

Marion M'naught

by Alexander Whyte

Marion M'Naught was a Scottish woman of great faith, intellect, and public spirit, who inspired others with her rare godliness, humility, and love for Christ.

Scripture: Proverbs 31:10, Matthew 5:10, 1 Corinthians 13:4, Galatians 6:9, 1 Peter 3:4

Topics: "Christian Perseverance", "Spiritual Endurance"

Description

Alexander Whyte delves into the remarkable correspondence between Samuel Rutherford and Marion M'Naught, a woman greatly gifted in mind and spirit, who played a significant role in Rutherford's life. Marion's exceptional experience in the divine life, her mental power, and her public spirit made her a standout figure in Rutherford's letters. Despite facing trials and persecution due to their fearless devotion to truth and justice, Marion and her husband remained steadfast, with Rutherford providing counsel on patience, forgiveness, and endurance. Marion's influence for good extended beyond her family to her community, where her rare godliness and public spirit left a lasting impact on Kirkcudbright.

Transcript

'O woman beloved of God.'--Rutherford

'The world knows nothing of its greatest men,' says Sir Henry Taylor in his Philip Van Artevelde; and it knows much less of its greatest women. I have not found Marion M'Naught's name once mentioned outside of Samuel Rutherford's Letters. But she holds a great place--indeed, the foremost place--in that noble book, to be written in which is almost as good as to be written in heaven.

Rutherford's first letter to Marion M'Naught was written from the manse of Anwoth on the 6th of June 1627, and out of a close and life-long correspondence we are happy in having had preserved to us some forty-five of Rutherford's letters to his first correspondent. But, most unfortunately, we have none of her letters back again to Anwoth or Aberdeen or London or St. Andrews. It is much to be wished we had, for Marion M'Naught was a woman greatly gifted in mind, as well as of quite exceptional experience even for that day of exceptional experiences in the divine life. But we can almost construct her letters to Rutherford for ourselves, so pointedly and so elaborately and so affectionately does Rutherford reply to them.

Marion M'Naught is already a married woman, and the mother of three well-grown children, when we make her acquaintance in Rutherford's Letters. She had sprung of an ancient and honourable house in the south of Scotland, and she was now the wife of a well-known man in that day, William Fullarton, the

Provost of Kirkcudbright. It is interesting to know that Marion M'Naught was closely connected with Lady Kenmure, another of Rutherford's chief correspondents. Lord Kenmure was her mother's brother. Kenmure had lived a profligate and popularity-hunting life till he was laid down on his death-bed, when he underwent one of the most remarkable conversions anywhere to be read of--a conversion that, as it would appear, his niece Marion M'Naught had no little to do with. As long as Kenmure was young and well, as long as he was haunting the neighbourhood of the Court, and selling his church and his soul for a smile from the King, the Provost of Kirkcudbright and his saintly wife were despised and forgotten; but when he was suddenly brought face to face with death and judgment, when his ribbons and his titles were now like the coals of hell in his conscience, nothing would satisfy him but that his niece must leave her husband and her children and take up her abode in Kenmure Castle. The Last and Heavenly Speeches of Lord Kenmure was a classic memoir of those days, and in that little book we read of his niece's constant attendance at his bedside, as good a nurse for his soul as she was for his body.

Samuel Rutherford's favourite correspondent was, to begin with, a woman of quite remarkable powers of mind. We gather that impression powerfully as we read deeper and deeper into the remarkable series of letters that Rutherford addressed to her. To no one does he go into deeper matters both of Church and State, both of doctrinal and personal religion than to her, and the impression of mental power is well as of personal worth she made on Rutherford, she must have made on many of the ablest and best men of that day. Robert Blair, for instance, tells us that when he was on his way home from London to Ireland he visited Scotland chiefly that he might see Rutherford at Anwoth and Marion M'Naught at Kirkcudbright, and when he came to Kirkcudbright he found Rutherford also there. And when Rutherford was in exile in Aberdeen, and in deep anxiety about his people at Anwoth, he wrote beseeching Marion M'Naught to go to Anwoth and give his people her counsel about their congregational and personal affairs. But, above all, it is from the depth and the power of Rutherford's letters to herself on the inward life that we best gather the depth and the power of this remarkable woman's mind.

There is no other subject of thought that gives such scope for the greatest gifts of the human mind as does the life of God in the soul. There is no book in all the world that demands such a combination of mental gifts and spiritual graces to understand it aright as the Bible. The history and the biography of the Bible, the experimental parts of the Bible, the doctrines of grace deduced by the apostles out of the history and the experience recorded in the Bible, and then the personal, the most inward and most spiritual bearing of all that,--what occupation can be presented to the mind of man or woman to compare with that? True religion, really true religion, gives unequalled and ever-increasing scope for the best gifts of mind and for the best graces of heart and character. 'In truth, religious obedience is a very intricate problem, and the more so the farther we proceed in it.' And he has poor eyes and a poor heart for true religion, and for its best fruits both in the mind and the heart and the character, who does not see those fruits increasing letter by letter as Rutherford writes to Marion M'Naught.

Her public spirit also made Marion M'Naught to be held in high honour. Her husband was a public man, and his intelligent fidelity to truth and justice in that day made his name far more public than ever he wished it to be. And in all his services and sufferings for the truth he had a splendid wife in Marion M'Naught. 'Remember me to your husband,' Rutherford writes; 'tell him that Christ is worthy to be suffered for not only to blows but to blood. He will find that innocence and uprightness will hold his feet firm and make him happy when swerving will not do it.' And again, 'Encourage your husband and tell him that truth will yet keep the crown of the causey in Scotland.' And when the petition is being got up for his being permitted to return to Anwoth, Rutherford asks his correspondent to procure that three or four hundred

noblemen, gentlemen, countrymen and citizens shall be got to subscribe it--a telling tribute, surely, to her public spirit and her great influence.

But an independent mind and a public spirit like hers could not exist in those days, or in any day this world has yet seen, without raising up many and bitter enemies. And both she and her husband suffered heavily, both in name and in estate, from the malice and the hatred that their fearless devotion to truth and justice stirred up. So much so, that some of the finest passages in Rutherford's early letters to her are those in which he counsels her and her husband to patience, and meekness, and forgiveness of injuries. 'Keep God's covenant in all your trials. Hold you by His blessed word, and sin not; flee anger, wrath, grudging, envying, fretting. Forgive an hundred pence to your fellow-servant, for your Lord has forgiven you ten thousand talents.' And again: 'Be patient; Christ went to heaven with many a wrong. His visage was more marred than that of any of the sons of men. He was wronged and received no reparation, but referred all to that day when all wrongs shall be righted.' And again: 'You live not upon men's opinion. Happy are you if, when the world trampleth upon you in your credit and good name, you are yet the King's gold and stamped with His image. Pray for the spirit of love. for love beareth all things, believeth all things. hopeth all things, endureth all things. Forgive, therefore, your fellow-servant his one talent. Always remember what has been forgiven you.' And on every page of the Kirkcudbright correspondence we see that, amid all these temptations and trials, no man had a better wife than the provost, and no children a better mother than Grizel and her two brothers. Her talents sought no nobler sphere for their exercise and increase than her own fireside; and her public spirit was better seen in her life at home than anywhere out of doors. Hers was truly a public spirit, and like a spirit it inspired and animated both her own and her husband's life with interest in and with care for the best good, both of the Church and the State. Her public spirit was not incompatible with great personal modesty and humility, and great attention to her domestic duties, all rooted in a life hid with Christ in God.

And then, all this--her birth, her station, her talents, and her public spirit--could not fail to give her a great influence for good. In a single line of Rutherford's on this subject, we see her whole lifetime: 'You are engaged so in God's work in Kirkcudbright that if you remove out of that town all will be undone.' What a tribute is that to the provost's wife! And again, far on in the Letters he writes to Grizel Fullarton: 'Your dear mother, now blessed and perfected with glory, kept life in that place, and my desire is that you succeed her in that way.' What a pride to have such a mother; and what a tradition for a daughter to take up! So have we all known in country towns and villages one man or one woman who kept life in the place. Out of the memories of my own boyhood there rises up, here a minister and there a farmer, here a cloth-merchant and there a handloom weaver, here a blacksmith's wife and there a working housekeeper, who kept life in the whole place. It is not station that does it, nor talent, though both station and talent greatly help; it is character, it is true and genuine godliness. True and genuine godliness--especially when it is purged of pride, and harsh judgment, and too much talk, and is adorned with humility, and meekness, and all the other fruits of holy love--true and pure godliness in a most obscure man or woman will find its way to a thousand consciences, and will impress and overawe a whole town, as Marion M'Naught's rare godliness impressed and overawed all Kirkcudbright. Just as, on the other hand, the ignorance, the censoriousness, the bitterness, the intolerance, that too often accompany what would otherwise be true godliness, work as wide-spread mischief as true godliness works good. 'One little deed done for God's sake, and against our natural inclination, though in itself only of a conceding or passive character, to brook an insult, to face a danger, or to resign an advantage, has in it a power outbalancing all the dust and chaff of mere profession--the profession whether of enlightened benevolence or candour, or, on the other hand, of high religious faith and fervent zeal; for, as Rutherford could write to Marion M'Naught's daughter:

'There is a wide and deep difference between a name of godliness and the power of godliness.' Even the schoolboys of Kirkcudbright could quite well distinguish the name from the reality; and long after they were Christian men they would tell with reverence and with love when, and from whom, they took their first and never-to-be-forgotten impressions. It was, they would say to their children, from that woman of such rare godliness as well as public spirit, Marion M'Naught.

It was all this, and nothing other and nothing less than all this, that made Marion M'Naught Rutherford's favourite correspondent. Her mind and her heart together early and often drew her across the country to Rutherford's preaching. Marion M'Naught had a good minister of her own at home; but Rutherford was Rutherford, and he made Anwoth Anwoth. I think I can understand something of her delight on Communion fore-noons, when his text was Christ Dying, in John 12:32, or the Syro-Phoenician woman, in Matt. 15:28.

And then the feasts on the fast-days at Kirkcudbright, over the cloud of witnesses, in Heb. 12:1, and all tears wiped away, in Rev. 21:4, and the marriage of the Lamb, in 19:7. And then, on the other hand, Rutherford is not surely to be blamed for loving such a hearer. His Master loved a Mary also of His day, for that also among other good reasons. If a good hearer likes a good preacher, why should a good preacher not like a good hearer? Take a holiday, and give us another day soon of such and such a preacher, our people sometimes say to us.

And why should that preacher not also say to us, Give me a day soon again of your good hearers? As a matter of fact, our good preaching friends do say that to us. And why not? Fine hearers, deep hearers, thoroughly well-prepared hearers, hearers of genius are almost as scarce as fine, deep, thoroughly well-prepared preachers and preachers of genius. And who shall blame Rutherford for liking to see Marion M'Naught coming into the church on a Sabbath morning as well as she liked to see him coming into the pulpit?

'I go to Anwoth so often,' she said, 'because, though other ministers show me the majesty of God and the plague of my own heart, Mr. Samuel does both these things, but he also shows me, as no other minister ever does, the loveliness of Christ.' It is as great a mistake to think that all our Christian people are able to take in a sermon on the loveliness of Christ as it is that all ordained men can preach such a sermon. There are diversities of gifts among hearers as well as among preachers; and when the gifts of the pulpit meet the corresponding graces in the pew, you need not wonder that they recognise and delight in one another.

Jesus Christ was Rutherford's favourite subject in the pulpit, and thus it was that he was Marion M'Naught's favourite preacher, as she, again, was his favourite hearer in the church and his favourite correspondent in the Letters. To how many in this house to-night could a preacher say that he wished them all to be 'over head and ears in love to Christ?' What preacher could say a thing like that in truth and soberness? And how many could hear it? Only a preacher of the holy passion of Rutherford, and only a hearer of the intellect and heart and rare experience of Marion M'Naught.

'O the fair face of the man Jesus Christ!' he cries out. And again: 'O time, time, why dost thou move so slowly! Come hither, O love of Christ! What astonishment will be mine when I first see that fairest and most lovely face! It would be heaven to me just to look through a hole of heaven's door to see Christ's countenance!' No wonder that the congregations were few, and the correspondents who could make anything of a man of such a 'fanatic humour' as that! But, then, no wonder, on the other hand, that, when two fanatics so full of that humour as Samuel Rutherford and Marion M'Naught met, they corresponded

ever after with one another in their own enraptured language night and day.

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