



Intimate Glimpses

— of —

Miss Belle H. Bennett

by

Emily K. Olmstead



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Great-Heart

Great-Heart is dead, they said—
Great-Heart the Teacher,
Great-Heart of Sweet White Fire.
Great-Heart is dead, they say,
Fighting the fight,
Holding the Light,
Into the night.

Great-Heart is dead, they say.
But the Light shall burn the brighter,
And the night shall be the lighter,
For (her) going;
And a rich, rich harvest for (her) sowing.

Great-Heart is dead, they say!
What is death to such a one as Great-Heart?
One sigh perchance, for work unfinished here,
Then a swift passing to a mightier sphere,
New joys, perfected powers, the vision clear,
And all the amplitude of heaven to work
The work (she) held so dear.

Great-Heart is dead, they say!
Nor dead nor sleeping! (She) lives on! (Her) name
Shall kindle many a heart to flame,
The fire (she) lighted shall burn on and on,
Till all the darkness of the lands be gone,
And all the kingdoms of the earth be won,
And won.

A soul so fiery sweet can never die,
But lives and loves and works through all eternity.

Note.—The above is a poem from "Bees in Amber," by John Oxenham. Through the kind permission of the American Tract Society we are using it as an expression of the meaning of the great heart of the late President of the Woman's Missionary Council to the women of our Church and to the world. We make this tribute our tribute to her. E. H.

FOREWORD

As those of us who knew and loved Miss Bennett read these pages, we verily feel that once more she walks among us. These words make her so vivid that we can all but feel the magnetic touch of her hand and dream that once more we look into her loving eyes; with all the greatness of her master mind and still more with the largeness and gentleness of her heart she lives for us again.

Therefore, we send forth this little book with the hope that those who did not have the privilege of being co-workers with her may come to appreciate her great personality. It is not in any sense a biography, and is not intended to take the place of the biography, which is to appear later. It is intended rather to give to many of our missionary women a real and sympathetic glimpse into the life of the woman who has been the master architect of the great work we all love.

Miss Emily Olmstead, who for four years lived in the inner circle, was to Miss Bennett friend and spiritual daughter. Had it not been for her untiring devotion, Miss Bennett could never have given to the church her last four years of service. When finally the last weeks of pain and suffering came, Miss Olmstead ministered to her with the love and tenderness that only a daughter can give. Miss Bennett's last thoughts and desires were often whispered into her ears, so that when we read this sketch we are indeed looking into the very heart life of one of the great servants of our Master. May He enlighten our eyes and strengthen our hearts with a great and noble purpose—the very God purpose that made her life strong and sweet and beautiful.

—*Sara Estelle Haskin.*

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IT was in Nashville in 1915 that I first met Miss Bennett. She was the guest of Miss Estelle Haskin for a day and night in the home where I was living while a student in Peabody College. She smiled at me—and I smiled back. There was something so irresistible about that smile that it was little wonder a friend of hers said, "Miss Bennett is able to gather more love from the four corners of the earth than anyone I have ever known."

I shall never forget how she looked that first night. To me, she was regal looking in handsome black. Somewhere about her dress, there was a touch of blue combined with filmy lace that deepened the blue of her eyes. Her gray hair was piled becomingly on top of her head; her hands and arms were shapely and free of jewelry of any kind. As she talked, a little couplet kept running through my mind: "her

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voice so sweet, her words so fair, as some soft chime had stroked the air." She was truly a lady "to the manner born." Generations had given her that by heredity. The more she talked, the more my heart kept going out to her.

That night, at bed time, I slipped into her room which adjoined mine; and encouraged by her smile of welcome, I found myself asking permission to say my good-night prayer with her. I had no such intention upon entering the room, and to this day, I do not know what impelled me unless it was the heart hunger of one who had been bereft of a mother as a very young girl.

The next morning I again slipped into her room to close the windows and to light the fire, whereupon a sleepy voice from the bed, called: "Child, stop that at once; I learned how to wait on myself long before you were ever born. Come over here and kiss me

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good morning, then clear out." I cleared out, but not until I had closed the windows and lighted the fire.

After that, Miss Bennett and I were no longer just acquaintances—we were friends. Both of us were from Kentucky, our homes being less than 150 miles apart. We had a number of friends in common, and she also knew my mother's people in Lexington, a neighboring city of Richmond. The next morning at breakfast, she gaily announced that she had found another missionary daughter. Little did that missionary daughter know then that some day she would live and work with her.

Three years later, the Woman's Missionary Council, under which I was serving as a deaconess, appointed me to Richmond, Kentucky, to assist Miss Bennett in the work of the Council. For thirty-five years, she had been giving her time without any money compensation, and the work had grown so tremendously, she could not carry the burden alone.

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I shall have to confess that as the time drew near for me to go to Richmond, I experienced a feeling both of joy and fear; joy that I was to be associated with such a personality; fear that I might not give satisfaction. Suppose we should not suit each other! Suppose we should get on each other's nerves! Living and working together day after day was quite different from seeing each other occasionally. In a rush of feeling, I realized that Miss Bennett was one of the greatest leaders in all of Southern Methodism; a woman with a magnificent mentality who had travelled over much of the world; a person of whom one might well stand in awe. Suppose we should not be happy together! All during the journey on the train, I was conscious of vague forebodings. When I reached the Richmond station, however, I saw Miss Bennett waving me a smiling welcome, then she folded me in her arms and all the mists of forebodings rolled away!

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She at once turned to the 'bus driver, and with as much pride as if she were introducing me at the court of King George, she said, "Billy, I want you to shake hands with this deaconess who has come to live with me." Billy obeyed, but his look of adoration was not bestowed upon me.

We drove at once to the Glyndon Hotel where Miss Bennett had been making her home for more than twenty years following the death of her mother. Again in that gracious manner so inimitable, she introduced me to the hotel manager, his wife, and a few friends in the lobby. When we entered the dining room for a late supper, every waiter was lined up to "meet the deaconess who had come to live with Miss Belle." Could a queen have received a more royal welcome?

When we went upstairs, and she threw open the door to her room, I well recall the cry of admiration that involuntarily escaped me. The massive four poster bed with its canopied top,

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the high, old fashioned bureau, the mahogany secretary and book case combined—all bespoke the colonial architecture. Afterward, I learned that the furniture had come down to her from one generation to another from the Chenault family who originally came to Kentucky from Virginia. On the walls of her room were steel engravings and elegant paintings brought from the Orient and other places where she had travelled. Over the mantel was a large oil painting of her father whose gentle, sweet face was not unlike his daughter's. Everywhere there was an air of elegance and comfort which set her room apart from every other in the hotel. Just outside her room in the hall, were handsome mahogany book cases containing rare collections—an almost inexhaustible library.

Late that night, she accompanied me to my room in the hotel. A vase of flowers and other little personal touches showing her thoughtfulness, gave the room a home-like appearance. Turning

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to me, she said, "Daughter I know you are tired—so am I—but we must kneel and ask God's blessing upon us as we take up life together." I recall only the opening sentence of that prayer, but it was impressed indelibly on my heart. "Lord," she said, and there was a note of weariness in the voice, "thou hast heard my prayer and sent her; already she has lifted the burden." That night, another prayer went up to God asking that He would help me lift the burden every day, and that we might help each other.

Later, I learned how her great unselfish heart hungered for companionship and fellowship with those who loved the things she loved. In her letters while away, she often wrote, "How I miss our quiet hour together each morning; I shall be happy to get back home."

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Immediately after breakfast the next morning, we went to her room to commence the day's work which varied very little when she was at home, throughout the four years of my stay with her. First, always, the quiet hour together about nine o'clock. It was often interrupted by some member of the family connection, sometimes by a friend needing help or advice; quite often by a telephone call, but the lesson was always resumed. Occasionally, if a friend who was sympathetic chanced to come in, that friend was invited to share our devotions. After the morning lesson, the mail was opened and read. Sometimes one letter alone required so much thought, and often prayer, that much of the morning would be given to it. When lunch was over, the work was again taken up, but when the little cuckoo clock on the wall struck two, she would invariably look up and say: "Let's lie down for half an hour; I cannot hold my eyes open one second longer." One half hour each day for rest was all that she

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could spare! The room was always darkened, and while she stretched across the canopied bed, I rested on the couch. Never once was the little ivory clock forgotten as she propped it up beside her that she might not oversleep! She sometimes did, when she had had a sleepless night, and then she chided me in a laughing way because I had not called her at the end of the half hour. She was an indefatigable worker. Many times when I was so tired and worn, I could scarcely sit up, she was keenly alert and reluctant to stop at six o'clock. She often remarked that she had kept up that pace for so many years, she had become accustomed to it. Some of her nieces frequently phoned to take us for a ride through the beautiful bluegrass country, just to get her away from her work awhile. She enjoyed getting out in the open, but if a letter of importance demanded her attention, she could not be persuaded to leave.

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About two weeks after my coming, she had a telegram calling her to Nashville. Then it was that I learned for the first time that she locked everything away of any value in her room, and allowed the manager to rent it during her absence. When I remonstrated with her for going to so much trouble, she told me that in one year's time she had paid in room rent during her absences, the equivalent of a year's college education for some deserving young man or woman. I have been told that she had a representative in nearly every country of the world who had been helped financially by her. Fortunately, the hotel management was always careful who was put in Miss Bennett's room during her absence. Later, when I learned just what things to put away under lock and key, on the eve of departure, she was relieved of that duty.

On the first occasion of her going away, she handed me nearly a dozen keys to be taken care of. I suggested that we put all of them in the wardrobe,

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with only the wardrobe key to be responsible for. She agreed and laughed when I hid the bunch of keys in a pair of brand new shoes which she had just purchased. On her return home, she phoned me she was unable to find any of her keys except the one. Strange to say, we both had forgotten where they were hidden! After a short search, however, I found them in the shoes, and turning to her, I laughingly remarked: "Suppose I had died while you were away; probably you would never have found your keys," whereupon her sense of humor which was keen, shone out as she retorted, "Indeed, I would have found them when I put on my best Sunday shoes to wear to your funeral, so there!" Often at church, something would occur to provoke a smile, and I never failed to glance at her from my seat in the choir; I always found a responsive twinkle in her blue eyes. How human she was in every thing! There was no sanctimonious manner about her, yet deep down lay the bed-

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rock foundation of piety and abiding faith. Often, in the midst of dictating a letter, she would suddenly exclaim: "This is a difficult letter to answer; let's bow our heads and ask for divine wisdom." The thing that touched me inexpressibly was the way she included me in the work from the beginning; she never used the pronoun *I* when *we* could be substituted. Again and again, she emphasized the fact that we were working together in the great cause of missions.

When the day's work was over, she sometimes walked home with me, for soon after going to Richmond, I found home life preferable to life in a hotel, especially when Miss Bennett was out of the city. Her evenings were never spent in work, and any special delivery letters or telegrams that came in the evening were left unopened until morning. She had experienced too many sleepless nights when messages were opened at bed time. We spent many of the winter evenings together reading in her room; she generally had me read

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aloud. In all the years she had presided at the Council meetings and meetings of the Home Mission Society, she had learned the art of being a good listener.

I can see her now in the big leather chair, the electric light shining down on her hair making it a silvery sheen. Sometimes, there was a light on her face that made me think, of Moses when he came down from the mount with the tablets of stone, and "his face did shine, tho he wist it not." Any new book, periodical and news of interest were always laid aside that we might enjoy them together.

When ever she returned from a trip, she was eager to tell me of all the happenings, whether it was some great meeting she had attended, an inspirational speech she had heard, or the plans of a committee that had launched a big work.

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Upon her return from Europe in 1919, where she had been sent as a member of a deputation of five to open up mission work in Belgium, her relatives and friends never listened to a more stirring account of the conditions in that war stricken country, as she so graphically portrayed the suffering among the Belgians. The address she gave at the little Richmond Church brought a hearty response in money and clothing for the needy Europeans.

Her heart was always tender toward everybody in need. One day, soon after I went to Richmond, word came to her that a splendid young Negro fellow, a graduate of Hampton who had gone from the town to do Y. M. C. A. work in Africa, had met with a very tragic end. A huge sea monster had evidently seized him while in bathing, as his body was never recovered. The phone message came from his sister saying that the mother was almost prostrated with grief. Without even waiting to put on her hat, Miss Bennett hurried from the room, telling me to follow

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her to the young man's home. When we reached the place, we found the mother in the little darkened parlor sitting on the sofa, wringing her hands and piteously calling for her boy. Without a moment's hesitation; with no thought of difference in their station of life; conscious only that a human being was in distress, she walked straight to the sofa, raised the bowed head of the Negro mother and laid it against her breast, while she stood talking to her of her boy's Christ-like life and of the supreme sacrifice he had made for the people of his own race. Then in that wonderfully sympathetic manner, Miss Bennett said; "Patty, I want you to know the deaconess; she is a friend to the colored people for she has worked among them for several years, and she is your friend, too." After a little further conversation and a prayer, the mother's sobs grew more

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quiet and her heart comforted as she voiced her gratitude to "Miss Belle" for coming to see her.

Walking home together in the gloaming, I could but marvel at the greatness of the woman beside me. She numbered among her personal friends many of the great ones of the earth; yet, she like the lowly man of Galilee, "walked with kings nor lost the common touch."

Her devotion to her kinspeople was always a beautiful thing to see. She loved her brother, the last one of six, with all the affection of her great heart, telling me again and again, how he made it possible for her to give her entire time to the work of the church by taking charge of her business interests. Whenever her work necessitated a trip to New York, she always found time to have her brother's two daughters, students at Vassar College, as her week end guests. During the summer vacation and at Christmas, as many as eight or ten of her nieces and nephews were her guests at the hotel

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for meals. She declared it was her only way to visit with them. They were never happier than when she shared in some of their pleasures. One young niece, a freshman now in a junior college, remarked one day: "Aunt Belle, any individuality that I might have is overshadowed by the fact that I am the niece of Miss Belle H. Bennett; and I suppose that if my name ever appears in 'Who's Who,' it will be because of the fact that I am the niece of that distinguished lady." The greatly amused lady laughingly admonished her young niece to pave her own way to fame. The love and affection of her nieces never shone out more clearly than in the letters they wrote her during her last illness.

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It was during that last illness that she told me many things I had never known before; especially, of her Bible Class among the Negroes in the town, a class which she taught for more than a year. She said her heart had been greatly burdened because our Southern Methodist Church had not entered Africa. She had made more than one appeal to the Board of Missions, but each time she was told that the way seemed blocked for lack of funds. Sitting one day in her room at the hotel, she agonized in prayer, asking the Lord to open the door to Africa in some way, when suddenly a voice seemed to say, "Why not do something for Africa at home, in the meantime?" So conscious was she that it was the voice of God speaking to her, she turned to the phone on her desk, called a Negro minister in the town whom she knew well, and asked him if there was anything she could do to help his people. In a voice trembling with suppressed emotion, the minister replied, "Oh, Miss Belle, my wife and I have been

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praying every day for nearly a year that you might spare us some of your time, but you seemed so busy." Miss Bennett said she thought and acted quickly. She told him to come at once to her room at the hotel. The result was, that the following Sunday a Bible Study class was organized with all the Negro preachers in the town as her pupils. Like the Word of God, it grew mightily. Members from the local Negro churches, members and preachers from churches in the surrounding counties came until the class numbered more than three hundred.

At the annual Council meeting which was held in Washington, Miss Bennett related this incident, telling the women that she believed the Lord was ready for them to enter Africa. When she concluded her speech, a note was sent to the chair from a wealthy woman in California who was present. It read:

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“Miss Bennett, I am willing to start the work in Africa with five thousand dollars.” Before the Council meeting closed, sufficient money had been appropriated to enter the dark continent.

A number of similar incidents seemed fresh in her memory during those shut-in days of her illness. She talked a great deal of the work of the church during its infancy, comparing it with the growth of the seed: “first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear.” Remarking on how few people were allowed to finish what they had begun, her face glowed as she thanked God that she had been allowed to see the fulfillment of some of her dreams, and hopes.

Yes, she had lived to see the little seed thought of missionary training for women which God had planted in her heart thirty-two years before, grow into a wonderful tree of knowledge and inspiration; and out from the Scarritt Bible and Training School

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had gone more than a thousand young women to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ.

She had watered and nurtured the wee bit of a seed thought of education for the mountain youths which had sprung up in the heart of her sister, until the Sue Bennett Memorial at London, Kentucky, with its student body of more than five hundred, had become a mighty oak, spreading its branches throughout the counties of Kentucky, e'en to the uttermost parts of the earth.

She had seen her hopes for the women of Southern Methodism to be represented in all the councils of the church, realized, when the women were granted laity rights; she herself being among the honored few to be chosen as a delegate to the General Conference.

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Many achievements that seemed wholly impossible in the beginning, passed in panoramic view, as we sat and talked together in the quiet of her room.

The illness which had been gradually sapping her life for more than a year, and which resulted in her death, became very evident early in February; but she did not stop to measure her physical strength when the work of the church called her. Two committee meetings of importance called her to Kansas City and Memphis when she was scarcely able to be out of bed.

Early in March, she called a meeting of all the Council women to be held in Memphis. It was of such paramount importance that she felt she must not fail to be there, even if she went at the risk of her life. On the morning of the fourth of March, 1922, in a fearful blizzard, we left the hospital where she had gone for a week's rest, and boarded the train for Memphis, Tennessee, travelling all day from 8 o'clock that morning until 10 o'clock that

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night. With super-human strength, and a touch of the old-time vigor and enthusiasm, she rallied the women. It was a memorable meeting in many respects. Upon her return to Richmond, nearly a week later, a physician and trained nurse were called in, and her condition pronounced critical.

Her disappointment was keen over not being able to attend the regular Annual Council meeting which was to be held in San Antonio (the first in twelve years that she had missed); also the General Conference to which she had been elected as a delegate. She told me she had to spend the waking hours of the night in prayer that she might win the victory over self. After all her years of struggle and hard work to have the women of the church recognized in its councils, she like Moses, was not allowed to enter her

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Caanan. How marvellously she succeeded in winning this victory was seen by those who ministered to her; there was a peace and quietness that brought to mind the words of the prophet Isaiah, "In quietness and in confidence shall be your strength."

When the surgeon advised an exploratory operation to determine the exact cause of the disease which seemed to baffle them, Miss Bennett was willing. The day we left for Lexington, May 15th, she was apparently more cheerful than any of us, coming to the dinner table and chatting through the meal. She had been able to answer the mail up until that time, often dictating important letters from her sick bed; again, when she was able to be up and around her room, the nurse and I took turns by reading to her the newspapers, the church periodicals, and other current periodicals of interest. The quiet hour was always observed, we, spending sometimes several hours in Bible reading and study.

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The night before the operation, her self control was remarkable. She seemed to feel that she must be brave and cheerful for the sake of her loved ones who were so distressed. Only once, when I kissed her good night, she held to my hand and whispered, "Daughter, I am counting on your prayers that I may do His will, and that I may be unafraid."

The next morning, just before being taken to the operating room, she smiled and said, "After the operation is over, please remember to return the amethyst cross to dear Mrs. Cunnigim." I told her I believed there would be no need to return it, for I felt that she was going to get well and wear the cross. She said nothing, and somehow, I felt that she knew she would not recover from the surgical operation.

I well recall how deeply touched she had been a couple of months before when the beautiful amethyst cross had come to her as a gift from Mrs. Cuning-

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gim, the wife of the president of Scarritt. It was accompanied by a note saying that as some of the soldiers in the world war were wearing the Croix de Guerre and other medals for bravery and honor, so she felt that such a brave soldier of the Cross as Miss Bennett, who had served so long and faithfully, should be cited for bravery; and she wanted her to accept the amethyst cross as her Croix de Guerre. Miss Bennett had accepted it, and had worn it always with the greatest joy; but she wrote Mrs. Cuninggim that when she died, it must return to the little daughter in the family, that when she grew to young womanhood, she might wear the amethyst cross that had been such an unselfish thought of her mother's.

When the operation revealed the hopelessness of Miss Bennett's condition it was not necessary for any one of us to tell her; she knew it already. One day, a few weeks after the operation, in answer to my question as to how she had rested the night before,

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she replied, "Much better than I expected, for it isn't easy to go to sleep when I know that on awakening I shall not be able to be up and about my Lord's business; instead, I must lie patiently each day and await His call to release me." She spoke truly. It was not easy for one who had given nearly every waking hour for thirty-five years to the great work to which God had called her, to lie passive. But through her surrendered life as she lay on her sick bed, God was able to make her a benediction to those who visited her room.

One of the books which she had re-read her, A. J. Gordon's, "The Holy Spirit in Missions" seemed to have a new meaning to her. When one of the ministers of the town came to see her, she told him of it, adding "If I had just known as a young girl what I know about missions now, I believe

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I should be in India today.' And the saintly man who had been helped by Miss Bennett's inspirational life, replied fervently, "You are in India today, Miss Belle; and not only in India, but in China and Japan, and even the uttermost parts of the earth, because of your influence in the lives you have sent out."

Similar expressions of gratitude for her life of service brightened up the dark, shut-in days. Letters, including telegrams and cablegrams, came from many parts of the world telling what she had meant in times past.

Oh the blessed fellowship that was ours during those last few weeks of her illness. Just at twilight each day was the time for our evening prayer together. One night, after a day of much company, she asked that we repeat in unison, the "Now I lay me down to sleep" of our childhood days. At another time when the long strain had begun to tell on my nerves, and I sobbed through the prayer, she laid her hand gently on my bowed head,

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saying, "Daughter, I never fail, day nor night, to thank God for you. Dont' grieve because I am going away; when I have laid aside this nervous body, I shall be 'closer to you than breathing, nearer than hands and feet.'" How naturally she talked of her Home-going, and of the joy when she should see her Saviour face to face.

Just two days before her death, we had our last prayer together. The pain had been unusually severe, and she was worn from the suffering. In a rather petulant tone, she said, "Oh, I wish the Master would come for me; I am so tired, so tired of waiting." When I tried to comfort her, and to remind her how brave and patient she had been through the long weeks and months, she lifted her voice in prayer, and the room seemed vibrant with the Master's presence. When I closed the

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prayer at her request, she asked that we repeat together First Peter 5:10, the verse that had been such a comfort to her at the hospital: "And the God of all grace who called you unto His eternal glory in Christ Jesus, after that you have suffered for a little while, shall Himself perfect, establish and strengthen you . . . unto the ages of the ages."

In the very early dawn when the death angel hovered so close, we sat by her side; and though she seemed to sleep quietly under the influence of the medicine that deadened the pain, I saw her lips move. Bending to catch the words, I heard her whisper, "First Peter" and I knew that the Master was coming to take her unto Himself. Just forty minutes after the midnight hour, on July 20th, she entered into the life more abundant. Let us not grieve because of her entrance into that life. Did not Christ Himself say to His disciples, "If ye had loved Me, ye would rejoice that I go unto the Father."

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We miss her gracious, consecrated personality, her statesman-like vision, her sympathetic and tender love in times of personal need; yes, we miss the wonderful companionship and fellowship of such a Spirit filled friend. But the words of the Christ come to us with redoubled meaning as we think of her life, "Ye shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and unto the uttermost parts of the earth."