

WHITE QUEEN OF THE CANNIBALS

The Story of Mary Slessor of Calabar

by

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CHAPTER SEVEN

WITCHCRAFT

One day Chief Njiri and his warriors came to visit Chief Edem. They stayed several days. They had wild parties every day. They drank native beer until they became drunk. Then they would quarrel and fight. They asked Mary to settle their quarrels and decide who was right. Mary was praying every day that there would not be bad fights and that no one would be killed.

Finally it was the last night of the visit. The men were so drunk that Mary knew there would be trouble. When the chief and his men were ready to leave, everyone was excited. The people were shouting and pushing. Some shots were fired and the men began stabbing with their swords. They were too drunk to know what they were doing. Mary ran into the crowd. She went up to Chief Njiri.

"Chief," said Mary, "your visit is over. Go now before trouble starts." She took hold of the chief's arm and led him out of the village and his men followed him. They started for their own village.

"I'm glad that's over," said Mary, but she had spoken too soon.

On their way home, as they were staggering along, Bakulu, one of Njiri's men, cried out, "Look!" and pointed with his finger. The chief and his men stopped.

"It is witchcraft," said Bakulu. "See the little banana plant with palm leaves, nuts and a coconut shell close by!"

"Don't go past it," said one of the other men. "It is bad medicine. You will get sick and die."

"It is the people in the last village we passed through. They did it. Let us punish them," said Chief Njiri.

"Yes, let's punish them," shouted the men. Mary had been following the men to make sure they would go home.

She heard the shouting. Now the men started running past her. She tried to stop them, but they slipped away. Mary took a short cut through the jungle. She reached the road to the village before the men did.

"GOD, our Father in Heaven," prayed Mary, "help me for JESUS' sake to stop these men, so there will not be a bloody battle."

"Stop," she cried as the first men came in sight. "Stop, I want to talk to you."

The men stopped. The others soon came running up. They had to stop, too.

"You men are planning to do something bad. You do not know that the people of this village did bad things to you. You only think they did. You have drunk too much beer. You do not know what you are doing. Go home."

"But Ma," said Njiri, "they have made bad medicine against us. They made witchcraft. They must be punished before we are hurt."

Njiri and his men argued with Mary, but finally they listened to her.

They turned around and once more started for home. Mary went with them to make sure they would get there. At last they came again to the banana plant and the witch medicine. They were afraid to pass it.

"If we pass it, we will get sick and die," said Njiri.

"That is sinful foolishness," said Mary. "That banana plant and those other things will not hurt you. I am not afraid of them."

Mary picked up the banana plant, the palm leaves, nuts and coconut shell and threw them into the jungle.

"Now, brave men, come on. I have cleared the path. Let us go to your village."

Timidly the men tiptoed past the place where the "medicine" had been. Then they went on to their own village. Once more Mary thought that all would be peaceful now for a while. She started for the village of Ekenge.

No sooner was Mary gone than the people of Njiri began drinking again. Then they started quarreling and fighting. One of the men in the village ran and told Mary.

"I will fix that," said Mary. She took some of the men of Ekenge with her.

She went to the village of Njiri. With the help of the men of Ekenge and some of the people of the village, they tied some of the most drunken men and the wildest fighters to the trees. They left them there to cool themselves in the breezes of the jungle.

After several hours Mary untied them because she was afraid that some lions might come and kill and eat them. Now that things were quiet, Mary again started for home. On the way she picked up the little banana plant that had caused so much trouble and took it with her.

"I will plant it in my own yard and see what witchcraft can do!" said Mary.

Early the next morning, a man from Njiri's village came running into Ekenge. He went to Mary's house.

"Ma," said the runner, "Chief Njiri was very sick last night. He suffered very much. The witch doctor took sticks and shells and shot from his leg. It is because he walked past the banana plant and other magic medicine. Give me the little banana plant for the chief."

"No, I cannot do that," said Mary. She knew that if the banana plant was taken to the chief, someone would die because of the witchcraft belief.

"But you must send it," said Chief Edem. "If you do not send it, he will make war on us."

"Very well," said Mary, "I will send it. But I know there will be much trouble."

So he took the banana plant to Chief Njiri. When he received it, he and his warriors went to the village which he thought was working witchcraft against him. He made all the people of the village come to him. In great fear they came.

"Every one of you must swear that you did not make that bad medicine against me. I am going to find out who is working that witchcraft to hurt me."

All the people of the village swore they had not done it.

"I am going to take one of your finest young men with me. If I find that you have told me a lie, I will kill him."

Njiri's warriors captured a young man and took him along. If the villagers had tried to rescue him, he would have been killed, and many of them would have been killed also. They sent a man to Mary.

"Ma," said the man, "please help us. Please get Njiri to free Kolu."

"I don't like to have anything to do with Njiri. He is very wicked. But I will go and try to get Kolu free."

Mary went to the village of Chief Njiri. She walked right up to the chief.

The warriors of Chief Njiri looked at her with angry faces. They shook their spears at her.

"Chief Njiri," said Mary, "why have you taken this young man? He has done you no harm. You are doing a bad thing."

"Ha, ha," laughed Chief Njiri. "Do you think I am so foolish, Ma? I know these people put bad medicine in my path. I saw the sticks and shells which the witch doctor took from my leg. If sickness comes, I will kill this man."

"The village people have sworn to you that they did not put those things in your path," said Mary.

"Perhaps they are lying."

"They are not lying, but you have lied. You promised to go home and not harm these people. You lied to me. You have made trouble. You went to their village and made them swear. You stole this young man. It is wrong to lie. GOD will surely punish those who speak with a lying tongue. Please set this young man free so that he may return to his village and his people."

"Ma," answered Chief Njiri, "you do not understand these things. You do not know the badness in the hearts of these people. You do not know the bad things they want to do against me. You do not know about witchcraft."

"Oh, yes, I do," said Mary. "I know that GOD will punish those who do witchcraft. He will punish those who are foolish enough to believe in it. The people who trust in JESUS do not fear witchcraft. Why do you not trust in JESUS?"

"I don't need JESUS. I am a strong chief. I have many warriors. No one can harm me."

"If no one can hurt you, why don't you set this young man free?"

"I will not set him free. If I keep him, his people will be afraid even to try hurting me."

"But think, Chief, how you would feel if you were captured and taken away from your people? Think how sad this young man feels. Great chiefs show mercy and kindness to the weak. Will you show mercy and kindness to the people of the village and free this young man?"

"A great chief is not weak. He does not act like a woman. A woman shows kindness and love. I am not weak. I will punish. I will revenge myself on those who would do evil to me."

"Revenge belongs to the true and powerful GOD. He will punish those who do evil. I beg you, Chief Njiri, to set this man free."

"Ma, if I were not a good chief I would have killed you a long time ago. But go now. I do not want to hear your talk. I will not set this young man free. Maybe I will kill him. Maybe I will not kill him. But I will not set him free. Go, before I become angry with you."

"I will go, but remember Chief Njiri, the great and powerful GOD who sees and knows the badness in your heart. He knows the evil you do. Please turn to Him and believe in Him before it is too late and you end in Hell, the place where bad people suffer forever."

"Go," said Chief Njiri angrily, "get out of my village. Go back to Ekenge."

Sadly Mary started back to Ekenge.

"I have failed these people who asked for my help. O GOD, soften the heart of Chief Njiri and keep Your protecting hand over the young man Kolu."

When Chief Edem heard that Njiri would not set the man free, he said, "Njiri has insulted our Ma. Let the warriors get their spears and shields. Let us get ready for war."

The women slipped quietly into Mary's room to tell her the latest news. It made Mary sad that these men were getting ready for a war, but neither one of the chiefs would listen to her. Mary knew where to go for help. She prayed to GOD.

"O GOD," prayed Mary, "You can stop this war. You can soften the hearts of these cruel chiefs. Please stop this war so that the warriors may not be killed and their wives made widows and their children orphans. Hear me for the sake of JESUS, my Saviour."

A man knocked on the door of Mary's hut. "Ma, Ma," he cried, "Kolu has been set free. Chief Njiri let him go, and he is back at the village. There will be no war!"

"Thank You, Father in Heaven," prayed Mary. "Thank You that You heard my prayers and that peace and quiet will again be in the villages."

Mary had a true friend in Ma Eme, the sister of Chief Edem. She helped Mary often. She did everything she could to help Mary and the mission, but one thing she never did, that was to confess CHRIST openly. She and Mary talked of many things as they worked together. One day Ma Eme said,

"When my husband died, I had to go through the chicken test."

"What is that?" asked Mary.

"All of my husband's wives, I too, were put on trial. The witch doctors were trying to find who caused my husband, a great chief, to die. Each of us had to bring a chicken. The witch doctor chopped off the heads of the chickens one at a time. If the headless chicken fluttered one way, the witch doctor said the wife was innocent. If it fluttered the other way, he said she was guilty."

"What happened when they cut off the head of your chicken?" asked Mary.

"It fluttered wildly in the right direction. The witch doctor said I was innocent. But the strain had been so great I fainted and had to be carried to my hut. But many of the other wives were killed."

"You do not believe in the witch doctors, do you?" asked Mary.

Ma Eme looked all around. Then she stepped close to Mary and whispered, "No, but I would not tell anyone else. They are too strong and tricky. They could cause me much trouble if they knew I was against them."

"I shall fight the witch doctors as long as GOD gives me strength. GOD is against the witch doctors who do such evil things."

Chief Edem had promised Mary a house, and the people of the village had said they would build it.

But whenever Mary wanted to start, they would say, "Tomorrow, we will start, Ma." But tomorrow just did not come.

At last Mary and the children she had adopted and the native children cleared the ground. They stuck sticks in the ground for the wall. They began to make the roof. Then some of the lazy people of the village began to help, and at last the house was built.

Mary also wanted to build a church and school at Ifako.

The chief there had promised to help. But the people of that village were lazy, too. They were always putting off doing the building.

One morning a man came from Ifako.

"My master wants you," he said.

Mary went to Ifako. The chiefs were together at a cleared piece of ground.

"See, Ma, here is your ground. Here are the sticks, and mud, and palm leaves and other things we need to build. Shall we build the church today?"

It did not take long for Mary to say yes. The people of the village forgot to be lazy. They were having fun building the church.

When it was finally finished it was twenty-five feet wide by thirty feet long. We would not think that was a very big building, but it was the biggest in the village.

"See," said the Chief of Ifako, "it is much better than the house at Ekenge."

"It is a fine church," said Mary. "Now we must keep it clean and nice. There should be no dirty things in or around GOD's house."

We would not think it was such a fine church. The walls were made of dry mud and sticks. The roof was made of palm-leaf mats. The floors were made of mud and so were the seats.

But everything was polished and rubbed as smooth as possible. There were no windows or doors in the building. There were just holes in the wall to let in the light for windows and a larger hole to serve as an entrance. But Mary thought it was a fine church because it was the best in that part of the country and because it was a place where people could hear about the Saviour and learn "book."

"We will hold our first service in the new church next Sunday," said Mary. "I want you all to come."

"We will come, Ma," promised the natives.

~ end of chapter 7 ~

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