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*The Voice
of the Turtle*

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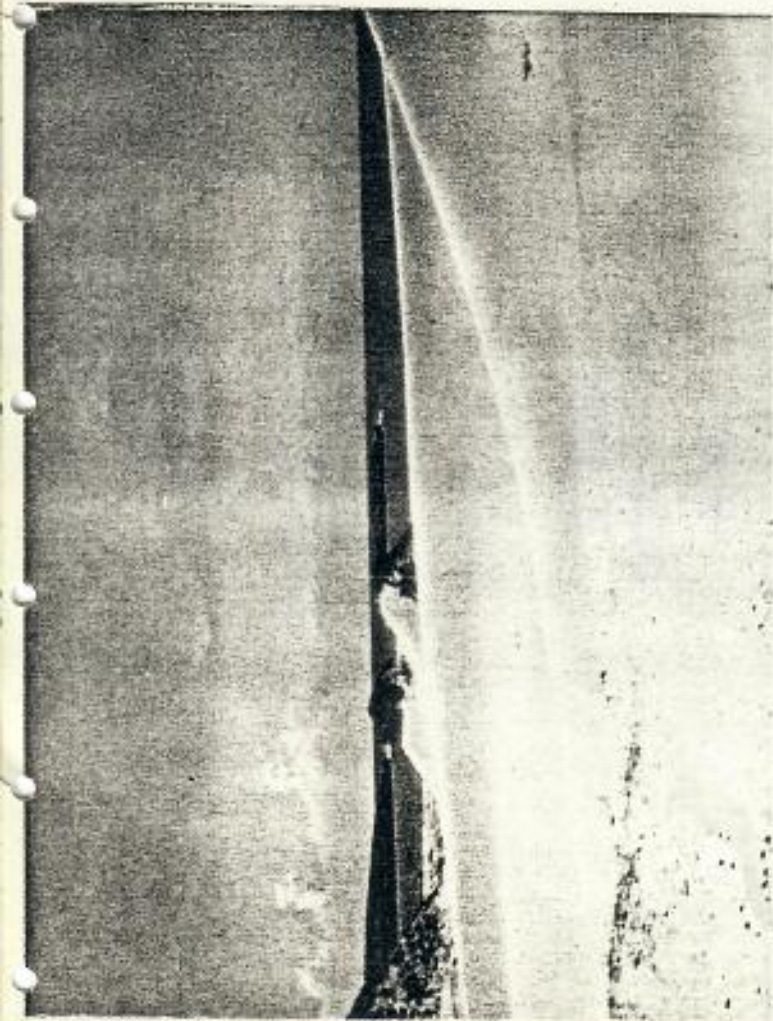
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THE VOICE OF THE TURTLE



1. SOMALIA. The sea and the sand

2. The first turtle was processed in the cannery long before the structure was completed

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Prelude

The wind lay astern, the triangular sail bellied out before us and the dhow careered on, driven by the blustering Trade wind, her bowsprit buried deep in the waves' trough, stern raised high in the air.

Under the awning that covered the poopdeck we sprawled, watching the barren coastline of southern Somalia flow past. Suddenly my companion, Hussein Ogaden, titular chief of the Barjunis, sat up, rummaged in the old haversack in which he kept his belongings and produced a half-eaten *chapatti*, a banana and some strips of dried leaf used for wrapping and preserving tobacco. From inside his shirt he pulled out a curved Omani dagger and carefully sliced both the unleavened bread and the banana into small pieces which he then rolled in segments of the leaf and tied with sail-twine. As he was arranging the tiny packets in a row on the deck in front of him I caught his eye.

'What game do you play, Hussein?'

'This is for your sake, Beard,' he answered, 'because you are not of the faith and may bring us bad luck. See those black rocks ahead, on them many ships have foundered and their crews have died. Now I make a food-offering to the spirits of the place.'

'What spirits?'

'The spirits that Merciful God has placed there to warn travellers such as we, that there is danger. Look! There is one!' he added and pointed up above the mast to where a sooty tern flickered in the sky.

'But birds such as that are everywhere along the coast.'

'No. Not so. These are not ordinary sea-birds, for they have spirits within them and we call them by a special name: *Hengava*. Now watch!'

Tucking the small packets into his waist band, he ducked out from under the awning and stood balanced on the bulwark, facing the land. Raising both arms above his head, palms open and fingers raked, he cried in a high falsetto voice.

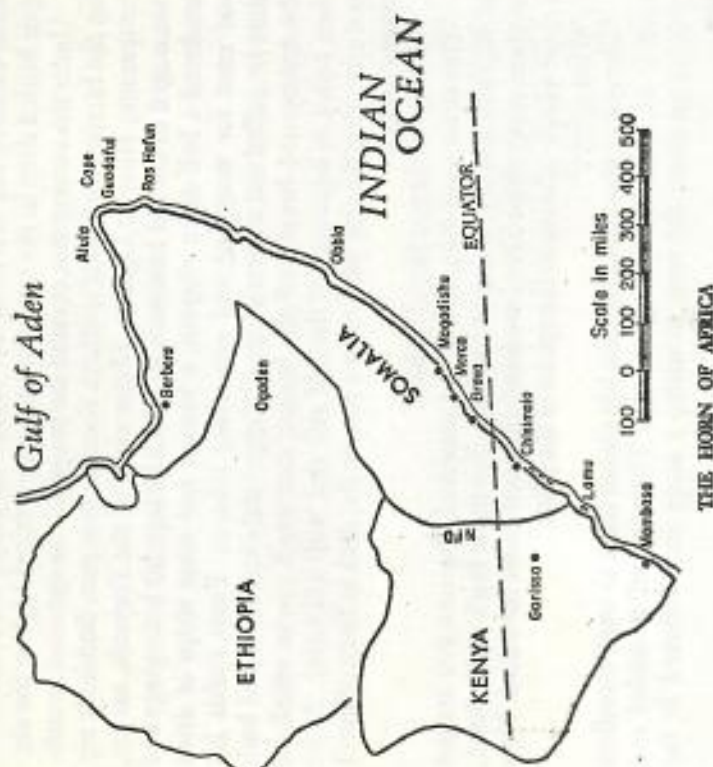
'*Hengava! Hengava!* See, we bring you food. Good food, carefully wrapped so that the fishes shall not take it. Accept this food, accept our prayers, give us a safe passage and a speedy return! Take it and eat, *Hengava!*' and he threw out the straw-coloured bundles to where a small covey of the birds swept low over the waves.

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THE HORN OF AFRICA

Momentarily attracted by the splash the terns dipped, circled and then flew on.

'See, Hussein, the *Hengawel* don't take your food!'

'They never do, Beard, because they eat only little fishes. But we must make our offerings none the less.'

A week later we returned, but this time the sea was calm and as it was dusk we anchored in the lee of those same rocks for the night. Hussein managed to scramble ashore and came back after a few minutes carrying half-a-dozen limp feathered bundles in his hand.

'But those are *Hengawel*! Your spirit-birds!' I exclaimed.

'I know,' he said, grinning slyly. 'But this time the sea is calm. There is no danger. And besides, I'm fed up with eating fish!'

Somalia, as I was to discover, was a land of paradox.

CHAPTER ONE

First Footsteps

*'... shall man have whatever he wisheth?
The future and the present are in the hand of God...'*

KORAN. Sura 53

Admittedly, it was 4 a.m., but it should not have been that cold, I thought. Not in August, at sea-level and right on the Equator.

I knew we were on the Equator, for we were sitting on the remains of a large concrete column with an inscription proclaiming that at this point the glorious forces of Fascist Italy entered the southern hemisphere, bringing the light of modern civilization into the dark places of the world. There was a lot more in this vein, but the obelisk was broken into several pieces, making the lettering difficult to fit together, so that eventually Knud and I gave it up and sat huddled on the largest of the fragments, waiting miserably for the sunrise which would disperse the clouds of mosquitoes and bring some warmth to our chilled bodies.

'Pass the chianti,' I said.

'No use. It's finished,' came the reply.

Depressed still further by this unexpected answer and suddenly aware of the penetrating cold of the concrete upon my seat, I rose and stumbled stiffly over the uneven ground to where the ponderous silhouette of the truck reared up into the night. Arriving at its front end I knelt and, forgetful of the stiffening mud which clogged the road and into which our wheels had carved great ruts before ceasing to turn entirely, crawled under the vehicle until I reached a point directly beneath the sump. Here I lay happily conscious of three things. Firstly, that the mud was comfortable; secondly, that the sump exuded a miraculous, albeit oily warmth; and thirdly, that I had escaped from the mosquitoes. So, a-straddle the Equator with my feet probably in the southern hemisphere and my head in the northern, I fell asleep.

When I woke it was to the belching croaks of a large bull-frog which had established himself in a small puddle within a few feet of my head and from which he was daring anyone to dispute his ownership—which I did and drove him protestingly out from his private pond and so gained some peace again. It was already light, but since there was no sign of Knud, our driver, or the other occupants of the truck, I lay back and pondered upon the strange set of circumstances that had brought us to our present position. . . .

We had been sitting in our office in Mombasa waiting, as was usual those days, for the telephone to ring. It had not always been like that, for at one time the civil engineering and submarine contracting business which Knud had established and which I had helped to develop, had thrived. But that was prior to the Lancaster House Conference and the subsequent general loss of business confidence in Kenya when the crash programme of Independence was announced. Now for the past six months things had been completely dead, with no contracts or development work coming in at all. Many of the smaller European firms in Kenya had already gone into liquidation and others, ourselves included, were on the brink of doing so.

The real question was not 'what-to-do', but 'where-to-go'. For the hundredth time we pulled out the atlas and went over the possibilities. East Africa in general was out, since all the territories concerned were approaching independence and were suffering from various degrees of commercial depression in consequence. South Africa seemed promising, but neither of us cared for the politics of the Government there. India was out of the running and Australia too remote. There was no place for us in any of the emergent Arab States, we felt.

As usual we reached no conclusion at all and fell silent. Presently Knud heaved his six-foot-three frame upright and started to pace the small room, which hardly contained his bulk. Stopping before the wall map he suddenly jabbed his cigarette at it.

'How about there? It's near enough.' I looked up and saw him indicating a large blank area which contained one label and hardly any other place-names at all—Somalia.

'But there's nothing there!' I exclaimed instinctively.

'How do you know?' he replied and then continued, 'What do you know of the country specifically?'

'—Well, it's had its own government for about two years. Before

that it was under United Nations trusteeship, I think. Originally an underdeveloped Italian colony taken by us in 1941 or thereabouts, then military occupation till about '48 when we handed over to the U.N. Italy was the Protecting Power, I remember.'

'Yes, but what about the country itself? What happens there? Are there any industries? What are the exports? Have you heard of any trouble there, rioting, political assassinations, are foreigners welcome?'

Since neither I nor Knud could answer any of these questions or the others that we flung at each other, we dug out our reference bible, *Whitaker's Almanack*, but all we learnt from this was that the population of Somalia at eight humans per square mile was one of the lowest in the world and that the capital was Mogadishu, which we knew. That made us feel much better, since if *Whitaker's* knew no more, then our ignorance kept good company. As a result of this discovery we decided that it would be better to divide our research, so whilst Knud took it upon himself to find out whether Somalia might indeed prove suitable, I was charged with formulating the line of activity we might best undertake if we did move there. For neither of us was this an easy task. My partner found up-to-date information very hard to obtain and eventually resorted to writing long letters of enquiry to every ministerial department he thought likely to exist and posting them hopefully and vaguely to Mogadishu. I, on the other hand, questioned every dhow captain, trader and Indian merchant that I knew in order to find out just what already existed in Somalia and what further possible fields of business there might be. After several months of suggestion and elimination we eventually whittled down the possibilities to one, which was so unlikely as to appear ludicrous and therefore all the more attractive.

We would go to Somalia and open up the world's first turtle cannery!

This actually was not so hare-brained as it sounded. Our work during the past three years had made us fully conversant with the maritime conditions prevailing in this portion of the Indian Ocean and we were accustomed to dealing and working with Coast Arabs and African sailors and fishermen. Knud's earlier experience had been in factory and workshop layout besides civil engineering, and at one time I had dabbled in the turtle-produce markets and knew the basic business both as regards preparation and marketing. Finally, we had learnt that the coasts of Somalia abounded with sea-turtles. What was new, however, was our decision to build a cannery.

Up till then turtles had been prepared for the commercial markets either by sun-drying the shell for use in soups, or, in recent times, by shipping both meat and shell in a frozen state. The former method was primitive and wasteful, whilst the latter required the presence of large cold stores at both despatching and receiving points and costly refrigerated carriage between them. This method, though giving a bigger turnover, reduced the profit margin considerably, besides entailing a large capital outlay. Why no one had considered a turtle-cannery up to that moment we were at a loss to discover, but our various potential buyers assured us that such an enterprise did not exist anywhere in the world. It was this factor that really decided us, the temptation of becoming an industrial 'first' being far too great to resist.

So whilst I busied myself with the selection of canning machinery and the collection of stores, plant and materials, Knud flew to Mogadishu to obtain official approval for our project from the Somali Government who, on our initial approach by correspondence, appeared willing to grant the necessary permits and facilities.

Two weeks later he came back, full of enthusiasm for the way in which he had been received and with the appropriate blank trading licences and entry permits secure in his brief-case. He had even obtained a plot of land for the factory site at Chisimaio, the port chosen by us as being most suitable for our requirements. We had selected this township for several reasons. Firstly, since no cargo ships plied between Kenya and Somalia we would have to take in all our gear by road and Chisimaio was the nearest regional headquarters of the administration in Somalia. Secondly, it lay at the northern end of the Barjun Islands, the area in which we intended to start turtle-fishing. Moreover, Chisimaio was one of the three major ports in the country (the other two being Merca and Mogadishu) and we planned to ship out our products from there to Europe.

With the return of Knud our plans crystallized and within a few weeks we were ready to move. Since it was necessary that both of us signed the various concession documents in person before the appropriate Ministers and officials prior to the work actually starting in Chisimaio, it was decided that we two would fly on ahead to Mogadishu, and having completed these formalities would cable Geoff Waldegrave and Tony Cope, the sole remaining European members of our shrunken company, who would then set off for Chisimaio in two trucks bringing with them the first loads of our

equipment and machinery. The prospect of this overland journey was rather worrying since the greater portion of the 600-mile trip was through the desolate desert region of Kenya's Northern Frontier District (usually referred to as the NFD), and also a similar area on the Somali side of the border. However, Geoff was experienced in travelling long distances through the bush-veldt, so Knud and I left all the arrangements for this in his hands, after having agreed that since we had no idea how long the final paperwork might take us in Mogadishu, he would not leave Kenya until receiving our cable, so that we might be on hand at Chisimaio for his arrival there with the trucks.

As it turned out, our stop-over in Mogadishu lasted even longer than we had planned and it was two weeks before we were able to leave there. Not that there was much for us to do really, but after the moderately efficient mechanism of government that existed in Kenya the antiquated form of bureaucratic control of Somalia came as something of a shock. It was not that the various Somali officials were not helpful; on the contrary they were courteous itself, but their new republic had inherited an administrative machine dating from the pre-war days of Italian colonialism, and as yet they had neither the experience nor time to streamline it to their real requirements.

Each day we would walk from Government office to Government office, collecting signatures, seals and stamps until our brief-cases bulged, yet the final necessary documents seemed as distant as ever. But by ten each morning the various offices would empty and secretaries, departmental heads and Ministers would become more and more elusive. It took us some days to catch on as to what was happening. The business of administration started at eight, and by nine-thirty most of the executives had already started to drift round to each others' offices for a general chat. At ten everyone disappeared for coffee in the boulevard cafés, returning briefly between twelve-fifteen and one, when all offices closed. Following the afternoon siesta there was an hour's work from four-thirty to five-thirty, but since this was merely to get rid of correspondence and took place behind closed doors it served no purpose for the general public. There was nothing one could do about this routine; the system could not be broken and one could only drift with it, which we soon did. One advantage of this forced inactivity was that it enabled us to get to know Mogadishu and its novelty, though we had already begun to appreciate that Somalia was unlike any other country we had ever known after the first night in our hotel.

Mogadishu, in years gone by, had had few visitors, and in consequence one main hotel, the Croce del Sud, had sufficed. With the coming of independence, the flow had increased and the new government financed the building of two more, named the Guiba and Seebeli, after the only rivers in the country. These new hotels, whilst of modern design, had been erected in great haste and as cheaply as possible, in consequence of which they embodied some surprising features, as the Seebeli soon proved to us. For example, the self-operated lifts seldom arrived at the destination selected, and the operating button, though it set the cage in motion, extinguished the lights within it, so that one rose or descended in complete darkness, usually arriving at the roof-garden or the basement when all one wanted was one's own floor. The plumbing, too, was a little alarming—with taps that did not work, flush handles that revolved endlessly and uselessly and bidets that directed a jet of water all over the ceiling. The telephone system had its peculiarities and we discovered that the only way to raise the operator was to ring for room-service and then tell the maid to go and tell the switchboard operator that we were calling. But in spite of all this the atmosphere was extremely friendly and the hotel staff quite unique—or so we thought till we realized that they were all just normal Somali types.

The first morning, waking early, I picked up my only guide to Somalia, Burton's *First Footsteps in East Africa* (1856), and came across this passage:

'... you must open your doors to your friends at all hours: if when inside it suits him to sing, sing he will, and until you learn solitude in a crowd, or the art of concentration, you are apt to become irritable. You must abandon your prejudices...—here I rang the bedside bell and returned to my reading—... and he who objects to having his head shaved in public, to seeing his friends combing their locks in his sitting-room, to having his property uncereemoniously handled or to being addressed familiarly by a perfect stranger, had better avoid Somalia...—at this point the door swung open and a massive, beaming Somali woman appeared, waving a duster.

'Nabad! Cosa vole?

'E-cr, due caffè per favore, anché pane, burro è marmalata.'

'Ha-hey! Caffè completo. Subito!'—then, 'You 'merican?'

'English.'

'Inglesch? W'all'ail Ingresi! Fatuma!' (this in a yell over her shoulder). 'Fat'mal Kali, kali!'

A second enormous female, in a very pregnant state, waddled in. There followed an exchange of rapid, staccato Somali and our first visitor turned back to me.

'Fatuma says you lie. You not Ingresi. *Lei non è Ingresi*. You *Tedeschi*. Sherrman you! What your name?'

'My name's Travis. He is Augustinus...', and I pointed to the other bed where Knud lay, his head covered and possibly still asleep, though I suspected wide-awake and hoping things would get back to normal and quieter in a little while if he pretended not to notice.

'I Amina, she Fatuma.' We all shook hands and Fatuma sat down heavily on Knud's foot, apparently worn out. Amina turned on her, they chatted for a while, Fatuma eased Knud's foot out from under her buttocks and relaxed a bit more. Amina started on her again and Fatuma rose, grumbling heavily, and ambled out of the room. Amina turned to me.

'Travis, I tell her to get your breakfast. Also eggs. If you *Ingresi*, you eat eggs. I say bring lots of eggs. Also tea. Not coffee. You drink tea.' It was a statement, not a question.

'Now I get you laundry-boy, Travis. Bye-bye,' and out she sailed.

'What on earth was all that?' came an awed voice from under the bed-clothes.

'That, as you heard, was Amina. I think she works here. At least, I hope so—otherwise the management will be complaining!'

'Don't worry about that. Amina would handle them if they did, I'll bet. In fact, she probably *is* the management!'

As it turned out, Amina wasn't. But we very soon discovered that her forthright and assured approach was nothing unusual among Somali women.

In theory the Somali woman should be a down-trodden, spiritless creature, restricted by religion and environment from developing any clear character whatsoever. Physically mutilated by forced circumcision when a child, a labourer all her life, deprived of any formal schooling or training, seemingly a plaything for the whims of chance or men. Every mortal circumstance seems against her and yet the dominant and extraordinary personalities of Somali women have been remarked by travellers since Egyptian times.

One factor alone seems responsible for this. A nomad can have few possessions and both house and worldly goods are limited to what can be carried on a camel's back. In consequence, apart from

his livestock, his real wealth must be in intangibles. For the Somali two stock items fulfil his needs in this respect. A great hate and a great love. These, as he says, 'make a man'. For the first, a wrong to brood over, a blood-feud to be carried in his heart, an ambushade to plan, a paeon of hate to compose, a song for the battle itself and an ecstatic poem should victory be his. So with his love: the first sight of the girl and the lonely nights' dreaming by distant campfires, the deliberation as to his love-gift, the plea for brief meetings and the composition of his sonnets in her praise. But while his hate may outlast his own lifespan, being handed down from generation to generation, his love, like the flowers of his desert land, is a thing of brief substance.

Perhaps it is the realization of this that gives the Somali woman her inner strength, for, in compensation for the rest of her hard life, she knows that surely, during one short phase of it, she will be prized above all else and that for a glimpse of her a man will travel on foot hundreds of miles, will risk his life (since her male kinsfolk will inevitably object to the suitor), and in honour of her shadowed eyes and slender arms will think up lyrical verses comparable to Herrick or Marlowe. Admittedly, love does not last and all too soon her considerate lover will become indifferent, cruel and bad-tempered, seeking out new women and spending his time with the other menfolk, but then in her experience what joyous, gentle thing does last? When this time comes, her affection is turned for a few more years on her children, until finally the radiant girl becomes a bitter scold, the 'Nagger-of-the-World' as they say, or else a gaunt and silent creature whose upright carriage (when free of burdens) is all that remains of the beauty that was hers.

But at least she has the memory of love, and that does not die.

Almost a year later, sitting under a village tree, I listened to two old crones talking about times past.

'*W'all' ai!*' exclaimed one, 'How fine he was! Strong and fierce and for my sake he went on a *razza* [raid], and brought back more than sixty camels, of which his share was eight. These he sold and brought me golden ear-rings and silver bracelets, heavy as stone. But I refused, saying they were too small a gift, and then he sang me his *belmo* [love-plea] which shut my words in my throat and he took me there beneath the thorn-tree. After that night he returned to his *rer* [tribal encampment], and two days later he was killed by those he had raided, who came seeking their camels and finding none took the price in blood. *W'all' ai!*, but he was a man!'

To us, Mogadishu seemed to fall into four natural divisions. First there was the seafront area, the centre of which was made up of the original Arab-type buildings of the time of Said Bargash, the powerful Sultan of Oman who, during the mid-nineteenth century, had extended his rule to include Zanzibar, the coastal ports of Kenya and Tanganyika and also Mogadishu. This was a region of twisting lanes, tall overhanging buildings, crazy balconies and crumbling ruins. On either side there stretched more modern but war-torn neo-Arabic structures of the Italian colonial era, mainly offices of government and including, on the north side, a large *lungomare*. This part of the town had a certain shabby air of magnificence, with large houses set apart and sufficiently back from the road for their broken shutters and peeling paint and plaster to escape first glance. Along the promenade itself, with its massive trellis-wall, great holes lay open to the sea and the black and twisted stumps of the heavy iron lamp standards protruded from the broken masonry. It was here that the new republic staged its parades and along one side had been erected a tawdry boxwood stand from which the State's *élite* viewed the pageants. After two successive Independence Day celebrations, however, the strain of bearing tanks, lorries and infantry was proving too much for the old esplanade, unrepaired for the past twenty years, and ominous subsidings and crackings marked its surface.

Behind the frontal zone and in a slight depression lay the commercial part of the town, a characterless plain of blocks regularly traversed by small streets which cut across the three main avenues at right angles. Unlike the rest of the city, there were no architectural surprises, no *culs-de-sac*, no winding alleys or unexpected courtyards; everything was uniform, regular and very dull. It was here that both the Guiba and Scebeli hotels had been built.

Beyond all this lay a ridge of which the centre hillslope formed the suburbs of the wealthy, a place of pillar-box villas with walled gardens and climbing bougainvillae. Most of these houses were leased by their owners to members of the many and obscure foreign interests in Somalia, such as the various departments and subsidiaries of UNO, foreign aid groups, ambassadorial staff and other such. Rents for these, we were told, had leapt from £15 a month to £150 since independence, in consequence of these in-pourings. Speculation in real estate was rife, with shoddy flats and ugly bungalows being erected on every available piece of land.

The fourth division of Mogadishu consisted of the native town, which lay on the plain to the south of the commercial centre and the

towns-peoples' homes on the hills on either side of the wealthy residential slopes. By and large this housing area was well laid out, the mud-and-wattle walled and iron-sheeted or thatched roofed huts running in lines, with wide alleyways and drainage ditches separating them. The earthen roads were far cleaner than their counterparts in Cairo or Nairobi and the people did not have the hang-dog appearance so often associated with tropical poverty. Wandering through the area we were seldom pestered by beggars, whose pathetic figures draped the pavements of the city's centre, but were treated with open and cheerful curiosity, many people stopping to find out who we were and if we spoke Somali (which at that time we did not), or Italian, which we did. Here, so far from Kenya, none of the ordinary folk know either Swahili or English.

The commercial part of the town consisted in the main of small shops—selling Italian goods at inflated prices—import/export offices and many restaurants. The back streets were crowded with garages and repair shops, with broken-down vehicles of all descriptions occupying most of the available space. This sector of Mogadishu was still entirely dominated by Italians, with Somalis fitting in as junior clerks, messengers or garage hands. Much to our surprise we found that none of the Italian residents had attempted to learn Somali, nor were interested in or cared about the country in which they lived. Unfortunately, the majority of these expatriates were from the lower sections of their own society and we found them crass, uneducated and unbelievably gauche as compared with the dignified Somalis, compared with whom the Europeans made a poor and perhaps ridiculous spectacle.

Though from the start we were careful to be extremely polite in our dealings with the Italians, once they knew that Knud and I had come to Somalia to start up a business, their attitude hardened and they adopted a seemingly instinctive attitude of non-co-operation towards us. Somalia, they felt, was *their* preserve. A country no longer an Italian colony, yet one which was for their own unique exploitation. All of them were in Somalia to make money and none were there to make it their home. Their attitude and the attitude of those Europeans who lived in Kenya were entirely different. In order to buttress their position in Somalia these Italians had adopted a system of mutual aid for, wherever possible, cousins, nephews, sisters and aunts had been brought from the 'old country' to fill those lower posts that might have reasonably been given to Somalis. Virtually no Somali was trained by them and after sixty years of

Italian rule or direct influence there existed in Somalia at that time one Somali doctor, one magistrate, no engineers, lawyers, vets, accountants, architects or even plumbers or electricians. In consequence, though Somalia was an independent republic her whole economy was shackled to that of Italy and she remained a commercial lackey to that country. Whilst providing tied markets for Somalia's exports of bananas and, to a lesser extent, hides, Italy paid for these commodities in 'blocked lira', which prevented Somalia from exchanging this currency on the open market but forced her to purchase goods solely from Italy. In consequence, Somalia became a useful dumping ground for cheap Italian goods at ridiculous prices. We soon found out the practical application of this.

Realizing that in a country lacking a general road system the only practical form of transport for us was by Landrover, we made enquiries concerning them. For a genuine Landrover, it appeared, one had to wait fourteen months *after* having obtained a special import licence, which was not easy to come by. Moreover, the *full price in cash* had to be paid out at the moment of ordering. However, an Italian equivalent (but much smaller and less robust) could be obtained on the spot. The price? A mere £1,700! This crazy economic state of affairs showed up in everything. Decent rope one could not buy, nor tools, wood screws, pulleys, piping, galvanized wire, chain, nor most other basic items. Wood suitable for the tropics was unobtainable, though Kenya, with its sawmills and lumber industry, was just across the border. Instead, planed and shaped timbers of an unsuitable type were brought from Italy and cost the earth in consequence. The real requirements of an emergent country were not to be had. Instead the stores were loaded with boxes of liqueur chocolates, fluffy children's toys, silk shirts and toilet requisites. There were eight cinemas and no libraries (apart from those newly-created by foreign aid organizations, all of political interest only). There were too many restaurants and too few schools. Too many cars and too few mechanics. Too many newly-built villas and no drainage system.

Besides the commercial chaos we were quickly caught up in the international politics merry-go-round since Mogadishu, for some incomprehensible reason, had recently become a stage on which the world's giants played out their grim farce. In 1962 there existed in the capital the following major groups: a large United Nations structure, with various sub-bodies such as UNESCO, UNICEF, WHO—FAO, besides the embassies and ambassadorial staff and

various missions of the United States, the USSR, Great Britain, the Chinese People's Republic, Czechoslovakia, Ghana, Egypt, West Germany and France. There was also a very big United States aid organization, President Kennedy's Peace Corps, as well as a multitude of Russian, Czech, Chinese, German and even Common Market technical teams and project engineers. All these were, of course, split as in the world at large into East, West and non-committed alignments. The Western *blat* scurried around offering money, scholarships, pamphlets and good advice to every government department that existed, whilst the Eastern groups followed in their wake offering counter-proposals, different projects, more pamphlets and alternate currencies. Proposals for giant irrigation schemes, mass education programmes, light and heavy industries, complex communications and transport systems costing thousands of millions of pounds, dollars or roubles were bandied about as carelessly as election promises and certainly without the consent of the Treasury departments of the countries concerned!

There were two main drawbacks to all this. The first was that though the merry-go-round had been in operation for several years, the Somalis had yet to see any concrete results or even signs of them. Secondly, Mogadishu being quite a small town, the various protagonists continually impinged upon one another with comic-opera results. In crowded restaurants, a United States team of economic advisers would find themselves sitting at a table adjacent to a similar Soviet group. Worse still, the Americans' particular protégé—a junior member of one of the Somali ministries and one whom they had been grooming for months—would be seen to be the guest of honour at the Russian table! Under such circumstances the Americans would either leave in a huff, their food untouched, or else sit it out in apparent agony, the backs of their necks brick-red, whilst their neighbours practically purred with bringing off a major coup. To 'non-aligned' bystanders such as ourselves the whole performance, many times repeated with variations, was glorious recreation.

Everywhere one went in Mogadishu this political 'one-up-manship' raged. In every place, that is, except the Lido.

In various cities and at various times throughout modern history there have existed places of entertainment which have become world-renowned for their 'atmosphere'. Not all of these have been sumptuous, in fact quite a few have been shabby, but all have been unique. In the former category stand the Moulin Rouge of the '90s and the present-day Rupe Tarpia of Rome which, incidentally, has been in

continuous business for about 2,000 years. As examples of the latter type there was the Sphinx of Algiers and Quinn's Hut in Tahiti. All these establishments have been more than bars, less than brothels, neither night-club nor theatre, restaurant nor dance-hall; places where the amusement was provided mainly by the spectators themselves, the coming-and-going crowd, the meetings and the partings, the roistering and the sobriety; each separate cameo a brief charade of the human race. The Lido is one such exceptional club and is becoming surprisingly well known throughout the world. At first glance there is nothing to the Lido. A vaguely octagonal building built at the end of a road leading out along the beach to the north of Mogadishu. It is cheap, garish and filled with perhaps sixty oilcloth covered tables scattered around a central dance floor. The lighting is indifferent, the murals atrocious, the service sloppy. Empty and in daylight the Lido looks what it is—a hideous clap-board travesty of a night-club.

But the attraction of the Lido, like all such places, is in its occupants; a motley, polyglot gathering of up to twenty nationalities, oil-men from Texas, wealthy Somali ranchers, airline passengers on a stop-over, Italian businessmen and, occasionally, their wives, embassy groups and project engineers. Sprinkled throughout this assembly will be a variety of Somali girls; slender, coppery Yunis from the north, smaller Migdams from the oases of Galkayu, and half-caste Ethiopians from the Ogaden. In the Lido, by virtue of the astonishing *laissez-faire* of the Somali character, everything is allowable as long as it is fundamentally peaceful. Elsewhere, Somalis may not be served alcohol, but here even the girls can order what they like as long as they behave. *Kat* may be chewed or *kashish* smoked (though not bought). Tables may be occupied without ordering and without charge. You may sit, drink, watch, chat, pick up a girl or a man, get drunk or stay sober—any or all of these as the mood dictates. You can wear shorts and beachwear or evening dress. You may talk to people at other tables without introduction or ask anyone to dance without risk of causing offence. You can be solitary or sociable, sedate or staggering, aloof or lecherous; but you must not cause a rumpus or break things. In accordance with these rules, therefore, the Lido is a political no-man's-land, and East and West on finding themselves sitting next to one another, if not visibly enchanted by such an arrangement, at least avoid scowling openly. For this reason alone the Lido deserves sanction.

But since Knud and I were not primarily in Somalia to sit around

drinking coffee by day or to enjoy the spectacle of the Lido by night, it soon became apparent that we must make some drastic move to further our ends, or we would be spending several more months doing just that. So we approached the authorities concerned, asking that since the necessary final documents seemed to be taking a long time to prepare, might we not have their verbal approval to go ahead with our building programme in the meantime. Much to our surprise, but in a manner typical of their nonchalant outlook, they agreed and after a single morning's work we found ourselves in possession of a host of temporary permits and provisional land allocation orders—free at last to head on south to Chisimaio. It was at this point that we found ourselves up against the major problem of Somalia: transportation, or rather the lack of it. We had already tried to buy a Landrover without success, there being none available for the reasons already explained. We now tried to hire such a vehicle locally, but all the firms we approached wanted £120 or more for the 600-mile round trip, so we quickly sought other means of travelling. Ships, we discovered, did not normally ply between the two ports, there were no aeroplanes to be chartered, nor were there any buses apparently. For several days we were at a complete loss until in desperation we asked the hotel receptionist if he could suggest any method by which we might make the journey down to Chisimaio. This question seemed so ludicrous to him that it took the best part of an hour to get him to understand our real need, since the man took it for granted that we were averse—for some unexplained but mystical reason—to travelling by road. He spoke of camel-trains and donkey carts, forced marches and litters, until in desperation we demanded that if everything was so difficult just how was communication carried on between the two towns? Back came the simple answer, by fleets of lorries, of course. And did these lorries take passengers? Naturally! That was how everyone travelled and the fare if we sat in the cab would be thirty shillings, but if we chose to sit on the back like everyone else it would be ten. If we wished he would show us the depot where all the trucks assembled to take on goods and passengers.

Half an hour later we were back in the hotel having booked our passages to Chisimaio. It had cost fifty shillings for the two of us, including the use of the two canvas cots that were fixed to the rear wall of the cab behind the driver's head.

The following morning arriving at the large open square of beaten

earth which was the 'depot' and which lay behind the market in the native town, we were worried to find that our big truck had disappeared from its parking place of the previous day, but were told on enquiry that it would be back shortly, having gone to pick up a spare wheel from the garage. It was then 7 a.m. At 10 it turned up and everything was 'almost ready', but by mid-day we were advised to have lunch since the man who had the money for the fuel for the journey had not yet arrived. Fearing that it might leave without us, we took our meal (the first of many similar) at one of the little eating shacks in the nearby bazaar: black, sweet tea served in glasses that burnt one's fingers and limp *sambusas*, a type of curry puff filled with minced meat, raw onion and garlic. At 1 o'clock all the other passengers climbed out of the back of the truck where they had been lying and crawled underneath the chassis where they went to sleep. At four the driver turned up again and assured us that we would be leaving at any moment and that we would be in Chisimaio by 10 the next morning. Knud mused over this latest information, shook his head and ambled away towards the market, saying he would be back in a minute. An hour later, the situation being exactly the same, he reappeared carrying a basket containing two kilos of cheese, forty-eight rolls, six tins of sardines, one kilo of onions and two two-litre flagons of chianti, for, as he said, if the preparations took this long, how long might the journey?

Finally, at dusk we set off, the huge truck lurching over the ground, wheezing heavily through her compressed-air brakes as we threaded our way down the narrow streets that led out of Mogadishu and on to Chisimaio.

emaciated, red-eyed man with forearms like a riveter's, ate nothing as far as we could see, but chain-smoked at each pause and chewed *kât* whilst driving.

This drug is in common use throughout Somalia and undoubtedly contains certain properties that Western medical research would do well to investigate. Known to the Arabs since antiquity either as *kât* or *mirâf*, it is obtained from the leaf of a small shrub, *Catha edulis*, found in plentiful supply on the high plateaux and hillsides of both Somalia and Ethiopia. In its standard form the drug is sold as a small bundle of raw dried leaves, slender and greeny-yellow, bound up with twine. In some places the sale of *kât* is forbidden, but so general is its distribution that such a ban serves no purpose, shopkeepers merely keeping the packets under the counter and displaying a solitary banana leaf at their doors as an indication that the narcotic is available within. The effects of *kât* are similar to many such stimulants: increased concentration, quicker muscular reactions and greater physical endurance. It also dispels sleep and kills the appetite. To be brought into use the leaf must be chewed for several days at a stretch, for no reaction is noticeable for the first twenty-four hours. The taste is thin, slightly bitter and quite refreshing.

It is of course habit-forming and continued chewing brings on hallucinations and lack of co-ordination, due in part to starvation, since the addict cannot bring himself to eat. In spite of the drawbacks it has many useful applications. Through its agency the nomads are able to range far out into the empty wastes in forced reconnaissances for water sources, frequently travelling on foot as far as 100 miles per day for as long as three days at a time, an otherwise impossible feat.

But for all these good points, it was not very comforting to have the lorry on which one is travelling in such an erratic fashion, being driven by a chewer of *kât*, or so Knud and I felt, as our companion became more and more wild-eyed and strange, given to sudden outbursts of laughter and sometimes lifting both hands from the wheel to beat out upon the dashboard drum-rhythms which apparently reverberated through his head, demanding expression. However, there was nothing that could be done about it and our only consolation lay in the fact that his growing sleeplessness made our halts for rest fewer and further between, bringing Chisimaio ever nearer in consequence.

As we neared the Guiba, animal life became more prolific. Elephant there was in plenty; also kudu, sable antelope, giraffe-

CHAPTER TWO

The Corner Stone

*'We were not of those who prayed
And we were not of those who fed the poor,
And we plunged into vain disputes with vain disputers'*

Sura 74

That initial journey down to Chisimaio took three days and four nights, ample justification for Knud's pessimism. For the first 100 miles the going was reasonable, the murrum road being dry and hard, for the rainy season had finished in those regions two months ago. Thereafter, as we approached the Guiba river, it became progressively muddier and the truck was forced to make long detours to avoid the quagmires and marshes into which the highway frequently disappeared. These detours were quite exhilarating for the ground was so soft that each vehicle had to make its own road and the swampy green surface that appeared in front of the bonnet emerged from under the rear axles as a creamy chocolate mud into which any subsequent truck would sink. Our lorry with its load of screaming, shouting occupants, would swerve abruptly off the road crashing straight through the thickets of acacia and Indian fig that lay on either side and then lurch and roar through the bush at the maximum possible speed compatible with forward visibility. About the only things to which it gave way were the trunks of large trees and boulders, if seen in time. Branches rapped and swept along the cab sides and roof, and all those sitting in the back were forced to lie flat in a great jumble of legs and arms to avoid being brushed off. Twice, indeed, some poor unfortunate either fell or was knocked off, but the truck did not dare stop until it reached firmer, more open ground—which in one case was a good eight miles from the scene of the mishap. But such halts were welcome (to the rest of us), for it enabled legs to be stretched and bones to recover from the incessant jolting. It also enabled us to eat in relative comfort. Our driver, an

necked gerenuk and many others. Signs of the big carnivores were plentiful: bark-clawings of lion, the pungent whiff of leopard hanging about the wet thickets, whilst in the night their bull-like bellowings and grunting, sighing coughs sounded through the bush. This section of Somalia was very rich in wild life and in these few days we saw more than ever we had in the many years that we had known Kenya.

Eventually we reached the river, swollen and turgid with the rains, and crossed the narrow bridge. We were now on the last stretch, for Chisimaio lay but twenty miles or so ahead, and we were elated at the prospect of soon finishing the journey. But we were mistaken, for no sooner had we passed over the Guiba than the road ended entirely and became a morass of mud out of which we could not break. The reason for this was not hard to discover. Fringing the banks of the river to the north were the great banana plantations whose produce was transported to Chisimaio in fleets of ancient trucks. These daily convoys had succeeded in chewing up the whole area in their continuous attempts to find alternate routes across the soft ground. Many of the vehicles now lay all about us, bogged down chassis-deep in mud, they and their loads abandoned till the ground dried out. Some of them had been there for as long as six weeks, we were told, and would probably remain for another four before being salvaged. Every year it was the same, but since this inefficient cartage was carried out by individual lorries on a contract basis and because the plantation owners would not agree amongst themselves on building a decent highway, the chaos seemed likely to continue. In the meantime other users of the road suffered.

Forced to a halt by the soft ground, our driver, hitherto ferociously eager to plough on, surprisingly seemed quite content to rest and sleep. In answer to our queries he explained that he had stopped chewing *khat* that morning, since he had a wife in Chisimaio and the leaf rendered him temporarily impotent. Tomorrow morning, he said, with the brisk air of a gardener discussing the state of his rose-bushes, his equipment would be in a fine state and he would be capable of lovemaking. As a further inducement to this on arrival as he partook of his coffee he intended smoking just three cigarettes, each with several grains of hashish buried in them. That would clinch the matter. Cheered considerably by this thought our happy drug-addict clambered out of the cab and wandered out into the gathering dusk across the sea of mud, leaving his lorry and his passengers to look after themselves as best they could. There being

nothing else to do, Knud and I got down as well and wandered over to some broken concrete-work lying nearby, where we sat in gloomy despondency, taking desultory bites of cheese and spirited gulps of wine. It was only after some hours that we discovered that the masonry on which we sat were the fragments of an obelisk marking the Equator, but this interesting fact somehow failed to cheer us, for the air was cold and the mosquitoes whined in dense clouds about us.

At sunrise the driver returned from wherever he had spent the night, looking pale and haggard but in good spirits. Gaily throwing bundles and belongings on to the ground despite their owners' cries, he eventually unearthed spades, mattocks, planks and matting from the back of the lorry. With these he proceeded to free the front wheels and to pave the way out of the drying ooze. So effective were his strivings that within two hours we were clear of the worst, the road emerging from the marsh and resuming its welcome, pot-holed form.

We reached Chisimaio by mid-morning, though at first we did not realize that the ramshackle village of sand-floored streets and broken-down houses was, in fact, our destination and, indeed, the second biggest town in the whole of Somalia. The truck halted in a large dusty square, the centre of which was taken up with some very depressed flower beds. On one side, over an imposing Beau Geste façade, the colours of the Somali Police Force hung limply, but through the crenellated portcullis the outer battlements of the building could be seen to give way to rusty corrugated iron and palm-leaf thatching within. Next to this fake huddled a drab, low building from one end of which extended an open-sided restaurant. Draped over its forty-odd tables and chairs the entire visible population of Chisimaio now sprawled, slept, or lazed the day away. 'Hoteli,' grunted our driver and jerked a thumb to indicate we should descend. We did so, our bags were thrown out on to the sand beside us, the driver lifted a valedictory hand and we stood back to avoid the dust cloud that arose as the lorry moved off. Leaving our luggage where it lay, we threaded our way through the tables to an open doorway. Inside we found ourselves in a low-ceilinged cubicle, with a minute bar across one end and facing us a typical *cassiers* pulpit—complete with till, glass ash-tray for change and calendar on the wall. This last was half obscured, however, by the slumped figure of the portly Italian behind the desk who, clad in the inevitable cotton singlet, snored and sweated loudly and wetly with his

head on the counter and one protective arm embracing the cash register. On being woken he displayed no annoyance or surprise whatsoever at the intrusion and, squeezing himself out from his cubby-hole, climbed cheerily up the rickety wooden staircase before us to show us to our rooms. These consisted of two large, low-ceilinged cubicles with a collection of wire-spring bedsteads stacked in each. Our landlord explained that he provided accommodation by the bed, not by the room, and we could therefore occupy one or two rooms or sleep in the passage way if we cared, for it made no difference. We next viewed the bathroom, a slimy dungeon with a broken tap sticking straight out of a wall, which comprised the bathing facilities, and a hole in the floor at the other end which served as a lavatory. Naturally the hotel did not supply mattresses for the beds, but there were some somewhere he would seek out for us. Pillows there were none. Nor towels. And now if we would excuse him . . . He stumped off down the stairs and we heard the sigh from his chest and the creak from the stool as he reassumed his former position. Within a couple of minutes he was snoring again. . . .

Knud and I sat down on two of the rusty beds and straightway decided that our first and most important problem was to find a suitable house, for here we could not remain, especially since Geoff and Tony would be arriving shortly, bringing with them all the equipment. However, as we discovered for ourselves at lunchtime, at least the food that was served in the open restaurant was reasonable. Or so it seemed to us after three days of cheese, stale bread and raw onions. That afternoon we received a cable from Mombasa saying that our convoy of trucks had already left and was due in Chisimaio the following day. This made our task of house-hunting and establishing the locality of the cannery site even more imperative, and armed with our permits and introductions we went to see the District Commissioner to gain his aid. Ahmed Mohamed was quite unlike most Somalis we had met, being short, stocky and very dark skinned. He was also stout, cheerful and smoked a pipe, which fussy characteristic set him apart from those languorous hand-movements of the incessant cigarette-smoking Somalis. Impressed by the array of red, buff and blue orders, authorizations and directives from the various Ministries in far-off Mogadishu (all of which, incidentally, were couched in Latin, following Italian colonial imitation of their Roman antecedents) the DC moved into action. Gathering his entourage about him, plus a few odd stragglers in the form of passers-

by, peanut vendors, beggars and lunatics, we marched off on a tour of inspection.

First the cannery site. That originally set aside for our use proved to be unsuitable since its access lay across soft sand, and centred on it was a group of water holes used seasonally by the nomads who would rightly object to our appropriating them. However, using the sweeping powers of the vague directives, Ahmed Mohamed asked us to choose whatever empty area within the town's boundaries that we liked. Thus, before the afternoon was out we were in possession of a strip of land 400 metres long by 100 wide, situated on common ground adjacent to the beach and right in the centre of Chisimaio. We both felt that this was the fastest example of official action that had ever been performed, certainly in Chisimaio, and returned to the hotel greatly encouraged. The question of a house was still unsettled, but that seemed of relatively minor importance now, and we were too elated to worry over the dismal prospect of our wretched quarters.

Changing before dinner that evening, we were surprised by the hotelier tapping at our door.

'You have a visitor,' he said and clumped down the stairs again. Peering out into the bare corridor I saw the slender figure of a Somali girl, whose hair and lower face were covered by a soft blue chiffon veil, the standard head-dress of a high-class prostitute. News of our arrival seemed to have travelled fast.

'Excuse me, but I think you would like me to show you my house,' she said in good Italian.

'Quite probably, but not tonight. I am tired,' I replied.

'Well, come and see me tomorrow morning. I am at your disposal.'

'Eer, I shall be busy, but thank you very much for your kindness.'

'It is nothing; I have a nice house. Not very big but I have kept it clean. It has a bathroom. A European bathroom. It is near your place on the beach. It would be very convenient for you!'

'Yes, I am sure, but bad for work.'

'Why bad for work? My house is a nice house. One of the best in Chisimaio. Why do you not want to see it? I will not ask you much rent for it.'

Rent! She had a house to rent! Not able to resist the impulse I shouted back to Augustinus over my shoulder.

'Knud! Our problems are solved! We're going to live in a whore-house!'

'A what?'

'You heard! A house of ill-repute, a whore-house or, more accurately, a whore's house!'

And we did.

Dudi, for so our landlady was called, was a woman of considerable character. On our first meeting in the ill-lit corridors of the hotel I had taken her to be a mere girl, for her figure was good and her voice young. She was, however, in her early thirties and had more or less retired from her profession. When she was very young she had been taken into the household of an Italian who was working on a banana estate. There she stayed for several years until, tiring of her, he threw her out. For a while she was on the streets of Mogadishu, but she had more than a sleek body to offer, being intelligent, eager to learn and shrewd. Becoming the mistress of another Italian, she met through him various ships' captains, for he was connected with the port. One of these, falling in love with her, took her back with him to Venice, where she stayed for some years. Eventually returning to Somalia she settled in Chisimaio, buying several houses with the money her benefactor had given her on their parting. These dwellings she had renovated and furnished and then rented out to some of the Europeans that lived in the town. A nice side-line to her character was that her original lover, now old and rather run down, had a house in Chisimaio in which he lived out his retirement. Being bad-tempered and crabby he found it difficult to keep servants, so Dudi visited him twice each day to cook his food herself, refusing payment for this service saying, 'We were friends once, and besides, I know what he likes to eat.'

At the time of our arrival in Chisimaio, Dudi was well established, with three little villas all occupied and herself inhabiting an enormous old Arab house in the centre of town, where she gave advice and help to all the young prostitutes, and occasionally entertaining the officers of passing banana boats to rip-roaring, glass-smashing parties where they paid for the drinks but the girls were free. Of her past way of life she made no bones, disdaining to wear the respectable veil of a lady of property, always displaying her bold little face to its best advantage in a frame of misty blue chiffon, the hall-mark of her original trade.

Her fourth house, which she showed us the following morning, was the smallest of the lot and unfurnished, but even so we were very happy to take it, for it lay just out of town on the far side of a stretch of open common ground with the cannery site in direct view

some 400 yards away. It was simple in the extreme, being built in the form of a U, having three rooms in the main body, with two wings housing kitchen and bathroom facilities respectively. Between the arms formed by these lay an open patio and the house had its own well of fresh water outside the front gate. The villa had been freshly painted and well scrubbed and was effectively fly-screened. Comparing it with the bulk of the buildings of Chisimaio—rambling, crumbling, bat-infested, rat-ridden ruins—we were lucky indeed and lost no time in coming to an agreement. This business concluded, we returned to the hotel for lunch, which we had hardly begun when our two trucks rolled into the square to disgorge Geoff and Tony, caked in dust and with eyes bloodshot and swollen from the desert's glare. Being eager to meet up with us they had travelled almost non-stop, eating stale sandwiches and fruit as they drove. Twice they had lost themselves, for the empty border country has no permanent roads and such tracks as there are are soon covered by the restless sands. Since Geoff had to make a series of such trips in the next few weeks to bring up all the gear and machinery, he had wisely marked the route with stone cairns at key points. In the excitement of our meeting, and in their thirst, the two gulped down the strong wine without a thought of their empty stomachs or their exhaustion and very soon, with the tale of their journey barely half-told, they were forced to stagger off to bed before they collapsed at the table. Here they lay like the dead till the morning, leaving Knud and I to park the trucks in a safe place for the night.

Guessing that basic building materials and tools would be difficult to obtain in Chisimaio, we had brought most such items with us from Mombasa, and it was these that comprised our first truck loads. During the next few days, whilst Knud was busy with the detailed survey and his drawing board, the others took charge of the unloading and the preparation of the site, whilst I was left to gather some form of labour force together. Having asked the DC about procedure, I was told that Chisimaio had a Municipal Labour Department and that the engagement of workers must be channelled through it. It took several days of frequent visits before I was able to find this office open. When at last I did so, I was received with the utmost courtesy by a tubercular-looking young Somali who proclaimed himself the Labour Officer and who took down my modest initial requirement of twenty labourers, three stone masons, and a carpenter and promised to have these personnel ready the following day, after having consulted his records. Returning at the

agreed time I was surprised to find the compound in front of the Labour Department filled with some 200 excited Somalis, whose pushing and shoving was being controlled by opposed pushing and shoving on the part of twenty policemen. Having eventually elbowed my way in, I found my ill-looking official even paler than the previous day, sweating profusely in spite of the early hour. His door was guarded by two bull-built police sergeants, who were smacking their riot sticks reflectively against their thick thighs. The greetings over, the Labour Officer went on to say that he had prepared a list and would bring in the applicants for my approval before I signed them on. Dramatically unlocking an enormous metal filing case, which was empty save for one slim buff folder, he set this on the desk before him and reluctantly opened it. Inside were two or three sheets of lined foolscap paper on which long lists of names were written in pencil. Putting his finger on the top one, he read out, 'Achmed Ali'.

'Achmed Ali,' bellowed one of the guardians of the door to the crowd outside. 'Eiwal' came a simultaneous shout from 200 throats as 200 hands shot up and 200 Somalis scrambled forward. The press in the rear funnelled the mob into the doorway until one man was shot through the narrow gap like a pea from a bursting pod. With his entrance the two sergeants behind him fell to the pleasurable work of holding the others out.

'Achmed Ali?' asked the Labour Officer. The man now leaned on the desk, looked all around, stared at the ceiling, lowered his wide-eyed head to gaze at me, blew his nose on the floor and mumbled something.

'This is Achmed Ali,' said the Labour Officer proudly to me.

'What about all the others? Lots of them seem to think they are Achmed Ali too,' I replied in my innocence.

'But *this* is Achmed Ali. It must be, for he is here.'

Struck dumb by this logic I could only nod. The Labour Officer moved his finger down to the second line of the list.

'Achmed Ali.'

'Achmed Ali,' came the roaring echo and again 200 voices screamed 'Eiwa' in unison. Another fevered jolting, and this time I heard the two guardians grunt with their exertions. There was a tearing sound, a stifled cry and the second scraggy, panting applicant was in front of the desk, clutching the meagre remnant of his cotton robe and trying to re-adjust it for decency's sake. Behind him the door-keepers let loose with their truncheons in earnest to restore dignity

to the proceedings. This applicant, by the same token of elimination, was Ahmed Ali.

Eventually one wall of the room was lined with my labour force, and we were still no further down the alphabet list than 'Ali Awad'. The door was bolted and a stout bar put across it. The two sergeants then sat on the floor with their backs to it and administered to each other in silent sympathy, for their uniforms were torn and bloody and one had a great bruise on his cheek.

'What about the masons?' I asked.

'I am afraid you cannot engage these men. You see, I tried to get some to come, but when they heard you were seeking labourers as well they feared the anger of those who were not taken on and would not come. Anyway, I have no lists nor records of artisans,' he added proudly. I refrained from pointing out that, since there was no means of identifying anyone anyhow, there seemed little point in lists of names.

'It would be better,' continued the sunken-chested official, 'if you went round privately by yourself and engaged them. Then, when this is done, come and tell me who they are.'

'Fine, but what use is that to you if you have no records?'

This question was ignored as being far too factual and we sat on in silence in the hot shuttered room for half an hour until the crowd outside had dispersed and the detachment of police outside assured us that we could come out. The rest of the day was spent in spreading word around the bazaar as to our requirements in the way of artisans, and that evening Knud interviewed those that turned up. From these we were able to pick out the ones that we liked, placing at their head a diminutive Barjuni stone-mason named Mzee (elder) Saleh. We did so, not because Saleh was a natural foreman or even authoritative; on the contrary, he was a gentle and mouse-like person. But he had the reputation of being holy, an authority on Islamic custom, and when he spoke men listened.

In order to conform to both local tradition and materials, Knud had designed the cannery as a stone block building, with exterior walls four feet thick for the purpose of insulation and with windows and embellishments following Arabic styles. The foundations needed to be very extensive in consequence and it was this work that we now commenced. Within a few days, our original labourers having got into the routine, I returned to the Labour Office for a further twenty men. The same scene as before was re-enacted, with the roll again starting with the mythical 'Achmed Ali'. This time the crowd

that had gathered was even larger and police reinforcements had to be called in. The following week I came back once more for more men, only to find the office locked and deserted. Eventually I was directed to the DC's office and there the dismal postscript to the last recruitment was related to me. On returning to his house the Labour Officer had been waylaid by a gang of men made up of those who were unsuccessful in being chosen, and he had been badly beaten up. He was now in hospital with a broken arm, concussion and other injuries. The DC went on to say that he deemed it wiser if we did not bother his department with further employment issues but engaged labour as we saw fit, the only restriction being that we should employ five Somalis for every one Barjuni. This latter ruling we thought unfair. All this area, the district of Guiba, had been the land of the Barjunis until Somalia's recent independence. Now, political pressures from the north were causing influxes of nomads into the territory of these coast-dwellers and already there was much discontent. Besides, for our purpose the Barjunis were far better workers, coming from a settled, communal way of life and accustomed to crafts and trades. However, there was nothing to do but acquiesce.

On the day that the deep foundation trenches were complete, Mzee Salch quickly announced that the morrow ought to be a holiday, a 'blessing-day' for the building, for this was the custom. We agreed, though we were rather taken aback when he asked for money for the sacrifice. This, it appeared, took the form of four goats which would be ritually slaughtered in each of the outer-wall trenches, and their blood sprinkled along the entire maze of diggings. Afterwards there would be a feast, but to this we were not expected to subscribe, the goats being our sole obligation. Should we not agree to the sacrifice the workers would be very unhappy for, since every building claimed a victim, men would undoubtedly fall from its walls or be crushed by collapsing masonry during its construction in lieu of the goats. As a final thrust he added darkly that it might well be us, for not allowing the ritual. . . . We handed over the money without further argument.

Most of the transport in Chisimaio was effected by flat, two-wheeled carts drawn by donkeys. These animals, unlike their unhappy brethren in northern Africa and even Europe, were hardly ever maltreated, being well fed and quite pampered. They were all strong and healthy and possessed of very definite characters. Although we had no real need of such a vehicle in the building pro-

gramme, neither Knud nor I could resist the idea and before long the muster-roll was swelled by one donkey and one driver. A nice touch was that officially owners of donkeys received no wage, all payment being due to the animal. However, since donkeys cannot easily handle money, the earnings are handed to the driver on the animal's behalf. But it is still the donkey's money and it is the donkey's name by which the team is known. Indeed the man forfeits his name to the animal and becomes technically nameless as a result. Our donkey was called Omar and though his work was ostensibly to carry stone from the lorry dump to the masons, the process of loading the little cart and then unloading it 10 yards away took so much time that before long Omar was left to roam around the site free of his harness, whilst his owner did odd jobs as required. Omar, in a matter of days, developed an acute sense for judging to the minute when 4 o'clock (our knocking-off time) came. Even though unfettered and actually unemployed, he hated the idea of overtime and would bray out his discontent should the work continue. Four o'clock to him meant a roll in the sand, a nibble at the few little tit-bits that his owner had saved, and freedom to gallop across the common where grazed those other unemployed or just-released donkeys.

On this common in front of our house, and on similar open spaces nearby, were mustered several hundred of these animals, the transport force of the district. Early each morning those that were scheduled for work were collected by the owners and for a long time I could not see how the drovers were able to distinguish their individual beasts, since none were branded nor had punched ears to identify them. At last I realized that the whole process was governed by a simple law, as inflexible as one of Newton's. This we called the law of Recognition by Repulsion. The owners did not recognize their donkeys, their donkeys recognized *them*! It worked this way. A hundred or so of these little animals would be grazing quietly in indeterminate groups. On the appearance of a man carrying a halter and traces, ninety-nine donkeys would go on munching without a second glance in his direction. The hundredth would edge quietly but noticeably to the far side of the pasture and either try to slip away into the bushes or lie down in a hollow. Once this movement had been spotted, both man and donkey gave up all attempts at pretence. The former ran straight through the herd waving a bridle and crying out his charge's name, such as: 'Abdullah!'

'Abdullah, my dove, my rose!'

'Abdullah! Come, my moon! My sweetness!'

'O thou without compare. Wait! It is I!'

The moon of contentment, hearing the endearments, would lay back his ears, kick up his heels and determinedly trot off in the opposite direction. The pair would then disappear and soon all that could be seen or heard was a small trail of dust in the still air and the distant voice now crying:

'O misbegotten whore-son,

Your mother was a camel,

And your father a djinn!

Come here, cease this foolery,

We have bread to earn

Would you have us starve

O faithless one . . .

. . . come back . . . come back!'

And the cries and the dust would die away in the distance. Ten minutes, fifteen minutes or even half an hour might elapse before the pair hove in sight again, this time with the donkey contentedly trotting along beside its master, both seemingly eager to get to work and their friendship re-established.

Chisimaio, remote though it was, had discovered the benefits of automation long ago. The port had no natural harbour for the bay on which it stood was shallow, but from one end of it there stuck out a long wooden jetty. From this were embarked the banana loads and to it came the lighters with whatever imports the merchant ships brought. All produce other than bananas was transported between this port area and the town (a mile or so distant) by caravans of donkeys. To control the scores of animals involved needed but three men at either end of the route to load or unload and to turn them round. Other than this they needed no attention whatsoever, moving the mounds of freight as assuredly as a conveyor belt and equally as unattended. Small wonder that of each working pair of man and beast it was the donkey which took pride of place.

Once the foundations were in and the walls began to climb up into the sky, the work, repetitive as it was, demanded little of our time and the four of us were able to assemble and check the canning equipment which Geoff had meanwhile ferried up from Mombasa. In order not to distract our workers this was done in the open patio of our villa. Before coming to Somalia we had sent Geoff back to England to attend a course of instruction on canning techniques;

whilst Tony, being our mechanical engineer, had had a similar training in the machinery itself. So Knud and I were largely in their hands, but with their guidance we gradually assembled the maze of piping, valves and monstrous pressure-cookers which constituted the processing plant. Eventually we were ready for the first trial run. Retorts were filled, burners lit, valves shut or opened. Since the units were not insulated in any way, that being a job to complete after their final installation in the cannery, we realized that the initial business of getting 'steam-up' would take some little time. Nevertheless, after forty minutes had gone by with nothing much happening except for the creaking of expanding metal and a few squeaks from various pipes, we began to get bored and went inside for tea. On re-emerging, the pressure gauges were still registering zero and the temperature indicators had barely moved.

'That's odd,' said Tony. 'Must be something stuck,' and he prowled round the apparatus tapping it gingerly with a spanner.

'These gauges often take a little time to open up,' he said authoritatively, and thus reassured we all stood by and waited some more. More creaks. A slight hissing somewhere. Time went by. Was it our imagination or was the whole thing beginning to glow and also bulge? I could feel the heat given off from its outer surface from where I stood.

'This is odd,' said Tony again, 'Hmm. Now let me see. This to that, yes. That goes to this. Yes. Then up here. Mmm. How about that? No-hmm. Well, this then,' and he disappeared behind the boilers, muttering as he went.

'Christ! came the yell. 'Omygod! Look out!' and as he shouted he hit something. There was a clang and a siren-like noise as a plume of steam soared up into the air like the spouting of a whale! At the same instant all the needles on all the gauges facing us snapped round past their danger maximum to come to rest hard against their stops. Geoff shot into the shelter of the lavatory, and I dived over the wall, beating Tony by a split second, where we lay flat on our faces expecting the explosion any instant. At the end of a long half-minute the scream of escaping steam decreased so that we could make ourselves heard and the white jet sank out of sight behind the wall. Peering anxiously around the gate I saw Knud nonchalantly leaning against the door post, within a yard of a still hissing valve.

'Is it safer?' I asked stupidly.

'It should be. I turned off the burners. You can all come out now.'

On hearing this the rest of us sheepishly emerged and warily approached the monster. It transpired that a main by-pass cock, which allowed steam to activate the gauges and to "blow-off" through an escape valve, had been inadvertently closed. As Knud pointed out, however, it was an excellent test for the plant. Our normal operating pressure would be about 30-40 pounds per square inch and just now the needle had ceased to register on reaching 150! But to avoid a re-occurrence we wired up the offending valve, leaving it in the permanently open position.

Once a part of the roof was on, the various items of machinery were installed in the factory. This was the concern of Knud and the others, for my responsibility lay in the organization of the turtling and to this I addressed myself. It was not a prospect that I enjoyed. Indeed for some while past I had deliberately pushed it out of mind, but now it had to be faced. I had always loved animals and though I had lived in the wilds long enough to have shed much of the false sentimentality that often surround the 'animal lover' of civilization, I had never killed any wild creatures other than from personal hunger or dire necessity. Yet I was now committed to setting up an industry concerned with the catching and killing of animals. The argument that turtles were reptiles was not acceptable to my conscience. They were harmless, simple beasts that could only survive away from man's environs, and I was going to hunt them down in their remote sanctuaries in order to make money. It was as simple as that. This thought depressed me very much and many times I would have given up the whole venture had it not been for my responsibilities towards Knud and the others. In the end I saved my conscience in a manner which others might call convenient self-delusion, and indeed I was never sure how much of this factor lay buried in it. My argument to myself went thus: 'Morally, which is the more evil? To restrict animals from birth and to rear them all for slaughter, and with only that possible end in view for them? Or to capture and kill a percentage of wild creatures that have lived their full natural lives up to that point and for whom the question of being caught is but one other hazard they must face in their lives?' Contrasted with the current 'acceptable' methods of penned-piggeries, forced rearing of calves, battery-laying chickens and other niceties of civilization, I felt, and still do, that that which I was about to do was morally less evil.

However, there was still one other mental hurdle which I must jump, and that was the question of the actual slaughter of the turtles.

It would be easy enough to leave this act to others, hardly see it in fact; but that would be mental cowardice. If I was going to make my living out of butchery then I must be prepared to be a butcher. To many sheltered minds this may seem unnecessary, but is it? We in the West particularly are too cloistered from life these days. Death, the natural end to all things, is hidden from us and many people go throughout their entire lives without ever coming into actual contact with the reality. Even when people die, they die in hiding, and coffin lids are nailed down, the curtained carriage calls and collects, and earth and fire consume—all with the utmost speed and secrecy. Similarly with our food. How many housewives now, presented with an unplucked chicken, a flapping turbot or a flayed carcase could deal with it without repugnance, indeed, if at all? Yet the 'clean' version, with the cellophane wrapped giblets tucked inside, the insipid filleted flesh of fish, the bloodless, icy leg of lamb are handled without concern. The height of this hypocrisy is reached regrettably, in the United States, where so great is the desire for the sheltering cocoon from life's nastiness that homely lavatory paper must be re-christened 'facial-tissue' to gain acceptance and indeed even to permit mention at all.

So for my pride of mind it was not enough to arrange the killings and say to myself I took no part. If I could not carry this out personally, then half my own arguments concerning the morality of the whole business were invalid and I would be deeply wrong to employ others to do this work. Before many weeks the cannery would be ready to begin processing and butchers had to be trained in advance. This was my first task.

By spreading the word around the market place, I soon secured the necessary sample turtles and from the Barjunis that lived in Chisimaio I selected eight likely candidates. Loading both reptiles and men into the back of the Landrover, I drove out of Chisimaio to find a lonely place on the beach near the water's edge, where we could work in peace. To this spot we returned daily with fresh turtles until we had perfected a killing and butchering technique that was as merciful and efficient as possible. Certain aspects of this work were indeed gruesome. Turtle, being of a very low order of living things, have a very elementary but powerful life-force which causes them to make certain muscular movements long after they are, in fact, dead. Their severed heads will open and shut their jaws, clicking their mandibles in ghastly rhythm for quite some time. Their hearts, placed in a bucket of sea water, will continue pumping

sample 100 kilos of cans prepared in various fashions and processed in differing ways. From these we would select a dozen at random for storing and further examination at set intervals and the remainder we distributed among the men, the cannery workers and the construction team alike. At the end of this time, not only had we a complete range of satisfactory products but our personnel had all put on weight and their skins now carried the healthy animal gloss of subcutaneous fat, such as only an African's can achieve. Then, loading one of the lorries with batches of cans that we considered our best, Knud drove back up to Mogadishu in order himself to dispatch the samples by air. After his departure, we laid-off most of the men in the factory and brought back the masons and carpenters to carry out such alterations within the cannery as we had found necessary following the month's trial. The main modification was to seal off in entirety the butchery and meat preparing room from the cannery itself, for the sight of the hissing retorts with their gauges and the loads of shiny steaming cans which emerged from them, had proved too much for the Barjunis and Somalis and we had been forever chivvying them back to their work from where they clustered, blocking the interconnecting windows and doorways. We now made access hatches through the thick walls, for conveying the raw produce from one room to another instead. There was other construction work, too. Extensions in the form of warehouse space, the foundations to what would be the power-house and water tower, and so on.

But all this I left to Geoff and Tony for, whilst the local fishermen had been able to cope with the effort of bringing in two turtles a day to satisfy our needs during the trial period, for future work we must increase this ten-fold. This meant that the turtle grounds to the south, all the way down the long stretch of Barjun Islands, right to the Kenya border, 120 miles away, must be opened up and there lay my responsibility. To organize this meant an extended personal tour through the entire area, seeing all the villages, meeting all the headmen, listing all the fishermen and assessing the potential. It meant a turtle count as well, and fixing a standard price for turtles. It meant building turtle sheds and pens, providing guardians over them: it meant the setting up of a regular freight haul to fetch the turtles and to distribute stores. It meant a host of things, but primarily it meant my going and living amongst the Barjun Islanders for a while, gaining their confidence and seeing how best they might be brought into the work. For that I needed a boat, a sizeable boat, and a crew to man it and it was this I now sought.

CHAPTER THREE

The Isles and the Islanders

'... Deal calmly with the Infidels;
leave them awhile alone ...'

Sura 86

Night had fallen long before we reached the islet, though the last rays of the sun had illuminated it fleetingly as a thin yellow line on the horizon when we were still some eight miles distant. Thus we were sure of our landfall, even though it was a moonless, dark night.

As the *johasi*¹ slid into the tiny bay no lights were visible on shore, nor indeed were any houses. A few seabirds disturbed by our arrival, complained with peevish notes as they swept invisibly somewhere above us. The lateen sail bulged, drooped and folded as the yard was lowered and we coasted on in silence, the birds' cries now lost behind. The silhouette of one of the crew appeared momentarily against the skyline forward, I heard a splash and the *nahoda*² Sh'ali quietly remarked that we had arrived and that I could disembark. I trailed my hand over the side and tested the water. There was no movement and this was indeed true, though I had not felt the grounding. I clambered up to the bows over the sacks of lime that formed our cargo and crawled out along the bowsprit on my stomach. Somebody caught hold of my ankles from below and I heard Ishmail's rough voice saying:

'*Ai-yah, mazuri. T'wendeni!*' [O.K., good. Let's go!]

I swung off and landed in a mass of wet seaweed that felt like not quite cold vegetable soup and which came up to my waist. It was this that had cushioned our grounding. A hand caught hold of mine and the nutmeg-grater voice said to follow but to be careful not to tread on any sting-rays, of which there were always plenty in this

¹ *Johasi*: a small, single-masted cargo dhow, undecked, but with a raised steering platform aft. Usually less than 15 tons.

² *Nahoda*: Ship's captain or dhowmaster.

man scrambled up on to his perch again, fiddled with the controls of the transistor radio and we got the world news in rapid Portuguese from Lourenço Marques. Down came my host. Presently, this gave out to a roar of static which he seemed not to notice, for it took a further ten minutes before he tried again. This time we heard the Voice of the Gospel from Radio Addis Ababa in a programme of Aramaic hymns. During the next two hours we had four unidentified languages, a weather report from Australia, a talk on the future of the European Common Market, Pakistani folk-songs and much interference. Whenever I tried to say anything I was violently 'ssh'd', so I gave up and turned my attention to the room.

This proved to be about 10 feet long and 7 wide, the bed and the door occupying similar positions on the opposing shorter sides. The furniture consisted solely of the string-bed whose legs, I now saw, were dangerously a-splay. Where the old man sat there was a tattered strip of raffia matting, dingy brown and irregular in outline. Out from the plaster of the walls at various haphazardly-selected points, five nails protruded. Two were empty while one held a trade calendar for 1949 on which an exotic beauty extolled the virtues of the Colpress Foundry Products. From the fourth hung three rusty fish-hooks, one of which had lost its barb. The final nail had tied to it a piece of faded red cotton strapping, which hung down for about 18 inches and then came to an end in a dejected curl. The walls were otherwise bare and windowless, in fact the room had no apertures at all other than the wooden slat door against which I now sat, and the rough contoured opening through which the dotard had first appeared and which was partly concealed by having a discarded *kanzu*¹ draped across it. The floor was of trampled earth with little mounds of near-fossilized chicken dung rising from it at odd intervals. A gob of semi-dried spittle, three cigarette ends and a broken matchstick gave evidence of a more numerous occupation. Large cockroaches stalked across the open spaces or fluttered conspiringly in dark corners. Sometime during the evening one of these creatures had been trodden on and its hard wingcases, raised from the dismal blob of its remains, cast elongated shadows like spear-blades across the uneven surface. A persistent, biting itch at several places down my back where it rested against the door eventually made me realize that the woodwork housed bugs. Shifting my position I saw that my wet shorts had caused a puddle to form on the floor and that I had

¹ *Kanzu*: A tubular, strong-like garment used by the men throughout the coastal regions of East Africa.

also brought in several pieces of black, lank weed which now lay scattered about me. Suddenly disgusted with the whole atmosphere, I got to my feet, pulled open the door and went out. The old man still sat slumped in his corner like a discarded rag doll and did not appear to notice my departure.

I made my way back towards the beach, guided by the noise of the waves. There I unrolled my blanket, which I had carried slung around my neck on a cord, spread it out on the sand and, after having scooped a depression for my hipbone, rolled myself up in it. The last sounds that penetrated my consciousness were a few sleepy chirrups from some nearby wildfowl and, distantly, the massed bands of the Red Army doing their best against a great deal of static.

It was the same birds which woke me; their shrill twitterings serving to make me poke my head briefly from out of the warmth of my blanket. However, there was only the barest glimmer of pearl on the dark sea and the stars were still plainly visible, so I went to sleep again. When I next woke, I discovered myself to be the centre of interest of two lean goats and three small children. But as the latter's mother or elder sister was busy performing her morning toilet unconcernedly within five yards of my head I retired once more until that particular activity was finished.

On my third emergence I found the beach deserted. Shaking off the fine layer of sand with which the ghost-crabs had covered me during the night, I rose and walked across the narrow beach into the sea. Whilst I was washing an old woman came down to clean her pans at the water's edge. I knew I was the first European to have landed on Fuma for eight years, yet after a perfunctory glance in my direction she busied herself with her scouring and took no more notice. I found myself contrasting the natural courtesy of her behaviour with the unbridled curiosity that her unexpected presence in a remote European village would have aroused, had the tables been reversed. Having finished my bathe, and in order to give my shorts a chance to dry off, I next walked up the shallow slope of the islet's spine so that I might see what was on the far side. Oceanwards there lay two long lines of reef upon which appeared irregular rocky outcrops twenty or more feet high. Southward stretched a long, curving arc of islets, reef-edged to seaward and with yellow sand beaches along the inshore edges of their crescents. From where I stood I could count twenty-seven. Away down the channel four small dhows were beating northwards towards Fuma. Close in, a school of dolphins rolled and leapt, their black backs sharp etched

against the vivid blue water. A heavy reverberating thud, like a distant shell-burst, drew my attention out towards the outer reefs and I was just in time to see the elephantine bulk of a manta ray launch itself into the air only to fall again in a mist of spray and repeat the dull thunderclap of noise.

Walking back down to the hovels that formed the village of Fuma I came across an area more stony than the rest across which were scattered pieces of drying shark meat, badly cut, poorly salted and alive with maggots. A few scraggy goats nosed amongst them, showering both the dried ground and dried fish with their indiscriminate droppings. In the shade of the first hut a child crawled in the filthy sand, its mouth covered with sores and its eyes encrusted with dirt. As it tried to rise to its feet, using the wall as a support, I saw that it had rickets. A little further on a cloud of blow-flies buzzed and swayed over a pile of conch shells out of which the meat had not been completely cleaned and from which, in consequence, a fearful stench arose. Some scraggy chickens, their legs malformed and a-splay, pecked disconsolately over a midden-heap. Scattered across the tiny beach lay the household litter of years: shards of china, rusty tins, fish bones, bits of string and other such. At the water's edge the piles of rotting seaweed, through which I had waded on arrival, heaved turgidly with each wavelet. Fuma by day confirmed the forebodings gained the previous night. Sh'ali, as if to avoid the contamination of the place had, I saw, moved his *jehassi* to an anchorage well out from the shore.

That the Barjunis were industrious and capable I already knew and I could not reconcile the appearance of this, the first of their villages that I had seen, with the people themselves. The Somals of the mainland were indolent and arrogant and had no conception of the idea of reward for labour, yet their settlements were spotless by comparison and moderately free from vermin and disease. This encampment looked like nothing so much as the last stand of a dying people who had been driven to the borders of existence by the pressures of more dynamic neighbours and who lacked the spiritual resilience to make a come-back. Indeed this first opinion I have never altered, being certain that, unless great ethnic upheavals take place in this region of East Africa within 200 years there will be no more Barjunis left. Now the dirt and depression of Fuma lay so heavily upon me that I could not bear the place any longer and waved until Sh'ali saw and sent the longboat to fetch me.

Whilst I was waiting for this, I thought how lucky I had been in

finding this young boat owner. Back in Chisimaio I had searched for several weeks for a suitable ship to use in this work of developing the turtle-catching throughout the islands. Quite a few of the craft offered would have served, but in each case their owners were unaccommodating, either demanding ridiculous rates or fixed hours and free provisioning. Eventually I had almost given up hope and was thinking in terms of buying a dhow outright when Sh'ali turned up. In appearance he was not prepossessing, having a mongoloid cast and a skin made permanently yellow by malaria. His eyes were so protuberant as to bulge grotesquely and he found difficulty in closing the lids completely, which made him look like a bulbous-eyed Pekinese. But he was lean, hard and active and spoke earnestly and sensibly. He owned a *jehassi* of about 14 tons which he captained. We could have this and the service of himself and his crew if we would allow him to fit in his freight runs about the islands when convenient to us and if we paid him a small monthly retainer whether we used the boat or not. For any produce carried we must pay at the standard rate plus 20 per cent extra for livestock. It was reasonable and I accepted as soon as I had inspected his boat, named the *Lipi* after some seabird. His dhow was only about three years old, roughly but solidly built and her gear was serviceable. When I commented on her lines and the strength of her ribs, Sh'ali proudly said that she was built in Lamu, renowned for its shipwrights, and that he had watched over her as she took shape. Asking what he was doing in Kenya he replied that, being from a poor family, he had gone down to the swamps there to work at that most arduous and deadly of all African trades, a cutter of mangrove-trees in the remote swamps. For five years he had done that, sleeping in the tangled branches of the mangroves at night with the stinking black mud all around him and the big blue swamp crabs and whining mosquitoes as company. That was where he got this and this and he pointed to his foot from which he had lost two toes and to his malaria-yellowed cheeks. After four years he had saved enough to build the *Lipi* but he had had to go back to the swamps for another year to pay for her mast and tackle. If he had survived five years as a mangrove cutter, I knew he must be well-nigh indestructible, as hard as the red-black wood he had hewed.

Back on board the *Lipi*, over the inevitable mug of black tea, I asked Sh'ali where was the water supply on Fuma, for I had seen no well or catchment. He laughed, and told me that only the biggest of the Barjun Islands had any fresh water, the others all ferrying it

from wells on the mainland or, as in the case of Fuma, from Chisimaio some fifteen miles away. Again I wondered how any people could settle on waterless islands by choice, when the whole coast with rivers and springs lay open to them. As we finished our tea, from around the southern tip of the bay swept the four small boats I had seen from the hilltop. The second of these pulled alongside the *Lipi* and into it climbed Sh'ali, his crewman and cousin Ishmail, and myself. On arrival at the shore, all the fishermen having disembarked and gone on ahead to the village, Sh'ali told me to stay there until he had prepared everything for the *baraza*,¹ at which I would have to speak. I was a little nervous at this—not because I did not know what to say but because the whole atmosphere of Fuma and its inhabitants' apparent lethargy and indifference to my presence had depressed me considerably. Moreover, Sh'ali had repeatedly told me that it was essential to enlist these men as turtle-catchers, that with Fuma 'on the pay-roll' the other Barjun islands would follow suit, but that if I failed to entice Fuma to work for us then the other islands would be doubly suspicious and hard to interest. In fact Fuma was going to be the test case and I, having eaten nothing for twenty-four hours and feeling dirty and depressed, was in no mood to tackle it. Prior to being asked to join the assembled menfolk a kettle of tea was brought out to me. Here the natural courtesy of the Barjuns was demonstrated. Before I was allowed to have any, the fisherman who brought it poured a good cupful into the sand. When I asked why he did this he looked surprised but answered that it was customary in order to get rid of any floating leaves in the brew which would otherwise enter the glass and spoil the drink. It was a thing one always did for guests, he added.

The meeting place had been made ready under the shade of the men's workroom, a stretch of mat-covered sand with dhow oars stuck in the ground to serve as posts, and a sail spread between these as an awning. At the tent entrance and facing the fishermen gathered under it had been placed an old stool and to this I was led. After the usual greetings, Sh'ali, who stood behind me, opened the proceedings with a long laudatory introduction which was punctuated at appropriate intervals by Ishmail putting in such phrases as 'Yes, indeed!' 'And I know it is so for I have seen it!' 'Truly, truly!' and other such trivia to get things moving. All this was to the set formula for such discussions. First, the chairman's introduction, next the

¹ *Baraza*: Communal meeting or conference. A forum at which all public matters are discussed.

suppliant with his proposals. Then question time and, in conclusion, a summing up by one of the elders. The actual agreement, if reached, would be detailed later. Maybe within hours, maybe weeks, depending on what motivating emotion was involved. On this occasion it was only at question time that I realized that my main points of fixed prices for turtles, cash advances, regular collections and payments were not really of great concern to the fishermen. This was all such as they had expected from a European and not really interesting. Europeans, they knew, came and rushed all over the place, wearing themselves and everyone else down in the process and then disappeared again like meteors, leaving only the dust of their departure as evidence that they had ever even existed. My audience needed reassurance as to the permanency of things, so that their children might be trained in the work, eventually taking their fathers' places in the years to come. It was here that Sh'ali, in an instinctive aside, brought out the clinching detail.

'But, of course!' he muttered impatiently, 'the place of work in Chisimaio is large and nearly complete and made of stone. . . .'
'Aiyeel Stone!' came the surprised murmur from all around, and I realized that in this word lay the proof in their minds, of the enduringness of the work.

'Yes,' I added, whilst the surprise was still on their faces. 'And the walls are thick as this and the roof-beams like this,' as I sawed off imaginary measures in the air with my hands.

'Aiye—so thick? And the walls all of stone? Then it is a building of ten generations!'

And as they said it I hoped fervently that it was so, being caught up in their enthusiasm for permanence.

From this point on the whole attitude of the villagers changed. The meeting woke up and impromptu questions and answers were tossed about on all sides. Surprisingly enough, they showed even more interest in the possibility of opening up old trades than in the turtle-catching which I had stressed as being the prime object and money-maker. Fishing for sea-slugs (*bêche-de-mer*), various shells, dried fish and oil, shark fins and other commodities which I did not then know about, seemed of more importance to them. For a while I could not follow their preoccupation with all these minor activities, until I realized that they were trades which absorbed the whole community, tiny children and old women alike, whereas the turtle-catching was just the affair of those young men who were strong enough to undertake it.

Seeing that here lay another critical issue, I decided that it would be both sensible and correct to encourage these activities, even if unprofitable, for the sake of bringing in the whole Barjun island chain and providing the outlet for the communal efforts of their society. Telling the men how little I knew of these various products, I asked if I might stay a while on Fuma and learn something of them. To this suggestion they were all in agreement and for the next few weeks I had a succession of tutors in a variety of trades that I hardly knew existed. There was the cowrie shell business, for example, that had lapsed due to lack of regular communication, but which now might be revived. At low tide the eight- and nine-year-olds were sent to scour the reef-flat for a small species of cowrie, white edged and pale brown backed, that hid in the pools there. These molluscs were less than half an inch long and neither ornate nor beautiful nor even rare, for they swarmed in every crevice. Basket loads of these shells were brought back to the village and dumped in the middle of a circle made up of the young married women, nursing their babies, and their struggling toddlers. With bits of bent wire the women hooked out the molluscs from the shells, like winkle-pickers. The meat went into a bowl for chicken food and the empty shells were tossed to the four- and five-year-olds who sat in the centre, either side of a wooden board. Each child had in his hand a tool made up of a rusty nail stuck through a piece of wood which served as a handle. With this they unceremoniously banged each shell breaking open the centre with the nail to form a ragged hole. The mutilated shells, of which now only the hard edgelip remained, were then passed over to some old women who rinsed them briefly in a pail of sea water and dumped them into small sacks which were sewn up when full. And that was that. From the headman I learnt that these punctured cowries were first sent to Zanzibar. From Zanzibar they went to Aden. From Aden to Port Sudan. From Port Sudan to Addis Ababa and from there out into the distant provinces of Ethiopia, where they were used as counters either for trade or play, no one knew which.

The glorious complexity of that journey! Knowing the dhow routes and their seasonal time-tables I calculated it would probably take eighteen months to two years for the shells to reach their destination. Small wonder that they fetched only about one shilling a sackful in Zanzibar, but then to these villagers, it was not so much the money as the need for social activity that they valued. In this labour the women and children were usefully and happily em-

ployed, each feeling that they had a place, that they were contributing and it was this which was important. Similarly with the *bêche-de-mer*. These repulsive looking creatures, sometimes known as sea-cucumbers, are considered a delicacy amongst the Chinese but their preparation is exact and laborious. I was told that about forty years ago, when the trade was good, two Chinese fishermen had been sent to Fuma by the merchants of Hong Kong to teach the people this work. Since then the flow from Fuma had continued to the same house of merchants, payment being through an Indian agent in Zanzibar. Forty years! Now I understood their idea of trade and interest in permanence. Recently, however, there had come no word from Zanzibar¹ and their previous year's production, five paltry sacks, had gone uncollected.

The preparation of the sea-slugs was certainly complex. Brought in to the village these obscene, elbow-length tubes were pierced with a wooden skewer. This caused them to void their intestines—in a white wriggling mass of worm-like threads from either end of the body, which was scraped off and discarded. Boiled for eight minutes, the bodies shrank to sausage size. To prevent further excessive shrinkage they were next buried overnight beneath wet mounds of a certain type of sea weed, then sun-dried a little before being boiled a second time. On emergence a small slit was made in their undersides and this was wedged open with a sliver of wood, allowing the air to circulate within the body cavity. The final sun-drying took fourteen days, at the end of which period the carcasses were finger length, fat, hard and heavy. They smelt strongly, giving off an indescribable acrid odour, and were blotchy in colour. Their actual shading depended upon the original species of slug, of which there were several, each commanding different prices. The most expensive were the red ones, which finished up the colour of dark brick. Next came the grey/black patterned ones, and lastly the very cheap white ones, whose final hue was dark slate grey. Months later I found that the price of the red ones had dropped during recent years and that in some Eastern markets it was impossible to get rid of them. The reason for this was that a Japanese *bêche-de-mer* boat, fishing the waters off northern Australia and illegally setting up camps there (as so many

¹ Shortly after this, the Communist take-over of Zanzibar occurred and the intricate web of trade that that island had spread across Africa was destroyed in one night. Undoubtedly the forebodings of the revolution had caused the dealer in *bêche-de-mer* to flee in advance, as did so many other traders of un-African origins.

still do), had found by accident (?) that if white 'fish' (as the slugs are known in the trade) were boiled in a copper pot, they took on the colouring of the more expensive red variety and could be palmed off as such. Mainland China, buying these copper-contaminated fish, had had serious food poisoning on a mass scale as a result, with many deaths reported. In consequence all red *bêche-de-mer* became suspect and the price had dropped.

On Fuma, the catching of these creatures was effected by diving, for they were found in anything from 12 to 20 feet of water, close in to the reef. Being shown the area, I tried the work myself, and did not like it at all. The sea was murky, stank, for all this edge of the reef was rotten and crumbling. Visibility along the muddy bottom was less than an arm's length and everything one touched was slimy and unpleasant. Moreover, there were many outcrops of 'fire' coral, whose stinging fronds raised ugly welts that itched and burnt for days. I had a strong instinctive feeling of antipathy for the spot and asked if there were not any more pleasant places nearby where the slugs might be found. But the men liked this area, claiming that it housed the expensive red species and also that it was near the anchorage and the boys who dived for them could be watched from the shore. Yet still I did not care for the locality, finding it ominous and foreboding and went away ill at ease, resolving to look further afield and try to find alternate grounds.

The processing of the slugs was the business of the old men, when they were not repairing nets. Because of the smell it was done a little away from the village and this suited the patriarchs, for here they could potter undisturbed and at peace. Though the whole community had been accustomed to the trade for generations and were a sea people, no one had ever tried eating a prepared slug. In fact they found them quite revolting and the knowledge that the distant Chinese valued these 'turds' (their exactly-descriptive name for the merchandise) gave rise to never failing mirth. Their disdain for the eaters was so great that I dare not try one myself whilst there, though later I made some soup for us all, back in our villa, following an involved recipe which I dug up from somewhere. But something must have been wrong, for the resultant opaque dish water was very bitter, tasting of pickled leather and brine and made me violently sick. The others, having more sense, merely smelt it and voted in favour of bread-and-cheese as an alternative. At that time, stuck with finding a market for Fuma's *bêche-de-mer*, I was trying all possible avenues and had visions of producing a canned sea-slug

soup, an 'exotic Oriental speciality' for limited European distribution. After this effort, having no wish to cause mass murder, I abandoned the idea, though I did try canning the slugs whole for the Far East market. The result was a black gooey sludge that ate through the acid-resistant linings of the cans in no time. Whatever nutriment was contained in the creatures, it seemed to be present in very powerful concentration and at this point I gave up.

Having heard that the Barjun Islands housed quantities of crayfish and that, indeed, a Kenya concern was already trying to organize the collection of live crayfish from the villages in the south by means of light aircraft, I asked if any of the Fuma men knew this work. It appeared that several of the younger fishermen had spent some time near the Kenya border, diving for these rock lobsters, sending their catches on to Lamu, alive in crates, for sale there. The most alert of these men, Shekue-bin-Mohamed, now offered to show me how it was done and together we spent three days out in his little *mashur*,¹ catching crayfish. At the end of this time I could see that the effort involved was out of all proportion to the reward and entirely new methods would have to be developed before crayfish became a worth-while side-line. As they practised it, the diver swam or waded for miles each day, criss-crossing the shallow inshore waters, seeking out the few rocks under which the crustaceans would be hiding. For the main part the sea bed here was covered with turtle-grass, broken by occasional pockets of sand which might or might not house crumbling coral or small rocks. Even when a crayfish was located by its whisker-like antennae protruding from under a ledge, its capture was by no means certain. First of all, the alternate exits had to be blocked with fine, pursed netting sewn into wire loops after the fashion of butterfly nets. Having done this the diver would then try to frighten the creature into making a bid for escape by pushing a long thin rod down the passage way in which it was hiding. Should everything go well the crayfish would crawl towards one of the netted holes at the rear of the rock and then launch itself backwards, in a tail-snapping trajectory, only to be caught up in the loose tangle net pegged over the bolt hole. It was rather like ferreting for rabbits, only the divers had no ferret.

Thinking about this I came to the conclusion that the only way to speed things up was to produce an under-water ferret. Now what creature was it that preyed on crayfish and for which they had a violent aversion? The common octopus fitted the bill to a nicety. The

¹ Small open fishing craft, fitted with a stepped mast and a dhow-type lateen sail.

trouble was that where crayfish abounded there were few octopus and vice versa. I spent a whole morning looking for a small octopus around Puma, without success, and then hit on the idea of making a dummy, in the hope that the fear-inducing mechanism of the crayfish would not be so complicated as to allow for the possibility of there being 'unreal' octopuses and that anything that looked or smelt or behaved vaguely like its enemy must in fact be an octopus. It took several days to produce a satisfactory 'Oscar', as I decided to call my pseudo-octopus, for I had few tools and materials to hand. Trying out my various Frankenstein's on sample crayfish that I kept in a submerged crate for the experiment, soon showed me that mere imitation, a rough copy of an octopus, had no effect. What was necessary was the model plus appropriate movements, a working model in fact, and this proved difficult to produce. Eventually, I had a contraption which consisted of a red rubber ball, found on the beach, into which rubber tube 'arms' had been inserted through slits. Inside the rubber tubing were threaded coils of springy wire, made up of unravelled flexible steel trace from my box of fishing tackle. These kept the tube arms wound in strange curls and whorls when in repose. From the top of the ball another tube sprouted and this had no flexible spring within and was considerably longer. At the far end it terminated in a plastic squeegee bottle. All the joints were sealed as tightly as possible with rubber solution and as a final flourish large eyes made of pieces of luminescent shell had been glued to the body. After a few trials, mainly to adjust his buoyancy, Oscar was ready to begin work.

In practice Oscar was kept out of the water until the rock housing the crayfish was entirely surrounded with one long skein of loosely bunched nylon net. The mechanical ferret was then either dropped into a hole in the top of the rock or pushed gently into a crevice till he came to the central aperture which all the crayfish residences had in common. Once in position the squeegee bulb was pressed and under the action of the mounting pressure within the model the coiled 'tentacles' gradually extruded themselves in the manner of children's-party 'blowers'. The reaction of the hidden crayfish to this was even more spontaneous than I had hoped. They burst from every possible nook and cranny with wildly flapping carapaces producing audible bat-like squeaks in their panic-stricken movements to get away from the writhing horror! In their expressed opinion Oscar rated an 'X' certificate without a doubt!

But even with this aide and the other better models I sent to the

islands subsequently, the fishermen were still nowhere near getting to the real problem of crayfish-catching. Those they took in this fashion were the strays from the main colonies. The vast bulk of the rock-lobster population lived in the deep water on the seaward side of the reef, their tenements lining the reef face below the 100-foot level. All that the divers were doing were collecting those few that had wandered inshore at night, either by mischance or perhaps in search of new food, and which had not been able to regain the depths by dawn. Using the aqualung I had brought with me, I carried out some deep-water surveys of the outer reef face and found tiers of rock terraces from under whose overhangs line upon line of bristling antennae proclaimed crayfish in inestimable abundance. But of these I did not even tell Shekue and his companions, for there was no point. It would only make them greedy and then they might do something foolish in their efforts to fish for them. To exploit such grounds would need a great deal of capital, experience and experimentation and we simply were not qualified to attempt it. Better that the crustaceans crawled and ate and lived out their lives undisturbed in their submarine cities.

With the crayfish survey over, my time on Puma was up. By now I knew all the villagers—from the happily mad old woman who lived alone and claimed direct descent from the Queen of Slabba, bibi-ya-Solomon-bin-David, to the blind and half-crazed syphilitic who spent all his time on a rock shouting to God to deliver him from his darkness. Over the years his voice had grown hoarse with straining to reach up to the ears of the prophet himself, but its power had not diminished and on a calm day he could be heard from several miles away across the echoing sea. The children, too, I knew and I had done what I could to help their physical distress, but in this I had to be very careful lest they sicken later and the blame be laid on my head. Against trachoma, sand-sores, rickets, ring-worm, tuberculosis, malaria and gonorrhea there were but few cures. A greasy leather amulet strapped to the upper arm, a few blue beads around the neck against the evil eye, and as a last resort the cauterizing of a hot iron to burn out the offending devil. Yet they knew 'Aspro' and the pathetic empty pink packets littered the ground around their hovels. They all suffered badly from migraine, probably brought on by malaria and eye-strain, and the little white tablets, relief-giving in this affliction, were thereby considered a universal palliative, even to the extent of being pressed into wounds and sores. In consequence of the dirt and disease live births were

few and far between and for any child to survive to the age of two was rare indeed. It could hardly be expected therefore that there would be much mirth, and the cry of a sick infant and the heavy sigh of an adult were heard far more often than talk and laughter.

Only in their work, the fishing and other allied occupations, was there animation, for all else was lost to them. A man, on coming into a little money, would never dream of spending it on himself or his family, on food, or clothing or his house. Boxes of fish hooks would be bought, and a store made of nylon twine, which might remain unused for ever. When a man and his household have nothing then anything at all must improve their living conditions 100 per cent. One chair where there was none. Two cups in the house instead of one. A tin spoon to stir the tea and measure out the sugar instead of a knife blade or piece of driftwood. A raffia fan to keep the flies from one's face. A piece of wood and a dozen nails with which to make a shelf or a table. Anything at all must better their life. Yet the inhabitants of Fuma had been so long on the border-line of existence that they had forgotten this and one of my main difficulties was giving them back this realization.

'But if we catch turtles, what do we do with all this money?' asked an elder, showing me a little box of cash, his share of the past decade's sea-slug money, untouched and inviolable. It was not that they objected to the work proposed, nor the prices offered, simply why do it at all? Gain? What is gain?

In the end, to show them how they would benefit, I paid them in goods to the equivalent value. Not consumables, for which they might develop a taste they could not afford, but simple things; string beds, cooking pots, wooden spoons, honing stones for their knives and other such. That way, even should they cease bringing in turtles, at least they would be that much better off. But it was a long process and took many months before some of the older ones in particular, would accept money.

From Fuma we sailed down to Coiama, the next major island in the Barjun chain. During the two weeks that I had been busy on Fuma, Sh'ali had been ferrying provisions amongst the other islands. On the last voyage, prior to collecting me, he had persuaded the titular chief of the Barjunis, Hussein Ogaden, to take leave from where he worked in the obscure Government office in Chisimaio and to come along with us on our tour. Now Hussein was considered a bit of a joke amongst the Barjunis. For a start, the Barjun social structure has no provision for a chief, each of its island com-

munities being autonomous. But the new United Somalia Government had split up its various provinces into districts, with either commissioners or chiefs in charge, and the fact that the independent Barjunis did not agree to a sole representative for their tribe was not allowed to stand in the path of orderly government. A search was made and the choice fell upon Hussein, then working in a remote customs warehouse in the port.

Actually, the choice was a wise one. Hussein's father had been a very eminent trader, known throughout East Africa, with houses and wives scattered over four territories. Of his sons only Hussein had survived and he had basked in his father's shadow till the old merchant died, after having squandered the whole of his considerable fortune through a series of ill-conceived ventures undertaken in his dotage. Hussein was a weakling and spineless; he was also a cadger, a breaker of promises and a coward. But he had one great asset in that he knew all this and had the sense to turn his failings into the characteristics of a clown, so his people took no offence at his actions, but tolerated him, saying that of course he was not-the-son-of-his-father and what-a-pity-it-all-was, and so on. The upshot of all this was that the Barjunis had a titular chief of whom they took not the slightest notice, that the Government had a legal scapegoat and that Hussein, besides receiving the princely stipend of £7 10s 0d a year for these new services, also had the opportunity to burn coffee and cigarettes from his more gullible tribesfolk. By any standard it was a satisfactory arrangement. Even his presence with me now served a useful purpose, for it gave my venture a sort of semi-official aura that would not escape the notice of the shrewd villagers. For Hussein it meant that he could conduct a bit of smuggling on his own account, since we would be travelling right down to the Kenya border, and for Sh'ali it gave him a willing if clumsy helper in running the *Liji*.

In appearance Hussein was tall and lanky, with a long, lugubrious face and a gait that seemed as though his body was entirely disjointed. A sort of Barjuni Fernandel, in fact. He was master of the 'double-take', in falling over obstacles that were not there and in praising the women's cooking in passing, so that he might skilfully remove all the meat from the pot with nimble fingers under cover of his words. He never had a cigarette on his person but smoked incessantly and could be relied upon to put more holy interjections into a sentence than the most venerable Mohammedan pilgrim. It was popularly believed that his chronic bladder trouble stemmed from

the fact that he must recite at least ten verses of the Koran and call down unmeten time-consuming blessings on the simplest act of nature before it was performed. The childlessness and bad temper of his wives was also attributed to the same cause.

Coïama was a bigger affair than Fuma in every respect. It was perhaps three miles long, equally treeless and rocky and with an even narrower strip of sand on its landward side. The village lay in a small declivity up from the beach and was invisible from seaward. What was visible, however, was a primitive boat-yard, with launching rails that sloped down the side of the low cliffs that fronted the sea. On these ramps several small *jahatis* were in the process of construction, the largest being perhaps 40 feet in length. Sh'ali told me that when ready, their restraining chocks would be knocked away and the boats allowed to skid down the hillside and over the edge of the 10-foot cliff to fall into the sea. It looked a very risky way of launching and I was not surprised when he added that sometimes the dhows fell on their sides and were smashed in the process. But it was cheaper for the islanders than going right down to Lamu, the only other alternative.

Coïama was Sh'ali's home and it was in his house that I waited whilst the second of our *barazas* was being prepared. Since the advent of the *Lipi* his status had improved considerably and he now owned a mud-and-wattle cottage which boasted a white-washed exterior and a tin roof, and which was considerably cleaner than anything I had seen on Fuma. It had two rooms either side of the central passage, which ran out into a tiny patio in the rear where his two children played amongst the scraggy chickens and their mother tended her charcoal fire and cooking cauldron. One of the two rooms was swept out for me, a string bed rustled up from somewhere, an old sail draped over the open doorway, and a kettle of drinking water placed on the floor beside me. I was then left in solitary splendour with nothing to do but stare at the blank walls and wonder if I dare lie on the bed. Few sounds came from the street outside, for the sun was now high and the lethargy of noonday was approaching. Eventually the heaviness of the atmosphere became so overpowering that I stretched out on the sagging strings and fell asleep, to wake soaked in sweat, bitten all over and, to judge by the unmoving shadows, with time still stationary in the hot, box-like room.

Regardless of Sh'ali's instruction to wait until I was fetched, I pulled aside the makeshift curtain and stepped out into the sunlight and then turned down an alleyway that led away from the centre of

the village. For the next two hours I explored as much as I could of Coïama, noting how the Barjunis' natural reticence led them to construct their hamlets out of sight of prying eyes, whether from seaward or from the mainland. None of their buildings ever broke the natural skyline, nor were any constructed on those outer slopes of beach or hillside where they might easily be seen. For the main part, those that were occupied were of the standard palm-thatched mud-and-wattle form, but there were many derelict houses built of coral blocks and mortar, some of which had beautifully wrought door posts of teak and camphorwood. Poking about within these ruins I saw that most of them still contained much discarded furniture including old wooden bedframes, crude wooden stools and pestles, and more numerous than any of these, stone hand-mills for grinding the maize on which the Barjunis subsisted. In their simplest form these grinders consisted of two heavy stone discs, perhaps 4 inches thick, the lower one without embellishment save for a narrow groove around the edge of its top surface. The upper wheel had a funnel shaped central hole (and another smaller hole), offset for a wooden dowel to be inserted. In action the upper stone was turned on the lower by moving the dowel through a small circle with one hand at the same time allowing corn to dribble down into the funnel with the other. Under the eccentric movement of the top wheel, pieces of maize would be trapped between the two surfaces and ground, the powder formed gradually being worked out to fill the groove at the edge of the lower wheel. It was simple, laborious and required a deal of skill in operation, but then the women had little to do except vaguely sweep out their houses and to prepare and provide one meal of porridge each day, so that the time taken in grinding the corn was of no importance.

Outside the village, the land was bare and arid, with scarcely enough green stuff growing between the rocks to feed the few goats that wandered about. Here and there a few pathetic 'fields' of a dozen square yards had been cleared and maize planted, but there was little nutrient value in the stony soil and on many of the plants the cobs had not formed. Only one tree did I find over the whole island, though the seaward side boasted a plateau covered with wild sage and thyme. The coast on this eastern edge was wild and inhospitable, with a jagged fringing reef and few bays or inlets. White herons and black ibis stalked by the edges of the rock pools and along the margins of the sand. Ravens there were and hooded crows, and from the bush-covered slopes I put up a burrowing owl.

Returning to the village, I was met at the outskirts by Sh'ali and all the village elders. Still wondering about the presence of so many abandoned stone houses I pointed to them and asked the headman the reason for such dereliction. He said that about fifty years previously (in 1911, as I subsequently discovered) the Barjunis had been a flourishing tribe, numbering 40,000 on their islands alone. Then in that year there had been washed up at Chovai, their sister island, a whole lot of bedding and mattresses. These had been taken by the villagers to their homes and used. At once a great sickness broke out and where there were 100 Barjunis possibly thirty survived and those that did carried the marks on them to this day, and the headman pointed out an old man in the group whose face was ravaged with the cicatrices of smallpox. After this, though some Barjunis came back from Zanzibar and Mombasa to replace those that had died, his people had lost heart and now they no more built in stone for they cared not for the future.

Again I saw how the word 'stone' seemed like a talisman to them, the essence of permanence, against which all things could be measured. So again this factor of our building the cannery of stone was the point I stressed at the village gathering and once more it was this that caught and held their attention. When we had decided to use local materials for construction in the factory, it had been purely for economic grounds. How thankful I was now that we had not built in more sophisticated brick or steel and aluminium, which for the Barjunis would have held no appeal.

Our stay in Coiama lasted three days, during which time I chose a site for our turtle pen—a stockade of mangrove poles built in waist-deep water, wherein the turtles that were caught might be confined pending their collection by the *Lipi*—and appointed some young men to build it and some older men to act as turtle guardians when the work began. Then on down the chain of islands we sailed, stopping at Chovai, Hodai, N'doa and Chiula for similar *barazas*. At the last of these I met with little success, for Chiula's inhabitants had found their natural bent as smugglers and were loathe to return to fishing. Their little township was situated at the head of the two arms of a creek, the centre of which was taken up by an extensive mangrove swamp. Screened from prying eyes by the thickets and from easy sea access by a network of complicated reefs and shoals, the villagers had developed a base from which goods of all kinds were smuggled in and out between Somalia and Aden, Zanzibar, Kenya, Tanganyika and even far-away China. In old storehouses by the

rotting sea wall were stacked mounds of poached ivory, illicit rhino horn, dutiable hides and skins, drums of petrol and oil, corrugated iron sheeting, sacks of sugar and cement, cartons of matches, chests of tea and barrels of nails. Packets of hashish there were, too, and bundles of *miras*; even opium, destined for the United States by way of South Africa, found its way there for temporary warehousing. Hardly surprising therefore that we met with no response and that the inhabitants seemed anxious to get rid of us, fellow Barjunis though my companions were.

Our next call was at Bur Gao, an old Arab/Portuguese settlement on the coast, now largely deserted. My interest here lay in the abandoned pre-war District Commissioner's house, which was built adjacent to a good anchorage and whose solid buildings, with water laid on from a nearby spring, might make an excellent ready-to-use foundation for another cannery which could be fed by the supply of turtles from the southern half of the Barjun chain, should the work go well and the demand make another such factory necessary. Inland from the old residence, up the estuary past the squalid Arab-type village, the country gave way to great marshes bordered by hilly country covered in very thick jungle, which seemed alive with leopard, judging from their tracks and other signs, and their coughing barks that disturbed the night. Sh'ali took me in the longboat up into the swamps to show me the big blue crabs which were found there, 18 inches across and of quite good flavour. Thinking that here-in might lie another item for canning, and wishing to see how easily they could be procured, I offered the village children 10 cents for each one brought to me within a twenty-four hour span and was overwhelmed with the finger-cracking scrambling brutes, having to pay for and liberate over 700 before the time limit expired. Prawns there were too, of 4 to 5 inches in length, which came out from the shelter of the mangrove roots with the falling tide, to feed and wait in the open estuary until the rising water sent them back to cover. These again could provide the projected Bur Gao plant with an alternative product, particularly during the rains, when the prawns thrive and turtles were more difficult to obtain. From Bur Gao we continued on to the last of our halts, the border village of Kiamboni. This cluster of huts lay either side of a hammer-headed promontory, which gave all-round protection to the dhows by reason of its shape. But there was nothing for us here, the outpost merely serving as a frontier-mark, housing a customs official (at whom the men from Chiula openly laughed) and a detachment of police.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Catching

*'It is God who hath subjected the sea to you . . .
That ye may go in quest of the gifts of His bounty.'*

Sura 45

Back at the cannery I found everything going well and, as a result of the samples which Knud had sent off, initial orders were coming in nicely. Indeed, already a considerable back-log of these was building up and it was imperative that a really satisfactory flow of turtles should be established at once. As a result of the many *barazas* during my month-long trip, agreement on turtling had been reached with all the Barjun islands (other than the smugglers' port of Chiula), and what now remained was to revisit the archipelago, to train the fishermen in methods of catching and to build the stockades for storing the live turtles. Consequently, when we left Chisimaio this time, it was with the *Lipi* deep-laden with nets, ropes, mangrove poles and assorted camp gear rather than her customary sacks of maize meal and drums of water. On arriving at Fuma I had all this off-loaded at a point on the shore a little way away from the village, telling the islanders and my crew that it was a better site for the turtle-pen we had first to build. My real reason was that this would give me the excuse I needed to live out in the open rather than accept the offer of the bug-ridden, ordure-bespattered hut that had already been set aside against my coming.

While Sh'ali and Ishmail busied themselves with grading and cutting the mangroves to size for the stockade, I took my sample nets and sacksful of netting twine over to the open-air workroom and there explained to the fishermen the difference between a turtle net and a normal fishing net and showed them how the former should be made. Our turtle nets were formed of rectangular strips, each one approximately 10 fathoms long and 2½ deep. Along the top edges were threaded hollow plastic floats and from the bottom trailed

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their lead weights. The mesh of the net was extremely wide, measuring 1 yard across from corner to corner of each nylon square. Turtles, having excellent sight underwater, will not venture near a denser barrier such as a smaller-meshed net would appear to them; and even if they did their large flippers would merely brush over its surface without becoming entrapped. With the yard-span weave, the net appeared sufficiently vague for them to ignore, and whilst their limbs would penetrate and become entangled, their big bodies could not squeeze through. In practice the nets were laid in barriers held in position on the seabed by anchors and supported on the surface by buoys, as shown in Fig. 1. In order to bar effectively

WIDE-MESH TURTLE NETS IN OPERATION
Length of each net = 60 feet Depth 15 feet Mesh 3 feet
Depth of water: 30 feet to 50 feet

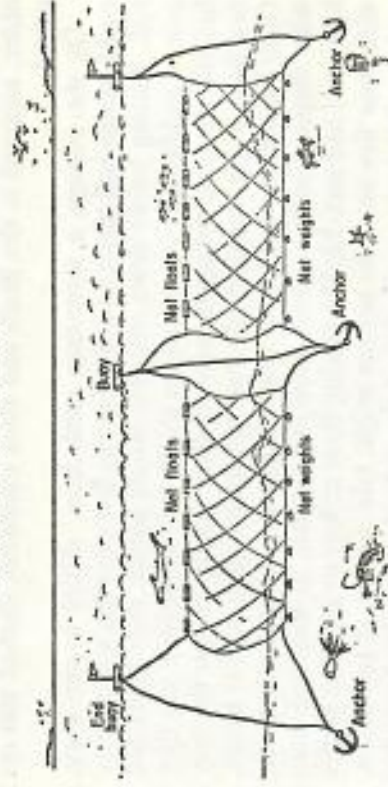


FIG. 1

a reef passage or a pathway across the seabed which the turtle might follow, groups of nets (up to possibly eight) would be strung together and laid as one, following the contours of the bottom and the pattern of their route. Because the flesh of dead turtles deteriorates very rapidly underwater (though not in the air) it was necessary that when trapped in the nets the creatures would be near enough to the surface to allow them to rise periodically for air and yet the nets must not be too far from the bottom, otherwise the turtle might swim underneath to avoid them. Five fathoms was thus the ideal depth of water in which to set the nets, though anything from 8 to 3 was workable. Deeper than that the trapped turtles would drown and spoil before being collected; if shallower, the net would drag on the bottom, snag and bunch into great useless folds. Since

the turtles usually roved around the inshore waters at night, the nets would best be laid just before dusk and recovered at dawn. If turtles were very plentiful in the area and active due to mating or other such periodic function, then the nets could theoretically be set three times each twenty-four hour period; at two in the afternoon, at seven in the evening and at three in the morning, but this was too strenuous a routine for the haulers to keep up for long. Broadly speaking, no net should be in the water longer than eight hours, since by then its 'set' under the influence of wind and current would have altered, causing it to tangle and sag, and it might also have become cluttered with bits of dead weed and other sea debris which would make its lattice more conspicuous as a barrier and thus more easily avoidable. Each morning the nets must be taken right out of the water, even if empty and apparently in good order, returned to the beach and there examined, cleaned and repaired.

On the average, a three-man turtle boat, skilled in the work, could handle and maintain a five-net rig, but even this was no easy task. Arising before dawn, the men would launch their boats and pole or paddle their way across the shallows to wherever it was they had laid the nets, aiming to arrive in their vicinity so that the very first light of day would enable them to pick out their marker buoys. Once located, the hauling-in would begin and this was slow work, with frequent halts to avoid damaging the net. If they had been lucky and had succeeded in snaring three or four or even five turtles with their five nets, the process might take as long as two hours, and possibly longer if the size of the individual reptiles precluded the men from loading them all in the boat at once, which meant another trip back to camp to unload half the catch before completing the haul.

To get the turtle into their little craft was not easy. Once the net-entrapped creature was close alongside the fishermen would crowd to that side heeling the boat over until its gunnel was level with the sea and the wavelets were slopping over it. Then, with a combined heave they would pull and slide the struggling turtle in over the side as quickly as possible, trying to prevent too much water from coming in at the same time. After that the boat would have to be baled out, the gear sorted out and the turtle properly secured on its back in the bilges before carrying on to the next section of net. Sometimes, should the boat be overloaded and the turtle very strong, boat, men, gear and turtle would overturn and the resultant mess of tangled rope,

struggling humans, floating paddles, enveloping nets, thrashing reptile and inverted boat would be extremely difficult to set to rights. Finally, back on the beach by eight or nine o'clock, the turtle fishers would brew some strong black tea before settling down to the job of unloading their nets and their catch. This done, the turtles would have to be disentangled, which in many cases meant cutting them out of the net, so intricately had they become wound up in it. The turtles delivered to stockade or storage shed, hauled thither on their backs like fat, leg-waving marine beetles; attention could be given to the nets, buoys and cordage. Unknotting, cutting and repairing these would take till past mid-day. Then lunch and a short sleep whilst the nets dried in the sun. By three-thirty the fishermen would be busy again, some picking the pieces of now-dry weed and flotsam from the outspread webs, others making the boats ready and arranging the cleaned and folded nets in their proper order for easy setting. At five, more black tea and back out across the sea to lay the nets once more; returning perhaps at seven to eat the evening meal and sit about the dying fire afterwards, whilst one told stories or recited from the Koran and the others sat around, heads turned inwards towards the solitary lamp so that they might see the loops in the nylon twine under which the shuttle must be passed, as they worked at their net-making.

No, it was not an easy life, and small wonder that the men usually stuck at it for some ten or eleven days only before retiring to their homes for a rest. For that was another thing, so rigid must be the routine and so absorbing the work, that no fisherman worth his salt could or would try to conduct it from his house or village. Even if the netting grounds were close by, he and his companions would elect to go and camp on a sand bank equally close whilst the netting was being carried on, for the diversions presented by homelife and all that it entailed were too numerous and too time-consuming. To cater for this, the Barjunis had developed in their other netting for fish and shark a cycle of action that had become almost sacrosanct. Finding that the period before and after the spring tides seemed to produce good hauls, due to the associated movement of tide and fish, and that other slack-water periods were not so productive, they had evolved an elaborate timetable. The nets entered the water for so many days before the new moon and were worked till so many days after; on the fifth day they were removed, perhaps, and on the eleventh returned to the sea. They were taken back to the village on the sixteenth and brought out again on the twenty-second and so on.

Their elders had tagged on a heap of weird mumbo-jumbo to make the cycle more mystic, hinting at 'magic-upon-the-waters' at certain times and the threat of personal disaster should a fisherman prolong his efforts beyond the allotted span. But basically it was a sensible routine, founded on the desire for a certain amount of home life and the need not to age men and their gear prematurely through over-usage. So I adopted it for the turtle netting as well, and this suited us all, since the fortnightly period of inactivity on the part of the fisherman gave me a chance to clear the turtle pens of old stock and to shift stores and camps as I might need, according to the locality of the next netting grounds.

Since most of the fishermen were too poor to buy them for themselves and since equipping untrained men with expensive nets was a risky venture for us, it was essential that the business of turtle netting be gone into gradually, and that only those men who had proved themselves to be reliable were entrusted with them. Once the catching went well, the successful boats could buy their requirements of nylon, floats and rope from us at cost and make their own nets, making the necessary materials part of the turtle price. Thus they would value and look after them. But in the interim, until that period was reached, the catching by net would not supply all the needs of the cannery and an alternate cheaper-to-equip method would have to be taught.

That was where the remoras came in. The remora or sucking-fish, known to the Barjunis as *taza*, is one of Nature's most successful parasites. This fish has a distinctive eel-like look with small fins, hardly any tail to speak of and a sinuous two-foot long body covered with a tough slimy skin. But it is in its head that the key to its existence lies. The top of the skull is flattened and bears upon its surface a peculiar grid of slots and flaps, in shape rather like the sole of a ribbed tennis shoe. With this device the remora is able to adhere to a semi-smooth surface by means of suction. Given the chance the *taza* will cling to anything that offers the prospect of a free ride and free food, and will quickly latch on to any passer-by that offers this, be they large predatory fish, small boats or even turtles. Once having secured a grip with its head the remora gets carried along willy-nilly, the remainder of its flexible body waving limply in the slipstream of its adopted provider. As regards sustenance the parasite relies either on the crumbs dropped from its host's jaws or particles of the excrement that it voids, for its own mouth, though equipped with small teeth, is very narrow and can only accommodate

small fragments of food. A curious fact concerning these fish is that, though readily adaptable by nature to battenning off any number of species of 'parents', once it has established an initial attachment the remora will continue to seek out the same kind of host on subsequent occasions.

It is this characteristic that the hunter of turtle can exploit if he knows how. To begin with the would-be turtle fisherman must catch a live, strong remora and to do this he must know where to look. During the period when remoras are free of their hosts, either through having been inadvertently brushed off, or having allowed themselves to be left behind in a lax moment, they frequently take up temporary lodgings in or near areas of weed or small rocks above which other suitable patrons are likely to pass. Typical of such places are the entrances to reef lagoons, through which the visiting shark and barracuda, turtle and large rays must come. Here then the man will fish perhaps for several days, for big remoras are neither plentiful nor easy to take on a hand line, their tiny mouths skilfully avoiding the barb of the small hooks whilst they suck and nibble the bait away. When he has caught a suitable sucker-fish the fisherman merely unhooks it and drops it in the bilges where it quickly attaches itself to the planks and settles down. Later the fish is pulled free by pressing the head down and sliding it forward, which releases the suction; it is then transferred to a slatted box, securely anchored in deep, cool water near the man's village or camp. Safe in the box the remora will be fed daily on a mixture of turtle offal and scraps of the fried fat until it is judged converted to the new diet. Taken out of confinement a small loop of strong cord is either passed through the mouth and out through the gill slots in the form of a collar, or else attached to a brass ring which is inserted in a hole made at the end of the body where it joins the rudimentary tail.

The remora is now ready to begin work. Once again the fisherman drops it into the bilges of his boat while he busies himself with paddle and sail. Arriving in a likely turtle locality the sucker-fish is detached from the planking, a light line is threaded to its 'collar' and it is dropped over the side. Being a lazy creature, unless its owner now beats the bottom of his boat with a club, making the hull resound like a drum, the fish will immediately attach itself to the underside and not go to work. But discouraged from resting there by the noise, the remora disconsolately swims off looking for a new 'host', whilst the fisherman pays out the line behind it. Should there be no turtle in the vicinity the sucker-fish will return to the

boat after having quartered the area thoroughly. If the remora suddenly ceases to take out line, it means that it has attached itself to a turtle, for no other patron is now acceptable to its palate. Feeling this, the boatman pulls quietly but firmly in on the line until his craft is directly over his 'sucker' where it clings to the shell of the turtle hidden on the seabed. Once in position there are two courses of action possible. Should the depth be less than 5 or 6 fathoms, the boat will be anchored and the man will dive over the side and pull himself down the line hand-over-hand until he comes to the turtle, which, in all probability, since it is daytime, will be sleeping under a ledge. Here the fisherman gently slips a figure-of-eight double noose over the turtle's extended fore flippers (once opening it will close, if the heavy rope he has brought down will not pull it down to the bottom and if the line above the line remains taut to the surface, sometimes covering the remora to finish its affliction and sucker to his own body by hanging a bit of turtle fat tied round his neck on a string and by rubbing his body with turtle oil beforehand. Back in his boat the fisherman will then exert a steady upward pull until the turtle is either dragged bodily from its hiding-place or else has to surface to breathe after its exertion in resisting. Either way the man is now able to haul it into his boat and then goes off to look for others of its kind.

However, if a turtle is located by the sucker-fish in water deeper than the limits of his diving, then the fisherman has to use an alternate method to bring his catch to the surface. Under these circumstances a device known as a 'turtle iron' is brought into play. A 'turtle iron' is an L-shaped metal bar, approximately 20 inches high and with a base of about 10, the end of which is bent back to 45 degrees to form a 'claw' pointing in the direction of the head of the haft. Some irons have three base legs equi-angled from one another. At the top of the haft there is a horizontal ring sufficiently wide to allow a thin line to run freely through it and above this another vertical ring by which to attach a hauling rope. In position directly over the unsuspecting turtle the fisherman threads the line leading to the hidden remora through the horizontal ring. He then slides the iron down this rope guide until it strikes the upper carapace of the turtle. Here, due to its shape, the clawed leg of the iron will slide down over the lip of the shell until the top end of the haft comes to rest against the turtle. A very few trial pulls on the hauling rope will cause the claw to skid around on the under side of the turtle until it lodges in the neck or leg cavity of the shell. Once the claw is

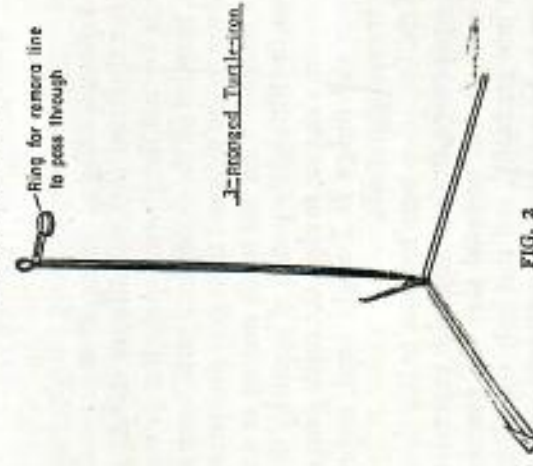
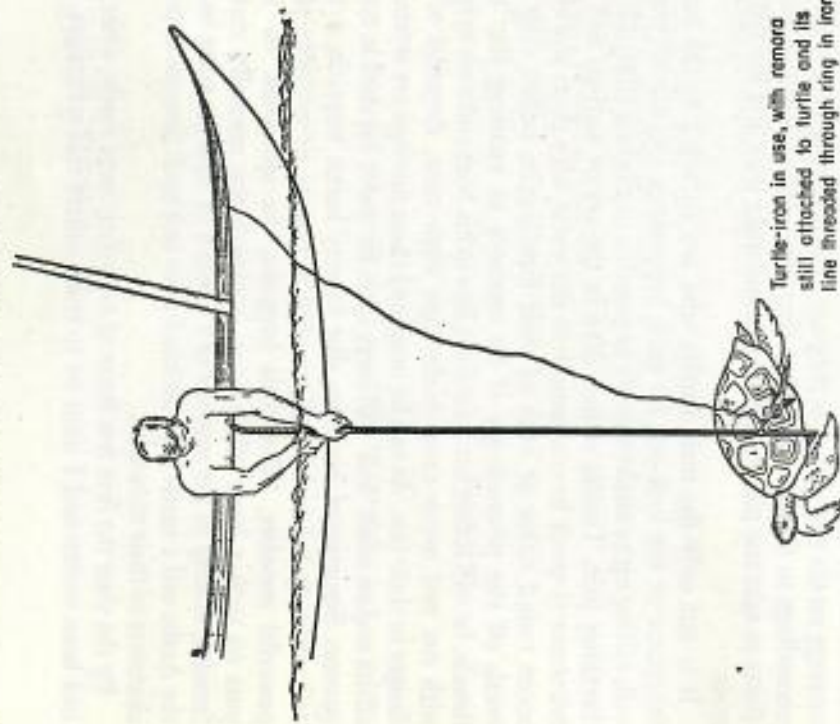


FIG. 2

located in these the fisherman can heave the turtle up to the surface, for the iron cannot work loose.

The main drawback to this method is that the precious remora can get caught between iron and shell and injured before being able to free itself. Since a 'good' remora, properly handled, is capable of catching perhaps forty or more adult turtles before tiring of this unnatural life, to risk losing it through using a turtle iron unnecessarily is foolish and for this reason most turtle fishers working with a remora will only cover areas in which they know that they can reach the seabed by diving.

At Puma, having built up a small netting team from the best fishermen and set them to work, I started to teach others the work of *taza*-fishing, beginning with the catching of the sucker-fish and leading up to their operation. For this I not only took men from this island, but opened up a camp there for others from Coiama and Chovai, and soon the sea in that northern section of the Barjun Channel was bustling with their small boats busy on their various errands. Sometimes should there not be enough green turtle in the area, I would get the trainee fishermen to launch their remoras at the small hawkbill turtle if they saw these on the surface. This cousin of the big turtle was not of commercial interest to us, for the flesh is rank and the oil from the liver unpalatable. Fifty years ago, however, this harmless little creature was near extinction in many parts of the



Turtle-iron in use, with remora still attached to turtle and its line threaded through ring in iron

FIG. 3

world, due to the demand for the 'tortoise-shell' which it yielded. Nowadays there is little demand for this and the hawkbill is becoming more numerous again. But there is still a limited market for the shell, mainly in the Orient, and to supply this the Barjuni fishermen showed me how they prepared the 'tortoise-shell'.

After killing the turtle they removed the top half of the carapace and buried it in loose sand, where it could be found and dug up again without difficulty. It was left for two or three weeks until the actual plates, which were originally attached to the cartilage of the carapace, were loose. These were then prised off, care being taken not to mislay any of the 'set', for each hawkbill backshell consists of thirteen actual plates and twenty-two edge pieces or 'claws', as they are properly known. The pieces of horn, perhaps a quarter of

an inch thick and a large plate spanning 10 inches, were then gently scraped clean of all the dead tissue, barnacles and sea growth which covered them. Only after this treatment is it possible to assess the quality of the 'tortoise-shell'. The prize sets are those in which the horn is of a clear golden honey colour, dappled with darker areas of reddish-brown, and have no scars or cracks upon them. These days a first-class hawkbill 'set', weighing some 5 pounds, will perhaps only fetch 30 shillings, whereas formerly ten times this figure for a similar shell was usual. It was not surprising, therefore, that but few of the men could be bothered with the hours of labour involved, often completely rewardless, since the horn might finally appear as scratched and of a poor colour under the revealing treatment. Accordingly, when one of the fishermen caught a hawkbill while practising, the surprised turtles were merely hauled into the boat, the remoras removed and then dumped back in the sea without further molestation.

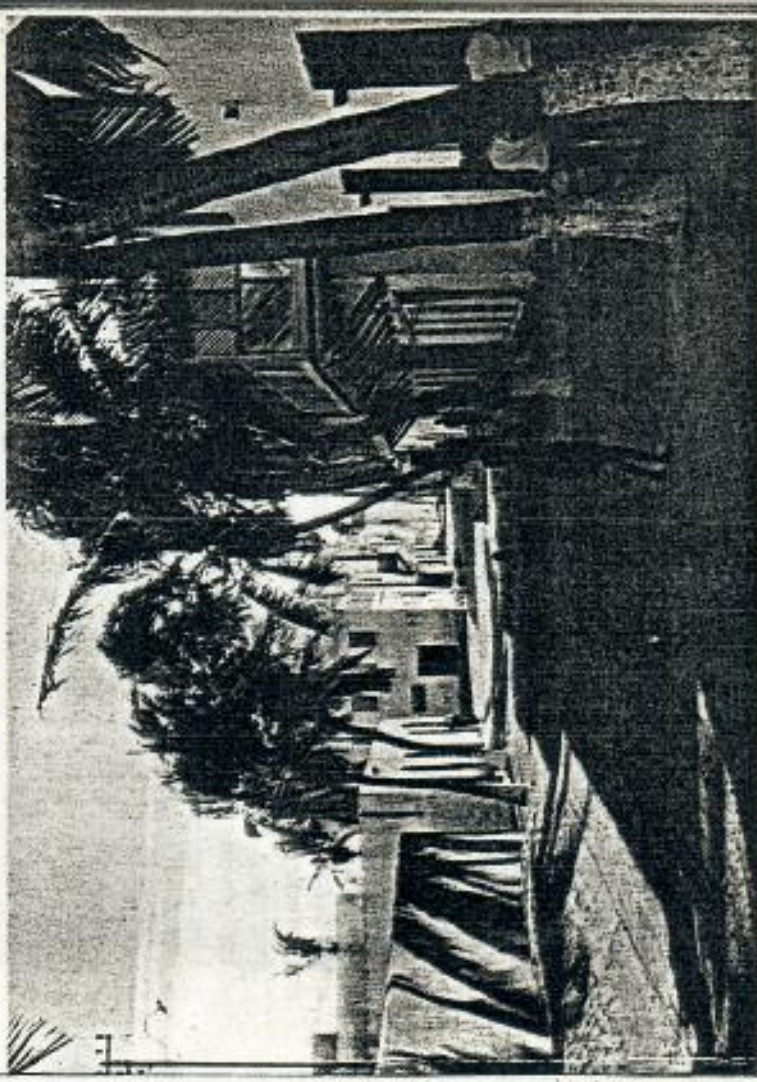
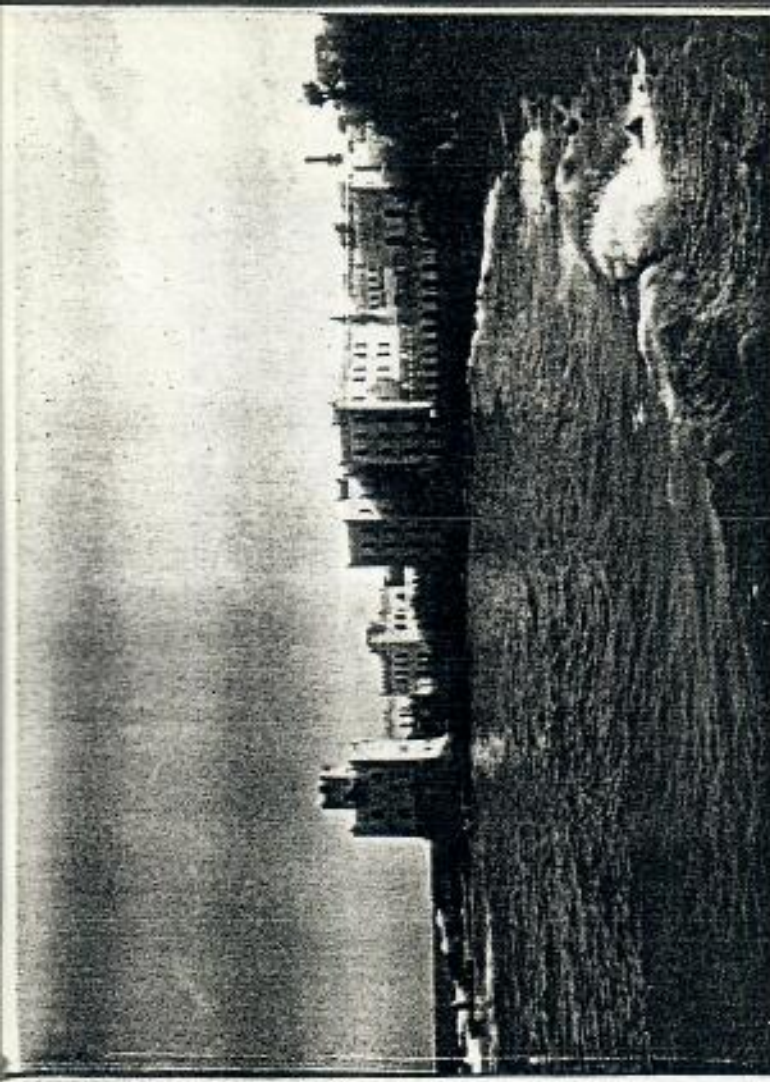
In all this work of remora-fishing, one of the things that interested the Barjuns was where I, a European who could not possibly be expected to know of such things, had myself learnt the trade. There were two answers to this. I had first come across the system amongst some of the remote islands in the Caribbean, though on some finer points the technique was slightly different. But that was long ago. More recently I had had contact with some of their own kinsfolk who used remoras and who inhabited a small island off the Kenya coast; it was there that I had brushed up on the method. They knew of these cousins of theirs but had little contact with them and were not too happy concerning my acquaintance with them, for they were a suspect off-shoot of the Barjuns and were feared. However, my knowledge was necessary to them now and they accepted it without too much quibbling about its origins. But the demonstrating of turtle-catching techniques was not all one-sided, for these men showed me how they had been accustomed to catch turtle in the past, by hand and at sea.

The matings of the green turtles are impressive. Their actual breeding cycle will carry on throughout the year, but not continuously in any one locality, and their sexual appetites seem to be largely influenced by the presence of calm waters and therefore easier feedings and heavier fat build-up. In most places the 'bulls' outnumber the 'cows' by about four to one, but since the restless males do not spend so much time in the inshore waters, almost as many females are caught, notwithstanding this adverse ratio of

sexes. Given the right conditions of calm seas and good grazing, for the green turtle exists solely upon the broad-bladed grass-like seaweed known as turtle-grass, it is not long before the bulls begin spending long periods floating upon the surface, necks continuously craning aloft in search of other turtles. When one is sighted, the eager male swims quickly across to intercept and quizz the stranger. Should it be another prowling 'bull', each will shear off after mutual recognition of the fact, but if the other is a 'cow' the male will rush up to her and seek to interlock flippers, which the female, reluctant at first, will try to avoid. During this process the pair waltz round and round on the surface, splashing and churning up foam as the 'dance' develops, oblivious of all else in their courtship. Eventually, should the female prove amenable mating will take place, the male carrying his organ of generation sheathed in his tail, which is much longer and more powerful than the stumpy egg-laying appendage of the 'cow'. A mating couple causing such a rumpus quickly attracts the attention of all the other 'bulls' in the neighbourhood, who will converge on the pair as fast as they can and then hang around for the proceedings to finish, whereupon they jostle one another in frantic efforts to take the place of the exhausted male who first located the bride.

It is not only the male turtles who are attracted to the scene; fishermen on the look-out for such happenings join the throng as well, sailing up as unobtrusively as possible until close alongside the threshing pair. Turtles cannot dive in the act of mating, and if a fisherman is quick he can jump into the water with them and slip a noose round either or both of their foreflippers, before they can break off the proceedings. If he succeeds in securing the 'ripe' female, he will tether her on a short line to his boat and seek to snare with net and noose those males that draw near, forgetful of the danger in their lust. As can be imagined these matings are strenuous affairs and an adult 'bull' will carry little fat under his shell in consequence. Sometimes, however, due to very hectic nuptials, a male will seriously injure himself, causing a rupture or prolapse of his powerful member. When this happens, the incapable 'ox' soon puts on such a layer of fat as to outweigh the normally massive females, exactly in the manner of a eunuch of Arabian tales; indeed the Arabs call a turtle thus afflicted after one such famous impotent character of their romances.

By the time the first few boats of *taza*-men were ready, more nets had been woven and I went on to teach others this technique. The



3. MOGADISHU. The old Arab sea-front

4. CHISIMAYO. Second city of Somalia. Main Street, 4 p.m.

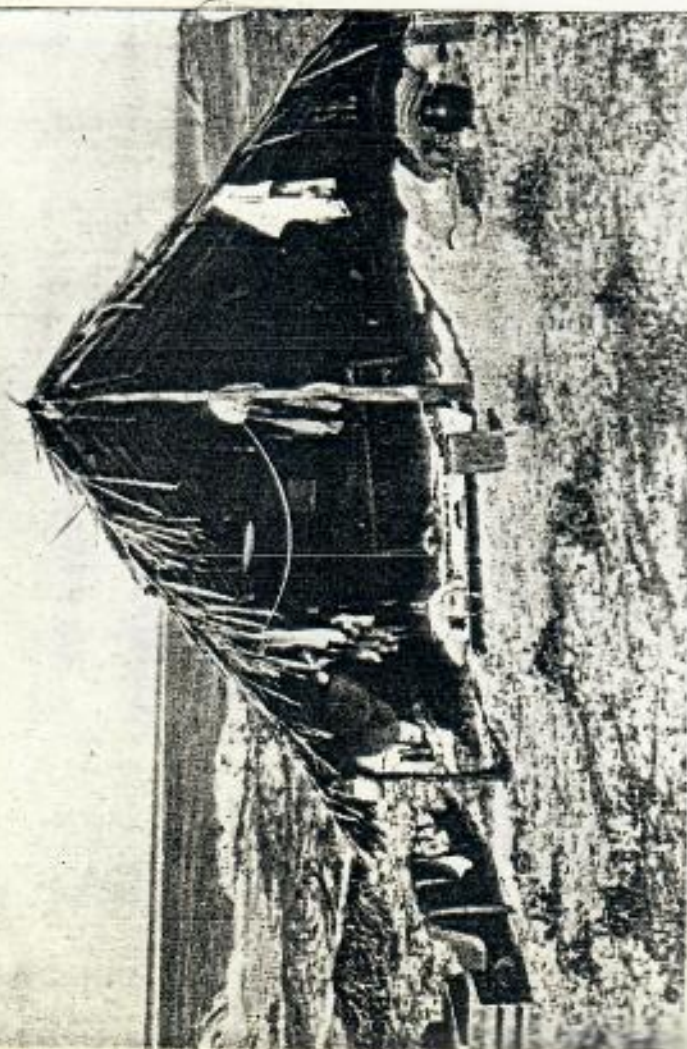
first team of netters, comprising gaunt Mohamedi, the headman of Fuma, and his son Shekue-bin-Mohamed plus a few helpers, had now got into the rhythm of the work and were discovering that their new turtle nets snared other quarry as well, especially large sharks. This pleased them immensely, for they loved the work of shark-meat preparation. After all, this was legitimate fishing, but turtles . . . well, they were still not too sure. The main reason why the big predators were attracted to the nets was the presence of the turtles in them, revealed by their struggles to get free. Hardly ever was a shark taken in a net that did not already contain a turtle. Luckily for us, rather than close directly in on the poor reptile and devour it straight out of the net, the hungry fish would usually circle their quarry before deciding to attack. This caused them to strike the net themselves, usually quite a few yards distant, and though they rolled and struggled wildly in their efforts to escape they were prevented from injuring the turtle by the intervening mesh. Most of the larger sharks seemed to think the entrapped turtle worth pursuing, with the exception of hammerhead which were seldom found in our nets. The species most frequently taken was grey nurse, that menace of the bathing benches in South Africa. The ones we feared the most, however, and which we rarely trapped, were the big tiger sharks. When these came on the scene and were caught they methodically chomped their way through the nylon twine, ruining the net, creating tears and gaps that it took days of patient toil to repair. Sometimes they succeeded in carrying off the turtle as well, as could be seen by the pathetic fragments of skin and shell that still adhered to the torn and lacerated tangle of net that was left to us to pull in the following morning.

Besides the salted flesh which the Barjunis prepare and sell there is another shark product which they value highly. This is a liver oil compound known as *seefa* with which they smear their boats to make the planking more water-resistant. *Seefa* is the most abominable-smelling muck possible and when I saw how it was prepared I was not surprised at its appalling stench. On being opened the liver of the shark (or even that of large rays) is cut into long blood-dripping slices and dropped into a big metal tank through a small hole in the top. Discarded 44-gallon oil drums are ideal. The drum is left out in the sun and more sliced raw liver added whenever available. Inside the drum, under the influence of the heat outside and of its own

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5. KANDERSHEIKH. The communal hut. The author's camp-bed near the entrance with the 'office': beer-box table and Landrover bench-seat outside

6. The author supervising the butchery. Note the mounds of dung produced by one adult turtle



decomposition the mass of rotting tissue soon attracts blow-flies and other insects which hover over the reeking orifice of the container in a perpetual buzzing, drunken cloud of contentment. After about six weeks the smell is so frightful that even the Barjunis cover their noses with their headcloths when they approach to feed fresh morsels into the organic furnace that quivers, hisses and bubbles within. Eventually, the brew is judged ripe, and pailfuls of brownish oily liquid, covered with a greeny-grey scum, are drawn off. Boats are then pulled up on to the beaches and are given two or three liberal coats of the unguent, inside and out. Whilst this is going on, spars, masts and paddles are similarly treated. Time is allowed for the dressing to 'cure' and two or three days later the boats are returned to the water, where they exude much of what they have absorbed, covering the anchorage and the nearby beaches with a film of stinking oil that contaminates all that comes into contact with it. Even the fishermen themselves are wary of fouling nets and lines with it, since in its early powerful stage it drives all healthy sea life, other than the coarsest scavengers, away from the area. When next the boats set off on their fishing, each will leave a heavy 'slick' upon the water in its wake and the smell of a newly *seef'a'd* fishing boat can be detected several miles away. Since it took about a month for the stench to die away to bearable proportions and since, with the advent of the shark catching, my fishermen were able to anoint their craft each new moon, I tried to interest them in an alternate water-proofing system, for I found the everlasting, all-pervading smell impossible to bear. I showed how cooking the livers a little and then adding caustic to the residue would cause the oil to break away from the tissue in a shorter space of time and more-or-less without odour. I even offered to supply the caustic and the firewood myself, but it was no good. Much like old-time farmers with their muck-heaps, the Barjunis were far too conservative to adopt simple scientific methods to gain the same result but with a cleaner preparation. No, like Farmer Giles, they found the smell healthy and powerful good for the ague and for headaches; it improved the eyesight, cleared the brain and increased virility. The fact that it was so lethal as to knock you out cold if you had a good lungful of it, did not seem to bother them unduly.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Catchers

*'Askest thou any recompense from them?
But they are burdened with debt.'*

Sura 68

Certainly the oldest method of catching turtles is by overturning the females when they come ashore to lay their eggs. The period of laying may extend throughout the year, according to local conditions, and on these occasions the females mount the beaches on five nights each lunar month, taking advantage of the spring tides to enable them to get as far inshore in the comparative safety of the sea. Certain instincts in the animal seem to recognize the danger of the full moon as regards discovery on land, since three of the five nights when laying takes place are during the darkness of the new moon period and only two in the full.

To 'turn' a fully grown female, weighing possibly 400 or 500 pounds, requires a certain knack, sheer bodily strength being useless. Actually, the trick is simple. Walking along beside the creature one takes hold of the 'elbow' joint with one hand and the lip of the shell at the mid-point with the other. As the turtle takes the weight of its forepart on its front flippers prior to taking the next floundering lurch up the beach one heaves upwards in conjunction and over it goes on to its back, beating its flippers crazily but uselessly in trying to return right side up. Once on its back, a turtle, though as helpless as a blackbeetle, is still able to injure its captor. The long front flippers, scraping furiously at the ground whilst failing to secure any grip, scoop up quantities of sand, which is thrown in all directions with sufficient force to blind. Further, should the 'turner' stand too near he stands a good chance of having his legs swept from under him and possibly broken by the flailing fore-flippers. However, once a turtle has settled down in this inverted position it lies dormant and is as much trouble as an over-stuffed armchair.

But a female turtle on her egg-laying forays usually has more serious dangers to contend with than men bent on turning her. Prominent among the hazards are land-traps such as steep inclines of soft sand just over the crest of the selected beach. The unsuspecting cow turtle, wheezing her way up from the tide-lines, suddenly finds herself launched on a sandy toboggan slide which leads down into a cone-shaped depression from which there is no escape. Here the pitiless morning sun will find her and at evening her baked body will provide a feast for the scurrying ghost crabs whose thistledown bodies can negotiate with ease those slopes of sand that caused her death. Even under such fatal circumstances the remorseless female urge is not to be gainsaid, for fifty-six days later the sand beneath her bleached bones will stir and out will break a new generation of turtles—1-inch long, soft shelled and delicate, yet, because they are so light, able to climb out of their mother's death-pit and make a headlong dash through serried ranks of crabs and clusters of hovering bird shadows that snatch at them with claw and bill, scampering back down the beach to the sea, their foster-mother.

Other dangers to the female turtle include being caught in inshore waters by night-cruising sharks, for the laying beaches lack the reefs or rocky crevices in which the turtle can normally take refuge from such attacks. Even the land carnivores take their toll. Hyenas that live near coastal villages harry their pilgrimages especially, for their immensely powerful jaws are capable of cracking through the reptile's skull, which is how hyenas usually seize them. In East Africa where, during certain seasons wild pig come down to the coast, lion follow in their wake and on occasions have been known to attack the turtles on the beaches at night. In one such case near Bur Gao in Southern Somalia, the local villagers were attracted to the scene by the crazed roarings that were heard in the morning. They found an old male lion, blind and in great pain. Spearfishing him to death, they found his eyes to be full of sand. Following up the meandering tracks they came across a female turtle, head hanging limp, already dead. Neck, head and carapace bore the marks of claws and one flipper was torn by teeth. From the signs in the sand it appeared that the lion had followed the reptile a while before attacking, which he did by seizing a flipper in his jaws and trying to wrench it off. In the struggle that followed the lion had managed inadvertently to turn the turtle over, but her flailings had succeeded in destroying his sight before he could take her by the throat, thus they both had lost their lives, his to the men and hers to sunstroke.

I soon discovered that the best people for 'turning' turtles were old but active, family-less fishermen. Not because of their cunning or even their experience but because of other seemingly unrelated characteristics. Firstly, though too old for venturing on the sea they liked being near it, and secondly, being old they suffered from insomnia and thus did not find it irksome to spend the hours of the night in wandering along the desert beaches; after all, they had no one at home waiting for them and often not even a home. I have a great weakness for old fishermen of any nationality; mainly, I think, because they have such wonderful tales to tell, true or otherwise. In this respect the Barjuni and Somali 'turtle-turners' I recruited were no exceptions, being true-life characters out of O'Shaughnessy:

'... Dreamers of dreams,
Wandering by lonely shore breakers
And sitting by desolate streams,
World losers and world forsakers
On whom the pale moon gleams ...'

I suppose the most remarkable of these was Juma Laki. He was, of course, old, but he was also gnarled, had twisted ears, drank anything that contained alcohol, smoked hashish when he could get it, had the tongue of a poet, a superb sense of humour and was the greatest wheedling twister throughout the literal and metaphysical doldrums. He was also 'fey' and had the reputed powers of second sight, and since this aura had been with him since childhood I could not lay it at the door of either drink or dope, though no doubt each helped. Like many old men who have spent most of their lives in solitude he was normally very quiet, but once he began talking nothing could hold him, and his Swahili, ever a joy to listen to, would grow so flowery, so full of onomatopoeia and subtle tones that before long, no matter how factual the matter under discussion, the truth would have to be sacrificed for the purity of his rhetoric. Thus 'five' would become 'ten score' because the scansion demanded it, and the calm sea would have to be filled with crashing, thunderous waves to meet the mounting climax of a sentence. It was tremendously inspiring and equally deluding. I would ask for a description of a coastline I knew to be one long sweep of sand and finish up with a mental image of Cap Finisterre in an equinoctial gale.

When finally asked, 'But is it rocky?' the answer would be: 'No, of course not!' Then I would say, 'yes, but you said ...', and that

would start him off again and gradually we would spiral out from our subject in ever-widening circles of description until we would finish up mentally becalmed on an ocean of words and for ever lost to those distant shores of truth from which we had started.

However, Juma Laki was a success as a turtle-turner, of that there was no doubt. In this he claimed that his supernatural powers, his second sight, aided him; but having walked with him on many nights I have no doubt that the real reason was that he covered such immense distances in his nightly wanderings. It was nothing for Mzee (Elder) Laki to walk twenty-four miles each way, along a coastline previously untrodden by him, between eight at night and six in the morning. If he had had some *banghi* [hashish], he could do even better and he would storm along, arms flailing, spouting aloud reams of beautiful unrelated nonsense. He would walk into the sea, scooping up handfuls of phosphorescent foam and fling it into the night sky, shouting how he too was a star-maker and matched Ithuriel in his wonders. Becoming hungry he would stop, stoop and then deftly grab up a pale ghost crab, stuff it into his mouth leaving a few kicking legs remaining outside, which he would wrench off when they tickled his slobbering lips and toss unfeelingly away. But for all this madness and play-acting he could pick out the humped shadow of a turtle amongst the humped shadows of the rocks way down the beach long before I noticed it. Then, if the turtle were too far from the sea to return to it before our arrival he would grow apparently even madder, would prance and dance, shout that he felt a Presence near, that he 'smelt' one of his daughters—for so he called the turtles he sought. Soon he would make short rushes in its vague direction until he finally discovered the creature, seemingly by accident. If, on the other hand, the turtle he saw were near enough the sea to escape if frightened, Laki would become silent and caution me to be so too, supposedly in order to let the Other-World spirits talk to him. Frequently he would call a halt—to allow the turtle time to crawl further up the beach and further away from safety—saying that he was tired, that he needed to rest awhile, he who could walk me off my feet at any time!

For a while his stratagems worked until I had puzzled out the reasons for his actions. Thereafter, as I learnt, I began to copy him and if I saw a turtle before it had caught his eye, would remark that I was suddenly overcome by tiredness and must rest, or else that I too 'felt' that we would come across one shortly. Laki soon saw what I was up to, so that in the end whoever saw a turtle first would

nudge the other and say: 'Look! Over there. Beyond that strip of white sand! Now, do we feel tired or do we "smell" something?'—and according to circumstances we would either rush forward or sit down and wait.

It was during these waiting periods that Laki would talk sensibly, for the presence of the female turtle kept his voice and rhetoric within reasonable limits. In the course of these conversations he revealed a remarkably accurate knowledge of natural history, nicely spiced with local legends and superstitions, of which the following is typical. We had had our attention attracted by a turtle whilst she was still in the water, due to the heavy layer of phosphorescence which coated her shell and which revealed her shape whilst she was still amongst the breakers.

'You could see her a mile off, couldn't you?' said Laki as she crawled painfully ashore. 'It's on account of all those "sea-insects",—the nearest his Swahili could get to phosphorescence. 'At least, that's what you Europeans call it and I dare say you're right, though those "insects" must be very small because you can't really see them one-by-one when you get close, nor can you feel them between your fingers. We call it "sea-fire"; but then it isn't hot, so that's a foolish word for it too. Anyway, we think that a turtle that carries such a sign upon her is something special and that all the other turtles will keep away from her and also the sharks and night-hunters.'

'Why is that?' I asked.

'Because she carries a djinn! A sea-djinn who wishes to come to land for some magical and possibly evil purpose, and who uses her as his chariot and marks her thus so that everyone may see and know and stand aside.'

'But what happens when the djinn has come ashore?'

'Oh, he lets the turtle carry him up the beach and then he gets off and goes away and does his business and gets back in time to ride her back into the sea when she's finished her laying. Djinn's business never takes long,' he added.

'Why doesn't he just walk in and out of the sea when he wants? Perhaps he doesn't like to wait for some female creature to make up her mind she needs to go and lay some eggs!'

'But he must wait!' Laki exclaimed. 'You see sea-djinn are bound by [Allah's] Law to keep within the confines of the sea. The only way out for them is to ride on some sea-beast that can carry them across the boundary where sea and land meet, and the female turtle is the only one that does that.'

'What happens if the djinn misses the turtle on her return?'
 'That's another reason why he marks her with sea-fire, so that he can easily find her again. But if he does miss her that makes it very bad for him, since the sea-djinn cannot live on land by himself. So he has to inhabit the body of a shore-dweller and wait there by the sea for another two or four weeks till that same turtle comes back to land again. This is very difficult and inconvenient for him and usually puts the djinn in a terrible temper. When it happens he usually revenges himself by driving the beast or man that he has possessed mad. What do you think makes cattle sometimes rush into the sea and drown? Or goats, or even the poor herdsmen who don't know how to swim? Sea-djinns of course! That way they get back to their own kingdom, but the beast or man that takes them back must always drown because they're not sea-creatures. That, too, is the Law. So you see, we are always very careful with turtles bearing the djinn's mark!'

'What makes the turtle so special?'

'Well, think! If we go up to that turtle now and turn her over the djinn will see that his chariot is lost and so are his chances of returning to his kingdom, so he will immediately enter one of us and drive us to madness. *You* can risk it if you like, but I'm going to sleep for a while.'

'Why sleep? If we can't take that particular turtle, let's go and find another.'

'Now who said anything about letting her go, Beard? Do you think Juma Laki would let twenty-five shillings slip through his fingers because of a stupid sea-djinn that wants a turtle as a chariot? If you do, you're the fool, not I! Remember what I said? The djinn has to have the turtle to get back across the boundary between the land and the sea. The boundary, that's all. So what we do is have a little snooze with one of us keeping an eye on the turtle. Then when she's finished laying, the sea-djinn will climb on her back and off she'll go back down the beach with us walking each side of her talking politely to the djinn, saying how much we enjoyed his visit and to give our regards to Solomon bin Davud. But just when his chariot splashes into the first wave—just one inch of water—we each grab a foreleg and stop her and tell the djinn he can get off now, he's back home and needs his chariot no longer, but we do. And then we turn her over and pull her up the beach a bit and then you give Juma Laki twenty-five shillings for a nice fat turtle and for saving your soul from the madness of the Pit!'

And that is what we did.

The first real inking I had of Laki's sense of poesy was the incident of the sea-shell. At that time I had a young European working with me who, having been brought up in Kenya, spoke Swahili fluently and was thus able to learn the business of turtle-fishing directly from the fishermen themselves. For this reason I had told Laki to take an interest in Andrew, to answer his questions, to explain the work and to teach him about the sea. Consequently I was not very surprised when Laki, hearing that I was driving over to another camp where Andrew was living, pressed into my hands an object wrapped in a piece of his shirt-tail—which he had modestly torn off behind a bush—with strict instructions that I was to give it to 'his-son-learning', for it was an important letter from his teacher-father and that Andrew would read it and understand. Arriving at this other turtle-catching station I gave the parcel to Andrew and forgot all about it until, my work there over, I returned to the Landrover and a final conversation with the lad before setting off on my return. 'By the way, what sort of joke was that precious package of yours?' he asked.

'How should I know? It came from Laki. He said you'd understand.'

'All that was in it was an old shell that had been washed up on the beach. There wasn't any letter!'

'Perhaps he forgot. At any rate, I'll ask him,' and so I drove off. Back at my own camp that evening, after supper had been eaten, the prayers said and the men were rolling out their sleeping mats around the dying fire, I remembered the episode and called Laki over.

'Old one, you forgot your letter. Your son-in-learning thanks you for the shell, old though it was and without beauty. But the letter was not there. Perhaps it dropped out.'

'Do you think, Beard, that I forget things? Perhaps I do when I have had *spiriti* [alcohol] or *bonghi*, but how many weeks since is that? Has the young man no eyes within his head, no understanding? Does he need to have written things to read? He asks for knowledge and I give it. If he cannot understand the lessons I point out to him then you had better find another teacher for him, for I won't waste my time...!'

'But this thing is new to him and he does not know you yet.'

'Do you need to know me, Beard, to hold an old shell in your

hand and to think? To think of the cool sea, the all-around green light, the noise of the waves passing far overhead like the wind in tall trees. The corals all alive and colourful, the pockets of yellow sand, the waving sea-grass. And there the shell's crawling and seeking, feeding and growing till the life within had done what-God-willed and so it died. Thereafter the empty shell, being taken by the sea and used as a plaything, rolled about by the waves, thrown around in the breakers, cast up and sucked back again until yesterday when I, old Laki, picked it up on this beach and held it in my hand and thought of these things and then sent it to my son-in-law that he might hold it and receive its message too. He should have looked at it and thought—puzzled out its secret, for he must learn to read the messages borne on the winds, cast up in spray on the reef, carried in the sea-bird's cry. These are the books from which I shall teach him, for these things are indeed the Truth-themselves and not just the empty words describing them! Tell the young man thus when you see him next and then perhaps he will understand the letters which I will send him when he is not with me and I cannot tell him myself of these marvels....

In the early days of his working for us, before our activities reached out beyond the Guiba river, Laki had to content himself with quartering those beaches near to Chisimaio. This was not greatly to his liking, for not only did they yield few egg-laying turtles but he had to share the grounds with other casual turtle-turners, drawn into the game by the thought of apparently easy money. But the old man was quite up to dealing with such amateur interference as the others offered and it was not long before I noticed that the flood of initial enthusiasts was drying up and that those that remained did so only in the minor role of assisting our disreputable ancient in transporting his catch to the cannery. Sensing a mystery, I quietly taxed Laki with this development when next he and his helpers appeared before me to collect their reward.

'Which is better, Beard?' he asked in an aside that the others could not hear. 'To lose half my sea-daughters to happenchance fools or to take these fools under my wing and surrender, say, one-tenth of all the bride-price you pay me to them?'

'I know that you have done this, Old One. But how?'

'Come and walk with Old Laki tonight, Beard, and you shall see how it is done!'

I drove down to the place near the particular beach at which he

had told me to meet him a good hour before the rendezvous and by the time Juma Laki appeared I had hunted around and unearthed quite a few of his 'props'. For the main part these consisted of the skulls and discarded carapaces of long-dead turtles, cunningly arranged on sticks and jointed with twine so that they moved with the earth tremor of one's footsteps. There were 'wind-flutes' too, hollow reeds hidden in the low bushes and among the dead trees that lined the beach head. At intervals these gave vent to low moans and thrummings under the invisible caress of the wind's fingers. Right down on the beach there was a sort of shrine made of sharks' jaws, turtle bones and a hyena skull, all ringed with palm fronds stuck upright in the sand and carrying bits of rugged bunting such as adorn the tombs of wandering saints.

It was at this holy-of-holies that Laki and his minions found me on their arrival. Whilst he himself came and greeted me, the others remained a little way off, plainly not daring to come too close in their superstition. At the charlatan's request I followed his example, stripped off my clothes, rubbed myself with clean sand and went and stood beside him in front of his macabre altar. Here he chanted for a while in a tongue he had made up himself, making strange signs in the air and shuffling his feet as he did so. Eventually he paused and waited and I saw the hyena skull bob up and down in a gruesome nod of acquiescence, which caught me off guard and made me nearly leap out of my skin. Behind me I heard the hiss of indrawn breath.

Later I found that Laki had produced this startling revelation by pulling with his big toe on a wire that was hidden in the sand. It was his search for this concealed loop that had caused him to jig around whilst he was 'praying'. Having thus been given permission by the spirit guardian, Laki and I crossed the invisible boundary and walked on along the shore in our search for turtles, leaving the others waiting 'outside'. I asked the old man if he was not afraid of divine anger in the hereafter on account of this charade; but he answered no, why should he be, for he had not really offered prayers and if anyone were to blame it was those we had left behind, since they had believed in what was expressly contrary to Islam, namely the existence of other gods but He, the One, the All-Perfect. Besides, had not God given him his wits to use?

Now although the turtle-turners supplemented our catches, the

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Now although the turtle-turners supplemented our catches, the

bulk of them were provided by younger men actively engaged in turtle-fishing. Of these undoubtedly the most successful and hard working were those who hunted with *remoras*. Originally all *taza* fishermen came from one tiny islet just across the border in Kenya and these people had developed their extraordinary technique as a direct result of their geographical location. Their island, named Kisingitini, though within several miles of the mainland, had little or no contact with it due to the extensive drying-out reef that hedged the coastline in some places, and to the areas of tangled mangrove swamps that formed an additional barrier along the remainder. Thus the islanders were effectively barred from trading their fresh fish with the mainlanders for meat and vegetables as was customary elsewhere, since their own islet, like many others, was unsuitable for rearing or growing these items. In consequence they were not only very isolated but restricted to a fish diet with little or no fats. The sea surrounding them, whilst plentiful in fish, was not suitable for netting, being open and without protection, so they developed a tradition of line-fishing in distant deep water which they reached with specialized long and narrow canoes, primarily built for eight or ten oarsmen but carrying a lateen sail for running with the wind. At some time during their history they had discovered the trick of *remora*-fishing for turtles in order to supplement their diet and obtain the fats they craved. Being Moslem, however, they felt guilty in eating this unauthorized flesh, for they were the first of the Barjuns to do so. The social stigma thus incurred cut them even further adrift from their neighbours, and as usual in such cases they developed an unhealthy reputation for witchcraft, which they first disputed but gradually accepted and eventually exploited in order to frighten other fishermen away from their fishing grounds or those that they thought worth visiting. In striking out towards new areas the men of Kisingitini were aided by their unique canoes, for these weighed up to 2 tons and were capable of carrying all the paraphernalia necessary for setting up temporary camps on other islands. Eventually small fleets of their fast craft ranged over the entire chain of Barjun islands and beyond, penetrating as far north as the mouth of the Guiba river in Somalia and to Kipini, near Mombasa, in the south. Everywhere they went they were unpopular on account of their more efficient techniques and greater working capacity and also somewhat feared on account of their reputed witchcraft.

With the introduction of East Africa into the turtling markets

after the last war, commercial interests in Kenya suddenly became aware of the existence of the fishermen of Kisingitini, since they were the only locals who knew how to catch these great marine reptiles. The fact that these men had evolved a unique method largely escaped notice, although in reality their achievement belongs to that select group of human activities based on co-operation with wild animals and which includes falconry, ferreting and the Chinese fishing-cormorant. Unfortunately, the green turtle in Kenya waters are only off-shoots from the great Somali herds and were not sufficiently numerous to resist hunting by skilled fishermen, who now sought them out not for their own dietary needs but for financial profit. In consequence, within five years the turtles there were reduced to near-extinction and the men of Kisingitini, after a brief and prosperous interlude, returned to their old ways, once again forgotten by the outside world.

Some years previously, during the period of their prominence, I had come to know the acknowledged leader of Kisingitini, a man named Sheamina. On our first meeting we had fought like cat-and-dog over some triviality or other, neither giving ground and finally going our separate ways, each damning the other as stubborn and unreasonable. Thereafter we did not meet again, though strangely enough, each time Sheamina came as far south as Mombasa he left greetings for me in the market place and I, whenever my work took me as far north as Lamu, always made a point of enquiring after Sheamina with the local *Q'adi* [religious magistrate]. In this fashion we acknowledged each other's continued existence.

Once the canning factory in Chisimaio had begun operating it soon became apparent that the spasmodic efforts of the local Barjuns whom I had trained would never be sufficient to supply our needs. It was not a question of the availability of turtles but simply the fact that these fishermen fished according to *their* needs, not ours. Having been paid for half a dozen turtles which they might have caught in one day, the islanders would then return to their homes for two or more weeks, until economic necessity drove them forth again. In consequence of their basic but understandable attitude, the problem of a continuous turtle supply soon became our greatest worry and eventually I decided to send an envoy down the coast to Kisingitini in Kenya, asking if Sheamina would resurrect his turtle-catching teams and sail north to join us. Ten days later the messenger returned bearing his answer. Sheamina would meet me in six weeks' time on the island of Chiula, at the far end of the Barjun chain,

roughly half-way between Chisimaio and Kisingitini. He would bring with him six longboats and their crews and would be prepared to start work immediately should we reach agreement as to the price of turtles and other such details. In order to enable him to prepare the expedition I was to send £50 to him at once. This I did without qualm, knowing well the degree of Sheamina's personal *heshima* and *amin*. These two terms need explaining. *Heshima* may best be translated as Word—not promise, but Word. *Amin* means repute in financial dealings. In a sparsely populated country where, due to illiteracy, all commercial activities are carried on by word of mouth and often through a chain of intermediaries, it is absolutely essential that verbal agreements be kept and messengers inviolable and trustworthy, otherwise the whole web of trading breaks down. Under such a system a man can only succeed in business if both his *heshima* and *amin* are acknowledged as incontestable. One broken pledge, one misappropriation and the commercial ostracism that follows dooms the miscreant to poverty. So it was that in handing over £50 to a perfect stranger I knew myself to be quite safe, not only that the money would get to Sheamina but that he would indeed be there waiting for me at Chiula when the time came. Eventually our entire trading system was carried on by word-of-mouth agreements and a far-flung system of casual couriers. There was indeed, no other method and if one tried to tie down the fishermen by contracts or receipts suspicion was immediately aroused and the men would all fade away as if by magic to their remote villages from which they could not be enticed, sure in themselves that it was *you* who were suspect, seeking to establish 'excuses-on-paper', and in advance, for the deception you were so patently planning.

Six weeks later I sailed down to Chiula in the *Lipi*, arriving there one day late due to adverse winds. In this I was not worried since exact dates for meetings in the wilds can never be kept, due to the difficulties in transport and the vagaries of wind and wave. Sheamina, I knew, would wait there for a week or more against my arrival, as indeed should I, were he late. At the anchorage off the village he met us, wading out to take our keel anchor on his shoulders and then wedging it firmly in a fissure of the reef off which we lay. While he was doing so I was able to examine him to see if he had changed during the years since I had last seen him. But no, he was still the same, a wiry man of middle height with lighter than usual skin and emaciated features which, combined with high cheekbones, gave him a Mongol cast. His head sprouted a grizzled grey stubble and his

front teeth sloped inwards, giving him a rat-like look when he smiled. The chore of anchoring done, Sheamina climbed up over the bulwark, stripped off his sodden *kanga*, which he hung out on the boom to dry, and came naked up to the poop, where I sat with the inevitable kettle of tea before me, waiting for him. The greetings over, we drank the customary three glasses each, with repeated *Bisma'lah's* over each polite belch. Sheamina then rose and with a jerk of his head indicated that we two should go ashore. On crossing the reef he did not take the track that led up to the village as I had expected, but instead cut to the south along a barely discernible goat-track. It was only when we were well out in the open, away from all possible interruption, that he stopped and seated himself on a stone, gesturing for me to do likewise.

'Now, Beard, we are by ourselves and let us arrange everything. After we have finished we will go to my camp and I will have a *baraza* [conference] with my men. Do not enter into the arguing there, for I tell you that what we two arrange now between us, so will it be, never fear. Yet each of my men will end by thinking it was his suggestions that have been accepted and so all will be happy. Now, tell me what you want of this work...?'

We sat for more than two hours after that, arguing, bargaining, proposing and counter-proposing until we had reached agreement on all foreseeable points and only then did we continue towards Sheamina's camp, which lay at the furthest end of the island, some five miles distant. On the way I asked him why it was he had chosen such an isolated spot, thinking it might be on account of the anchorage there or some similar reason. Sheamina sniggered, grinned rattily at me and came out with the one word: 'Women!' Asked to elaborate, he explained that although the other Barjun fishermen feared the men of Kisingitini their womenfolk did not, believing that their (supposed) knowledge of magical lore made them more virile than the rest of the tribe. If he quartered his men in the village, the women left their huts in the night and sought them out. If he camped within a short distance then the young girls would daily at the local well hoping to meet the strangers there. Either way caused trouble and the only solution was to make his base either on an uninhabited islet or else sufficiently far off to discourage the women.

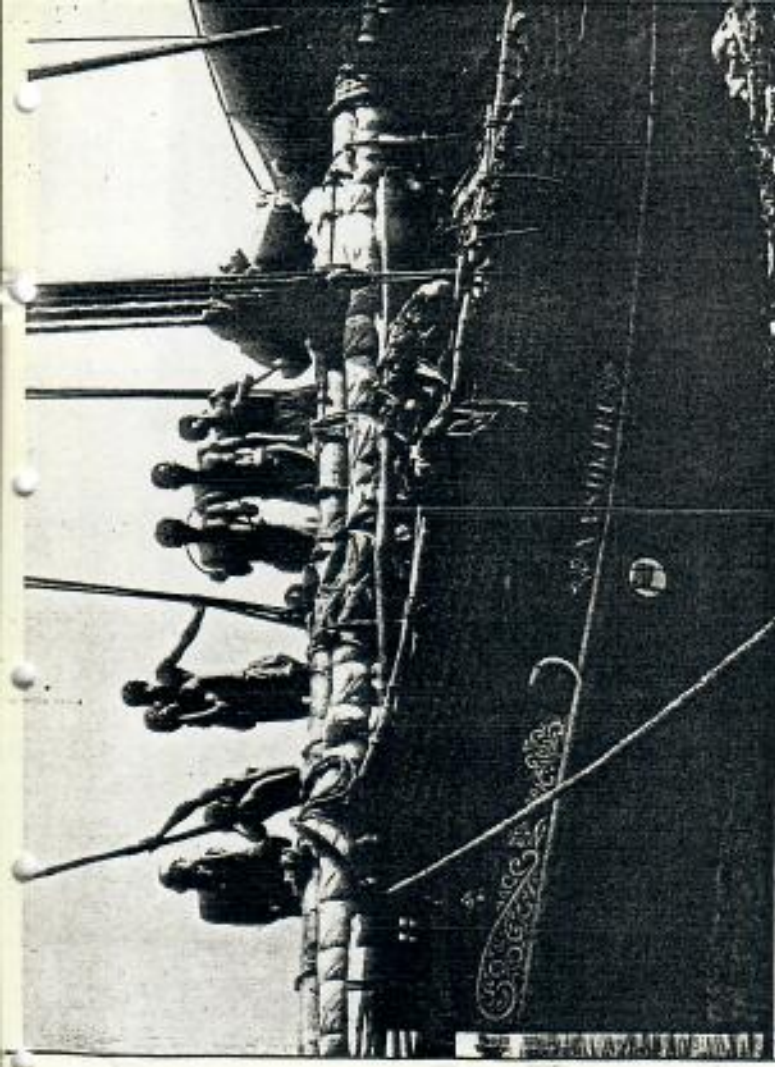
It was dark before we reached the camp and I was beginning to wonder how much longer we would stumble along the rock-strewn track when suddenly we came upon it. Sheamina had chosen his

site well, a little cove not 20 yards across, set in an inlet flanked with steep hills. Up from the narrow beach stood a grove of stunted thorn trees beneath which blazed several fires. Close in, darker than the dark sea, lay the long shapes of four rakish canoes, their sides fitfully illuminated by the leaping flames. The whole scene was one of continuous yet quiet activity, with men coming and going, bringing firewood, carrying unidentifiable burdens, gutting fish, stirring cauldrons and arranging stores. Sheamina halted on the cliff-edge overlooking the camp and stood in silence for a minute or two watching all this until, with a grunt of satisfaction, he led the way down and into the circle of firelight. The groups of his men that we passed through did not acknowledge us openly but looked sideways out of the corners of their eyes as they moved from our path. Coming to the nearest fire, in front of which an old sail was spread as a carpet, we made ourselves comfortable and Sheamina clapped his hands, whereupon a young boy brought us a beaker of water with which to swill out our mouths, a kettle of tea and two glasses. After we had drunk Sheamina rose and, telling me to wait there, went across to another fire where some of his men had already gathered. Knowing that the ensuring *baraza* would take some time I settled back to watch the proceedings.

The first impression and one that had already struck me was the vivacity of this encampment, entirely unlike that of normal Barjun settlements. Their frenetic movements had a certain ant-like quality; short brisk movements, brief pauses, swift scurrings—each person essentially busy. Here were two men salting down shark fillets, three fetching brushwood, two more baling out the boats, one sifting maize flour and, even as I watched, two smaller canoes swept into the bay with a clapping and a clatter as their sails whipped and the yards rattled as they were lowered. Before they had grounded, men leapt from them, dragging behind them two turtles, which on reaching the water's edge were overturned and had their throats slit by another fisherman who had gone down to meet them. Within ten minutes these turtles had been dismembered and various joints, bloodily dripping and the meat quivering, had been deposited into the cooking pots. As the butchers passed close by me, carrying their grizzly burdens, I was able to get a good look at these fishermen of Kisingitini. They were, I saw, a good deal heavier than the average Barjun and also considerably uglier. But their brutal faces were relieved by their animation, so that they seemed like a collection of negroid gnomes in an African legend rather than everyday fishermen.

7. BARJUN CARGO DHOW with replaceable matting sides

8. BUTCHERED DUGONG. Those unfortunate sea-cows trapped in the turtle-nets provided welcome meat for the villagers



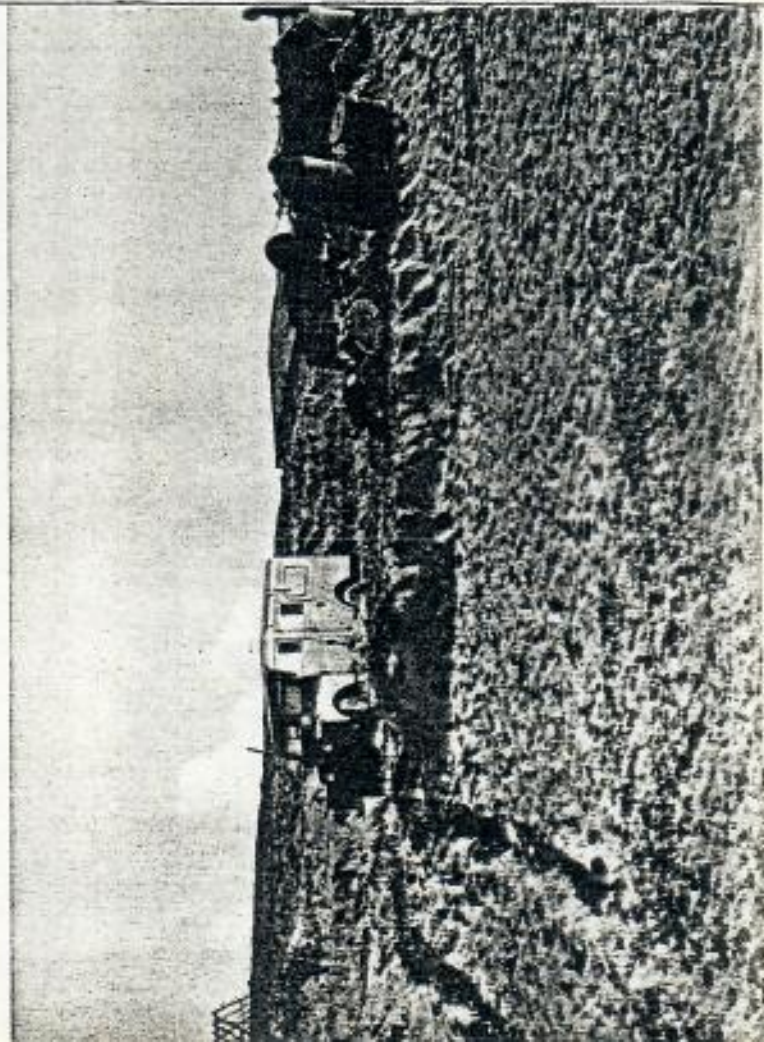
That initial *baraza* lasted for several days, during which time I stayed on as Sheamina's guest, spending my time in fishing for *taza* with the younger men and showing them a few tricks, such as a way of catching ghost crabs for bait, of which they did not then know. Meanwhile their seniors talked over the terms under which the fleet would work for us. Eventually all was settled exactly as Sheamina and I had agreed between us, though none suspected that the whole of their hard bargaining was guided along invisible rails that their leader set before them and that the outcome was decided long before they opened their mouths. This was where Sheamina showed his Arab political shrewdness, by which he was able to govern his body of headstrong autocrats without their ever realizing that he was in fact doing so. Never once did I hear him stress a point directly but always obliquely, dropping his seed-words carefully into the furrows he had prepared in their minds, and then waiting for them to sprout as of themselves from their recipient's lips. It was masterly and an education in statesmanship.

Though he was not a turtle-catcher, Issa eventually grew to be one of the most valuable of our group. This was all the more surprising when one considers that he was a near-lunatic and also deformed. Perhaps near-lunatic is a bit harsh. 'Simple' would be a better word, 'touched' as they say in the West Country or 'twp' as this state is called in Wales. As for his deformity, this consisted of a twisted, withered hand, which he kept tucked in against his side like an atrophied claw. I once asked him how it had happened, to which he answered that it was due to his mother sitting on it, but whether before his birth or shortly afterwards he could not rightly remember. This was a typical Issa remark, off-beat and naive, the sort that made you think you had not heard aright and caused you to ask him to repeat his statement, which he did, only to leave you more puzzled than ever. In stature Issa was small even for a Barjuni; a squat pixie of a man with bandy legs, pointed ears and the bland slant-eyed look of a happy troll. His simpleness took the form of being incapable of learning anything other than the easiest task and being unable to put into words any idea or thought that may have entered his addled pate. But though devoid of any personal initiative, he was possessed of a wonderful memory. It was this factor, in conjunction with his unshakeable good nature, that made him so valuable. Feed a message into Issa, set him in motion, and off he would waddle on a 500 mile journey to deliver it verbatim, as carelessly as if you had asked

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9. SOMALIA AFTER THE RAINS. A dried-out river bed, cut eighty feet deep in the arid land

10. THE SANDS OF SOMALIA. Even Landrovers found the going difficult



him to go 100 yards, and indeed to him there was no difference between the two save that the one took a little longer. You could then forget all about Issa until he reappeared after two days, a week or a month, however long it might take, bearing in his simple brain the answer or news you sought, for Issa always succeeded! No matter whether the person to whom he was directed had changed his village or his name, or was on a journey himself, Issa would track him down with imbecilic doggedness and return with his answer.

Since Issa only spoke Barjuni and most of his journeys took him across Somali-speaking districts, it followed that he could not obtain travel directions from other wayfarers, and for a long time I puzzled as to how, exactly, he was able to find his way. Eventually I discovered his method, which was simplicity itself. He would walk until he came to a police post (which insignia he was able to recognize), march in, take hold of any policeman who happened to be there, lead him outside, point up the road, grin and say the name of his destination in a questioning tone over and over again. This action, in the early days, frequently brought him a cuff across the ear and occasionally a night or two in the cells for impudence, but the various police-posts dotted across southern Somalia soon got to know him and helped him on his way, usually having given him a cup of coffee and sometimes having persuaded a passing truck to give him a lift.

Only once did Issa really surprise me, and this was after I had known him for many months and thought, stupidly, that I had nothing more to learn of his nature. For some while now, when he was not travelling on our errands, I had been accustomed to take Issa along with me on my travels. He was an ideal companion on long safaris, for he would sit happily and silently by my side in the Landrover from dawn to dusk—as comfortable a presence as a contented hound and equally as undemanding. Further, Issa could get a fire going in a trice, brewed excellent tea and eventually even learnt to use a tyre lever. On this particular occasion I had driven up to Mogadishu from Chisimaio on business and, having dropped my Sancho Panza at the house of some relatives of his on the outskirts, went on to my hotel. Some hours later, taking a stroll in the centre of the town, I saw his familiar bandy-legged figure gazing earnestly up at an outside illuminated cinema poster. This was an advertisement for one of the more torrid Brigitte Bardot epics and displayed the familiar blonde figure to its best and most scantily-clad advantage. Hearing my greeting behind him, Issa turned, grinned widely, jerked a thumb up at the voluptuous image, said, 'Hot

damel' precisely and emphatically and waddled off, leaving me gasping behind him. To my knowledge those were the first and last words of English that Issa ever spoke. His utterance was as astounding and as aggravating as hearing a prized but voiceless parrot speak but once during its lifetime and for the rest of my long acquaintance-ship with the little Barjun I was always anticipating his next *bon mot*, but it never came.