

T. J. Comber, 1852-1887.

FIFTY years ago, on June 27th, 1887, in the very month when an enthusiastic England was celebrating the jubilee of Queen Victoria's accession, T. J. Comber passed away on a German steamer anchored off Loango, on the coast of West Africa, worn out by fever and the sad experiences through which he had recently passed. He was then only thirty-four years old, yet into a brief space of time he had crowded so many adventures, living so energetically and intensely, and with such devotion, that he had had an influence on his generation out of all proportion to his years. His dauntless spirit had stirred men's imaginations, his happy disposition had captured their hearts. He played a notable part in the establishment of the Congo Mission, not only because of what he did in Africa, important as that was, but also because of the effect of his personality in Britain. Something of what Samuel Pearce meant to the first generation connected with the Baptist Missionary Society, Tom Comber meant in the eighties of the last century.

The captain of the *Lulu Bohlen* was so impressed with the spirit of the dying man and what he learned of his achievements, that, at the request of young A. E. Scrivener, who had been Comber's companion on that last sad and fruitless trip in search of renewed strength, he ran his vessel into Mayumba Bay, one hundred miles north of Loango, and there, on the desolate shores of Gabun, the gallant pioneer was laid to rest. It was strangely appropriate that his last resting-place should be almost midway between the Cameroons and the Congo.

I.

Thomas James Comber was born in Camberwell in 1852. His father, a manufacturing jeweller, was a member of the Baptist Church at Denmark Place, a historic cause famed for its connection first with Edward Steane and later with Charles Stanford. Tom, who had an elder sister, Carrie, and two younger brothers, Sidney and Percy—all of them to be immortally linked in self-sacrificing service for Africa—went to a British school near his home, and left it, when he was twelve, to enter his father's workshop. He had not long started in the city when his mother died. He owed a great debt to his teachers at the Denmark Place Sunday School, particularly to Mr. Rickards. They were concerned for the spiritual, mental and physical growth of the boys in their classes, and it is not too much to say that contact with them was among the most formative influences in preparing Comber for the part he was later to play.

It was while he was in his 'teens that a missionary purpose formed itself in Comber's heart. His thoughts turned towards Africa. He must have heard much in the Denmark Place environment of Alfred Saker and the Cameroons mission. He must have been stirred also by the accounts of Livingstone's explorations. The better to fit himself for any future opportunities that might come to him, the young jeweller attended evening classes in Latin and Greek at Spurgeon's College. Always he was busy reading.

"Ah, me, yes!" he wrote later to his father from Africa. "Bow Lane, and that lazy son of yours who used to loiter along carelessly, linger at all the newspaper windows when you sent him on errands, and run hard back to try and regain lost time, and who was so seldom 'blown up' for it! Gracechurch Street, the Hall, Clerkenwell, the workmen's trains, Bryer's, coffee shops, etc. Dear me! how different is my life now; I wonder if I could fit a brooch, or estimate the weight and value of a diamond now."

In 1868 Comber, a youth of sixteen, was baptised at Denmark Place. Soon he was himself a Sunday School teacher, and busy in public-house visitation, tract distribution and ragged-school work. Three crowded happy years were spent, and then, his purpose remaining clear and strong, he applied to Regent's Park College as a missionary student.

Comber spent four years at Regent's Park. They were important years. Gladstone was Prime Minister of his first and greatest administration. Sweeping reforms were being carried out in many of the principal departments of national life. In 1871 the religious tests which had excluded Nonconformists were abolished at the Universities of Oxford, Cambridge and Durham. In November of that same year Stanley found the lost Livingstone in the heart of Africa. Eighteen months later the great explorer-missionary died, and in April, 1874, while Comber was still at Regent's Park, Livingstone's remains, borne so faithfully over so many miles by his African friends, were buried in Westminster Abbey. Within the circle of the College, too, there were many important happenings. Those were the years of the Biblical Revision Committee, on which both Dr. Angus and Dr. Benjamin Davies served. The latter's powers were declining. In the autumn of 1874, the week-end before term commenced, there was an explosion in the neighbouring canal which wrecked the east end of the College and proved a severe shock to Dr. Davies. At the end of Comber's last session, to the grief of all his students, who were passionately devoted to him and shared the nursing duties at night, the old professor passed away.

Comber's closest friend at Regent's Park was a Devonshire youth, Henry Wright, who testified to the fact that throughout Comber's course the sense of constraint for missionary service was constantly evident, though it was combined with great cheeriness and a wide range of interests. Most of the students then took ale for dinner. Comber was an ardent total abstainer, and one day filled up the glasses of all his companions with water, suffering afterwards with imperturbable good humour the penalty of a ducking under the pump.

From the academic point of view Comber's college career was undistinguished, but when, in 1875, he offered to the Baptist Missionary Society he was eagerly accepted for service in the Cameroons. He was valedicted at the Assembly in Plymouth, but remained in England a further year that he might take medical classes at University College. During his last session at Regent's Park he had started a Children's Service at Camden Road Church. It met with remarkable success, giving an outlet for his fondness for children and his zeal to win disciples for Christ. Further, it brought him the close friendship of John Hartland, who was later to be his companion in Congo.

II.

An eager young man of twenty-four, Comber sailed for Africa in November 1876. Quintin Thomson was his companion on board the *Ethiopia*. At the time of their sailing the students of Regent's Park College gathered for a prayer-meeting to commend to God's keeping the knight-errant setting out for the Dark Continent. The voyage of forty-one days was uneventful, save for a meeting at Sierra Leone with Alfred Saker, the worn-out hero of the Cameroons Mission, who was returning to England for the last time. As he greeted the young recruit did he recall his own meeting with William Knibb in Jamaica thirty-three years earlier? Once more the torch was being passed on. Dr. Underhill had resigned from the Secretaryship of the B.M.S. and Mr. Baynes was taking control of affairs in London. The days of the Cameroons Mission were numbered. Already men's minds were concentrating upon the needs of the heart of Africa.

But Comber's immediate responsibilities and opportunities were in the Cameroons. He and Quintin Thomson landed at Victoria, and after a conference with the faithful Jamaican missionary, Jackson Fuller, and young George Grenfell, who had come out from England two years earlier, Comber found himself left for a while on his own. His burning desire was to get into the interior, and before many months had passed he made two important exploratory journeys behind the Cameroons Mountain, on one of which he discovered a lake to which he gave the name

of his former Sunday School teacher, though it may well have been Mr. Rickards' daughter who was chiefly in his mind.

The year 1877 had not passed, however, before news reached Comber and Grenfell of the challenge which Robert Arthington had made to the B.M.S. regarding new work in Congo, and of the decision of the Committee that the two of them should go down to the mouth of the river to explore the possibilities. Their first trip was a brief one. Their second, in the summer of 1878, took them with two African teachers, an Angola black as Portuguese interpreter, two Kru boys, three Cameroons boys, Jack the donkey and Jip the dog, right up to San Salvador, the capital of the old kingdom of Congo, where Don Pedro V. welcomed them, and they carved their names on the great baobab tree. Both Grenfell and Comber were fired with the immense possibilities of a mission in this vast though dangerous field. It was Comber who came back at once to England to report, and, if possible, to secure reinforcements.

The young man reached home again within a few days of his twenty-sixth birthday. His return caused great interest and enthusiasm, not only at the B.M.S. headquarters, and among his personal friends, but in the churches generally. Had he not been in parts where no white man had before travelled? Was he not calling the denomination to a new enterprise? The Committee decided to go forward. A young Irishman, Crudgington, who had just completed a training at Rawdon College, was willing to go to the Congo with Comber. After the latter had spoken at a meeting at the Downs Chapel, Clapton, W. R. Rickett, who was later to become B.M.S. Treasurer, found him a second companion in Holman Bentley. Then, after a gathering for young men at the Mission House, John Hartland, of Camden Road, volunteered. By the spring of 1879 the party was ready to set out. Comber had been married to Minnie Rickards by Dr. Clifford: their's was the first wedding in Westbourne Park Church. And at a great meeting in the Cannon Street Hotel they were bidden farewell. Alfred Saker, broken in body but indomitable in spirit, was present, and the whole audience rose to its feet to do him honour, as he gave his blessing to the new Congo mission.

The party sailed from Liverpool. On the quay a devoted and enthusiastic Welshman, John Parry, gave each of them a little packet containing a pound in sixpenny pieces and three-penny bits—"to be spent on the voyage"—and at the last moment was so stirred that he pulled off his watch and chain and placed them in Comber's hand.

"Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very Heaven!"

III.

Comber and his friends reached Banana in June, 1879, and divided up into two parties for the journey to San Salvador. Hardly were they established there, however, before Mrs. Comber, a young bride of only four months, died of meningitis. It was the first of the tragedies that were to darken the early years of the Congo mission, and which were largely the result of enthusiasm, inexperience and ignorance. Comber was driven with even greater intensity than before upon his missionary tasks. The foundations of the work at San Salvador were carefully laid. Long journeys were made in the country around, often among hostile peoples. On one trip Comber and Hartland were attacked, barely escaping alive and Comber only with a nasty wound in his back. Then, after several unsuccessful attempts, the difficult trek across country to Stanley Pool was accomplished. This opened up wide new possibilities. Crudgington was sent home for more reinforcements. Missionaries had to remain in San Salvador because of Jesuit opposition. But in the meantime Comber and Bentley, with the help of Grenfell, set about the planting of Stations on the Lower River.

The months passed amid many anxieties. Several times Comber went down with fever, but his energy and devotion carried him on, and slowly the mission began to extend. Grenfell had gone to England again and brought back with him a steamer; the *Peace*, and at length in 1884 it was successfully launched on Stanley Pool. But by then death had again been busy among the pioneers. Young Hartland was gone, and Doke, who had followed Comber at Regent's Park College, and Butcher and two engineers. And others had had to return to England. Comber had the joy of welcoming his brother Sidney to Africa, but he knew that there must be deep concern at home at what was happening.

"Do people fancy we have made a mistake, and the Gospel is not to be preached in Central Africa?" he wrote. "Let them take a lesson from the Soudan. When Hicks Pasha and party are cut off, they only send out a bigger pasha and a bigger party. Gordon is coming out, we hear, in Stanley's place. We want some good men of Gordon's stamp, fearless and resolute, to whom death is not bitter, and whom trial and difficulty do not daunt. Men with unswerving purpose, who glory in the hard, fast bonds of duty; men to whom the Congo mission shall be the one thing in life—all-absorbing, all-engrossing, and who will be ready for any phase of its many-sided work."

Such he was himself, but clearly he must have rest and change, and the leaders of the Society wanted to confer with him. Accordingly, in the autumn of 1884 Comber left Congo, visiting the Cameroons on the way back that he might see his sister, Carrie, who had gone there as a missionary. He took with him two African boys, his faithful personal attendants, Mantu Parkinson and Lutumu.

England was reached in January, 1885. That very month the country was shocked by the news of the fall of Khartoum and the death of General Gordon. A Christian hero had fallen. And to Comber and his friends there came speedily fresh personal grief. Sidney Comber died in Africa, then Cowe, then Cruickshank. It was no wonder that the hearts of some began to fail them. The Annual Public Meeting of the Society in the Exeter Hall in the spring was unusually crowded. Not a few who were there are still living and can recall the impression made by Comber's appeal for courage and persistence, and by his solemn quoting of the words: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit."

Comber was eager to return to Africa and his faith was infectious. Alfred Henry Baynes stood firm in the face of all criticisms of the enterprise. A breakfast was arranged at the Cannon Street Hotel at which H. M. Stanley and Comber were the guests of honour. A great valedictory service was held at Camden Road, then another in Liverpool. In spite—perhaps because of—the losses there was no lack of missionary volunteers, and Comber had with him his other brother, Percy, and Philip Davies, both of them fresh from Regent's Park College, and J. E. Biggs, and John Maynard, and Michael Richards. They made a gallant company. On the way to Congo they visited Cameroons. Young Thomas Lewis was there. "How bright and happy they all were!" he wrote.

The station at Underhill was reached in October, 1885. Almost at once the news of the death of his sister reached Comber. His wife, his brother and now his sister had laid down their lives for Africa. His heart was heavy for the Camberwell jeweller, who had thus seen one after another of his children stricken down. There were other deaths in the missionary ranks. Nevertheless, 1886 was a year of promise. Comber journeyed back to San Salvador, where eight years earlier the work had begun, that Mantu Parkinson might there among his own people confess his faith in Christ in baptism—the first-fruits of the Congo Church. Then came some busy months at Wathen.

Early in 1887 Comber was at Underhill. The Cameroons

work had been handed over to the Basle Mission, and Thomas Lewis and his wife were to join the Congo staff. Lewis has vividly described how he reached the mission station to find Comber and Moolenaar in the deepest distress, for shortly before Darling and Shindler had died there within a few hours of one another. In the little white bungalow on the hill was Mrs. Darling, a widow after only eight weeks of married life. "Comber in those dark days," said Thomas Lewis, "seemed to have done nothing but nurse the sick and bury the dead and comfort the bereaved." And the sad tale was not yet over. As he was about to escort Mrs. Darling to the coast, there came news of the death of Miss Spearing at Stanley Pool.

"What has happened has quite unhinged me!", wrote Comber to his father. He was a man sadly changed from the confident leader of a few months before. Yet he thought of nothing else than a brief sea trip to set him up for further work. But it was not to be. On June 14th he was attacked by severe fever. When he was a little better A. E. Scrivener took him down to Boma. They embarked on the *Lulu Bohlen* on June 24th, and three days later brave Tom Comber passed peacefully away.

Paradoxical as it may seem, this new catastrophe finally secured the continuance of the Congo mission. Few after 1887 challenged the policy of the B.M.S. in this matter. Congo had become a sacred place for British Baptists, a place hallowed by the sacrifices of a goodly succession of men and women, of whom Tom Comber was the outstanding example, *primus inter pares*—"so universally beloved; he was one of the most winsome characters I ever met," said Thomas Lewis. The Africans had called him "Vianga-Vianga," the man who hurries about, but his was not just restless, purposeless movement. H. M. Stanley said: "Wherever your Comber went, there was life and activity. Again and again as I looked at him, he reminded me of the young man with the banner, on which was the word 'Excelsior.'"

That he had not lived in vain, though his years here were few, is shown by the Baptist Church on the Congo, which to-day numbers more than 20,000 members, and by the many men of Comber's own generation who faced their tasks and opportunities for service more bravely and eagerly because they could never forget his gallant example.

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