



# How it all Began.

---

The Story of Miss Annie Van Sommer  
and the Nile Mission Press.

## How it all began.

### The Story of Miss Annie Van Sommer and the Nile Mission Press.



*'Harken to Me, ye that follow after righteousness, ye that seek the Lord; look unto the rock whence ye are hewn, and to the hole of the pit whence ye are digged.' Isaiah 51:1*

The rock from which the Nile Mission Press was hewn is the rock-like faith of a remarkable Christian lady by the name of Ann Van Sommer, and the pit from which the clay was obtained for making the bricks of the Nile Mission Press (NMP) 'structure' is deep, solid, limitless pit of God's love and grace and faithfulness, from which the Founder was ever wont to draw her needed supplies.

It seems fitting that one hundred years after Miss Van Sommer's birth (she was born on 8<sup>th</sup> June, 1852) a few facts about her should be set down, both to assist NMP supporters in estimating her worth, and to inform many who know little or nothing about the Press as to the origins and early inspirations of this work, which has one simple aim, the evangelism of the Moslem, so proud and self-efficient, so scrupulously religious, so tragically deluded and blinded to the truth of the Christian Gospel.

Annie Van Sommer came into what is generally called a clear knowledge of salvation at the age of eight years, thus disproving in herself the familiar notion that children are too young to experience conversion. The illustration which brought light and peace to her young heart was as follows: "A father was standing at the foot of the cellar stairs, in the dark, and calling up to his little girl at the top of the steps, in the light, to come to him. She hesitated. 'Don't be afraid' he said, 'but Father' she replied, 'it is dark down there, and I can't see you.' 'I can see you,' he said. When she still

hesitated he said, 'I tell you what. Jump and I'll catch you'. So she jumped and found herself safe in his arms."

Soon afterwards, little Anne started helping her father to distribute booklets to passers-by in the course of their walks around Reigate, Surrey, where they lived.

In the early 'eighties' she was working with Miss Robinson, who initiated the 'Soldiers' Homes' in Britain and Abroad. At Portsmouth, just before a large transport was due to set sail, perhaps for India, the little band of devoted women would be on board, giving out hundreds of booklets and leaflets. At that time such a venture as Miss Robinson's, to save our service men from the temptations of the ports, was quite unheard of. Miss Van Sommer became a valuable ally, going about the country to arouse interest, founding the Soldiers' Institute at York, and later doing the same thing at Alexandria, where she used funds to buy the former Brompton Oratory (which was for sale), have it dismantled, packed up, transported by sea to Egypt and re-erected! This incident reveals her faith, vision and enterprise.

While in Egypt, Miss Sommer often noticed of an evening, the darkened road lighted by a lamp here and there. Under the lamp was a group of Moslems listening intently to a man on a high stool, reading aloud to them. She was told it would be Eastern stories. In her heart a new desire was born. Could not these illiterates be helped to listen to the sweet story of Jesus?

At this time, just after General Gordon's death (1885), it was the soldiers who needed care, and years went by before the possibility of helping the missionaries became reality. Then, during the winter of 1896, many conversations took place. When she asked "Could not more be done to reach the Moslems through reading?" the answer was always the same: "We have tried, but the difficulty of getting our books accurately printed in Arabic, has so far proved insurmountable."

As an instance of how God often "works at both ends", Mr John Martin Cleaver, of the Egypt Mission Band, was just then considering prayerfully a proposal to start a Christian Literature Society, as an incentive to both British and Egyptian Christians to write suitable books. At first the two schemes, the writing and the printing of books, were thought to conflict with each other, but soon they were seen as two parts of one whole. Miss Van Sommer and Mr Cleaver joined hands in the undertaking, and the Nile Mission Press was the outcome.

Incidentally, it was through Annie Van Sommer's prayers for Egypt, and her pleading the cause of the Moslems at the student conference at Curbar, Derbyshire in 1897 that the original seven missionaries of the Egypt Mission Band (EMB) offered themselves for that land. The story is told in the book, *Lacked ye Anything*, by George Swan. Later the EMB became the Egypt General Mission (EGM). These two societies, the EGM and the Nile Mission Press are like brother and sister for they share a common mother. A third member of the 'family' is Fairhaven, the Holiday Home for Missionaries near Alexandria, and the fourth is the Fellowship of Faith for the Moslems, a world-wide Prayer-Partnership, which AVS founded in co-operation with the late Dr Samuel Zwemer.

The Nile Mission Press was not brought into being without many set-backs. Mr Arthur Upson, formerly with the North African Mission, was with Miss Van Sommer in prayer and planning from the very start; and those two shining lights, Messrs Douglas Thornton and Temple Gairdner of the CMS, both later ordained, were a tower of strength. Out of Egypt, Mr William Blackwood, Dr St Clair Tisdall and the Rev George Patterson (mere names to us today) helped he fight the early battles. There was plenty of advice to drop the whole idea, many reasons being put forward, but

at length another champion, Mr Albert Head, spoke up: "The risk is not great", he said "Let us try. If God should see fit to bless it, He will enable us to carry it through."

### **The Hand of God.**

At this point, I cannot do better than to continue the story in the Founder's own words; "The sequel to this decision was very remarkable. About a month later a letter was received from Dr Pain of the CMS hospital, Old Cairo. Writing from New Zealand, he sent £250 from a friend to help establish a Mission Press. We thanked God with a grateful heart. A week later he wrote again. His friend had doubled the amount and made it £500. I think it was a fortnight later, near the end of July 1904, when once more the same handwriting reached me from New Zealand. The giver, now known to be Archdeacon Williams, had again doubled the gift and £1000 altogether had been sent. I am sure that those who had lost heart, joined with us in thanksgiving. We felt the assurance given us that it was God's won doing."

There is another incident of crucial importance dating from this time. Let Annie Van Sommer speak again, her account being typical of her crisp, graphic, matter-of-fact style: "in 1900, an elderly gentleman died, and among other legacies to his relations, he had left £500 to the one whose desire was to help bring to pass the Nile Mission Press" (A.V.S herself). "As soon as she heard of the legacy, she knew what God had sent it to her for. It was to buy the printing press itself. But the money was not paid. A house had to be sold first and no one wanted the house. Years went by. One Sunday afternoon she made a special prayer that the house might be sold that week. She continued to ask this all week. But no news reached her. Nothing seemed to have happened. On the following Sunday she could wait no longer and she asked her brother if he ever heard of the house now. "Oh" he said, swinging round from his organ, "I meant to tell you there is someone after it. I hear on Friday." And about a fortnight later the purchase was made. May the kind old man who left the money receive his reward in heaven. The loving kindness of the Lord is very great."

The writer, who, as a great nephew, often visited the Van Sommers in their home – Cuffnells, Weybridge – can well picture the scene described above. William, the solicitor brother, had a full-sized pipe organ built into the wall of one of the lofty rooms, and beautifully he played it. The other member of the household was Elizabeth Van Sommer, also unmarried, also gifted and devoted. She kept house for her sister and brother, but also had widespread Christian interests besides.

So the good ship "N.M.P." was launched. Premises were secured and the date of the signing of the contract was 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1905. Now, after nearly half a century, the ship still sails the seas, keeping its course steady, in spite of dangers and storms and every kind of adventure. From Cairo, the heart of Islam, scriptures and Christian literature, mainly in Arabic, go out to all parts of the world wherever Moslems are to be found, and many are those who through this agency have found the Lord Jesus Christ as their Saviour, and yielded to Him as their Master, for life-sacrifice and service. A few details will be found at the end of this booklet of present day personnel, and where gifts for the work should be sent. The bi-monthly publication, *The Nile Mission Press News* is the successor to *Blessed be Egypt*, a quarterly, which Miss Van Sommer originated and for years edited. "No pains were ever spared," writes her niece, Mrs Lloyd. "The paper must be of the best; the photographs interesting; articles must be written by experts; the layout must be faultless." How sad that the modern rise in costs makes necessary a very modest publication by comparison.

Mrs Lloyd (mother of the writer) thus describes her aunt: "She appeared to me to always the same. Of stocky build, of medium height: 'comfortable', quiet, steady, but with a sense of humour too. She was plain of feature, but she had a contented nature, and I cannot imagine anybody being able to quarrel with her. If I say she was of a peaceable nature, I must be misunderstood to mean that peace at any price was her maxim. Very far from it. She was a good fighter for, and most tenacious of what she believed to be right; but her weapons were those of prayer and persuasion. She would make the facts known, as speaking for themselves of a need which she plainly saw. She would 'as the Lord, and tell His people'. That was her method, and it always worked. Having been fired by a sense of need, she would put all her thoughts before God and ask Him to form in her mind the right plan to meet the need. She carried on, always, the closed intercourse with her Father, God, of anyone I have ever known, though I have heard of others. She spoke with Him as being desirous only to know what He would have her do. Co-operation with His plan, His will, was what she practised. I saw it at work in all to which she set her hand."

And now a final tribute: "She was more than a missionary enthusiast. She had the vision of a prophet, and the insight of a statesman...Yet through all, she never lost the charm of a deep humility. As plans developed, she stood aside and let others take the lead. Her Christian character shone out in every crisis; through all difficulties and with great persistence she held on her way, her faith surmounting every obstacle and her love breaking down all barriers. She lived to see her faith vindicated, her cherished schemes brought to fruition, and the fellowship in service, which was characteristic of her life, bringing with it an enriching experience of wide friendships... Many came to her harassed and worried and went away with a new peace. Her life was lived in a great calm, which was maintained through stress and strain of a long and busy life." This tribute was paid by the Right Rev W Wilson Cash, D.D. at the memorial service to Ann Van Sommer, held in Dane Hill Church, Sussex. She passed to her rest on the 9<sup>th</sup> of February 1937.

**End note** – Nile Mission Press in Egypt continued its work until 1956 when all missionaries were removed from Egypt after the Suez Crisis and the installation of Gamel Abdel Nasser as President of Egypt. The shops were sold to the Nile Christian Bookshops which still operate today. Nile Mission Press relocated to Beirut where it operated under that name until it was changed to the Arabic Literature Mission.