall not likely see him, for it is hundreds of miles from Midnapore. I wish Mrs. Phillips could come too and be with him. I believe she could rest and get well faster than she can at home for it is a hill station and nice climate and she wouldn't have to be continually going off to meetings here and there and using up what strength she does get in that way. But she can't leave her children yet.

The deaths of Mrs. Dexter and Miss (sic) must have been da news indeed and was an unusual thing to happen both in one summer. Not that it is an unusual thing for people to die, but they were both closely connected with the interest at the Park and their deaths while those meetings were in progress was a coincidence.

We hear that our new missionaries left Liverpool the 14th of November and so if all goes well they must be in Calcutta this week, and that will bring them here before Christmas, which will be very nice. I will send you a post card after Christmas and the accompanying rush is over.

I haven't had a word from my brother Eldridge for a long time. I don't know what is the matter.

Perhaps you would like to now something further of those sinners I spoke of in the first part of my letter. My heart is lighter in regard to the woman at least. Our pastor saw her in the street and brought her to me and I talked long with her, but she seemed hard. We found that she had entered a complaint against her husband that he was a drunkard and beat her cruelly and she had to flee for her life! A part of this was true but I was determined we should not have a ca se in court and have so much extra disgrace brought upon us. Her brother came in to Midnapore (he lives twenty miles away) and the next day she had agreed to retract her accusations and take it out of court. I went with her to see about it, and then went to the house where she had been living for those few days to get her things and there saw proof that she had not been living there alone. She seemed a little softened that day and promised to stay quietly in a Christian neighbor's house 'till we could decide what to do.

Today the man in that house came to see me saying he didn't believe he could keep her for she seemed very uneasy and didn't want to stay.

I went over and called her to come over and talk with me. She came willingly but was in an almost despairing mood. I had a long quiet talk with her and she was all broken down, and prayed for herself so penitently and beseechingly that my mind feels quite easy about her. She will have to suffer, but it is right that she should. I only hope she will have the strength to bear it.

I must send this off now
or it will be too late again.

Yours with love,
Vina