

MARY SLESSOR
OF CALABAR
PIONEER MISSIONARY

BY

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VIII. THE POWER OF WITCHCRAFT

The belief in witchcraft dominated the lives of the people like a dark shadow more menacing than the shadow of death. Taking advantage of their superstition and fear, the witch-doctors—some of the cunningest rogues the world has produced—held them in abject bondage, and Mary was constantly at battle with the results of their handiwork.

The chief of Ekenge was lying ill. Since she had taken up residence in his yard he had treated her with consideration, and guarded her interests and well-being, and now came the opportunity to reciprocate his kindness. She found him suffering from an abscess in his back, and gave herself up to the task of nursing and curing him. All was going well, when one morning, as she entered with his tea and bread, she saw a living fowl impaled on a stick. Scattered about were palm branches and eggs, and round the neck and limbs of the patient were placed various charms. The brightness of her greeting died away. Edem was suspiciously voluble and frank, flattered the goodness and ability of the white people, but said they could not understand the malignity of the black man's heart. "Ma, it has been made known to us that some one is to blame for this sickness, and here is proof of it—all these have been taken out of my back." He held out a parcel which, on opening, she found to contain shot, powder, teeth, bones, seeds, eggshells, and other odds and ends.

On seeing the collection the natives standing around shook with terror, and frantically denounced the wickedness of the persons who had sought to compass the death of the chief. Mary's heart sank; she knew what the accusation meant. At once, before her eyes, men and women were singled out, and seized and chained and fastened to posts in the yard. Remonstrance, rebuke, argument were in vain. The chief at last became irritated with her importunity, and ordered his retainers to carry him to one of his farms, whither he was accompanied by his wives, those of note belonging to his house, and the prisoners. He forbade "Ma" to follow, and enjoined secrecy upon all, in order that no tales might be carried back to her. But she had her own means of obtaining intelligence of what was going on, and she heard that many others were being chained, as they were denounced by the witch-doctors.

The chief became worse, and stronger measures were decided on: all the suspected must die. Mary was powerless to do more than send a message of stern warning. Days of suspense and prayer followed. On the last night of the year she was lying awake thinking of the old days and the old friends, her heart homesick, and the hot tears in her eyes, when the sound of voices and the flash of a lantern made her start up. It was a deputation from the farm. They had learnt that the native pastor, the Rev. Esien Upabio, at Adi-

abo—the first native convert in Calabar—was skilled in this form of disease, and would “Ma” give them a letter asking him to come over and see the chief? The letter was quickly given, and she returned to her rest and her memories.

When the native pastor asked what was the matter, the reply was that “Some one’s soul was troubling the chief.” “In that case,” he said, “I can do nothing,” and no persuasion or bribe could move him from his position. His sister, however, thought it might be well for her to go and see what she could do, and he consented. Under her care the abscess broke and the chief recovered, and all the prisoners were released with the exception of one woman, who was put to death.

Aware of the uncanny way in which his guest heard of things the chief sent his son to forestall any tale-bearer. “No one has been injured,” she was assured. “Only one worthless slave woman has been sold to the Inokon.” As it was the custom to dispose of slaves who were criminals and incorrigible to this cannibal section of the Aros for food at their high feasts the story was plausible, but she knew better, and when the son added that the three children of the victim had been “quite agreeable,” she thought of the misery she had witnessed on their faces. She pretended to believe the message, however, for to have shown knowledge of the murder would have been to condemn scores to the poison ordeal, in order that her informant might be discovered.

When the chief was convalescent it was announced by drum that he would emerge on a certain day from his filth—for the natives do not wash during illness—and that gifts would be received. His wives and friends and slaves brought rum, rods, clothes, goats, and fowls, and there ensued a week of drinking, dancing, and fighting, worse than Mary had yet seen.

In the midst of it all she moved, helpless and lonely, and somewhat sad, yet not without faith in a better time.

IX. SORCERY IN THE PATH

A more extraordinary instance of superstition occurred soon after. A chief in the vicinity, noted far and wide for his ferocity, intimated that he was coming to Ekenge on a visit. It meant trouble for the women, and she prayed earnestly that he might be deterred from his purpose. But he duly appeared, and throwing all her anxiety upon God, she faced him calm and unafraid. Days and nights of wild licence followed, accompanied by an outcrop of disputes, most of which were brought to her to settle.

One morning she found the guest drunk to excess, but determined to return at once to his village. His freemen and slaves were beyond control, and

soon the place was in an uproar: swords were drawn, guns were fired, the excitement reached fever heat. With a courage that seemed reckless she hustled them into order and hurried them off and accompanied them for the protection of the villages through which they must pass. She was able to prevent more drink being supplied to them, and all went well until, at one point on the bush track, they came upon a plantain sucker stuck in the ground, and, lying about, a cocoanut shell, palm leaves, and nuts. The fierce warriors who had been challenging each other and every one they came across to fight to the death, were paralysed at the sight of the rubbish, and turning with a yell of terror rushed back the way they had come. Mary sought forcibly to restrain them, but, frantic with fright, they eluded her grasp, and ran shrieking towards the last town they had passed to wreak vengeance on the sorcerers. She ran with them, praying for swiftness and strength: she passed them one by one, and breathlessly threw herself into the middle of the path, and dared them to advance. She felt she was almost as mad as they were, but she relied on a Power Who had never failed her, and He did not fail her now. Her audacity awed them: they stopped, protested, argued, and gradually their hot anger, resentment, and fear died down, and eventually they retraced their steps. She took up the "medicine" they dreaded, and pitched it into the bush, ironically invoking the sorcery to pass into her body if it wanted a victim. But nobody could persuade them to proceed that way, and they made a long detour.

Unfortunately drink was smuggled to the band, and fighting began. She induced the more sober to assist her to tie a few of the desperadoes to trees. Leaving these, the company went on dancing, brandishing arms, embracing each other, and committing such folly that she felt that she could bear it no longer. As the swift twilight fell she called her few followers and returned, releasing on the way the delinquents bound to the trees, but sending them homewards with their hands fastened behind their backs. On passing the scene of the sorcery she picked up the plantain sucker, laughingly remarking that she would plant it in her yard, and give the witchcraft it possessed an opportunity of proving its power,

Nothing is hidden in an African community, and news travels swiftly. Next morning came a messenger from the chief she had escorted home. It had been a terrible night, he said; the native doctor had come to his master and had taken teeth, shot, hair, seeds, fish-bones, salt, and what not, out of his leg. If they had been left in the body they would have killed him. It was the plantain sucker that was to blame, and his master demanded it back. Mary read the menace in the request: the plant was to be used as evidence against some victim. Argument and sarcasm alike failed, and she was

obliged to hand it over. Edem was standing by. "That," he grimly remarked, "means the death of some one."

On the arrival of the sucker native oaths were administered to all in the village accused of the sorcery, ordeals of various kinds were imposed on young and old, slave and free, and the life-blood of a man was demanded by way of settlement of the matter. Strong in their innocence the people resisted the claim, but by guile the chief's myrmidons caught and handcuffed a fine-looking young man belonging to one of the best families and dragged him into hiding. Any attempt to effect a rescue would have meant his murder, and in their dilemma the people thought of the white "Ma," and sent and begged her to come and plead with the chief for the life and liberty of the prisoner.

She had never a more unpleasant task, for she detested the callous savagery, but there was nothing else to do; and she went depending less upon herself than upon God. She walked tremblingly into the man's presence, but her fear soon passed into disgust and indignation. He was the personification of brutality, selfishness, and cowardice. Laughing at her entreaties he told her to bring the villagers and let them fight it out. She pointed out that neither he nor his House had suffered by what had happened; that the accused people had taken every oath and ordeal prescribed by their laws; and that his procedure was therefore unjust and unlawful. "It is due to your presence alone that I escaped," he retorted; "they murdered me in intention if not in fact." His head wife sacked him up, and both became so rude and offensive to Mary that it took all her grace to keep her temper and her ground. As she would not leave the house the chief said he would, and walked out, remarking that he was going to his farm on business. Swallowing her pride she followed him and begged him humbly as an act of clemency to free the young man. He turned, elated at her suppliant attitude, laughed loudly, and said that no violence would be used until all his demands had been complied with.

She returned to her yard, and days of strain followed. The situation developed into a quarrel between the truculent chief and Edem, and every man went armed, women crept about in fear, scouts arrived hourly with the latest tidings. Her life was a long prayer. . . .

One day the young man was set free, without reason or apology being given or condition exacted, and told to go to his people. With his safety all desire for revenge was stilled, and matters resumed their normal course. The heart of Mary once more overflowed with gratitude and joy.

X. HER HOUSE AND HALL WERE BUILT

She was impatient to have a house of her own, but the natives were slow to come to her assistance. They thought the haste she exhibited was undignified, and smiled compassionately upon her. There was no hurry—there never is in Africa. If she would but wait all would be well. When argument failed, they went off and left her to cut down the bush and dig out the roots herself. Lounging about in the village they commiserated a Mother who was so strongheaded and wilful, and consoled themselves with the thought of the work they would do when once they began. She could make no progress, and there was nothing for it but to tend the sick, receive visitors, mend the rags of the village, cut out clothing for those who developed a desire for it, and look after her family of bairns.

One day, however, the spirit moved the people and they flocked to the ground. She constituted herself architect, clerk of works, and chief labourer. Her idea was to construct a number of small mud-huts and sheds, which would eventually form the back buildings of the Mission House proper. Four tree-trunks with forked tops were driven into the ground, and upon them were laid other logs. Bamboos, crossed and recrossed, and covered with palm mats, formed the roof and verandah. Upright sticks, interlaced and daubed with red clay, made the walls. Two rooms, each eleven feet by six with a shaded verandah, thus came into existence. Then a shed was added to each end, making three sides of a square. Fires were kept blazing day and night, in order to dry the material and to smoke it as a protection against vermin. Drains were dug and the surrounding bush cleared.

In one of the rooms she put a fireplace of red clay, and close to it a side-board and dresser of the same material. Holes were cut out for bowls, cups, and other dishes, and rubbed with a stone until the surface was smooth. The top had a cornice to keep the plates from falling off, and was polished with a native black dye. Her next achievement was a mud-sofa where she could recline, and a seat near the fireside where the cook could sit and attend to her duties.

In the other room she deposited her boxes, books, and furniture. Hanging upon the posts were pots and pans and jugs, and her alphabet and reading-sheets. In front stood her sewing-machine, rusty and useless after its exposure in the damp air. There also at night was a small organ, which during the day occupied her bed.

Such was the “caravan,” as Mary called it, which was her dwelling for a year: a wonderful house it seemed to the people of Okoyong, who regarded it with astonishment and awe. To herself it was a delight. Never had the building of a home been watched with such loving interest. And when it was finished no palace held a merrier family. At meals all sat round one pot, spoons were a luxury none required, and never had food tasted so sweet.

There were drawbacks—all the cows, goats, and fowls in the neighbourhood, for instance, seemed to think the little open yard was the finest rendezvous in the village.

Her next thought was for the church and schoolhouse. A mistress of missionary strategy, she wished to build this at Ifako, in order that she might control a larger area, but the chiefs for long showed no interest in the matter. One morning, however, an Ifako boy sought her with the message, "My master wants you." She thought the command somewhat peremptory, but went. To her surprise she found the ground cleared; posts, sticks, and mud ready, and the chiefs waiting her orders. She designed a hall thirty feet by twenty-five feet, with two rooms at the end for her own use, in case storm or sickness or palaver should prevent her going home. Work was started, and not a single slave was employed in the carrying of the material or in the construction. King Eyo sent the mats, some thousands in number, for the roof, and free women carried them the four miles from the beach, plastered the walls, moulded the mud-seats, beat the floor, and cleared up, and all cheerfully, and without thought of reward. Doors and windows were still awanting, but she asked for the services of a carpenter from Calabar to do this bit of work; and meanwhile the humble building, the first ever erected for the worship of God in Okoyong, was formally opened.

It was a day of days for the people. Mary had prepared them for it, and all appeared in their new Sunday attire, which, in many cases, consisted of nothing more than a clean skin. But the contents of various Mission boxes had been kept for the occasion, and the children, after being washed, were decked for the first time in garments of many shapes and colour—"the wearing of a garment," said Mary, "never fails to create self-respect." It was a radiant and excited company that gathered in the hall. There was perhaps little depth in their emotion, but she regarded the event as a step towards better things. Her idea was to separate the day from the rest, and to make it a means of bringing about cleanliness and personal dignity, while it also imposed upon the people a little of that discipline which they so much needed.

The chiefs were present, and they voluntarily made the promise before all that the house would be kept sacred to God and His service, that the slave-women and children would be sent to it for instruction, that no weapon of warfare would be carried into it, and that it would be a sanctuary for those who fled to it for refuge.

Services and day school were now held regularly in the hall. The latter was well attended, all the pupils showing eagerness to learn "book," and many making rapid progress.

The larger Mission House, which Mary intended to occupy the space in front of the yard at Ekenge, was a stiffer problem for the people, and for a time they hung back from the attempt to build it.

XI. A PALAVER AT THE PALACE

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to Christian truth and progress was not superstition or custom, but drink. She had seen something of the traffic in rum and gin at the coast, but she was amazed at what went on in Okoyong. All in the community, old and young, drank, and often she lay down to rest at night knowing that not a sober man and hardly a sober woman was within miles of her. When the villagers came home from a drunken bout the chief men would rouse her up and demand why she had not risen to receive them. At all hours of the day and night they would stagger into the hut, and lie down and fall asleep. Her power, then, was not strong enough to prevent them—but the time came.

The spirit came up from Calabar and was the chief article of trade. When a supply arrived processions of girls carrying demijohns trooped in from all quarters, as if they were going to the spring for water. At the funeral of one big man seven casks of liquor were consumed, in addition to that bought in small quantities by the poorer classes. A refugee of good birth and conduct remarked to Mary once that he had been three days in the yard and had not tasted the white man's rum. "Three days!" she replied, "and you think that long!" "Ma," he said, in evident astonishment, "three whole days! I have never passed a day without drinking since I was a boy."

She fought this evil with all her energy and skill. Her persuasion so wrought on the chiefs that on several occasions they agreed to put away the drink at palavers, with the result that those who had come from a distance departed, sober and in peace, to the wonderment of all around.

She saw that the people were tempted and fell because of their idleness and isolation; for they still maintained their aloofness from all their neighbours, and there was yet no free communication with Calabar. If a missionary happened to pay her a visit he would be stopped on the forest track by sentries who, after satisfying themselves as to his identity, "cooeed" to other watchers farther on. Dr. Livingstone believed that the opening up of Central Africa to trade would help to stamp out the slave traffic, and in the same way she was convinced that more legitimate commerce and the development of wants among the people would to some extent undermine the power of drink. All the ordinary trade she had seen done so far was the sale of five shillings' worth of handkerchiefs and a sixpenny looking-glass. She urged the chiefs to take the initiative, and was never tired of showing them her

possessions, in order to incite within them a desire to own similar articles. They were greatly taken with the glass windows and doors, and one determined to procure wood and "shut himself in." Her clock, sewing-machine, and organ were always a source of wonder, and people came from far and near to see them. The women quickly became envious of her household goods, and she could have sold her bedcovers, curtains, meat-safe, bedstead, chest of drawers, and other objects a score of times. More promising still was their desire to have clean dresses like their "Ma," and she spent a large portion of her time cutting out and shaping the long simple garment that served to hide their nakedness.

She also sent down to Calabar and asked some of the native trading people whom she knew to come up with cloth, pots, and dishes, and other useful articles, guaranteeing them her protection; but so great was their fear of the Okoyong warriors and so poor their faith in her power, that they refused point blank—they would as soon have thought of going to the moon. "Well," said Mary, "if they won't come to us we must go to them." She had been seeking to familiarise the minds of the chiefs with the idea of settling their disputes by means of arbitration instead of by fighting, and had been cherishing the hope that she might persuade some of them to proceed to Creek Town and discuss the subject with King Eyo. She now proposed to the King that he should invite them to a palaver at his house, and at the same time she would endeavour to have some produce sent down direct to the traders.

The King had never ceased to take an interest in her work: he frequently sent up special messengers to enquire if all was well, and always reminded her that he was willing to be of service to the Okoyong people. A grandson of the first King Eyo also sent men occasionally, with instructions to do anything they could for the white Mother, and to bring down her messages to Calabar. Such kindly thought often took the edge off her loneliness.

The King at once sent the invitation, and, trusting more in the word of Mary than in that of the King, all the chiefs in her neighbourhood accepted the offer and an expedition to Creek Town was organised. A canoe was obtained, and heaped with yams and plantains, gifts for the King, and with bags of palm-kernels and a barrel of oil, the first instalment of trade with the Europeans. Alas ! the natives know nothing about a load-line, and as the tide rose the canoe sank. It was not an unmixed pleasure setting out with men who were ignorant of the management of canoes, but another day was fixed and another canoe was found. The whole of Okoyong seemed to be at the beach, and every man, woman, and child was uttering counsel and heartening the intrepid voyagers. Several of the chiefs drew back and disappeared,

and of the half-dozen who- remained only two could be persuaded to embark when they learnt that guns and swords must be left behind.

"Ma, you make women of us! Did ever a man go to a strange place without his arms?" "Ma" was inexorable. She sat down and waited, and after a two hours' palaver swords were ungirt and handed with the guns to the women. Those who still declined to go were received back with rejoicing, and farewells were made with those who went, amidst wailings and tears. A start was made, but the craft proved to be ill-balanced, and the cargo had to be shifted. As this was being done she detected a number of swords hidden below the bags of kernels. Her eyes flashed, and the people scattered out of the way as she pitched the arms out on the beach. With a meekness that was amusing the men scrambled into their places and the canoe shot into the river, Mary taking a paddle and wielding it with the best of the men. The journey was made through dense darkness and drizzling rain, and occupied twelve hours.

But she was rewarded by the result. Nothing could exceed the kindness of King Eyo. He bore himself as a Christian gentleman, listened courteously to the passionate and foolish speech of the Okoyong representatives, reminded the supercilious Calabar chiefs that the Gospel which had made them what they were had only just been taken to Okoyong, and in giving the verdict which went against them, he gently made it the finding of righteousness, according to the laws of God. When all had been settled he asked Mary to take the chiefs over his palace, and invited them to a meeting in the church in the evening, where he spoke words of cheer and counsel from the words, "To give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

This experience made a great impression upon the chiefs: they left with a profound reverence for the King and a determination to abide by his decisions in the future, whilst Mary had added much to her dignity and position. This was proved the morning after they returned to Ekenge. She was awakened by a confused noise, and on looking out was astonished to find several chiefs directing slaves, who were working with building material. "What is the matter?" she asked in wonder. Instead of answering her one of the chiefs who had accompanied her to Calabar turned to the crowd and, in a burst of eloquence, described all he had seen at Creek Town, how the Europeans lived, and how King Eyo and every chief and gentleman had treated their Mother as a person superior to them, and given her all honour. They in Okoyong must now treat her as befitting her rank and station, and must build her a proper house to live in. Mary was hard put to it to preserve her gravity. Soon afterwards a young slave, for whom she had often pled, began to wash his hands in some dirty water in a dish outside: his master ran at him with a

whip, and it was all she could do to prevent him being lashed. Opening out again and again he called the lad a fool for daring to touch a dish used by their Great White Mother.

But what was more important than all was the fact that the way had at last been opened up for trade relations with Calabar. The people began to make oil and buy and sell kernels, and to send the produce down the river direct to the factories. As she had foreseen, they had now less time for palavers, and less inclination for useless drinking, and still more useless quarrelling and fighting.

XII. THE SCOTTISH CARPENTER

The story of the settlement in Okoyong and of the building of the but and hall was related by Miss Slessor in the Missionary Record of the Church for March 1889. The hall she described as "a beautiful building, though neither doors nor windows are yet put in, as we are waiting for a carpenter. And," she added, "if there were only a house built, any other agent could come and take up the work if I fail." In the same number of the Record there appeared an appeal by the Foreign Mission Committee for "a practical carpenter, with an interest in Christian work," for Calabar.

There happened to be in Edinburgh at this time a carpenter named Mr. Charles Ovens, belonging to the Free Church, who was keenly interested in foreign missions. As a boy he had wished to be a missionary, but believing that only ministers could hold such a post he relinquished the idea. He was an experienced tradesman of the fine old type, a Scot of Scots, with the happy knack of looking on the bright side of things. Having been in America on a prolonged visit he was about to return there, and had gone to say good-bye to an old lady friend, a United Presbyterian. The latter remarked to him, "I see Miss Slessor wants a man to put in her doors and windows—why don't you go to Calabar?" He had never heard of Miss Slessor, but the suggestion struck him as good, and he straightway saw the Foreign Mission Secretary, and then went and changed the address on his baggage. He left in May, and on his arrival in Calabar was sent up to finish the work Mary had begun. All his speech at Duke Town was of America and its wonders, but when he returned some months later he could talk of nothing but Okoyong.

He found Mary attired in a simple dress, without hat or shoes, dining at a table in the yard in the company of goats and hens. She sprang up with delight on hearing the Scots tongue, and welcomed him warmly. The conditions were most primitive, and his room was only eight feet long and five feet wide, but he possessed much of her Spartan spirit. Although ignorant of the native language he was of great assistance to her during his stay, while

his humour, and irresistible laugh lightened many a weary day. As he worked he sang “auld Scots sangs,” like the “Rowan Tree” and “The Auld Hoose.” When she heard the latter tears came into her eyes at the memories it recalled. Even Tom, his native assistant, was affected. “I don’t like these songs,” he said; “they make my heart big and my eyes water !”

The Mission House had progressed well under Mary’s superintendence. She had aimed at making it equal to any at the big stations, and had planned an “upstairs” building with a verandah six feet above the ground, and a kitchen and dispensary. She had muddled the walls, and the mat roof was being tied on, and now that Mr. Ovens was at work all was promising well, when an event occurred which put a stop to operations for months.