

WHITE QUEEN OF THE CANNIBALS

The Story of Mary Slessor of Calabar

by

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Moody Colportage #6

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CHAPTER ONE

A DRUNKARD'S HOME

"On the west coast of Africa is the country of Nigeria. The chief city is Calabar," said Mother Slessor. "It is a dark country because the light of the Gospel is not shining brightly there. Black people live there. Many of these are cannibals who eat other people."

"They're bad people, aren't they, Mother?" asked little Susan.

"Yes, they are bad, because no one has told them about JESUS, the Saviour from sin, or showed them what is right and what is wrong."

"Don't they have any missionaries out there, Mother?" asked blue-eyed Mary.

"Yes, there are a few and they are doing wonderful things for JESUS, but there are still thousands and thousands of people who have never heard a missionary. They need many, many more missionaries."

"When I get to be a big man, I'm going to be a missionary," said Robert, "and preach to the black people of Calabar and Nigeria."

"I want to be a missionary; too," cried Mary, tossing her red hair about.

"Girls can't be preachers," said Robert.

"I want to preach to the black people," said Mary, the tears racing down her cheeks.

"When I'm a missionary," said Robert, "I'll take you into the pulpit with me."

This made Mary happy and she was much happier when Mother Slessor said, "Perhaps you can be a teacher and teach the little black children of Calabar."

Now, children, I want to be sure you know your memory verse for Sunday school tomorrow. Let's all say it together."

And Mother Slessor and her six children joined in saying:

"Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature."

As they finished reciting the memory verse they heard a hoarse voice singing:

Gin a body - hic, meet a body - hic,
Coming - hic, through the rye - hic.

"It's your father, children. Off to bed with you quickly now. Oh, I do hope Robert has brought some money home with him so that we can buy some food for tomorrow."

"Where'sh the shteps? Somebody alwaysh moving the shteps," said the father, Robert Slessor, as he staggered drunkenly to the door.

Mother Slessor took hold of him and led him to a chair.

"Hello, dear," he said thickly.

"Howsh my, besht gurl? There ish no shoemaker's got a prettier wife – hic - than I have. Yesh shir, we drank a li'l toash to you, my dear."

"Oh, Robert," said Mother Slessor to her husband, "I do hope you brought home some of your paycheck. We need it badly for food. We don't have any money in the house. All the food we have is what I kept back from the children's supper so you could eat."

"Shure, I brought money home," said Father Slessor. "All I did wash buy my friendsh a few drinksh."

Mother Slessor's face brightened. At least they would be able to buy food. Her husband reached his hand into one pocket and brought it out empty. Then into another pocket and again brought it out empty. Finally trying several other pockets, he held out his hand with a small coin in it.

"Shee, there ya' are, I brought money home. There'sh a thrippence for ye."

"Oh, Robert!" said Mother Slessor in dismay as the tears filled her eyes. "Oh, Robert!"

Then because she was used to these things, Mother Slessor heaved a sigh and said quietly, "Come and eat supper, Robert."

The father staggered over to the table where Mrs. Slessor had placed the plate of food which the children had saved out of their own small helpings, that he might have something to eat.

"Who wants supper?" said Father Slessor, and he threw the precious food into the fire. He staggered to his bed and fell into drunken sleep. With a deep sigh Mother Slessor put out the light and she, too, retired for the night. Early the next morning she was up, preparing breakfast. Carefully she scraped every bit of oatmeal out of the container and boiled it for breakfast.

"Come, children, it's time to get up. Sunday school this morning," called Mrs. Slessor. Up jumped the six little Slessors. The older ones helped the smaller ones get dressed. When they had eaten the little oatmeal that Mrs. Slessor had for breakfast, they lined up for inspection.

"John," declared Mrs. Slessor, "you did not wash behind your ears. Go with Mary and let her scrub the dirt away. Now I'll put a bit of perfume on your hankies, and here's a peppermint for each of you. There, off we go to Sunday school and church."

Father Slessor snored in his drunken sleep, while the family went off to hear GOD's Word and to sing His praises. When they returned, Father Slessor was awake. He was sitting on the side of the bed and holding his head. He had "morning after" sickness.

"Come, Robert," said Mrs. Slessor, "and sit up to the table. Good Elder McDougal has given us a bit of meat and some bread, so we can eat this day."

Father Slessor groaned, but sat up to the table and ate dinner with his family. It wasn't much of a dinner. It would have been even less were it not for the kindness and charity of friends, because Father Slessor had spent all their money for drink.

After dinner the children did the dishes and ran out to play. When they were alone, Father Slessor hung his head and said,

"Oh, my dear, what can I say? I am so ashamed. I did so want to bring my wages home that we might have food for the children. And well - before I knew it, my wages were spent."

"Robert," said Mrs. Slessor, "you have said again and again that 'tis your friends who lead you astray. Would it not be well to move away to some other town where you can find new friends who will not drink and who will not tempt you to drink?"

"Aye, my dear, that no doubt would be the best. But where shall we go?"

"I have heard that there is plenty of work in Dundee, with the mills and all. Let's sell our things here and move to Dundee."

"Aye, let us do that. 'Tis certain it won't be worse than here for you and the children."

"Very well, then. I shall tell the children and we shall move before the week is out."

When Mother Slessor went outside to call the children, she found Mary seated on the steps with her stick dolls about her.

"Well, Mary dear, what are you doing?"

"I am the teacher and these are the black children of Calabar. I am teaching them about JESUS. I am telling them that He saved them from their sins."

Mother Slessor hugged her little teacher and told her about the move they planned to make. Then the other children were called and told, too. There was much excitement, especially when the furniture was sold and the Slessors with their remaining possessions took the train to Dundee.

It did not take long to find a place and get settled. Mother Slessor at once looked for a church they might attend. She found the Wishart Church, named for the famous preacher, George Wishart, who in 1544 had preached near the place where the church was built. Shortly afterward he was killed for preaching about JESUS.

But Father Slessor did not do better in the new home. He could not overcome the drink habit, and probably did not try very hard to overcome it. In the meantime a new baby came to the Slessor home. They called the baby Janie. How happy her brothers and sisters were to welcome Janie! Mother Slessor was not altogether happy because she knew there was another mouth to feed. Father Slessor promised to give up drinking, but that did not mean anything, because he never kept those promises.

The money they got from selling their furniture in Aberdeen slowly melted away. Sickness came to the Slessor home. Robert Junior, who was going to be a missionary to Calabar, became sick and died. Two other of the children also died, and only Mary, Susan, John, and Janie were left. But even that did not make Father Slessor give up his drinking. The Slessors had less and less money to buy food. At last Mrs. Slessor went to work in one of the factories. Mary had to take care of the home. But the wages Mrs. Slessor received were very small. Somehow they had to find ways of getting more money. When she was eleven years old Mary went to work in the factory, too. Would she ever get a chance to be a missionary or must she give up that dream?

"Mary, Mary," called Mrs. Slessor, "it's five o'clock. Time to get up and go to work."

"Ho, hum," said Mary, "I'm still tired, but I'll get right up. I don't want to be late!"

At six o'clock in the morning Mary was at work. She had to tend to the shuttles on the weaving machines. The weaving sheds where Mary worked were damp and dark. All morning long she heard the whirring of the belts and the clacking of the looms. In the afternoon she went to school. By the time she was fourteen years old she was an expert weaver. She now began to work full time.

The hours were long. Twelve hours every day for six days a week the fourteen-year-old girl worked in the factory. And the pay was very small. But it was a joy when she received her pay on Saturday night. Mary hurried home.

"Mother, Mother," she called happily as she hurried into the house, "here is the money I earned this week."

"Oh, Mary, that is so good of you," said Mother Slessor. She wiped tears from her eyes with the end of her apron. She felt sad that Mary had to work in a factory. She thought of her own childhood in a happy home where there was always plenty to eat and plenty of money to buy things that were needed. She quickly hid Mary's wages in the same place where she hid her own wages, so that her husband would not find the money and spend it for drink.

Mary did not lose courage by the long hours in the factory. She remembered that David Livingstone, the great missionary, had worked in a weaving factory, too.

"If I want to be a missionary, I must study," said Mary. "When can I find time?" Again Mary remembered something David Livingstone did when he was a boy. He would take books to work and read them when the weaving shuttles were working right and did not have to have someone attend to them. Mary did the same thing. She read many books from the Sunday school library. She read books like Milton's "Paradise Lost." But most of all she read the Bible.

Conditions at home grew worse. Mary's drunken father became meaner and meaner. Saturday nights were the worst. Mary and her mother would sit waiting, after the younger children had been put to bed, for the father to stumble home.

One night he was so mean to Mary, she had to run out of the house to get away from him. The whole family was unhappy because of Mr. Slessor's sinful habit. Finally, one morning he did not waken from the drunken sleep. In the night his soul fled to face the Judge in Heaven. The death of the father was really a great blessing to the family, for he had brought them only sorrow and trouble.

Now the family felt free. The load they had borne was lifted. Mary at once began to take a more active part in church work.

"If I want to be a missionary, I better have some practice. I know what I can do, I'll ask the Sunday school superintendent for a class to teach." She did, and was given a class of girls. She enjoyed teaching the girls very much. She called them her "lovable lassies."

But Mary was not satisfied. She wanted to get more practice.

On her way home from the factory Mary passed through the slums of the city. Mary herself did not live in a fine house; in fact, it was a very poor one. But in the slums the children lived in small, dark apartments. The streets on which they played were narrow and dirty. The children here did not know about the Saviour. They grew up rough and tough, cursing, swearing, stealing, and doing many mean things. Mary's heart ached for these children of the slums. She wanted to teach them that JESUS could make them happy. She talked with many people about it.

At last her church opened a mission in the worst part of the slums. Mary went to the superintendent.

"I want to teach a class in our mission," said Mary. "I am sure you can use me better there than you can here."

"But Mary," said the superintendent, "you are doing a fine job here in the church; why do you want to go to the mission?"

"There are many who will gladly teach a class here at the church, but not so many who are willing to teach at the mission. I am willing. I will teach there if you will give me a class. Please do."

"But Mary, those children are tough and mean. You couldn't handle them. You could not make them behave. You are hardly more than a child yourself."

"Oh, please let me try," said Mary, "I do so want to tell those boys and girls about my Saviour. Please let me try. Then if I don't make good, you can get someone else in my place."

"Very well," said the superintendent, "I will give you a class, but I warn you those children are tough and mean and hard to handle."

~ end of chapter 1 ~

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