

The Battahs of Sumatra.
A New Chapter in Missionary Annals.

V

John T. Beighton

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For nine long years so far as I can trace events—Battahland remained without a ray of light in its gross darkness. We may be quite certain, however, that the courageous journeys and zealous labours of the missionaries whose names we have recorded have had a share in the influences which have brought about the occurrences which have yet to be related.

On the 9th of June, 1832, four missionaries belonging to the American Baptist Missionary Society sailed from Boston for the Eastern tropics. Two of these eventually found their way to Siam, and the other two, Munson and Lyman, remained at Batavia, which the four together reached after a voyage of over three months. Discouraged in their work in Java, the two brethren resolved on finding a new sphere in Sumatra. In 1834 they embarked in a small over-crowded vessel, and after a tempestuous voyage landed at Padang. There they found Mr. Ward, and, no doubt, after receiving information and counsel from him, they undertook to enter Battahland.

Sailing from Padang, they soon reach the bay of Tapanuli, and, landing at Siboga, resolve on penetrating into the very heart of the country. But not knowing the language, nor aware of conflicts prevailing among the people, and especially of the fact that Moslem zeal had been endeavouring to enforce the adoption of Islamism, they enter the region under circumstances of great disadvantage. Their destruction is resolved upon. As they are approaching the valley of Silindung, an ambush is planned to intercept them. On reaching the guarded spot they are suddenly attacked. The carriers drop their burdens and flee; the guide and interpreter abandons them; only two of their followers, one a servant who had come with them from Java, remain. The natives soon surround them with angry looks and sounds. To show that their intentions are peaceable the missionaries give up their arms. But in vain; Lyman is shot by his own gun, and Manson speared, and both are eaten! The German narrator adds: "In the year 1841 a traveller on reaching the spot found only a few miserable hovels where there had been a large and prosperous village."

It is right that I should add that I cannot find evidence of any other Europeans having been similarly treated. Two Roman Catholic missionaries were poisoned in Pule Nias, and attempts to poison the Protestant missionaries in Battahland have been made; but the fact that poison was used is proof that in these instances there was no thought of gratifying the ghastly passion for human flesh.

I have found a memorandum of a narrative which apparently was published in the "London Quarterly Journal," vol. ii. p. 172, containing a thrilling story relating to the mother of one of these missionary martyrs—Henry Lyman. Dr. McClure tells it (May, 1836): "This woman gave the son of her love to be a missionary to the heathen; and a noble youth he was. Well I knew him—a companion of my early studies.... Who was to break the sad news to that poor mother? ...

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You who are mothers will believe that for a moment her soul was overwhelmed, and she buried her face, while her heart was convulsed with grief. But it was a passing shock. With astonishing calmness and resolution in another moment she added: 'Oh, that I had another son ready to go and take the place of my dear Henry, to tell them of that Saviour who hath so loved them!' " The fate of these two devoted men seems, however, to have caused general alarm, and the cessation of all effort to carry Christian civilisation to this strange people.

Meanwhile the rule of the Dutch Government was quietly extending itself. As has been intimated, this was not in consequence of conquest and annexation, but in response to the spontaneous and urgent appeals of the Battah communities themselves. About twelve years after the tragic event described, the government commissioned Dr. Franz Junghung, an enterprising German scholar, to visit the people, and the report of his investigations, published in 1847, constitutes the basis of our most trustworthy accounts of them.

Then came a distinctly religious mission, the honour of which belongs to the Netherlands Bible Society. This was in the person of an eminent Dutch man of letters, Dr. H. R. Van der Tunk, who was sent by the society to Battahland and prepared a grammar and dictionary of the language, and various translations which have proved of eminent service to the missionaries who have followed him. Very interesting is the origin of their entrance upon the work. A Dutch pastor became so deeply interested and moved by what he had read and heard of the people that he personally persuaded and engaged two earnest men to go forth and preach the gospel to them. Finally these two men, with another from Borneo, and a fourth specially sent from Germany, formed, in the year 1862, the first missionary staff of the Rhenish Missionary Society in its great work in Battahland. No doubt, from the very beginning of this successful mission, the readiness of the Battahs to receive Christianity is to be largely explained by the knowledge that the Dutch Government, whose authority is so welcomed by them, has the missionaries under its protection and patronage.

This authority and Christian influence move

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step by step together in their advance. The missionaries find it necessary themselves to form communities, and over these the Government appoints chiefs belonging to them. This connection of church and state is not without its disadvantages. The ambitious hope for chieftainship through the good offices of the missionary, and, failing to secure it, show their resentment by forsaking the missionaries, and sometimes, out of jealousy and hostility towards the chief-appointed, will not attend the same church, and even set up religious services of their own. These periods of excitement seem, however, generally to end in reconciliation and restoration. And there is another disadvantage; just as Christianity moves with each advance of Government rule, so does the faith of Mohammed. And thus a new element of difficulty and antagonism has to be confronted by the missionary in his Christian labour.

The missionaries are much to be commended for training the communities they gather into habits of self-government and self-support. As far as possible, they get the people to profess the new faith as families, postponing their admission into the Christian community till the husband is ready as well as the wife, with their children. Though at first the community is managed by the missionary, he at once trains it to elect its own elders, teachers, and pastors, and to supply the

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means of their support.

We read, therefore, in the Reports of sites being given, and of schools and churches and manses being built by the people, and of Sunday offerings and systematised contributions. One missionary writes of receiving twenty-four in one day into the community. Another celebrates Christmas Day by baptising sixty-seven people. Another gives details of a missionary tour from community to community. "This place," he writes, "is the highest inhabited point in our Battah Mission, and from it one enjoys a splendid view of the entire Tobah Lake and of Silindung. The nights are very cold. Through my five weeks' stay here I had on Sundays from one hundred and fifty to two hundred natives in my congregation, one third of whom are regarded by the local Evangelist as ready for baptism." Of another visitation he says, "I met with a very kind reception. Until late at night a number of chiefs and other men remained assembled at the house of the chief with whom I lodged, and all sorts of questions concerning heathen and Christian customs were talked over. The next morning it was resolved at once to begin the building of a school and a teacher's house. Eleven families presented themselves for instruction." Moving to another place, he remarks—

"A number of adults and children accompanied me, and, amid the sounds of trumpets and singing, we arrived at the house of the Evangelist. They have here a large mission building, comprising a dwelling-place for the teacher, a church, and a spacious room which serves as a residence for the visiting missionary. The people are yet independent, and are constantly quarrelling and fighting, so that their attention cannot be gained for religion. A few, however, have regularly attended divine service for two years, and some for four, and there are thirty of whom the teacher speaks confidently. Others come to church, but irregularly. The teacher is well spoken of by everyone, and I have learned to respect and to like him."

Moving on to another station, he says—

"I only remained at the station itself for a few hours. The teacher, who was educated at Depok [this is the missionary seminary near Batavia, in Java: the native assistants pass through two courses of training, first for two years in a seminary in the valley of Silindung, and thence they proceed to the institution at Depok] is an energetic man, but has scarcely any work to do. The station has been occupied five years, but he has only seven pupils. I sent out invitations to all the chiefs, principal and subordinate, for a consultation at the teacher's house. Only one came. The next day I repeated my invitation, and none came. After that I visited every one of the eighteen villages, which are about a mile and a half apart, and again invited the chiefs to meet me on the next day. The fact that I came myself and asked them for the third time made them ashamed, and they all came, excepting one who left home to avoid coming. When I had them collected around me, I asked them direct whether they would now begin to learn. Their answers to this question occupied from six to eight hours. Most objected, and only three poor fathers of families had themselves registered. I declared that I was not satisfied, and should remove the teacher. On this they looked grave, consulted each other for a long time, and finally asked for three weeks' consideration, which I granted. One of the chiefs asked me to dinner, but I told him that after his doubtful answer I had no desire to accept his invitation, and so dismissed him. In the night, while I was asleep, he knocked at my door, and said, "I am Ompu-Radja-Deak. I will learn. Will you come to my dinner now?" "Certainly," I replied; "I will come to you tomorrow." At the time appointed I went to his house, found it neatly prepared for me, and about eighty persons present, to whom I preached a short sermon. After that about forty-three persons had themselves registered for instruction. Unfortunately these people, with the exception of the three poor families first

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mentioned, have become uncertain again."

The missionary notes of his "favourite" station that he has "a congregation of two hundred and thirty-three pupils." The foregoing extracts are given as illustrations of the native characteristics, and of the methods of operation adopted by the missionaries. In one of the Reports there is an important summary of results:—

"During our twenty years' labours among the people, about seven thousand five hundred have been baptised, and there are besides two thousand catechumens. The principal places in which Christianity has become a kind of power are Siperok, where, out of six thousand inhabitants, one thousand two hundred have become Christians, and Silindung, where, out of a population of twenty-five thousand, six thousand have been baptised, including catechumens. The most gratifying feature is that the people have not only been baptised, but have already formed themselves into communities, which are in a fair way of becoming self-supporting. These communities have for their centre the large church erected at the principal station. There the Holy Communion is celebrated, and meetings of the elders are held. In other respects each community stands by itself. At their head they have teachers or evangelists who have been educated at our seminaries, whose principal work is to teach the children of

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the Christians. It is of the greatest importance that the number of these native helps should be multiplied, and that they should be maintained by the communities. This aim has been in part attained, as more than half the sum necessary for the forty teachers is contributed by the Battah Christians. The elders, who number over one hundred and twenty, are unpaid. In all the communities strict church discipline is maintained, and misdemeanours are punished according to their magnitude, by temporary or entire exclusion from the community, or, as the case may be, by refusal of the Holy Communion. In the communities belonging to the station of Pia Radja there were no exclusions during the last year amongst the three thousand three hundred and twenty members. In many families, though not in all, family devotions are held, and the number of those who can read the word of God for themselves is ever increasing. The schools contain one thousand one hundred and fifty pupils. During the time the Battahs were heathen they showed little aptitude for singing, but since becoming Christian a decided taste for it has been developed, and the two Battah hymn-books contain already a large number of beautiful hymns."

According to the last figures supplied to me by the Secretary of the Rhenish Missionary Society (Rev. A. Schreiber, D.D., of Barmen), the number of European missionaries is fifteen, of European female missionaries thirteen, of paid native assistants sixty-four, and one hundred and fifty-six unpaid. There are three ordained native pastors, eleven thousand seven hundred and eighty-five baptised, of whom two thousand four hundred and forty-three are communicants, and the number of children in the day schools is about one thousand five hundred. He adds, "Some of the churches are already self-supporting, and the work growing, by God's grace, every year."

As I pen my closing words, I see it announced in an English missionary periodical that at the last annual meeting of the Rhenish Missionary Society a Dutch gentleman, who had been travelling for four years in the Dutch East Indies, gave striking testimony to the reality of the Christian work which is being done among the Battahs. He stated that he went to look at it with a strong prejudice against missionaries and their operations. His views were completely altered by a

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personal visitation of the stations in Battahland. "The results of the mission to them," he declared, "are so striking that the worst enemy of missions must be compelled to rejoice in them." He visited the picturesque valley of Silindung, with its winding river, studded with islands, and its groups of houses and numerous church towers, and pronounces the Tobah Lake, with its surrounding rice fields, background of hills, and numerous villages, and on an eminence the church tower of Balige, as "one of the loveliest sights he beheld in all his Indian travels." At Balige his tour ended, where, as he drew near to it, his ear caught the sounds of sacred music. He was "welcomed in the land of cannibals by children singing hymns!" Here there are twenty-two church elders zealously at work in visiting and teaching the people, and persons are coming forward in hundreds to be baptised. This station, and that of Si-Gumpar (where the poor girl was rescued from the knives of cannibals—see Chapter No. n.), have become a base of operations for evangelistic work in districts which lie around and beyond the lake—districts containing populations much larger than had been supposed, which as being still intensely heathen, and at the same time free from the antagonistic elements of the faith of Mohammed, present claims most urgent for the extension of the mission, and give bright promise of rapid and widespread success. Let me earnestly express the hope that it will be remembered that to my revered father belongs the sacred honour of having baptised the first Battah convert—the "first fruits" of the spiritual harvest of Battahland.

"The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined."

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