

**ALFTER, ELLEN**

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## Ellen Alfter

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MISS ELLEN E. ALFTER, the daughter of Judge and Mrs. John H. Alfter, was born in Riverview, Mo., where in early childhood she accepted the Christian faith, and where, also, she received her early religious and educational training. Later she attended a private school in Versailles, Mo., and taught several years in the Morgan County schools. In 1902 she entered the Warrensburg College for teachers, graduating from the kindergarten department in 1907, having lost some time on account of illness of her parents.

While at Warrensburg she joined the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and was an active worker in the Y. W. C. A. She became a Student Volunteer in 1907, and soon after entered the Scarritt Bible and Training School in Kansas City for special training. Upon graduation from that institution in 1910, she was sent by the Board of Missions to San Luis Potosi, Mexico, as a kindergarten worker in the mission school there.

Blessed with a cheerful, lovable disposition and well prepared as she was for her chosen work, it is little wonder that her missionary labors were very successful. She chose as her special inspiration the thirteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians, but after the word "love" she always inserted, "for the Mexicans," so that her text read: "Love for the Mexicans never faileth." Who shall say that this was not the secret of her success with them? When she loved her little Mexican kindergartners she could forget how dirty they were, how untrained they were, and seemingly hopeless their little minds were. It took a great deal of love to help her go into the filthy homes, smell the dreadful smells, be patient with the ignorant Mexican men and women, and persistently try to overcome their superstitions; but her little text carried her through and made her work in Mexico a great success.

After nearly four years spent there, revolutionary troubles made it unwise for the missionaries to remain in Mexico, so she

was recalled and sent to the Homer Toberman Mission in Los Angeles to work with the Mexicans at that place.

Miss Alfter was a practical, sensible woman, and when she found many of the very poor Mexicans pauperized by mis-directed charity, she immediately went about remedying such conditions. She realized that with the Mexican, as well as with anybody else, the best way to help him was to put him in a position to help himself. He was handicapped by a lack of education and a knowledge of the English language. She started a night school and taught him to read and write and to speak English. He was overawed by superstitions encouraged by the Catholic Church; she told him of the loving Christ to whom he could go himself without the mediation of the priest. She realized that his ignorance of sanitation and of personal hygiene made him live in filthy hovels and take no care of his body; so she established a clinic where he and his whole family might learn cleanliness, how to care for their houses, and how to avoid disease. She helped the unemployed to find work, she patiently instructed the ignorant mothers in the care of their babies, she made friends with the boys and girls, and entered into their pleasures and sorrows as if she were one of them. Consequently they were all devoted to their "Elenita," as they lovingly called her. One man named Zeferino, who had left a life of drunkenness and brutality to become a Christian, said of her: "Her love was so much stronger than her physical strength, so much stronger than anything else in her life, she would put aside all natural desires and needs to help others, forgetting to eat, going without sleep, conquering pain, to go on with that which would help some one or fulfill the responsibilities she felt for the work."

She was especially fond of her kindergarten work, the dark-eyed, dark-haired little Mexicans who so loved their jolly little games, their pretty songs, and all the novelties of the kindergarten were, to her, tiny Christians in the making, and her patience with them and her love for them held a very big place in her life.

So did the Mexican boys. She understood and sympathized with them, she realized their utter lack of home training in morals, in fair play, in religion, and she tried with all her ability to make up those lacks in them. She chummed with them, she

taught them, she scolded them, and won their hearts entirely. If she could see those same boys now, as they take their part in the mission programs, showing ideals so much higher than most Mexican boys of their age, giving their services so willingly, she would feel fully repaid for the effort she expended in making them what they are.

One of the great problems in all Mexican work is how best to teach the people the difference between their old Catholic faith and the new religion of Christ which the missionary is bringing them. In the first place, the Mexican has had instilled in him from infancy, by the priests, a great fear of anything Protestant. Miss Alfter overcame their fear of her and her religion by kindness; and then the Mexicans were ready to listen to what she had to tell them. The difference between the Ten Commandments as taught by the Catholic Church and as they are taught by the Bible was one of the first things she explained. Then the text from Timothy, which says, "There is one God, and one Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus," was of special interest to them. It was very wonderful news that they might pray to God themselves without having to pay the priest to pray for them. It was a source of great satisfaction to the Mexicans to be able to read the texts in the Bible for themselves, the texts which Miss Alfter so often quoted to them. They passed their Bibles from house to house and painstakingly pointed out to each other the things in print which she had told them verbally.

Her practice, more than her teaching, convinced them that her religion was the true one. In the priests they had seen selfishness, heartlessness, and greed; in Miss Alfter they found unselfishness, love, and kindness. Interpreting for the Christian doctors in the clinic, caring for the flu victims, filling out questionnaires for the soldiers, distributing food and clothing to those who were needy, she taught high ideals along with her message of love.

While delivering Christmas baskets in the rain to her beloved Mexicans she caught cold, which later developed into pneumonia. On January 11, 1919, she died, and to her funeral flocked hundreds of her loving friends. The mission was packed, and there were almost as many on the outside. Numbers of Catholics, and the priest as well, attended. There was a request

for volunteers to take up the work that she had left unfinished, and forty surrendered their lives to the service of Christ. So the work of Ellen Alfter will live on in the lives, not only of these forty people, but in the lives of all those with whom she came in contact.

Her friends were requested to bring Spanish Bibles or Testaments to her funeral instead of the customary flowers, and these Bibles were sent to Mexico to be used where they were most needed. At the head of her grave in Evergreen Cemetery is a simple headstone in which is an open Bible with these words graven on it in both English and Spanish: "Love never faileth."

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