MARY SLESSOR



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A Dundee Weaver, the Twin-Mothers of Calabar, and a Life Laid on the Altar

Ochorus

Portraits of Courage – Mary Slessor

A Dundee Weaver, the Twin-Mothers of Calabar, and a Life Laid on the Altar

Ochorus Originals

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Matthew 10:8

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Preface

"but God chose the foolish things of the world, that he might put to shame them that are wise; and God chose the weak things of the world, that he might put to shame the things that are strong"
— 1 Corinthians 1:27, ASV

The first volume of this series told the story of Watchman Nee, who spent his last twenty years in a Chinese prison. The second told the story of John Hyde, whose courage was spent on his knees in the Punjab. The third told the story of Corrie ten Boom, whose family hid Jews behind a false wall in Haarlem. This fourth volume goes back further in time, and further from the places where most of its readers live. It tells the story of a Scottish factory girl who spent almost forty years in the forests of south-eastern Nigeria, and who died there, in a mud-walled room, in January 1915.

Mary Slessor was born in Aberdeen in 1848 and grew up in the slums of Dundee. From the age of eleven she worked at a loom in a textile factory. She had almost no schooling. She was small, shy of public speaking, and so timid about ordinary things that she would not cross a busy city street alone. At twenty-seven she sailed for Calabar, on the coast of what is now Nigeria, as a teacher for the mission of the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland. She learned the Efik language so well that people who heard her said she spoke it better than they did. She walked, barefoot and usually alone, into districts where no missionary had lived. She took in twin babies whom their families had been taught to throw away, and she sheltered their

mothers. She sat as a magistrate in a British colonial court. She raised a household of adopted African children. Long before she died, the people of the Cross River were calling her "Everybody's Mother."

Why Courage?

Her courage is the easiest part of her story to see, and it is real. She stood between armed men who were about to fight. She sat for nights beside prisoners who were to be made to drink poison. She walked through the forest in the dark to reach a dying chief whose people were ready to kill his household if he died. None of it came naturally. She wrote to friends that her courage often threatened to "take wings and fly away," and that nobody guessed it.

But this book will suggest that there was a harder courage in her life than facing armed men. There was the courage to go on for years with almost nothing to show for it. Her first district saw no baptisms for fifteen years. The African friend who did most to protect her never became a Christian. Many of the babies she rescued died in her arms. She quarrelled with the Church that sent her, and more than once she was tempted to cut herself loose from it. She was often ill, often lonely, and sometimes deeply depressed. She kept going, not because she was sure of success, but because she believed that she had been sent, and that the results belonged to God.

How This Book Is Written

Like the earlier volumes, this book tries to be honest about its sources, and the reader deserves to know what they are.

The main source is the biography by W. P. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor of Calabar: Pioneer Missionary*, published in 1916, the year after her death.

Livingstone worked chiefly from her own letters, and he printed long passages from them. His book is now in the public domain, and so, unlike the Corrie ten Boom volume, this book is able to let Mary Slessor speak in her own words. Her letters are vivid, funny, sometimes sharp, and often moving, and they are quoted throughout.

Livingstone was an admirer, and he wrote in the manner and language of his time. His book is also more honest than many later retellings. He kept her doubts, her illnesses, her temper, and her failures. This book draws on him gratefully, and also checks him. It uses the Scottish civil records of her family, the census returns, and the work of modern historians in Scotland and Nigeria. Where the popular story says more than the evidence, this book will say so.

Two things in particular need care. The first is that Mary Slessor lived and worked at the time when Britain was taking control of southern Nigeria. She depended on British officials, and she sometimes welcomed their power. She also defended African people against them, and against her own Church. A Christian biography should neither hide that story nor pretend that she stood outside it. The second is that the language used about Africans in her day, including sometimes her own, was often contemptuous. This book quotes that language only where it is needed to understand her, and it does not adopt it.

Scripture in This Book

As in the earlier volumes, all Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version of 1901, which is in the public domain. Each chapter opens with a passage that carries its theme, and further passages are woven through the story. Mary Slessor read her Bible every day from before dawn,

with a pen in her hand, and she filled its margins with comments. Some of them appear in these pages.

The verse at the head of this preface is Paul's: "God chose the weak things of the world, that he might put to shame the things that are strong." It is not a flattering verse. Paul was not saying that God likes weak people for their own sake. He was saying that when God does great things through unlikely people, nobody can mistake where the power came from. Mary Slessor would have agreed. Near the end of her life, when she was given a royal honour, she wrote that she was nothing more than "the unworthy, unprofitable, but most willing, servant of the King of Kings." She knew what she was, a factory girl from Dundee. She knew, too, that "we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the exceeding greatness of the power may be of God, and not from ourselves" (2 Corinthians 4:7, ASV). This book is the story of that treasure, and of the earthen vessel that carried it.

Introduction: The Legend and the Letters

"He that pleadeth his cause first seemeth just; But his neighbor cometh and searcheth him out."
— Proverbs 18:17, ASV

A Woman Who Became a Legend

Within a year of her death, Mary Slessor had become a legend. Her first biography was widely read in Scotland and beyond. A version for children appeared the same year under the title *The White Queen of Okoyong*. Popular lives followed in almost every decade of the twentieth century, some for adults, many for Sunday school prizes. From 1997 until a redesign in 2009, her portrait appeared on the Clydesdale Bank's ten-pound note, with a map of Calabar and a picture of her with African children. In Calabar a roundabout bears her name, with a statue of her carrying twin babies. Schools, a hospital, a road, and even a small asteroid are named after her.

A legend is a kind of compliment, but it is also a kind of distortion. Popular retellings of her life made her taller than she was, and sometimes less interesting. They invented dialogue for her, and gave names to people who were never named in any record. One popular book has a panther carry a baby out of her tent, a scene with no source at all. Others credit her with ending the killing of twins in Nigeria single-handed, or with being the

first woman magistrate in the British Empire. Some put words into her mouth that she never wrote. A saying often quoted as hers, "Why should I fear? I am on a Royal Mission," is not in Livingstone or any source from her lifetime; the earliest printings found are devotional books published nearly a century after her death.

This book is written in the conviction that the real woman is better than the legend. The verse at the head of this chapter is a proverb about lawsuits: the first person to tell a story always sounds right, until the next person comes and asks questions. This introduction explains which stories this book trusts, and why.

Livingstone's Biography

The foundation of everything written about Mary Slessor is W. P. Livingstone's *Mary Slessor of Calabar*, published in 1916. Livingstone was given access to a great mass of her letters, and he built his book out of them. He also gathered the memories of fellow missionaries, government officials, and friends in Scotland. He tells us in his prefatory note that late in life she was urged to write her own story, and was surprised that anyone thought she had done enough to deserve a book.

Livingstone was an admirer, and in places he writes as one. He calls her "one of the most heroic figures of the age." He sometimes hints that she was more than human, and he defends both her Church and the colonial government whenever they are criticised. His descriptions of Africans are full of the racial theories of his time, and some of them are painful to read today.

Yet he was also, in important ways, an honest biographer. He admitted that she could be "stern and exacting," that she was "often depressed and worried," and that many people "could not see her greatness for what they

called her eccentricities." He printed letters in which she confessed her fears and her failures. He recorded that her first district had no baptisms for fifteen years, that her closest African friend never became a Christian, and that some of her rescues ended in death. He told stories of her temper that a more careful admirer would have left out. The result is a book that often contains the evidence against its own enthusiasm, and that makes it useful.

Letters Burned and Letters Kept

Mary Slessor did not leave a large personal archive. She was a tireless letter-writer, but in her last months she destroyed many of the letters she had received, "in case anything should happen." A colleague is said to have found her burning her personal papers. What survives is scattered: letters in Dundee, in the National Library of Scotland, and in Edinburgh; two small diaries; her Bibles with their crowded margins; and letters to a colonial official who became her friend. Most of what we know of her inner life comes from the letters her friends in Scotland kept and gave to Livingstone.

That means her own voice reaches us through a selection made by an admirer. It is still her voice, and it is quoted freely in this book. But the reader should remember that we hear what Livingstone chose to print.

The Records and the Historians

Some facts can be checked against records made at the time, and where they can, this book checks them. The Scottish parish and civil registers correct several details of the traditional story. Her father was baptised in Aberdeen, not in Buchan as Livingstone says. Her mother bore eleven children, not seven. The deaths of her brothers were from tuberculosis and croup, not pneumonia, as is often repeated. The census of 1891 finds her on furlough

in Devon, described as a teacher of the Church in West Africa, with her adopted daughter Janie in the house.

Modern historians have also examined her life. The fullest scholarly study is Jeanette Hardage's *Mary Slessor, Everybody's Mother*, published in 2008. Asked whether Slessor was an agent of empire or a liberator of the oppressed, Hardage answers, "Both, to some degree." Esther Breitenbach, a Scottish historian, has studied how her fame was built after her death. She argues that much of it was deliberate invention, and that there was little in Slessor's actual practice as a missionary that was unique. Nigerian historians have their own views. The church historian Ogbu Kalu praised her vision as "much broader and more activist" than that of her fellow missionaries. Other Nigerian writers have pushed back against the idea that a single Scottish woman saved the twins of Calabar, and have restored the Efik rulers, consuls, and earlier missionaries who acted before her.

This book has learned from all of them. It does not accept every criticism, and it does not repeat every tribute. It tries to put her back into her own world, alongside the African men and women who sheltered her, argued with her, worked beside her, and sometimes resisted her.

Her World and Ours

Mary Slessor went to Calabar in 1876, when no European power ruled the region. She died in 1915, when it was part of the British colony of Nigeria. Her whole working life coincided with the British conquest of the country, and she was caught up in it. She asked British consuls for help, sat in British courts, travelled in government cars, and told African children that the government was, at bottom, Christian. She also refused a house the government offered to build for her, so as not to be too closely identified

with it. She said plainly that Europeans were "foreigners, and they own the country."

This book will not pretend that those tensions are easy to resolve. It will tell the story as it happened. The reader will meet a woman who loved African people deeply, lived among them as few Europeans did, learned their language and laws, and spent her life defending the weakest of them. The reader will also meet a woman who shared many assumptions of her time and race, who could be imperious, and who was sometimes wrong.

What This Book Is For

The purpose of telling her story truthfully is not to diminish her. It is the same reason she herself gave for reading the Bible with a pen in her hand. She wanted to know what was really there. Jesus said, "ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32, ASV). A legend can inspire for a while, but it cannot bear much weight. A real life, told with its failures and its unanswered questions, can teach us how God works through ordinary, flawed people. Mary Slessor would have preferred that. She spent her last years insisting that she was "not goody-goody at all," and that her life was a record of what God had done, not of what she had done.

A Wild Lassie

"Like as a father pitieth his children, So Jehovah pitieth them that fear him."
— Psalm 103:13, ASV

Aberdeen, 1848

Mary Mitchell Slessor was born on 2 December 1848 in Gilcomston, a district on the edge of Aberdeen. Her birth was entered in the register of the parish of Old Machar. She was named after her mother.

Her father, Robert Slessor, had been baptised in Aberdeen in 1815. Livingstone says he "belonged to Buchan," the farming country to the north, and perhaps his family did, but the parish register records his baptism in the city. He is usually remembered as a shoemaker, and the records confirm it, but they also show a man who moved from trade to trade. In 1841 he was a handloom linen weaver. At Mary's birth he was a shoemaker. A few years later he appears as a fireman, a stoker of furnaces. Later still he was a labourer. It is the record of a working man in a hard time, when the old hand trades were dying and the new factories wanted cheap labour, not skill.

Her mother, also Mary, had been born in 1821 at Old Meldrum, a small town in the Aberdeenshire countryside, the only child of William Mitchell and Ann Wilson. She married Robert Slessor in 1840. Those who

remembered her described her as sweet-faced, patient, gentle, and retiring, with a deep and quiet faith. She was a member of Belmont Street United Presbyterian Church in Aberdeen, and she followed with intense interest the mission that her Church had begun on the far side of the world, at a place called Calabar.

That mission was only two years old when Mary was born. It had been founded in 1846, and its reports appeared every month in the Church's *Missionary Record*. In the Slessor house they were read aloud and talked over. "I had my missionary enthusiasm for Calabar in particular from her," Mary said long afterwards of her mother. "She knew from its inception all that was to be known of its history."

Eleven Children

Livingstone says that Mary was the second of seven children. The registers tell a sadder story. Her mother bore eleven children, and at least four of them died as infants, too young even to be baptised. The eldest, Robert, born in 1844, was dead by the time of the 1851 census. After Mary came William in 1850, a second Robert about 1852, Susan in 1855, John in 1857, and Janie, the youngest, in 1862.

Family memory preserved a story about Robert, the elder brother. He announced that he would be a missionary when he grew up. A girl could not hope for such a career, but he consoled Mary by promising to take her into the pulpit with him. Livingstone also tells us that when Mary played at keeping school, the imaginary pupils she scolded and taught were always Africans. These are the kind of details a family cherishes after a life has turned out as hers did, and we cannot know how much later memory has shaped them. The elder Robert died before Mary was three. If the pulpit

story is her own memory, it may belong to the second Robert, who bore the same name and who died in December 1860.

Drink

"Dark days came," Livingstone writes. Robert Slessor drank. He lost his work, and in 1859, hoping that her husband might make a fresh start where nobody knew him, his wife agreed to move the family south to Dundee. The furniture was sold to pay for the move, and the money soon ran out. By the census of 1861 the family was living in Dura Street, in the east of the city, near the textile mills.

The move did not cure him. Livingstone's account of these years is restrained, but it is enough. Every penny Robert Slessor could lay his hands on went on drink. His wife, who was not strong, went out to work in a factory. Mary, still a child, was sent with parcels to the pawnbroker. She ran by the quietest back streets so that her friends from church would not see her. Then she came home with enough money for the week, and her mother kissed her and sent her out to pay the most pressing bills.

There was one night of terror in every week. On Saturdays, after the younger children were in bed, mother and daughter sat sewing or knitting in silence, waiting for the sound of uncertain footsteps on the stair. Now and then they prayed to quiet their hearts. When he came, he would sometimes throw into the fire the supper they had gone without in order to provide for him. Sometimes Mary was put out into the street, and she wandered alone in the dark, crying.

Mother and daughter tried to hide the family's shame. The younger children, Livingstone says, knew nothing of the Saturday vigils, and the neighbours and church friends were kept from the secret. The family was never publicly disgraced, and they believed that was an answer to prayer.

Few families, Livingstone adds, looked brighter or more hopeful in church on Sunday. That was their faith, and it was also their pride.

Mary Slessor rarely spoke of her father. Livingstone tells us that she once wrote and published, under her own name, a story that her friends knew to be an account of these years, but he chose not to reproduce it. He says the memory was the only one that could "send a shaft of bitterness across the sweetness of her nature." It made her shy, and it made her dread speaking in public. It also, he suggests, made her the fierce defender of children and of the weak, and prepared her for a lifelong fight against the trade in cheap spirits on the West African coast. Whatever else the book of Proverbs meant by it, the Slessor children learned for themselves that "Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler" (Proverbs 20:1, ASV).

Robert Slessor died in Dundee on 16 September 1870. It was Mary, aged twenty-one, who went to register the death. By then he was working as a shoemaker again.

A Prayer That Was Not Answered

Much later, writing to a friend about prayer, Mary Slessor said something she seldom said about her own life. She was trying to explain that God does not always answer prayer in the way we expect. "I know what it is to pray long years and never get the answer," she wrote. "I had to pray for my father. But I know my heavenly Father so well that I can leave it with Him for the lower fatherhood."

That sentence carries the weight of a childhood. She had prayed for her father for years, and he had not changed. She did not pretend otherwise. But she had found another Father, one who did not fail, and she had learned to trust him with the question she could not answer. The psalm at the head of this chapter says, "Like as a father pitieth his children, So

Jehovah pitieth them that fear him." The next verse gives the reason: "For he knoweth our frame; He remembereth that we are dust" (Psalm 103:14, ASV). Mary Slessor knew what a weak and failing father looked like. She came to know a Father who understood weakness because he had made us, and who pitied it instead of despising it. It may be that some of the tenderness she later showed to drunken chiefs and frightened slaves was learned in Dura Street.

A Wild Lassie

In spite of it all, she was not a gloomy child. She remembered herself as "a wild lassie," and in later life she would describe her childhood escapades with a mixture of amusement and shame. Her mother took the children to Wishart Church, a plain building above a row of shops in the Cowgate, near the old Port Gate, from whose walls the Reformer George Wishart had preached during the plague of 1544. The children went to church with a drop of perfume on their handkerchiefs and a peppermint in their pockets for the sermon.

Her conversion came through an old widow who lived in a room in the back lands of the tenements. The old woman used to watch the children playing in the street, and worried about their souls. One winter afternoon she gathered some of the girls in from the cold and dark to sit by her fire, and talked to them about the danger of neglecting salvation. Then she pointed to the fire. If they put their hands into it, she said, it would burn them. But if they did not repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, their souls would burn forever in a fire far worse.

The words went, Livingstone says, like arrows to Mary's heart. She could not get the picture out of her mind, and it kept her awake at night. She decided that she had better make her peace with God, and in the words

that she herself used, she "repented and believed." Years later she would sometimes say that it was hell-fire that drove her into the Kingdom.

That is not the kind of conversion story Christians usually like to tell today, and she did not recommend it either. But it is honest, and it is worth noticing what she did with it. The old widow was saying what the apostles said to the jailer at Philippi: "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and thou shalt be saved" (Acts 16:31, ASV). Fear brought Mary to the door. But once inside, she found, as Livingstone puts it, that it was a Kingdom of love and tenderness and mercy. In all her later work she never tried to frighten anyone into it. Livingstone says that she never sought to bring anyone into the Kingdom, as she had come, "by the process of shock and fear." The girl who had been frightened into faith grew into a woman who drew others by kindness.

So the story of Mary Slessor begins not with courage but with fear, and not with a strong father but with a broken one. It begins in a poor and anxious home, where a mother prayed through Saturday nights and a daughter ran to the pawnbroker by back streets. God had not given her an easy start. He had given her a mother who loved Calabar, a heavenly Father who could be trusted when her earthly father could not, and a hard school in which to learn endurance. The next lesson would be the loom.

Fourteen Years at the Loom

"It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth."
— Lamentations 3:27, ASV

The Half-Timer

Dundee in the 1860s was a city of chimneys. Its mills and weaving-sheds spun and wove flax and jute into sailcloth, sacking, and canvas for half the world, and they ran on the labour of women and children. Men's wages were low and men's work was uncertain, and in many families it was the mother and daughters who kept the house going. The Slessors were one of those families.

At the age of eleven, Mary went to work at Baxter Brothers, one of the largest textile firms in the city. She became what was called a half-timer. The law then allowed children to work in the factories only if they spent part of each day at school, so she worked half the day and went to the school attached to the works for the other half. When she was put on full time she went to school at night instead. For a while she moved to the Rashiewell factory to learn weaving under her mother, who was also working there, and she tried two other works. By the age of about fourteen she was back at Baxter's, where she became a skilled and well-paid weaver.

Livingstone was careful about the word. In Dundee a "mill-girl" was a spinner, and Mary Slessor was not a spinner. She was a weaver, a "factory

girl," and she would have wanted the distinction kept. She worked at the loom, eventually in charge of two wide looms at once, for about fourteen years.

When she brought home her first wages, her mother wept over them and put them away, saying they were too sacred to spend. But they could not stay unspent for long. The family needed every shilling, and before many years had passed Mary's wages were the main support of the home.

Six Till Six

The working day ran from six in the morning to six at night, with an hour for breakfast and an hour for dinner. Mary rose at five to do her share of the housework before she left, and there was more of it waiting when she came home. In the weaving-shed the belts whirred overhead, the shuttles flew, and the noise was so constant and so loud that talking was almost impossible. It was, as Livingstone says, hard and monotonous work, and she was one small figure among thousands.

It would be easy to make this sound picturesque, and it was not. It was the life of the Scottish industrial poor, with its long hours and its tiredness, its crowded rooms and its early deaths. Of Mary's own brothers, the younger Robert died of croup in December 1860, when he was about eight. William, who had become an apprentice blacksmith, died of tuberculosis in April 1870, not yet twenty. Five months later their father died. Mary was twenty-one, and she was now, in all but name, the head of the household.

The verse at the head of this chapter comes from the book of Lamentations, written in the ruins of Jerusalem. It is not a cheerful book, and the verse is not a cheerful sentiment. "It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth." The poet does not pretend the yoke is light. He says

that it is good, because of what it teaches: to sit alone and keep silence, to wait quietly, to hope in God when there is nothing else to hope in. Mary Slessor did not choose her yoke. It was put on her by her father's drinking and her family's poverty. But when she later found herself alone in an African forest, with fever in her bones and no one to help her, she had already learned to work while exhausted, to make do, and to keep going. The loom had made her hard and patient.

A Book on the Loom

She came out of the factory schools with little more than reading and simple arithmetic, and almost no knowledge of the world. The only books she had read were from the Sunday school library. But her mind was waking up, and she was hungry to learn. She began to take time from her sleep to read. She carried a book to the factory and laid it open on the loom, glancing at it when the work allowed. She read on her way to work and on her way home, walking through the grey streets with her head down over a page. Livingstone compares her to David Livingstone, the explorer, who as a boy in the cotton mill at Blantyre had propped a book on his spinning-jenny. The comparison is his, but it would not have displeased her.

She read above all the Bible. Once a girl asked her for something to read, and Mary handed her own Bible, saying, "Take that; it has made me a changed lassie." She read it, Livingstone says, not as a duty but as a letter addressed to herself, full of news about the God who had loved her. The psalmist's words were true for her in a literal way: "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, And light unto my path" (Psalm 119:105, ASV). She walked a dark road every morning, and she walked it reading.

Her Mother's Sayings

Her real school was the Church. From the Sunday school she went on to the Bible class, and she brought home the questions that puzzled her and put them to her mother. Mrs. Slessor did not always find them easy to answer. "Is baptism necessary for salvation, mother?" Mary asked once. Her mother thought, and said that the Bible says he that repents and is baptised shall be saved, but it does not say that he that repents and is not baptised shall be damned.

Some of her mother's sayings stayed with Mary all her life. "When one duty jostles another, one is not a duty," she was told. It is a piece of hard-won wisdom from a woman who had more duties than strength, and her daughter would one day need it badly, when the claims of her family at home and her work in Africa pulled against each other. Another saying was a kind of prayer: "Thank God for what you receive: thank God for what you do not receive: thank God for the sins you are delivered from; and thank God for the sins that you know nothing at all about, and are never tempted to commit." It is not hard to hear in the last phrase the voice of a wife who knew exactly what temptation had done to her husband.

Mary's friends noticed something in her even then. A younger girl in the Bible class, the daughter of an elder, remembered going early to meet her so as to walk with her to the class, drawn by her goodness and her kind ways.

Work as unto the Lord

Paul wrote to the slaves at Colossae, men and women whose work belonged to someone else, "whatsoever ye do, work heartily, as unto the Lord, and not unto men" (Colossians 3:23, ASV). He was not telling them that their

condition was good. He was telling them that even labour they had not chosen could be offered to God. The weavers of Dundee were not slaves. But many of them had as little choice about their work as Mary had, and the Church that taught them this verse was teaching them that their lives were not wasted.

She was not wasted. The fourteen years at the loom gave her a body that could endure, a will that did not give up, and a working woman's understanding of the poor that never left her. It gave her, too, the habit of supporting her family, which would shape her decisions for the next twenty years. She would send most of her missionary salary home to her mother and sisters, and would live on African food because she could not afford anything else. And it gave her a way of looking at people. When she stood years later in an African village, surrounded by women carrying loads on their heads and babies on their backs, she did not look down on them as a lady looks at labourers. She had been a labourer herself.

Taming the Roughs

"And the common people heard him gladly."
— Mark 12:37, ASV

Wishart Church

Outside the factory, Mary Slessor's life was the Church. She went to the Sabbath morning fellowship meeting and the week-night prayer meetings. She taught a Sunday school class of what she called "lovable lassies," and she added, looking back on it, "I had the impudence of ignorance then in special degree surely." She took a monthly tract paper, the *Monthly Visitor*, round the homes of the district. However tired she was after ten hours at the loom, she was not absent from any meeting. "We would as soon have thought of going to the moon as of being absent from a service," she wrote shortly before she died. "And we throve very well on it too."

Wishart Church stood in the middle of a slum. Narrow arched passages, called pends, led off the Cowgate into tall tenements with stone stairs climbing outside the buildings to landings and crowded rooms. Out of these dark courts poured crowds of boys and girls who ran the streets day and night with no one to govern them. Mary loved them, Livingstone says, in spite of their roughness. When the church decided to open a mission for them, and took a room at 6 Queen Street, nearly opposite one of the worst of the pends, she volunteered to teach.

The Roughs

It was dangerous work. The older boys came to the meetings to wreck them. "That little room," she wrote later, "was full of romantic experiences," and she remembered how some of the older men on the mission staff would surround the "smaller individuals," herself among them, when they left at night and faced the crowd outside. One of those men was J. H. Smith, who became her lifelong friend and counsellor. When the mission grew, it moved into a shop under the church, and she had charge of classes for boys and girls on Sundays and weeknights. She and a few others tried preaching in the open air, and the roughs pelted them with mud.

From these years comes the best-known story of her youth. Livingstone tells it without naming a witness, and it rests, as far as we know, on her own later telling. A gang had decided to break up the mission. One night they closed in around her in the street. Their leader had a lead weight tied to a length of cord, and he swung it round her head, closer and closer. She stood still. The weight grazed her forehead, and she did not flinch. At last he let it drop. "She's game, boys," he said, and the whole gang followed her into the meeting. Years later, Livingstone adds, a photograph of a man with his wife and family hung on the wall of her house in the African bush. It was the young man who had swung the lead. He had done well in life, and he had sent her the picture in gratitude.

Livingstone tells a second story, of a bully who stood outside the hall with a whip, driving the younger lads into "Mary Slessor's meeting" but refusing to go in himself. She asked him what would happen if they changed places. He said he would get the whip across his back. She turned her back to him and said she would bear it for him if he would go in. He threw down the whip, went in, and gave himself to Christ that day.

These are good stories, and later books have added names and details to them that no source contains. It is fair to tell them as Livingstone told them, as stories she and her friends remembered, without claiming more certainty for them than they have. What is not in doubt is the kind of courage they describe. It was not the courage of someone who felt no fear. Throughout her life Mary Slessor was afraid of crowds, afraid of speaking in public, and afraid of cows in fields. It was the courage of someone who stayed where she was when she wanted to run. The mission in Queen Street was her first training for the forests of Calabar.

One of Themselves

A new congregation in the city, Victoria Street United Presbyterian Church, started a Sunday morning service for young people under a layman named James Logie. Mary offered to help as a monitor. Logie saw her ability, and they became close friends. He was the kind of friend a poor young woman rarely finds, a man with education and standing who took her seriously and wanted her to succeed. "He is the best earthly friend I have," she wrote. For the rest of his life he looked after her money affairs.

Before the Sunday meetings she would go through the dark passages of the tenements, knocking on doors, waking the lads, and pleading with them to come. They adored her, Livingstone says, with a shy loyalty, and many of them changed. She visited their homes, and she went "not as one who was superior to the inmates, but as one of themselves." She would sit down by the fire and nurse a baby, or take a cup of tea at the table. Paul wrote of his own ministry, "To the weak I became weak, that I might gain the weak: I am become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22, ASV). Mary Slessor did not have to become

poor to reach the poor of Dundee. She was one of them already, and she never forgot it.

She was criticised for being unconventional. On Saturday afternoons she would take her class of rough boys out of the city into the countryside, which respectable church workers did not do. She loved the green fields, and she thought the boys should see them. It is a small thing, but it is the first sign of a pattern that would run through her whole life. When she thought something was right and useful, she did it, and she let other people worry about whether it was proper.

Learning to Think

She read everything she could borrow. Not all of it suited her. One book much admired in Scottish homes was Philip Doddridge's *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*, which urged its readers to practise meditation. A friend found her looking gloomy and asked what was the matter. "I canna meditate," she said, "and Doddridge says it is necessary for the soul. If I try to meditate my mind just goes a' roads." Her friend told her not to worry about meditation, but to go and work, "for that's what God means us to do." She took the advice. It was a lesson in knowing herself. Some Christians are made for quiet contemplation, and she was not. Her prayer would always be the prayer of a busy woman, spoken in the middle of the work.

Another friend, wanting to test her, lent her Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, a difficult book. When he asked her about it, she said it was grand. She had sat up reading it and had not noticed the time until she heard the factory bells calling her to work in the morning. From then on her reading grew wider and deeper. She learned to argue with the freethinkers she met on her visits, and she learned to write. Papers she read at the church's

fellowship association were remembered for their good sense and their fervour. Her style, Livingstone says, was formed by the Bible.

The Common People

She was often asked to speak at meetings in other parts of the city, and she dreaded it. Once a friend went with her to such a meeting, but she could not be persuaded to go up onto the platform. Instead she sat in the middle of the hall among the people and gave a quiet talk on the words of the verse at the head of this chapter: "And the common people heard him gladly." Her friend wrote that the common people heard her gladly too, and crowded round her afterwards to ask her to come back.

It is fitting that this is the first Bible text we know she spoke on. Mark says that when Jesus taught in the temple, the religious experts argued with him, but the ordinary crowd listened with delight. He spoke their language. He told stories about sheep and coins and bread. He did not stand above them. Mary Slessor would spend her life among people whom the respectable world despised, and she would find, again and again, that they heard the gospel more gladly than the respectable did.

She was still shy. She would be shy all her life. But she had found that she did not need a platform. She could speak sitting down, among the people, in their own words. It was a way of speaking that would carry her into the yards of African chiefs and the huts of outcast women, and it began in a hall in Dundee, where a factory girl sat in the middle of the crowd and talked about Jesus. "For God gave us not a spirit of fearfulness; but of power and love and discipline" (2 Timothy 1:7, ASV). She was not free of fear. But she was learning that fear did not have to decide what she did.

"Pray for Me!"

"And I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then I said, Here am I; send me."
— Isaiah 6:8, ASV

A Mission Born in Jamaica

The mission to which Mary Slessor gave her life did not begin in Scotland. It began in Jamaica, among people who had been slaves.

Many of the enslaved Africans brought to the Caribbean had been shipped from the Bight of Biafra, and a great number of them passed through Calabar. When slavery ended in the British colonies in the 1830s, the freed people of Jamaica had not forgotten the land their parents had come from. Many had become Christians through Scottish and other missionaries, and they began to ask whether the gospel that had come to them in their captivity might be taken back to Africa. The Scottish missionaries in Jamaica took up the idea, and a small number of them offered to go.

A link with Calabar came through a ship's surgeon named Ferguson, who had once been wrecked on a slaving ship near the coast and had been kindly treated by the people there. Later, as a Christian living in Liverpool, he used the captains of trading vessels to ask whether the rulers of Calabar would receive missionaries. An invitation came back in 1843, from the king

and chiefs of the Efik towns, offering land and a welcome. In 1846 the Rev. Hope Masterton Waddell, an Irish-born minister who had served in Jamaica, led a small party to Calabar. It included men and women from Jamaica of African descent. The mission they founded in Duke Town and Creek Town was taken over the next year by the new United Presbyterian Church of Scotland, and it was this Church that Mary's mother followed so eagerly in the pages of the *Missionary Record*.

It is worth remembering that beginning. Later histories of the mission often made it sound as if Scotland brought light to a dark land on its own initiative. In fact the mission was first imagined by freed African Jamaicans, invited by African rulers, and carried out with the help of both. Mary Slessor inherited that story, and in her own way she carried it on.

The Death of a Brother

Mary's mother once heard the Rev. William Anderson, a veteran of the Calabar mission, speak in Dundee about the needs of Old Calabar, and she was so moved that she longed to give her son John to the work. John was a gentle boy, much loved by Mary. But his health failed. He was advised to seek a warmer climate, and he emigrated to New Zealand, where he died soon after landing. His mother, Livingstone says, felt the loss of her hope for him even more than his death.

For Mary, John's death was a bitter grief, and it turned her thoughts towards the mission field. Could she take her brother's place? She told no one. For some time the thought floated in her mind, unspoken, until it slowly became a purpose. She sometimes considered the Church's mission in South Africa, but her heart always came back to Calabar.

She knew what people said about the place. West Africa was called the white man's grave. Fever killed Europeans there with frightening speed, and

the graveyards of the coastal missions were full of young men and women who had not lasted a year. One of her fellow students later remembered her answer when people asked her why she wanted to go. Calabar, she said, was the post of danger, and therefore the post of honour. Few would volunteer for it, and so she wanted to go, because the Master needed someone there.

1874

Early in 1874 the news reached Britain that David Livingstone had died in the heart of Africa. His body was carried to the coast by his African companions and brought home to be buried in Westminster Abbey. The whole country was moved, and a wave of missionary enthusiasm followed. For Mary Slessor it was the moment to act.

She thought through her situation carefully. Her sisters were now working and could contribute to the home. If she became a missionary, she believed she could still send money back to support her mother. She did not realise how much that decision would cost her in the years to come, but she made it with her eyes open. She would go to Africa, and she would go on helping her family. For the rest of her mother's life she did both.

When she finally spoke to her mother, Mrs. Slessor gave a glad consent. Some of her church friends were lukewarm. James Logie and J. H. Smith encouraged her. Logie, who soon joined the Church's Foreign Mission Committee, promised to look after her affairs while she was away. To save money for the change, she took on two sixty-inch looms at the factory, hard work for anyone.

In May 1875 she offered herself to the Foreign Mission Board of the United Presbyterian Church. Her heart was set on Calabar, but she was so anxious to be accepted that she said she would go anywhere. Women had been part of the Calabar mission since its early years, and the Board had

found them, in its own rather chilly phrase, "economical and effective." More were needed. She was accepted as a teacher for Calabar and told to go on with her studies in Dundee. In December the Board decided to bring her to Edinburgh for three months of special preparation.

On the night before she left Dundee, in March 1876, a friend found her standing at the mouth of the close where she lived, in tears. "Good-bye," she said. And then, with passion, "Pray for me!"

Edinburgh

She arrived in Edinburgh lonely and shy, and found her way first to Darling's Temperance Hotel, where a small service of worship was held every evening. She lodged with a city missionary, Robert Martin, and became friends with his daughter Mary, and through her with another young woman, Mary Doig. She went to live with the Doig family, who treated her as one of their own. A married daughter, Mrs. M'Crindle, became a friend for life. In later years it was to Mrs. M'Crindle's house that the tired missionary came first when she returned on furlough.

She attended the Normal School, where teachers were trained, though she was never formally enrolled and her name does not appear in its registers. She was never, in the modern sense, a trained teacher. What she had was a working woman's intelligence, a wide if irregular reading, and a gift for people.

In the evenings she worked in the city missions with her two friends. At one of them, in the High Street, she gave her first address to a meeting of women. A friend remembered it long afterwards. It was on the question Pilate asked the crowd: "What then shall I do unto Jesus who is called Christ?" (Matthew 27:22, ASV). Christ, she told the women, was standing before them as surely as he had stood before Pilate. "Dear women," she

said, "you must do something with Him: you must reject Him or you must accept Him. What are you going to do?" She said nothing about hell-fire. She put the question to their reason and left it with them.

Her two friends came under her influence. Both offered themselves to the Church for missionary work and were accepted for China. The three Marys, as people called them, spoke at meetings together before they sailed for their different fields. In July the Committee declared itself satisfied with her preparation. Her salary was fixed at sixty pounds a year.

Here Am I

The verse at the head of this chapter comes from Isaiah's vision in the temple. He saw the Lord high and lifted up, and heard the seraphim crying, "Holy, holy, holy." His first response was not courage but dread: "Woe is me! for I am undone." Only after his lips had been touched with a coal from the altar did he hear the question, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And then he answered, "Here am I; send me."

That is the right order. The call to go does not begin with a person's gifts or courage, but with God's holiness and mercy. Mary Slessor was not a heroine when she offered herself for Calabar. She was a factory worker of twenty-six, poorly educated, frightened of public speaking, carrying the weight of a family she could not abandon. What she had was a sense that God had loved her, and that she owed him everything. Jesus told his disciples, "The harvest indeed is plenteous, but the laborers are few. Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he send forth laborers into his harvest" (Matthew 9:37-38, ASV). She had prayed that prayer in Dundee. Now she was the answer to it.

Scores of Casks

She sailed from Liverpool on 5 August 1876 on the steamer *Ethiopia*. Two friends from Dundee went with her to the docks. As they stood on the quay they watched cargo being loaded into the ship, and much of it was casks of spirits for the West African trade.

"Scores of casks!" she said ruefully. "And only one missionary!"

It was a joke, but it was also a judgement, and it named something she would fight for the rest of her life. The same ships that carried missionaries to Africa carried gin and rum by the ton, and much of it came from Christian countries. The daughter of Robert Slessor knew what drink did to a home. She was about to discover what it did to a whole people.

Learning Calabar

"therefore thus saith the Lord Jehovah, Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner-stone of sure foundation: he that believeth shall not be in haste."
— Isaiah 28:16, ASV

Arrival

The voyage was a delight to her in most ways. She had spent her whole life inside the walls of a factory and a tenement, and now there was sunshine, sea, and space. Her one grievance was that no service was held on board on Sundays. "My very heart and flesh cried out for the courts of God's house," she wrote. Some of the crew told her not to worry: there was always a Sabbath in Calabar.

In September 1876 the *Ethiopia* entered the wide, muddy estuary of the Cross and Calabar rivers. Mangrove swamps lined the banks. On the islands she could see the ruins of the barracoons, the pens where enslaved people had once been held to wait for the ships. Some fifty miles from the sea the steamer turned into the Calabar River, and at last anchored off Duke Town. On the hill above the town stood the buildings of the mission. Canoes swarmed out to meet the ship, and she stepped down into the mission boat and went ashore.

The World of the Efik

Calabar in 1876 was not part of any European empire. Britain had a consul on the coast and regarded the region as within its sphere of influence, but it governed nothing. The towns along the river were ruled by their own people, the Efik, who had grown rich for two centuries as middlemen in trade with Europe, first in slaves and then, after the slave trade ended, in palm oil. Duke Town, Creek Town, Old Town, and Henshaw Town were in effect small trading states, each with its ruling families and its great Houses.

Mary quickly learned that these were not lawless people. Their society was ordered by laws and customs as powerful as any in Europe. The basic unit was the House, a large household under a master or chief, with his wives, children, and slaves. Slaves could rise to positions of wealth and trust, but they could also be sold or killed at their master's will. Anyone outside the protection of a House was at the mercy of Ekpe, called Egbo by Europeans, a powerful men's society that made and enforced law. Its masked messengers could come out suddenly with whips, and women found in the streets could be flogged and stripped. Livingstone admits that Egbo "had a certain power for good" as well, and was often used to keep order.

She also learned that the people had a religion of their own, far more complex than she had expected. They believed in a high God, but lived in fear of spirits, witchcraft, and the dead. Sickness and death were not thought to be natural. When someone died, someone else was to blame, and the blame was settled by ordeal, especially by making the accused drink a poison made from the Calabar bean. When a great man died, slaves and wives might be killed to go with him into the spirit world.

She saw early what this meant for Christian converts. If a man with several wives became a Christian, what was to happen to the wives? If a slave-owner was converted, what was to happen to the slaves? The missionaries were not simply preaching to individuals. They were asking people to step out of a whole social system that held their lives together. Mary concluded, Livingstone says, that the missionary must help to create "a new set of conditions" in which converts could actually live. It was a thought that shaped the rest of her life.

A Church After Thirty Years

The mission had been at work for thirty years, and the results were modest. There were 174 communicant members in all the congregations, though more than a thousand people attended Sunday services. The staff was small: a handful of Scottish ministers and teachers, one African ordained minister, and eighteen African agents. They worked in five stations along the rivers.

But Mary was impressed. She heard African Christians sing the hymns of her childhood in their own language, and heard one of them preach with eloquence and power. At Creek Town she heard King Eyo Honesty VII speak at a congregational meeting. He was a Christian, who led worship in his own town, and she liked him at once. When she told him that her mother in Dundee followed the mission's affairs with great interest, he was so pleased that he wrote to Mrs. Slessor, and the two corresponded: an African king and a poor widow in a Scottish tenement, brought together by the gospel.

Her first address in Africa was given under a tree, beside a small spirit-house built for a dead man and stocked with food for his ghost. An African agent of the mission, John Baillie, spoke first in Efik, then turned to her and asked whether she had anything to say. She could hardly speak. She asked

him to read the fifth chapter of John, the story of the man who had lain by the pool for thirty-eight years, and as he read, her thoughts cleared. She spoke through him as interpreter about the people's need of healing, and asked them the question Jesus asked the sick man, which she knew in the words of her King James Bible: "Wilt thou be made whole?" The version used in this book renders it, "Wouldest thou be made whole?" (John 5:6, ASV). It was the question she would put, in one form or another, to everyone she met for the next forty years.

Not in Haste

She was impatient. She wanted to see results. "It is difficult to wait," she said. But she wrote in those early months some words that could stand over her whole life:

> *Christ never was in a hurry. There was no rushing forward, no anticipating, no fretting over what might be. Every day's duties were done as every day brought them, and the rest was left with God.*

She added a verse, and it is the verse at the head of this chapter: "He that believeth shall not make haste," in the words she knew. In Isaiah it is God's promise of a foundation stone laid in Zion, a stone that has been tested and will not give way. Those who trust in it do not need to run. The first Christians saw in that stone a picture of Christ. For Mary Slessor, a woman who by nature wanted everything done at once, it became a discipline. She would spend almost forty years in Calabar, and she would see very little of the harvest. She needed to learn early that the work was built on a foundation she had not laid, and that it did not depend on her speed.

Learning Efik

She was determined to learn the language properly. She had already seen how untrustworthy interpretation could be. She was told of an interpreter who, translating a sermon on the rich man and Lazarus, remarked to the audience that for his own part he would rather be the rich man. She learned Efik by ear, from the people, more than from books, and she learned it so well that visitors in later years said she spoke it better than many Efik did. The inspectors who visited the mission in 1881 and 1882 put her influence down largely to "the singular ease with which she spoke the language."

She lived at first with the senior missionaries on Mission Hill, the Rev. William Anderson and his wife, whom everyone called Daddy and Mammy Anderson. Mammy Anderson was a formidable woman who, as Livingstone puts it, ruled the town from the mission house. One of Mary's duties was to ring the bell for morning prayers before dawn. Once or twice she overslept and was scolded. Once she woke in a panic to a room flooded with light, rushed out and rang the bell, and discovered it was the moon. She claimed to have climbed every tree worth climbing between Duke Town and Old Town, and she was often late for meals. When she was sent to bed without food, Daddy Anderson smuggled her biscuits and bananas.

Another friend of those days was Mammy Fuller, a Black Jamaican woman who had come to Calabar in 1858 as a nurse with a missionary family and stayed. She could remember the day slavery ended in the West Indies. Someone once said to her, "Mammy, I believe you would say a good word about the devil himself." "Well," she replied, "at any rate he minds his own business." She would outlive Mary and stand at her grave.

The Man Selling Rum

Livingstone reconstructs, in the present tense, a Sunday she spent visiting in Duke Town. She talked with a father whose only child had died, and who was more troubled by the thought that an enemy had bewitched the child than by the death itself. She sat with women in crowded yards, some listening, some mocking, and she met a girl being fattened in seclusion for her marriage. She concluded that the women were "the greatest problem in the Mission Field."

In the poorest part of the town she came on a group of men selling rum. When she spoke against the drink, one of them answered her in the pidgin of the coast: "What for white man bring them rum suppose them rum no be good? He be god-man bring the rum, then what for god-man talk so?" Why did the white men bring the rum, if it was bad? It was God's people who brought it. So why did God's people speak against it?

Livingstone says simply, "She cannot answer the man." She could not. The trade spirit that poured into West Africa came from Europe, much of it from countries that called themselves Christian, and it did terrible harm. The man had seen straight through the contradiction. It was a lesson she never forgot, and it gave her an anger against the liquor trade that lasted all her life.

An old woman in one of the poorest huts told her, "I have prayed and prayed till there is no breath left in me. God does not answer. He does not care." Mary asked her whom she prayed to. "I don't know," she said, "but I call Him God." Mary sat with her and spoke to her of the God who did care.

Old Town

The climate soon broke her early confidence. She had fever again and again, and once she came close to death. In one illness, half-conscious, she thought she had lost her faith in God; when she came to herself she realised that she had given herself into his keeping and need not fear. She grew homesick. "I want my home and my mother," she wrote. In June 1879, after less than three years, she went home on her first furlough. Before she returned she asked the Committee to send her anywhere but Duke Town. In October 1880 she came back to Calabar, and found to her joy that she was to be in charge of Old Town. She was, she felt, a real missionary at last.

At the entrance to Old Town a human skull hung on a pole. She lived in a house of wattle and mud with a mat roof, with a young woman and several boys and girls in her household. On Sundays she walked a circuit of the villages of Qua, Akim, and Ikot Ansa, holding services under trees and in chiefs' yards, and came back for Sunday school and an evening service in the chief's yard at Old Town, where a white cloth was spread on a table with a lamp and a Bible.

It was at Old Town that she began to live on local food, and her colleagues thought it was because she preferred to live like the people. Livingstone tells us the real reason. Boarding with the other missionaries was expensive, and she was sending a large part of her salary home to her mother and sisters. She could not afford to live as the other women did, so she ate what the people ate. She was, Livingstone says, "too loyal to her home and too proud of spirit to reveal the reason." The simple way of life that later became part of her legend began as poverty, kept secret out of pride.

Twins

At Old Town she came face to face with the custom that would become the great cause of her life. Among the Efik, as among many peoples of the region, the birth of twins was a disaster. It was believed that one of the children must have been fathered by an evil spirit, and that the mother had committed some terrible sin. The babies were killed, often by being crushed into a pot and carried out through a hole broken in the back wall of the house, and left in the bush. The mother was driven out to live alone.

It is important to be accurate about what Mary Slessor found. She was not the first to oppose the custom. The Efik rulers of Calabar, working with the British consul, had agreed to ban the killing of twins as early as 1849 and 1851, and the agreements had been renewed since. The missionaries had been rescuing twins since 1852, and some mission houses, Livingstone says, "were alive with babies." But laws do not change beliefs. The killing went on secretly in the towns and openly in the countryside. Livingstone adds that Mary "could even see how, from the native point of view, it was essential for the safety of the House, but her heart was hot against it."

She understood, too, why the babies of slave mothers who died were thrown away. No slave woman could afford to raise another woman's child, who would belong to the master once grown. She wrote to the Committee asking that one woman missionary be set aside just to care for rescued children. "If such a crowd of twins should come to her as I have to manage," she said, "she would require to devote her whole time to them." An old chief, watching the women missionaries at work, gave his verdict: "them women be the best man for the Mission."

A Storm and a Flogging

She began to travel. A chief named Okon, living in exile across the estuary, begged her to visit his people, and she went in a state canoe with thirty-three paddlers, who sang songs in her honour through the night. She spent two weeks in his compound, sleeping in a room that opened onto the women's yard, treating the sick and holding services morning and evening.

While she was there, two young wives of a chief were caught having gone at night into a yard where a young man was sleeping, and two other girls who had known and said nothing were accused with them. The men decided that each should receive a hundred lashes. Mary went to Okon, who said that if she forbade it they would listen to her, but people would say that God's word destroyed the power of the law. So she did something characteristic. At a public meeting she first told the girls that they had done wrong and that she could not shelter them from punishment. Then she turned on the men. "It is your system of polygamy," she said, "which is a disgrace to you and a cruel injustice to these helpless women. Girls like these, sixteen years old, are not beyond the age of fun and frolic." After long argument, the punishment was reduced to ten strokes each, with none of the salt and mutilation that normally followed. Mary nursed the girls afterwards and gave them an opiate for the pain.

It is not a comfortable story. She did not stop the flogging; she bargained it down. She had gone, Livingstone says, "as far as she dared." But it shows the way she would work for the rest of her life: respecting the people's sense of law, confronting its injustice to the weak, and settling for the best that could actually be won.

On the way home a storm struck the canoe. The crew panicked and the chief was helpless, and she took command, got the canoe into the shelter of

the bush, and sat with water up to her knees and the children tied to her under a waterproof sheet. She reached Old Town shaking with fever.

Towards the end of 1882 a tornado wrecked her house at Old Town. She was brought to Duke Town so ill that she was sent home, and in the spring of 1883 she was carried on board the ship, too weak to walk. With her she took a baby girl, one of a pair of twins. She had rescued both, but while she was out of the house the relatives had come, taken the boy by a trick, and killed him. She was determined that the girl would live. The child's name was Atim Eso. In Scotland she would be baptised Janie.

Bereft

"Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides thee. My flesh and my heart faileth; But God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever."
— Psalm 73:25-26, ASV

Janie

Mary spent most of her second time at home with her mother and sisters at Downfield, a village on the edge of Dundee to which she had moved them on her first furlough. She saw few people, and gave most of her time to nursing the baby she had brought from Calabar. The little girl was baptised in the Sunday school of Wishart Church and given the name Janie, after Mary's youngest sister. In later records she appears as Janie Annan Slessor. She was the first of Mary's African children, and she would be with her, with one short interval, until the end of her life.

It is worth pausing on what it meant to bring a rescued twin to Scotland in 1883. In Calabar the child was believed to be accursed, and the woman who carried her was taking on a share of that curse. In Dundee she was a curiosity, a "living illustration," as Livingstone puts it, of the work of the mission. Mary took Janie with her to the meetings where she spoke, and audiences were deeply moved. It is easy to be uneasy about that today. But the child was loved, and she was alive. Her brother was not.

A Recruit

On a visit to her old friends the Doigs in Edinburgh, Mary met a young woman named Jessie Hogg, who worked in the same city mission where Mary had helped before she sailed. Jessie had heard a great deal about her and was eager to meet her. Within five minutes Mary turned to her and asked, "And what are you doing at home? What is hindering you from going to the mission field?" "There is nothing to hinder me," Jessie said. "Then come," said Mary; "there is a good work waiting for you to do." Jessie Hogg applied, was accepted, and reached Calabar before Mary did. She served there for thirteen years and became one of the women the Africans called the mothers of the mission.

A letter Mary wrote at this time to a friend in Dundee shows how she thought about working among the poor. It is one of the clearest statements of her convictions that survives:

> *Nothing, I believe, will ever touch or raise fallen ones except sympathy. They shrink from self-righteousness which would stoop to them, and they hate patronage and pity. Of sympathy and patience they stand in need.*

She went on to say that the poor also needed teaching, real knowledge of the Bible as a whole, not only the favourite passages used at evangelistic meetings. "I am pained often at home," she wrote, "that there is so little of depth, and of God's word, in the speeches and addresses I hear." The factory girl who had been scolded for her lack of education had become a woman who thought the Church often underestimated what ordinary people could understand.

No Men in the Room

In January 1884 she told the Committee that she was well and ready to go back. The women of Glasgow, however, asked that she be kept at home for a while to speak to women's meetings around the country, and for some months she travelled and spoke. She found it an ordeal. She was so shy that it was often simply impossible for her to open her mouth if men were present, and she would make it a condition that there be none in the audience. When a distinguished minister had been asked to chair the meeting, the problem was usually solved by putting him somewhere behind her, out of sight. Livingstone says these meetings taxed her strength more than the work in Africa.

In December the Committee gave her permission to return, and decided to send her, for the time being, to Creek Town.

Cut Adrift

Then her youngest sister, Janie, fell seriously ill. The doctors said that only a milder climate would save her. Mary was torn between her sister and her work, and she came up with a plan she would never have proposed for herself. She wrote to the Committee early in 1885 that she could not go to Creek Town unless she was allowed to take her sister with her, and to build a small mud house where the two of them could live apart from the other missionaries. By living on local food, she explained, she could go on supporting her family.

The Committee, as Livingstone puts it, received the proposal "with a certain mild astonishment," and refused it. It is not hard to see why. A sick young woman from Dundee would hardly have recovered her health in Calabar. Mary then took the advice of a lady from Exeter and moved her

sister to the south of England. She wrote to the Committee asking whether, if she were free to come back later, she would be allowed to, or whether she must consider herself finally separated from the mission. The Committee replied kindly. It regretted her troubles, said it would welcome her offer of service again, and continued her home allowance until the end of April. Mary thanked them, and accepted the allowance only until the end of February. She would not take money for work she was not doing. For a time she had cut herself adrift from the service of the Church.

She settled her sister at Topsham, a small town on the estuary of the Exe in Devon, in a house found for her by a deacon of the Congregational church. The records of that church show the family living at 48 The Strand in 1885. Her mother came south to join them. Janie began to improve. Mary joined in the life of the Congregational church and spoke at its meetings about Calabar.

Then another blow fell. Her sister Susan, a dressmaker in Scotland, died suddenly in Edinburgh in April 1885. Livingstone says she collapsed as she entered the house of Mary's friend Mrs. M'Crindle. It was Mary who registered the death. She was now earning nothing, and she alone had to provide for her mother, her invalid sister, and the African child.

"I Have Given You Back to Him"

She needed to go back to work. Before she applied, she told her mother that she wanted to go up-country, into the unreached interior, if the opportunity ever came, and asked whether her mother would let her. Mrs. Slessor's answer stayed with her all her life. "You are my child, given to me by God, and I have given you back to Him. When He needs you and where He sends you, there I would have you be."

The Committee reinstated her gladly. There was talk of a new advance into the interior, and in the meantime she was to go to Creek Town. Friends in Topsham promised to look after her mother and sister. Then, a month before she was due to sail, her mother suddenly failed and took to her bed. All Mary's arrangements collapsed. She was, says Livingstone, "like a wild creature at bay." She prayed, and the next day she wrote to an old friend from the factory in Dundee, asking her to come and keep house. The friend came. Mary wrote her long, careful letters of instructions for the journey, forgetting no detail that might make it easier.

Livingstone records one small scene from those last days. On Guy Fawkes' night, when bonfires and fireworks filled the streets, Mary wanted to take her friend to a church meeting, and did not dare to go out among the crowds of rough young men. She was a woman who would soon walk alone into the most feared district of Calabar, and she was afraid of a Devon street on bonfire night. The contradiction is not a flaw in the story. It is the story. Courage, for her, was never the absence of fear.

The Turn of the Year

She sailed in November 1885 and was back in Calabar early in December. On New Year's Day, 1886, she began a long letter to her mother and sister, full of love and cheer and news. She finished it two days later, when the mail from home arrived. "I was hardly able to wait for mine," she wrote, "and then I rushed to my room and behaved like a silly body, as if it had been bad news. It brought you all so clearly before me. At church I sat beside the King and cried quietly into my wrap all the evening." The letter ended, "Tell me all your troubles, and be sure you take care of yourselves."

She never had an answer. Her mother had died at Topsham, peacefully, in December, within weeks of Mary's sailing. Three months later, on 5

March 1886, her sister Janie died too, and was buried beside their mother in Topsham cemetery.

Mary was inconsolable. "I, who all my life have been caring and planning and living for them," she wrote, "am left, as it were, stranded and alone." And again: "There is no one to write and tell all my stories and troubles and nonsense to." She asked hungrily for every detail of the last days, and for keepsakes. "I would like something to look at," she wrote again and again. Even in her grief she remembered to repay the factory friend for the sixpences she had spent on stamps for her letters to Calabar.

On the night she heard of her mother's death, she led her usual prayer meeting. She told no one what had happened. She thought her mother would have wanted her to go on.

Nearer Than Britain

Then she wrote a sentence that tells us more about the next thirty years of her life than any other:

> *Heaven is now nearer to me than Britain, and no one will be anxious about me if I go up-country.*

It is a sentence of grief, and of something harder to name. For twenty years her life had been bound up with the needs of her mother and sisters. She had worked at the loom for them, shaped her missionary life around them, and lived on local food to send money home. Now there was no one to send it to. The ties that had held her to the coast, and to Scotland, were cut. She was free, with the terrible freedom of the bereaved.

The psalm at the head of this chapter was written by a man who had almost lost his faith. He had watched the wicked prosper while the righteous suffered, and it nearly broke him, until he went into the sanctuary

of God and saw things differently. Then he wrote, "Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides thee. My flesh and my heart faileth; But God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever." Mary Slessor was not a psalmist, but she came to the same place by the same road. Her flesh and heart had failed. Everything she had lived for on earth had been taken. What remained was God, and a people who did not yet know him.

Creek Town

She was placed in charge of the women's work at Creek Town, where she lived in part of the house of the veteran missionary Hugh Goldie. It was a season of famine and sickness. She lived on rice and sauce so that she could feed the hungry, and she had more fever than ever before.

Her household was small but lively. Janie, now about four, was "as wild as a boy," and shared Mary's bed, meals, and thoughts. Mary talked to her about the family in Scotland who had died, and the child never stopped praying for "all in Scotland who remember us." One day a man appeared at the mission house, and Mary learned that he was Janie's father. She had been told that both parents were dead. She asked him to come and see his child. He shrugged. "Let me look from a distance," he said. Mary took him by the arm and drew him to the child, who was trembling with fear, and told her in Efik to put her arms round his neck. She did, and hid her face on his chest, and his face softened. After that he walked a long way every other day, with his new wife and a gift of food, to visit her.

There were others in the house: Okin, the son of a slave woman whose mistress wanted him brought up as a Christian; Ekim, the son of the king of Old Town, whose mother had given him to Mary years before; and Inyang, a big, steady girl of thirteen who did the cooking and washing and

was kind to the little ones. There were rescued twins, and a baby whose mother had died after a charm was thrown at her door. When Mary asked the child's owner, a daughter of an old king of Creek Town, to lend a slave woman to nurse it, the answer came back, "Let it die." Livingstone's comment is four words long: "She let it live."

She found comfort in unexpected people. One was an old blind woman in Creek Town, who had nothing in the world except what the mission gave her, and whose hut was open to the rain. "Blind Mary is our one living, bright, clear light," Mary wrote. "She knows the deep things of God. That old hut is like a heaven here to more than me." Another was the king himself. King Eyo became her friend and confidant, and she often sat in his state room advising him on the affairs of his small kingdom and his dealings with the British.

In every letter home she asked for one thing. "Pray for us here," she wrote. "Pray in a business-like fashion, earnestly, definitely, statedly."

Forward

There was talk of sending her to one of the stations on the Cross River. But her mind was fixed elsewhere, on the people inland whom no missionary had reached. She was, says Livingstone, of the same order of spirits as David Livingstone, and she borrowed the explorer's own words: "I am ready to go anywhere, provided it be forward." In October 1886 the mission council in Calabar decided to send her to Okoyong, and informed the Church at home, adding carefully that this was in line with her own desire. The Church agreed.

It would take nearly two more years before she could go. But she had found the comfort Paul describes, the God "who comforteth us in all our affliction, that we may be able to comfort them that are in any affliction,

through the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God" (2 Corinthians 1:4, ASV). She had lost her mother. She was about to become a mother to a great many people.

"Father!"

"Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of good courage; be not affrighted, neither be thou dismayed: for Jehovah thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest."
— Joshua 1:9, ASV

Okoyong

Okoyong was a stretch of forest country lying between the Cross River and the Calabar River, a day's journey inland from Creek Town. Its people had come down generations before from the hills to the east and taken the land by force. They were farmers and hunters, living in scattered clearings under their own chiefs, and they were feared by everyone around them. With the Efik of Calabar they were in a state of more or less permanent feud. Raids, kidnappings, and killings went back and forth, and heads and captured slaves were counted as trophies. British consuls had sent messages to the Okoyong chiefs, and the messages had been ignored.

Livingstone describes Okoyong in the darkest colours his vocabulary allowed, and some of what he says is plainly the race theory of his day. But the practices that troubled Mary were real, and she described them herself. Sickness and death were not believed to be natural, and when a free man fell ill or died, the witch-doctor would name those responsible. They were chained and made to take the ordeal of the poison bean, or of boiling oil

poured over the hands. When a chief died, slaves and wives were killed to accompany him. A few months before she arrived, Livingstone says, a chief of middling rank was buried with eight slave men, eight slave women, ten girls, ten boys, and four of his free wives. After she had lived there some time, she made her own inquiries and estimated that at least a hundred and fifty lives a year were being taken at funerals within twenty miles of her house, and as many again by the ordeal. We cannot check her figures. They were what she believed after careful questioning, and they explain why she went.

There was drink everywhere. Gin, guns, and chains, Livingstone says, were almost the only goods that came into Okoyong. Babies were given gin. Work was paid for in gin. Fines and debts were settled in gin. Quarrels followed the drinking, and then the guns came out, and after the guns the chains.

The mission had tried before. One missionary exploring the district had been seized and held for a ransom of rum, and escaped with difficulty. An African teacher from Calabar had settled there, and had been driven out after a shooting. When the Okoyong heard about the new laws in Calabar, Livingstone says, they were amazed. Killing for witchcraft forbidden? Then what was being done to stop witchcraft from killing? Twins and their mothers taken to Duke Town? Had no disaster followed? To them the reforms of the coast looked like madness.

Three Visits

It took a year of negotiation before Mary could go. Three times she went up with parties from the mission, and each time the people, men, women, and children, came out armed and sullen and promised nothing. She wrote

afterwards, "I had often a lump in my throat, and my courage repeatedly threatened to take wings and fly away, though nobody guessed it!"

In June 1888 she went up once more to settle the arrangements. King Eyo lent her the royal canoe, a hollowed tree-trunk twenty feet long with a shelter of palm leaves, a piece of Brussels carpet, and six pillows. The paddlers were Efik, sworn enemies of the people she was going to meet. As they paddled up the river she thought, "Man can do nothing with such a people," and left the matter with God.

From the landing beach a forest track led four miles inland to a village of mud huts called Ekenge. The people crowded round her and called her "Mother." The chief, Edem, was sober and welcoming. That night she gathered the paddlers for family worship, and the villagers stood watching in wonder as they heard the Efik boys repeat together the words, "God so loved the world." The women kept her talking until late. One of them, the chief's sister, drew her attention. "I think," Mary said, "she will be my friend, and be an attentive hearer of the Gospel." The first half of that hope came true. Her name was Eme Ete, and everyone called her Ma Eme.

At Ifako, a neighbouring village, the chiefs promised her ground for a school. She asked whether the school would be a place of refuge, as the mission buildings in Calabar were, for people accused of witchcraft or marked for death at a funeral. They agreed. She asked whether her own house would be a refuge too. They agreed again. She chose two sites at once, one at Ekenge and one at Ifako, so that the promise would cover as many people as possible.

When her friends in Creek Town saw her packing, they looked at her with pity. They said that nothing on earth would subdue Okoyong except a consul and a gunboat. She smiled and went on packing.

4 August 1888

By the evening of Friday 3 August 1888 everything was ready. She lay down, but did not sleep.

The next morning was grey and pouring with rain. The carriers grumbled and quarrelled. She was tired and low, and was glad to see King Eyo, who had come down himself to see the canoe loaded. Few people wished her well. One young man said to her, with a sob in his voice, "I will constantly pray for you, but you are courting death." Livingstone remarks that it was not great faith for a Christian, but that Mary's own faith that morning was not strong enough for her to criticise him. At the last moment the senior missionary decided that someone should go with her, and the mission printer, Mr. Bishop, stepped into the canoe. With five children from her household, Mary settled into a corner, and the canoe pushed off into the rain.

It was nearly dark when they reached the landing beach, and there were four miles of forest still to walk. She went ahead with the children, to get them fed and asleep, leaving Mr. Bishop and the carriers to follow with the loads. As she faced the forest, dark and loud with the noises of the night, a feeling of helplessness and fear came over her. What would she find at the end? Would the people be fighting, or drinking, or dancing? Livingstone says that her heart "played the coward," and she wanted to turn and run. She tried to pray and could not even move her lips. She could only look up and say, inwardly, one word: "Father!"

It was enough. Paul wrote to the Romans, "ye received not the spirit of bondage again unto fear; but ye received the spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father" (Romans 8:15, ASV). The cry of a frightened child to its father is the most basic prayer there is, and it is the one the Spirit teaches. Mary Slessor had learned to pray for an earthly father who did not change.

Now, alone in the forest at the start of the great work of her life, the only prayer she had was to her heavenly one.

The Procession

Livingstone describes the little procession that walked into Okoyong that night. First came a boy of about eleven with a box of tea, sugar, and bread on his head, his wet clothes clinging to him, his feet slipping in the mud. Behind him was a boy of eight, crying, carrying a kettle and pots. Then a little boy of three, crying loudly, trying to keep up, and a girl of five, sobbing. Last came Mary, with a bundle on one arm and a baby girl riding on her shoulders, pulling herself along by the branches. She was singing nonsense songs to cheer the children, with tears close to her own eyes.

It is hard to imagine a less impressive invasion. Livingstone could not resist the obvious comment, and it is the verse at the head of the preface of this book: God often chooses the weak things of the world to confound the strong.

When they reached Ekenge, the village was silent. Two slaves came out and explained that the chief's mother had died that morning at Ifako, and everyone had gone to the funeral. Mary knew what that might mean: a death in a chief's family was exactly the occasion for killing. She undressed the children, got them to sleep, and sat in her wet clothes to wait.

When Mr. Bishop arrived, it was with bad news. The carriers were exhausted and refused to bring anything up that night. There was no food. The children had nothing dry to wear, and the next day was Sunday. So she sent a boy with a lantern to the beach, asked Mr. Bishop to gather some slaves from the farms as carriers, and went back into the forest herself, without boots or hat. One of the other boys ran after her so that she would not be alone. It was so dark that she kept losing sight of his white clothes,

and she fell again and again. When she reached the river she waded out to the canoe, pulled back the cover under which the paddlers were sleeping, and roused them. By midnight the loads were at Ekenge. Her feet were so badly cut that for six weeks she could not wear boots.

The Saddest Sunday

Her first Sunday in Okoyong, she told friends later, was one of the saddest days she ever spent. She ached all over. It rained without stopping. The village was squalid, the people were at a funeral that might end in killing, and she was more than once close to tears. Livingstone wonders whether her faith had weakened. Perhaps it had. What is certain is that she did not go home. A few women came back from Ifako with fretful babies or to fetch food, and she gathered them together and told them, as simply as she could, about Jesus. Livingstone calls it "the first faint gleam of a better day for Okoyong."

The verse at the head of this chapter was spoken to Joshua at the edge of a land he had to enter. "Be strong and of good courage; be not affrighted, neither be thou dismayed." It is often read as if it describes a brave man. It does not. God does not tell people not to be afraid unless they are afraid. The command came with a reason: "for Jehovah thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest." Joshua's courage was not a feeling. It was trust in a presence. Mary Slessor walked into Okoyong afraid, and she stayed there afraid, on and off, for fifteen years. What kept her there was not that the fear went away, but that she was not alone.

A Room in the Women's Yard

She was given a room in the women's yard of Chief Edem's compound, which had belonged to one of his wives. With her own hands she fitted a door and a window frame, and filled the gaps in the walls with mud. For many weeks this was her home, shared with the three boys and two girls of her household, next to the rooms of the chief and his wives, with two cows on the other side of the partition.

Her work began with a child. In a fight between Okoyong and Calabar, a man from Ekenge had been killed and beheaded. His wife died of the shock, and their baby girl was brought to Mary, starved and weak. People laughed to see the white woman carrying the child about. But the grandmother came and blessed her. For a few days the baby seemed to rally, and then she died. It was the custom to bury infants anywhere near the huts. Mary dressed the little body in white, laid it in a wooden box, covered it with flowers, and buried it in her own ground with prayer, while the grandmother knelt sobbing at her feet. People from Ifako came to watch the white woman's "witchcraft," and said, in effect, "Why this waste?" The words are the ones the disciples used when a woman poured her precious ointment over Jesus. The work in Okoyong began, Livingstone says, with the Christian burial of a little child.

A First Victory, and Its Price

When the people came back from the funeral, they turned on a young man who had stayed behind in the village and been attentive to Mary. They accused him of deserting their customs, and made him take the ordeal of boiling oil. She saw what was happening too late to stop it, and watched the oil poured over his hands.

Soon afterwards a young slave woman, newly bought as a wife by a local master, went into the hut of a male slave at one of the farms and refused to leave, and then walked into the forest and hanged herself. The male slave was brought in chained. The master and his family decided that he must die, since he must have used sorcery to put the thought into her mind, and the witch-doctor had said so. Mary argued that he had done nothing wrong. The crowd grew angry, and people shouted that a stranger who was there only on sufferance had no right to interfere with the dignity of the free-born. Guns and swords were waved in her face. She stood her ground, quiet and patient, and in the end they agreed to spare his life. It was, says Livingstone, her first victory.

But Livingstone, to his credit, does not stop there. The man's life was spared, but he was loaded with chains, starved, flogged, and his body was cut to drive out the sorcery they believed was in him. When Mary went to find him, he was lying unconscious, a bleeding heap, tied to a post, while the women of the yard sat by and took no notice.

That was what victory looked like in Okoyong in 1888. It was real, and it was partial. A life had been saved that would otherwise have been taken, and the price of saving it had been paid in the man's own body. Mary Slessor would win many such victories over the next fifteen years, and very few of them would be clean. She had not come to a place where one brave act would change everything. She had come to a place where the old customs were woven into every part of life, and where the people themselves, as she would later discover, were often as weary of them as she was, and as unable to break free.

Ma Eme

"A friend loveth at all times; And a brother is born for adversity."
— Proverbs 17:17, ASV

Life in the Harem

For many weeks after she arrived, Mary Slessor lived in the women's yard of Chief Edem's compound at Ekenge. Her room was next to that of the chief and his head wife. Five lesser wives lived close by, and other wives, slaves, visitors, and children came and went all day. Goats, fowls, rats, cockroaches, and centipedes were everywhere. At night the three boys of her household slept behind a barrier of boxes, and the two girls shared her side of the room. Every evening her belongings had to be carried outside to make space for everyone to lie down, and since it was the rainy season they had to be dried in the sun each morning.

There was no privacy at all. The wives and their visitors thought it their duty to keep her company, because in Okoyong, as Livingstone puts it, the idea of being alone was terrible, and good manners required that a guest never be left by herself. Mary longed for silence. She wanted a place where she could pray aloud. When she escaped to the patch of ground set apart for her, the women followed her. So she took a machete and hacked at the bush, praying as she worked, so that the noise of the blade covered her voice.

It is one of the most human pictures in the whole of her story: a small, exhausted Scotswoman chopping at the undergrowth in a forest clearing, talking to God at the top of her voice so that nobody would hear.

Eme Ete

The woman who made those months bearable was the chief's sister, Eme Ete, whom Mary had noticed on her first visit. Ma Eme was the widow of a powerful chief. She had just come back from the ceremonies after her husband's death, where all his wives had been under suspicion of having caused it. Each wife had brought a white fowl to the place of trial, and the witch-doctor had cut off its head and judged her guilt or innocence by the way the body fluttered. When Ma Eme was declared innocent, she fainted with the strain.

One day Mary noticed marks on Ma Eme's arms and, showing her own vaccination scar, said that white people had marks like that too. Ma Eme answered simply, "These are the marks of the teeth of my husband." In Okoyong a man could do almost what he liked with his wife.

She was a big woman, fattened in the way that was admired in her society, and with the other women she spoke in the rough manner of the yard. But when she spoke to Mary or the children, Livingstone says, her voice softened. She was a mother to everyone in the compound. She scolded, encouraged, and advised, and when her brother was drunk or in a temper she stood between him and his wives. She brought Mary food and looked after her comfort, and did it, Livingstone says, "with the delicacy and reserve of a well-bred lady." Mary called her "a noble woman, according to her lights and knowledge."

A Secret Ally

What nobody else knew was that Ma Eme had made herself Mary's ally. At the risk of her life she kept Mary informed of everything that was planned in secret: who had been accused, who was chained in a farm hut, when an ordeal was to be held, when a war was about to begin. She became, in Livingstone's phrase, a sort of secret intelligence department.

In later years the two women worked out a signal. If Ma Eme learned that some killing was being planned, she would send a certain bottle to the mission house with a request for medicine. It was a warning that Mary should be ready to act at a moment's notice. On one occasion, Livingstone says, Mary lay down every night for a month without undressing, ready to go out the moment she was called. The first night she allowed herself to undress and sleep properly, the call came, and she went as she was.

The chiefs came to believe that the white woman could read their minds. Much of what looked like second sight was Ma Eme.

It is worth being clear about what this meant. Ma Eme was the sister of the chief. She belonged to one of the leading families of Okoyong, and she had herself been through the ordeals and the fear. She was not a Christian, and she did not become one. She sacrificed to the spirits every day of her life. And yet, again and again, she risked her own safety to warn a foreign woman about plans to kill people accused of witchcraft. We do not know all her reasons. Perhaps she loved Mary. Perhaps she, too, was weary of the killing. Perhaps she knew what it was to stand before the witch-doctor waiting for the verdict. Whatever her reasons, much of the life-saving for which Mary Slessor became famous would have been impossible without her.

The Women of the Yard

Mary saw terrible things in those months. A young wife gave a hired slave a piece of yam as part of his wages while her husband was away, breaking the law of the harem, and was condemned to the ordeal of boiling oil. As the drinking went on, the cords that bound her were tightened for sport until she screamed. Mary went out, faced the crowd, and carried her off, and kept her chained to her own verandah until the dancing ended at dawn, which was the only way to keep her safe.

She also saw the women of the yard at their best. Once a large number of prisoners lay chained in the heat all day, waiting for the poison ordeal. Among them were mothers with babies. At dusk, when the guards left for a while, some of the older women crept up to them with water for the children and the mothers. Mary had had rice cooked in readiness, and the women smuggled that to the prisoners too. If they had been caught, Livingstone says, their lives would have been forfeit.

She did not idealise Okoyong. Some of the things she saw in the harem, she said, she could never describe, and years later the memory of them would still make her flush. "Had I not felt my Saviour close beside me," she said, "I would have lost my reason." She had no patience with people at home who talked about the innocence of those who lived outside civilisation. She told them to go and live for a month in a West African harem. It may have owed as much to a Calvinist's conviction that sin runs through every human society as to the prejudices of her time. She had, after all, grown up with a drunken father in a Dundee slum.

School by Lamplight

She began teaching almost at once, before she had any buildings. At Ifako the school was held on the verandah of a house by the roadside, with lengths of firewood for seats and an alphabet card hung on a post. At Ekenge it was held in the evening, in the chief's outer yard, when the wives and slaves had finished their work. Men and women, old and young, slave and free, crowded in to learn the alphabet and the multiplication table. Then she held worship, standing bareheaded and barefoot beside a small table with a lamp and a Bible on it, while the people sat on the ground in the dark. She taught them to sing the gospel to their own tunes. One day, passing the school, she heard them singing to the melody of an Okoyong war-song:

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.

The Chief's Abscess

Chief Edem had been kind to her from the beginning, and when he fell ill with an abscess on his back she nursed him. One morning she came in with his tea and found a live fowl impaled on a stick, charms hung all round him, and the chief holding out a parcel of shot, powder, teeth, bones, and eggshells that he said had been taken out of his back. Someone had bewitched him. Before her eyes, men and women were named, seized, and chained to posts in the yard.

She argued and pleaded, and the chief grew so irritated that he had himself carried off to one of his farms with the prisoners, and forbade her to follow. But she had her own ways of knowing what was happening, and she

heard that more people were being chained. On New Year's Eve, lying awake homesick with tears in her eyes, she was roused by a deputation from the farm. They had heard that an African minister in Calabar, the Rev. Esien Ukpabio, the first convert of the Calabar mission, knew how to treat such illnesses. Would she write to ask him to come? She wrote at once. Ukpabio refused, because he was told that the trouble was a soul troubling the chief, and he could do nothing about that. But his sister went, and under her care the abscess broke and the chief recovered.

All the prisoners were released except one woman, who was put to death. The chief sent his son to Mary to tell her, before anyone else could, that nobody had been hurt. Only one worthless slave woman, he said, had been sold away. Mary knew it was a lie. She knew the woman had been killed, and she thought of the faces of the three children the woman left behind. But she pretended to believe it. If she had shown that she knew the truth, the chief would have wanted to know how she knew, and scores of people might have been put to the poison ordeal to find her informant. Livingstone does not name the informant. It is hard not to think of Ma Eme.

That was the price of friendship in Okoyong. Mary's knowledge saved lives, but only as long as it was secret. There were times when protecting the one who had told her meant keeping silent about a murder. She did not like it, and she did it.

A Foolish Choice?

The friendship lasted for twenty-five years. Ma Eme's people built the boathouse at the river where Mary kept her canoe. Ma Eme stood beside her in the worst crisis of her early years, as the next chapter will tell. When

the population of Okoyong moved inland in the 1890s, Ma Eme moved away to a distant farm, but they stayed in touch.

In July 1913, near the end of her life, Mary went back to Okoyong for a visit, and Ma Eme came to see her. She was still a devout follower of the old religion. She sacrificed daily to the spirits with food and blood, and she would not touch the twins who had grown up in Mary's house, though she admitted it was a marvel that they had lived. The two old women sat together all day and talked about the past. "Do you remember this?" "Do you remember that?" They talked, Livingstone says, about "the killing time when they worked hand in hand in secret for the preservation of life." Nothing Mary could say would move her friend. At the end of the day Ma Eme went away, as Livingstone puts it, "the same kind, high-bred, mysterious heathen woman that she had always been." She died not long afterwards.

Mary said:

> *My dear old friend and almost sister, she made the saving of life so often possible in the early days. It is sad that she did not come out for Christ. She could have been the honoured leader of God's work had she risen to it. I cannot fancy Okoyong without her. She made a foolish choice, and yet God cannot forget all she was to me, and all she helped me to do in those dark and bloody days.*

Mary Slessor did not pretend that her friend was a Christian. She believed that Christ was the only way to God, and she grieved that Ma Eme had not come to him. She called her choice foolish. But she would not stop there. She knew what Ma Eme had done, and she trusted that God knew it too.

A lawyer once asked Jesus who his neighbour was, and Jesus answered with a story in which the one who stopped to help a wounded man was a Samaritan, a man the lawyer would have regarded as outside the true faith.

Then Jesus asked, "Which of these three, thinkest thou, proved neighbor unto him that fell among the robbers? And he said, He that showed mercy on him. And Jesus said unto him, Go, and do thou likewise" (Luke 10:36-37, ASV). Jesus did not say that the Samaritan's religion was right. He said that his mercy was real, and that it put the religious people to shame.

There is a proper humility for Christians in a friendship like this one. It does not mean pretending that all faiths are the same, which Mary would never have done. It means recognising mercy when we see it, being grateful for it, and leaving to God the things that only God can judge. When Abraham pleaded for the people of Sodom, he asked, "shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Genesis 18:25, ASV). Mary Slessor left her dearest African friend in the hands of that Judge. That is where she belongs in this book too: honoured, grieved over, and left with God.

The Poison Bean

"Judge the poor and fatherless: Do justice to the afflicted and destitute. Rescue the poor and needy: Deliver them out of the hand of the wicked."
— Psalm 82:3-4, ASV

A Carpenter from Edinburgh

In 1889, as far as can be told, a Scottish carpenter named Charles Ovens arrived at Ekenge. He had been working in Edinburgh and was about to go back to America when an elderly woman of the United Presbyterian Church asked him why he did not go to Calabar instead, where a missionary living alone in the bush wanted a man to put in her doors and windows. He changed the address on his luggage and went. He found Mary, he said, without hat or shoes, eating her dinner in the company of goats and hens. He was given a room eight feet by five, and he set to work building her a proper house.

Ovens was a cheerful man who sang Scottish songs in the evenings until she wept with homesickness, and he became one of the most valuable witnesses of her life at Ekenge. It was Ovens who was with her during the crisis that Livingstone calls her greatest battle.

Etim

One morning, as Ovens worked on the house and Mary sat on the verandah watching him, a strange cry came out of the forest. She stood up, listened, and said, "There is something wrong." Then she went off into the trees. A little later a boy came back asking Ovens to come at once and bring something to revive an injured man.

He found her sitting beside a young man lying unconscious on the ground. "It is Etim, the eldest son of our chief, Edem," she told him. Etim was about to be married, and had been building a house for his bride. A log he was carrying had slipped and struck him on the back of the neck, and he was paralysed. Ovens was surprised at how grave she looked. She told him why: "There's going to be trouble; no death of a violent character comes apart from witchcraft." Ovens made a stretcher, and they carried Etim to Ekenge.

For two weeks she nursed him in his mother's house, hoping that he would recover and that the crisis she dreaded might be avoided. He did not. One Sunday morning, hearing the sound of wailing, she ran to the yard and found him dying. People were blowing smoke into his nostrils and rubbing pepper into his eyes, and his uncle Ekpenyong was shouting into his ears to call his spirit back. When he was dead, the chief dropped the body into Mary's arms and cried, "Sorcerers have killed and they must die. Bring the witch-doctor."

The Prisoners

The witch-doctor named a neighbouring village as guilty. The free men of Ekenge marched there at once with their guns, sacked the houses, and came back with more than a dozen men and women in chains, the rest having

escaped into the forest. The prisoners were fastened to posts in a yard that had only one entrance.

Mary now did something that shows how well she understood the people. To calm the grief and anger of the dead man's father and uncle, she offered to dress Etim for burial in the style his rank deserved. She wrapped the body in silk and put on it a suit she had made for his father. His head was shaved in patterns and painted yellow, and crowned with a silk turban and a tall black and scarlet hat with bright plumes. The body was seated in an armchair under an umbrella, with a whip and a silver-headed stick tied to the hands and a mirror placed in front so that he could admire himself. On a table beside him were the treasures of the house, including the skulls of enemies killed in war, and some candles Mary had given. When the people saw it they went wild with delight, and the drinking and dancing began.

Some readers may be uneasy at a missionary helping to stage a funeral display with war trophies on the table. Mary did not see it as a compromise of her faith. She saw it as honouring a dead young man and his grieving family in the way they understood, in the hope of turning their grief away from killing. She would do whatever she could within their customs, so long as no one died.

Then she told Ovens that he would have to stop all work. "This is going to be a serious business," she said. "We can't leave these prisoners for a moment. I'll watch beside them all night and you'll take the day." For days and nights the two of them took turns sitting opposite the chained prisoners in the filthy yard, while armed men danced and drank around them and one barrel of rum followed another. At one point Ovens lost patience and said he would get a hammer and chisel and free the prisoners himself. "Na, na," she said. "We'll have a little more patience."

The Beans on the Stone

One day she came to Ovens and said they wanted a coffin. When they went into the yard to take the measurements, she saw eséré beans lying on the pounding stone. She shivered. She went back to her hut and prayed, pleading with God for guidance in the struggle that was coming. When she stood up, Livingstone says, her fear had gone.

She went back and took the two chiefs, Edem and his brother Ekpenyong, aside, and told them that there must be no killing. They did not deny that the ordeal was about to take place. Only the guilty would die, they said. She did not argue. She went to the entrance of the yard and sat down, and made it plain that she would not move until the matter was settled.

The chiefs were furious. A white woman among them was a good thing, but she had no right to interfere with their laws. The dead man's mother became violent. Even the slaves threatened her. The drunken crowd ran about waving guns and swords and shouting, "Raise our master from the dead, and you shall have the prisoners."

That night Mary wrote a note to the mission in Duke Town and sent it secretly down the river with two African carpenters who were working with Ovens. Three of the women prisoners had babies who cried all night from hunger and fear. Another, a woman named Inyam, had a daughter of about fifteen, who clung to her mother and came again and again to clasp Mary's feet, and offered herself as a slave for life if only her mother could go free. The girl was a cousin of the dead man, and she was betrothed to his father, the chief.

"Run"

Later that night, while Mary was keeping watch, several men came and unlocked the chains of one of the women, a mother, and led her out to the body to take the poison. Mary did not know whether it was a trick to lure her out of the yard, so that the others could be killed while she was gone. The prisoners begged her not to leave them. But she could not watch a woman walk to her death.

She followed. The woman was standing at a table covered with a white cloth, with a glass of water holding the poison in front of her, and was lifting the glass when Mary touched her on the shoulder and whispered, "*Ifehe!*" It means "Run." The woman looked into her eyes, understood, and the two of them ran into the bush before anyone realised what had happened. They reached Mary's hut, and she told Ovens to hide the woman, and he pulled her inside and locked the door. Mary went straight back to the yard. "Where is she?" the prisoners asked. "Safe in my house," she said.

She wondered afterwards why no one had stopped her or harmed her. Perhaps the men were too drunk to react quickly. But she thought of her prayer.

One by One

Finding that she would not give way, the chiefs tried persuasion. "God will not let anybody die of the bean if they are not guilty," they said. It was their own theology, and it is worth noticing that it was a theology of divine justice: the poison was believed to be God's verdict. They released two prisoners, letting them swear the native oath instead of taking the ordeal. Later they released five more, and then two more. Then they stopped. "We

have done more for you than we have ever done for any one," they said, "and we will die before we go further."

Three prisoners were left. One was a woman with a baby, whose chief, Akpo, had fled into the forest, which in their eyes proved his guilt. The other two, a free man and Inyam, the mother of the fifteen-year-old girl, were taken away. Mary had to choose whom to stay with, and she stayed with the woman and her baby.

The next day visitors warned her that Egbo was coming and that she should flee to Calabar. She said Egbo could come and play the fool as much as he liked, but she would not leave her post. The chief threatened to burn down her house. "You are welcome," she said. "It is not mine." He said the woman would die. The prisoner herself was so terrified and exhausted that she begged Mary to give in.

It was Ma Eme who broke the deadlock. She knelt before her brother, the chief, and begged him to let Mary keep the woman for the time being, chained to the verandah of her hut, where she could not possibly escape with such a weight of iron. To Mary's astonishment, the chiefs agreed, on condition that if the woman were sent away to Calabar, Mary would pay a heavy fine and leave Okoyong for ever. The slaves pretended they could not find the keys. Mary waited, patiently and firmly, until the keys appeared. Then she and Ma Eme gathered up the long chain between them and hurried the woman and her baby through the scrub to Mary's hut, where they hid them in a large packing-case behind a barricade.

Two missionaries arrived from Calabar that afternoon and gave a magic-lantern show to the crowd, which, Livingstone says, was meant to add dignity to the funeral and make up for the lack of human sacrifice. The next day the chief released the free man as a further act of mercy, but insisted that Inyam must take the poison. Mary followed him about all day, pleading. He looked at her at times, Livingstone says, as if he thought she

were mad. That night she heard that the burial would take place in the chief's house, and she was sick with dread.

Late in the evening she heard a faint voice at the barricade: "Ma, Ma, make haste, let me in." She pulled the planks aside, and Inyam crawled in on her hands and knees, still heavily chained. She said she had rubbed through a link of the chain and escaped over a roof. Mary looked at the thick chain and guessed, Livingstone says, "whose were the kindly black hands that had given her aid," but she kept the thought to herself. The funeral took place that night. In the coffin, instead of human companions for the dead man, was a cow.

What Followed

For the first time anyone could remember, a man of a chief's family in Okoyong had been buried without human sacrifice. Livingstone calls it her greatest victory, and in one sense it was. But the story did not end cleanly, and Livingstone, to his credit, tells what followed.

On the way to the funeral, one party met another coming back drunk, remembered an old quarrel, killed a man and carried off his head. Fighting broke out. A few days later the village was seized by panic at the sound of an Egbo band approaching. Women and children and unarmed men poured into Mary's yard, and she packed as many as she could into her room and sent the rest into the bush behind. The Egbo band stayed only a short time and no shot hit anyone there. But they burned every house in the village from which the prisoners had come, and burned the livestock alive. Then Edem's village took its own revenge, and for more than a week armed men roamed the forest, shooting anyone they met.

The elder chief, Ekpenyong, was accused of having killed his nephew by witchcraft so that his own son could inherit, and in his fury he demanded

to take the poison ordeal himself and to make his brother take it too. Mary scolded him, got his promise to give up the idea, and searched his house with the help of his wives, finding eleven beans at the bottom of a basket. That night he was found drunk, fighting with his women over a bag. She demanded it, and found palm-nuts and cartridges, and under them forty more beans. "I'll take the liberty of keeping these," she said, and walked out between the lines of armed men with her heart pounding. In the night he slipped away to take the ordeal anyway. Another chief held him by force until she arrived, and in the end he took the native oath instead and moved away to found a new settlement.

Blood for Blood

The hardest part of the aftermath was a case she refused to judge. The man who had killed and beheaded the mourner on the funeral road was the eldest son of a family known for violence, and he had killed before. War threatened between his family and the family of the dead man. Mary pressed for arbitration, and both sides asked her to preside. She knew that he was a triple murderer and that the penalty would be death, and she shrank from it. She asked them to take the case to a Calabar chief instead.

The verdict was blood for blood. Fines were offered and refused. Slaves were offered to die in his place and refused. His youngest son, a baby, was sent as an atonement and rejected. Then his second son, a young man of twenty, was sent, and it was agreed that his death would redeem his brother. Mary was in anguish, all the more because she had refused to act as judge. She was relieved to hear that the young man had escaped and was being hidden by a slave-trader across the river. But one morning she heard firing, and learned that he had been betrayed, brought back, filled with gin, and

strangled and hanged in front of his mother and sister. Only those two mourned him.

Livingstone does not say that Mary blamed herself, but he says her distress was acute "especially as she had declined to act as judge." It is not hard to see why. She had refused to sit in judgement because she could not bear to sentence a man to death, and the case had gone to a court where an innocent man died instead. Perhaps it taught her something. In later years, when the British asked her to preside over a court, she accepted.

Weary of the Old Customs

Some weeks later she went to find Akpo, the chief who had fled, and asked Edem whether he could come home safely. Edem said he could, and that all thought of vengeance was gone. Akpo did not believe it. Mary went to him three times before he would come back. When he stood again in his ruined village, with his house, farm, and animals all gone, he knelt and held her feet and vowed that he and his household would be under her yoke for ever.

Edem gave the returning men land and seed. That evening he came to Mary alone. He knelt, took her feet, and thanked her again and again for her love and courage, and for forbidding them to take life when his son died. Then he said something that changed how she understood the whole struggle:

> *We are all weary of the old customs, but no single person or House among us has power to break them off, because they are part of the Egbo system.*

One by one, Livingstone says, secretly and without each other's knowledge, free people came to her to thank her for the safety she was bringing, and

urged her to keep going and do away with all the old customs, "the end of which was always death."

That is perhaps the most important thing in this chapter. Mary Slessor has often been pictured as a lone Scotswoman imposing her will on a savage tribe. The truth Livingstone preserves is more interesting. The people of Okoyong were caught in a system that no single family could escape. If one chief refused to kill at a funeral, his dead would go unhonoured and his House would be shamed. Many of them wanted a way out, and could not find it alone. What Mary offered them was an outside authority strong enough to take the blame for breaking the custom. They could say that Ma would not let them.

The psalm at the head of this chapter is addressed to judges. God stands in their assembly and rebukes them for judging unjustly, and commands them: "Rescue the poor and needy: Deliver them out of the hand of the wicked." The wise man of Proverbs puts it simply: "Open thy mouth for the dumb, In the cause of all such as are left desolate" (Proverbs 31:8, ASV). The prisoners chained in Edem's yard had no voice. The girl clasping Mary's feet had nothing to offer but herself. Mary Slessor spoke for them. She could not save everyone, and she knew it. One woman had died after the chief's illness, and a young man of twenty had died for his brother's crime. But on the night the cow was buried, a whole yard of prisoners walked free.

Twin-Mothers

"When my father and my mother forsake me, Then Jehovah will take me up."
— Psalm 27:10, ASV

A House Full of Babies

Of all her work, Livingstone says, the sweetest and the saddest was the care of the babies of the bush. Her house became a refuge for small children: sick ones left with her to nurse and give back, unwanted ones brought to her, and abandoned ones she rescued from the forest. So many came and went, were named, written about in her letters, and then disappeared from them, that her friends in Scotland could not keep track.

Most came in the last stages of sickness or starvation. She washed them, fed them, and fought for their lives, sitting up night after night with a wasted little face in her lap, or walking up and down singing to a baby who could not sleep. She slung a hammock beside her bed and put the babies in it, so that when one woke in the night she could reach out a foot and rock it back to sleep without getting up. More than once, when the tinned milk ran out, she strapped her latest baby to her body and walked the long miles through the bush to Creek Town, and came back the next day with the child and the tins.

Many of them died. Those who died she dressed, laid among flowers in a box, held a service over, and buried in a small cemetery near her house, which in time, Livingstone says, "became full of tiny graves." She mourned each of them as if it had been her own flesh and blood. The carpenter Ovens, who saw it, tried to comfort her in his own way: "Never mind, lassie, you'll get plenty mair." And there were always more.

It is important to hold both parts of this together. The story of Mary Slessor and the twins is often told as a story of rescue, and it was. But it was also a story of many small deaths, of babies who came to her too late or whom she could not save, and of a woman who kept opening her door knowing that much of the time she would end by digging another grave.

The Child of Wonder

Some did live. One baby girl, whose mother had died soon after her birth, was thrown into the bush beside the road to the market because of a quarrel between the families of her parents. She lay there for five days and six nights. Mary Kingsley, the English traveller, told the story in her book *Travels in West Africa*. Women from the village passed the spot on the next market day, heard a feeble cry, and mentioned it that evening in Mary's yard as a curiosity. Mary was off at once, and brought the child home. Ants had eaten into her nose and upper lip. Leopards and snakes had somehow left her alone. She lived, and grew into a healthy girl, and the people who had thrown her away came to pet her and play with her, calling her "the child of wonder." Mary named her after herself.

This Mary, together with Janie, the twin brought home from Old Town; Alice, another rescued twin; and Annie, a child whose mother had been accused in a case of a stolen dog, became the inner circle of her family. Later others would join them: Maggie, Dan, Whitie, Asuquo, and more.

There was also Mana, a girl who had been kidnapped as she walked home from a spring, brought to Okoyong, and sold as a slave to Ma Eme. Mana became one of the most faithful members of the household, and, as we shall see, one of the first Christians of the Cross River.

We know less about most of these children than we would like. They appear in Livingstone's pages chiefly as they related to Mary, and many of their later lives are hard to trace. But their names should be remembered. The story of "Everybody's Mother" is also the story of the children who made her one.

Susie

Of all the babies who passed through her hands, none was loved more than Susie, her first Okoyong twin.

Susie's mother, Iye, was a slave woman from Bende, owned by one of the leading women of the district, who treated her well. Then she gave birth to twins, a boy and a girl, and everything changed. Mary Kingsley happened to arrive at Ekenge that very day to meet Mary Slessor for the first time, and she described what she saw. The date was probably 1895; Livingstone says 1893, but Kingsley's own account puts the visit later.

Iye was cursed and abused. Her clothes were torn and her treasured china basins smashed, and she was driven out of the village as an unclean thing. Kingsley believed she would have been killed with her children if the people had not feared Mary's anger. The babies were crammed into an empty gin-case, which was put on Iye's head, with her brass cooking-pot and her market calabashes on top. Mary heard the news and ran barefoot and bareheaded down the forest path, and four miles out she met Iye staggering towards her with the whole village yelling behind. Mary took the load from her head and carried it herself, since no one else would touch it.

Then she did something that Kingsley thought showed her understanding of the people. She did not take Iye down the village path to her house, because the path would then have been polluted, and the villagers would have had to cut a new one. Instead she stood in the blazing sun, at the height of the hot season, while the people cut a new track through the forest straight to her own grounds. Only then did she take the mother and babies home.

The boy was already dead. The people who had packed the twins into the box had crushed his head. Kingsley's comment is brief: all the boy needed was burying. The girl lived. For days the villagers would not come near her. If Mary or Kingsley handed the baby to one of the household children, men and women fled off the verandah and over the fence. Iye herself would not hold her. She sat for hours singing a lament over her own fate, and Kingsley recorded the words:

> *Yesterday I was a woman, now I am a horror, a thing all people ran from. Yesterday they would eat with me, now they spit on me.*

Kingsley noticed that Iye did not blame the villagers. She did not think they had done wrong. She only felt that some power beyond her had sent this curse of twins upon her.

"Mem, Mem"

The surviving baby was named Susie, after Mary's own sister who had died in Edinburgh. She became the darling of the house. When she was fourteen months old, Mary left her for a few minutes with Mana, who put a jug of boiling water on the floor. The baby pulled it over on herself. For thirteen days and nights she was never out of Mary's hands. A young woman missionary, Miss Murray, who had asked to be posted to Okoyong for a

time, helped her; "She was like a sister to me," Mary wrote. Thinking a doctor might do more, Mary carried Susie through the forest to Creek Town, arriving at midnight, and woke the doctor, who told her there was nothing more he could do. She went back to Ekenge and went on nursing her. In the dark, when everyone else was asleep, she would hear a faint voice saying, "Mem, Mem, Mem," the child's name for her, and a little hand would be held up for her to kiss.

Early one Sunday morning Susie died in her arms. They dressed her in a pinafore, with her beads and a sash and a flower in her hand, and Mary said she looked "like an angel child."

The whole district was moved. While Susie was dying, none of the villagers went to their farms or to market, and when she died they came to mourn with Mary. Mary could not bring herself to lead the burial, and sat at the window while Miss Murray took the service. The villagers gathered round the grave of a twin, the very thing they had once fled from. One of the women, a leader in the old religion, stood up and praised the white mother's God for the child, and prayed that they might all share her hope. "Surely," Mary wrote afterwards, "they all felt the vast difference between their burials with all their drink and madness, and ours so full of quiet hope and expectant faith."

Her own grief was terrible. "My heart aches for my darling," she wrote. "Oh the empty place, and the silence and the vain longing for the sweet voice and the soft caress and the funny ways. Oh, Susie, Susie!"

Buying Iye

Iye had come to love the child she would not touch at first, and when Susie died she was broken. "Ma, don't cry," she said. "I have done this. God hates

me. I shall go away and not bring any more evil on you." And she went back to her hut in the bush.

Mary had always refused to buy slaves, even to set them free, because she thought the people would misunderstand it and think she was taking part in the trade. But she made an exception for Iye. She paid ten pounds for her freedom and brought her into the mission house. Iye stayed with her for years. In 1903, when the first baptisms took place in the district, Iye was among those baptised.

It is worth noticing the honesty of that detail. Mary Slessor did, at least once, buy a human being. She knew the arguments against it and had used them herself. She did it anyway, for one grieving woman whom everyone else regarded as cursed. It was not a policy. It was love, doing what it could.

Mary Kingsley

Mary Kingsley was one of the most remarkable travellers of her age, a clever, witty, independent Englishwoman who explored the rivers of West Africa alone and wrote brilliantly about what she saw. She was no friend of missions. She thought most missionaries misunderstood Africa and did more harm than good. But she and Mary Slessor became friends. They sat up late into the night arguing about religion and the immortality of the soul. "I would give anything to possess your beliefs," Kingsley said, "but I can't, I can't; when God made me He must have left out the part that one believes with."

Mary, for her part, said that Kingsley was one of the most truly Christian women she had ever met, whatever she believed or did not believe. She gave the traveller a great deal of what she knew about the religion and customs of the people, and much of it went into Kingsley's books. When Kingsley died in South Africa in 1900, nursing prisoners of

war, Mary grieved. “The world held not many so brave and so noble,” she wrote. “Life feels very cold and seems grey and sunless.” She sent a guinea towards a memorial.

Kingsley’s published verdict on Mary Slessor is one of the most valuable we have, because it came from someone who had no reason to flatter a missionary. She wrote that Slessor had been eighteen years in Calabar, that for the last six or seven she had lived alone in the forest at Okoyong, and that her knowledge of the people, their language, their thought, their diseases, and their difficulties was extraordinary. Okoyong, she wrote, had been given to killing at funerals, ordeal by poison, and constant warfare. “Many of these evil customs she has stamped out.”

What She Did and Did Not Do

It is often said that Mary Slessor ended the killing of twins in Nigeria. She did not, and she would not have claimed it. The practice had been banned in the Efik towns of Calabar decades before she arrived, and other missionaries had been rescuing twins since the 1850s. It persisted in the interior long after her death. When a news agency interviewed her in Liverpool in 1898, she said that she had saved fifty-one twins. Many more passed through her hands in the years that followed, and many of them died.

What she did was to carry the protection of twins and their mothers into places where the old agreements meant nothing, to take the babies and, increasingly, the mothers into her own household, and to wear down the fear by living with it year after year. Over time her approach began to change. For most of her life she took the twins into her own house, as the missionaries had always done; in 1895 the Okoyong chiefs still refused to let twins be kept in their homes. By 1901 some twins were being cared for by

their own mothers in their villages, and late in life, at Ikpe, Livingstone says she "had come to realise that it was not good to take twins from their mother," and insisted that a baby stay at home with its mother while she and Jean stood guard. That case ended in tragedy, as a later chapter tells. But the direction of her thinking, from rescuing children out of their families towards helping families keep them, was a sign of a deepening wisdom.

Taken Up

The verse at the head of this chapter is from David's psalm of trust: "When my father and my mother forsake me, Then Jehovah will take me up." It is an extraordinary thing for a psalmist to say. A parent's love is the strongest human love there is, and David imagines a day when even that might fail, and declares that God's love will not.

For the twin babies of Okoyong, that was not an imagined day. Their fathers and mothers did forsake them, not out of wickedness but out of fear, bound by a belief that told them their children were a curse. Mary Slessor went out into the bush and took them up. She could not save them all. She could not always save their mothers from their grief or their villages from their fear. But she showed, in her own tired arms, what the psalm says of God. The prophet wrote of the Lord as a shepherd who "will gather the lambs in his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and will gently lead those that have their young" (Isaiah 40:11, ASV). Mary Slessor carried a great many lambs, and led a great many mothers. She believed that she was only doing, poorly and partially, what God had first done for her.

Laid on the Altar

"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service."
— Romans 12:1, ASV

A Surprise

In September 1891, while she was at home on furlough, the Foreign Mission Board of the United Presbyterian Church learned something that surprised almost everyone who knew her. Mary Slessor was engaged to be married.

Her friends had assumed that she had given herself entirely to Okoyong, and that there was no room in her life for anything else. They were half right. The story of her engagement is short, and Livingstone tells it with great reserve, but it is one of the most revealing episodes in her life. It shows what she wanted, and what she was prepared to give up.

Charles Morrison

The man was Charles W. Morrison, a teacher on the mission staff at Duke Town. He came from Kirkintilloch, near Glasgow, had been an active Christian worker at home, and had been accepted by the Board at once when he applied. Livingstone describes him as "a man of fine feeling, with a

distinct literary gift." He was, Livingstone adds, "in his twenty-fifth year." Mary was about forty-two. Livingstone does not comment on the difference in their ages, and neither, apparently, did she.

They had met only a few times. Mary had been ill in Duke Town in 1890, and Morrison had been attentive and kind while she recovered. He was drawn, Livingstone says, to "the brilliant, unconventional little woman." We can guess some of what drew her to him. He was a reader and a writer in a world where she had few people to talk to about books. Among the handful of possessions she kept to the end of her life were two battered novels, Bulwer-Lytton's *Eugene Aram* and Dickens's *Sketches by Boz*. On the flyleaf of one, in her handwriting, are the initials "C. W. M." and "M. M. S." In the other are their two signatures, one above the other. A photograph taken in 1891 shows her wearing an engagement ring.

They became engaged before she left for Scotland at the end of 1890. From the beginning there was one condition, and it was hers. She would not leave Okoyong. She had given her word to the people there, and she would not break it, even for her own happiness. If they married, Morrison would have to come and live at Okoyong. She thought he would make a good missionary, and that the two of them could share the work, one staying while the other went home on furlough.

On His Altar

While the Board considered the matter, friends wrote to congratulate her. Her reply to one of them is the heart of the story:

> *I lay it all in God's hands, and will take from Him whatever He sees best for His work in Okoyong. My life was laid on His altar for that people long ago, and I would not take one jot or tittle of it back. If it be for His glory and the advantage of His cause there to let another join*

in it I will be grateful. If not I will still try to be grateful, as He knows best.

It is not a cold letter. It is the letter of a woman who wanted very much to be married, and who had decided beforehand what she would do if she could not have both. The phrase she used, "laid on His altar," was the language of her Bible. It echoes the verse at the head of this chapter, where Paul urges Christians to present their bodies "a living sacrifice." A sacrifice laid on the altar was not taken back. Mary Slessor believed that she had laid her life there years before, when she offered herself for Calabar, and later when she went into Okoyong. She did not think an engagement gave her the right to reclaim it.

Morrison, and perhaps Mary too, suspected what the Board would say. He asked her whether, if they refused to send him to Okoyong, she would come back to Duke Town to be with him. Her answer, written to a friend, was blunt:

It is out of the question. I would never take the idea into consideration. I could not leave my work for such a reason. To leave a field like Okoyong without a worker and go to one of ten or a dozen where the people have an open Bible and plenty of privilege! It is absurd. If God does not send him up here then he must do his work and I must do mine where we have been placed.

It is easy to read that as hard. It may be better to read it as honest. She did not pretend that the choice cost her nothing. She simply thought that one person's happiness, even her own, could not weigh against the lives of the people of Okoyong, where she was the only missionary, when there were ten or a dozen stations on the coast with churches and Bibles already.

A Qualified Refusal

The Board's answer was what Livingstone calls "a qualified refusal." Morrison's work at Duke Town was important, they said, and they could not approve his moving to Okoyong until full provision had been made for carrying it on. In effect, the answer was no.

When Mary was told, she said only, "What the Lord ordains is right." Livingstone adds that she "apparently" dismissed the subject from her mind. The word "apparently" is his, and it is the only hint he gives that there may have been more to it than she showed.

What followed was sad. Morrison's health broke down, and he had to return to Scotland. A specialist advised him not to go back to Calabar. He offered himself for the Church's mission in South Africa, but there was no opening, and to the regret of the Committee, which thought highly of him, he resigned. Livingstone says he went later to America, and was living in a hut in the balsam woods of North Carolina when a fire destroyed the literary papers he treasured. The loss, Livingstone says, affected him deeply and hastened his death, which came soon afterwards. Livingstone gives no dates for any of this, and modern researchers have not been able to trace Morrison's later life.

Popular books have often said that Mary Slessor never married because she was "married to Africa." The truth is less poetic. She wanted to marry, and chose a man she thought would share her work. The Church would not let him join her, and she would not leave her people. His health failed. Whatever else they might have become to each other, those facts ended it. Livingstone closes the chapter with lines of verse about a solitary life lived "without cheer of sister or of daughter," and says that she turned her face, alone, towards the future.

No Good Thing Withheld

It would be too easy to turn this story into a lesson that God rewards sacrifice with something better. Mary Slessor did not get something better. She did not marry. She went back to Okoyong and lived without a husband's companionship for the rest of her life, often lonely, sometimes desperately so. Not long afterwards, overwhelmed by the work, she wrote, "I feel dreadfully lonely, and want a helper," though the helper she meant was a fellow missionary, and in the end she did not ask for one because she knew how short-staffed the mission was.

And yet she did not think that God had cheated her. The psalmist says, "No good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly" (Psalm 84:11, ASV). She seems to have believed that literally, and to have concluded that if God withheld marriage from her, then for her, in her place, it was not the good thing. That is a hard kind of faith, and it is not one anyone should demand of another person. But it was hers. In the last years of her life she urged the young women at home: "Don't grow up a nervous old maid! ... I'm a witness to the perfect joy and satisfaction of a single life, with a tail of human tag-rag hanging on." By then the tag-rag included eight or nine adopted children, a host of rescued babies, and a whole district that called her Mother.

A Letter to the Church

That furlough of 1891 produced one other thing that deserves a place in her story. Recovering from influenza and bronchitis, she read in the Church's *Missionary Record* an appeal from a fellow missionary for more craftsmen to be sent to Calabar. He added, in passing, that Calabar was not yet ready for anyone to teach trades to its people. Mary disagreed. She wrote

a long letter to the editor, so exhausting to write that she hardly knew whether the words were spelled right, and it was printed under the name "One of the Zenana Staff."

She argued that the people of Calabar were entirely capable of learning trades, and that their weakness, a lack of persistence, was explained by their history, in which life had always been governed by "force of circumstance." Training them was too big a task for individual missionaries. It was a matter for the whole Church. "Let the science of the evangelisation of the nations occupy the attention of our sermons, our congregations, our conferences, and our Church literature," she wrote, "and we will soon have more workers, more wealth, more life, as well as new methods."

According to Livingstone, the letter stirred the Mission Committee into action, and led in time to the founding of the Hope Waddell Training Institution at Calabar in 1895, which taught trades and gave a secondary education to generations of young men of the Cross River region. How much the Institution owed to her letter is hard to measure. Others were thinking along the same lines, and it had many parents. Livingstone says that she never took any credit for it and never mentioned it in her letters.

In February 1892 she sailed back to Calabar, with Janie. The Congregational church at Topsham held a farewell meeting in her honour. When illness upset her plans for that furlough, she said something that sums up the spirit in which she went back: "We alter things for the good of our children, and God does the same to us."

"The Woman's God"

"Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called sons of God."
— Matthew 5:9, ASV

A Walk in the Rain

In the first months at Ekenge, before the crisis over Etim's death, a message came from a village near the Cross River, eight hours' walk away. A chief there was dying. His people were waiting outside his house, armed and ready, because when a chief died, members of his household would be killed to go with him. One of the women of the village had told them about the white Ma at Ekenge, who had cured her grandchild. Send for her, she said, and the chief will not die. So they sent a message, with a bottle and four brass rods, worth about a shilling, as her fee.

Edem and Ma Eme told her she could not go. It was too far, the streams were too deep, the rains were too heavy. "I am going to get ready," she said. She spent a sleepless night wondering whether she was right, and in the morning set out with an escort of women. The rain came down in torrents. First she abandoned her boots, then her stockings, then her broken umbrella, and then, one by one, most of her clothes, which the women carried on their heads in calabashes. She walked on in the lightest of garments through the dripping forest.

After three hours they came to a market-place where hundreds of people were gathering. Mary, soaked and half-dressed, felt humiliated, and hurried through the crowd, wondering whether she had lost their respect. She learned later that nothing she ever did won the hearts of the Okoyong more than that walk in the rain.

She reached the village, dressed herself in whatever odds and ends of clothing the women could find, and went straight to the sick man. Her medicine was not enough, and she persuaded a trader living in his canoe nearby to go across the river to the Scottish missionaries at Ikorofiong for more. He came back with what she needed, and with a letter and some tea from the missionary's wife. She brewed the tea in a basin and thought it a feast. The chief recovered. No one was killed. The people began to talk about making peace with Calabar and learning to read. From then on, Livingstone says, Okoyong was open to her.

The Woman's God

That chief did not forget her. At the end of 1890, as she was packing to leave for her furlough, messengers arrived from a distant township. A young freeman had accidentally shot himself in the hand while hunting, and they wanted medicine. She sent it. Then secret word came that the young man had died, that his brother had wounded a chief of a neighbouring town in revenge, and that the chief's warriors were preparing to attack at dawn.

Everyone told her not to go. She was ill. She would miss the steamer. The men were savage, they said, the forest would be full of armed men firing at anything that moved, and in the dark no one would recognise her. She went anyway, with two armed attendants carrying lanterns, and stopped at the house of a chief eight miles away to ask for a free man to beat

the Egbo drum before her, so that the warriors would know a protected person was coming.

The chief sent back a diplomatic answer. He had heard of no war, he said, and would inquire in the morning. And if there was a war, a woman who went into it only proved her ignorance of a people who had always loved fighting and were not likely to be helped by a woman. Mary sent him a reply that has been remembered ever since:

> *In measuring the woman's power, you have evidently forgotten to take into account the woman's God.*

She went on without him. At the first village she was surrounded in the dark by armed men, who questioned her and then let her rest until cock-crow, when they would take her with them. At the second cock-crow they were gone before she was on her feet, running down the hillside like wild goats. The women stood at every door crying, "Run, Ma!" She ran as fast as her weakness allowed, lost sight of them, and fell back on prayer.

She found the war-party in the bush a hundred yards from the enemy village, and told them to behave like men and not like fools, as if they were schoolboys. Then she walked on to the village, where a wall of armed men stood silent. As she was about to push through them, an old man stepped out of the line and knelt at her feet. He asked her to help them make peace. It was the chief she had walked through the rain to heal.

What followed took all day. Two chiefs laid down their arms and knelt before the other side, begging them to accept a fine. Mary knelt too, and asked that arbitration might take the place of war. Bands of armed men kept arriving and demanding the old, manly way of settling things. In the end a fine was agreed, heavier than she thought fair, and part of it was paid on the spot in trade gin. As the boxes of gin were brought forward, she saw another fight about to start over the drink, so she took off as many of her

outer garments as she decently could and threw them over the bottles, which put them under her protection by Egbo law. She then poured one glass for each of the senior men and kept the rest under her clothes. One band of young men begged to be allowed "a small scrap" on the way home, so as not to go back "like women" without having fought. She walked with them until they were past the danger. That night, too tired to hold a service, she spoke quietly to the people about Christ and walked home alone through the forest.

Knitting

After she came back from her furlough, the palavers grew larger. Ma Eme would send the signal bottle when trouble was brewing, and Mary would go. Sometimes, if she could not get there in time, she used a trick. She would scribble some words, any words, on a large sheet of paper, add a few blobs of red sealing-wax to make it look official, and send it by a fast runner to the chiefs. By the time they had finished puzzling over the mysterious document, which none of them could read, she had arrived.

At the palavers themselves she knitted. She said it kept her from being nervous and from showing fear, and that the sight of the needles going quietly on in the middle of the uproar calmed everyone down. An official told Livingstone that she once sat knitting and listening through a whole day and night, until both sides got hungry and went home without fighting.

Livingstone describes one of these meetings. Two sections of the Okoyong people had been quarrelling for some time, and she called them together in a forest clearing. Three years earlier, she said, such a meeting would have been impossible. She was frightened, and after a sleepless night she set out alone with her knitting and walked through the armed guards.

Every chief was there under a great silk umbrella of blue, red, and yellow, with twenty to fifty armed men around him. A chair had been set for her in the middle, beside the oldest chief. She went round both groups first, joking, to ease the tension, then sat down, took out her knitting, and let them talk. She spoke only now and then, to draw out a fact or clear up a point. Night fell, torches were lit, voices rose, and when she sensed that things were getting out of hand she brought the matter to a head. An old chief summed up, she gave her verdict, and it was accepted with cheers.

Under Protest

Then came the oath to seal the agreement. A razor, corn, salt, pepper, and rum were brought. A free man from each side knelt at her feet and clasped the other's fingers. Cuts were made on the backs of their hands, and when the blood flowed, salt, pepper, and corn were laid on the wounds. The two men then sucked up the blood-soaked mixture and swallowed it, and the covenant was made.

Out of courtesy, the chiefs asked her to pray. She refused. Livingstone says that she always witnessed such oaths "under protest, recognising that they knew no better way." She did not object when one of the chiefs prayed instead.

It is a telling moment. She was willing to sit through the oath, because it was the only way the people knew of making an agreement binding, and because the agreement meant peace. But she would not lend her prayers to a rite she believed belonged to another religion. She drew a line, and she drew it gently. Then, after a ten-hour sitting, she walked four miles home in the dark, tired and hungry and happy.

Run, Ma, Run

Her letters from these years are full of interruptions. A letter will begin with household news, break off, and start again with "It is many days since I had to leave off here," followed by the account of some sudden journey. The cry that sent her out of the house was always the same: "Run, Ma! Run!" She called this her "commonplace" work. "So, you see," she wrote, "life here, as at home, is just a record of small duties which occupy the time, and task the strength without much to show for it."

Livingstone collected some of the episodes. A chief had died, and the people had moved the poison ordeal to a hidden place deep in the forest to keep it from her. She found them, and sat there for four days and four nights, never taking off her clothes, sleeping in snatches on plantain leaves, afraid not of the armed men but of the eyes of wild animals shining at the edge of the firelight. In the end the people gave up and the accused lived. Another time an Egbo band from a far-off town came to seize the goods of a widow for a debt. Mary locked one of them in her yard, ordered the rest out, and made them give back what they had taken.

Once a slave couple came to her door with their child left behind. Their master had driven the wife from her cooking with a sword, fired a gun at the husband, and carried off the baby, threatening to kill it. "What does it matter?" the husband had said. "We are his; he can kill us if he likes; we have nothing to live for." Mary sent word to the master. He came the next day, drunk, and lay down at her feet. During a palaver of several hours he shook his fist in the slave's face and shouted, "If it wasn't for the reign of the white woman I would cut you in two! The white woman is your salvation." Mary calmed them both, scolded and pleaded and joked, and in the end sent them home together, the master told to control himself and the slaves told to work faithfully and not provoke him. The baby was returned.

That story should give us pause. Mary Slessor did not free the slaves who came to her. She sent them back to their master, after getting a promise that he would treat them better. Slavery was the foundation of Okoyong society, and she had no power to abolish it. She wrote in the margin of her Bible years later, "Slavery never pays; the slave is spoiled as a man, and the master not less so." But in the forest of the 1890s, the best she could often do was to stand between the master and his sword.

Once a free man watched her prevent the killing of anyone at a funeral, and complained: "Ma, you have spoiled our fashions. Before you came, a person took his people with him: now one must go alone like this poor girl; you have confused Okoyong too much."

And once, when a visiting missionary watched her clear a crowded yard in a moment by shouting at it in Efik, driving out men, women, children, and the old chief himself like sheep before a dog, he saw what it cost her. When it was over she came and sat down beside him, trembling from head to foot, and said, "I am done for this day."

Children of God

The verse at the head of this chapter is one of the Beatitudes. "Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called sons of God." It does not say that peacemakers will be successful, or thanked, or safe. It says that they will be recognised as belonging to God's family, because making peace is what God himself does. Paul says of Christ, "he is our peace, who made both one, and brake down the middle wall of partition" (Ephesians 2:14, ASV).

Mary Slessor spent much of her life in Okoyong breaking down walls between enemies. She did it with prayer and patience and jokes and knitting, with sealing-wax and borrowed authority, and sometimes by throwing her own clothes over the gin. She did not always succeed, and she

did not always get justice. But Paul's instruction, "If it be possible, as much as in you lieth, be at peace with all men" (Romans 12:18, ASV), describes her very well. She did as much as lay in her, and a good deal more than anyone expected of a woman on her own.

Consul and Gunboat

"He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth Jehovah require of thee, but to do justly, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with thy God?"
— Micah 6:8, ASV

The Coming of the Protectorate

When Mary Slessor arrived in Calabar in 1876, British power on the coast was little more than a consul with no soldiers and no administration. By the time she returned from her furlough in 1892, that had begun to change. In 1884 and 1885, as the European powers carved up Africa among themselves at the Berlin Conference, Britain had declared a protectorate over the coastal districts around the Niger delta and Calabar. In 1891 Sir Claude Macdonald was appointed Commissioner and Consul-General, with instructions to turn a paper claim into a working government. Two years later the territory became the Niger Coast Protectorate.

Livingstone describes this as the extension of civilised rule to a backward country, carried out, he says, "not without an occasional display of force." That phrase deserves attention. The British did not ask the peoples of the interior whether they wished to be governed. They sent officials to make treaties, and where the treaties were refused or broken, they sent gunboats and soldiers. Villages were burned. People in Okoyong

came to associate the Consul, in Livingstone's own words, "with big guns and burnt towns." That was the power that now stood behind Mary Slessor.

Ma's Court

Macdonald was a man Mary liked and respected. He was sympathetic to the missions, and he took her advice seriously. When he proposed to send a British vice-consul to Okoyong, she argued that the people were not ready for strangers imposing new laws, and that there would be trouble. Macdonald accepted her view. Instead of sending an official, he authorised her to do what was necessary herself, and to organise and supervise a native court.

Later writers have usually said that she was made vice-consul for Okoyong in 1892, and that is how most biographies describe it. Livingstone is more careful. He says her position was "akin to that of a consular agent." In practice she conducted the public business of the district. She presided over the court. Cases were referred to her from Duke Town, and she travelled round Okoyong to hear them, with a government messenger who carried her decisions back to headquarters for official signature. Chiefs and ordinary people came to ask her how their old customs could be fitted to the new laws. She took no salary for any of it. Livingstone says it was work she did not like, and that she accepted it only because she believed it was part of her loyalty to Christ.

The Caning

A British official, T. D. Maxwell, visited her court in these years and left one of the most vivid descriptions of her we have. He expected, he said, he

hardly knew what, and found "a little frail old lady" with a lace shawl over her head, rocking in a chair and crooning to a black baby. Years of fever had aged her early. He was struck, he said, by her very strong Scottish accent. She made him rest after his march before any business was done. The court was held below her house, and her yard was full of litigants and onlookers, all treating her with deep respect.

Suddenly she jumped up with an angry growl. Her shawl fell off, the baby was handed to someone else, and she made for the door, where a large, overdressed man was standing. She seized him by the scruff of the neck, boxed his ears, and hustled him out into the yard, telling him plainly what would happen if he came back. Then, as suddenly as the storm had risen, it died away, and she was back in her rocking-chair with the shawl and the baby. The man was a local chief who had been rude to her and had been forbidden to come back until he apologised. He had tried to slip in on the excuse of greeting the visitor.

Maxwell had seen many Nigerian courts, and he said he had never seen one that better deserved to be called a court of justice. The litigants got justice, "sometimes, perhaps, like Shylock, more than they desired." He gave an example. A man sued another for a small debt. The defendant admitted he owed the money, and Mary ordered him to pay. But she added that the plaintiff was a rascal. He treated his mother shamefully, neglected his children, had lately beaten one of his wives with unnecessary vigour, kept a disgraceful farm, seldom washed, and had looked suspiciously sleek around the time a neighbour's goat went missing, though he had been acquitted. So before the debt was paid, the plaintiff would receive a good sound caning in front of everyone.

Maxwell told the story with admiration, and it is easy to see why. It is funny, and it shows a judge who knew everyone in the district and cared more about what was right than about technicalities. But a modern reader

should see the other side as well. A man who came to court to recover a debt and won his case was beaten on the order of the judge for offences he had not been charged with, including one of which he had been acquitted. There was no appeal. Her justice was the justice of a mother of a large and unruly family, and it depended entirely on her being right. Often she was. Not always.

The Appeal to the Consul

In 1894 she did something she had never done before. A man had been accused of causing his master's death by witchcraft, and his accusers, knowing that Mary would stop the ordeal, spirited him away in chains to a village beyond her reach. She decided that the time had come to ask the government for help, not only to save this man but to end killing for witchcraft throughout Okoyong. So that no African would be blamed for it, she carried the letter to the river herself.

The news spread quickly that Ma's patience was exhausted and she had sent for the Consul. The people who had carried off the prisoner came running to beg her forgiveness, but she had already gone. The prisoner escaped that night and came to her house. His master chained all his other people in fury, then thought better of it, freed them, and sent to ask Mary to go to Duke Town and make the Consul come "in peace and not in war."

The Vice-Consul, Ralph Moor, came up with a small guard of soldiers, who paraded through the village and made a great impression. He found Mary on the roof of her house mending the mats, and she climbed down and received him without the slightest embarrassment. At the conference that followed, the chiefs promised to stop killing at funerals, and to let Ma save twins and care for them in a special hut. A year later, when twin-killing had not stopped, she brought up Sir Claude Macdonald himself to renew

the agreement. He told the chiefs that he had not come to take their country, but to help them govern it justly. After consulting together, the old spokesman explained that when they heard something only once they did not think it worth attending to, but now that they had heard it twice, they would obey. As for twins, he said, "We are not sure that no evil will happen to us if we obey you; we have our fear, but we will try." When Mary spoke of a time when she would no longer be with them, the chiefs were alarmed. "God cannot take you away from your children," they said, "until they are able to walk by themselves."

"You White People"

Some time later Mary wrote an account of her first seven years in Okoyong. It was never published, and Livingstone printed much of it. It is one of the most important documents of her life, and it will appear again in the next chapter. In it she described the death of the most powerful chief in the district. Every drop of European liquor for miles around was bought for his funeral, and she was afraid of what would follow. But no one was killed, except one man, who, blamed by the witch-doctors, hanged himself because the chiefs refused to let him take the poison ordeal to prove his innocence. Afterwards some chiefs, talking about the change, said to her, "Ma, you white people are God Almighty. No other power could have done this."

Mary recorded that remark without comment, and it is not hard to see why it troubled later readers. The chiefs were not wrong about where power lay. Behind the white woman in the rocking-chair stood the consul, and behind the consul stood the guns. The same report says that the people had "begged me to be their consul, as they neither wished black man nor white man to be their king." It also says that they still needed "superintendence and watching, for their ideas are not so nicely balanced as

ours in regard to the shades and degrees of right and wrong." That sentence is the voice of her time and her race, and it is not attractive.

Yet there is another side to it. The chiefs had also said, back in 1889, that they were weary of the old customs and could not break them alone. Mary's authority, backed by the government, gave them a way out. Many lives were saved. Women who would have been strangled at funerals lived. Men who would have died by the poison bean went home to their families. It was a good thing done by means that were not wholly good, in a world where there were few wholly good means available.

What the Lord Requires

A visitor to Okoyong in these years wrote that Mary was really "Queen of the whole of Okoyong district," and that the High Commissioner left its administration in her hands. The same visitor noticed that she never let an African sit down in her presence, and never shook hands with them, though she would nurse them through the most loathsome diseases. When the visitor asked why, she said simply, "I live alone." She seems to have meant that a woman living alone among men who had always settled their disputes with guns could not afford to let her authority be questioned. It was a hard, practical decision, and it put a distance between her and the people she loved.

The verse at the head of this chapter was spoken by the prophet Micah to a nation that thought God could be satisfied with sacrifices. What God wanted, Micah said, was simpler and harder: "to do justly, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with thy God." Mary Slessor tried to do all three, and the three do not always sit easily together. Justice in Okoyong sometimes needed a firm hand, and she had one. Kindness was her deepest instinct, and she gave it without limit. Humility before God she practised

all her life. Humility before the people she governed was harder, and it grew slowly.

Paul told the Christians in Rome that "rulers are not a terror to the good work, but to the evil" (Romans 13:3, ASV). The psalmist warned, "Put not your trust in princes, Nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help" (Psalm 146:3, ASV). Mary Slessor lived between those two verses. She was grateful for rulers who stopped the killing, and she worked with them. But she knew, too, where her own help came from, and she would soon see what the government's power could do when it was turned on a whole people.

Smallpox and Silence

"For though the fig-tree shall not flourish, Neither shall fruit be in the vines; The labor of the olive shall fail, And the fields shall yield no food; The flock shall be cut off from the fold, And there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet I will rejoice in Jehovah, I will joy in the God of my salvation."
— Habakkuk 3:17-18, ASV

No Baptisms

About seven years after she went to Okoyong, Mary was persuaded to write down an account of her work there. It was never published, and Livingstone found it among her papers. It begins with a protest.

> *In these days of high pressure men demand large profits and quick returns in every department of our commercial and national life, and these must be served up with the definiteness and precision of statistics. This abnormal and feverish haste has entered to some extent into our religious work.*

She said that the methods and standards of business were "utterly foreign to the laws of Christ's kingdom," and that she shrank from reducing the working of God's Spirit in people's hearts to "any given number of figures on a table." Then she gave the figures anyway, and they were stark. There

had been no baptisms in Okoyong, and no communion services. No ordained minister had ever lived there. There were no formal candidates for church membership. Women, boys, girls, and a few men said that they had put themselves in God's hands. One free-born woman of good position had suffered persecution for Christ. That was all.

She was honest about why. She was one woman, running a dispensary, a school, a court, a house full of rescued children, and a refuge for runaway slaves and threatened wives. She built and repaired her own buildings. There was no baker, no butcher, no laundry, no water supply, and no help except what the people lent her. The evangelistic work of the station, she wrote, was "manned year by year by the magnificent total of one individual. Is it fair to expect results under such circumstances?"

That was a rebuke to her Church, and she meant it as one. But she did not blame the Church alone. The report also says that the results had not been what they would have been "had we been more faithful and kept more in line with the will and spirit of God." She always wrote "we" in her reports, never "I." She believed she was a fellow-worker with God, and that both the failures and the successes were shared.

When friends asked about progress, she used to say, "There is not much progress to report, and yet very much to thank God for." And she would add, "After all, it comes back to this, Christ sent me to preach the Gospel, and He will look after results." She remembered a single line from a sermon she had heard long ago in her mother's church in Aberdeen: "Between the sower and the reaper stands the Husbandman." Paul had said the same thing: "I planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planteth anything, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase" (1 Corinthians 3:6-7, ASV).

Akpap

In 1896 the people of Okoyong began to move away from Ekenge. Like farming peoples everywhere who worked the soil hard, they moved on to fresh land, and a new market had grown up at a place called Akpap, further inland and nearer the Cross River. Even Ma Eme moved to a distant farm. Mary saw that she must follow, and the mission agreed to build a new house there. Long before it was built, she moved into a two-roomed shed with no windows and no floor, and from there, Livingstone says, she ruled Okoyong as if from a palace.

Then disaster came. A new baby brought an infectious disease into her household, and four of her children died of it. Soon afterwards smallpox swept through the region and killed hundreds. She spent hours every day vaccinating people, and when her supply of vaccine ran out, the mission engineer, Mr. Alexander, helped her take lymph from the arms of people already vaccinated with a penknife and pass it on to others.

At Ekenge, where the epidemic was worst, she turned her old house into a hospital. The sick poured in, and everyone else fled, and she could find no one to nurse the patients or bury the dead. Ekpenyong, the elder chief whose poison beans she had once carried off, caught the disease and died, and she buried him. Then Edem, her own chief, who had taken her into his compound eight years before, fell ill. She fought for his life day and night. He died in the middle of the night. She was alone. With her own hands she made a coffin, laid him in it, dug a grave, and buried him. Then she walked through the dark, wet forest to Akpap and threw herself on her bed as dawn was breaking.

The carpenter Charles Ovens, who had come back to build the new mission house, arrived that morning with Mr. Alexander. They found the hut silent at eleven o'clock, and inside, Mary, grey and exhausted. "I had

only just now fallen asleep," she said. It was some time before they found out why. Two days later Alexander went to Ekenge to fetch materials from the old house, and found it full of corpses, with no one living anywhere near. The house was never lived in again, and the forest swallowed it.

"My Four Bairns"

News came from further up-country of people fleeing the smallpox, leaving the dead and dying in their houses, and dying in the bush themselves. Mary wrote:

> *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.*

It is a hard sentence to read. A mother whose four children have just died wonders whether God took them so that she would be free to help others. Many Christians today would not say it, and would not want anyone to say it to them. But it was her own way of refusing to believe that the deaths were meaningless. She was not explaining suffering from the outside. She was trying to find a way through it from the inside.

She did not find it easily. Livingstone says that for a time she had "no heart for anything." He calls it an unusual note, and a sign that her strength was failing. We would call it grief, and perhaps depression. It would not be the last time.

In the evenings, Ovens watched her lead family worship in the shed. She sat on the mud floor with her back against the wall, the boys and girls in a half-circle in front of her, and behind them baskets full of twin babies. She prayed very simply. Then they sang a hymn she had written in Efik to the

Scottish tune "Rothesay Bay," and she kept time with a tambourine, which she used to tap on the heads of girls whose attention wandered.

A friend wrote to her about the great crowds at the Church's synod in Edinburgh, and she answered:

> *It is easy to be good with all the holy and helpful influences about you. 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 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.*

The Shy Speaker

In 1898 the mission council insisted that she take a furlough. Her clothes had been eaten by ants and she had nothing fit to wear, but a box arrived from a church in Glasgow with everything she needed, including a warm shawl for the voyage, which she took as an answer to prayer. She took four girls with her: Janie, now grown up; Mary, the child of wonder, aged five; Alice, about three; and baby Maggie.

She was more famous than ever, and shyer. At a drawing-room meeting in Glasgow, finding men in the audience, she stood up and could not speak, and finally turned to them and asked, "Will the gentlemen kindly go away?" When told they would be disappointed, she asked whether they would kindly go and sit where she could not see them. At Stirling she asked a gentleman who had slipped in to hide behind the lady in front of him. When people praised her she left the room until they had finished. In Edinburgh, overwhelmed by the welcome, she broke down, and then insisted that her work was no more remarkable than that of any other missionary in Calabar. "They all work as hard or harder than I do."

She pleaded for workers, using the language of her age: "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? ... Why should the Queen have good soldiers and not the King of Kings?" She also said, in words that would echo in her later life, that her work in Okoyong was done. She wanted an ordained minister sent to take it over, and she wanted to go further inland.

Three Years Alone

She returned at the end of 1898, and the plans to send her help broke down. For the next three years she was alone at Akpap, apart from occasional visits from women missionaries in Calabar. She had long spells of low fever and sleeplessness, and once spent three months in bed. Many of her letters from these years are dated "Midnight," "3 A.M.," or "Just before dawn." She confessed that "our poor wee services here take as much out of me as the great meetings at home did."

Sometimes the darkness came through. "All is dark," she wrote, "except above. Calvary stands safe and sure." And: "Life apart from Christ is a dreadful gift." She wondered whether she would ever go home again. "How could I leave the bairns in this dreadful land? Who would mother them in this sink of iniquity?" She dreamed of a bit of land and a small house of her own, where she could "stay out my days there with my bairns and lie down among them."

There were signs of change too. Six boys of free birth whom she had taught were now Christians, and were holding services in the villages. Two were sons of the most powerful chiefs. Once, as she and Mr. Alexander sat at breakfast, a woman came in without a word and put a large calabash on the table. Mary thought it was food and said they had already eaten. The

woman said nothing. Mary lifted the lid. Inside were twin boys. A woman had brought her twins to be saved rather than thrown away. Some parents began keeping their twins at home, and Mary told the chiefs that if anyone blamed a misfortune on them, she would "make palaver." "I feel the smallness of the returns," she wrote, "but is the labour lost? A thousand times No!"

On 21 December 1899, according to the small marriage register Mary kept in Efik, Janie married a young man named Akibo Eyo, whom Mary called her best scholar. There was no church wedding. The two took an oath before a chief and before Ma Eme that each would marry the other alone, a pledge of faithfulness in the only form that would bind in Okoyong. (Some modern accounts give the date as 12 December.) The marriage did not last. "Difficulty and disappointment came," Livingstone says, and Janie, now usually called Jean, came back to Mary's household, where she stayed to the end. A baby whose mother had died in childbirth was brought to the house, and Jean took him as her own. He was named Daniel MacArthur Slessor, and Dan would become, after Jean, the best known of Mary's children.

The Fig-Tree

The prophet Habakkuk wrote the words at the head of this chapter when he knew that invasion and ruin were coming to his country. He imagines a farm in total failure: no figs, no grapes, no olives, no grain, no sheep, no cattle. And then he says, "Yet I will rejoice in Jehovah, I will joy in the God of my salvation."

That is not the joy of success. It is the joy of a person who has lost almost everything and discovered that God is still there. Mary Slessor's years at Akpap were a time of empty fields. Four of her children died in a single

epidemic. Her chief and protector died while she nursed him, and she buried him herself. She worked alone for three years, often ill, often sleepless, with no baptisms to report. And through it all she wrote that she was "always satisfied and happy in His love." Not always triumphant. Not always cheerful. But satisfied. The psalmist says, "Weeping may tarry for the night, But joy cometh in the morning" (Psalm 30:5, ASV). The morning, when it came, would come in a place she did not yet expect.

Not by Might

"Then he answered and spake unto me, saying, This is the word of Jehovah unto Zerubbabel, saying, Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith Jehovah of hosts."
— Zechariah 4:6, ASV

The Aro

For years, from her house in Okoyong, Mary Slessor had looked across the Cross River towards the west. Beyond the river lay the country of the Ibibio and, further north, of the Igbo, millions of people whom no missionary had reached. Over much of that country one people held extraordinary power. They were the Aro, whose home was a cluster of towns called Arochukwu, which Mary knew as Arochuku.

The Aro were traders, and for two centuries they had been the great organisers of the slave trade in south-eastern Nigeria. Their power rested on an oracle, a shrine in a wooded gorge near Arochukwu called Ibini Ukpabi, which Europeans called the Long Juju. People from all over the region brought their disputes to it for judgement. Some of those who consulted it, or who were found guilty by it, never came back: they were said to have been devoured by the oracle, and in fact many were sold into slavery through the Aro trading network. Aro agents lived in towns throughout the region, bound to local people by oaths of blood-brotherhood, and trade

routes, marriages, and justice all ran through them. Livingstone says that "all roads in the country led to Aro."

Livingstone also repeats stories that the Aro and their neighbours sacrificed and ate slaves at their feasts. Such stories were widely told by Europeans at the time, and some of the region's peoples told them about each other. They were never properly documented, and modern historians treat them with great caution. What is certain is that the Aro system was built on the buying and selling of human beings, that people died by it, and that it resisted the British advance with all its strength.

Mary knew Aro slave-traders personally. Some of them passed through Okoyong with their captives, and she made friends with them and learned how the trade worked. She told them frankly that she meant to come to their country one day. They invited her, and hinted that it might not be safe. She would have gone years before, but she could not leave Okoyong without someone to take her place, and no one was sent. "The test of a real good missionary," she wrote while she waited, "is this waiting, silent, seemingly useless time."

The Expedition

In 1900 the Niger Coast Protectorate became the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria, with Sir Ralph Moor, the same man who had once found Mary mending her roof, as High Commissioner. The Aro refused to accept British rule. They went on trading in slaves, raided towns that had submitted to the government, and blocked the routes inland. At the end of 1901 the British sent a military force of around sixteen hundred African soldiers under British officers, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel A. F. Montanaro, advancing in several columns. One of them went up from Itu, on the Cross River. Arochukwu was taken at the end of December 1901.

The oracle was found and destroyed. The campaign, known as the Aro Expedition, lasted about three months. At its end the Aro chiefs were made to accept disarmament, the suppression of the oracle, and the prohibition of slave-trading. More than two thousand five hundred guns were surrendered.

Livingstone, writing fifteen years later, describes the expedition as the forces of civilisation meeting the warriors of barbarism. He says the government had been "very patient and conciliatory" and that force became "absolutely necessary at last." He gives no account of the fighting or of those killed. He calls it, in passing, a "punitive expedition." That is exactly what it was. A foreign army invaded a country that had not attacked Britain, defeated its people, destroyed their central shrine, disarmed them, and imposed a new government on them. The fact that the Aro slave system was cruel does not change what the expedition was.

Exile in Creek Town

Mary took no part in the fighting. When the troops were being gathered, the government, anxious for her safety, asked her to come down to Calabar until the trouble was over. She went, very much against her will. The government sent a special escort for her and offered to build her a house at Creek Town for herself and her family. She refused. She did not wish, Livingstone says, "to become too closely identified with the Government." She squeezed into part of the mission hospital instead, where she had no privacy, and longed to get away from the crowds and "the bright, the terribly bright sky."

Okoyong stayed quiet. People came down to see her, brought their disputes for her to settle, and loaded her with food. Her boys kept up the services at Akpap. Twin babies whom she had placed with their own

mothers in four different villages were safe. Then one of her oldest friends, the wife of a great chief, gave birth to twins, and Mary wrote at once to the chief telling him to put his wife in a canoe and send her down to Creek Town. She explained herself in words that are among the most revealing she ever wrote:

> *I am sorry for her, 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.*

"We are foreigners, and they own the country." At the very moment when a British army was marching through the country to the west, Mary Slessor said plainly that the land belonged to its people and that she and her kind were guests in it. She did not say that the expedition was wrong. As far as we know, she never said that. She believed that God used governments to restrain evil, and she hated the slave trade with her whole heart. But her instinct as a missionary was not the instinct of a conqueror. She tried to make the law fit the people, not the people fit the law.

When the campaign was over, she asked the Commissioner for permission to go home. He asked her to wait until a certain movement of troops was finished. She smiled and said she would go at the first opportunity, and she did.

Advice to the Young

Her months in Creek Town had one good result. She met a new generation of missionaries, and some of them became her close friends. The Rev. A. W. Wilkie and his wife, and later the Rev. J. K. Macgregor, head of the Hope Waddell Institute, and his wife, gave her homes to go to when she was ill

and exhausted for the rest of her life. The young missionaries found her fascinating. Her talk, one of them said, was "better than medicine."

One young woman told her how hard it was, in a busy station like Duke Town, to know exactly what to do. Mary answered, "Do? lassie, do? You've not got to do, you've just got to be, and the doing will follow." She told another, "Make a bold stand for purity of speech and charity of judgment." These are the sayings of a woman who had learned, through years of exhaustion, that the work flowed from the life, and not the other way round.

Under Escort

In June 1903 Mary set out from Akpap to visit the new stations she was planting on the Cross River. She missed the government launch at Ikunetu and tramped home, saying that God had not meant her to travel that day. The next week she caught it, and found on board Colonel Montanaro himself, the commander of the expedition, on his way up to Arochukwu. He invited her to come with him, under his escort. She had no change of clothes and no food, and she thought and prayed about it all the way up the river. Livingstone records what she was thinking:

> *Here is the challenge to enter that region of unbroken gloom and despair. If it is not entered now, the Roman Catholics will come in, and the key position to the whole territory will be taken out of our hands.*

She went. At Arochukwu, eighteen months after the expedition, she walked roads that had been trodden for centuries by captives on their way to the coast, and saw the gorge where the oracle had stood. The chiefs and traders, many of whom she already knew, welcomed her and promised to

help her. A little later she came back with two boys and opened a school in the palaver shed of one of the towns. A hundred children crowded in, along with men and women and some of the old slave-dealers themselves. When she left, the people followed her to the landing-beach and called after her, "Don't be long in coming back, Ma! If you don't care for us, who will care for us?"

It must be said plainly. Mary Slessor entered Aro country in the company of the soldier who had conquered it, and she went partly to get there before the Catholics. Her letters from these years contain harsh words about the Roman Catholic Church, which she called "that corrupt body," though she also counted Catholic officials among her friends. She did not create the opening the expedition made, but she walked through it gladly, and she saw the hand of God in it. Historians who see her as a servant of empire have fair evidence on their side.

Not by Might

And yet there is another side, and her friend Mr. Wilkie saw it. He wrote that if she had been settled in the Aro country before the expedition, "it is doubtful whether an armed expedition would have been necessary, and it is at least possible that the suppression of the slave-trade would have been achieved by the peaceable means of the Gospel." Livingstone agreed: primitive peoples, he said in the language of his time, "often bend more quickly before Christ than break before might of arms." Wilkie could not prove it, of course. But Okoyong, which had been as feared as Arochukwu, had changed without a single soldier, through fifteen years of one woman's patience, backed by the distant threat of the consul. One official told Livingstone that her influence with the Aro chiefs after the war did more to settle the country than all the government's force.

The verse at the head of this chapter was spoken to Zerubbabel, a governor of Judah trying to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem with few resources, against the opposition of powerful neighbours. The prophet told him that the work would not be done by armies or by political power, but by God's Spirit. The psalmist says the same thing: "Some trust in chariots, and some in horses; But we will make mention of the name of Jehovah our God" (Psalm 20:7, ASV).

Mary Slessor lived in a time when the chariots and horses of Britain were conquering Africa, and she did not refuse their help. But what changed Okoyong was not the consul's guns. It was a woman sitting at the entrance of a yard, refusing to move while a glass of poison stood on a table. What would change the Creek country, as the next chapter tells, was not the Aro Expedition either. It was a slave girl named Mana, teaching the women of Itu to pray.

First Fruits

"For herein is the saying true, One soweth, and another reapeth."
— John 4:37, ASV

Akom

Among the first people in Okoyong to become a Christian was a woman who had once been among its fiercest defenders of the old ways. Her name was Akom. She had been betrothed as a baby of one year to a powerful chief and had grown up in his harem. When he died she escaped the poison ordeal herself, and helped to send his wives and slaves into the grave with him. Later she married the elder chief Ekpenyong and ruled his household for twenty years.

After the death of Edem's son Etim, when Ekpenyong himself fell under suspicion and moved away, a witch-doctor accused Akom and her son of bewitching a sick young chief. He claimed to have seen them in a vision dancing all night and stabbing the sick man with spears. Akom fled with her son to the neighbouring people of Umon, who gave her the protection of their shrine. When Mary came back from Scotland, Ekpenyong begged her to bring his wife home, and she arranged it on condition that Akom swore the most dreaded of the native oaths, which included drinking blood drawn from the wrist.

Akom came to see Mary but would not come through her gate. A twin-mother had once lived in the yard, and anyone who had sworn that oath believed they would die if they touched anything a twin-mother had touched. Mary pretended to be offended: if her house was polluted, Akom had better go home, since she did not receive visitors on the road. After a while Akom came in. Mary gave her an order for mats, which she made beautifully, and Akom began to come regularly and listen.

When twins were brought into the house, Akom mastered her fear and stayed. Then she hurt her foot, and a painful sore developed, and then a skin disease. Everyone, including Akom, believed it was the oath taking its revenge. Her husband ignored her and waited for her to die. Akom wept and despaired, and Mary spoke to her strongly. At last Akom stood up and prayed: "I am a fool; my God, my Father, listen not to my foolishness. Kill me if Thou wilt, but do not leave me."

The disease was checked by a local remedy. Akom refused to make any sacrifice to the spirits for her recovery. "My Father owns the bush and gives us the knowledge of the medicine," she said, "and as the Master knows what He has made He knows also how to bless it." When the man who had accused her of witchcraft came to be friends with her, she said to Mary, "See what God has wrought. The man who demanded my life comes to tell me his affairs! I sometimes wanted to take revenge, but I have got it from God, and His revenge is of a sweeter kind than that of the Consul."

Akom's words are worth reading twice. She was an African woman, brought up in the deepest fears of her people, who came to trust a heavenly Father more than the oath she had sworn. She made her own theology of healing: God made the plants and gave the knowledge of medicine, so there was no need to pay the spirits. And she made her own theology of forgiveness, which was better than the Consul's justice. She was not repeating a missionary's words. She had found something for herself.

The First Communion

On the fifteenth anniversary of her arrival in Okoyong, in August 1903, the first communion service in the district was held at Akpap. No congregation had ever been formally organised, but the mission sent up the Rev. W. T. Weir from Creek Town to see whether there were people ready to join the Church.

On the Saturday evening, in the hall under the mission house, seven young Christians were baptised in front of the people. Others wanted to come forward, but their families held them back. "Wait and see," they said, "until we know what the thing is." Some parents anxiously asked Mary whether baptism was a kind of *mbiam*, a binding oath that would kill them if they broke it.

On the Sunday a great crowd filled the hall and overflowed into the grounds, sitting on stools and chairs and even on empty gin-boxes. Before the communion Mary presented eleven children for baptism, six of them children she had rescued. Then the first Lord's Supper in Okoyong was celebrated. Afterwards the people sang the hundred and third psalm, in an Efik version, to the old Scottish tune "Stroudwater." When they came to the third and fourth verses, Mary seemed lost in thought, with a far-away look and tears in her eyes. In English they run, in the version she knew from childhood:

> *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.*

In the American Standard Version the same words read: "Who forgiveth all thine iniquities; Who healeth all thy diseases; Who redeemeth thy life from

destruction; Who crowneth thee with lovingkindness and tender mercies" (Psalm 103:3-4, ASV). She had watched lives taken for fifteen years in Okoyong. Now she was hearing Okoyong people sing about a God who redeems life from destruction.

At the end she spoke to those who had been baptised. "Okoyong now looks to you more than to me for proof of the power of the Gospel." That evening she talked for a long time about what the district had been like fifteen years before, and she was glad, Livingstone says, that after all the work had not been a failure.

Livingstone calls the day the crown of her service, and adds that "alone, she had done in Okoyong what it had taken a whole Mission to do in Calabar." That is an admirer's exaggeration. She had not been alone. She had had Ma Eme, and Edem, and the African boys who kept the services going when she was ill, and the carpenter Ovens, and many others. And the numbers were small: seven young people and eleven children after fifteen years. But they were a beginning, and she knew it.

Planting at Itu

Earlier that year she had begun something new. With no help from the mission, and against the doubts of some of her colleagues, she had decided to plant a base at Itu, a market town on the Cross River at the mouth of the Enyong Creek. Itu had been a slave market for centuries. Now, since the Aro Expedition, it was a government station, and the Creek behind it led into the heart of Aro country. She saw that whoever held Itu could reach the Ibibio, the Igbo, and the Efik.

In January 1903 she canoed to Itu with three of her young people: two boys named Esien and Effiom, and Mana, the girl who had been kidnapped as a child and sold as a slave to Ma Eme. She left them there. Esien was to

hold services, Effiom to lead the singing, and Mana to teach the girls. When she went back a few weeks later, the results had exceeded all her dreams. The old chief told her he was too old to change his ways, but the young could learn them, and that God had made him and was therefore bound to look after him whatever he did. But the children were eager, and the services were so crowded that there was no room. She built a school on the hill with her own hands, and the people began building a church, with two rooms at the end for her. A fellow missionary, Dr. Rattray, wrote when he heard, "Bravo! Uganda was evangelised by this means, and the teachers there could only read the gospels."

By August the congregation at Itu numbered more than three hundred, meeting in a church they had built themselves. And that month, Livingstone says, Jean, Mana, Iye the mother of Susie, Akom, and Esien the teacher at Itu were baptised and sat down at the communion table. Jean's adopted son Dan was baptised too, and Mary watched with deep joy as her oldest daughter presented him to God. Esien's mother, who had resisted her son's faith, sat at the service beside two twin-mothers. (Livingstone tells of these baptisms in a different chapter from the Okoyong communion, and does not say whether they took place on the same occasion.)

A Slave Girl's Triumph

In October Mary was at Itu, watching the building of a house for herself and the teachers, and was delighted to see the men and women working together, joking and laughing. In Okoyong the sexes were kept strictly apart, she wrote, but here "they were daffin' and lauchin' as in Scotland." When she worried aloud that six rooms was too much to ask of them, they said, "It's not too much, Ma; nothing can be too much."

One woman insisted on washing Mary's feet in hot water, and told her, "Ma, I've been so frightened you would take our teacher away because we are so unworthy. I think I could not live again in darkness. I pray all the time. I lay my basket down and just pray on the road." This woman prayed in the meetings, electrifying everyone, and had begun family prayers in her home, though her husband laughed at her. There were many others like her.

Livingstone tells us who was behind it all. It was Mana, "a black slave-girl," who had taught and nursed and trained the women of Itu, quietly and modestly, "as a mother might." The church at Itu owed its first life not to a Scottish missionary but to an African girl who had once been bought and sold. Paul wrote, "There can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither bond nor free, there can be no male and female; for ye all are one man in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28, ASV). At Itu that verse was not an idea. It was a slave girl teaching free women to pray.

Onoyom

On one of her journeys up the Creek, a small canoe shot out from the bushes and bumped into hers. The man in it held out a letter. His master at Akani Obio had sent him to wait for her and bring her to his house. She turned aside, up a quiet creek full of water-lilies, and was received by a well-dressed young couple in a house with a concrete floor and a European bed with mosquito curtains. The man was Onoyom Iya Nya, a chief so trusted by the government that he was the only man in the district who had not been disarmed.

He told her his story. In 1875, as a boy, he had guided a Scottish missionary, Dr. Robb, through his town, and had been punished for it. He grew up in the old religion, went to the feasts at Arochukwu, and when his

father died, saw ten little girls killed and buried with him. Later his house burned down and his child died, and he went looking for the sorcerer he believed was responsible, meaning to kill him. On the way he met a former mission teacher, a man who had fallen into drink and was homeless. The man asked him how he knew it was not the white man's God who was angry with him. "Where can I find this God?" Onoyom asked. "I am not worthy to say," the old teacher replied, "but go to the white Ma at Itu, and she will tell you." Onoyom had the fallen teacher read him the Bible while he waited for Mary to pass. Now he asked her, "And now, will you show me what to do?"

It is one of the loveliest stories in her life, and Mary was only its last link. A missionary sowed in 1875 and never knew what came of it. A drunken, homeless man who had lost his way still pointed a chief to God. And a slave girl and two boys had made the name of the white Ma at Itu known up and down the Creek. "For herein is the saying true," Jesus said, "One soweth, and another reapeth." Mary Slessor had spent fifteen years sowing in Okoyong with little to show for it. Now, in a place where she had barely begun, she found herself reaping what others had sown.

She went home that night through a storm, singing and praying all the way. But she was tired, and often afraid of what lay ahead, and there were nights when she woke in the dark and cried, "Calm me, O God, and keep me calm." Then she would go and look at the sleeping children, and say to herself, "Surely I have more reason to trust God than childhood has, after all the way He has led me."

"I Dare Not Go Back"

"But Jesus said unto him, No man, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."
— Luke 9:62, ASV

A Memorandum

In November 1903 Mary Slessor did something she disliked. She wrote a formal paper for the mission council in Calabar, setting out what she thought the mission ought to do.

She began by saying what many missionaries felt and few said aloud: that the mission's methods were "very far from adequate" for the size of the field. Churches and schools on the rivers were good, but they reached only the people who lived near them. The villages of the interior were broken up by old enmities and oaths and fears, so that even houses in the same village might keep apart. What was needed, she wrote, was "something more mobile and flexible than ordinary congregational work." She suggested sending church members out in small bands to travel through the villages for a week at a time, having African teachers spend part of each month in outlying districts, and asking Christian traders to hold services at the trading posts up the river, where Efik traders, she knew, kept Bibles locked in their boxes.

She asked for a minister, with his wife and an African teacher, to take over Okoyong, since she could not build up a church there in the way an ordained man could. She asked for Itu to be made a proper European station. It was, she said, the natural gateway to the whole region. "It was not without reason that it was the slave mart, and that it became the Government base." She was due for home leave at the start of 1904, after five years in Africa, and she asked instead for six months to travel up and down the Creek with her own canoe and crew. Then she added a sentence that shows her better than any description: "But I am willing to change ... any plan of ours in order to let any larger undertaking make way if it should be proposed."

The council would not take the responsibility. It passed her paper to the women's committee in Scotland and asked her to wait. It did agree unanimously that Itu should become a medical station.

A Mere Wreck

Then her body gave way. She collapsed, and was, Livingstone says, "again far down in the dark valley." When she recovered, she wrote, "I rose a mere wreck of what I was, and that was not much at the best. My hair is silvered enough to please any one now, and I am nervous and easily knocked up, and so rheumatic that I cannot get up or down without pain." The council thought she should go home. Instead it gave her permission to make her tour of the Creek, on one condition: she must not commit the mission to any new work.

She accepted the condition and set off. "It seems strange," she said, "to be starting with a family on a gipsy life in a canoe, but God will take care of us. Whether I shall find His place for me up-river or whether I shall come back to my own people again, I do not know. He knows, and that is

enough." It is the faith of Abraham, of whom the letter to the Hebrews says that "he went out, not knowing whither he went" (Hebrews 11:8, ASV).

She went at her own expense. Her salary was now a hundred pounds a year, and she spent almost nothing of it on herself. "I have no object on earth," she wrote, "but to get my food and raiment, which are of the plainest, and to bring up my bairns." The building was done by herself, her household, and the free labour of the people. The girls and boys who worked with her were paid nothing but their keep. Livingstone says that all the opening of the Enyong Creek to the gospel cost the mission was her salary.

Before she left she went to Duke Town to hand over the business of the Okoyong court. The Commissioner sent her an invitation to dinner, the kind of invitation that was really a command. She declined it, saying that she was not visiting. Livingstone suspects she had nothing fit to wear. The Commissioner came to see her instead.

Itu

She reached Itu in July 1904 with her family, still weak. A government doctor who visited her there found her in an unfinished native hut with almost no furniture, sitting in a chair rocking a tiny baby, while five other babies slept around the room wrapped in pieces of brown paper and old newspapers. The congregation her young teachers had gathered now numbered three hundred and fifty. "To-day," she wrote, "as the custom is after the lesson, the bairns each took a part in prayer, and before we rose a boy started 'Come, Holy Spirit, come.' We sang it through on our knees."

Calls came every day. A deputation from the Ibibio country begged, "Give us even a boy!" A chief on the Creek sent word, "It is not book that I

want; it is God!" Onoyom came from Akani Obio to say that his people had three pounds saved to pay a teacher. And late one night fifteen young men from Okoyong arrived by torchlight to tell her that the women missionaries sent to Akpap had already left, and they had no Ma. She sent them to shelter for the night and spent the rest of it in prayer. "Oh Britain," she wrote, "surfeited with privilege! tired of Sabbath and Church, would that you could send over to us what you are throwing away!"

Cement

In November 1904 she went to the mission council for the first time in six years, and reported what had been done. At Itu there was a church, a teacher's house, a day school, and a class of forty people preparing for baptism. At Arochukwu there was a school on land given by the chiefs. There were small congregations beginning in four more places along the Creek. The council gave her permission to continue for another six months, on the same condition as before: no expense to the mission.

She laid the cement floors of her houses herself. Once, when colleagues met her at a landing-place and remarked on how many trunks she was travelling with, she explained that they were full of cement; she had nothing else to carry it in. A lady in Scotland later asked her whether she had ever had lessons in using cement. "No," she said. "I just stir it like porridge, turn it out, smooth it with a stick, and all the time keep praying, 'Lord, here's the cement, if to Thy glory, set it,' and it has never once gone wrong."

It is a funny story, and it tells us something about how she prayed. Her prayers were not separate from her work. They were said over the cement bucket.

God Is Stronger Than Juju

Meanwhile Chief Onoyom was building a church at Akani Obio with eight hundred pounds of his own savings. At first he planned a building of mud and thatch, but then he reflected that if he were building a house for himself it would have iron walls, and he could not do less for God. So he built it with iron walls, a cement floor, and a bell-tower. For the seats and pulpit he chose a huge tree that the town regarded as its chief shrine. The story was told that the people said the spirit would never let it be cut down. "God is stronger than juju," said Onoyom, and went out with his men to fell it. They failed the first day, and the town rejoiced. The next morning they knelt and prayed that God would show himself stronger than the spirit, and then went back to work and brought the tree down. At the dedication, Onoyom provided food for everyone but allowed nothing stronger than palm wine. Then he came shyly up to Mary and pressed a handful of money into her hand, asking her to buy food for herself, because he did not know what kind she liked.

Later Onoyom sent away his other wives, providing for them, and took back as his only wife a woman he had once rejected because she had borne twins. Some time afterwards, the chief, his wife and their baby, a score of his people, and sixteen young men and women were baptised at Akani Obio. Mary was ill and had to be carried to the service, and she hid her face on the communion table. "Over forty sat down in the afternoon to remember our Lord's death 'till He come,'" she wrote. "It cannot go back this work of His. Akani Obio is now linked on to Calvary." And then, thinking of her mother, who had first told her about Calabar: "I am sure our Lord will never keep it from my mother."

"I Dare Not Go Back"

The mission's rules said that she was to go back to Akpap in April 1906. When she was reminded of it, Livingstone says, she was "inclined to be mutinous."

"There is an impelling power behind me, and I dare not look backward," she said. "Even if it cost me my connection with the Church of my heart's love, I feel I must go forward." And again: "I am not enthusiastic over Church methods. I would not mind cutting the rope and going adrift with my bairns, and I can earn our bite and something more." She thought seriously of taking a government post, or of opening a shop with her girls, so that she could support herself and stay where she was.

She wrote to the secretary of the women's committee in Scotland. The government was building roads into the country around her faster than anyone had imagined, she said, and God had led her step by step to exactly the right place. "And the minutes says 'I am to return to Akpap in April!'" Okoyong was very dear to her, she wrote, "but to leave these hordes of untamed, unwashed, unlovely savages and withdraw the little sunlight that has begun to flicker out over its darkness! I dare not think of it. Whether the Church permits it or not, I feel I must stay here and even go on farther as the roads are made." She could no longer walk far, she admitted, but if the roads were good she could have four wheels made and a box put on them, and the children could pull her about. "With such facts pressing on me at every point you will understand my saying *I dare not go back*." At the end she added, "This is not for publication; it is for digestion."

The phrase about "untamed, unwashed, unlovely savages" is painful to read, and it is her own. It was the language of her time, and she used it even about the people she was risking everything to serve. But it is worth noticing why she used it. She was not arguing that the people were

unworthy. She was arguing that they were in greater need than the people of Okoyong, and that she could not abandon them.

Set Free

Livingstone, who worked for the Church, is at pains to defend the committees. They were stewards of limited money, he says, and had to be sure of every step, while she, "all afire with energy and enthusiasm, would have gone on in faith." Both sides had a point. A mission cannot be run on one woman's impulses, and the committees were right to worry about who would pay for the new work when she was gone. But the Church had also left her alone in Okoyong for years, and she was right that the chance in the Creek would not wait for committees.

In the end the Church gave way. It decided to free her from the ordinary rules and let her work as a pioneer missionary, going where she thought right. Livingstone calls it a remarkable position, and so it was. The committee in Scotland passed a resolution recognising that it was the Church's duty to occupy the region, regretting that its funds were too stretched to send new staff at once, and thanking Miss Slessor for her generosity and her brave pioneer work. A minister, the Rev. John Rankin, was sent to survey the country, and came back full of enthusiasm. Within three miles of Arochukwu, he reported, there were nineteen large towns. Some of the chiefs were persecuting the young Christians, and when the teachers asked the converts what they had said to the chiefs' threats, they answered, "You can put us out of our country, but you cannot put us away from God." The women said they would die for Jesus Christ. The head chief of the Aro, who had once controlled the oracle itself, offered to build a house for any missionary who would come. Rankin was appointed to

Arochukwu, and it became a regular station of the mission. The work Mary had begun alone had been taken up by the Church.

No Looking Back

The verse at the head of this chapter is one of the hardest sayings of Jesus. A man offered to follow him, but first wanted to go home and say goodbye to his family. Jesus answered that no one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God. A ploughman who looks over his shoulder cuts a crooked furrow.

Mary Slessor was often tempted to look back. She loved Okoyong more than anywhere on earth. She loved her Church and was afraid of losing it. She was ill and tired and nearly sixty. But she had heard, as she believed, a voice behind her saying, as Isaiah put it, "This is the way, walk ye in it" (Isaiah 30:21, ASV), and she would not turn round. It made her difficult to manage. It made her, at times, "mutinous." It also opened the Enyong Creek to the gospel.

On the Bench

"learn to do well; seek justice, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow."
— Isaiah 1:17, ASV

"A Voluntary"

By 1905 the British government of Southern Nigeria was setting up a system of native courts across the country. Each court was made up of local chiefs who sat in turn, with the District Commissioner as its president and a permanent vice-president to keep it running. Before Mary left Itu she was asked, informally, whether she would take charge of the court business of her district, as she had done in Okoyong, but this time on an official footing. If she agreed, the court would be moved to Ikot Obong, near where she was living, to spare her strength.

She was pleased, and she agreed. She was already, in practice, the person everyone went to with their disputes. An official position, she thought, would give her more power to protect the poor and the oppressed, and above all women. "It will be a good chance," she said, "to preach the Gospel, and to create confidence and inspire hope in these poor wretches, who fear white and black man alike; while it will neither hamper my work nor restrict my liberty."

When she was told that a salary went with the post, she refused it. "I'm born and bred," she said, "and am in every fibre of my being, a voluntary." She meant something quite specific. The United Presbyterian Church had been founded on the principle known as Voluntaryism: that the Church should be supported by the free gifts of its members, never by the state. She was not going to take the government's money for doing what she thought of as Christian service.

The formal offer came in May 1905. The High Commissioner invited her to become a member of the Itu Native Court with the status of permanent vice-president. He proposed to pay her a nominal salary of one pound a year and to give her the rest, forty-seven pounds a year, for her mission work. She thanked him, accepted the post, and declined the money. In October she took over the court's books, and for years she did much of the clerk's work herself.

It is often said that she was the first woman magistrate in the British Empire. That may be true, but it has never been properly established, and it is safest to say that she was one of the first women anywhere in the Empire to exercise a magistrate's powers.

"God Help These Poor Helpless Women!"

The cases that came before her were grim. One of the first was a murder charge in which a woman was involved, and many of the rest concerned marriage, and with it poisoning, sacrifice, debts, oaths, and cruelty. She was often sick with disgust. "God help these poor helpless women!" she wrote one evening. "What a crowd of people I have had to-day, and how debased! They are just like brutes in regard to women. I have had a murder, an eséré case, a suicide, a man for branding his slave-wife all over her face and body; a man with a gun who has shot four persons. It is all horrible!"

Some of her sentences survive in her own handwriting. A man found guilty of brawling in the market and snatching eight brass rods from a woman's basket: one month's hard labour. A man who chased a girl into the bush intending to harm her: one month's hard labour. A man who seized a woman in the market, kept her chained for fourteen days by the neck and wrists, and put a curse on her to kill her if she told the white people: six months' hard labour, which was the most the court could give.

She used her position above all for women. She fined a whole town three pounds for failing to provide water for twin-mothers. She granted a woman a divorce on the spot from a husband she had good reason to leave, and made her fellow missionary witness it. The government's report for 1907 recorded that the District Commissioner had summoned a number of husbands who had deserted their wives for bearing twins, and that every one of them had agreed to take his wife back, and that other men in the same position had then done the same without being summoned. It called this "a sign of the civilising influence worked through the Court by that admirable lady, Miss Slessor."

Her Kind of Justice

She was not a conventional judge. Three chiefs sat beside her on the bench and a jury sat behind, but she ruled the court. An official saw her stand up and box the ears of a chief who had gone on interrupting after being warned, to the great amusement of the other chiefs. She would try a group of men, lecture them, and fine them, and when they had no money she would take them up to her house and set them to work to earn it, feeding them well and talking to them while they worked. Livingstone says that often, instead of administering the law, "she administered justice by giving the prisoner a blow on the side of the head!" He meant it as praise.

People trusted her court because she heard their stories in their own language, without an interpreter. One District Commissioner spent three days on a single case and got nowhere, and she settled it to everyone's satisfaction with two questions. Once, standing by while a government doctor questioned a chief through an interpreter, she suddenly broke in, and the chief crumpled in front of her. He had told a lie. "To think," she said afterwards, "he could have expected to deceive *me*!"

The court also used the oath of the old religion. A witness would promise to tell the truth while a member of the court drew a foul mixture from a bottle across his tongue and face, and touched his arms and legs with it, in the presence of a skull. It was believed that anyone who lied under this oath would die. Soon after Mary joined the court, a witness who had plainly lied collapsed and died on his way out of the building, and the oath was held in great respect for some time afterwards.

This is uncomfortable material for a Christian biography, and it should not be hidden. A missionary who had refused to pray at a blood covenant presided over a court that swore witnesses on an oath believed to kill, and a man appears to have died of his fear of it. Her court combined a fierce care for the weak with procedures no modern court would allow: summary blows, fines worked off as labour at the judge's house, and verdicts that depended on her knowing, or thinking she knew, who was lying. It was, as she knew, justice by a strong personality, and it was only as good as she was.

When two ministers from Scotland visited her court at the end of her time there, they watched her hear a case in which a man, drunk on trade gin, had attacked his wife with a machete because she had stumbled against him. Mary wanted a severe sentence. The jury did not. The headman laid down the principle that men had a perfect right to do whatever they liked with their wives, or wives would become unmanageable. Out of deference to what he called the white woman's peculiar views, the jury agreed to send

the man to prison for a short term. It was a reminder of how far she had to push against the settled convictions of the men she sat with. She told the visiting minister that she did not care for the work at all. "The moral atmosphere of a native court is so bad," she said, "that I would never go near one were it not that I want the people to get justice."

As her health failed, she began to sit in her room reading or writing while the girls of her household questioned the people who came to her, reported the facts, and carried her answers back. Sometimes she simply called her ruling out of the window. People sent her letters addressed, to be on the safe side, to "Madam, Mr., Miss, Slessor." In November 1909, or possibly a year later, worn out, she resigned. The Commissioner of the Eastern Province wrote to thank her for her services to the country. Livingstone says she was glad to be free of it.

"Failed, Failed"

One episode from these years has been quoted in almost every popular life of Mary Slessor, and it needs to be handled with care.

In 1908, while she was at Duke Town, the High Commissioner invited her to dinner at Government House to meet a visiting woman writer. She did not want to go. She had nothing to wear and did not want to be put on show. The Macgregors, with whom she was staying, persuaded her. As she set off in the hammock the government sent for her, Mr. Macgregor noticed "the light of battle in her eyes," and laughed, because he knew she loved a prank. She came back with her face full of mischief. "Ay," she said, "I met your lady writer, and I made her greet four times and she gied me half a sovereign for my bairns!" To "greet," in Scots, is to weep.

The writer published an account of the meeting in the London *Morning Post* under the title "But yet the pity of it." She described a

woman close on sixty in a skimpy tweed skirt and a broken green picture-hat with a knot of red ribbon, holding out hands scraped raw from work and saying, "Ye'll excuse my hands." She reported Mary telling, in broad Scots, how she had put the death-oath on a man accused of stealing plantains, and how he had died on his way to Calabar: "I put *mbiam* on him, an' he knew he had stolen them and died." And she ended with Mary looking out into the sunshine and saying of her whole life's work, "My time's been wasted. The puir bairns. They'd be better dead. Failed, failed."

Livingstone says flatly that the article "excited laughter and derision in the Calabar bush," and that Mary had been deliberately "mystifying" a writer she did not take to, spinning her a tale of gloom and getting half a sovereign out of it for the children. That is quite possible. Her own report of the evening sounds like a woman pleased with a joke. But it is also possible that Livingstone, who wanted to protect her reputation, explained away something real. She did have dark moods, as we have seen and will see again. She was exhausted and ill that year. She was quite capable of saying "Failed, failed" in a black moment and laughing about it afterwards. We cannot know. What we can say is that the most famous despairing quotation attributed to her comes from a stranger's newspaper article that her friends thought was a leg-pull, and it should not be quoted as her settled judgement on her life.

Seeking Justice

The verse at the head of this chapter was addressed by Isaiah to the rulers of Jerusalem, who were very religious and very unjust. God told them he was sick of their sacrifices. What he wanted was that they should "seek justice, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow." The law of

Moses put it more starkly still: "That which is altogether just shalt thou follow, that thou mayest live" (Deuteronomy 16:20, ASV).

Mary Slessor's court was not altogether just, and she knew it. But she sat in it, unpaid, for four years, because she believed that without her the women who came before it would get no justice at all. Twin-mothers were taken back into their homes. Women who had been chained and branded saw the men who did it sent to prison. A woman who wanted to leave a brutal husband was set free. It was an imperfect instrument in imperfect hands, used for the people Isaiah named: the oppressed, the fatherless, and the widow.

Children of the Desolate

"Sing, O barren, thou that didst not bear; break forth into singing, and cry aloud, thou that didst not travail with child: for more are the children of the desolate than the children of the married wife, saith Jehovah."
— Isaiah 54:1, ASV

An Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe

Mary Slessor never had a child of her own. She had, in the end, a household larger than most mothers ever know. She would stand in the middle of it sometimes, pretending to be at her wits' end, and recite the nursery rhyme about the old woman who lived in a shoe and had so many children she didn't know what to do. "I have only three girls at present," she once wrote, "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."

She was candid about her failings as a housekeeper. "I have not an elaborate system or method of work," she wrote. "It is just everything as it comes. I am afraid my mind is not a trained machine. It only works as it chooses." The mission frowned on missionaries adopting children, and her household was a constant strain on her money and her strength. She did it anyway. On Sundays there was tea at a big table in the hall, where Jean,

Mana, Annie, Mary, Alice, and Maggie sat round her, with small boys and girls on the floor, and the boxes of treats from Scotland were opened.

Most of the babies who came to her died, or were returned to their families. But a core of children grew up in her house and were hers for life. The historian Jeanette Hardage counts nine. We know something about most of them, though less than we would like, and they deserve more than a list.

Jean

Jean, first called Janie, was the twin girl Mary had carried out of Old Town in 1883, whose brother had been killed. She was baptised in Dundee and grew up in Mary's house. Her Efik name was Atim Eso. Her marriage in 1899 failed, and she came home. She adopted the motherless baby Dan and raised him as her own. As the years went on she became Mary's right hand. She ran the household, cared for the babies and their mothers, taught in the school, and ran into the bush to rescue twins when Mary was too weak to go. In the Ikpe years she worked as a teacher and evangelist at a place called Nkanga, where she gathered some two hundred men and women to hear her preach, and Mary thought her the best Efik teacher she knew. Like Mary at her loom, she read with a book propped open wherever she worked.

For most of those years Jean worked for her board alone. Around 1907, Livingstone says, Mary "felt it was time to acknowledge her services," and began to pay her a shilling a week. It is a small detail, but an honest biography should notice it. Mary Slessor gave everything she had to her work, and she expected her household to do the same, and Jean did, for almost nothing.

Mary loved her deeply. In 1907 a story about Jean, spread by someone in the district, reached Mary in Scotland, and she cut short her last furlough to rush back. Livingstone does not say what the story was. When she got home she found it was untrue, and she was "too grateful to be angry." In 1909 doctors advised an operation for an internal illness Jean had suffered in silence for years. Mary was against it, and sent her to Duke Town for treatment instead. We do not know whether she was right. "Jean has as many faults as myself," she wrote in 1913, "but she is a darling ... and a treasure." Jean nursed her through her last illness, went with her on her only holiday, and was at her deathbed. She died herself at Use in the influenza epidemic of 1918, aged about thirty-six.

Annie, Mary, Alice, Maggie

Annie came to Mary as a baby in the Okoyong years. Livingstone calls her "the drawer of water and hewer of wood, kind willing worker." She married, and she and her husband joined the church together, and later led the services at Use while Mary was at Ikpe, and then worked at Nkanga. Their little boy died at the age of two, and was the first person to be given a Christian burial in the part of the Ibibio country where Mary was then working. A little girl followed, who used to run about the church at Use calling to "Ma."

Mary, the "child of wonder" who had lain for five days by the market road, grew into what one visitor called "the smart, handsome favourite." She had suitors in Okoyong and in the Ibibio country and turned them all down. "Why can't I stay at home with you?" she asked. Then the government's new motor car came to Use, and with it a young African driver named David, an educated Anglican from Lagos. He won her. They were married first before the District Commissioner, and Mary insisted that

her daughter stay at home until they had been married in church as well. At the wedding breakfast the guest of honour was an old Muslim in white robes, a friend of David's family, who had once taken Mary's hand, kissed it, and told her that only God could make her such a mother to everybody. Livingstone notes that few tributes from white men had touched her more, "though she was half-afraid her feeling was scarcely orthodox." David asked her to pray for them before they left, and she did. A baby followed.

Alice, another rescued twin, was steady and dependable, and later came to faith and said so. Maggie, whom one visitor called "fusionless," meaning scatter-brained, was the youngest of the four girls Mary took to Scotland in 1898. When Alice and Maggie were older, Mary worried that, having no family and no betrothal, they had no one to protect them from insult, and she sent them to board at a mission girls' school in Calabar. Their later lives are not well recorded. There are hints in the modern biographies that at least one of the younger girls had a hard life after Mary's death, without her protection.

Dan, Whitie, Asuquo

Dan, Jean's adopted son, whose full name was Daniel MacArthur Slessor, went with Mary to Scotland in 1907 at the age of about six, and became almost as well known there as Jean. When he fell in love with the government motor car and its driver, Mary sent him off to the Hope Waddell Institute at Duke Town, "in terror for the safety of his body and his morals." He was the best educated of her children. He was with her in her last year, helping in the school and interpreting. He lived until about 1970, and in 1958 he wrote down his reminiscences of her, which are kept in Dundee and were used by later biographers.

Whitie, whose full name was Madge White Slessor, was the last twin Mary saved. She trained as a nurse. Asuquo, one of the last babies to join the household, went to the Hope Waddell Institute with Dan, and is said to have run away from school to go to sea. Of both their later lives little is known.

When Mary died, the girls wept in the night, and among the things they cried out was this: "We shall be counted as slaves now that our mother is dead." It is a terrible sentence. Mary had given them love, a home, education, and a name. What she had not been able to give them was a secure place in the society around them, because by the customs of the country a child without a family had no protection. They knew it.

The Problem of the Women

That problem, the place of women without a family, was one Mary had thought about for years. In the Ibibio country, Livingstone says, a woman had no place outside the harem. A girl who was not betrothed to someone had no protection in law, and could be insulted or injured with impunity. Women who became Christians, or who were driven out as twin-mothers, had nowhere to go.

Mary concluded that the root of the problem was economic. Until women could support themselves without depending on men, they would never be free. Some of the more thoughtful women told her frankly that they saw no future for themselves except the harem. So she began to plan a settlement: a home in the countryside where her own girls, twin-mothers, abandoned children, and Christian women with nowhere else to go could live and support themselves by farming and simple industries, such as laundry, baking, basket-making, weaving, and shoemaking. It had to be

based on the land, and it had to pay for itself. She did not believe in homes that were kept alive by money from outside.

As a European she could not buy land. So she arranged, with the government's help, to acquire it in the names of Jean and the other girls, and to give the mission a permanent interest in it. In 1908 she fixed the site at Use, near Ikot Obong, where she was living. The government sent fruit trees: mangoes, guavas, pawpaws, avocados, and pineapples. She began to think about rubber and cocoa. She bought a cow, to save its owner from prison for debt, and it became famous in the mission as "Ma Slessor's coo" for running away with the whole household, and once with two senior missionaries, hanging on to its rope. She did not want the settlement named after herself, and suggested it be named after Mrs. Anderson or Mrs. Goldie, the missionary wives of her early years.

The settlement never became the institution her friends hoped for. She did not want a large institution, and other places kept calling her away. After her death the Church raised money for a memorial home for women and girls in her name. But the idea behind it was far ahead of its time. She saw that the gospel had to give women not only a new heart but a way to live, and she saw that the way to live was work and land of their own.

The Last Visit Home

In 1906 she became so ill that a government doctor told her to go home or die. She did not go until 1907, when she could no longer walk more than a few steps. She took Dan with her. "Oh, the dear homeland," she wrote. "How I long for a wee look at a winter landscape, to feel the cold wind, and see the frost in the cart-ruts ... to take a back seat in a church."

She was in Scotland from May to October. Her friends were shocked to see "an old wrinkled lady huddled in a corner of a carriage." She visited her

old haunts in Dundee with a friend from the factory, and met three women with whom she had begun mission work there nearly forty years before. On the night before she left, friends found her weeping in bed. She had been overcome, she said, by the feeling that she was homeless in her own country. "I'm a poor solitary with only memories." When they told her she had troops of friends who loved her, she said, "Yes, I ken, and I am grateful, but it's just that I've none of my ain folk to say good-bye to." She never went back to Scotland again.

More Are the Children of the Desolate

The verse at the head of this chapter was written to Jerusalem in exile, a city that had lost its people and seemed to have no future. God told her to sing, because the children of the desolate would outnumber the children of the married. The psalmist says the same of God: "He maketh the barren woman to keep house, And to be a joyful mother of children" (Psalm 113:9, ASV). And again: "God setteth the solitary in families" (Psalm 68:6, ASV).

Mary Slessor was a solitary woman who had lost her own family and never married. She was also the mother of a large household, and the "Ma" of a whole region. The children of the desolate were more than she could count. They were not an easy family. Some died, some struggled, and some were left exposed when she was gone. But they were a family, and she loved them fiercely, and they loved her. James wrote that "pure religion and undefiled before our God and Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction" (James 1:27, ASV). She did not only visit them. She took them home.

Ikpe

"And he hath said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my power is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me."
— 2 Corinthians 12:9, ASV

A Call From the North

The call to her last field came, of all ways, out of a war. During one of the smaller military expeditions that followed the Aro campaign, government troops were attacked by the people of a district at the upper end of the Enyong Creek, who fled, Livingstone says, "at the first experience of disciplined firing." A young man who had been used by the soldiers as a guide persuaded some of them to go and ask advice of the great white Ma at Use. They came, and talked with her long and earnestly. Later more came, saying they wanted to be "God-men."

Their home was Ikpe, two days up the Creek by canoe, an old slave-trading town that had been allied with the Aro and had long closed its market to outsiders. When Mary first visited, the older chiefs were sullen. She understood why. "Poor old heathen souls," she wrote, "they have good reason to be, with all they have to hope from tumbling down about their ears." But young men were already building a church, with two rooms for

her at the back, though none of them could read and their only teacher knew barely more than the alphabet.

She knew she was too old and too ill to start again. She was over sixty. She could not walk far, and was carried to church. But the thought of people worshipping a God they barely knew, with no one to teach them, broke her down. "Why cannot the Church send two ladies there?" she asked. "If the wherewithal should fail at the end of two years, let them take my salary. I shall only be too glad to live on native food with my bairns." No ladies were sent. So she went herself. "I must go," she said. "I am in honour bound to go."

In a short time she was back at Ikpe with fifty sheets of corrugated iron. "I am committed now," she wrote. "No more idleness for me. I am entering in the dark as to how and where and when. How I am to manage I do not know, but my mind is at perfect peace about it, and I am not afraid. God will carry it through. The Pillar leads." The pillar was the pillar of cloud that went before Israel in the wilderness. She had used the image for years: she would not move until God moved.

Real Life

She lived in two rooms behind the church, with a camp-bed and a few dishes, and at times had as many as two hundred and fifty people clearing bush for her. Livingstone says the people of Ikpe were hostile to white people as a whole, and wanted neither them nor their religion. But there was nothing warlike about the frail old woman in the camp-bed, and "her very helplessness protected her."

Her courage had not left her. One Sunday, during the service, a fight broke out in the market with sticks and swords. She went out, seized one man's wrist, and stopped it. When government agents came with a police

escort to vaccinate the people against smallpox, the crowd took the vaccine for the white man's witchcraft, guns appeared, and there was about to be bloodshed. The people were asked to trust Ma. They said they would be vaccinated if she did it herself, so she sent for vaccine and spent days doing it, joking and coaxing when she was near fainting. "This poor frail woman is the broken reed on which they lean," she wrote of herself. "Isn't it strange?"

She described her life at Ikpe in one of her best letters:

> *It is a real life I am living now, not all preaching and holding meetings, but rather a life and an atmosphere which the people can touch and live in and be made willing to believe in when the higher truths are brought before them. In many things it is a most prosaic life, dirt and dust and noise and silliness and sin in every form, but full, too, of the kindliness and homeliness and dependence of children who are not averse to be disciplined and taught, and who understand and love just as we do.*

The journeys between Use and Ikpe were brutal. She was once asked how she could stand them in her state. "Oh," she said, "I just had to take as big a dose of laudanum as I dared, and wrap myself up in a blanket, and lie in the bottom of the canoe all the time, and managed fine." Laudanum was opium dissolved in alcohol, the ordinary painkiller of the time, and she used it, as she used sleeping draughts, to get through pain and sleeplessness. It is one of the details Livingstone kept that the legend leaves out.

Once she reached the landing-beach at half past five on Christmas morning after a night in the canoe, carrying, as Livingstone puts it, "the usual motherless baby." A message was waiting for her: "Ekereki said I was to tell you that his mother is asleep." It meant that the woman had died. Mary was struck that the Christian way of speaking of death as sleep had

already entered the language of a people who had once thought every death the work of a witch. Annie's little son had been the first Christian buried there. Now this woman was laid beside him, the first adult to receive a Christian burial in that part of the Ibibio country. That New Year's Eve she was down with fever, and at midnight an army of driver ants poured into the house from every side and dropped from the roof. "My 'first-feet' were driver ants," she wrote, using the Scottish word for the first visitor of the New Year.

The Autocratic Doctor

In 1911 a young doctor named Hitchcock came to the mission hospital at Itu, and began riding over every other day to examine her. He suspected she was not eating enough. Her diary shows that he was right. On 14 June she wrote: "Market Morning. Have only 3d. in cash in the house; sent it with 2 Ikpats (the first Efik schoolbook) and New Testament to buy food, and sold all 3 books for 6d." There was money for her in Duke Town, but she seldom had cash in hand, and she would not ask.

The doctor forbade her to go to Ikpe, to cycle, or to take services. She laughed, went to church, and held two services, and nearly collapsed. He sent her to bed and sent over a chicken with instructions for cooking it. "I'm not a meat eater, doctor," she said. When he suggested she go to Duke Town for a rest, she said, "I cannot draw a salary and not do what I can." A friend told her she had done enough in the past to have no qualms. "I've been paid for all I've done," she said. Late in the year she escaped, in her words, from "the dearest and cleverest and most autocratic Mission doctor that ever lived," and went straight back to Ikpe.

A Box on Wheels

In 1912 the mission council offered to send two women to Ikpe, but first asked for a medical report on the site. It was bad: the house stood on land that flooded. Mary refused to accept the verdict and stayed. She was growing deaf, and said she felt like "a spluttering candle." She hated being carried in a hammock. "I feel a brute in it," she wrote, "it seems so selfish to be lying there, while four boys sweat like beasts of burden. To push a little carriage is like skilled labour and no degradation." The women of a Glasgow church sent her a basket-chair on wheels, a kind of cart, and her boys pushed her through the bush in it. It was the "box on wheels" she had written about in 1906.

In September 1912 she completed thirty-six years as a missionary, and took stock of herself: "I'm lame and feeble and foolish; the wrinkles are wonderful, no concertina is so wonderfully folded and convulated. I'm a wee, wee wifie, verra little buikit, but I grip on well, none the less." An old doctor told her that by ordinary rule she should have been dead long ago.

That winter a friend in the women's committee paid for her to take the first real holiday of her life, a few weeks in the Canary Islands with Jean. She protested that it was selfish and extravagant, and then enjoyed it. "I sat and knitted and crocheted and sewed and worked through the Bible all the day long," she wrote. "He is so near and so dear." A woman who met her at the hotel said that of all the people she had ever met, Mary Slessor impressed her most as "the perfect embodiment of the Christian life."

The Ikpe Twin

Back at Ikpe, the chiefs turned against the church. They did not mind schools, they said, but they wanted no interference with their customs, and

if houses of God were built, everyone would die. "I shall never give you teachers without the Gospel," she told them. "If you don't take the one, you won't have the other." When they announced, with an air of great generosity, that they would allow some worship but would not themselves join in "the confusions of the church," she replied, "God will doubtless be immensely pleased and benefited by your wondrous condescension." Livingstone says they laughed.

Then twins were born in Ikpe. Mary slept with the babies in her own bed, while people watched outside in the dark. The father wanted to kill the surviving boy and throw the mother into a swamp. Mary made him swear an oath not to harm the child, and when he grandly agreed to let it live, she bowed ironically to the ground, which unnerved him completely. By now, Livingstone says, "she had come to realise that it was not good to take twins from their mother," and she insisted that the child stay at home. Jean went to live with the mother, and then the mother and baby were brought to a lean-to under Mary's verandah, with Jean sleeping beside them. "It is really far braver and kinder of her to live with that heathen woman with her fretting habits," Mary wrote, "than it is for her to go out in the dark and fight with snakes."

One Sunday, while they were at church, the mother broke the baby's thigh and gave him poison. With care he recovered. For weeks they watched over him, hoping that when his parents saw how healthy and handsome he was they would keep him. At last the parents agreed to take him home. Four days later they sent for Jean, who came back carrying "a weak, pinched form that had death written on its face." He died soon afterwards. Livingstone ends the story with a single sentence: "that was the end of 'Ma's' strenuous fight and Jean's ten weeks' toil by night and day."

It is one of the saddest stories in her life, and it is right that it is told. Near the end, after nearly forty years, she could still lose. Belief is not

changed by argument or by a single act of love. It changes, if it changes at all, over generations.

Odoro Ikpe

In 1914 she pushed on once more, to a government rest-house on a hill five miles from Ikpe called Odoro Ikpe. It had no door and a mud floor. She borrowed a camp-bed, and the girls slept on the floor among the lizards. When an old chief offered her a place to build and told his young men to build "a house for book," she said, "No! We don't begin or end either with a house. We begin and end with God in our hearts." A young man in a hat, who had not taken it off to speak to her, told her they could not accept God's word if she brought twins and twin-mothers into their town. She looked at him, Livingstone says, "as witheringly as she could," and said, "I speak with men and people worthy of me, and not with a puny bush-boy such as you have shown by your manners you are." The hat came off, and the crowd cried, "Ma, forgive! forgive! he does not know any better."

Her tongue could still wound, and she knew it. She was also, in these last years, a woman of her time in ways that are hard to admire. When the government began taking batches of men from each village, with the chiefs' consent, to work in the coalfields and on the railway, Livingstone records that she approved. When her own workmen were lazy, she resorted to what she called "muscular Christianity," which amused everyone, and which seems to have meant cuffing them. She was in debt to her carpenter and labourers, and once borrowed five shillings from a government doctor. She was a very old, very ill woman, in debt, supervising a building site from a chair in the sun, and still, some nights, writing by candlelight that she was "the happiest and most grateful woman in the world."

Strength in Weakness

"I begin every day," she said in these years, "almost every journey in pain, and in such tiredness that I am sure I can't go on, and whenever I begin, the strength comes, and it increases." That is almost a paraphrase of the verse at the head of this chapter. Paul had asked three times for his "thorn in the flesh" to be taken away, and was told, "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my power is made perfect in weakness." Isaiah says, "He giveth power to the faint; and to him that hath no might he increaseth strength" (Isaiah 40:29, ASV). Mary Slessor was not healed. She was not made strong. She was given, each morning, enough strength to begin.

A Poor Exponent of Faith

"Straightway the father of the child cried out, and said, I believe; help thou mine unbelief."
— Mark 9:24, ASV

On a Log Among the People

An old friend from her Dundee mission days, J. H. Smith, was collecting testimonies for a book called *Our Faithful God: Answers to Prayer*, and he asked Mary Slessor for hers. She wrote it sitting in the open air:

> *My life is one long daily, hourly, record of answered prayer. For physical health, for mental overstrain, for guidance given marvellously, for errors and dangers averted, for enmity to the Gospel subdued, for food provided at the exact hour needed, for everything that goes to make up life and my poor service, I can testify with a full and often wonder-stricken awe that I believe God answers prayer. ... I am sitting alone here on a log among a company of natives. My children, whose very lives are a testimony that God answers prayer, are working round me. ... Food is scarce just now. We live from hand to mouth. We have not more than will be our breakfast to-day, but I know we shall be fed, for God answers prayer.*

It is a confident statement, and she meant it. But it would be a mistake to stop there, as popular books often do, and make her a saint who never doubted. Livingstone, who had her letters, knew better, and so do we.

Unanswered

To someone who complained that God had not answered his prayers, she wrote: "You thought God was to hear and answer you by making everything straight and pleasant. Not so are nations or churches or men and women born; not so is character made. God is answering your prayer in His way." And to another, in the same mood, she wrote the sentence that we met in the first chapter of this book: "I know what it is to pray long years and never get the answer. I had to pray for my father. But I know my heavenly Father so well that I can leave it with Him for the lower fatherhood."

She did not pretend that every prayer was answered in the way she wanted. The prayer of her girlhood, for her drunken father, never was. Her faith was not that God always gives what we ask. It was that God can be trusted when he does not.

A Poor Exponent

Nor did she pretend that her own faith was strong. "I am a poor exponent of faith," she said. "I ought to have full faith in our Father that He will do everything, but I am ashamed of myself, for I want to 'see,' and that sends faith out of court. I never felt more in sympathy with that old afflicted father before in his prayer, 'Lord, I believe, help Thou my unbelief.' Every syllable suits me."

The words at the head of this chapter were spoken by a father whose son had been tormented since childhood. The disciples could not help, and when Jesus came, the father said, "If thou canst do anything, have compassion on us, and help us." Jesus answered, "If thou canst! All things are possible to him that believeth." And the father cried out, "I believe; help thou mine unbelief." Jesus healed the boy. He did not wait for the father's faith to be perfect. He accepted the faith the man had, doubts and all.

That was the faith of Mary Slessor. It was real and it was mixed. She had seasons of darkness that today we might call depression. We have met them in this book: the first Sunday in Okoyong, when she was on the edge of tears; the time after the smallpox when she had "no heart for anything"; the years alone at Akpap, when she wrote "All is dark except above." Before her last public meetings in Scotland in 1907 she wrote, "I am suffering tortures of fear, and yet why is it that I cannot rest in Him?" In 1909, covered in boils and unable to sleep, she said, "Only sleeping draughts keep me from going off my head." Late in life she spoke of times "when I'm not well and the doldrums come very near."

Her comments in the margins of the book of Job show how she read her own experience. When Job cries out against God, she did not think he was rebelling. "His plaint was a relief to his own spirit, and an appeal for sympathy," she wrote. Beside one chapter she wrote, "The atmosphere is clearing; the clouds are scattering ... the spirit swings back on its pivot and begins to see God." And further on: "Right, Job, turn to God! Leave it to Him. The fit of depression will pass when you have sounded the depths, and profit will follow." She was writing about Job. She was also writing about herself.

Talking to Her Father

Her prayers were not formal. At a tea-table in Scotland after a tiring journey, she was heard to say, as if speaking to someone in the room, "Thank ye, Faither. Ye ken I'm tired." When a lady asked her how she had come to such closeness with God, she said, "Ah, woman, when I am out there in the bush I have often no other one to speak to but my Father, and I just talk to Him." At a meeting of women missionaries in Duke Town, when everyone was laughing and chattering, it struck her that they ought to be praying, and she said so, and they all got up and went into the next room to pray. Sometimes she called her household to prayer at odd hours, and when Jean protested that the time was long past, she said, "Jean, the gate of heaven is never shut."

She believed profoundly in the prayers of others. She was sure, she said, that the only explanation for how she had survived so many dangers, and why so many people had submitted to her, was that she had been prayed for more than most. "Prayer-waves pulsate from Britain all through Calabar," she wrote. "Pray on, dear one. The power lies that way." She also said, "Praying is harder work than doing, at least I find it so." Paul, who knew the same difficulty, wrote that "we know not how to pray as we ought; but the Spirit himself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered" (Romans 8:26, ASV).

Her own prayers for her friends grew simpler as she grew older. She used to ask for many particular things for them. In the end, Livingstone says, her prayer was only this: "Lord give them Thy best and it shall suffice them and me."

The Bible With a Pen

She read her Bible every morning from first light, about half past five, with a fine pen in her hand. She underlined the key words and wrote in the margins, and would sometimes spend three days on a single chapter. When one Bible was full she began another. Several of them survive, crowded with her notes. Some of those notes are short enough to remember:

God is never behind time.
Good is good, but it is not enough; it must be God.
The secret of all failure is disobedience.
Blessed the man and woman who is able to serve cheerfully in the second rank, a big test.
Slavery never pays; the slave is spoiled as a man, and the master not less so.
It were worth while to die, if thereby a soul could be born again.

She read the Old Testament as if it were set in Calabar. Beside one passage she wrote, "this happens in Okoyong every day." When Laban and Jacob set up a heap of stones and said, "Jehovah watch between me and thee," she wrote, "Beautiful sentiment, but a *mbiam* oath of fear." Of Jael, who killed a sleeping enemy with a tent peg, she wrote, "Not a womanly woman, a sorry story; would God not have showed her a better way if she had asked?" Of part of Deborah's song: "Fine poetry, poor morality." John was her favourite book. Beside the verse about the crowds looking for Jesus, she wrote, "The secret of our failures in winning men; they don't find Him with us."

One more note from her Bibles has become famous, though it is not in Livingstone. Later biographers report that she wrote in one of them the words "God and one are always a majority." It was not her own saying. It

was an old proverb, already in print in the 1860s and attributed by some to the American reformer Frederick Douglass. But she wrote it down, and it fits her.

"Not Goody-Goody at All"

In her last years her friends noticed that she was growing gentler. She had always known her faults. "I don't half live up to the ideal missionary life," she said. "It is not easier to be a saint here than at home. We are very human, and not goody-goody at all." Livingstone says she was often "deep in the valley of humiliation over hasty words spoken." She began to say things she would not have said when she was younger: "My opinions may not just suit every one, and it is possible other people may be right and I far wrong." Of a very serious young missionary she wrote that what was needed was "one to laugh, to hitch on to the yoke, and joke over all that we don't like."

She refused to take credit for her work. "I have lived my life very quietly and in a very natural and humble way," she said. "It isn't Mary Slessor doing anything, but Something outside of her altogether uses her as her small ability allows." When a friend wrote that her reward would be a starry crown in heaven, she answered, "What would I do with starry crowns except to cast them at His feet?" It is the spirit of Jesus' words to his disciples: "when ye shall have done all the things that are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants; we have done that which it was our duty to do" (Luke 17:10, ASV).

A Royal Honour

In 1913 that humility was put to a test. Some of her friends in Calabar, missionaries and officials, had been trying for two years to have her work publicly recognised. J. K. Macgregor wrote an account of her life for the government. When Sir Frederick Lugard became Governor-General of the newly united Nigeria, he sent a strong recommendation to the Colonial Secretary in London, and she was chosen, with the approval of King George V, as an Honorary Associate of the Order of the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem. The badge was a silver Maltese cross, to be worn on a black ribbon on the left shoulder.

When the official letter came, she said to herself, "Now, who has done this? Who am I, and what is my distinction that I should have it?" She told no one. When the badge arrived in Calabar, her friends knew she would never come down to receive it unless she were cornered. So they wrote telling her that she surely would not want to receive it secretly, and that it was her duty to come, and they enclosed a telegraph form already filled in with the single word "Coming." They knew she would have no peace until she had sent it. She sent it.

The night before she left, she read the story of Peter's denial to her household and told them that Peter had fallen because he followed Jesus "afar off." "Eh, bairns," she said, "it's the wee lassie that sits beside her mother at meal times that gets all the nice bittocks. Keep close to Jesus the Good Shepherd all the way."

The presentation was made in the Goldie Memorial Hall in Calabar, in front of the European community and the students of the Hope Waddell Institute. She arrived in an old cotton dress, a straw hat, and cloth shoes, and sat with her head in her hands while the Provincial Commissioner spoke about her. When she rose, she could not at first find any words. Then

she turned to the African boys and girls in the hall and told them in Efik to be faithful to the government, because at bottom it was Christian, and friendly to the missions, as the badge proved.

That remark, which Livingstone records with approval, belongs with the other evidence of how closely she identified British rule with Christianity. It was a sincere belief, and she had seen much good done by men she trusted. It was also a belief that the history of the following century would not bear out, and it is not one this book can share.

Then she spoke in English. The day before she had watched soldiers in a mock battle and had been struck that the officers always went in front, leading their men. "If I have done anything in my life," she said, "it has been easy because the Master has gone before." Afterwards she wrote to friends in Scotland: "Don't think that there is any difference in my designation. I am Mary Mitchell Slessor, nothing more and none other than the unworthy, unprofitable, but most willing, servant of the King of Kings." And as the congratulations poured in, she fled to Ikpe. "I shall never look the world in the face again," she said, "until all this blarney and publicity is over."

Help Thou Mine Unbelief

The honour did not change her faith, and neither did her doubts. Both are part of her story. She could write that her life was "one long daily, hourly, record of answered prayer," and in the same years call herself "a poor exponent of faith." She could sit on a log with nothing but breakfast in the house and say she knew they would be fed, and lie awake at night unable to rest in God. The psalmist knew the same double experience: "Why art thou cast down, O my soul? And why art thou disquieted within me? Hope thou in God; for I shall yet praise him" (Psalm 42:11, ASV). A faith like

that is not less than a faith without doubts. It may be more honest. It is certainly more useful to the rest of us.

The Time of the Singing of Birds

"For, lo, the winter is past; The rain is over and gone; The flowers appear on the earth; The time of the singing of birds is come, And the voice of the turtle-dove is heard in our land"
— Song of Solomon 2:11-12, ASV

Back to the Old Haunts

In July 1913 she went back to Akpap for the first time in eight years. The station now had two women missionaries and a new church. People came from all over Okoyong to greet her, and she remembered their names and their family histories. The twins she had rescued were now healthy young men and women. Mana and Iye were there. And Ma Eme came, still a devoted follower of the old religion, and the two old women sat together all day and talked about the killing time. More than four hundred people came to a service in the unfinished church, the largest congregation Okoyong had ever seen. She thought of the words of Jesus about one who sows and another who reaps.

At Christmas 1913 a new church was opened at Use, built by the people under her direction without outside help, and more than eighty visitors were fed. "A bonnie kirk it is," she wrote, "the biggest Christmas I've ever had in Calabar." She added a remark that shows how far she had come from the young woman who ran everything herself: "Jean and Annie

do not hesitate to set it aside quietly in their superior way; it often works out better than mine, truth to tell."

The War

In August 1914, while she was building her house at Odoro Ikpe, rumours began to reach the bush of fighting in the white men's world. Trade stopped. Canoes that went down to Calabar for rice and kerosene came back with their loads of palm oil unsold. On 13 August letters arrived with the news that Britain was at war with Germany. Nigeria bordered the German colony of Kamerun, and she feared for Calabar. Prices doubled. Her kerosene ran out, and she read the Bible at family prayers by the light of burning sticks.

When her first war mail came, she read why Britain had entered the war and said, "Thank God! our nation is not the aggressor." Then she read about the invasion of Belgium, and tried to stand up, and could not. The girls carried her to bed, and she lay in a fever for a fortnight. She grew steadily weaker. She was not afraid of death, but she was afraid of dying alone in the bush, because she knew that her skull might be taken and worshipped as a powerful charm.

At last she lay in a stupor, and the church boys at Odoro Ikpe lifted her in her camp-bed and carried her five miles to Ikpe. The next morning they put her in a canoe under a tarpaulin and paddled her down the Creek to the landing-place for Use. She lay in the road in the moonlight, scarcely breathing, while a trader sent for the doctor from Itu. He stayed all night, not expecting her to live. All through the night her mind was on the soldiers in the trenches.

She recovered a little. She sent for her colleague Martha Peacock, and told her it might be the end. "Oh," she said, "if only the war were over and

my children safe in the Kingdom, how gladly would I go!" She called the children together and told them what to do when she died.

The war stirred her in ways that are not easy to read now. When two government officers she counted among her oldest friends were drowned on naval service, she grieved for them deeply. At times she wrote with fierce patriotism: "Oh if I were thirty years younger, and if I were a man! We must not have peace until Germany licks the dust." Scottish women, she told a nervous friend, were not Belgians; "they would stand up to William the Execrated." But she also wrote, in calmer moods, "Miss Slessor, why do you worry? Is God not fit to take care of His own universe and purpose?" She rested, Livingstone says, on the words "The Lord reigneth," as on a soft pillow. She prayed that her nation might be "sent from its pleasures to its knees." At the Christmas service she did not like having to explain to her African congregation why Christian nations were at war with each other.

She wrote to a friend that Christmas:

> *There will be few merry Christmasses in Europe this year. But, thank God, there will be a more profound sense of all Christ came to be and do for mankind. He will Himself draw near, and will fill empty chairs in lonely homes and hearts, and make His people ... to know that here and now He is the Resurrection and the Life, that he that believeth in Him shall never die.*

She was echoing Jesus' words at the grave of Lazarus: "I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth on me, though he die, yet shall he live; and whosoever liveth and believeth on me shall never die" (John 11:25-26, ASV).

Plans

She knew now that only a voyage home might heal her, and she made plans. Mrs. Arnot, who as Miss Young had been one of the missionaries Mary recruited and had since been widowed, offered to take a small house in Scotland where they could live quietly together. Mary accepted, with tears. She would go in the spring. She would visit her mother's grave in Devon. She wrote to ask a friend to send her a hat and boots, and other things "which civilisation demanded." Her only regret was Ikpe. "It is ten years since I first took them on, and they have never got a teacher yet. It is bitterly hard!"

Her colleagues noticed that the old power of recovery was gone. One day she told them she had been going through her desk and tearing up letters, "in case anything should happen."

On New Year's Day, 1915, Martha Peacock and another missionary, Miss Couper, came to tea. Miss Peacock had made her a plum pudding, and when they arrived it was on the table with a rose from the garden stuck in the top. Mary was, Miss Peacock said, as happy as a girl, and admitted she had had to use great self-control not to taste the pudding before they came. Miss Peacock noticed something else. "A new tenderness seemed to have come into her life, and with regard to those with whom she differed, she seemed to go out of her way to say the kindest things possible." Mary told her about something harsh she had written and then torn up, and said, "I wonder I could have been so hard."

The Last Letters

It was the time of year when her mother had died, twenty-nine years before, and she was thinking of her. She wrote to her old friend Miss Adam about

the previous Sunday's service, and how Annie's little girl had run about the church pointing at her and calling to her. "I can't say 'Don't bring her,' for there should be room enough for the babies in our Father's house." She ended, "God be with you till we meet again."

On 5 January she wrote to a woman in Edinburgh whose two sons had joined the army:

> *My heart bleeds for you, my dear, dear friend, but God's love gave the mother heart its love and its yearning over its treasures, so He will know how to honour and care for the mother, and how to comfort her and keep her treasures for her. Just keep hold on Him, dear one, and put your boys into His hand, as you did when they were babies. ... In God's governance not one precious thing can ever be lost.*

On Friday 8 January she sat in a deck-chair in the little garden in the sun and wrote letters. The last was to Mrs. Arnot. She was better, she said, though "a wee shade weaker than usual." It was never finished. The last words on the page were: "I can't say definitely whether I shall yet come in March, if I be spared till then ..."

"O God, Release Me"

That afternoon the fever came back. Alice nursed her, lying on a mat beside the bed when she needed rest. On Sunday Mary got up, went over to the church, and led the service. On Monday she was violently ill, and one of the girls went to fetch Miss Peacock, who sent for the doctor from Itu. He came with ice and medicine, and the sickness stopped. But she was restless and exhausted, moved from bed to chair and back again, and now and then gave "a great cry of weariness as if she were wearied unto death."

Once, when Miss Peacock was tending her, Mary said, "Ma, it's no use." Once she prayed in Efik, "*O Abasi, sana mi yok*": "O God, release me." Sometimes she only said, "Ma," the name everyone called her, as she called her friend.

On the night of 12 January the girls, Jean, Annie, Maggie, Alice, and Whitie, gathered with Miss Peacock to keep watch. The room had rough reddish-brown mud walls, a cement floor, and an iron roof. Besides the bed there were a washstand, a chair or two, and a chest of drawers that had belonged to her mother in Dundee. Her breathing grew difficult. It was very dark. Two men were sent running to Itu for the doctor. They had forgotten the clock and did not know the time. A cock crowed, and one of the girls said, "Day must be dawning," but when Miss Peacock drew back the curtain it was still pitch dark.

At half past three in the morning, on 13 January 1915, Mary Slessor died. She was sixty-six. Miss Peacock wrote that there was no great struggle at the end, and that "Ma Akamba, 'The Great Mother,' entered into the presence of the King." (The government *Gazette* announced her death "at Itu," the district in which Use lay.)

She used to say that "the time of the singing of birds" was wherever Christ was. For her, as the Song of Solomon has it, the winter was past, the rain was over and gone, and the time of the singing of birds had come.

"Everybody's Mother"

When the girls understood that she was gone, they cried out in grief and fear: "My mother is dead, my mother is dead. We shall be counted as slaves now that our mother is dead." The sound woke the town, and people came to the house and sat on the steps and wept with them. As the news spread,

people came from Itu and the whole district to see the one they called *Eka kpukpru owo*, "Everybody's Mother."

A launch came up from Duke Town, and after services in English and Efik at Itu, her body was carried down the river through the night. At dawn it was brought ashore at the government beach at Duke Town. The flags of the town were at half-mast. The coffin, draped in the Union Jack, was carried shoulder-high by the boatmen, in black vests and mourning cloths, through streets lined with the students of the Hope Waddell Institute, policemen, and schoolchildren. Officials, merchants, and missionaries followed. She was buried in the old mission cemetery on the hill above Duke Town, where she had first gone ashore thirty-nine years before.

At the head of the grave sat Mammy Fuller, the Jamaican nurse who had befriended her when she was a young teacher ringing the dawn bell by moonlight. When the procession came near and some women began to wail, the old woman stood up. "*Kutua oh, kutua oh*," she said. "Do not cry, do not cry. Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Ma was a great blessing." As the coffin was lowered, she said one word: "Safe." A slip from the rose bush at Use was planted in the earth. Afterwards Mammy Fuller said, "I have been just near heaven all the time."

The Governor-General, Sir Frederick Lugard, telegraphed: "Her death is a great loss to Nigeria." The psalmist puts it another way: "Precious in the sight of Jehovah Is the death of his saints" (Psalm 116:15, ASV). She would not have used the word "saint" of herself. She had told her friends she was "not goody-goody at all." But she had lived and died, as the *Gazette* said, "on the scene of her labours," as she had wished, among her own people, her daughters around her, and the forest dark outside.

Everybody's Mother

"But we were gentle in the midst of you, as when a nurse cherisheth her own children: even so, being affectionately desirous of you, we were well pleased to impart unto you, not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls, because ye were become very dear to us."
— 1 Thessalonians 2:7-8, ASV

What She Left

When Mary Slessor died, the churches she had begun along the Enyong Creek were small, poor, and young. Livingstone, writing the next year, counted nearly fifty churches and schools in the district she had opened, with nearly fifteen hundred members and more than two thousand pupils. He printed the accounts of five of the Creek congregations for 1914. Asang had four hundred and twenty-eight members. Onoyom's town, Obufa Obio, had a hundred and eighteen and more than seven hundred pounds in the bank. Itu, where Mana and two boys had begun the work in 1903, had a hundred and nine. All of them were paying their own way.

By the standards of the Church at home these were modest numbers, and Mary knew it. Livingstone says that at the end of her life she was troubled by how little had been done. After seventy years, the whole Calabar mission had a Christian community of about ten thousand, eight hundred people and a communion roll of three thousand, four hundred,

and it had barely touched the interior. The Church at home, she felt, had never risen to the opportunity. It was interested in her, but not in Nigeria.

Livingstone was an admirer, but he was honest enough to record the criticism too. "It was not ... the broad policy she originated that was criticised," he wrote, "so much as matters of detail, and no doubt there was sometimes justification for this. She admitted that she had no gifts as an organiser." She was a pioneer, and she knew it. She opened doors and left others to build the rooms behind them.

The Legend

Within a year of her death she had become a legend, and the legend grew for the rest of the century. Livingstone's biography, and his version for children, were followed by dozens of popular lives. Missionary societies used her story to recruit and to raise money. Her face appeared, from 1997 until a redesign in 2009, on the Clydesdale Bank's ten-pound note. When Queen Elizabeth II visited Nigeria in 1956, she laid a wreath on Mary Slessor's grave. There is a park named after her in Dundee, and a charity in her name runs a clinic at Akpap, in Okoyong.

In Nigeria, too, she is remembered. In Calabar there is a Mary Slessor roundabout, with a bronze statue of her carrying twin babies. There are schools named after her, including one at Arochukwu, and the mission hospital at Itu bears her name. In 2000 the people of Calabar chose her as one of the city's people of the millennium. The Presbyterian Church of Nigeria, which grew out of the mission she served, honours her as a mother of the church, and a centenary service was held in Calabar in January 2015. Newspapers there still call her "the woman who stopped the killing of twins."

Some of this honour is deserved and some of it is legend. Historians have tried to separate the two.

What the Historians Say

The Scottish historian Esther Breitenbach has studied how Mary Slessor became famous. In a 2017 article she argues that the icon owed much to "deliberate acts of invention," and to the meeting of British expansion in south-eastern Nigeria with missionary enthusiasm and the hopes of Scottish women for careers of their own. She suggests that there was little that was unique in Slessor's practice as a missionary, and sets out to show the gap between the myth and the historical reality.

There is truth in that. Other missionaries rescued twins before her and alongside her. Other women lived alone on remote stations. The killing of twins had been banned in Calabar before she arrived, and it did not end when she died. Her authority rested in part on British power, and she welcomed that power and sometimes praised it in terms that are hard to read now. The "White Queen of Okoyong" was a title invented in Scotland. The people of Okoyong called her Ma.

But other historians see more. The historian Jeanette Hardage, whose 2008 study is the fullest academic life of Slessor, asked whether she was an agent of imperialism or a liberator of the oppressed, and answered, "Both, to some degree." She noted that Slessor admired much of British culture and wanted to share it, but that she did not spare colonial officers when she thought them arrogant or cruel, and that she knew local law and custom better than most of them. The Nigerian church historian Ogbu Kalu wrote that her vision was "much broader and more activist" than her fellow missionaries could imagine. She rejected the idea that a missionary should live in a compound apart from the people, and, in the words of the

Dictionary of African Christian Biography, she was a "catalyst that challenged the mission to change."

Nigerian writers themselves have taken different views. Some honour her as the mother of the church and the saviour of the twins. Others point out that the Efik rulers, the consuls, and earlier missionaries had acted before her, and that the story of a lone Scotswoman rescuing Africa from itself leaves out the Africans who made change possible. Both are right to speak.

What This Book Has Found

This book has tried to tell her story with the Africans left in. It has found that the real woman was more interesting than the legend, and in some ways more admirable.

She was a factory girl with almost no schooling, afraid of crowds, of public speaking, of cows in fields, who walked alone into the most feared district of Calabar and stayed there fifteen years. She was not fearless. She was afraid and went anyway.

She did not work alone. Ma Eme warned her, again and again, of killings that were planned, at the risk of her own life, and never became a Christian. Edem took her into his compound and protected her, and she buried him with her own hands. Mana, a former slave girl, began the church at Itu with two boys, and taught its women to pray. Onoyom built a church with his own savings and cut down his town's sacred tree. Jean ran her house, rescued twins, preached to two hundred people, and was paid a shilling a week. The story of Mary Slessor is also theirs.

She did not always win. The man whose life she saved was flogged and cut. The young man who died for his brother died after a verdict she had declined to give, and she grieved over it. The Ikpe twin was poisoned by his

own mother. Many of the babies she carried home were buried in the little cemetery full of tiny graves. Her first district saw no baptisms for fifteen years.

She was not always right. She could be imperious and harsh. She boxed ears, caned a man who had won his case, and spoke with withering contempt to those who crossed her. She approved of the government's drafts of village men for the coalfields and railway, she shared the racial assumptions of her age, and she told African children that the British government was Christian at bottom. She was bitter about Roman Catholics, though she counted Catholic officials among her friends. She knew many of her faults, and grieved over her "hasty words."

And she was loved. When she died, the girls she had raised were terrified of what would become of them, and the whole district came to mourn. The people of Okoyong, who had once been ready to kill any stranger, had called her Mother. The people of the Creek, whom she had described in her worst moments as "untamed, unwashed, unlovely," built churches with their own hands and paid for them with their own money. An old Muslim kissed her hand and said only God could make someone such a mother to everybody. The chief whose household she saved from slaughter stepped out of a line of warriors and knelt at her feet.

The Alabaster Box

Livingstone ended his biography with the story of the woman who broke an alabaster box of precious ointment over the head of Jesus, a few days before his death. The disciples complained about the waste. Jesus defended her: "She hath done what she could; she hath anointed my body beforehand for the burying" (Mark 14:8, ASV). Livingstone thought Mary

Slessor had done the same with her life: broken it open, and poured it out for Christ, and let people call it a waste.

It is a good image. But the verse at the head of this chapter may fit her better still. Paul was writing to a young church in Thessalonica, a church he had founded and had been forced to leave. He reminded them how he had lived among them: "we were gentle in the midst of you, as when a nurse cherisheth her own children: even so, being affectionately desirous of you, we were well pleased to impart unto you, not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls, because ye were become very dear to us."

Not the gospel only, but our own souls. That is what Mary Slessor gave the people of the Cross River. She preached the gospel to them in their own language for nearly forty years, and she also gave them herself: her salary, her health, her nights, her home, her chance of marriage, and in the end her life. They had become very dear to her. It was not a perfect gift. It came mixed with the prejudices of her age and the flaws of her temper, and it was carried into their country on the tide of an empire. But it was a real gift, and they knew it, and they called her "Everybody's Mother."

Paul wrote to another church that when everything else has passed away, three things remain: "faith, hope, love, these three; and the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:13, ASV). Mary Slessor's faith was often weak, by her own account. Her hope was sometimes dark. But her love was the one thing that no one who knew her ever doubted.

Appendix A: Lessons from the Life of Mary Slessor

"Remember them that had the rule over you, men that spake unto you the word of God; and considering the issue of their life, imitate their faith."
— Hebrews 13:7, ASV

The lessons below gather the themes of this book so that readers can return to them. Mary Slessor would not have wanted her life to be a pattern. She would have wanted it to point beyond herself to the God who, she said, had gone before her. Each lesson therefore rests on Scripture, not on her example alone. The letter to the Hebrews tells us to consider how those who went before us lived and died, and to imitate their faith, not every detail of their lives.

1. God Uses Unlikely People

A factory girl with almost no schooling, frightened of crowds and of public speaking, became one of the best-known missionaries of her age. God does not wait for impressive people. "God chose the weak things of the world, that he might put to shame the things that are strong" (1 Corinthians 1:27, ASV).

2. A Broken Home Is Not the End of the Story

Mary grew up with a father who drank and a mother who prayed through the night. She never saw her prayers for her father answered, but she found a heavenly Father she could trust. "When my father and my mother forsake me, Then Jehovah will take me up" (Psalm 27:10, ASV).

3. Hard Years Can Be Training Years

Fourteen years at the loom taught her endurance, thrift, and an understanding of the poor that she carried into Africa. "It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth" (Lamentations 3:27, ASV).

4. Courage Is Not the Absence of Fear

She walked into Okoyong so frightened she could only pray one word. She went anyway. "Be strong and of good courage; be not affrighted, neither be thou dismayed: for Jehovah thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest" (Joshua 1:9, ASV).

5. Learn the Language of the People

She learned Efik so well that people said she spoke it better than they did. The gospel travels best in the heart language of those who hear it. "To the weak I became weak, that I might gain the weak: I am become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22, ASV).

6. Honour the Mercy of Those Outside the Faith

Ma Eme risked her life, again and again, to warn Mary of killings that were planned, and never became a Christian. Mary grieved her choice and never

forgot her mercy. “Which of these three, thinkest thou, proved neighbor unto him that fell among the robbers? And he said, He that showed mercy on him” (Luke 10:36-37, ASV).

7. Speak for Those Who Cannot Speak

She sat at the entrance of a yard full of chained prisoners and would not move. “Open thy mouth for the dumb, In the cause of all such as are left desolate” (Proverbs 31:8, ASV).

8. Partial Victories Are Still Worth Winning

Many of her rescues were incomplete, and some failed. She kept going. “And let us not be weary in well-doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not” (Galatians 6:9, ASV).

9. The Weakest Are Precious to God

Twin babies thrown into the bush, their mothers driven out as cursed: these were the people she spent her life for. “Suffer the little children to come unto me; forbid them not: for to such belongeth the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:14, ASV).

10. A Life Laid on the Altar Is Not Taken Back

When she had to choose between marriage and the people she had promised to serve, she chose the people. “Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service” (Romans 12:1, ASV).

11. Make Peace

She knitted through palavers, knelt between armed men, and threw her own clothes over the gin. “Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called sons of God” (Matthew 5:9, ASV).

12. Be Wary of Borrowed Power

Her authority was partly the consul’s, and she sometimes spoke of British rule as if it were Christian. Christians who work alongside governments must remember where their help comes from. “Put not your trust in princes, Nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help” (Psalm 146:3, ASV).

13. Leave the Results With God

Her first district saw no baptisms for fifteen years. “Christ sent me to preach the Gospel,” she said, “and He will look after results.” “I planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase” (1 Corinthians 3:6, ASV).

14. Rejoice When the Fields Are Empty

After the smallpox took four of her children and her chief, she wrote that she was “always satisfied and happy in His love.” “Yet I will rejoice in Jehovah, I will joy in the God of my salvation” (Habakkuk 3:18, ASV).

15. The Gospel Needs Ordinary Messengers

The church at Itu was begun by a former slave girl and two boys. Onoyom was sent to Mary by a homeless drunkard who still remembered the gospel. “There can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither bond nor free,

there can be no male and female; for ye all are one man in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28, ASV).

16. Do Not Look Back

When the rules said she must return to Akpap, she said, "I dare not go back." "No man, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62, ASV).

17. Seek Justice, Especially for Women

She sat unpaid on a colonial court for four years so that women would get a hearing. "Seek justice, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow" (Isaiah 1:17, ASV).

18. Give People a Way to Live, Not Only a Message

She saw that women would not be free until they could support themselves, and planned a settlement on the land. Faith must care for the whole person. "Pure religion and undefiled before our God and Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction" (James 1:27, ASV).

19. Strength Is Given Day by Day

"I begin every day ... in pain," she said, "and whenever I begin, the strength comes." "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9, ASV).

20. Doubt Is Not the Opposite of Faith

She called herself "a poor exponent of faith" and said the prayer "help Thou my unbelief" suited her in every syllable. "I believe; help thou mine unbelief" (Mark 9:24, ASV).

21. Know Your Faults, and Grow Gentler

She was often sorry for "hasty words," and in her last days said of something harsh she had written, "I wonder I could have been so hard." "Be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving each other, even as God also in Christ forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32, ASV).

22. Give Yourself, Not Only Your Message

She gave the people of the Cross River her salary, her health, her home, and her life. "We were well pleased to impart unto you, not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls, because ye were become very dear to us" (1 Thessalonians 2:8, ASV).

23. The Greatest of These Is Love

Her faith was often weak and her hope sometimes dark, but no one who knew her doubted her love. "But now abideth faith, hope, love, these three; and the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:13, ASV).

Appendix B: Chapter-by-Chapter Study and Reflection Guide

"But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deluding your own selves."
— James 1:22, ASV

This guide is for personal reflection, small groups, or a reading course of about twenty weeks. Its purpose is not to make Mary Slessor an object of admiration, but to let her life hold up a mirror in which readers can examine their own discipleship under Scripture. Groups may find it helpful to begin each session with the chapter's opening verse and to end with prayer. Some chapters raise hard questions about mission, power, and culture. They are meant to be discussed honestly, not settled quickly.

Introduction - The Legend and the Letters

Central idea

The real Mary Slessor, as her letters and the records show her, is more interesting and more useful than the legend.

Scriptures to revisit

Proverbs 18:17; John 8:32.

Reflection

1. Why do Christians like legends about their heroes? 2. What is lost when a life is simplified?

Chapter 1 - A Wild Lassie

Central idea

A childhood shaped by a drinking father and a praying mother taught her to trust a heavenly Father when her earthly father failed.

Scriptures to revisit

Psalm 103:13-14; Proverbs 20:1; Acts 16:31.

Reflection

1. Is there a prayer you have prayed for years without an answer? 2. What does it mean to “leave it with Him”?

Chapter 2 - Fourteen Years at the Loom

Central idea

Long, hard years of work formed endurance and an understanding of the poor that God later used.

Scriptures to revisit

Lamentations 3:27; Colossians 3:23; Psalm 119:105.

Reflection

1. How do you regard work you did not choose? 2. What might God be forming in you through it?

Chapter 3 - Taming the Roughs

Central idea

She learned to speak among the people rather than above them, and to stay where she was when she wanted to run.

Scriptures to revisit

Mark 12:37; 1 Corinthians 9:22; 2 Timothy 1:7.

Reflection

1. Where do you meet people "as one of themselves"? 2. What fear is deciding what you do?

Chapter 4 - "Pray for Me!"

Central idea

A mission first imagined by freed African Jamaicans called a factory girl who answered, "Here am I; send me."

Scriptures to revisit

Isaiah 6:1-8; Matthew 9:37-38; Matthew 27:22.

Reflection

1. What surprised you about the origins of the Calabar mission? 2. What are you doing with Jesus?

Chapter 5 - Learning Calabar

Central idea

She learned the language, the laws, and the fears of the Efik, and learned not to be in a hurry.

Scriptures to revisit

Isaiah 28:16; John 5:1-9.

Reflection

1. How would you answer the man selling rum? 2. Where is impatience harming your work for God?

Chapter 6 - Bereft

Central idea

The deaths of her mother and sisters freed her, painfully, to go where no one would worry about her.

Scriptures to revisit

Psalm 73:25-26; 2 Corinthians 1:3-4.

Reflection

1. How has grief changed the direction of your life? 2. Whom might you now comfort with the comfort you received?

Chapter 7 - "Father!"

Central idea

She walked into Okoyong afraid, able to pray only one word, and stayed.

Scriptures to revisit

Joshua 1:9; Romans 8:15.

Reflection

1. What "Okoyong" are you afraid to enter? 2. What does it mean that courage rests on presence, not feeling?

Chapter 8 - Ma Eme

Central idea

Her closest ally never became a Christian, yet made much of the saving of life possible.

Scriptures to revisit

Proverbs 17:17; Luke 10:25-37; Genesis 18:25.

Reflection

1. How do you honour kindness from people who do not share your faith? 2. What does it mean to leave such questions with "the Judge of all the earth"?

Chapter 9 - The Poison Bean

Central idea

Her greatest victory over the ordeal was partial and costly, and it showed that the people themselves longed to be free of the old customs.

Scriptures to revisit

Psalm 82:3-4; Proverbs 31:8-9.

Reflection

1. When have you had to accept a partial victory? 2. Are there people around you trapped in a system they cannot break alone?

Chapter 10 - Twin-Mothers

Central idea

She took up children whom their parents had been taught to fear, and learned over time to help families keep them.

Scriptures to revisit

Psalm 27:10; Isaiah 40:11; Mark 10:13-16.

Reflection

1. Who are the "cursed" people in your society? 2. What did Mary come to believe, late in life, about taking twins away from their mothers?

Chapter 11 - Laid on the Altar

Central idea

She wanted to marry, but would not take back a life already given to the people of Okoyong.

Scriptures to revisit

Romans 12:1-2; Psalm 84:11.

Reflection

1. What have you laid on the altar that you are tempted to take back? 2. Can singleness be a calling rather than a loss?

Chapter 12 - "The Woman's God"

Central idea

Peacemaking in Okoyong took patience, humour, knitting, and a clear line she would not cross.

Scriptures to revisit

Matthew 5:9; Romans 12:18; Ephesians 2:14.

Reflection

1. Where could you be a peacemaker this week? 2. What did you make of her sending the runaway slaves back?

Chapter 13 - Consul and Gunboat

Central idea

She used British power to stop killings, and the story raises hard questions about justice and borrowed authority.

Scriptures to revisit

Micah 6:8; Romans 13:1-4; Psalm 146:3.

Reflection

1. When is it right for Christians to rely on the power of the state? 2. What is lost when justice depends on one strong personality?

Chapter 14 - Smallpox and Silence

Central idea

Years of loss, loneliness, and no visible fruit did not destroy her contentment in God.

Scriptures to revisit

Habakkuk 3:17-18; 1 Corinthians 3:6-7; Psalm 30:5.

Reflection

1. How do you measure success in your service? 2. Can you be "satisfied" without being "triumphant"?

Chapter 15 - Not by Might

Central idea

She walked through the door a punitive expedition had opened, while insisting that the land belonged to its people.

Scriptures to revisit

Zechariah 4:6; Psalm 20:7.

Reflection

1. How should Christians think about missions that followed conquest? 2. What did Wilkie mean by the "peaceable means of the Gospel"?

Chapter 16 - First Fruits

Central idea

After fifteen years she saw baptisms in Okoyong, and at Itu a former slave girl and two boys began a church.

Scriptures to revisit

John 4:35-38; Psalm 103:1-5; Galatians 3:28.

Reflection

1. Whose sowing are you reaping? 2. Who are the unnoticed Manas in your church?

Chapter 17 - "I Dare Not Go Back"

Central idea

Her refusal to retreat strained her relationship with the Church and opened the Enyong Creek.

Scriptures to revisit

Luke 9:57-62; Hebrews 11:8; Isaiah 30:21.

Reflection

1. When is holy stubbornness right, and when is it pride? 2. What would you do if your church told you to go back?

Chapter 18 - On the Bench

Central idea

She sat as a magistrate to get justice for women, in an imperfect court with imperfect methods.

Scriptures to revisit

Isaiah 1:16-17; Deuteronomy 16:18-20.

Reflection

1. How do we pursue justice through imperfect institutions? 2. How should we treat famous quotations whose source is doubtful?

Chapter 19 - Children of the Desolate

Central idea

A single woman raised a large family and planned a way for women to live free.

Scriptures to revisit

Isaiah 54:1; Psalm 68:5-6; Psalm 113:9; James 1:27.

Reflection

1. How can the church be a family for the solitary? 2. What did you notice about Jean's shilling a week?

Chapter 20 - Ikpe

Central idea

Old, ill, and in pain, she began again, and was given strength one day at a time.

Scriptures to revisit

2 Corinthians 12:7-10; Isaiah 40:28-31.

Reflection

1. What would it mean for you to "begin" today in weakness? 2. How do you respond to failures like the Ikpe twin?

Chapter 21 - A Poor Exponent of Faith

Central idea

Her faith was real and mixed with doubt, and her Bible was full of honest arguments with God.

Scriptures to revisit

Mark 9:14-29; Romans 8:26; Psalm 42; Luke 17:10.

Reflection

1. Which of her Bible notes spoke to you? 2. Is your faith more honest, or more comfortable?

Chapter 22 - The Time of the Singing of Birds

Central idea

She died among her own people, with her daughters around her, trusting that "not one precious thing can ever be lost."

Scriptures to revisit

Song of Solomon 2:10-13; John 11:25-26; Psalm 116:15.

Reflection

1. What did her last letters reveal about her? 2. How would you like to be found at the end?

Chapter 23 - Everybody's Mother

Central idea

Her legacy is both real and mythologised; what remains beyond dispute is her love.

Scriptures to revisit

1 Thessalonians 2:7-12; Mark 14:3-9; 1 Corinthians 13.

Reflection

1. What in her life would you like to imitate, and what would you avoid? 2. To whom are you giving not only the gospel but your own self?

Appendix C: Chronology of the Life and Times of Mary Slessor

"So teach us to number our days, That we may get us a heart of wisdom."
— Psalm 90:12, ASV

The dates below are meant as orientation. Dates confirmed by civil records or official documents are given plainly. Where the sources disagree, the disagreement is noted. Where only Livingstone's biography gives a date, it is followed unless it is plainly wrong.

1843 - The Invitation

The king and chiefs of the Efik towns of Calabar send a written invitation for missionaries, arranged through a Liverpool surgeon, Dr. Ferguson, and missionaries in Jamaica.

1846 - The Mission Founded

Hope Masterton Waddell leads a party from Jamaica, including Jamaicans of African descent, to found the Calabar mission. It passes to the United Presbyterian Church in 1847.

1848 - Birth

Mary Mitchell Slessor is born on 2 December at Gilcomston, Aberdeen, one of eleven children of Robert Slessor, shoemaker, and Mary Mitchell.

1849-1878 - Laws Against Twin-Killing

Efik rulers of Calabar, with British consuls, agree to ban human sacrifice and the killing of twins (1849-1855), and renew the agreements in 1878. Missionaries rescue twins from 1852.

1859 - Dundee

The family moves to Dundee. By 1861 they are in Dura Street. Mary becomes a half-timer at Baxter Brothers' works at about eleven.

1860-1870 - Deaths in the Family

Her brother Robert dies of croup (December 1860); her brother William dies of tuberculosis (April 1870); her father dies on 16 September 1870. Her brother John dies in New Zealand soon after emigrating (date uncertain).

1874 - Livingstone's Death

News of David Livingstone's death moves her to offer for mission service.

1875 - Offer Accepted

In May she offers herself to the Foreign Mission Board of the United Presbyterian Church, and is accepted as a teacher for Calabar.

1876 - Sailing

After three months in Edinburgh, she sails from Liverpool on the SS *Ethiopia* on 5 August, and arrives at Calabar in September. (Livingstone's "Saturday, September 11" cannot be right, since that date was a Monday.) Her salary is sixty pounds a year.

1879-1880 - First Furlough

Home from June 1879; returns in October 1880 to take charge of Old Town.

1882-1883 - Janie

She rescues twin babies, Atim Eso and her brother; the boy is killed by relatives. A tornado wrecks her house at the end of 1882, and she is invalided home in the spring of 1883 with the girl, later baptised Janie.

1883-1885 - At Home

Dundee, then Topsham, Devon, with her invalid sister. Her sister Susan dies in Edinburgh in April 1885. She sails for Calabar in November 1885 and is posted to Creek Town.

1885-1886 - Bereft

Her mother dies at Topsham in December 1885; her sister Janie dies there on 5 March 1886.

1886 - Okoyong Decided

In October the mission council decides to send her to Okoyong.

1888 - Into Okoyong

After a year of negotiation she moves to Ekenge, in Okoyong, on 4 August.

c. 1889 - Etim's Death

The carpenter Charles Ovens arrives. Etim, son of Chief Edem, dies after an accident; Mary prevents the poison ordeal and the funeral takes place without human sacrifice.

1890-1892 - Engagement and Furlough

Engaged to Charles Morrison late in 1890; the Board declines to transfer him to Okoyong. Furlough from January 1891 to February 1892. Her letter to the *Missionary Record* contributes to the founding of the Hope Waddell Institute (1895).

1891-1893 - The Protectorate

Sir Claude Macdonald becomes Commissioner and Consul-General (1891). About 1892 he authorises her to run a native court in Okoyong, usually described as making her vice-consul. The Niger Coast Protectorate is named in 1893.

1894-1895 - The Consul Called

She appeals to the Consul in 1894; the chiefs agree to abandon killing at funerals. Macdonald renews the agreement the following year. Mary Kingsley visits Okoyong (probably 1895); Susie is born and later dies.

1896 - Akpap and Smallpox

She moves to Akpap. Four of her children die of an infectious disease. In a smallpox epidemic Ekpenyong and Edem die; she buries Edem herself.

1898 - Furlough

Home with Janie, Mary, Alice, and Maggie. Returns at the end of the year.

1899-1901 - Alone

Three years alone at Akpap. Janie marries Akibo Eyo by native oath on 21 December 1899 (Livingstone's register; some modern accounts give 12 December). Dan is born about 1900.

1901-1902 - The Aro Expedition

British forces invade the Aro country; Arochukwu falls at the end of December 1901. Mary is brought down to Creek Town for about three months and declines a government house.

1903 - Itu and the First Communion

In January she plants Esien, Effiom, and Mana at Itu. In June she visits Arochukwu with Colonel Montanaro. In August the first communion is

held in Okoyong, and Jean, Mana, Iye, Akom, and Esien are baptised.

1904 - The Creek

She settles at Itu in July and opens work along the Enyong Creek at her own expense. Onoyom builds his church at Akani Obio.

1905-1909 - The Native Court

Appointed permanent vice-president of the Itu native court (moved to Ikot Obong) in May 1905. She declines the salary. Resigns in November 1909 (possibly 1910).

1906 - Pioneer

After her refusal to return to Akpap, the Church frees her to work as a pioneer missionary. Arochukwu becomes a mission station.

1907 - Last Visit Home

In Scotland with Dan from May to October.

1908 - Use

She fixes the site of the women's settlement at Use, near Ikot Obong, and makes it her headquarters.

1910-1912 - Ikpe

She opens work at Ikpe on the upper Enyong Creek. In 1912 she completes thirty-six years' service, and takes a holiday in the Canary Islands with Jean.

1913 - Honour

Visits Akpap in July, and sees Ma Eme for the last time. Made an Honorary Associate of the Order of the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem, on the recommendation of Sir Frederick Lugard. A new church is opened at Use at Christmas.

1914 - Odoro Ikpe and the War

She builds a house at Odoro Ikpe. News of the war reaches her on 13 August. She falls seriously ill and is carried to Use.

1915 - Death

She dies at Use at 3.30 a.m. on 13 January, aged sixty-six, and is buried in the mission cemetery at Duke Town, Calabar. (The government *Gazette* gives the place as Itu, the district in which Use lay.)

1918 - Jean

Jean (Janie Annan Slessor) dies at Use in the influenza epidemic.

1956 - A Royal Wreath

Queen Elizabeth II lays a wreath on her grave during a visit to Nigeria.

1997-2009 - The Banknote

Her portrait appears on the Clydesdale Bank ten-pound note.

Appendix D: Notes on Sources and Method

"it seemed good to me also, having traced the course of all things accurately from the first, to write unto thee in order ... that thou mightest know the certainty concerning the things wherein thou wast instructed."
— Luke 1:3-4, ASV

This appendix explains where the story told in this book comes from, how the sources were weighed, and which popular claims have been corrected. It is written for readers who want to check the story for themselves, and for anyone who will retell it.

Livingstone's Biography

The main source for Mary Slessor's life is W. P. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor of Calabar: Pioneer Missionary* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1916). It is now in the public domain. Livingstone had access to a large collection of her letters, and much of his book consists of quotations from them, together with the memories of missionaries, officials, and friends. Almost all the words of Mary Slessor quoted in this book come from Livingstone.

Livingstone was an admirer, writing for the Church that had sent her, and the book has the faults that implies. He sometimes hints that she was more than human. He defends the Church's committees and the colonial government whenever they are criticised. He gives no account of the

violence of the Aro Expedition. His descriptions of African peoples are shaped by the racial theories of his time. This book has not repeated that language except where it was necessary to show how she or her contemporaries thought.

But Livingstone was also candid in ways later popular books were not. He kept her doubts and depressions, her temper and her physical force, her use of laudanum and sleeping draughts, her quarrels with the Church, her dependence on the government, and her failures. Much of the hard material in this book is his. His dates are occasionally wrong. Two are corrected here:

Saturday, September 11. Her arrival is given as "Saturday, September 11" 1876, but 11 September 1876 was a Monday.

1893 for about 1895. Mary Kingsley's visit is dated 1893. Kingsley's own account, which speaks of Slessor having been eighteen years in Calabar, points to her second voyage, about 1895.

A caution for anyone checking these pages against the widely used Project Gutenberg e-text of Livingstone: it contains transcription errors that are not in the printed book. It gives "1848" for the chiefs' invitation (the book has 1843), "April 1888" for her return home with Janie (1883), "June 1908" for her move to Itu (1903), and "18th January" in the government *Gazette* notice of her death (the book has 13th). Dates in this biography have been checked against a scan of the 1916 edition.

Other Early Sources

Mary Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa* (1897), contains the fullest independent eyewitness account of Slessor at Okoyong, including the arrival of Iye and her twins, and Kingsley's assessment of her work. The *Missionary Record* of the United Presbyterian Church and its successors

printed extracts from her letters and reports. Two later popular books were read for this biography, A. J. Bueltmann's *White Queen of the Cannibals* and the chapter on Slessor in Mary Rosetta Parkman's *Heroines of Service* (1917). Both depend on Livingstone and add invented dialogue, names, and scenes. They have not been used as sources of fact.

Records and Modern Scholarship

Scottish parish and civil registers and census returns, as quoted by family historians, have been used to correct the details of her family. The records of the Congregational church at Topsham, and the 1891 census, document her years in Devon.

This book has drawn, for facts and interpretation, on the modern scholarly literature, especially Jeanette Hardage, *Mary Slessor, Everybody's Mother: The Era and Impact of a Victorian Missionary* (2008); Carol Christian and Gladys Plummer, *God and One Redhead: Mary Slessor of Calabar* (1970), which drew on the memories of her adopted son Daniel; James Buchan, *The Expendable Mary Slessor* (1980); Elizabeth Robertson, *Mary Slessor: The Barefoot Missionary* (2001); Esther Breitenbach, "The Making of a Missionary Icon: Mary Slessor as 'Heroine of Empire'," *Journal of Scottish Historical Studies* (2017); Elijah Obinna, "Bridging the Divide: The Legacies of Mary Slessor, 'Queen' of Calabar, Nigeria," *Studies in World Christianity* (2011); and the entry on Slessor in the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*, which quotes the Nigerian church historian Ogbu Kalu. These modern works remain in copyright, and this book has not reproduced them.

Several details of her adopted children's lives are not in Livingstone and come from these later works and from Sally Ayres's 2013 study of Janie for the Telling Our Stories project in Exeter: Janie's Efik name, Atim Eso, and

her death in 1918; Daniel Slessor's 1958 reminiscences and his long life; and the fragments known about Whitie and Asuquo. They have been used with that caution.

Corrections to the Popular Story

Her family. Her mother bore eleven children, not seven. Her father was born in Aberdeen, not Buchan. Her brothers did not die of pneumonia: Robert died of croup, William of tuberculosis, and John in New Zealand.

The killing of twins. Mary Slessor did not end the killing of twins in Nigeria. The Efik rulers of Calabar, with British consuls, had banned it from 1849, and missionaries had rescued twins from 1852. The practice survived in the interior long after her death. Her contribution was to protect twins and their mothers in districts the old agreements did not reach, over decades.

"White Queen." "The White Queen of Okoyong" was the title of a Scottish book for children, not a name used by the people. They called her Ma, and later *Eka kpukpru owo*, "Everybody's Mother."

Vice-consul. Most modern accounts say she was made vice-consul for Okoyong in 1892. Livingstone describes her position more cautiously as "akin to that of a consular agent." She was unpaid.

First woman magistrate. The claim that she was the first woman magistrate in the British Empire has not been established.

Paid for her court work. One popular book says the government paid her. She refused all payment.

Never married. The idea that she never married because she was "married to Africa" is interpretation. She was engaged to Charles Morrison, and the engagement ended because the Church would not transfer him to Okoyong, she would not leave it, and his health failed.

Isolation by choice. Her colleagues believed she lived alone on local food by preference. Livingstone shows that she did so at first because she was sending most of her salary home, and was too proud to say so.

The lead-weight gang. The story of the young man who swung a lead weight at her head in Dundee comes from Livingstone alone, without a named witness. Later books added names and details. This book tells it as a remembered story.

Legends. A panther carrying a baby from her tent, and other dramatic scenes and names found in popular books, have no source.

Quotations

"Why should I fear? I am on a Royal Mission." This saying, often quoted as hers, is not in Livingstone or any source from her lifetime, and the earliest printings found are devotional books of the 2000s. It should not be quoted as hers.

"God and one are always a majority." Modern biographers report that she wrote these words in one of her Bibles. The saying was not her own; it was an older proverb, in print by the 1860s.

"Christ sent me to preach, not to baptize." This wording is Paul's (1 Corinthians 1:17). Livingstone does record her as saying, "Christ sent me to preach the Gospel, and He will look after results."

"Failed, failed." This comes from a 1908 newspaper article by a visiting writer. Livingstone says Mary was deliberately "mystifying" the writer, and her own account of the evening suggests a joke. It should not be quoted as her considered verdict on her life.

Dates Still Uncertain

Several dates remain uncertain or disputed: the date of her brother John's emigration and death; the date of Janie's marriage (21 or 12 December 1899); the date of her appointment in Okoyong; the year of Mary Kingsley's visit; and whether she resigned from the Ikot Obong court in November 1909 or a year later. The later lives of several of her adopted children, and of Charles Morrison, are not well documented.

Scripture

All Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version of 1901, in the public domain, checked against its published text. Where Mary Slessor herself quoted the King James Version, her words are given as she wrote them.

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