

Letter to Editor of the Medical Times and Gazette, 26, 27 January [1863]

Livingstone, David, 1813-1873

Published by Livingstone Online (livingstoneonline.org)

[0001]

1 GENERAL CORRESPONDENCE.

2 ENGLISH LOSSES IN CENTRAL AFRICA.

LETTER FROM DR. LIVINGSTONE.

[To the Editor of the Medical Times and Gazette.]

SIR - In a leading article in the *Medical Times and Gazette* of July 5, 1862, headed "English Sacrifices in Central Africa," after remarking on the general sickness that prevailed at the mission station Magomero, you very naturally ask "How, then, can we reconcile these sad facts with the statement that 'the mission under the direction of Dr. Livingstone settled down in an admirable station high up the river, where the country is an elevated plateau, where the climate is tolerably salubrious, and where a dense population is immediately available for missionary work.'" The quotation is from the Bishop, ([aThe late Bishop Mackenzie.-ED]) and expresses the opinion which I formed, and still hold, as to the general healthiness of the plateau referred to. The spot, taken as a temporary residence until extensive acquaintance with the whole region should enable the head of the mission to select a suitable locality for a permanent abode, was forty or fifty miles distant from the "Elephant Marsh," and at an altitude of between 3000 and 4000 feet above it. We shall therefore try to think of the marsh and mission station as distinct as Oxford and London. The plateau is ten or twelve miles broad, and probably 100 in length. We happened to travel along it at the hottest season of the year, and even then found the climate deliciously cool. When previously in the Upper Shirè valley, at an altitude of 1200 feet above the sea, we were drinking water at 84°, and in one day mounting up to an altitude of between 3000 and 4000 feet, we had every few miles a gushing stream, with the water at 65°. The air had that bracing effect which the mountain breezes have at home, and we all struck by observing far more very old people than we had seen anywhere else. Our stay was too short for our own experience to be worth anything; and the experience of the missionaries amounts only to this, that without ordinary sanitary precautions the health is endangered here as it is everywhere else.

The missionaries were placed in very peculiar circumstances, and such as probably they never anticipated. As we climbed up the plateau together, and felt its refreshing breezes, we met parties of Portuguese, with long lines of bound captives in their possession. These were soon made free, and the Bishop, trusting to the support of those who had sent him, bravely took charge of them. These re-captives soon amounted to 200; but in what follows I have only the testimony of the missionaries themselves, for I then left, and pursued the exploration of Lake Nyassa for some 225 miles. Magomero was situated on the bend of a small river of exactly the same shape as that into which General MacClellan, for "strategic reasons," ran. It was shaded by lofty trees, which the poor Bishop admired exceedingly, and resolved to preserve. The efforts of the missionaries failed to prevent these 200 people from depositing their droppings all over a space of less than 100 yards by 50, and it then was fitly described as a "pest hole." For some months the people adjacent and around them brought abundance of provisions for sale, and no one imagined that these were all their surplus stores; but after the expenditure of the surplus came famine. The missionaries nobly shared [0002]

their own provisions with the poor wretches whom they had adopted, and were reduced to the same hard and scanty fare. About fifty of the natives perished by ulcers and dysentery, and to me the wonder is, not that in that foul den the whites presented the sorry figure you have drawn, but that they were not all cut off together. Now, don't blame them; they felt the necessity of removing out of the pest hole, but the grass had all been burned off, and new huts could not be built; slave-hunting, at the instigation of the Portuguese of Tette, was going on all around them; they were in new and untried circumstances; had to retire to the lowlands; but still all think that the plateau is the healthiest abode, and will return as soon as possible.

The Bishop, whose untimely fate every one who knew him must deeply deplore, never spared himself, and was foremost in depriving himself of the comforts, which you rightly conclude are indispensable to Europeans, in order to save his orphan children.(*[bThe orphans of the liberated slaves.-ED]*) He and Burrup were the strongest of the party, and were proportionately disregardful of their health. Exposed for more than a week previously to hard, fast marches, worse fare, and drenching showers, he set out from Magomero, ill with diarrhoea, on his last and fatal trip, and began by walking through the stream, remarking that he would soon be wet at any rate. After two days' walking in a plight which you may imagine, he reached the Shirè, embarked in a miserable small canoe, and after dropping down the stream one day was upset, lost clothes and medicines, and went on,

of course, still wet - coffee, tea, and sugar all gone; it is scarcely possible to conceive a more doleful plight: but let any one go through the same amount of exposure in England, and he will as certainly be cut off by consumption as the Bishop and Mr. Burrup were by fever and dysentery. When I began to travel I walked through streams, and braved rains in the same way the Bishop did; but I found that I had fever perpetually, and gave up the habit, though it was really pleasant to have the extremities cooled. You will perform a good service if you warn all Europeans going to the tropics to take as good care of their health there as they do at home. In addition to the loss of invaluable services, these untimely deaths are a great misfortune to the cause of African civilisation, because people immediately ascribe them to the inevitable effects of the climate, and with it you say "it is of no use to send missionaries where they cannot live." In our expedition, though we have undergone exposure to which no missionary need subject himself, we have had but two deaths among a large number of Europeans in four years, and these were caused by detention sorely against our will in most unwholesome localities.

No great work can be accomplished without pain and suffering, and even death. Those who, with you, "would not say a word to damp the energy of missionaries and of those that send them," must expect to hear cases like that of the noble-minded Indian officer who lately fell a victim to gigantic labours during the Indian famine, or that of Lord Canning, and try to place a slight drag on the imagination. Horror seems to lay hold on you at the bare mention of "Elephant Swamp." I am actually to pass through it to-morrow, and am only sorry that the enormous herds of elephants - we have seen eight hundred in it at once - have become so knowing we have no chance of getting a steak or a foot. But see the effects of bad example: my imagination, do as I will to prevent it, obstinately pictures you sitting on that wilderness of eight hundred cesspools, which the commissioners only the other day swept away, and drinking water mixed, according to Dr. Acland, with all the abominations and unutterable filthinesses which are poured out of Oxford, Reading, etc., into your cup. Oh! you filter your water through a few inches of sand, do you? I would not trust it (unless I were in London) though filtered through the Great Sahara. The delicious unconsciousness with which you exclaim "Elephant Marsh; good heavens! what a vista of deep swamp, rotting vegetation, flies, vermin, stinks, agues, and dysentery do the words call up!" only excite a merry laugh, which I beg you to believe has not one particle of ill-nature in it, and the quotation,

"Oh, wad some power the giftie gie us,

To see ourselves as others see us.”

You have actually a larger area of cesspool and marsh around and above London than exists in the Elephant Swamp, and to the direful effects let typhus, typhoid, diphtheria, cholera, consumption, scrofula, etc., testify. Here they are absolutely unknown. But our fever, if ill-treated, as by bleedings, or not treated, as it was in the case of the missionaries at Lynyanti, who took only a little Dover's powder, is as fatal as any two in your catalogue. And while it would be "penny wise and pound foolish" to make missionaries of inferior men, good men ought invariably to be accompanied by a thoroughly educated and well-paid Medical officer. I am, &c.

DAVID LIVINGSTONE. River Shirè, January 26.

We have just heard the sad tidings that the Rev. H. C. Scudamore has been cut off by fever about forty miles above this, but not on the plateau. In this case there seems to have been no undue exposure. He was skillfully treated by Dr. Dickenson. I am bowed down in grief for our beloved Scudamore. This case is different from those on which I have remarked. - D. S.

Elephant Marsh, January 27.