THE LANDING BEACH AT EKENGE.

CHAPTER III

Ma's great adventure: how she went up-river by herself in a canoe and lived in a forest amongst a savage tribe; how she fought their terrible customs and saved many lives; how she built a hut for herself and then a church, and how she took a band of the wild warriors down to the coast and got them to be friends with the people who had always been their sworn enemies.

Ma felt that she was not getting to the heart of things.

Behind that wall of bush, for hundreds of miles inland, lay a vast region of forest and river into which white men had not yet ventured. It was there that the natives lived almost like wild beasts, and where the most terrible crimes against women and children were done without any one lifting a finger to stop them. It was there that the biggest work for Jesus was to be carried on. "If only I could get amongst these people," she said, "and attack their customs at the root; that is where they must be destroyed."

She dreamed of it night and day, and laid her plans.

One district lying between two rivers behind Creek Town, called Okoyong, was specially noted for its lawless heathenism. The tribe who lived there was strong, proud, warlike, and had become the terror of the whole country. Every man, woman, and child of them went about armed, and even ate and slept with their guns and swords by their side; they roamed about in bands watching the forest paths, and attacked and captured all whom they met, and sold them as slaves or sent them away to be food for the cannibals. They and the people of the coast were sworn enemies.

Ma knew all about them, and was eager to go into their midst to teach them better ways. She pled with the Mission leaders at Duke Town. "I am not afraid," she said; "I am alone now and have nobody to be anxious about me."

But the missionaries shook their heads. "No, no, it is too dangerous," they told her.

And her friends the traders said, "It is a gun-boat they want, Ma, not a missionary."

It was hard for her eager spirit to wait. For fourteen years she had worked in the factory at Dundee, for ten more she had toiled in the towns on the Calabar River, and she was now a grown woman. But God often keeps us at a task far longer than we ourselves think is good for us, for He knows best, and if we are patient to the end He lets us do even more than we had hoped for. So it was with Mary Slessor. She was at last allowed to go.

The Okoyong people, however, would not have her.

"We want no missionary, man or woman," they said sullenly.

For a whole year messengers went up and down the river, but the tribe remained firm. Then Ma said:

"I'll go myself and see them."

THE OKOYONG DISTRICT.

One hot June day she got the loan of King Eyo's canoe, a hollow tree-trunk twenty feet long, on which there was a little arch of palm leaves to shade her from the sun, and set out up the Calabar River. As she lay back on a pillow she thought how pretty and peaceful the scene was—the calm water gleaming in the light of the sky, the cotton trees and bananas and palms along the banks, the brilliant birds and butterflies flitting about. The only sound was the dip of the paddles and the soft voices of the men singing about their Ma. And then she thought of what might lie before her, of the perils of the forest, and the anger of the blood-thirsty Okoyong, and wondered if she had done right.

"We'll have a cup of tea, anyhow," she said to herself, and got out an old paraffin stove, but found that matches had been forgotten. Coming to a farm the canoe swung into a mud-beach, and Ma went ashore, and was happy to find that the owner was a "big" man whom she knew. He gave her some matches, and on they went again. When the tea was ready Ma opened a tin of stewed steak and cut up a loaf of home-made bread.

"Boy," she said, "where is the cup?"

"No cup, Ma—forgotten."

"Bother! now what shall I do?"

"I wash out that steak tin, Ma."

"Right; if you use what you have you will never want."

But alas! the tin slipped out of his hand and sank.

Ma was a philosopher. "Ah, well," she said, "it cannot be helped. I'll drink out of the saucer."

Ma was really very timid. Just before leaving Devonshire she would not go out on Guy Fawkes' Day, because she shrank from the crowds who were parading the streets; and yet, here she was going alone into an unknown region in Africa to face untamed savages. What made her so courageous was her faith in God. She believed that He wanted her to do this bit of work, and that therefore He would take care of her. She would not carry a weapon of any kind. Even David, when he went out to fight Goliath, had a sling and a stone as well as his faith. Ma was going to fight a much bigger giant, and she took nothing with her but a bright face and a heart full of love and sympathy. She was more like Jesus, who faced His enemies with nothing but the power of His spirit.

The paddlers landed her at a strip of beach on the river, and with a fast-beating heart she trudged along the forest path for about four miles until she reached a village called Ekenge.

CANOE BEING MADE OUT OF A TREE-TRUNK.

Shouts arose: "Ma has come! Ma has come!" and a crowd rushed forward. To her surprise they seemed pleased to see her. "You are brave to come alone," they said; "that is good."

The chief, who was called Edem, was sober, and he would not allow her to go on farther, because the people at the next village were drunk and might harm her. So she stayed the night at Ekenge.

"I am not very particular about my bed nowadays," she told a friend, "but as I lay on a few dirty sticks laid across and across and covered with a litter of dirty corn-shells, with plenty of rats and insects, three women and an infant three days old alongside, and over a dozen goats and sheep and cows and countless dogs outside, you don't wonder that I slept little! But I had such a comfortable quiet night in my own heart."

Next day all the big men of the district came to see her, and her winsome ways won them over, and they agreed to give her ground for a church and school, and promised that when these were built they would be places of refuge into which hunted people could fly and be safe.

She was so happy that she did not mind the rain, which came on and wetted her to the skin as she walked back through the forest to the river. The tide, too, was against the paddlers, so they had to put the canoe into a cove and tie it to a tree for two hours. Ma was cold and shivery, and lay watching the brown crabs fighting in the mud, but she dared not sleep in case a crocodile or snake might make an attack. The men kept very quiet, and sometimes she heard them whisper, "Speak softly and let Ma sleep," or "Don't shake the canoe and wake Ma." When they started again she gradually passed into sleep, and only wakened to see the friendly lamps of Creek Town gleaming like stars through the night.

A month or two later she was ready to go and make her home among the Okoyong. The people of Creek Town were alarmed, and tried to make her give up the idea.

"Do you think any one will listen to you?"

"Do you think they will lay aside their weapons of war for you?"

"We shall never see you again."

"You are sure to be murdered."

Such were some of the things said to her. But she just smiled, and thought how little there was to fear when Jesus was with her.

"I am going," she wrote home, "to a new tribe up-country, a fierce, cruel people, and every one tells me they will kill me. But I don't fear any hurt. Only—to combat their savage customs will require courage and firmness on my part."

The night before she left she could not sleep for thinking and wondering about all that was before her, and lay listening to the dripping of the rain until daylight. When she heard the negro carriers coming for the packages she rose. It was still wet, and the men were miserable and grumbled and quarrelled amongst themselves until good King Eyo arrived and took them in hand. Seeing how nervous she was he sat down beside her and cheered her up, saying that he would send secret messengers from time to time to find out how she was getting on, and that she was to let him know if ever she needed help. Her courage and smiles came back, and she jumped up, gathered her children together, and walked down to the beach. Amidst the sighs and sobs and farewells of the people she stepped into the canoe.

"Good-bye, good-bye," she cried to every one, and the canoe sped into the middle of the stream and was lost in the mist and the rain.

"PLUNGED INTO THE DEPTHS OF THE FOREST."

It was night when the landing-beach was reached, and the stars were hidden by rain-clouds. As Ma stepped ashore on the mud-bank and looked into the dark forest and thought of the long journey before her, and the end of it, her heart failed. She might lose her way in that unlit tangle of wood. She would meet wild beasts, the natives might be feasting and drinking and unwilling to receive her. A score of shadowy terrors arose in her imagination. For a moment she wished she could turn back to the safe shelter of her home, but when she thought of Jesus and what He had done for her sake, how He was never afraid, but went forward calm and fearless even to His death on the Cross, she felt ashamed of her weakness, and, calling the children, she plunged stoutly into the black depths of the forest.

What a queer procession it was! The biggest boy, eleven years old, went first with a box of bread and tea and sugar on his

head, next a laddie of eight with a kettle and pots, then a wee fellow of three sturdily doing his best, but crying as if his heart would break. Janie followed, also sobbing, and lastly the white mother herself carrying Annie, a baby slave-girl, on her shoulder, and singing gaily to cheer the others, but there was often a funny little break in her voice as she heard the scream of the vampire-bat or the stealthy tread and growling of wild animals close at hand.

Brushing against dripping branches, stumbling in the black and slippery mud, tired and hungry and wretched, they made their way to Ekenge. When they arrived all was quiet, and no one greeted them.

"Strange," said Ma to herself, for a village welcome is always a noisy one. She shouted, and two slaves appeared.

"Where is the chief? Where are the people?" she asked.

"Gone to the death-feast at Ifako, the next village, Ma."

"Then bring me some fire and water."

She made tea for the children, undressed them, huddled them naked in a corner to sleep, and sat down in her wet things to wait for the carriers, who were bringing the boxes with food and dry clothes. A messenger arrived, but it was to tell her that the men were too worn out to carry anything that night. She jumped to her feet, and, bareheaded and barefooted, dived into the forest to return to the river. She had not gone far when she heard the pitter-patter of feet. She stopped.

"Ma! Ma!" a voice cried. It was the messenger. He loved Ma, and, unhappy at the thought of her tramping along that lonesome trail, he had followed her to keep her company. Together they ran, now tripping and falling, now dashing into a tree, now standing still trembling, as they heard some rushing sound or weird cry.

When she came to the beach she waded out to the canoe, lifted the covering, and roused the sleeping natives. They grumbled a good deal, but even these big rough men could not withstand Ma's coaxing, masterful ways, and they had soon the boxes on their heads and were marching merrily in single file along the wet and dark path to Ekenge. She made them put the packages into the hut which Edem, the chief, had allotted to her, a small, dirty place with mud walls, no window, and only an open space for a door. When everything was piled up inside there was hardly room for herself and the children, but she lay down on the boxes, and as it was after midnight, and she was weary and foot-sore, she soon fell into a deep sleep.

When the chief and his followers came back from the revels at Ifako they welcomed Ma, for it was an honour for a white woman to live in their midst. But they had no idea of changing their ways of life for her, and went on day and night drinking rum and gin, dancing, and making

MA EME ETE.

sacrifices to their jujus or gods. Sometimes the din was so great that Ma never got a wink of sleep. The yard was full of half-naked slave-women, who were always scolding and quarrelling. Some were wicked and hateful, and did not want such a good white Ma to be with them, and tried to force her to leave. But there was one who was kind to her, Eme Ete, a sister of the chief, who had a sad story. One day she told it to Ma. She had been married to a chief who had not treated her well. When he died his followers put the blame on his wives, and they were seized and brought to trial. It was an odd way they had of testing guilt or innocence. As each wife stepped forward the head of a fowl was cut off, and the people watched to see how the body fell. If it lay in a certain way she was innocent; if in another way, she was guilty! How Eme Ete trembled when her turn came! When she knew she was safe she fainted.

Eme Ete was big in body and big in heart. To Ma she showed herself gentle and refined, and acted towards her as a white lady would, caring for her comfort, watching over her safety, going to her meetings, and helping her in her work. They grew to be like sisters. Yet Eme Ete was always a little bit of a mystery to Ma. She wanted the people to change their old ways, but she herself would not, and went on with her bush-worship and sacrifices, and never became a Christian. But of all the native women Ma ever met, there was none she loved so well as this motherly heathen soul.

In the yard there were also many boys and girls. Ma was fond of children, but these ones were not nice: they stole and lied and made themselves a trouble to everybody. "Oh, dear," she sighed, "what can I do with such bairns?" But she remembered what her Master said, "Suffer little children to come unto Me and forbid them not"; and she gathered them about her, took the wee ones in her arms and nursed them, made clothes for their bodies, and taught them what it was to be clean and sweet and good. When the sick babies died she would not let the people throw them away into[Pg 57] the bush, as they usually did, but put them into little boxes on which she laid some flowers, and buried them in a piece of ground that she chose for a cemetery. "Why, Ma," said the natives in wonder, "what is a dead child? You can have hundreds of them."

None of the children could read or write, nor, indeed, could any of the older people, and so Ma started schools, which she held in the open air in the shade of the forest trees. At first everybody came, even the grey-headed men and women, and learned A B C in Efik and sang the hymns that Ma taught them. The beautiful birds which flew above their heads must have wondered, for they had only been accustomed to the wild chant of war-songs. And at night the twinkling stars must have twinkled harder when they looked down and saw, not a crowd of people drinking and fighting, but a quiet company, and a white woman standing talking to them in grave sweet tones about holy things.

But when Ma spoke about their bad customs they would not listen. "Ma," they would say, "we

like you and we want to learn book and wear clothes, but we don't want to put away our old fashions."

"Well," replied Ma patiently, "we shall see."

And so the battle began.

The first time she failed, because she did not know what was happening. A lad had been accused of some fault, and she saw him standing, girt with chains, holding out his arms before a pot of boiling oil. A man took a ladle and dipped it into the burning stuff, which he began to pour over the boy's hands. Ma sprang forward, but was too late; the boy screamed and rolled on the ground in agony. She was very angry, especially when they told her the meaning of the thing. It was a test to show whether the boy was innocent or guilty of the charge brought against him. If he had not been guilty, they said, he would not have suffered.

"Oh, you stupid creatures," cried Ma. "Everybody will suffer if you do that to them. Let me try it on you," she said to the man with the ladle, but he rushed off amidst the laughter of the crowd.

Next time she did better. A slave was blamed for using witchcraft, and condemned to die. Ma knew he was innocent, and went and stood beside him in front of the armed warriors of the chief, and said:

"This man has done no wrong. You must not put him to death."

"Ho, ho," they cried, "that is not good speaking. We have said he shall die, and he must die."

"No, no; listen," and she tried to reason with them, but they came round her waving their swords and guns, and shouting at the pitch of their voices. She stood in the midst of them as she had stood in the midst of the Dundee roughs, pale, but calm and unafraid. The more angry and excited and threatening they grew the cooler she became. Perhaps it was her wonderful courage which did not fail her even when the swords were flashing about her head, perhaps it was the strange light that shone in her face that awed and quietened them, but the confusion died down and ceased. Then the chiefs agreed for her sake not to kill the man, but they put heavy chains upon his arms and legs, and starved and flogged him until he was a mass of bleeding flesh. Ma felt she had not done much, but it was a beginning.

People at a distance heard of her, and one day messengers came from a township many miles away to ask her to visit their chief, who was believed to be dying.

"And what will happen if he dies?" asked Ma.

"All his wives and slaves will be killed," was the prompt reply.

"Then I will come at once," she said.

"Ma," put in Chief Edem, "you must not go. They are cruel people and may do you hurt. Then see the rain; all the rivers will be flowing and you cannot cross."

But Ma thought of the women who might be murdered, and she went. The rain poured down, and as she fought her way for eight hours through the forest her clothes became soaked and torn, and she threw most of them off and left them. As she trudged with bare head and bare feet through the villages on the way, she looked very ragged and forlorn, and the people gazed at her in wonder. When she reached the township she found the men armed and ready to begin the slaughter, and the women sad and afraid. Although she was wet and cold and feverish she went straight to the hut of the sick chief and nursed him, and gradually brought him back to health, so that there was no more thought of sacrifice and blood.

CHIEF EDEM.

Her next trouble was in her own yard. Edem, her chief, was kind to her, but he was also under the power of the old bad ideas and believed in the witch-doctors, cunning fellows who pretended to know the cause of sickness and how to cure it. Falling ill he called in one of these medicine-men, who declared that an enemy had placed a number of things in his body, and made believe to take them out. When Ma came Edem held them up—cartridges, powder, teeth, bones, eggshells, and seeds—and said, "Ma, a dreadful battle has been going on during the night. See what wicked persons have done to me." Her heart sank: she knew what would follow.

Sure enough, a number of men and women were seized and chained to posts and condemned to die. Ma set herself to save them. She begged and coaxed the sick man so much on their behalf that at last she wearied him, and he got his followers to carry him secretly away to one of his farms. Ma could only pray, and she prayed that he might get better. By and by strength did return, and the prisoners were released, only one woman being put to death.

No sooner was this trial ended than a worse came. A chief whom Ma feared, a very cruel and blood-thirsty man, paid a visit to Edem. He and his followers did nothing but drink, and soon they were mad with the fiery liquor, and the whole village was in a violent uproar. Ma bravely went into the midst of the mob and sought to calm them. She saw that the best thing to do was to get the visitors away, and she hurried them off as quickly as possible, going with them herself in order to prevent bloodshed on the way, for they wanted to fight every one they met. In the forest path they saw some withered plants and leaves on the ground. "Sorcery," they yelled, and fled back in a panic—they thought these things had magic in them and were meant to do them harm.

"Let us go to the last village and kill every one in it," they shouted; "they have tried to bewitch us."

And they rushed pell-mell along the path flourishing their swords and shouting their terrible war-cries. Ma prayed for swiftness, and ran until she came in front of them, and then, turning, she threw out her arms and breathlessly dared them to pass. It seemed a mad thing to do, but again that something in her face made them stop. They argued with her and then they obeyed her, and went forward by another path. But they began to dance and caper and fight each other, until Ma, with the help of some of the soberer ones, tied the worst to the trees. The others went on, and she did not leave them until they were safe in their own district. On the way back she unloosed the drunken prisoners, who were now in a raging temper, and sent them home with their hands fastened behind their backs.

But that was not the end. Next day the cruel chief went to the village that was blamed for laying the things on the path, and although it did not belong to him, but to Edem, he made the people take ordeals, and carried away a young man in handcuffs to put him to death. Ma hastened to the chief. He was rude and rough, and laughed at her, but she tried not to mind, and begged hard for the lad's life. When she returned she found that Edem was getting ready to fight, and she prayed earnestly that the heart of the cruel chief might be softened. It was softened, for news came that the prisoner had been sent home, and so there was peace and not war.

Ma began to wonder how long she would be able to live in the midst of such sin and dirt. She had hung a door at the opening of her mud-room, and made a hole in the wall for a window and curtained it with pieces of cloth, but the place was so small that at night she had to lift her boxes outside in order to give herself and the children room to sleep. It was overrun with rats and lizards and beetles and all sorts of biting insects. She could not get away from the squabbling and bad language and rioting of the wives and slaves, and was often tired and ill. It was the thought of Jesus that gave her patience and courage. She remembered how He had left His home above the stars and dwelt on earth amongst men who were unlovely and wicked and cruel, and how He never grumbled or gave in, though life to Him was often bitter and hard. "Shall I not follow my Master," she said, "because my way is not easy and not nice? Yes, I will be His true disciple and be strong and brave."

She was longing to be alone sometimes to read her Bible and think and pray in quiet, and one day she started to build a little hut of her own some distance away from the others. First she fixed stout tree-trunks in the ground, and on the tops of these, cross-wise, she laid other pieces. Sticks were then placed between the uprights, and strips of bamboo, beaten until soft, were fastened in and out, just as the threads had been woven in the loom of the Dundee factory. This was the skeleton of the hut, and when Ma looked at it she clapped her hands with delight.

"It's like playing a game," she said to the children.

The walls were next made by throwing in large lumps of red clay between the sticks. When the clay was dry the surface was rubbed smooth, and then mats of palm leaves were laid on the top and tied down to form the roof.

"Now for the furniture," she said. With kneaded lumps of clay she built up a fireplace, and moulded a seat beside it where the cook could sit, then made a sideboard, in which holes were scooped out for cups and bowls and plates, and a long couch, which she meant for herself. All these were beaten hard and polished and darkened with a native dye.

The flitting was great fun to the children. So many of the pots and pans and jars were hung on bits of wood on the posts outside that Ma declared the house was like one of the travelling caravans she used to see in Scotland; and so she called it "The Caravan." When everything was finished she stood and looked at it with a twinkle in her eye. "Be it ever so humble," she said gaily, "there's no place like home!" Then they sat down to a merry meal. What did it matter if there was only one dish and no spoons or forks? There was no happier family in all the land that night.

Ma was now able to read her Bible in peace and pray to God in quietness and comfort. But outside she had still the goats and fowls and rats and the insects and even the wild things of the forest, and sometimes they came in. One morning when she awoke, she saw on her bed a curious thing, and found that it was the skin of a snake that had stolen in during the night and shed its old clothes as these reptiles sometimes do. So she began to dream of a bigger house with an upstairs, where she could be safer.

But first there must be a church. The chief and free men and women helped, and by and by there rose a long roomy shed, complete, except for a door and windows. What a day it was when it was set apart and used for the worship of God—the first church in wild Okoyong!

Ma told the people that they could not come to God's house except with clean bodies and clean hearts. Few of them had clean clothes, or clothes at all, and the children never wore any. But Ma had been receiving boxes from Sunday Schools and work-parties in Scotland, and out of these she dressed the women and little ones in pinafores of all colours. How proud and happy they were! But the excitement died into quietness and reverence when they went inside the building, and an awe fell upon them as Ma explained what a church meant, and that God was in their midst.

The chiefs rose and said that they would respect the building, that no weapon of war would ever be brought into it, and that all their quarrels would be left outside; and they promised to send their followers to the services and their children to the schools.

But like some better people at home these wayward savages could not be good for long. They went back to their evil doings, and were soon away raiding and fighting, leaving only a few women and the children in the village. It was the rum and gin that caused most of the mischief. Every one drank, and often Ma went to bed knowing that there was not one sober person for miles around. The horrible stuff came up from the coast, having been shipped overseas from Christian countries. Ma never ceased to wonder how white men could seek to ruin native people for the sake of money. It made her very angry, and she fought the trade with all her power.

"Do you know," she said one day to her chief, "you drink because you have not enough work?

We have a rhyme in our country which says,

Satan finds some mischief still
For idle hands to do.

Why don't you trade with Calabar?"

He grinned. "We do trade with Calabar," he said; "we trade in heads."

"Well, you must trade in palm oil and food instead. And first you must make peace."

"We can't do that, Ma, because Calabar won't come to Okoyong."

"Of course not, because they are afraid, and rightly too. Well, if they won't come to you, you must go to them."

"But, Ma, we would never come back."

"Tuts! I will go with you."

She made them go to the river and get a large canoe and fill it with yams and plantains (these were gifts for the Calabar people), and with bags of palm nuts and a barrel of oil (these were to begin trading with). But they knew little about boats, and they loaded it so high that it sank. Another was got, and all was ready, when some of the chiefs drew back and said they would only go if Ma allowed them to take their guns and swords.

"No, no," she said, "that would be foolish. We are going in peace and not in war."

"Ma, you make women of us! No man goes to a strange place without arms."

But she would not yield, and they started. Suddenly she caught sight of some swords hidden under the bags of nuts, and, stooping, she seized them and pitched them out on the bank. "Go on," she cried, and the canoe swept down the river.

King Eyo received the trembling chiefs like a Christian gentleman, spoke to them kindly, and showed them over his large house. There was a palaver, and all quarrels between the two peoples were made up, and all evil thoughts of one another vanished, and the men from Okoyong went back astonished and joyful. They began to trade with the coast, and so busy did they become in their fields growing food and making palm oil that they had less time for drinking and fighting, and grew more sober and prosperous.

They were very grateful to Ma.

MA'S TINY COMPASS.

"We are not treating her well," they said to one another. "We must build her a better house."

And they began to erect a large one with upstairs rooms and a verandah, but they could not manage the woodwork. Ma begged the Mission authorities to send up a carpenter to put in the doors and windows, and by and by one came from Scotland, named Mr. Ovens, and appeared at Ekenge with his tools and Tom, a native apprentice, and set to work. Mr. Ovens was bright and cheery, and had a laugh that made everybody else want to laugh; and he made so light of the hard life he had to live that Ma praised God for sending him. Like herself, he spoke the dear Scots tongue, and at night he sang the plaintive songs of their native land until she was ready to echo the words of Tom, "Master, I don't like these songs, they make my heart big and my eyes water."