

From Weaving Shed to Mission Field

by C. J. L.

Contents

- Chapter 1 "A Wild Lassie"
- Chapter 2 The Awakening
- Chapter 3 Among the Roughs
- Chapter 4 New Scenes and New Friends
- Chapter 5 A Busy Day
- Chapter 6 Fresh Openings
- Chapter 7 A Friendly Chief
- Chapter 8 Caring for the Wee Ones
- Chapter 9 Beginning Work at Okoyong
- Chapter 10 Sowing and Reaping in Okoyong
- Chapter 11 "The Rest That Remaineth"

Chapter 1 — "A Wild Lassie."

"I was a wild lassie," was what Mary Slessor said of her own girlhood; but as we turn the pages of her life-story we shall see that, even as a child, she had a more than usual amount of energy and will-power; qualities that might have made her selfish and overbearing, but after her conversion these very qualities used in the service and for the glory of her Lord and Saviour made her fearless, and helped her to acquire great influence, not only over wild, lawless boys and youths in the Homeland, but over still more wild and lawless savages in West Africa.

But we shall not be able to understand her missionary life unless we know something about her early days, and see how God in His own wise way was training her for service in the mission field. Mary, the second of seven children, was born when the snow lay thickly on the Scottish hills, and the wind whistled through the boughs of leafless trees, on December 2nd, 1848, in a lowly home not far from the city of Aberdeen.

All who knew her mother spoke of her as an earnest Christian, possessed in no common degree of the beautiful ornament so precious in the sight of God, "a meek and quiet spirit." Her great desire was to

train her children for the Lord, and she prayed much and often for each by name. But the good Shepherd who gathers the lambs with His arm, and carries them in His bosom, early took three out of the seven to be with Himself, and when quite a little girl Mary was left with one brother and two sisters, the brother about a year older, but the sisters younger than herself.

Mrs. Slessor took a great interest in mission work, and one of the first things Mary remembered was how in the long winter evenings her mother would gather her children round her and talk to them about the poor black people in Africa, who had never heard of the Lord Jesus and His love, and who often fought with and killed each other.

"Playing school" was one of the favourite amusements of the Slessor family. They were by no means rich in dolls, but that did not matter, as chairs and stools did very well for make-believe scholars, Mary always insisting upon it that they must represent black boys and girls.

Even when quite a child she must often have wondered why her mother's face so frequently wore a sad, anxious look, and why, though her husband could, and sometimes did, earn good wages, it was such a struggle to provide food and clothing for the family. It did not take her long to find out the cause, and as the eldest girl she began to help bear her mother's burdens, and in every way in her power try to lighten them.

Mr. Slessor had acquired a fondness for strong drink, in which by far the greater part of his earnings was spent; and though when sober he was a kind and even affectionate husband and father, his conduct when under the influence of drink often resembled that of a madman. Saturday night was, week after week, a trying and anxious time. For hours after the other children were in bed and asleep, Mary and her mother would sit up, dreading rather than hoping for the return of the husband and father. When at last his unsteady step was heard, they would draw closer to each other, for as sometimes happened, after throwing the supper which they had stinted themselves to procure for him into the fire, he would turn them both out of doors, to pass the night as best they could.

Still, they hoped and prayed on, and none of their friends even guessed the shadow that darkened their home. When, a year or so later, Mrs. Slessor, finding that she could not keep her family upon the small sums of money her husband brought home, went to work in one of the mills,

Mary in a great measure took her mother's place in the household. By this time the family had removed to one of the suburbs of Dundee, hoping that when away from his old drinking companions Mr. Slessor would give up his unsteady habits. But though for a few weeks the change worked well, the improvement did not last, and a time of greater hardship than the family had yet known lay before them.

When Mary was only eleven years of age she herself went to work at the mill as a "half-timer," working half the day and attending school the other half. Two or three years later her working hours were from six in the morning till six at night, with some time allowed for meals.

But though it had been her dream, as she herself said in after years, to be a missionary in Africa (and she had been wisely and lovingly trained by her godly mother), she had not been converted. She had never taken her place before God as a lost sinner, and tasted the sweetness of His pardoning love. But the time when she was to pass from death to life was not far distant.

A poor but pious widow, who lived in one room down a close, or court, not far from the mill gates, longed to do something for the troop of working girls who passed her window soon after the ringing of the great bell at the mill set them free, so often invited as many as her room would hold, to leave the cheerless streets and have a warm and cosy talk by her bright fireside. Mary would sometimes be one to accept the invitation; and though I do not think that the widow called her little gathering either a Bible class or an evening school, she would talk in a plain homely way to the girls, and it was during one of those talks that Mary, then about fourteen years of age, was aroused to feel and own her need of personal salvation. But how it came about I hope to tell you in the next chapter.

Chapter 2 — The Awakening.

We must not forget that Mary Slessor had enjoyed the great blessing of a Christian mother, who though her own path had often been one of trial and difficulty, had done her utmost to train her children for the Lord.

Mary, who was far from strong, was even from early childhood thoughtful beyond her years; not that she was remarkably grave or grown-up in her ways. Her love of fun often came very near getting her into trouble, though her affectionate disposition made her really sorry if by her thoughtlessness she had given pain to any one she really

loved.

It might have been said of her, as of Timothy of old, "From a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15). But though she knew the way of salvation, and could repeat many hymns and portions of scripture, she did not seem to feel her need, as a lost and guilty sinner, of a Saviour; and it was not the sweet story of His love that led to her awakening.

If we want to know how she was converted, we must again take a peep into the humble room mentioned in our last chapter—

The winter's night seemed more than usually cold and cheerless, as the great bell of the weaving factory rang the welcome hour of six; the gates were thrown open, and some hundreds of work-people poured out. The streets were wet and sloppy, and the lamps shone with a dim, feeble glimmer through the thick mist that hung like a heavy curtain over the town.

But the widow, whose home was just one humble room, felt that even the cheerless outlook might be for her a God-given opportunity. She had swept up her hearth and put a fresh supply of peat on the fire, that blazed and crackled cheerfully. "They'll be here in a minute, and it's a bad night," she said half aloud, as the sound of young voices reached her. Throwing her door wide open as a group of girls, of whom Mary was one, passed, she invited them to enter and have a warm before going to their homes.

Mary even as a girl had a great deal of influence over her companions, who looked up to her as a leader, though perhaps they might not have found it quite easy to explain why they did so. She accepted the kindly given invitation; seats could not be found for all, but as they did not intend to stay long no one minded, as they warmed their chilled hands by the cheery blaze, and talked over the news of the day or the doings in the weaving shed.

But the widow would not let the girls depart without a faithful word of warning. Her object lesson was close at hand. "Do ye see that blaze?" she exclaimed so suddenly that a silence fell upon the group, as she continued, "If ye were to put your hand into it, it would burn ye sair; but if ye do not repent of your sins and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, your souls will burn for ever and ever in the fire of God's

wrath."

No more was said, and Mary went home; but tired as she was with a long day's work, there was no sleep for her that night. The arrow of conviction had entered her soul; unseen things had become strangely real. She might die, and "after death the judgment," and she trembled at the thought of having to meet a holy God.

At last she could bear the misery no longer, and the prayer, "O God, for Christ's sake, be merciful to me a sinner," rose from her burdened heart. She simply believed what God had said in His word, and peace and joy filled her soul.

Years after, in telling the story of her conversion, she said, "I was saved as by fire. Fear drove me into the kingdom; but when I came to Christ, I found His rule was one of love. I proved that His yoke was easy, and His burden light." For her, old things had passed away, all things had become new. Her Bible seemed a new book, and she searched and studied it with real delight. For other reading she had but little time, except by carrying a book in her lunch-basket and, when the light permitted, reading on her way to and from work; or during her long hours of daily toil, by placing it open on her loom, and getting a glimpse at it as she passed to and fro, she managed to read a number of useful and interesting books which friends were always willing to lend her.

But in all her reading the Bible had the largest place. To a young girl who worked near her at the loom, and who had asked her for something to read, she offered her Bible, saying, "Read this book, it has made a different lassie of me."

She longed to do something for the Saviour who had done so much for her, and she began to teach a class of "lovable little lassies" in the Sunday School. She also became a regular helper in the work of taking a gospel paper, called the *Monthly Visitor*, to the houses of people living in one of the lowest parts of the town. In this way she got to know quite a number of very poor people, and, young as she was, what she had known of sorrow helped her to understand and enter into their troubles.

Her heart often ached over the crowd of hatless, shoeless children who poured out from the courts and alleys around. They were rough, wild and dirty, but she loved them, and longed to do something for them; and when a mission and week-night school was opened in a very poor

neighbourhood, she became one of the first teachers.

Chapter 3 — Among the Roughs.

Perhaps Mary Slessor little guessed how sorely her faith and patience were to be tried in the mission room that had been opened not far from the Cowgate, or how by its disappointments and difficulties she was to be trained for her life work on the West Coast of Africa.

"Yes, there was danger outside," she wrote in after years, "for though the children came in good numbers, a gang of rough, lawless youths set themselves to break up the mission, and left no means untried to carry out their purpose." When the teachers appeared some of the older men formed a kind of body-guard, and did their utmost to get the younger and weaker ones safely through the crowd, who hooted, yelled, and threw mud and sometimes stones.

Open-air preaching was begun. It was dangerous; but a little band of brave, earnest workers for Christ, of whom Mary was one, had faith and courage for it. One night a gang of the wildest of the youths closed round her. The leader carried a leaden weight at the end of a piece of cord, and began to swing it round her. Mary never winced or moved. He came nearer and nearer still, but she stood her ground. At last it almost grazed her forehead, but she did not show any sign of fear. "She's game, boys," and the lead was dropped, and the whole band followed her into the hall, where her influence and kind, pleasant manner shaped them into something like order and attention.

Many years afterwards, in one of her bush huts in Africa, a photograph hung on its mud wall of a man, his wife and family. The man was the tormentor of early days, who had been converted, was doing well as a business man, and had sent her the photograph in grateful remembrance of that night which had been, he said, "the turning-point in my life."

One night a youth, whose wild ways had made him the terror of the neighbourhood, stood outside with a whip, driving the boys and girls into the mission room, but refusing to go in himself. Mary faced him.

"If we changed places, what would happen?" she asked.

"I should get the whip across my back," he said.

Mary turned her back to him, saying, "I'll bear it for you if you'll go

in."

"You don't mean it, do you?" he asked in surprise.

"Yes, I do, try me."

He threw down the whip and went with her into the hall. That night he was converted, and became her firm friend and faithful helper.

A love of all growing and living things was a strongly marked feature in her character. She did not get many half-holidays, but when she did, few things gave her greater pleasure than being able to take a class of boys or girls out into the fields, where they could breathe a purer air than that of the crowded courts in which they lived, or as they gathered a bunch of daisies or a spray of rowan berries, to learn from their teacher many a long-to-be-remembered lesson of the wisdom and goodness of God.

When an early Sunday morning meeting for lads was started, Mary did not plead the long hours she worked on week-days, or the early rising that was a needs-be to enable her to take a large share in the work of the house before going to the factory, but entered with her whole heart into the work. On cold winter mornings she would often rise before daylight, and flitting through dark archways and narrow passages would knock at the lads' doors, telling them she should look out for them at the meeting, and should feel disappointed if they were not at the mission room in time for the opening hymn; and they very seldom failed to rally in answer to her summons.

For fourteen years Mary worked at the loom for ten hours on five days a week and a half-day on Saturdays. Most of her evenings she spent in teaching various classes in the night school, and yet she found or made time to improve her own education, which she felt had been far from good. All through those busy years the dream of her childhood to be a missionary was taking shape and form till it became a settled purpose. She thought and prayed much over it, but for a long time did not speak of her desire to any of her friends.

As both her younger sisters were like herself employed in the weaving shed and were earning good wages, her help was not so much needed at home as it had been during the long years of struggle and hardship the family had known; and when she asked her mother if she would be willing, should the way open, for her to become a missionary, Mrs. Slessor gave a glad consent even though it may have been a tearful

one.

Perhaps the death of Mary's only brother may have deepened her desire to become a missionary. He had been converted at a very early age, and had looked forward to preaching the gospel in Africa himself as his life-work; but his health broke down, and acting upon the advice of the doctors he undertook a voyage to New Zealand, but died a week after reaching that country. Both she and her mother felt the loss keenly, but soon after she confided her desire to go to the far-off mission field to one or two trusted Christian friends. They encouraged her to go forward. She offered herself for foreign service, and was accepted as a missionary for Calabar on the west coast of Africa, though it was thought it would be well for her to spend some months in training at the Normal School in Edinburgh before setting out.

Chapter 4 — New Scenes and New Friends.

It was a cold, windy night in the month of March, 1876, when Mary Slessor stood at the entrance of the close, or court, in which she lived. Her face bore the traces of recent tears, and it was hardly to be wondered at, for the day had been a trying one. Early the next morning she was to leave Dundee for Edinburgh. The old life would lie behind her; and even though she felt sure that God was not only marking out her path, but guiding her step by step in it, she hardly knew how much she had learnt to love many of her companions in the weaving shed (several of whom she had had the joy of winning for Christ), her fellow-workers in the Sunday school, or the boys and girls of her classes, till the time when she must say good-bye to them really came.

To one special friend who, anxious to have as much as possible of her company, had walked home with her, she said in a voice almost choked with tears, as she grasped her hand at parting, "Pray for me; oh! do pray for me."

Parting with her much-loved mother and sisters was, we may be sure, no small trial; but her last evening in the old home was one long to be remembered. The hearts of all were too full for many words, but each found relief and comfort in prayer.

On reaching Edinburgh, and feeling herself quite a stranger in the crowded streets of the busy city, she turned her steps towards an address that had been given her before leaving Dundee. She received a kind welcome from Mr. and Mrs. Dearing, though other lodgings were found soon after for her with some members of their family and other

Christian workers whom she met during her stay in the Scottish capital, and with whom she formed warm and lasting friendships.

Miss Slessor sailed for Africa in August of the same year. Two Dundee friends went with her as far as Liverpool, and saw her on board the steamer "Ethiopia," by which she was to sail. It grieved her to see a large number of casks of spirits put on board. Turning to her friends she exclaimed sadly, "Only to think of it, scores of casks and only one missionary."

So much of her life had been spent within the walls of the factory that the ever-changing beauty of sea and sky was a never-ending source of delight to her. When the headland of Cape Verde was passed, and she saw on the shores groves of tropical trees, she began to realise that every day and hour brought her nearer to the land where she had so often, even from a child, longed to be; and as the vessel passed the Gold Coast, the Slave Coast and the Ivory Coast, all she had ever heard or read of the horrors of the slave trade came back to her memory, and threw a shade of sadness over her naturally bright and hopeful spirit.

Duke Town was to be the first station of the young missionary teacher. Before leaving Scotland it had been arranged that she should live, while learning the language of the people among whom she had come to work, with an old and valued missionary and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Anderson, who had been among the first to carry the gospel message to the West Coast of Africa. They had been used by the Lord in blessing to many souls, and were much loved by the natives, who called them Daddy and Mammy.

At first Mary found her work very simple. She gave what help she could in the day school, and after a few weeks of patient, uphill work at the language began to visit the people in their huts and yards, finding, to her great delight, that she not only knew many words of Elfik (the native language of that part of Africa), but was able to understand many of the words used by the people themselves.

It was not till after, in company with three Kroo boys as guides, she had visited the out-stations of the Mission that she really began to understand what it meant to live and work among heathen. In some of the villages a "white Ma" was so strange a sight that on her first visit the children ran away screaming with fright, and the women gathered round her shouting, quarrelling and fighting, till the chief drove them away with a whip.

Every village, yard or town, as these clusters of huts were sometimes called, was under the control of a chief who had a great deal of power. Every chief had several wives and usually a great number of slaves, who though as a rule were not badly treated, could be sold or even killed by the order of the chief. Though the British Government had tried many years ago, the time of which I am writing, to bring the tribes living near the coast into something like law and order, very little in the way of rule had been done; and the heathen clung to their old cruel customs, and made offerings of blood to their Jujus, or native idols, in some parts of the country called fetishes.

The journey to the out-stations had to be on foot, but as Mary was a good walker she did not mind. Much of the way lay through the bush, where the tall, graceful ferns and profusion of brightly coloured flowers were a source of never-ending wonder and delight.

One of her duties while living with the Andersons was to rise very early, and going on to the hill on which the house stood, ring a bell, the object being to call the native Christians who lived near to a simple morning service. Mary would sometimes wake tired and sleepy, and finding her room flooded with light would rise hastily, fearing she had overslept herself, and run out, only to find that she had mistaken the bright moonlight for daylight.

Chapter 5 — A Busy Day.

After a few months' study of the language and the people, Miss Slessor found her life a very busy one; but she loved her work and was happy in it, and from letters written to friends in Scotland, after she had been about a year at Duke Town, we can gather some idea of how busy her days were.

All through her fourteen years of factory work she had been an early riser, and the habit so early formed proved of real value during her missionary life. On Lord's-day morning, after spending some time in prayer and Bible study, she would look out a few brightly coloured texts and picture cards, and would send one to each of the chiefs and head men of the villages nearest Mission Hill, with a kindly message saying that Mr. Anderson would be quite disappointed if he did not see them at the meeting. She then made her way to one of the yards. A man was sitting at the door of his hut rocking himself backwards and forwards, and looking sullen and unhappy. "Why do you not come to hear the word of God?" Mary asked.

He shook himself and replied, "If your heart was vexed, would you go to any place? Would you not rather sit at the door of your hut and nurse your sorrow?"

After a few more words, Mary found that his only child had died, and according to native custom had been buried under the mud floor of their hut, the family sitting round the grave in dirt, despair and drunkenness. Mary spoke to him of the resurrection. He was at first surprised, then interested, and in the end took her inside the hut where the mother was sitting upon the grave with bowed head, crying bitterly.

Part of John 11 was read and very simply explained. The father said, "If what you say is true, that God took the child, I shall not mind losing him so much, but I think an enemy bewitched him, and that is why he was sick and died."

The heathen Africans believe that all sickness and death are caused by witchcraft. Before leaving, Mary said to the mother, "Do you not find comfort in these words?"

"No," was the sad reply, "How can I find comfort when my child is gone?"

Mary put her arm round her and told her how her own mother had found comfort for the loss of her children in the thought that they were safe with the Lord Jesus, who carries the lambs in His bosom, and who when He was on earth had said, "Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not." The woman was touched, and asked Mary to come again.

In the next yard there were only a few girls, all the older people having gone to work on one of the farms at some distance, but they listened quietly while she tried to tell them of the love of God and the power and willingness of Christ to save. In another yard she found a group of women, some sleeping on the ground, others smoking or talking over the news of the neighbouring yards. They were in a way pleased to see Mary and listened to what she had to say, but she left them feeling that her visit had only helped them to pass the time, and not, as far as she could see, awakened any desire for better things, so she left somewhat sadly, but she could still pray for them.

The next visit was to a heathen house. The master was dead; the

mistress, an old woman, hard, cross-grained and unlovable, sat crouching over the fire. A group of half-starved, frightened looking girls and women were quarrelling over a pipe; the shrill voice and long arms of the old woman soon settled the dispute, and they asked Mary to speak to them. The room was full of skulls, charms and the remains of offerings made to the idols they served. The stench was dreadful, and the fumes of gin and tobacco made the air almost stifling. But at last she got them fairly quiet and attentive, and she felt encouraged by the hope that one or two really wished to hear more.

Another visit was to a village where lady missionaries had for some time visited and worked. The women were with few exceptions cleaner, and wore more clothing than those she had seen earlier in the day; but they were disappointing, for though several said that they wished very much to follow the "God-fashion," they were not ready to take the first step by giving up drinking, fighting and telling untruths.

Her first three years in Africa were busy and on the whole happy ones, for though every day she saw much in the homes of the people that grieved and saddened her, still she loved them, and many returned her affection with real love and confidence. Her work, too, in the day and Sunday schools was full of encouragement, and she formed some warm and lasting friendships, one being with a coloured woman, Mammy Fuller, as every one called her, a gentle, unselfish, kindly Christian, a woman of a meek and quiet spirit.

In her early life Mammy Fuller had been a slave; and well did she remember the time when she, with thousands of other slaves in the West India Islands, had been set free, millions of British gold having been cheerfully paid for their release. She had gone from Jamaica with a missionary and his wife as nurse to their children, and when they left for England she remained, a humble but faithful and true-hearted helper in the mission at Duke Town.

To return to Miss Slessor. Much as she loved her work, at times a feeling of home-sickness came over her, and she longed not only to see the faces and hear the voices of her mother and sisters, but for the grey skies and cool mountain breezes of her native Scotland. So when her furlough became due she took it thankfully, and made all the haste she could to Dundee. Even in those early days she spoke to friends of her desire to go further inland, or as it was called "up country," to live and work among heathen to whom the gospel had not been carried.

Chapter 6 — Fresh Openings.

"He will fulfil the desire of them that fear him" (Ps. 145:19) is still a precious word of encouragement to those who desire not only to *know* but to *do* the will of God, and the strength and comfort it gave did not fail Miss Slessor as she went forward.

Soon after her return to Africa in October, 1880, she was free (her work at Duke Town having been taken over by others) to go inland. Her new sphere of work was to be at Old Town among some of the darkest and wildest tribes in the west of Africa. The change would mean her living alone at a distance from fellow-workers, and living almost wholly upon native food. But the chief and headman of the first village she visited were friendly, and the service she had longed and prayed for lay before her. So taking with her one young woman who could not speak a word of English, and several small boys and girls of whom she had taken the entire charge, she said a cheerful good-bye to friends at Duke Town and went to her new field of work.

The native house in which she, with the children, was to live did not look very inviting or give much promise of comfort. It was built of mud and wattle with a mat roof, where all through the day lizards seemed to be playing at hide and seek, while at night rats ran over the sleepers.

Almost her first work was to begin a day and Sunday school. The people attended well, old and young wishing to be taught, the headman, or under chief of the village, taking his place day after day with those who were learning A.B.C., and in the Sunday school repeating texts and hymns with the children. He set them a good example, for he was never absent and, though he had no clock, hardly ever late.

But Mary Slessor soon found that her work would not be all smooth sailing, for though the people following the lead of their headman were friendly and quite willing to learn to read, and a few even showed some interest in the gospel message, they did not wish to give up the worship of idols or part with their old cruel customs, and it grieved her deeply when she learnt that a number of little babies were killed every year.

Twin babies were not allowed to live, and the mother was driven from her home, no one daring to give her food or shelter. She often hid herself in the bush, where she either died of hunger or was eaten by

wild beasts; and as no one cared for the trouble of bringing up a baby whose mother had died, it was either killed or thrown away to die of starvation. Mary told them that such conduct was displeasing to God, and that she was quite willing to take the babies that nobody wanted, love them, care for them, and when they were old enough teach them.

The chiefs looked very grave and called the people together for a great native palaver. After some hours spent in talking they said they would not so much mind the motherless babies being taken care of, but if twins were allowed to live they were sure the Juju god would be angry, and send plague, famine or some other trouble on the village. "No, no, the twin babies and their mothers must be got rid of as quickly as possible." Mary tried to show them how foolish and even wicked their conduct was. The day was a long and trying one, but it closed without her having been able to gain her point.

She had, however, one faithful friend, the widow of a chief, who was a thoughtful, sensible woman; and though she did not see that the waste of child-life was really a sin against God, she made up her mind to stand by Mary and help her in every way she could. She seemed to know at once when and where twins were born, and would send a message, usually in the form of a secret sign, so well understood among Africans. Mary would then hurry off to the place and carry away the babies.

At first she tried taking the mothers with them to her house, but soon gave that up as worse than useless, for the mothers themselves did not wish the babies to live, and they neglected or badly treated them. First one baby would die and then the other, and the mother would run away and hide in the bush. Very soon there were quite a number of babies in the mission house; the elder girls helped to nurse and take care of them.

Her hands were very full ones. She not only taught school, visited the people in their huts, looked after the wants of her numerous household, but undertook the work of a small dispensary, to which people were coming sometimes all day long, and often from great distances, for medicine either for themselves or their sick friends.

One day as she sat sewing she noticed a tornado (a violent storm of wind and rain) brewing over the Calabar hills. She knew what was coming and did not attempt to go out. The storm broke over the village; the wind lifted fences, canoes, trees and buildings, tearing off the mat

roof of her house. The thunder pealed and the rain came down in torrents. It was quite dark, except for the vivid flashes of lightning. She had seen heavy storms before but never such a bad one. The frightened people, came crowding into her yard. Taking a baby in each arm she groped her way through the water which reached up to her knees. She managed to secure a few wraps, and then, to keep up the spirits of the children, who were clinging to her and crying, started a hymn, "Come, let us sing." One by one they joined her, and there above the crash of thunder and the roar of the tempest the song of praise was heard.

Chapter 7 — A Friendly Chief.

About a year after settling at Old Town Miss Slessor began to visit several inland villages, carrying a small stock of simple medicines and doing all she could to help the people, who soon learnt to look upon her as a true friend. She spoke the language of the people like one of themselves, and seemed able to get into touch with them and win their love and trust in a way that few were able to do.

Many of her journeys had to be taken by boat; and as the news of her arrival at a village spread quickly, a crowd would sometimes be at the landing-place wanting to have wounds dressed, medicine for themselves or their friends given, cuts bandaged, or other help of some kind. Sometimes so many people wanted her help that she lost the tide, and had to remain on the bank of the river all night, her only shelter being a mud hut and her bed a heap of dirty rags.

But to her these busy days were golden opportunities of telling the sweet story of a Saviour's love. The natives felt that she loved and understood them; they told her their troubles, and though she had to listen to many a sad story of cruelty and wrong, she had the joy of being able to tell them of the One who had said, "Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out" (John 6:37).

One of her journeys was undertaken at the request of a friendly chief named Okon, who lived about thirty miles from Old Town, and who had often asked her to visit his village. To an African thirty miles seems a long journey, and for days before the time fixed for her to start there was a good deal of excitement in Old Town. Every one was talking of the proposed journey; some advised her not to go, while others said that if she went so far away they were afraid she would not return to them.

The long-talked-of day came at last. At six o'clock in the evening word

was sent that the royal canoe, which had been sent for her, was ready. It had been freshly painted in the brightest of red, blue and orange, and a small awning of mats had been put up to screen her from the great heat. As she made her way to the beach, followed by about half the people of Old Town, women and children were waiting at the entrance of every yard, all eager to embrace her, wish her a safe journey, and charge the rowers to look well after her, and see that no harm came to their "great white mother."

Deeply touched by the love shown to her by these simple, untaught people, with a smile and a word of thanks she stepped on board, and found places as best she could for four small children she could not well have left. The African is never in a hurry, and before her paddlers were ready to make a start it was quite dark. Snakes and alligators were, she knew, numerous on the banks of the river, but her heavenly Father was, she felt, watching over her, and all fear was taken away.

At last the command to start was given, and answered by the dip, dip of thirty-three paddles, and the canoe glided out into the middle of the river. The men kept time to the dip of their paddles by songs in her honour. Of one the refrain was, "Ma, our beautiful, beloved mother is on board. Ho! ho! ho!"

After ten hours' paddling Okon's village was reached, and she was carried ashore over golden sand into the yard, or compound, of the chief. His room was given up to her and the children, and she was treated with great respect. The weather was lovely, and the days on the whole were pleasant; but even to her, used as she had grown to African life, the nights were more than a little trying.

The chief had many wives, and as each thought it the height of good manners never to allow their guest to be alone for a moment, and to sit and sleep as close to her as they could possibly get, and as each coveted the honour of being "the fattest," the heat and odour sometimes made the nights almost unbearable. Lizards, too, played hide and seek among the mats that formed the roof, and sent down clouds of dust, while large rats practised hop, skip and jump over the sleepers.

Much good seed was sown during the fortnight spent in Okon's village, and "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy," was a lesson that Mary hoped was not altogether lost upon some of the chiefs and headmen of his and neighbouring villages.

The state canoe was again got ready for her return journey, and with the children she went on board. The evening meal of yams and herbs, cooked in palm oil, and carried on board smoking hot, had hardly been eaten, and the crimson and gold of a glorious sunset had hardly faded, when the wind began to rise, a mass of black clouds overcast the sky, and Mary knew that a stormy night was ahead.

The rain fell in torrents, and the river began to rise. The first rush of wind gripped the canoe and swung it round and round. The crew pulled their hardest, but in vain. The thunder pealed, the storm grew wilder, and the men lost heart, and gave way to almost childish fear. They could do nothing with the canoe. Seeing others in danger enabled Mary to forget her own fears, and she took command. In a few minutes order was restored, and the boat was brought close to the bush; and though it dashed up and down the foaming waters like a straw, the men held on to it tightly, and did their utmost to keep it from being upset.

The storm died away as suddenly as it had begun; but Mary was shaking with ague, and in a high fever. Before reaching Old Town she was so very ill that the paddlers feared she would die, and pulled their hardest. When the beach was reached she was quite unable to stand, and by her own desire was carried by a path through the bush to the mission house.

Ill as she was, her first care was to light a fire, and after giving the children dry clothes and warm food, tuck them up comfortably in bed. Then she tottered to her bed, from which for some days she was not able to rise; and when she got up she was so weak and ill that after a short visit to Duke Town, during which she got worse instead of better, it was decided that she must take her furlough, which was almost due, and go to Scotland for a year. It was a great trial to her to be laid aside from her loved work, but she saw that it was God's way for her and bowed to it.

When the time for sailing came, she was so weak that she had to be carried on board, and many thought she would not live to reach the land of her birth. With her was a twin child, Jeanie, whose life she had saved; but she dared not leave her, knowing, as she did only too well, that all the care and love she had given her would be wasted if she was allowed to fall into the hands of her relatives.

Chapter 8 — Caring for the Wee Ones.

The voyage was in more ways than one good for Miss Slessor. It was well for her to have a break in her life, crowded as it had been with work of varied kinds; sea breezes, and the rest she was obliged to take on shipboard, did much to restore her health. On her arrival in Scotland she found her mother and sister in very poor health. The doctor said that neither were strong enough to bear the cold of a Scottish winter, but might be better if they could live where the winds were not so piercing, and bright, sunny days more frequent.

Acting upon his advice, Mary removed first her mother, then her sister, to Topsham in Devonshire, where a small house was taken, and simply though comfortably furnished, and where for some weeks the invalids appeared to be gaining strength daily. But when the time for her return to Africa drew near, she felt she must make some arrangement that would result in their being well cared for in her absence. It must have been a great cheer and relief to her to find that a friend of her own early days was willing and able to take charge of the little household when she again sailed for Africa.

A short time after her return to Calabar, her mother, who had for some time been failing, died almost suddenly, and three months later her much-loved sister received her home-call. While she felt their loss keenly, she said, "There is no one left now who will be anxious about me if I go up country."

It was decided that for the sake of her health she must not, for a time at least, return to the mud hut, but with her family of rescued little ones share the house of fellow-missionaries, Mr. and Mrs. Goldie.

Her work was in the day and Sunday schools, Bible classes, infant school, visiting and teaching the women in their yards; added to which was the care of her own household. Jeanie, who had been named after her sister, had grown into a fine strong girl, four years old, merry and good tempered, but high spirited, and needing a firm though loving hand to train her rightly. Miss Slessor had heard that both her parents were dead, but one day her father appeared at the mission house. She asked him to enter and look at his child, but he shrugged his shoulders, shook his head, and seemed unwilling. She took his hand and drew him in, and told Jeanie to put her arms round his neck and kiss him.

The child, though trembling with fear, obeyed. His face grew softer, and he smiled at her, and at last took her on his knee. After that first

meeting, though lying at some distance, he very often went to see her, taking his new wife and a gift of food for the children.

Next came a girl of six, full of tricks, who, with Jeanie, seemed enough for one house. Her father, who was a Christian, was thankful that her up-bringing should be undertaken by Miss Slessor. Then there was Oki, a boy of about eight, whose mother was a slave, but her mistress, who wished the child to be trained as a Christian, had given him to Miss Slessor. He was sometimes troublesome, full of fun and frolic, his new clothes seldom lasting more than about a week, but warm-hearted and affectionate, and with all his faults Miss Slessor loved him dearly, as indeed she did all the outcast little ones she mothered.

Then there was a son of the king of Old Town, who as a free-born boy might one day occupy the throne of his father. She felt more than usually anxious he should grow up kind, truthful and God-fearing. When she went to Scotland she had been, though very unwillingly, obliged to let him return during her absence to his heathen home and its ways, but when she settled at Creek Town he was again with her. Next came Inyang, a tall girl of thirteen, who did not take kindly to reading and writing, but was honest and hard-working, and never seemed so happy as when employed in some kind of household work.

Twin babies, five months old, who had been found by her when they were only a few days old lying on the ground, dirty, uncared-for, and ready to perish, were the latest additions to her little family. She had washed, nursed and fed them, and under her care they had grown into healthy, happy babies. Another wee mite, neglected and starving, the child of a slave, was sent to her by a daughter of the old king Eyo, who was really very friendly with Mary; but when she asked if a slave woman could not be spared to look after it, as her hands were so very full, the answer returned was, "Let it die." But she took the baby.

Household duties, as well as the care of her family of children, had to go on often under difficulties. She was never sure of a really free five minutes. Sick people from the villages for miles round came or sent to her for medicine. Hungry people wanted food, and those who were in trouble sought her advice and help.

At Creek Town, as elsewhere, much of her work lay among the women, and though she could not speak of many who had openly confessed their faith in Christ (Miss Slessor knew better than many

how hard it was for a woman living in a heathen family to come boldly out for the Lord), she could and did rejoice over some whom she felt sure really and truly loved the Saviour.

One blind woman interested her greatly. Of her she wrote, "She is so poor that she has not a farthing in the world but what she gets from us; she has no one to care for or help her, her mud hut is open to sun and rain, and the cows walk in and out of it just as they please, but her voice seems set to music; and she has always so much to tell of the loving-kindness of the Lord; so unlike most of the people here, who seem to know only how to complain and grumble. Blind Mary is a bright testimony for the Lord."

Chapter 9 — Beginning Work at Okoyong.

"I am going to a new tribe up-country, a fierce, cruel people, and every one tells me that they will kill me; but I do not fear any hurt; only to combat their savage customs will require strength and courage on my part."

The words I have just quoted form part of a letter written by Miss Slessor to a friend in Scotland just before going to live among the wild, lawless people of Okoyong. I will not linger over the cruel customs of the savage tribes of Okoyong, as were I to do so it would only shock and sadden my young readers. They were firm believers in witchcraft, and if any one died, from whatever cause, they made up their minds that they had been bewitched by some one, and the suspected person or persons must be sought out and killed. The number of babies killed every year was, Miss Slessor soon found, far greater than it had been in Calabar.

If ever a people needed the gospel, surely those among whom she longed to live and work did; but they did not want the gospel. Guns, swords and strong drink were the only things they seemed to care for. Rum and gin were in every house, given to every babe, and drunk by men, women and even little children.

A few attempts to begin mission work among them had been made, but without success. A native teacher from Calabar had gone to live among them, but after a stay of only a few weeks had been obliged to fly for his life.

But the more Mary Slessor heard of the darkness and cruelty of the people, the deeper grew her desire to go and tell them of "JESUS, the

mighty to save." A good deal of time seems to have been wasted in trying to get leave to buy a piece of land on which to build a schoolhouse. Twice she had gone with a party for the purpose of making arrangements, but only to find the people sullen and unfriendly. At last, after much prayer, she decided to go alone and talk the matter over with the chiefs.

She went up the river in state. King Eyo again lent her his royal canoe: a hollow tree trunk, twenty feet long. She lay in comfort under a canopy of freshly cut palm branches. The journey was, as usual, made by night. Too anxious to sleep, she lay still and prayed, and before the morning dawned, found the rest and peace of leaving all in the hands of the One who was, she believed, sending her as His messenger to those wild, savage people.

When the landing-place was reached she went alone to a village four miles inland. The chief, who for once in his life was sober, seemed pleased at her courage in venturing alone, and said he was willing to sell her some ground, and that she might teach his boys. So she gathered the children together, and while the people stood round wondering, taught them hymns and texts.

It was late before she was taken to the hut where she was to sleep, but the women crowded round her, talking and asking questions, and it was past two in the morning before they would leave her to take the rest she so greatly needed. One, a sister of the chief, Ma Eme, interested her greatly. "She will, I believe, be my friend as long as I am in Okoyong," said Miss Slessor. And so she proved.

The next morning a walk of two miles further inland took her to another village, where to her great joy the chief also gave her a friendly reception. She told him she must return to Creek Town to make preparations for her removal, but promised not to remain away long.

When it became known at Creek Town that she was really going to live at Okoyong, she had a great number of visitors, as every one wished to hear from her own lips if what they had heard was true. Some pitied, while others blamed her. Many begged her not to trust the chiefs, who were, they said, not men of their word. But she only smiled, and went quietly on with her packing.

By Friday evening, August 3rd, 1888, all was ready, and she lay down to rest, but was too tired to sleep. On the morrow she was to enter upon the untried path; it would be one of danger and difficulty, but her faith

and hope were in God. "I can," she said, "do nothing with those wild people, but my Lord and Master can do everything."

The morning broke dull, grey and cheerless, and the rain fell in torrents. The Negroes who had been sent to carry her packages to the canoe grumbled and disagreed among themselves. Mary felt weary and unrefreshed after her sleepless night, but to her great relief King Eyo himself came down to see that all that could be done for her comfort was done.

Few wished her God-speed. One young man said with a sob in his voice, "Yes, I will pray for you, but you are seeking death in going to Okoyong."

When the landing-place was reached it was still raining, and a walk of four miles through the dripping forest lay before the little party. Miss Slessor went on first with the children, as she wanted to get them something to eat and put them to sleep. It was a strange procession that made its way through the dark African forest. The children were wet, tired and hungry, and Miss Slessor, whose garments were soaked with rain, was carrying a large bundle in one arm and a baby girl in the other. She kept singing and chatting merrily to the children, but to keep her own tears back was sometimes almost more than she could do.

Real work for God in Okoyong began with a little child. A poor little baby whose father had been beheaded, and whose mother died of grief shortly afterwards, was brought to Miss Slessor. It was starved, dirty and sickly. She took it to her motherly heart, cared for and loved it. With proper food and care it seemed for a few days to be making good progress, but was too weak to recover, and died. To bury a baby was a thing unheard of in Okoyong. The bodies of little children who died were thrown into the bush to be eaten by wild beasts; but Miss Slessor had made up her mind that the infant she had nursed and loved should have Christian burial. She robed the cold, still form in white, and, with a flower in each hand, laid it in an empty provision box, and dug a tiny grave in a corner of the ground she had bought. Then while nearly all the people of the village stood looking on and wondering at the strange ways of the white woman, she offered a short, simple prayer, and spoke to them of the Saviour who loved and blessed the little children.

Chapter 10 — Sowing and Reaping in Okoyong.

For many weeks after her arrival at Okoyong, Miss Slessor's life was one of constant strain and trial, as not even a mud hut had been built for her, though the chief made repeated promises that his people should begin the work. In the meantime a room in his quarters was given up to her and the four children she had brought with her. It was next to the one occupied by the chief and his head wife. Three lesser wives, who seemed to be always quarrelling, were in the room just beyond, while two cows, small native animals that gave no milk, were very near neighbours. Fowls, dogs, cats, rats, centipedes and cockroaches were everywhere.

She was never even for a moment left alone. Much as she often longed for a little quiet time, she could not get it, for if, taking her Bible, she escaped into the bush, she was followed by people who wanted to tell their troubles, or ask her advice and help. Still she held quietly on her way, making friends with the women, nursing the sick, teaching the children, and doing cheerfully and ungrudgingly any little acts of kindness that came in her way.

The sister of the chief, Ma Eme, still stood her friend, but she herself had passed through a time of great trial. She was the widow of a big chief from whose funeral she had just returned when Miss Slessor went to live at Okoyong, and as the witch doctor said that one of his wives had bewitched him, they all had to take their trial on the charge of having used witchcraft. Each brought a white fowl, and by the way in which it fluttered after its head was cut off, their guilt or innocence was decided. Ma Eme was pronounced "not guilty," but the strain had been so great that on hearing the good news she fainted.

It soon ceased to be a matter of wonder to the devoted missionary that in addition to the number of infants who were killed, so many little children died. Their mothers were ignorant and took very little interest or care with their upbringing. If they lived it was well, if they died they would have no further trouble.

Miss Slessor wrote: "Centuries of hardness and cruelty have made these poor women as hard and unfeeling as they often seem, but when you once get really to know them, you can't help loving them, for they can be kind and unselfish even at great risk to themselves."

One day a number of prisoners were brought in; several were women who had young children with them, some even infants in arms. Heavily chained, they were left on the ground all day without food or water, under the burning rays of an African sun. At dusk the guards left them for a little while, and in fear and trembling a few of the elder women stole out, and gave water to the children, dividing what was left among the mothers. Miss Slessor, who all day had been hoping for some such opportunity, had cooked a quantity of rice, which also was smuggled to the prisoners. If the women who carried food and water had been caught in the act, it most likely would have cost them their lives.

The slave children gave her a good deal of trouble. They were so wild and naughty that it seemed almost impossible to love them, but she pitied and, as far as she could, cared for them. They were without exception expert thieves, but as very little food was given to them, they were obliged to steal to live.

The free-born children fared a little better, but lying and cruelty were in the very air they breathed, and they grew up just like their elders. Yet all the time she was winning her way among the people; they felt she was their friend, that she really loved them and wanted to do them good. They trusted and in many things obeyed her, though some of the sights she witnessed were so very shocking that she wrote, "Had I not felt my Saviour very near me, I should, I think, have lost my reason."

There was a sound of singing among the trees of the forest; but it was not the wild war-song of Okoyong. Listen as the voices float on the heated air:

"Jesus, the Son of God, came down to earth:
He came down to save us from our sins;
He was born poor that He might feel for us;
Wicked men killed Him, and nailed Him to a tree,
He rose, and went to heaven to prepare a place for us."

They were the children of her day-school, and we may be sure that as she led their song her heart thrilled with a deep, glad thanksgiving.

At first nearly the whole population of the village came to be taught, but as the novelty wore off the numbers grew smaller, till she only had about thirty regular scholars. Still, these made good progress, and were soon able to read easy words. The reading lesson always ended with a Bible story, and she taught them simple hymns and choruses, which

they enjoyed singing so greatly that it was often dark before she could get away.

Miss Slessor longed to have a home of her own, but the natives were slow to come to her help. "There was no hurry," they said; there never is any hurry in Africa. One day to her great delight the people flocked to the ground and said they were ready to build. She must be, she soon found, architect, clerk of the works and chief labourer. After many delays a mud and wattle house of two rooms was built, with a shaded veranda, and a shed at each end was added.

The natives carried her few belongings, and for the first time she felt at home in Okoyong.

Chapter 11 — "The Rest that Remaineth."

"It was the dream of my girlhood to be a missionary in Calabar," Miss Slessor had often said, and in the record of her long and useful life, we have, I hope, learnt a little of how graciously God in His goodness had not only allowed her to go to Africa, but had made even her early trials, and the fourteen years she worked at the loom, a training for the work that lay before her.

For thirty-nine years, with the exception of short furloughs spent in Scotland, and one delightful holiday of six weeks provided for her by the kindness of friends, which she spent at Las Palmas, Grand Canary, she lived and worked in Africa, doing many things that do not always form part of the work of a missionary.

Though part of Africa had come under British rule, it had been found no easy task to get the inland tribes to obey laws, however wise and good, that they thought were opposed to their old savage customs. The British Consul, and those working under him, had to face very real difficulties. They did not know the people or their language as well as Miss Slessor did, and it can hardly be a matter of surprise that they turned to her for advice and help.

The people of Okoyong loved and looked up to her, calling her "The Great White Mother," and when Government officers pressed her to help them in the native court where those who had wilfully broken the laws were tried and sentenced to fines or imprisonment, though she would much rather have been left free for her own work as a pioneer missionary, she consented, as she knew that her influence would be not only on the side of justice but mercy.

Her work on these new lines was so well and faithfully done, that a report of it having reached His Majesty, King George V., he sent her out, with a most kind message, a really beautiful silver Maltese cross. She did not seem to have been lifted up by the honour paid her, but wrote to a friend, "I can't understand why so much notice should be taken of a poor, weak body, who is one of the most unworthy and unprofitable, and yet, I trust, most willing, servants of the King of kings."

On one of her visits to Scotland, she took several of the children she had rescued, and though she was careful that they should not be spoiled by having too much notice taken of them, they on their return with her to Africa had many happy memories of the Scottish and English friends who had been very kind to them. One small, black boy, Dan, on the morning of their departure cried to be taken back to the house where he had been staying. On his return to Africa, his English clothes were a never-ending wonder, while grey-headed chiefs would play with his toy train and admire his watch.

But all through these years during which Miss Slessor had gone bravely on with her work her own health had been far from good. Frequent attacks of fever had weakened her, till at last she found herself unable to walk for miles through the bush as she had been used to do. "If I could only have," she wrote, "some kind of a box on four wheels, then the bairns could push and pull me about." A Cape chair was sent to her, and she continued her work, though often in great pain and weakness.

It was not until the outbreak of the World War in 1914 that she broke down entirely. It seemed to her so terrible that so-called Christian nations should be at war with each other. "What," she asked, "can I say to the natives, when they say to me, 'You tell us we should not fight with those who have offended or done us wrong, but love and forgive our enemies, and yet the very people who send you to tell us these things are fighting with and killing each other'?"

Though there was much to sadden, yet there was abundant cause for rejoicing. The gospel had been the power of God to the salvation of many, once heathen, who were simply trusting in the finished work of the Lord Jesus, and who proved the reality of their faith by their earnest, consistent, Christian lives.

More than one preaching place had been built, and from time to time a

little company gathered to remember the Lord's death. The children she had loved and trained were round her, and during the last year or two she was cheered by visits from fellow-workers. But her strength was, her friends saw, failing fast, though her mind remained clear, and her simple faith in the love and goodness of her heavenly Father was unshaken. To a friend she said, "Why do Christians talk and write about the cold hand of death? It is not that at all, but just the hand of Christ."

For several days she had been losing strength, and more than once those who watched her thought the home-call had come, but each time she rallied, till just before the breaking of the day, early in January, 1915, her spirit left a body of weakness and pain and went to be with the Saviour she had long known and loved.

"Coming, coming, yes, they are,
Coming, coming, from afar;
From the wild and scorching desert,
Afric's sons of colour deep;
Jesus' love has drawn and won them,
At the cross they bow and weep."

Copied by Stephen Ross for WholesomeWords.org from *From Weaving Shed to Mission Field* by C. J. L. London: G. Morrish, [1928].

www.WholesomeWords.org