

Doctor To Africa

The Story of

STIRRETT OF THE SUDAN

By

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MISSIONARY IN NIGERIA, WEST AFRICA

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THE SUDAN INTERIOR MISSION Africa

CHAPTER THREE

"Let the Earth Hear His Voice!"

ANDREW P. STIRRETT first arrived in Nigeria in November, 1902, when he had pursued with unflagging zeal his God-given resolve to minister to the needy people of Africa. Catching him in a reminiscent mood early in 1947, he told his story of that first trip to the dark continent, whose interior was still a locked land of mystery and romance and from whence came tales of the evils of slavery, cannibalism, human sacrifice and sin.

His acceptance by the mission boards of both Canada and England was still in abeyance, when he finished his course in the School of Tropical Medicine. Unwilling to permit that the 38 years be added to, and thus ensure a definite refusal, he quietly went about his preparations, booking his own passage on the *S. S. Burutu*, bound for the port of Forcados in the Bight of Benin, situated at the mouth of the great Niger River. With a note to the S.I.M. of his intent, he left England, still unaccepted by man, but most definitely accepted of GOD for his task.

Pity the one who would dare to venture into Satan's domain without the unmistakable call of GOD burning as a fire in his bones. Sad would be the life that was drawn by the adventure, and not by the SPIRIT of GOD. And just as pathetic would be the life, called of GOD, that would be turned aside by man, home ties or ambition.

The Christian should confer not with flesh and blood, but with the Lord Himself, and there receive his marching orders. Isaiah was in the temple, and on seeing the Lord, he offered himself as a missionary to a people who were blind, deaf and hard of heart. "**Here am I,**" he faithfully answered, "**send me!**"

Before leaving Liverpool Dr. Stirrett armed himself with a letter from the representative of the Niger Company in England to the agent in Nigeria, containing permission for the company boat to take him up the river to Patigi. It was here that the first missionary party had settled as a basis of operation, and were praying for a wedge into the restrictions that prevented them from

working into the interior, and particularly hindered them from pushing into the Moslem and pagan areas of the northern part of Nigeria.

On his arrival at Forcados the Niger Company's boat came alongside the steamer, and Stirrett lost no time getting in touch with the agent, and showing his letter of permission for passage up the river. In a land where white men are few and far between, and where one might expect real camaraderie when members of the Anglo-Saxon people meet, he was chilled with the open rebuff that he received.

Chilled and not a little startled, for here was a prospect not anticipated, of being dropped from the steamer into the hot, steamy jungle of mangrove, swamp and untold perils, while fellow "white men" would leave him to his own devices.

On urging his letter on the agent, he was finally told quite plainly that knowledge of his coming had preceded him but he could not, and would not, be accommodated. The reason for such an action was not long in coming. Some Roman Catholic priests appeared at the head of the gangplank; to them the agent hastened, and assisting then into the boat that could easily have accommodated one more, they putted off up the river.

Andrew Stirrett was mild to the point of not realizing the affront that had been put upon him, but even he felt not a little perturbed at the circumstances under which he had been placed. He had an unfailing source of help, however, and he was not long in availing himself of it. To quote him: "There I was at the mouth of the river, stranded. Stranded, but not forsaken." And as he stood at the railing lifting his heart to GOD, his fingers idly tearing up the now useless letter, he heard the hearty chug-chug of a large river boat, and opening his eyes, saw coming around a sweep of land a heavy launch with the government flag at its prow.

As it swept up in a wide arc and tied up at the foot of the steamer's gangplank, the missionary breathed a hurried prayer, and hastened to the captain who was even then clambering up the steep side of the ship. They met at the top of the ladder, and he was not long in putting his request. Again we quote the words of the man who was soon to be known as the Paul of Nigeria.

"Well," said the captain to me, 'I have no cabin for you, but if you can rough it on the deck we can take you.' I was used to roughing it," added the Doctor (remembering the cattle boat and the slums of Liverpool, no doubt), "so the bargain was made. I soon got my things out of the hold and into the launch, the Sarauta (Hausa for ruling or governing), and we immediately got away. Before long we passed the slower Niger Company boat which had refused me passage. We beat it by one and a half or two days to Patigi. Hallelujah! How good the Saviour is and was to me, His unworthy servant!"

The journey up the river took four days; four hot, steaming, sweating days which must have been times of nightmare and delight, as the boat snaked its way up the mighty Niger, through belts of mangrove swamp and gorgeous vegetation. His only food during those strange days was condensed milk and cabin biscuits, a supposedly edible food, made hard enough that even weevils and worms could not bore through them. One can imagine the man, once used to affluence and a good table, daily soaking his biscuits in condensed milk diluted with water, and thanking GOD for the repast.

During that long trip he would see the giant mango trees laden with the luscious peach-like fruit that must have tempted him almost beyond endurance, as they slipped unattainably past. Clusters of banana trees, coconut palms, pawpaws and the variegated fruits of the tropics so plentiful along the river, must have made him look with the longing eyes of the rich man seeing Lazarus with his plenty in Abraham's bosom.

The picturesque scene would unfold slowly before him as the launch breasted the stiff current of the river. The line of forest would be broken by great stretches of sandy beach, where log-like crocodiles, stirred from slumber by the unaccustomed sound of an engine, would lift a ruminating eye, then slowly slide into and under the water. The eye-smarting red of the Flame of the Forest tree darted here and there like tongues of fire as they danced in the breeze.

The crested palms, tall mahogany, wild fig, all lent their color and stature to the sweep of forest that grew in tangled mass to the water's edge. And in and around and through them all scampered the lithe, grayish-red monkey and the ponderous baboon. While winging, hopping, chirping and whistling through them all, with gay abandon were the multi-colored tropical birds, from the tiny Blue Cordon and the Scarlet Bishop to the occasional stately Crown Bird, the long-legged crane, the bright-plumed parrot, all scintillating and animated, as though welcoming the visitor to their shores.

Four days of sweating, of condensed milk and cabin biscuits amidst this galaxy of beauty? That was merely the preface to more than 46 years of utter simplicity in diet and living, that he might the better bring the Bread of Life to these people; to reveal the great King in His beauty, and that they might worship Him in the beauty of holiness. Not for this missionary, the elaborate outfits regarded as a necessity for the tropics; not for him the cluttering impedimenta of a settled life. He counted all things but loss that he might win CHRIST and win others to Him.

Forty-five years after this it was necessary to take a hurried trip to Lagos for medical treatment in the government hospital. An inland air service provided speedy transportation, and in six hours the distance was covered that had previously taken weeks, and had cost the lives of many. As we winged our way over the mouth of the Niger, still dotted as of yore with dugout canoes and fishing boats, we tried to visualize from the air that landing and trip of long ago.

The muddy waters streaked into the blue of the ocean; the river crept its meandering route from the heart of Nigeria, its bed unchanged through the long centuries. And we thought of the Doctor's years of heartache and toil, bearing the burden and the heat of the day with an altogether too small band of workers, and how they had made that land first resound to the sound of the Gospel, and stirred the restless denizens of the forest with the glad Gospel song in native tongue. And as the plane sped past we remembered that every area that the shadow of the plane touched now had its Gospel witness, its Christian community, a blood-washed number, a body for His Name.

During the necessary research to glean the scarce grains of material regarding those early days, one of his fellow-workers, W. S. Craig, made mention of the frugal equipment of the beloved physician. "He traveled with only one load," recalls Mr. Craig, "and that was a large steel trunk that could be carried on the head of a native. Into that trunk he put everything he needed. That is to say, practically all that he owned-everything from camp bed to cabin biscuits (!), his clothing, medicine, record books, and Scriptures, later the *Hausa* Bible and hymn book."

The Doctor himself, when viewing a missionary's loads coming into Jos one day some 40 years later, was heard to remark: "You have half a ton of goods? When I first came out to this country I had one suitcase and one box!" And he has had little more since. Truly his treasure was in Heaven where his heart was fixed, and he has had little time for what to others are necessities of life in Africa.

At Patigi he found that little band of men who had dared to believe that CHRIST had bade them "**go into all the world and preach the Gospel**," and who were in Nigeria to fulfill their share of that great commission. In that year, 1902, there were four men who comprised the first official party of the Sudan Interior Mission, which during the next 46 years was to grow into the largest mission society in Africa, with over 700 missionaries serving in Nigeria, French West Africa, the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, Ethiopia and Aden.

This first party included E. A. Anthony, who was field superintendent in that early day, Mr. C. Robinson, Mr. A. Taylor - all of whom have "**put on immortality**." The Fourth member was A. W. Banfield who was to achieve distinction as the compiler of the *Nupe Dictionary and Grammar*, and as the chief translator of the complete Nupe Bible. He later established the Niger Press for the printing of the Christian literature in the vernacular by converted Africans, and eventually became Secretary for West Africa for the British and Foreign Bible Society. He was honored with an F.R.G.S. for his unique service in the African languages. Mr. Banfield is the last of that group that gathered to welcome Dr. Stirrett as he stepped out of the government launch at the wharf at Patigi. His course, too, is nearly finished, and for the last few years he has been lying helpless and paralyzed in Toronto as the result of a stroke.

Of the five men who gathered around the table that evening in the wilderness only Andrew Stirrett remained in the field till his death on July 9, 1948, and in him was exemplified the spirit of those men "**of whom the world was not worthy**," "men who have hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ," "whose names though not emblazoned on the written pages of missionary annals and biographies of human endeavor, yet are part of the warp and woof of the far-flung net of the Sudan Interior Mission; and whose names above are all recorded in the Lamb's Book of Life, where selfless, consecrated service is transcribed and will some day make celestial reading.

Here should be mentioned those other leaders of this great missionary enterprise, whose complete story will be found in Dr. R. V. Bingham's *Seven Sevens of Years and a Jubilee*. The forerunners of the five already mentioned were Walter Gowans, Thomas Kent and Rowland V. Bingham, who made the first attempt to penetrate to the heart of Nigeria in 1893; Kent and Gowans laid down their lives in what may be termed by the unthinking as an abortive attempt, but which in reality was a living seed which has borne fruit a thousandfold in the subsequent years.

These men were criticized and condemned by well-meaning, organized denominational missions, a member of which mentioned in his official story of the early days that "these men were untrained, ill-equipped and totally unfit for the task that was before them. Their attempt ended in failure, leaving to us the evangelization of the *Hausa* people." If that attempt be failure, then GOD grant that there may be many more such in the promotion of Christian missions!

Nothing daunted, Mr. Bingham returned again to the attack, but each time was thwarted by the ravages of fever and ill health until he all but laid down his life as had his early companions. Nevertheless, there was born in his heart such a passion for the people, such a vision of their Christless, hopeless state, that through him, his fervor and faithful preaching and presentation of the burden of the Sudan, five others took the place of the three, and were ready to say: "**Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life or by death.**"

Mr. Anthony had already received word of the new recruit, and had been instructed to receive him on probation. Indeed, there was little else to do. The small man was clinging to his call with every fiber of his slight being and his giant faith. In a report written in 1933, Mr. Bingham has said of their feeling at that time: "The letters written during that period reflect the sentiment of the council and would perhaps be better stated as advising that the candidate be received on suspicion rather than on probation!" One could perhaps learn here not to despise the day of small things, and that GOD could use the seemingly weak things of the world to confound the mighty.

Government restrictions at the time forbade the missionaries entering amongst the *Hausa* Moslem peoples, and every effort was made to keep the missions in what might be termed as pagan areas. During these days of negotiation and prayer, the Doctor was kept at Patigi where he spent some two years. Here he had to learn the Nupe tongue, but in the course of his studies found that his native teacher could also speak Hausa, and he began immediately to study what was to become the lingua franca of Nigeria.

In speaking of his bilingual study of those early years, he said: "My stay in Nupe country compelled me to use that highly intoned language, which gave me an ear for intonation for which I now thank the Lord." Then with his usual humility he added: "I believe the common people hear me fairly well." Fairly well! The Doctor's ability with the *Hausa* tongue led to his being selected as one of the committee to translate the Bible into that language, a Book that is now feeding the souls of thousands of Hausa-speaking people. Like JESUS of old, wherever the *Bature Mai Magani* went, the common people heard him gladly.

Wherever he went there was the same tumultuous greeting, the same display of affection from old and young, Christian, pagan and Moslem. An evangelist, dealing with some of his fellow-countrymen who were Moslems, said that when he spoke to them of the righteousness of JESUS and His holy offering for sin that a way to Heaven might be opened for all, the men nodded their heads.

"*Gaskiya* (truly)" said one of them, "we have heard this before from *Bature Mai Magani*. And," he added as an undisputed statement of fact, "if anyone gets into that Heaven you speak of, the *Bature Mai Magani* will have preference above all others;" and his fellow-Moslems acquiesced in sage agreement. Another added: "His is indeed a *tsofo mai bakiin karfe*," using an expression somewhat difficult to render into English. It could be translated "the old man of iron," as indeed he must have seemed to the indolent African.

One could never forget the last visit the aged Doctor paid to the large Tangale tribe which he had first seen as cannibalistic head-hunters. Early in 1915 Mr. Bingham, on a visit to the field, determined to look over the unopened field lying in northeast Nigeria.

Accompanied by Dr. Stirrett he had paced out the stretch of 250 odd miles, under a broiling sun, until they reached the rocky, hilly country now known as *Tangale-Waja*. Here the great Tangale peak, key landmark of the area, towering above the other rounded and pointed rocks, poked its declamatory finger to the sky. Racked with dysentery that almost cost the Doctor his life, they reached Biliri and Kaltungo, the two main towns of the Tangale people. Here they surveyed the ground that was to be eventually broken two years later by John S. Hall and C. Gordon Beacham, whose tale is well told in *From Cannibalism to CHRIST* by Hall, and *New Frontiers in the Central Sudan* by Beacham."

On his last visit to the people, after the Gospel had culled out a blood-washed number during 30 years of preaching, a great throng had gathered to welcome him. G. W. Playfair, successor to R. V. Bingham as general director, was making one of his periodic tours of the mission stations, accompanied by the Doctor. The missionaries and people were waiting in the native church for their arrival, some 900 black faces looking expectantly out from the mud wall and mud-seated tabernacle at Biliri.

The car ground to a stop on the steep hill opposite the church, and as the car door opened a whisper like the rustling of leaves went through the building. Out of the car stepped a small, stooped, pink-faced man, who walked over to the church with a quick little gait that seemed to scarcely bend the knees. As he came to the door of the building he took off his felt hat, looked back over his shoulder at the towering peak where the town nestled with its headstones in plain view, glanced quickly into the well-filled church, then stepped through the doorway. What thoughts must have flashed through his mind as he remembered the first day he had visited there, and the subsequent years of Gospel ministry.

As his thin body slipped easily between the door posts, it was not hard to see what the people thought of their beloved physician. With one accord they rose to their feet, silent in homage to the little Doctor. One missionary, at least, felt a lump in his throat at this display of affection and esteem. So must the churches have welcomed Paul the aged. So doubtless those of "Ebony Row" greeted Dr. Stirrett when he joined their glad throng in that land of eternal day. He will sit right down with them, and join in the songs of the redeemed. Anyone who has seen the Doctor in the midst of white or black, can imagine him starting the song that has become peculiarly his own through translation and usage:

Madalla! Madalla! Bari kowa shi ji!
Madalla! Madalla! Dukan kowa shi bi!
Ko zo wurin Allah to wurin Yesu,
Ku ba shi godiya don Mai Cetonmu!

Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!
Let the earth hear His voice!
Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!
Let the people rejoice!
Oh! Come to the Father through Jesus the Son,
And give Him the glory, great things He hath done!"

~ end of chapter 3 ~