# He Stood So Tall and Strong

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Missing! That was the first report. Ernie Gross heard the message in disbelief. His mind fought against accepting the news: Ron was missing in Nigeria! He hung up the phone.

Already his wife Virginia was peppering him with questions. He tried to answer but the details were meagre. The call was from Bob Fisher in Bluefield, West Virginia. He had heard from his missionary daughter, Joy Ann at Iyale, Nigeria. The report was that Dr. Kenneth Dick, Joan Rycroft and a Nigerian had gone to Lagos to meet Ron on his arrival. They left Lagos for the return trip to the mission at Iyale. That was two weeks ago. Nothing had been heard from them since then. Spencer Dibble and Joy Ann had been searching along the route and would continue to do so. That was all.

Ernie and Virginia discussed the possibilities. Could it have been foul play—highwaymen or robbers? Or could it have been an accident? Or could it be that Dr. Dick and the others had tried to communicate but that the message had not been delivered? And so they seesawed between grief and hope.

Then followed determined efforts to contact Lagos directly. The telephone proved ineffective. Someone suggested Wycliffe Bible Translators. They were cooperative but hampered by Nigerian regulations. The U.S. State Department seemed to be the best news facility.

On the third day after the first report, the last shred of hope vanished. The State Department sent word that the

Volkswagen microbus had been found in a river, wedged under a bridge, and that all four bodies were inside.

To Ernie and Virginia, it seemed incredible. Dr. Kenneth Dick had gone to Nigeria in 1961 with his wife Norma. They had seven children. He was the only doctor for over a half million people, and often treated 800 patients a day.

Joan Rycroft, Toronto, Canada, had graduated from Emmaus Bible School in 1969. She had reached Nigeria in August 1970. Now three months later, her service was abruptly ended.

The Grosses knew nothing about the Nigerian, but this only seemed to accentuate their interest and concern for his family. Later they learned that his wife delivered their firstborn child on the night of his death. Dr. Dick had often spoken to this man about the Savior.

Their own son Ron, after years of deep and prayerful concern, had landed in Lagos on October 19 to help with the construction of hospital facilities at Iyale and later with a school. He had spent the next days in Lagos with Dr. Dick and party, attending to various business matters. Then on the 24th they started out for the mission at 2 a.m., anxious to catch the last ferry across the Niger River. Like Borden of Yale, Ron was taken home to Heaven before he ever reached the place of his heart's desire.

Ernest and Virginia Gross were engaged in the Lord's work in Greensboro, North Carolina, when their second son, Ron, was born in 1943. From the outset he was a happy, carefree child. By contrast his brother Kenn, three years older, was very serious minded.

By the time Ron was five, the family had moved to Greer, South Carolina. Kenn was concerned that his brother still didn't know the Lord. So out in the garden one day, he impressed on Ron the need of getting straightened out with the Lord. It was through "the gospel in a nutshell" that Ron came to the point of decision.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have everlasting life. John 3:16

He came in and told his parents he had been saved. Neither he nor they ever doubted in after years that this was the time of his spiritual birth.

Throughout his school years, he carried his Bible or Testament as part of his Christian testimony. But he also showed a genuine personal concern in the spiritual welfare of his classmates. It was evident that God was shaping a vessel to be used for His glory.

Following high school Ron enrolled at Emmaus Bible School in Oak Park, Illinois. There was no question that his heart was in the work of the Lord, and he moved resolutely toward the goal. He had found abundant life in Christ and he was anxious that others should find it too. If he could be said to have a personal anthem, it would be "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21).

During those years at Emmaus, a gracious work of the Holy Spirit was going on among some of the students in the matter of Christian discipleship. It included a determination to live sacrificially for the spread of the gospel. There were prayer meetings in the men's dormitory during the lunch hour. There were monthly all-night prayer meetings in the library. There were

gospel crusades to Mexico during the Christmas recess and summer, crusades to Europe.

Ron was deeply influenced by this movement. His keen desire was to forsake material things in order that men might not perish for lack of the gospel. The words of this poem ate deeply into his soul:

*I have more than I can wear,*
*Their feet and hands and heads are bare;*
*I have more than I can eat,*
*They die with hunger in the street;*
*My life knows love of noble souls,*
*Their hearts are thirsty, empty bowls;*
*I worship Jesus, risen Lord,*
*But these have never heard His Word.*
*These things let me remember when*
*Cries of the needy rise again.*

But his physical condition would not keep pace with the surging tide of his soul. It seemed he was forever hampered by allergies. As a matter of fact he was allergic to thirty-three different substances, including dairy products, chocolate, meat and wheat. Often during these days he longed to be moving out with the teams as they left for Mexico or overseas. But his disability was there to block him.

Coupled with this was a deep sense of his own inadequacy. His poignant jottings reveal the agony of soul which he endured.

*When I am in a position of leadership,*
*I must demand respect for my position.*
*I must earn respect for my person.*
*I have failed in both.*

Yet it was not as a failure that his classmates remember him, but as a friend who delighted in showing kindnesses to others.

He left his room at school unlocked and made it generally known that anyone who needed change (for a phone call or coke or any other reason) should feel free to enter his room and borrow from his big jar of loose change.

Whenever he knew the guys' rooms were to be inspected by the maintenance department, he would go to each of the rooms, empty trash cans and make the beds. He did it in a quiet, humble way, and never looked for any credit for himself.

No matter how busy he was, he would always give a haircut to any fellow who wanted it, and always with gladness.

If relatives or friends casually expressed the desire to have something, Ron would often walk in with the article the next day—if he could afford it.

When he went off to Bible camps in the summer, he invariably took along extra jackets for the youngsters who forgot theirs. Whenever it was cold at the camp fires, he would pass them out—sometimes going without one himself.

A southern preacher came to Chicago for a funeral.

In June 1968 I was at a funeral home in Chicago. My sister had died and I was very sad. A young man came fifteen miles to see me. He was a Christian and a real comfort. It really reached my heart when he handed me twenty dollars "to help me get home again." His name was Ron Gross. Someone has said, "It is not the duration

of life, but the donation that counts." Ron gave much in his span of years.

Few realized the extent of his generosity—that he helped to buy a car for a worker going to Mexico—that he paid the way to camp for kids every year—that he later made it possible for a friend to go to Bible School with money he had set aside for his own trip to Nigeria.

But his life was having a profound impact on others. On September 5, 1965 a young fellow, about ten years older than Ron, took time out to write him:

Thank you for your friendship. Your honesty and integrity, your radical commitment, your genuine concern and love for others—and your somewhat reckless courage—because of these things, I am thankful that I have known you.

Words fail when I try to describe the possible consequences of the decisions that I have made this summer. Some of my most fundamental notions about life have been transformed—others have been radically altered. It was you who stood at the threshold of some of these crucial decisions; who, by your very resolution, encouraged and influenced me to make them. Bridges are burned, possible avenues of retreat have been blocked—certainly not because of you alone: but because for the first time in a very long while I had met someone who had the guts to say "no" to the dictates of the world and "yes" to the terrific demands of the Cross. Again, not you, but Christ in you.

May our Lord lead us farther into the experience of crucifixion; may our will, passions, emotions, intellect be nailed to the Cross and resurrected, renewed in the image of Christ. May all that is in us unite in the glory of

the Son of God; may we see more of His role as servant realized in our own lives in this world. Ron, may our God bless you with fulness of joy and peace and the consuming fire of the Holy Spirit.

In a life that was marked by kindness, dedication, unselfishness and sacrifice, there was still room for humor and fun. His southern drawl, his tilted head and crinkled eyes—and often a poker face—heightened the enjoyment of his jokes. He had a teasing manner that made people enjoy every minute of the attention he gave them. No one was immune from his jests, even his own father. Under his own picture of his dignified dad, he posted the title of Betty Elliot's book THE SAVAGE MY KINSMAN. This would be shocking only to those who did not know the remarkably fine relationship between this father and son. Incidentally, the captioned picture is now one of the parents' treasured mementos.

Ron's time at Emmaus was interrupted by a siege of physical and emotional distress. By 1964 he was well enough to return and to finish his course.

After graduation he worked for a printing company and then for a business machine company. His colleagues noticed that he was not fighting his way up the success ladder like others. One of them reproached him, "What's the matter—don't you have any ambition to get ahead in business?"

He answered, "What does it amount to if you get a big job and a lot of material things? I have ambitions—but not to get ahead in business."

During this period, he used all his spare time preparing hand crafts for summer camps, counseling people of all ages, working with the young people at Overbrook

Gospel Chapel in Greenville. In November 1968 this local assembly commended Ron to devote his full time in Christian service.

It is hard to say when Nigeria first arrested his attention. He began to correspond with Herb Rohmann who had gone to Iyale in 1964. Ron had known him when Herb attended Bob Jones University and later when he was at Emmaus.

By 1970 his guidance had come into focus clearly enough for him to apply for a visa. A well-meaning friend sought to dissuade him.

"Don't go. There's plenty to do here."

"I feel that the Lord is definitely leading me to go."

"But something may happen to you and we'd never see you again."

"Each one of us is an island surrounded by the sea of God's love, and nothing can happen to us without first passing over the sea of God's love."

This same friend, when confronted with the fact that Ron's life had been taken, wrote showing submission to God's will. The article was entitled "Not an Accident, but an Arrangement." A quote from it read "Although his death seems to be a shocking, 'untimely' one, we (the members of the Young People's group) believe it to be . . . not an accident; but an arrangement. Ron's purpose on earth was completed, therefore God out of His unrequited love and wisdom, deigned a time to bring His believing child home. It was therefore a perfect arrangement of time, circumstance, place.

"Although Ron is no longer ours to enjoy fellowship with on earth, he continues to speak. The God-given truths

that he has taught us, will live on in our minds. But we do not wish it to stop there. We the young people who had the unspeakable privilege of knowing such a faithful servant, would like to transfer these truths concerning the Lord Jesus Christ from our minds to our hearts."

When almost two years passed with no action on his visa application, there were naturally questions as to whether God wanted him to go. But finally in July '70 the visa was granted and Ron was required to be in Nigeria no later than October 20.

To the busyness of these tumultuous days was added a crushing sorrow over what Ron had hoped would be lifelong partnership. His deep feelings of anguished confusion are mirrored in the scribbled notes:

These silent walls are desperate walls. Relentlessly they're closing in to crush their prey and make me but historic past. My eyes jump to and fro to catch them in their hideous march. With deftness and dexterity they're always still beneath my gaze. They seem to laugh as if to say, "You're struggling to escape the only One Who wants to be with you." As beaten Ronnie tucks his tail between his legs, I fling myself upon my bed, one thought in view, "Though no one needs me, Jesus loves me."

Yet towering above his personal grief was the burning desire that people in Nigeria might become true disciples of the Lord Jesus. One of the last things he said before leaving for Africa was, "I'd give my life if I could get these people to see the value of dedicating their lives to the Lord."

*My diary is a native's breast*
*Where tempests brood and shadows rest*

*Without one ray of light.*
*To write the name of Jesus there,*
*To see that native bow in prayer,*
*To point him on to worlds more fair,*
*This is my soul's delight.*

When Ron arrived in Lagos on October 19, he had less than $60.00 with him. He was met as scheduled by Dr. Dick, Joan Rycroft and the Nigerian named Mr. Balogun. Joan had come along to pick up some of her own baggage which had been previously left in Lagos because of a crowded mini bus.

They stayed in Lagos till the 24th, making necessary purchases and conducting other business for the mission. Then early in the morning, they set out for Iyale. After traveling about 125 miles, they came to a straight stretch of road. But then the road curved abruptly over a bridge spanning the Oni River. There was no sign indicating a curve or a bridge. It was about 4:30 or 5:00 in the morning. Rain was falling at the time, and the river was swollen. The car plunged over the edge of the bridge, dropped 15 to 25 feet to the river bed, landing upside down.

When Dr. Dick did not return to Iyale by the 25th for a speaking engagement, his colleagues were disappointed but not surprised. It was not at all unusual for him to be gone two or three weeks. After all, there could be trouble getting residence permits, locating baggage or getting the vehicle fixed. So there was no alarm.

Another week went by with no message. But then, communications were poor anyway. Maybe he had sent a message, which never arrived. As a precaution it was decided to radio to Lagos from the sawmill 25 miles

from Iyale. The next day a message came back that Dr. Dick had left Lagos on the morning of the 24th.

Immediately police stations along the probable route were alerted. On Thursday, November 5 a search party left Iyale for Lagos—Spencer Dibble from Ika, Joy Ann Fisher, Abu John the head dispenser at the hospital, and two boys to take back messages. By this time the Sudan Interior Mission had contacted all its stations and the Central Intelligence Division of the government had entered the case.

Finally on November 8 the missionaries were led to contact the police station at Ijebu Ode. The police there had an entry about a VW bus in the Oni River; they had tried unsuccessfully to pull it out the day before.

The missionaries rushed to the scene and knew immediately it was Dr. Dick's van. Shortly thereafter the bodies were removed and the van hauled out.

Burial for the three missionaries was quickly arranged in the little cemetery in Ijebu Ode. Spencer Dibble read 2 Corinthians 5:1-9 and portions of 1 Corinthians 15, ending with the triumph song of verses 55-57. He explained the Christian hope to those men standing by who had helped with the graves. Then a Nigerian Christian spoke to the few Yorubas who might not have understood the message in English.

Memorial services for Ron were held in Greenville, South Carolina, on November 15th. Over 600 persons overflowed the auditorium.

Cards and letters began to stream in to the family. One lady wrote, "He stood so tall and strong and it was such an inspiration to listen to him."

Another said, "May God use him to shame us and stir us out of our complacency and self-indulgence."

And still another expressed the hope that "his grave there in Africa will be a silent witness to a white man's love for his black fellow man—a love which was put in his heart by our Lord Jesus Christ."

Christmas in the Grosses' home was a time of sadness, but of spiritual enrichment. Mrs. Gross wrote to a friend:

The past few days have been hard, but they have helped us to re-evaluate things. We've had brought to mind the sharp contrast between things seen and things unseen, the transient over against the enduring, our light afflictions against an eternal weight of glory. So we thank the Lord for his child-training. We've looked at the Christmas tinsel around us, and it has lost its dazzle and attraction in the light of eternity. Now we're faced with the shortness of time, and material things seem as unattractive as food to a person who has overeaten. We pray we won't lose this feeling as the newness of our loss wears off. . . . Just think—our Ron was really "at home" for Christmas this year with his Savior.

Already the persistent WHY that spread across Nigeria, Canada, and the United States has begun to be answered. Some young people have trusted the Savior! Some have dedicated their lives to the Lord. Some have committed themselves to service in Nigeria. Who knows where the blessing will end?

God's invariable principle of spiritual harvest is still at work: "Except a grain of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone, but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit."

*There is no gain but by a loss,*
*You cannot save but by a cross:*
*The corn of wheat to multiply*
*Must fall into the ground and die.*

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*Wherever you ripe fields behold,*
*Waving to God their sheaves of gold,*
*Be sure some corn of wheat has died,*
*Some soul has there been crucified—*
*Someone has wrestled, wept and prayed*
*And fought Hell's legions undismayed.*

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*—William MacDonald*