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TRIAL BY SASSWOOD

Esther Warner

非洲文学



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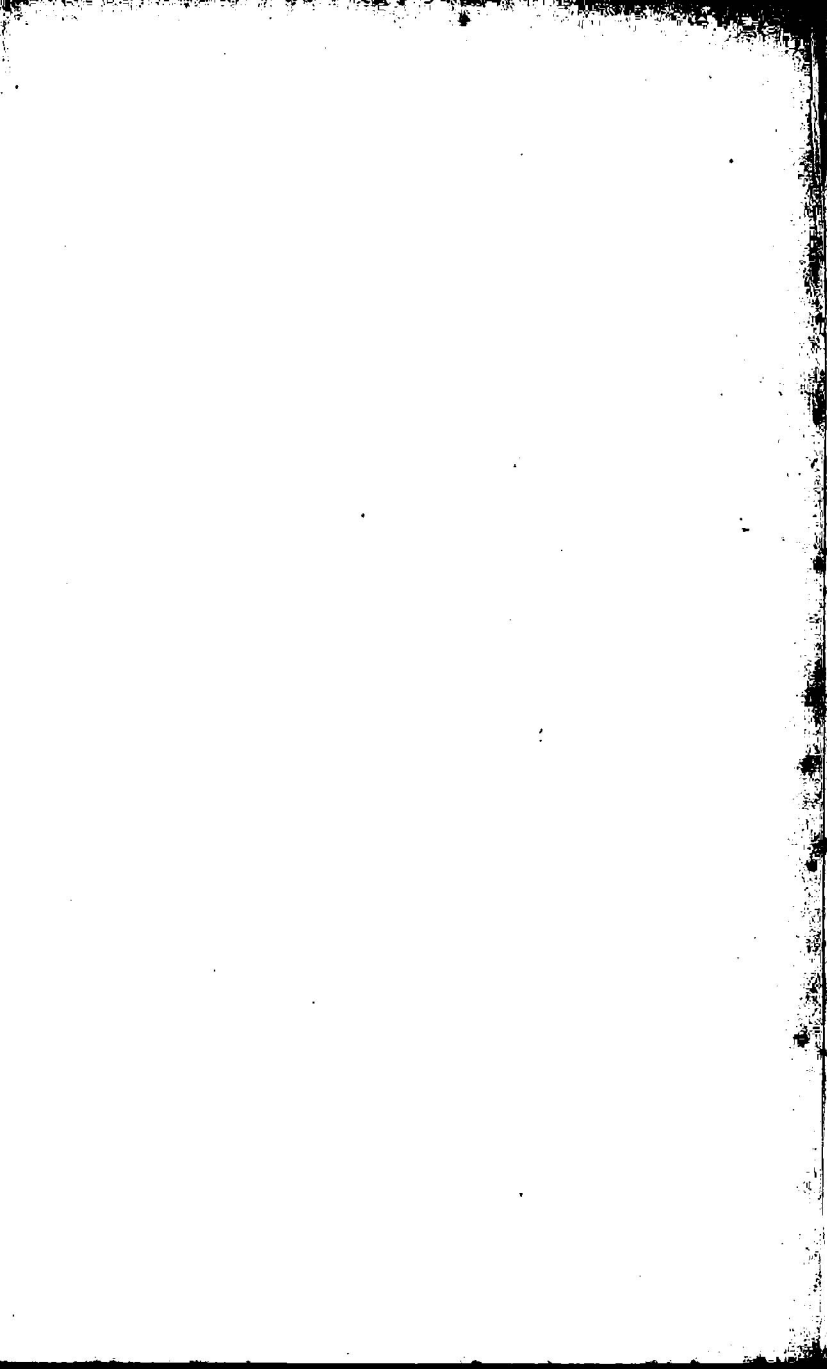
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Trial by Sasswood

Esther Warner Dendel was educated at the Iowa State College and Columbia. Upon leaving college she taught wood carving (first learned from her father) in the mountains of West Virginia and art in the Des Moines public schools. She subsequently travelled in Liberia and found that country to be a wood-carver's paradise. Her experiences there provided wonderful background material for her books, *New Song in a Strange Land* and *Trial By Sasswood*. She has also published a novel, *The Silken Cotton Tree*. She and her husband design and make ceramics from designs inspired by native Liberian artists: they live in California.



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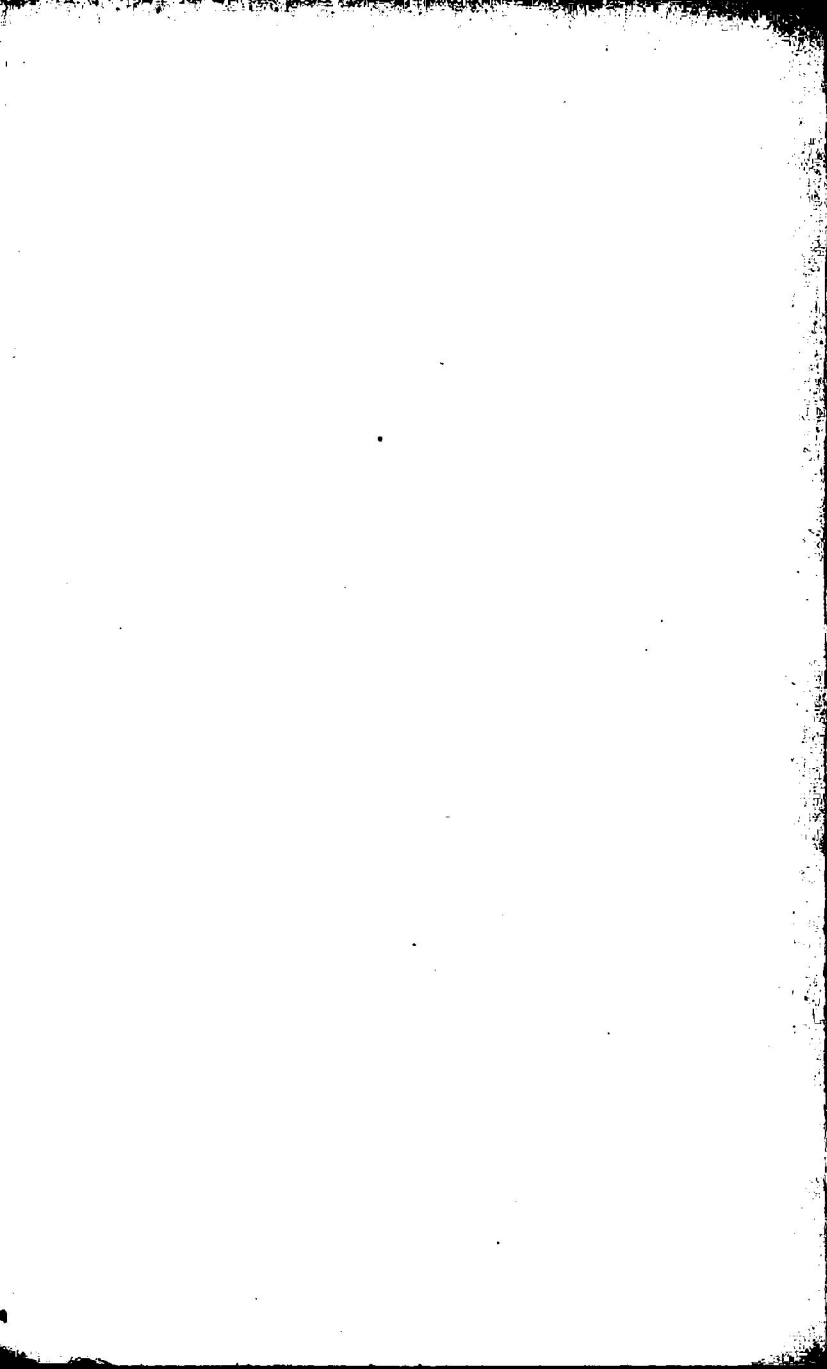
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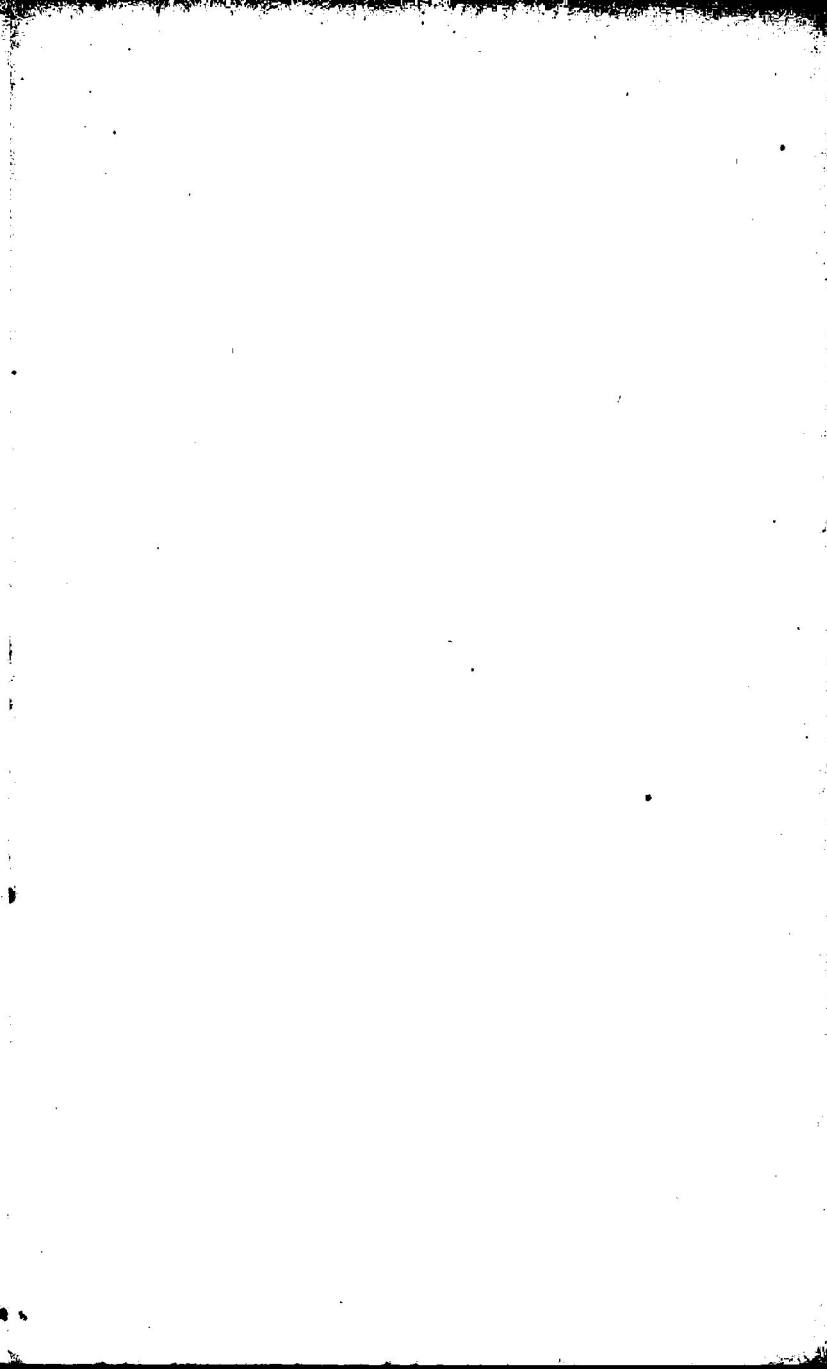
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*For Sadie Rogers who knew that the only
difference in colour which matters is the
dye of a person's thoughts and
for Oakley Parker who was never known
to look down on any man, neither up
but always level, as becomes a friend*



Contents

Foreword	9
1 Blood-Rain	11
2 Sawdust and Sand	30
3 Truth is All of One Piece	43
4 The World is How Big?	55
5 Deads' Town Needs Soap	70
6 The Tells and the Tolds	87
7 Bad-Kpuesi	110
8 Who Felled the One-Eye?	118
9 Anywhere is Somewhere	136
10 Thorns Also and Thistles	157
11 Savour of Salt	174
12 White Man on the Mat	190
13 Coals of Fire Kindled	201



Foreword

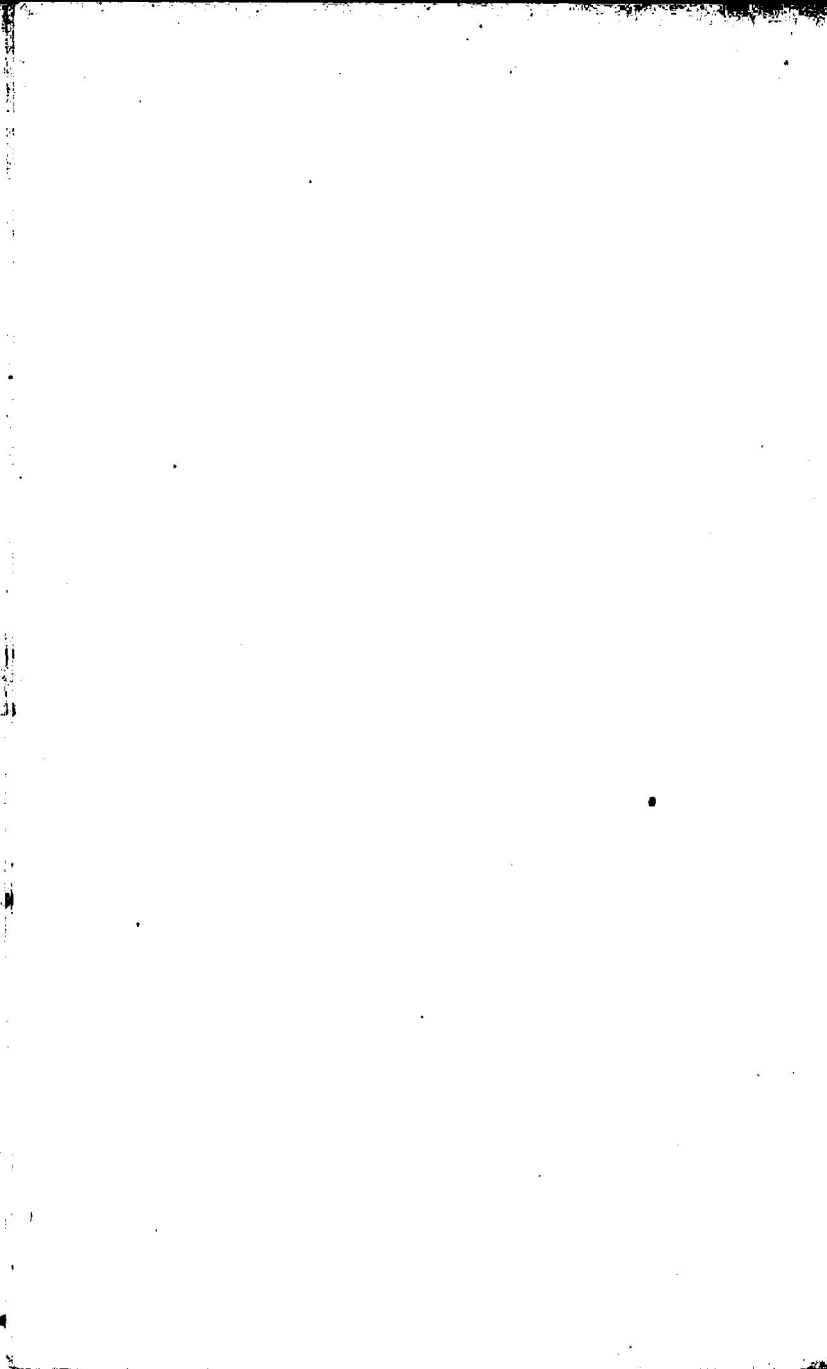
When people who know that I have lived in Africa ask me about the causes of the recent (though they are not recent) troubles there, they usually seem to expect big round answers couched in terms of economics or sociology or political science. I do not know any big round answers, nor even the vocabulary of the specialists.

Droves of professional investigators have fanned out over the globe recently, travelling widely to discover sensible answers to knotty problems. We have sent them in our panic to survive, and in our desire to be understood and appreciated. They have told us what they have found in a number of excellent recent books. Our problems have to be seen in the round, and if some of the experts have seemed to generalize too much about *peoples*, it is because matters are too urgent for them to take time to know *persons*, except as best they can in hasty interviews.

This story is one of persons whose lives became part of my own. It is my answer (fragmentary, I know), but it is not my book. It is Comma's and Johnny's and Bola's and their kinsmen's. It is not imperative, except as friendship and understanding, no matter on how small a scale, have become imperative. It is not scholarly, except that the kind of wisdom Emerson and Thoreau gave us can be heard in the folk-lore of the deep forests of Africa. It is not assertive, for friendship needs no vindication, and is its own compulsion.

Costa Mesa, California

ESTHER S. WARNER



1. Blood-Rain

*A blackened name will not weather itself bright.
The smudge will fall away only when scoured
by the hand that fouled it.*

If the first storm of the long Liberian rainy season spills its fury over the land just before dark when the sun is flaming fiercely between banks of swirling indigo clouds, the drops when they fall seem tinged with red. Blood-rain, the tribes-people call this, and it is known to be evil.

I stood at the bar of the plantation clubhouse looking out of the open window-wall over the top of distant jungle as the murky clouds piled up in the sky. They rolled and churned like huge slate-coloured barrels wallowing through heavy seas.

A few yards beyond the club, where the parking lot ends on the verge of a precipice, a lanky boy sat in the back of a red pick-up, a drum cradled between his knees. His body was tensed around the wooden cylinder as though it were the core of his being. He flicked the sides of his long hands against the drum head, making it speak in choppy thrums.

'Comma is making the drum cry for him.' Johnny, my steward boy, was back of the bar, glugging Coca-Cola syrup out of a gallon jug. He jerked his head in the direction of the pick-up.

Comma struck the drum near the outer edges. There was no lift or lilt in it. The pauses in rhythm were like gasps for breath between sobs. Some three months previous, I had seen him pound the centre of that drum with the palms of his hands, pummelling it so hard that it had seemed the force that lifted the heels of the houseboys dancing over

the dew-studded lawn. His head had been thrown back and high that night. The other boys were prancing for his good fortune in being sent on a responsible errand.

We had entrusted him with fifty dollars, more than any of them earned in a year. After he had trekked to his home village and had rested a few days with his people, he was to bring back the chimpanzee he planned to purchase with the money (we were collecting the animals for export to a breeding farm in Florida). Instead of appearing at the end of three weeks, he had been gone three months. When he did show up, he had neither animal nor money, his clothes were hanging askew in dirty tatters, and he had been beaten until his swollen features were scarcely recognizable.

I did not care about the lost money; I was too contrite over my thoughtlessness in sending him unguarded through the forests with that sum, more than most natives are able to amass intact during a lifetime of labour. What *did* matter was that Comma's plans for his future had been wrecked. He was mission-schooled, a promising student who had won a scholarship for medical training down the coast. No one believed the story he told about being robbed, not of the money, but of the chimpanzee. There were gaps and contradictions in his tale which he told in trailing sentences and with shifty eyes. When asked why he had been gone twelve weeks instead of three, he stammered that he had lost track of time, it was as though he had been out of the world. Yet his wounds were obviously new, recently inflicted.

Sticky Cola overflowed Johnny's glass and ran unheeded along the polished mahogany while we stood there listening, seeing Comma's back bent like a pulled bow, taut with grief, against the darkening forest and the gathering storm. The trickling syrup ran over the edge of the bar, splotted the skirt of my white evening dress with ruddy streaks, puddled between the straps of my silver slippers. Johnny

righted the jug with maddening slowness and ran his forefinger through the pool on the counter. The Cola was about the colour of his own skin. Then he wrapped his amazingly long and red tongue around his sweetened finger while he coldly regarded the stain on my dress.

'Poor Boy can wash it out tomorrow,' he said with weary indifference. 'But Poor Boy cannot wash the stain off Comma's spoiled name! Nor can any person, only you, Missy, *who don't want to!*'

Johnny had a deep voice and he put drum-boom into the end of his sentence, the big drum, the one they call simply, 'the man'. It was evidence of his hostility that he had called me 'Missy'. That is the accepted way for a servant on the plantation to address his employer's wife, but it had seldom been used at my house since Comma had come to us. He had called me 'Mommio' from the beginning and the others had taken it up. Any honoured native woman is called 'Ma', of which 'Mommio' is the diminutive and affectionate form. When my servants used it the difference in our skins was minimized. By calling me 'Missy' Johnny was reminding me that I was white and had done a typically 'white thing' when I had sent Comma to the interior. Doing the white thing by someone implies in Liberia, not a vicious or deliberately brutal act, but a thoughtless one which often has brutal consequences.

Comma had said, and the other boys had backed him up, that if I would walk to his village, I would learn the truth about what had happened, and that I would be able to clear him with the Mission. They had only hinted at first that this was the least I could do to right matters. When the hints did not seem to register, they had reasoned, pleaded, and finally turned hostile, saying that I didn't care whether I polished clean the name that I had helped to blacken.

Johnny's feelings were evident in his behaviour towards