

MARY SLESSOR

OF CALABAR

PIONEER MISSIONARY

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THE CONQUEST OF OKOYONG

“I am going to a new tribe up-country, a fierce, cruel people, and every one tells me that they will kill me. But I don’t fear any hurt-only to combat their savage customs will require courage and firmness on my part.”

I. A TRIBE OF TERRORISTS

SOME time in the dim past a raiding force had swept down from the mountains to the east of Calabar, entered the triangle of dense forest-land formed by the junction of the Cross and Calabar Rivers, fought and defeated the Ibibios who dwelt there, and taken possession of the territory. They were of the tribe of Okoyong believed to be an out-post, probably the most westerly outpost, of the Bantu race of Central and South Africa, who had thrust themselves forward like a wedge into negro-land. Physically they were of a higher type than the people of Calabar. They were taller and more muscular, their nose was higher, the mouth and chin were firmer, their eye was more fearless and piercing, and their general bearing contrasted strongly with that of the supine negro of the coast.

To their superior bodily development they added the worst qualities of heathenism: there was not a phase of African devilry in which they did not indulge. They were openly addicted to witchcraft and the sacrifice of animals. They were utterly lawless and contemptuous of authority. Among themselves slave-stealing, plunder of property, theft of every kind, went on indiscriminately. To survive in the struggle of life a man required to possess wives and children and slaves-in the abundance of these lay his power. But if, through incompetence or sickness or misfortune, he failed he was regarded as the lawful prey of the chief nearest him. To weaken the House of a neighbour was as clear a duty as to strengthen one’s own. Oppression and outrage were of common occurrence. So suspicious were they even of each other that the chiefs and their retainers lived in isolated clearings with armed scouts constantly on the watch on all the pathways, and they ate and worked with their weapons ready to their hands. Even Egbo law with all its power was often resisted by the slaves and women regardless of the consequences. No free Egbo man would submit to be dictated to by the Egbo drum sent by another. A fine might be imposed, but he would sit unsubdued and sullen, and then obtain his revenge by seizing or murdering some passing victim. But all combined in a common enmity against other tribes, and the region

was enclosed with a fence of terrorism as impenetrable as a ring of steel. The Calabar people were hated because of the favoured position they enjoyed on the coast, and their wealth and power; and a state of chronic war existed with them. Each sought to outrival the other in the number of heads captured or the number of slaves stolen or harboured, and naturally there was no end to the fighting. All efforts to bring them together in the interests of trade had been in vain. Even British authority was defied, and messages from the Consul were ignored or treated with contempt.

They had their own idea of justice and judicial methods, and trials by ordeal formed the test of innocence or guilt, the two commonest being by burning oil and poison. In the one case a pot was filled with palm oil which was brought to the boil. The stuff was poured over the hands of the prisoner, and if the skin became blistered he was adjudged to be guilty and punished. In the other case the esere bean-the product of a vine-was pounded and mixed with water and drunk: if the body ejected the poison it was a sign of innocence. This method was the surest and least troublesome-for the investigation, sentence, and punishment were carried out simultaneously-unless the witch-doctor had been influenced, which sometimes happened, for there were various means of manipulating the test.

These tests were applied when it was desired to discover a thief, or when a village wanted to know whose spirit dwelt in the leopard that slew a goat, or when a chief wished to prove that his wife was faithful to him in her heart, but chiefly in cases of sickness or death. They believed that sickness was unnatural, and that death never occurred except from extreme old age. When a freeman became ill or died, sorcery would be alleged. The witch-doctor would be called in, and he would name one individual after another, and all, bond and free, were chained and tried, and there would be much grim merriment as the victims writhed in agony and their heads were chopped off. The skulls would be kept in the family as trophies. Occasionally the relations of the victims would be powerful enough to take exception to the summary procedure and seek redress by force of arms, and a vendetta would reign for years.

If a man or woman were blamed for some evil deed an appeal could be made to the law of substitution, and a sufficient number of slaves could be furnished as would be equivalent for themselves, and these would be killed in their stead. The eldest son of a free House, for instance, would be spared by the sacrifice of the life of a younger brother.

The fact that a man's position in the spirit-world was determined by his rank and wealth in this one, demanded the sacrifice of much life when chiefs died. A few months before Miss Slessor went up amongst them a chief of moderate means died, and with him were buried eight slave men, eight slave women, ten girls, ten boys, and four free wives. These were in

addition to the men and women who died as a result of taking the poison ordeal. Even when death was due to natural decay the retinue provided was the same. After her settlement she made careful enquiry, and found that the number of lives sacrificed annually at the instance of this custom could not have averaged fewer than 150 within a radius of twenty miles, while the same number must have died from ordeals and decapitation on charges of causing sickness. To these had to be added the number killed in the constant warfare.

Infanticide was also responsible for much destruction of life. Twin murder was practised with an even fiercer zeal than it had been in Calabar. Child life in general was of little value.

It was significant of the state of the district that gin, guns, and chains were practically the only articles of commerce that entered it. Gin or rum was in every home. It was given to every babe: all work was paid for in it every fine and debt could be redeemed with it: every visitor had to be treated to it: every one drank it, and many drank it all the time. Quarrels were the outcome of it. Then the guns came into play. After that the chains and padlocks.

Women were often the worst where drink was concerned. There were certain bands formed of those born in the same year who were allowed freer action than others: they could handle gun and sword, and were used for patrol and fighting purposes, and were so powerful that they compelled concessions from Egbo. They exacted fines for breach of their rules, and feasted and drank and danced for days and nights at a time at the expense of the offenders.

Such lawlessness and degradation at the very doors had long caused the Calabar Presbytery much thought. Efforts had been made to enter the district both from the Cross and the Calabar Rivers. In one of his tours of exploration Mr. Edgerley was seized, with the object of being held for a ransom of rum, and it was only with difficulty that he escaped. Others were received less violently, though every member of the tribe was going about with guns on full cock. Asked why, they said, "Inside or outside, speaking, eating, or sleeping, we must have them ready for use. We trust no man." When they learned of the new laws in Calabar their amazement was unbounded. "Killing for witchcraft prohibited!" they exclaimed. "What steps have been taken to prevent witch-craft from killing?" "Widows not compelled to sit for more than a month in seclusion and filth!-outrageous!" "Twins and their mothers taken to Duke Town-horrible! Has no calamity happened?"

Very little result was achieved from these tours of observation. A Calabar teacher was ultimately induced to settle amongst them, but after a shooting affray was compelled to fly for his life. Missionaries, however, are never

daunted by difficulties, nor do they acquiesce in defeat. Ever, like their Master, they stand at the door and knock. Once again the challenge was taken up, and this time by a woman. So difficult was the position that the negotiations for Miss Slessor's settlement lasted a year. Three times parties from the Mission went up, she accompanying them, only to find the people—every man, woman, and child—armed and sullen, and disinclined to promise anything. "I had often a lump in my throat," she wrote, "and my courage repeatedly threatened to take wings and fly away—though nobody guessed it!"

At last, in June 1888, in spite of her fears, she resolved to go up and make final arrangements for her sojourn.

II. IN THE ROYAL CANOE

She went up the river in state. Ever ready to do her a kindness, King Eyo had provided her with the Royal canoe, a hollow tree-trunk twenty feet long, and she lay in comfort under the cool cover of a framework of palm leaves, freshly lopped from the tree, and shut off from the crew by a gaudy curtain. Beneath was a piece of Brussels carpet, and about her were arranged no fewer than six pillows, for the well-to-do natives of Calabar made larger and more skilful use of these than the Europeans.

The scene was one of quiet beauty; there was a clear sky and a windless air; the banks of the river—high and dense masses of vegetation—glowed with colour; the broad sweep of water was like a sheet of molten silver and shimmered and eddied to the play of the gleaming paddles. As they moved easily and swiftly along, the paddlemen, dressed in loin-cloth and singlet, improvised blithe song in her praise. Strange and primitive as were the conditions, she felt she would not have exchanged them for all the luxuries of civilisation.

She needed sustenance, for there was trying work before her, and this a paraffin stove, a pot of tea, a tin of stewed steak, and a loaf of home-made bread gave her. Wise mental preparation also she needed, for there were elements of uncertainty and danger in the situation. The Okoyong might be on the war-path: her paddlers were their sworn enemies: a tactless word or act might ruin the expedition. As the canoe glided along the river she communed with God, and in the end left the issue with Him. "Man," she thought, "can do nothing with such a people."

Arriving at the landing beach she made her way by a forest track to a village of mud huts called Ekenge, four miles inland. Her reception was a noisy one; men, women, and children thronged about her, and called her "Mother," and seemed pleased at her courage at coming alone. The chief, Edem, one of the aristocrats of Okoyong, was sober, but his neighbour at Ifako, two miles farther on, whom she wished to meet, was unfit for human

company, and she was not allowed to proceed. She stayed the night at Ekenge, where she gathered the King's boys about her to hold family worship. The crowd of semi-naked people standing curiously watching the proceedings exclaimed in wonder as they heard the words repeated in unison: "God so loved the world," and so on. At ten o'clock the women were still holding her fast in talk. One, the chief's sister, called Ma Eme, attracted her. "I think," she said, "she will be my friend, and be an attentive hearer of the Gospel." Wearied at last with the strain she was forced to retire into the hut set apart for her.

A shot next morning startled the village. Two women on going outside had been fired at from the bush. In a moment every man had his gun and sword and was searching for the assailant. Mary went with one of the parties. but to find any one in such a labyrinth was impossible and the task was given up. Going to Ifako she interviewed the chiefs. The charm of her personality, her frankness, her fearlessness, won them over, and they promised her ground for a schoolhouse. Would, she asked, the same privilege be extended to it as to the Mission buildings in Calabar? Would it be a place of refuge for criminals, those charged with witchcraft, or those liable to be killed for the dead, until their case could be taken into consideration? They assented. And the house she would build for herself-would it also be a harbour of refuge? Again they assented. She thanked them and promptly went and chose two sites, one at Ekenge and one at Ifako, about twenty to thirty minutes' walk apart, according to the state of the track, in order that the benefits of the concession might operate over as wide an area as possible. She fore-saw, however, that as they were an agricultural and shifting people, and spread over a large extent of territory, she would require to be constantly travelling, and to sleep as often in her hammock as in her bed.

Rejoicing over the improved prospects, she set out on the return journey to Creek Town. It was the rainy season, and ere long the canoe ran into a deluge and she was soaked. Then the tide was so strong that they had to lie in a cove for two hours. The carcass of a huge snake drifted past, followed by a human body. She was on the outlook for alligators, but only saw crowds of crabs on the rotten tree-stumps and black mud fighting as fiercely as the Okoyong people. She was too watchful to sleep, but she heard the boys say softly, "Don't shake the canoe and wake Ma," or "Speak lower and let Ma sleep." When they were once more out on the river she slumbered, and awoke to find the lights of Creek Town shining through the darkness.

When her friends saw her packing her belongings they looked at her in wonder and pity. They said she was going on a forlorn hope, and that no power on earth could subdue the Okoyong save a Consul and a gunboat. But she smiled and went on with her preparations. King Eyo again offered his canoe and paddlers and a number of bearers for her baggage. By Friday

evening, August 3, 1888, all was ready, and she lay down to rest but not to sleep. On the morrow she would enter on the great adventure of her life, and the strangeness of it, the seriousness of it, the possibilities it might hold for her, kept her awake and thoughtful throughout the night.

III. THE ADVENTURE OF TAKING POSSESSION

The dawn came to Creek Town grey and wet. The rain fell in torrents, and the negroes, moving about with the packages, grumbled and quarrelled. Wearied and unrefreshed after her sleepless night, Mary was not in the best of spirits, and she was glad to see King Eyo, who had come to supervise the loading and packing of the canoe: his kind eyes, cheery smile, and sympathetic words did her good, and her courage revived. Few of the natives wished her God-speed. One young man said with a sob in his voice, "I will constantly pray for you, but you are courting death." Not great faith for a Christian perhaps, but her own faith at the moment was not so strong that she could afford to cast a stone at him. As the hours wore on, the air of depression became general, and when the party was about to start Mr. Goldie suddenly decided to send one of the Mission staff to accompany her on the journey. Mr. Bishop, the printer, who was standing by, volunteered, and there and then stepped into the canoe. Mary and her retinue of five children stowed themselves into a corner, the paddlers pushed off, and the canoe swept up the river and disappeared in the rain.

The light was fading ere they reached the landing beach for Ekenge, and there was yet the journey of four miles through the dripping forest to be undertaken. It was decided that she should go on ahead with the children in order to get them food and put them to sleep, and that Mr. Bishop and one or two men should follow with dry clothes, cooking utensils, and the door and window needed for the hut, whilst the carriers would come on later with the loads. As Mary faced the forest, now dark and mysterious, and filled with the noises of night, a feeling of helplessness and fear came over her. What unseen perils might she not meet? What would she find at the end? How would she be received on this occasion? Would the natives be fighting or drinking or dancing? Her heart played the coward; she felt a desire to turn and flee. But she re-remembered that never in her life had God failed her, not once had there been cause to doubt the reality of His guidance and care. Still the shrinking was there; she could not even move her lips in prayer; she could only look up and utter inwardly one appealing word, "Father!"

Surely no stranger procession had footed it through the African forest. First came a boy, about eleven years of age, tired and afraid, a box containing tea, sugar, and bread upon his head, his garments, soaked with the rain, clinging to his body, his feet slipping in the black mud. Behind him was an-

other boy, eight years old, in tears, bearing a kettle and pots. With these a little fellow of three, weeping loudly, tried hard to keep up, and close at his heels trotted a maiden of five, also shaken with sobs. Their white mother formed the rear. On one arm was slung a bundle, and astride her shoulders sat a baby girl, no light burden, so that she had to pull herself along with the aid of branches and twigs. She was singing nonsense-snatches to lighten the way for the little ones, but the tears were perilously near her own eyes. Had ever such a company marched out against the entrenched forces of evil? Surely God had made a mistake in going to Okoyong in such a guise? And yet He often chooses the weakest things of this world to confound and defeat the mighty.

The village was reached at last, but instead of the noise and confusion that form a bush welcome there was absolute stillness. Mary called out and two slaves appeared. They stated that the chief's mother at Ifako had died that morning, and all the people had gone to the carnival. One obtained fire and a little water, while the other made off to carry the news that the white woman had arrived. She undressed the children and hushed them to sleep, and sat in her wet garments and waited. When Mr. Bishop appeared it was to say that the men were exhausted and refused to bring up anything that night. A woman of weaker fibre and feebler faith would have been in despair: Mary acted with her usual decision. The glow of the fire was cheerful and the singing of the kettle tempting, but the morrow was Sunday, there was no food, the children were naked, and she herself was wet to the skin. She gave one of the lads who had arrived with Mr. Bishop a lantern, and despatched him to the beach with a peremptory message that the men must come at once and bring what they could. But knowing their character she asked Mr. Bishop to collect some of the slaves who had been left to watch the farms, and send them after her as carriers, and then, bootless and hatless, she plunged back into the forest.

She had not gone far before one of the other lads came running after her to keep her company, a touch of chivalry which pleased and comforted her. So dense was the darkness that she often lost sight of her companion's white clothes, and was constantly stumbling and falling. The shrilling of the insects, the pulsation of the fire-flies, the screams of the night-birds and the flapping of their wings, the cries of wild animals, the rush of dark objects, the falling of decayed branches all intensified the weirdness and mystery of the forest gloom. Even the echo of their own voices as they called aloud to frighten the beasts of prey struck on their ears with peculiar strangeness.

By and by came an answer to their cries, and a glimmer of light showed in the darkness. It was the lad with the lantern. As she had surmised, he had failed in his mission. She moved swiftly to the river, splashed into the water, and, reaching the canoe, threw back the cover under which the men were

sleeping, and routed them out, dazed and shamefaced. So skilful, however, was she in managing these dusky giants that in a short time, weary as they were, they were working good-humouredly at the boxes. With the assistance of the slaves who came on the scene they transferred what was needed to Ekenge, and by mid-night she felt that the worst was over.

Sunday did not find her in more cheerful mood. Her tired limbs refused to move, and wounds she had been unconscious of in the excitement of the journey made themselves felt, while her feet were in such a state that for six weeks afterwards she was unable to wear boots. Whether it was the persistent rain and the mud 'and the weariness and the squalid surroundings, or the fact that the tribe she had come to civilise and evangelise were given over to the service of the devil, or that her faith had weakened, or whether it was all of these together, her first Sunday in Okoyong was one of the saddest she ever experienced. More than once she was on the verge of tears.

And yet she was eager to begin work. Prudence, how-ever, held her back from visiting the scene of debauchery at Ifako. A few women had come home with fractious babies, or to procure more food for the revellers, and gathering these about her she held a little service, telling them in her simple and direct way the story of the Christ who came from the Unseen to make their lives sweeter and happier.

It was the first faint gleam of a better day for Okoyong.

IV. FACING AN ANGRY MOB

The room allotted to Mary was one of those in the women's yard or harem of Edem the chief, and had been previously used by a free wife, who had left its mud floor and mud walls in a filthy state. At one entrance she caused a door to be hung, while a hole was made in the wall and a window frame fitted in. The work was rude and gaps yawned round the sides, but she ensured sufficient privacy by draping them with bedcovers. The absence of the villagers at Ifako gave her time to complete the work, and with her own hands she filled in the spaces with mud. She also cleared a portion of the ground set apart for her and circled it with a fence, and within this did her washing. But soon there were calls upon her.

"He took a little child and set him in the midst." Her work began with a child. In a fight between Okoyong and Calabar a man of Ekenge had been beheaded. His head was recovered and sent home, thus removing the disgrace, but his wife did not survive the shock, and left a baby girl, which was now brought to Mary. It had been fed on a little water, palm oil, and cane juice, and looked less like an infant than a half-boiled chicken. Its appearance provoked mirth in the yard, but she stooped down and lifted it and took it to her heart, resolving to give it a double share of the care and comfort of

which it had been defrauded. As she carried it about in her arms, or sat with it in her lap, she was regarded with a kind of amused astonishment. But the old grandmother came and blessed her. At first the child rallied to the new treatment: it grew human-like: sometimes Mary thought it looked bonnie; but in a few days it drooped and died.

The bodies of children were usually placed anywhere in the earth near the huts or under the bush by the way-side, but she dressed the tiny form in white and laid it in a provision box and covered it with flowers. A native carried the box to a spot which she had reserved in her ground: here a grave was dug, and she stood beside it and prayed. The grandmother knelt at her feet, sobbing. Looking on at a distance, curious and scornful, were the revelers from Ifako: they had heard of the proceedings, and had come to witness the white woman's "witchcraft." All that they said in effect when they saw the good box and the white robe was, "Why this waste?" And so the work in Okoyong was consecrated by the death and Christian burial of a little child.

When the people came crowding back from the devil-making they sought out a young lad who had detached himself from the orgies and remained in the village, where he had been very attentive to Mary. They accused him of deserting their ancient customs. She saw him standing in their midst near a pot of oil which was being heated over a fire, and noticed the chief in front going through some movements and the lad holding out his arms, but was unaware of what was taking place until she saw a man seize a ladle, plunge it into the boiling oil, and advance to the boy. In a moment the truth flashed upon her and she darted forward, but was too late. The stuff was poured over the lad's hands, and he shuddered in agony. It was doubtful whether her intervention at that early period would have done any good. They were following the law of the country, and if she had managed to prevent the act they would probably have resorted to the ordeal there-after in secret; and her object was to show them a better way.

Immediately after this the men of the village left on an expedition of revenge against a number of mourners with whom they had quarrelled. A week of rioting followed. Then a freeman died in the neighbourhood, and once more the village was deserted. Mary, meanwhile, moved hither and thither, making friends with the women, healing the sick, tending the children, and doing any little service that came in her way.

The return to normal conditions brought her into active conflict with the powers of evil. The mistress of a harem in the vicinity bought a good-looking young woman whom the master coveted, and she became a slave-wife. She appeared sullen and unhappy. One afternoon Mary saw her mudding a house that was being built for a new free-born wife, and spoke to her kindly in passing. A few minutes later the girl made her way to one of her master's farms, and sat down in the hut of a slave. The latter was alarmed,

knowing well what the consequences would be, but she refused to move. The man went off to his work, and she walked into the forest and hanged herself. Next morning the slave was brought in heavily ironed, and at a palaver the master and his relatives decreed he must die; they had been degraded by being associated in this way with a common slave.

Mary, who was present, protested against the injustice of the sentence; the man, she argued, had done no wrong; it was not his fault that the girl had gone to his hut. "But," was the reply, "he has used sorcery and put the thought into the girl's mind, and the witch-doctor has pronounced him guilty." She persisted. The crowd became angry and excited; they surged round her demanding why a stranger who was there on sufferance should interfere with the dignity and power of free-born people, and clamoured for the instant death of the prisoner. Threats were shouted, guns and swords were waved, and the position grew critical, but she stood her ground, quiet and cool and patient. Her tact, her good humour, that spiritual force which seemed to emanate from her in times of peril, at last prevailed. The noise and confusion calmed down, and ultimately it was decided to spare the man's life. She had won her first victory.

But the victim was loaded with chains, placed in the women's yard, starved, and then flogged, and his body cruelly cut in order to exorcise the powers of sorcery that were in him. When Mary went to him he was a bruised and bleeding heap of flesh lying unconscious by the post to which he was fastened. The women in the yard were sitting about indifferent to his plight.

V. LIFE IN THE HAREM

For many weeks she was an inmate of the harem, a witness of its degraded intimacies, enduring the pollution of its moral and physical atmosphere, with no other support than hallowed memories and the companionship of her Bible. Her room was next that of the chief and his head wife: the quarters of five lesser wives were close by; other wives whose work and huts were at the farms shared the yard with the slaves, visitors, and children; two cows-small native animals that do not produce milk-occupied the apartment on the other side of the partition; goats, fowls, cats, rats, cockroaches, and centipedes were every-where. In her own room the three boys slept behind an erection of boxes and furniture, and the two girls shared her portion. Every night her belongings had to be taken outside in order to provide sufficient accommodation for them all, and as it was the wet season they had usually to undergo a process of drying in the sun each day before being re-placed.

There was a ceaseless coming and going in the yard, a perpetual chattering of raucous voices. The wives were always bickering and scolding, the

tongue of one of them going day and night, her chief butt being a naked and sickly slave, who was for ever being flogged. There was no sleep for Mary when this woman had any grievance, real or imaginary, on her mind.

Both wives and visitors conceived it their duty to sit and entertain their white guest. To an African woman the idea of loneliness is terrible, and good manners made it incumbent that as large a gathering as possible should keep a stranger company. All that is implied in the word "home," its sacredness and freedom, its privacy, lies outside the knowledge and experience of polygamists. Kind and neighbourly as the women were, they could not understand the desire of Mary to be sometimes by herself. She needed silence and solitude; her spirit craved for communion with her Father, and she longed for a place in which to pour out her heart aloud to Him. As often as politeness permitted, she fled to the ground reserved for her, but they followed her there, and in desperation she would take a machete and hack at the bush, praying the while, so that her voice was lost in the noise she made.

One woman of mark was Eme Ete-Ma Eme as she was usually called—a sister of the master, the same who had attracted her attention on the previous visit. She was the widow of a big chief, and had just returned from the ceremonies in connection with her husband's death, where she had undergone a terrible ordeal. All his wives lay under suspicion, and each brought to the place of trial a white fowl, and from the way in which it fluttered after its head was cut off the judgment was pronounced. The strain was such that when the witch-doctor announced Ma Eme free from guilt she fainted. Big-boned and big-featured, she had been fattened to immensity. One day Mary pointed to some marks on her arms and said, "White people have marks like these," showing the vaccination cicatrice on her own arm. Ma Eme simply said, "These are the marks of the teeth of my husband." In that land a man could do as he liked with his free-born wife—bite her, beat her, kill her, and nobody cared. When consorting with the others Ma Eme had the coarse tone common to all, but as she spoke to Mary or the children her voice softened and her instincts and manners were refined and gentle. A mother to every one, she scolded, encouraged, and advised in turn, and when the chief was drunk or peevish she was always between him and his wives as intercessor and peacemaker. She watched over Mary, brought her food, looked after her comfort, and helped her in every way, and did it with the delicacy and reserve of a well-bred lady. Unknown to all she constituted herself Mary's ally, becoming a sort of secret intelligence department, and, at the risk of her life, keeping her informed of all the underground doings of the tribe. "A noble woman," Mary called her, "according to her lights and knowledge."

The wives appeared to have less liberty than the slaves. How carefully guarded their position was by unwritten law Mary had reason to know. A girl-wife employed a slave-man to do work for a day. His master unexpect-

edly sent for him, and he asked the girl for the food which was part of his wage. She at first declined; her husband was absent, and it was against the law of the harem, but as he insisted she yielded and handed him a piece of yam. When this became known she was seized, bound, and condemned to undergo the ordeal of the burning oil. It was an occasion for feasting and merriment, and as the fun progressed the cords were gradually tightened until she screamed piteously with the pain. Mary went and faced the crowd and pled for her release. There was the usual uproar, but she succeeded in carrying off the victim, who was kept chained to her verandah until the dancing and rioting ended with the dawn.

Conditions in the harem were not favourable to child life. The mothers were ignorant and superstitious, and there was no discipline or training. Infants were often given intoxicating drink in order that fun might be made of their antics and foolish talk. As they grew up they learned nothing but what was vile. The slave children became thieves—they had to steal in order to live. But if caught they would be chained to a post and starved or branded with fire-sticks. They became deceitful—they had to lie in order to gain favour. In this they simply followed the instinctive impulses of their nature and of the lower nature about them. As the insects mimicked inanimate objects to escape injury or death, so they simulated the truth to save themselves a beating or mutilation. The free-born children did not require to steal, but lying was in the air like a contagion, and none could avoid its influence. Of the older boys and girls Mary wrote: “They are such a pest to every one that it is almost impossible to love them.” Yet with a divine pity she gathered them to her and mothered them.

Her earlier observations of the character of the African women were confirmed by her sojourn in the harem. Hard and callous, as a result of centuries of bush law and outrage, their patience and self-repression under the most terrible indignities were to her a marvel. They were not devoid of fine feeling, and beneath the surface of their nature the flow of affection and pity often ran pure and sweet. On one occasion a large number of prisoners were chained previous to undergoing the ordeal of the poison bean. There were mothers with infants in their arms, who throughout a hot day lay on the ground in torture and terror. At dusk the guards left them for a time, and seizing the chance a few of the older women stole tremblingly towards them with water, which they gave to the children and divided the remainder among the mothers. Anticipating such an opportunity Mary had had some rice cooked, and this also the women smuggled to the prisoners. Had they been discovered their lives would have been forfeited.

Bands of women of the special class already described came from a distance to see the white “Ma,” always more or less under the influence of drink; loose in speech, and destitute of modesty, these Amazons made her

angry. They would appear at night and demand admittance to the yard in the hope of obtaining rum and other good things from the wealthy white woman. When barred out they threatened reprisals. The chief, who never allowed his wives to go out of the yard to dance even with his own relatives, stood on guard all night before his guest's room, and it was only after sunrise, when all were astir, that they were admitted. Haggard after their night's debauch, they presented a sorry sight, their bare bodies painted and decked with beads, coloured wools, and scraps of red and yellow silk, and many with babies at their side. Mary regarded them with pity, but all they could extract from her was disapproval and rebuke, and they left with threats to make her position untenable.

Some of the scenes she witnessed in the harem cannot be described. "Had I not felt my Saviour close beside me," she said, "I would have lost my reason." When at home the memory of these would make her wince and flush with indignation and shame. She had no patience with people who expounded the theory of the innocence of man outside the pale of civilisation-she would tell them to go and live for a month in a West African harem.

VI. STRANGE DOINGS

The sound of native voices chanting came through the brooding stillness of the hot afternoon. With the wild war-song of Okoyong the forest was familiar, but these words were strange and wonderful:

Jesus the Son of God came down to earth.

He came to save us from our sins.

He was born poor that He might feel for us. Wicked men killed Him and hanged Him on a tree. He rose and went to heaven to prepare a place for us.

They were sung with a tremendous force, and as each voice fell into the part which suited it, the result was a harmony that thrilled the heart of the white woman who listened.

It was Mary Slessor's day school.

For a people possessing no written language, no literature, no knowledge beyond that handed down from father to son, the first step towards right living, apart from the preaching of the Gospel, is education. Schools go hand in hand with churches in missionary effort. Mary began hers before she had the buildings in which to teach, one at Ekenge and the other at Ifako. The latter was held in the afternoon in order that she might be back in her yard by sunset. The schoolroom was the verandah of a house by the wayside; the seats were pieces of fire-wood; the equipment an alphabet card hung on one of the posts.

At first the entire population turned out and conned the letters, but as novelty wore off and the men and women returned to their work the attend-

ance dropped to thirty. Good progress was made, and ere long the dark-skinned pupils were spelling out words of one and two syllables. The lesson ended with a scripture lesson, a short prayer, and the singing of the sentences she taught. The last was so much enjoyed that it was often dark before she could get away.

The school at Ekenge was held in the outer yard of the chief's house in the evening, when all the wives and slaves were at leisure. Men and women, old and young, bond and free, crowded and hustled into the yard, amidst much noise and fun. After a lesson on the alphabet and the multiplication-table she conducted worship. It was a weird scene-the white woman, slim and slight, standing bare-headed and barefooted beside a little table on which were a lamp and the Book; in front, squatting on the ground, the mass of half-naked people as dark as the night, their shining faces here and there catching the gleam of the light; the earnest singing that drowned the voices of the forest, and the strange hush that fell, as in grave sweet tones the speaker prayed to what was to them the Unknown God.

The tale of such doings was carried to every corner of Okoyong, and invitations began to arrive from chiefs in other parts. Some, who were known as "the terror of Calabar," came personally to ask her to visit their villages, and all laid down their arms at the entrance to her yard before entering into her presence. But her own chief warned her against acting too hastily, and she would probably have followed his advice and sought to strengthen her position at Ekenge and Ifako had the matter not been taken out of her hands.

VII. FIGHTING A GRIM FOE

The principal wife of a harem in close neighbourhood to Mary went to pay a visit to her son and daughter at a village in the vicinity of the Cross River, some eight hours distant from Ekenge. She found the chief so near death that the head man and the people were waiting outside, ready for the event. Hastening into the harem she spoke of the power of the white "Ma" at Ekenge. Had she not cured her grandchild who had been very ill? Had she not saved many others? Let them send for her and the chief would not die. Her advice was acted upon, and a deputation was despatched with a bottle and four rods-about the value of a shilling-to secure Mary's aid. She was called to the private room of her chief, where she found the messengers. "What is the matter with him?" she asked. As no one knew she decided to go and see for her-self. Edem and Ma Eme objected-the length of the journey, the deep streams to be crossed, the heavy rains, made the task impossible. "I am going to get ready," was her reply. Finding her immovable, the chief turned with a face of gloom to the deputation and sent them back with a demand for an escort of freewomen and armed men. Mary imagined he

was merely endeavouring to mark time until the death took place: in reality he saw the district given over to violence and murder, and she in the midst and her life imperilled.

She passed a sleepless night. Was she right, after all, in taking so great a risk? She laid the matter where she laid all her problems, and came to the conclusion that she was. With the morning appeared the guard of women, who intimated that the armed men would join them outside the village. The rain was falling as they set out and later

She passed a sleepless night. Was she right, after all, in taking so great a risk? She laid the matter where she laid all her problems, and came to the conclusion that she was. With the morning appeared the guard of women, who intimated that the armed men would join them outside the village. The rain was falling as they set out and later came down in torrents, continuous, and pitiless. Her boots were soon abandoned; then her stockings; next her umbrella, broken in battle with the vegetation, was thrown aside. Bit by bit her clothes, too heavy to be endured, were transferred to the calabashes carried by the women on their heads, and in the lightest of garments she struggled on through the steaming bush.

Three hours of trudging brought her to a market-place where, in the clearing atmosphere, hundreds of natives were gathering. They gazed at her in amazement. Feeling humiliated at her appearance, she slunk shyly and swiftly through their midst and went on, wondering if she had "lost face" and their respect. Afterwards she learnt that the self-denial and courage which that walk in the rain exhibited had done more than anything else to win their hearts. Others, however, were not so well-disposed.

At one town the old chief was anything but courtly, and only with reluctance allowed her to pass.

When she reached the sick man's village and looked into the grim expectant faces of the armed crowd, she felt as if she were walking into a den of wild beasts. At any moment the signal might be given, and the slaughter of the retinue for the spirit-land begin. The women, silent and fear-stricken, carried off her wet clothes to dry. She was cold and feverish, but went straight to the patient and tended him as well as she could. Then she turned to the pile of odds and ends of garments which had been collected for her, and looked at them with a shudder. But there was no alternative, and, arraying herself in the rags, she went forth to meet the critical gaze of the crowd.

The medicine she had brought had proved insufficient, and more must be obtained; many lives, she knew, depended upon it. To go back to Ekenge was out of the question. Was there, she asked the people about her, a way to Ikorofiong? The Rev. Alexander Cruickshank was stationed there, and he would supply what was needed. They confessed that there was a road to the river and a canoe could be got to cross, but they dared not go there, they

would never come back, they would be seized and killed. Some one told her that a Calabar man, whose mother was an Okoyong woman and who came to trade, was living in his canoe not far off. "Seek him," said she. He was found, but would not land until assured that it was a white woman who wanted him. Mary prevailed upon him to undertake the journey; and he returned with all she required and more. With the thoughtfulness and kindness of pioneer missionaries Mr. and Mrs. Cruickshank sent over tea and sugar and other comforts and, what she valued not less, a letter of cheer and sympathy. Hot with fever, racked with headache, she brewed the tea in a basin, and it seemed to her a royal feast. The world of friends had drawn nearer, she felt less lonely, her spirits revived.

The patient drew back from the valley of death, regained Consciousness, and gathered strength; and the women looking on in wonder, became obedient and reliable nurses; the freemen thought no more of sacrifice and blood; the whole community had visions of peace; they expressed a wish to make terms with Calabar and to trade with the Europeans and learn "book." She was engaged all day in answering questions. Morning and evening she held a simple service, and seldom had a more reverent audience. Much worn out, she left them at last with regret, promising to be always their mother, to try and secure a teacher, and to come again and see them.

Her faith and fearlessness had been justified, and she had her reward, for from that time forward Okoyong was free to her.