

WHITE QUEEN OF THE CANNIBALS

The Story of Mary Slessor of Calabar

by

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Moody Colportage #6

edited for 3BSB by Baptist Bible Believer in the spirit of the Colportage Ministry of a century ago

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CHAPTER EIGHT

THE POISON TEST

"Tomorrow we will have our first service in our new church. You must dress right for it," said Mary.

She took out of her mission boxes clothes of all kinds and colors which the people in the homeland had sent to her.

"You must wear these to church tomorrow," said Mary. "In GOD's house you must be clean. You must be dressed. You must not bring your spears into church."

"Can we come?" asked the children.

"Indeed you can," said Mary. "The children can come and the slaves can come. GOD's house is open to everyone."

The next day was indeed a happy day for Mary. The church was filled with people. Many of them came just out of curiosity, but there were many who had learned to know and love and trust in JESUS.

Mary now started day classes and these too were crowded because many wanted to learn "book." They wanted to learn about Ma's GOD and about the Saviour who took away sins. It was not long before a change could be seen in many of these people. They had become Christians. The look of fear was gone from their eyes. They no longer feared the demons because they had a Saviour who loved them and took care of them. They did not do the wicked things they had done before. They tried to live as GOD wanted them to live.

Mary was happy. Now she wanted to build a larger and better mission house in Ekenge. Chief Edem wanted that too.

He felt that the church schoolhouse in Ifako quite outshone the little two-room house in Ekenge. Mary wanted doors and windows in the new house. She could not make them. The natives could not. They had never seen any.

Mary wrote to the Mission Board about it. The Mission Board put a notice in the magazine they published asking for a practical carpenter who was willing to go to Calabar. Mr. Charles Ovens saw the notice.

"This is GOD's call to me," he said. "I have wanted to be a missionary ever since I was a little boy. I could not study to be a minister. I learned to be a carpenter. Now I can be a carpenter for GOD. I can build mission houses and churches and while I build I can tell the people about my Saviour."

It was in May, 1889, that Mr. Ovens started for Calabar.

In Duke Town he found a native helper and the two of them went to Ekenge. Mary was very glad to have him come. He was a very jolly man. He sang at his work. Everyone liked him and the natives gladly helped him in building the houses.

For a long time Mary had been trying to get the chiefs of Okoyong to trade with the traders on the coast. They would not listen. Now she invited them to her new house. She showed them the things she had and how useful they were. The chiefs looked at the door and windows. They liked them. The women looked at the clothes and at the sewing machine. They liked them. They looked at the clock on the mantel. They liked it, too.

"We will trade with coast people," said Chief Edem.

Mary wrote to the traders and invited them to Okoyong. She told them to bring dishes, dress goods, mirrors, clocks, and the like to trade for ivory, oil, and bananas and other things in the jungle.

"It is too dangerous to come up-country," answered the traders. "We are afraid the native guards on the jungle paths will kill us."

Mary wrote to good King Eyo, of Duke Town. She asked him to invite the Okoyong chiefs for a conference. She promised they would bring jungle goods to trade.

King Eyo invited the chiefs. They did not want to go. Mary told them of the interesting things they would see on the coast. She told them of the good things they could get by trading.

At last they agreed to go. They collected two caneloads of bananas, barrels of oil and other jungle crops. Then the chiefs and warriors came marching down to the river to go to the coast.

"Wait," said Mary. "You cannot take those spears and swords and guns along. You will only get into trouble. You must leave your swords and spears, your guns and knives at home."

When Mary said this, many of the natives disappeared into the jungle. They would not go without their weapons.

"Ma, you make women of us," argued those who remained. "Would a man go among strangers without arms?"

"You may not take arms," said Mary. "You are not going to war. You are going for a friendly visit."

"If we cannot take our swords and guns we will not go. We will stay home."

"But you promised and I promised King Eyo that you would come. Will you go back on your word and make me a liar?"

For two hours they argued with Mary. The beach filled with natives from the village who wanted to see the chiefs start on their trip. The chiefs did not want to look like cowards to the people of the village. At last they took off their swords and gave their guns to their white Ma. Those who had run away to the jungle came back and decided to go along.

"We do not like this," said the chiefs, "but we will go. We will not make you a liar, Ma."

They got off into their boats. As one of the boats rowed off, one of the bags shifted. Mary saw the gleam of flashing swords.

"Stop!" cried Mary. The rowers stopped. Mary took the swords and threw them into the river.

"Shame on you," said Mary. "I did not think you would try to fool me like that." The chiefs said nothing. They just rowed down the river.

The chiefs who went to Duke Town had a wonderful time. They went to the church services. King Eyo Honesty talked with them about the Gospel and what it meant for their lives. He took them to his house and had a big dinner for them. They traded the bananas, oil, and other things which they had brought for things to take home like mirrors, clocks, and white people's clothes. Then the next day they rowed back to Ekenge.

The village people were all gathered down at the landing place to welcome the chiefs home. They watched patiently for the boats. When the boats came the people shouted for joy.

"Welcome home, Chief Edem," said Mary. "How was your trip? Did you enjoy your visit at Duke Town?"

"The trip was fine, Ma," said Chief Edem. "Duke Town is a big village. They have a big churchhouse. We saw many things."

"Did you need your guns and swords?" asked Mary.

"No, Ma, you were right. We did not need guns or swords. King Eyo was good to us. We have many fine things."

"If you work hard and get things to trade, you can get many more fine things," said Mary.

"We are going to work hard. We want many of those fine things we saw."

The men did work. Because they were busy they had less time and less desire to get drunk and quarrel. Mary's missionary work was having its effect on the lives of the people. Slowly they were changing from their heathen ways, but there was still much to do.

One day while Mary and Mr. Ovens were working on the mission house they heard a wild scream from the nearby jungle. Mary jumped up.

"Something is wrong in the jungle," said Mary. "Johnny, go and see what it is."

One of her orphan boys ran off to find out what was wrong. In a few minutes he came back.

"Ma, Ma," he cried, "a man is hurt. Maybe he is dead. Come quick."

Mary grabbed her case of medicines and followed Johnny into the jungle. When she reached the place where the young man was lying, she looked into his face.

"It is Etim, the son of our chief, Edem. He is going to get married soon and is building his house. A tree fell the wrong way and hit him. He cannot move his arms or legs. This means bad trouble. The people will say it is witchcraft."

Mary with her helpers quickly made a stretcher to carry Etim. They carried him to his mother's home at Ekenge.

"I will nurse him," said Mary to Etim's mother.

For two weeks Mary took care of him night and day. She prayed GOD to spare the young man's life. She did everything she knew to help him. Etim did not get better. Day by day he became worse. Sunday morning came. Mary could see that he did not have long to live. She left him for a short time to arrange for Mr. Ovens to take care of the church services. Hearing Etim groaning and crying out, she rushed back to the house where he was.

The natives were blowing smoke into his nose. They were rubbing pepper into his eyes. His uncle, Ekponyong, shouted into his ears. They thought they were helping him to get well. Instead they made him die sooner.

In a moment he gave a cry and fell back dead.

"Etim is dead!" cried the people in the house. "Witches have killed him! They must die! Bring the witch doctor at once!"

The people who were in the house quickly disappeared, and soon only Mary and Etim's relatives were left. When the witch doctor came, he did all kinds of queer things, which he said would tell him who had made the young man die. He pretended to be listening to the dead boy talk.

"It is the people of Payekong. They are to blame. They put a spell on him," said the witch doctor.

Chief Edem called for the leader of his soldiers.

"Take my warriors and go to Payekong," said Chief E'dem. "Capture the people and burn down the houses. Quickly now!"

The warriors were too late. Chief Akpo, the chief of Payekong, had heard the news. He and his people had run off into the jungle. Only a few people were left in the village. Those were captured by Edem's soldiers and brought to Ekenge.

Mary was sure that Chief Edem would make the people take the poison bean test. This is how the test was made: A small brown bean full of poison was crushed and put into water. The person who was tested had to drink the poison water. The natives thought that if the person drank the water and died, he was guilty; if he lived, he was innocent.

"That is no way to honor your son, Chief Edem," said Mary. "You know it is wrong and sinful to kill people."

"But they are bad people. They deserve to die."

"You do not know that. That water is poison. Anyone who drinks it would die."

"Oh, no, Ma, if the one who drinks it is innocent he will live."

"I do not agree with you. Come, let us honor your son in a better way."

Mary wrapped the young man's body in silk. She dressed him in the finest suit she could find. She wrapped a silk turban around his head and then placed a high red and black hat with bright colored feathers on his head. No chief had ever been dressed so fine for his burial. The body was carried out into the yard and seated in a large chair under an umbrella. A silver-headed stick and a whip was placed in his hand. This showed he was a chief's son. A mirror was also put in his hand so he could see how wonderful he was. On a table beside him were placed all his treasures. Those included skulls he had taken in war. Then the people were let into the yard to see Etim.

The people shouted. They were so happy they danced around. They called for whiskey to drink. Chief Edem gave them much whiskey to drink. They became wilder and wilder.

Mary and Mr. Ovens took turns watching the prisoners. They were afraid the people would kill them. As Mary was going to her house for a little rest, she saw some poison beans on the pounding stone. This filled her with fear. She was not afraid for herself, but for the poor prisoners. She fell on her knees and prayed.

"Dear Father in Heaven," prayed Mary, "watch over these poor people. Do not let harm come to these prisoners. Keep the other people from doing murder. Give me the courage to face the chiefs and tell them they are wrong. In all these things may Thy will be done. I ask this in JESUS' name."

After she had prayed Mary got up and went to Chief Edem and his brother Ekponyong.

"You must forbid the poison bean test," said Mary. "It is wrong and sinful. GOD is watching what you do. Do not do that sinful thing."

"That is my business," said Chief Edem. "I am the chief of this tribe. I will do what seems good to me."

Mary argued with the chief, but he would not listen. Ekponyong, his brother, encouraged Edem to make the prisoners take the poison bean test. Mary then went to the yard where the prisoners were kept. She sat down in the gateway. She was not going to let anyone get the prisoners. This made the chiefs very angry. The crowd of village people howled and yelled. Chief Edem's warriors shook their swords and guns at her and stamped the ground angrily.

"Raise our master from the dead," shouted the people, "and we will free the prisoners!"

Mary kept her place.

She wrote a note to Duke Town asking for help and sent it off secretly by one of her orphan boys. Still she watched over the prisoners. She would not leave her place in the gate. The people were angry with her, but still many of them loved and respected their white Ma and would not hurt her.

Suddenly a man pushed his way through the crowd. He shoved Mary aside. He grabbed one of the women prisoners. He dragged her in front of the body of Etim. He handed her the cup of poison.

"Drink!" he cried. "Drink and prove that you are innocent, or drink and die!"

~ end of chapter 8 ~

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