



# Worldwide Missions

## Missionary Biographies

### Mary Slessor

by Cuthbert McEvoy

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#### Chapter 1 — Early Life and Trials

Mary Mitchell Slessor, the factory girl who became the most remarkable woman missionary of her age, was born on December 2nd, 1848, in Aberdeen, [Scotland]. Amid the shadows of a home darkened by intemperance and poverty, Mary, the second of seven children, found guidance in the example of a saintly mother, who, with rare courage and patience, kept the light of faith shining above the dreary sorrow of her lot.



In these facts may be found a clue to the secret of Mary Slessor's extraordinary career. The land of her birth was the native land of great missionary leaders such as Duff, Moffat, Mackay and Livingstone. The example of intemperance that darkened the days of her childhood explains why it was that her gentle nature flamed into a stern indignation that more than once cowed the drunken loafers of Okoyong. Her noble mother set the compass of her daughter's devoted life. Her duties as elder sister trained her to be the mother of her people; and the struggle with poverty made her the stateswoman and economist she afterwards became. But in the fact that her spirit was the victor, and not the victim, of the unfavourable elements of her environment; that instead of succumbing, as so many in her position might have done, she soared—in this we can only acknowledge, as she herself would have acknowledged, the gift of the grace of God.

There was, indeed, much in the outward circumstance of the childhood and youth of Mary Slessor that was drab and sordid. As a little girl she might have been seen playing in the mean streets of the city with her companions, indistinguishable from what the passer-by would designate "gutter-children." Her wildness even excited the apprehensions of the neighbours that she would come to no good. It was to one of these that Mary attributed her first serious

thoughts. The children had run out of the cold, dark streets into the warmth of an old widow's room, and, as they stood round the glowing fire, the old widow exclaimed suddenly:

"Do you see that fire? If ye were to put your hand into the lowes it would be gey sair. It would burn ye. But if yo dinna repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, your soul will burn in the lowin', bleezin' fire for ever and ever!"

Far more must be attributed to her mother's watchful love and piety, which, in these dreary surroundings, followed her children with unremitting care. Volumes are contained in the touching record that the children were regularly sent off to church "with a drop of perfume on their handkerchiefs and gloves, and a peppermint in their pockets for sermon-time."

In her later girlhood, we see the future missionary trained in the school of hard experience, and the same mother-love prompting her amid her untoward surroundings to lay hold of whatsoever things were noble, true and of good report.

At the early age of eleven she went out to earn a living. Her place of occupation was the textile works of Messrs. Baxter Brothers and Company, Dundee. Like Livingstone she worked at the loom. We can picture the great throng of factory girls making their way in the grey of the early morning to the scene of their clattering, strenuous toil. Mary is among them; often, doubtless, laughing and chattering like the rest, for all through her life she loved a joke; but often, too, eagerly reading some well-loved book as she walks. In the midst of her work the book is propped open so that every now and then she may snatch a glance at its pages.

It was not always light literature with which she used thus to beguile the hours of labour. It is known that one of these books was Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*. A friend had lent it to her one evening, and she became so absorbed in it that she read on through the night, oblivious of the flight of time, till she heard the factory bell calling her again to her work. Study would have been hard enough for any girl who had to work from six a.m. to six p.m. But for Mary Slessor the conditions were additionally hard. The household had to be set going before she started in the morning, and this necessitated her rising at five o'clock.

Nor were her evenings always conducive to study. One night in each week was a terror to Mary and her mother. On Saturdays they would both sit late at their work in trembling, waiting for the sound of uncertain steps that heralded the father's return. His entrance into his home on this night he made the occasion of a violent outburst of drunken rage, and mother and daughter often saw the supper, which they had denied themselves to provide for him, thrown in anger on the fire. Into such sore straits did the father's intemperance bring them that there was scarcely enough to feed and clothe the large family. Not seldom it was Mary's duty, on her return from the factory, to catch up a parcel, which her mother had prepared, and to run with it by back streets and devious ways to the pawnbroker's. With the proceeds she would pay off the more pressing debts, and for another week the wolf would be kept from the door.

Besides her mother's influence there was another which powerfully affected Mary Slessor's life, namely, the Christian Church. Today, when organised Christianity has many critics both without and within, it may be asserted without fear of contradiction that with all its defects, fancied or real, there neither was, nor is, any other organisation in existence which could have done what the Christian Church did for Mary Slessor.

To outsiders, and perhaps sometimes to the workers themselves, the Wishart Church in the east end of the Cowgate, Dundee, may have seemed a prosaic institution. The casual critic, dropping in upon its services or passing its modest building above a series of shops, may have marvelled that there could be anything in the appearance of the premises to attract, or anything in the routine of its Church life able permanently to elevate, the dreary existence of any of the thousands about its doors. He would mentally compare its attractions unfavourably with those of the public house, the theatre or the picture-palace. If only we had eyes to see we should find that some of the greatest missionaries the world has ever known have not gone out from Churches which set themselves to compete with the meretricious attractiveness of commercial institutions, but from those humble and sober companies of the followers of

Christ who find the supreme attraction of the Church in the realised presence of the Lord and in the spiritual fellowship of believers. It was just such a Church which was the garden of Mary Slessor's spirit. To that soul, striving against the almost overwhelming tragedy of its surroundings, the Church furnished, as nothing else could, the power she needed from eternal springs. To the hard-worked factory girl it gave new power by giving her the opportunity of new work.

When the Wishart Church, Dundee, determined to open a mission in a room at 6, Queen Street—a small side-thoroughfare nearly opposite Quarry Pond, one of the worst of the teeming slums of the city—Mary Slessor volunteered as a teacher. She had regularly attended the Sabbath morning fellowship and week-night prayer meetings of the Church, and had also taught a class in the Sabbath School. Moreover she had added to her labours by becoming a distributor of that well-known illustrated leaflet, *The Monthly Visitor*. In a sense, therefore, she had graduated as a missionary to the slums. She had also become a diligent Bible student. To the end of her days the Bible was her chief book. The photograph of a page of Mary Slessor's Bible is one of the most interesting of the many illustrations in Mr. Livingstone's fascinating volume.

So the factory-girl was installed as a mission teacher. If the perilous nature of the work was prophetic of her future, no less prophetic was the manner in which she handled it. The gangs of undisciplined roughs who infested the neighbourhood looked upon the mission teachers as fair game for their horseplay. When school was over on Sunday afternoon it became necessary for the older men of the staff to form a bodyguard for the "smaller individuals" to escort them out of the danger zone. Thus Mary, whose short stature placed her among the protected class of "smaller individuals," escaped many occasions of molestation and, perhaps, injury. Once, however, she had to face danger alone. "A gang of roughs had determined to break up the mission. One night they closed in about her on the street. The brutal leader carried a leaden weight at the end of a cord and swung it threateningly round her head. She stood her ground. Nearer and nearer the missile came. It shaved her brow. She never winced. The weight crashed to the ground. 'She's game, boys,' he exclaimed. To show their appreciation of her spirit they went in a body to the meeting. There her bright eyes, her sympathy, and her firmness shaped them into order and attention. On the wall of one of her bush houses in West Africa there used to hang a photograph of a man and his wife and family. The man was the lad who had swung the lead. On attaining a good position he had sent her the photograph in grateful remembrance of what had been the turning point in his life."

So the wild, merry, eager-spirited factory girl, whom her home difficulties might well have rendered careless or sullen, was so guided by her saintly mother's example, and so inspired by the ministrations of the Church, that, making stepping stones of her very obstacles, she surmounted the first steep slopes of that eminent and heroic virtue that made her personal influence a blessing to thousands, and will make her name a lasting inspiration to the world.

## Chapter 2 — "Send Me."

The incidents and considerations which finally determine a missionary to embark upon his life work, and the stages by which he reaches it, are matters of paramount interest to the student of Christian biography. For in these things he can see the guiding hand of God. Into that mysterious region, whence comes the impulse to some and not to others, we may not enter. But we can often trace quite definitely those incidents and conditions which the impelling Spirit has employed to achieve the end.

In the case of Mary Slessor we find the influence of her mother and of her Church closely intermingled. The United Presbyterian Church, of which Mrs. Slessor was a devoted member, had always placed foreign missions in the forefront of its activities. It had missions in India, China, Japan, Kaffraria [former name for a region in the Transkei, E. South Africa. Founded in 1848 as the dependency of British Kaffraria, it was added to Cape Colony in 1865], and Calabar. The visits of missionaries to the home Churches were looked forward to by the members with the keenest interest. Their names were cherished and their activities were eagerly followed in the monthly *Missionary Record*. The sombre church buildings in their sombre surroundings were flooded for their members with all the colour and romance of the

orient and with the lofty spiritual excitement that always comes of witnessing the Acts of the Apostles unfolded in their own day before their eyes. More, perhaps, than they ever understood, the missionaries of the United Presbyterian Church were enshrined in the prayers and interests of many an obscure dweller in the tenements of Dundee. One such was assuredly Mrs. Slessor, who, with all her harassing domestic anxieties, followed the fortunes of the missionaries of her Church with extraordinary keenness.

It is interesting to observe that an address delivered by the Rev. William Anderson as to the needs of Old Calabar, on the West Coast of Africa, so deeply moved her that she desired to dedicate her son John to the work. Her desire, although not granted in the way she expected, was nevertheless fulfilled beyond all that she asked or dreamed. John's health failed and he had to emigrate to New Zealand, where he died a week after landing. Mary's bitter grief at the death of a well-loved brother became, as it often has become to noble natures, the dark gateway to a wider life. It gradually dawned upon her that she herself might be intended to respond to the great call which her mother had hoped might come to her son. For some time the thought remained with her, locked in her heart. Her nearest and dearest did not suspect her inclination. And what was there to lead them to suspect that in that hard-working factory girl going in and out among them was a potential missionary of the first quality? But the thought was not evanescent. It remained. It had taken up its abode with her. It grew. Like the flickering needle of a compass that swings from side to side, but at last points steadfastly to one fixed goal, so she found that the thought of her destination always came back to Calabar.

Inured to hardship and need, it was the difficulty and need of this field that proved the chief attraction to Mary Slessor. None knew better than she the needs and difficulties of the teeming tenements around her. But with true apostolic reasoning she saw that the needs of Calabar were infinitely greater. No part of the slums of Dundee was outside the sound of the church bells. The gospel was preached in the Pends and alleys. But in Calabar—the great slum of all African heathenism—there were millions to whom the name of Christ was unknown, and the means of hearing of Christ absolutely impossible. The children of Calabar were born, lived and died in an atmosphere of spiritual darkness unrelieved by a solitary ray of hope.

The good and generous aspirations that spring up in every human heart, sprang up also in those savage breasts, but finding no sanction or encouragement in all the dark world about them, wilted and withered and were lost in the heavy gloom of superstition and cruelty, of sensuality and bloodshed, of craft and treachery, that hung like an impenetrable cloud upon their lives from the cradle to the grave. These facts Mary Slessor knew and weighed. There could be no comparison between the needs of Dundee and the needs of Calabar.

To one of Mary Slessor's sympathetic nature the story of the Calabar Mission must have made a profound appeal. Its interest lay in the fact that the mission originated among the descendants of the original natives of Calabar. For centuries Calabar had been the most prolific hunting-ground for the slave dealer. Crowds of the hapless victims, torn from their burning homes and slaughtered families, were shipped across the Atlantic, and helped to furnish the negro population of the United States. When the noble work of Abraham Lincoln was complete, and the slaves were emancipated, some of them living in Jamaica turned their thoughts in sympathy to their fatherland across the sea and longed for their benighted kinsmen to enjoy the blessings which the Gospel had brought to them.

The Jamaica Presbytery eagerly took the matter up, and eight of their number dedicated themselves for service if called upon. But the home officials were unsympathetic; the climate of Calabar, they said, was dangerous. But the brave Jamaica Presbytery, nothing daunted, made all their preparations in faith, and chose, as first agent for their society, the Rev. Hope M. Waddell. Everything was now ready in Jamaica—everything but a connection with Calabar. The sacrifice was laid, but the fire from heaven had not yet descended. The way in which the necessary connection was provided is one of the many romances of modern missions and illustrates the profound truth of Cowper's words:

Deep in unfathomable mines  
Of never-failing skill,  
He treasures up His bright designs  
And works His sovereign will.

Many years previously a slaver, in the course of its nefarious pursuits, was wrecked upon the coast of Calabar—a coast which had doubtless provided it with many of its victims. The natives, instead of wreaking their vengeance upon their would-be captors, treated them kindly.

Among the recipients of their kindness was the ship's surgeon, Dr. Ferguson. The poor natives had cast their bread upon the waters and were to find it after many days. In course of time Dr. Ferguson was enabled to return to Scotland by another slaver sailing for the West Indies! Observe the devious route, but note the purpose of it. After this, perhaps as a result of this voyage, Dr. Ferguson became ship's surgeon on a vessel plying between Liverpool and Jamaica. He became well known in the Colony. He got to know of the longing of the Jamaica Presbytery to send missionaries to Calabar. He remembered the kindness of the natives of Calabar to a shipwrecked mariner. He instituted enquiries in Calabar through captains of trading vessels to whom he was hospitable. He received in 1843 a memorial from a local king and seven chiefs offering ground and a welcome to any missionaries who might care to come. He communicated the information to the Jamaica Presbytery. The matter was settled. The United Presbyterian Church took over the mission. The Rev. Hope Waddell and several assistants sailed, in 1846. One of the first subscriptions to the mission was £1,000 from the surgeon of the slave ship which the tempest many years before had cast on the coast of Calabar!

In the words of the poem already quoted:

God moves in a mysterious way  
His wonders to perform,  
He plants His footsteps in the sea  
And rides upon the storm.

This romantic story was fresh in the minds of members of the United Presbyterian Church at the time when Mary Slessor was a devoted student of the pages of its *Missionary Record*. The narrative of pathetic faith so wonderfully rewarded must have found an instant welcome in her warm heart. When in 1874 the news of the death of David Livingstone stirred all Britain with missionary enthusiasm, it became impossible for Mary Slessor to keep her cherished desire any longer to herself. Her sisters were now in good situations, and she saw her way to continue her support of the home. The call, she felt, had come, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" and she replied, "Here am I; send me." She disclosed her secret first to her mother, and met with a glad consent. When her friends learnt of her desire, some encouraged her and some tried to dissuade her. But her decision was now made. Though the whole world might deny her, she had known the Spirit of the Highest and could say, "Stand thou on that side for on this am I."

In May, 1875, at the age of twenty-six and a half, she offered her services to the Foreign Mission Board. Though her heart was set on Calabar she very commendably offered herself for any field for which she might be required. So satisfactory were the reports received of her work in connection with the Church in Dundee, and so favourable was the impression which her personality created, that she was accepted at once as a prospective teacher. After three months' special training in Edinburgh at the Normal School in the Canongate—a period during which she formed life-long friendships, and profoundly influenced those who came in contact with her—the Committee decided to send her out to Calabar. "She was now," says her biographer, "twenty-eight years of age, mature in mind and body; she retained the freshness of girlhood, was vivacious and sympathetic, very human and likeable, with a heart as tender and wistful as a child's. What specially distinguished her were her humility and the width and depth of her love."

She sailed for Calabar on August 5th, 1876, by the steamer *Ethiopia*. As she was waiting to embark she noticed a large number of casks of spirit which were being carried on board and were destined for the West Coast of Africa. The memory of the tragedy that had darkened her own home rose within her. "Scores of casks!" she exclaimed ruefully, "and only one missionary!"

## Chapter 3 — On the Field

Up to this point Mary Slessor's life had been spent in the grey latitudes of the north. Its greater part had been confined to the unlovely streets of a city and the cheerless walls of a great factory. She had lived amid the roar of traffic and the din of the loom. But townbred though she was, she had in her that strange spirit that has made her countrymen the greatest travellers and colonisers in the world. We can understand, therefore, something of the intense interest and excitement with which her eager spirit welcomed the fascinating experiences of her voyage towards the tropics. She would note how the prevalent greyness of the northern skies yielded to an all-encircling splendour; how the sea turned from grey to green and then from green to deepest purple; how the bracing, chilly air became mild and humid, and then further south assumed a torrid heat.

Her excitement must have reached its highest pitch when the great steamer slowed round from its ocean course and took a northeasterly direction up the broad estuary of the Cross and Calabar Rivers. Here at last was the very land of which she had heard and read and dreamed, and for which her prayers had long been offered. Great mangrove forests were on her right, and the vast flat plain of the delta of the Niger on her left. As the vessel ascended the great river, flocks of bright-coloured parrots would fly out of the forest, an alligator would suddenly splash into the water from the bank, and now and then a native in his canoe would sail down the stream. At last the steamer drew in to the red clay cliff upon the right, and there, in a hollow of the cliff, were the crowded mud walls of Duke Town, the centre of the Calabar Mission. Shabby and unromantic it looked as it lay broiling in the hot rays of a brilliant sun. And yet to Mary Slessor it was not unromantic. The supreme romance of the bloodless victory of the Gospel for her eyes clothed those crowded and unsightly mud walls with beauty. That hill behind the town she knew had been the very place where the dead bodies of the natives used to be cast into the bush to become the food of wild beasts. And that hill was now crowned with the mission buildings. Here before her eyes was the witness of things not seen. Those buildings stood to her for the token of answered prayer. For were they not the consummation of the longing of the negroes in far-off Jamaica, that their fatherland might share those blessings which the Gospel had brought to them? The God who had answered their prayer had now enlisted her in His service for the furtherance of His purposes of mercy for mankind.

But responsive as Mary Slessor's vivacious nature was to all the elements of interest, excitement and romance of her novel surroundings, she was aware that beneath the gleaming surface, that seemed bright and fair, there lay sinister depths that harboured incredibly terrible things. If one part of the world needs the Gospel more sorely than any other it is Calabar. Desolated by the iniquitous slave trade of centuries, the wretched inhabitants had no connected records of a past of their race—only a grim and awful tradition of perpetual raids by pitiless traders upon their defenceless homes.

In their history, if history it could be called, there was nothing noble, no outstanding hero, no period of progress or of peace to inspire after-generations. As they looked back upon the past of their race they saw it shrouded in clouds of cruelty, fear, superstition and uncertainty. When they tried to fly from the slave-dealers, who preyed upon their coasts, and to take refuge in the hinterland of the Sahara and Soudan, they found themselves at the mercy of the outposts of the higher civilizations of Egypt and Arabia, by which they were enslaved and crushed. Thus harried on every side they betook themselves, a wretched and utterly demoralised folk without a past and with nothing to hope from the future, to the poisonous swamps and malarial forests, where they dragged out a miserable and filthy existence—the very outcasts and slum-dwellers of African paganism. As if their lot were not already sufficiently wretched, they clung with strange obstinacy to certain superstitions that made life more miserable still.

If twins were born, they believed one of the two was the child of an evil spirit. The hapless mother, who herself shared the superstition, was regarded as having been guilty of gross sin, and was forthwith turned out into the bush in all her weakness. She must not tread the ordinary paths used by her tribe, for to tread them would be to pollute them so that they could never be used again. She must make a path for herself into the untrodden bush, there to perish of starvation or to be devoured by wild beasts. As for the twins, since it could not be

decided which was the child of the evil spirit, both of them were placed in a large calabash or jar, either alive, or more often after their backs had been broken, and then were conveyed through a hole broken in the wall of the hut to a solitary part of the jungle and there left to the wild beasts and the insects.

If a death occurred, the conclusion was that someone had been responsible for it. The witchdoctor was sent for, and he proceeded to note down the names of all those whom he proclaimed guilty. The only way in which the accused could clear themselves was by undergoing the ordeal of the poison bean or of the boiling oil. A poisonous bean ground to powder and mingled with water was offered to the proscribed wretch. If he died his guilt was proven. If he survived then he was innocent. The ordeal of the boiling oil was carried out by pouring oil brought to the boiling point over the suspected person's hands. If they blistered he was guilty and was put to death.

If a chief died, his wives, or a selection of them, were slaughtered at his grave in order to bear him company in the other world. Such customs as these were fastened upon them by immemorial usage. To omit them would in their eyes be an offence. By observing them they fulfilled their distorted idea of righteousness. Thus the changes and chances of this mortal life, which bear heavily enough upon those who have all the consolations of Christian enlightenment, were made by their delusion the occasion of still more cruel blows.

The Dundee factory-girl was pitted against all this. Her presence on the field meant that she was the pledged antagonist of all that brought needless suffering on any human being, of every custom, however deeply-rooted, which obscured the thought of a loving God. Her problem was one which might have baffled a statesman with the resources of military power at his disposal, and assuredly it would have baffled this unarmed Scotch lassie had she not been endowed with a genius which can only be called divine. The entirely original manner in which she grappled with her task, the success which she achieved—a success which was not only officially acknowledged by a royal decoration, but which gave her the undisputed homage of thousands of natives—and the impression she produced on those who knew her, constitute her title to be called the most remarkable woman missionary who ever lived.

## **Chapter 4 — Mary Slessor at Work**

When Mary Slessor arrived in September, 1876, the Calabar Mission had been instituted thirty years. There were twelve Europeans on the staff—four ordained missionaries, four men teachers and four women teachers; of natives there were one ordained missionary and eighteen agents. The sphere of work was confined to the triangle of land that lay in the confluence of the Cross and Calabar Rivers. The principal stations were Duke Town, Old Town and Creek Town.

At first Mary Slessor lived at the Mission Buildings on Mission Hill which she had seen from the steamer on her first arrival at Duke Town. She lived under the somewhat ascetic care of the veteran missionaries "Daddy" and "Mammy" Anderson. It was intended that for a time she should look round and become acquainted with the conditions of her new life. Her vivacious spirits, that afterwards found their channel in such splendid achievement, were at first rather trying to her seniors. To let off the energy that had been repressed in the Mission House she would climb any tree that took her fancy. She boasted that she had climbed every tree worthy of the name between Duke Town and Old Town. Sometimes her escapades made her late for meals, and she was solemnly warned by Mrs. Anderson that a repetition of the offence would mean going without food. The offence was repeated and the penalty duly announced. But "Daddy" Anderson smuggled biscuits and bananas to her. The young adventuress was sure that it was with the connivance of the apparently Rhadamanthine "Mammy."

The task to which she was first set was simple. It was to teach in the day-school on the Mission Hill, and to visit in the yards both on week-days and Sundays. Later on she made a tour of the stations. Most of the journey lay through the bush, and involved long and fatiguing marches, climbing, jumping and wading—a burdensome enterprise for older people, but to her a thoroughly enjoyable excursion. In some of the districts a white woman had never been seen before, and the children ran away from her, screaming with fright. The women clustered

round, gesticulating and chattering and touching her. When their attentions became too burdensome the chiefs would drive them away with a whip.

Here is a specimen of the kind of work which the new missionary had to do in Duke Town on Sundays. Her first duty is to look out some illustrated texts, which she sends round to the leading natives with a kind message reminding them that Mr. Anderson expects to see them at the service. Going out, she finds a man sitting at the door of his hut rocking himself to and fro in sorrow. Mary learns that his only child has died and has been buried in the house, and, according to custom, the family is sitting in filth, squalor and drunkenness. She enters and finds the mother sitting with bowed head over the grave, the form of which can be distinctly seen under a blue cloth that covers the ground. To her attempted consolation the man replies that he would not mind if God had taken the child. His sorrow is that someone had bewitched it. The woman is equally inconsolable, but is softened when Mary speaks to her of her own mother in Scotland, who finds comfort in the thought of the reunion beyond.

In the next yard she finds a few slave girls. She speaks to them and they listen respectfully. Another yard is crowded with women, some eating, some sleeping, some dressing each other's hair, some lounging half-naked on the ground gossiping. They take her to an inner yard, where a fine-looking young woman is being fattened for her future husband. She is scornful, and Mary speaks to her sternly, leaving her half crest-fallen, half defiant. In the next house the master is dead, and the mistress, a hardened and repulsive woman, sits in a room filled with bush, skulls, sacrifices and charms. A number of half-starved, cowed women and girls covered with dirt and sores are quarrelling over a pipe. The shrill voice and long arms of the mistress settle the matter, and they call on Mary to speak. After many interruptions she secures a hearing and leaves them impressed.

Further on a husband brings his woe-begone wife, who has lost five children, and asks Mary to give her some medicine. She speaks of the resurrection. A crowd gathers and listens intently. When she says that even twin children are safe with God, the effect was almost the same as when St. Paul mentioned the Gentiles in his defence before the enraged mob in the Temple. "They gave him audience unto this word and then lifted up their voices, and said, Away with such a fellow from the earth." Mary's listeners were not so violent, but they started and shrugged their shoulders and slunk away with looks of terror. Her Sunday visiting takes her through much that is nauseating; hovels little better than ruins; pools of filth that send out pestilential odours; faces stamped with starvation and misery; bodies covered with sores; inmates huddled together and clamouring only for food. With this varied picture of animalism, squalor, suffering and despair stamped vividly upon her mind, the young missionary turns with a reinforced determination towards the only earthly remedy for wretchedness like this, and prepares for the four o'clock service at Mission Hill.

If the phrase "in journeyings often" is descriptive of the apostolic life, then Mary Slessor in this respect was truly apostolic. Her work often involved long and perilous journeys through the bush or along the great rivers fringed with the exposed and tangled roots of the forest trees which overhung them.

A chief, living some thirty miles up the estuary on the opposite bank, invited her to visit his village. To her own people it seemed a hazardous expedition, for thirty miles to an African in those parts is more than two hundred to a European. All the place is in excitement. Half the population follows her to the beach. Women, generally not allowed to be seen in public, are waiting at their yards to embrace her and to charge those concerned that she shall be well cared for. The king has lent her his state canoe, repainted for the occasion. Kindly natives have strewn rice-bags to form a couch for her, and with delicate thoughtfulness have erected a little screen of matting so that she shall have privacy. At last, when darkness has already fallen, the command "Sio udeñ!" is given, and amid shouts and cries of farewell more than thirty paddles strike the water at once and the great canoe shoots into mid-stream, the dark faces on the beach disappear in the night and the spot where she embarked is marked only by the red glow of torches on the black ripples of the river.

For a time Mary tries to read by candle-light in her improvised cabin, but the clamour of the paddlers, who are extemporising songs in her honour, is more distracting than the din of the factory-loom. For the loom never sang such things as "Ma, our beautiful, beloved mother is on

board, Ho! Ho! Ho!" and such is the song of these devoted paddlers. Reading is abandoned, and at last the gentle movement of the boat and the monotonous throbbing of the "tom-tom" lull her to sleep, and though the dark waters beneath her are infested with alligators and snakes, she sleeps as soundly as if she were in her bed at home. At dawn, after ten hours' paddling, she is carried ashore over golden sand and under great trees and deposited in the chief's compound amongst goats, dogs and fowls.

Her arrival created an immense sensation. Crowds poured in upon her from far and near. Many had never seen a white woman before. Doubtful men and women were forcibly dragged to her and made to touch her skin. At meal times a favoured few were permitted to see her eat and drink, and they shouted descriptions of the performance to the less fortunate ones who were excluded. Day after day she prescribed, bandaged, cut out garments, and taught the secrets of starching and ironing. Every morning and every evening a service was held, and it was with difficulty she prevented one merging into the other. On Sunday she placed a table with a white cloth on it in the corner of the yard. On this were placed Bible and hymn book. Fierce-looking noisy men, who came in from a distance and joined the crowd, became strangely silent. Never had she more appreciative audiences. Many heard the story of Christ for the first time. In the evening the multitude was so great that her voice could barely reach them all, and at the end many pressed about her to bid her good night with deep feeling and then vanished into the darkness.

## **Chapter 5 — A Mysterious Check and a Perilous Enterprise**

It has been truly said that God buries His workers, but carries on His work. Sometimes the workers seem to be cut off before their time, like Murray McCheyne and Ion Keith-Falconer. Sometimes, like Robert Moffat and Hudson Taylor and Griffith John and John Paton, they die full of years. But sometimes, while the worker still lives on, his work receives a check just when it is on the verge of some great fruition. All the promise seems suddenly blighted. The training and experience which might have accomplished so much are rendered of no use. Such a mysterious arrest came to the work of Mary Slessor.

It will have been gathered already that she had attained remarkable facility in the language. The natives used to say that she knew their language better than they knew it themselves. This was due to her habit of unconsciously adopting the direct method. She learnt more of the speech from constant intercourse with the natives than she ever learnt from books. It is clear also that she had the gift, so invaluable to a missionary, of mixing with her fellows and of winning their affection and respect. Moreover, while holding fast to the great vital truths of the Gospel she discerned at once its application to the conditions about her. She translated the Bible not into native letters but into native life. She was supremely gifted with an overflowing sympathy and a sound common sense. She could detect with unerring intuition when a situation demanded severity, and when it could be saved with a smile. She had a fund of energy which was directed by an unflagging zeal. This extraordinary combination of gifts marked her out for a career of quite exceptional usefulness. And yet just when achievement was almost within her grasp it seemed as if all her purposes were to be brought to nought.

First of all, in 1883, at the age of thirty-four, her health collapsed and she was ordered home. She was so frail that she had to be carried on board, and it was considered doubtful whether she would survive the voyage. With her was a girl twin whom she had rescued. She had saved both, a boy and a girl, but during her temporary absence from her house the relatives had stolen the boy away and killed him. She was determined that the girl should grow up and confute their fears, and therefore would not allow her to be left behind.

After eight months' rest at home, just when she had intimated to the Foreign Mission Committee that her health was restored and that she was ready to return, her younger sister Janie fell ill, and it became evident that a change to a milder climate was necessary. In her desperation she made the extraordinary proposal to the Foreign Mission Committee that she should take her sister with her to Calabar—a proposal that was wisely set aside. At last, acting on the recommendation of a friend, she decided to take her sister with her to Devonshire, and wrote to the Committee asking whether in the event of the way becoming clear she would be allowed to return to Calabar, or whether she was to consider herself finally separated from the

Mission. The Board replied sympathetically that in consideration of her work they would gladly continue her home allowance for three months longer. With characteristic independence, Mary refused to accept more than two months' allowance, and so voluntarily with an aching heart cut herself adrift from the service of the Church.

Janie's health was improving in Devonshire, but again, when it seemed possible for Mary Slessor to resume her work, another event occurred which threatened to prevent her return. Her sister Susan, in Scotland, suddenly died. Mary had now the full responsibility of the upkeep of the home, and yet was earning nothing. Her mother, her invalid sister and the African baby all needed provision and care. It was imperative that Mary should return to her work, but again came the mysterious hindering of her plans. The Committee had consented to her re-instatement and her passage was already booked when her mother suddenly failed and took to her bed. She could not be left without care, and yet if her daughter stayed with her she would be unable to provide for her.

At this crisis Mary wrote a pathetic letter to an old Scottish factory friend, and implored her to come and take her place in the Devonshire home. With the prompt readiness of true friendship she came, and thus permitted Mary Slessor to return to what was to be the crowning work of her life—the conquest of the fierce people of Okoyong.

In 1886 she was back, but the letters from her dear ones at home, which had always sustained her in her labours hitherto, were no longer to comfort her in her greatest achievement of all. The heavy news came that Mrs. Slessor had died suddenly at the beginning of 1887, and three months later her invalid sister Janie passed away and was laid beside her mother in the Topsham cemetery.

To the lonely missionary these losses were an inexpressible grief. But her mother being dead yet spake to her! On her last furlough, when Mary had asked her whether she would be willing for her to face the perils of the interior if the opportunity should open, her mother had replied: "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." These words Mary never forgot. They were to her like a solemn benediction on the work that she was about to undertake. "Heaven is now nearer to me than Britain," she wrote, "and no one will be anxious about me if I go up-country."

The new and unevangelised territory to which Mary Slessor felt the Spirit urging her lay where the sides of the angle formed by the junction of the Cross and Calabar rivers broaden out into the interior. The inhabitants belong physically to a higher type than the people of Calabar; they are taller and more muscular, the nose is higher, the chin firmer, and the eye more fearless and piercing than that of the languid negro of the coast. But on the other hand the worst qualities of heathenism received in them a terrible emphasis. There was no form of iniquity in which they did not indulge. They were utterly lawless and contemptuous of authority. Slave-stealing, plunder of property and theft were the commonplaces of their everyday life. They hated the Calabar people on the coast because of their more favoured position for trade. A state of perpetual hostility existed between them. Each sought to outdo the other in the number of heads captured or the number of slaves stolen. All efforts to bring them together had been in vain. Even the British authority was defied, and messages from the Consul were set at naught.

The value set on human life—which is regarded as one of the chief characteristics of civilisation—was at the lowest conceivable ebb. Human sacrifice was common amongst them. Only a few months before Miss Slessor started on her expedition a chief died, and with him were buried eight slave men, eight slave women, ten girls, ten boys and four free wives—forty in all! It was estimated that within a radius of twenty miles there were no less than one hundred and fifty such sacrifices a year. The ordeal of the poison bean and of the boiling oil must have carried off an equal number. Twin-murder was practised even more vigorously than in Calabar. The chief articles of commerce that entered Calabar—gin, guns and chains—fairly summed up the recurring sequence of the social life. Gin was in every home. Gin was given to every babe. Gin was the wage for work. Gin gave rise to quarrels. Quarrels were settled with guns. After the guns had done their work, the chains were fastened on the prisoners.

The missionary who would preach to the people of Okoyong had a task almost as hopeless as that of preaching to a jungle of tigers. One Calabar teacher had tried it, but after a shooting affray had had to fly for his life. Another had been seized and held for a ransom of rum. Others had attempted missionary work amongst these savages with as little success. It was to this perilous field that Mary Slessor had been looking amid all the strange hindrances that had beset her return from her last troubled furlough.

As at the first her desire turned always to Calabar, so now it was Okoyong that was written on her heart. Her already tested ability and experience, and her fervently expressed desire overcame the reluctance of the Foreign Mission Committee, and permission was given for her to launch out upon what seemed indeed to be a forlorn hope. But the Christian leader in every age is always to be found at the head of a forlorn hope. And it was the position of Mary Slessor now.

## Chapter 6 — The Great Achievement

It must not be imagined that Mary Slessor entered upon the crowning stage of her life work gaily and light-heartedly. She had counted the cost. In a letter home she wrote, "I am going to a new tribe up-country, a fierce, cruel people, and everyone tells me that they will kill me." Protracted negotiations with the natives preceded her settlement amongst them. Three times Miss Slessor accompanied the negotiating party, but found men and women armed and sullen and unwilling to promise anything. "I had often a lump in my throat," she wrote, "and my courage repeatedly threatened to take wings and fly away."

At last, in June, 1888, she took her courage in both hands and went up the river to make final arrangements for her sojourn. King Eyo of Calabar, as on a previous occasion, lent her his state canoe, and as it moved swiftly at the stroke of the paddlemen over the silver surface of the river, through scenes of tropical beauty and luxuriance, she meditated on the grave uncertainty and danger of her enterprise and committed herself anew to the keeping of God. The dangers were indeed great. Her crew of paddlers were the sworn foes of the people of Okoyong. A single unwise word might turn the expedition into a tragedy.

Her reception was better than she had feared. The human spirit is the same all the world over. The fact that this defenceless woman had come alone upon such an expedition touched the wild natives with admiration. Their chivalry was enlisted. Men, women and children noisily crowded about her, acclaiming her as "Mother." She stayed the night at Ekenge, the chief's village, and held family worship with the crew of her canoe gathered about her. A crowd of half-naked savages looked on with wonder at the proceedings and listened in astonishment to the words repeated in unison, "God so loved the world." The women held her fast in talk to a late hour until, worn out with the strain of this first fateful day, she retired to the hut set apart for her.

The next day began in such a manner as to test the nerve of the stoutest missionary. The village was aroused by the sound of firing. Two women had been fired on from the bush. In a moment every man had his gun and sword and was searching for the assailant. It was characteristic of Mary's intention to identify herself with the people from the outset, that instead of remaining in her hut she went out with one of the search parties. But the labyrinth of jungle was too thick and the task proved fruitless.

Going to a village two miles further on Mary interviewed the chiefs and by her frankness and fearlessness won them over and got them to promise ground for a schoolhouse. From the first she displayed that power of negotiating and of foresight which was one of the secrets of her success. She bargained that the Mission Buildings should enjoy the same privileges as those of Calabar—that they should be a place of refuge for criminals, those charged with witchcraft, or those liable to be killed for the dead, until their case could be taken into consideration. She wisely chose the two sites at a distance of about two miles from each other in order that the benefits of the concession might extend over as wide an area as possible. Then, in a deluge of rain that soaked her to the skin, she returned in safety to her starting point, the initial stage of her enterprise successfully accomplished.

By August, all preparations for her final departure for Okoyong were ready. Never surely did any missionary enter upon a great undertaking in more depressing circumstances. King Eyo with unremitting kindness had placed his canoe and paddlers again at her disposal. But there the regal glamour ceased. An air of deep gloom hung over all the natives, who came in a crowd to bid her farewell. They were certain they would never see her face again. When Mary Slessor and her five orphan children were stowed away in the part allotted to them, and the boat swept up the stream in a deluge of rain that further darkened the dreary day, the pioneer felt as hopeless as those who had just bidden her farewell. But worse was to follow.

Landing in the fading light of a rainy day, there lay a journey of four miles through a dripping forest to Ekenge. "The procession was headed by a boy about eleven years of age, tired and afraid, a box containing tea, sugar and bread upon his head, his garments, soaked with the rain, clinging to his body, his feet slipping in the black mud. Behind him came another boy, eight years old, in tears, bearing a kettle and pots. With these a little fellow of three, weeping loudly, tried hard to keep up, and close at his heels trotted a maiden of five, also shaken with sobs. Their white mother formed the rear. On one arm was slung a bundle, and astride her shoulders sat a baby girl, no light burden, so that she had to pull herself along with the aid of twigs and branches. She was singing nonsense songs to lighten the way for the little ones (surely an echo of the apostolic songs in the prison of Philippi), but the tears were perilously near her own eyes.

The long four-mile tramp was at last over, and the village of Ekenge was reached. But it was deserted. The chief's mother had died that morning, and almost all the population had gone to the carnival. Fire and a little water were obtained. The children were undressed and hushed to sleep, and the newly arrived missionary sat in her wet garments and waited. One of her helpers at length appeared, with the news that the crew were exhausted, and refused to bring anything up to Ekenge that night. There was no food, the next day was Sunday, the children were naked and she herself was wet to the skin. With that instant decision which characterised her she plunged, bootless and hatless, into the dark forest again. Stumbling, falling, hearing the screams of night birds and the flapping of their wings, shouting ever and anon to frighten wild beasts from her path and catching the weird echo of her own voice amongst the dark stems, she came at last upon the glimmering river; splashing into the water where the canoe was moored, she threw back the cover where the sleeping men lay and routed them out, dazed and dumbfounded. With that mixture of biting sarcasm and humour of which she was past mistress, she so skillfully handled these dusky giants that the bulk of what she needed was there and then transferred to Ekenge, and by midnight the worst was over.

Sunday saw the villagers trailing back to their village, ill-tempered, bedraggled and debauched, and only partly recovered from the effects of the funeral wake which they had been attending. They were in the worst possible mood to receive any kind of instruction. The messenger whom God had sent to them lay stiff and weary after the experiences of the previous day; her feet were bleeding from wounds which prevented her wearing boots for six weeks afterwards; the rain was falling in persistent torrents; everywhere was mud and filth; she herself was thrice-dispirited. Yet so great was her desire to begin the work that she gathered a few of the women about her, and told them something of the Son of God who had come to make their lives happier. Thus, in circumstances which might have utterly dismayed the bravest heart, passed the missionary's first memorable Sunday amid the savages of Okoyong a Sunday redeemed from the blank misery of despair by the messenger's heroic determination to begin at once, however feebly, to attack this citadel of Satan.

It is hard for those accustomed to the steady routine of civilised life to understand the chaotic and disordered conditions of existence upon which Mary Slessor had entered. It was a fantastic nightmare of horror. The death of a relative in a neighbouring village would be the signal for wholesale emigration to the scene of death in order to join in revels of drunkenness, dancing and bestiality. Back they would come when the revels were over, drunken, besotted and angry, fighting one another or nursing some grudge and hatching some plot of assassination against a group of mourners with whom they had quarrelled. Even before this is carried out, some boy who had not taken part in the revels is suspected of disaffection because of his absence, and is brought trembling to the pot of boiling oil; it is poured over his hands and arms and he slinks away shuddering in agony, only to be killed eventually because the oil has raised blisters where it touched the skin. Two young girls have escaped from the

chief's harem and have gone into a yard where a boy is sleeping. They are seized and chained up while an excited palaver is held to decide what their punishment shall be. To these savages the infliction of corporal punishment is a kind of entertaining spectacle. The opportunity of making it sufficiently interesting must not be lost. Strong arms are to ply the alligator hide and one hundred stripes are to be administered. The jeers and laughter of the crowd of spectators mingle with the screams of the victims, and the excitement reaches its highest pitch when salt is rubbed into the wounds and mutilation or dismemberment follows. Such was life in Okoyong—a sinister cinema of cruelty, bloodshed, drunkenness, murder, agony, suspicion, horror. The factory girl was right at the outset when she judged that the needs of Okoyong were greater than the needs of the slums of Dundee.

Mary Slessor began her work by simply ministering with loving sympathy to the humblest needs that came in her way. She visited the sick, cared for the children, encouraged the women, spoke kindly to any who seemed sorrowful or lonely. She never allowed any journey however long and perilous, through forest or by river, by day or by night, however weary or sick she might be herself, to deter her from carrying all the resources of her ministration to any human need that had been brought beneath her notice. Her kindness, her courage, her self-denial, her justice touched to life something in those savage breasts that lay deeper than all the tangle of hideous custom with which they were so rankly overgrown.

By degrees she attained a recognised moral ascendancy in the wild disorder of the community. This stood her in good stead in the more stubborn battle that she had to fight with the active powers of evil. One afternoon a young slave-wife who was sullen and dissatisfied with her unhappy lot went and sat down in the hut of a slave. The slave was alarmed, knowing well what the consequences would be, but the woman refused to move. The man went off to his work and she walked into the forest and hanged herself. The next morning the man, heavily chained, was brought into a palaver, and the master of the slave-wife and his relatives decreed that the man must die. They had been degraded by association with a common slave.

Mary Slessor was present at the palaver and protested against the injustice of the sentence. It was not the man's fault, she argued, that the girl had gone to his hut. "But," was the reply, "he put the thought into the girl's mind, and the witch-doctor has pronounced him guilty." Mary persisted. The crowd became angry; why, they demanded, should a stranger who was there on sufferance interfere with their power. Threats were shouted, guns and swords were waved, and the position grew critical; but she stood her ground, quiet and cool and patient. Her tact, her good humour, the spiritual force that seemed to emanate from her in times of peril, at last prevailed. The noise and confusion subsided and ultimately the man's life was spared. It was through countless critical victories like these that she was gradually accorded an informal position of arbitrator that would never have been allowed to any other.

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Fifteen years have passed since that Sunday when, with weary frame and bleeding feet, she first entered upon her work at Ekenge. It is the anniversary and a red-letter day. For the first time a communion service was held in Okoyong. A great throng filled the hall and overflowed into the grounds, many sitting on native stools and chairs and even on gin-boxes. Before the communion service she presented eleven of the children, including six whom she had rescued; and seven young people were received into the Church. These were the outward signs of a profound change in the life of the community. "The old order of heathenism had been broken up. The business of life was no longer fighting and killing. Women were free from outrage and the death menace; slaves had begun to realise that they were human beings with rights. Industry and trade were established. Peace reigned. The people were openly living the Christian life, and many lads were actively engaged in Church work."

Alone Mary Slessor had done in Okoyong what it had taken a whole Mission to do in Calabar.

## **Chapter 7 — Spade-Work and Honour**

In this brief stretch it is impossible to give any adequate impression of the life of strenuous

and multifarious activity which Mary Slessor led. In addition to the services on Sunday and the visitation and nursing of the sick, and the application of the message of the Gospel at every possible opportunity, she was called to take part in all kinds of work. Visitors not seldom found her on the roof re-tiling her house after a storm. Once she was discovered making cement. Asked if she had ever had any lessons in cement-making she replied, "No, 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." Planting corn, and cocoa and yams, cutting away the ever-encroaching bush that might harbour beasts of prey, tending the starry jasmine that was trained over her verandah, listening to a story of an unjust divorce, declaring the innocence of one who had been wrongly accused, deciding the rights in a dispute about a land case, darting into the bush to rescue an infant which had been left there to die, burying the dead, comforting, counselling, rebuking the living. This was her service.

A Government official who came to see her gives the following account: "Her compound was full of litigants, witnesses and onlookers, and it was impressive to see how deep was the respect with which she was treated by them all. She was again in her rocking-chair surrounded by several ladies—and babies in waiting—nursing another infant. Suddenly she jumped up with an angry growl; her shawl fell off, the baby was transferred to some one qualified to hold it, and with a few trenchant words she made for the door where a hulking, overdressed native stood. In a moment she seized him by the scruff of the neck, boxed his ears, and hustled him out of the yard, telling him quite explicitly what he might expect if he came back without her consent. I watched him and his followers slink away very crestfallen. Then as suddenly as it had arisen the tornado subsided, and (lace shawl, baby and all) she was again gently swaying in her chair. The man was a local monarch of sorts who had been impudent to her, and she had forbidden him to come near her until he had not only apologised, but done some prescribed penance."

It would be a misconception to think of Mary Slessor merely as a woman devoid of those tenderer qualities which are the particular grace of her sex. She had a passion for children. "I never saw anything," wrote Miss Welsh, "more beautiful than her devotion to these black children. She had a poor sick boy in her arms all the time, and nursed him while walking up and down directing the girls." She had a whole family of children whom she had rescued from twin-murder and who became her devoted helpers. Traders and Government officials held her in high esteem as a friend, and there existed between them a delightful and humorous *camaraderie*.

Her knowledge of the native life through and through, her wonderful acquaintance with the idioms of the language and gestures of the people, her wisdom, her sense of humour and of justice, qualified her to act as arbitrator and even as dictator in important crises of the tribal life. On one occasion news was brought her that two tribes intended to fight; although her heart was beating wildly, she stood between them and made each pile their guns on opposite sides of her, until the heaps were five feet high. She was constantly present at tribal palavers. Her methods were original. She had the feeling that the sight of her knitting quietly during the stormy periods of a debate had a calming influence. So she always took her knitting with her on these occasions. Once when relations were sorely strained between two sections of the Okoyong people and feeling was running high, she entered the scene of the palaver to find every chief present clad in all the colours of the rainbow and surrounded by a cordon of twenty or thirty of his followers carrying swords and loaded guns. It was very combustible material and only needed a spark to produce a devastating blaze. A chair was placed for her between the contending parties. But she moved first of all from group to group, evoking laughter with her jokes and by-play until the tension of feeling was relieved. Then to her knitting, and the palaver began.

She did not interrupt except every now and then to ask a question, to elicit information, or to check some outburst of feeling. Night fell, torches were lit, voices were raised and just at the critical point Mary called for a summing up. She gathered up the main points and gave her verdict, which was unanimously adopted with ringing cheers. A freeman from each side came forward, and it fell to her lot to administer the native oath. After this binding and terrible formula the tension gave place to merriment and fun. And after a ten hours' sitting, Mary returned home the four miles, tired but happy.

It was not long before her genius for settling native disputes became known to the British Government officials of the region. So fully did they recognise her unique position and influence that Sir Claude Macdonald, the Consul General of the Niger Coast Protectorate, empowered her to organise and supervise a native court. Virtually she became Vice-Consul of Okoyong. She presided at the native courts, created public opinion, established just laws, protected the poor, and quietly coordinated native customs with new legislation and generally conducted all the public affairs of the tribe. It was on account not only of services like these but of all her heroic record of unspeakable benefits conferred by her life upon the district that Sir Frederick Lugard, Governor-General of Northern and Southern Nigeria, recommended to the Secretary of State for the Colonies that Mary Slessor's services should be brought to Royal notice.

In due course she received an august-looking document asking her acceptance of the Silver Cross of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem in England. A Government launch was despatched up the river to bring her down to Duke Town, where the public presentation was to be made. At a great gathering in the Goldie Memorial Hall a little wrinkled woman in straw hat, old cotton dress and list shoes sat on the platform with her face buried in her hands, too overcome at first to reply to those who had spoken only in just appreciation of her great work. "Who am I that I should have this?" she asked. "If I have done anything in my life it has been easy because the Master has gone before."

Those who heard the simple and beautiful words she uttered on this occasion record that they were entirely selfless; she made it appear that the Royal decoration which she had received was the recognition of the work of the Mission, and that it might equally well have been awarded to any member of the staff. So the British Government honoured Mary Slessor and honoured itself in so doing.

## Chapter 8 — Personal Characteristics and Closing Scenes

What was the personal appearance of this remarkable woman, and what were the salient features of her character?

A fellow student with her in her early days of preparation at the Normal School writes: "The beauty of her character showed itself in her face, and I have rarely seen one which showed so plainly that the love of God dwelt within. It was always associated in my mind with that of Miss Angelica Fraser; a heavenly radiance seemed to emanate from both." On one of her later furloughs she is described as "a most gentle-looking lady, rather below the average height, a complexion like yellow parchment, and short, lank brown hair; a most pleasing expression and winning smile, and when she spoke I thought I had never heard such a musical voice." Younger missionaries who met her towards the close of her life remember her as "a slight woman with shrunk and colourless skin and deep-set eyes." The Rev. J. K. Macgregor, B.D., Principal of the Hope Waddell Institute, wrote after his first meeting with her: "A slim figure, of middle height, fine eyes full of power, she is no ordinary woman. It was wonderful to sit and listen to her talking, for she is most fascinating, and besides being a humorist is a mine of information on missionary history and Efik custom." A writer in the *Morning Post* who had met her on the field gave this striking picture of her: "She was a woman close on sixty, with a heavily-lined face and a skin from which the freshness and bloom had long, long ago departed; but there was fire in her old eyes still, tired though they looked; there was sweetness and firmness about her lined mouth. Heaven knows who had dressed her. She wore a skimpy tweed skirt, and a cheap nun's veiling blouse, and on her iron-grey hair was perched rakishly a forlorn, broken picture-hat of faded green chiffon with a knot of bright red ribbon to give the bizarre touch of colour she had learned to admire among her surroundings.

" 'Ye'll excuse my hands,' she said, and she held them out.

"They were hardened and roughened by work, work in the past, and they were just now bleeding from work finished now; the skin of the palms was gone, the nails were worn to the quick; that they were painful there could be no doubt, but she only apologised for their appearance."

The salient features of her character have already been inferred from the scattered hints of preceding pages. The impressions of some of those who knew her will help to focus those features into a clear and defined likeness. Miss Amess, a fellow helper in Okoyong, writes: "She had been so courageous that I imagined she must be somewhat masculine, with a very commanding appearance, but I was pleasantly disappointed when I found she was a true woman, with a heart full of motherly affection. Her welcome was the heartiest I received. Her originality, brightness and almost girlish spirit fascinated me. One could not be long in her company without enjoying a right hearty laugh. To be with her was an education. She had such a complete grasp of all that was going on in the world. One day, after studying Efik for two hours, she said to me, 'Lassie, you have had enough of that to-day. Go away and read a novel for a short time.' She was very childlike with her bairns, and dearly loved them. One night I had to share her bed, and during the night felt her clapping me on the shoulder. I think she had been so used to black babies that this was force of habit, for she was amused when I told her of it in the morning. Her outstanding characteristic was her great sympathy, which enabled her to get into touch with the highest and the lowest. Once whilst cycling together we met the Provincial Commissioner. After salutations and some conversation with him she finished up by saying 'Good-bye, and see and be a guid laddie.' She had really two personalities. In the morning one would hear evil-doers getting hotly lectured for their 'fashions,' and in the evening when all was quiet she lifted one up to the very heights regarding the things of the kingdom."

The limits of this simple sketch do not allow of any detailed account of the great work she continued to do even after the conquest of Okoyong. How she crossed the river and pushed on to Itu, Ikotobong, and Enyong Creek; how she penetrated into the mysterious Aro country and planted the banner of the Gospel among the powerful people of that region; how she took part in the abolition of the Ju-Ju sacrifices that had been responsible for thousands of deaths and had held the whole region under a despotism of terror—all this is told in the thrilling volume by Mr. W. P. Livingstone. Even up to the age of sixty-six, when she was the victim of continual suffering and had to be taken from place to place in a kind of four wheeled box, she still laboured on, planning, prospecting, ever reaching out to the very last.

The end came at Itu at 3:30 on the morning of January 13th, 1915. Her faithful girls Janie, Annie, Maggie, Alice, Whitie—some of whom she had snatched from death as infants, were about her bed, watching tenderly over her. The room in which she lay was very roughly built, with walls of reddish-brown mud; the floor was of cement, with a rug here and there, and the roof was of corrugated iron. The furniture was of the scantiest and simplest. Amid these surroundings the strong and tender spirit passed away.

The body was brought on a launch to Duke Town, and rested at Government Beach till dawn. There the mourners gathered. Government officials, merchants and missionaries were all there. All flags flew at half-mast, and the whole town was hushed and still. Great crowds watched the coffin, draped with the Union Jack, borne slowly at the head of a long procession to Mission Hill. In the cemetery adjoining those Mission Buildings on which her eyes had first gazed in excited interest nearly forty years ago, all that was mortal of Mary Slessor was laid to rest.

Copied by Stephen Ross for WholesomeWords.org from *Mary Slessor* by Cuthbert McEvoy. London: Carey Press, [1920?]

**More Information on [Mary Slessor](#)**