

Smouldering

by

LILIAS TROTTER



ALGIERS MISSION BAND
and the
NORTH AFRICA MISSION

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and others

A THIN cloud of smoke was hovering over a certain spot on the opposite side of the little Swiss valley. Day after day it had been hanging there, without increasing or diminishing. At last I asked what it was.

"Oh, it is a larch tree", they answered. "A wood-cutter lit his fire under it a week ago to cook his dinner, and it has been alight ever since."

"But it will spread, will it not?"

"No, there is no flame, so it cannot spread", was the answer.

And so it proved. Damp with the mists that rose around, and with the sap of its own life within, it smouldered on and *nothing happened*. When we left, a few days later, it was smouldering still.

"There is no flame, so it cannot spread." The words have often rung in my ears since. May God send them on to ring in other ears too! For if the hearts in England, where God's Fire smoulders now were lit up into flame, the glow would be felt right round this poor dark, cold world before long. Such a cold, dark world it is to the God Who "so loved" it, that nothing but love will meet His longing! The false religious systems at their best are frozen stiff with formalism and slavish fears, chilled through and through with meaningless ceremonies and silly superstitions, and a dull morality with no motive power to make it workable—and from this poor best, down and down they trend to depths that are indescribable.

Thus far can be seen by those who have

only this world's light. But to us on whom the light of Eternity has arisen "in the face of Jesus Christ"—to us the great surging world looks dark with an infinitely deeper sadness—

"Sadness for the eyes that cannot see
Thee,
Whom to see is heaven."

That sums it up: "without Christ". All that is of dimness and dreariness and hopeless weary heart-emptiness is wrapped up in those two words.

Oh, the hugeness of the need!

What *can* touch it all? These days of ours are slipping between our fingers as it were, and their chances will soon be over for ever. The months we have still to live, even the youngest of us—how fast they go by! What does Christ feel about the priceless months in which, as with our Swiss larch tree, *nothing happens* around the spot where we stand? Nothing happens. Is it so? "*There is no*

flame, so it cannot spread." Oh, the smouldering lives and their possibilities!—more sorrowful in one way than the unlit souls around.

" For of all sad words of tongue or pen
The saddest are these—it might have
been."

It is not, in the first instance, the question of *doing* more, but of *being* more. If that larch tree had for one half-hour given itself away to the fire that was kindled in it, the outward results would have been visible soon enough. Flame *must* spread. But the larch would not let itself go. The strong sap within fought out the battle; the tree held itself carefully back, and *it* saved its life. The Autumn storms were coming on, and I daresay it has saved it to this day.

And the Autumn storms are coming on the world too, and the chances of spreading a fire round us are dwindling day by day. If we *will* "save" our lives for ourselves,

“save” our money to spend on our own pleasures, “save” our time for our own interests and pursuits, “save” our homes from the sorrow of a parting—well, if we will, we must. But “he that saveth his life shall lose it”: all that saving will show out as deadly loss when Christ comes.

Let us give ourselves away to Him for His world—away, away down to the deepest depths of our being; money, time, influence—and home if He calls us to it—all as fuel to His fire, but our heart of hearts *first*. “They . . . first gave their own selves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of God”: that was God’s order in the beginning, and it is so still; but where the influence of those “own selves”, thus given, will end, who can say? Like a flame once roused it may sweep on and on.

May I tell you a bit of personal history? It is just the case in point.

Years ago I was busy in London work. All was prospering with God’s blessing, and I

had no thought but to spend my life there. The whole missionary subject seemed to me rather dull, and was altogether beyond the horizon.

But I had two friends with whom I was thrown a good deal just then in work, and they had both of them taken to heart the outer darkness. I do not remember that they said anything personally to me about it, but one felt it right through them : they were all aglow. And after a bit, though I took no more personal interest in the matter than before, I began to feel that they had a fellowship with Jesus that I knew nothing about. I did love Him, and I did not like to be out in the cold over it; so I began to pray—
" Lord give me the fellowship with Thee about the heathen that Thou has given to those two."

It was not many weeks before it began to come—a strange, yearning love over those who were " in the land of the shadow of death "—a feeling that Jesus could speak to

me about them, and that I could speak to Him—that a great barrier between Him and me had been broken right down and swept away.

I had no thought of leaving England then, no thought even at first of trying to stir others at home, but straight as a line God made my way out into the darkness before eighteen months were over; and through eternity I shall thank Him for the silent flame in the hearts of those two friends, and what it did for me. Neither of them has ever had her path opened into foreign work, but the light of the Day that is coming will show what He has let them do in kindling other souls.

* * *

The above lines from the inspired pen of Miss Trotter, written many years ago, bear a message that needs to be freshly broadcast.

“There is no flame, so it cannot spread.”
What a picture of so much that is called organised Christianity to-day! Is it not also

a true picture of much of our missionary work and interest? It smoulders on—but nothing happens! How far have the "mists" of unbelief, and even of fear, damped down our enthusiasm for God's work as missionaries and Christian workers? As "home supporters" have the mists of lack of results, or little stirring news, caused our interest to smoulder? And what of the converts upon whom the mists of loneliness and fear, and a misguided nationalism have descended? Are we praying for them as we ought? And if not, why not?

Is it not because our own spiritual life instead of burning brightly is just smouldering? "Quench not the Spirit", says the Apostle, and let us remember that one of the ways in which a fire may be quenched or damped down is by smothering it with rubbish. In like manner do the cares and pleasures of this life choke and go nigh to quench entirely the sacred flame once kindled within us. For all those things that

tend to feed and strengthen the sap of the old self-life hinder the growth and well-being of the new man.

Another way of "unkindly quenching the flame" is to neglect it. "Neglect not"—"stir up the gift that is in thee", wrote Paul to Timothy. While we sleep, the fire may die down and go out altogether. What an awakening for the soul from its dreams of self-complacency when roused by that midnight call to the startling realisation of the fact that the lamp which should be shining brightly contains but a smoking wick! Vain then is the cry to wiser and more gracious neighbours, "Give us of your oil for our lamps are going out." In this solemn plight our most earnest Christian friends are powerless to help us. They can only say "Go, and buy for yourselves."

Go, buy—but where? Thank God, there is One Who says to the lukewarm soul: "I counsel thee to buy of ME. Thou thoughtest thou wast rich and hadst need of nothing,

but thou art poor and wretched. Be zealous and repent, come, buy of Me all thou needest." He will not quench the smoking flax but fan it to a flame, for " He it is Who baptiseth with the Holy Ghost and with fire ".

The Holy Ghost—He comes first as the wind. This is no gust of temporary enthusiasm, but a keen searching wind, that not only disperses the mists of doubt and fear, but pierces to the very joints and marrow of our being. This Breath of God will lay bare and sweep away the rubbish in our lives and at length kindle into a flame the smouldering embers of our love and devotion to Himself.

O Thou Who camest from above
The pure celestial fire to impart,
Kindle a flame of sacred love
On the mean altar of my heart!

There let it for Thy glory burn
With inextinguishable blaze;
And trembling to its source return,
In humble prayer and fervent praise.

Jesus, confirm my heart's desire
To work, and speak, and think for
Thee;
Still let me guard the holy Fire,
And still stir up Thy Gift in me.

And so " shall the fire ever be burning
on the altar; it shall never go out ".



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