

Chapter 1

Something Better

A heartbroken young couple lingered near the baggage car, watching silently as the train's porter lifted a small trunk from his cart and shoved it through the open door. But when he tossed several heavy bags on top of the trunk, the young woman gasped out a desperate, "Oh, no!"

Putting his arm around her shoulders, her husband choked a sob. He then gently led her away, whispering, "Come, Lillian; let's find our seats in the passenger car and wait there."

For several minutes they sat quietly, holding hands, tears rolling down their cheeks. Finally, Lillian voiced the question uppermost in their minds.

"Why, Orley? Why didn't God heal our little Teddy?" Just a few weeks earlier, they had left their mission home in Pomata with a happy, healthy baby boy, filled with excitement over the prospect of a few weeks of rest and recuperation away from the cold and high altitudes of the Andes Mountains.

"And now, we're going home with our precious baby wrapped in his blue blanket," she sobbed, "lying alone in the trunk in that awful baggage car."

"Shhh, Lillian, someone might hear you," Orley said. "If the railroad authorities knew a dead baby was wrapped in that trunk, they wouldn't allow us to take him to Puno. And it's so important that we have him near us in our little cemetery at Plateria Mission."

"At least he'll rest beside the other children of missionary parents who wait for Jesus to awaken them," Lillian said.

"Just think how Teddy will laugh with glee when the angel carries him swiftly through the air to us again," said Orley.

"My arms just ache to hold him close." Lillian began to cry again.

Just then they heard the whistle of the engine and felt the first lurch as the train began to move. Soon, they left the beautiful city of Arequipa, Peru, located 7,500 feet up the steep ascent of the Andes Mountains. Traveling on the world's highest standard gauge railway, Orley and Lillian Ford would literally reach the "roof of the world" in just eight hours.

MISSION IN THE CLOUDS

Though their eyes stared out the train window, neither Lillian nor Orley noticed the magnificent scenery. They seemed unaware of the awesome precipices on one side of the train and the wall of icy peaks on the other side. They had lived on the high plateau surrounding Lake Titicaca for several years. Still they, like the other passengers, found it hard to breathe as the air became thinner. Some got mountain sickness and had to receive oxygen from tanks the train always carried.

As the train slowly chugged upward from one switchback to another, Lillian talked about her baby again.

“If only the doctors could have stopped the infection that spread so rapidly, or reduced his high fever! Little Teddy seemed so healthy and strong. Remember how well he stood that awful sixty-mile trip just a short time ago from Pomata Mission to the meeting at Plateria Mission?”

“Yes,” Orley said, smiling faintly. “He looked so cute tucked in a basket on one side of a mule, with a balancing basket of baggage on the other side. He even slept through that terrible rainstorm. I’m sure God saved your life when your horse was startled by that lightning and thunder and ran away.”

“That was a terrifying ride! I leaned forward and hugged his neck as he leaped over ditches and stone walls. You’d buttoned my raincoat up so well, and tucked the bottom of the long coat into the stirrups, I feared the horse might drag me along. But when he bucked, the raincoat opened up so I could fall off. I still have some black-and-blue spots from landing on that stone pile.”

“Was I ever glad when I heard your horse’s loud neigh,” Orley added. “Otherwise, you might have lain there in the darkness a long while. Later we found Teddy, safe in the arms of the Indian who led the mules. I was so thankful his mule didn’t become startled and run away too.”

Slowly the train chugged into Puno, located on the banks of icy Lake Titicaca, 12,507 feet above sea level. This highest navigable lake in the world lay on the border of Peru and Bolivia. Surrounding it were hundreds of villages where Indians drank alcohol or chewed coca leaves, from which cocaine is produced, to forget their ever-present enemies-hunger and cold. Living mostly on barley and walnut-size frozen potatoes, they were enslaved by the rich Peruvian landowners. “How will we travel from Puno to Plateria?” Lillian asked.

MISSION IN THE CLOUDS

“I’ll rent some horses, and well ride along the lakeshore. We dare not take Teddy on one of the lake steamers. I’m sure I can hire some carriers to take the baby.”

“But it’s over eighty miles on the old Inca highway,” she said. “And it’s so cold by horseback!”

“I know, dear, but there’s no other way. Let’s trust Jesus to comfort and sustain us.”

Once they had secured the precious little trunk, Lillian stayed with it until Orley had found both horses and carriers. Carefully wrapping the precious little body, they then suspended it from a pole carried by two Indians.

After resting at Plateria Mission, they continued on the sixty miles to Pomata Mission. Each group of Indians they met asked, “Where is Iscabilacajucha?” The Indians had loved the little white baby and affectionately called him, “Iscabilacajucha,” which meant “Little Pastor.”

With tears flowing down their cheeks, the Fords pointed to the little bundle behind them. The Indians bowed their heads and followed along behind the carriers—a sad little procession. Several hurried ahead to the little cemetery. When they arrived, a little grave had been dug in the hard, frozen ground. As the parents dismounted, the Indians from the mission received them with embraces and kisses.

After a short graveside ceremony, the Fords returned to their three-room adobe house. No longer did its whitewashed walls, bright curtains, or pretty dresser scarves laid on box furniture look cheerful. Together, they placed Teddy’s toys and clothes in his little box bed. Orley tucked it far back in the corner, and Lillian covered it with a blanket. Then, sitting down on their cot, Orley took her hand and began to open his heart to her.

“Lillian, our plans are not always God’s plans. Even though we had to surrender our precious baby boy, we may be sure that God is working out for us some higher good. In the future life we will see that our seemingly unanswered prayers and disappointed hopes have been among our greatest blessings. Whatever Christ asks us to give up, He offers in its stead something better.”

For the first time in many days, Lillian saw hope.

“Something better,” she said, pausing, then said it again. “Something better! I can’t imagine anything better than Teddy. But I can trust God. Maybe He’ll teach me how to do better work for Him or give me the energy and cheerfulness to do it.” She spoke slowly,

MISSION IN THE CLOUDS

thoughtfully. “Maybe this great sorrow will bring us much closer to God and to each other. Maybe He can teach me to love this bleak, cold mountain country where our baby rests until Jesus comes. And I do want God to give me ways to show deeper love for these Indians.”

“God’s better gifts don’t always seem good at the time, Lillian. I shall never forget a sentence I memorized years ago in college. Now I understand the meaning better. Would you like me to quote it?”

“Please do.”

“Of all the gifts that heaven can bestow upon men, fellowship with Christ in His sufferings is the most weighty trust and the highest honor” (The Desire of Ages, p. 225).

Lillian looked puzzled. For several minutes she pondered each word. Only the sound of the cold wind and the ticking clock broke the silence. Tears began to flow again before she spoke. Orley held her close as she sobbed out her commitment.

“If suffering for Jesus’ sake is one of His better gifts, I’m sure He’ll help me believe that He knows what is best.”