

In Storm and Weather

A Perilous Journey to Cameroon

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Basel

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It was in the days of January in the year of 1894 when we arrived in Hamburg to embark on our journey to Cameroon. We had celebrated Christmas at the Basler mission house and the mission congregation had gathered to celebrate our departure. ‘Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain.’ These were our parting words that were called to us back then and which we took with us as guiding words for our journey. It seemed more promising to us than ever as the mission’s children’s choir sang to us this beautiful song as a last salute:

Go forth happily to the holy war!
Thru night and thru greys beams the victory
If weathers are turbulent do not be afraid
Always look up; Jesus is the light.

In Hamburg it was bitterly cold, the thermometer read between 15 and 16 degrees below freezing. With this kind of cold the Elbe river was completely frozen and yet we had to reach the North Sea by the river. That alone was not a cause for concern because in such cases there is always an icebreaker to plow ahead and part the ice sheet, thereby clearing a path for the ship to travel in. What did scare us before the journey was the message that the news from the sea sounded very unfavourable: nothing but headwind, fog and storm; many ships sank as a result and many accidents were reported. I was frightened and said to my husband “I feel so terribly frightened when it looks like this!”

But my husband said “Well, I think our God can surely save us, but if he will not do it, we shall pray to him anyway.’ With these words my faith was powerfully strengthened and I could turn myself over to be led by God.

Soon the carriage arrived, that would bring us through the city to the Elbe. We commended ourselves to God’s protection and we climbed into the carriage, which took us away. Fifteen minutes later, we were at the little beach house on the Elbe. We had to wait here until the little boat, which was suppose to bring us to the steamer, was ready to let us aboard. The wait seemed quite long for us, because it was so severely cold. Gradually, all the travelers arrived. A warm beverage was offered, then “All aboard!” was called at once. From the little beach house a bridge led over to the little ship so that the boarding went smoothly. Besides us missionaries there were also several merchants traveling along with us. Some were even from Hamburg. It was a touching farewell. Handkerchiefs and hats were waved, and people called out, “Have a good trip!” and “Live well!” There was so much commotion that, for a moment, we forgot what

threatening dangers we would meet. The icebreaker, a little boat with sharp irons to part the ice, went in front of our boat and on to Cuxhaven where the ocean steamer was waiting for us.

First each person looked for a cabin, which was going to be his lodging for the coming weeks. Then we tried to arrange things as nicely as possible. There were not many passengers during this wintry season, particularly because we were going to West Africa on a freight ship. Yet, this made things all the cozier on the boat. We all joined together as if we were family.

We told all sorts of stories to each other, or read, or played a parlor game. If it came to it, the ladies did handiwork. But we also enjoyed looking out over the beautiful, majestic sea. This way, life on the sea was not in the least monotonous. On the contrary, it offered a lot of diversity. Of course, when we first began our trip, it was not exactly comfortable. It was just as we had been warned. We had head wind, fog, and storm. The foghorn sounded the whole day, and it aroused an eerie feeling in us all. Since every ship had a foghorn, a horn would sound sometimes here and sometimes there. We always feared that there could be a collision with another ship because one could not see in the fog. It was especially eerie at night. We always looked around fearfully to see if the fog was lifting, but that did not happen until several days later.

The ship rocked violently. The crew had to work efficiently; everything in the steamboat that was in danger of coming loose had to be fastened down: every sail, every barrel, every window, every door, every beam. The lifeboats were kept ready just in case. The orders were posted in passageway. On it was indicated in which order travelers and crew should use the lifeboats, in case of a disaster. One day they said "no one is allowed on deck." It would have been too dangerous up there. Now the tables were enclosed around with wooden frames, four fingers wide; every plate was also put in a separate frame, so that it could not slide about. If you held your plate tightly, at least you could eat your soup. That one or another bowl along with its contents, was dropped on the floor between the kitchen and the dining room, could not be avoided.

In those days, however, the travelers were so seasick that they could not enjoy their food and were especially glad if they could appear at the table at all. Upon departure, the ship had not been loaded sufficiently, therefore, it swayed back and forth, and the stronger the wind was, the more the ship swayed. The suitcases in the cabins always rolled back and forth, and a plank was placed against the bed, so that while sleeping, we would not fall out. But we knew we were in God's hands, and we let him take charge of us every day.

All the passengers shared their joy and sorrow one with another and in this way made their situation easier. We also knew that the voyage would be better, once we had gotten past the Gulf of Biscay. In those days, we suffered much from the cold, even though there was steam heating. It became so musty in the closed rooms that you could no longer stay in them and longed for fresh air. Our Captain had a hard time, because he carried the responsibility for the entire ship. One time, when the storm was raging most violently, he strapped himself to the Captain's bridge so that he wouldn't be thrown off it. We were often afraid that at anytime the ship's propeller would break into pieces. But God watched over us. After a hard night the Captain came to my husband in the morning and said: "Mr. B., the wind has turned and is going south. Last night

everything was lost, but now everything will be alright.” Those who witnessed the morning that followed the fear filled days will never forget it. Loud jubilations went through our ranks. In an instant all fear was gone and joy shone on every face. We were allowed onto the upper deck. The cold slowly began to leave and the fog disappeared. We no longer saw seagulls or petrels anxiously circling the ship.

Suddenly, everything had become remarkably different. We could enjoy the beautiful sea, which became ever calmer and smoother. How we thanked our God, that he had helped us so kindly! We sang songs of praise and joy.

We could no longer see the land, merely the sky and water, and we were pleased when we saw something emerging far off on the horizon. “A ship!” it was soon called, and there was much suspense until we knew where the ship came from. On open seas boats greet each other by simply raising the flag. But when at an island, another ship arrived at the same time as us, both ships threw their anchors overboard and the gentlemen paid visits to one another. Since it was a steamer from the south which was headed for Europe, we could give them letters to take along and we hurried to report to our loved ones about our well being. From there on the weather improved; gradually the air became as mild as springtime. After a few days we set our course for the beautiful Island Madeira where eternal spring reigns.

After long, fearful days, we saw land again for the first time and we longed to set foot upon it. We had to hurry, however, because our steamer would travel onward in a few hours. We came into the city Funchal, where we saw magnificent gardens and many fresh vegetables and fruit. From the latter, the ship cook bought whole baskets full; that did us good for the next few days, where the fresh vegetables and fruit tasted splendid to us at all meals.

After we had left Madeira, we traveled on again southwards for two days until we arrived at the Canary Islands. We had also anchored here because there is a large coal storehouse, which our captain wanted to use in order to renew his coal supply.

This island is just as beautiful as Madeira. Here, just like in Madeira, there are divers. The boys come by the hundreds rowing in their small boats towards the steamers. Their boats are laden with cages, in which they offer their Canaries for sale, or with chairs, which are plaited from wicker or with beautifully garnished small boxes or with silver goods or fruits and vegetables. As soon as a passenger lets himself be seen, one boy after the other jumps in the water, looks upward and says, “Master, one shilling,” (master, one mark). He means that you should throw this much into the water, so that he can get it. But they are also content with 25 pennies. With ample skill they then dive and take the coin out of the water, no matter how deep it sinks. Some are even so expert, that when you throw a coin into the water on the other side of the ship, they also are able to retrieve it; in this case, you give them twice the amount.

But the hours went by too quickly; anchors were again raised and out we went into the open sea. How wonderfully blew the fresh sea-air again! There was definitely no lack of entertainment. Sometimes we saw flying fish; those are long fish from 1/2 to 3/4 meters long, who are at times alone, and at other times jump in larger numbers from the water up to 8 to 10 meters high and then immediately thereafter they drop back into the water. It looks quite comical. The sea lights offer a beautiful sight in the evenings. The whole ship, as far as it touches the sea surface, is

illuminated there, as if by a light from the sea. It comes from small animals, which find themselves together at the surface of the sea around the ship.

Now we had beautiful weather nearly all the time. Only once were we surprised by an African thunderstorm because in the meantime we had arrived near Sierra Leone on the African coast. The call came, "Everyone vacate the deck!"

These thunderstorms usually arrive suddenly and then blow by just as fast. Black clouds covered the sky, sharp lightning flashed, and wind whipped the ship causing it to roll violently once again. Soon a strong rain came, and then by evening everything had passed. Except for the cool air and the wet deck, it would have been impossible to tell that a thunderstorm had moved over us. We thought we had all dangers behind us and hoped we would be able to land at our destination within a short time. If only we had already been in Liberia, the Negro Free State on the African coast! But we soon discovered that a ship can be threatened by dangers that the eye can't see.

It was a wonderful afternoon; the sea was smooth as glass and we stood on deck playing Ring-toss. Each player gets four rings made from ship ropes; each must throw these on numbers which are drawn with chalk inside a square on the floor of the deck; then depending on whether he throws the rope ring on high or low numbers, he wins or loses. Just as we sailed past a small rock island, one of the gentlemen remarked jokingly to his neighbor, "What do you suppose would happen if we had to land on this rock island?" Our ship approached the land slowly; because the Captain wanted to pick up some Black workers for the Gold Coast and Cameroon. He announced his intentions by blowing the ship's whistle. As we gazed at the island, our ship suddenly gave a sharp jerk, and it felt to us as if the ship sank a little. We looked at each other and noticed immediately that something must have happened. Our ship no longer moved forward. The Captain gave the orders for the ship to move at full steam but the ship stayed in the same place, slanting strongly on one side. Now it was clear, that we were stuck.

After a minute or so the captain said: "My dear Sirs and Ladies! I regret to inform you that a misfortune has befallen us. The ship has been driven up against a rock and we must make way as quickly as possible to land. Prepare yourselves! First the ladies and the invalid gentlemen, and then the other passengers." The rescue boats were ready quickly, the Captain called our names, and I was called first. I did not know what to do to enter the boat, which was lying so far below, and there was no more time, not even to use the ship's stairway, or even climb a rope ladder, much less would it have been possible to be transported into the boat by means of a chair. I was told I should simply sit on the ship's edge. I did just that, and when the waves lifted the boat, the sailors who were in the boat grabbed me and pulled me in. In this manner everyone was able to get in, about twelve people. Also some suitcases were thrown down to us, which could have been very dangerous. Thank God, no one was injured by this. Everything happened quickly and soon we were on our way to land. The trip went slowly; for we had only a few oarsmen because all four lifeboats had to be manned. We were $\frac{3}{4}$ of an hour away from land. We saw a large number of black people standing on the bank. We did not know whether or not they had good or bad intentions towards us. We came into the next vicinity of the so called Rock Island; there we considered whether it would be better to land on the uninhabited island or to put ourselves in danger on the mainland. In the same moment God sent us a sign. A small tree boat came up to us

from the opposite direction, a man on the boat shouted to us: "Mr. B., do not fear; no one will do you harm!" It was a native who had worked for us before and was pleased to see us again.

This man escorted us into his village. He rode in his canoe always next to ours until we reached the land and then brought us into the chief's house. We had met before and he gladly accommodated us. Indeed, his house had very little room. He had no beds because the people normally sleep on a mat and cover themselves with only a cloth. However, he had a cot that we could use. Some of the travelers had brought hammocks from the steamer with them, which they fastened to the roofs on the front of their houses. Therein they found their night's lodging. Others laid books under their heads. Every man helped himself as best he could; some were content to be allowed to sit on the porch.

The whole night people rowed back and forth from the ship; first the passengers were brought on land and then the provisions. Many blacks had assembled on the beach because they noticed our misfortune and wanted the spoils. When a ship was stranded, the rules of the beach were that each man could take what he wanted. They immediately went out into the sea in their small boats and fished many things out of the water. When the majority of the crew had left the ship, the Captain and a few people kept watch in a lifeboat. Even then, the blacks penetrated the ship and took what they could. They also came from other villages to plunder the ship. The village where we landed was in a dispute with a neighboring village. While the blacks in their boats continued to plunder, the people of the neighboring village came and attacked the women and children left behind in the village. They set the cottages on fire and perpetrated all kinds of mischief. There was finally a large battle, in which many were wounded. These were grateful for the help provided by our ship's doctor. At that time, he treated and bandaged 25 people in one night.

How happy we were, that when the battle started, we had already moved to the large village It was called "Big Nifu", whereas the other's name was "Little-Nifu." Both villages were on the beach, about one hour away from each other. A European merchant, who was there for company business, sent someone to tell us that we should come to the larger village. Little-Nifu didn't have room for us all because there were 70 people total with the ship's crew. A small motorboat that the captain brought to Africa was used to bring us and our belongings from one place to another.

In Big Nifu were some larger rooms: a tumbled-down, abandoned mission house, a warehouse, and among the natives themselves here were a few small rooms available. Also, there was an open space where the captain had a tent pitched for the ship's crew. We mission people were allowed to lodge in the mission house with a few traders. At least there were wooden floors, even if there were no bed frames. We put a piece of clothing under our head, and could sleep that way. Laundry from the boat was spread out over all the roofs of the Negro huts, and they looked like large loads of linen laid out to be bleached in the sun. Some of these items were offered to us for sale by Negroes. Because they didn't know the value of the things, you could get stuff incredibly cheap, e.g. a big piece of meat for a couple pennies. We had to look around to get something for our stomachs. Our merchant could give us rice and ham. So we cooked rice soup with ham. It had been a long time since anything tasted that good to us. Even the Governor of Cameroon (at that time), who also made the trip, ate with us.

How lucky we were, that there was a stove and cookware, even if there were not enough plates for all of us, and just as few sets of silverware. We could still buy tin spoons from our dealer. There were thirteen people in our small house; because of that, one party always ate first, then the other. Our captain had sent us meat, potatoes, shortening, coffee, and tea and in the following days, he also sent utensils and a rug for each of us, so that we would be well supplied. One of us had acetic acid—as a means of treating headaches—that we could use to make potato salad. All of us had to help; some got wood and water, others peeled potatoes, one of us cooked, or we took turns. Purchases also had to be made in the village: eggs, chicken, salt, and pepper, among other things. Once, someone told us that a mattress was for sale in the yard of a Negro. We went there and bought it, a fairly narrow mattress well suited for a boat, for 4 Marks. - -. Another time, someone asked to whom the bundle of canvas down on the beach belonged. I said that it had to be mine, and I actually found my linen there that I had brought with me for bed sheets. It was obviously too heavy for the people, and so they had left it on the beach.

Thus, the days passed one after another more rapidly than we would have thought. On the sixth day, another steamer arrived to pick us up. Shortly before the departure, a fellow traveler brought us our Bible and our devotional book that he found. Soon our few belongings were packed up. The sayings on the walls of the Mission house greeted us once more: “God is faithful”, “Commit your destiny to God”, etc.. We thanked God for so benevolently protecting us. Then we sailed for the Gold Coast.

We only saw some of the smokestack, the mast, and some other remains of our sunken ship, the “Adolf”; half of the ship was already under water on the second day, the other half by the third day.

We were very cordially welcomed by the missionaries from Basel in Akra, where we stayed for the time being. We praised and thanked God together, and a missionary gave a speech on the words of the 23rd Psalm: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want” and so on. Later, we set out on another steamer and arrived safely in Cameroon. Thus, we finally achieved our goal, despite tempests and shipwreck, through God’s goodness.