

ADIAHA MAKARA IS DEAD

by
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Preface

This is an imaginative reinscription of the life of Mary Mitchell Slessor (1848-1915) who became the first woman Presbyterian missionary to Calabar, now a state in Nigeria. Actual dates and events inform this historical fiction, but the narrative does not purport to be history. Nor does it attempt to analyze the ideologies or behavior of missionaries. It is simply the recounting of an extraordinary Scottish woman's life in the West African jungle.

The Story

The damp, broad jungle foliage brushed against the mud and palm hut as Mary Slessor, called "Ma" by the local inhabitants, fought her last battle against malaria. She lay absolutely still upon her old, rickety cot, every breath an effort, every thought a struggle. In her lucid moments, she reflected on her 67 years of life - from the dense clouds of cotton dust in the Dundee weaving mills to the unremitting dank darkness of the Calabar (map) jungle where she now awaited death.

Perhaps, Mary thought, her raw beginnings in Scotland had hardened her enough to have accomplished what she had in Calabar. She had arrived in 1876 to find large groups of people who had never seen a European before. After 39 years, she felt satisfied that she was leaving her Ibibio and Igbo friends along the Calabar River and Enyong Creek with the skills to prevent the historic blood feuds and twin-killing which had greeted her appearance.

She recalled that life in Gilcomston, Aberdeen where she'd been born on December 2, 1848, had been one of hardship. Mary shivered with the memory of the many nights she'd spent pacing the footpath just outside the family residence waiting for her grizzled father to fall asleep or pass out from the whiskey which controlled his life. But she wasn't alone on those nights thanks to her older brother Robert who had spent as much time outside as she had; and, who had been good company throughout his short life.

Mary's mother, after years of aggravation and assaults at the hands of her increasingly hostile and unpredictable husband, slipped into the night with her children and disappeared in the cold mist of Dundee. For a while, life improved for the beleaguered Slessor family.

It didn't last long. Her father's sudden appearance at their Dundee door destroyed her mother's attempts to shape a better life for them. He bellowed at Mrs. Slessor that stalking her had been easy. Since he could no longer sustain the discipline needed to keep his shoemaker's job, he threw his clothes on the floor of their tiny flat and took over the space that Mrs. Slessor worked so hard to maintain. Mary and Robert returned to the streets at night; once again awaiting release from their father's alcoholic brutality.

To amuse herself and to keep Robert's spirits high, Mary played practical jokes and told exhilarating imaginative stories. Sometimes, she pulled her battered shoes and socks off and, against all convention of the age, ran barefoot through the neighborhood. Neighbors shrieked at her to behave like a young lady and to return her shoes and socks to her feet, but she simply sprinted past them with her lips curled in their characteristic mischievous smile. On many occasions, a delegation of neighborhood women visited Mrs. Slessor to criticize Mary's wanton behavior. Mrs. Slessor did her best, but never did succeed in getting Mary to conform to the rigidity of wearing shoes when gamboling in the neighborhood. Years later, the jungle floor suited Mary's feet just fine.

In her Dundee childhood, she saw weekly the stout, formidable minister of her local United Presbyterian Church. He stood, slightly slumped over the mahogany pulpit, delivering a disquieting sermon about the "bush children" of Calabar. He began one of his sermons with the word "cannibal" which instantly brought Mary to attention. She crooked her neck, straining to hear every word. She became fascinated with the movement of his muttonchop sideburns moving up and down as he emphasized the spiritual paucity of people living almost naked in the grueling heat and humidity of the deep jungle in West Africa. "Cannibal" and "jungle" took Mary far from her iron-cold Dundee to the warm verdancy of Calabar.

A few years later, Mary, on one of their nights of pacing, declared to Robert her intention of becoming a missionary. Robert turned suddenly and emitted a small laugh of superiority. He held her slight shoulders tightly and said, "Only men can become missionaries."

Mary shook herself free and, dancing and laughing in front of him, she called back, "Robbie, ye'll see".

A few weeks after this exchange, Mary sat beside Robert's bed holding a cool, damp cloth on his feverish forehead. She spoke softly to him of his plans to be a missionary and encouraged him to seek his goal, but she saw in his eyes that he didn't have the reserve of strength. She and her mother took turns cradling and rocking him as he slipped

toward death.

In 1859, barely eleven years old, the Slessor misfortunes compelled Mary to go to work at a Dundee weaving mill. A rotund, gruff manager took her to the raucous women waiting to start their day's work. The women stopped laughing long enough to eye Mary warily. They sensed that she was different; not one of them. Perhaps it was the way she stood defiantly erect with her eyes holding their stares. For the 14 years she spent as a "weaving girl," Mary never let the dust or work dull her defiance of mill-life rigidity.

Everyday, Mary passed through the grimy slums of Dundee on her way to the mill and everyday she measured the depths of poverty in the area. The children she encountered daily didn't have parents capable of teaching them anything that might raise them from the soot and filth in which they lived. She went to the church elders and offered her services as a teacher to these children.

Each evening, instead of treading home, she stopped at a gloomy, squalid tenement where one miniscule room had been converted to a classroom. She looked at the sad dirty faces of the children, most of whom were too tired and malnourished to pay close attention, and she determined to give them a chance out of their circumstances.

The first night, about 15 ill-mannered children entered the small room. Chaos swirled about them like leaves spinning in a dust whirl. Mary was exhausted battling their insolent remarks, their loud shouts back and forth, but she refused to give up. Night after night, she returned to face their catcalls and cruelty. Gradually, very gradually, the atmosphere improved.

Going home at nine or ten o'clock was a dangerous proposition. Gangs of youths prowled the streets looking for outlets for their raging energy. At first, she slid surreptitiously along the walls of buildings, ducking into doorways and alleys when groups appeared. She had many long, apprehensive walks home. One night, a group of five teenaged boys surrounded her with taunts and threats. She stood absolutely still while they circled her round and round, swinging heavy clubs inches above her head. Mary didn't flinch. The boys slowly realized that this young woman was not timorous in the face of their ferocity. They stopped and stared at her while she picked up her bag and, without a single word, strode out of their circle, never to be harassed again.

Lured by sermons about mysterious Calabar, Mary, now 28 years old, longed for a dramatic change in her life. At one weekly Presbyterian Church women's committee meeting, she listened again to the commitment made by the elders of the Church to the people of the jungles of Calabar. While a woman described the conditions and the concomitant needs of the people living there, Mary glanced at the large wall map of Africa which the committee women had taken months to draw and color. There it was, tucked under the western shoulder of the continent - this Calabar; this magnet pulling her

ineluctably toward it.

Finally, it was her turn to speak to the committee. She'd rehearsed her carefully-chosen words for hours before this meeting knowing that her dream of going to Calabar hinged on her ability to get committee support. Many of these women were married to the influential church elders and were not disposed to meddle in their husbands' affairs.

She nervously arranged her notes on her lap before she commenced speaking in her rhythmical broad Scots. She skillfully lay the foundation for her goal by eliciting the sympathy of these formidable women for the "less fortunate" native peoples of Calabar. Mary broke through their icy moral reserve with her words of praise for their interminable efforts to improve the lives of the Calabar people. At the end, she blurted out her desire to be a missionary to Calabar.

Silence dropped on the group like a blanket. The women, clad in their black and grey dresses with high starched collars stared incredulously at Mary until one shattered the brittle silence.

"Mary, my dear, 'tis all well'n guid for ye ta hav' sich passion fur our cause but we must keep in mind that we'r but mere women with wee minds and wee power."

Mary slowly raised her head and looked sadly at the broad woman. With her lips set in disappointment, Mary shook her head gently, and responded, "Aye, 'tis said we'r mere women, but the evidence here in this room today is proof contrary. We hav' succeeded through our diligence and persistence in raising the social standards of a group of peoplewe found sorely disadvantaged. 'Tis we ladies who've concerned ourselves with the education and welfare of our less fortunate African friends. Isn't it time we women undertook to finish the Lord's work by sending a woman to teach His word unencumbered by the economics so often attached to men's 'efforts'?"

"Meeting adjourned" set off a cacophony around Mary. Women demanded answers, challenged her aggressiveness, and admonished her unladylike ideas. Through the din, however,lightly, ever so lightly, Mary heard the phrases "'Tis possible," "Why not a woman?" and "Mary can do it" and she sensed victory was hers.

Eight months later, Mary received word from the United Presbyterian Church Missionary Board that she was to be the first woman missionary to Calabar. She would join a handful men already there.

So, in the summer of 1876, Mary stepped aboard the steamer "Ethiopia" in Liverpool. She turned once to look back at her frail and sad mother draped in her black shawl and felt guilt draped across her own shoulders.

On September 11, 1876, the "Ethiopia" eased into her slip on the delta of the Old Calabar River. Although it was early morning, the air was heavy and malodorous. Mary felt trapped in a cave of huge mangroves thrusting their towering trunks out of and above the slime of the shallow estuary. Swatting away mosquitoes, she surveyed the vast swamps

stretching from the mangroves into a wilderness as yet little disturbed by European traders.

Soon the clamorous noises of the port drew her attention and she turned her gaze to the array of scrambling, shouting people loading and unloading boats with spices, palm oil, palm nuts, ivory, gold and tin. She wondered why, with all the activity of this port, Calabar was called an untamed enigma by the Europeans.

A stocky, bearded man greeted her and introduced himself as her "missionary trainer," Mr. "Daddy" Anderson. His broad grin and open manner gave her confidence that this would be a pleasant place. However, she soon saw "Mammy" Anderson, standing rigidly beside her husband, casting a shadow across his friendliness.

From the day Mary arrived in Duke Town, a British trading port on the Calabar River, the Andersons attempted to mold her into a righteous missionary but Mary wasn't as malleable as they'd expected a Dundee mill girl to be. She sat for hours on the porch railing and composed romantic poems about Calabar; she disappeared with the village children for games along the riverbanks. Often, she was so excited by her surroundings that she was late to meals.

Mary asked many questions about the hovels and filthy conditions in which the natives of Duke Town lived but was never satisfied with the simple answer that the people hadn't yet come to Jesus. For Mary, there had to be a less philosophical reason and if so, there had to be a solution. She often wrote in her diary of the violent heathenism she saw everywhere. To rectify the situation, she resolved to supplant violence with her values of pacificism, justice, and cleanliness. She began an earnest study of one of the principle languages of the area: Efik, and within a year was fluent and ready to fulfill her resolution.

Then in 1879, she fell ill. It was her first encounter with malaria. She became weak and feverish. Her moods became shadowy and unpredictable. Daddy and Mammy notified the Presbyterian Mission Board which ordered Mary back to Dundee for rest and recuperation.

Completely recovered, she returned to Calabar seven months later. Upon arrival, Daddy and Mammy informed her that she was needed 2 miles further upriver to operate the mission at Old Town. She was to be in charge of all the women's work in the rough, swampy town known for its wickedness.

Shortly after receiving news of her assignment, she stepped into the clearing which opened off the path from Duke Town and felt elated by her freedom. Yes, she noted the filthy hovels and disorder everywhere. She saw the unattended children darting about. She saw the group of glassy-eyed men passing a dirty bottle of homemade palm alcohol among themselves. She watched two women swagger suggestively past some sitting men.

She approached the challenge of living in Old Town head on. First she organized a group of people to help her build her first home - a mud hut with a palm leaf roof. She

put away her "missionary skirts" and "hats" and donned simpler, old clothes which were more comfortable in the heat.

Several months later, some English people came from Duke Town to see how she was doing. She set the only 2 chairs she owned in the dust garden in front of her hut. Then, chattering away, she produced a small feast of native food which her two guests scorned and refused to eat. Shocked at Mary's behavior, they couldn't wait to return to Duke Town to spread the gossip that Mary "had gone native."

Their reports sent Daddy Anderson scampering to Old Town to see for himself. What he found was not shocking at all. Mary had almost all the village children seated on bits of cloth on the dust round her feet. They were carefully reciting parts of the Bible with Mary's guidance. Some village women, fascinated, hovered nearby.

After tea, Daddy returned to Duke Town and put an end to the idle talk.

Early one morning as she walked on the main jungle path along the Calabar River, she heard the high wailing of babies. She shoved aside broad, dripping wet leaves. Stuffed into a hole in the base of a tree were two identical baby girls, stripped of their clothes and shivering in the damp morning. She picked each baby up and stared into the jungle undergrowth for the mother. The mother had to be nearby as these babies were only hours old. She called out in Efik but received no response.

Thinking the woman might be injured or ill, Mary rushed with the babies back to her hut to rouse the villagers. Scarcely had she reached her own doorway when she was confronted by the Old Town chief standing tall and round in his feathered cloak and red loin-cloth. He stood, legs apart, spear planted on the ground to his right, and arms crossed in stern reproach.

"You must return these babies to the tree," he commanded.

"Why? Is the mother nearby? Do you know the mother?" demanded Mary.

A ring of villagers had formed around her, faces unveiling fear and shock. She looked at the crowd and raised her voice once more: "Why?"

The villagers glanced at one another and then focused their attention on the chief. He continued to stand rigidly at the entrance to her hut. She shifted the two babies on her hips hoping her body heat would afford them a modicum of warmth. Patience had gotten her answers before.

Fifteen minutes of staring passed until the chief nodded to an elderly woman on his right. Thin and long-breasted, she nevertheless stood straight and stepped gracefully toward Mary. In quiet tones, she implored Mary to return the babies to the tree or to at least, allow her to do it for Mary.

Mary softened and asked again, "Why?"

The lines on the old woman's face creased more deeply. She glanced at the chief and just as quickly returned her gaze to Mary. "Because twins are evil," she hissed.

Mary stepped back, grasping the twins more strongly. She shouted round at the people, "Twins are just like other children... and if only you let them grow up, you will see for yourself that there is no difference."

Heads shook. Villagers began to back away. Mary excused herself to the elderly emissary and moved toward the chief, who in fear of the twins jumped aside just enough to let Mary pass into her hut. His shadow spread over her hut.

Once inside, she quickly wrapped the babies in cotton blankets and prepared warm milk. She fed the milk slowly, drop by drop with a teaspoon until each child settled into a gentle sleep on her bed.

While the babies slept, she rigged up two small hammocks which she hooked between her bedposts and the wall posts. Over the years, more babies were added so that Mary's room looked like a living star with a central, stationary point (her bed) and waving lines radiating outward (the babies' hammocks) to the walls.

The next day, during feeding, Mary noticed one of the tiny girls wasn't eating. Her eyes looked far away. Mary held the infant to her breast, then put her ear to the child's chest. The heartbeat was very faint. The child moved toward death quickly. Mary wept openly until the cries of the living baby jarred her into action. She turned all her attention to the surviving twin, Janie.

Janie (named after one of Mary's sisters) grew steadily into a healthy, strong, heavy-boned child. Even as a toddler, she was Mary's helper - holding, carrying or passing things for Mary.

Mary's disappointment in the Old Town people increased with every twin she saved. Eme Ete, a middle-aged widow who had agreed to be Mary's housekeeper would inform Mary whenever twins were born. No matter what she was doing, she would run to the "secret" spot where the twins had been abandoned. Sometimes they were already dead, their mother driven into the dense undergrowth. If Mary arrived in time, she took the infants home and nursed them and guarded them from the father and relatives who often attempted to steal and destroy them. Her persistent efforts to save twins earned her the name "'Ma' who loves babies."

From Old Town, she ventured further and further into the jungle. A Christianized tribal king, Eyo, who was the overlord of the village chiefs, sent her a canoe with 9 crewmen for use on her journeys. Her first canoe trip was to an interior village renown for its abuse of women.

She was greeted warmly by the chief and villagers who already knew her by her reputation. The chief loaned her a hut in his compound for her two-week visit. This she shared with several scruffy dogs, the chief's chickens, a couple of rats, a lizard and the omnipresent mosquitoes.

Everyday, the apprehensive villagers, naked and covered with grime, came to watch this curiosity among them. At first, they feared getting close to her and often ran away screaming if she made a sudden movement. Mary patiently sat on a large rounded stone near her hut and sewed clothes or prepared herbal medicines.

Eventually, the chief gave her permission to visit the sick and she had great success healing their most-often ordinary ailments: a cut, a boil, a cough, a fever. The villagers grew confident and some began to ask her questions.

One day, from her position on her rock, she heard a commotion down the hill in another chief's yard. Women were shouting and men were responding. She dropped her sewing and dashed down the slope. Once inside the other chief's compound, she saw two naked teenaged girls bent over a fallen tree and a young man poised with a thick whip, salt and a knife ready to inflict the punishment ordered by the chief for their transgressions. The girls had been caught frolicking outside the yard with other young girls. The chief ordered that they be whipped, have salt rubbed into their wounds and then have their ears cut off.

Mary jumped in front of the whipman and tried to wrestle the whip away. The chief, enraged, pushed her aside but she turned and lunged at the whipman again. The chief became disconcerted. This was not the behavior of a woman.

While he stood dumbfounded, she called for a palaver, or council. Because she was a guest with an extraordinary reputation, the chief grudgingly agreed to it.

Mary had asked for the palaver so she was granted permission to speak first. She walked over to the two girls who were standing near the chief and spoke strongly to them about their duties and responsibilities. The men in the group nodded and murmured their approval. The two girls hung their heads, silently absorbing Ma's castigations.

Then Ma turned her attention to the gloating men whom she roundly chastised for causing the whole problem in the first place by marrying girls who were too young. Some of the men stood up defiantly and growled their displeasure. Others continued sitting, grumbling among themselves.

She stood before the biggest and meanest of the men and glowered at him. He backed away mumbling that since she was a guest of the village, he had no choice but to honor her suggested sentence for the two girls.

They were flogged while Ma stood nearby. As soon as the flogging ceased, Ma attended the girls' wounds. Everyone in the village was satisfied and she found many more visitors to her campfire Bible lessons after that.

Mary's time in the steaming jungle under added stress had weakened her so that she caught another fever and neared death. She didn't respond to any treatment and suffered so much during the monsoon season that she was again ordered back to Scotland in 1883.

She took Janie with her and found respite in the cool, heather hills around Dundee.

Once back in Calabar in 1885, she was informed by the Mission Board that her new assignment would be Creek Town, quite a distance from Duke Town and Old Town.

Not long after settling in at Creek Town, on a warm, soft evening, she and 10 year old Janie sat on the narrow verandah of the hut watching the children buzz around in the dusty yard. Suddenly, Janie caught her breath, "Heh!"

"What's wrong?" whispered Ma.

Janie pointed to the edge of the yard where a riotous tangle of dark green philodendrons and vines marked the line between Mary's yard and her neighbor's. At first, Mary saw only overlapping green leaves darkened by night, but then a man's silhouette took form against the verdurous backdrop. The man didn't move, making it appear that he was a carefully-placed garden sculpture. Gradually, Mary absorbed the details of this silent shape: he was very tall, close to 2 meters, and very solid.

She whispered to Janie that she didn't think the man meant any harm but Janie was not completely convinced. When Mary returned her scrutiny to the silhouette, she discerned only the broad leaves gently rustling against each other.

For several nights, he appeared in the same spot. He made no attempt to approach the hut or the children so Mary decided not to confront him.

Then he disappeared for a week. When he once again took up his vigil, Mary could see the outline of something lumpy at his feet. When he left that night, the lumps remained. In the early morning, Mary went to examine the lumps. She laughed to herself when she got close to the "sinister" shapes. The man had very neatly laid a palm leaf on the ground and then had piled several bananas and mangoes on top.

This appearing/disappearing man repeated leaving his offering of fruit for several weeks until one night, Mary noticed he was not standing in his usual place but was in fact 3 meters closer to the verandah. She invited him to sit with her but he turned quickly, parted the leaves and vanished.

Two nights later, Mary planted Janie on the verandah while she took up a position in the shadows near the man's spot." The stranger emerged from the verdant undergrowth at the usual time. Mary waited and watched, barely breathing, for 5 minutes before inching toward him. He sensed her presence and snapped his head quickly to the left where she was standing rigidly still.

Very softly, she greeted him in Efik and just as softly, he returned the greeting. She thanked him for the fruit and invited him to join her on the verandah. Once seated, he stared intensely at Janie which increased her already heightened apprehension.

Mary's weeks of pent-up curiosity could no longer be restrained. She asked the man directly who he was and what he wanted. He looked down at his huge, gnarled hands on his lap and whispered almost inaudibly, "That girl's father."

Mary had not expected such a dramatic confession. She sat back in her chair and stared at the man. Now, she could detect similarities in their profiles and their heavy-boned frames. Yes, she admitted to herself, it was possible that this man was Janie's father !

When she finished questioning the man, Mary realized that he knew too many details about Janie's birth not to be her father. He disclosed that he'd been watching Janie and Ma for the past ten years. Like Janie's twin sister, his wife had faded away and died. He told Ma that he was curious about the evil in Janie and when it would manifest itself.

Over a period of many nights, the man returned and sat with Ma and Janie. For her part, Ma spent those evenings trying to dislodge his superstition that twins were evil. She spent her days trying to convince Janie that the man was indeed her father.

At first, Janie was frightened by his bigness and his quiet ways. However, she gradually came to accept him and, with Ma's urging, one night gave him a fast hug before running off.

After that, Janie's father stopped coming every night but for as long as he lived, he came periodically to sit on the verandahs of Mary's various huts and to talk to Janie. And each time he came, there would be fresh fruit or vegetables in a neatly wrapped palm leaf on a verandah step.

While living in Creek Town, Ma kept hearing reports coming out of the jungle of violence against women and children. She was certain she could improve the lives of these people who were said to live in and around Okoyong, deep in the bush.

Ma applied several times to the Calabar Mission Board for permission to go to Okoyong. After years of denying her permission, the Board finally agreed with her that the people of Okoyong needed guidance. The Mission Board sent native representatives to Okoyong to seek permission for Ma to live among them. The Okoyong people assaulted the representatives and chased them back, bruised and battered.

Ma knew why the assault had occurred. The Okoyong people, known for their bellicosity, had been enemies of the "coast people", the natives of Creek Town, for over 100 years. Ma was furious at the Mission Board for its insensitivity to tribal differences.

She secretly packed a bag and told Janie to slip away and tell King Eyo, the principle lord of the area who had always helped Ma. He immediately sent a canoe with 10 men to a designated spot for a rendezvous with Mary in the early morning mist.

They paddled silently upriver to a point where they had to disembark and trek overland. Mary felt the oppression of the high-pitched humming of the mosquitoes but she also felt electrified by the challenge facing her in Okoyong.

As she had noticed in other villages, she saw the staggering drunken men she'd so often heard rumors about. She also noticed that even the youngest of toddlers aimlessly roaming was armed with a knife. Her presence attracted most of the inhabitants who

stared unabashedly at her but who also kept a distance lest this "white" woman be evil in disguise.

Mary directed her gaze to the oldest-looking male present and deliberately, calmly, gave greetings to him. He responded in kind although his voice cracked and trembled, not so much with age as with fear.

She requested a meeting with all the important men of the village to negotiate her presence in Okoyong. The old man hesitated, then looked toward the eastern section of the village where a large path narrowed into the jungle. She waited while he appraised her request.

Suddenly, he pushed the people nearest him aside and began an ungainly trot toward the path. Several younger men followed, soon overtaking him as they entered the bush.

Ma waited standing flagpole straight until noises reverberated in the labyrinth of immense leaves and coils of vines. Then, she shifted her scrutiny to the source of the sonance. Seconds later, spear-bearing men, all tall and muscled, burst from the natural canopy of the jungle and formed a human aisle into which another tall, rotund man stepped. He stopped, splayed his fat round legs, keeping his right hand on the upright red-shafted spear, and glared down the length of the aisle at the end of which stood the diminutive Ma.

He motioned for her to approach, which she did very slowly, never moving her eyes from his. When she was within 2 meters of this great mass of polished ebony, she halted. The aisle closed in behind her like a well-oiled trap. The chief's skin shone in the coruscating sunlight making hers look pallid by comparison. His large, perfectly round head dwarfed hers and effectively radiated power. She bowed to this radiance.

He ordered seats for himself and her. They sat a meter apart, his bare feet toeing out; her shod feet pressed together straight ahead. They spoke, remaining in their respective positions for one hour while men held palm leaves above them.

At the end of the negotiations, the chief agreed to protect Ma from the roaming drunks and she agreed to build a small hut near his compound. She also agreed not to leave her yard without his permission.

After one night, sleeping on a straw mat in one of his wives' mud huts, Ma returned to Creek Town to collect her things and her assistants, Janie and Eme Ete.

Before she departed from Creek Town, Ma wrote a letter home to a friend in which she stated, "I'm going to live with a new tribe further inland. They are a fierce, violent people and everyone has told me they will surely kill me. I'm not afraid." Her friends had every reason to believe she'd be killed. The Okoyong people had a well-deserved reputation for cannibalism, slave-trading, and drunken marauding. And, if the people of Okoyong didn't kill her, Mary's friends reasoned, the incessant rain dripping through the jungle canopy or the wild animals that visited the village at will, surely would.

In 1888, when she got close to Okoyong, the chief's runners spotted Ma's single-file group on the trail and dashed back to their village. Consequently, when she pushed through the soaking wet leaves into the main village, she was greeted by the full-figure of the chief wearing his long red and yellow print loincloth and red and yellow headdress. His only words were, "It is an honor for a white woman to live among us." He turned and strode through the center of the village to his path trailed by 30 young attendants.

Ma enlisted the aid of five men and two women to build a large mud hut next to the chief's compound. During the 3 weeks it took to dig, shape and harden the mud bricks, she slept with the same two wives as before, listening to their stories of life in Okoyong.

At last, she was able to settle into her own hut with Janie and Eme Ete. Her first priority was to establish a school in her yard. Because it rained much more inland than along the coast, she and her friends built a covered pavilion.

At first, almost everyone in Okoyong came to her little school. Old and young, even the headmen and chief came to learn to chant "ABC." Ma was ecstatic until she realized that for most of her students, it was the novelty of her presence and the cadence of her broad Scots ABC's that drew them to the pavilion. She quickly sorted the earnest adults from the gawkers by making "classes" which met at different times. The children, however, were kept together.

Within a month of moving into her hut and assessing living conditions in Okoyong, Ma declared unofficial war on their customs. Rum and gin shipped by Christian countries filled the lives of the people from the youngest to the oldest. Drinking and dancing and singing and shouting seemed the 'normal' way to get through the day. Planting and tending crops were haphazard at best. The Okoyong found it easier to steal what they wanted from other tribes. That included stealing people. Raucous laughter, loud chatter, horrible quarrels filled the night air so that sleeping became near impossible. The children lied as a matter of course and were exceptionally cruel.

Ma tried the traditional "missionary way" to change their behavior. She scolded and excoriated the people to no avail. She used Janie and Eme Ete as examples of clean living. It didn't work.

Since school still held fascination for the children, Ma decided to go at the problem that way. She made every child wash his face and hands upon arrival at school believing as most missionaries did at the time that 'cleanliness was next to Godliness.' She taught by demonstration and personal example.

Next, she formed small women's groups which gave the women a sense of status and personal attention. Ma taught hygiene, basic herbal medicine, and reading and writing. Little-by-little, through the women and children, she gained respect.

Her medical skills became useful to the tribe and she was often called to the houses of important villagers to administer first-aid or herbal medicine. Wives of chiefs,

particularly, sought Ma's ministrations for their husbands. If a chief died, his wives were ritually killed so that they might attend to his needs after death. Ma narrowly saved many chiefs and her reputation grew to such an extent that wife murder decreased.

In her seventh month there, she did something unheard of. She interfered in a chief's punishment of a villager. The man had done nothing extracrdinarily wrong by Okoyong behavioral standards (he'd stolen some fruit) but the chief in a show of power had ordered the man tortured to death.

Ma ran in front of the 6 young enforcers and screamed "No !" The men, many drunk, swirled their spears above her head or pointed their guns at her heart. She screamed again, "No !"

Other women began to chant "No !" and suddenly the confusion abated. The chief met with lesser chiefs and agreed not to kill the offender. Instead, they ordered him chained, flogged, and starved for 4 days and nights. Ma had to settle for that and spent many hours putting salve on the man's open wounds or dripping water into his parched and swollen mouth.

Life in Okoyong made her tired and ill. Her squalid, rat-infested hut never seemed free of bugs, noise, and dust. In desperation, she asked the Mission Board to allow her to build a bigger, more substantial hut which she would furnish using her own money. Permission was granted without discussion so Ma contracted with some of the more reliable Okoyong men to build a clay hut with separate rooms. The men took this assignment quite seriously, and after several months, had managed to erect a long, narrow hut with 3 large rooms.

Ma stepped inside the hut for the first time after a brief blessing. She began to laugh heartily to the chagrin of the builders. Finally, she turned to one and put her hand on his crossed arms. She said, "Dinna ken that I dinna like tha hut. I'm laughin' with joy, laddie, fer ye've built a hut tha likes o' which I shoulna' hoped e'er ta see ! Someha' ye've made it look like tha inside of a Scottish caravan. I feel right the home." Grins broke out everywhere and the house was henceforth called "The Caravan."

Ma was so pleased with the quality of the construction that she asked the men to build a church for the village. From that day on, the men stood up straighter and did better work thus guaranteeing food and stability for their families. Under Ma's firm hand and entrepreneurial guidance, life was improving slowly for everyone.

The church was a sturdy, long and low shed with rows of crude benches neatly arranged. When the minister came to dedicate the church, he was suitably impressed and complimented Ma's builders on their ingenuity. However, in an aside to Mary, the minister objected to the "nakedness" of the parishioners and instructed Mary to take care of the problem.

There was really only one solution since the villagers didn't have enough cloth available

to make European-style clothes. Ma wrote letters to several churches in Scotland and asked for clothing donations. The response was so overwhelming that one room in "The Caravan" had to become a storeroom !

Ma insisted that everyone who wanted something from her, "pay" for it in one way or another. People paid in fruit, in beef, in milk, or most often in labor for their Sunday clothes or a chocolate or some English tea. The arrangement suited everyone and Ma made sure no one was made to feel inferior or poor.

Unfortunately, from Ma's perspective, the European traders increased their shipments of rum and gin along the western coast of Africa which intensified the drinking problems everywhere especially among people like the Okoyong who didn't have enough work and who hadn't made a firm commitment yet to abandon violence.

Ma became incensed and borrowed King Eyo's canoe once again to make her way to the coastal trading houses. She fought the traders valiantly but their greed was stronger than her words. After 6 weeks of arguments with the liquor traders, she returned to Okoyong frustrated, but not defeated.

Her next strategy worked. She gathered together all the chiefs of the Okoyong settlements and explained the benefits of trade with fellow Africans along the coastline. The chiefs all shook their heads and told her they wouldn't send their men downstream or along the coast because it was too dangerous. Their centuries-old enemies would surely kill them and they'd be easy targets in canoes. What they didn't tell Ma was that most had never been in a boat before and so were frightened beyond words.

Ma sent a messenger to King Eyo who then invited the chiefs to his kingdom for a trading palaver. The King promised to send canoes and to guarantee the chiefs' safety. The chiefs were so flattered that they accepted immediately.

They had an uneventful trip downriver which increased their confidence. King Eyo received them graciously and with a lot of ceremony designed to show his respect for their status. They, in turn, behaved with decorum in his village and saw first-hand the inherent wisdom in King Eyo's behavior and methods.

Although King Eyo had no jurisdiction over the visitors, because of his reputation as adjudicator, they permitted him to hold a big gathering to hear their complaints, quarrels, and fears. By 2:00 a.m. the next day, he'd heard each chief and had settled all the quarrels equitably, thus reinforcing his reputation.

On the third day, King Eyo held a second palaver during which he negotiated a trading agreement between the chiefs of his kingdom and the chiefs of Okoyong. The king offered very good terms and by the end of the day, the agreement was in place.

Once back in Okoyong, the chiefs exhorted everyone to work hard making palm oil and growing certain vegetables and fruits desired by their new coastal allies. Everything went smoothly for three weeks. Ma walked past the storage pavilion near the entrance to the

jungle path leading to the Cross River. She shook her head in disbelief when she saw that not a single crate of palm oil had been sent downriver. Instead, guards were walking around the pavilion where crates spilled out beyond the overhanging roof.

Ma walked quickly to the youngest chief's compound. He was a handsome, garrulous man whom she knew would happily tell her everything about the crates. They sat together outside his hut drinking tea which she always carried with her as an 'emergency gift.' True to his nature, the young man told her why the products weren't being shipped. Simply put, the men were afraid of the river.

Ma thanked the chief and set off at a fast trot to organize a palaver. The 8 chiefs sat in a circle listening to Ma's words about trade agreements and honor. They hung their heads and stared at their hands or feet.

She looked beyond them, suddenly stood up and declared: "Right. I'll go downriver with ye. Ye'll see. T'will be a'right." The men were caught in her net. They couldn't very well say they wouldn't go when this woman who'd done so much for them was willing to go along. With trepidation in their voices, they agreed.

The next day, amid shouting and shoving men, Ma began the 16 kilometer trek along the main jungle path. At the edge of the river, six old canoes donated by King Eyo awaited them. She let the men rest and then commenced instructing them in canoe-handling. Even after her careful instructions, 2 canoes sank, confirming the men's fear of the river.

She maintained a businesslike manner and got the group reorganized so it could begin again. All went well, the trade was made and the men returned home safely, filled with exciting stories about the river, canoes, villages along the banks, etc. Ma was relieved but her relief was short-lived. Although the men had successfully made it downriver and back, they flatly refused to go again without her. Thereafter, every two weeks or so, Ma found herself sitting in a long canoe coaxing the men and singing songs to keep their minds off their fear of the river.

Okoyong prospered. Palavers with traditional enemies had eased most of the tensions created by constant warfare. Gradually, the Okoyong men became accustomed to their river trips and Ma no longer had to go with them. However, the Okoyong men became famous for their songs which floated downriver with them.

One day, a chief who had developed the habit of visiting Ma's compound once a week asked her if she wanted anything. She thought for a moment and then replied, half-jokingly, "I wouldna mind a proper house with glass windows."

The chief put his palms on his thick thighs, said, "Uh-huh," stood up and left.

A month later, a man from the Mission Board arrived. Ma was at a neighboring hut when word reached her of his presence so she quickly returned to the "Caravan." There she found the gentleman pacing off lines and writing figures in a tiny notebook.

She creased her brows and asked him sharply what his business was. He smiled and said he'd been sent to see about building her a 2-storey "proper" house. For once, Ma was speechless !

Not only did the Mission Board build her a 2-story house, it also sent a carpenter from Scotland to design and supervise construction of the house. Mr. Ovens, bright-eyed and cheerful, filled Okoyong with his laughter and ideas. His final gift to Ma was to order and install glass windows at his own expense.

With a European house around her, Ma didn't have to spend so much time fighting bug and rat infestations, and could turn her attention to the more serious matters of human relations. During this time her reputation as a peacemaker developed. By using the Igbo's respect for palavers, she often stopped battles by simply walking onto the battlefield and yelling to the chiefs that she wanted a palaver. Given her status, the chiefs dared not refuse. She'd then negotiate a peace.

However, a secondary problem often arose. Sometimes the warriors would drink so much in celebration that they'd recommence fighting anyway ! Her solution to this secondary problem was straightforward: she made a deal with the liquor traders to send all liquor to her storehouse from where she doled out the alcohol in drams. After dispensing a daily quota of alcohol to the rightful owners, Ma locked up the storeroom. The traders knew that Mary had Christianized enough people who would support her efforts to block liquor trading altogether if they didn't compromise. Her firmness in this matter went unchallenged the entire time she lived in Okoyong.

After her third visit home to Dundee in 1891, Mary realized that the British government's attitude toward Calabar was changing. The economic desires of the traders were dominating parliamentary decisions. To prevent the Okoyongs from being used, she decided to teach them as much as possible about the European notion of self government. By incorporating herself into the palavers, she was able to ease the Okoyongs toward a more democratic format.

About a year later, she received a formal letter from the Consul General of Great Britain to Calabar informing her that the government intended to install consuls in the larger jungle communities. Ma replied immediately that such an idea was untenable in Okoyong because the people weren't ready yet. She wrote: "You mustn't send one here. If you do, there'll be trouble, for my people are proud and fierce, and will fight."

The tall, slightly stooped Consul stood near the long window in his library reading Mary's letter. An idea occurred to him which would allow him to satisfy the government and Mary simultaneously. He appointed Mary 'Consul of Okoyong'!

His strategy was successful. Shortly after her appointment, Ma established a court and self-government procedures modeled after British ones. The people accepted these changes because they trusted and loved her. The British government for its part began to refer to

Ma as "The White Queen of Okoyong."

With over 1000 people under her guidance, word of Ma's power and goodness spread fast. By 1893, she was receiving weekly requests to live among other tribes and to teach the Bible, sewing, washing and first aid. It was an impossible situation so Ma wrote to Scottish churchwomen and begged them to become missionaries with her. Several women responded and many lived in the jungles of Calabar for the remainder of their lives.

* * *

After 15 years in Okoyong, Ma yearned to move to another, less fortunate group of people in the remote interior, northwest of the Enyong Creek. It was a frightening place inhabited by the Ibibios, people who'd lost their sense of self from years of being plundered by slave traders. Ma called them "untamed, unwashed, unlovely savages" and yearned to help them. The Mission Board, from long experience, knew it was pointless to deny her desire.

In 1903, she walked into a village in Itu. As she had done before in so many other villages, with Janie, Eme Ete, and two missionary assistants, she began the process of bringing dignity and order to the lives of these people who'd lost them in the previous 100 years of slave-trading and liquor-drinking. Because her reputation preceded her, Ma accomplished her goals relatively quickly and with few of the obstacles she encountered in the 1870's.

By 1905, she had established a string of mission schools alongside a road the British government had built for the natives to use to get to various large markets. She even learned to ride a bicycle so she could do more work, faster. The Church of Scotland (now called the United Free Church) decided to honor Mary Mitchell Slessor by building a large mission hospital in her name at Itu and staffing it with a full-time doctor and several full-time nurses.

With so many changes coming so quickly, life became a whirlwind for Ma. Nevertheless, she still found time for an afternoon cup of tea with Janie everyday. On one occasion, she and Janie and Dan were enjoying their half-hour rest period when a government officer appeared in her yard. He approached her directly and in a plaintiff voice asked,

"Ma, what are we going to do?"

"What is it now?" Ma 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?"

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

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!"¹

From that day on, Ma was "Vice President of the Native Court" and the first woman judge in the territories. She refused the salary each month so the British government sent it to the mission headquarters in Duke Town.

The first day of her Native Court, Ma used a simple, marred wooden table. She listened to horrific tales of cruelty. Without legal training or law books, she pronounced fair and equitable judgements based on her knowledge of the customs of the litigants. The common sense which informed her decisions became her trademark in justice.

On the same day, after a short teabreak, she took up her position again and called for silence. Everyone obeyed except two middle-level chiefs who persisted in their quarrel. So engrossed were they in their argument that they didn't notice Ma striding toward them, dust rising up behind her in dragon puffs as her long green skirt swished against the dirt floor of the thatched court pavilion. She stopped next to the bigger and older of the chiefs and told him to be quiet. He nodded "no" and continued talking. With a swipe as fast as a cobra's strike, she boxed the man's ears. He grabbed his ears and shook his head back and forth. Silence reigned in Ma's court. From that day, few if any ever dared challenge her authority.

In 1907, at age 59, Ma built her last permanent mission house at Use. Here, she found people very resistant to her teachings. They wanted the prestige associated with her presence but the chiefs flatly refused to let the people learn from her.

Coupled with the chiefs' recalcitrance, her failing health had made her seem strident. By now the years of toil in jungles had ground her down. She often found it so difficult to walk that she was sometimes reduced to using a wheelchair. About this time, she noticed that she couldn't see the words in her Bible clearly and that she also often had to ask people to repeat what they'd said.

On the eighth day in Use, Ma, with Janie at her side, trudged to the main village

clearing and tried to talk to everyone who passed. The villagers were polite and often stopped to listen but not the chiefs.

That night, she went from cooking fire to cooking fire in order to talk quietly to the women. She did this repeatedly for over a week until one morning a great hulk of a man appeared at her hut. The village women had pressed him to talk to Ma. He listened intently, asked some questions, and, satisfied, he announced his decision to permit his villagers to attend her school.

Two days later, a group of twenty women and fourteen children accompanied by twelve spear-bearing men arrived at her hut and waited silently for her to notice them. Mary heard their footsteps and went to the door.

It took Mary, Janie and Miss Peacock less than thirty minutes to put blankets under the trees, get slates and chalk, and two large basins of water. The chief's wives and children watched in awe.

When everything was in place, Ma asked the oldest woman to step forward. She explained to the tall, lean woman that everyone must wash his or her hands before sitting on a blanket. Ma demonstrated by plunging her swollen, pain-ridden hands in the first basin with a bar of soap. She gently scrubbed each hand and then moved them to the other basin. The tall woman eyed the basins warily but she tested the first one with her index finger and finally, grinning broadly, slapped her hands into the water splashing drops over the side of the basin. Ma laughed loudly sending reverberations of laughter down the line of onlookers. School had commenced.

Mary's letters home to Scotland began to change. Although they were still full of hope and ideas, they also revealed an unwritten weariness. Some friends tried to lure her home with promises of a flat, gardens full of flowers, a proper cup of tea, lecture tours, etc. Whenever Ma received one of the tempting letters, she would drift for a few minutes into an imaginative reverie about home. But, she admitted to herself, she didn't have time for home yet. She had to build a great mission house atop Odoro Ikpe for whoever might succeed her. She had to get a woman's cooperative started. She had to check on the progress of the Hope Waddell Training Institution for boys. She had to...

* * *

In 1907, the Mission Board sent her home to Scotland for medical treatment. Her large, flat feet were almost always swollen as were her hands. Pain filled her days. Despite this, she, along with Dan and Janie, made speeches to church groups throughout Eastern Scotland.

King Eyo awaited Ma's return in a state of high anxiety. He was well into his sixties in 1908 and not a day had passed that he hadn't worried about Ma's safety. In fact,

unknown to her until his death in 1910, he had sent men to every encampment she'd ever made, to every hut she'd ever built, and to every place she'd ever wandered. The king's men had always remained hidden and had routinely relayed messages of Ma's whereabouts and safety back to King Eyo.

One day in 1910, she heard a loud wailing in the undergrowth about thirty meters from her house. She limped her way to the source of the noise where she found two brawny men whom she'd known for over 25 years. They were rolling from side-to-side, their arms wrapped around their stomachs. She rushed to them, put her hands on the shoulders of one and tried to get him to stay still long enough to tell her the source of their agony. Tears coursed down his face. Finally, under her caresses, one man sat up and put his head in his hands. Through wrenching sobs, he told her that King Eyo was dead. She fell back, stunned. Then, tears wet her own face.

She led the men to her hut where the crying renewed itself. Janie packed bags for them, then waited in silence for Ma's directions.

During this time one of the men revealed that they had been assigned to guard Ma. She was shocked !

"Whatever for ?" she demanded.

Sheepishly, he told her that the great King Eyo had not let a day go by without at least 2 of his men guarding the woman who had brought Christianity to his life. From 1880, he'd secretly protected her. Ma turned her back to the men and keened.

A few months after the king's funeral, a mission doctor approached Ma's hut. Janie had sent word that Ma was forgetting things, was in more pain, and seemed disoriented at times. The doctor chatted with Ma over tea and took stock of her health. To the doctor she seemed weary beyond comprehension. Upon his recommendation, she went to the Canary Islands for several months of rest.

Feeling better after her time in the Canaries, Ma was back on her verandah having tea and chocolates with some women from the village when a runner puffed up the long hill to her hut. He handed over a large bundle of mail and then pulled an important-looking letter from under his belt. She looked at the return address in awe - "Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem" - one of King George V's main charities. Ma couldn't believe it. There she was in a patch of jungle rarely visited by white men, wearing her raggedy old skirt, bare feet peeking from under its irregular hem, holding a letter from a famous charity.

Janie bumped Ma's shoulder with her own and Ma quickly opened the envelop. Everyone froze in position.

The letter announced that Ma had been selected to receive the Silver Cross for her years of selfless service to the people of what was now officially called "Nigeria."

“Fancy me with a Royal medal!” she said.

“What have I done?... But... it will let folk here ken that the King is interested in the work we are doing.”

She accepted the medal on behalf of the people of Calabar.

Whispers reached her from the villagers in 1914 that her white friends were going to war. She knew the rumors were true as food and lamp oil had become scarce in Calabar. But she continued her work as though nothing were wrong.

In the evenings, she found it hard to think of anything but the horrors of war. Her powerlessness to stop the Great War left her depressed and sluggish.

She sat in her chair in August 1914 reading the letter sent by the British government officially informing her that war had broken out. She slumped over and slid to the cement floor of her last house at Odoro Ikpe. Janie rushed to her but couldn't get Ma to focus or respond.

After she got Ma into bed, Janie was so alarmed that she called a meeting of as many mission workers in the area as possible. They sensed that Ma was near the end and they agreed with Janie that Ma should not die away from white people. So, amid fits of crying at her bedside, the men and women made a sling bed with which to carry her to the Enyong Creek. With a raging fever, Ma was senseless most of the time and wasn't aware of the journey she'd begun.

A new canoe awaited her frail frame. 5 young men, all Christians under Ma's guidance, gently paddled the canoe downriver to the dock near the path to Use.

Janie took care of Ma and gave her antimalaria medicines. Ma revived enough at one point to be able to stand aided; but Janie detected the loss of vitality in Ma's eyes. The small shrivelled body was present, but the spirit was gone.

Janie put her round face close to Ma and whispered, “Please, Ma, don't die. We don't know how to live without you.”

Ma replied softly, “Yes, Janie, you do. I can go now.”

At night, alone on her straw mat, Janie wept uncontrollably. During the day, she maintained the “stiff upper lip” Ma had taught her.

At Use, the fever returned full force sending Ma back to bed. On January 13, 1915, Janie sat next to Ma, listening to her labored breathing and delirious ramblings about the light ahead.

Janie heard the last breath and then the loud silence that followed. Two hours later, just as a ray of sun touched Ma's face, Janie stood up, put the basin down, squared her shoulders and walked to the creaky door. She opened it slowly, letting the creak crease the air. Alice, Annie, Maggie and Miss Peacock jumped from their mats but no one said a

word.

With the posture of an aristocrat, Janie whispered, "Adiaha Makara is dead." ("Mother of the World is dead").

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ENDNOTES

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