MARY SLESSOR

OF CALABAR

PIONEER MISSIONARY

BY

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XVI. CLARION CALLS

The discovery of coal up in the interior at Udi brought a new interest into her life, for her far-seeing mind at once realised all the possibilities it contained. She believed it would revolutionise the conditions of West Africa. And when a railway was projected and begun from Port Harcourt, west of Calabar, to Udi, and there was talk of an extension to Itu, she sought to make her friends at home grasp the full significance of the development. That railway would become the highway to the interior, and Calabar would cease to be so important a port. Great stretches of rich oil-palm country would be opened up and exploited. She urged the need for more men and women to work amongst the rank heathenism that would soon collect and fester in the new industrial and commercial centres. Up there also was the menace of Mohammedanism. “Shall the Cross or the Crescent be first?” she cried. “We need men and women, oh, we need them!”

She had been saddened by the closing of stations for furloughs, and the apathy of the Church at home.

We are lower in numbers in Calabar than ever—fewer, if you except the artisans in the Institute, than in the old days before the doors were opened! Surely there is something very far wrong with our Church, the largest in Scotland. Where are the men? Are there no heroes in the making among us? No hearts beating high with the enthusiasm of the Gospel? Men smile nowadays at the old-fashioned idea of sin and hell and broken law and a perishing world, but these made men, men of purpose, of power and achievement, and self-denying devotion to the highest ideals earth has known. We have really no workers to meet all this opened country, and our Church, to be honest, should stand back and give it to some one else. But oh! I cannot think of that. Not that, Lord! For how could we meet the Goldies, the Edgerleys, the Waddells, the Andersons? How can our Church look at Christ who has given us the privilege of making Calabar history, and say to Him, “Take it back. Give it to another?”

She had been deeply interested in the great World’s Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910, and had contrasted it with State diplomacy and dreadnoughts, but was disappointed that so little practical result had followed. “After all,” she said, “it is not committees and organisations from without that is to bring the revival, and to send the Gospel to the heathen at home and abroad, but the living spirit of God working from within the heart.”

All this made her more than ever convinced of the value of her own policy. She believed in the roughest methods for a raw country like Nigeria. Too much civilisation and concentration was bad, both for the work and the natives. There should be, she thought, an office of itinerating or travelling missionary permanently attached to the Mission. It would have its drawbacks, as, she recognised, all pioneer work had, but it would also pay well. She was not sure whether the missionaries did right in remaining closely to their stations, and believed that short regular expeditions into the interior would not only keep them in better health, but give them a closer knowledge of the people. Not much teaching could be given in this way, but their confidence would be won, and the way would be prepared for further advance. Her hope lay in women workers; they made better pioneers than men, and as they were under no suspicion of being connected with the Government, their presence was unobjectionable to the natives. They could move into new spheres and do the spade-work; enter the homes, win a hearing, guide the people in quiet ways, and live a simple and natural life amongst them. When confidence had been secured, men missionaries could enter and train and develop, and build up congregations in the ordinary manner.

Even then she did not see why elaborate churches should be erected. She was always so afraid to put anything forward save Christ, that she was quite satisfied with her little “mud kirks.” The raw heathen knew nothing of the Church as white people understood it. To give them a costly building was to give them a foreign thing in which they would worship a foreign God. To let them worship in an environment of their own setting meant, she believed, a more real apprehension of spiritual truth. The money they were trained to give, she would spend, not on buildings so much as on pioneer work among the tribes.

So, too, with the Mission houses. She thought these should be as simple as possible, and semi-native in style; such, she believed, to be the driest and most healthy. In any case disease could come into a house costing £200, as into one costing £2o, and “there was such a thing as God’s providence.” Still, she recognised the importance of preserving the health of newcomers, and admitted that her ideas might not apply to them. “It would be wrong,” she said, “to insist on mud-huts for a nervous or aesthetic person.”

It was much the same feeling that ran through her objection to the natives suddenly transforming themselves into Europeans. Her views in this respect differed a good deal from those of her co-workers. One Sunday, after a special service, a number of women who had arrayed themselves in cheap European finery, boots and stockings and all, called upon her. She sat on a chair, her back to them, and merely threw them an occasional word with an angry jerk of her head. They were very upset, and at last one of them ventured to ask what was the matter. “Matter!” she exclaimed, and then spoke to them in a way which brought them all back in the afternoon clothed more appropriately.

On all these questions she thought simply and naturally, and not in terms of scientific theory and over-elaborated system. She believed that the world was burdened and paralysed by conventional methods. But she did not undervalue the aesthetic side of existence. “So many think that we missionaries live a sort of glorified glamour of a life, and have no right to think of any of the little refinements and elegancies which rest and soothe tired and overstrained nerves—certainly coarseness and ugliness do not help the Christian life, and ugly things are not as a rule cheaper than beautiful ones.” Her conviction was that a woman worth her salt could make any kind of house beautiful. At the same time she believed—and proved it in her own life—that the spirit-filled woman was to a great extent independent of all accessories.

What always vexed her was to think of thousands of girls at home living a purposeless life, spending their time in fashionable wintering-places, and undergoing the strenuous toil of conventional amusement. “Why,” she asked, “could they not come out here and stay a month or six months doing light work, helping with the children, cheering the staff? What a wealth of interest it would introduce into their lives!” She declared it would be better than stoning windows, for she had no patience with the policy of the women who sought in blind destruction the solution of political and social evils. “I’m for votes for women, but I would prove my right to it by keeping law and helping others to keep it. God-like motherhood is the finest sphere for women, and the way to the redemption of the world.”

Many a clarion call she sent to her sisters across the waters:

“Don’t grow up a nervous old maid! Gird yourself for the battle outside somewhere, and keep your heart young. Give up your whole being to create music everywhere, in the light places and in the dark places, and your life will make melody. I’m a witness to the perfect joy and satisfaction of a single life—with a tail of human tag-rag hanging on. It is rare! It is as exhilarating as an aeroplane or a dirigible or whatever they are that are always trying to get up and are always coming down! . . . Mine has been such a joyous service,” she wrote again. “God has been good to me, letting me serve Him in this humble way. I cannot thank Him enough for the honour He conferred upon me when He sent me to the Dark Continent.”

Over and over again she put this idea of foreign service before her friends at home. Some were afraid of a rush of cranks who would not obey rules and so forth. She laughed the idea to scorn. “I wish I could believe in a crush—but there are sensible men and women enough in the Church who would be as law-abiding here as at home.”

XVII. LOVE-LETTERS

During the course of her career Miss Slessor wrote numberless letters, many of them productions of six, ten, twelve, and fourteen pages, closely penned in spidery writing, which she called her “hieroglyphic style.” She had the gift, which more women than men possess, of expressing her ideas on paper in as affluent and graceful a way as in conversation. Her letters indeed were long monologues, the spontaneous outpouring of an active and clever mind. She sat down and talked vivaciously of everything about her, not of public affairs, because she knew people at home would not understand about these, but of her children, the natives, her journeys, her ailments, the services, the palavers, all as simply and naturally and as fully as if she were addressing an interested listener. But it was essential that her correspondent should be in sympathy with her. She could never write a formal letter; she could not even compose a business letter in the ordinary way. Neither could she write to order, nor give an official report of her work. The prospect of appearing in print paralysed her. It was always the heart and not the mind of her correspondent that she addressed. What appeared from time to time in the Record and in the Women’s Missionary Magazine, were mainly extracts from private letters, and they derived all their charm and colour from the fact that they were meant for friends who loved and understood her. In the same way she would be chilled by receiving a coldly expressed letter. “I wish you hadn’t said Dear Madam,” she told a lady at home. “I’m just an insignificant, wee, auld wifey that you would never address in that way if you knew me. I’ll put the Madam aside, and drag up my chair close to you and the girls you write for, and we’ll have a chat by the fireside.”

She could not help writing; it was the main outlet for her loving nature, so much repressed in the loneliness of the bush. Had she not possessed so big and so ardent a heart, she would have written less. Into her letters she poured all the wealth of her affection; they were in the real sense love-letters; and her magic gift of sympathy made them always prized by the recipients. She had no home people of her own, and she pressed her nearest friends to make her “one of the family.” “If,” she would say, “you would let me share in any disappointments or troubles, I would feel more worthy of your love--I will tell you some of mine as a counter-irritant!” Many followed her behest with good result. “I’m cross this morning,” wrote a young missionary at the beginning of a long letter, “and I know it is all my own fault, but I am sure that writing to you will put me in a better temper. When things go wrong, there is nothing like a talk with you. . . . Now I must stop, the letter has worked the cure.” Her letters of counsel to her colleagues when they were in difficulties with their work were helpful and inspiring to the highest degree. On occasions of trial or sorrow she always knew the right word to say. How delicately, for instance, would she try to take the edge off the grief of bereaved friends by describing the arrival of the spirit in heaven, and the glad welcome that would be got there from those who had gone before. “Heaven is just a meeting and a homing of our real selves. God will never make us into new personalities. Everlasting life—take that word life and turn it over and over and press it and try to measure it, and see what it will yield. It is a magnificent idea which comprises everything that heart can yearn after.” On another occasion she wrote, “I do not like that petition in the Prayer Book, From sudden death, good Lord deliver us. I never could pray it. It is surely far better to see Him at once without pain of parting or physical debility. Why should we not be like the apostle in his confident outburst of praise and assurance, Tor I am persuaded . . . ‘?” Again: “Don’t talk about the cold hand of death—it is the hand of Christ.”

It was not surprising that her correspondence became greater at last than she could manage. The pile of unanswered communications was like a millstone round her neck, and in these latter days she began to violate an old rule and snatch time from the hours of night. Headings such as “10 P.M.,” “Midnight,” “3.45 A.M.,” became frequent, yet she would give love’s full measure to every correspondent, and there was seldom sign of undue strain. “If my pen is in a hurry,” she would say, “my heart is not.” When she was ill and unable to write, she would simply lie in bed and speak to her Father about it all.

There was a number of friends to whom she wrote regularly, and whose relations to her may be judged from the manner in which they began their letters. “My lady of Grace,” “My beloved missionary,” “Dearest sister,” were some of the phrases used. But her nature demanded at least one confidante to whom she could lay bare her inmost thoughts. She needed a safety-valve, a city of refuge, a heart and mind with whom there would be no reservations, and Providence provided her with a kind of confessor from whom she obtained all the understanding and sympathy and love she craved for. This was Miss Adam, who, while occasionally differing from her in minor matters of policy, never, during the fifteen years of their friendship, once failed her. What she was to the lonely missionary no one can know. Mary said she knew without being told what was in her heart, and “how sweet,” she added, “it is to be understood and have love reading between the lines.” Month by month she sent to Bowden the intimate story of her doings, her troubles, hopes, and fears, and joys, and received in return wise and tender counsel and encouragement and practical help. She kept the letters under her pillow and read and reread them.

Never self-centred or self-sufficient, she depended upon the letters that came from home to a greater extent than many of her friends suspected. She needed the inflow of love into her own life, and she valued the letters that brought her cheer and stimulus and inspiration. Once she was travelling on foot, and had four miles of hill-road to go, and was feeling very weary and depressed at the magnitude of the work and her own weakness, when a letter was handed to her. It was the only one by that mail, but it was enough. She sat down, and in the quiet of the bush she opened it, and as she read all the tiredness fled, the heat was forgotten, the road was easy, and she went blithely up the hill.

Outside the circle of her friends many people wrote to her from Scotland, and some from England, Canada, and America. Boys and girls whom she had never seen sent her letters telling her of their cats and dogs, of football, and lessons and school. With her replies sometimes went a snake skin, a brass tray, a miniature paddle, or other curio. But it was the letter, rather than the gift, that was enjoyed. As one girl wrote: “You are away out helping the poor black kiddies and people, and just as busy doing good as possible, and yet you’ve time to send a letter home to a little Scottish girl, a letter fragrant with everything lovely and good, that makes one try harder than ever to do right, and that fills one’s heart with beautiful helpful thoughts.”

To her own balms, wherever they were, she wrote letters full of household news and gentle advice. To Dan at the Institute she wrote regularly—very pleased she was when she heard he had been at lectures on bacteria and understood them!--and when Alice and Maggie were inmates of the Edgerley Memorial School she kept in the closest touch with them. Here is a specimen of her letters, written chiefly in Efik, and addressed apparently to Alice:

MY PRECIOUS CHILDREN-I am thinking a lot about you, for you will soon be losing our dear Miss Young; and while I am sorry for myself I am sorrier for you and Calabar. How are you all? and have you been good? and are you all trying to serve and please Jesus your Lord? Whitie has gone to sleep. She has been making sand and yono-ing my bedroom, the bit that you did not finish. Janie has yono-d the high bits, so Whitie is very tired. Janie has gone to stay all night with the twin-mother and her baby in the town where Effiom used to live long ago. One baby was dead, but she is keeping the other, and the chief says, “Ma, you are our mother, but what

you have done will be the death of us.” But I tell them just to die.

The mother almost died. One child was born dead, and Janie and I stayed all night there. Mary is at Ikot Ekpene. We saw her as we passed in the motor. The whole town came to-day and put splendid beams in the verandah both in front and behind, swept all behind, and put on a corrugated iron roof, did the porch and various other things, and the safe.

Good-bye. Are you well? We are well, through God’s goodness. Are you coming soon for holidays? My heart is hungry to see you and to touch your hands. Greetings to Ma Fuller. Greet Ma Wilkie and Mr. Wilkie for me. Greet each other. All we greet you. With much love to Maggie, Dan, Asuquo,—I am, in all my prayers, your mother,

M. SLESSOR.

The girls and Dan also wrote regularly to her in Efiksuch letters as this:

I am pleased to send this little letter to you. Are you well? I am fairly well through the goodness of God. Why have you delayed to send us a letter? Perhaps you are too busy to write, but we are coming home in a fortnight. If you hear we are on the way come quickly out when you hear the voices of the people from the beach, because you know it will be us. Greet Whitie, Janie, Annie, and all, and accept greeting from your loving child MAGGIE.

After her death there was found at Use a bundle of papers, evidently much treasured, labelled “My children’s letters.”

XVIII. A LONELY FIGURE

She returned to Use, but only remained long enough to arrange for the material for the house at Odoro Ikpe. Of the special difficulties that would beset her on this occasion, she was quite aware. The timber supply on the ground was scarce, transport would be expensive, there was no local skilled labour, and she was unable to work with her own hands, while it was not easy to procure carriers and other work-people, since the Government with the consent of the chiefs, were taking batches of men from each village for the coalfields and railway, a measure she approved, as it prevented the worst elements in the community drifting there. But nothing ever discouraged her, and she returned at the end of April and embarked once more, and for the last time, on building operations.

Friends kept tempting her to come to Scotland. Her friend Miss Young was now Mrs. Arnot, wife of the Rev. David Arnot, M.A., Blairgowrie, and from her came a pressing invitation to make her home at the manse. “1 will meet you at Liverpool,” Mrs. Arnot wrote, “and bring you straight here, where you will rest and be nursed back to health again.” It was proposed that Alice should come with her, and be left at Blairgowrie while Mary visited her friends. She was delighted, and wrote gaily that when she did come she “would not be a week-end visitor or a tea visitor, but a barnacle. It is, however, all too alluring. One only thing can overtop it, and that is duty as put into my hands by my King.” Then she paints a picture of the piles of timber and corrugated iron about her for the building of a house, “for the happy and privileged man or woman who shall take up the work of salvage,” and of Ikpe waiting patiently, and the towns surrendering on all sides, and adds, “Put yourself in my place, and with an accession of strength given since I camped up here, how could you do other than I have done? I verily thought to be with the Macgregors, but this came and the strength has come with it, and there must be no more moving till the house is up, when I hope and pray some one will come to it. What a glorious privilege it all is! I can’t think why God has so highly honoured and trusted me.”

She entered on a period of toil and tribulation which proved to be one of the most trying and exacting in her life. The house itself was a simple matter. Large posts were inserted in the ground, and split bamboos were placed between; cross pieces were tied on with strips of the oil-palm tree, and then clay was prepared and pounded in. But fifty men and lads were employed, and she had never handled so lazy, so greedy, so inefficient a gang. Compelled to supervise them constantly, she often had to sit in the fierce sunshine for eight hours at a time; then with face unwashed and morning wrapper still on she would go and conduct school. If she went to Ikpe for a day, all the work done required to be gone over again. Sometimes she lost all patience, and resorted to a little “muscular Christianity,” which caused huge amusement, but always had the desired effect. But she was very philosophical over it. “It is all part of the heathen character, and, as Mrs. Anderson used to say, ‘Well, Daddy, if they were Christians there would have been no need for you and me here.’ “Jean often became very wroth, and demanded of the people if “Ma” was not to obtain time to eat, and if they wanted to kill her?

Annie and her husband had been placed at Nkanga, and Jean now managed the household affairs. The faithful girl had her own difficulties in the way of catering, for on account of the isolation money frequently ran done, and she could not obtain the commonest necessities to feed her “Ma.” An empty purse always worried Mary, but it was a special trial to her independent and sensitive spirit at this period, for she was in debt to the skilled carpenter who had been engaged, and to the labourers, and was compelled to undergo the humiliation of borrowing. On one occasion she obtained a loan of 5s. from one of her rare visitors, a Government doctor, a Scot and a Presbyterian, who was investigating tropical diseases, and who, finding her in the Rest House, had contentedly settled down with his microscopes in the Court House shed. After working all day in the bush he spent many evenings with her, and she was much impressed by his upright character, and his kindness and courtesy to the natives, and said matters would be very different in Africa if all civil and military men were of the same stamp. The only other two visitors she had at this time were Mr. Bowes, the printer at Duke Town, and Mr. Hart, the accountant, the latter bringing her all the money she needed.

By the end of July the house was roughly built, and she was able to mount up to the top rooms by means of a “hen” ladder, and there on the loose, unsteady boards she sat tending her last motherless baby, and feeling uplifted into a new and restful atmosphere. A pathetic picture she made, sitting gazing over the wide African plain. She had never been more isolated, never felt more alone.

So lonely ‘twas, that God Himself

Scarce seemed there to be.

She was without assistance, her body was broken and pitifully weak, and yet with dauntless spirit and quenchless faith she looked hopefully to the future, when those infant stations about her would be occupied by consecrated men and women.

XIX. WHEN THE GREAT WAR CAME

Into the African bush, the home of many things that white men cannot understand, there was stealing a troubled sense of mystery. The air was electric with expectation and alarm. Impalpable influences seemed fighting the feeble old woman on the lonely hill-top. She was worried by transport difficulties. What the causes were she did not know, but the material did not come, and as she was paying the carpenter a high wage she was compelled to dismiss him. What work there was to do she attempted to accomplish with her own thin, worn hands.

In the early days of August the natives began to whisper to each other strange stories about fighting going on in the big white world beyond the seas. News came from Calabar that the European firms had ceased to buy produce: canoes which went down river for rice and kerosene, returned again with their cargoes of nuts and oil. She wondered what was happening. Then excited natives came to her in a panic, with tales of a mad Europe and of Britain fighting Germany. She pooh-poohed the rumours and outwardly appeared calm and unafraid in order to reassure them, but the silence and the suspense were unbearable. On the 13th she received letters and heard of the outbreak of the war. All the possibilities involved in that tremendous event came crowding upon her mind, the immense suffering and sorrow, and, not least to her, the peril to Calabar. Nigeria was conterminous with the Cameroons, and she knew the Germans well enough to anticipate trouble. The cost of articles, too, she realised. would go up, and as she had little food in the house she at once sent to the market for supplies. Already prices were doubled. Her kerosene oil gave out, and she had to resort to lighted firewood to read at prayers.

She went on bravely with the routine duties of the station—Dan, who was now with her, helping in the school—but she longed impatiently for news. “Oh, for a telegram,” she would cry, “even a boy bawling in the street!” The officer at Ikot Ekpene, knowing her anxiety, sent over the latest intelligence, but she half suspected that he kept back the worst. The worst came in her first war mail which arrived when she was sitting superintending operations at the house. She read why Britain had entered the conflict and exclaimed, “Thank God! our nation is not the aggressor.” Then came the story of the invasion of Belgium and the reverses of the Allies. Shocked and sad she essayed to rise, but was unable to move. The girls ran to her aid and lifted her up, but she could not stand. Exerting her willpower and praying for strength she directed the girls to carry her over to the Rest House and put her to bed. Ague came on, and in half an hour she was in a raging fever which lasted, with scarcely an interval, for a fortnight. She struggled on amidst increasing difficulties and worries, the horrors of the war with her night and day. Her old enemy, diarrhoea, returned, and she steadily weakened and seemed entering the valley of the shadow. She did not fear death, but the thought of passing away alone in the bush troubled her, for her skull might be seized and be worshipped as a powerful juju by the people.

At last she lay in a stupor as if beyond help. It was a scene which suggested the final act in Dr. Livingstone’s life. The girls were crying. The church lads stood alarmed and awed. Then they raised her in her camp-bed and marched with her the five miles to Ikpe. Next morning they lifted the bed into a canoe and placed her under a tarpaulin and paddled her down the Creek. They landed at Okopedi beach, where she lay in the roadway in the moonlight, scarcely breathing. The agent of a trading-house brought restoratives and sent for Dr. Wood, then at Itu, who accompanied her to Use and waited the night as he feared she would not recover. All through the hours her mind was occupied with the war and the soldiers in the trenches.

Next day she was a little better, but would not hear of going to Itu to be cared for there. To her Use was home where the children could minister to her, but realising her lack of strength she sent a message to Miss Peacock asking her to come over. Miss Peacock said to her fellow-worker, “Ma must be very ill before she would send for any one,” and she cycled to Use at once. Mary confided to her that it might be the end, and “Oh,” she exclaimed, “if only the war were over and my children safe in the Kingdom, how gladly would I go!” She called the bairns to her and told them what to do in the event of her death. Like all natives in the presence of serious illness they were greatly upset and wept bitterly, but as the disorder passed they began to think that she would get better, and went about their duties, Jean to her marketing, and Alice to the care of the house, with Whitie to help, while Maggie looked after the baby.

The shadow of the war continued to darken her heart. She agonised for the cause which her native land had taken up, and many a cry went up to God on its behalf in the hour of trial. Miss Peacock remained several nights, and returned to Ikotobong with a strong presentiment that “Ma” was not to be long with them, and she and Miss Couper arranged to keep in touch with her as closely as possible.

As she plodded on towards strength and as better news arrived about the war situation she began to be more like herself and take up her old duties. For a time she lay in the verandah on a deck chair; and then went to the church, conducted the Sunday services, but was obliged to sit all the time and lean her body against the communion-table. Yet in the midst of her weakness and suffering she had always a bright laugh and a word of encouragement for others.

Reluctantly she came to the conclusion that nothing would heal her but a voyage home and as she was longing for a few more hours—it was not years now—of work she made up her mind to face it, and to include in her furlough a visit to the graves of her mother and sister at Exeter. The difficulty of the east wind in Scotland was overcome by a proposal from Mrs. Arnot, who in the mystery of things had suddenly been bereft of her husband, that she would take a small house where they could live together in quiet. “I shall meet you,” that lady wrote, “and make a home for you and care for you if God puts it into your heart to come.” The wonderful kindness of the offer brought tears to her eyes and she consented with a great content. Her plan was to return to Odoro Ikpe, complete the house, and leave for Scotland early in the spring; and she asked Miss Adam to send her a hat and boots and other articles which civilisation demanded. Her only regret was at leaving her people and specially those at Ikpe. “It is ten years since I first took them on, and they have never got a teacher yet. It is bitterly hard!” Miss Peacock and Miss Couper noticed, however, that the old recuperative power which had always surprised them was gone, and one day she said that she had been overhauling her desk and tearing up letters in case anything should happen.

The tragedy of the war came home personally to her. Two of her official friends, Commander G. Gray and Lieutenant H. A. Child, C.M.G., were serving in the Navy and were both drowned by the capsizing of a whaler when crossing the bar at the entrance to the Nyong River. “They were my oldest and most intimate friends here, capable, sane Empire-builders,” and she sorrowed for them with a great sorrow. Sometimes her old fighting spirit was roused by the news of the deeds of the enemy. “Oh, if I were thirty years younger, and if I were a man! . . . We must not have peace until Germany licks the dust and is undeceived and stricken once for all.” Her comments brought out the fact that she had followed European events very closely during the past thirty years, whilst her letters to her fainthearted friends in Scotland showed her usual insight:

God does not mean you and me to carry the burden, and German soldiers are flesh and blood and must give out by-and-by, and they cannot create new armies, and with long-drawn-out lines of battle on East and West they can’t send an army that could invade Britain. They could harass, that’s all, and our women are not Belgians; they would fight even German soldiers. Yes! they would stand up to William the Execrated. Moreover, Zeppelins can do a lot of hurt, but they can’t take London; and Ostend and Antwerp are no nearer Britain for any kind of air attack than Berlin is, and above all our perspective is doubtless better than yours—any one can see that to try and take towns and to fight in streets filled with civilians has not a pennyworth of military value. It is a sheer waste of energy and life which should have been utilised on the armies and strongholds of a country. Brussels, Bruges, Antwerp, even Paris, had they got it, would be a mere blare of trumpets, a flash in the pan, a spectacular show, and if they took Edinburgh or London or Aberdeen, it would be the same, they would still have to reckon with a nation or nations. It has all been a mistake for their own downfall, and they will clear out of Belgium poorer than they entered it. Haven’t the East Indians done nobly? Bravo our Allies!

She had now fallen into calmer mood. “Miss Slessor,” she would say severely to herself, “why do you worry? Is God not fit to take care of His own universe and purpose? We are not guilty of any aggression or lust of conquest, and we can trust Him to bring us through. He is not to be turned aside from the working out of His purpose by any War Lord.” She always fell back on the thought, “The Lord reigneth” as on a soft pillow and rested there. Writing one morning at 6 o’clock she described the beauty of the dawn and the earth refreshed and cooled and the hope and the mystery of a new day opening out, and contrasted it with the darkness and cold and fog experienced by the army and navy. “God is always in the world,” she said; “the sunshine will break out and light will triumph.” And she did not ignore the deeper issues, “May our nation be sent from its pleasures to its knees, and the Church be awed and brought back to Him.”

On Christmas Day a service was held at which she intimated the opening of the subscription list for the Prince of Wales’ Fund. She did not like to speak of war among Christian nations to natives; but it was current history, and she made the best explanation she could, though she was glad to turn their thoughts to the day of National of Intercession on the following Sabbath. Dan acted as interpreter in the evening to Mr. Hart, who gave an address.

To a friend she wrote:

There will be few merry Christmasses in Europe this year. But, thank God, there will be a more profound sense of all Christ came to be and do for mankind, and a closer union and communion between Him and His people, through the sadness and insufficiency of earthly good. He will Himself draw near, and will fill empty chairs in lonely homes and hearts, and make His people—aye—and thousands who have not sought Him in prosperity—to know that here and now He is the Resurrection and the Life, that he that believeth in Him shall never die.

On New Year’s Day Miss Peacock and Miss Couper went to spend the afternoon with her, and the former writes:

According to old-time customs I had made her her favourite plum-pudding and sent it over with a message that we meant to come to tea on New Year’s Day. On our arrival the tea-table was set, and the plum-pudding with a rose out of the garden stuck on the top was on the table. Miss Slessor was as happy as a girl, and said she had to exercise self-control to keep from tasting the pudding before we arrived. And we had a merry meal. Then, when we left, she had to escort us to the end of the road. A new tenderness seemed to have come into her life, and with regard to those with whom she differed, she seemed to go out of her way to say the kindest things possible. She spoke to me of something she had written which she had torn up and said, “I wonder I could have been so hard.” It was not difficult to see the last touches of the Master’s hand to the life He had been moulding for so many years.

XX. THE TIME OF THE SINGING OF BIRDS

At the turn of the year her thoughts were again with her mother who had passed away then, twenty-nine years before. She was feeling very weak, but read and wrote as usual. Her last letter to Miss Adam told, amongst other things, of the previous day’s service and how Annie’s little girl would run about the church and point to her and call to her—”I can’t say ‘Don’t bring her’ for there should be room enough for the babies in our Father’s house.” Her closing words to her old friend were, “God be with you till we meet again.” Even in her feeble state she was always thinking of others. David had taken his wife to Lagos, and her vivid imagination conjured up all the dangers of the voyage, and she was anxious for their safety. In the same letter in which she speaks of them, written on the 5th, she pours out sympathy and comfort to a lady friend in Edinburgh whose two sons had joined the Forces.

My heart bleeds for you, my dear, dear friend, but God’s love gave the mother heart its love and its yearning over its treasures, so He will know how to honour and care for the mother, and how to comfort her and keep her treasures for her. Just keep hold on Him, dear one, and put your boys into His hand, as you did when they were babies. He is able to keep them safe in the most difficult and dangerous situations. I am constantly praying with you, and with others of my friends, who, just as you, are giving up their dearest and most precious at the call of Duty. God can enrich them and you and all the anxious and exposed ones even through the terrible fires. In God’s governance not one precious thing can ever be lost.

On Friday the 8th she sat on a deck-chair in the little garden outside the door enjoying the sunshine, for the harmattan wind was cold, and writing some letters. The last she penned was to Mrs. Arnot, in which she said she was better though “a wee shade weaker than usual.” It was never finished, and was found, later, on her pad. The final words were: “I can’t say definitely whether I shall yet come in March—if I be spared till then . . .”

In the afternoon there was a recurrence of fever. Alice tended her unceasingly, seldom leaving her bedside, and stretching herself, when in need of rest, on a mat beside the bed. She was a great comfort to Mary. On Sunday

spirit again dominated body; she struggled up, went over to the church, and conducted service. Next day she was suffering acutely from diarrhoea and vomiting, and one of the girls went to Ikotobong and summoned Miss Peacock, who immediately cycled over.

“I got a messenger,” says Miss Peacock, “and sent him to Itu stating the symptoms, and asking Dr. Robertson to come and see her. All the afternoon the vomiting and diarrhoea continued until Dr. Robertson arrived. He had secured some ice at one of the factories, and gave her some medicine, and both the diarrhoea and vomiting were stopped. All the afternoon there had been a great restlessness and weariness, and unless to ask for something she seldom spoke. Her mails were brought into the room by one of the girls, but she took no notice of them. She was moved from her bed on to her chair, and back again several times, but did not seem to be able to rest anywhere; then she would give a great cry of weariness as if she were wearied unto death.

“As the evening wore on she became quieter, but had a great thirst, and begged that a little bit of the ice might be put into her mouth. She had a very quiet night, without any recurrence of the former symptoms, and I thought she was somewhat better, until the morning revealed how exhausted she was. The old restlessness began again, and I got a lad from the school to take a message over to Itu to Dr. Robertson. My report was that Miss Slessor had had a quiet night, but was suffering from extreme exhaustion. The doctor sent over some medicine with instructions, and she seemed again to be able to lie quietly. Once when I was attending to her she said, ‘Ma, it’s no use,’ and again she prayed, *‘O Abasi, sana mi yok’* (‘O God release me’). As I fed her with milk or chicken soup, she would sometimes sign to me, or just say ‘Ma.’ A lonely feeling came into my heart, and as I had to send a message to Ikotobong, I asked Miss Couper to cycle over in the afternoon. She stayed all the afternoon, and when she left Miss Slessor was still quiet, and her pulse was fairly good. This was the 12th.

“The girls—Janie, Annie, Maggie, Alice, and Whitie-- were all with me, and we made our arrangements for the night-watch. It was not a grand room with costly furnishings; the walls were of reddish-brown mud, very roughly built; the floor was of cement, with a rug here and there, and the roof corrugated iron. Besides the bed, washhand-stand, and a chair or two, there was a chest of drawers which had belonged to her mother, and in which was found all that was needed for the last service. Her greatness was never in her surroundings, for she paid little attention to these, but in the hidden life which we caught glimpses of now and then when she forgot herself and revealed what was in her mind with regard to the things that count.

“As the hours wore on, several times she signed to us to turn her, and we noticed that her breathing was becoming more difficult. It was a very dark night, and the natives were sound asleep in their houses, but I sent off two of the girls to rouse two men to go to Itu; and we waited anxiously the coming of the doctor. A strange uneasiness seemed to come upon us. All the girls were round the bedside, and now and then one or two would begin to weep. The clock had been forgotten, and we did not know the time. A cock crew, and one of the girls said, Tay must be dawning,’ but when I drew aside the curtain there was nothing but pitch darkness. It was not nearly daybreak, and we felt that the death-angel was drawing very near. Several times a change passed over the dear face, and the girls burst out into wild weeping; they knew only too well the sign of the dread visitor. They wished to rush away, but I told them they must stay, and together we watched until at 3.30 God took her to Himself. There was no great struggle at the end; just a gradual diminishing of the forces of nature, and Ma Akamba, ‘The Great Mother,’ entered into the presence of the King.”

And so the long life of toil was over. “The time of the singing of birds,” she used to say, “is where Christ is.” For her, now, the winter was past, the rain was over and gone, the time of the singing of birds had come. . . .

When the girls realised that she was gone, they gave way to their grief, and lamented their position in the. world. “My mother is dead—my mother is dead—we shall be counted as slaves now that our mother is dead.” The sound of the weeping reached the town and roused the inhabitants from their slumbers. Men and women came to the house and mingled their tears with those of the household. They sat about on the steps, went into the bedroom and gazed sorrowfully on the white still face of her whom they regarded as a mother and friend. As the news was passed on, people came from Itu and the district round, to see in death her who had been Eka kpukpru owo, “Everybody’s Mother.”

As soon as Mr. Wilkie received the telegram announcing the end, he obtained a launch and sent it up with the Rev. W. M. Christie, B.A., who, Mr. Macgregor being at home, was in charge of the Institute. While it was on the way an English and an Efik service were being held at Itu. The launch arrived at 5.30 P.M., the coffin was placed on board, and the return voyage begun. It was midnight ere Duke Town was reached, and the body rested at Government Beach until dawn. There the mourners gathered. Government officials, merchants, and missionaries, were all there. The boys of the Institute were drawn up on the beach, policemen were posted in the streets, and the pupils of Duke Town school continued the line to the cemetery. All flags flew at half-mast, and the town was hushed and still. Great crowds watched the procession, which moved along in silence. The coffin was draped with the Union Jack, and was carried shoulder high by the boat boys, who wore black singlets and mourning loin-cloths, but no caps.

At the cemetery on Mission Hill stood a throng of natives. Old Mammy Fuller who had loved Mary so much, sat alone at the top of the grave. When the procession was approaching she heard some women beginning to wail, and at once rose. “Kutua oh, kutua oh,” she said. “Do not cry, do not cry. Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Ma was a great blessing.”

A short and simple service was conducted by Mr. Wilkie

and Mr. Rankin, and some of the native members led the singing of “When the day of toil is done,” and “Asleep in Jesus.” The coffin was lowered by eight of the teachers of Duke Town School, and lilies and other flowers were thrown upon it. Mammy Fuller uttered a grateful sigh. “Safe,” she murmured. One or two women wept quietly, but otherwise there was absolute silence, and those who know the natives will understand the restraint which they imposed upon themselves. Upon the grave were placed crosses of purple bougainvillea and white and pink frangipanni, and in the earth was planted a slip from the rose bush at Use, that it might grow and be symbolic of the fragrance and purity and beauty of her life.. . .

“Ma,” said Mammy Fuller to Mrs. Wilkie when all was over, “I don’t know when I enjoyed anything so much; I have been just near heaven all the time.”

XXI. TRIBUTE AND TREASURE

Many tributes were paid to the dead pioneer. As soon as Sir Frederick Lugard, the Governor-General of Nigeria, heard of the event he telegraphed to Mr. Wilkie: “It is with the deepest regret that I learn of the death of Miss Slessor. Her death is a great loss to Nigeria.” And later came the formal black-bordered notice in the Government Gazette:-

 It is with the deepest regret that His Excellency the Governor-General has to announce the death at Itu, on 13th January, of Miss Mary Mitchell Slessor, Honorary Associate of the Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem in England.

For thirty-nine years, with brief and infrequent visits to England, Miss Slessor has laboured among the people of the Eastern Provinces in the south of Nigeria.

By her enthusiasm, self-sacrifice, and greatness of character she has earned the devotion of thousands of the natives among whom she worked, and the love and esteem of all Europeans, irrespective of class or creed, with whom she came in contact.

She has died, as she herself wished, on the scene of her labours, but her memory will live long in the hearts of her friends, Native and European, in Nigeria.

Testimony regarding her qualities and work was given in Scotland by the Mission Committees of the United Free Church, by officials, missionaries, and others who knew her, and by the Press, whilst from many parts of the world came notices of her career which indicated how widely known she had been. The appreciation which would perhaps have pleased her most was a poem written by a Scottish girl, fifteen years of age, with whom she had carried on a charming correspondence—Christine G. M. Orr, daughter of Sheriff Orr, Edinburgh. She would, doubtless, have had it included in any notice of her work, and here, therefore, it is given:

THE LAMENT OF HER AFRICAN CHILDREN

She who loved us, she who sought us

Through the wild untrodden bushlands,

Brought us healing, brought us comfort,

Brought the sunlight to our darkness,

She has gone—the dear white Mother—Gone into the great Hereafter.

Never more on rapid waters

Shall she dip her flashing paddle,

Nor again the dry leaves rustle

‘Neath her footstep in the forest,

Never more shall we behold her

Eager, dauntless on her journeyings.

Now the children miss their teacher,

And the women mourn their helper;

And the sick, the weak, the outcast

Long that she once more might touch them, Long to hear her speaking comfort,

Long to feel her strong hand soothing.

Much in loneliness and danger,

Fevered oft, beset with trouble,

Still she strove for us, her children;

Taught us of the great good Spirit,

He who dwells beyond the sunrise;

 Showed to us the love He bears us,

By her own dear loving-kindness;

Told us not to fear the spirits,

Evil spirits in the shadows,

For our Father-God is watching,

Watching through the cloudless daytime.

Watching at the silent midnight,

So that nothing harms His people;

Taught us how to love each other,

How to care for little children

With a tenderness we knew not,

How, with courtesy and honour,

To respect the gentle women,

Nor despise them for their weakness,

But, as wives and mothers, love them.

Thus she taught, and thus she laboured; Living, spent herself to help us,

Dying, found her rest among us.

Let the dry, harsh winds blow softer

And the river’s song fall lower,

While the forest sways and murmurs

In the mystery of evening,

And the lonely hush lies silent,

Silent with a mighty sorrow.

Oh! our mother—she who loved us,

She who lost herself in service,

She who lightened all our darkness,

She has left us, and we mourn her

With a lonely, aching sorrow.

May the great good Spirit hear us,

Hear us in our grief and save us,

Compass us with His protection

Till, through suffering and shadow,

We with weary feet have journeyed

And again our mother greets us

In the Land beyond the sunrise.

Both the Calabar Council and the Women’s Foreign Mission Committee in Scotland felt that the most fitting memorial to her would be the continuation of her work, and arrangements were accordingly made for the appointment and supervision of teachers and evangelists at Use, Ikpe, and Odoro Ikpe, and for the care of the children. It was also decided to realise her settlement scheme and call it “The Mary Slessor Home for Women and Girls,” with a memorial missionary in charge, and later an appeal for a capital sum of £5000 for the purpose was issued. It would have pleased Mary to know that the lady chosen for the position of memorial missionary was her old colleague Mrs. Arnot. She had worked hard and waited long for the accomplishment of this idea, and she may yet, from above, see of the travail of her soul and be satisfied.. . .

By and by her more special possessions were collected and sent home. If she had been an ordinary woman one might have expected to see a collection of the things that a lady likes to gather about her; the dainty trinkets and souvenirs, the jewellery and knicknacks that have pleasant associations connected with them. When the little box arrived it was filled less with these than with pathos and tears. It held merely a few much-faded articles, one or two Bibles, a hymn-book (the gift of some twin-mother at home), an old-fashioned scent-bottle, a pebble brooch, hair bracelet, two old lockets, and her mother’s ring—all these were evidently relics of the early days—a compass, and a fountain pen.

But there also came a large packet of letters, those received during her last years, which revealed where her treasures on earth were stored—in a multitude of hearts whose love she had won. They were from men in Nigeria—Government officials, missionaries, and merchants—from men and women in many lands, from the mothers and sisters of the “boys” to whom she had been kind, from Church officials, from children—all overflowing with affection and admiration and love. She had often called herself a “rich woman.” One learned from these letters the reason why.

XXII. SEEN AND UNSEEN

Miss Slessor had a sure consciousness of her limitations, and knew she was nothing but a forerunner, who opened up the way and made it possible for others to come in and take up the work on normal lines. Both in the sphere of mission exploration and in the region of ideas she possessed the qualities of the pioneer,—imagination, daring, patience, —and like all idealists she met with opposition. It was not, however, the broad policy she originated that was criticised, so much as matters of detail, and no doubt there was sometimes justification for this. She admitted that she had no gifts as an organiser, and when she engaged in constructive work it was because there was no one else to do it.

What she accomplished, therefore, cannot be measured only by the visible results of her own handiwork. The Hope Waddell Institute was the outcome of her suggestions, and from it has gone out a host of lads to teach in schools throughout the country, and to influence the lives of thousands of others. She laid the foundations of civilised order in Okoyong, upon which regular church and school life has now been successfully built. When she unlocked the Enyong Creek, some were amused at the little kirks and huts she constructed in the bush, and asked what they were worth —just a few posts plastered with mud, and a sheet or two of corrugated iron. But they represented a spiritual force and influence Jar beyond their material value. They were erected with her life-blood, they embodied her love for her Master and for the people, they were outposts, the first dim lights in the darkness of a dark land, they stood for Christ Himself and His Cross. And to-day there exist throughout the district nearly fifty churches and schools in which the work is being carried on carefully and methodically by trained minds. The membership numbers nearly 150o, and there is a large body of candidates and enquirers and over 2000 scholars. The remarkable progress being made in self-support may be gathered from the following figures taken from the accounts of the five Creek congregations for 1914:



All these churches and others that she began are spreading the Gospel not only by direct effort, but also by means of their members as they trade up and down the country.

One cannot estimate the value of her general influence on the natives; it extended over an area of more than 2000 square miles, from all parts of which they came to seek her help and advice, whilst her fame reached even to Northern Nigeria, where she was spoken of as the “good White Ma who lived alone.” To West Africans, a woman is simply a chattel to be used for pleasure and gain, but she gave them a new conception of womanhood, and gained their reverence and confidence and obedience. Although she came to upset all their ideas and customs, which represented home and habit and life itself to them, they loved her and would not let the wind blow on her. She thus made it easy for other women agents to live and work amongst them; and probably there is no similar mission field where these can dwell in such freedom and safety. And through her womanhood she gave them some idea of the power and beauty of the religion which could make that womanhood possible. Her influence will not cease, for in the African bush, where there are no daily newspapers to crowd out events and impressions, and tradition is tenacious, she will be remembered in hut and harem and by forest camp fire, and each generation will hand down to the next the story of the Great White Mother who lived and toiled for their good.

Upon the Mission staff her example acted like a tonic. Her tireless energy, her courage, her enthusiasm, were infectious and stimulating to the highest degree, and stirred many to action. Such an inspiring force is a valuable asset in a tropical land, where everything tends to languor and inertia. And in Scotland her influence was also very great. Round her name and work gathered a romance which deepened and widened interest in the missionary enterprise of the Church. Her career demonstrates how important is the personal touch and tie in sustaining and increasing the attraction of the work abroad. By the spell of her personality she was able to draw support not only from large numbers of people within her own Church, but from many outside who had little thought or care for missions. It was because she was not a mere name on a list, but a warm, living, inspiring, human presence. For while she was great as a pioneer and worker, she was equally great as a woman.

XXIII. THE ALABASTER BOX

But the interest in Nigeria on the part of the home people as a whole was never enough for Miss Slessor. It was largely an interest in herself and her work, and she wanted rather the larger vision which would realise the possibilities of that great field, and endeavour to conquer it for the Master. The general indifference on the subject was a deep disappointment to her. But it had always been so.

The story of Calabar is one of the most thrilling in the history of missions, yet through it also there runs an undercurrent of tragedy—the tragedy of unseized opportunities and unfulfilled hopes. As one reads, he can fancy that he is standing by a forest at night listening to the sound that the wind brings of a strange conflict between a few brave spirits and legions of wild and evil forces, with incessant cries for help. From the first days of the Mission, urgent appeals for more workers have constantly been made; there is scarcely a year that the men and women on the spot have not pressed its urgent needs upon the home Church, but never once has there been an adequate response. To-day, as always, the staff is pitifully small. To minister to the needs of the many millions within the area assigned to the Church, there are only eighteen European missionaries, three medical missionaries, and thirteen women agents, apart from the wives of the married missionaries. In Duke Town and Okoyong, on the Cross River and the Enyong Creek, and far up at Uburu, the city of the salt lakes, all the stations are undermanned, and the medical men are overwhelmed by the thousands of patients who flock to them to be healed.

What Mary Slessor did, other women are doing in the same spirit of selflessness and courage, but with the same sense of powerlessness to overtake what is required. The number of these women agents does not appreciably increase, for, while fresh appointments are continuously being made, there are usually more changes amongst them than amongst the men missionaries, on account of resignations from ill-health or marriage. Yet in Nigeria women have unlimited opportunities for the employment of their special gifts.

The remarkable feature of the situation is that the Mission is face to face with an open door. It is not a question of sitting down in the midst of a religiously difficult and even hostile community as in India or China, and waiting patiently for admission to the hearts of the people, but of entering in and taking possession. The natives everywhere are clamouring for teachers and missionaries, education, and enlightenment, and they are clamouring in vain. The peril is that under the new conditions governing the country, they will be lost to the Christian Church. With freer intercommunication, Islam is spreading south. All Mohammedans are missionaries, and their religion has peculiar attractions for the natives. Already they are trading in the principal towns, and in Arochuku a Mullah is sitting, smiling and expectant, and ingratiating himself with the people. Here the position should be strengthened; it is, as Miss Slessor knew, the master-key to the Ibo territory, for if the Aros are Christianised, they will carry the evangel with them over a wide tract of country.

Miss Slessor’s life was shadowed by the consciousness of how little had been done, as well as by the immensity of what was still to do. Making every allowance for the initial difficulties that had to be overcome, and the long process of preparing the soil, the net result of seventy years’ effort seemed to her inadequate. There is only a Christian community of 10,800, and a communion-roll of 3,412, and the districts contiguous to the coast have alone been occupied, whilst no real impression has been made on the interior. Over the vast, sun-smitten land she wept, as her Master wept over the great city of old, and she did what she could —no woman could have done more—to redeem its people, and sought, year in, year out, to make the Church rise to the height of its wonderful opportunity—in vain.

She knew, however, that the presentation of startling facts and figures alone would never rouse it to action; these might touch the conscience for a moment, but the only thing that would awaken interest and keep it active and militant would be a revival of love for Christ in the hearts of the people; and it was for this she prayed and agonised most of all. For with it would come a more sympathetic imagination, a warmer faith, greater courage to go forward and do the seemingly impossible and foolish thing. It would, she knew, change the aims and ideals of her sisters, so many of them moving in a narrow world of self, and thrill them with a desire to take part in the saving and uplifting of the world. There would be no need then to make appeals, for volunteers would come forward in abundance for the hardest posts, and consecrated workers would fill up the ranks in Nigeria and in all the Mission Fields of the Church.

She knew, because it was so in her case. Love for Christ made her a missionary. Like that other Mary who was with Him on earth, her love constrained her to offer Him her best, and very gladly she took the alabaster box of her life and broke it and gave the precious ointment of heir service to Him and His cause.

Many influences move men and women to beautiful and gallant deeds, but what Mary Slessor was, and what she did, affords one more proof that the greatest of these is Love.

THE END