

MARY SLESSOR

OF CALABAR

PIONEER MISSIONARY

BY

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XXXI. THE PASSING OF THE CHIEFS

In the year 1896 Miss Slessor realised that she was no longer the centre of her people. Like all agricultural populations addicted to primitive methods of cultivation, they had gradually moved on to richer lands elsewhere. Even Ma Eme had gone to a farm some distance away. A market had been opened at a place called Akpap, farther inland and nearer the Cross River, and farms and villages had grown up around it, and she saw that it would be necessary to follow the population there. The Calabar Committee—a Committee had succeeded the Presbytery—was at first doubtful of the wisdom of transferring the station, largely owing to the remoteness and inaccessibility of the new site, the nearest landing-place being six miles away, at Ikunetu on the Cross River. There was some advantage in this, however, for the Mission launch was constantly moving up and down the waterway. The voyage was between low, bush-covered banks broken by vistas of cool green inlets, with here a tall palm tree or bunch of feathery bamboos, and there a cluster of huts, while canoes were frequently passed laden with hogsheads of palm oil for the factory, or a little dug-out containing a solitary fisher. The track from Ikunetu to Akpap was the ordinary shady bush path, bordered by palms, bananas, orange trees, ferns, and orchids, but in the wet season it was overgrown with thick grass, higher than one's head, which made a guide necessary, since one trail in the African forest looks exactly like another.

After some consideration it was decided to sanction the change, and to build a good Mission House with a beach shed at Ikunetu. Long before the house was built, however, and even before it was begun, Mary installed herself at Akpap, in conditions similar to those of her first year at Ekenge. Her home consisted of a small shed of two divisions, without windows or floor, into which she and the children and the furniture were packed. And from this humble abode, as from a palace, she ruled Okoyong with all the dignity and power of a queen. Never had her days been so busy or her nights so broken and sleepless. No quarrel, tribal or domestic, no question of difficulty of any kind, was settled other than in the Mission hut. Sometimes the strain was almost greater than she could bear. There was much sickness among the children, and an infectious native disease, introduced by a new baby, caused the death of four. Matters were not mended by an epidemic of small-pox, which swept over the country and carried off hundreds of the people. For hours every day she was employed in vaccinating all who came to her. Mr. Alexander, who was the engineer of the Mission at this time—the natives called him *etubom ubom nsunikan*, “captain of the smoking canoe”—remembers arriving when her supply of lymph had run out, and of

assisting her with a penknife from the arms of those who had already been inoculated.

The outbreak was severe at Ekenge, and she went over and converted her old house into a hospital. The people who were attacked flocked to it, but all who could fled from the plague-stricken scene, and she was unable to secure any one to nurse the patients or bury them when they died. She was saddened by the loss of many friends. Ekpenyong was seized and succumbed, and she committed his body to the earth. Then Edem, her own chief, caught the infection, and she braced herself to save him. She could not forget his kindness and consideration for her throughout all these years, and she fought for his life day and night, tending him with the utmost solicitude and patience. It was in vain. He passed away in the middle of the night. She was alone, but with her own hands she fashioned a coffin and placed him in it, and with her own hands she dug a grave and buried him. Then turning from the ghostly spot with its melancholy community of dead and dying, she tramped through the dark and dew-sodden forest to Akpap, where, utterly exhausted, she threw herself on her bed as the land was whitening before the dawn.

Towards the village that day two white men made their way,—Mr. Ovens, who was coming to build a Mission House, and Mr. Alexander, who had brought him up. When they arrived at the little shed it was eleven o'clock in the forenoon. All was quiet. "Something wrong," remarked Mr. Alexander, and they moved quickly to the hut. A weak voice answered their knock and call, and on gaining entrance they found "Ma" tired and heavy-eyed. "I had only just now fallen asleep," she confessed. But it was not for some time that they learned where she had been and what she had done.

When, two days later, Mr. Alexander went over to bring some material from the old house, he found it full of corpses and not a soul to be seen. The place was never fit for habitation again, and gradually it was engulfed in bush and vanished from the face of the earth.

Conditions were the same far and wide, and her heart was full of pity for the helpless people. "Heart-rending accounts," she wrote, "come from up-country, where the people, panic-stricken, are fleeing and leaving the dead and dying in their houses, only to be stricken down themselves in the bush. They have no helper up there, and know of no Saviour. I am just thinking that perhaps the reason God has taken my four bairns is that I may be free to go up and help them. If the brethren say that I should go I shall."

It is not surprising that these events had a depressing effect upon her; she said she had no heart for anything. It was an unusual note to come from her, and indicated that her strength was waning. The presence of Mr. Ovens was a help; his sense of humour seasoned the days, and he made light of difficulty and trial, though he was far from comfortable. One of the divisions in the

shed had been turned over to him, she and her children crowding into the other. The place was infested by ants and lizards, and all night the rats used his body as a springboard to reach the roof. There was always one scene in the strange household which touched him with a feeling of pathos and reverence—family worship in the evening. A light from a small lamp illumined the interior. Miss Slessor sat on the mud-floor with her back resting on the wall. Squatting before her in a half-circle were the girls and boys of the house. Behind these were ranged a number of baskets filled with twin babies. “Ma” spoke and prayed very simply and naturally. Then a hymn of her own composition was sung in Efik to the tune of “Rothesay Bay,” she accompanying it with a tambourine. If the attention of the girls wandered she would lean forward and tap them on the head with the instrument.

One human solace never failed her—the letters from home. How eagerly she longed for them! How they lifted her out of her surroundings and chased away for a time the moral miasma that surrounded her and often seemed to choke her as if it were physical. Some one wrote about the Synod meetings. “It is easy to be good,” she said, “with all the holy and helpful influences about you. Fancy a crowd of Christians that fill the Synod Hall! It makes me envious to read about it. Away up here among heathenism, working away with the twos and the threes and the tens, one almost forgets that there are crowds who would die for Christ. But, with all their imperfections, there are, and we are not in a losing cause at all. I am seldom in Duke Town or Creek Town, and hear little in the way of sermons, and have little of the outward help you have. But Christ is here and the Holy Spirit, and if I am seldom in a triumphant or ecstatic mood I am always satisfied and happy in His love.”

Her furlough was overdue, but there was a difficulty in filling her place, and she would not leave the people alone. Meanwhile she kept “drudging away” as well as she could from dawn till dark. People were coming to her now from far-off spots, many from across the river from unknown regions who had never seen a white person before, drawn to her by the fame of her goodness and power. At first they sat outside, and would not cook or eat or drink inside the compound because of the twins, but by and by they gained courage and mixed with the household. The majority of these people were neither bright nor good-looking, but she only saw souls that were precious in the sight of her Master. In one of her letters she describes what was the daily scene: “Four at my feet listening; five boys outside getting a reading-lesson from Janie; a man lying on the ground who has run away from his master and is taking refuge until I get him forgiven; an old chief with a girl who has a bad ulcer; a woman begging for my intervention with her husband; a nice girl with heavy leglets from her knee to the ankles, with pieces

of cloth wrapped round to prevent the skin being cut, whom I am teaching; and three for vaccination.”

On the last night of the year she wrote: “My bairns have been made happy and myself glad by a handsome Christmas box from the Consul-General and Colonel Boisragon of our Consular staff. They were up with a party, and spent the greater part of three days with me, trying to do good among my people: and they have sent dolls and sweets and fruit and biscuits, and many useful things for the house, and a carpenter to mend my stair, and plane and rehang my doors. He is here now doing odds and ends about the house, so I feel quite cheered up. He (the Consul) must have gone to a steamer and got all these things for us, for there are no such things for sale here, and it shows how much interested he is in mission work. It is seldom, comparatively, that Government officials care for these things.”

XXXII. CLOTHED BY FAITH

As Mr. Ovens was at Akpap engaged on the new Mission House the Calabar Committee decided to send her home in 1898 whether they could supply the station or not. “It will be rather trying to get back to the home kind of life and language,” she said; “but I shall just want a place to hide in: away from conventionalities and all the paraphernalia of civilisation.” Her chief problem was the disposal of the children, whom she dreaded to leave under native influences. There were so few missionaries in the field then that it was difficult to find homes for them. She settled two babies, some of her girls, and the former slave-woman with a lady agent. The rest she made up her mind to take with her. It was a daring thing to do, but doing daring things was her normal habit. She justified herself to a friend by saying that Janie was now a big girl and a great help. Mary was five years old and able to fend for herself; Alice was about three and fairly independent, and Maggie was sixteen months, and could sit about and be easily amused.

The next problem was how to equip both herself and her retinue for the voyage. Her wardrobe had been gradually depleted in the bush, and during her illnesses ants had eaten up all that remained. She and the children had nothing but the old garments they had on. But she was not dismayed: in the simplicity of her faith she believed that the Master knew her difficulty, and would come to her aid and provide all her needs. And she was not disappointed.

When at Duke Town, preparatory to departure, a box from Renfield Street Church, Glasgow, arrived for her, and she went down to the beach and opened it to see if it contained anything she might require. And everything she required was there, including many knitted and woollen articles—a most uncommon circumstance. There was also a shawl—” I do not know

what I should have done without that on the voyage," she said. The ladies of the Mission took the cloth and flannelette and soon had the whole party fitted out. In acknowledging the box she begged the givers not to be vexed at what she had done: the articles had been used in the service of Christ as much as if they had been distributed in Okoyong.

She was so far spent that she was carried on board. On the voyage she received much kindness, and believing that God was behind it all she accepted everything as from Him and was very grateful. Her simple faith in the goodness of her kind was shown by the fact that the telegram she despatched on arriving at Liverpool to Mrs. M'Crindle, Joppa, was the first intimation that lady received that she was coming. And at the railway station she confidently handed her purse to the porter, asking him to take it and buy the tickets. Mrs. M'Crindle met her at the Waverley Station, Edinburgh. There was the usual bustle on the arrival of a train from the South. The sight of a little black girl being handed down from the carriage caused a mild stir, when another came the interest increased, when a third dropped down a crowd gathered, when a fourth stepped out the cabmen and porters forgot their fares and stared, wondering who the slight, foreign-looking lady could be who had brought so strange a family.

XXXIII. THE SHY SPEAKER

Eagerly looked for after her heroic service in Okoyong she received a warm welcome from her friends in the United Presbyterian Church. For some weeks she lived at Joppa, and then anxious to be independent she took a small house near at hand, where she and Janie managed the work and cooking. It was not a very comfortable ménage, and Miss Adam, one of the "chief women" of the Church and Convener of the Zenana Mission Committee, made arrangements for her and the children staying at Bowden, St. Boswells. Here, looking down upon a beautiful expanse of historic border country, she spent a quiet and restful time. As her vitality and spirits came back she began to address meetings, and found that the interest in her work had deepened and extended.

She was, if anything, shyer than ever, and would not speak before men. At a drawing-room gathering in Glasgow the husband of the lady of the house and two well-known ministers were present. She rose to give an address, but no words came. Turning to the men she said,

"Will the gentlemen kindly go away?" The lad of the house said it would be a great disappointment to them not to hear her. "Then," she replied, "will they kindly go and sit where I cannot see them?" When she began to speak she seemed to forget her diffidence, and she held the little audience spell-bound. At a Stirling meeting a gentleman slipped in. After a slight pause she

said, "If the gentleman in the meeting would hide behind the lady in front of him I would be more at my ease." On another occasion she fled from the platform when called on to speak, and it was only with difficulty that she was brought back. When people began to praise her she slipped out and remained away until they had finished.

"She was a most gentle-looking lady," writes one who heard her then, "rather below the average height, a complexion like yellow parchment, and short lank brown hair: a most pleasing expression and winning smile, and when she spoke I thought I had never heard such a musical voice." She went to her home-city, Aberdeen, and addressed a meeting in Belmont Street Church, which her mother had attended; and of her power of speech the Rev. Dr. Beatty, the minister, who was in the chair, says: "It was characterised by a simple diction, a tearful sympathy, a restrained passion, and a pleading love for her people, which made it difficult to listen to her without deep emotion." At one meeting in Glasgow she spent an hour shaking hands. "What a lot of love there is in the world after all," she said gratefully. She received such a reception at a meeting in Edinburgh that she broke down. Recovering herself she earnestly denied that her work was more remarkable than that of any other missionary in Calabar: "They all work as hard or harder than I do." She went on to plead for an ordained missionary for Okoyong. "I feel that my work there is done, I can teach them no more. I would like to go farther inland and make a home among a tribe of cannibals."

Many a stirring appeal she made for workers.

"If missions are a failure," she said, "it is our failure and not God's. If we only prayed and had more faith what a difference it would make! In Calabar we are going back every day. For years we have been going back. The China Inland Mission keep on asking for men, men, men, and they get what they want and more than we get. We keep calling for money, money, money, and we get money—of great value in its place—but not the men and the women. Where are they? When Sir Herbert Kitchener, going out to conquer the Soudan required help, thousands of the brightest of our young men were ready.

Where are the soldiers of the Cross? In a recent war in Africa in a region with the same climate and the same malarial swamp as Calabar there were hundreds of officers and men offering their services, and a Royal Prince went out. But the banner of the Cross goes a-begging. Why should the Queen have good soldiers and not the King of Kings? "

Her nervous timidity was often curiously exhibited. She was, for instance, afraid of crowds, and she would never cross a city street alone; and once, when she was proceeding to a village meeting she would not take a short cut through a field because there was a cow in it. Yet she was never

lacking in high courage when the need arose. At a meeting in Edinburgh several addresses had been delivered, and the collection was announced. As is often the case the audience drew a sigh of relief, relaxed attention, and made a stir in changing positions. Some began to whisper and to carry on a conversation with those sitting near them. She stood the situation as long as she could, then rose, and spoke, regardless of all the dignitaries about her, and rebuked the audience for their want of reverence. Were they not presenting their offerings to the Lord? Was that not as much an act of worship as singing and praying? How then could they behave in such a thoughtless and unbecoming manner? There was something of scorn in her voice as she contrasted the way in which the Calabar converts presented their offerings with that of the well-educated Edinburgh audience. When she sat down it was amidst profound silence. "That is a brave woman," was the thought of many.

With her bairns she left towards the end of the year (1898), Miss Adam accompanying them to Liverpool to see them safely on board. A more notable person than she realised, she was sought out by a special representative of Reuter's Agency and interviewed. Her story of the superstitious practices connected with the birth of twins in West Africa had the element of horror which makes good "copy," and most of the newspapers in the kingdom next day gave a long description of these customs and of her work of rescue. Incidentally she stated that up to that time she had saved fifty-one twins from destruction. She thought nothing of this talk with the reporter, never mentioning it to any one, and was unaware of the wide publicity accorded to her remarks. She spent Christmas on board the steamer. Again every one was kind to her, the officers and stewards vying with each other in showing her attention. All along the coast she was well known, and invitations came from officials at Government headquarters, but these she modestly declined. She was interested in all things that interested others, and would discuss engineering and railway extension and trade prices and the last new book as readily as mission work and policy. The children she kept in the background, as she had done in Scotland, and would not allow them to be spoiled. On arrival in Calabar they were much made of, and it was only the experienced Janie who did not like the process.

XXXIV. ISOLATION

An exceptionally trying experience followed. Arrangements had been made by the Committee in Scotland for the better staffing of the station, but these broke down, and for the next three years she worked alone, her isolation only being relieved by an occasional visit from the lady missionaries in Calabar. During that long period she fought, single-handed, a double battle

in the depths of the forest. She was incessantly at war with the evils that were still rife about her, and she had to struggle against long spells of low fever and sleeplessness. And right bravely did she engage in the task, conquering her ill-health by sheer will-power, and gaining an ever greater personal ascendancy over the people.

1. A Mother in Israel

The gradual pacification of Okoyong brought about by her influence and authority increased rather than diminished her work. As the people settled down to orderly occupations and trade the land became valuable, and disputes were constantly cropping up regarding ownerships and boundaries. There was much underground palavering, of which no one knew but herself, which kept her all ways on the strain. She had to mother the whole tribe, and it took all her patience and tact to prevent them reverting to their old violent practices. A Government official of that time, who had to enquire into a number of cases over which there had been correspondence with her, says, "I stayed with 'Ma,' and had my first lesson in how to deal with natives. It did not require very long for even a 'fresher' to see what a power in the land she was. All came to her in any kind of trouble. As an interpreter she made every palaver an easy one to settle, by the fact that she could represent to each side accurately what the other party wished to convey."

Her fame had gone still farther, and people were now coming from places a hundred miles distant to see the wonderful person who was ruling the land and doing away with all the evil fashions. And what did they see? A powerful Sultana sitting in a palace with an army at her command? No. Only a weak woman in a lowly house surrounded by a number of helpless children. But they, too, came under her mysterious spell. They told her of all the troubles that perplexed their lives, and she gave them advice and helped them. In one week she had deputations from four different tribes, each with a tale of wrong and oppression. Innocent people fled to her to escape the fate decreed by the witch-doctor: guilty people sheltered with her, knowing that they were sure at least of nothing worse than justice. She welcomed them all, and to all she spoke of the Saviour, and strove to bring them to His feet. And none went away without carrying some of the fragrance of that knowledge, and in remote districts unvisited by the white man it lingered for years, so that when missionaries went there later on they would come across a man or a woman who said, "Oh, I know all about Jesus, the White Mother once told me."

She was so interested in these strangers that the desire came to know more about them and their surroundings, and she made numerous trips up the Cross River by Mission steamer and canoe and visited the townships on the banks. On one of these journeys she felt for the first time that death was

at her side. A dispute had arisen between Okoyong and Umon, and the Umon people, strong in the belief that she would mete out justice even against her own tribe, begged her to come and decide the quarrel. It was a long day's journey for the best walkers, "but," said she, "if they can do it in a day, so can I." A well-manned canoe was, however, sent for her, and she proceeded in it with some of the twin-children. They were speeding down a narrow creek leading into the river, a man standing with his paddle at the bow to negotiate the canoe past the logs and trees, when a hippopotamus, which was attended by its young, rose immediately in front and attacked it savagely. The man at the bow instantly thrust the paddle into the gaping mouth, and shoved the canoe violently to one side. Mary seized some large tin basins with covers, which the natives used for holding cooked food, and placed them outside in front of the part where the children were sitting, and where the infuriated hippopotamus was trying to grip and upset the canoe. These curious weapons succeeded in baffling the monster. Several times it made a rush and failed. The shouting, the snapping of the jaws, the whirling of the paddles, the cries of the children—"O Abasi ibom Ete nyana nyin mbok O!" ("O God, Father, please save us, Oh")—almost unnerved her. The hippo at last made for the stern, where some of the paddlers beat it off and kept it at bay long enough to enable the others to turn the canoe and rush it out of its reach.

But she could not now afford to be long away from her station, for the utmost vigilance was required to combat the evils around her. In spite of British laws and gunboats twin - murder continued in secret. She noticed, however, that where the people came within the influence of the Mission their fears gradually disappeared. What pleased her was that women to whom she had been kind voluntarily brought in twins to her that would otherwise have been killed. One day she and Mr. Alexander were sitting at breakfast when a woman walked in, and without remark placed a large calabash on the table. Mary thought it was a dish of native food and said, "You have come too late, we have just finished." Still the woman was silent.

Mary opened the calabash and found that it contained two twin boys.

There were other promising signs. The mother of a twin baby who was saved came to the Mission House and lived there, working at the farm during the day. One master took a twin and the mother home. All his other wives at once gathered up their children and left him, but he remained firm. As the woman had been a neighbour of "Ma's" at Ekenge, it is probable that her influence had told on her then. But the outstanding event in this direction was that a twin boy was taken home by his parents, who were determined to keep him. The affair made a great stir, but she told all the chiefs that she would stand by the parents, and if they dared to say a word or trace any calamity to the family she would "make palaver." They were grimly

silent, but could not dispute her word. She believed that their attitude was only due to fear, which would die away if a stand were made.

Her work in school and Bible Class was beginning to tell. Six of the best boys of free birth and good standing whom she was training were now Christians, and working in the villages around. Two, sons of the most powerful chiefs in the district, took the reading and another was the speaker. It was not much to boast of perhaps. "I feel the smallness of the returns," she said, "but is the labour lost? A thousand times No! "

2. The Cares of a Household

Her most trying fight during these years was with ill-health. She was now occupying the new house, which she pronounced "lovely," but it was hotter than any she had lived in, and she often sighed for "her lowly mud-hut" again. At one time she was three months in bed, and recovery was always a slow and weary process. The people were afraid she would have to go to Scotland and came and assisted her in every way, while her boy scholars maintained the services. But often she would struggle up and conduct the Sunday meetings herself, although it meant a sleepless night. "I am ashamed to confess," she wrote, "that our poor wee services here take as much out of me as the great meetings at home did." To fill in the wakeful hours she would rise in the middle of the night, light a candle, and answer a batch of correspondence. There were friends to whom she did not require to write often: "Ours is like the life above, we do not need to tell; we can go on loving and praying, but this is a rare thing in the world." Others were not so considerate. Some of her letters at this period are marked "Midnight," "8 A.M.," "Just before dawn," and so on. But more often she was unable to sit up, and was too tired to write, and lay thinking of her last visit home, and particularly of her sojourn at Bowden; "I never had such a time; I live everything all over again during these sleepless nights; it grips me more than my real home life of long ago."

She never grumbled to her correspondents, even when in the grip of nervous debility. Her letters are filled with loving enquiries about people, especially young people, at home. She kept them all in mind, followed their lives with interest, and was always anxious to know if they had consecrated themselves to the service of Christ. "Life is so great and so grand," she would write, and "eternity is so real and so terrible in its issues. Surely my lads out here are not to take the crown from my boys at home."

Now and again, however, a strain of sadness is perceptible in her letters, perhaps due to the state of her health and her isolation, as well as the outlook abroad, which was then unrestful. "All is dark," she said, "except above. Calvary stands safe and sure." Often she wondered what worldlings

did in the midst of all their entanglements and the mysteries of life and death without some higher hope and strength. "Life apart from Christ," she would say, "is a dreadful gift."

Her own future loomed uncertain, and the thought of the children began to weigh upon her mind: It is not likely I shall ever go home again. I feel as if I did not want to. How could I leave the bairns in this dreadful land? Who would mother them in this sink of iniquity? "And soon afterwards she wrote: "I do not think I could bear the parting with my children again. If I be spared a few years more I shall have a bit of land and build a wee house of my own near one of the principal stations, and just stay out my days there with my bairns and lie down among them. They need a mother's care and a mother's love more than ever as they grow up among heathen people, and I could do a little, through them, for the dark homes and hearts around, and it would be a house and home for them when I am gone, where the missionaries could be near them."

Janie, the faithful, unselfish soul who had been with her from babyhood, was at last married. "Her husband," she said, "is my best scholar, and if his social standing is not the highest, he is a real companion to her and to my bairns, who worship him." The ceremony was performed by "Ma," and the entry, in Efik, in a tiny marriage register runs as follows:—

December 21, 1899.

Janie Annan took oath before Obon (chief), Okon Ekpo, and Eme Ete, that she will marry Akibo Eyo alone. Akibo also took oath that he will marry Jane alone. They went to the farm with Eme Ete. M. M. S.

The break in the family life gave her much more to do, but Janie—or Jean as she was now more often called—still clung to her, and spent much time at the Mission House attending to the babies as before, her husband not objecting to her handling the twins, and even allowing her to take one home to her house during the day. But difficulty and disappointment came, as they so often do in Africa, and once more Jean became an inmate of the household, in which she was to remain to the end. One day a baby arrived whose mother had died after giving it birth, and she took it and made it her special child. This was Dan MacArthur Slessor—called after a home friend of the Mission—a black boy who was to become almost as well known in Scotland as Jean herself.

By and by with returning strength the house-mother was able to resume her old strenuous ways from cock-crow till star-shine. The cares of her household never grew fewer. "Housekeeping in the bush," she would remark, "means so much more as well as so much less than in

Scotland. There are no 'at homes,' no drawing-room ornaments to dust, no starched dresses, but on the other hand there are no butchers or bakers or nurses or washerwomen, and so I have to keep my shoulder to the wheel

both indoors and out of doors.” There were defects in the situation; she did not need other people to tell her that; she was often overwhelmed with the multitude of her duties, at her wits’ end to manage all the children. “I have only three girls at present,” she writes, “and I have nine babies, and what with the washing and the school and the palavers and the visitors, you may be sure there are no drones in this house.” Sometimes she would stand in a state of pretended distraction and repeat—

*“There was an old woman who lived in a shoe,
She had so many children she didn’t know what to do.”*

She was not a housewife in the real sense, although she knew domestic economy with the best, and there were days when she arose in her might and introduced order and tidiness, but matters soon fell back into the normal conditions. She was always quite candid about her deficiencies. “I have not an elaborate system or method of work; it is just everything as it comes. I am afraid my mind is not a trained machine. It only works as it chooses.”

Yet no family of white children could have been more cared for or loved. She endeavoured to make Sunday a specially pleasant day for them, and tea then was always a happy function. All sat at a big table in the hall—Jean, Mana, Annie, Mary, Alice, and Maggie, with bunches of small boys and girls on the floor. It was then that boxes of delicacies from home were opened and devoured. How grateful she was to all her friends! “The gifts,” she would write, “are veiled in a mist of love, real Scottish love, reticent but deep and strong, full of pathos and prayer; the dear love inspired in our strong rugged Scots character by the Holy Ghost and moulded by our beloved ‘Presbyterianism of the olden time; love that does not forget with the passing years.” Two years after she returned she related cheerfully that she was still wearing the dress that had been given to her on furlough as her best on the occasions when Government officials called upon her.

She saw pathos in these gifts, but none of that deeper pathos which lay in her own life. She saw nothing to grieve about in her own position, but only in the empty houses along the Cross River. She was not anxious about herself, but desperately anxious about the extension of Roman Catholic influence in Calabar. “o think,” she exclaimed, “that all our blood and treasure, love and sacrifice and prayer, should have been given to make a place for them.”

From her house in the bush she had been eagerly watching the sweep of that great movement which culminated in 1900 in the union of the United Presbyterian and Free Churches of Scotland. She loved the blue banner of the United Presbyterian Church, and one of her constant admonitions to the younger generation was to carry on the grand old traditions. At first she had

been inclined to favour a kind of fraternal federation, each denomination keeping its distinctive principles, but she came to believe in the transfusion of the two streams of spiritual life.

“ We must not forget,” she wrote, “that the Free Church people were met at the Disruption by an empty exchequer and a confusion and blank that taxed all their energies. It took them such hard work in those days to get churches and homes for themselves that they got a bias that way, and the outlook to the ‘ other sheep ‘ may not have been so wide as that of our forefathers. These used the little prayer-houses and humble meeting-places for prayer and preaching: they were men nursed in persecution and contempt and poverty, and they reaped God’s compensations in a detachment from the world, and in the grit and spirituality and faith and unity which stress and persecution breed. And we have inherited it all, and it is our contribution to the Church life of to-day.”

Her hope was that the Union might create a new and enlarged interest in the foreign field and fill up the ranks in Calabar; but she was to be disappointed in this, and she often expressed the view that the Mission to which she had given her heart and life had been swallowed up, and had somehow lost its individuality. . . .

Into the United Free Church the United Presbyterians brought thirty-eight women missionaries and one hundred and eighty - five women agents, and the Free Church brought sixty European women missionaries and ten Eurasians, and nearly four hundred native women agents, making, on the women’s side of the work alone, a total missionary staff in round numbers of one hundred European workers assisted by nearly six hundred local agents, and all these were now put under a new body, the Women’s Foreign Mission Committee, composed of some of the most gifted and consecrated minds of the Church.

XXXV. EXILED TO CREEK TOWN

A dramatic public event which vitally affected her own life and the course of the mission enterprise brought her seclusion to an end. The story belongs more to the next phase of her career, but may be briefly noticed here. With the extension of British influence into the interior of the continent the form of Government had undergone another development. Two protectorates were formed, Northern and Southern Nigeria, and Sir Ralph Moor was appointed High Commissioner of the latter. The same policy of pacifying and “cleaning up” the country continued; but there were still large stretches practically untouched by the agents of the Government, including the territory lying between the Cross River and the Niger, in the upper part of which slave-raiding and trading went on as it had done for centuries. The

Aros, a powerful tribe who controlled the juju worship, were the people responsible for this evil. They would not submit to the new conditions, continued to make war on peaceable tribes, and indulged in human sacrifices, blocked the trade routes, and resisted the authority of the Government. One officer was only able to penetrate fifteen miles west of the Cross River, not without perilous experiences, and then was obliged to beat a rapid retreat to escape being killed and eaten. The Government was very patient and conciliatory; but it became absolutely necessary at last to despatch a small expedition, and a field force was organised at Calabar for the purpose. Dr. Rattray of the Mission staff was attached to it as medical officer. The Aros did not wait for the advance; they raided a village only fifteen miles from Ikorofiong, and, as a precaution, all the missionaries upriver were ordered down to Duke and Creek Towns.

Okoyong was unmoved by these matters. "Ma" Slessor's authority was supreme, but while the Government believed that all would be well, they thought it better that she should also come to Calabar until the trouble was over. Very much against her will she complied. They sent up a special conveyance for her, and treated her with all consideration. They even offered to build a house at Creek Town for her and her large family; but she did not wish to become too closely identified with the Government, and declined their kindly assistance. She found accommodation in part of the hospital, where, however, she had no privacy, and was not very comfortable.

It was the first time she had been in Calabar since her arrival three years before, and she was not happy. She was never otherwise than ill, and she longed to get away from the crowd and "the bright, the terribly bright sky." The children also were unwell. But there were compensations. The Okoyong people kept steady during the unrest, and remained true to their Queen. They came down to see her, brought all their disputes for her to settle, and loaded her with gifts of food, which were very acceptable, as prices had risen. Her lads kept on the services, and the people attended regularly. She heard good news of the twins, which the mothers had taken in order to relieve her; they were in four different homes in four different districts, and nothing had been said by the people. One of her oldest friends, the wife of a big chief, a wealthy leisured woman, bore twins. She instantly wrote to the chief telling him to put her into a canoe and send her down to Creek Town. "I am sorry for her," she said, "but we cannot make different laws for the rich and for the poor, and yet one may press too far with a chief, and incite rebellion. After all we are foreigners, and they own the country, so I always try to make the law fit in, while we adjust things between us."

A campaign of three months sufficed to break the power of the Aros, but long before that she was wearying to be back in Okoyong. At last she appealed to the Commissioner. He asked her to wait until a certain movement

of troops was completed. Smilingly she replied that she would be off at the first opportunity—and she went.

Her enforced sojourn in Creek Town was followed by the best results. New missionaries had come out in whom she became interested. The one to whom she owed most was the Rev. A. W. Wilkie, B.D., who soon afterwards married a daughter of Dr. George Robson, the Editor of the *Missionary Record*. With these two she formed a friendship which was to prove one of the joys of her life. Mr. Wilkie understood her from the first; his keen insight enabled him to explore a character that was growing ever more complex, and he possessed that quality of understanding sympathy to which alone her sensitive nature responded.

She enjoyed meeting these young workers who had come to carry on the traditions of the Mission; she liked them because of their eagerness and energy and their desire to do things. All her knowledge was at their disposal, and she would tell them of the golden days of the past and describe the characteristics and superstitions of the people as well as speak of the higher things of life. Some of them thought her the most fascinating woman they had ever met. “Her talks,” they declared, “are better than medicine.” Many a wise bit of counsel she passed on to her sister missionaries. “She gave me at the very beginning of life in Calabar,” says one, “a piece of advice that I have never forgotten, and which has comforted me over and over again. I was saying that in a place like Duke Town it was so difficult to know exactly what to do, and she said, ‘Do? lassie, do? You’ve not got to do, you’ve just got to be, and the doing will follow.’” “‘Make a bold stand for purity of speech and charity of judgment,’” she told another, “and let none of the froth that rises to the top of the life around you vex or disturb your peace.” Many acknowledged that they had their lives enriched, their faith strengthened, and their work helped by contact with her.

XXXVI. PICTURES AND IMPRESSIONS

The younger missionaries began to frequent Akpap, and from the accounts of their visits we obtain some unstudied and vivid pictures of “Ma” and her household. This slight woman with the shrunk and colourless skin, the remarkable deep-set eyes, and the Scots tongue, so poor in the gifts of the world, so rich in the qualities of the spirit, made a deep impression upon them, although it is a question whether they ever fully understood all she was and did. They lived in the European atmosphere, she in the native; they noticed only superficial aspects, she moved deep beneath the surface amongst conditions of which they were only dimly aware.

“We walk for five or six miles along the pleasant bush path,” writes one, “and as we near the big trees and the clearing round the Mission House,

children's voices cry, ' Ma is coming,' and a sweet, somewhat strident voice inquires, ' What Ma? Jean put the kettle on, Jean put the kettle on.' And we'll all have tea,' sings out my friend. ' How are you, Ma? ' for we have reached the verandah, and ' Ma,' eagerly hospitable, is giving us a royal welcome." She was usually found barefooted and bareheaded, with a twin-baby in her arms and a swarm of children about her, or on the roof nailing down the sheet-iron which a tornado had shifted, or holding a palaver from the verandah, or sitting in Court, but always busy. "No one can have much time for rest here," was the verdict of one missionary after a short stay. "Her power," wrote another, "is amazing; she is really Queen of the whole of Okoyong district. The High Commissioner and his staff leave the administration of it in her hands. It is wonderful to see the grip she has of the most intricate native and political questions of the country. The people tell me she knows their language better than they do themselves, and that they appeal to her on their own customs and laws. She has done a magnificent work, and the people have a deeper reverence for her than you can imagine. When they speak of her their tones change. One thing I noticed, she never allowed a native to sit in her presence. She keeps them all at a respectful distance, although when they are ill, sometimes with the most loathsome diseases, she will nurse them; and she never shakes hands with them. She told the High Commissioner to do so with some—but for herself, never When I asked her the reason she looked at me and said simply, ' I live alone.' "

The reference to her command of the language bears out what all competent observers have stated. Some missionaries retain their accent even after long service and speak as foreigners, but she had all the vocabulary, the idioms, the inflections, the guttural sounds, the interjections, and sarcasms, as well as the quick characteristic gestures that belong only to the natives. "She excelled even the natives themselves in their own tongue," says Mr. Luke. "She could play with it and make the people smile; she could cut with it and make them wince; she could pour spates of indignation until they cried out, 'Ekem! Enough, Ma' and she could croon with it and make the twins she saved happy, and she could sing with it softly to comfort and cheer." One visitor who accompanied a missionary friend found her haranguing a crowd who had arrived to palaver. She stopped now and again and spoke to the visitors in broad Scots. "Well," said the missionary afterwards, "what do you think of her? "" I would not like her to catch me stealing her chickens "was the reply.

One of the qualities which astonished her guests was her utter fearlessness. There were no locks_ on her mission doors. She went everywhere, condemning chiefs, fining them, divorcing them; and came home to her bairns to be a child with them, and to romp and sing to them queer little chants of her own composition. One story of these days her visitors carried

away. A murder had been committed, and the slayer was pursued by the people, who intended to follow out their custom and torture him.

He was seized and chained. Straining to break loose, his eyes almost bursting from their sockets, he cried, "Beware You may kill me, but my spirit will come back and spoil you. Ay, it will not be you, the staves, but you, the chiefs, that will suffer. Beware I will come if you do not take me to Ma's house."

He was taken to "Ma," who on hearing the evidence ordered him to be conveyed to Duke Town. Then she loosed him from his chains and sat down with him alone in the house for the whole afternoon. The doors and windows were open, and all he had to do was to strike her down and fly. But she showed no fear. At night he was again chained and placed in the prayer- or store-room underneath until the guard arrived. During the night he managed to slip off his chains and was free to escape into the bush. When she went into the room in the morning with food and called him, there was no sound or reply. It was dark in the place, but she entered and moved around to find the prisoner. At the back of the door she came into contact with his swinging body. He had taken off his loin-cloth and hanged himself.

Her visitors noticed, almost with wonder, her devotion to her children and the little morsels of humanity that came pouring in upon her. Miss Welsh, LL.A., thus describes the household: "Jean, the ever-cheerful and willing helper; Annie the drawer of water and hewer of wood, kind willing worker; Mary the smart, handsome favourite; Alice the stolid dependable little body, and Maggie the fusionless, Dannie the imp, and Asoquo who looked with his big innocent eyes a wee angel, and who yet was in constant trouble, chiefly for insisting on sharing the cat's meals. Then there were the babies—a lovely wee twin-girl, whom their mother was nursing, a poor wee boy almost skin and bone lying cradled in a box. Behind the house in a rough shelter was another twin-mother caring none too kindly for her surviving child." Another writes, "I never saw anything more beautiful than her devotion to these black children. She had a poor sick boy in her arms all the time, and nursed him while walking up and down directing the girls. He died at 11.30 and she slept with him her arms all night. Next morning he was put in a small milk packing-case, and the children dug a grave and buried it and held a service."

And here we have the scene at evening prayers: "We began with an Efik hymn of her own, which she repeated line by line, while the little ones chanted it with a weird intonation. They then sang the whole to the tune French. She tested their memory of the morning lesson, and gave them a homely but powerful address, interrupting herself once to tell us how hydrophobia had broken out a few days before, and how she had held one poor lad of ten in her arms until he died. She prayed, and the children bowed

down their heads till they rested upon the ground. They next chanted the ‘Amen,’ and half-chanted the Lord’s Prayer, and finished with what she called ‘one of the new fanciful English hymns ‘—’ If I come to Jesus.’ Then very simply and sweetly she commended us all to the Father’s love and care.”

Long talks, often prolonged into the night, would follow. “How Ma talked,” says Miss Welsh, “and what a privilege it was to listen, what an experience, and what an education! How she made the past vivid as she lived it over again—the days of her girlhood—her mischievous pranks, her love of fun, her early days in Calabar, tales of the old worthies, tales of herself, and her own life, of her early pioneering, of loved ones at home, of kind letters whose messages of cheer she would share, of comfort and help from God’s word—from the passage of the day’s reading, of new lessons learned, of new light revealed. I can still hear her, still listen with the old fascination, still enjoy her wild indignations, still marvel at her amazing personality, her extraordinary vitality and energy, still feel as I have ever felt her God-given power to draw one nearer to the Lord she loved so well.”

When her guests departed she would walk with them a long way, her feet bare, her head uncovered. “No,” said a missionary, “I would not like to see other ladies do that, but I would not care to see her different. It is easy to give a false impression of her. She is not unwomanly. She is eccentric if you like, but she is gentle of heart, with a beautiful simplicity of nature. I join in the reverence which the natives show her.”

XXXVII. A NIGHT IN THE BUSH

Miss Slessor began to feel that her days in Okoyong were drawing to a close. Her part of the work there was done. The district was civilised, and all that the station required was organisation in detail and steady development. But she was not one to rest in any circumstances in which she was placed. She abated nothing of her devotion in the interests of the people, and although her strength did not now allow her to take long journeys on foot she never hesitated to answer the call upon her sympathy and courage. She had more than one adventure in these days, but she had passed through so many hard experiences that she made light of them, regarding them as mere incidents in the day’s work.

One afternoon, while she was in school, there appeared before her a young man of the superior class of slaves, who said his wife had given birth to twins in the bush more than twelve miles away. All the people had deserted her, a tornado was brewing—would she conic and help?

“Ma “thought of her brood of children, and one a sickly baby, but turning them over to the slave twin-mother she had bought, and leaving food

with her in her hut, she committed the whole twelve to Providence and set out with Jean.

The young man led them at a breathless pace. "If only you could *dion* the rain-cloud," he cried back. "I am praying that God may keep it back," was all Mary could jerk out. The way seemed endless, and the shadows of night fell swiftly about them, but at last they arrived near the spot and were joined by the mistress of the slave and an old naked woman. They found the mother lying on the ground surrounded by charms. "Ma" pushed these away with her foot. The night was pitch dark, there were occasional raindrops, and the woman was delirious. She ordered the husband and his slave-man to make a stretcher. They regarded the idea with horror, and pleaded that they could never carry her, their belief doubtless being that they would die if they touched the unclean burden. All begged "Ma" to leave the woman to her fate, but she turned upon them with a voice of scorn, and such was her power that the men hastily set to and constructed a rough stretcher of branches and leaves, and even helped to place the woman upon it.

Before leaving, a sad little ceremony had to take place. One of the infants was dead, and Jean took her machete and dug a little cavity in the ground, and upon some soft leaves the child was laid and covered up. She then lifted the other twin, the men raised the stretcher, and the party set off, a fire-stick, red at the point, and twirled to maintain the glow, dimly showing them the way. The rain kept off, but it was so dark that "Ma" had to keep hold of the hem of Jean's dress in order not to lose her. The latter stumbled and fell, bringing down Mary also. "Where are you?" each cried, and then a hand or a foot was held out and gripped. Sometimes the men dropped to their knees, but the jolting brought no cry from the unconscious form they were carrying.

By and by they drew up in the utter solitude, and had to confess they were lost. The men left to grope for signs of the path and the two women were alone. Jean grew depressed, not on her own account but on "Ma's," for she knew that she was utterly exhausted, and could not hold out much longer. "What if they desert us?" she said. "Well," replied Mary, trying to appear as if fatigue and fear and wild beasts had no existence, "we shall just stay here until the morning." Jean's response was something like a grunt. One of the men returned. "Can't find a road," he grumbled, and disappeared again.

What was that? A firefly? No, a light. The other man had discovered a hut, and had procured a lighted palm tassel dipped in oil. Poor as it was the light served to show the way until the path was reached.

After sore toil they gained the Mission yard. The men laid the stretcher in an open shed and, overcome with their exertions, threw themselves down anywhere and went asleep. But there was no rest yet for Mary. Securing

some old doors and sheets of iron she patched up a room for the woman, in which she could pass the night.

The children were awakened and crawled out of Iye's hut into the yard crying in sleepy misery. Jean and Annie carried them to the Mission House and put them to bed, and brought back some hot food for the patient, who was constantly moaning, "Cold, cold; give me a fire."

Not till she was fed and soothed did Mary give in. She could not summon sufficient strength to go upstairs, but lay down on the floor where she was, with her clothes on, and all the dirt of the journey upon her, and slept till daybreak.

The baby died next day, and the mother hovered at the point of death. Mary strove hard to save her, but the result was doubtful from the first. None in the yard would give any help save Jean; the woman was a social leper, and all sat at a safe distance, dumb or blaspheming. Conscious at the end, the poor girl cried piteously to her husband not to reproach her. "It is not my fault," she said, "I did not mean to insult you."

"Ma" placed her hand on her hot brow calming her, and prayed that she might find an entrance into a better world than the one which had treated her so badly. When she passed away she thrust aside the leper woman whom her people sent to assist her, and washed the body herself and dressed her so that for once a twin-mother was honoured in her death. She was placed in a coffin of corrugated iron, strengthened with bamboo splints, and beside her were put the spoons and pot and dish and other things which she had used.

Her husband and his slave bore her away into the bush, and there at a desolate spot, where no one was likely to live or plant or build, they left her and stole from the place in terror.

XXXVIII. WITH LOVING-KINDNESS CROWNED

On the fifteenth anniversary of that notable Sunday in 1888 when Mary settled at Ekenge, the first communion service in Okoyong was held. It crowned her service there, and put a seal upon the wonderful work she had accomplished for civilisation and for Christ. Alone, she had done in Okoyong what it had taken a whole Mission to do in Calabar. The old order of heathenism had been broken up, the business of life was no longer fighting and killing, women were free from outrage and the death menace, slaves had begun to realise that they were human beings with human rights, industry and trade were established, peace reigned. Above all, people were openly living the Christian life, and many lads were actively engaged in Church work.

No congregation had been formally organised, but the readiness of the young people to join the Church was brought to the notice of the Rev. W. T.

Weir, who was stationed at Creek Town, with the result that he was appointed to go up and conduct the necessary services.

On the Saturday night in August corresponding to the one when she arrived, a preparatory service was held in the hall beneath the Mission House, and in the presence of the people seven young Christians were received into the Church by baptism. More were coming forward, but the fears of their friends succeeded in preventing them. "Wait and see," they urged, "until we know what the thing is." Some of the parents anxiously asked "Ma" whether the ceremony was in any way connected with nib jam.

On Sunday came a great throng, which filled the hall and overflowed into the grounds, many sitting on native stools and chairs, and even on gin-boxes. Before the communion service she presented eleven of the children, including six she had rescued, for baptism.

It was a quiet and beautiful day, with the hush that comes with God's rest-day all the world over. As the company gathered to the first Memorial Table in Okoyong, she thought of all the years that lay behind, and was greatly moved. In the stillness the old Scottish Psalm tunes rose thrilling with the gratitude and praise of a new-born people. After the bread and wine had been partaken of, thanks were returned by the singing of the

103rd Psalm to the tune Stroudwater. When the third and fourth verses were being sung—

Kprukpru muquankpo ke ima
Enye adahado;
Anam okure,
Ye ndutukho fo.

Enye onim fi ke uwem,
Osio ke mkpa;
Onyun odori fi eti
Mfon y'aqua ima.

All thine iniquities who doth
Most graciously forgive:
Who thy diseases all and pains
Doth heal, and thee relieve.

Who doth redeem thy life, that thou
To death may'st not go down;
Who thee with loving-kindness doth
And tender mercies crown

—she seemed to be lost in a trance of thought, her face had a far-away look, and tears stood in her eyes. She was thinking of the greatness of God's love that could win even the oppressed people of dark Okoyong.

She could not let the assembly break up without saying a few words. Now that they had the beginnings of a congregation they must, she said, build a church large enough for all who cared to come. And she pled with those who had been received to remain true to the faith. "Okoyong now looks to you more than to me for proof of the power of the Gospel."

In the quiet of the evening in the Mission House, she seemed to dwell in the past. Long she spoke of what the conditions had been fifteen years before, and of the changes that had come since. But her joy was in those who had been brought to confess Christ, and she was glad to think that, after all, the work had not been a failure. And all the glory she gave to her Father who had so marvellously helped her.

For a moment also her fancy turned to the future. She would be no longer there, but she knew the work would go on from strength to strength, and her eyes shone as she saw in vision the gradual ingathering of the people, and her beloved Okoyong at last fair and redeemed.