

## A ROMANCE OF THE MISSION FIELD

THE return to Europe of Bishop Francis Steinmetz, Vicar Apostolic of Dahomey, after thirty-eight years in French West Africa, recalls a romance of missionary enterprise which is worth recording. He belongs to the Lyons Society of African Missions, founded by Mgr. Marion de Brésillac in 1856. The holy founder applied in the first instance for Dahomey, but was refused by Propaganda on account of its evil reputation. It was considered the most pernicious district of the West African Coast from the malignity of its climate and the barbarity of its population. Instead he was allotted Sierra Leone, itself a sufficiently difficult post, as events were to prove. It was only at a later period, after his death, that it was found practicable to attempt the evangelisation of Dahomey: that, therefore, Bishop Steinmetz has been able to rule his tropical diocese for twenty years or more, and return to Europe in full health and vigour, is eloquent testimony of the progress made in the Dark Continent.

When Mgr. de Brésillac had made sufficient progress with his newly-formed congregation for the African Missions, he left for the West Coast of Africa, burning with zeal, early in 1859. His Society then numbered little more than two dozen priests and students, and of these a small party of three priests and one lay brother, with M. Raymond as Superior, had already preceded him at Sierra Leone a year previous. Leaving his Society at Lyons under the charge of a very remarkable man, Father Augustine Planque, whom he had chosen as his co-adjutor and successor, the holy bishop did not wait with worldly prudence to see his congregation further expand and consolidate before venturing afield, but hastened to Sierra Leone to rejoin the small contingent there. On arrival at

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Freetown on May 14th, 1859, it was discovered a virulent epidemic of yellow fever had broken out, the most violent experienced for nearly thirty years. So great was the devastation caused that the Captain of the vessel hesitated to allow his distinguished passenger and his party to land. 'I am the Bishop of Sierra Leone,' de Brésillac replied; 'it is my duty to be there.' With that he was permitted to disembark with his companions.

At first all went well and the joy of the young community at being rejoined by its founder was great. But a tragic dénouement was soon to follow. One of the fathers fell ill and died, another followed, and a lay brother had to be shipped home broken in health. Soon only two of the little party remained, M. Raymond and de Brésillac. Then they, too, died, on the 25th and the 28th of June respectively, and were buried together, the prayers at the grave-side being said by the Anglican bishop in the absence of a Catholic priest! The entire Mission to Sierra Leone had been wiped out within six weeks of the Bishop's arrival.

The consternation with which the news was received at Lyons can be imagined. Father Planque called together the young Community of scarcely more than a dozen souls, and suggested they should be disbanded. But he was met with a heroic refusal; they would carry on! Father Planque was commissioned to proceed to Rome to lay their case before the Holy See and await its decision.

There he received a cordial welcome, and Pope Pius IX, embracing him, exclaimed: 'The work will live; it will live!' Father Planque was confirmed in his appointment as Superior of the Society and, armed with the necessary authority, returned to Lyons. He set to work with indomitable energy, undismayed by the heavy task imposed upon him, and after half a century of strenuous labour had the satisfaction of

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seeing the Society firmly established and succeeding in what at first had seemed an almost hopeless task.

For it must be remembered that the sphere of activity chosen by the Congregation was one of the worst in the whole of the vast missionary field of the Church. The West Coast of Africa was then, and for long after, known as the 'white man's grave.' Such was the toll of life taken by the deadly climate and the dreaded black-water fever, that the average length of life for the missionaries for the first forty years of the Congregation's labours on the Coast was not more than from three to five years, while by 1870 the age of the *oldest* priest on the Mission did not exceed forty-two. Apart from the labour incurred in raising funds, gaining postulants, and expanding the work in Europe, the mere strain of sending relay after relay of recruits to Africa—once work had been re-begun there—to replace those so prematurely fallen at the front, must have been stupendous. But the Society never faltered, and is now firmly rooted in the once barren soil of West Africa, where its congregations of native Christians number nearly three hundred thousand souls, over an immense district of fifteen hundred thousand square miles. European influence, hygiene and medical science have done much to ameliorate the conditions of living for both the white man and the native; but the toll on the health and life of the missionaries is still severe, and Bishop Steinmetz's record of thirty-eight years of service is unique.

Already within three years of de Brésillac's death the Society was in a position to resume active labour on the mission field, and this time it had the consolation of being allowed by Propaganda to go to Dahomey, the first goal of its Founder's ambition. Some idea of the difficulties which had frightened the authorities may be gathered from the following description of a French traveller, writing at a later date.

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‘ For those,’ wrote M. Louis Prout, in his *African Visions*, ‘ who lived between 1880 and 1894, the word Dahomey evokes disgust; it is synonymous with unprecedented ferocity and unimaginable savageness; it evokes the most terrible visions of incredible hecatombs and ritual feasts consecrated by innumerable massacres accompanied by the frenzied cries of a delirious population. There, as it is pronounced, one sees under one’s eyes multitudes of wretched victims thrown on to the top of walls, fastened to baskets whence only the head emerges to fall under swords red to the hilt . . . . one sees long lines of stakes placed by the King of Porto Novo at the frontiers of his territory which are nothing but human corpses impaled . . . .’

Things were worse in 1860 than 1880; nevertheless, there was another side to the picture. Relatively the climate was reported upon favourably if sufficient precautions were taken and immune from the epidemics which periodically ravaged Sierra Leone. And if its evil reputation for barbarism was well deserved, the lives of Europeans at least had always been respected, while the reigning King of Dahomey was anxious to establish friendly relations with the European powers, especially France. The moment seemed favourable, therefore, to make a start, and a pontifical brief was obtained by which all the territory from the Volta to the Niger was erected into a Vicariate Apostolic and confided to the care of the Society. The diocese of Dahomey had been founded, and on January 3rd, 1861, a small party of three priests under Father Francis Borghero, an Italian of Genoa, set sail for the distant post.

There is no need to record the varied fortunes of the new missions, which, once firmly established, has continued to prosper; but some idea of the transformation of the native character it has been able, in con-

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junction with other European influences, to effect may best be obtained from the writer already quoted. On first setting foot in the country, he remarks, one would naturally expect to see ferocious countenances marked with cruelty. Instead, one is surprised to-day to meet only faces 'sweet and intelligent, welcome looks and glances subtle and lively, though also calm and measured, such as belong to the most inoffensive people.' Although he ascribes this transformation solely to the 'paix français,' which has caused humane virtues to replace the native cruelty, no one can doubt how much of this is due to the softening influences of Christianity and the educational efforts of the missionary. For of the two million inhabitants of Bishop Steinmetz's Vicariate, thirty thousand are Catholic, with nineteen primary schools, attended by four thousand boys and girls. But an even better indication of the extent of the Church's influence on the native character is the success which has already attended the bishop's efforts to create a native clergy.

There is perhaps no more difficult work to which the Church sets her hand in pagan countries than the creation of a native clergy. 'You do not know the Baganda,' said a native Chief to a French Missionary; 'you will never make a priest of him.' None the less it is one of the most important tasks which cries out to be undertaken. For not only will a native clergy be able to 'carry on' in case of persecution if the foreign missionary is banished—as might, for instance, happen to-day in China—but the message of the native priest carries a greater conviction to his countryman than anything a stranger may say. 'How can we know,' African natives have said to the missionaries, 'that you speak the truth to us? But when our own people tell us we must believe.' And experience in Africa has shown the astounding effect the preaching of native priests has had on their hearers.

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It is natural that Bishop Steinmetz, as a true son of the founder of his Society, should be particularly anxious to advance such a work. For it was his very advocacy of this cause—the formation of a native clergy—which had wrecked Marion de Brésillac's career in India. He had begun his missionary life in the venerable Society of the Missions Etrangères, and even before his departure from the Rue du Bac, its headquarters in Paris, for the Far East, had announced his intention of making this his chief work. But he had met with much opposition, for the difficulties in his way were great, and he was in many ways, like other pioneers, in advance of his time. He left India his career apparently ruined, though in reality guided by Providence to the true work of his life. Africa not India was to be the stage. And the policy he advocated, with so much zeal and self-sacrifice, nearly a century ago, is now the guiding principle of missionary action in all the pagan countries of the world. Bishop Steinmetz has built a seminary which already houses thirty-eight students, and he is enthusiastic in his praise of the native priest. It is interesting to recall that he had already the project of the seminary in his mind when he visited Europe in 1912 and received the warm encouragement of Pope Pius X.

With their slender resources it has not been possible for the missionaries to reach all the tribes of Dahomey, and the Bishop has given an interesting account of one of these to a Fides correspondent in Rome. It is the 'Somba' tribe, living in a mountainous district in little forts guarded by towers. The ground floor is occupied by the cattle, well protected against wild beasts; the first floor is the living room of the family; the crops are stored in the attic. Although so extremely primitive that they do not even possess clothes, they are noted for the purity of their

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morals and their honesty. And the Bishop gave an interesting example of the latter. The administration had sent them a number of farm implements to help them in their work. Some time later one was returned. It had belonged to a man who had failed to pay for it, and his heirs returned it rather than even seem to be connected with a theft.

Perhaps it may be the Bishop's consolation in Europe to obtain sufficient personnel to enable him on his return to Africa to send a resident missionary to a tribe that would appear so well to deserve one.

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