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THE BLACK PROPHET HARRIS OF AFRICA
A Second Sammy Morris

By George Whitefield Ridout

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While no date of publication for this booklet was shown, I suspect that it may have been written somewhere around 1920. G. W. Ridout, the author, served as a soldier during World War One, and thus it seems to me that the booklet may have been published at some time after 1918 when that war ended. -- DVM

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INSIDE FRONT-BACK COVER TEXT

The Black Prophet Harris Of Africa

The man who, without any training or earthly calling, obeyed the call of God to preach and evangelize among the tribes of Africa.

Wins 50,000 souls for Christ.

This is a special authentic account of this strange unknown prophet of God and Black Prophet of Africa, by Rev. George Whitefield Ridout.

It was a saying of Dr. Charles Inwood:

"When God is going to do something wonderful he begins with a difficulty, and if he is going to do something very wonderful he begins with an impossibility." That is a strange statement, but as we read the history of God's acts along the ages we see how startlingly true it is. We are reminded of those words of Isaiah 55:8-9: 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your

ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts."

"It was an obscure Moravian that led John Wesley, the Oxford man, to his conversion. It was an ex-coliery man, a miner, who led that great Wales Revival. It was a Chicago shoe salesman, Moody, whom God used to bring on the great Revival in Great Britain and America. It was an untutored, unknown, unheralded, Kru black man that God chose out and sent forth among the villages of Africa to call the multitudes to repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Black Prophet Harris in his humble sincere way and methods had some fifty thousand converts in the gold and ivory coasts of Africa.

"God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm."

"The most interesting thing in Africa is the native himself. The more I see him and study him the more I respect him. If I had a thousand tongues and each one of them were inspired by the gifts of the prophets of old, all should be dedicated to pleading for this people." -- Bishop Hartzell.

A native preacher, dying, gave this charge to his people upon his deathbed: "We are not what we were -- savages -- but men, professing to be taught according to the Gospel. Let us do then accordingly. My former life is stained with blood, but Jesus Christ has pardoned me. Beware of falling into the same evils into which I have frequently led you. Seek God and He will be found of you to direct you."

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01 -- AFRICA, HARRIS' NATIVE LAND

I know of a land that is sunk in shame,
Of hearts that faint and tire--
And I know of a Name, a Name, a Name
Can set that land on fire.
Its sound is a brand, its letters flame--
I know of a Name, a Name, a Name
Will set that land on fire."

Africa has long been known as the Dark Continent. Bishop Hill once wrote: "Where is light most needed? Without question in dark, dark Africa." Some have taken Job. 10:22, "The land dark as midnight, the land of the shadow of death, without any order, and where the light is as midnight," (Revised) as fitting language wherewith to depict the darkness of Africa.

But thank God, when Christian Missions in the nineteenth century began to open in Africa, the long, long night was broken and the morning light appeared. Livingstone, Mackay, Melville

Cox, William Taylor were God's pathfinders and, as the Africans themselves would put it, "fire bringers." They blazed the way for the multitude of missionary enterprises that are now going on in all parts of Africa, and out of these movements have come other streams of influence for the spread of the glorious gospel. These early missionaries of Africa hazarded their lives for the gospel. A visitor to Africa said to a missionary there: "A queer country this is, where the only things of interest you have to show me are the graves." "Yes," was the answer, "but they are the milestones of Christianity to regions beyond." One of those pioneers said: "Though every step be over the grave of a missionary, Africa must be redeemed;" and Bishop MacKensie said, "If I had a thousand lives to live, Africa should have them all." Melville B. Cox, who lived only four months after reaching Africa, said: "Let a thousand fall before Africa be given up."

African missions took on new meaning and new enthusiasm after David Livingstone had penetrated the depths of the continent and opened it up to the white man. Livingstone was the great missionary-explorer, and he once said: "I view the end of the geographical feat as the beginning of the missionary enterprise."

Three of God's servants who also aroused interest in Africa were Bishop William Taylor and Sammy Morris, the Kru boy -- and the other who kindled our evangelistic wonder and amazement was the Black Prophet Harris, who in this century achieved a record for revivalism and salvation among the tribes without any equal in the history of missions in Africa.

Those who are acquainted with Bishop Taylor's work in Africa will remember the marvelous triumphs of the gospel in his days, his self-sustaining Faith Missions, and the soul-saving work that ensued. William Taylor, Sammy Morris, and others were the forerunners of the singular and little, unknown man of God -- William Harris, -- whose strange, obscure, unheralded ministry of flaming evangelism it is the purpose of these pages to record.

When we were in Brazil we found in a minister's library a publication of an English missionary society in which the story of the Prophet Harris was given. It was, in fact, the first time that the story of Harris' wonderful career was ever told, and we are indebted to Rev. F. Deaville Walker and his story of the Ivory Coast (published in England) for the interesting bits of history published in this sketch.

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02 -- THE BLACK PROPHET HARRIS OF AFRICA -- Second Sammy Morris

Synopsis Second Chapter

1. The Black Prophet's Humble Origin.
2. The Method of His Soul Saving.
3. His Manner of Preaching.
4. Receives No Offerings; No Gifts.
5. Arrested by Government But Carries On.
6. Whole Villages Become Converted.
7. People Give Up Their Idols and Fetishes.

8. 50,000 Souls Saved.
9. The White Missionary Comes.
10. The Prophet Retires and Dies in Solitude.

"See heathen nations bending
Before the God we love,
And thousand hearts ascending
In gratitude above;
While sinners, now confessing,
The gospel call obey,
And seek the Savior's blessing,
A nation in a day."

Not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: but God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty." -- 1 Cor. 1:26-27

"Who but Thou, almighty Spirit,
Can the heathen world reclaim!
Men may preach, but till Thou favor,
Heathens will be still the same:
Mighty Spirit!
Witness to the Savior's name."

Marvelous are the Lord's ways of working. Paul, writing in 1 Corinthians 1:26, says: "For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called; but God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty."

The Story of the Ivory Coast, and of that strange black Prophet, who wrought such wonders and made thousands of converts on the Ivory Coast of Africa, is amazing. He was a Kru evangelist appearing suddenly like Elijah. With the fiery zeal of a Hebrew prophet this unlearned man denounced the old heathen religion and got thousands of people to destroy their idols, fetishes, charms, etc., and give themselves to Christ; even degraded fetish priests joined in cutting down the sacred groves in which the old worship centered. Harris preached to them the one true and great God of the Bible; his message was one of the living God as against their heathen gods of wood and stone. Harris was of medium height, with gray beard, always dressed in a long white gown with sleeves, and a big white turban; around his shoulders and hanging down in front he had a broad red band, and upon his breast there hung a cross. He walked barefooted and carried a long bamboo walking staff to which was fastened a small crosspiece which gave his staff the form of a rude cross; this he used as a symbol of his mission; he would hold this up before the people and tell of Jesus who died on the cross. He lived simply, carried a small Bible, and utterly refused all gifts or offerings by the chiefs or the people; all he asked was food and shelter. His preaching was in the open air; he spoke in pidgin English, and used an interpreter and he moved the hearts of thousands. He would baptize his converts in a simple way by laying the Bible on their heads as they kneeled, then sprinkling water upon them.

How Harris began his work is hidden in mystery. It seems almost like the story of Elijah again. Nothing is written of Elijah's antecedents, not a word about his training or gifts or qualifications. He is introduced to us as Elijah the Tishbite; all we know about Harris is that he was just the Black Prophet of Africa -- he seems to have had some contacts with mission stations and heard the gospel in English, and it would seem that he worked among English-speaking people, because the language that he preached in was pidgin English and this was interpreted into the tribe language by native men who also had some trifling knowledge of the English, sufficient to put the message of salvation across so that the gospel preached in such simplicity became the power of God to the salvation of tens of thousands of Africans.

Some characteristics of his methods in the great meetings he held were:

1. His appearance -- he always dressed in a white robe and white turban.
2. He always made the cross prominent, he carried a cross suspended with cord from his neck upon his breast.
3. He carried a prophetic staff made of bamboo and in the form of a cross; this, no doubt, added greatly to his impressiveness to the natives.
4. He carried his Bible and made use of it not simply by reading it, but he used it as he laid hands upon the heads of his converts.
5. He never made capital of his powers; he was always humble, he would allow no offerings and received no gifts, all he asked was journeying mercies, a place to sleep and enough to eat.
6. His practice was to baptize his converts in every service where they repented and accepted Christ.
7. When old age came upon him he retired to some obscure village and there passed to his reward.

There are some things about Harris that read somewhat like Sammy Morris: one lived mostly in Gold Coast, the other from the Ivory Coast; both had contacts with the English-speaking missionaries and became converted; both had a remarkable conversion and both developed a deep religious experience. Sammy Morris, of course, became known to America because of his marvelous experiences after coming in contact with Bishop Taylor's missionaries and his coming eventually to America; Harris comes out entirely as the raw native, he owes nothing to any human agency -- he was God-commissioned, God-sent, God-prospered in the salvation of souls. Harris stands out as one of the most singularly extraordinary preacher-evangelists known in missionary history.

"In hamlet, town and village,
He stayed to preach the Word:

And when men heard his trumpet-call
Their hearts were strangely stirred.

"The Gospel truths neglected,
Through barren years of sin,
A sense of deep conviction wrought
In those he sought to win.

"Dividing joints and marrow,
Pierced the two-edged sword:
Till souls cried out, 'What must we do?'
And turned unto the Lord."

Most of Harris' work began and continued on the African French Gold Coast till they arrested him and sent him out of their territory to the English; but before this occurred Harris had crossed the eastern frontier of the French colony and paid a brief visit to the adjoining region of the British Gold Coast. There on a more limited scale was a repetition of the scenes that followed his preaching on the Ivory Coast. At his fervent appeals some thousands turned to God. At the bidding of Harris they sent messengers to the Methodist workers at one or two other places, asking for teachers to be sent them, and it was in this way that the Missionary Society first heard of the prophet and his work, But we had no idea of the extent of the movement. It was supposed that it centered in Apollonia, and spread only in a lesser degree to the adjoining districts of the Ivory Coast. This, as we now know, was quite erroneous. Apollonia was a mere offshoot of the greater movement.

After about three months in Apollonia, Harris returned to the Ivory Coast, where he continued to preach and to consolidate his work, but the government of the French Ivory Coast was with some anxiety watching the mass movement that had now spread over so wide an area of their territory. In the wholesale conversions to Christianity, ancient customs were being changed, and fetish shrines were being destroyed, to such an extent that the Government feared might lead to disturbances. So in the autumn of 1914 the Governor of the colony summoned Harris to appear before him. Without hesitation Harris obeyed. In the palatial Government House the unlettered Kruman stood before the representative of the power of France. What passed between them we do not know. Apparently the Governor was satisfied that the movement was not political, and Harris was dismissed with a word of caution. But as the prophet left the Government House by the stately avenues of palms, there met him a company of people. There were Atties who had come from upcountry to seek baptism at his hands, and there in the very presence of the Governor, Harris baptized them.

The times were difficult for the Administration. The great war was devastating Europe, and the Ivory Coast was drained of troops. In the event of a native uprising the situation might become serious. The Government was apprehensive and watched Harris with increasing uneasiness. At last, in April, 1915, it was resolved to arrest and deport him, and the Governor instructed one of the Administrators to carry out this decision.

Taking with him two soldiers, an interpreter, and his own cowboy, the Administrator made his way to Port Barret, on the seashore, where Harris was thought to be. There, on the surf-beaten beach with its fringe of coconut palms, he found the prophet holding a service with several hundreds of people around him. As the Administrator approached, he noticed that the people were kneeling on the sand. They were praying, so he resolved to allow the service to proceed that he might see for himself what was going on. After the prayer Harris preached for ten or fifteen minutes. To the rhythmic accompaniment of the stringed gourds, the people sang a hymn; and then the prophet called those to come forward who desired to be baptized. There was perfect order, and no excitement or confusion of any kind. Quietly a number came to the front and knelt down, with their hands upon the bamboo cross, while Harris placed his Bible upon their heads and administered the Sacrament of baptism. To the Administrator's surprise, his own interpreter and cowboy came to him and asked his permission to go forward with the others. The Administrator was startled, but nodded his consent, and those two men knelt before the man they had come to arrest and received baptism at his hands.

At the close of the service, the Administrator, desiring to carry out his instructions in the quietest way possible, stepped up to Harris and told him that he was sorry to interfere, but the Government could not allow this sort of thing to go on, and the Governor had ordered his arrest. In the name of the Government he "requested" Harris to accompany him to the Liberian frontier. Without any question, Harris bowed to the authority of the rulers. Without opposition, without arguing the point or attempting to justify his work or position as a God-sent prophet, this remarkable man meekly submitted. He appealed to the people to make no trouble, to go home and serve God, and on no account to return to their fetishes. And that crowd of converts stood quietly on the sand, while their prophet walked away with the Administrator and his men. Partly on foot and partly by canoe, they took him to the frontier of his native land, nearly three hundred miles away and forbade him to return to French soil.

Having deported Harris, the Government resolved upon an even more drastic step towards crushing the movement he had inspired. It was decided to destroy the churches. An Inspector and an Administrator were ordered to carry out this decree, and they went from village to village, called the people together, informed them of the Government's order, and then directed the little church to be set on fire. We can imagine the grief with which those simple converts saw their little sanctuaries go up in flames. At one place the whole Christian community, in indignation, left their homes and tramped across the frontier to the Gold Coast, where, under the British flag, they might have freedom to worship God in their own way. When the French Governor called upon them to return, they named as their condition the rebuilding of their churches.

Without their prophet, without teachers or shepherds, those Ivory Coast Christians remained firm to the allegiance Harris had taught them. Braving the wrath of the Government, they maintained their Christian faith and worship, and as time went on even dared to rebuild their churches. Harris had told them that one day a white man would come and teach them about God, and they settled down to wait and to pray for his coming. They were all illiterate, and about all they knew were the barest facts of their new religion. The Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed, even the Ten Commandments, seem to have been unknown to them. Probably they had never heard a chapter of Scripture, and very few, if any, verses quoted.

Harris had told the people that they must keep God's Day; and though often it caused difficulty with their employers, or even with the Government for such as were called up for labor on the roads, those villagers, just emerging from gross darkness, kept it with the utmost care according to their dim light.

Sunday after Sunday the church bell rang to summon the people to the House of God. When they were assembled, the official "preacher" did his best to conduct a service. An unlearned and ignorant man, it was but little he could do. The people knelt in prayer, and either the preacher or one of the apostles attempted in his uninstructed way to lead them. They would venture to sing a few lines -- some snatch of song they had picked up. They sang feebly in pidgin English -- of which they did not understand a word. After the first verse -- if they succeeded in getting so far -- their stock of crude rhyme failed, and they lapsed into a mere humming of the air. Or possibly some man or woman in the congregation would launch out in an impromptu lyric -- always in their mother tongue -- and the whole congregation would hum a response. Thus to express their own thoughts in simple and unpremeditated lyric was infinitely better.

Harris had told them they must obey the Bible, for it is God's book, and he had held a copy on each head when he baptized them; but in the Roman churches they found no Bibles, and they came to the conclusion that those could not be the right kind of churches.

Thus, thrown upon their own slender resources, those eager multitudes groped slowly forward with their faces toward the dawn, looking for the white man, and Rev. W. J. Platt was the man sent of God. The English Methodist missionaries took up the work.

"What has become of Harris?" For some years he sunk into silence and nothing was heard of him. He returned to his own native village near Cape Palmas, Liberia; but still when able, visiting some adjacent village to preach, and eventually died an old man past eighty years -- but, he left behind him about 50,000 converts.

"Yet all these treasures of Thy grace
Are lodged in urns of clay;
And the weak sons of mortal race
The immortal gifts convey.

"Feebly they lisp Thy glories forth,
Yet grace the vict'ry gives:
Quickly they molder back to earth,
Yet still Thy gospel lives."

* * * * *

THE END