George Grenfell
A Light in Congo Darkness

Huge crocodiles dozing on the muddy banks of the mighty Congo sullenly opened their beady eyes to gaze at the strange monster, then hastily plunged into the river. The cause of their alarm was a small steamer, named the *Peace,* the first ship ever to breast the Congo waters under steam power. The crocodiles were not alone in being alarmed at the sight and sound of the throbbing steamer. Frequently the Africans were so startled they fled pell-mell into the jungles or were so aroused they swarmed out in their canoes to do battle.

Coming in sight of a large village, the white captain shouted orders to his black crew. The boat slowed up and drew within fifty yards of the shore. The captain's keen eyes observed that the people were friendly, so he climbed down into the ship's canoe and was paddled ashore by several of his men. Scores of natives crowded around to look at the strange man with the white face, who proceeded to tell them that he was a missionary and had come to bring the light and love of God.

"Do you mean to suggest that we are living in darkness?" asked the chief somewhat petulantly.

Just then the missionary heard the sound of sobbing. Making his way through the crowd he found two little girls bound with cords and tied to a tree. "What does this mean?" he asked.

With no evidence of shame, the chief told how he and his warriors armed with spears and bows and arrows, had gone far up the river in their canoes on a raiding expedition against another tribe. "And these girls," continued the chief, "are part of the booty we captured. They are my slaves and are tied here until somebody buys them."

His heart touched by the sight of the trembling, sobbing girls, the white man promptly handed over some beads and cloth, took the girls down to the river and told them to get into the canoe. As they were paddled out to the *S.S. Peace,* they kept wondering if the white man would be cruel to them.

Soon the ship started upstream again and the astonishment of the girls knew no bounds as they sped swiftly past forests and villages on the banks. On and on they went for several hours. Eventually, the *Peace* turned a bend in the river and the missionary saw a whole fleet of canoes filled with fierce-looking warriors, some holding spears, others with bows in their hands and poisoned arrows drawn to the head.

These Congo men were enraged because, just a few days earlier, people from down the river had suddenly raided their town, burned many of their huts, killed many of the villagers and taken away some of their children. Since the *Peace* had also come from down-river, those on board must likewise be enemies, they conjectured.

At a signal from the chief, the fierce battle-cry of the tribe was sounded and a shower of spears and arrows struck the steamer. One of them almost pierced the missionary captain. Suddenly one of the little slave girls began to shout and wave her hand. "What is it?" asked the missionary.

"See!" she answered excitedly, pointing to a warrior who was standing up in a canoe and preparing to hurl another spear. "That is my brother and this is my town!"

"Call to him and attract his attention!" said the captain. The little girl shouted as loudly as she could, but the African warriors were making a fearful din, and the only answer was a hail of spears and arrows. Hastily, the captain issued an order to the steamer's African engineer, and in a moment a wild, piercing shriek rent the air, then several others in quick succession. The warriors ceased their yelling and stood as if turned to stone. They had never before heard the whistle of a steamer!

"Shout again-quickly!" said the captain to the little Congo girl.

Instantly the shrill childish voice rang out across the water, calling first her brother's name and then her own. The astonished warrior dropped his spear, seized his oar and quickly paddled to the steamer. In response to instructions from the captain, the girl told how the white man in "the big canoe that smokes" had found her and the other girl in the town of their enemies, had saved them from slavery, had brought them safely home, and now was going to set them free.

The story passed quickly from one canoe to another, as the two girls were taken ashore; and as the captain walked up the village street all the warriors who, only a few minutes before, had tried to kill him, were now gazing wonderingly at the white friend who had brought back the daughters they thought they had lost forever. Now they were ready to listen to his story of the great Father God who sent His Son to be the Light of this dark and sinful world.

This remarkable ship captain was George Grenfell, pioneer missionary in the vast Congo region of Africa. The statement of Jesus concerning John the Baptist, "He was a burning and shining light," was almost constantly in his mind. He was convinced that the desperate need of the whole wide world is the saving light of the gospel of Christ and that it was his business to take that light to Congo's millions. His life may be summarized in three statements: **I. A Light Begins to Shine; II. A Shining Light Lightens the Congo Darkness; Ill. A Burning Light Burns Out.**

I. A Light Begins to Shine

George Grenfell was born August 21, 1849, in Sancreed, near Land's End in Cornwall, England, being the son of a carpenter. When he was three years old, the family moved to Birmingham, where George and his brother began to attend the Sunday school of the Heneage Street Baptist Church. When fifteen years of age, in the spiritual aftermath of the great revival of 1859, he was soundly converted and baptized. Thus the candle of his life was lit by contact with Him who is "this dark world's light," and very soon thereafter he began to think seriously of being a light-bearer for Christ in the Dark Continent. Like Mackay of Uganda, Laws of Livingstonia, and many others, he found in David Livingstone his hero and human inspiration. The Pathfinder's books were eagerly devoured as fast as they came from the press.

About the time of his baptism, George left school and became an apprentice in a large hardware and machinery plant. Here he acquired that knowledge of machinery which proved to be of such inestimable value in his subsequent missionary career. It was also while working in this plant that through an accident he lost the sight of one of his eyes.

George aligned himself with a group of very zealous young men connected with the Heneage Street Church. Their Sunday, beginning with a morning prayer meeting at seven, included usually seven services, with tract distribution and personal work during the intervals. Then, after such a strenuous Sunday, they regularly went to the minister's house at 6:30 Monday morning for studies in Greek and Bible! Moreover, they published a paper called *Mission Work,* the object of which was to set before its readers "proofs from all quarters of the globe that the gospel is, as of old, the power of God unto

salvation." Its editor was George Grenfell.

It was this sort of consecrated enthusiasm Christ needed in Africa. Finally convinced of a divine call to be a missionary, George gave up business at the age of twenty-four and entered the Baptist College at Bristol. After a year's training, he was accepted by the Baptist Missionary Society for service in Africa and sailed with the veteran, Alfred Saker, who was in England on furlough. They reached the Cameroons in January 1875. Early the next year Grenfell married Miss Mary Hawkes. She died in less than a year, and Grenfell experienced his first great sorrow.

Six hundred miles south of the Cameroons, the Congo, second largest of the world's rivers, enters the Atlantic. A hundred miles from the sea, navigation was barred by a series of cataracts, beyond which the map was blank. How incredible that this great river, called the Congo or the Lualaba, should have flowed almost entirely across the African continent for thousands of years and yet, until seventy-five years ago, its vast basin, an area as large as all of Europe, was a land of mystery. On one occasion a native, who was said to have traveled rather extensively, was questioned by a European traveler.

"Do you know where this river goes?"

"It flows north and east."

"And then?"

"It keeps on flowing north and east."

"And then?"

"*Allah yallim* -- God knows."

Until seventy-five years ago that was the sum of human knowledge on the subject -- *"Allah yallim."* Livingstone, to be sure, had reached the Lualaba in 1871 at Nyangwe, where he wrote his burning indictment of the slave trade. At first he thought he had found the long-sought source of the Nile, but later suspected it might turn out to be the Congo. He urged the powerful Mohammedan, Tiptu Tib, to help him secure supplies and carriers for the purpose of ascending the river. The appeal fell on unresponsive ears, and Livingstone had to content himself with exploring the upper reaches of the Lualaba and its eastern branch, the Luapula, until in 1873 at Chitambo's village he knelt down to die, his work for Christ and Africa bravely done. But as for the further course of the Lualaba for more than 2,000 miles -- *"Allah yallim."*

So it was until August 8, 1877, when Henry M. Stanley and his sadly depleted, half-starved caravan reached Boma, near the mouth of the Congo, after their heroic odyssey of 999 days in crossing Africa. But some months before Stanley's sensational achievement had turned the eyes of the world on Equatorial Africa, two men were independently planning to plant a chain of mission stations far in the interior or even across the continent. One of these was Grenfell, then laboring in the Cameroons. The other was *Robert Arthington, who in England had dedicated his fortune to Christ and himself to poverty in order to supply money to various missionary societies. This noble man deprived himself of all but the barest of necessities, wore the same coat for seventeen years, and even begrudged the use of candles, that he might devote the utmost farthing to world evangelization.*

On May 14, 1877, Arthington offered the Baptist Society 1,000 pounds for the purpose of taking "the blessed light of the gospel" to the Congo region. With astounding vision he wrote: "I hope we shall soon have a steamer on the Congo, to carry the gospel eastward, and south and north of the river, as the way may open, as far as Nyangwe." The Society did not act, however, until the publication of

Stanley's letter in the *Daily Telegraph,* September 17, 1877.

Early in 1878 Grenfell was on his way along the bank of the Congo. "So," as stated by C. H. Patton in *The Lure of Africa,* "the Baptists were the first to see and to seize the great opening made by Stanley's explorations." Grenfell encountered almost insuperable difficulties. But finally, after thirteen attempts, after splashing through many swamps and tramping through grass often fifteen feet high, after frequent perilous escapes from savages and after one of his companions had been severely wounded, he passed the cataracts and reached Stanley Pool, in February, 1881. By means of the vast system of waterways created by the Congo and its numerous tributaries, some twenty or twenty-five million people could be reached. Canoes were available but they were both slow and dangerous. Hippopotami often upset them, after which crocodiles feasted upon the occupants. The solution of the problem was a steamer, as had been suggested several years earlier by Robert Arthington, who now provided one thousand pounds toward its construction and three thousand pounds toward its perpetual maintenance. "I believe the time is come," wrote this noble-hearted man, "when we should place a steamer on the Congo River, where we can sail north-eastward into the heart of Africa for many hundred miles uninterruptedly and bring the glad tidings of the everlasting gospel to thousands of human beings who now are ignorant of the way of life and of immortality."

Grenfell, who had remarried in 1879 [other sources indicate 1878], left his wife on the Congo and proceeded to England, where he supervised the construction of the *Peace,* a screw steamer 78 feet in length and drawing twelve inches of water. After it had been tested on the Thames, it was taken apart, put in 800 packages weighing 65 pounds each and shipped to the mouth of the Congo. It took a thousand men to carry the vessel and necessary food supplies up the river and past the rapids to Stanley Pool. Grenfell had brought with him a young missionary engineer whose special assignment was to put the vessel together and then keep it in good running order. Soon after reaching African soil, he fell sick and died. Two other engineers were promptly sent out from England, but both of them died within a few weeks.

So Grenfell himself had to undertake the gigantic task of putting the ship together. This he successfully accomplished. He declared that the *Peace* was "prayed together." Certainly much prayer, as well as hard work and ingenuity, had been necessary. Finally the vessel was launched, steam was up and the *Peace* began to move. "She lives, Master! She lives!" shouted the excited Africans.

At last George Grenfell was able to begin in earnest his remarkable work of missionary exploration and of establishing mission stations as centers of light. He thought of himself as a successor of John the Baptist, of whom John the Apostle wrote: **"The same came to bear witness of the Light, that all men through Him might believe."** And it was Grenfell's great yearning to be worthy of the tribute Jesus paid the Forerunner, "He was a burning and a shining light."

"I am the light of the world." A life cannot shine until lighted at that resplendent Flame!

"Let your light so shine." A life is lighted to lighten! He was a SHINING light."

II. A Shining Light Lightens the Congo Darkness

The maiden voyage of the steamer *Peace* covered twelve hundred miles and brought many memorable adventures. Captain Grenfell went half way to Stanley Falls and turned aside to explore several of the chief tributaries. Having decided on Lukolela as the site of a mission station as soon as a missionary was sent out, he stayed there two days making friends with the people. As he stopped in the villages, his heart was saddened to encounter ever fresh examples of the hideousness and depravity of barbarism. In certain areas he found many evidences of fetishism, with its many facets

and its degrading idolatry. "It was," he said, "a wondrous joy to take for the first time the light of life into those regions of darkness, cruelty, and death."

In order to indicate something of the abysmal darkness into which Grenfell brought "the light of life" and to show the unrealism of those who oppose missions on the ground that the heathen should not be disturbed in the tranquility and beauty of their native religious customs, a few facts and incidents will be cited.

Grenfell found six general types of atrocious practices being committed by Congo peoples, all of which were either definitely a part of their religious system or an expression of the depravity from which their religion was powerless to lift them. These types were: **burial murders, witchcraft cruelties, slave raiding, cannibalism, sensuality, and sadistic methods of punishment.**

1. Burial Murders

Among practically all the tribes of the entire Congo area, no free person of any consequence could be buried without the sacrifice of one or many lives. This was due to their belief that the dead notability must not be ushered into the spirit world alone. There must be at least one wife or one servant -- in the case of a chief or king or queen, many servants -- to accompany the deceased and to carry on the spirit life as nearly as possible on the lines of the terrestrial existence. The practice of interring pottery, cloth, beads, cooking utensils and various implements involved a staggering waste of property; but much more tragic was the waste of human life.

In his diary dated July 7, 1889, Grenfell relates:

We hear two people are tied up at Mungula's, ready to be buried alive. The man killed yesterday was decapitated; his skull will soon adorn Mungula's house. The woman killed yesterday was beaten to death with sticks. At 3:15 I went and started to protest against burying the two victims with the corpse. The wild-looking executioner untied the young woman and took her into the house where the grave had been dug. I followed him and found the young man who was to be her fellow-victim already seated by the side of the grave . . . I rebuked the old chief sharply and explained to the onlookers that God, who had given life, would call to account those who took it away. My heart was very hot within me to see the tears of the poor crying victims of such cruel customs. Three times I warned Mungula plainly that he would have to meet me and these innocent victims before God's throne and answer for their lives. But we had not turned our backs more than a few seconds when the poor victims were thrown into the grave and the corpse placed on their bodies. They were speedily covered in and buried alive.

2. Witchcraft Cruelties

Relatively speaking, burial customs slew their thousands while witchcraft ordeals slew their tens of thousands. By virtue of these ordeals, the population in one single area was reduced from about ten thousand in 1845 to two thousand in 1885. In all Central Africa it was well-nigh impossible, in native belief, to die a natural death. Illness and death were normally caused by the use of occult powers or "the evil eye." If a man or woman was killed by a crocodile, leopard, buffalo, elephant or python, the animal in question was believed to be a witch in disguise or at least under the direction of a witch. All sickness, except in extreme old age, was attributed to witchcraft. Consequently, after every death from either disease or accident, a witch-doctor was called in to "smell out" the guilty party, who was forthwith made to undergo the poison ordeal. If he was lucky enough to vomit the poison, he was innocent, but if he died, which usually happened, he was clearly guilty. In frequent instances public opinion was so excited the accused person was killed at sight whereupon his body was cut open and searched for the conclusive proof of witchcraft, namely, the presence of a gallbladder. Since every

normal human being has a gallbladder, all accused and slaughtered persons were proved to be witches.

In his translation work, Grenfell learned that there was no word for "forgiveness." Unhappy Congo, where no one knew what it was to forgive or be forgiven!

3. Slave Raiding

As indicated in the story of the two slave girls rescued by Grenfell, raiding for the purpose of securing slaves was a very common, as well as a very devastating, practice. Such raids were undertaken to replenish the slave labor supply, which was constantly being depleted by burial murders, poison ordeals, harsh treatment or by disease.

Slaves were also sought because of their market value, especially where Arab or Portuguese slave traders could be contacted. This form of "man's inhumanity to man" brought indescribable suffering.

4. Cannibalism

A further reason for the slave raids mentioned above was to secure victims for cannibal feasts. When Grenfell reached the principal Bangala settlement in November, 1888, the people were busy killing and cutting up slaves in preparation for a feast. The pathway into the town was lined by hideous rows of skulls, and most of the people were decorated with necklaces of human teeth taken from captives they had eaten.

Being thin sometimes had special advantages in the Congo. As Grenfell went about in the steamer, he often took school-boys with him to sing the gospel and perhaps act as interpreters. On numerous occasions he was entreated to sell a fat boatman in his employ or some of the school-boys who, coming from the shores of the salt sea, were considered especially appetizing. One day a lad rushed up to him and said: "Master, three of us were captured. They ate the other two, but I was so thin they turned me loose!"

In most sections of the Congo, man was the most voracious of all the carnivora. When the son of chief Mata Bwiki was asked if he had eaten human flesh he replied: "Ah yes! And I wish I could eat everybody on earth."

5. Sensuality

Many other types of barbaric degeneracy could be cited. Grenfell says: "The chief characteristics of Balobo people are drunkenness, immorality and cruelty, from each of which vices spring actions almost too terrible to describe." In one place of which he speaks, the death of a chief's wife was followed by four days of "unbridled license in every species of sensuality," in addition to the sacrifice of four slaves.

6. Methods of Punishment

Methods of punishment were in part prompted by a sadistic enjoyment in inflicting pain. "Thieves," says Grenfell, "are often punished by gagging with a stick thrust through the flesh of the cheeks. Sometimes they are tormented by having their bodies rubbed with pepper before being decapitated." Guilt for petty offenses was often determined by having the accused thrust his arm into a pot of boiling water. If his arm was unscalded, he was innocent. Among the Ngombe, women ofttimes were required to put a certain stringent sap under the lid of one eye. If innocent, the eye would not be

damaged. As a result of this ordeal a large number of one-eyed women were in evidence in this region.

For almost twenty-five years Grenfell steamed along the Congo and its tributaries in the *Peace* or its larger successors, the *Goodwill* and the *Endeavor* establishing mission stations and taking the light of redemption's story to those dwelling in the habitations of darkness. In one of his letters he says:

I cannot write you a tithe of the woes that have come unto my notice and have made my heart bleed as I have voyaged along. Cruelty, sin and slavery are as millstones around the necks of the people, dragging them down into a sea of sorrows. I pray that God will speedily make manifest to these poor brethren of ours that light which is the light of life, even Jesus Christ, our living Lord.

The light! The light of life!

It was that light he sought to diffuse!

In the habitations of darkness, "He was a SHINING light."

III. A Burning Light Burns Out

To be "a burning and shining light" was Grenfell's passionate desire. Like John the Baptist he was a shining light because he was first and always a burning light. Taking the "blessed gospel light" to Congo's wretched millions called forth his utmost energy, and in this service his flame never flickered, despite manifold sorrows.

There were the sorrows of pity. At Stanley Falls he saw the notorious Tippu Tib, who conducted wholesale slave raids throughout vast areas of Central and Eastern Africa. The devastations and crimes of the Arabs made him sick at heart. "We counted," he says, "twenty burned villages and thousands of fugitive canoes." Among the smoking ruins of one of these villages, a man called out, "We have nothing left, nothing! Our houses are burned, our plantations are destroyed, and our women and children have been taken away into slavery."

There were the sorrows of anxiety. Grenfell's life was in peril countless times and he admitted that it was a heavy strain to keep one's spirits up when disaster constant-threatened. At the end of one of his voyages he writes:

Thank God we are safely back. It might have been otherwise, for we have encountered perils not a few. But the winds which were sometimes simply terrific, and the rocks, which knocked three holes in the steamer when we were fleeing from cannibals, have not wrecked us. We have been attacked by natives about twenty different times; we have been stoned and shot at with arrows, and have been the mark for spears more than we can count.

There were the sorrows of indignation. Grenfell was sadly disillusioned by the administration of the Congo Free State by the Belgians. Knowing the chaos and savagery of native rule, he expected a great improvement from the rule of the Belgians and assisted them in many ways, notably by serving in 1891 as a capitol Commissioner to settle the southern boundary of the State. Even prior to this, however, he had begun to have serious misgivings, as he saw the Belgian octopus fastening itself on the Congo and as King Leopold enunciated the monstrous, doctrine that this vast region and its inhabitants were his personal property. His disillusionment corresponded to that of the Africans, who at first were charmed to discover the value of raw rubber and that it would enable them to buy glittering trinkets and cloth on which their hearts were set.

Before long, however, with spirits crushed by forced labor, floggings, imprisonments, mutilations and murders, they cried out in bitter despair, "Rubber is death!" When, therefore, in 1890 the Belgian authorities commandeered the *Peace* to further their own schemes, Grenfell made such an effective protest in England that the steamer was restored and the Belgian King bestowed on him at a personal interview in Brussels the insignia of "Chevalier of the Order of Leopold." Somewhat humorously, Grenfell described himself as feeling "like barn door with a brass knocker." It was a poignant sorrow of his last years to observe that while King Leopold was hypocritically professing to bestow thousands in philanthropic efforts for the uplift of Central Africa, he was in reality sending his myrmidons over the Congo with orders to make the people produce more rubber and was filling his personal coffers with millions saturated with African blood. The Belgians also hindered him in his efforts to establish mission stations all the way across Central Africa. By patient persistence, however, he succeeded in establishing stations farther and farther along the course of the Congo, even as far as Yakusu and Yalemba.

Added to the other sorrows were the sorrows of death. Africa was already known as the White Man's Grave. The toll of missionary life was greatest in the Congo, which was called "the shortcut to heaven." In 1883-84 seven of Grenfell's colleagues finished their course after only a few months of service. In 1885 four men died in three months, and in 1887 six missionaries fell in five months. In other years also there were distressing losses. Some people at the home base felt that the loss in life was too enormous and that the Congo Mission should be abandoned or at least curtailed. But Grenfell was of a different spirit. In 1888 he wrote to the Society: **"We can't continue as we are. It is either advance or retreat. But if it is retreat, you must not count on me. I will be no party to it, and you will have to do without me."**

The sorrows of death came even closer and almost crushed him. He had buried his first wife in the Cameroons, and it was his sad lot to bury four of his children on the Congo. These graves were like milestones along the river as he pushed farther and farther inland. His grave was destined to be the farthest of all.

Grenfell's last years were darkened by the sorrows of illness but gladdened by the sweet joys of harvest. In 1902 he writes of the work at Bolobo: "Our services are crowded as they have never been before. God's spirit is manifestly working." In his voyages up and down the river he saw many evidences of happy change. Poison ordeals, burial murders and other abhorrent practices were diminishing and "the light of life" was beginning to dawn in many dark hearts. Concerning one place he states,

Just twenty years have elapsed since I first landed at the foot of this cliff and was driven off at the point of native spears. The reception this time was very different. The teacher and a little crowd of school children stood on the beach to welcome us.

In 1905 he says of another place:

It was here that, twenty-one years ago, we first came into view of the burning villages of the big Arab slave-raid of 1884. This time, as we were looking for a good camping place, we suddenly heard strike up 'All Hail the Power,' from on board one of the big fishing canoes hidden among the reeds so that we had not observed it. What a glorious welcome! Whose heart would not be moved to hear 'Crown Him Lord of All' under such circumstances? I little thought to live to see so blessed a change, and my heart went forth in praise.

He believed that love, which is the essence of Christianity, should and would find expression in [selfless] service. He established a printing press, taught brick making, treated the sick, engaged in translation, and rendered such distinguished service in exploration and cartography that the Royal

Geographical Society awarded him a Gold Medal in 1886. He was the first person to steam up the Congo and to explore many of its tributaries.

In a letter to a friend, he wrote:

I know John 3:16 and that's good enough holding-ground for my anchor ... Our Christianity is too much a matter of words and far too little a matter of works. One might think that works were of the Devil by the assiduity with which the great proportion of church members keep clear of them.

Soon after opening up a new station at Yalemba, near Stanley Falls, he fell ill of haematuric fever. His native boys, who affectionately called him Tata or Father, gently took him on board the *Peace* and steamed down to Bapoto. He rapidly grew weaker and his soul departed July 1, 1906. His last words were, "Jesus is mine."

One of the native boys, Balsuti, concludes the account of the burial with these beautiful words: "Then we sang another hymn. Last of all we closed the grave. And so the death of Tata finished." In the words of: Hawker, "Well written, O Balsuti: 'The death of Tata finished,' but not the life!"

When Jesus referred to John the Baptist as "a burning and a shining light," He was thinking of a candle, which must pay a heavy price to shine. What does it cost a candle to furnish light? It costs its very existence! It costs everything! Even so, to take the light of the saving gospel into the dark Congo cost Grenfell and the early missionaries everything. Who else will pay that price?