

Grenfell of the Congo.

WHATEVER scholars may say for or against the hand of God in history, the Christian observer has no doubt about the evidence of there being a guiding providence in the association of the three major events that combined to produce the situation which culminated in the formation of the B.M.S. Congo Mission.

The first was the incentive provided by Robert Arthington, the Quaker of Leeds. Inheriting great wealth which accumulated during his lifetime more rapidly than he realised, Arthington desired passionately the return of his Lord which, according to his conviction, was delayed only until the Gospel had been preached for a witness to all the nations. To hasten this consummation Arthington assumed poverty that his fortune might be spent in promoting speedy evangelism throughout the world. His large house on the then outskirts of Leeds remained closed save for one room where he practised a life of extreme austerity and discipline. This room became an observatory from which he followed world movements and events, and kept himself abreast of new openings for the Gospel. The Congo region was among these, for Arthington, in common with other men, was fascinated by that land of mystery. He knew as did others, that the immense volume of water that surged through its mouth far into the Atlantic, indicated a great river coming from the heart of Africa. He knew of the attempts of Roman Catholic missionaries, traders and adventurers through four centuries to penetrate the formidable western land barrier and to probe a way to the land and water beyond. He believed that mid-Africa must be inhabited by a vast population that needed the Gospel. Like others, he had been moved by the tale of Livingstone's explorations and his revelations of human suffering and need. So on May 11th, 1877, he penned his epoch-making letter to the B.M.S. Committee in which he urged the sending of an expedition to the King of Kongo at San Salvador to ascertain that monarch's attitude to the settlement of missionaries in his domain, and offered to give £1,000 to meet the cost. That offer was accepted.

The second element was the presence in Cameroons, 800 miles north of Congo, of two young and eager missionaries, George Grenfell and Thomas Comber, who chafed under the limitations of their narrow coastal foothold and, with the true pioneer spirit, had had their appetities whetted by exploratory canoe journeys along Cameroons streams. They, too, looked southwards to the prospective larger Congo region, and so, when the B.M.S.

Committee invited them, on the strength of Arthington's letter, to go to San Salvador, they made their response with alacrity.

In the midst of these moves, and this is the third factor, news reached this country that H. M. Stanley the explorer, had emerged on the West African coast after an adventurous journey of 999 days in which he had travelled 3,000 miles on the Congo from its source to its mouth. His revelation that the river was mostly navigable and that big populations lived on its banks was received as a confirmation of the steps that had already been taken. So the Congo Mission was born.

Each of the five men who formed the missionary staff in the opening years is worthy of extensive notice, but our concern here is with George Grenfell, the centenary of whose birth falls on August 21st. Grenfell's birthplace was the Cornish hamlet of Sancreed, a few miles from Penzance and Land's End. The wide spaces of the Atlantic are close at hand and its gales sweep the countryside. Ennis Cottage, the family home, is still standing and Grenfell's association with it is to be commemorated by a plaque. Grenfell is a Cornish name and George could claim kinship with such notable figures as Sir Richard Grenville, Sir Wilfred Grenfell and Julian Grenfell. His own modesty and charm, his courtly bearing and consideration for others, were evidences of an innate nobility derived from worthy forebears.

Depression in trade led Grenfell's father to move to Birmingham when George was in his third year. The family was attached to the Church of England and the children attended the parish church Sunday School for some years until the unwelcome attentions of a bully led to their transferring themselves to Heneage Street Baptist Church, another instance of unexpected causes leading to far-reaching results. For Heneage Street Church, now a down town cause soon likely to be moved to another part of the city, but then pulsating with life and vigour under the leadership of the Rev. Samuel Chapman, was a determining factor in shaping Grenfell's course. In particular, the teaching and example of a godly Sunday School teacher, unlearned in the schools but wise in the things of God, played its part in his conversion and the public profession of his faith in baptism while he was in his early teens. Let this James Weston, shop porter, be held in honour for the part he played in the making of Grenfell. Thenceforward Grenfell was engaged in a round of Sunday activities from early morning until late at night, which helped further to mould his character and fit him for service. Samuel Chapman was succeeded by Benwell Bird, who showed his interest in a group of young men, of whom Grenfell was one, by meeting them at 6.30 on Monday mornings for the study of elementary Greek.

David Livingstone, then in the midst of his African discoveries and adventures, fired Grenfell with a missionary passion, as he did many others in the mid-nineteenth century and since. So did the wraithlike Alfred Saker, pioneer and Father of the B.M.S. Cameroons Mission. And any alert lad who grew to manhood in expanding and bustling Birmingham whose leaders included John Bright, Joseph Chamberlain, Richard Cadbury, R. W. Dale and Charles Vince, could not fail to be stimulated and broadened in outlook. Grenfell's decision for missionary service was made in his twenty-third year. His application for admission to Bristol College, supported by the church and endorsed by Benwell Bird, was approved, and he entered as a student in 1873. While he threw himself into college life, its academic side irked him. In any case, his stay was short, for an urgent call to become colleague and eventual successor to Saker was responded to in 1874, and by the early months of 1875 he was on African soil. Incidentally we may wonder how a man with one eye would fare with a college committee today, and what chance a man with about a year's theological training would have with a candidate board.

Grenfell's Cameroons period may be regarded as an apprenticeship. English was understood and spoken by many of the natives, the mission was well organised, and Grenfell was quickly engaged in preaching, teaching, simple medical work and industrial activities. The mission was established on or near the coast and was surrounded by great mountains. The unknown hinterland sounded a constant call and presented a compelling challenge. Grenfell explored the waterways, made contacts with the people and, with Thomas Comber, who had by now joined the mission, discussed plans for advance. During this period Grenfell married Mary Hawkes of Birmingham who, however, lived only a few months in Africa. Then in 1878 the call to Congo reached him.

While awaiting the Home Committee's letter of instructions, Grenfell and Comber paid a preliminary visit to Banana, a trading post at the mouth of the Congo, to make their first contacts and to arrange for their later trip. They even made plans for proceeding at once to San Salvador, but were prevented by the rainy season, and had to content themselves with a letter to the king apprising him of their projected visit. They were back in Congo in the summer and set out on their eight days' journey to San Salvador on July 30th, with a band of thirty carriers. It was an exacting introduction to conditions of travel in Congo. A path had sometimes to be hacked through the forest and long grass, swamps negotiated, rivers crossed by fording or on slender improvised suspension bridges, and precipitous hills surmounted. Their reception by the king was cordial and permission for the

establishment of a mission was readily granted. The second objective, the opening of a road through the cataract region to the navigable stretch of the Congo, remained unrealised through the intractability of native chiefs who refused right of way to the white men. Comber therefore returned to London to make his report to the Home Committee and Grenfell went back to Cameroons.

By 1880 Grenfell was once more in Congo to take his place among the small missionary staff. In the interval he had linked himself with Africa by marrying Rose Patience Edgerley of Cameroons.

The way to Stanley Pool still eluded numerous attempts to find it. Comber and Hartland made efforts to break through on the south side of the river while Holman Bentley and Crudgington took the north side. Success came at length, and in 1881 Bentley and Crudgington stood on the desolate shore of the Pool gazing eastwards over the tawny swift-flowing river as it narrowed before plunging over the cataracts. The road had to be made secure by the planting of a line of posts between Musuko, the limit of navigation from the ocean, first on the south bank and then on the north up to the Pool. Grenfell's organising powers and mechanical skill here found full scope. He organised wild and undisciplined workmen, supervised building operations with local material, planned a barter system of payments and constantly applied oil to the machinery.

With a clear waterway of 1,000 miles stretching before them and the Home Committee's plan of planting ten stations on its banks at intervals of approximately a hundred miles, a steamer became a necessity. Though the Congo basin includes the main river of 3,000 miles from source to mouth, and tributaries amounting to another 13,000 miles, the course of these is mostly shallow and broken by hundreds of islands and sandbanks. Lightness in draught was essential. The boat must be capable of carrying goods as well as passengers, and be adapted for the burning of wood in the absence of coal. Grenfell returned to this country with plans and specifications which were approved by the Home Committee and experts. Robert Arthington provided the money for the steamer building and the work was carried out at Chiswick with Grenfell in daily attendance at the yard. The boat ran its trial trips on the Thames, was named *Peace*, and was on show near Westminster Bridge for several weeks. Then it was dismantled and packed into 800 bundles for overland transport in Africa. This transport was a herculean task at which Grenfell proved himself a master. The route from the river base to Stanley Pool ran for 230 miles through grim country. For each of the three sections into which it was

divided, hundreds of men had to be recruited, organised into teams under headmen and, as far as possible, trained to work to a time-table. Severe physical obstacles and the hostility of suspicious chiefs and their tribes had to be overcome. For Grenfell it meant constant travel along the line of advance in exacting tropical conditions with fret to body, mind and spirit. But, aided by his colleagues, he won through, and in six months every bundle, save two, was safely on the shore of Stanley Pool.

While waiting for the arrival of engineers who were to reconstruct the steamer, Grenfell embarked on a preliminary voyage up the Congo in a small steel boat. On this journey his talent for exploration revealed itself. He spent the time taking soundings and bearings, charting and mapping the river, visiting villages on its banks and noting sites for possible stations. After going 400 miles upstream, he began his return journey hoping to find at its end that work had begun on the *Peace*. To his dismay he found on arrival at Stanley Pool that three of the slender missionary force had been sent home ill, another had died and the two engineers had also died on their way up country. This was among his darkest hours. With much misgiving he resolved to essay the re-building with the help of his African lads, with such success that the job was completed in four months. Grenfell wrote home that often he reached an impasse which he made a matter of prayer, and that "light always came in the morning." The launching took place in July, 1884, when, to the joy of the missionaries and the unbridled excitement of the natives, the preliminary trials proved satisfactory.

Without delay the *Peace*, with Grenfell on board, made its first journey up the Congo and covered the distance made in the steel boat. All the hopes centred in the vessel were realised and thousands of natives were awed by the sight of this new wonder of the white man. For the next two years—1884-1886, the *Peace* was used for exploratory work. In five extensive journeys it travelled 15,000 miles. On them Grenfell not only charted the main river for the thousand miles from Stanley Pool to Stanley Falls, but explored many tributaries which included the Mobangi, the Lefine, the Ruki, the Lomami, the Lulongo, the Buruki, the Juapa, the Kasai, the Lilua and the Kwa to the limit of navigation. Every part of each journey was carefully recorded. The map Grenfell made was 125 feet long and is so accurate that, to this day, it is used by captains of state and trading steamers.

This remarkable achievement might have brought personal glory and advantage to Grenfell had he so chosen. As it was it aroused intense interest in governments and learned societies. The members of the Royal Geographical Society listened with

enthralled attention to the tale of his discoveries and adventures, published his maps and conferred the Founders' Gold Medal upon him, and other honours, including some from royalty, came to him.

The record of these journeys makes thrilling reading. Often the path of the steamer was blocked by crowds of armed natives in canoes. More than once wire guards had to be placed in position to protect the crew from poisoned arrows shot by natives who surrounded the vessel or who fired from overhanging trees. On occasion it was pursued many miles along the river. These incidents sometimes had their amusing side, as when a menacing fleet of canoes was put to ignominious flight by blasts from the steamer's whistle.

Grenfell's devotion to exploration drew criticism at home. This however was effectively countered by Alfred Henry Baynes, the B.M.S. General Secretary and Grenfell's staunch supporter, and by Grenfell's colleagues who had little difficulty in proving that accurate knowledge of the country and its peoples was an essential preliminary to its effective missionary occupation.

Grenfell was always a missionary. Throughout the unsettled early years of his life in Africa and on his exploratory voyages he made and seized opportunities for evangelism. This was particularly the case with the lads who travelled with him on the *Peace*. Visits to villages were used by him as occasions for seed-sowing. Two years after the opening of Lukolela, the first up-river station, in 1886, Grenfell began the work at Bolobo where he shared in the acquisition of the local unwritten language, opened a school for boys and itinerated in neighbouring villages. He had learnt much already of the degradation of pagan life on his travels, but what he saw of its power among the virile folk of Bolobo shocked him. One can the more picture his joy when the simple school chapel was opened there on Easter Sunday, 1889, and it fell to him to tell for the first time the glad tidings of a Saviour who had conquered death and sin for all who trusted in Him.

Even now an ordered life eluded him, for it was necessary that the *Peace*, as the connecting link in the growing missionary chain along the Congo, should make three voyages each year up and down river to carry missionaries, mails, stores and other material for new stations. Other missions also availed themselves of the facilities it offered. Grenfell took the lion's share in all this. And the expanding work placed other responsibilities upon him, for he was the trusted leader and adviser of younger missionaries of the B.M.S. and other missions. New stations were opened at Monsembi and Upoto in 1891, Yakusu in 1895 and Yalamba in 1906. The state turned to him for help and, with the consent of the Home Committee, he spent over a year in 1891-1892

as leader of a Royal Commission to fix the boundary between the Congo Free State and Portuguese territory.

Advance was still the order of the day at the turn of the century. Spurred once more by Robert Arthington, who offered a further £17,000 to provide and equip an expedition to explore a vast territory to the north-east towards Lake Nyanza and the Nile, Grenfell set out, a man of fifty, on this project with a fleet of canoes. He explored the Lindi, the Aruwimi and the Lualaba. These journeys involved dragging boats and equipment round cataracts, exposure to the extremes of tropical climatic conditions, and making contacts with new and strange peoples. On each journey he found large populations and openings for the Gospel which, alas, could not be seized through the shortness of staff and the absence of needed recruits.

Amid many setbacks and sorrows, Grenfell had his joys. He tells how one day in a district where on his first visit he had come upon the horrors of the Arab slave trade with burning villages, fleeing people and bodies of others who had been killed while trying to escape, the *Peace* anchored for the night while the strains of *All hail the power of Jesus's Name* came from a fleet of nearby canoes. Schoolboys had come out to hail the *Peace* and its beloved captain. Of another incident at Bolobo he wrote, "How can I get into the dumps when there are over forty young folk squatting on the floor of the next room singing a translation of *Lo, He comes with clouds descending to Calcutta* with a swing that makes my heart beat fast with the assurance of that blessed hope?"

The gap of eleven years between the opening of Yakusu and Yalamba stations was due partly to lack of reinforcements and partly to delaying tactics by the state authorities. When permission to begin at Yalamba was at length received, Grenfell hoped that a Yakusu missionary could be spared to undertake the task. But when he found the inadequate staff there working under high pressure through the rapidly expanding mission, he cheerfully shouldered the burden himself. With some of his loved Congo lads, he assumed once more the hazards of life in primitive conditions. Before long the strain of over thirty years in tropical Africa told upon his health and it became evident to his black helpers that he was seriously ill. They cared for him as best they could and sent a moving message in broken English to Yakusu in response to which one of the staff there hastened down river to his bedside. Little could be done, however, and on Sunday July 1st, 1906, Grenfell passed into the unseen. He was buried "as great men are buried" in the state cemetery at Basoko. Shortly after, the worn-out *Peace* was broken up.

The character of this truly great follower of his Lord can

be seen in this story told by Stapleton, a younger colleague. He was travelling with Grenfell on the *Peace*, when Grenfell suddenly exclaimed, "You know, I sometimes feel lately as though my work is nearly done. What will there be for me to do in the next life? All my life has been spent in learning how to explore. What use will God be able to make of me? Will it all be wasted?"

With a flash of inspiration his colleague replied, "You forget that there is the River of the Water of Life, and God will find you a *Peace* and exploring work to do."

"Oh!" rejoined Grenfell, "if God would use me to explore His hidden things and to reveal a pathway for His messengers, what a delight it would be!"

He spoke of this again and again. One day he said, "I shall be on that river. I shall see Livingstone. He will be on the bank for he is a better walker than I. I shall meet Bentley and Comber and many others." Then, after an interval of silence, he added, "I have begun to design my steamer for the River of the Water of Life." And, his biographer adds, he is still exploring.

H. L. HEMMENS.

Talking Drums of Africa, by John F. Carrington, Ph.D. (Carey Kingsgate Press, Ltd. 5s.).

This is a fascinating and important book. Dr. Carrington is an educational missionary at Yakusu, greatly gifted as a scientist and linguist, and with unusual powers of understanding the African mind. He has made a special study of the use of drums to send messages and has himself mastered the difficult and apparently dying technique. In very attractive fashion—aided by a number of clever illustrations of his own—Dr. Carrington here lets us into the secret of the forest language. Friends of the B.M.S. will rejoice to know that the great tradition of Grenfell, Bentley and Weeks in the sympathetic, scientific observation of African customs is being so well maintained in the present generation. This will make an admirable gift book for boys, young and old, and indeed for any interested in African life. It is also an important contribution to anthropology.

ERNEST A. PAYNE.

George Grenfell: Master Builder of Foundations, by H. L. Hemmens. (Carey Kingsgate Press, Ltd. 1s. 6d.).

Written by Grenfell's biographer for the Centenary Celebrations. With seven pages of pictures.