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Hope Masterton Waddell

Excerpt

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MISSIONARY WORK AND ADVENTURE.

CHAPTER I.

1829.

Call to missionary work—Jamaica—Tropical scenery—Hampden congregation—Christmas revels—Description of Jamaica—Maroons—Slave insurrections—Earthquakes—Hurricanes—Sugar estate—Scenery—Established Church missionaries—Cinnamon Hill—Lucea congregation—Green Island and mountain station—Port Maria congregation.

IT was in the year 1822 that “it pleased God, who called me by his grace, to reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen.” I was then in the eighteenth year of my age, and the second of my apprenticeship to a mercantile house in Dublin;* but my parents having consented to my studying for the ministry, my master most kindly gave me up my indentures, indorsed with a good character. Accepted in 1825 by the Scottish Missionary Society as one of its students, I was ordained in 1829 by the Edinburgh Presbytery of the United Secession Church, and, accompanied by a “true yoke fellow,” departed for Jamaica, the appointed field of my future labours. There we landed in the middle of December, among scenes, to the eye the loveliest, to the heart the bleakest that can be imagined.

A life-time in the tropics has not effaced the first vivid impressions of the splendid scenery that burst on our view as our ship passed close along the coast of several of the West India Islands. Their varied forms and brilliant colours—their cane-fields, and pastures, and woods—steep ascents and deep ravines—snow-white

* Messrs. Andrew Pollock & Co., druggists and general merchants.

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beach, sparkling wavelets, and verdant shores, clothed in beauty to the water's edge, all bathed and glowing in floods of radiance—surpassed every previous conception, and seemed to assure us that the Isles of the Blest were not fabulous—that *there* might be found the Gardens of the Hesperides.

Rio Bueno harbour was our first anchorage, and looked most picturesque. The town, small and the houses peculiar, lay round the cove at the base of high and wooded hills, up the sides of which shone forth white houses, embowered among the broad-leaved bananas. The day was gorgeous, but, sated with splendours, we hailed the gloaming, and hoped for rest. The darkness, however, brought no repose, for the night was more tropical than the day. Fire-flies innumerable lit up the bay, the little winking blinkers flitting about in all directions; and others with globes of dazzling light sailing like steam-ships in straight lines hither and thither, making an insect illumination. There was an insect serenade, too, which gradually but unceasingly swelled, till it filled the air—a chorus of countless multitudes of tiny voices—a universal song from all little creeping and flying things that love the night, in shrill notes of endless number and variety. The “still evening” belonged not to a Jamaica paradise. There it seemed the heaven of all living things to come forth in the cool, dewy moonlight, and enjoy themselves with music and dancing. Men might, indeed, become in time deaf to their melody; but still they sang on in the ear of Him who gave them their voices, and delighted in their tuneful happiness.

Next day we proceeded in the ship's long-boat to *Falmouth*, and before night were welcomed to the hospitable home of our brother, Mr. Blyth. The view from his house was worthy of being remembered. In the distance, and not too distant, rose up long ranges of black conical mountains, tier above tier, clothed with forest. The intervening space was a vast plain, covered with luxuriant cane-fields, and dotted with sugar-works, cocoa-nut groves, and gigantic cotton-trees; while in the foreground, at the foot of the hill where his house was erected, stood his beautiful white stone church, then new, and a rare and lovely feature in a Jamaica scene. I longed to explore the gloomy recesses of those highlands, and behold nature in its primitive grandeur.

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A NEGRO CONGREGATION.

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The congregation which assembled in Hampden Church the following Sabbath consisted of about five hundred people, mostly negro slaves. Decent in appearance and decorous in conduct, attentive and intelligent-looking, they were a superior people to what I had expected. They were generally dressed in Osnaburg and Penistons,—the former a coarse linen, and the latter a coarse blue woollen cloth, the usual material of clothing for slaves. There were a good many respectable free people of colour also, of all shades between white and black, and a few whites. Among these was the proprietor of a neighbouring estate, just arrived in the colony, who expressed the greatest pleasure, and especially that many of the people had Bibles and hymn-books, and could use them. He would write home, he said, and make known how much pleased he was with what he saw and heard at church that day. The Lord's Supper was afterwards dispensed, and nothing could exceed the devotional and becoming conduct of the communicants.

Such particulars as the foregoing were then matters of great moment. Negro congregations were rare, except in the principal towns; and the religious instruction of the slaves, and their admission to church privileges were fiercely resisted by the dominant portion of the community. Could it be done with safety? Could they become good Christians? Could they be educated and become intelligent, yet continue docile and obedient? These questions were everywhere debated. Freedom or slavery depended on the reply. The experiment of evangelizing the slaves was in progress, great interests depended on the result, and all engaged in the work anxiously marked its progress.

Christmas came on, when the slaves had three holidays, and made the most of their annual festival by unbounded revelry. Then they got their annual clothing, and a good allowance of salt-fish, sugar, and rum, which enabled them to feast and be merry. The estate overseers usually gave a dance to the people, where the most dissolute of both sexes were sure to be present, and to indulge too freely in the shrub made for the occasion. Companies of young men paraded the estates, carrying a fanciful and gaily-painted structure, called a "Johnny Canoe,"* and followed by a crowd singing and beating the gomby. In the towns, two parties

* A corruption, doubtless, of some African word.

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or "sets" of girls, called from their dresses "reds and blues," paraded the streets in rivalry, followed by crowds of both sexes and all ages. The young women who led, gaily dressed, sang sweet airs to improvised words; their followers swelling the chorus. They received contributions from the householders, and spent their evenings in feasting and merriment. The three days became a week among the town slaves, who made a Saturnalia of a Christian festival, spending the time in the grossest rioting. The result of so much license or licentiousness, it was hoped, would be great good humour, to prepare the slaves for another year of ill-requited toil.

"Whatsoever doth make manifest is light." The word of God having discovered and reproved the gross immoralities of these Christmas revels, the more intelligent and the better disposed slaves had begun to abandon them, and gave one of the three days to the public worship of God. They discerned that they were impositions to amuse them, and were thinking of something better both for this world and for the world to come.

It may not be amiss here to devote a few pages to a brief glance at the state of the island, at and previous to the period of which I write. Its history was a troubled one, abounding in convulsions,—Maroon wars and slave insurrections, hurricanes and earthquakes. The *Maroons* were wild negroes, who had escaped from their Spanish masters at the time of the British conquest in 1655; and being joined continually by runaway slaves and desperadoes, held the passes and fastnesses of the country, and set the colonists at defiance. In 1738 they were brought to terms by a series of regular military operations; and on condition that their freedom and settlements should be secured to them, they agreed to receive no more runaways, and to serve as a mountain police for their capture and delivery. They had townships in different parts of the island. Those in Trelawny rebelled in 1795; but after inflicting severe loss on the military, being all marksmen, were subdued and banished. Some were sent to Nova Scotia, others to Sierra Leone. It is said that they mostly belonged to the untamable tribe of Coromantees, a branch of the Ashantee nation, who, as one of themselves told me, were among the blacks what

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SLAVERY AND THE SLAVE TRADE.

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Englishmen were among the whites—able to fight and beat all other countries.

The slave-trade had been prosecuted by the Jamaica colonists with the utmost recklessness from an early period. In 1698, when the white population was only about 7000, the black had increased to 40,000; and that number was but the half of what had been imported. In 1776 they were introduced at the rate of 18,000 yearly. Up to that date, about 600,000 negroes had been landed, of whom 130,000 had been sold away again, and 270,000 had perished, leaving about 200,000 in the island. In 1817, when the slave-trade had been suppressed, their numbers were 346,000. It is certain that a much greater number, probably twice as many, had perished. Even after the importation had ceased, and when the planters had the greatest interest in taking care of their slaves and promoting their natural increase, they decreased at the rate of several thousands annually. In 1829, their numbers were 322,000; five years later, they were only 302,000.

The murderous system which thus unceasingly ground down the people to death produced frequent insurrections among them. From 1678 till 1832, there were twenty-seven, partial or general. These, and the terrible vengeance, sometimes atrocious cruelty, with which they were put down, characterized West India slavery. In 1760, some insurgent negroes were burned alive, and others, gibbeted alive, left to die in prolonged agonies like men crucified. One is known to have survived nearly nine days in that unceasing torture without a drop of water. Of the last insurrection, the most extensive, determined, and destructive ever made in the colony, some account will be found in this volume.

All this while the free people of colour were rapidly increasing in numbers, wealth, and education, and gaining a corresponding position and influence in the island. In 1830 they obtained their emancipation, and full political equality with their white fellow-subjects, when they numbered about fifty thousand.

Earthquakes and hurricanes have been frequent in the West Indies, and at times made awful ruin. The former, however, are not always destructive. Several took place in Jamaica during my

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residence without doing any harm, at least in Jamaica, though one of them destroyed Port au Prince in St. Domingo. The worst, since it came under British rule, was in 1692. The mountains were rent, and *Port-Royal*, the chief city, and head-quarters of the buccaneers, an amazingly wealthy and wicked city, was swallowed up, with three thousand inhabitants. Ships floated where it had stood. As if God had determined to make it, like Sodom and Gomorrah, a monument of divine vengeance, the town was no sooner rebuilt near its old site than it was destroyed by fire. Fire from heaven struck a powder magazine. Some years afterwards, when partially restored, it was again consumed by fire, which burned three days. Yet once more it was shattered in pieces, in 1744, by a tremendous hurricane which rent and scattered solid masonry. Port-Royal never lifted its head again, and *Kingston* took its place as the most important seat of commerce in the British West Indies.

The worst hurricane that Jamaica experienced in the same period was in 1780, when, accompanied by an earthquake, it destroyed the town of Savanna La Mer, and nearly all the plantations in the west end of the island. Ships that had been at anchor in the bay were found, when the convulsions of nature ceased, far up the town, among the ruins of the buildings, which the mighty rushing of the sea had overflowed.

A sugar estate in good order was a fine sight. The canes presented an appearance of the utmost luxuriance, and especially when crowned with their lilac arrowy blossoms. The pastures, shaded by the most valuable or beautiful trees, were often like English parks. The works, usually white and clean, comprised an extensive range of buildings. There were the overseer's house and stores, with the barracks for book-keepers, carpenter, and mason; the mill-house, boiling-house, cooling-house, and still-house; the carpenters', coopers', and blacksmiths' shops, and extensive trash-houses. A little way off stood the hospital or "hot-house;" and on a rising ground overlooking all, the Great House or proprietor's mansion, flanked by the "negro houses" or slave village; these last being buried in cocoa-nut, orange, mango, and the avacado-pear trees.

A flourishing sugar estate could be imagined and painted as a

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SUGAR ESTATE AND LABOUR.

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scene of prosperity and happiness. Ah, how much the reverse! Cheerful willing labour was not to be found; it was not looked for; nor peace and purity. The proprietors or island nobility were for the most part absent, and their "great houses" unoccupied, and going to decay, except where a planting attorney resided and kept everything in good order. These attorneys formed the squirearchy of the island. One might have several properties under his care, some had many, and were very great men indeed. Every estate had its own overseer, who had "book-keepers," carpenter, and mason under him. From the attorney down all were unmarried, yet all had families. A married lady was rarely seen. Some planters had not seen one since they left home. Others knew not how to address one when they met her. The "house-keeper" system had become a colonial institution. It was thought cheaper than the other; but that was a mistake. Pilfering and waste prevailed, and vices not to be described. The sugar estates were commonly "whited sepulchres." Planters have owned to me that they were shocked at first by the style of living, but were laughed at and ensnared, and became in the end used to it as unavoidable. Others never got over it. Troubled by pangs of conscience, they drank to excess, and died in despair. "Buckra die hard this time, hearee!" said the negroes; "since gospel come buckra die hard."

In crop time the sugar works were a busy scene; for the manufacturing process never ceased for four or five months, except on Sundays, and then only for a few hours to scour the coppers. In the beginning the people were lively, and seemed to thrive on the sweet cane-juice, of which they had a plentiful supply. But ere the season closed they began to suffer, were fagged and sickly, from excessive toil and want of proper food. They started for the field at the earliest dawn, roused by the loud crack of the driver's whip resounding through the negro houses; and except half an hour for breakfast, eaten in the field, and an hour and a half at noon for dinner, they continued at work while they had light. Besides their day-labour they had to work in the mill-yard the half of every second night. For the people were always divided into four "spells," two for each night, to carry on the sugar-making uninterruptedly. The night they "took spell" the people never went

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to their houses, but threw themselves down to sleep in the trash-houses, to be near when called, huddled together regardless of sex or age. When crop was over, the people got Saturdays for working their provision grounds, the Sunday being market-day throughout the island. Some masters gave every Saturday till crop recommenced, others only the legal number, twenty-six.

The scenery of Jamaica is too magnificent to be described. Everywhere grandeur and beauty prevail. Through its whole length, 160 miles, run lofty and precipitous mountains, from the Blue Peaks in the east, 8000 feet high, to the *Dolphin* Head in the west, 3400, clothed with eternal verdure, and noble forests to their summits. In a succession of lesser ridges they decline on the north side to the sea; while on the south, great spurs striking off enclose vast plains, twenty or thirty miles each way, like those of St. Elizabeth and Westmoreland. Everywhere the mountains are broken into deep valleys, abrupt, rugged, and filled with impenetrable woods; and everywhere the cultivated districts present the most lovely landscapes of hill and dale and mingled woodland and plantation scenery. The frequent groves of cocoa-nut trees, their giant leaves waving, rustling, and glancing in the sun and wind, the bright skies, brilliant atmosphere, glowing colours, deep contrasts of light and shade, and universal irrepressible luxuriance, filled one with admiration of such tropical splendours.

The surrounding sea is also most beautiful. In the morning, smooth as glass, it mirrors the fleecy clouds floating aloft, and as the sun emerges from its placid depths seems converted eastward into molten gold. During the day the trade-winds ruffle its surface, and dot the blue expanse with wreaths of foam. Defended by encircling reefs, only a few hundred yards distant, the verdant shores never hear the surging and breaking of a heavy swell; nor are they ever deformed by long bare tracts of slimy sand, forsaken by the ebbing waters; for the great equatorial current fills the Caribbean Sea and keeps it always at high tide. In the gentle, limpid wavelets that murmur and sparkle along the pure white sands, children might delight to bathe.

With all these natural charms Jamaica was formerly considered to be most unhealthy, and even when our mission began was



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RELIGIOUS PARTIES.

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called "the grave of Europeans." No insurance society would assure any man's life there, on any terms. The mortality which had occasioned its bad repute sprung, however, chiefly from the bad living of those who went thither. No doubt the torrid zone tries the constitution of northerners, and tries their mental as well as bodily stamina; but intemperance, and rashness, and the want of reasonable care, have killed soldiers, sailors, and planters more than climate. Its character has, however, certainly improved since that time.

The religious parties in the island at the commencement of our mission must be briefly noticed. The Church of England was established there from an early period, but only in 1825 was Jamaica made an episcopal see. Previous to the arrival of the bishop the parish clergy were in a state of shocking disorder; nor did his presence immediately correct the evils which prevailed. Things not to be spoken of were too well known in nearly all the parishes along the north side. The Rev. Mr. Trew had distinguished himself for zeal and fidelity, and was perhaps the first parish minister who attempted the instruction of the slaves. Four or five zealous evangelical curates succeeded him, and were already eminent when I went to the country. Of them nothing but good could be spoken by any who loved good. In time they got parishes, and their number, happily, increased. Except by them, the gospel was not preached in the parish churches, and few attended them. The clergy were bound, indeed, to "christen" the slaves at the requisition of the masters, but that was done without instruction. The negroes got a half-holiday for the occasion, came in clean frocks to the overseer's or master house steps, and drew up in a row. One by one they advanced and received a new name and a few drops of water on the head, by the high authority of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. "It was like driving cattle to a pond," said one of them afterwards to me. "I heard something about God," said another, "but thought the parson in the long gown was he." If it did nothing else it made many of them think they were now proof against *Obea*.

The word *parish* must not mislead the reader. It is not to be understood in its ordinary ecclesiastical sense. There are twenty-