

MARY L. WHATELY

Letters from Egypt



*Elizabeth Whately
1879 Regent Street
London, England*

Letters from Egypt

- Living Geography Book—Learn about the people, customs, and climate of 1879 Egypt in these letters from a Christian friend.
- Biblical Insights—Gain a greater understanding of the culture and how it is reflected in so many Scripture verses.
- Missionary Emphasis—See the mixed multitude of people and be stirred to pray for the work of the Lord among them.

Thank you for your interest in
Letters from Egypt.

We hope you enjoy the enclosed
first three chapters of this
living geography book!

**Visit www.SimplyCharlotteMason.com
to order the complete
Letters from Egypt today!**

Letters from Egypt

by

Mary L. Whately

Letters from Egypt

Originally published in 1879
By Dodd, Mead & Company
New York

This edition edited by Sonya Shafer.
Copyright © 2009 Simply Charlotte Mason, LLC
All rights reserved.

Published by
Simply Charlotte Mason, LLC
P.O. Box 892
Grayson, Georgia 30017-0892

Cover Design: John Shafer

Available at www.SimplyCharlotteMason.com

Contents

Letter	Page
I. Introductory	5
II. A Little about Old Egyptians.	11
III. The River	19
IV. The Gardens of Egypt.	29
V. The People	45
VI. The People (continued)	55
VII. What They Eat	61
VIII. Superstitions	69
IX. Slavery As It Is in Egypt.	81
X. The Village	99
XI. Town Life.	115
XII. The House of Mirth	133
XIII. The House of Mourning	151
XIV. Nile Trips.	163
XV. About the School	177
XVI. Conclusion	191

Editor's Note

Though written in 1879, this glimpse into Egyptian culture is still helpful and timely. For it is the older beliefs and customs that laid the foundation for what Egypt has become.

The author's insight into customs, culture, and climate ring true even today. Upon completing a read-through of this book, I picked up a modern photographic and diary travelogue from Egypt. So many of the components of the photos and comments called up a mental connection with what Mary Whately described more than one hundred years ago!

And the Scriptural tie-ins that she pointed out are amazing. You will gain a better cultural understanding of many Bible verses as you read through *Letters from Egypt*.

I have sought to keep the old-fashioned spellings from the author's original text. In the editing process I omitted some small portions that might tend to cause division rather than unity among believers, and added Scripture references to help identify the many Bible quotations and allusions that are woven throughout the letters.

It is my hope that these *Letters from Egypt* will touch your mind, your imagination, and your heart.



Letter I

Introductory

My Good Friends,

By God's providence I have been led to settle in this distant land, and can but seldom visit England; however, I do not forget friends there, for whom I always have felt great interest. One day it came to my mind that I might do some little good to old folk at home—and perhaps to the young, too—in spite of being so far off, and having a large school to look after, and several other things; and this was my idea:—that I would write some simple familiar accounts of the land of Egypt where I dwell, which might be useful and pleasant, and which might lead such as are *praying* Christians (and I believe there are many such to be found in humble abodes) to join with me in asking the Lord to let the Gospel light shine into this land where there is so much of ignorance and darkness and false belief.

There are indeed so many books about Egypt already, that some may think another was not wanted, but most of the learned and historical books would not suit any one who had not received an advanced education, and many are very difficult to understand even for those who have had this; the others are chiefly written by travellers, and being written in general by those who were ignorant of the language of the country, and who had only stayed a

short time there, are apt to be full of mistakes and incorrect notions.

I have lived a great many years here, and my business has been among the people, especially the poor, and the children. I began to study the language as soon as I arrived, and am accustomed to converse in it with different classes of the people, and also to visit them and receive them in my turn, so that I can tell you a good deal about their ways and habits.

But before we begin to speak about the Egyptians of the present day we must first understand something about the country itself and its former inhabitants.

All who study their Bibles know that Egypt is there spoken of very frequently; indeed, except Canaan, the promised land, no other place is so frequently alluded to in Scripture. The first time we hear of it is in the twelfth chapter of Genesis, where we find Abraham going to sojourn in Egypt on account of the famine in Canaan, and afterwards we have the history of Joseph's captivity, leading to the settling of his family there, and the sufferings of the children of Israel under Pharaoh. There are very ancient histories and records of the Egyptians, many of which are of peculiar interest as confirming the Scripture accounts; not that the word of God *needs* the histories of uninspired man to prove its truth, but that it is very curious and beautiful to see that, the more learned men search into the records of the past, the more clearly do the accounts given in the Bible stand out. To give one instance out of many, some very old writings on stone were discovered in the ancient Egyptian characters (or picture letters), and when the meaning was, after much trouble, made out, they found it alluded to the great famine, when people from all countries came to buy corn in Egypt (Genesis 42). The old Egyptians

Introductory

were idolaters, and though in many things they were a very clever people, they were foolish as well as wicked in this, and made idols of every possible material; some of stone so large that they seemed to represent giants of the most enormous size; others so small that they could be carried in the pocket or round the neck, and these were often carved out of agates or cornelians, and other rare polished stones; others again were made of a curious sort of blue pottery, others of copper; they are still found in the sand in the places where the ancient people of the land used to bring their dead and have their idolatrous temples. They also worshipped many animals; monkeys, cats, beetles, were all revered, but the *bull* was considered especially sacred, because they fancied one of their chief gods had taken the form of a bull, and they kept many of these creatures in sacred enclosures, gave them divine honors, and actually buried them in coffins of polished marble, having first embalmed their bodies,—which means to wrap them up in linen with quantities of spices, and then bake, by very slow heat, in ovens. I have seen these marble coffins, and have often picked up the whitened bones of the sacred bulls in the sand, in a place where once a great city and splendid temples are believed to have stood.

The golden calf made by Aaron to please the children of Israel was no doubt made in imitation of the Egyptians among whom the people had lived so long, and of their sacred bulls: the inspired Psalmist, in holy anger at the profane and wicked action, says, “So they turned their glory into the similitude of an ox which eateth hay” (Psalm 106:20).

It is sad to think of a people so learned and clever in many respects, being so darkened in mind as to religion; for in the arts of life they were far more advanced than the

nations of Europe, who at that early time were mostly quite barbarous and savage in their customs, and ignorant of much that was quite familiar to the Egyptians. While our own ancestors were living in wretched huts built of reeds, with neither books nor public buildings, and scantily clad in the skins of beasts, the Egyptians had built long before stately palaces for their kings, and temples for their idols, of solid stone, so strong that, after so many hundreds of years, a great part still remain; and though in ruins, some of the great pillars are quite perfect. They carved inscriptions on the walls of these buildings, and on pillars of granite or marble, and on the images of their gods. Their writing was very curious, consisting not of letters, as with us, but of signs like small pictures, each sign expressing a word. Some of these signs were remarkably ingenious, and showed much thought and wisdom. For instance, an eye was used as a sign of the all-seeing power of God; for it seems they had some little idea of a Supreme Power, although a very indistinct and imperfect idea. But as I have already said, they worshipped various living creatures, as well as the idols they made with their own hands. Their priests and learned men are believed to have first taught that the Divine Spirit entered into certain animals, and that others were emblems or signs of the Divine Power; and by degrees the emblems came to be looked on as real deities of an inferior order, and thus received worship.

But the bull was not the *only* animal which was honored by tombs and special burying-places, though none was so highly thought of and revered. I once visited an ancient burial-place for sacred cats, and actually saw in the pit many bundles of linen brown with age, which contained the bones of the dead pussies! These when exposed to the open air were apt to crumble and turn into dust, but when

Introductory

first found were in good preservation, the pit or cave being in dry sand, and the air of the country very dry and pure.

Human beings were buried in the same way, rolled up in linens with spices, and then exposed to heat, after which they were packed in cases of wood and stone.

The people seemed to have tried in this way to keep their dead from the decay which is the lot of all flesh, not knowing that *One* alone who tasted of *death* yet saw no corruption, because that holy *One* alone was without *sin*.

Thousands of yards of the linen for which Egypt was famous were wasted in thus wrapping dead men and dead animals. I saw an ancient tomb which had been recently opened more than twenty years ago; and lying among the sand and rubbish that had been thrown out, I found a small earthen jar without any opening to it.¹ On breaking this it was found to contain one of the sacred birds of the Egyptians called an Ibis (as I was told by a learned man who was of the party visiting the tomb). I unfolded at least two yards of half-burnt linen (for it had been baked according to their custom), and found within the crumbling bones of the bird, his long beak being quite perfect,—a memorial of the folly of man in thus wasting time and labor, and yet more their *sin*, in worshipping the creature more than the Creator.

In my next letter you will have a little more on the early history of Egypt, and some account of its climate and productions.

¹ It seems the custom was to make the jar after the embalmed creature was ready, and then to bake all, otherwise it would not have got in, as no sort of opening was to be found.



Letter II

A Little about Old Egyptians

*I*n the *Book of Exodus* we read, that after Joseph's death, and that of the generation following, there arose a "new king who knew not Joseph." Now it is plain that this must have been a king from a distance, and not a son or nephew of the Pharaoh who was Joseph's friend, as such would not have been ignorant of the history of that remarkable person, who was second only to the monarch himself, and who had saved Egypt in the great famine. The early histories of Egypt show that there were several changes of what is called the "dynasties" or royal families of Egypt, one king being overcome and driven out by another from a distant province, or from even a different country, and sometimes the old race or dynasty returning again.

But it is not easy, even for the most learned men who have searched carefully into the records of those ancient times, to be sure of the dates or exact periods at which the events spoken of took place. We must recollect that there was no printing and no paper then, so that the records and histories were written either on stone or on skins carefully prepared, or upon the leaves of a certain reed which was used in Egypt for writing on. Only portions of their ancient writings have come down to us, a great deal having been lost or destroyed in the course of time: so it is only by

putting a bit from one and a bit from another together, that learned men can find out what happened and was recorded. However, one thing is quite clear, even to unlearned people, and that is, that the Pharaoh spoken of in Exodus was of a different family and race from the Pharaoh whose dream Joseph interpreted; the name of Pharaoh was given to all the kings of the country, just as afterwards Caesar was to all the emperors of Rome. But though Pharaoh himself knew not Joseph, it is impossible that the people should not have known something of the true God from the descendants of Joseph and his brethren; and therefore they were as sinful as he was in oppressing the Israelites, and shared in the punishments sent by God in the time of Moses.

After the chosen people had left Egypt, and the wicked king and his army had been destroyed in the Red Sea, the nation still remained idolaters, though they had seen the power of the Creator and the uselessness of their own false gods,—yet so perverse is man's heart. "For the customs of the people are vain," saith the prophet (Jeremiah 10:3). We may hope, indeed, that some at least did learn to forsake their idols; but, as a nation, we know they remained the same. Different foreign powers came one after another to fight in Egypt, and to obtain that fertile land for their own rulers; the Assyrians, as foretold in Scripture, for a time ruled over the people. You will see this invasion alluded to in Jeremiah 46, as well as in other places. Later, the Greeks, under the famous Alexander the Great, took Egypt; Alexandria, on the seacoast, was founded by this monarch; and he left the country to Ptolemy, one of his four successors. The family of Ptolemy reigned for a considerable period over Egypt; and such numbers of Greeks settled in the chief towns that the Greek language seems to have been learned by many of the educated among the people, and the language of the

A Little about Old Egyptians

country was written in letters imitated from the old Greek characters, so that the hieroglyphic or picture characters went out of use.

After the rule of the Greek came the *Iron* power,—the Roman,—which had nearly all the known parts of the world at one time under its strong hand. The Jews and Egyptians were alike under Roman rule when our blessed Lord was born, and when the cruelty of the tributary King Herod (who governed subject to the Romans) caused the young Child and His mother to be sent by Divine command into Egypt for a season. They still show a tree,—a great sycamore fig, under which I have sat many a time,—which the tradition says Jesus and His mother and Joseph rested under on their first arrival. We cannot tell whether it be true or not, but it is possible.

After the death and resurrection of our Lord, the Gospel was brought into Egypt, it is said, by the Evangelist Mark, but of this there is no actual proof, although it appears to be probable. Apollos, whose name is mentioned in the Epistles and Acts of the Apostles, was, as you know, a Jew of Alexandria: there was quite a Jewish colony in that city, and they had adopted the Greek language (not the Egyptian, which seems strange, but Alexandria was then, as it is now indeed, full of a mixed multitude, and having been long the capital under the Greek rule, that tongue had greatly prevailed); the Old Testament had been translated by learned Jews into Greek from the original Hebrew; and at the time when Christianity began to spread in Egypt, Alexandria was a sort of centre for education, as there were many learned men there of different nations, but especially Jews and Greeks; and many books were found there both in Greek and in the Egyptian written language, which was called the Coptic. Many copies of the Scripture were

written in this. When I say “many,” however, you must remember it is only compared with the *utter* poverty of nations who had no books, or hardly any; but when printing and paper do not exist, books must of necessity always be expensive and few. As time passed, the Egyptian Church became corrupted, just as was the case with the Greek and Roman Church, and as always *will* be the case when the study of the Scripture is neglected, and when ceremonies and outward forms are made of too much consequence. The ceremony—the procession, the chanting, the dress of the minister, and the *way* in which the service of God is *arranged outwardly*—being more thought of than prayer and constant dependence on Christ and close attention to the Word of God, gradually takes the highest place in men’s hearts, instead of being considered as comparatively of very little consequence. Besides this, in all the Christian Churches of the time I speak of, which is called by historians the “Middle Ages,” there was a great inclination to adopt many old heathen festivals and customs, with a certain alteration, which was supposed to make them Christian; from these causes, and from others which I do not wish to talk of here, the Egyptian Christians had lost much of their simple faith, and though there were no doubt some believers among them, I fear there were but few, and that very many had almost lost sight of Christ in the multitude of saints they revered and the vain ceremonies in which their religion consisted.

Their clergy had become fonder of disputing about words than of teaching the ignorant, and often too much given to luxury and grandeur. At this period (about 600 years after Christ) a new religion had begun to make a stir in the world. In Arabia, which you know is divided from Africa by the Red Sea, the famous Mohammed had arisen,

and his followers were fast spreading in the East, and getting more and more powerful.

This man was originally only a camel-driver, but was very clever; and having, when on a journey into Syria (as Palestine had now got to be called), learned something of the Christian religion, and something also of the Jewish, from Jews resident in Arabia, he made a book, with the help of some friends, which was compounded of passages taken from the Old Testament, and some little from the New also,—rather in the form of allusions than of actual quotations; and to these were added a great many maxims and directions of his own. He began with a great truth,—that God is one God; for he wished to overthrow the idolatry of Arabia, and so far was right; but the addition that he was himself the prophet and apostle of God was an assertion without grounds, as you of course know. The only proof that God has sent a man to make himself inspired *head* and leader must be miracles; mere *teachers* and preachers of the already-written and revealed word do not need miraculous aid, for they appeal to God's word, which is thoroughly authenticated and proved by thousands of evidences to any one who fairly examines it. But any one who claims to be the medium of a *new* revelation is in a different position from a teacher of revealed truth, and should have miraculous powers to prove what he asserts. The Arabian prophet spoke of visions and wonders he had seen, but no witness was ever brought to prove that he had any divinely miraculous power at all. But the Scripture says, "If one shall come in his *own* name, him ye will receive"; and so it was (John 5:43).

We need not wonder at the great success that after a time followed, for not only were the maxims and regulations arranged so as to suit specially the nations of the East, and

clothed in language peculiarly acceptable to them, but there was real good mixed with it sufficient to satisfy the moral craving of some who had conscience and morality to a certain degree. Besides this, it had the help of the arm of flesh which Christians are forbidden to use in spreading their religion. I do not mean that some bearing the *name* have not done so; but by their disobedience to the Saviour's plain command, and assurance that His kingdom is not of this world, they show that they are not in reality His disciples, or at the best are very weak and mistaken ones.

But the faith of Mohammed was aided by the sword from the first. Arabia was peopled in great part by wandering tribes, as is still the case, many of them having no houses but the "Bedouin's moving home," the tent, their wealth consisting in camels and goats. Numbers of the children of Midian and Esau, as well as the Ishmaelites, from whom the Arabs of Arabia proper are said to have descended, lead this travelling life. Other tribes were more settled, and had cities and villages under chiefs, who were generally at war with one another more or less. By degrees these tribes began to join themselves to the new leader, and to offer their swords in assisting to spread the new doctrines; at first only a very few joined, and those either relatives or personal friends; but after meeting much opposition, he gained a firm footing, and was regarded as the chosen of God by all his followers.

At last, after his death, his successors went on fighting their way with bravery worthy of a better cause. With their book, the Koran,¹ in one hand and a sword in the other, as one may say, they went on their conquering way till they had all Arabia and Palestine and many other countries under their sway and rule, and then at length they invaded Egypt also. The poor Egyptians were crushed

A Little about Old Egyptians

under the fierce wild Arab soldiers, who gave no quarter: conformity or death was proclaimed; multitudes gave in and conformed; others, more courageous, or at least more true to their religion, fled and hid where they could. After a time, the Arab *Caleefs*, as they were called, that being the name of their kings or chiefs, ruled entirely over Egypt. The remnant of the Christians, though much persecuted and trampled on, were allowed to live; but the Arabic language was taught in all the schools, and soon became the only spoken tongue in the whole country, and the customs and ways of the conquerors prevailed in many respects. After a long period the poor country fell into the hands of yet another foreign power. The Turks, also Mohammedans, who had come from Asia into Europe, and taken from the Greeks the great city of Constantinople, had increased as rapidly as the Arabs had done in power, and had become masters of Palestine and then of Egypt also. But though their power as rulers was great, they never seem to have spread their language, nor mixed with the people of the land as the Arabs did. One reason for this is, that the Koran (the sacred book of all the followers of Mohammed of whatever nation) is not allowed by their religious law to be translated into any other tongue, and is therefore read and studied in the original Arabic by Turks as well as Arabs, and taught in all their schools. This would alone insure the preservation of the Arabic language among the people. Although the Turks still rule over Egypt, and the great part of the wealth of the land is in the hands of their descendants, and many of these Turkish families use their own tongue exclusively among themselves, still the Arabic is the language of the country, the Arab customs are those that prevail, and in

¹ This is properly pronounced Korann, with the emphasis on the last syllable, and the *k* a soft guttural.

Letter II

many respects the Turk is still a foreigner, while the Arab is become an Egyptian.

This sketch, very short and very imperfect as it is, may just give you such an idea of old Egypt as will enable you to understand better what I wish to tell you about present Egypt, as I now see it, and as I have watched and observed its climate and people for many years.

Letter III

The River



The river of Egypt! that is the most important thing in respect of cultivation, and indeed the most important feature altogether, in the country we are now considering. How often it is alluded to in the Bible! Pharaoh, in his wonderful dream, saw the lean and fat cows coming up out of the river (Genesis 41),—not *a* river, but *the* river, observe; and into *the* river were the infants of the children of Israel thrown, and the young Moses saved in his little ark of bulrushes “in the flags by *the* river’s brink” (Exodus 2:3). Then, later, we read how Moses and Aaron, at God’s command, smote the waters of the river and turned them into blood (Exodus 7:20), and in the Prophets we find again and again mention of “the river” of Egypt (e.g., Ezekiel 29:9). It is not named; it is spoken of as the river of Egypt because it is the *only* river in that strange country. Just think how many rivers there are in our small island of England,—how many in Ireland, which is still smaller; the children in schools are often quite tired with the number of names they have to learn of all our rivers,—Thames, Severn, Trent, and many more. Now Egypt has but *one*; that one, however, is a large and very long river, and is very remarkable in the effect it has on the country. Egypt is, as you know, in the north of Africa, which of course is very much

Letter III

further south than Europe, and much hotter; the south part of Egypt, indeed, is very near the tropics, and there falls scarcely any rain except near the sea-coast. At Cairo, where I live, which is near the middle, there are sometimes four or five showers in the year, sometimes more, but rarely; in the upper provinces, only one or two; nothing would grow, therefore, if the vegetation depended on rain, and though there are heavy dews, these would be quite insufficient; the sun is so powerful that the whole land would be one vast sandy desert, dry and barren, were it not for the wonderful river Nile. At a certain season every year this river begins to rise gradually; it is supplied from the mountains where it has its source very far off in the middle of Africa, where rain falls copiously at a regular time of year. When it has reached the greatest height (which is ascertained by careful measurement, persons appointed for the purpose watching day and night as the time draws near), the dams which have been artificially made are cut or broken through, and the water overflows the low lands all over the country and fills the numerous canals which cross it in every direction. It would certainly overflow its banks naturally and without this artificial help as soon as the height of those banks had been reached by the water, but much of the country would then be untouched, and some lands get more water than they needed. From very ancient times the Egyptians knew how to regulate the flow and manage it so that (except on occasions of sudden and excessive rise which now and then make a flood in some places) the land should be properly watered; and their various conquerors had the wisdom to let the natives, who were accustomed to it, have the direction of their great river and its canals. It is probable that the irrigation was much more extended in old times, and that, instead of being as now a strip of cultivated land on each

side of the river and sandy desert beyond—as is the case in a large part of the middle and southern provinces—the canals were more numerous and a far wider tract under cultivation. However, the canals are increasing under the present government, and the famous “sweet water canal” of Suez is alone a proof of what water can do in Egypt. When I first came here, the whole region where the modern town of Ismaila stands was nothing but a sandy waste, inhabited by gazelles and desert foxes. Now the great work of the two canals—the salt water one connecting the Mediterranean and Red Seas, and the sweet water one which conducts the Nile water—have combined to make it a delightful spot; gardens rose like magic, grapes and even strawberries grow where twenty years ago burning dry sand and pebbles lay, and thickets of feathery bamboo and gay flowering shrubs meet the eye and look the more attractive from the waste all around. “The parched land shall become a pool, and the thirsty land springs of water” (Isaiah 35:7). Would that those who labored in that wondrous canal had known the blessed spiritual refreshing of which the entrance of the water into the desert land affords so beautiful a type!

But to return to the river: its rise does not begin till summer, and during the winter it is gradually sinking and retiring. The winter of Egypt is very unlike our English ideas of that season; there is comparatively very little cold; the nights are indeed sharp, and sometimes a strong cold wind blows, but you would say it cannot be very severe when frost is almost an unknown thing. Some laborers in the country near Cairo once found a very thin film of ice, at daybreak, on some shallow water channels, and reported that the water was bewitched as it would not flow! So very rare was the wonder that none of them had ever seen such a thing before. Latterly, Europeans have introduced artificial

Letter III

ice, and cheap ices are even sold in the city; but this anecdote may show what the climate in winter is. The sun is generally warm at midday, and the people seek out sunny corners to sit in, especially the old; and now and then a party of laborers will light a fire of brushwood and sit round it in a field. The poor have a curious way of warming themselves in the short period of cold, which they feel especially, being used to such heat; there are no fireplaces, and fuel is dear, but in the country villages dry reeds and such light things are tolerably abundant. They will then light a bundle of these in the oven,—a large one made of mud brick is the common kind. As soon as this is extinct, which is pretty soon of course, the good woman of the house—or rather *hut*—sweeps out the embers, and the family cram into the oven and sleep! I was hospitably offered the use of an oven, heated on purpose for me and a friend by some kindly peasants, during one of our little voyages up the river, when stopping at a village on the coast during cold, stormy weather. But, in general, the winter months are delightful and healthy. All the fields are luxuriantly green; the orange gardens are rich with their golden fruit, and I have more than once spent a Christmas afternoon in an orange grove; while friends in England were rubbing their hands over the fire after returning from church, I and my party were picking oranges off the trees, and choosing a shady spot to rest in. The harvest of sugar-canes is in winter; a good deal of sugar is manufactured in Egypt, although not sufficient to supply all that is consumed; a large quantity is brought from France, but being not nearly so sweet, it is more expensive and very inferior. The Egyptian sugar, though less brilliantly white, is of a very good quality, and “goes far,” as the housewives say, from its extreme sweetness. But the canes are not only used for sugar making; a great

number are eaten—or rather *chewed*—to extract the juice, by the people, who are excessively fond of this cheap and wholesome luxury; Europeans seldom care for it, because the juice, which is thin and watery, with little flavor, and only moderately sweet, has to be obtained with an amount of trouble which they seldom think it worth,—the hard pith in which it is contained requiring Egyptian teeth to do it justice. As the natives of the country almost always have remarkably fine strong teeth, they find no difficulty in masticating the canes, and no fruit can be more enjoyed than they are in their season. The great bundles of sugarcane on their way either to the manufactory or to the markets are a beautiful sight in winter, whether the larger species, of a rich purple color, with its flag-like green leaves waving about over the head of the camel who bears it, or almost smothering the little donkey; or the smaller kind of cane, called the native or belladee, which is of a delicate yellowish green. The former is more cultivated about Cairo, as being much larger and coming earlier, but some say the little native cane is the sweetest.

All the vegetables we have in summer in England are in their prime in the winter of Egypt, or in very early spring, and the green fields, in January, February, and March, are more brilliantly green with the rich clover of the country than any fields I have seen even in dear old Ireland, the emerald isle! But there are two sides to everything in this world, and spring drives away the verdure just as winter does with us, only that heat and not cold is the agent; the clover disappears, the cattle having eaten it, and having, poor things, nothing but dry food to look forward to for several months; the hot winds begin to blow, the corn rapidly gets yellow, and is reaped in April (I speak here of middle Egypt). By the middle of May, the intense heat

Letter III

of summer has usually set in and the fields look dry and brown,—unless watered with much labor from the canals; the very weeds, except the thistles, which seem to need scarcely any water, are withered up, and man most literally eats bread in the sweat of his brow if he has to labor in the field. For the native of the soil, I do not think that great heat is the cause of as much suffering among the poor as great cold. The Egyptian, if a *real* child of the country (for settled foreigners of Syrian, Armenian, or even Turkish extraction are far more sensitive to heat, though they may have been here for two generations or more), does not mind heat, and prefers summer in general to winter; if he has to labor hard, of course he must be greatly fatigued in the hot weather, but at any rate his family do not suffer with him. Cold falls *most* heavily on little children and aged persons, while these in the hot weather here sit in the shade of their mud walls, and as they do not mind dust and vermin, which abound, they appear happy in their way,—and certainly the comforts within their reach are cheap. Fuel and warm clothes, as you know too well, are costly, but the cucumbers and melons of summer here are cheap luxuries; and the pools of water in which the bare-legged boys are playing half the day cost nothing at all. Foreigners, however, even to the second and third generation, feel summer heat very trying, especially if obliged to be exposed to the outer air in the middle of the day. As far as possible they ought to avoid this, and to be very early in their habits, and temperate; with these precautions, the inconvenience will be considerably diminished.

In June, the heat is at its greatest height and the river at its lowest—every thing seems panting and parched; the ground is so hot that one can scarcely endure to lay a bare hand on its surface, and it appears as if one walked into a

The River

furnace if obliged to be out in any part of the day except the early morning and late evening. These are very lovely—the pure dry air seems to make every object stand out and look as if painted in rich and delicate hues, but like all earthly beauties these fair colors soon fade; as the hours advance a whitish haze of intense heat seems to settle over every thing, and (oh how true are the words of the Book of God in even the smallest particular!) then “the hireling earnestly desireth the shadow” (Job 7:2). Well may the weary hired laborer long for the shadow, which sets him free to throw himself down and rest, and bathe his burning brow in the waters of the little channel, and enjoy the comparative coolness of night. To us, indeed, it is but comparative, for in July the nights are only a little less hot than the days. When September comes the suffocation seems increasing, a sort of still breathless heat prevails: this shows the river is at its height. The water is not good to drink at this time, unless carefully filtered or boiled; the peasants do not, however, take this trouble, and drink it as it is. At last, about the fifth or sixth of September (sometimes several days later), the great day comes when the Nile is cut. The watchers who for a week or more have relieved each other night and day, measuring incessantly to ascertain the moment the right height has been reached, give the news, and immediately the dam is removed and the water flows; not all at once all over the country, but at first over the lower lands, and then, entering the canals, by degrees waters all the country.

All the coasts of the river are at once flooded, of course, and the effect on the landscape is wonderful to see. Where you saw yesterday a great brown dry field, reaching from the high-road all the way to the river-banks, is now a shallow lake glistening in the sun, the little villages with their groups of palm-trees peeping out like islands from the

Letter III

water. The pools and brimming canals look very beautiful and refreshing after the long, sultry heat; not that it is less hot, rather I think more oppressive in some respects, but the moisture is something delightful to look at; and every one is so happy. The poor women, who had to toil along a weary way to fill their great pitchers, now laugh and sing as they trip down to the water-course close at hand; the children spend most of their day in the river or the canals,—occasionally, however, getting drowned therein; the great buffaloes stand up to their horns in water, giving contented puffs to show their enjoyment; everywhere reeds and rushes spring up with wonderful speed; water birds sport in the places lately full of dry clods and choking dust; the brilliant kingfisher darts after his prey in the deep pool that was but yesterday a pit “wherein was no water” (Genesis 37:24). It is impossible not to rejoice over the inundation, and while thanking the Giver of all good for His mercies, the Christian adds an earnest prayer that the water of life may flow also in Egypt.

Then the water begins to subside, and the laborer goes out to sow his seed. Often he is seen throwing it on the surface of a shallow lake, reminding one of the words, “Cast thy bread on the waters, and thou shalt find it after many days” (Ecclesiastes 11:1). Perhaps still oftener we see the seed flung on a sort of thin mud, the man with difficulty finding a spot just raised enough to be sufficiently dry to support his weight while he stands. Raised pathways border all the canals and most of the fields that are liable to overflow, but the sower has sometimes to descend from this causeway to reach distant parts of the field. In that hot sun the water dries very quickly, and in a wonderfully short time a beautiful green hue appears spreading over the whole country. A little later the crops are in full beauty. The

The River

fields lately so bare are now all covered with rich verdure. The ancient Egyptians not unreasonably made September their new year, as after the inundation the commencement of vegetation seemed more like spring, and more suited to starting afresh, as it were, than any other period. The chief crops in Egypt are wheat, barley, beans, lentils, maize, cotton, sugar; the clover I have already mentioned, and a great variety of vegetables, as tomatoes, black and white egg-plants, cucumbers, melons and gourds, onions, garlic, and some others not known in Europe, all grow abundantly; indeed, with proper attention and plenty of water, almost any thing will grow in this fertile land. But it must be cultivated with care; not a wild berry is found that could give nourishment, however imperfect, to man; all land not made to pay its tribute by labor and watering soon becomes a sandy desert from the power of the sun.

Come learn about the people, customs, and climate of Egypt in these letters from a Christian friend. You will gain a greater understanding of the culture and how it is reflected in so many Scripture verses. You will see the mixed multitude of people, and your heart will be stirred to pray for the work of the Lord among them. A fascinating living geography book from 1879!

My Good Friends,

By God's providence I have been led to settle in this distant land, and can but seldom visit England; however, I do not forget friends there, for whom I always have felt great interest. One day it came to my mind that I might do some little good to old folk at home—and perhaps to the young, too—in spite of being so far off, and having a large school to look after, and several other things; and this was my idea:—that I would write some simple familiar account of land of Egypt where I dwell

Simply
Charlotte Mason
.com