

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 FOUR

"Served His Generation"

TWO YEARS of language study, which, to quote Mr. Banfield, was a case of "trying to distinguish between barks and grunts," and Dr. Stirrett was ready for the next step, and the Lord graciously opened the way.

A railway line had reached tenuous fingers up into the heart of Nigeria, penetrating as far as Zungeru, then the capital of Northern Nigeria. The seat of authority was later changed to Kaduna as a more healthy site, and Zungeru lost its place of prominence, and a large part of its European population of government officers and traders. At that time, however, it was the hub of activity for the governing of the northern provinces, many of them then closed territories for all save armed men.

A few miles from Zungeru was the *Hausa* town of Wushishi, and here around 1904 the mission was permitted to open a station, erect their buildings and preach the Gospel. This was the wedge which the Lord drove ever deeper into the crumbling walls of Mohammedanism and government restrictions, and which became a veritable oasis where the Water of Life was given without stint and without measure.

It was here that Dr. Stirrett, with great joy in his heart, had his first real contacts with the *Hausa* people, and could use the product of his two years of quiet study. Here, too, he commenced a ministry of evangelism which was to be peculiarly his own, and was to send his name far and wide throughout the broad reaches of West Africa. Jungle home, Mohammedan town, trading caravan, itinerant beggars and traders: all were soon to know of *Bature Mai Magani*, either through personal contact with him or through the hearing ear while gossiping round the inevitable campfire, the grapevine of the African.

The railway had not pushed beyond the Zungeru area, and great caravans of camels and donkeys came down from the northern reaches of Kano and Lake Chad and beyond, trading and bartering

their goods as far south as Lagos. They made the return trip laden with imported goods: bolts of cloth, beads, wire, tools and weapons which they carried back to their people. With these traders then, the Doctor began the type of service that was the keystone of his years in Africa.

Miss E. A. Clark, who was sent to Wushishi in 1912, and has been stationed there ever since, first met the Doctor at that time.

About a mile from the mission compound was what the *Hausa* people called a "Zango" or wayside camp, where they stopped at night during their long tiresome journeys. Day by day the newly arrived caravans would move into the camp as others moved out, providing a constant kaleidoscope of African life. Veiled Tuaregs, turbaned *Hausas*, light-skinned Arabs, each with their different customs and colors, all with their servants and slaves, came to the evening campfire with the common *Hausa* tongue. The great ungainly camels, viewing the world with supercilious air, resembled as someone has aptly said, "an acidulated Victorian maiden aunt having trouble holding her prince-nez in place!"

Those desert transports would sink with the slow dignity of an old-world curtsy, to their knees to be eased of their burdens. The young camels would rush alongside for their evening refreshment, bawling and jostling each other, as they sought out and nuzzled their respective mothers. Small-boned donkeys stood low-hipped in relief at the easing of their packs, nibbling contentedly at their bundles of grass.

The men settled into their Zango, each language group in a corner by itself, where they sorted and piled their goods for trade, and prepared food for the evening meal.

After the first few noisy hours, the camp would settle down to the serious business of breaking the day-long fast. The smoke of a dozen fires rose in a steady column, to hover over the resting place until slowly dispelled by the evening breeze. Great pots of ground guinea corn or millet would be slowly cooking into the porridge-like *tuwo*. A nauseous-looking gravy, made from the gathered herbs and leaves of the bush, might be graced with the spare flesh of an African chicken, or dried lumps of camel meat. And as they waited, fires would light up the faces of the men as they squatted on their heels, chewing the teeth-staining cola nut, or as they slumped in great fatigue against the piled-up barter goods.

The sun, near the end of its diurnal round, and eager to be gone, dropped perceptibly lower and lower, until one waited with baited breath to hear it crash on the distant hills. Other eyes were watching it too, and as the orb touched the horizon and cast its golden glow over the entire country, a penetrating voice, that of the muezzin, broke forth in a not unmusical sing-song to scatter the quiet stillness: "*Allahu akbar! Allahu akbar! La ilaha, illa Allah, Mohammed rasul Allah!*" "God is great! God is great! There is no God but God, and Mohammed is His prophet! Come to prayer; come to prayer!"

As one man, the camp would rise. With water or clean sand they would wash hands, feet, face and nostrils, that there might be purity for their evening prayer. Facing the east that was now fast closing in darkness, they lifted hands and voices to Mecca, that their prophet had made holy for them, and prayed to God in his name. Hands on knees, forehead to the ground, squatting, rising, repeating vain prayers and scraps of the Arabic Koran, fingering their casbi, the rosary-like beads of Mohammedanism; all the genuflections of the hopeless Mohammedan *salla* were

present. The day closed upon them, leaving them in greater darkness than ever before.

As the prayer finished, a majestic golden moon would attend them with unhurried decorum, to provide them with light for their evening meal, illuminating one of those wild scenes that has made the blood of countless travelers to course more quickly, and which gilds the imagination of every venturesome reader of tropic tales.

In a different part of Wushishi another meal was finished, and a little man, wearing the beard so revered by the Mohammedan, would be picking up his stick and lantern, and setting out to trudge the intervening mile or so to the caravan camp. He too had heard the muezzin call the faithful, and in imagination could see the throng at prayer to an unhearing, dead prophet. He must hurry with the message of Light and Life!

Arriving at the zango, he would be welcomed with the endless salutations, and his "*Sannu dai! Sannu dai! Lafiya lau!*" would answer each one of them. As opportunity offered, he would gather as many as cared to listen into a little knot around his lantern, and tell them the *labarin Yesu*, the news of JESUS.

As long as he was at Wushishi, and indeed wherever he happened to be at the time it was his invariable custom to visit the zangoes each night. Thousands must have heard for the first time, (and alas too many for the last time!) the news of GOD's redeeming grace.

In this way, too, the news was scattered far and near, over the fast-closed Mohammedan north. His "**Word will not return void**," and the Doctor realized that at these stops he might be the only one to speak to them of the Saviour of the world. He could not enter the Mohammedan towns and cities, but these campfire talks would long be discussed and remembered, passed from mouth to mouth, unknowingly being used of GOD to spread His Word.

He had found an open door into the north, that no man could shut.

Some ten years after Miss Clark arrived at Wushishi, a man walked all the way down from Sokoto, the ancient city and Mohammedan stronghold of northwest Nigeria. He traveled 650 miles, seeking the *Bature Mai Magani* (the white Doctor). He had heard his neighbors tell of meeting this white man at the Wushishi Zango, and what they could remember of the message of salvation had stirred an intense longing in his own heart.

The man, Malam Yusufu, determined that if the opportunity offered, he too would go and hear the good news of which he had tasted so little. After long years of unsatisfied yearning, he set out in search of the one man Whom he knew could help satisfy the longing. As far as any reports show, the man was soundly saved in accepting JESUS CHRIST as his personal Saviour. The Word of GOD is not bound. It knows no boundary or barrier, and will perform its own work of conviction in the hearts and lives of all who hear.

It has been recalled by G. W. Playfair, that this same Malam Yusufu mysteriously disappeared shortly after making his confession of faith in the Lord JESUS CHRIST. A short time after his decision, he left on a trip to Lokoja, and then simply vanished from all contact with the missionaries.

It is the belief of those concerned with tracing him, and who knew the bitter animosity of the Mohammedans to one of their number who might turn away from them, that he was killed, a martyr for CHRIST.

In later years, it became the usual outcome of a profession of faith, for a Mohammedan to lose any position he might have; be ostracized and beaten by his family; be imprisoned by the Mohammedan native court; or simply disappear as was Yusufu's fate.

To this day the people of Wushishi still call the mission house "*Gidan Almasihu*," the house of CHRIST, because the Doctor so constantly preached Him that the people thought that JESUS must live with him. **"It was noised that He was in the house."**

This practice of visiting the camps of the nomadic people at night must have been a habit created early in his missionary career. Mr. T. "Tommy" Titcombe, of the early missionary vintage, (1908) tells of visiting the camps of the cattle Fulani.

These Fulanis are a light-skinned, fine-featured people, whose ancestry is wrapped in mystery, but who are doubtless of early Egyptian descent. They own great herds of humped-back cattle, and living in temporary grass huts they roam vast distances throughout the whole of West Africa. Mr. Titcombe recalled one Sunday afternoon setting out with the Doctor, gathering people together on a knoll overlooking the creek where they watered their cattle, and telling them of JESUS and His love. Returning to the mission for a late evening meal he found the older missionary had prepared yams on the Saturday, and these, eaten cold with a dash of palm oil, constituted their Sunday supper.

The strong Presbyterianism of the Doctor forbade cooking on Sunday, and indeed, he himself invariably fasted from Sunday noon until Monday noon. The market and the caravan camp! These were the two places where the Doctor delighted to go, finding there ever new faces and open ears to hear his message, and knowing that many of them might never hear it any other way.

In 1947, Brother and Mrs. G. W. Playfair were making a trip by boat, car and plane across Africa, visiting the widely-flung stations of the S. I. M. and sister missions en route. While attempting to cross a river northeast of Ubangi, they found swollen water had washed out the bridge, delaying them for long, precious hours.

Wanting to redeem the time, they went into a nearby village, seeking Hausa-speaking natives with whom they might do some personal work. They finally located one, a truck driver, assiduously wiring together a lorry that should have been relegated to the scrap heap. Yes, he spoke Hausa, the mechanic informed them. He had learned it at Jos, and had often heard the *Bature Mai Magani* preach in the market there!

And now, some 1,500 miles away, the seed sown by the Doctor was being watered by the witness of those who were passing by.

It has been estimated by the general director of the S.I.M., G. W. Playfair, that the Doctor has

preached to no less than 1,500,000 people in Africa, a somewhat conservative estimate when one knows the congested crowds of the native markets.

In 1919 there was a meeting of the secretaries of the Missions for Northern Nigeria held at Lokoja, and Dr. Stirrett, who held that office in the S.I.M. for many years, was to attend with Mr. Alvarez of the Church Missionary Society; Mr. I. Sherk of the United Missionary Society (founded by Mr. A. W. Banfield as a foreign mission project for his home church); Mr. Brink of the Dutch Reformed Church Mission; and Dr. Stirrett of the S. I. M. The rest had gathered at Lokoja and were eating lunch when Dr. Stirrett arrived, bustling as usual, moving as quickly as his short legs would carry him.

He would scarcely wait to drink a cup of tea. He was utterly determined to preach in the market place, and if he delayed the people would be scattered and the opportunity lost. He gulped the tea hastily and was off. The conference would come later! First things first, his delight was to preach, and wherever he found an audience of even one he delivered his soul of the message. His eagerness to preach the Gospel remained undiminished to the end.

Mr. A. Stewart had just arrived on the field, and settled at Minna, which was then the Doctor's temporary headquarters. The Doctor never settled anywhere. As soon as he was known to be one place he was most likely somewhere else! On this occasion he was setting off for the Minna market with the new worker in tow.

The latter was fascinated at the idea of seeing the experienced warrior at work. The sounds and smells of that strange town were all wonderfully new to Mr. Stewart; the sounds of the weird, pagan singing; the thud of the tom-tom; all the wild cacophony of sound that makes up African village life broke for the first time on his ear. He followed the Doctor closely, as the latter clung to lantern, *Hausa* New Testament and hymn book with one hand, carrying a stout stick with the other. Not that he needed a stick in walking; rather he needed a brake. But its use was for a far more subtle purpose than as an aid to locomotion, as the new missionary soon saw.

They had not gone far when a small, deadly viper crossed their path. That scourge of Africa is the most loathsome and deadly of created things, with its dart and jab, death begins to work in the victim. This viper, stirred from nocturnal predacousness, tried to whip past them and into the shelter of the long grass. One step, a quick thud, and the twisting, squirming serpent has lost its head to the Doctor's blow.

Arriving at a receptive compound near the market place, the missionary seated himself on an upturned, tree-hewn mortar. The people gathered around him, their dusky faces standing out in quick relief in the yellow lantern light. Again the message was given. There was no doubt that he was heard and appreciated as was attested by the murmurs of approval and replies to his questions.

Not far away were the children of the compound, and as soon as they saw he was finished with the elders they knew it was their turn. They scrambled for a place on his knee; babies were totally unafraid of him, for he was the man who loved the black people. Together they would learn a *Hausa* Bible text, sing some simple choruses, hear a message easily intelligible to their childish hearts, and again the seed was sown.

He had an irresistible attraction for children. When little Marian Kirk of missionary parents was sick and fretting under the burning of fever, she moaned to her mother: "Mummy, I want the little Doctor, the one who loves me!" A testimony indicative of the hold he had on many hearts.

Another time the Doctor was expected to visit a station near the railway line, and the missionary went down on his motorcycle to pick him up. On arrival at the station he found that the train had come and gone, but there was no sign of the visitor. On investigation he learned that the little white man was in the nearby market place, and there he was found, the center of a knot of eager listeners. The motorcycle was late; why waste precious moments? Thus would the Doctor reason as he waited at the station.

"Redeeming the time."

Dr. Stirrett, however, is really noted for his work in the Jos market, the largest in that part of Nigeria. Here every day found him, rain or shine, standing on a rock that would bring him above the level of his listeners. From there he would deal with them regarding sin, righteousness and judgment. His words eddied and swirled through the constant chatter and flow of a half a dozen languages, a veritable babel of Babylon. His sharp, high-pitched voice pierced the din, and many of the people paused before passing, or stood with listening ear to the white man.

Ungainly buzzards pecked near the rock on which he stood. These scavengers of Africa are protected by law for their foul task. Their red-rimmed eyes, long, featherless, skin-wrinkled necks, curved beaks and totally unwholesome appearance, gave the effect of a visitant from the nether world. They searched for refuse, the dead and decaying matter, fit food for such creatures. They cared not for man, white or black, but went about their business of assiduously gorging themselves. Satiated, they hopped off to some haven of their own, until the craving for dead flesh drew them back again.

One could project the parallel to this illustration and let it touch the people standing around the market preacher. They, too, looked red-eyed and lustful, feeding on the dead and decaying things of the world: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, the pride of life.

The harlots, adulterers, thieves, and the whole band of sinful humanity pressed around. They, too, could reach a point of satisfaction today, but with the morrow would come the consuming fire of unsatisfied desire still burning within. To such was the message of freedom and salvation brought. For such CHRIST alone could save and satisfy.

On such a day there stood amongst the listeners a rather light-skinned fellow, who drew away from the preacher with a look of intense disgust and hatred on his face. Stooping down he picked up a large jagged rock, heaved it at the earnest preacher, and turned to leave. The missile caught the Doctor on the top of his head, knocking his helmet off, but doing no injury.

Without missing a word he continued with his preaching, sparing not so much as a glance at the daring rogue. Not so submissive were the thrower's fellow-countrymen. A Tangale man, from whom we heard the account, was standing by.

Edging around the crowd he came to where the man had moved in his retreat.

"Why did you do that?" asked the pagan Tangale of the rebellious, bigoted Mohammedan. "If you don't want to listen to *Bature Mai Magani*, the market is large. and you can go some other place."

Even as he was speaking the Doctor saw them, stopped his message, and stepping off his rock walked over to them.

The light-skinned Fulani drew back, imagining that there might be harm in the diminutive white man. With never a glance at the culprit he laid a restraining hand on the arm of the Tangale, and with a voice filled with compassion said to him: "Son, don't bother talking to this man. You are only speaking to a corpse, one dead in trespasses and in sins. Don't speak to a corpse. Why don't you come and speak to the Lord of life, the Lord JESUS CHRIST, and tell Him you repent and believe the Gospel? The stone thrown at me was nothing. Come to JESUS and believe on Him, and I will gladly suffer a hundred stones thrown at me."

The Fulani turned and slunk away. The Tangale listened to the white man, then he too turned and walked into Jos town, where he was preparing his loads for the return trip to Biliri. Three days later he paid his last visit to the market, and there heard the astounding news; the man who had thrown the stone had suddenly died the night before, without previous warning or sickness. "You are speaking to a corpse!" Prophetic words, indeed, for GOD guards his own with jealousy. One thinks of Miriam and Korah, and the Lord's vindication of His servant Moses.

After building up a church work and market service in Jos, the surrounding villages became his parish as well. He had no time for tennis or other forms of recreation or exercise. But he always had time to walk anywhere to preach the Gospel. Sometimes he would take others with him, when those short, piston-like legs would cover the ground with unbelievable rapidity, and usually to the chagrin of his companion.

As late as December, 1946, he had tuckered out a young missionary of no more than 35 years of age, on a fast eight-mile walk. And the Doctor was 81!

When the new church at Bununu was finished, C. F. Beitzel invited the Doctor as the special speaker for the opening day. Some 300 people were packed into the church while he preached to them as though dealing with each one individually. When they had filed out, the building filled again with newcomers, and he preached the same sermon again. It was high noon when the special meetings were over, the tropical sun blazing overhead.

Still going strong, Stirrett insisted on walking with Mr. Beitzel, a man some 30 years younger, to a village some seven miles from Bununu. At that village the Chief ultimately accepted CHRIST as his Saviour, and died in the faith. The men walked the seven miles back to Bununu, had a quick lunch, and set off in another direction to another village. Returning to the mission station they found the people had gathered again, and the Doctor joyfully preached to them too.

"He nearly wore me out," confesses Mr. Beitzel, "although I would have been ashamed to admit it to him!" At 82 years young, he was still bringing forth fruit in his old age, and like the date palm, his best fruit too.

~ end of chapter 4 ~