MA'S HOUSE AT USE.

CHAPTER VIII

Ma learns to ride a bicycle and goes pioneering; the Government makes her a Judge again and she rules the people; stories of the Court, and of her last visit to Scotland with a black boy as maid-of-all-work; and something about a beautiful dream which she dreamed when she returned, and a cow and a yellow cat.

Ma settled at Itu in a little mud hut, with a table and chair and a few pots and pans. The girls worked and slept anywhere; the babies, new and old, crawled all over the place like caterpillars, and at night lay on bits of newspaper on the floor. Ma helped in the building of the Mission House and Church, and when they were finished sent for some one to fix up doors and windows. Mr. Chapman, from the Institution, arrived, and was treated as the guest of the people, so that when he made his bed in the middle of the church the young men of the village came, as was their custom, and slept on the floor round him as a guard of honour, and got water and food for him in the morning.

Ma was as busy as a bee. She carried on a day-school, preached to four hundred people, taught a Bible Class and a Sunday School, received visitors from dawn till dusk, and explored the forest and made friends with the shy natives. Every now and then she canoed up the Creek as far as Arochuku, and stayed in the villages along the banks. Mud-and-thatch churches began to spring up. Onoyom, however, said he was not going to be satisfied with anything less than the very best House of God, and taking three hundred pounds that he had saved up, he spent it all on a fine building. When the time came to make the pulpit and seats, he said: "We want wood, cut down the juju tree." Now the juju tree is where the god of a village is supposed to live, and his men were horror-struck.

"The juju will be angry; he will not let us, he will kill us."

"Ma's God is stronger than our juju," was his reply. "Cut it down."

They went out and began the work, but the trunk was thick, and after a time they stopped.

"See, we cannot cut it."

The heathen crowd, standing in a ring watching them, were overjoyed. "Ah, ha!" they cried, "our juju is stronger than Ma's God."

Next morning Onoyom took out a party of men who wanted to be disciples of the new faith, and before beginning to hack at the tree they knelt down and prayed that the White Mother's God would prove more powerful than the juju. Then, rising, they attacked it with lusty strokes, and soon it tottered and fell with a mighty crash. It was the turn of Onoyom to rejoice.

The Juju Tree.

When the Creek churches were ready, missionaries travelled up from Calabar to open them, and were astonished to see the happy, well-clothed people, and the big sums of money they brought. At one place there was a huge pile of brass rods, the value of which was £20. You must remember that these were still heathen people, but they were longing to love and serve the true God. So eager, indeed, were they that they worried Ma until she was almost distracted. Messages came every day like this: "We want to know God: send us even a boy." "We want a White Ma like you to teach us book and washing and sewing." "We have money to pay a teacher, send one." Sometimes she laughed, and sometimes she cried.

"What can I do? I am only one poor old woman!"

Then she prayed that more missionaries might hear these calls, and come out from Scotland to help. Sometimes another kind of cry came down the Creek. A messenger from Arochuku arrived.

"Ma, the bad chiefs are going to thrust the teachers out of the land."

Ma was startled.

"And what did the teachers say?" she asked.

"That the chiefs could put them out of the land, but they could not put them away from God."

"Good, and what do the people say?"

"That they will die for Jesus."

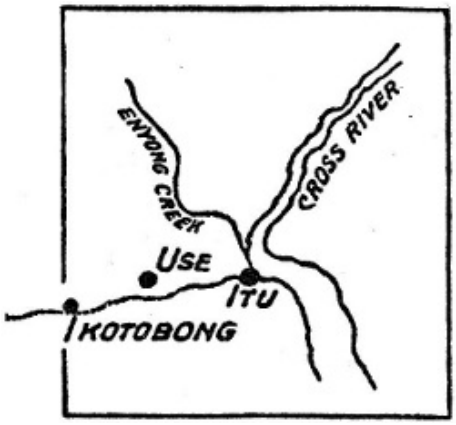
"Why, that is good news!" Ma exclaimed with delight. "Go and tell them to be patient and strong, and all will be well."

As there were no missionaries to come up and help her, she went on alone, this time into the great dark forest-land that stretched far to the west of Itu. It was the home of the Ibibios, that naked down-trodden race who had been so long the victims of slave-hunters, "untamed, unwashed, unlovely savages," Ma called them; but it was just because they were so wretched that she pitied them and longed to uplift them. Like Jesus, she wanted to go amongst the worst people rather than amongst the best.

The Government were now making a road through the forest, and as she looked at it stretching away so straight and level and broad, she began to dream again. "I will go with the road," she said, "and build a row of schools and churches right across the land." She had troops of friends amongst the white officers, who all admired and liked her, and they, also, urged her to come, and one said she should get a bicycle.

"Me on a bicycle!" she said. "An old woman like me!"

She had watched their bicycles going up and down the road, and was afraid of them. She said she would not go near them in case they should explode; but one of the officers brought her out a beautiful machine from England, and that cured her. She soon learned to ride, and it became a great help in her work.



One day she took Etim, another of her bright scholars, who was only twelve, and set out for a village called Ikotobong, six miles beyond Itu, in a beautiful spot amongst the hills, and started a school and congregation. Etim was the schoolmaster! And right bravely the little fellow wrought; very soon he had a hundred children deep in the first book.

The head-teacher at Ikotobong, one of those who learned to love Jesus through her, thus tells the story of her coming:

When she walked through the town she saw many idols which we all worshipped, and she pitied us very much. Seeing that the people were sitting in darkness she asked for a dwelling-place. The town's chiefs gave her a very nice little hill in the middle of the town. And from the first day all the people were astonished very much at her wisdom, gentleness, and love, because they had never seen a white person like her before. And amazement fell upon every one in the town concerning all that she told them about God, and pleasure filled their hearts because she lived

amongst them. Before she came the people hated one another, and did not sit in love and peace, but when she came to us her good influence and love becalmed us. Though she was an old woman she had to work like a very powerful big man. The Ibibio people wondered and wondered about her in gladness, she was so full of love to every one, and working hard every day for their good. So by all her kind and compassionate work she came to be called Adiaha Makara, meaning the eldest daughter of all Europeans, and Ma Akamba, meaning great madam.

At last God answered Ma's prayers. Three things happened.

First, the Church in Scotland, which was now called the United Free Church, resolved to follow her into the wilderness and made Itu into a regular station with a doctor in charge. A hospital, called the Mary Slessor Mission Hospital, was added, and a launch was sent out for the Creek work. "It is just like a fairy-tale," said Ma. "I am so glad for the people."

Next a man missionary was sent to Arochuku, and came back with such a glowing story of the numbers of people living there, and their longing for the right way, that he was sent up at once to open a station.

Then the Church told Ma that they would place two ladies at Akpap, and she need not return, but remain in the wilds and be a pioneer.

The sky of her life, which had been so dark before, now became clear and blue and filled with sunshine.

One afternoon a Government officer visited her and said:

"Ma, what are we going to do?"

The same question was always being put to her. Everybody, from the British officials down to runaway slaves, came to her for counsel and help; few did anything in that part of the country without first talking to her about it.

"What is it now?" she asked.

"We want a magistrate for this big and important district, and we want a very clever and strong person who will be able to rule the people and see justice done."

"Well?" she asked again.

"Oh, Ma, don't you see what I'm driving at?"

"Fine that," she answered with a twinkle. "You want a very clever and strong man to rule this people, and see justice done, a very worthy aim."

"Quite so, and you are the man we want, Ma."

"Me? hoots, laddie, the tea must have gone to your head!"

"No, Ma, I'm serious. We officers can't do the work; we haven't the language for one thing, and you know it better than the natives themselves; also you know all their ways and tricks; they worship you; you have great power over them; and what a chance to protect the women and punish the men as you like! Think of the twins, Ma!"

"Ay," mused Ma, "it might help God's work. I don't like it, but I would do it for His sake."

"Thank you, Ma. Your official title will be Vice-President of the Native Court, but of course you will be the real President and do as you like. The salary will be——"

"I'll take no salary," she snapped. "I'm not doing it for the Government. I'm doing it for God."

By and by the letter from the Government came appointing her, and saying that her salary would be given to the Mission to help on her work.

So Ma became again the only woman judge in the Empire. The Court was held in a thatched building at Ikotobong. Ma sat at a small table, and around her were the chiefs getting their first lessons in acting justly and mercifully towards wrongdoers. Often she had to keep them in order. They were very fond of talking, and if they did not hold their tongues she just rose and boxed their ears.

She sat long days trying the cases, her only food a cup of tea and a biscuit and a tin of sweets. She needed all her courage to get through, for the stories of sin and cruelty and shame poured into her ears were terrible for a white woman to hear. "We do not know how she does it," the other missionaries said. She could not have done it had it not been that she wanted to save her black sisters and the little children from the misery they suffered.

She was like no other judge in the world, because she had no books to guide her in dealing with the cases, nothing but her knowledge of the laws and customs of the people and her own good sense. She knew every nook and cranny of the native mind, and although many lies are told in African Courts, no one ever deceived her. They often tried, but she always found them out, and then they would cower and slink away before her flashing eye.

Very difficult questions which puzzled the Government officials had sometimes to be decided, but Ma was never at a loss. Once two tribes laid claim to a piece of land, and a British Commissioner tried for days to find out to whom it belonged, and failed. He was in despair. Ma came, and as usual appealed to the people themselves.

"Isn't it the custom for the tribes to whom land belongs to sacrifice to it?"

"Yes, Ma."

"Can you tell the tribe that has been in the habit of sacrificing to this bit of land?"

"Yes, Ma. Our tribe," said one of the big men.

"Then it belongs to you."

"Quite right, Ma," cried every one, and they went away laughing.

The people who came to Court were so ignorant and foolish that Ma sometimes did what no other judge would do; she treated them like naughty children, and gave them a slap or a rap over the knuckles, and lectured them and sent them away. After sullen, fierce-looking men had been fined for some offence, she would take them to the Mission House and feed them and give them work. Then, in the evening, she would gather them together and talk to them about Jesus.

The oath given to the witnesses was not the British one, but the native one or mbiam. A pot or bottle was brought in filled with a secret liquid which had a horrible smell. One of the chiefs dipped a stick into it and put some of the stuff on the tongue, head, arm, and foot of the witnesses, who believed that if they told a lie it would kill them. They often trembled with fear when taking it. Once one died suddenly after giving false evidence, and the people thought it was a judgment upon him.

THE MBIAM POT.

GIVING THE OATH.

Judge Slessor had to look sharply after the native policemen, for they were important men in their own eyes, and often did things they ought not to have done. One went to summon villagers to clean the roads. The children in the Mission school were singing their morning hymn, and he rushed in among them lashing with his whip and shouting, "Come out and clean the roads." The teachers complained, and the policeman was tried before Ma.

"You need to be punished," she said, "for you have grown so big that you will soon be knocking your head against the roof." This pleased the people even more than the punishment he got from the jury.

The Court became famous in the land, for the people knew that Ma understood them and gave them justice. So much, indeed, did they trust her that they got into the habit of taking their quarrels and troubles first to the Mission House, and there Ma made peace and saved them going to law. Even when she was ill they came and squatted down outside her bedroom window, and the girls took in their stories to her, and she called out to the people and told them what to do.

A young man, a slave, wanted to be free, and came to Ma. "I am sorry," she said, "the Court

cannot do anything, but—the country lies before you."

He took the hint, and bolted out of the district.

A huntsman, in search of game, saw a movement amongst the bushes, and cried out, "Any one there?" There was no answer, and he fired. A scream made him rush to the spot, and to his horror he found that he had shot a girl. He carried her to the nearest house, where she died. He was brought up and tried, and acquitted, as he had not meant to harm her. But native law is "life for life," and the people demanded a life for the life that had been taken. The man, in his despair, ran to Ma. Cutting off a lock of his hair, he gave it to her. This meant that all he had was hers, and that the tribe would have to deal with her too. But she knew that if he stayed he would be killed, and told him to fly, which he did.

Ma was also going on with her real work, preaching and teaching, training boys and girls to become little missionaries, and carrying the light of the Gospel further and further into the heathen forest. And, as usual, she was dreaming dreams. She now remembered the dream of Mr. Thomson to build a holiday home for the missionaries. She said to herself, "Can I not build a little one for the ladies in Calabar?" Some money came to her, and she sought out a spot on the wooded hills nearer the Creek called Use, and began to put up several mud cottages that might be used for rest-homes. She did most of the work herself, with the aid of Janie and the other girls, sleeping the while on the floor in a hut.

One night a lady missionary stayed with her who was anxious to get away early next morning.

"All right," said Ma, "I'll set the alarum clock."

The visitor looked puzzled, for there were no watches or clocks to be seen. Ma went out to the yard where the fowls were kept and brought in a rooster and tied it near the foot of her bed. At dawn the "alarum" went off; the cock crew, and the sleepers were roused.

"Ma," said a Government doctor at last, "you will die if you do not take a rest." And very sorrowfully she replied that it was likely, and so she went home to Scotland, taking Dan and leaving Janie to take care of the other children.

Dan, who was only six years old, proved a very handy little man-of-all-work. He soon learned to speak English, and ran her messages, carried her parcels, and even cooked her tit-bits of food. He had a royal time, being loaded with toys and books and sweets, and Ma was anxious that he should not be spoiled. She would often ask those with whom she stayed to allow him to sit on the floor, that he might not forget who he was.

He had quick eyes, and saw everything. When he went out in a town with Ma he begged to have the money for the street cars, for, he said, "Gentlemen always pay for the ladies!" But he did not always understand what he saw. At table he thought the sharpening of the carving-knife on the steel was part of the grace before meals!

Her friends found Ma much changed. "Oh, Mary," said one, "I didn't know you."

"Nae wonder," she said, laughing, "look at my face!" It was dark and withered and wrinkled, though her eyes were as bright and merry as ever and full of changing lights.

One day she went to pay a visit to Mrs. Scott, the lady of the manse at Bonkle, in Lanarkshire. They had written to one another for years, but had never met. There were young people there, and all were greatly excited, for the black boy was also expected. Everything that love could think of was done for the comfort of the guest. At last the cab appeared at the bend of the road, and all hurried to the gate. Down jumped Dan smiling, sure of his welcome. Then was helped out a frail and delicate lady, who looked round shyly and brightly answered all the greetings. She walked slowly up the garden path, gazing at the green lawns and the flower-beds and the borders of shady trees, and drinking in the goodness of it all.

"All this," she said, "and for me!"

She was so weak and ill that she was glad to sink into a cushiony chair placed for her in the sunniest corner of the sunny room. The young girls followed her in. Stretching out her hands towards them, she cried:

"Oh! how many of you lassies am I to get?"

And, glad to tell, she did get one, Miss Young, who went out to Calabar and became to her like a daughter, and was afterwards picked out by the Church as the one best fitted to carry on the work that lay closest to her heart after she herself was done with it all.

It was times like these that made Ma young again. She just wandered quietly about in the woods and meadows, or went and listened to the music practices in the church. She was delighted with the singing, and before leaving thanked the precentor for the pleasure she had got, and he gave her his tuning-fork, which he valued, and she kept it as one of her treasures to the end.

Coming out one night after the service, she looked up to the starry sky, and said, "These stars are shining upon my bairns—I wonder how they are"; and once, when "*Peace, perfect peace? with loved ones far away*!" was sung, she said: "I was thinking all the time of my children out there."

She missed them more and more as the months went on. One afternoon, when she was sitting down to tea in a house in Perthshire, she begged to be allowed to hold a red-cheeked baby-boy on her knee. "It is more homely," she said, "and I have been so used to them all these years."

Then she made up her mind. "I cannot stay longer, I am growing anxious about my children. I am sure they need me." Her friends tried to keep her, but no, she must go. They bade her farewell at one or two large meetings, where her figure, little and fragile, and worn by long toil in the African sun, brought tears to many eyes. The meetings were very solemn ones. As she spoke of the needs of Africa, one who listened said: "It is not Mary Slessor who is speaking, but God."

One night before she sailed she was found crying quietly in bed, not because she had no friends, for she had many, but because all her own loved ones were dead, and she was homeless and lonesome. She just wanted her mother to take her into her arms, pat her cheek, and murmur, as she had done long ago, "Good-bye, lassie, and God be with you."

Dan did not wish to leave all the delights of his life in Scotland, and although he had mechanical toys and books and sweets to cheer him, he sobbed himself to sleep in the train.

So Ma looked her last upon the dear red and grey roofs and green hills of Scotland, for she never saw them again.

She went to Use, which now became her home. It was a lonely place amongst trees, near the great new highway. A wonderful road that was. Bordered by giant cotton trees and palms, it ran up and down, over the hills, without touching a village or town. These were all cleverly hidden away in the forest, for the people had not got over their terror of the slave-hunters. Except on market-days the road was very silent, and you met no children on it, for they were afraid of being seized and made slaves. Leopards and wild cats roamed over it at night.

At one part a number of rough concrete steps led to the top of the steep bank, from which a narrow path wound up the hillside and ended in a clearing in the bush. Here stood Ma's queer patchwork mud-house, just a shapeless huddle of odd rooms, with a closed-in verandah, the whole covered with sheets of trade-iron, tin from mission-boxes, and lead from tea-chests. It was hard to find the door, the steps of which were of unhewn stones.

She began to work harder than ever. What a wonder she was! She did all the tiresome Court business, sometimes sitting eight hours patiently listening to the evidence; she held palavers with chiefs; she went long journeys on foot into the wilderness, going where no white man went. On Sundays she visited and preached at ten or twelve villages, and between times she was toiling about the house, making and mending, nailing up roofs, sawing boards, cutting bush, mudding walls, laying cement. Was it surprising that her hands were rough and hard, and often sore and bleeding?

She was seldom well, and always tired, so tired that at night she was not able to take off her clothes, and lay down with them on until she slept a little and was rested, and then she rose and undressed. At times she was on the point of fainting from pain, and only got relief from sleeping-draughts. It was true of her what one of the missionaries said: "God does most of His work here by bodies half-dead, but alive in Christ."

She had now, however, hosts of friends, all willing to look after her. Nearly every one, officials, missionaries, traders, and natives, were kind to her. Sir Walter Egerton, the British Governor, and Lady Egerton would send her cases of milk for the children, and the officials pressed upon her the use of their steamers and motor-cars and messengers and workmen. At Ikotobong was Miss Peacock, that girl with the great thoughtful eyes who had listened so eagerly to Ma when she had addressed the class in Falkirk years before. She became one of the many white daughters who hovered about her in the last years and ministered to her. Two missionary homes were open to

her in Calabar, those of Mr. and Mrs. Wilkie and Mr. and Mrs. Macgregor, and there she was always made comfortable and happy.

Once Government officials found her so ill that they lifted her into the motor-car and took her down to the Mission House at Itu. Something rare and precious was there, a bonnie white child, the daughter of the doctor missionary. During the first few days when Ma was fighting for her life, little Mamie often went to her side and just stood and stroked her hand for a while, and then stole quietly away.

When the turn for the better came, she charmed Ma back to health by her winning ways. For hours they swung together in the hammock on the verandah, and laughed and talked and read, their two heads bent over the pages of *Chatterbox* and *The Adviser*, and over the *Hippopotamus Book* and *Puddleduck*, and other entrancing stories. Some times they got so absorbed in these that time was forgotten, and "Oh, bother!" they said when the sound of the gong called them to meals. Ma was still a little child at heart.

After she returned to Use a new church was opened at Itu, and as she was not able to go down she wrote this letter to Mamie:

> I may not get to the big function, which will make me rather cross, as I have looked forward to it. Anyhow if I am not there will you pop my collection into the plate for me, like a bonnie lassie? I wish it were multiplied by ten.
>
> I wanted you and me to have a loan of that pretty picture-book of your mother's. It has all the blouses and hats and togs that they keep in the store in Edinburgh, and I was just set on our sitting together and picking out a nice coat and hat and pinafore, all of our own choosing, for you to wear in Scotland. Oh! but you may be going to England? Oh well, they are much the same. But here we can't do it, for it will be too late to get them for you to land in. Anyhow ask that dear Mummy of yours to help you to choose, and you will buy them with these "filthy lucre" pennies. Mind, the Bible calls them "filthy lucre," so I am not saying bad words!
>
> Now, dear wee blue eyes, my bonnie birdie, are we never to have a play again or a snuggly snug? We shall see, but I shall never forget those days with old Brown and Mittens and the Puddleduck relations, and all your gentle ways and winsome plays. Be Mama's good lassie and help her with all the opening day's work, and you yourself will be the bonniest there. If I am there you will sit beside me!

Ma's mind was as restless as her body. She was for ever planning what more she could do for Jesus. Her new dream was a beautiful one, perhaps the best of all. To understand it you must know that the women and girls in West Africa all belonged to households, and were bound, by native law, to obey the heads of these—their masters. The compounds were their only homes. If they became Christians they still had to do what their heathen masters told them. When they were given orders which as true servants of Jesus they could not obey without doing wrong, they were in a fix, for if they left the compounds it was not easy for them to live, as they had no houses in

which to stay and no farms where they could work and grow food. Ma had often thought of the problem, and now she made up her mind that the women and girls must be taught simple trades, so that if they had to leave the compounds they would be able to support themselves.

And this was her dream. She would start a home for women and girls where she would take in waifs and refugees and other helpless ones, and train them to do things, such as the weaving of baskets, the making of bamboo furniture, shoe-making, and so on. They could also rear fowls and goats and cows, and dig, and grow food-plants and fruit-trees. And best of all, they would learn to be clean and tidy and womanly.

Ma was never long in making her dreams begin to take form. She went out one morning to look round the land at Use. Why, Use was the very place for the settlement! She would begin in a small way with just a few cottages and a garden, and gradually make it bigger. She started at once, and soon had many useful trees and plants in the ground, and fowls and goats and a cow in the yard.

That cow was a wild one, and a great bother, as it was always breaking out and wandering into the forest. Ma had no tinkling bell, but she tied a tin pail to the beast so that the rattling noise might tell where it was.

The stock had to be watched, for wild animals roamed about after dark, and leopards often sprang into the yard in search of prey.

One or two rooms at Use were kept for visitors. The doors of these were sealed up with strips of bamboo and mud until they were wanted. Once two lady missionaries arrived, and had to sleep a night before the doors were hung. Not long before a leopard had carried off the cow's calf, and the ladies thought it wise to barricade the hole. Ma looked on smiling, and said:

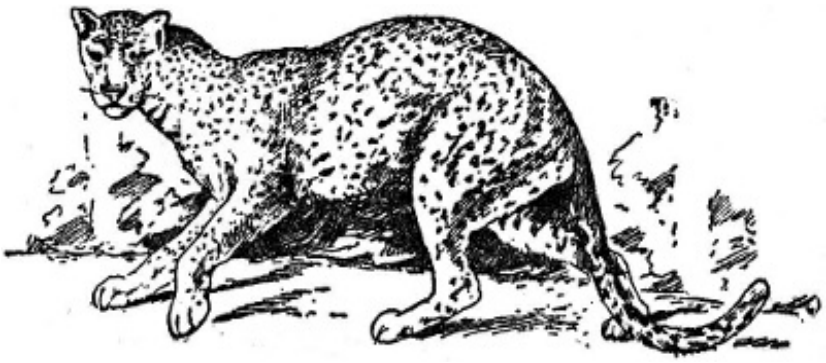
"There will be rats and lizards and centipedes, and maybe a snake, but a leopard would never come in ... even though it did it would just look at you and go away again."

"We'll not give it the chance, Ma," said the ladies.

"Well, I'll give you the cat: it will scare the rats at any rate."

This cat, a big yellow one, had been found, when a kitten, meowing piteously by the side of a bush track, and was taken to the Mission House, where it became a favourite with Ma. It always travelled with her, lying in a canvas bag at the bottom of the canoe, or motor-car, and sometimes she carried it on her shoulder.

The night did turn out to be a lively one, for although no leopard came, every other kind of creeping and jumping and flying thing paid the ladies a visit, and there was not much rest for them, nor for the yellow cat, which hunted the rats until the dawn.



A WEST AFRICAN LEOPARD.