A STYLE OF HAIRDRESSING.

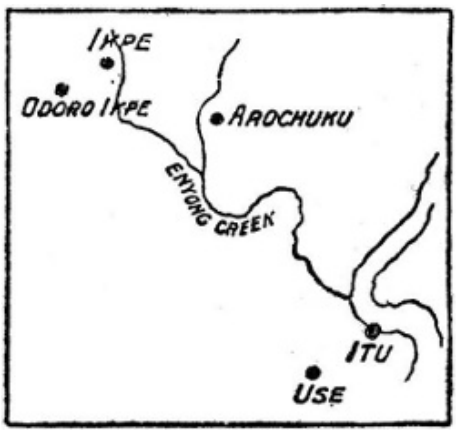
CHAPTER IX

Ma goes farther up the Creek and settles in a heathen town in the wilds; she enters into happy friendships with young people in Scotland; has a holiday in a beautiful island, where she makes a secret compact with a lame boy; and is given a Royal Cross for the heroic work she has done.

One day there came out of the unknown a black boy with a number of strange-looking men.

"Mökömö Ma," he said, "I salute you. We come to see you. We are from Ikpe. The soldiers and the people fought there and the people fled. I know about you and I told them and they want your help."

"Ikpe?" echoed Ma. "Where is that? I never heard of it."



"Far up the Creek," he replied vaguely; "two days by canoe. A big town."

"But I never knew of trading canoes going there."

"No, Ma, they don't allow Calabar men at Ikpe."

"Oh, I see, a closed market. Well, what do they wish?"

"They want to be god-men and learn book."

She talked long with the men, whose cry was "Come yourself, Ma, come back with us."

It was known that she was always ready to go anywhere at a moment's notice.

"No, not now, I cannot, but I'll come soon"; and having her promise they went away with light hearts.

She was growing very, very feeble, and she shrank from entering a new place, where she would have no friends amongst the natives and could see no white faces, but the spirit of adventure still tugged at her heart, and one morning she boarded a canoe and went up the river.

It was a wonderful thing, even for her, to lie in the canoe and watch the changing beauty of the Creek. They passed the places she knew, and then came to a region that was strange to her. Hour after hour they sped, pushing through the tangle of water-lilies, watching the fishermen plunging their spears into the mud after fish, passing farms where the green corn was sprouting, and bare landing-beaches where long canoes lay side by side, coasting along stretches of thick jungle where the water was green and the air cool; where lovely flowers and ferns grew on the branches, and monkeys gambolled and swung by their tails; where butterflies and dragon-flies glinted in the sunlight, and snakes slid down old trunks and stole rustling away.

Now and again she saw the snout of a hippopotamus, with its beadlike eyes, watching them, and noted that the banks were scored by their massive feet. After they had done eight hours' paddling one of these monsters rose angrily in front and opened its enormous jaws as if it would swallow the canoe and the paddlers and Ma and all. The stream was narrow and darkness was falling, and Ma said, "Well, well, old hippo, we won't dispute your right to turn us aside." The canoe made for the bank, and Ma stayed all night in a dirty little hut swarming with mosquitoes. The chief here had heard of her and the Jesus religion, and was already praying to what was to him the unknown God. "And my people just laugh at me," he said. Ma prayed with him and cheered him and left him happier.

In the lovely morning light the canoe went on, until the Creek became like one of these little streams which feed the mills in Scotland. Ma had at last to get out and walk through the bush. She came to Ikpe, a large mud town, very dirty and smelly, where all sorts of tribes mingled, and found that the people wore little or no clothes, that the girls and boys ran about naked, and that all, old and young, seemed more wicked and shameless than any natives she had seen.

Only a few welcomed her, and these, having heard of her promise, and knowing that she always kept her word, had begun to build a church, with two rooms at the end for her to live in. It was situated in a circle of tall palm trees among which monkeys romped and chattered.

She remained some days, living on native food, and when she left told the people she would come back.

Several times she returned, and always the people asked:

"Ma, have you come to stay?"

"No, not yet."

"Oh, Ma, when are you coming?"

What could she reply? How could she leave the work at Use? She begged the Church to send up other ladies, but the months passed, and meanwhile two churches were ready in the district, and the people were beseeching her to come.

"It's another call," she said, "and I must obey. I'm an old woman and not very fit, but I'll do my best, and I'll carry on the work at Use too. No more idleness for me!"

So up and down the Creek she went. The journey always took the best part of two days. A canoe, with ten paddlers, was sent down from Ikpe to the beach near Itu. What a bustle there was at Use before everything was ready! Then the house had to be shut up. This was done by nailing the windows, and building in the doorways with strips of wood and clay.

In the afternoon the household set off, Ma sitting in the centre of the canoe on a chair, and the children and babies round her, and the yellow cat in its bag at her feet. When it grew dark they landed at some village and spent the night, and before daybreak at four o'clock they were off again. Ma did not like the bit which was haunted by hippos. "But," she would say, "they haven't touched me yet; they just push up their ugly heads and stare at me."

When the sun became strong and they were all hot and tired they went ashore at a clearing, and the paddlers lit a fire and cooked some food, Ma joking all the time to keep everybody happy. Ikpe beach was reached about four in the afternoon, and there was still a long walk before them, and it was a very weary company that lay down to rest.

The paddlers were just the wild boys of Ikpe, very good-hearted under all their badness, as Ma told the Sunday School children of Wellington Church, Glasgow:

> They are ungrudging hard workers too. They paddle the whole day, singing as merrily as if the sun were not beating on them like a blazing fire. When we came up a month ago we had such a heavy load of timber for building purposes that they could hardly get a seat. One chief on the road asked me to put a part of it at his beach as they would never be able to take it up, but the boys sturdily answered, "The canoe is good, let us go on."
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> They pulled eight hours on end without stopping to eat a bite. About seven o'clock we all lay down, after holding worship in the canoe, and didn't they sing! And then the moon began to show through the mist about 3 A. M., and they jumped and pushed off, and then for eight hours pulled and sang and laughed and shouted in their high spirits, wakening the echoes of dreadful-looking places, where mud and ooze hold the crocodile and other creatures.

It was the same coming back, and when they all arrived at Use they broke a little hole in the

doorway and crept in and threw themselves down on bed and floor until morning. They were often soaked, and Ma sometimes was so tired and ill and racked with pain that she could not leave the canoe, but slept in it all night. "However can you do it?" she was asked. "Oh," she replied cheerily, "I just take a big dose of medicine and wrap myself in a blanket and manage fine."

Once when she got back to Use she found that a tornado had damaged the house, and she began to repair it with her own hands. The hard work was too much for her, and she took to her bed and became delirious. Yet she struggled up and went over to the church and sat in a chair and preached.

A young missionary, Dr. Hitchcock, had come out to take charge of the medical station at Itu for a time. He had heard of Ma and of her masterful ways, but he was strong too, and not afraid of her, and when he saw her so ill he took her in charge and ordered her firmly to do what he bade her, just as if she had been a child. Poor Ma! She was a child in strength then, and she obeyed him meekly, and he treated her like a mother and she loved him as a son, and under his kind and watchful care she gradually got better. "But you mustn't cycle any more," he said, "you are past that now." So some friends in Scotland sent her out a basket-chair on wheels which the boys and girls pushed, and in this she continued to make her journeys into the forest.

A special joy in these lonely days was the love of many girls and boys at home. She told one that she had always a few choice packets of letters lying beside her chair and bed, and took them up as one would take up a book, and read them over and over again. Many were from her little friends. They told her about their schools, their games, their holidays, their pets, and their books—the letters of one boy, she said, were always like a sardine tin, they were so packed full of news—and she sent long replies back, wonderful replies, full of fun and stories and nonsense and good sense.

One of the mothers said she was very kind to take such bother.

THE CHURCH AT IKPE.

"Why," she wrote, "look at their kindness to me! The darlings, with their perfectly natural stories and their ways of looking at everything out of a child's clear innocent eyes, and the bubbling over of the joys of a healthy life. It is a splendid tonic, and just a holiday to me too, taking me with them to the fields and the picnics and the sails on the lochs. Oh, one can almost feel the cool breeze and hear their shouts. Don't you think for a moment that though I am like a piece of wrinkled parchment my heart is not as young as ever it was, and that I don't prefer

> children to grown-up folks a thousand times over. I would need to, for they have been my almost sole companions for twenty-five years back. Oh, the girls at home are so bonnie with their colour and their hair and their winsome ways. I just loved to look at and to talk with them when I could. In church and Sunday School they were a thing of beauty and a joy to me all the time. I don't say that I don't love black bairns better and know them better than white ones, for I do. But one must confess to the loveliness of Scottish girls."

One of her most loving and diligent little correspondents was Christine Grant Millar Orr, who stayed in Edinburgh, and was, at this time, just thirteen, a clever girl, fond of writing stories and poems, and as good as she was clever.

Her fresh young heart went out to the weary and lonely old lady in the African bush who chatted to her so charmingly. "You have a genius for letter-writing," she told Ma. "Your letters are so full of news and yet so full of love and tenderness and your own dear self."

Here is a bit from one of Ma's letters to her:

> What a bonnie morning this is! It will be dark and cold with you. It is half-past six, and I am in the little verandah which is my sanctum. We have had breakfast, but I am not yet able to do any work, as I need an hour or so to get the steam up. So I shall bid you a good-morning, and just wish you could be here to enjoy our bush, and cocoa-nut and oil and wine palms which surround us, all wrapped in a bewitching lovely blue haze from the smoke of the wood fire. Yes, you would even enjoy the pungent smell of the bush smoke, and would think there were few places like Calabar.... But an hour later! Oh, it will be hot!

Ma thus tells Christine about the "smokes" season, which lasts from November to February:

> It is a funny season when the air is so thick with what seems fine sand that you can't see ten yards away, and the throat and back of the nose and the whole head is dry and disagreeable, just like influenza at home. Between these "smokes," which are supposed to come from the Great Sahara Desert, the hot season blazes forth in all its fury, and one feels so languid and feeble, and wonders where one can go for a breath of air or a mouthful of cold water. Then the snow on the moors and the biting winds and the sea waves of your cold land sing their siren songs.

No wonder Christine wrote back:

> How I should love to take you bodily out of African heat and work and give you a long sweet holiday at The Croft, with your face to the greenest field in Scotland, and the great hills and the fresh caller air everywhere. The blossom, white and pink, the laburnum, the heavy masses of hawthorn, the sweet odours of wallflower, the calling of the blackbirds, the mossy lawn, the shady glade with birch trees and wild hyacinths and baby birdies in the hedges, and the glorious

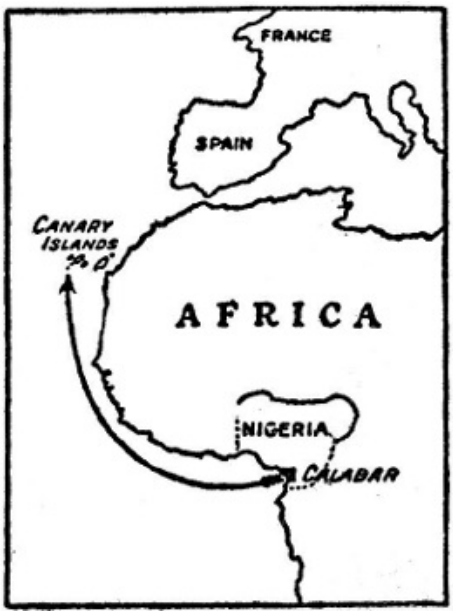
warm spring sunshine gliding through the leaves—how you would love them all!

Kind hearts at home knew of the longing for a change that sometimes came to Ma, and one of the ladies of the Church, Miss Cook, like a fairy godmother, quietly arranged that she should take a trip to the Canary Islands, and paid all the cost. Ma felt it was a very selfish thing for her to accept when there were others who also needed a rest, but the doctors said:

"Ma, if you go you will be able for a lot of work yet."

"In that case," she replied, "I'll go." She took Janie with her.

It was her first real holiday, for she had nothing to do but bask in the sunshine among the flowers and be petted by everybody, especially by Mr. and Mrs. Edisbury, who managed the hotel at which she stayed. What a time of joy it was! "From the first hour we arrived in fear and trembling," she said, "to the hour we left with a heart full to overflowing, our visit was a delicious vision of every kind of loveliness."



She was not long in the hotel before she heard that Mrs. Edisbury had a little lame son, nine years old, named Ratcliffe, who could only walk about on crutches. She could hardly walk herself then, and her tender heart was filled with love and pity and sympathy for the boy. "Oh," she said, "I must see him." She found him in the nursery, a very bright and eager child, and at once they became fast friends. For hours he would sit by her side, his great grey-blue eyes fixed on her face, while she told him thrilling stories of her adventures in wild Africa.

Before they parted they had a quiet talk and made a secret bargain. Each was to do something every day only known to themselves; nobody was to be told—not even Ratcliffe's own mother. His face was glowing when they were planning it, and he felt it was splendid to have a secret which one would think about from day to day, but which no other person would know of. His mother and aunt heard that it had been made, and sometimes they teased him to tell, but he just smiled, and nothing ever made him open his lips and speak of it. We shall learn by and by what it was.

On board the steamer going back Ma wrote a long letter to Ratcliffe:

> You were in the land of Nod long before our boat came in, so neither Janie nor myself could go to say good-bye to you. But what do you think your dear daddy did? Just came away with us in the middle of the night, in the dark and the cold, and took us to the boat with all our luggage and stuff, and in the dark found our way for us to the big steamer, and then up the long stair at the ship's side, and

> brought us into the cabin where I am now sitting, and which has to be our home for the next ten days or so. And your dear mother waited up to say good-bye, and so did your dear aunty, and they sent us off laden with apples and flowers, and, better still, with warm loving wishes and hopes that we should meet again. My heart was glad and thankful, but it was very sore and sorry, and I am afraid I cried a wee bit when Mr. Edisbury went away out into the dark and left us. How happy your dear parents and your auntie made us! and how good it was to meet you. It will ever live as a picture in my heart and memory the times we spent with you, and it was very good for Janie to know you....
>
> We have a crowd on board, and to-day we had a birthday cake to tea, because it is a lady's birthday. As no one ever asks a lady how old she is—you remember us talking about that—well, they put 21 on the icing of the cake, but she is an old lady, and they made her funny presents, a little dolly, and a china pug dog with a tail that keeps wagging after you have touched it, and some beads. It was such fun. There is so little to do on board that every one gets wearied, and wants a bit of fun to pass the hours away....
>
> And now, dear little friend, good-bye. Be good and brave, and hurry putting your pennies in the bank so that you can come to see us and stay a long time. Janie sends her compliments to you and to all, and says, "Do not forget us." So say I.

Joyful days in Ratcliffe's life were these when letters arrived from Ma, "bang, bang from the wilds," as she said. In all she spoke of the mysterious secret. "Now, sonny," she would say, "do you remember our little secret treaty? I do, and keep it. There is a telephone and a telegraph, secret, wireless, swift, which never fails, and it carries to Canary via the Kingdom of God." Or this, "Are you remembering our old secret? Dear old sweet-heart, so am I, and I get surer and surer than ever for the Best. Keep on!"

Sometimes Ratcliffe wrote in reply, sometimes his mother or auntie, but always there was a message to say that "the secret was being kept."

Ratcliffe liked to hear about the children and their doings and about the teeming life of the forest, "cunning things among insects and beautiful flies and butterflies and small creatures among the bushes glistening like fine stones or flowers," but best of all he loved the snake stories like this:

> One night in the dark there came up to my ears small screams from below. Janie was jumping about and Annie and she were throwing things, and by the light of the fire it looked awful. Janie laughed back to my screams, "It is a snake, don't come," and she was lashing all she was able with a stick. Annie was making noise, and not much more. I got round in my slow way to the outside. Janie had forced it back till she and Annie and Maggie were all on the outside and could run, but Janie held on, and I threw her a machete and she hacked the things into bits. In the morning the bits were all gone, some other beast had eaten it, and there were only marks. Another day Janie was chasing with the others a horrid thing we call

> Asawuri. I don't know what it is in scientific English. It makes a long oo-o-oo-o of a note and lives in the bush in a hole. It is bigger than a lizard and marked handsomely like a snake, and has a deadly poison; that's why God has given it the note of warning, I suppose. Janie killed it.... I am always keeping my secret. Are you? Don't slacken! Don't tell.

Ma always tried to cheer and help him:

> I expect you will be at school by this time. Are you? How do you like it? Do the masters give any punishments? I am sure they won't need to do that with you, for you will be doing your best. But it will sometimes be hard to do lessons when it is hot, and you will want to do other things; and let me whisper a secret to you. I, too, am an awful duffer at arithmetic! I simply can't do it. Never mind, I've got on fairly well, and so will you; and now I have only the sums of the boys in the school to bother me, and I never give them harder ones than I can do quickly and explain well myself. You will come out on top some day. All the same, try for all you are worth and catch up. Auntie and mother will help you—that's what aunties and mothers are for, you know. Just you put your arms round auntie's neck and look at her with your bonnie speaking eyes, and you'll see what will happen. Janie can't count at all, she never could, and I had a great pity always for her, and yet what could I do without Janie? She is worth a thousand mathematicians to me and to our people.

Ma rejoiced that she was able to do a little more for her beloved Master, and she began to take more care of her health. She did not want to be great or famous, only to walk very quietly from day to day, and do simple things, looking after the needs of her people and fighting the sin and ignorance that marred their lives. So we find her again at Use and Ikpe spending the long hours preaching, teaching, doctoring, building, cementing, painting, varnishing—a very humble and happy woman.

She paid a visit to Okoyong, the first since she had left eight years before. The wild old station had become so quiet and peaceful that it was almost like a bit of Scotland, and there was a fine new church. Everybody came to "köm" her, and she could scarcely get her meals for talking about the long ago. She saw Eme Ete and Mana, and Iye the mother of Susie, and Esien, now a leading Christian, and many others; and when she went over to the church she found four hundred people gathered to hear her, the men and boys in the centre, and the women in coloured frocks and head-dresses at the side, while the children sat in rows on the floor. All were clean and tidy, and she thought what a big change it was from the terrible days when the naked villagers were only fond of drink and bloodshed.

"Yes," said a church member later to one of the lady missionaries, "even the leopards became less bold and dangerous when Ma came!"

She was glad to have a talk with Eme Ete, but sorry to know that she was still a heathen, and sacrificed every day in her yard to a mud white-washed figure of a woman that had egg-shells for

eyes. There was also a mud altar on which she laid her offerings of palm-wine, gin, and food, and sometimes she put a fowl or eggs in the lap of the image. Her rooms were full of charms, such as bunches of grass and feathers and bottles. It made Ma very sad. Eme Ete died soon after, and from the roof of her house was hung a great fold of white satin, which is a sign of death in a heathen home, and the doors were shut and the place left to rot and fall to pieces.

Though Ma was hidden away in the African forest and thought she was a nobody, there were others who, knowing what she had done, and having been helped by her example, made up their minds that her story should not be left untold. They wrote it out, and by and by it came into the hands of Sir Frederick Lugard, the Governor-General of Nigeria, as the whole country was now called, and he, marvelling at the tale, sent it home so that it might be brought to Royal notice.

One day a native runner appeared in the yard at Use with a bundle of letters, amongst which was a large one that looked important. Ma turned it over and wondered what it could be. It was from a very famous and ancient society, the Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem, which has the King at its head and other Royal persons amongst its officials, begging that she would agree to become one of its Honorary Associates and accept the Silver Cross which it gave to those who were noted for goodness and good work.

She looked at her torn dress and her rough hands and her bare feet, and around at the poor little shanty of a house, and chuckled.

"Fancy me with a Royal medal!" she said. "What have I done? I dinna deserve anything for doing my duty. I couldna' even have done that unless God had been with me all the time. To Him be all the honour."

"But," she added, "it's nice too, for it will let the folk here ken that the King is interested in the work that we are doing." And so, being a loyal subject, she wrote back, saying "Yes."

MA'S SILVER CROSS.
Now in the Museum of the United Free Church.

Another letter arrived telling her that her election had been approved by King George V., and then came the beautiful diploma. But she had to go down to Duke Town to be given the Cross at a public meeting, and this was a great trial. Everybody, however, was kind and treated her like a princess. While they were praising her she sat with her face buried in her hands, and when she spoke she made it seem as if the honour were done to the Mission and not to herself. A bouquet of roses was handed to her, and when she got home to Use she planted a stem beside the rough-hewn steps, and to her delight it grew and flourished. When she died a cutting from it was planted on her grave.

Of course she had to tell Ratcliffe all about the affair. "The Silver Cross," she said, "is a nice thing called a decoration, which one wears on special occasions, and is just like a prize given at

school to a boy. You wonder what I got a prize for? So do I! I can't make it out at all. But you see our King is so good and kind, he is always doing nice things, and this is one of them."

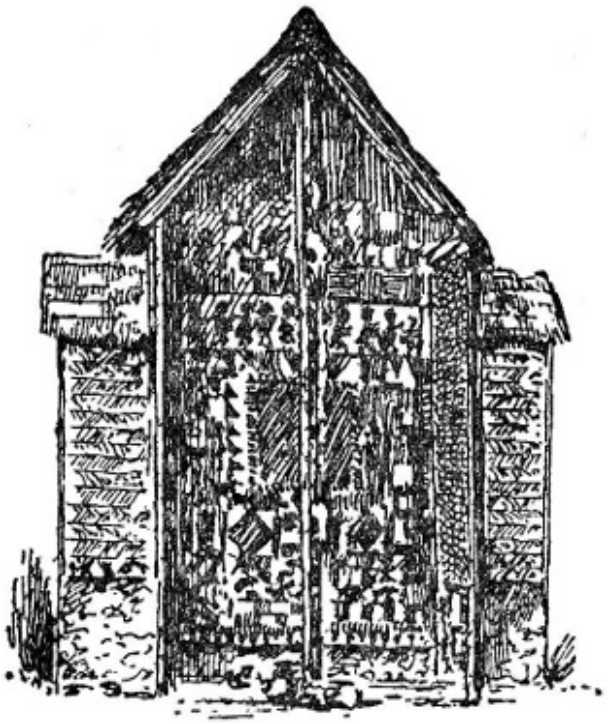
Ashamed of all that people were saying and writing about her, she hastened up to Use, where she pinned the cross on her breast to show the girls how it looked.

By this time Mary and Annie were married and had homes of their own, and Alice and Maggie were at Duke Town learning to wash and iron and cut out and make clothes, and Dan was also at school. Once Dan had a splendid holiday, and Ma tells Ratcliffe about it:

> Dan has gone up the Cross River with his master to a new country where coal has been found and where tin has been found, and where our wonderful fellow-countrymen are to build a railway which will enter and open up new lands and peoples and treasures, and add to the wealth and greatness of our Empire. The coal will make the biggest changes you can think of. It is like a fairy tale. Just think, if we have coal, we can start to manufacture everything out here, for we have material for almost everything, and all the timber in these endless forests can then be sent over the world. And what crowds of people from Britain and here will be getting employment at the railways and the mines! It is a wonderful old world this, isn't it? We are always hearing that it is played out.

Among the men who were opening up the wild country, officials, engineers, and traders, Ma had many dear friends, and she was always praising them up for the work they were doing.

"We come of a wonderful race, Ratcliffe," she said. "How proud I am of our countrymen many a time. How brave they are! What knowledge and grit they possess! How doggedly they hold on! How they persevere and win! No wonder a handful of them rule the horde of natives and leave their mark. The native, clever in his own way, just stares and obeys."



MEMORIAL TO A DEAD CHIEF.