JUDGE SLESSOR IN COURT.

CHAPTER IV

Stories of how Ma kept an armed mob at bay and saved the lives of a number of men and women; how in answer to a secret warning she tramped a long distance in the dark to stop a war; how she slept by a camp-fire in the heart of the forest, and how she became a British Consul and ruled Okoyong like a Queen.

A low wailing cry, with a note of terror in it, drifted out of the forest into the sunshine of the clearing where Ma was sitting watching the work on the new house. She leapt to her feet, and listened with a far-away look on her face. Next moment she sprang in amongst the trees and disappeared.

Mr. Ovens saw that the natives about him were uneasy, and when a messenger came running up and said, "You have to go to Ma and take medicine for an accident," they burst into loud lamentations. On reaching the spot he found that Etim, the son of the chief, a lad about twenty years of age, had been caught by a log which he had been handling, and struck senseless to the ground.

"This is not good for us," Ma said, shaking her head. "The people believe that accidents are caused by witchcraft, the witch-doctor will be called in to smell out the guilty ones, and many will suffer."

They carried the lad home, and she nursed him day and night, but life ebbed away; and one Sunday morning when all was quiet and beautiful, she heard again that strange wailing sound which told of peril and death. She rushed to the scene. The men were blowing smoke from a lighted palm leaf into the lad's nose, rubbing pepper into his eyes, and shouting into his ears to keep back the spirit.

"Silly babies," she could not help saying to herself.

“He is dead," cried the chief, and giving the body to Ma he shouted in a terrible voice:

"He has been killed by sorcerers, and they must die! Where is the witch-doctor?"

The witch-doctor came, an evil-looking man with cunning eyes, and after humming and hawing he blamed the people in a village near the spot where the accident happened.

"Off! seize them!" called the chief to his freemen.

But a swift foot had secretly carried a warning to the village, and Chief Akpo and his followers had fled. Only a dozen men, and some women and babies who could not run, were captured, and they were loaded with chains and brought to Ekenge and imprisoned in a yard.

Ma felt that this was a big affair, and perhaps the turning-point in her life amongst the Okoyong.

"If these people are killed," she said, "all my work will be undone. I must prevent it at any cost."

And first she went away by herself and knelt down and prayed, and then came back calm and strong.

She knew what the natives liked, and hoping to please and soften Edem, she said to him, "I am going to honour your son." From her boxes she brought out fine silk cloth of many colours, shirts and vests and other clothes, and put them on the dead body. The head was shaved and painted yellow, and upon it was wound a turban, and above that a black and scarlet hat with plumes of feathers, and an umbrella. To one hand was tied a stick, and to the other a whip. Last of all a mirror was placed in front of the dead eyes, because the people believed the spirit would see what had been done and be glad. There he sat, the lifeless boy, with all his finery, a sad queer sight. When the people came in they yelled with delight, and danced and called for rum to make merry. Barrel after barrel was brought and emptied, and they began to grow wild, leaping about with swords and guns, and singing their weird tribal songs.

"Humph!" said Ma, "my cure seems to be as bad as the disease. Still, they have forgotten the prisoners."

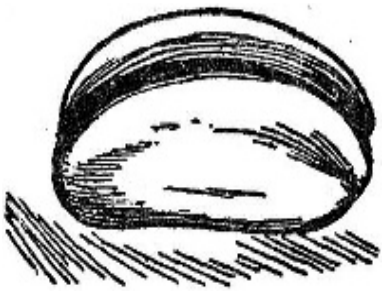
These were chained to posts, and expected every minute to have their heads chopped off. They were all very miserable. The babies were crying, and there was a girl of fifteen who clung weeping to her mother, and ran up to any one who came, saying piteously, "Oh, I'll be a slave for life if only you will spare my mother."

Ma turned to Mr. Ovens. "We must not leave these poor creatures. You will watch by day, and I will watch by night, and we may save them yet."

So time and time about these two sat on guard. They had no weapons, they were alone in the midst of a drunken mob, and yet they had no fear, for they trusted God and believed that He would take care of them.

Because they were there, Edem and his brother chiefs did not touch the prisoners. Some days passed. Then one afternoon Ma saw little brown objects lying on a stone. "Eseré beans!" she exclaimed in alarm. These beans grow on a wild vine, and are very poisonous. She knew they were to be crushed and put in water, and given to the prisoners with the idea of finding out who was guilty of the death of Etim. Of course all who drank the water would die, and the people would believe that justice had been done. That was the only kind of justice they knew.

Ma sought out the chiefs and told them they must not do this wicked thing, and when they put her aside she followed them about and begged and worried them until they became angry.



THE ESERÉ BEAN.

"Let us alone," they cried. "What does it matter? Your God will not let the innocent die."

Their followers grew excited, and some of them lost control of themselves and hustled Ma and threatened her.

"Make the dead live," they snarled, "and we shall give you the prisoners."

Ma's reply was to sit down and look at them with stern eyes.

"I will not move from here," she said firmly, "until you set all these poor people free."

It was night. Stealthy steps came into the yard. In the darkness Ma saw two men take away one of the mothers. She looked at the woman going to her death, and at the others, who pled with her to remain, for they feared this was a trick to get her away. What should she do? Praying and hoping that she was right, she ran after the mother, and was just in time, for the woman was raising the poisoned water to her lips.

"Don't," cried Ma, and giving her a push she said, "Run." In an instant both jumped into the bush and made for Ma's hut.

"Quick," Ma cried to Mr. Ovens, "hide this woman."

He drew her in and piled up boxes against the door, and Ma ran swiftly back to the yard, where, to her joy, she found the other prisoners still safe. The warriors had been so astonished at what she had done that they had forgotten all about them.

Through more weary and exciting days the struggle went on. The chiefs at last said gloomily, "We will set some of the prisoners free and see if Ma will be satisfied." After giving a number a terrible native oath, and making them swear they were not guilty, they handed them over to Ma.

"Now," said the freeman, "we will kill the others."

"No," said Ma, and dared them to do such a dreadful thing.

They stormed and raged at her.

"We shall burn down the house and yard."

"All right," she retorted. "They are not mine."

More prisoners were released, and only three were left. Eme Ete came and knelt before her brother and begged him to set free one of them, a weak and timid creature, and this was done. A man and woman now remained, and Ma was resolved to save both. After a bitter struggle they let the man go, but nothing would make them give up the woman. She was doomed to death.

One afternoon Ma was secretly told that the funeral and the murder were to take place that night, and she was sick at heart. But when darkness fell, unknown hands—were they the hands of Eme Ete?—cut the chains that bound the victim to the post, and with her leg irons on she crawled over the roof and found a refuge in Ma's room, from which, later, she fled to the freedom of the bush.

So the funeral of the young chief took place, but only a cow was killed and put into the coffin. No human blood was shed. It was the first time in the history of the tribe that such a wonderful thing had happened, and it was due to Ma's heroism and faith.

Two of the parties who went to the funeral met in the forest and quarrelled, and a man's head was cut off. War was declared, and there was much fighting before Ma got them to stop and settle the matter by palaver. "Blood for blood," was the verdict; "the murderer must die." It was a custom of the natives that another could suffer in the place of one who was condemned. This man's friends offered his youngest brother, a little child, but the judge would not have him. Then a bigger brother was sent, and accepted. Before he could be killed, however, he escaped. One day Ma heard the sound of singing and joy-guns, and was told that he had been found and put to a cruel death before the eyes of his mother and sister.

A day or two afterwards loud screams filled the air. Ma rushed out and saw the women and children fleeing towards her yard.

"Egbo! Egbo!" they cried.

She listened, and heard the throb-throbbing of a drum. Egbo was a more dreadful thing in Okoyong than in Calabar, for there was no law against it. The men were dressed in leopards' skins and wore hideous masks, and carried long whips with which they flogged all whom they caught, and often killed them. Soon the village was filled with the queer figures, and shots were being fired. The women in the yard trembled in terror, and Ma prayed. By and by the noise died away, and on looking out she found that all had gone. Only one village had been destroyed. In revenge Edem armed his men, and they went after them, and shot down every straggler they came across.

Then arose another trouble. The brother of Edem, called Ekpenyong, was accused of slaying the dead lad Etim, and after drinking heavily he said he would take the poison ordeal to prove his

innocence. When Ma arrived at his yard the women were clinging to him and trying to seize a bag which he held, and he was striking them fiercely.

"He has the beans in the bag, Ma," they cried.

She walked through the line of armed men who stood by.

"Give me the bag," she said quietly to the chief.

"No, Ma, there are only palm nuts and cartridges in it," he mumbled.

"Give it to me."

He threw it at her feet. She looked in and saw palm nuts and cartridges. Had he spoken the truth? But deep at the bottom she came upon two-score of the poison beans.

"I'll keep these," she told him.

"You will not! They are mine."

"Give them back," shouted the warriors.

Ma's heart beat wildly, but she walked down the ranks of the men, saying, "Here they are, take them."

A CHIEF AND HIS CHILDREN.

They were so amazed at her courage that they let her pass, and she went and hid the beans in her house.

During the night Ekpenyong stole off to find more beans. Eme Ete sent Ma a secret message, and she rose and followed him, and coaxed him to take the native oath instead of the ordeal.

After all these wild doings the people came back to a better mind, and began to realise how brave and good Ma was; and at night, when she was alone with her bairns, they slipped in, one by one, and called her their great white mother, and thanked her with tears for all her love and devotion.

Edem, too, was softened, and the thought of vengeance left his heart. Ma prevailed upon him to allow the chief who had run away to return. Poor Akpo! His village had been burnt to the ground, and all his goats and fowls and goods were lost. But Edem gave him a new piece of land, and seed for food plants.

"Ah, Chief," said Ma, "that is the right way; that is the Jesus way."

"Thank you, Ma." And he, too, came and knelt before her, and held her feet and poured out his gratitude for all she had done.

"Go on, Ma," he said, "and teach us to do away with the bad old bush fashions. We are weary of them, they bind us like chains, and we need you to help us."

These words thrilled Ma with happiness, and were a reward for all she had come through; but they made her humble too, for she knew that unless God had been with her she would not have borne up so long.

Now that she was surer of herself and of that wondrous Power behind her, she grew bolder still, and went wherever trouble threatened. No place was too far for her to reach. Natives in distant parts were often surprised to see her walking into their midst when they were starting to fight. Once a secret message came, saying that two tribes, many miles away, were on the warpath. Ma was ill and weak and in bed, but she rose at once. Edem said, "Ma, you are going into a wild beast's den, and will not come out alive."

Night fell as she was tramping along, and she was always nervous of the darkness and the mystery of the forest. The animals frightened her. "I prayed," she said, "that God would shut their mouths, and He did." At midnight she reached a village where she hoped to borrow a drum and a freeman to beat it before her as she marched, a sign that one under the protection of Egbo was coming. But the chief, a surly despot, would not see her, and would not give her the drum.

"If there is a war," his message said, "a woman is not likely to stop it."

Back went her reply. "You think only of the woman. You have forgotten the woman's God. I go without a drum."

On she went, and came at last to one of the villages where the trouble was brewing. All was silent and still. Suddenly, out of the darkness swarmed armed men and closed around her and demanded her business.

"I have come to stop the war."

They jeered at her, such a small, feeble woman, and smiled grimly.

"You won't do that," they said.

"We shall see. I want to have a palaver and hear the story."

"All right, Ma," they replied, humouring her. "Go to sleep until second cock-crow and we shall wake you up and take you with us." But when she was awakened the band were already away on their errand of death.

"Run, Ma, run and stop them!" cried the women, who feared what would happen; and she rushed breathlessly up and down steep tracks and through streams until she caught up with the warriors, who were making ready to attack and uttering their wild war whoops.

She walked into their midst.

"Don't go on like beardless boys," she said in scorn. "Be quiet."

Then she went on until she came upon the enemy drawn up in line across the path.

"I salute you," said she.

There was no reply. Why was this white woman interfering with them at such a moment?

"Oho! I see you are gentlemen and have nice manners."

They frowned. Things were looking dangerous, but Ma was never at a loss, and she began to smile and joke. Then stepped forward an old man and came and knelt at her feet.

"Ma, you know me? You remember you nursed and healed me?"

It was the sick chief she had gone to see after she arrived at Ekenge.

"Ma," he went on, "we confess that this quarrel is the fault of one of our foolish men, and it is a shame to bring evil on the whole town for one. We beg you to make peace."

Ma's heart thrilled with joy, and soon she had a number of men from each side talking over the matter. Often it seemed as if war must come after all, and it needed all her patience to make them agree, but at last it was decided that a fine should be imposed. To her horror this was paid at once in gin, and every one began to drink. She knew they would soon get violent and fight after all, and was almost in despair.

But taking off nearly all her clothes, she spread them over the boxes and bottles and dared any one to touch them. Only one glass would she give to each of the head men. So disappointed were the others that they surged round her in anger, but some of the older and wiser men obtained whips and made themselves into a bodyguard to protect her.

"If all of you go to your homes and don't fight," she said, "I'll promise to send the stuff after you."

They believed her, and trooped away like children.

It was night again when, worn out in body and mind, she tramped back through the dark and lonely forest, with crickets whistling and frogs croaking around her, and the little lamps of the fireflies pulsing in and out like the flashes of a lighthouse. But there was a light in her own face that even the fireflies could not outshine.

Two years passed, two years of toil and hardship and strain. In the heat and rain, by day and night, Ma was never idle. If she was not tramping through the forest and putting down the customs of the people, she was busy with work about her own door, helping the women to sew and cook, teaching the children in school, preaching on week-days and Sundays, and doctoring all who were ill. It was a marvel she kept at it so long. Perhaps it was because she had such a happy spirit, saw the funny side of things, and laughed at her troubles. She was always ready with a joke, even when lying ill in bed, and missionaries who went to see her usually found her as lively as a girl.

At this time she lived in a way that would have killed any other white person. She did not wear a hat or boots or stockings; she went about thinly clad; she ate the coarse food of the natives; and although she was careful about the water she drank she did not filter or boil it, as all white people have to do in the Tropics. It made life simpler and easier, she said, not to bother about such things. How she did it no one knew; the secret lay between her and God.

Even she, however, gave in at last. She became so ill that she was taken to Duke Town a wreck and carried on board the steamer and sent home. Janie again went with her, a woolly-headed lassie with velvet skin, and eyes that were always ready to laugh. She was beginning now to think that it would be a fine thing to be a white girl. One night, in a house in Glasgow when she was being bathed, she took the sponge and began to scrub the soles of her feet, which were whiter than the rest of her body. "Why are you doing that, Janie?" she was asked. "Oh, because the white place is getting bigger, and if I scrub perhaps I'll be all white some day!"

At this time Ma was dreaming another of her dreams. She wanted to see a place in Calabar where black boys could learn to use their hands as well as their heads, and so be able to become good workmen and teachers, and help to build up their country and make it rich and prosperous. She wrote a long letter to the Church magazine telling about her idea, and it was thought to be so good that the Church did what she asked it to do, and started a school which has grown into the great Hope-Waddell Training Institution, where boys are being taught all sorts of things.

Made strong by the home air and the love of new and kind friends, Ma fared forth again to her lonely outpost in the African backwoods.

The people of Ekenge were glad to see their white mother back, and confessed that they did not seem able to do without her. They came to her like children with all their troubles and sorrows, and she listened to their stories and advised and comforted them. When they quarrelled they said, "Let us go to Ma," and she heard both sides and told them who was wrong and who was right, and they always went away content.

She needed no longer to go to any of the villages round about when a chief died. She just sent a message that there must be no killing. There was a great uproar, but back always came the reply, "We have heard. Our mother has made up her mind. We will obey." They did not know that Ma all the time was in her room kneeling and praying to God.

Some mourned over the old ways. "Ah, Ma," they sighed, "you have spoilt all our good fashions.

We used to take our people with us when we went to the spirit land; now we must go alone."

But she had still to be on the alert, for many of the tribes at a distance from Ekenge had not yet given up their dark practices, and whenever they were bent on anything wicked they plunged deep into the heart of the forest to escape her eyes.

One day she heard that a chief had died, and was guided to one of these hidden spots, where she found his free men giving the poison ordeal to a number of prisoners. They thought she would grow tired and go away if they simply sat and waited, but days and nights passed and she remained with them, sleeping on the ground beside a fire. Of the armed men lying around her she was not afraid, but only of the wild beasts that might come creeping up through the darkness and leap upon her. It was not she who became wearied and hungry, but the men themselves, and by and by the prisoners were set free.

Eme Ete helped her most. It was she who told her when wrong-doing was being plotted. In the swift way that only natives know about, Eme Ete received news of it. Calling a trusty messenger she gave him a special kind of bottle.

"Take that to Ma and ask her to fill it with ibok (medicine)—go quick!"

When the messenger arrived at the Mission House and Ma saw the bottle, she knew what it meant. It said to her, "Be ready!" and she would not undress until she heard the cry, "Run, Ma, run!" Once she lay down to rest in her clothes for a whole month before word came, and then she saved the life of a man.

Sometimes a quarrel arose so quickly, and the call was so sudden, that she was not ready to go, and so she took a large sheet of paper and wrote anything on it that came to her mind, and after splashing some sealing-wax on it to make it look important, she sent it off by a swift runner. None of the fighting men could read, and by the time they had fingered it and talked over it Ma appeared.

She liked best, however, to appeal to the good side of the chiefs, and get them to meet and reason and settle their affairs themselves. She called it the Jesus way; they called it the God-woman way; learned men would call it "the art of self-government."

On page 10 a picture is given of one of these palavers. It was in a green glade in the forest four miles away. The chiefs of the two tribes, who sat opposite each other under coloured umbrellas, were dressed in gorgeous clothes and ringed round by armed men. Ma took her place between them and began to knit, for the natives love to talk, and she knew the palaver would be a long one. Besides, she never felt quite so nervous when she knitted. First one spoke and then another, and the long hours passed, and Ma's back began to ache, but still the talking went on, and the excitement rose to fever-heat. Darkness fell with a rush, and torches were lit and threw a weird light on the scene.

"Enough!" cried Ma. "Come, let us end."

An old chief went over all that had been said, and Ma gave the verdict, which pleased both sides.

Then, as was the custom, a warrior from each party stood forward, blood was drawn from their hands and mixed with salt and pepper and corn; and half being given to one man and half to the other, they swallowed their portions at the same moment. This was the terrible blood covenant sealing the peace between tribes, and none ever dared to break it.

The sitting had lasted ten hours, and Ma was tired and hungry, but she walked back in the moonlight feeling very happy.

So with a love that never wearied, with a patience that never gave in, with a humour that never failed, Ma gradually put down the evil order of things far and near. Year by year she grew in power, and from her house ruled over thousands of people. She was really the Queen of Okoyong. This was a marvellous thing, for at that time all the country belonged to chiefs, and they could do as they liked.

By and by a change came, and Britain took charge of the land and placed Consuls in the various districts. When Ma heard of it, she said: "You mustn't send one here. If you do there will be trouble, for my people are proud and fierce, and will fight."

"Well, Miss Slessor," the Government replied, "you know them best. Why not do the work yourself?"

And she did. She became what Dr. Livingstone had been. He always wore a blue cap with a gold band to show that he was a British Consul. Ma did not wear a hat, but she acted as a Consul, started a native court, and, like Deborah of old, judged the people and guided them about the new laws that were put into force. It was the first time in the history of our Empire that a woman had done such things. The result was all for good. Wild and lawless as the people were, they obeyed Ma, and so the rule of Britain over them began in peace.

Ma always bore herself with queenly dignity, but she was really very humble. She only did the work because she thought it was what Jesus wanted her to do. "I am only a poor weak woman," she said, "and not a Queen at all." The officials of the Government knew better; when they went to visit her they were amazed at the power she held over the people, and the deep respect and admiration they felt for her.

"She is a miracle," they exclaimed, "this white Queen of Okoyong."

AT A PALAVER.