

Court and Furlough

The court takes up a great deal of my time, but I do not know how to let any of it go, for it holds such possibilities for good.

—Mary Slessor, 1906¹

MISSIONARY MINA AMESS VISITED Slessor in Ikot Obong from Akpap in 1906. “One could not be long in her company,” she wrote, “without enjoying a right hearty laugh.”

There was no routine with “Ma.” One never knew what she would be doing. One hour she might be having a political discussion with a District Commissioner, the next supervising the building of a house, and later on judging native palavers. Late one evening I heard a good deal of talking and also the sound of working. I went in to see what was doing and there was “Ma” making cement and the bairns spreading it on the floor with their hands in candle light. The whole scene at so late an hour was too much for my gravity.²

Mary lived in mud-floored houses during her years in Nigeria, but she preferred a cement floor. Not only was it cleaner and more permanent, it was also a barrier to the frequent ant problem. Congo missionary Samuel Lapsley once reported that white ants (termites) crawled up his bedpost in the night and made a hole as big as his hand in his mattress before morning.³ Black driver ants travel in columns by the thousands and can kill any small animal (or abandoned infant) in a short time. Slessor

1. *WMM*, April 1906, 91.
2. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor*, 236.
3. Phipps, *William Sheppard*, 57.

wrote of getting up in the middle of the night and finding driver ants, “thousands and thousands of them, pouring in on every side, and dropping from the roof. We had two hours’ hard work to clear them out.”⁴

Biographer Livingstone tells of fellow missionaries teasing Mary about her “richer than usual . . . household gear” when she moved to Ikot Obong. Mary surprised them with her explanation that the trunks were filled with cement. When a woman in Scotland had asked how she learned to make cement, Mary said, “I just stir it like porridge; turn it out, smooth it with a stick, and all the time keep praying, ‘Lord, here’s the cement, if to Thy glory, set it,’ and it has never once gone wrong.”⁵

Charles Partridge gave Mary a bicycle about the time she moved to Ikot Obong. At the age of fifty-seven, she wrote, “Fancy, an old woman like me on a cycle!”⁶ She was excited that the combination of new roads and her bicycle made it easy to get to villages several miles away. She made good use of it and often mentioned it to Partridge or in letters to Scotland. Mary wrote home, “There are 700 men on the four or five miles between [Ikot Obong] and Itu, living in grass huts by the roadside. They are from every part of the country, and it is such a grand chance to sow the seed and have it carried far and near as they return to their homes!”⁷

Despite Slessor’s high spirits about the way things were going, she continued to have frequent bouts of fever. She was unable to attend the opening of the new church in Duke Town in January because she was ill. In February, she wrote, “I had fever right on three or four times a week, all through January, and I have only twice been able to walk to Church this year. But last Saturday I took quite a turn for the better and am now just myself again.”⁸

Mary soon enjoyed “a most pleasant visit” from High Commissioner and Lady Egerton. She found Lady Egerton “charming,” and she let Commissioner Egerton know that the changes he saw in the district were due to Charles Partridge’s good work. “He was speaking on the difference

4. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor*, 271.

5. *Ibid.*, 213.

6. *Ibid.*, 219.

7. *WMM*, June 1906, quoting MS letter of February 28, 1906, 142.

8. MS to CP, February 24, 1906.

in it from his last visit," Slessor wrote. And, "He thinks it is too civilized for me now," a conclusion she no doubt appreciated.⁹

Later in the year, *The Women's Missionary Magazine* published a letter from an enthusiastic Miss Slessor:

Our Administrator [Partridge] has just come back from Britain after furlough, and has brought with him a phonograph, a magnificent instrument, and a number of grand old hymns—e.g., "Holy, holy, holy!" "Abide with me," &c., and on Sunday night he gave the village a great treat by having this at the service. We also hung a sheet up, and filled the lamp, and gave an exhibition of several Scriptural slides on the screen. It was all done without any forethought, but it proved a great success . . . and I spoke into the "trumpet" the parable of the Prodigal. . . . The audience was simply electrified. That parable has gone on to be reproduced all over the Ibibio towns where our Administrator will be going on his civilizing and governing tours. Is it not grand? It seems like a dream! It has opened up new ideas of means and possibilities for service. A person with means could get the Gospel carried round like that, when he or she could not speak a word of the language. It is so marvelous: every sound reproduced! Even the little halt I made to remember a word came; the people could not keep down their delight and wonder. . . . Oh, it was a red-letter day!¹⁰

JUSTICE?

Court work went on. Mary wrote of a murder involving a woman.

She is but a girl, and they have brought her here in preference to tying her up and torturing her to confess whom she wants for a husband, seeing she declares she will never marry this one to whom she has been betrothed from infancy. She has invented several excuses, the chief one being that there is one of wives whom she does not like. God help these poor down-trodden women! The constant cause of palaver and bloodshed here is marriage. . . . It is almost impossible for a European magistrate to hold this horde of people; I wish we had mission stations here and there, to which things could come till they are enlightened a little. What an awful thing heathenism is!¹¹

9. MS to CP, April 30, 1906.

10. *WMM*, November 1906, 277.

11. *WMM*, January 1906, 20.

Court and Furlough

A Foreign Mission deputy from Scotland visited Mary Slessor during his stay and later reminisced about her court. “At a little table sits the only woman judge in the British Empire,” he wrote. She had some toffee beside her, along with her cup of tea. He described her court routine.

Behind her sit the chiefs, who form a sort of jury. In front is the dock (a bamboo rail); at one side another rail forms the witness-box. The body of the court is occupied by interested spectators. With voluble language and abundant gesture pleas are made and evidence is given. Then the judge has a word or two with the jury (retiring to a little shed to consult if the case needs more consideration), and a decision is pronounced which may not be always welcome, but which is always recognized as just. And as a rule the decision is accompanied with some sound words of Christian council [*sic*], for this court gives an opportunity to dispense both law [and] gospel.¹²

The deputy, Rev. James Adamson, wrote of the informality of the scene. If a car was heard on the newly built road, “jury, prisoner, witnesses, audience, native policeman”—everyone except Mary and European visitors—dashed off to see it. When the commotion died down, they returned to their places and court resumed.

A District Commissioner (D.C.) was president of the Native Court; Mary was vice president. The commissioner often did not know the language of the people, and the clerks who translated could be bribed to interpret in favor of one side or the other. In practice, the D.C. seldom attended court. But when he did, Addison told how the two judges sometimes held different points of view. When a man hacked his wife with a machete, the D.C. considered it simple assault. Mary called it “a cowardly shame” and wanted severe punishment. When a man was arrested for possession of a gun, the D.C. considered it serious and wanted to make an example of him. Mary said just take his gun and let him go—he didn’t do anything.¹³

A European eyewitness to the trial for the machete incident wrote about the jury retiring with Judge Slessor to deliberate the case:

The headman started by laying down as a fundamental principle that they had a perfect right to do whatever they liked with their wives; they could not yield an inch on this, as their women would

12. *Record*, 1915, 172. Report of Rev. James Adamson, who visited MS in 1909.

13. *Ibid.*

MARY SLESSOR—EVERYBODY'S MOTHER

soon become unmanageable! But in deference to the white man's peculiar views, as to the treatment of women, they would go the length of admitting that, perhaps, the husband had gone just a little too far in his use of the matchet. They could not see that the man had done anything to merit a severe sentence, but in view of the prejudices of the white people they sent him to prison for a short term!¹⁴

T. D. Maxwell said the first time he met Mary he saw "a little frail old lady with a lace . . . shawl over her head and shoulders . . . swaying herself in a rocking chair and crooning to a black baby in her arms." He commented on her "very strong Scottish accent" and described later court proceedings. Court was near Slessor's house, he said, "full of litigants, witnesses, and onlookers," and Mary was back in the rocking chair holding another baby.¹⁵

Suddenly she jumped up with an angry growl: her shawl fell off, the baby was hurriedly transferred to some one qualified to hold it, and with a few trenchant words she made for the door where a hulking, overdressed native stood. In a moment she seized him by the scruff of the neck, boxed his ears, and hustled him out into the yard, telling him quite explicitly what he might expect if he came back again without her consent. . . . The man was a local monarch of sorts, who had been impudent to her, and she had forbidden him to come near her house again until he had not only apologised but done some prescribed penance. Under the pretext of calling on me he had defied her orders.¹⁶

Maxwell wrote, "I have had a good deal of experience of Nigerian Courts of various kinds, but have never met one which better deserves to be termed a Court of Justice than that over which she presided . . . and it was essential justice unhampered by legal technicalities."¹⁷

Biographer Livingstone wrote, "Some of her methods were not of the accepted judicial character. . . . Often, instead of administering the law, she administered justice by giving the prisoner a blow on the side of the head!"¹⁸ Or, he wrote, "She would try a batch of men for an offence, lecture

14. *WMM*, November 1909, 258–59.

15. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor*, 129.

16. *Ibid.*, 130.

17. Jeffreys, "Magistrate," 628–29.

18. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor*, 232.

them, and then impose a fine. Finding they had no money she would take them up to the house and give them work to earn the amount, and feed them well.”¹⁹ Mary justified this action by saying that she hoped to influence the men in a lasting way.

The authors of *God and One Redhead* wrote, “An administrative officer once saw her flailing a chief of some importance over the head with his own umbrella for telling lies. . . . But the victim of her wrath seldom commanded any public sympathy since she was felt to be just.”²⁰

M. D. W. Jeffreys, whose career as a British administrative officer began two months after Mary Slessor’s death, analyzed some of her cases from archived court records in the missionary’s handwriting. He commented that reports often indicated that “both sides took oath [*mbiam*].” He wrote, “It is usual in English practice to take the oath first, and in native practice to take it last, that both parties accept the verdict and bear no ill-will to each other. It seems that this instance is another record of a pagan practice accepted by Mary Slessor, but not permitted by European magistrates.”²¹

Even if she “concluded a pagan trial with a pagan ending,” in Jeffreys’ words, he agreed with T. D. Maxwell that, in at least some of Mary Slessor’s cases, “if law was not always administered, at least justice was.”²²

Slessor’s methods have come under fire, not whether she administered justice. One twentieth-century author wrote, “A natural meddler with an iron will, the role of magistrate suited her well.”²³ Others noted a different aspect of Slessor’s role as magistrate. A former Calabar missionary wrote, “Let no one think that the spiritual adviser was lost in the law-giver. I am safe in saying that in no Court of Justice in the world was the Gospel preached so habitually.”²⁴

Calabar mission historian Geoffrey Johnston quoted the minutes of the Presbytery of Biafra, stating that Slessor’s “acting in an official or semi-official capacity is calculated to compromise her position and interfere

19. *Ibid.*, 233–34.

20. Christian and Plummer, *Redhead*, 110.

21. Jeffreys, “Magistrate,” 805.

22. *Ibid.* Jeffreys also pointed out that Mary Slessor was not the only missionary to serve as magistrate in a Native Court in Calabar. Three men were also appointed, though not from the Scottish Presbyterian Mission.

23. Birkett, *Mary Kingsley*, 34.

24. *WMM*, March 1915, 56.

with her usefulness.” Johnston states that the presbytery either did not realize what Mary’s significance was or did not understand “that being a reforming chief rather than a reforming preacher was a legitimate missionary function.”²⁵

UDO ANTIA

Mary Slessor first mentioned Udo Antia in a letter to Charles Partridge in February 1906. Partridge was in England at the time, and another would have filled his position during his absence. Antia was convicted and incarcerated at Ikot Ekpena for slave dealing and seizing a boy for debt. He escaped, and when he was recaptured, he was sent to the Native Court at Ikot Obong with additional charges of escape, resisting arrest and disturbing the peace. Mary sentenced him to two more years in prison.²⁶ Before he was recaptured, road surveyors sent some boys out to ask for use of a shed. Antia made them take the *mbiam* oath and threatened them if they told where he was. After an extended search, during which his house was burned down, he finally turned himself in. Mary wrote about the trial, “His mother came in, and she expecting they would shoot him, hung on to me, lay on me, hugged me for four long hours. I could not get out of her embraces till I was nearly fainting. . . . It was a bad hour for me I tell you, for even Udo Antia is loved by a Mother. What a mighty, what a mysterious thing is mother love! She coveted the chance of dying for him.”²⁷

A large crowd attended the trial and wanted to see “how the White Man would punish, and to gloat over him,” Mary wrote. She thought they were disappointed that she gave the prisoner only a two-year sentence. “His slaves have stolen every thing and run away,” Mary told Partridge, “I wish you had been at Udo’s trial, if only to study Ibibio character.”²⁸

Asuquo Udo Antia, a son of Udo Antia and a respected physician and emeritus professor at the University of Ibadan, published a family history in 2002. Dr. Antia asserts that Obong Udo Antia II “was, without any doubt, the most eminent, powerful and influential Obong [chief] of his village and by extension that of Mbiabong Clan in Ibiono Ibom.”²⁹ He

25. Johnston, *Maxim Guns*, 258.

26. Antia, Asuquo Udo, *Obong Udo Antia II*, 19–20.

27. MS to CP, February 24, 1906.

28. *Ibid.*

29. Antia, *Obong Udo Antia*, ix.

owned a great deal of land, including farms, and had many wives and slaves, a sign of wealth.³⁰ (Twenty-seven wives or concubines are named in Dr. Antia's work.) One of the titles of Udo Antia II was "a beheader of human being, a title usually conferred on a warrior, or a man of bravery."³¹

When Dr. Antia was growing up, he heard stories about his father's imprisonment. "The alleged and widespread reason for the imprisonment that circulated then and up till now," he writes, "was that he had serious disagreements with Slessor . . . who imprisoned him for daring to describe her as just being another woman like any of his wives and also by calling her unprintable names."³²

Udo Antia continued to appear in Mary's letters to Partridge, frequently in 1908 and from time to time until the month before she died. In April of 1908, she reported that Udo was back home. Four months later she told of sending a court messenger on an errand, and one of Udo Antia's slaves shot and killed him. To Mary's consternation, the current District Commissioner put Antia in charge of "seven policemen with a corporal" to find the culprit. Slessor complained, "And so these dogs of war were let loose with all Udo boys on these poor villages, with the result that there has been a reign of Terror—every Chief insulted, chained and tied up [and] beaten; women and men hauled into Udo Antia's place and beaten and kept in hunger and fear; the villages plundered clean of every thing, and all the time I had to sit and bear it. knowing that the DC had given the order."³³

At the end of August, Slessor wrote that the murderer had been recaptured but then escaped "after the manner of his Illustrious Master."³⁴ The next month she wrote, "Five Chiefs all as mad on revenge, came to the Court on Thursday to take oath on what the 'Raid' [by Udo Antia and his men] had taken from their places, in order to get compensation. Udo is certainly not beloved by his neighbours."³⁵ In November, the news was,

30. *Ibid.*, 33–38.

31. *Ibid.*, 13.

32. *Ibid.*, 14.

33. MS to CP, 14 August 1908.

34. *Ibid.*, August 29, 1908.

35. *Ibid.*, September 13, 1908.

“Udo Antia has a case against him going on in which I’m sure he lies like a Dragoon.”³⁶

Udo Antia’s biographer son admits that not everybody was glad when his father was released from prison but states that he was “readily reconciled with his subjects.” He rebuilt his ruined compound, including a new “residential palace” on donated land, and “his entire surviving households of wives, children, slaves, servants, etc. returned from wherever they had been.”³⁷

In 1909 Antia complained to Slessor that his “boys” were trying to kill him. She told him to call them into court. She wrote to Partridge that Antia’s boys were in revolt, and his wives were scattered. The *obong* was punished for “brutality to a wife with four fine children she has brought up for him.”³⁸ Antia’s biographer says the chief’s “travails . . . continued for as long as the Scottish Presbyterian Missionaries and the British government were firmly established.” Although he continued to suffer “insults” from missionaries and British authorities, Asuquo Antia writes, “he maintained his status as an important, powerful and influential ruler of the people.”³⁹

Mary was incensed to report in 1911 that the troublemaker was again “the pet of Ikot Okpene⁴⁰ under [the new D.C.], who won’t hear that his record is bad. . . . Udo is a hero to some White Men, who utterly deny his record. It is most distressing.”⁴¹ By December 1912, Udo was back in prison and Slessor wrote, “Their eyes are opened at last, and he gets his deserts, and the land which groaned rests.” Antia was out again in 1913 and had gained “power and prestige” by giving the court clerk a wife. Mary’s last letter to Charles Partridge (1914) complained that whenever there was a new D.C., Udo “breaks out,” and “when he is out of prison, there is not much Peace.” She added, “Perhaps one of God’s reasons for keeping me here so long, is the keeping of such miserable characters in subjection and silence to a certain extent.”⁴²

36. Ibid., November 28, 1908.

37. Antia, *Obong Udo Antia*, 22–23.

38. MS to CP, February 17 and May 8, 1909.

39. Antia, *Obong Udo Antia*, 23–24.

40. Variant spelling of Ikot Ekpene.

41. MS to CP, April 12 and September 4, 1911.

42. Ibid., December 26, 1912, August 10, 1913, December 24, 1914.

A Final Furlough

Mary was pleased with the progress she saw up and down the river and creek. Churches and schools were established, and people sought her out to ask for teachers. But episodes of malaria and other maladies continued. She knew she needed to go “home” for a rest, though she later wrote, “I don’t know that it is an unmixed pleasure to be at home, without a home. . . . It is certainly a great strain, but I suppose it is because the churches want to hear of God’s work, so we must do it as a duty if not as a pleasant privilege.”⁴³

Mary continued to hold court at Ikot Obong, but she had moved to another house at Use Ikot Oku by December 1906. She had a “cottage” built there and had a site cleared for a “ladies’ rest house.” The Calabar Mission Council also approved Slessor’s offer to build a house at Arochukwu, if the Women’s Foreign Mission Committee okayed it; the council also agreed to ask for two more women missionaries to be sent to Calabar.⁴⁴ There would be other houses built for Mary in new areas, but Use would become her “retreat” for the rest of her life.

Slessor worried about leaving her girls behind, but finally decided to leave them in Jean’s care at Use while she went to Scotland. On this trip she took along six-year-old adopted son Dan. Government officials helped with preparations and travel. A friend, Mr. Gray, helped pack and store things and took her to Duke Town. He even arranged for his sister to meet Mary in Edinburgh. Charles Partridge sent her a warm coat, which came in for a lot of praise during her furlough. Slessor wrote, “And now comes this Cloak, which says ‘Here your needs are all met.’ It is simply wonderful. . . . It is so good of you and your family circle to care for me like this.”⁴⁵ A Mr. Middleton, she told Partridge, joined the ship in Lagos and oversaw the missionary’s care on board the ship and following her arrival at Liverpool.⁴⁶

The trip in the *Orcades* was a special treat for both Mary and Dan. She wrote to Charles Partridge from the steamship that she was feeling stronger and enjoying the voyage. “The breeze has been delightful,” she wrote, “and the water so calm and deep green and clear, and the lap, lap

43. MS to Mrs. Black, DUNMG, Nov. 20, 1907.

44. Christie, “Annals,” October 16 and December 13, 1906.

45. MS to CP, April 2, 1907.

46. Livingston, *Mary Slessor*, 239.

of the waves is . . . restful to wearied nerves." She worried, though, that the chiefs in his district in Calabar not only missed Partridge but would also be afraid of a new District Commissioner.⁴⁷

When Hope Waddell's J. K. Macgregor and his young wife visited Slessor before they returned to Calabar, he described Mary with admiration. "A slim figure, of middle height, fine eyes full of power, she is no ordinary woman." He and his wife enjoyed sitting with her and listening to her, "for she is most fascinating, and besides being a humorist is a mine of information of mission history and Efik custom."⁴⁸

Mary's June letter to Partridge told him more about the trip home. Her bicycle was missing from the luggage when they reached Liverpool, but Mr. Middleton found it and had it sent on to her. "Mr. Middleton . . . cut himself off from company and fun and everything to keep me company," she wrote. The weather had been beautiful on the trip, but Scotland's weather was terrible. "Winter could not be much worse," she wrote, "and where are the roses and the strawberries and the beauty of the traditional June?" The Prince and Princess of Wales were coming to visit Edinburgh, she informed him. She admitted she wasn't feeling very patriotic but thought that might change when they arrived. Mary wrote of a frightening visit to Edinburgh, too. "After getting somehow to an Electric Car, I nearly shrieked from the pain at my back, just from the fear, but I was more afraid of a carriage, and refused it, as a Judge here [was] caught between two cars and barely escaped with his life. It is an awful country for bustle and movement. It is a splendid country for all that, and the achievements of Man are marvelous."⁴⁹

A July letter thanked the Commissioner "for ordering off all male visitors from the Use house" and asked him to repeat the order before he left England to return to Africa. Later Mary hinted at problems that would cause her to cut her furlough short. She wrote of Rev. Arthur Wilkie going to Use and Ikot Obong and not finding Jean there; "she had gone to Okpo at the request of the Old Chief there for a day." Her letter doesn't make clear what happened except to say, "It *would* be better for them to leave

47. MS to CP, May 20, 1907.

48. Livingston, *Mary Slessor*, 211; MS to CP, June 27, 1907.

49. *Ibid.*, MS to CP.

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things alone I think, for Jean has her side of the story, but I am sorely perplexed . . . and cannot sleep at nights because of it.”⁵⁰

Slessor even wrote to her D.C. friend about shopping.

I have been reveling in “frocks and furbelows.” It is simply lovely to see the shop windows and to examine and very nearly *envy* the beautiful creations the girls wear, and to look at the “milk and roses” of complexion, and the beauty and roundness of form they all possess. But of course this is most unbecoming in the senior member of a Presbyterian Mission! and you must keep my weakness a secret. . . . I am trying to take the plainest and cheapest of frocks out with me. Only fancy them telling me that my costume is like a brides rigout!!!! Really, the three junior mission ladies, Misses Peacock, Reid and Amess told me so when we all met the other day in Glasgow, and I confess to feeling ashamed to be in grey and silk when they were so modestly and consistently garbed in Navy Blue, and I could be the mother of the lot!! Well, it is my last shew off, so I may be pardoned.⁵¹

Mary was pleased that she had recovered from her illness soon after she got home, and “here I am [now] cycling all over the country and behaving like a young lady,” she wrote. Partridge’s letters to Slessor are lost, but the letter she was answering told of his delay in returning to Calabar due to his own illness. She wrote, “I ought to be preaching to you and telling you ‘it serves you right’ for you are such an agnostic. & etc., etc., but I am too sorry to indulge in this, and I shall sing the *other side* and remember all your constant and uniform patience and kindness to me, through thick and thin, and shall say that you are just a dear good old man.” She continued, “I intend to leave for Calabar by the boat leaving on the 19th [of October].” She had “a hard fight to get away,” though, she said, because the Mission Board “were persisting in making me stay all winter ‘to get quite strong’ on one hand, and on the other ‘to go through the Churches telling about Calabar and its needs.’ As if I could at my age do the one and gain the other.”⁵²

The return trip to Calabar was not like the pleasant trip home five months earlier.

50. *Ibid.*, July 11, 1907; October 3, 1907.

51. *Ibid.*, September 21, 1907.

52. *Ibid.*, October 3, 1907.

Mary wrote to her friend Charlotte Crawford from the steamship *Fantee* on November 6. She praised the good weather, the “sea and sky one sheet of blue” and wished she could share it with those at home in Scotland. She had rested and not missed meals, she said.

But we had dreadful company all the way to our last stoppages. A crowd of men going to the gold mines [in Ghana or Ivory Coast], made a perfect pandemonium of the ship. Night and day, they roared and hurrahed and behaved like Hooligans. Every low music hall song and every vulgar chorus the boys on the street shouted was given here in the middle of the night, and all the day long. The Cap'n got angry in the end, and so did some more of us, specially last Sunday when they roared and danced till 4 o/c a.m. and then did the same till 4 o/c a.m. the next morning. That was their last night, so we all let them go on, but poor fellows they went off in that dreadful [sun], to go up country to a homeless place and a rough life, after a fortnight of drinking and gambling and sleeplessness. One passenger said as they went, “They will all die like dogs up there.”⁵³

Slessor did have some kind words for the “poor fellows.” They were “kind in their own way,” she said, “and all came and bade me a kindly goodbye and smilingly agreed to my word of warning advice.” She told of one man whose parents were Baptists and who “spoke nicely always about missionaries,” but whose behavior had been upsetting. Another “wild lad” had “constituted himself my cavalier and fellow at table, and I think he has been touched to better living at least. He looks so young, and he has a wife and two children, yet he squanders his money and his health like anything,” Mary wrote. She was also not impressed with the news that the man's favorite poet was Omar Khayam.⁵⁴

Mary enjoyed her last two nights at sea. They were quiet, but hot. Nearing the end of the journey, Mary revealed, “No one knows I am coming by this boat.”⁵⁵ It would not surprise those who knew her.

The *Fantee* reached Calabar on November 9, 1907. As soon as she could, Mary headed for Use. She wrote to thank a friend for the gift of a cake when she and Dan departed. It was “a great treat when I came home,” she wrote, “and had nothing else to eat for two days, till we got bread at

53. MS to Crawford, November 6, 1907.

54. Ibid.

55. Ibid.

the beach.”⁵⁶ A letter also found its way into *The Record*, asking that Mary’s thanks be passed along for letters and gifts of money that had been sent to her while she was on furlough. She especially thanked those who had taken her and Dan into their homes. “What the Bethany Home must have been to our Lord,” she wrote, “no one can better appreciate than the missionary coming home to a strange place homeless.”⁵⁷

Before the year ended, Elizabeth McKinney, a new missionary at Creek Town, visited Slessor and reported surprise at Mary’s accommodations—the veteran was sleeping on a mattress laid over a sheet of corrugated iron. The newcomer saw Slessor’s inventiveness in action. McKinney had to catch a boat early the next morning. Mary, who had no clock, tied a rooster to her bed. It worked.⁵⁸

Mary wrote to Charles Partridge that she was “rudely healthy” and surprised at how easily she could walk up the hill. She was glad to report that the chiefs of the town came the morning after her arrival and “cleaned all the bush and the road before the sun was high.” British officials on board the *Fantee* had told Slessor the current District Commissioner expected her to resume court duties. The forward-looking missionary had more than Use and court on her mind, though. “I purpose going up to Ikpe [some twenty-five miles away], to see if I can begin work there,” she wrote.⁵⁹

She hurried to go there before starting court work, because the Ikpe people had often come to beg her to visit and to send a teacher. She found that it was a large market town, that a church had already been built, and that the people already understood something about Christianity. No one could read, but she wrote that “they regularly meet for worship and keep the Sabbath.” The people gave her plenty of food, “and if all goes well, I shall stay in the vestry of the Church till I build a House, and make that my head quarters when the [new missionary] ladies come.”⁶⁰

Making Ikpe headquarters would be a long time in coming. Meanwhile, Mary continued to live at Use. Living conditions there were

56. MS to Mrs. Black, November 20, 1907.

57. *Record*, 1908, 21.

58. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor*, 238.

59. MS to CP, November 23, 1907.

60. MS to CP, December 7, 1907.

still rustic for her household, as they were for others in the community. In 1908 she wrote to Partridge,

I've done my best here, for I've bought a cow . . . and the cow has been added to the menagerie. She took us all in tow the first week, every night and morning and gave us a run through bush and every thing, till of course we had to let go; and then we had wild excursions all over the bush with an occasional race after her again, till again she took the rope. And thus we played in the moonlight till I was at my wits end and everything was broken to pieces. My hands are wounded still. One night she took the young men of Use for a run and had them well on the road to Ikot Obong, but at length she did arrive dragging four or five of them, and she was kept a prisoner with grass and water in her room. Speak of milking this creature! But she lets me scratch her nose now, and she came home with Jean quite quietly, so I shall try to tame and pet her, and perhaps in the future, we too, may have Fresh Milk, not necessarily out of whiskey bottles, well, well!⁶¹

Whether or not the household ever got their fresh milk is unknown. No further mention was made of the cow, though the story of "Ma Slessor's coo" became well known among the missionaries.⁶²

61. MS to CP, September 13, 1908.

62. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor*, 253.