THE LILY-COVERED ENYONG CREEK.

CHAPTER VII

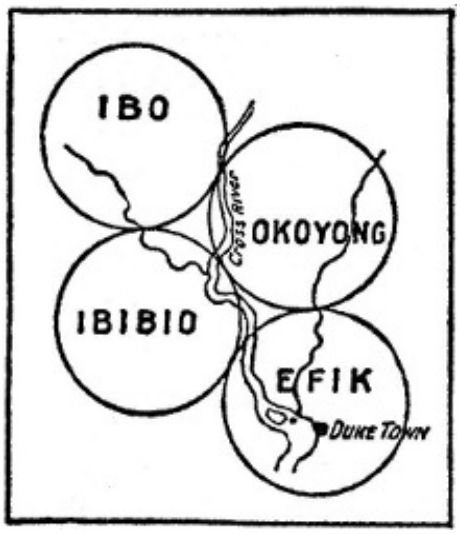
Tells of a country of mystery and a clever tribe who were slave-hunters and cannibals, and how they were fought and defeated by Government soldiers; how Ma went amongst them, sailing through fairyland, and how she began to bring them to the feet of Jesus.

On some quiet summer day you may have been wandering through a country lane when you suddenly felt a whiff of perfume, fresh and sweet, and wondered where it could have come from. You looked about, but there was nothing save a tangle of green wood. You searched the hedges, and went down to the brown stream below the bridge and along its banks. The fragrance was still scenting the air, now strong, now faint, but you could not find its source. Then suddenly you came upon it—a sweetbriar bush, hidden away in a lonely and lowly spot.

Ma Slessor was like this modest briar bush. The influence of her goodness spread far and near, and the fame of her doings reached peoples who lived hundreds of miles away. They said to one another, "Let us go and see this wonderful White Mother"; and they left their villages and travelled through forests and across wide rivers and creeks, risking capture and death at the hands of hostile tribes, to seek her advice and help. Some of these visitors spoke languages Ma did not understand, and they had to talk to one another in signs. Chiefs in districts she had never heard of sent her messages: "Oh, Great White Mother, come and dwell with us, and we will be God-men." Escaped slaves from cannibal regions, who had been doomed to be eaten, fled to her for refuge. All received from her a kind welcome and food, and, best of all, had a talk about the Divine Chief who was to be the real Saviour of Africa.

There were other visitors to Okoyong she liked less, slave-dealers from beyond the Cross River, who brought women and girls to sell. A slow fire of rage had long been burning in Ma's heart against this cruel system, and sometimes it burst into fierce flame. She would hear a sound of bitter sobbing, and go out to see a string of naked little girls being driven forwards by a man carrying brass rods on his head—the money which the natives use. She would be so angry that she would shake her fist at the trader and storm at him, but he would only grin and ask her which girl she wanted, and would then describe their good points just as if they had been so many fowls

or goats. Sometimes there would be sick ones, or ones suffering from ill-treatment, and these the dealers would leave, and she would nurse them back to health, though she was always very unwilling to let them go again into the awful whirlpool of slave-life.



She knew many of the dealers quite well, and often had long talks with them about the mysterious country from which they came. Whitemen had not yet entered into the heart of it, but Ma learnt enough to be sure that it was a far more wicked place even than Okoyong had been. It was called Iboland, and one of the tribes, the Aros, were so cunning and clever that they had become a power over a vast region. It was they who were the slave-stealers, seeking their victims everywhere, and selling them in markets to the traders. One of their best hunting-grounds was Ibibio, the country to the south, where the natives were poor and naked and miserable, and lived in little settlements deep in the forest, because of their fear of the slave raiders.

The Aros believed that they had a wonderful chuku or juju—which means the god of the Aros—in a rocky gorge down which a stream flowed. At one spot there was a dark ravine and a pool overhung by trees and creepers. Here, amongst the white lilies, swam ugly cat-fish, with fierce-looking eyes, that were held to be sacred, and which it was death to catch. On a little island was a hut, guarded by priests, in which the juju was supposed to live. The people thought it could aid them in time of trouble, and came in great numbers to the shrine to ask advice and get their quarrels made up. Though the priests helped many in this way, they were cunning and greedy, and often acted very cruelly. They took the food and money which the visitors brought, and then said the juju wanted a living offering. So some poor man or woman was taken into the glen blindfolded, and the friends of the victim knew that the sacrifice was made by seeing the blood flowing past lower down.


THE WAY INTO THE JUJU GLEN.

Others who entered never came out again. The priests said they had been seized by the juju, and the blood-red river seemed to show this, but a dye had been thrown in to colour the water. These persons were taken far away in secret, and sold into slavery. Any that were not of much value were slain and eaten in the cannibal feasts.

Now that Ma's dream of conquering Okoyong had come true, she was dreaming other dreams, and the most fascinating of these was to go to this terrible cannibal country and put down the evil doings of the natives. She told the slave-dealers about it.

"All right, Ma," they said, for they liked her, and admired her courage. "We, who know you, will be glad to welcome you; but we are not sure about the priests—they may kill you."

"I will risk that," she said; "as soon as I can get away from here you will see me."

In order to find out more about the tribes, she sometimes went far up the Cross River in a canoe, stopping wherever she could get shelter. On one of her journeys, when she had some of the house-children with her, the canoe was attacked by a huge hippopotamus. It rushed at the canoe, and tried to overthrow it. The men thrust their paddles down its throat and beat it, but it kept savagely nosing and gripping the frail vessel. Great was the excitement. Its jaws were snapping, the water was in a whirl of foam, the men were shouting and laying about them with their paddles, the girls were screaming, Ma was sometimes praying and sometimes giving orders. At last the canoe was swung clear, and paddled swiftly away.

The story of this adventure is still told in Calabar, and if you ask Dan, one of Ma's children, about it, he will say, "Once, when Ma was travelling in a canoe, she was attacked by hippopotamuses, but when they looked inside the canoe and saw her, they all ran away!"

What Ma saw and heard made her all a-quiver to go into these strange lands, but she would not leave the Okoyong people until some one came to take her place. The Mission had no other lady to send, and so she could only watch and pray and wait.

Matters became worse. The Aros hated the white rule, and would not submit to it. They tried to prevent the Government opening up their country to order and justice and peace, and would not allow the officials to enter it; they blocked the river so that no white vessel, or native one either, could pass; they went on with their slave-hunting and cannibalism. At last the Government lost patience. "We must teach them a lesson," they said. So a warning went to all the missionaries along the banks of the river to come down to Calabar at once. Ma Slessor did not like the order. "Everything is peaceful in Okoyong," she said. "My people won't fight." The Government said they knew that, but her life was too precious to risk, and they sent a special steamer for her and the children.

When she came she found several companies of soldiers, with many quick-firing guns, already moving up the river. They landed in the Aro country, and marched through swamps and attacked the hosts of natives who had gathered to bar their way, and defeated them. Still, the bushmen would not give in, and the soldiers had many a weary time in the trackless forests. At Arochuku they went down the gorge to the juju house, at the door of which they found a white goat starving to death. Many human skulls and cooking-pots lying about told a gruesome tale. The place continued to be the scene of wicked ceremonies, and was at last blown up with dynamite.

Ma was sorry she had not gone to Iboland before the soldiers, because she felt that if she had

done so she might have saved all the fighting and bloodshed. Now that a way had been blazed into the country, she was more than ever eager and impatient to go.

"The Gospel should have been the first to enter," she said; "but since the sword and gun are before us, we must follow at once."

So while carrying on the work at Akpap, she began to explore and look out for some place that would do for an outpost. One day she left Akpap, taking with her the slave-girl Mana, who now knew English and her Bible well, and a bright boy called Esien, and tramped to the Cross River, where she boarded a canoe and paddled slowly upstream. By and by she came to another smaller river on the west, which seemed to run far into the interior between Ibo and Ibibio, and there she landed on a beach at the foot of a hill. This was Itu, a famous place, for it was here that one of the greatest slave-markets in West Africa used to be held, and it was down this side river, the Enyong Creek, that the slaves were brought in canoes, to be sold and sent over the country, or shipped abroad to the West Indies or America.

"A good place to begin," Ma said; and she landed and climbed up the steep bank to the top, where she had a beautiful view over the shining river and the green land. "Oh, yes," she repeated, "a bonnie place to begin."

Once more she lived the gipsy life. She opened a school, made Mana and Esien the teachers, and started to build a church. The people, who had so long trembled in the shadow of slavery, were so pleased that they did all they could to help her, and the children of the village tumbled over one another in their eagerness to "learn book."

When she left for Akpap again the chiefs gave her the gift of a black goat, and she tied a piece of string to it and led it to the beach, where the Mission boat picked her up and took her down to the landing-place for Okoyong. She was bareheaded and barefooted, but in high spirits at the success of her trip, and she went away gaily into the forest, leading her goat and singing:

Mary had a little lamb,
Its fleece was white as snow!

Mana did a wonderful work at Itu: she taught the women and girls to read and sew, held prayers in the chief's yard every night, and preached on Sunday; and just because she loved Jesus, and tried to be like Ma, she soon had hundreds falling under the spell of the new way of life. This humble slave-girl did not fall away like others. She and Esien remained always true disciples of their Lord.

"If only some one would come and help me at Akpap," Ma prayed, and her wish was answered,

for another brave woman, Miss Wright, one of the Mission agents in Calabar, offered to go up and stay with her, and after that everything was easy, for Ma Slessor loved Ma Wright, and Ma Wright loved Ma Slessor, and both loved the bairns, and the bairns loved both, so that it was a happy company which lived in this African forest clearing.

By this time Ma's own special family was complete, and no more members were added, so we can look in upon them and see who they were and what they did.

First, of course, came Janie, who was now a big lassie, very kind, and full of sympathy for everybody. She spoke English fluently, and, like Ma, was a constant reader of the Bible; few white boys or girls, indeed, know it so thoroughly as she did. She was Ma's right hand, and could do almost anything, indoor or outdoor, clean, cook, carry a load, build a house, or work in the fields. But she liked working outside best, and, although a twin, had many friends amongst the people.

Mary was another good girl, though not so fond of hard work as Janie. She waited upon Ma, and did all her little ploys. Alice was a quiet, solid, plodding little soul, not as bright as Janie or Mary, but faithful in whatever duty she was given to do, and always willing and obedient. Annie had no head at all for her lessons, but was very diligent, and always smiling. Maggie the restless—Ma's name for her was Flibberty-gibbet—was the one who was fond of the babies, always busying herself about them, except when she was in the kitchen cooking a tit-bit for her own little mouth. The baby of the family was Whitie, a twin with dancing eyes, and giving promise of being clever by and by.

Then there were the two boys, Dan, a lively little fellow, not clever, but good, who had been brought up by Janie and was a favourite with Ma, and, as is often the case with a boy amongst a lot of sisters, was a little spoiled; and toddling Asoquö, who was so very fond of food that he sometimes stole the cat's milk!

In the house at this time was another boy named Impie. Poor Impie! He was deformed and could not use his legs, and the natives had some queer notion about it. He lay all day, so patient, with a smile for everybody; and when, in the evening, Ma Wright took him on her knee until bedtime, his face was a picture of perfect content. He died soon afterwards.

All the children were astir before six in the morning. Annie made up the wood fire and boiled water in the kettle for Ma's tea, and Janie or Mary prepared it and brought it in. Then they swept up the yard, and went into the bush to gather firewood or look for herbs to make efere or native soup. At prayers the children squatted on the verandah. They sang a hymn in English, and the bigger ones read verse about, Ma explaining as they went along—for she never hurried through worship no matter how busy she might be. Then she prayed in Efik, and all repeated the Lord's Prayer in English.

Prayers were not always at the same time, and sometimes when everybody was out of doors sweeping up or cutting down bush, Ma summoned them to the shade of a palm or cotton or orange tree, and had them there just to teach them that people could worship God anywhere—at

their work, as well as in church.

"Boys and girls," she used to tell her young friends in Scotland, "should pray at their play or lessons as well as when reading or saying their prayers night and morning. Make a habit of it by looking up and saying a word or two in thought at any time. God is interested in our play and work and everything."

Then came lessons for a couple of hours, Ma doctoring patients or holding palavers the while. After breakfast the big lads or children from the village came, and school was held out in the open air under the verandah. This went on until six o'clock, when the evening meal was taken.

Prayers were again held on the verandah, and as the refugees in the yard and many of the neighbours came and sat below, the native tongue only was used. There was a hymn, and Ma would tell a simple gospel story, and all would say: "This night I lay me down to sleep." By that time one or two of the little ones were already in slumber-land, and were carried off to bed.

On Sunday nights the hymns that children all over the world know were sung, sometimes with choruses which Ma made up herself; and instead of reading, the girls told what they remembered of the sermon. Janie was best at this. Mary and Alice could, at least, say the text, and when it came to Annie's turn she always said: "Nkokop nte Jesus edi eyen Abasi"—"I heard that Jesus is the Son of God."

Market-day was an exciting time for the children. The people came crowding in from the villages with all sorts of food and things to sell, such as yams—these are something like large potatoes, shrimps from the river, oil from the palm-nut, sugar-cane, ground nuts, Indian corn, and fowls. Most of them came to see Ma, many simply to "köm" her, that is, to give her compliments, others to get advice or medicine. They brought little gifts for the children, sugar-cane, oranges and bananas and other fruit, or seed-plants, which they put in their own plots of ground, for they all liked to grow things.

It was Ma who taught them to love flowers. She knew a great deal about the wild plants of the forest. One day, when walking with a visitor along the path, he complained of toothache, and by and by she picked a flower and told him to chew it. He did so, and the pain vanished. He plucked another which he thought was the same, and she said, "If you eat that you will be dead in five minutes."

Ma taught them many other things—indeed all they knew—and needed to be very patient, for think of the ages of darkness and ignorance that lay behind them! She tried, above all, to get them to hate lying, which is so common in Africa. Her one great and constant bit of advice and warning to them was—"Speak the truth."

These pleasant days in the Mission House were soon to end. Ma was now ready to go forward, and only waited to be sure that God was leading her, for she never wanted to go any way but His. One day she trudged the six miles to the Cross River in the hope of catching the Government launch for Itu. It passed when she was resting in a hut, and she had to trudge back the weary

miles to Akpap again.

"Oh, Ma," said Miss Wright, "I am sorry you missed it."

Ma was tired, but only smiled and said, "Never mind, lassie, God did not mean me to go to-day, and He knows best."

A week later the launch saw her and picked her up, and on board she found the Military Commander.

"Ma," he said, "I'm going as far as Arochuku. Why not come up with me?"

"Oh," she thought, "is this what God meant when He turned me back last week?" And although she meant only to go to Itu and had no change of clothing or food, she said, "Yes, I will go."

And so she passed Itu and sailed up the Enyong Creek, one of the loveliest little waterways in the world. She had seen many beautiful bits of tropical scenery, but never one so beautiful as this. At first it is broad and open, and here and there she saw a tiny canoe with a man fishing for shrimps, and she was told that electric fish, which gave one a shock, lived in the water. Then it ran through the forest, where it was as still as a lake in the heart of the hills, and dark and green because the branches drooped over it. Through the little arches of foliage she got glimpses of what looked like fairyland beyond. The surface was covered with lilies of dazzling whiteness. Scarcely a sound broke the deep and fragrant silence. Sometimes a kingfisher would rise and fly lazily away, sometimes a troop of monkeys would look down from the branches overhead and chatter, sometimes grey parrots with red tails would scream angrily for a moment at being disturbed.

But as Ma lay and enjoyed all the peace and the beauty, she seemed to see other things—she saw canoe-loads of sad-eyed slaves passing down, week after week, year after year, century after century—what terrible misery and despair that lovely creek must have known!

And when she landed and walked through the forest trails, the same thought was in her mind—how these paths had been beaten hard by endless files of hopeless slaves—men, women, and little children.

"At last," she said thankfully, "the cruel reign of heathendom is over, and peace and kindness and happiness are now coming to this dark land!"

She found the villages and towns almost touching one another, and full of people.

"Welcome, Ma! we looked for your coming," shouted her old friends, the slave-traders, although they knew well that she would try and stop their evil doings.

She found that some native traders from the coast had been telling the people about Jesus, and she called the chiefs and held a palaver and set about starting a school and building a church. It

was curious to see not only children but grave men and women squatting on the ground learning A B C! And some of the men were old slave-hunters.

"Come back soon, Ma! You are the only one who cares for us," they cried as she left.

One day, when coming down the Creek, she was idly watching a snake trying to swim across the quiet water, when bump, bump, her canoe was run into and nearly overturned by another, which shot out from the side.

"Sorry, Ma," said the man in it. "I have been waiting for you many days. My master at Akani Obi wants to speak with you."

The canoe was turned, and followed by the other into a creek that was fairylike in its tender beauty, and came to a beach where stood a nice-looking, well-dressed native and his wife. They took her into their home, which was furnished like a European one.

"I am Onoyom," said the man. "When I was a little slave-boy, one of your white missionaries explored as far as this. All the people fled. I was not afraid, and I took him to the chief. I was punished afterwards. When I grew up I went to the cannibal feasts at Arochuku. My master died, and ten little girls were killed and placed in his grave. I became steward of the House, and ruled as chief. My house was burned down, and my child died. I thought some enemy had done it, and I wanted to murder people. I met a man who had been a teacher, and he said, 'Perhaps God is angry with you.' I said, 'I want to find this God.' He said, 'Go to the White Ma and she will help you.' I took a canoe to find you. I missed you. I left a man to wait, and he has brought you. Now, will you tell me what to do?"

As she listened Ma's eyes grew bright with joy. She talked with him and his household, telling them of Jesus and His Gospel, and praying with them, and promised to come and begin a school and church. Then they made her a cup of tea, and went with her to the beach.

As her canoe skimmed over the quiet water again, darkness fell, and a rain-storm came on and Ma was drenched, but she did not care; she sang aloud in her blitheness of heart, for after ages of darkness and wickedness the sunlight of God was beginning to shine in the Creek.

After that what a life she led! She was always moving up and down the Creek, visiting strange places and camping anywhere. Sometimes she had to sleep in the open air, or in huts on the floor, or in the canoe; sometimes she was caught in tornadoes and soaked to the skin; sometimes she was not able to wash for many days; sometimes she ran out of stores and lived on native plant-food and tea made in old milk tins. She was often ill, full of aches and pains and burning with fever; but even when she was suffering she never lost her happy spirit and her bright laugh. She was like a white spirit fluttering hither and thither, a symbol of the new life that was stirring in the land. The people were rising out of the sleep of centuries, everywhere they were eager to learn, everywhere they cried for teachers and missionaries.

"Oh," cried Ma, "if only I could do more, if only I were young again! If only the Church at home

would send out scores of men and women. If ..."

She did too much, and her frail weak body could not stand it. Sleep forsook her, and that meant loss of nerve. When she thought of the immense work opening up before her, with only herself to do it, she quailed and shrank from the task. In the night she rose and went wandering over the house, and looked down upon the children slumbering in perfect trust and peace.

"Surely, surely," she said, "God who takes care of the little ones will take care of me."

It was time for her holiday to Scotland, but she could not leave because she was very near death. A long rest revived her, and she rose—to go home? No. The flame that burned in that worn little body leapt up and glowed best in the African forest. Instead of going to Scotland she made up her mind to spend six months wandering about the Creek in her own canoe, visiting the people and opening new Mission stations.

"Oh, Ma!" said the other missionaries, "are you wise to do this after all you have gone through? You have worked so hard, and you need a holiday. Go home and rest, and then you will be better able to do what you wish."

But no, she would carry out her plan; and so giving up the Court work to be freer to serve her own Master, she set out joyfully on her quest for new toils and triumphs.

"MARY HAD A LITTLE LAMB!"