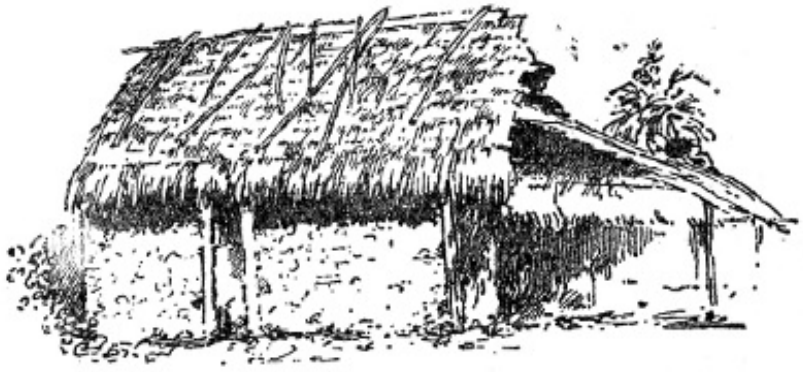

MA'S HOUSE AT AKPAP.

CHAPTER VI

How the Queen of Okoyong brought a high British official to talk to the people; how she left her nice home and went to live in a little shed; how she buried a chief at midnight; how she took four black girls to Scotland, and afterwards spent three very lonely years in the forest.

The tribes in some of the out-of-the-way places were apt to forget that British law was now the law of the land, and go back to the old habits that were so deep-rooted in their nature. Ma often threatened that she would have to make them feel the power that stood behind her. Once, when the land of a widow was stolen, she asked the people whether they would have the case judged by God's law or by the Consul and a gun? After a while they said, "Iko Abasi—God's word."

Ma opened her Bible and read: "Thou shalt not remove thy neighbour's landmark—that is God's law"; and the land was returned to the woman.

Then a chief died, and the blame was laid on one who was innocent. As a tornado was blowing, Ma could not visit the district, but she sent a message:

"I'll come and see about it when the rain goes off."

"Oh, yes," the people grumbled, "and when she comes she won't allow us to give the prisoners the bean. Let us take away the man and hide him."

And they hurried him to a spot deep in the forest beyond her reach.

Ma was vexed, and she was ill and tired. "I am not going to hunt for them this time," she said quietly. "They must learn to obey the law, and I will give them a lesson."

So she wrote to the Government at Duke Town, asking them to send up some one to deal with the matter, and she took the letter herself to the beach, and dispatched it by a special canoe.

Nothing can be hidden in negroland, and the news of what she had done soon reached the disobedient people. They came out of the forest in as great a hurry as they went in, and rushed to the Mission House.

"Where is Ma? We want Ma."

"Ma," said Janie crossly, "is away for the Consul. I hope he will bring a big gun with him. It's time. You are killing her with your silly ways."

They went back sorrowful and alarmed, for a big gun meant ruined homes and crops, and many arrests, and imprisonment down at the coast. When they saw Ma later, they begged her to ask the Consul to come with thoughts of peace and not of war.

"Good," she replied, "and we shall have a proper big palaver about all your bad customs."

When the Government official with his guard of soldiers arrived, he was amused to find the Queen of Okoyong sitting bareheaded on the roof of her house repairing a leak. She came down, and they had a palaver with the chiefs and people, who promised not to do any more killing at funerals, and not to murder twins.

Ma shrugged her shoulders. "They will promise anything," she told the officials. "I'll have to keep a close eye on them all the same."

She did; and as they broke their word she brought up the Consul-General himself, Sir Claude Macdonald. He spoke kindly, but firmly, to the chiefs.

"The laws are made for your good and safety and peace, and if you do not obey them you will be punished."

They agreed to all he said. "Sir, when words are spoken once, we don't mind them; but when they are spoken twice, we obey."

Ma also addressed them, telling of the blessings that would follow obedience, and of the quiet and happy days they would enjoy long after she had
gone.

"Ma! Ma!" they cried in alarm, "you must not leave us! You are our Mother, and we are your children. God must not take you from us until we are able to walk by ourselves."

After that things were better, though Ma's life did not grow less hard. Indeed, it was more stirring than ever. For various reasons her people were leaving their huts and building new ones at a place called Akpap, and Ma had to shut up the Mission and go with them.

The only house she could find to live in was a little shed like a two-stalled stable, or one of the sheep-houses you see on the Scottish hills, with a mud floor and no windows. But she did not

mind. She always thought of her Master, who had not a place to lay His head. So she put her boxes in one end, and in the other she lived and slept with the children.

It was a grand play-ground for rats, lizards, ants, beetles, and other jumping and creeping things. At night the rats ran over Ma, and played hide-and-seek in the roof. Once, when Mr. Ovens arrived to do some carpentry work, he went to wash himself in the shed. In the dimness he felt what he thought was a sponge floating in the basin, and saying Ma was surely getting dainty, he used it for his face, only to find that it was a drowned rat!

From this lowly hut, as from a palace, Ma continued to rule Okoyong.

Soon a strange disease seized her new lot of babies, and four died from it. Then smallpox, that dreadful scourge, swept through the land, and so many of her people were carried off that they lay unburied in their huts. Ma was busy from dawn till dark, and often from dark again till dawn, vaccinating the well ones, and nursing the ill and the dying.

To her great grief her old friend, Chief Edem, caught the disease. In spite of his faults, which, after all, were the faults of his African upbringing, he had been very good to her, and she was grateful for all he had done. When she reached his hut at Ekenge there was no one with him, for as soon as a man or a woman was stricken all others fled. She fought the disease through long weary hours, but was not able to save him, and he died in the middle of the night. Tired as she was, and weak from lack of sleep, and alone, she felt that she could not let him lie like that. Going out she got some wood and made a coffin. Then in the darkness she dug a grave and buried him. There was no dancing and drinking and killing as this chief of Okoyong entered the spirit-land, only the faint noises of the forest, and the stillness of the starry sky, and a woman's mute prayer. When all was done she dragged her wearied body back in the cool of the dewy dawn to Akpap.

Was it a wonder that she began to lose her strength? Fevers laid her low, and illnesses, due to lack of good food, weakened her. She could scarcely crawl about. Yet she would not give in, and bravely drudged away at her work. At last the other missionaries said, "Ma, if you don't go home, you will die." She did not want to die: she wanted to live, and do much more for Jesus. "If," she said, "a holiday will help me, I will go. But what shall I do with my girls? I cannot leave Janie, Mary, Alice, and Maggie here. If I go I must take them with me."

Her friends were astonished.

"How can you take four black girls to Scotland, and you so ill, Ma? It is impossible."

"God can do impossible things," she replied in simple faith. "He will keep me and take care of them."

"What about your clothes?" they asked.

"We have none but the old things we have on: the ants have eaten up the rest. But God will

provide what we need."

Sure enough, when they went to Duke Town a box arrived from a Glasgow church, and in it was all the nice warm clothing they required.

It was the same everywhere. Kindness fell on her like sunshine. At Liverpool she handed her purse to a railway porter, and he bought the tickets and fixed them up in a carriage. And at Edinburgh there was a faithful friend, Mrs. M'Crindle, on the platform, waiting to take the whole family to her home in Joppa.

"Isn't God good to me?" she often said, with a happy smile.

ALICE, MARY, MAGGIE, JANIE.

The four African foundlings were stared at by the rosy-cheeked boys and girls, who, however, were kind to them when they heard their sad stories. None except Janie knew a word of English, but they were all clever, and soon picked it up, and Mary even went to school in Portobello.

After a happy time Ma took a house of her own at Seton Mill, where she got a glimpse of the sea, and here they all lived as in Africa, Janie being cook, and Ma going about often bare of foot and bare of head. But life in Scotland is not like what it is in the wilds of the Tropics, and Ma was sometimes found shivering over the fire. So a fairy godmother, in the shape of Miss Adam, a lady of the Church who loved her, carried them off to a lovely village in the south called Bowden, where they stayed all July and August.

A little girl named Happy Gray, who was staying with Miss Adam, grew very friendly with the children, and together they wandered through the fields and woods, gathering flowers and raspberries, or climbed the Eildon Hills. They taught Happy how to burst "cape gooseberries" on the back of her hand, and showed her that when they gathered nettles they did not feel any sting. With her they drove to Stitchel Manse, where they ate apple tarts in the summer-house, and also went to St. Mary's Loch, the four black faces being a wonder to all the people in the countryside.

After a time Ma left this haunt of peace to go and speak at meetings, for she was a famous person now, and every one was eager to see and hear the wonderful pioneer who lived alone amongst savages. She was very shy, and would not open her mouth if men were listening, and if any one began to praise her she would run away. It was always the work she spoke about, and the need for more women and girls to go out and help.

Once in Edinburgh she was coaxed to address a meeting in the Synod Hall. "I dinna ken how I'm to do it," she said to a friend. "You'll pray for me? Where will you sit?" Her friend said, "In the gallery." "I'll look for you, and ken you are praying, and that will help."

And, as usual, she spoke well. By and by many students of the Church College came creeping in under the gallery and listened, and she did not seem to mind, but appealed to them too, saying, "There are many students who are ready, and making ready, to serve Jesus, and to tell about Him, and they will be running after fine churches and good manses, but there are multitudes who have never heard of Jesus out yonder. And for His sake will they not come out and work for Him there?"

Sometimes she spoke of the good of prayer. "If you are ever inclined to pray for a missionary, do it at once, wherever you are," she said; "perhaps she may be in great peril at the moment. Once I had to deal with a crowd of warlike men in the compound, and I got strength to face them because I felt that some one was praying for me just then."

At another meeting, when Mary with her bright happy face was with her, she told the young people how to be real ladies and gentlemen. "It is not," she said, "the wearing of fine clothes, or the possession of great wealth, but having gentle manners and kind consideration for the feelings and happiness of others—not the giving of our money or the denying of ourselves of small luxuries to help the coming of the Kingdom, but the cheerful daily giving of ourselves for the good of others at home and abroad."

She was most at home with children, and at her best at the tea-table, or when she curled herself up on the rug in front of the fire. Then came fearsome stories that made them tremble—true stories of what she had seen and done in dark Okoyong.

"Oh, mother," the children would say when being tucked in bed, "how can Miss Slessor live alone like that with wild men and wild beasts and everything?"

"Ah," was the soft reply, "she does it because she loves Jesus, and wants to help Him. I wonder, now, if you could love Him as much as that?"

And the little minds in the little heads that were snuggling down amongst the comfy pillows also wondered.

Ma was a puzzle to the grown-ups, too, for they saw that she was not only very shy but very timid. Some small girls had more courage than she. She would not cross a field that had a cow in it: she was nervous in the streets, and usually got some one to take her across from side to side. She had not even the nerve to put up her hand to stop a car: she would take one only if it were standing. She shook when in a boat or sitting behind a fast horse.

Why was she afraid in this way? Just because these things happened to herself. In big things, where the cause of Jesus was in danger, or others were to be protected and saved from hurt, she forgot her own feelings, and thought only what was to be done, and was braver and stronger even

than men. Her heart was so loving that she was willing to die in the service of Jesus. You remember what He said, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." That was her kind of love—the kind which Jesus Himself had for the world, which made Him do so much for us, and which led Him at last to His awful agony on the Cross.

She should have stayed a year, but when the winter came on with grey, cold, weeping skies, she and the bairns missed the sunshine and heat. Ah! and she was always thinking of the work to be done in Africa. To her friends who pressed her to stay, she said, "If ye dinna send me back, I'll swim back. Do you no ken that away out there they're dying without Jesus?" So they set sail and spent Christmas Day at sea.

What a reception they got at Akpap! "Everything will be right now," the people said, "Ma is back." And once more she became the sovereign lady of Okoyong.

The next three years were the loneliest and worst she ever spent in the forest. She was never once down in Calabar, few white persons came to see her, and she had a big battle to fight with ill-health. There was not a day that she did not suffer weakness and pain: for whole nights she never slept, for months she was low with fever, and at times she believed she was going to die. Think what it must have been for her to lie there alone, tended only by her black girls. But she was never in the dumps. Somehow her spirit always managed to conquer her body, and she would struggle up and with a droll smile and a stout heart go on with her work. Nobody knew all she did in those years, for the story is hidden behind a veil of silence; only now and again we get a glimpse of her, lit up for a moment, as by a flash of lightning, and she is always bravely fighting for Jesus and the right, now hurrying to rescue twins and orphans, now sallying out to some village to put down the drinking, now travelling far to save life.

MA MENDING THE ROOF ON SUNDAY.

When she was not doing these things she was busy about her own doors. She had now a new house with a room underneath, and here she taught the day-school and held services and Bible classes and preached on Sundays. And there were always the Court and the palavers and the dispensary and the building and repairing and cooking and digging and a hundred and one other duties. So absorbed, indeed, did she get in what she was doing that often, as in the early days at home, she lost count of time. Sometimes she did not know what day of the week it was. Sundays

had a habit of getting mixed up with other days. Once she was found holding her services on a Monday thinking it was Sunday, and again on a Sunday she was discovered on the roof hammering away in the belief that it was Monday.

She ruled with a firm but kindly hand. The hard and terrible times she had come through had changed her a little. She had still the old sweetness, but she could be stern, and even rough, with the people, and she often spoke to them in a way which a white man would not have dared to do. Those who were brought up to Court for harming women she punished severely. If any chief challenged what she said, she would take off the slipper she had put on as part of her simple Court dress, and slap him over the bare shoulder with it.

Yet she was never afraid. She went about alone by day and night, and never carried a weapon. She had no locks on her doors. Once a murderer was caught and nearly torn to pieces by the mob before he was chained and brought to Ma to be judged. She heard the evidence, and ordered him to be sent down to Duke Town for trial. Then she took off his irons, and sent away the guard, and bade him come into the house, where she sat down and talked to him earnestly for a long time. He was a big man, violent and sullen, and he could easily have knocked her down and escaped into the woods. But he listened quietly, and allowed her to lead him to the room below, where she fastened him in for the night.

Only once in all the years she spent in Okoyong was she struck, and that was by accident. There was a quarrel and a fight, and she went into the press of excited men to stop them. One of the sticks hit her. A cry of horror arose:

"Ma is hurt! Our Ma is hurt!"

Both sides at once fell on the wretched man who held the stick, and began to beat him to death.

"Stop, stop!" Ma cried. "He did not mean to do it."

And it was only by using all her strength and forcing them back that she saved his life.

And so the years wore on, and the new century came. "A new century," said Ma, sitting dreaming in her lonely little house. "What will it hold? It will at least hold His loving kindness and care all the way through, and that is enough."

For fifteen long patient years Ma gave her life to Okoyong, and she had her reward, for it became a land of peace and order and good will, the bad old customs died away, and the people were slowly but surely becoming the disciples of Jesus.

It was a wonderful thing for a white woman to have done alone, but Ma would not take any credit for it; she said it was no power of her own that had won her such a place in the heart of the wild people: it was the power of Jesus working in her and through her. He was the King of Okoyong, and she was only His humble servant-maid.

JANIE.