Doctor To Africa

The Story of

STIRRETT OF THE SUDAN

By

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MISSIONARY IN NIGERIA, WEST APRICA

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Joy of the Lord is His Strength

SOMEONE HAS SAID that a sense of humor is an essential requisite for a successful missionary life. That would be a double-action sense of humor, when one can laugh at himself, as well as at others. This may not be a criterion for missionary work, but unfortunate is that person who cannot laugh or bear the brunt of a joke.

The average African, under ordinary circumstances, is one embodied chuckle, and his hilarity can be called forth at the slightest provocation. Once while preaching the Doctor tried to press home the instability of temporal things, with a story of a bank teller who was inadvertently locked in the vaults and couldn't be released until someone from outside opened the doors. In the meantime he had more money under his hands than he could ever hope to amass himself, but he couldn't spend it, he couldn't eat it, he couldn't pay someone to get him out, while the air was getting so bad that it might finally snuff out his life.

As the picture unfolded and the plight of the hapless man was grimly drawn as only the doctor could do it, the listeners' smiles grew wider and wider, until the vision of a man having money and not able to buy anything with it became too much for them, and the church rocked with gales of infectious laughter, the missionary as loud as the rest.

The Doctor at another time was speaking in the large Kagoro church, and had brought along two native gowns to illustrate the difference between the righteousness of GOD and that of man. After introducing his subject he lifted up a filthy, ragged shirt that he had brought along, and in the enthusiasm of the moment he cried out:

"Who would want a rag like this? Who would accept this torn riga and be happy to wear it?" and as he asked his rhetorical question he received a very unexpected answer.

"*Ina so!*" (I want it!), and down the aisle marched a man as naked as the day he was born. The

Doctor's high pitched, jerky chuckle led the rest in uproarious laughter.

With such people the missionary could laugh, and they loved him for it, and would listen with sober mien the next moment as he spoke to them of eternal verities.

Some of his little jests have become mission bywords, received avidly by new missionaries and re-echoed by the old. His favorite joke on himself is in regard to his bachelor state. The good man had denied himself the joys of married and family life that he might the better give himself to the work of the Lord. But he was no cranky bachelor, although confessedly he was somewhat eccentric, with all the foibles that aging alone might bring.

"I was engaged to be married once," he bemoans plaintively. "Her name was Miss Button. Then she had to go home, and there has been a Button missing all my life!"

Stirrett had a watch of which he was inordinately proud, and to him it was an infallible chronometer. No need to ask anyone the time if he was present. Often he ambled into the dining room, a few minutes late by the house clock, and just as often he would stalk over to that recalcitrant timepiece, compare it with his own, then set it right. If he was ahead of the house clock, he usually prepared to sit down as a rebuke to the others for their tardiness. It was most fortunate that he did not go by sun time, else Old Sol might have found himself prodded out of bed a little earlier some morning, or sent scurrying to a hurried retreat in the evening!

"The time? Did you ask the time? Just a moment. Let me see now," and he would squint through his glasses at his watch and bring the questioner's into line.

Socially the Doctor was no recluse, but he gave little of his time to the rare occasions when missionaries could gather for fun and fellowship. He was, however, full of those amenities that made him lovable to those about him. There was an inherent graciousness in him that caused a shrinking from giving offence or bringing hurt to others.

One time while sitting at the dinner table the Doctor turned to a lady missionary, and quite unthinkingly made some remark at which the overtired worker took immediate offense, burst into tears and left the table. For a moment the Doctor paused, nonplussed and confused at her sudden departure. Then he, too, left the table, wrote the sweetest note of apology and self-abnegation, and sent it to her by the hand of the houseboy.

The letter was a balm to the overwrought worker who confessed that the Doctor's humility had touched her own heart. It has often been said that never once has he permitted the sun to go down on a difference of opinion, a strained relationship or a moment of anger. He was instant in redressing wrong, making sincere apology, and taking the brunt of the blame to himself whether he deserved it or not.

Dr. Stirrett might never be called an outstanding medical man, even by those who owe most to him. Yet he was for years the only physician of the S.I.M. He ushered the missionaries' children into the world, and some of these second generation missionaries have come back to the land of their birth, to join in the work of evangelizing the Sudan.

He nursed his co-workers, helping them to battle dysentery, malaria and the like, plus the host of

other ills that one is heir to in Africa. When the patient didn't respond to treatment he had recourse to prayer and the Great Physician. One hears nothing but praise and thanks from those to whom he was the beloved physician.

While he was not a brilliant medical man, nevertheless his long experience with tropical diseases and sickness gave him a grasp of their peculiarities, causes and cures, until he was able to make an outstanding contribution to the ministry of healing in West Africa. After long years as physician-in-general to a large clientele of black and white patients he was able to write an authoritative book for the guidance of others. This was, as he printed on the name plate:

A Medical Book
for
THE TREATMENT OF DISEASES
in West Africa
Also
PHARMACY NOTES, DISPENSARY HINTS
AND HEALTH HINTS
Written in Non-Technical Language
by
A. P. STIRRETT, M.D., C.M.

Surely an awesome title for a book, and yet it does no more than suggest what is contained therein. A glance down the table of contents reveals the need for help in the battle against the little-known diseases of the tropics. One reads of ainhum, beriberi, bilharzia, black water fever, guinea worm, kala azar, leprosy, malaria, snake bite, yellow fever, elephantiasis, tropical ulcers, and a hundred and one diseases never heard of in the western world.

This book is to be found in every mission dispensary, eagerly read by the new worker, constantly referred to by the old, most of whom are the only means of proper medical care amongst the natives. It does not take a trained nurse or doctor to follow his simple instructions for diagnosis and treatment, but all can be a real help in the alleviation of pain and suffering amongst the ignorant people of the bush.

Miss L. Trapp, R.N., refers to the book as of inestimable value to her in the large medical work amongst a pagan people, where patients number as high as 300 per day, not counting regular classes for midwifery, hygiene, weekly leper injections, and the other ministries of healing and help. To such places and to such people, the Doctor's wide experience still becomes a real aid in the battle for health and cleanliness.

In 1946 he revised his notes to include the now widespread use of atabrine, the sulpha drugs and penicillin, which are dealing a death blow to the scourges of the tropics.

As one reads the treatise one can almost hear the Doctor speaking in his ejaculatory sentences, and terse descriptions. In at least one respect he differs from the usual medical tome by inserting such expressions as the following:

"Blackwater Fever Treatment: This is a serious disease and demands constant and earnest prayer to GOD. A doctor and nurse must be sent for at once," and he continues with instructions for the

immediate aid of the patient.

Dr. Stirrett knew, as do all that live in the tropics, that their health is a precarious thing, with even the healthiest of mortals finding that they cannot withstand the rigors of the country. Only those who have felt the fire of malaria burning in their bones, or who have seen the sudden death due to spinal meningitis, or have seen the deadly swelling that brings death to a snake-bite patient, can tell of the fear that sometimes wells up in the heart, and makes one long for the comparative security of the homeland.

The sight of fingerless, toeless, emaciated lepers is so commonplace as to go almost unnoticed by the missionaries. And yet one cannot see the "remorseless nibblings of this unhurried death" without an inward shrinking, and a struggle to even come nigh unto the leper. Foul ulcers on every part of the body provide a feeding ground for flies which carry germ laden bodies into the mission station and house.

Trachoma, smallpox or spinal meningitis might sweep through a town or hamlet, aided and assisted by extremely unsanitary conditions and uncaring natives. It is this that led the Doctor and his co-workers to realize that their dependence is not upon the arm of flesh, but upon the goodness of Him by whom we are fearfully and wonderfully made. And in committing their bodies to Him, and using the best means of preserving health, men and women are able to carry on long years of labor in the vineyard.

Others serving in various agencies and government offices spend 18 months in West Africa, then must go to the homeland for a period of recuperation. The missionary stays for four or five years, thus more than doubling the efficiency of his term, while underneath him are the Everlasting Arms.

When Stirrett first arrived on the field little was known of the effects of either malaria or the sun; and while not much could be done about the former, he did a great deal about the latter. He dressed in a manner that one smiles at now, and doubtless he had many an inward chuckle himself at his precautions of the early days.

He wore great, broad-brimmed, double-felt hats, lined with turkey red flannel, and for years was seen constantly with an umbrella during the hours of sunshine.

The custom of wearing more comfortable, light clothing, that later became standard tropical wear as knowledge of the sun's rays decreased the fear of it, never fully caught up with Dr. Stirrett. He invariably wore a collar and tie, coat and heavy boots that would take the punishment and scuffing that his queer, stiff-kneed walk gave them.

On one occasion he was seen wearing full length underwear, the very thought of which would make one who lives in the tropics to perspire.

Perhaps be was built for the tropics, for enervating heat and wide changing temperatures had little effect on him. His small, spare home seemed impervious to the rigors of the tropical climate. He loved the sun, the broiling heat and the occasional biting cold that is the amazement of Africa. One dares not leave a thermometer where the sun will touch it. One who did so saw it race up to the 140 degree F. mark and keep on going past the glass restriction. Shade

temperatures of 105-115 are common.

Sometimes one cannot shake a clinical thermometer down to normal to test the fever of a hapless patient.

And paradoxically, during the months of December to February the biting harmattan winds, sweeping down in dust-laden fury from the Sahara Desert, bite through protective clothing like a winter's gale. With the nose and throat caked with alkaline dust, eyes red-rimmed and smarting, skin dry and cracking, one wonders if the artic could stand in contrast to the Africa of the hymn: "Where Africa's sunny fountains roll down their golden sand!"

As the doctor took the utmost precautions against the sun outwardly, so he sought to safeguard against the country's sicknesses inwardly.

His food was a diet guaranteed to give long life in the tropics, if not a pleasant one gastronomically speaking. He ate heartily of the foods that were his fad of the time, and at first used palm oil on them with a free hand. Later he became attached to the healthful properties of beniseed.

Fresh fruit, of course, was his mainstay, and he could consume more bananas, mangoes and guavas than most large-sized men. Guinea corn porridge was his daily fare throughout the long years, and sometimes it was the basis of his two or three meals a day. He was once seen, absent-mindedly (at least, we hope it was absent-mindedness!) piling spinach and carrots on a plate already brimming with porridge.

Of late years, R. B. Oliver reports that the Doctor's midday meal consisted of a heaping plate of guinea corn porridge, "garnished" with two large Spanish onions on top, followed by six bananas and a glass of milk. He ate to live, and his 83 years of clear thinking and active living attest to the fact that his experiments were not in vain.

At one time he averred that meat at least twice a day was a must for the tropics. Since this was usually tough goat meat, or the scrawny African chicken, his recommendation was not always followed. Later, however, he became a vegetarian, although not rabidly so, and was ever gracious in accepting what was given him while visiting others. His food must be plain, and once he was heard to rebuke a missionary for cutting a tomato to resemble a rosebud, and putting a dab of salad at the heart.

"Leave them as GOD made them," he said, not unkindly, "and they will do you more good."

Plain food and plenty of walking; this was his faithfully followed prescription for a healthy life in the torrid zone.

He disliked cars, horses, and indeed any method of locomotion save shanks mare, for thus he was in step with his people, and they took the rugged road together.

To his great chagrin he was once compelled to take it easy on a seven day trek to the mission station at Karu. He made the trip in folding chair, carried on the heads of four stalwart Gbaris - the Doctor slung on to the pole like some meat going to market. His intention was to stop short

of the compound, and enter the mission on foot, thus saving himself the embarrassment of being carried into the house.

R. B. Oliver, however, anticipated the worthy Doctor, and went out to meet the traveler. As he saw the men approaching through the tall elephant grass he was amazed to see the Doctor being thus carried. As they met, Oliver greeted him warmly, having been long without visitors. To his surprise the Doctor neither looked up nor answered him, and the procession carried on to the compound in silence.

When they reached the house he alighted from the hammock, dismissed the hateful thing from his sight, then turned and greeted his host as though he had just come out of the house to meet him.

He was actually ashamed to be seen being carried, instead of briskly leading the party in with his own snappy heel-and-toe pace. This is the only time on record when he was so caught, and if ever he took such an effeminate course again he hid it well, and preserved his own pride in walking.

Apart from his administrative duties as field secretary of the S.I.M. missionary to the *Hausa* people, physician to the mission family, and supervisor of the dozens of local dispensaries scattered throughout the field, he also made and dispensed the drugs for which his early training had equipped him.

His office was in Jos of later years, a single room that doubled for consulting room, dispensary and bedroom. For the latter he had a rickety bed that gradually grew more dilapidated with the years. It would easily hold his slight frame, but became an eyesore to his fellow missionaries, particularly when they knew that other Europeans often came to him for consultation.

A bed was finally brought from home for him, and a committee of one was appointed to see about making the change. To her suggestion he replied: "I don't want anyone in this mission to sleep on a bed worse than your humble servant, A. P. Stirrett." The old bed remained.

As he grew older the Doctor paid less and less attention to his dress, and as the country opened up, so did the influx of government officials and other Europeans become greater. Important functions were periodically held to which the leaders of the missionary societies were often invited. To make sure that he was always presentable, Miss M. Hopkinson of the Jos office staff, made him her responsibility, and the Doctor had the understanding hands of a woman to make sure his clothes were pressed, his shirts were buttoned and his ties knotted.

One cannot understand what potent charge she used on these occasions, for this most independent of men would have resented "being taken care of!" Suffice it to say that with Miss Hopkinson as his guardian angel, he always turned up at the affairs in good order, despite the missing Miss Button!

One such occasion was marked by a signal honor being done to Dr. Stirrett, when he, with Dr. P. Barnden of the S.U.M. were given distinctive presentations on the occasion of the crowning of King George VI in 1936. Dr. Barnden received the O.B.E., and Dr. Stirrett a coronation medal, honors richly deserved by these men of GOD who had labored so long and faithfully for the

betterment of the Nigerian members of the British Empire.

Mr. Ira Sherk of the United Missionary Society recalls many early contacts with Dr. Stirrett. On one occasion they were traveling together (circa 1911), and they shared a cabin on board ship. The Doctor, as his custom was, arose early for his devotions. After prayer came his exercises and sponge bath. He was most thoughtful in trying not to awaken his companion.

As he softly splashed in the basin in the gloomy dawn that had barely lightened the porthole, a song invariably rose to his lips, and a sibilant whisper of the words would carry to the ears of the sleeping man:

"Will there be any stars, any stars in my crown,
When at evening the sun goeth down?
When I wake with the blest in the mansions of rest,
Will there be any stars in my crown?"

And as the whisper filled the quiet cabin the other was effectively wakened, to lift a sleepy eye and watch this man, whose crown would indeed be well-studded with stars, and whose reward for labor would indeed be great.

"**The joy of the Lord is his strength**." We smile at him, we laugh with him, and rejoice that we have been privileged to know him and to appreciate the work he has done.

~ end of chapter 7 ~

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