

Lives that Lift

C L Paddock 1935



The Queen of Calabar and Okoyong

In the great busy weaving mill of Dundee there were long rows of noisy, whirring looms, but of all the weavers none were more efficient than little Mary Slessor. She was only eleven, and too young to work in the mills, but her father, who had been a shoemaker, became a slave to drink and the little family was worse than fatherless. The responsibility of providing food and clothing for the rest of the children fell on Mary and her frail, gentle mother.

From six o'clock in the morning until six o'clock at night, Mary toiled faithfully at the loom. The roar of the machinery, the flying shuttles and whirring belts were all about her, but in her heart there was a quietness, a peace, and joy that her fellow workers did not know. She became so skillful at her work that she could do the weaving well and still be thinking thoughts far away. So, many an hour, as the shuttle flew back and forth and Mary's nimble fingers were guiding it, in spirit Mary was traveling far afield in her thoughts and day dreams. Perhaps for hours she would be in far-off Africa, living the experiences of Livingstone, who had become her hero. And like Livingstone she studied as she worked. Propped upon the machine in front of her she often had a book.

These books helped her in fancy to slip away from the tedious, irksome labor, and permitted her ambitious, romantic mind to wander where it would over the great unexplored world. Many a day dream she had of Africa, its dense trackless forests, its wild animals, and its dark-skinned natives whose lives were darker still because the gospel had never been taught them. The more she heard of Africa the stronger became her desire to go and tell the heathen of a God who loved them.

Mary had a real missionary spirit, one that works at home as well as across the sea. She began to work for the boys in the slum districts of the great city of Dundee. These boys were the toughest boys in all the city, but she soon won their love and respect. For fourteen years she helped to care for her own dear ones, working long hours at the mill, and giving her evenings and Sundays to help the poor and needy in the tenement section of her home city.

When Mary was twenty-five the news was flashed around the world, "Livingstone is dead. His heart is buried in Africa." From that very hour she was resolutely determined that she would go to Africa. Constantly there kept sounding in her ears the words of her hero who had fallen, "I go to Africa to make an open door. Carry out the work which I have begun. I leave it with you."

Time had made changes. Mary's father was dead and her sisters were old enough to help their mother. She must go to Africa. "The time has come," she said, "for me to join the light-bearers to the dark continent." Shrinking and timid though she was, she offered herself to the mission board, expressing a desire to be sent to the most difficult field in the Dark Continent.

After a brief hurried preparation, when she was just 28 years old, Mary Slessor started on her long journey to Calabar, the happiest girl in the world. The section where she located was a low, swampy, unhealthy district near the equator, inhabited by a cruel and degraded tribe. Here in dark Calabar this slip of a girl began her work. Here she remained for twelve years, winning the hearts of the black people; then pushed on to the terrible tribe of Okoyong, a ferocious, cruel, head-hunting people who had defied the British government and who had never been influenced by the Gospel.

Around thousands of camp fires in that region today the natives are telling their dark-skinned children of a Great-White-Ma who once lived there alone, and went about doing good.

In the blaze of the tropical sun, and in the inky blackness of night this courageous, young woman, who at home was afraid to cross the cow pasture alone, traveled through the dense brush in which lived ferocious, man-eating animals and cruel savages. Over swollen rivers and through heathen villages where a white face had never been seen, she pushed her way, always with joy in her heart.

"She went about with bare feet and bare head, lived on native food, drank unfiltered water, slept on the ground, got drenched with rain, and in short, did everything that would have killed an ordinary person."

She was granted permission by the cruel Okoyong tribe to settle in their territory. With her own hands she helped to make herself a mud walled house and there she lived in the midst of that terrible people. They could not understand her queer ways, nor her stranger words, but by her actions she spoke a language of love, and they soon learned to respect and reverence her.

As the months slipped by, the fame of the White-Ma spread from village to village. She exerted a power extraordinary over these black savages of the jungle. She was called by day and by night to minister to the sick or to those who may have been injured in a fight or a drunken brawl. She rescued the black babies that had been thrown into the woods to die. In emergencies she snatched guns from the hands of burly angry savages who might have killed her with a single blow. The chief asked her to sit with him as judge in difficult cases. Long and dangerous journeys she made to make peace between warring tribes.

It was through her work and influence that the horrible custom of slaying human beings when a chief died, was discarded by the Okoyong tribe. The women of the tribe she introduced to the mysteries of sewing. She taught them how to wash and iron their clothes. As she ministered to their wants she gathered the people about her, and in her earnest and quiet way, told them of the great God who loved them.

Single-handed she conquered by love this tribe which soldiers and guns had never been able to handle successfully. As a tribute to her influence she was made Vice Consul for Okoyong by the British Government in the year 1891.

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For almost forty years she labored in the land of her own choosing. Scores of times she was stricken with fever, but she worked on, leaving everywhere mission stations, mud chapels, and changed and brightened lives as monuments of her labor of love and devotion.

No missionary to Africa, unless it be Dr. Livingstone, did more for that dark, needy land than Mary Slessor, and no one was loved by more of the dusky, dark-skinned people.

Worn out by her labors, she died in January, 1915, the Queen of Okoyong and Calabar, and as she herself expressed it, "the happiest woman in the world." She was buried in the land where she had labored.

Around her grave the grief-stricken natives gathered to wail and to lament. The feeling which was in the hearts of all was perhaps best expressed by one old native who said, "Ma was a great blessing."

