

MARY SLESSOR
OF CALABAR

PIONEER MISSIONARY

BY

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ONWARD STILL

*“It is a dark and difficult land, and I am old and weak—
but happy.”*

I. IN HEATHEN DEEPS

THE new sphere to which Miss Slessor felt she was called, had been occupying her attention for some time. During one of the minor military expeditions into the interior, the troops were suddenly attacked by a tribe who fled at the first experience of disciplined firing. A lad who had been used by the soldiers was persuaded by some of their number to conduct them to the great White Mother for her advice and help. When they appeared at Use, she and they talked long and earnestly, and they returned consoled and hopeful. Some time afterwards the guide came down on his own account, bringing a few other lads with him. Her influence was such that they wished to become God-men, and they returned to begin the first Christian movement in one of the most degraded regions of Nigeria.

She knew nothing of the place save that it was away up in the north-west, on one of the higher reaches of the Enyong Creek, and a two days' journey for her by water. The lads lived at a town called Ikpe, an old slave centre, that had been in league with Aro, and the focus of the trade of a wide and populous area. It was a “closed” market, no Calabar trader being allowed to enter.

On her return from Scotland the young men again appeared, saying that there were forty others ready to become Christians, begging her to come up, and offering to send down a canoe. She disliked all water journeys, and even on the quiet creek was usually in a state of inward trepidation. But nothing could separate her from her duty, and she responded to the call. For eight hours she was paddled along the beautiful windings of the Creek; then a huge hippopotamus was encountered, and frightened her into landing for the night on the Ibibio side, where she put up in a wretched hut reeking with filth and mosquitoes. Here the Chief was reaching out for the Gospel, holding prayers in his house, and trying to keep Sabbath, though not a soul could read, and the people were laughing at him. As the Creek made a bend she left the canoe and trudged through the bush to Ikpe. She found the town larger and more prosperous than

she had anticipated, with four different races mingling in the market, but the darkness was terrible, and the wickedness shameless, even the children being foul-mouthed and abandoned. The younger and more progressive men gave her a warm welcome, but the older chiefs were sulky—"Poor old heathen souls," she remarked, "they have good reason to be, with all they have to hope from tumbling down about their ears." The would-be Christians had begun to erect a small church, with two rooms for her at the end. That they were in earnest was proved by their attitude. She had eager and reverent audiences, and once, on going unexpectedly into a yard, she found two lads on their knees praying to the white man's God.

She made a survey of the district, and came to the conclusion that Ikpe was another strategic point, the key to several different tribes, which it would be well to secure for the Church, and she made up her mind to come and live in the two rooms, and work inland and backwards towards Arochuku. There was the Settlement to consider, but that, she thought, she could manage to carry on along with the occupation of Ikpe.

Her bright and eager spirit did not reckon with the frailties of the body. When she returned, she entered on a long period of weakness. Now and again deputations came down to her. Once a score of young men appeared, and before stating their business said, "Let us pray." She made another visit, saw the beginnings of the church at Ikpe, and another at Nkanga on the Creek bank, three miles below Ikpe, and, what affected her more, heard rumours of a possible occupation by the Roman Catholics. "I must come," she said to herself.

On one journey she was accompanied by Miss Peacock, who rose still more highly in her regard on account of the resolute way in which she braved the awful smells in the villages. On another, Mr. and Mrs. Macgregor shared the hardships of the trip with her. When these two arrived at the landing-beach for Use, a note was put into their hands from "Ma," to the effect that she had not been able to obtain a canoe, and they had better come to the house until she saw what the Lord meant by it. They remained at Use some days, "Ma" suffering from fever, but refusing to postpone the trip, saying that if she had faith she would be able to go. They were to start early one morning, but her guests sought to keep her in sleep until it was too late. They succeeded until I A.M., when she awoke, gave directions about packing, and rose. "What do you think of her?" they asked of Jean. "She is often like that, and gets better on the road," she replied, which was true. As "Ma" herself said, "I begin every day, almost every journey in pain, and in such tiredness that I am sure I can't go on, and whenever I begin, the strength comes, and it increases."

The party left at 3.15 in the moonlight, and soon afterwards were in a canoe. For hours they paddled, past men with two-pronged fish-spears fishing, by long stretches of water-lilies of dazzling whiteness, by farms where the fresh green corn was beginning to sprout, by extensive reaches of jungle where brilliant birds flitted, and parrots chattered, and monkeys swung from branch to branch by a bridge of hands. They stopped for lunch, and Mr. Macgregor was interested in watching her methods with the people. A chief wished to see the Principal, and said he was anxious to place two more boys with him in the Institute. She told Mr. Macgregor to say he would see him after they had eaten. The business-like Principal thought this a waste of time, but she held that he must not cheapen himself—if he made food of more importance than the education of their boys they would think him dignified and respect him. And she was right.

By and by they came to a tortuous channel as narrow as a mill-dam, and it was with difficulty that the canoe was punted through. They swept on under trees, hung with orchids, where dragon-flies flashed in and out of the sunlight. This was the country of the hippos, and the banks were scored by their massive feet; it was also, as they found to their cost, the haunt of ibots, a fly with a poisonous bite. After passing over a series of shallows they reached Ikpe beach towards dark, and camped in the unfinished church, “Ma” in the “vestry,” and the Macgregors inside the building.

Mr. Macgregor had seen much of Nigeria, but he had never witnessed such degradation as he found existing here. The girls went without any clothing, except a string of beads, and the married women wore only a narrow strip of cloth. He had again a lesson in native manners. Paying ceremonial visits to the chiefs, they sat and looked at the ground, and yawned repeatedly, and after a time left. To him the yawning seemed rude, but “Ma” said it was the correct thing, and when the chiefs returned the calls he knew that, as usual, she was right.

One of the questions that the chiefs asked was, “Is this the man you have brought to stay and teach us?” “Ma” turned to the Principal with a wry face. “Well,” she said in English, “I like that. They’ll need to be content wi’ something less than a B.D. for a wee while—till they get started at any rate.” She informed them who Mr. Macgregor was, and the great work he was doing in Calabar, and that in the goodness of his heart he had come up to see the position of things in the town.

“Ma”—incredulously—“do you mean that this is not the man who is to come and lead us out of darkness?”

“No, he is not the man—yet.”

“Ma”—reproachfully—“you always say wait. We have waited two years, and again you come to us and say wait. When are you coming to us?”

There was nothing for it but to put them off once more. But she improved the occasion by extolling the Institute, with the result that when they left, two boys were taken to the canoe and consigned to Mr. Macgregor’s care, one decently clad in a singlet and loin-cloth, and the other with only a single bead hanging at the throat.

Mr. Macgregor went exploring on his own account, and came across a Government Rest House perched on the brow of a cliff, with a magnificent view over the plain. Here he noticed that the people were particularly opposed to white men. One of the villages “Ma” had labelled “dangerous,” and he learnt that when the Court messengers appeared, they were promptly seized, beaten, and cast out. This, it is interesting to note, came to be the scene of “Ma’s” last exploits. He rejoined the ladies at Nkanga, where the little native church had been completed. They held the opening service. The Principal had no jacket; his shirt was torn, his boots bore traces of the streams and mud through which he had passed. Miss Slessor wore the lightest of garments. It was one of the strangest opening ceremonies in the history of Missions, but they worshipped God from the heart, and “Ma” seemed lifted out of herself, and to be inspired, as she told the people what the church there in their midst meant, and the way they should use it for their highest good.

The Macgregors left her at Arochuku, and she continued down-creek. She had been upheld by her indomitable spirit throughout the journey, but now collapsed, and was so ill that she had to spend the night in the canoe. In the darkness she was awakened by one of the babies crying, but was so weak that she could not move. The girls were sound asleep, and could not hear her. Exerting her willpower, she rolled over to the child, whose head had become wedged between a box and the footboard of the canoe, and was being slowly killed. In the early dawn the journey was resumed to Okopedi beach, and thence she crawled over the weary miles to Use.

II. “REAL LIFE”

“I must go. I am in honour bound to go.” It was her constant cry. She heard that services were being held regularly at Ikpe on Sundays and week-days, and yet no one knew more than the merest rudiments of Christian truth; none could read. A teacher had gone from Asang, but he was himself only at the stage of the first standard in the schools, and could impart but the crudest instruction. They were groping for the light, and worshipping what to most of them was still

the Unknown God, and yet were already able to withstand persecution. The pathos of the situation broke her down. "Why," she cried, "cannot the Church send two ladies there? Why don't they use the money on hand for the purpose? If the wherewithal should fail at the end of two years, let them take my salary, I shall only be too glad to live on native food with my bairns."

Once more she went up, and once more she stood ashamed before their reproaches. She could not hold out any longer. "I am coming," she said decisively. She was not well—she was never well now—she had bad nights, was always "tired out," "too tired for anything," yet she went forward to the new life with unshakeable fortitude. In a short time she was back with fifty sheets of corrugated iron and other material for the house. "I am committed now," she wrote. "No more idleness for me. I am entering in the dark as to how and where and when. How I am to manage I do not know, but my mind is at perfect peace about it, and I am not afraid. God will carry it through. The Pillar leads."

She did not care much for the situation that had been granted; it was low-lying, and she was anxious to conserve her health for the work's sake, but she had faith that she would be taken care of. Palm trees bordered the site on three sides, and amidst these the monkeys loved to romp. "These palms," she said, "are my first joy in the morning when the dawn comes up, pearly grey in the mist and fine rain, fresh and cool and beautiful." She lived in two

rooms at the back of the church, with a bit of ground fenced off for kitchen, and her furniture consisted of a camp-bed and a few dishes. But she was chiefly out of doors, for she had as many as two hundred and fifty people engaged in cutting bush, levelling, and stamping. Despite the discomfort and worry incidental to such conditions, she was quite happy. The natives as a whole were hostile to white people; they wanted neither them nor their religion; but there was nothing martial or predatory about "Ma," and her very helplessness protected her. And there was that in her blood which made her face the conflict with zest; it always braced her to meet the dark forces of hell, and conquer them with the simple power of the Gospel.

Her fearlessness was as marked as ever. One Sunday, during service, there was an uproar in the market. She went out and found a mob fighting with sticks and swords, a woman bleeding, and her husband wounded and at bay. She seized the man's wrist and compelled quiet, and soon settled the matter by palaver. On another occasion the Government sent native agents with police escort to vaccinate the people, as small-pox was rife. They resented the white man's "juju," and there was much excitement. The conduct of the agents enraged the crowd, guns appeared, and bloodshed was imminent, when an appeal was made to "Ma." She succeeded in calming the rising passions, and in reas-

uring the people as to the purpose of the inoculation. “This poor frail woman,” she said, “is the broken reed on which they lean. Isn’t it strange? I’m glad anyhow that I’m of use in protecting the helpless.” The people said if she would perform the operation they would agree, and she sent to Bende for lymph, and was busy for days. It was a difficult task, the people were suspicious, and she had to banter and joke and coax when she herself was at fainting point. Apart from this she doctored men and women for the worst diseases, nursed the sickly babies, and generally acted her old part of a “mother in Israel.”

“It is a real life I am living now,” she wrote, “not all preaching and holding meetings, but rather a life and an atmosphere which the people can touch and live in and be made willing to believe in when the higher truths are brought before them. In many things it is a most prosaic life, dirt and dust and noise and silliness and sin in every form, but full, too, of the kindness and homeliness and dependence of children who are not averse to be disciplined and taught, and who understand and love just as we do. The excitements and surprises and novel situations would not, however, need to be continuous, as they wear and fray the body, and fret the spirit and rob one of sleep and restfulness of soul.”

Use was still her headquarters, and she often traversed the long stretch of Creek, though the journey always left her terribly exhausted. On one occasion, when she had arrived at Use racked with pain, she was asked how she could ever endure it. “Oh,” she said, “I just had to take as big a dose of laudanum as I dared, and wrap myself up in a blanket, and lie in the bottom of the canoe all the time, and managed fine.” She often met adventures by the way. Once, after thirteen hours in the canoe, she arrived at Okopedi beach late in the evening, along with Maggie and Whitie and a big boy baby. Stowing the baggage in the beach house they started in the dark for Use, “Ma” carrying a box with five fowls and some odds and ends, and Maggie, who was ill, the baby. When they reached the house they found they had no matches and were afraid of snakes, but she was so tired that she lay down as she was on a bed piled high with clothes, the others on the floor, the baby crying itself to sleep. At cock-crow fire was obtained from the village, and a cup of tea made her herself again, and ready for the inevitable palavers. Again, she went up to Ikpe with supplies by night; the water had risen, she had to lie flat to escape the overhanging branches, and finally the canoe ran into a submerged tree and three of the paddle boys were pitched into the water. Not long afterwards she left Ikpe at 6.30 A.M., was in the canoe all night, and reached the landing-beach at 5.30 on Christmas morning with the usual motherless baby.

On this occasion she received a message, “Ekereki said was to tell you that his mother is asleep”—referring to the death of one of the first members of the

congregation, a gentle and superior woman for whom she had a great regard. The wording of the message made her realise how soon the Gospel had the power of changing even the language of a people. Some time previously Annie's two year-old boy had died, and the question of a Christian burial-place had been considered by the congregation. Heathen adults were buried in the house and the children under the doorstep. It seemed cruel to leave bodies out in the cold earth, but of their own volition the members secured a piece of ground and laid the child there; and now this woman was placed by his side, the first adult to obtain a Christian burial in that part of Ibibio.

On New Year's eve she was down with fever, and was very weak, but, she wrote, "My heart is singing all the time to Him Whose love and tender mercy crown all the days." In the middle of the night she was obliged to rise. "My 'first-feet' were driver ants, thousands and thousands of them, pouring in on every side, and dropping from the roof. We had two hours' hard work to clear them out."

III. THE AUTOCRATIC DOCTOR

Returning from Ikpe on one occasion in 1911, she found that a tornado had played havoc with the Use house, and immediately set to, and with her own hands repaired it. The strain was too great for her enfeebled frame, and symptoms of heart weakness developed. She had nights of high fever and delirium, and yet so great was her power of will, that she would rise next day and teach and work, while on Sundays she took the services, although she was unable to stand. "I had a grand day," she would say, "notwithstanding intense weakness."

Dr. Robertson of Itu had gone home on furlough, and there came to take his place, Dr. Hitchcock, a young, eager, clear-headed man, as masterful in his quiet way as "Ma." He had proposed going to China in the service of the Church, but agreed meanwhile to put in a year at Itu. She watched him for a time with growing admiration, and saw the curiosity of the natives turn rapidly to confidence, then to appreciation, then to blind devotion and worship. When she looked at the great crowds flocking day after day to the dispensary and hospital, she thought of the scene of old when the poor and the halt and the maimed gathered round Christ. "A rare man," she said, "a rare Christian, a rare doctor. A physician for soul and body. I am beginning to love him like a son." And like a son he treated her. Although he had scarcely a minute to spare from his work, he ran up every second day to Use to study her. He believed that she was not being nourished. That there were grounds for his suspicions her own diary records. There was money for her in Duke Town, she had often cheques lying be-

side her, but it was not always easy to obtain ready cash, and sometimes she ran short. On June 14 she wrote :

Market Morning.—Have only 3d. in cash in the house; sent it with 2 Ikpats (the first Efik schoolbook) and New Testament to buy food, and sold all 3 books for 6d. Got 5 small yams, oil, and shrimps, with pepper and a few small fresh fish.

It was on the following morning as early as six o'clock that the doctor called to examine her again. His decision was that she was not to go to Ikpe, she was not to cycle, she was to lie down as much as possible. She laughed, and on the Sunday went to church and conducted two services; but she almost collapsed, and when the doctor came next day he ordered her to take to her bed, and not go to any more meetings until she obtained his permission. Mary had at last met her equal in resolution. "He is very strict," she confessed, "but he is a dear man. Thank God for him."

A trip to Ikpe which she had planned for the Macgregors had to be cancelled, and they decided to go to Use instead, and aid and abet the doctor in his care of her. She got up to receive them, and then wrote, "The doctor has sent me back to bed under a more stringent rule than ever. Very stern. I dare not rise." "You must eat meat twice a day," the doctor said. "I'm not a meat eater, doctor," she rejoined. His reply was to send over a fowl from Itu with instructions as to its cooking. "Why did you send that fowl, doctor?" she asked next day. "Because it could not come itself," was all the satisfaction she got. It was not the first fowl that came from Itu—the next came cooked —while the Macgregors telegraphed to Duke Town for their entire stock. "What a trouble you dear folk take," she sighed.

"You will have to go to Duke Town for a change," suggested the doctor one day. "Na, na," she replied; "I've all my plans laid, and I cannot draw a salary and not do what I can." "You have done so well in the past," remarked Mr. Macgregor, "that you need not have any qualms about that." "I've been paid for all I've done," was her retort. But the doctor insisted, and the very thought of leaving the station and the household work unattended to, put her in a fever. "Of course," she said, "to the doctor my health is the only thing, but I can't get rest for body while my mind is torn about things. He is vexed, and I am vexed at vexing him."

Not satisfied with the progress she was making, the doctor transferred her to Use, where she was under his constant observation. "Life is hardly worth living," she complained, "but I'm doing what I can to help him to help me, so that I can be fit again for another spell of work." That was her one desire, to be well

enough to go back to the bush. A messenger from Ikpe came down to find out when she was returning. "Seven weeks," was the doctor's firm reply. "I may run up sooner than that," was hers. "I'm quite well, if he would only believe it."

But it was well on towards the end of the year before she was, in her own words, out of the clutches of the "dearest and cleverest and most autocratic Mission doctor that ever lived." She literally ran away, and was up at Ikpe at once, exultant at having the privilege of ministering again to the needs of the people. There was a throng at the beach to welcome her. She was soon as busy as she had even been, though she was usually carried now to and from church and other meetings. Jean she placed at Nkanga as teacher and evangelist, the people giving her is. per week and her food, and "Ma" providing her clothes. It was astonishing to her to see how she had developed. An insatiable reader, she would place a book open anywhere in order that she might obtain a glimpse of the words in passing, reminding "Ma" of her own device in the Dundee weaving-shed. Her knowledge of the Bible was so thorough and correct that the latter considered her the best Efik teacher she knew. Soon she gathered about her some two hundred men and women from the upper Enyong farms, who were greatly pleased with her preaching. She came over to Ikpe for Christmas, the first the household had spent in that savage land, and there was a service in the church, which was decorated with palms and wreaths of ferns. Mary told the story of Bethlehem, and the scholar lads, of their own accord, marched through the town singing hymns. . . .

About this time Miss Slessor rendered important service to the Mission by her testimony before an Imperial Government Commission, which had been sent out to investigate the effects of the import, sale, and consumption of alcoholic liquor in Southern Nigeria. She provided very convincing evidence of the demoralisation caused through drink, but with keen intuition she felt that little would come of the "palaver," and she was right.

IV. GOD'S WONDERFUL PALAVER

Her attitude to money was as unconventional as her attitude to most things. It had no place in her interests; she never thought of it except as a means of helping her to carry out her projects. "How I wish we could do without it!" she often used to say. "I have no head for it, or for business." Her salary she counted as Church money, and never spent a penny of it on herself except for bare living, and until the last years the girls received nothing but food and their clothes. "You say," she wrote to one giver, "that you would like me to spend

the money on my personal comfort. Dear friend, I need nothing. My every want is met and supplied without my asking." Her belief was thus expressed : "What is money to God? The difficult thing is to make men and women. Money lies all about us in the world, and He can turn it on to our path as easily as He sends a shower of rain." Her faith was justified in a marvellous way, for throughout all these years and onwards to the end she obtained all she needed, and that was not little. She required funds for extension, for building, for furniture, for teachers' wages, for medicines, for the schooling of her children, and many other purposes, and yet she was never in want. Nothing came from her people, for she would not accept collections at first, not wishing to give them the impression that the Gospel was in any way connected with money. It came from friends, known and unknown, at home and abroad, who were interested in her and in her brave and lonely struggle. There was scarcely a mail that did not bring her a cheque or bank-draft or Post-Office order. "It often happens," she said once, "that when the purse is empty, immediately comes a new instalment. God is superbly kind in the matter of money. I do not know how to thank Him. It is just wonderful how we ever fail in our trust for a moment." On one occasion, when she was a little anxious, she cried, "Shame on you, Mary Slessor, after all you know of Him!"

Her attitude towards all this giving was one of curious detachment. She looked upon herself as an instrument carrying out the wishes of the people at home who supplied the means, and she gave them the honour of what was accomplished. Their gifts justified her going forward in the work; each fresh £10 note she took as a sign to advance another stage, so that, in one sense, she felt her Church was backing up her efforts. As she regarded herself as being owned by the Church, all the money she received was devoted exclusively to its service; even donations from outside sources she would not use for personal needs. One day she received a letter from the Governor conveying to her, with the "deep thanks of the Government," a gift of £25 to herself, in recognition of her work. The letter she valued more than the money, which she would only accept as a contribution towards her home for women. All the sums were handed over to Mr. Wilkie or Mr. Macgregor, who banked them at Duke Town, and they formed a general fund upon which she drew when necessary. She looked upon this fund as belonging to the Mission Council, to be used for extension purposes either up the Cross River or the Enyong Creek, or for the Home for Women and Girls when the scheme matured, and she never sought to have control of it. Mr. Wilkie was always afraid that she was not just to herself, and she had sometimes to restrain him from sending more than she required. It was the same later when Mr. Hart, C.A., had charge of the accounts. This explains why, on

more than one occasion, she was reduced to borrowing or selling books in order to obtain food for herself and her household. There was money in abundance at Duke Town, but she would not ask it for private necessities. Sometimes also she was so remote from civilisation that she was unable to cash a cheque or draft in time to meet her wants.

Many a hidden romance lay behind these gifts that came to her—the romance of love and sacrifice and devotion to Christ. One day there arrived a sum of £50, accompanied by a charming letter. Long she looked at both with wonder and tears. Her thoughts went back to the Edinburgh days, when she was a girl, on the eve of leaving for Calabar. One of her friends then was a Biblewoman, who was very good to her. Always on her furloughs she had gone to see her in the humble home in which she lay an invalid, or as Mary expressed it, “lingering at the gate of the city.” She thought she must now be dependent upon others, for she was old and frail. And yet here she had sent out £50 to help on her work.

If there was romance in the giving, there was pathos in the spending. Acknowledging sums she was bidden expend upon herself, she would go into detail as to her purchases—a new Efik Bible to replace her old tattered copy, the hire of three boys to carry her over the streams, seed coco yams for the girls’ plots, a basin and ewer for her guest-room—“I can’t,” she said, “ask visitors to wash in a pail,”—a lamp, and so on. She sought to explain and extenuate the spending of every penny. “Is that extravagant?” “Is that too selfish?” she anxiously asked. After enumerating a number of things which she intended to buy for Ikpe house, she said, “Does that seem too prosaic? But it will clarify your views of Mission work, and make them more practical and real, for, you see, the missionary cannot go about like Adam and Eve, and the natives must be taught cleanliness and order, and be civilised as well as Christianised.”

Her own small financial affairs had been in the hands of her old friend Mr. Logie, Dundee, whose death in 1910 sent her into silence and darkness for weeks. He had been like a father to her; to him, indeed, she chiefly owed the realisation of her dream to be a missionary. She did not know for a time how she stood, and as her purse was nearly empty, she was growing anxious, when a small amount arrived from a friend, to whom she wrote: “I have been praying for a fortnight for money to come from somewhere, as I have been living on 7s. given to the children by a merchant here who is a great friend of our household. So your gift is a direct answer to prayer. ‘Before they call I will answer.’” She applied to Mr. Slight, another tried friend, who had been Treasurer of the United Presbyterian Church, and took a warm personal interest in all the missionaries, and after the Union was the accountant of the United Free Church. He made

matters simple and clear to her understanding and set her fears at rest—she had no debts of any kind save debts of gratitude. Mr. Slight's death in 1912 again made her feel orphaned. "I had no idea how much I leant on him till he was removed, and it seems now that my last link with the old Church has snapped. What he has done for me through a score of years I can never acknowledge warmly enough." In later years her affairs at home were managed by Miss Adam.

Congregations continued to send her boxes of goods, whilst her own friends were unceasing in their thought for her. "I should never mention a want," she told them, "because you just take it up and bear the burden yourselves, and it makes me ashamed. Here are all my needs in clothing for the children and myself anticipated, and here are luxuries of food and good things, and all steeped and folded in the most delicate and tender sympathy and love. Surely no one has so many mercies as I have." She saw few pretty things, and had never the opportunity of looking into a shop window, so that the arrival of these boxes was an occasion of much pleasurable excitement to her and to the girls. Her only trouble was that she could not hand on some of the food to others. "When you have a good thing, or read a good thing, or see a humorous thing, and can't share it, it is worse than having to bear a trial alone." She was particularly grateful for a box of Christmas goods that came in 1911. She had been much upset by the local food, and she ate nothing but shortbread and bun for a week, and that made her better!

The people about her, too, were kind. Women would bring her presents of produce; one, for instance, gave her fifteen large yams and a half-crown bag of rice, and a large quantity of shrimps. "You are a stranger in these markets," she said, "and the children may be hungry."

V. WEAK BUT STRONG

She met with a severe disappointment early in 1912. The Calabar Council was willing to send two ladies to Ikpe, but thought it right to obtain a medical report on the site which had been given for the house. This was unfavourable; the Creek overflowed its banks for four hundred paces on one side and thirty on the other, and the surroundings of the house would be muddy and damp. She would not, however, acquiesce in the judgment thus passed, and remained on, and prosecuted the work as usual. The Council was very anxious for her to take a furlough, and her friends, personal and official, in Scotland were also urging her to come for a rest. She had now never an hour of real health or strength, and was growing deaf, and felt like "a spluttering candle," and she began to think it

would be the wisest thing to do. As the idea took definite shape in her mind, she looked forward with zest to the renewal of old friendships. "We shall have our fill of talk and the silences which are the music of friendship." The East Coast of Scotland was now barred to her by medical opinion, but she had visions of the lonely hills of the south, and of Yarrow, and all that Border country where she had spent so many happy days, and would go there, away from the crowds and the rush.

Discerning a note of pity in the letters from Scotland, she bade her friends not to waste their sympathy upon her. "I am just surrounded with love," she wrote. It was to the children she referred. "I wake up in the early dusk of the dawn and call them, and before I can see to take my Bible, the hot cup of tea is there, and a kiddie to kiss me 'Good-morning' and ask, 'Ma, did you sleep?'" "It was not wonderful that she loved those black girls. They had been with her from their birth. She had nursed them and brought them up and taught them all they knew, and they had been faithful to her with the faithfulness which is one of the most remarkable traits in the African nature. Mary could never abide the superior folk who referred slightingly to them because of their black skin, and she was too proud to justify her feelings towards them. Alice, the "princess," had now grown into a fine womanly girl, quiet and steady and thoughtful. One night in the dark she crept to "Ma's" side and shyly told her that some months before she had given her heart to Christ. It was a moment of rare joy. As neither Alice nor Maggie was betrothed—though often sought after—and they had no legal protector against insult, she decided to send them for training to the Edgerley Memorial School, where they would be under the influence and care of Miss Young, another capable agent whom she had led to become a missionary and with whom she had a very close and tender friendship. She regarded her as an ideal worker, for she had been thoroughly trained in domestic science. "I would have liked that sort of training better than the Normal training I got at Moray House," she said.

Meanwhile, as she was forbidden to cycle, her thoughts harked back to her old plan of a "box on wheels." She had never been reconciled to a hammock. "I feel a brute in it, it seems so selfish to be lying there, while four boys sweat like beasts of burden. To push a little carriage is like skilled labour and no degradation." She, therefore, wrote to Miss Adam, whom she called the "joint-pastor" of her people, to send out a catalogue of "these things." Miss Adam was, however, unwell, and the ladies of Wellington Street Church, Glasgow, hearing of the request, promptly despatched what was called a Cape cart, a kind of basket-chair, capable of being wheeled by two boys or girls. The gift sent her whole being thrilling with gratitude, as well as with shame for being so unworthy of so

much kindness, but her comfort was that it was for God's work, and she took it as from Him.

The vehicle proved a success, but the success proved the undoing of her furlough. "Instead of going home as I had planned, in order to get strength for a wider range of work, I shall stay on and enjoy the privilege of going over ground impossible for my poor limbs." On one of the first drives she had, she went in search of a site for a new and larger church which she had determined to build, and was gathering material for, at Use, and then she planned to go to Ikpe via Ikot Ekpene by the new Government road, opening up out-stations wherever she could get a village to listen to the message. Her aim, indeed, was nothing less than to plant the whole Ibibio territory with a network of schools and churches. She seemed to grow more wonderful the older and frailer she became.

The spurt lasted for a time, but again the terrible weakness troubled her, and she had to conduct household affairs from a couch. School work was carried through on the verandah, and when she spoke in the church she was borne there and back. She came to see that only a real change would do her permanent good, and that it would be true economy to take a trip home, even for the sake of the voyage, which, much as she feared the sea, always invigorated her.

What made her hesitate now was the depleted condition of the Mission. "We were never so short-handed before," she said, "and I can do what others cannot do, what, indeed, medical opinion would not allow them to try. No one meddles with me, and I can slip along and do my work with less expenditure of strength than any." Had there been some one to fill her place she would have gone, but she was very reluctant to shut the doors of the stations for so long a period. How she regarded the idea may be gathered from a letter to a friend who had given her some domestic news:—

These little glimpses, like pictures, of home and the old country, of family ties and love, make me long for just one long summer day in the midst, if only as an onlooker, and for the touch of loving hands and a bit of family worship in our own tongue, and maybe a Sabbath service thrown in with a psalm and an old-fashioned tune, and then I should feel ready for a long spell of work. But I should fret if it were to take me from this, my own real life and home and bairns. This life is full; the other lies at the back quiescent, and is a precious possession to muse on during the night or in the long evening hours when I'm too tired to sleep and the light is not good enough to read or sew, or mostly when I'm not well and the doldrums come very near. But I should choose this life if I had to begin again : only I should try to live it to better purpose.

Another respite or two carried her into the middle of the year, when her opportunity of a furlough was lost. She said she would have to hold on now for another winter—or go up higher. In September she completed thirty-six years as a missionary, and took humorous stock of herself : “I’m lame and feeble and foolish; the wrinkles are wonderful—no concertina is so wonderfully folded and convoluted. I’m a wee, wee wifie, verra little buikit—but I grip on well, none the less.” “Ay,” said an old doctor friend to her, “you are a strong woman, ‘Ma.’ You ought to have been dead by ordinary rule long ago—any one else would.”

VI. HER FIRST HOLIDAY

Anxiety as to her health deepened both in Calabar and Scotland, and pressure was brought upon her to take a rest. One of her lady friends on the Women’s Foreign Mission Committee, Miss Cook, appreciated her fear of the home winter, and wrote asking her to take a holiday to the Canary Islands, and begged the kindness at her hands of being allowed to pay the expense. “I believe,” she said, “in taking care of the Lord’s servant. I am afraid you do not fully realise how valuable you are to us all, the Church at home, and the Church in Nigeria.” The offer, so delicately put, brought tears to Mary’s eyes, and it made her wonder whether after all she was safeguarding her health enough in the interests of the Church. As soon as the matter became a duty, she gave it careful consideration, resolving to abstain from going up to Ikpe, and to go down to Duke Town instead, where she would consult the Wilkies and the Macgregors. But she would not dream of the cost of any change being borne by Miss Cook, and she asked Miss Adam to find out if her funds would allow of her taking a trip. There was no difficulty regarding clothing. Among the Mission boxes she had received was one full of warm material, and she surmised that God was on the side of a holiday.

Her friends at Calabar did not hesitate a moment; they wanted her off at once. She went to consult her old friend, Dr. Adam, the senior medical officer, that “burning and shining light,” as she called him, who first showed her through the Hospital, where she spoke with loving entreaty to every patient she passed, and left many in tears. After a thorough examination, he earnestly besought her to take the next boat to Grand Canary. Still she shrank from the prospect. It was a selfish thing to do; there were others more in need of a holiday than she, it was a piece of extravagance, it would involve closing up the stations. And yet might it not be meant? Might it not be of the nature of a good

investment? Might she not be able for better work? Might it not do away with the necessity for a furlough in the following year? She decided to go.

It was arranged that Jean should accompany her, and that she should put up at the Hotel Santa Catalina, Las Palmas. Letters from Government officials were sent to smooth the way there for her. Miss Young and others prepared her outfit, and made her, as she said, “wise-like and decent,”—she, the while, holding daily receptions, for she was now regarded as one of the West African sights, and every one came to call upon her. Mr. Wilkie managed the financial side, and gave the cash-box to the Captain. When she transhipped at Forcados it was handed to the other Captain, and he on arrival at the Islands passed it on to the manager of the hotel. On board she was carried up and down to meals, and received the utmost kindness from officers and passengers alike. The Captain said he was prouder to have shaken hands with her than if she had been King George.

The season at Grand Canary had not begun, and there were very few visitors at the hotel. Those who were there saw a frail nervous old lady, followed by a black girl who was too shy to raise her eyes. “We were certainly a frightened pair,” Mary afterwards confessed. But the management attended to her as if she were a princess. “What love is wrapped round me!” she wrote. “All are kind,—the manager’s family, the doctor’s family, and the visitors. It is simply wonderful. I can’t say anything else.”

The first days were spent in the grounds, drinking in the pure air, watching the changing sea and sky, and admiring the brilliant vegetation. The English flowers, roses and geraniums and Michaelmas daisies and mignonette, were a continual joy, whilst the crimson clouds piled above the sapphire sea often made her think of the “city of pure gold.” Later, she was able to ascend the hill at the back, and “there,” she says, “I sat and knitted and crocheted and sewed and worked through the Bible all the day long, fanned by the sea-breeze and warmed by the sun, and the good housekeeper sent up lunch and tea to save my walking, and in the silence and beauty and peace I communed with God. He is so near and so dear. Oh, if I only get another day in which to work! I hope it will be more full of earnestness and blessing than the past.”

It was her first real holiday, but she felt it had been worth waiting a lifetime for. There was something infinitely pathetic in her ecstasy of enjoyment and the gratitude for the simple pleasures that came to her. Only one thread of anxiety ran through her days, the thought of the appalling expense she was incurring, for she had made up her mind that the cost was to be paid out of her own slender funds.

A lady in the hotel, with whom she formed an intimate and lasting friendship, and who saw much of her, gives this impression of her character :

She made many friends, her loving sympathy, her simplicity, her keen interest in all around her, her sense of humour and love of fun endearing her to all. The entire negation of self which she evinced was remarkable, as well as her childlike faith and devotion to her Master and to His service. A lady was heard to say, "Well, after talking to Miss Slessor I am converted to foreign missions." Her mind was ever upon her work and her children, and she used often to say she was idling, there was so much to be done, and so little time in which to do it. Of all the people I have met she impressed me the most as the perfect embodiment of the Christian life.

Jean waited upon her mother-mistress with a patient and thoughtful devotion which was a wonder to those who saw it. She wore her Calabar frock and bandana, and had she not been a very sane person, her head would have been turned, for she was a favourite with every one, and was given as many ribbons as would serve her all her life. But she was as shy the day she left as when she arrived.

The departure came in the middle of the night. A general and his aide-de-camp and a merchant each offered to convoy her to the ship, and pleaded that they had conveyances, but the manager of the hotel would not hear of it, saw her himself safely into her cabin, and placed the cashbox once more into the Captain's hands. It was the same steamer by which she had travelled to the Islands, so that she felt at home. On board also was Dr. Hitchcock, on his way out again to take up work at Uburu, a large market town in the far north amongst a strangely interesting tribe. How she envied him, young and strong and enthusiastic, entering on such glorious pioneer work! At Accra the Governor of the Gold Coast, a stranger to her, sent off to the steamer a bouquet of flowers, with an expression of his homage and best wishes for a renewal of her health.

When she arrived at Duke Town Dr. Adam again examined her, assisted by Professor Leiper of the London School of Tropical Medicine, and the verdict was: "Good for many years—if you only take care."

She was given written directions as to the care of her health, and these she regarded with a rueful face. "Life will hardly be worth living now," she said. "But for the work's sake I must obey. God wants us to be efficient, and we cannot be so except by living decently and taking care of the wonderful body He has given us."

She turned up her Bible and found the verse she had marked as a "promise" before leaving: "*But if the Spirit of Him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, He that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by the spirit that dwelleth in you.*" She saw now that this meant

something besides the Resurrection, for the voyage, the climate, the food, and the rest had worked in her a miracle, and she realised more than ever what prayer and faith could do for the body as well as for the spirit. There was a lesson in it, too, she thought, for the Church. She had had a month at sea, and a month in the Islands, with the best of care and food, and no furlough had ever done her more good. She felt that a visit to Scotland would not have rested her so much. There was the bustle and excitement and movement and speaking—of all the bugbears of a furlough, she said, speaking at meetings was the chief. If only the hard deputy work at home could be eliminated from the missionaries' programme, they would have a happier and a better time. I But here the personal equation obscured her judgment. For to abandon the system would be to do away with the intimate touch and association by which interest in the Mission Field is so largely maintained. To many missionaries, also, the duty of telling to the congregations up and down the country the story of their work is one of the chief pleasures of their furlough.

Laden with chemical foods, medicines, and advice, she returned to Use to find that the entire cost of the trip had been defrayed by Miss Cook, who wrote: "I am only sorry that I did not beg you to stay longer in order to reap more benefit. Come home next year; we all want to see you."

VII. INJURED

But a furlough home was far from her thoughts. She rejoiced in her new strength, and set herself with grim determination to redeem the time. She was now doing double work, carrying on all the activities of the settled station at Use, and establishing her pioneer centre at Ikpe. During the next two years she travelled between the two points, sometimes using the canoe, but more often now the Government motor car, which ran round by Ikot Ekpene and dropped her at the terminus, five miles from Ikpe. David was the driver, and she had thus always the opportunity of seeing Mary, his wife, who lived at Ikot Ekpene.

At Use the work had gone on as usual; there had been no backsliding, and the services and classes had been kept up by the people themselves; and she proceeded with the building of the new church, which was erected under her superintendence and without any outside help. When she was at Ikpe she placed Annie's husband—they were both now members of the Church—in charge, and he conducted the services, but Miss Peacock, whom Mary styled her "Bishop," gave general supervision.

On one of her early journeys up to Ikpe she met with a slight accident, a pellet of mud striking one of her eyes. The people were alarmed at the result, and

would have gone off at once to the District Commissioner had she not restrained them. Some native workmen passing his station later mentioned the incident, and within a few minutes the officer had a mounted messenger speeding along the tract to Ikpe, with an urgent order to the people to get her conveyed in the Cape cart to the nearest point on the road, where he would have a motor car waiting. Next morning, although it was market day, the members of the church left everything and took her to the spot indicated. Here were the District Commissioner and a doctor, with eye-shade and medicine and every comfort, and with the utmost despatch she was taken round the Government road to Use. The hurt was followed by erysipelas, and she was blind for a fortnight and suffered acute pain and heavy fever; but very shame at being ill after so fine a holiday made her get up although the eye was swollen and “sulky,” and she was soon in the midst of her work at Ikpe as if nothing had happened.

Building, cementing, painting, varnishing, teaching, healing, and preaching filled in the days. A visitor found her once at 10 A.M. finishing school in a shed. She continued it in the afternoon. Then she visited the yards of the people, and they crowded round her and brought her gifts of food. Later she leant against a fallen tree trunk and talked to one and another. In the gathering dusk she sat on a small stool and attended to the sick and dressed their sores. After dinner some men and lads arrived carrying lamps, and she held her catechumens’ class—a very earnest and prayerful gathering.

The burden of the untouched region around her vexed her mind. Sometimes she was depressed about it all, and said she would need to fill her letters with nonsense, for “it would not bear writing.” Time and again she sought ‘ to impress her friends with the needs of the situation: “The last time I was at school I counted eight hundred women and girls running past in eager competition to secure the best places at the fishing-grounds where the men had been working all the morning, and these are but a fraction of our womankind. But what can I do with super-vision of the school and church and dispensary and house; hold?” She did not pretend that she worked her station properly, and she pointed out how necessary settled, steady, persevering teaching was. “These infant churches,” she said, “need so much to be instructed. The adults are illiterate, and the young need systematic teaching of the Bible. They are an emotional people, and are fain to keep to speaking and singing and long prayers, and the sterner practical side of Christianity is set aside. They are children in everything that matters, and when we have led them to Christ we are apt to forget how much more they need in order to make a strong, upright, ethical character on which to build a nation. Then we need a literature, and this, too, is the work of

the Church. What ails it? Is it not forgetting that God can't give His best till we have given ours?"

With all its bustle it was a very lonely and isolated life she led. There was no mail delivery, and she had to depend mainly on the kindness of Government officials to forward her correspondence. "I have been here seven weeks," she wrote on one occasion, "without one scrap from the outside—letter or paper—nothing to read but the old advertisement sheets of papers lining the press and the boxes. If you wish for the names of hotels or boarding-houses in any part of Europe—send to me. I have them all on my tongue's end." It was a red-letter day when a stray white visitor entered the district, for there would be tea and a talk, and a bundle of newspapers would be left—one never forgets another in this way in the bush. She was amused to receive a note from Scotland asking her to hand on a message to Dr. Hitchcock at Uburu. "Do you know?" she replied, "you are nearer him than I am—the quickest way for me to send it is via Britain!"

Life was not without its menace from wild beasts, the forest being full of them, and the doors had always to be closed and fastened at night to keep them out. Snakes were prevalent, and prowled about the building, and many a fight Jean and the others had with the intruders.

VIII. FRIENDSHIPS WITH OFFICIALS

Throughout these years, as always, "Ma" Slessor's relations with the Government officials were of the most friendly nature. It was remarkable that although she was essentially feminine and religious, and although she was engaged in Mission work, she attracted men of all types of character. Much of this power was due to her intense sympathy, which enabled her to get close to minds that would otherwise have been shut to her. What she wrote of another applies to herself :

What a strange thing is sympathy! Undefinable, untranslatable, and yet the most real thing and the greatest power in human life! How strangely our souls leap out to some other soul without our choosing or knowing the why. The man or woman who has this subtle gift of sympathy and magnetism of soul possesses the most precious thing on earth. Hence it is rare. So few could be trusted with such a delicate, sensitive, Godlike power and hold it unsullied that God seems to be hampered for want of means for its expression. Is that the reason that He made His Son a "Man of Sorrows and acquainted with grief"?

Most of these men had no interest in missions, and some did not believe in them. "The more I see of mission work in West Africa the less I like it," said

one frankly to her. "Give me the genuine bushman, who respects his ancestral deities and his chief and himself. . . But if all missionaries were like you!" None of these men belonged to her own Church; three of her favourites were Roman Catholics. Her introductions to some were of the most informal character. One day a stranger appeared and found her busy on the roof of the house. "Well," she said, eyeing him critically, "what do you want?" He stood, hat in hand. "Please, Ma'am," he replied meekly, "I'm your new District Commissioner—but I can't help it!" She was delighted, and took him into the inner circle at once. As frequent changes took place in the staff, the number whose acquaintance she made gradually increased, until she became known and talked of in all the colonies on the West Coast and even in other parts of the world.

The official view of her work and character differed little from any other. Says one who knew her long and well:

I suppose that a pluckier woman has rarely existed. Her life-work she carried out with immeasurable courage and capacity. Her strength of character was extraordinary, and her life was one of absolute unselfishness. She commanded the respect and confidence of all parties, and for years I would have personally trusted to her judgment on native matters in preference to all others. Shrewd, quick-witted, sympathetic, yet down on any one who presumed, she would with wonderful patience hear all sides equally. Her judgment was prompt, sometimes severe, but always just. She would speak much of her work to those who, she knew, took an interest in it, but very rarely of herself.

Another writes:

My first impression of her was that she was a lady of great strength of mind and sound common sense. Also that for one who had lived so many years in the bush wilds she was very well read and up-to-date on all subjects.

Mr. T. D. Maxwell, who knew her in Okoyong days and to the end, says:

I am sure that her own Church never had a more loyal adherent, but her outlook on this life—and the next—was never narrow. Her religion was above religions—certainly above religious differences. I have often heard her speak of the faiths and rituals of others, but never without the deepest interest and sympathy. She was young to the end; young in her enthusiasm, her sympathy, her boundless energy, her never-failing sense of humour, her gift of repartee, her ability always to strike the apt—even the corrosive—epithet. A visit to her was, to use one of her own phrases, "like a breath o' caller air to a weary body"—and in West Africa that means incomparably more than it can at Home.

It was a peculiarly affectionate relation that existed between her and many of those men whom she regarded as "the strength and the glory of Britain." A wit-

ty member of the Mission once said they were given over to “Mariolatry”—an allusion to her first name. They never were near without visiting her, and often made long journeys for the privilege of a talk. They were delighted with her sense of humour, and teased her as well as lionised her. Half the fun of a visit to her was taking her unawares, and they often threatened to bring their cameras and “snapshot” her on sight. “Ma,” they would write before calling, “get your shoes on, we are coming to tea!”

They wrote her about their work and ambitions and worries as if she were a mother or sister, and discussed the political and racial problems of the country as if she were a colleague, always with a delicate deference to her experience and knowledge, sometimes veiled in light banter. “I am at your feet, Ma,” said one, “and your wisdom is that of Solomon.” They often twitted her about being able to twist them round her little finger : “You break our hearts, and get your own way shockingly.” On one occasion she received a grave and formal Government typewritten communication about land, which ended in this way:

I have the honour to be,
Madam,
and affectionate
Your obedient ^ servant.

When they left the Colony they kept up the friendship. Many were bad correspondents, yet from the remotest parts of the world they wrote letters, as long as her own, full of kind enquiries about her work and the bairns, and begging for a reply.

On her part she wrote them racy and informative letters; and she also got into touch with their mothers, sisters, and wives at home, who welcomed her news of the absent ones, and were good to her in turn. One lady she delighted by praising her husband. “Naturally,” the lady replied, “I agree with you, and you are welcome to court and woo him as much as you like!” A high official brought out his wife, and she wrote Mary from a desire to make her husband’s friends hers also. She ended in the usual way, but he added, “She sends her kindest regards—I send my love!” The nature of some of the friendships formed at home through officials may be surmised from an order she gave for a silver gift, value £5, to be sent to the first-born child of one of her “chums.” It went to the mother, and the inscription was “From one whom his father has helped.”

Very notable was the kindness shown by the Government to her as woman and missionary. Instructions were issued that she was to be allowed to use any and every conveyance belonging to them in the Colony, on any road or river, and that every help was to be afforded to her. Workmen were lent to her to execute repairs on her houses. Individual members sought opportunities to be kind to her. She was taken her first motor-car drive by a Commissioner. The highest officials did not think it beneath them to buy feeding-bottles and forward them on by express messenger. They sent her gifts of books, magazines, and papers—one forwarded *The Times* for years—and at Christmas there would come plum-puddings, crackers, and sweets. One dark, showery night the Governor of Southern Nigeria, Sir W. Egerton, and several officials appeared at her house to greet her, and left a case of milk, two cakes, and boxes of chocolates and crystallised fruit. “The Governor is a Scotsman,” she wrote, “and must be sympathetic to mission work, or else why did he come with his retinue and all to a mud house and see me at that cost to his comfort and time on a wet night?” Lord Egerton was charmed with her. Replying to some remark of his she said, “Hoots, my dear laddie—I mean Sir!”

It was the great anxiety of her official friends that she should not outlive her powers : her influence generally was so great that to them the thought of this was distressing. They were always very solicitous about her health, writing to her frequently to say that she should take life more easily. “Take care of yourself, Ma—as much as you can.” “Don’t be so ridiculously unselfish.” “Learn a little selfishness—it will do you all the good in the world,” was the advice showered upon her. When she had the Court work she was often urged to take a month’s holiday. On hearing of her intention to go to Ikpe one wrote, “Dear Lady, I hate the idea of your going so far into the bush. Don’t go. There are plenty of men willing and eager to be of service to you, but away up there you are far away from help or care.” Another warned her against the people. “But,” he added, “we know you will go in spite of it—and conquer!”

Latterly they became more importunate. “Do be careful,” one wrote. “Do take quinine and sleep under a net and drink filtered water.” Her custom of going hatless into the blazing sunshine was long a sore point, and when they failed to persuade her of the danger, they resorted to scheming. “We know why you do it,” they said artfully. “You know you have pretty hair and like to display it uncovered, imagining that it gets its golden glint from the sun. Oh, vanity of vanities! Fancy a nice, quiet missionary being so vain!” Certainly no argument could have sent her more quickly to the milliner’s.