

Fourth Letter Read W.L. Apr. 4/75

Steamer Lombardy, Indian Ocean
Jan 31, 1875

Dear Children

As we were coming down the other day from Northern India to Allahabad, we were glad to learn from Mr Kellogg, that we were just in time to witness a Hindu Mela, which was to continue several days. A Mela is a great annual gathering of Hindus from different parts of India for the purpose of bathing in the Ganges. There are two places which are considered as especially sacred. The first is at Hurdwar, where the river issues from the lower range of the Himalayan Mountains; the second is at Allahabad, where the Ganges & the Jumna flow together. The people gather in immense numbers at Allahabad every year & sometimes in particular years, two or three millions have resorted thither. As the early morning hour is the most favorable for seeing the bathers, we set out before breakfast & drove down with Mr Kellogg to the junction of the two rivers, three miles below the City. It had been said that the Rajah of Nepal with his splendid retinue would bathe that morning & perhaps on that account the crowd was somewhat increased. Through all the streets people were passing toward the sacred spot. Outside of the city a broad common was covered with the moving masses, with white flowing garments & turbans of every imaginable color, and as we drove on, the throng extended as far as the eye could reach. No scene could be more picturesque. Most of the people were on foot - families walking together with their scanty baggage borne on poles. The wealthier rode in queer looking carts drawn by oxen or horses or donkeys. Some were perched on camels, while many of the high-caste Hindu women were carried in a covered chair closely shut. On either side of the road was a line of beggars, a row or two apart, seated on blankets on which they received a few kernels of rice or pulse from the scanty store of the pilgrims. At intervals also were Fakirs or mendicant priests, placed in every variety of posture & subjecting themselves to various self-inflictions as a matter of merit. Their faces & bodies were besmeared with mud & wet ashes till their features could hardly be distinguished. Their hair also was matted with filth. I remember one who sat with his legs over the back of his neck. Another pretended to keep a standing position for many days & nights, merely supporting his elbow in a sling attached to a pole, standing by his side. Another lay on his face with his head entirely buried in the sand, from which he uttered his clasped petitions to the passers by. Still another in a recumbent posture was dragging himself to the Ganges by his elbows. All these were supposed to be very sacred persons & they received large contributions from the poor superstitious people. I notice one Fakir who had received several gifts of flowers

I saw a deluded woman throw a wreath around his neck. Perhaps she had some heavy sorrow in her heart & had come hundreds of miles on foot to gain a blessing by such superstitions as these. The dust produced by these masses of people is thick & stifling, & the heat of the sun to a foreigner is scarcely endurable. The deluded worshippers are weary & foot-sore, & perhaps for days have had neither comfortable shelter nor sufficient food, but what are all these hardships compared to bathing in a river which they consider rich in all blessings for the present life & the life to come. So on they move. As we pause to study the expressions of their faces & the whole spirit of their strange worship, all seemed cheerful & almost exultant as if quite sure that their hopes are to be realized - for there, right before them, is the sacred confluence of the Jumna & the Ganges. Some say that a third river also, flowing from the mountains under ground, rises at this point & mingles its waters with the others. The water is riled & dirty, enough to render this boiling up of a third river quite plausible, but I suspect that the stirring up of the mud & the mire by the constant bathing of thousands of men & women affords a sufficient explanation. But what are those heaps which lie yonder on the shore? It is the hair which a great number of barbers are shaving from the heads of the pilgrims. The devout Hindu first seats himself upon the sand & has all the hair shaved off close, except a tuft on the top of his head. Perhaps he feels that his sins can be thrown off or at least diminished in this way. At any rate, when to his shaving he has added a thorough washing in the thin mud of the two rivers - at the same time, drinking a small quantity for his stomach's sake, he feels very certain that he is pure & I suppose that he looks all poor Christians like ourselves, with no sacred bathing & with our hair all on, as very pitiable creatures indeed. I shall never forget the look of satis faction which I saw upon the face of a poor woman as she came up from the river with a cup of water in one hand & a handful of mud in the other. You would have thought from her expression that she was safe from all evil in this world & the next. That mud she has doubtless carried since then to her distant home. It will probably be kept to be placed in small patches upon the beds or over the doorway of her poor hovel. How solemn the thought that this senseless worship which now deludes 200,000,000 of people has continued its degrading influence for thousands of generations. Hindooism has existed for a great many centuries. Before America was discovered by Columbus, probably before our Saviour lived upon the earth, the Ganges was considered sacred, & just such scenes were witnessed as I have described. Nay, far worse scenes than these. For the English Government in India now prohibits

many cruises which once were common. In former times mothers brought their infants to these Melas, & threw them into the Ganges. Who can tell how many thousands of these innocents may have been drowned at this place! May the time be hastened when the Gospel shall have banished all these dark superstitions from the earth!

Our missionaries at Allahabad had a tent erected near the river in which they kept up preaching services every day during the continuance of the Mela. The members of the Theological Class who are now pursuing their studies in the city also took their turn in preaching. With such a force the tent could be occupied nearly the whole day. It was a good opportunity for these young native preachers to exercise their gifts in proclaiming Jesus to their country men. But, alas! how small one little white ^{preaching} tent looked to me in a throng of heathen which extended two or three miles. We have only begun the great work of missions. We should send out not a score or two but hundreds to tell these millions of benighted ones the story of the Cross.

In the evening we heard an eloquent sermon in one of the Churches of Allahabad from Rev. Mr. Somerville of Glasgow of Scotland. As he held up the great & blessed way of salvation through Jesus Christ - a salvation so glorious & unobscuring & complete, & yet so free, I could not help thinking of the poor woman whom I had seen with the handful of mud, how you conceive of a greater contrast? - the offer of eternal life & the unfailling love of our dear Redeemer with an inheritance of glory on the one hand, & on the other, a little clay from the Ganges, to be smeared upon the face. What a cruel delusion is this dark idolatry! How thankful should we be for the light which has shone upon our path & how ready to impart it to others. Remember the words of our Lord Jesus, how He said, "freely have ye received, freely give".

Your affectionate friend

J. F. Ellinwood.