

missionary heroes

Mary Slessor

The Woman Who Conquered Cannibals (Born 1848, died 1915)

by Basil Mathews

Mary Slessor (1848-1915) was a Scottish missionary who served the Lord Jesus Christ in Africa where she was commonly called "Ma" Slessor.

I. The Mill-Girl

The Calabar Girls at the Station



As the train from the south slowed down in Waverley Station, Edinburgh, one day in 1898, a black face, with eyes wide open with wonder, appeared at the window. The carriage door opened and a little African girl was handed down onto the platform.

The people on the station stopped to glance... But as a second African girl a little older than the first stepped from the carriage to the platform, and a third, and then a fourth black girl appeared, the cabmen and porters stood staring in amused curiosity.

Who was that strange woman (they asked one another), short and slight, with a face like yellow parchment and with short, straight brown hair, who smiled as she gathered the little tribe of African girls round her on the railway platform?

The telegraph boys and the news-boys gazed at her in astonishment. But they would have been transfixed with amazement if they had known a tenth of the wonder of the story of that heroic woman who, just as simply as she stood there on the Waverley platform, had mastered cannibals, conquered wild drunken chiefs brandishing loaded muskets, had faced hunger and thirst under the flaming heat and burning fevers of Africa, and walked unscathed by night through forests haunted by ferocious leopards, to triumph over regiments of frenzied savages drawn up for battle, had rescued from death hundreds of baby twins thrown out to be eaten by ants—and had now brought home to Scotland from West Africa four of these her rescued children.

Still more would those Scottish boys at Waverley Station have wondered, as they gazed on the little woman and her group of black children, if they had known that the woman who had done these things, Mary Slessor, had been a Scottish factory girl, who had toiled at her weaving machine from six in the morning till six at night amid the whirr of

the belts, the flash of the shuttles, the rattle of the looms, and the roar of the great machines.

Born in Aberdeen, December 2, 1848, Mary Slessor was the daughter of a Scottish shoemaker. Her mother was a gentle and sweet-faced woman. After her father's death Mary was the mainstay [chief support] of the home. Working in a weaving shed in Dundee (whither the family moved when Mary was eleven) she educated herself while at her machine.

The Call to Africa

Like Livingstone, she taught herself with her book propped up on the machine at which she worked. She read his travels and heard the stories of his fight against slavery for Africa, till he became her hero.

One day the news flashed round the world: "Livingstone is dead. His heart is buried in Central Africa." Mary had thrilled as she read the story of his heroic and lonely life. Now he had fallen. She heard in her heart the words that he had spoken:

"I go to Africa to try to make an open door...; do you carry out the work which I have begun. I LEAVE IT WITH YOU."

As Mary sat, tired with her week's work, in her pew in the church on Sunday, and thought of Livingstone's call to Africa, she saw visions of far-off places of which she heard from the pulpit and read in her magazines—visions of a steaming river on the West Coast of Africa where the alligators slid from the mud banks into the water; visions of the barracoons [building used to enslave people temporarily) on the shore in which the captured blacks were penned as they waited for the slave-ships; pictures of villages where trembling prisoners dipped their hands in boiling oil to test their guilt, and wives were strangled to go with their dead chief into the spirit-land; visions of the fierce chiefs who could order a score of men to be beheaded for a cannibal feast and then sell a hundred more to be hounded away into the outer darkness of slavery—the Calabar where the missionaries of her church were fighting the darkness of the most savage people of the world.

Mary Slessor made up her mind to go out and give her whole life to Africa. So she offered herself, a timorous girl who could not cross a field with a cow in it, as a missionary for cannibal Calabar, in West Africa.

For twelve years she worked at the centre of the mission in Calabar and then flung herself into pioneer work among the terrible tribe of Okoyong. No one had ever been

able to influence them. They defied British administration. For fifteen years she strove there, and won a power over the ferocious Okoyong tribe such as no one has ever wielded. "I'm a wee, wee wifie," she said, "no very bookit, but I grip on well none the less."

To-day over two thousand square miles of forest and rivers, the dark natives, as they squat at night in the forest around their palaver [a conference or discussion]-fires, tell one another stories of the Great-White-Ma-Who-Lived-Alone, and the stories they tell are like these.

II. The Healing of the Chief

Through the Forest in the Rain

A strange quiet lay over all the village by the river. For the chief lay ill in his hut. The Calabar people were waiting on the tip-toe of suspense. For if the chief died many of them would be slain to go with him into the spirit-world—his wives and some of his soldiers and slaves.

Suddenly a strange African woman, who had come over from another village, entered the chief's harem. She spoke to the wives of the chief, saying, "There lives away through the forest at Ekenge a white Ma who can cast out by her magic the demons who are killing your chief. My son's child was dying, but the white Ma (the African uses the word "Ma" as mother, to name a woman after her eldest son, e.g. Mrs. Livingstone was called Ma-Robert; and as in this case, for a woman whom they respect) saved her and she is well to-day. Many other wonders has she done by the power of her juju. Let your chief send for her and he will not die."

There was silence and then eager chattering, for the women knew that their very lives depended on the chief getting well. If he died, they would be killed.

They sent in word to the chief about the strange white Ma.

"Let her be sent for," he ordered. "Send a bottle and four rods (value about a shilling) and messengers to ask her to come."

All through the day the messengers hurried over stream and hill, through village after village and along the forest paths till at last, after eight hours' journey, they came to the village of Ekenge. Going to the courtyard of the chief they told him the story of their sick chief, and their desire that the white Ma who lived in his village should come and heal him.

"She will say for herself what she will do," said the chief.

So he sent a messenger to Mary Slessor. She soon came over from her little house to learn what was needed of her.

The story of the sick chief was again told.

"What is the matter with your chief?" asked Mary Slessor. Blank faces and nodding heads showed that they knew nothing at all.

"I must go to him," she declared. She knew that the way was full of perils, and that she might be killed by warriors and wild beasts; but she knew too that, if she did not go and if the chief died, hundreds of lives might be sacrificed.

Chief Edem said, "There are warriors out in the woods and you will be killed. You must not go."

Ma Eme, a tall fat African widow of Ekenge village, who loved Mary Slessor, said, "No, you must not go. The streams are deep; the rains are come. You could never get there."

But Mary Slessor said, "I *must* go."

"Then I will send women with you to look after you, and men to protect you," said Chief Edem.

Mary Slessor went back to her house to prepare to start on her long dangerous journey in the morning. She could not sleep for wondering whether she was indeed right to risk her life and all her work on the off-chance of saving this distant sick chief. She knelt down and asked God to guide her. Then she felt in her heart that she must go.

In the morning at dawn a guard of Ekenge women came to her door.

"The men will join us outside the village," they said.

The skies were grey. The rain was falling as they started. When the village lay behind them the rain began to pour in sheets. It came down as only an African rain can, unceasing torrents of pitiless deluge. Soon Mary Slessor's soaked boots became impossible to walk in. She took them off and threw them into the bush; then her stockings went, and she ploughed on in the mud in her bare feet.

They had walked for three hours when, as the weather began to clear, Mary Slessor came out into a market-place for neighbouring villages. The hundreds of Africans who were bartering in the market-place turned and stared at the strange white woman who swiftly passed through their midst and disappeared into the bush beyond.

So she pressed on for hour after hour, her head throbbing with fever, her dauntless spirit driving her trembling, timid body onward till at last, when she had been walking almost ceaselessly for over eight hours, she tottered into the village of the sick chief.

The Healing Hand

Mary Slessor, aching from head to foot with fever and overwhelming weariness, did not lie down even for a moment's rest, but walked straight to the chief who lay senseless on his mat on the mud floor. Having examined him she took from her little medicine chest a drug and gave a dose to the chief. But she could see at once that more of this medicine was needed than she had with her. She knew that, away on the other side of the river, some hours distant, another missionary was working.

"You must go across the river to Ikorofiong for more medicine."

"No, no!" they said, "we dare not go. They will slay any man who goes there." She was in despair. Then someone said, "There is a man of that country living in his canoe on the river. Perhaps he would go?"

They ran down to the river and found him. After much persuading he at last went, and returned next day with the medicine.

The chief, whom the women had believed to be almost dead, gradually recovered consciousness, then sat up and took food. At last he was quite well. All the village laughed and sang for joy. There would be no slaying. They gathered round Mary Slessor in grateful wonder at her magic powers. She told them that she had come to them because she worshipped the Great Physician Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father—God who made all things. Then she gathered them together in the morning and evening, and led them as with bowed heads they all thanked God for the healing of the chief.

III. VALIANT IN FIGHT

Years passed by and Mary Slessor's name was known in all the villages for many miles. She was, to them, the white Ma who was brave and wise and kind. She was mad, they thought, because she was always rescuing the twin babies whom the Calabar people throw out to die and the mothers of twins whom they often kill. But in some strange

way they felt that her wisdom, her skill in healing men, and her courage, which was more heroic than that of their bravest warriors, came from the Spirit who made all things. She would wrench guns from the hands of drunken native men who were three times as strong as she was. At last she used to sit with their chief as judge of quarrels, and many times in palavers between villages she stopped the people from going to war.

Through the Forest Perilous

One day a secret message came to her that, in some villages far away, a man of one village had wounded the chief in another village and that all the warriors were arming and holding councils of war.

"I must go and stop it," said Mary Slessor.

"You cannot," said her friends at Ekenge, "the steamer is coming to take you home to Britain because you are so ill. You will miss the boat. You are too ill to walk. The wild beasts in the woods will kill you. The savage warriors are out, and will kill you in the dark—not knowing who you are."

"But I must go," she answered.

The chief insisted that she must have two armed men with lanterns with her, and that she must get the chief of a neighbouring village to send out his drummer with her so that people might know—as they heard the drum—that a protected person was travelling who must not be harmed.

It was night, and Mary Slessor with her two companions marched out into the darkness, the lanterns throwing up strange shadows that looked like fierce men in the darkness. Through the night they walked till at midnight they reached the village where they were to ask for the drum.

The chief was surly.

"You are going to a warlike people," he said. "They will not listen to what a woman says. You had better go back. I will not protect you."

Mary Slessor was on her mettle.

"When you think of the woman's power," she said to the chief, "you forget the power of the woman's God. I shall go on."

And to the amazement of the natives in the villages she went on into the darkness. Surely she must be mad. She defied their chief who had the power to kill her. She had walked on into a forest where ferocious leopards abounded ready to spring out upon her, and where men were drinking themselves into a fury of war. And for what? To try with a woman's tongue to stop the fiery chiefs and the natives of a distant warlike tribe from fighting. Surely she was mad.

Facing the Warriors

She pressed on through the darkness. Then she saw the dim outlines of huts. Mary Slessor had reached the first town in the war area. She found the hut where an old Calabar woman lived who knew the white Ma.

"Who is there?" came a whisper from within.

But even as she replied there was a swift patter of bare feet. Out of the darkness leapt a score of armed warriors. They were all round her. From all parts dark shadows sprang forward till scores of men with their chiefs were jostling, chattering and threatening. "I have heard that you are going to war. I have come to ask you not to fight," she replied.

The chiefs hurriedly talked together, then they came to her and said—

"The white Ma is welcome. She shall hear all that we have to say before we fight. All the same we shall fight. For here you see are men wounded. We must wipe out the disgrace that is put upon us. Now she must rest. Women, you take care of the white Ma. We will call her at cock-crow when we start."

This meant an hour's sleep. Mary Slessor lay down in a hut. It seemed as though her eyes were hardly shut before she was wakened again. She stood, tottering with tiredness, when she heard the cry—

"Run, Ma, run!"

The warriors were off down the hill away to the fight. She ran, but they were quickly out of sight on the way to the attack. Was all her trouble in vain? She pressed on weak and breathless, but determined. She heard wild yells and the roll of the war drum. The warriors she had followed were feverishly making ready to fight, a hundred yards distant from the enemy's village.

She went up to them and spoke sternly.

"Behave like men," she said, "not like fools. Do not yell and shout. Hold your peace. I am going into the village there."

She pointed to the enemy. Then she walked forward. Ahead of her stood the enemy in unbroken ranks of dark warriors. They stood like a solid wall. She hailed them as she walked forward.

There was an ominous silence. She laughed.

"How perfect your manners are!" she exclaimed. She was about to walk forward and force them to make way for her when an old chief stepped out toward her and, to her amazement, knelt down at her feet.

"Ma," he said, "we thank you for coming to us. We own that we wounded the chief over there. It was only one of our men who did it. It was not the act of all our town. We ask you that you will speak with our enemy to bring them to peace with us."

The Healed Chief

She looked into the face of the chief. Then she saw to her joy that this was the very chief whom she had toiled through the rain to heal long ago. Because of what she had done then, he was now at her feet asking her to make peace. Should she run back and tell the warriors, who a hundred yards away were spoiling for a fight? That was her first joyful thought. Then she saw that she must first make her authority stronger over the whole band of warriors.

"Stay where you are," she said. "Some of you find a place where I can sit in comfort; and bring me food. I will not starve while men fight. Choose two or three men to speak well for you, and we will have two men from your enemies."

These grim warriors, so sullen and threatening a few moments ago, obeyed her every word. At length two chiefs came from the other side and stood on one side of her, while the two chiefs chosen in the village came and threw down their arms and knelt at their feet.

"Your chief," they said, "was wounded by a drunken youth. Do not let us shed blood through all our villages because of what he did. If you will cease from war with us, we will pay to you any fine that the white Ma shall say."

She, too, pressed them to stop their fighting. Word went back to the warriors on both sides, who became wildly excited. Some agreed, others stormed and raged till they

were in a frenzy. Would they fight even over her body? Furious warriors came moving up from both sides. But by arguing and appealing at last she persuaded the warlike tribe to accept a fine.

The Promise of Peace

The town whose drunken youth had wounded the enemy chief at once paid a part of the fine. They used no money. So the fine was paid in casks and bottles of trade gin. Mary Slessor trembled. For as the boxes of gin bottles were brought forward the warriors pranced with excitement and made ready to get drunk. She knew that this would make them fight after all. What could she do? The roar of voices rose. She could not make her own voice heard. A daring idea flashed into her mind. According to the law of these Egbo people, clothes thrown over anything give it the protection of your body. She snatched off her skirt and all the clothing she could spare and spread them over the gin. She seized the one glass that the tribe had, and doled out one portion only to each chief to test whether the bottles indeed contained spirit. At last they grew quieter and she spoke to them.

"I am going," she said, "across the Great Waters to my home, and I shall be away many moons. Promise me here, on both sides, that you will not go to war with one another while I am away."

"We promise," they said. They gathered around her and she told them the story of Jesus Christ in whose name she had come to them.

"Now," she said, "go to your rest and fight no more." And the tribes kept their promise to her,—so that when she returned they could say, "It is peace."

For nearly forty years she worked on in Calabar, stricken scores of times with fever. She rescued her hundreds of twin babies thrown out to die in the forest, stopped wars and ordeal by poison, made peace, healed the sick.

At last, too weak to walk, she was wheeled through the forests and along the valleys by some of her "twins" now grown to strong children, and died there—the conquering Queen of Calabar, who ruled in the hearts of even the fiercest cannibals through the power of the Faith, by which out of weakness she was made strong.