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CHAPTER SIX

The Benadir Coast

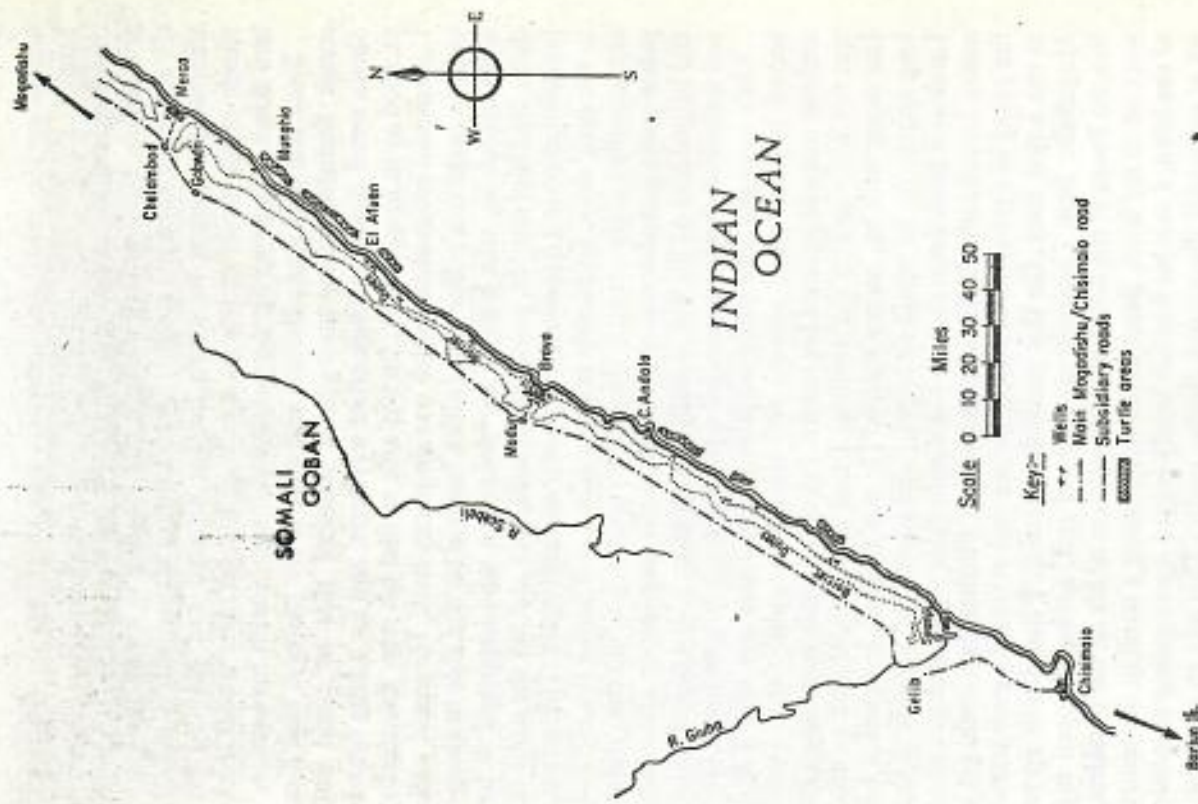
*'... whilst others travel through the earth
in quest of the bounties of God ...'*

Sura 73

Once the catching and the catchers were organized our whole establishment underwent a significant change. The full cannery layout had been finally settled, and indeed the basic factory unit was working well within the half-completed shell. An adequate number of initial production orders had been placed by various buyers in Europe for our turtle-shell, oil and meat and so Knud, his creative work with the project ended, had taken a job as site engineer with an American construction company who had been engaged by FAO to build a deep-water harbour at Chisimaio. All this left me in a personal limbo, with no really satisfactory occupation other than that of a self-appointed and unnecessary general supervisor. But although our local Barjunis together with Sheamina were at last bringing in sufficient turtles, I knew that, whilst such concentrated catching was allowable for one season, our future must lie in the development of other tortling areas. The Barjuni frontiers of activity finished at the mouth of the Guiba river, some twenty miles to the north, and beyond this very little fishing and certainly no tortling took place, for the Somalis do not care for fish in general and have a loathing for the 'unclean' turtle.

So my own course of action was plain to see. I must take the Landrover and go in search of new areas to work and additional sites for future canneries, leaving the Chisimaio plant to get on with its routine.

The decision once made, it needed very few days to get ready. On this initial survey I planned to be away for a month and, apart from a comprehensive kit of tools and spares for the vehicle, I intended travelling as light as possible, carrying only what was essen-



THE BENADIR COAST
(southern section)

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

dame!' 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.

tial with me. It was not until I was jolting along the once-surfaced road that led out of Chisimaio toward Gelib, the bridge-village some twelve miles up from the mouth of the Guiba, that I realized how glad I was to be away. It was, of course, an escape—an escape from a nine-to-five existence (even in Somalia); an escape from the butchery which, though I had come to accept it and had participated in it, I could never face without revulsion; an escape from the daily petty labour troubles; an escape from the Barjunis themselves and their dirt and squalor. I was free again, free to work as I pleased, to sleep where I wished, and with no detailed plan or timetable other than to travel northward along the coast, seeking out the desolate beaches and the sheltered waters that the turtles loved.

It was only on the second day that I began to have an inkling of the difficulties involved in this seemingly simple task. The previous afternoon I had cut short my journey at Gelib fruitlessly, in order to see if questioning at the coffee houses would provide any useful information. As it turned out, it was I who had to answer their questions, mine being either misunderstood, ignored or merely productive of a counter question.

'Turtles [ouba]? Now what were they?'

'Where did they live?'

'Were they creatures of God or Satan?'

'Why do you want to know?'

'What news from the south?'

And so on. This, as I soon discovered, was their standard reaction to any unusual questions (and certainly, a European asking about such things was unusual), and before long I gave up most such attempts, since even when I did glean any tit-bit it was usually wrong. Not that this was done maliciously but because the informer wished to be encouraging and therefore gave the answer he thought would cheer me up. Consequently, when assured that there were hundreds of turtles nearby, I had a stock follow-up query: 'What colour were they? Were there perchance any *blue* ones amongst them?'

In answer to this, at various times I was offered beaches alive with blue, red and silver turtles, so it appears that Somalia holds some interesting surprises for the zoological collector.

Having wasted a day thus in useless questioning, I was more eager than ever to get on and it was with some annoyance that I found that any one of the several tracks I took leading south-east from Gelib along the northern bank of the Guiba towards the

sea, finished up in mangrove swamps. Returning to the main Gelib-Mogadishu road I followed this for some twenty kilometres before striking east again in an effort to reach the sea, but only to find that between lay a barrier in the form of a long escarpment of dunes, bush-clad on their lower slopes, but with bare and shifting sands for the last 300 of their 700 feet of height. These dunes ran parallel to the coastline all the way to Mogadishu and beyond, broken only by occasional rifts where the only coastal habitations on this long stretch were huddled. It was the unapproachable part of the coast between such places as Gelib, Brava, Merca and Mogadishu that I was now trying to force. For the next three days I tried as best I could to cross the dunes along a thirty-miles front, but without success. Where the sandhills were lowest the bush was thickest, and though I carved out many paths up through the initial undergrowth and thereafter sought to carpet a way up the remainder with the fronds I had cut, it proved useless. I tried everything I knew: letting air out of the tyres so that they might flatten and thus grip better; rushing the wind-ridged escarpment at full speed and finally, in desperation, removing all the plugs and with the vehicle in reverse, attempting to 'wind-it-up' backwards using the starting handle as a key. It was no good. Once indeed, I did get to the summit by means of this last method only to find the Landrover perched on a precipice which cut into the hills from the other side and around whose crumbling edges there was no way down. But from here at least I could see the elusive shore. Below the crest on which I stood the hill fell away far more steeply than the side up which I had laboured. Along the bottom ran a narrow coastal plain, clad in creper-grass save for bare rocky outcrops. Then came an area of red sandstone or volcanic marl, criss-crossed with ravines and dried-up river beds, baked by the sun, sluiced by the rains and polished by the wind-borne sands, until it had lost all semblance of a terrestrial landscape, being as alien as a Martian desert and equally as unwelcoming. Beyond this desolate zone, at last, the sea!

A long sweeping coastline backed by a low cliff and fronted with narrow shelving beaches extending as far as the eye could see in either direction and broken only by occasional rock promontories. Against this bastion of land flowed the Indian Ocean, the long monsoon swell massed against it in interminable lines of breakers, while further out the Trade winds dappled the indigo surface with white flowers of foam.

From this vantage point I looked northward along the ridge. No

tracks or clearways were visible upon its seaward face which in any case seemed too steep to attempt in safety with the truck. I camped where I was that night, since the crest seemed tolerably clear of insects and I wanted to see if I could spot any surf-cruising turtles in the sea below. In this I was successful, counting more than forty in the late afternoon period, but of a landing I saw none. The next morning I drove the Landrover into some thick bush on the landward side out of sight of inquisitive eyes, and taking some biscuits, fruit, chocolate, waterbottle and blanket, set off over the ridge and scrambled down the other side, to make my way to the coast. By now I realized that much of this and future surveys would have to be done on foot and I wanted to get the 'feel' of the country and to ascertain my basic requirements for living in it before starting in earnest. So for that day and the next I moved up and down the shoreline testing myself on the terrain but keeping always within eight or ten miles of my hidden vehicle. At night time I tried out all the possible sleeping grounds. The bare red areas housed too many scorpions and were too hard. The patches of scrub and hillsides were carpeted with thorns and harboured ants and other biting horrors. However, I found that in places between the beaches and the cinabar desolation, there lay little pockets of fine soft and miniature aeolian dunes and that cosseted by these I slept comfortably and cleanly, albeit waking to find myself covered with a fine layer of sand.

On the third day I returned, confident that I could both live and work in these surroundings, and with my plans for the next three weeks fully formed. Unearthing the Landrover I drove back to the main road and thence back to Gelib, where I made some purchases before returning to the base of the escarpment. Here I left the wagon at a miserable, semi-permanent, nomad village I had passed previously, having paid the headman a few shillings to look after it. Taking the large shopping basket bought in Gelib, I set off on a trek that would, I reckoned, cover 150 miles of coast and take me some eight to ten days to accomplish. My object was simple; to walk northwards to the next coastal town of Brava and take a lorry-bus back to collect the Landrover. To do this I needed only the barest essentials. These I now carried on me or in my basket, which I preferred to the sweating, back-aching constriction of a pack. Wearing shorts, shirt and sandals, I slung around my neck a blanket and a headcloth to keep the drifting sand from my face at night. Horizontally across my shoulders I carried a short fish-spear lashed

to a Somali walking stick. From one end of this dangled the ubiquitous blue enamel kettle of the nomads and from the other my basket. In the latter were notebooks, swim-fins and face mask, salt and pepper, limes, a 150-foot length of nylon twine, knife, matches and an anthology of poetry.

That day set the pattern for most of my subsequent travels. Reaching the shore and having scrambled down the cliff, using the line to lower my belongings first, I tramped along the sidelines, seeking from this rubbish-dump of the sea information as to what lay off-shore. From the sand grains could be determined the coral and rock structures; from the shell particles the vegetable and animal mantling of it; from the pebble size and beach slope the wave strengths and inshore currents; and from the bird feathers and droppings, their species and therefore the food they sought. Cray-fish carapace fragments told of rocky ledges and underwater boulders, certain weed tendrils signified mud, and others, such as the broad-bladed 'turtle-grass', determined the fauna which fed on it.

But besides gleanings from this sea-refuse, my eyes would be searching for other information. The presence of sand hillocks higher up suitable as turtle laying-grounds. Tracks of mammals in the softer earth—of desert fox, hyena, mongoose and even buck. For camel-droppings, goat bones and especially for old herd tracks. Such trails, becoming more numerous and turning inwards towards a common centre, led to ancient brackish wells, used by the nomads and their stock in times of inland droughts. In places along this coastline the soil and rock formation was relatively porous and allowed the sea to seep through far underground. Thus its salt was largely absorbed, so that drinkable water might lie in subterranean rock pockets up to a mile or more inland. Where these natural cisterns were known to exist deep shafts had been laboriously excavated during the past 2,000 years. Perhaps one in twenty had been successful, usually striking the precious fluid at depths of 90 to 160 feet. Consider the labour involved! Without tools of any description their makers had worked, grubbing with hands alone through soft sand, rubble, clay and limestone, haltingly removing each day's rootings in small leathern buckets attached to goat-skin thongs. One family group might work daily for four months of the year throughout fifteen years, each season that they brought their little flock to the coast to avoid the furnace of the hinterland summer. And at the end of it, perhaps nothing! Small wonder then that the many abortive workings were left derelict without filling-in or fencing-off, to prove a permanent

hazard to man and beast alike, their floors carpeted with the dry bones of those that had fallen into them. To get the water out from these wells was not easy either. For workings down to 100 feet the herdsmen preferred to use a rope of halters, headcloths and thongs clumsily knotted together. For those without the necessary length of line, or in shafts too deep, precarious hand-holds had been scratched in the vertical wall and, using these, the tribal or family group would form a human chain to pass their kettles and waterskins down and up again. It was to avoid such climbing on my own that I had brought the long nylon cord, tying the kettle to its end to serve as a bucket.

Normally, around mid-morning, the day becoming parchingly hot, I would leave my bundle of belongings on the empty shore and turn my searchings to the sea itself. I did this for three reasons. To escape from the heat of land and to allow my body to soak up salt water and thus reduce my thirst; to see if the submarine territory at that place was suitable for turtle and finally, to catch my day's food by means of the hand spear. Should the coast be steep or the water murky I would not venture far out or stay in for longer than necessary, since in such areas prowled the packs of tiger sharks which moved up and down the coastline. If underwater conditions were good and an off-shore reef gave daytime protection from such predators and promise of sea pastures as well, then I might stay in for three or four hours, exploring the locality for natural entrances in the reef and harrying the smaller fish in the shallows for my meal. Eventually I would emerge, if lucky, with half-a-dozen fry, gill-threaded by a cord around my waist: sand dabs and flounders, mullet and small bream, gaterin or baby rock cod. These I would scale and fillet, spreading the halves on a flat stone and covering the thin slices with lime juice and seasoning. In fifteen minutes they would be ready, the sun and the citric acid having done their work. Having eaten, I would curl up under the shade of an overhanging rock to doze or read the heat of the afternoon away. Towards sundown I would try and cover a further five or eight miles, gathering as I went twigs, sun-bleached driftwood and dried camel dung for my evening fire. If possible, dusk was spent on a low vantage point from which I could watch the sea, for this was the hour of the turtles' inshore promenades and the best time to estimate their numbers. Then I would walk on again to find a suitable patch of ground on which to sleep. As for the fire, this was more of a token, a pin-point of brief light in the clear night, the symbol by which I might establish myself as a human being in the empty darkness, for it

lasted but a short spell, flaring up with a crackle of tinder and dying to red-eyed embers all too soon.

For five days I travelled thus without once seeing either herdsmen or villagers, or indeed any sign of human activity other than the shafts of old cisterns and the scanty droppings of flocks. Waking in the depths of the fifth night, as I often did, to watch the wheeling stars, I became distantly aware of a thread of sound, now rising, now fading. I lay still and listened, with open eyes no longer seeing the cold planets, all senses subordinate to my straining ears. Gradually it became clearer, more decipherable, no longer as elusive as a gnat's whine in a shuttered room. It rose and fell in slow cadence, a monotonous chant—not sad, certainly lonely and yet containing much that was defiant. As a backing there was a slow 'tonk-tonk' like a log drum, which took time to identify as the wooden neck-bell of a slowly plodding camel, so strange an accompaniment did it make. When the voice of the solitary psalter seemed very near I sat up, but saw no movement across the dune's face in the starlight, and so I waited until the anthem rang through my head and my body swayed to its domineering measure.

Eventually he appeared amongst the hummocks. A tall, thin man leading a solitary camel by its halter rope. The pair advanced until I could hear the slurp-slurp of the beast's splayed feet upon the sand and the man's breathing between each verse:

Allah il'lah [tonk-tonk]; *La il'allah* [tonk-tonk]

Allah il'lah [tonk-tonk]; *La il'allah* [tonk-tonk]¹

They passed within 10 feet of where I sat upon the ground, not deviating from their path, and apart from one long stare from the wanderer and an upward movement of the camel's muzzle as he caught my scent, there was no evidence of surprise or concern from either of them at seeing me there. I could have been brigand or madman, and certainly a bearded European squatting in the desert 100 miles from anywhere at two in the morning would have been an object of some surprise. Yet my presence was accepted, as was the sand on which our encounter took place, as part of the natural order of the world. Indeed, are not all things in the hand of God, as his

¹ This is not easy to translate, since the original Arabic contains a meaning within a meaning that the English language cannot catch. Perhaps:

'There (and/or Here) is God:

God is There (and/or Here),'

would be near. It is both a question and an answer. An affirmation and a credo.

orison indicated? Once again, for me, it was a vivid illustration of the practical significance of the Mohammedan religion, whose very name 'Islam' means submission and acceptance of God's will. The will which, on this occasion, included my being in that place, at that hour and on that night. Or so his faith assured him.

Yet what would have been my reaction had I found this old Somali and his camel camping by the roadside in England, I wondered? Which of us had come to better terms with life? Many times subsequently I was surprised in similar circumstances, usually by similar old men with one or two camels, yet never once did my discovery seem to startle them. Sometimes, should I have a fire, they would draw near, utter the usual greetings, squat and try to strike up a conversation. Topics were always restricted to simple things: rain or the lack of it, pasturage, sickness and death of stock and humans. Often I could not understand their tongue nor they mine, in which case we would sit in companionable silence for a few minutes until, warmed from the night's chill, they were ready to go on to wherever they were going, if indeed they knew.

Travelling alone like this, by foot and without belongings, I was never subject to the incessant demands for food, tobacco, money or gear which occurred when I had a proper camp, with men and vehicles around. Ragged travellers under the stars we were, kindred in our need; therefore we could provide only the company of ourselves as fellow men for a short space of time before the threads of our destinies drew us out again along our separate paths.

Eight days had already gone and I was not half-way to Brava when I came to an area heavily populated with turtles. I spent several days there, most of the time taken up with observing their routines. This particular stretch of coast was ideal for the great reptiles, for it had flat beaches backed by low dunes and a thin ribbon of off-shore reef which gave protection from sea and shark alike. Within its shielding arm lay immense tracks of soft weed, the 'turtle-grass' they needed, whose yard-long blades swayed silvery, like dense and subtle olive groves, beneath the sea's stroking. Dotted across this submarine pasturage lay deeper circular pits of yellow sand, their edges forming little cliffs of tangled weed stems. Under the overhanging lips of these the turtles dozed through the noon hours and here I watched them, fascinated at their automatic respiratory cycle. Floating on the surface they inflated their long lungs, which lie on either side of the backbone, close under their top carapace, then swam down to wedge themselves under the shadow of such root-walls. Here, buoyed up

by the water so that their outstretched rear flippers just brushed the sand floor, they rested and slept, whilst the hump of their shell or sometimes the back of their neck, braced them against the projecting lip. Poised thus, they swayed in unison with the surge, like gatherings of grotesque marionettes strung to a common system of control threads.

Every thirty to fifty minutes each one depending on its size, would lower its head and thrust its hind flippers against the seabed to propel it a foot or so forward where, free of the overhang's restraining weight, it would float gently upwards, limbs astraddle, to the surface. Here it would lie for half-a-minute, sufficient time for one long forced exhalation and a softer intake of new air. Then the head would sink, body tilt, fore flippers thrust out and back, and down would slide the huge bulk to resume its station under the ledge. Throughout this process the eyes would usually be closed and the animal apparently asleep. Only shock-producing movement in the water nearby, fore-runner of danger, would cause it to wake, and sometimes peril drew near without the sea's tocsin sounding, as I saw for myself.

It was while I was exploring one of the breaks in the reef that I witnessed the death of a young 4-foot turtle. He had wedged himself beneath the shallow overhang of the side wall, just near the entrance, for his siesta. I would have seen him earlier had not the day been overcast, for I had already passed the place twice; but engrossed as I was in the canyon itself, I had overlooked him. In fact it was not he that caught my eye at all, but a movement along the shadowed face of the rampart close to where he lay. While I was still puzzling out the nature of the veiled form, it moved again, halted momentarily, then flowed out into the light, slid round a projecting bulb of coral and, seizing the comatose turtle by tail and flipper, turned in a smooth arc and swept past me, out to sea in a great flurry of power that washed me to one side and left me quite frightened. It was a grey nurse shark, 9 to 10 feet in length, which had taken advantage of the gloomy day to hunt within the lagoon.

Having seen the stealth of his approach and the ferocity and speed of the attack, I resolved in future to limit my exploration to the near-shore waters on such days, since the grey nurse shares with the tiger shark the morbid distinction of being the most notorious of the seven species of shark confirmed as man-eaters. However, I was reasonably confident that these, in common with most other big oceanic fish, would not venture within the reef or even its entrances

on clear calm days, and I continued to investigate the nature of the reef gates, sure that it was here that lay the answer to the turtles' choice of haven. By watching these breaks from the shore, particularly at dawn and dusk, when their comings and goings were most frequent and the slanting light threw their low silhouettes into sharper relief, it soon became apparent that, whilst one reef-gap served as an entrance, another—usually up-wind or up-current—served as exit.

Apart from highwater or flat calm days and then usually only under duress, no turtle would cross the reef itself. For their entrances they preferred wide, flat channels, sand-floored and often intricate in form, whilst their exits were generally narrower, deeper and had a semi-permanent out-going current to aid their departure. I realized that all this information would be necessary when it came to laying nets for our projected camps, since none of the fishermen we had yet used had any real idea of turtle behaviour and either set their nets at random or else at places where custom decreed they should. But while all this observation would prove of value in the future and at other localities, it seemed as though the excellent areas I had discovered so far would be for ever barred to us, for, try as I might, I could see no possible method of access. Behind the beaches stretched several miles of either drifting sand, too soft to support a vehicle's weight, or huge tracts of baked earth, so cut by ravines and fissures that a pathway across them would be impossible to find. As for an approach from the sea, this too was impracticable, the lagoons being too shallow to bring large vessels within them, and the exterior reef slope too precipitous and wave-wracked to allow safe anchorage there.

But one possibility remained and with this in mind I now made longer daily marches towards my destination, the old coastal port of Brava, that lay half derelict amid the encroaching sand. On arrival there, I lost no time in buying myself a seat on a Chisimaio-bound lorry, thankful that the natural mistrust of the town's isolated inhabitants prevented them from plaguing me with time-consuming questions. The journey back took some fourteen hours, including a three-hour halt in the middle of the road for sleep. Here the other occupants crawled, as usual, beneath the chassis, whilst I stayed in the cab to my discomfort, for I found its tattered upholstery alive with fleas and the woodwork crawling with bugs. The following morning my descent from the truck at a deserted point in the bush caused no undue comment. After all, if a half-naked European

appears on foot from out of the sand at Brava he is equally likely to demand subsequently to be let down again in the middle of nowhere. That all Europeans are inflicted with madness is well known, and if some seem madder than the rest, what is there strange in that?

The Landrover lay waiting for me at the village. It had been scoured clean with dry sand by the womenfolk, under the direction of the headman, which well-meant action made me thankful that its alloy body was unpainted. As a bonus for their care, I gave them some spare pieces of rope, worth to them more than either money or tobacco. Then back I drove the way I had come. Late that night I stopped at Modun, the wayside halt where the branch road from Brava joins the main highway. Here I slept, not wishing to risk the tortuous and pot-holed track that led to the coast in the dark. At dawn, from the escarpment's crest, I looked to see if perchance I had missed any passes across its southerly arm on my previous trek up the coast. But no, the long ridge of aeolian dunes lay golden and continuous, without break or rift in the clear morning air, and I dropped down over the crest to where Brava lay couched in the sand below, knowing that now only one possibility remained of forcing an access into the far remoteness where the turtles basked within the reef.

The town boasted one hotel and it was here that I decided to base myself for the next stage of my work. The inhabitants spoke both Arabic and the pure Kiswahili of Zanzibar, a legacy of the days when Brava was the only watering point for the dhows on their journeyings to that island from the shores of Southern Arabia. This made communication far easier for me, since my Somali was still very rudimentary. But the people of Brava were a weird lot, as I soon discovered, and little headway could be made with them. For centuries they had existed by selling their precious sweet water at exorbitant prices to the dhows, taking in exchange carpets, tiles, beaten copper, slaves and women. They had thus lost all contact with their neighbours and the foreign inroads into their blood left them still more alien. With the decline in the old trade routes of the sea, cut off by the surrounding sands, they had no outlet and so turned in upon themselves. Signs of degeneracy and in-breeding were everywhere; receding chins, great hooked noses, tiny bones and small stature, and hands like vultures' claws; one in three were cross-eyed, idiocy and blindness could be seen on all sides, and the canker of hereditary syphilis was visible on many faces. Like pale ghosts they moved around their crumbling mansions, whispered under the great stone arches of doorways or peered rat-eyed from the great

shuttered loggias that hung on the high walls like monstrous wooden bird cages.

To give this furtive population a period in which to get used to my presence, I decided not to attempt to invite their co-operation in the work at this stage, but busied myself with trying to force a way through to the south by driving along the beach at low water, only seeking the higher ground when forced to do so by the incoming waves. Though the average rise and fall of the tide here was but 5 or 6 feet, the flatness of the sand beaches meant that the sea receded at least 50 yards and that this expanse usually dried sufficiently to bear the Landrover's weight. For almost a week I forged ahead, constructing a series of hard-standings above the tide-lines on to which a truck could be driven to escape the rising water. At the end of this time I had opened up a safe track for some eighty kilometres south from Brava; but I was obliged to accept defeat, for the beaches gave way to a series of steep rock promontories and the hinterland proved impassable. Thirty kilometres beyond this barrier lay the reef-protected beaches of the turtles and here they possessed a natural sanctuary, invincible to man at least.

Having proved to my discomfort that whilst the coastline from the Guiba river to Brava supported huge herds of turtle, but that the whole stretch could house neither fishing camps nor factory, I turned my attention to the next stage from there to Merca. For this I hoped to enlist the fisherfolk of Brava and returned to the hotel accordingly. However, I had reckoned without the month of Ramadan. Somali people as a whole, though of the Islamic faith, are rather lax and unorthodox in their religious duties. For them the fast of Ramadan (the month set aside to commemorate the time during which Mohammed received his revelation from God) is merely a holiday for the city-dweller, an excuse to sit up late in cafés and restaurants and to do little work during the day. For the nomad it can hardly be allowed to affect their lives, for stock must still be moved and wells dug, and places of worship in the wilderness do not exist. What prayers they have they offer at the cairn-tombs of wandering mullahs, from whose summits flutter distinguishing rags of red or white bunting. But the people of Brava, set apart from their neighbours and having had more contact in the past with the true Arab world, behaved in a very different fashion. In strict accordance with the Law they neither ate nor drank from sun-up to sun-set, neither did they go near their wives for the entire period, but passed the day in quietness and the night within the mosques. Of these

Brava housed well over 100 which, for a population of some 3,000, was more than adequate and many were unattended in consequence.

By the time I got back from my road-making the fast had entered the third week and I saw that nothing could be expected or even attempted until its culmination with the sighting of the new moon. So I rested and wrote up my notes and explored the crumbling old town. At nightfall, after the first long prayer session, I would enter one or other of the mosques and sit beside a pillar or near the wall a little apart from the other men gathered there. My presence was of course noticed, but since I knew and kept the simple rules of behaviour whilst within and observed the customs on entering and leaving, no undue attention was paid to me and I could squat in peace upon the clean rice straw matting and lazily observe the comings and goings: the murmur of low voices, the little groups of gown-wrapped figures, the soft light from the oil lamps casting golden shadows between the pillars. Indeed, it was the lamp light that drew me within in the first place, being far more pleasant than those bare bulbs, one to each room, which hung nakedly in the hotel and whose harsh light pulsed with each throb of the town's ancient generator. After a few nights of listening to and watching the repetitive rites, I took in with me the book of poetry which I carried, for the atmosphere was ideal for such reading. Engrossed in its pages, I did not notice the concern it was causing, until an old man approached and asked me what it was that I read. As soon as he spoke, I realized my offence, for it is forbidden to read anything other than the Koran within the precincts of the mosque, and I lied, saying it was the *Kitab*¹ of the Christians and showed how it was written in verse form, which he could recognize as being similar to the style of the Koran. Grudgingly satisfied he returned to the others, leaving me ashamed, so that I resolved to carry a New Testament with me for such times, which I thereafter did and was glad, for I thus completed a reading which otherwise I would never have undertaken. On subsequent evenings, one particular patriarch, with the only kind face in the town, came repeatedly to ask me to read something out of my 'Kitab' for him; some of the words of the prophet Issa-ibn-Maryam (Jesus-son-of-Mary), for had not God himself said through his last prophet (Mohammed) in the holy Fifth Sura, that He had given Issa the Evangel the guidance for the people? So caught in my own lie, I tried to choose something at least

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shuttered loggias that hung on the high walls like monstrous wooden bird cages.

To give this furtive population a period in which to get used to my presence, I decided not to attempt to invite their co-operation in the work at this stage, but busied myself with trying to force a way through to the south by driving along the beach at low water, only seeking the higher ground when forced to do so by the incoming waves. Though the average rise and fall of the tide here was but 5 or 6 feet, the flatness of the sand beaches meant that the sea receded at least 50 yards and that this expanse usually dried sufficiently to bear the Landrover's weight. For almost a week I forged ahead, constructing a series of hard-standings above the tide-lines on to which a truck could be driven to escape the rising water. At the end of this time I had opened up a safe track for some eighty kilometres south from Brava; but I was obliged to accept defeat, for the beaches gave way to a series of steep rock promontories and the hinterland proved impassable. Thirty kilometres beyond this barrier lay the reef-protected beaches of the turtles and here they possessed a natural sanctuary, invincible to man at least.

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vaguely appropriate and the white walls of that small mosque listened to a tongue they had never heard reciting 'The Hound of Heaven', 'The Hundredth Psalm', 'Omar Khayyam' and such as seemed suitable of Rossetti and de La Mare. At the close of each poem, or at any pause that I would make, the old man would rock too and fro, muttering 'Aman, Aman' making me feel even more guilty in my deception.

As the eve of the new moon approached so tension mounted and in the forecourts of some mosques little skin drums gave out their hypnotic beat throughout the night. Towards dusk whole families forsook their shuttered rooms and went up to their flat roofs, there to squat and gaze westwards to where the orange sun sank behind the black dunes. Even then the sexes kept apart, with the men and elder boys strung along one parapet and the women and girls together with the smaller children on the other. Asking the innkeeper why this was so, I was told it was lest the men, desperate from a month's continence, were tempted and incurred divine wrath. He went on to say that during the holy month the women of Brava did not walk abroad at all, but visited each others' houses and indeed the shops by means of the narrow flying buttresses that linked many of the houses at roof level and so gave the town two levels of pedestrian traffic.

As I sat alone on the hotel roof for the third dusk vigil in succession, watching the other silent watchers rather than the sky, a great sigh went up from the whole town, like the sound of a distant rocket's climb, and I looked and there it was, low in the violet west, the crescent of Islam that marked the end of the fast—the new-born moon with the evening star close beside it. Somewhere an ancient cannon boomed repeatedly, and as I returned down the rickety staircase to my room, fireworks began to crackle and bark in the street below. A little later, walking through the town, there was bustle, commotion and activity on all sides, with women scurrying hither and thither through the streets bearing covered dishes which hissed and steamed and left aromatic clouds in their wake. Men, freshly shaven and scented, stalked proudly up and down carrying their young sons, costumed in bright new robes and clutching sticky sweetmeats in their hot hands. From the mosques paeons of rejoicing rang and the old gramophone in the brothel on the square blared out its cacophony to the jostling crowd that fought to enter its blue doors. The hotel was deserted; even the boy with trachoma,

¹ Whence we get our 'Amen', and which means roughly 'Agreed'.

who usually slept on the floor behind the desk and who acted as a watchdog, had fled to join the celebrations. My room seemed bare and cold and I came down again, walked around the corner to where I had parked the Landrover and drove slowly out of town through the shouting, pushing, sweating, excited press of people. The moon had long since sunk but the night was clear and, knowing my way blindfold, I had no need of headlights. A very few miles took me out of sight and sound of the junketing town and deep into the dunes. For rather than be lonely in the rejoicing crowd I preferred to be content and at peace in the empty desert which I knew and already loved, and I slept dreamlessly that night in the hollow that I scratched out for myself in the yielding sand.

The celebrations lasted for three days and even then it was some time before any real activity began again. Finding it difficult to track down any fishermen, I called on the local District Commissioner, a tall, poised Somali from the north. He told me that he hated the place, feeling that it was a thankless post, and in this he was right. The townspeople resented his foreign presence and raised barriers against him. Nevertheless, he had a very clear idea of their needs and was trying as best he could to break down their insularity and apathy. He showed me with some pride his current project, a development of the town market into a communal market for the whole district; a place where the nomads might bring their stock and hides to sell or barter for tobacco, rope, cloth and other necessities. But it was difficult work, for the proud fuzzy-haired herders did not take kindly to the implied arrogance and ill-humour of the stunted townsfolk. There had been several fights already and one killing, but now, maybe, things would be better, and he shrugged his elegant shoulders in disbelief at his own hopes and we went back to his lonely house on the edge of the town. No, he had no contact with the fishermen since they despised him as a man from the inland plains who spoke Italian but not Swahili; but his clerk might help, since he was from the coast. And so I left him there in his office: a sad, good-looking man with a sensitive face, listening to a languorous Italian dance rhythm on a portable gramophone and staring resignedly at the huge, almost empty map of his district, which covered one wall.

The clerk, Ali Tayim, was quite different. A born conspirator and grafter, and I wondered how many people ever got inside the DC's office without first 'smoothing-the-way'. Few, I guessed. Turtles was it I wanted? Why yes, that could be arranged. But better than

deal directly with the fishermen, why not let him, Ali, see to it. Payments also would be less bothersome if left to him. Of course the men would require money in advance, as evidence of good faith, before either parting with information or their services. A deposit of say 2,000 shillings would do nicely for a start. And why stay in the hotel? His cousin happened to have a house, a fine house, eminently suitable for a gentleman such as myself. I could have it for nothing and live there in privacy and comfort. Well, almost for nothing, and he named a sum thrice what I was paying at the hotel.

All this took place on the short ride down to the beach and by the time we got there I had developed a hearty antipathy for my aidé. I knew already, from looking at the few ill-kept boats and gear along the foreshore, that the fisherfolk of Brava would in all probability prove useless as turtle-catchers and that eventually we might have to bring in our own trained men. But so that these locals would not feel too slighted it was necessary that some of them should be roped in for the work as a token gesture, even if their efforts proved entirely fruitless. The frequent and unprofitable conferences with those men whom Ali contacted over the next few days confirmed my original opinion. They were a hang-dog lot, without spark and interested only in seeing what they might screw out of me in the way of cash, equipment and promises, the only one of which I complied with being an undertaking to buy turtle at a standard price, if and when we used the area in future. Then, having registered this agreement in the DC's office, I set off northward again, thankful to get away from both Ali and his kinfolk.

This next stretch of coast from Brava to Merca appeared, from such maps as there were, to be similar to that which I had already covered, and indeed for the first twenty kilometres it was so. Not wishing to leave the Landrover in Brava itself I drove along the beach until forced by the sea to seek a way further inland, but within a very few miles I abandoned the vehicle altogether, this time at the skin tents of a nomad family who had decided to camp for a few weeks near one of the coastal wells. Continuing up the coast on foot, I carried the same basic gear in my basket as before, with the addition of tea, sugar and a small tin of tobacco paste to offer to those I met with on the way. The next thirty kilometres proved difficult going, long tracks of soft, loose sand into which one sank to the ankles, alternating with areas where the hills drew near to the shore and brambles, thorn bushes and dense scrub blocked the way. But whilst

this was a place of torment for myself it must have been a paradise for mongoose families, for their shrill chitterings out-voiced the cicadas and small bushes vibrated with their hidden jostlings as whole groups of the little animals scampered from one to another in the comings-and-goings of their busy sorties. But there were stinging flies there too, dense swarms of them, and they drove me on again to seek open ground for the night.

The next day brought me to an area of rocky headlands at the northern tip of which lay a small bay and, amazingly enough, a deserted fish cannery, legacy of a brave pre-war attempt by Italian colonists to set up a tuna fishery there. Behind the bat-infested buildings a track led westwards up into the high dunes, only to be lost amid the sands. As I subsequently learnt, it was the impossibility of keeping this access road open that caused the failure of the El Afuen project, for such was the name of the site.

Beyond the cannery, to the north, the coastal plateau widened and off-shore the unmistakable shading of a reef darkened the water. Besides tuna it seemed as though turtle must frequent the coast and I pushed on, eager to explore this new region. The further I went the more evidence there was that here there were immense herds of the creatures, for the tractor-tyre tracks of the egg-laying females covered the sand with their meanderings and the mounds of their nests above the tide-lines were visible everywhere. In the late afternoon hosts of the reptiles began to break the surface of the lagoon in ever-increasing numbers till I knew not in which area to begin my count. Other sea life there was in plenty too; close to the shore the disc-like bodies of sting-rays glided shadowy across the seabed whilst further out the unwieldy forms of manta-rays flung themselves into the air, to crash back again in flurries of foam and cannon-shots of sound. When these huge rays cruised close under the surface, the black tips of their pectorals just broke through into the air, giving the impression of small sharks cruising in pairs. I soon saw there were sharks, too, within the reef. However, when they swam together, the sharks never kept abreast but moved on a diagonal line, the bigger being in advance and to one side. There were other creatures there too, heavy, dark torpedo shapes which moved slowly and which kept to the shadows. They were big, bigger than the sharks and somehow seemed more sinister, probably because I could not identify them. I remember thinking that, should we be able to establish fish camps in the neighbourhood, we would have to be careful of these beasts, whatever they were. In this I

proved right, though not in the sense that I had anticipated.

Seeing the long ribbon of shore-protecting reef stretch away into the far distance, I moved on with all haste. There was no need to survey the inshore waters, for the evidence of turtle lay plain and open before me, their tracks and bones upon the sand and their bobbing heads constantly breaking the surface. As for their habits and their pathways I had gleaned all I needed to know of these already. Besides, there were too many sharks about for comfort and I did not like the look of those bigger, darker shapes that moved so stealthily in the water. Now my interest lay mainly in the shore, and as I continued northwards my hopes rose. The dunes, in retreating westwards, had left a wider plateau than before, so that even where the baked red earth lay bare and impassable a path might be found around its edges either hard by the sea or close up against the brushwood slopes. But for the most part the coastal plain stretched level and hard, carpeted with sage and other small bushes. Across this celadon greenery thin game trails wound pale and dusty, probably the work of buck, for there were several varieties in the locality, ranging from the calf-high mouse-deer (*dik-dik*) that scurried timorously from bush to bush a-tip-toe, to massive, blundering, sable antelope bulls that crashed into the thickets on my approach.

With the rocky headland of El Afuen the well borings had at last given out, which no doubt accounted for the absence of herdsmen and their flocks, for of these I saw no signs at all. Firewood there was in reasonable supply and the plain housed few flies. Setting up a series of turtling camps would be easy anywhere along this stretch, provided that I could find water and, more important still, a way into the area.

Knowing that Merca must be about 100 kilometres away and having only my small water bottles and no evidence of there being any further wells *en route*, I now started to walk in earnest, travelling mainly by night to avoid dehydration as much as possible. Having covered seventy kilometres or so, the off-shore reef petered out and I came to the end of the turtle pastures, still without sign of a water hole. However, almost immediately afterwards I saw stock trails leading towards me across the plateau and, sure enough, tucked away in a fold of the ground nearby lay a well. This was of a completely different type from what I had seen previously, for its contents were within 10 feet of the surface and, although drinkable, had neither the clarity nor the coolness of the deep cisterns. But scummy and animuncular though it might be, it was fresh water and in

plentiful supply. On this one well we could base a camp near the shore, opposite the extreme northern tip of the reef, and work down inside its great length as we wished.

It now remained to me to find or make our access into the area. One glance up at the escarpment ruled this out. Here the hills were steeper than ever, with their wind-razored crests lifting over 800 feet, and even more significant, no trails of game or stock wound up into them. I pressed on hurriedly towards Merca along the plain, hoping that it continued all the way to the town itself, and on reaching rising ground and seeing the white cluster of its buildings glinting in the distance I was overjoyed at the way things were turning out, until I noticed that between us lay a barrier of dunes, a spur from the main escarpment that ran right down to the sea. Coming to these they proved as I had feared: soft, feathery sand, the ever-shifting particles of which would bear no vehicle's weight and across whose surface no animal tracks older than a few hours could be seen. But for all that, this final obstacle was only a mile wide and its far side ran down to the metalled road which linked Merca with the main Chisimaio-Mogadishu highway.

I was sure that somehow a way could be found by which our vehicles could cross the dunes and so reach the coastal plain. Indeed a road *had* to be made, and that was that. With this thought dominant in my mind, I trudged on down the tarmac towards the little port of Merca. Since leaving Chisimaio my erratic wanderings had taken me more than 300 miles on foot and I would not be defeated by a stretch of sand merely a mile wide.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Far Camps

*'By the heaven and by the Nightcomer,
But who shall tell thee what the Nightcomer is?'*

Sura 86

Merca was a pleasant little town of small sugar-cube buildings, totally unlike the drab decay of Brava. Its access road met the coast some four kilometres south of the port and thence ran along the shore, framing the bay on which Merca sat. Once within the hamlet the tarmac drove straight to its centre where it came to an abrupt end in a little garden quadrangle. On the left side of this square were the post office, the DC's office and the cinema, all in modern Italian colonial style. Opposite these were the premises of the shipping agents and port authorities. The third facing side housed a small arcade of shops while the fourth lay open for the road's wide entry.

Merca owed its prosperity (and therefore its comparative activity and cleanliness) to the fact that it was the chief port in Somalia for the export of bananas. Not that it was particularly near the banana estates, for, apart from one group some seventy kilometres inland, the bulk of this produce stemmed from the lush areas of the upper Guiba. But there was no other harbour along the coast and Merca, distant though it was, had to suffice. Indeed it was this fact that had decided RAO to sponsor the construction of deep-water berths at Chisimaio (in the design work of which Knud was now assisting) so that Somalia's banana crop might then be shipped out more efficiently. But even at Merca there were no berthing facilities, the cargo vessels lying-off as best they could and loading by lighter, no easy task in heavy monsoon weather without shelter of mole or break-water.

It was not without reason that the only hotel in Merca was named 'The Golden Banana'. The town thought, discussed, dreamed and

lived for bananas. Everyone was, in one way or another, connected with the trade. As transporters, carters, packers, tally-men and dock-workers. As clerks, weighmen, inspectors, sorters and graders. However, I never saw anyone in Merca eat a banana, though the hotel manager religiously presented me with basketfuls at every meal in recognition of my being a stranger, and then waited anxiously by my table until I had acknowledged that the bananas of Somalia, and in particular those that came through Merca, were indeed the best in the whole world. I think the man wanted reassuring. Confronted with the spectacle of cartloads, lorryloads and finally boatloads of bananas daily throughout his life, he needed to know, to see for himself, that all this was not merely a weird and useless merry-go-round, but that there did exist somewhere people who actually ate these yellow crescents and thought them good.

Yet eating bananas and clucking their praises did not help with the problem of driving a road across the sand to open up the fishing grounds. Labour, I soon realized, would be difficult to obtain in Merca, as would trucks, and I had decided to return to Chisimaio for aid when a chance meeting altered the whole business.

Having ferried the Landrover back from Brava, I found that its brakes needed adjusting and I was busy doing this in the compound at the back of the hotel when, hearing a hideous clanking, I peered out from under the chassis to see a cavalcade of tractors and earth-moving equipment rumble into the yard. From the cab of the foremost there clambered a burly black-bearded character, booted and literally spurred as for a rodeo, and flaunting a hat that only a Texan would wear. But in this I was wrong, for he was a Canadian, an employee of an oil prospecting company, in charge of their road-making gang. To me he seemed like a miraculous apparition and I hastily rummaged in the rear of my vehicle for some beer which I had stowed there for the journey back to Chisimaio. Going across to the newcomer I explained my need and asked if he would look at the sand spur to see if a vehicle track might be made across it and, if so, as to whether I might hire some of his equipment to do so.

He was one of those rough extroverts that the oil business seems to attract, very sure of himself and of his ability within his field, with few interests outside of his work other than alcohol and women, both of which he needed in large quantities.

'Consider you got yourself a road team, fella! I don't need to see it. Sand, bush, loose earth, it don't signify. We ain't in no hurry to git where we're due right now. Only take a few hours, I guess, anyways!'

'And your rates? The price for the job?'

'Hell, nothing! Well, maybe a case of beer or a quart of Scotch. No skin off my nose. Glad to help. Christ, this dust! Tomorrow morning do yer! Meet you down the road where you said. Six o'clock OK? Hell, I'm goin to git me a bath! Thanks for the beer, fella. See yer.'

And off he ambled.

Sunrise next morning found me anxiously waiting at the turn-off. Presently a distant chugging and rumbling announced the approach of my ally and dispelled the doubts I had harboured concerning both his memory and sincerity. On arrival he sat in the cab of the leading vehicle nursing his head and viewing the world from blood-shot, rheumy eyes. I could smell the night's nuances from afar: cheap scent, whisky, stale cigarettes and frowsty shuttered rooms.

'Christ, my head. That bloody cow. . . . That bloody, bloody cow. . . .' was all he could say for five minutes. Eventually he turned and shouted back to the bull-dozer behind, 'Hey, Alil Gimme my rucksack, will ya!' And when the lumpy hold-all appeared, he rummaged within to unearth a bottle which he held to the light, squinting ferociously at it before pulling off the cap and raising it to his lips. Two short swallows and then it was lowered, while he gagged and the tears welled.

'Hell! More like Old Shit than Old Crow!' he gasped, wiping his eyes with the back of a hand that looked like a bear's paw.

'O Christ. Let's get it over with. Where d'ya want it laid, fella?'

Within four hours the job was done. A hard packed roadway that skirted the shore, in places being carved out of cliff-rock, in others by flinging the sand aside and covering the trench thus formed with hard core up to the same level and often slightly higher. Halfway down its mile-long stretch a lay-by had been scooped as a final flourish.

'Wal, there y'are, fella! May have to keep that high stretch clear of loose sand in the wind an' watch out for fall-aways after rain-storms. Other than that she's OK, I reckon. Wal, I'd best be on my way. Thanks for the beer. Sure has helped this morning.' His eye gloomily surveyed one of the cases that sat open and half-empty on the seat beside him. 'So long now. Take it easy.' As he let in the clutch and moved off I caught the grumbling complaint. 'That cow, that bloody, bloody cow. . . .'

After his snoring convoy had disappeared from sight, I sat happily in the middle of our new access road playing with a beer-

top cap. The way across the dunes that I had despaired of accomplishing had been wrought in less than half a day! I walked up and down its entire length several times, patting its side walls, admiring its proportions and already seeing in my mind's eye the tread marks of our laden vehicles upon its virgin surface. On the way along I picked up eleven beer-top caps and wondered how long the remaining case-and-a-half, the price of this miracle, would last.

That evening I left for Chisimaio, eager to start the work of organization for the new camps. Driving continuously, I got there the following morning, for the road was dry and the devastation of previous rains had been made good by time and the steam-roller effect of other vehicles upon its rutted surface. At the factory I found all well, though the turtle catch was falling as I had thought it would. The Barjuni fishermen were fatter, an ominous sign regarding the work, and less keen to drive themselves than they were. After all, their immediate monetary needs were satisfied, now they could coast a little—just bringing in enough to cover everyday expenses. It was very understandable and good to think that their economy was becoming stable, but it did not help us to fulfil orders, of which there were still plenty and more arriving each month. Luckily, the majority of them were for the orthodox items of oil and calipee rather than the newly introduced canned meat. This meant that I could begin the distant camps as self-contained units producing dried meat only, shell and oil, without having to think immediately of a portable, vehicle-housed canning plant. Chisimaio could cover all new type orders, whilst my camps would try to satisfy the remainder. Later perhaps, having proved the various areas, we would set up other canneries throughout Somalia. At least that was the idea.

The projected camps were planned to be entirely portable, which meant that, since the coast between Chisimaio and Merca was without anchorage or shelter, even the fishermen's boats would have to be transported there by lorry. And before this could be arranged, the Barjunis themselves had to agree as to who was coming and who was staying. The successful fishermen did not wish to risk this new venture, and anyway, it was better that they stayed to supply the factory's needs. That left those who were incompetent and those who were unlucky (this being the worse fault in their eyes) and it was from these two categories that our boat crews had to be selected. It was a long drawn-out affair, this choosing. The stores, building materials, equipment, nets, anchors, salt, rope and gear had all been

packed and loaded for many days and the bickering and deciding and counter-deciding still went on. All who came were volunteers, no fishermen being actually employed, for that they would not be, and rightly so. Under the agreement we provided transport, a camp to live in, a basic food ration, water and gear at cost. We were also responsible for buying all turtles that they caught, at a fixed price, whilst operating from our camps, for repairs to their boats and to cash advances for the upkeep of their families whilst away. Sickness or injury were our responsibility as well. So was, I discovered, the provision of a camp story-teller, a prayer-leader, an arbitrator and a herbal healer. After much wheeling and canvassing I managed to get these four unproductive posts taken over by active camp members. That of arbitrator and prayer-leader by Mzee Ibrahim our net expert, and the healing and story-telling by the boat repairer, Abukari.

After two weeks of high drama and crisis upon crisis, my collection of prima donnas was ready, or so I fondly thought. Having loaded their five three-man *makous*,¹ we turned to the task of placing our flagship (a 4-ton ten-oared racing juggernaut which I had bought from Sheamina) on the truck reserved for it. It took only five minutes for the forty, shouting, independently-acting Barjunis to man-handle the monster on to the big Mercedes. The bows of the 38-foot craft projected some 12 feet in front of the driver whilst the stern swayed perilously some distance behind the tail board. The sight of the whole caravanerie loaded, and at last ready to go, was too much for my fishermen. With whoops of joy they clambered up on to the trucks to fight for pride of place. These niceties settled they then all descended to go to the mosque for special prayers. Here they stayed all day returning only after dusk, clad in their Sunday best and pulling with them two bleating pessimistic goats.

'For the feast! For the feast, O Beard!' they cried.

'What feast?' I asked.

'The feast of our leave-taking to which you are bidden! Come! Come!'

Perhaps I would not have gone so willingly had I known that by so doing I was involving myself in local politics and moreover that the two goats were at my cost!

After the greasy cumin-scented meal came the speeches, to which I did not pay much attention at the beginning, for I was watching the other guests and wondering why so many of the more important

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

Barjunis were present at what should have been, after all, a small affair. Suddenly my ears caught the end of a sentence '... and since that day, forty years ago, my brothers, our land has not been our own'.

The speaker then ceased and after a chorus of *Eima, eima, w'allai's*,¹ another took his place. This time I listened attentively, realizing that there was a meaning to all this gathering and to my having been invited. The business of the leaving for the fishing camps was just an excuse. During the next hour the plan was made plain by the various speech-makers. The Barjunis, restless at new taxes and unhappy under their Somali overlords, wished to re-establish the old boundaries of 1921 when all the territory south of the river Guiba (Juba-land, in fact) was part of Kenya and under British rule. Here was something! With the entire African continent crying out for independence, a minority African race was asking for the re-imposition of colonialism!

'... then there was justice in the courts, and now there is none. No position of authority can our children hold, for they are reserved for camel-drovers [the Somalis]. We are forbidden to trade with or visit our cousins in Ungu [the Zanzibar coastal domain of Kenya, Tanganyika, Pemba, and Zanzibar]. We groan under herders' taxes and have no schools. And each year their camels graze further south. Let us be men again! This is our land, ours, to do with as we please. Let us call on the Ingresi to come and free us and take us into their care. We know this is the only way, but how can it be done, my brethren, how can it be done ... ?'

There was silence. A carefully contrived pause, in accordance with custom, before the inevitable denouement. The most influential of the Barjunis hawked and spat, wheezed a sigh, looked all round the assembly and finally singled me out for his vulturine stare.

'*Allah Kerim!*² Brothers, *Allah Kerim!* There is with us now one who shall be our messenger, who will take our words to the *Serikali*³ in L'hon-don, for he is of their race and knows the ways of such matters there. The Beard shall do this thing for us then when next he goes to his country, may it be soon! He knows our hearts and he knows the truths that we speak and he will open their eyes. ...'

There was a lot more rhetoric and then came the carrot, the inducement.

'... And when this thing has been done, and we are masters in

¹ God is Merciful.

² Government.

our own land under the Ingresi, how can we reward the Beard?' [Pregnant pause]. 'Let this be the way of it. We shall demand of the *Serikali* that they give us *Mrefu* and *Kidefu*¹ as Governor and Provincial Commissioner over the new Guiba-land, over us all, and they will have much honour and we trust them not to take too much from us for themselves in taxes. Let that be the way of it, my brothers, *Je'sh'allah*² Let that be the way of it....'

There was a chorus of '*Je'sh'allah*'³ from the company and then a silence and all eyes were on me for my reply. There was really no way out of it and they knew it. Their little trap had been skilfully laid and well executed. I answered as best I could. That I was honoured by their trust and that whenever I did return to England I would give their message faithfully, but held no great hope of the Ingresi returning to Guiba-land, pointing out that Kenya was now independent (which they neither understood nor believed) and that administration of territories and peoples was no longer the interest of the British. As for their offer to Knud and myself, we were honoured but we were not really interested in politics but in making money (this was a mistake, for a chorus of interruptions proclaimed that indeed tax-levying was *the* most profitable activity possible and not too much work either). Admitting my error, I passed hastily on to thank them for the feast they had made out of my goats, and in conclusion that indeed God was merciful (I didn't know exactly what I meant by that and neither did they, but it was a nice final flourish and went down well). They were disappointed, certainly, but then they had never expected a miracle. Something might come of it, perhaps, and anyway the goats had been sweet....

The next morning the convoy of vehicles finally got away around noon after the inevitable delays that lasted hours. To make sure that none of the lorries strayed off the road in order to make further adieus, I brought up the rear of the column until we had passed the Guiba river, where I took the lead. But this proved impracticable, for the dense dust clouds which the others raised, and from which I had sought to escape, hid them so effectively as to prevent my seeing if any of the four dropped out, and I was forced to follow in their wake again. As it turned out this was fortunate, for it enabled us to provision the whole troop in a most unexpected way. The dust-laden road ran now through an area of acacia shrubs, the haunt of great flocks of guinea fowl. These birds, when sated with the acacia

¹ The Long One and the Bearded One, i.e. Knud and myself.

² God-willing.

berries they loved, squatted in droves in the road, sunning themselves and taking dust-baths. They were accustomed to being disturbed by trucks, and being lazy and full-fed left their scurried getaway until the last second. These tactics were successful normally, but not for a lorry which carries the bows of a boat some yards in front of its bonnet and from which faggots of firewood could be thrown. Within a five-mile stretch my fishermen had accounted for some forty of the great grey-flecked birds and for our wayside supper that night we had a choice of grilled, stewed, boiled, baked and curried guinea-fowl, all of which were delicious, except for one or two which retained the too-strong flavour of acacia berries through not having been drawn quickly enough.

It took us two days to reach Merca, with frequent stops to collect things that had fallen off with the jolting or to re-lash equipment or, most frequently, to make tea. There was no point in rushing and breaking things and I wanted the fishermen, who tended to be homesick, to arrive in good fettle. So it was a junketing, picnicking procession that bumped and lurched along the rutted road, singing, whistling and shouting messages from one lorry to another. To escape the worst of the dust, I followed about five kilometres behind, but even so managed to become completely caked in it within half an hour of the start.

On our eventual arrival at the turn-off, rather than have the overladen vehicles chew up my new road, I drove on a few hundred yards right down to the beach, where we off-loaded the boats. These, with skeleton crews, then set off down the coast with instructions to meet us on the shore inside the northern tip of the reef. Considerably lightened, the vehicles now returned and took the track south that led to the dunes and our access road across them. We arrived at the big well to find some nomads watering their camels. From the caravan's headman we learnt that this watering place was called Munghia, and I used this for the name of our camp nearby. By the time I had selected the best area up from the beach to begin the unloading, the boats were already in sight, and before long the usual hurly-burly of African activity took charge of the proceedings.

When dusk came no real advancement had been made at all, though mounds of gear had been shifted energetically but pointlessly from one arbitrary place to another throughout the afternoon. The only real progress was that a fire had been made, tea brewed and, since the last *maslow* to arrive had brought a medium-sized turtle

which they had caught dozing on the surface, supper was already in the pot.

The next morning enabled me to get things under way, for all the boats and their crews set off down the reef to explore the coast prior to starting the fishing. This left me with my own camp gang of seven, made up of their leader, Abukari, whom I had trained and who now knew the work of turtle processing thoroughly; four younger men as general camp workers; the wizened *Mzee* [elder] Ibrahim, net-maker, arbitrator and story-teller, and fat Haji Yusuf, Koranic reader and joker. Leaving Abukari to supervise the erection of the framework of the large hut, using the load of mangrove poles brought with us for this purpose, I set off with two of the others in the Landrover to buy palm fronds for its thatching at the market in Merca. This standard hut was to be the central feature of each of the planned camps, their only near-permanent structure and the base point to which we would return season after season. It was some 40 feet long and had no side walls, but with the shallow inverted vee of the roof reaching to within 18 inches of the ground. One end was completely closed off and the other, away from the prevailing wind, wide open. Stored under the shallow caves, acting as low walls, were sacks of net, rope, salt, maize-meal, and other stores. On the inside of this palisade were stacked the men's wooden boxes, containing their clothing, bedding and personal belongings. Spread over the open sand-swept floor were raffia mats, on which the men slept and the produce was stacked at night and which served as a flat clean platform for the net-makers by day.

At some distance from the hut, between it and the beach, were the collapsible butchery tables, protected from wind and sun by a single front wall and an overhanging roof. Nearby, pits were dug and fire-places built to house the boilers and rendering pans, and fencing off this area were the mounds of firewood necessary to sustain them. Here too, was the camp kitchen. Further off, in the hottest, most wind-swept area we could find, were erected the low lath-and-wire frames on which the calipee and meat were sun-dried. Our furthest outposts were the refuse pits, dug deep into the sand, down-wind and half a mile away. Near the beach lay the turtle shed, an open-sided thatched roof shelter, in which the giants could slumber on their backs in the shade without distress. In the sea adjacent a turtle pen was constructed of stout mangrove poles, where any excesses to the daily catch might be housed prior to being slaughtered.

The work of butchery was done on the beach itself, below the

tide-line, so that the sea would afterwards sweep the area clean. The sea-washed joints of meat and segments of shell were carried to the tables up near the boilers for the final skilled cutting prior to cooking. When we moved camp, everything was uprooted, dismantled and loaded. Nothing remained to mark our stay, save the ash mounds of our fires and the long, low hut whose thatched roof merged perfectly into the landscape.

But at this stage we were far from thinking of moving. The business of settling in took much longer than I had thought, for on the second day the fishermen started bringing in turtles a-plenty, and my camp personnel were hard put to cope with the flow without the added labour of building. In the end I brought the fishermen themselves into this work, paying them extra that it might be completed the sooner, though it was to their advantage, since they did not like sleeping in the open, being frightened of djinns and, more sensibly, hyenas. In their fear they were justified, for the scavengers were quite numerous and crept down from the escarpment nightly to crunch the turtles bones as we slept. This continued until the first refuse pit was dug and used; even then we had to keep a nightly watch on those live turtles in the shed, for we had not then built the pen in the water to house them. The hyenas were the large 'patchy' type, with bodies as big as donkeys and jaws that cracked turtle skulls as though they were matchboxes and with the same splintering noise. Of these beasts *Mzee* Ibrahim told gruesome stories; how they bit off men's faces who slept under the moon. They did not crack their skulls or tear their throats, mark you, but bit off their faces, so that their victims were left to scream and gurgle through ragged blood-spouting holes till they died. After that pleasant story every one of us slept face downward for some little while, for the moon was then full, the hut still unbuilt and hyenas prowled freely amongst us as we slept. Several times I woke to see these scavengers, made terrifyingly huge by the moon and my low position on the ground, slinking low-haunched nearby. Finally, one night, seeing one penetrate the ring of sleepers I shot at it with the spear gun that I kept loaded by my side. There was a yelping bark as the brute fled, carrying the spear in its side. The noise woke the others, so we made tea and smoked and chatted away the hours till dawn.

Mzee told us more hyena-lore, of how there were two types in these parts, the big, face-biting kind such as I had hit, and a smaller yellower one. I thought he meant by this the jackal, but he said not, hyena [*sei*], Witch-hyena. At this description everyone sat up and

huddled closer together, for they knew something horrifying was about to be told them.

'Better stoke up the fire before I begin,' said *Mzee* ominously, and this was quickly done. 'Now you people have never been further than the Guiba river and so you do not know what goes on outside, but in my youth I went far, by dhow and road, even as far as Alula and Berbera in the north and distant M'kullah. Socotra I know, the abode of djinns, and Ras Hafun, where the fish cast themselves on to the shore, so great are their numbers....'

I thought this a great lie, till I visited the place long afterward and found it true. *Mzee* went on in this reminiscent way for some time, tantalizing us listeners with fragments of description and half-glimpses of strange happenings, till the web of introductory words was spun and spider-like he brought us back to its centre, the fire around which we sat.

'Yes,' he went on. 'Even now, out there,' and he jerked a horny thumb over his shoulder towards the dark hills, 'There are many evil things, black creatures of the Pit. Nightwalkers...!' The men peered apprehensively into the darkness as he spoke, conjuring up affects and pale wraiths out of the empty ground.

'But it is not of these that I speak, but a peril that goes under the noon-day sun and may come upon any of you who walk through the dunes, and sandy wastes by yourselves. Each one of you, remember what I say now, otherwise we, your brothers, may never see you on this earth again. And what is this Thing, you ask? I will tell you so that you may know it if you see it on your path and turn in haste and run till you have escaped from it. [Pause.] If you can... [as a low aside]. I spoke of hyenas, such as we saw tonight. Now the *fesi* is but a beast, though marked in evil and a fell thing. It is its own wife and husband¹ and has no need of others of its kind in consequence. You know the greatest insult amongst us is to call a man a hyena, this being a four-fold affront since the beast skulks on four legs; it is cowardly, attacking only the weak, the sick and the sleeping; it is an eater of refuse and filth; and it makes love to itself. But this other kind, the witch-hyena, is not really an animal at all, but an evil spirit of the wilderness, that takes on form like to a hyena, but smaller, yellower and does not fear the sun.

'It lies in wait for solitary travellers in sandy, dusty places; in

¹ The male hyena carries beneath its tail two musk glands which protrude exactly like the lips of a vulva. The Arabs believe the animal to be hermaphrodite in consequence.

dry ravines and the great bowls of the desert. When the fiend sees one such Son-of-Adam it rises from the ground and rushes forward. They see it like a big fox, but with the blunt hyena's head. It circles them growling and snarling. Not too frightened, for it seems only a small animal, the wretch stops and waves his stick at it, seeking to drive it off, but the creature leaps and dances around him, just out of reach—and all the time its low tail and whirling feet are raising the dust! Soon the dust is knee high and only the beast's head and shoulders appear above it. The snarls come from all around! The Lost One thrashes the air and the ground with his staff on every side to keep it at bay and so fills the air with yet more sand. Higher rises the cloud of dust. The path is lost! The pattering of feet encircle him! Occasionally two red eyes burn through it and sink away! Terrified, the Doomed Soul cries out and tries to run but whichever way he turns the cloud rises higher and thicker in front of him and the snarls are loudest. And so the Darkness at Noonday covers him. The snarls have become great roars like a male camel in heat and fill his ears with their sound. He sinks to the ground, spent, casts away his stick and cries aloud to God.... Too late! Through the dust clouds comes a Figure, walking upright on its hind legs, black-boned, huge and monstrous, with a lolling red tongue and eyes like coals. So awful is the sight of it that the man gives one shriek and his soul flies out of his mouth like a moth and the Devil-Thing catches it and devours it, for it does not feed on flesh.' [His voice sank to a whisper.] 'Later, other travellers will come across the body by the pathway, will see the signs written in the sand, the blundering footsteps, the prints of many small paws all about and the broken staff. Hastily they will close the dead man's eyes, looking away while they do so, lest they see mirrored there That which would drive them mad.... Remember what I say now, and avoid the empty places when the sun is high. For you enter them at the peril of your Soul!'

Was that why the lonely travellers in the sands that I had met with journeyed by night, I wondered? Was it some allegory perhaps, to warn people against sun-stroke and desert-madness? I never found out. Much later, exploring the barren hinterland near El Afuen with *Mzee* Saleh as a companion, we came across a large burrow in the side of a ravine. This the old man examined carefully, before pronouncing it the hole of a witch-hyena, which led deep into the bowels of the earth. It certainly was not the lair of a jackal nor a foxes' earth, and it was too small to accommodate a normal hyena.

Perhaps it belonged to a species of badger, but the countryside was very desolate. As it was broad daylight I asked Mzee why, if it were the dwelling place of a Fiend, he was not more afraid. He touched the amulet he carried, saying that he was protected from such things and then smiled and added: 'Besides, I am with you and you do not believe in this Thing! Therefore it has no hold over us.'

Luckily, besides such repulsive creatures as hynas, the camp attracted other less dangerous and more amusing animals. Somalia is one of the few places on earth where wild creatures are largely without fear. The vast territory's population is so low, that man's nomadic wanderings do not seriously interfere with the animals' more settled lives, nor do the humans have need to drive wild creatures away in their need for *lebenraum*. So man and beast exist side by side, for the Somalis are not hunters, leave the buck and other game alone, only killing lion or leopard in defence of their flocks. Neither do they eat venison or other dark meat, preferring the flesh of steer, goat and camel. In consequence, the wild creatures accept man in a way that I found wholly entrancing, even the shyest of them allowing me to approach quite closely before moving off. In fact, some of them were so curious, unafraid and impertinent as to become a con-founded nuisance, as we discovered with the onset of the mongooses.

For the first few days the shrill chitterings and hasty scurrings of these little rodents had been largely ignored in the hurly-burly of setting up the camp. Once we were on a more settled routine however, their incursions could no longer be overlooked. At very first light, along with the grunts and scratchings of my waking Barjunis and the pipe-thread trills of the desert larks from somewhere way up in the violet air, came the busy patterings and interrogatory squeaks of the mongoose families as they conducted their daily inspection of us and our belongings. The fishermen, lying on the ground rolled in their cotton blankets, did not take kindly to these quizzing noses and tickling feet as the animals rummaged through their bedding in search of warmth or fleas, or merely to satisfy their own curiosity. But though the dozy sleepers thrashed and swore, the mongooses were far too quick for their clumsy movements and the worst that ever happened was that one would be hurled across the floor space in the shaking out of a blanket. A little apart from the others, sleeping on a low canvas cot, I escaped their notice for a while, but the respite was short and before long the bolder ones had mastered the art of running up my arm or the

blanket, whichever happened to be touching the ground. First thing I would know about this invasion would be a distant chirruping sound, followed by silence, till a minute tickle in my ear proclaimed that someone was investigating that orifice to see what, if anything, lay within my head. At that hour of the morning they need not have bothered. Then more complaining 'tch-tck's' which gradually grew less pronounced as their originator crept down the length of my body, exploring as he went.

Although they were restless companions, they were so light footed and gentle in their movements that they did not disturb one much, once the mental hurdle of having a live, scurrying, 10-inch long animal in bed had been overcome. Later, there was one that forsook the rest of his family each evening, preferring the restrictions of my sleeping bag to his customary nest or burrow. For the first few nights I was frightened of crushing my visitor each time I rolled over and would lie awake for long periods in an agony of uncomfortableness before easing myself into a new position as gently and as slowly as I could. All this concern proved quite unnecessary, for the mongoose was lightning fast in his reactions and would be out from under wherever he was at the first twitch of my body. Eventually I used to try and catch him out, but no matter how tight and snug he might be against my side or within the confines of arm or leg, no sudden grab could ever hope to catch him; though if my fingers sought him out gently he would not try to escape, merely protesting sleepily at being hauled out into the cold night air for my examination.

Since the mongooses neither gnawed their belongings nor stole or spoilt their food, the men were fairly tolerant of them and did not harm them. In order to deter them from making themselves a nuisance whilst we ate, I placed a butchering board of turtle meat mixed with egg fragments for them on a low mound nearby and to this they came as regularly as fowls to a trough, whole families gathering in advance under cover of the low bushes, causing them to quiver with their incessant movements. This board attracted other creatures, notably a beautiful hen harrier which quartered the area each afternoon till her due was given her. Hooded crows came too, but these I drove off, for they were thieving creatures, carrying things away from out of the hut while our backs were turned. A pair of ravens used to visit us as well, and these I fed on a rock outcrop a little way off, for some of the men feared them, deeming their plumage too dark to bode us good.

Then, of course, there were the crabs, the ghost crabs from the beaches that were the bane of our lives till I took steps to get rid of them. During the day these pale creatures stayed mostly in their holes above the tide lines, waiting for the time when the incoming waves would swish by their front doors and they could scuttle out to grab such tit-bits as might be borne on them. At dusk they ventured out in their thousands, parading silently up and down, fighting with one another, moving with a dry rustling sound on the approach of footsteps. But it was in the deep of the night that they became a nuisance, leaving the beaches and wandering inland, drawn by our fires and the smell of our meat. They stayed away from the circle of our light, hovering around us in the shadows, creeping into the hut under the rear eaves, hiding themselves in blankets, boxes, nets, and cook-pots. On hearing footsteps or other movements they would frantically scratch and scamper in whatever nook they had chosen and before we went to sleep all the bedding had to be shaken out. They were quite harmless but unpleasant, and smelt of dead seaweed and brine. And they were scratchy and irritating, scampering across one's face or searching into one's hair with delicate probing claws whilst one slept. Since they could not be eaten and neither bit nor stung, the Barjunis ignored them completely, only occasionally bothering to brush them away from their faces in the darkness. But I loathed them, finding them nerve-racking and a nuisance. Besides, they got caught in the stored nets and had to be taken out of everywhere, and should a corner of my blanket touch the ground they would scuttle up into my bed in a trice and I would feel their feather-like brittles and prickings on my lips and eyelids as they clambered restlessly over my head.

Racking my brains for a way to discourage them, I remembered a trick I had seen used in the Seychelles, where the fishermen like them for bait and have need to catch them. All around the camp area I dug small holes in the ground. In these I placed empty 4-gallon oil cans of the rectangular sort, long-ways up and with the top taken right out. Around these the sand was packed tight, so that the upper edges were flush with the surface. From side to side, centrally across the top of the tins were wedged thin rods of wood, less than pencil thick. In the bottom of the metal pits thus formed a few scraps of turtle offal were tossed. The defences were complete! The ghost crabs, coming up from the beach towards the camp, would smell the scraps and converge on the traps. Coming to the edge of the pits they would circle the buried cans seeking a way

down. Finding none they then walked gingerly across the wooden strut. Roughly half-way along this and directly over the bait they would stop and, sensing it lay below them, either fall deliberately upon it, or lose their balance straining to get at the food, and tumble in. Once down, there was no way up those smooth shiny walls and morning would find each can full almost to the brim with kicking, rustling crabs, which were then dumped unceremoniously into the sea.

One of the natural drawbacks to this area was the prevalence of poisonous snakes, which seemed to me surprising in view of the multitude of mongooses. Amongst the thickets and also beneath the boulders in the dry watercourses there were many puff adders, fat, worm-like and obscene. The dry scrub and sandy places housed horned vipers, whilst buried in the soft dunes were another species of asp, reputedly with the most fatal bite of all. The local name for this nastiness was 'seven paces' for, having been struck, its victim was popularly supposed to take only seven steps before falling dead. Ignorant of this fact our jester, fat Hagi Yusuf, picked one up one day and brought it back to camp alive in his headcloth for me to examine. On being told what it was he understandably felt weak at the knees and had to sit down. Asked what he would have done had the snake bitten him, he thought for a second and then came out with a beautiful answer: 'Well, in my fear I would probably have run five or six steps only before fainting and never taken the fatal seventh. Like that I would have been safe!'

After a few mornings of having discovered various snakes hidden in different places round the camp, presumably having crept in during the night for the warmth, I decided that some form of protection was needed and asked Ibrahim what we could do. He suggested putting a 'snake fence' around the camp, and as soon as he described what he meant I recalled Knud having told me of the same system being used in the Rufiji delta of Southern Tanganyika, renowned for its dangerous serpents. A 'snake fence' consists of a thin strand of strong twine fastened to pegs encircling the area to be safeguarded. The twine must be kept quite taut and must follow the contours of the ground but about 2½ to 3 inches above it. The ground behind the 'fence' must also be cleared of all grass or vegetation for several feet. The whole thing is very simple and very clever. Any snake on first coming to the barrier starts to crawl under the string. Feeling this touch its back and 'giving' as it moves on forwards, it

draws back, not trusting this 'unsafe' thing above. The snake then lifts its head over the string and tries to pass that way, but as soon as the weight of its body touches, the twine sags and again the snake pulls back, fearing to trust its weight on such a yielding support. The path blocked, it either turns back or travels around the periphery of the fence seeking an alternate entrance—of which there is none. Having once rigged this slender cordon I was very surprised to find that it did in fact work, for the evidence of the snakes' movements in trying to pass could be seen each morning as squiggles in the dust along the outside. Thereafter, although the 'fence' was not completely infallible, it was only on rare occasions that we found any snakes within the camp. The only drawback to the whole system was that I was for ever tripping over it and in this respect it seemed to me to be almost a graver danger than the presence of snakes in our belongings, but to this the men did not agree. Besides, they got much amusement out of my frequent tumbles and in order to promote these would try and distract my attention each time I approached the barrier. Plump little Hagi Yusuf did a superlative mime of this when he thought I was not looking, until one day he himself caught his ankle and went sprawling.

As to our joker, for a long while I wondered at his name, for the prefix Hagi is normally a title of respect given to those who had made the holy pilgrimage to Mecca, and I was sure that Yusuf had not done this. Seeking out my tutor in these matters, old Ibrahim, I asked him the reason and he gave me the answer, which I thought interesting and typical of Somali finesse. All men were customarily known as So-and-so, the son of Such-and-such: Issa-bin-Mohammed or Ibrahim-bin-Said, for example. When a child was not only illegitimate but his mother simply did not know who had fathered her baby, she gave the boy the prefix of 'Hagi', which obviated the need for a subsequent paternal label. Besides, once he grew up, memories being such short things, people might even believe he *had* made the pilgrimage and give him the respect which could have been his had his father been illustrious and, who knows, perhaps even was!

CHAPTER EIGHT

Drought

'Over every soul is set a guardian . . .'
Sura 86

Once the camp at Mung'hia had been established and the routine of the turtle-catching and processing was in full swing, I was left with far more time to think about developing other bases in the vicinity. Much to my surprise, I had been told that there were a few Somali (as distinct from Barijuni) fishermen along this coast and it was these that I now sought out. Hearing that a group of such fishermen was to be found at the inland village of Gobwen (in itself a strange fact), I drove the twenty miles there to try and locate them. Calling at the police post on the main road to ask directions, I was given the incidental news that there had been trouble over the grazing rights on the Kenya border and that thirteen Somalis had been killed by askaris of the Kenya Frontier Police. Boundary violations and disputes over the pasturage and watering of stock in that area were perennial and not taken too seriously outside the immediate locality of each particular incident, and neither my informants nor myself gave the news much importance.

At the mud-and-wattle village I tracked down the man I was looking for without difficulty, for his very trade set him and his friends apart. Saidi was a fine-looking man, handsome by any standard of society, with a calm, hawk-like face, pale eyes and a smooth *caffee-aw-lait* skin. He looked and was, immensely strong and his whole bearing radiated that sheer animal poise and confidence which so few humans of any race possess. Yes, he was a fisherman. No, he had no boat. Yes, he and his companions walked the fifteen miles to the coast to set their lines and nets. Yes, they sold their catch in Merca or sometimes Gobwen. If the latter, then they travelled by night, running most of the way with the baskets of fish on their heads so that they would not spoil. No, they had neither huts nor encamp-

ment on the coast, but returned to Gobwen each day. Yes, I could see his gear and he took me to his house and showed with pride the roughest, crudest, most pathetic collection of fishing junk I had ever come across. Nets made of knotted parcel twine, hooks beaten from old nails, floats of driftwood and discarded bottles and sinkers of assorted pebbles through which holes had been laboriously drilled for the string to pass. Yet he was a fine, tough man, alert and obviously very hard working. What should not a man like this produce, given the proper tools and a little training? Determined to foster him, I made arrangements before leaving to meet Saidi and his troupe at a certain point on the coast in a week's time. Earlier than that he could not come for the rains were soon due, and all the villagers had to make ready their plots of land for its onset.

On the way back to Munguia, I thought of the problems that the discovery of Saidi had raised. My Barjunis were excellent in their own areas, but already they were experiencing the pangs of homesickness and I guessed that they would never be reconciled to or accept long periods away from their beloved islands. For the present it was essential that they came with me and developed new areas, for the seeking out of such potential fishermen as Saidi would take time and their training in the work even longer. The Barjunis were intensely jealous of the Somalis, particularly in what they considered their own province, the sea and its workings. I would have to keep the two peoples well apart, playing down the importance of the newcomers, till they were fully capable of working their areas to our satisfaction. Then I could pull out my Barjunis and push on to new localities. That way, I now saw, was the only method by which we might extend our longshore fisheries throughout Somalia.

On my next visit to Merca I was told by the proprietor of the 'Golden Banana' that there was trouble in Mogadishu, with rioting and window-breaking, and that it was not safe for foreigners to appear in the streets there. Not being able to get to the bottom of this, for his account of these happenings was very garbled, I bought myself a small radio before returning to camp. That evening, to my great surprise, I heard that the border trouble that I had already forgotten had grown, that Kenya and Somalia were denouncing each other as aggressor, that the British Army was sending troops into the area, that the Communist *bløc*, true to form, was blaming the white imperialists for the affair and, most serious, that the British Embassy in Mogadishu had been attacked by a mob and that diplomatic relations between Britain and Somalia were at breaking point.

Two evenings later I heard that relations had been formally severed, that the Embassy had been closed down and that all British subjects had been evacuated by air to Aden. Here was a pretty kettle of fish! But there was nothing I could do about it and rushing off to Mogadishu or Chisimaio would certainly not help matters. So I decided to stay where I was, getting in as many turtles as possible and try to continue at least until the rains.

Due to the fact that both the fishermen and my team were working steadily throughout the day and much of the night, the question of a regular supply of fresh food for us all had become of prime importance. Surrounded on all sides by turtles, the Barjunis had for once achieved a surfeit of their favourite meat and alternate fare became necessary. Partly because it provided me with a break from camp routine and partly because it was I who could most easily be spared, now that the butchering had reached a steady routine, I appointed myself camp provider and would set off each afternoon in one of the small boats to spear fish for our main evening meal. I soon found a deep pool within the reef in which enough large fish to satisfy our needs could be found. This area opened into one of the passages through the reef and consequently the bigger fish from the outer reef face would congregate here prior to their night's inshore excursion. The deepest part of this 'ante-chamber' was about 8 fathoms, just within my skindiving limits, and in its depths circled snappers and bream, whilst from under its ledges peered rock cod, gaterin and large crayfish. So unaccustomed were the fish to the presence of a human among them that I could usually count on spearing 50 to 60 pounds of fish within a quarter of an hour, and with our supper ensured I could then explore the area leisurely until the darkening seascape proclaimed the approach of dusk and my return.

During the last half-hour of my stay there things would begin to liven up considerably, with the bigger fishy predators coming in over the reef for their night's hunting. One could always tell when they were due: the snapper would circle faster and in tighter spirals; the rock cod would make short, sharp dashes from cover to cover and the huge discs of the sting rays that had lain comatose till then, half buried in the sand, would lift off and take tentative flight from one place to another. Suddenly there would be a whitish flicker in the gloom and the first of the small sharks would appear, probably a small black-tipped of about 4 or 5 feet. Within minutes there would be others of his kind and maybe the skulking shape of a grey nurse

as well, and with that it was time for me to go. Once, indeed, the first of the hunters on the scene had been two 12-foot tiger sharks whose arrival caused considerable consternation all round, in myself as much as any of the other inhabitants; but after a cursory inspection they swept on in their regal way as grimly malevolent as a pair of sombre cruisers cutting through a fleet of pleasure craft.

Late one afternoon, sailing back after such a foray, I saw a whole convoy of vehicles surrounding the camp. Even at a distance I could make out trucks and jeeps and a couple of armoured cars, and as I drew nearer I could see that the whole beach was lined with soldiers, whose parachutist-type overalls and sub-machine guns proclaimed them to be from Somalia's crack commando regiment. At one end of the line stood a group apart, the declining sun winking on polished boots, glinting medals and shining visors. Hypnotized by this spectacle I coasted in, quite sure that I would be summarily executed as soon as I stepped ashore as a neo-colonist spy, a filthy imperialist or an *agent provocateur*, such as the radio was nightly proclaiming all my countrymen living in Africa to be. It was only on lowering the sail and hoisting the load of wet fish on my shoulder prior to wading ashore that I realized the humour of the situation. This particular fascist-lackey, the only one of his breed left in Somalia (for hearing no news from Chisimaio I thought it likely that Geoff and Tony had already fled the country) was not in very good shape to face his end with dignity. He was clad in a torn pair of oil-stained shorts that kept slipping down to his knees, he badly needed a haircut, was caked in salt and had half-a-hundredweight of fish dripping slime down his back! My Barjunis were clustered in the entrance to the big hut, wide-eyed and visibly frightened. At the water's edge I dumped my load in the shallows and walked on up to the impressive, impassive group that awaited me on the little knoll. Doing so Masefield's 'Consecration' sprang vividly to mind:

'Not . . . the portly presence of potentates goodly in girth;
Mine be the dirt and the dross, the dust and
The scum of the earth. . . .'

Dust and scum were certainly applicable, though of the sea, not the earth, I thought, as I rubbed the salt crust from my forehead and surreptitiously tried to remove the slime from my hands on my tattered shorts. A tall, very portly potentate, clad in an immaculate white uniform across which was draped the wide blue sash of

Somalia's foremost Order, stepped forward, holding out his hand as he did so.

'Mr Travis? Delighted!' and he turned expectantly to a little official who fussed at his side.

'Dear Sir,' said the interpreter, obviously schooled in some secretarial system. 'His Excellency, the General in charge of the Police Force of the United Somalia Republic hopes he finds you well? His Excellency has journeyed here today in company with his personal escort and a detachment of the army. His Excellency wishes to reassure himself of your personal safety in these troubled times. His Excellency wishes to know if you have had any unpleasantness with local people and if so who, where and when. His Excellency will take all steps to safeguard you here in your work and will leave you his personal guards to watch over you should you wish it. . . .'

This long declaration went on for a further full five minutes, with each sentence commencing with 'His Excellency', at which utterance the little speech-maker shot a humble glance at his lord and master and executed a half-bob of respect. But the final sentence was the one I most appreciated—'His Excellency would like you to join him in some coffee and light refreshment before he leaves'.

Very soon, with a cup in one hand and the sandwich in the other, I was showing the general and his entourage over the camp, explaining the processes involved in the preparation of the various products. Not caring for the idea of the turtle meat, I was able to present him with some of the refined oil, the efficacy of which he had heard as a skin tonic, and I put half a dozen crayfish, which he admitted to liking in the boot of his staff car. Before they left the interpreter delivered yet another long speech for which he had obviously been briefed. The gist of this was that though Somalia now had its political differences with my homeland, they bore no grudge against myself. Our cannery in Somalia was the first foreign investment in their country and the authorities were very conscious that we had done more to aid their economy since our arrival than had many grandiose foreign-sponsored projects, all of which had gone no further than the conference tables.

Long after the cavalcade of vehicles had left, I sat on, looking down the road of their departure, thinking about my visitors. What other country in the world, however cultured, would bother to send such a delegation to assure a struggling foreigner that, regardless of external politics, he and his work were welcome and his well-being and

safety their concern. Somalia, in the true meaning of the word, was proving a very civilized country.

Two days later, leaving the camp to its own devices, I journeyed south in the direction of El Afuen, to the rendezvous with Saidi. On the headland we had named I found him and his group awaiting my arrival with their archaic gear all ready. They had planned to set their crude nets for sharks and, although I had several of our nylon turtle nets stowed in the back of the Landrover, I did not intend giving them these until I had seen how they used their own equipment. But I need not have worried, for they made an excellent job of their net-laying, positioning the gear well and taking a deal of trouble in setting it. Without boats this was not easy, and Saidi and the rest of his Somalis were forced to carry the furred nets on their heads whilst they waded and swam out to the gaps in the reef where they laid them. As they were doing this, besides watching their methods, I explored the shore-line and found great heaps of empty turtle carapaces thereabouts. On his return I asked Saidi about these and he replied that this was their own work, for so plentiful were the turtles there that they did great damage to his nets. Consequently, when they saw a turtle in shallow water they hunted it down and killed it. They did not eat the meat or use the reptiles in any way, but destroyed them as vermin. I then told Saidi that if he and his men caught these 'vermin' for me they would earn far more than their fish-netting brought them, and to help in this work they could have the special nets that I had brought with me.

The rest of that day was spent in talking about turtles, about which the fishermen knew very little, though they met them constantly. That a European should have so much knowledge of these creatures seemed to them very strange and by evening they had given me a new title, discarding the Kiswahili *Kérew* (Beard) for their Somali *Wobah* ('Turtle'), and from then on that became my accepted name amongst all Somalis, so much so that when my addle-pated messenger Issa told his news he always began with the formula, 'Listen! For the Turtle speaks . . .', which required the answer: 'Tell the Turtle . . .'. That they gave me the designation 'Turtle', I did not mind at all.

In fact, I was rather pleased.

No European name makes sense to an African and we are all secretly dubbed with some epithet by which we are known amongst them. Many of these are very shrewd and often cutting, and wisely, as a rule, they are not revealed. One Englishman I knew was called

'Snake-voice', because he lisped, and I had heard a very gruff dowager labelled 'Really-truly-male'. At least, 'Turtle' indicated my trade, though I suppose they could have been referring to my walk! Anyway, I found my new name extremely useful in all subsequent dealings in Somalia and that was the main thing.

In the evening I helped Saidi with the setting-out of the turtle nets, since he and his men were naturally unfamiliar with the technique, though they learnt very rapidly. I slept with them that night and gave them a hand the following morning in hauling the nets. Happily, this first attempt secured three big turtles, at which success they were justly proud. Wading back through the shallows, chitchatting noisily amongst ourselves as we went, we were not keeping a look-out and suddenly there was a great threshing in the water around Saidi's legs and a thick, whip-like tail broke the surface. The fisherman gave a sudden cry of pain and toppled over backwards whilst a sand cloud billowed up under him and a dark shadow sped away across the bed of the lagoon. It was a sting-ray and Saidi in his carelessness had trodden squarely upon it! One of the poisoned spines in the root of its tail had struck him directly in the calf muscle, and when we got him to shore I saw that a good 3 inches of the pen-thick spear remained embedded in his flesh. Already the agonizing effects of the poisonous mucus which covered the spine and lay within its grooved length were making themselves felt. Saidi's face was a dirty yellow and his whole leg trembled uncontrollably, even though he held it tightly above the knee in his iron grip, in an effort to hold it steady.

With the poison already in the wound there was no point in waiting to sterilize any implements; so with his knife I sliced deep into the muscle along the length of the embedded fragment, forced back the lips of the wound and prised out the barb, taking care not to leave any pieces within the cavity. Saidi and the others wanted to cauterize the terrible gash and already a bar of iron was in the fire for this purpose, but I persuaded them not to, since I was sure that if they did the muscle would be so damaged as never to recover. Instead, I laved the raw flesh with jets of sea water spurted from my mouth, applied a tourniquet above the knee and had him carried to the Landrover, where we made him as comfortable as we could before driving back to my own camp, where I kept a medical kit for such emergencies. By now, in spite of the douche, the poison was giving Saidi intense agony. The jolting of the truck on the rough terrain made little real difference to his torment, so I drove as fast as

I could. By the time we reached Munghia his leg was in a terrible state, gangrenous slime having formed within the slit, while the spongy tissues bubbled occasionally and gave off an unpleasant odour. I knew he would not accept any injection at my hands, but I thought that if we got him into hospital he might by then have become unconscious or would take a sleeping draft and thus would have no say in the matter of further treatment. Accordingly I halted only long enough to get out the permanganate of potash crystals and sprinkle them liberally upon the putrefying flesh before continuing to Merca.

When his sodden *kanzu* was removed in the casualty ward of the little hospital, his whole limb was seen to be affected, the foot was striped in blue and yellow and the thigh was swollen like a great sausage, like a victim of elephantiasis. The Italian doctor took one look, reached for morphia and penicillin, and made ready to administer them. Saidi, his face seemingly devoid of all flesh and colour, gave a moan, rolled off the pallet on which he lay and started to crawl towards the door. The orderly and I pounced on him and held him, but lifted back on to the couch he would not be. There ensued one of the most remarkable conversations in which I have ever taken part. Saidi had relapsed into his local Somal dialect, which the orderly interpreted in Kiswahili and I translated into Italian. The fisherman lay curled in a ball on the floor, with his head in his *kanzu* and his disfigured leg stuck stiffly out to one side. The orderly knelt over him to hear his whispered words, I sat at his feet trying to ease the grotesque limb into a better position, and the doctor, a fat and pompous little man, strutted up and down muttering imprecations *sotto voce* against his own stupidity of ever coming to this crazy, barbarous country.

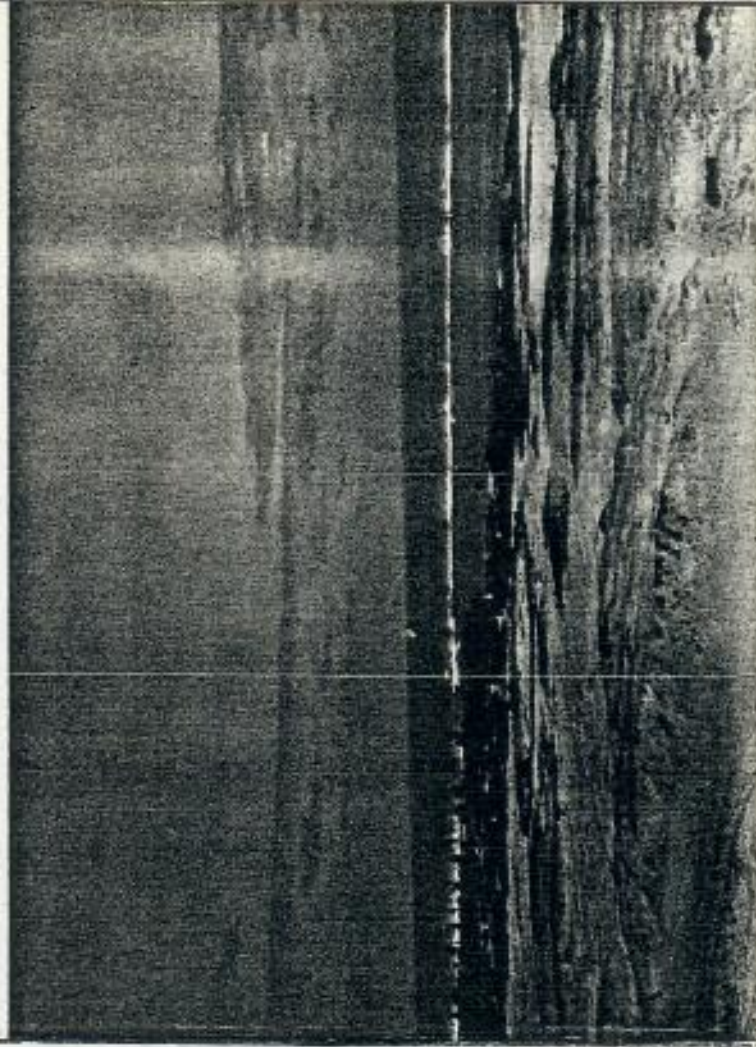
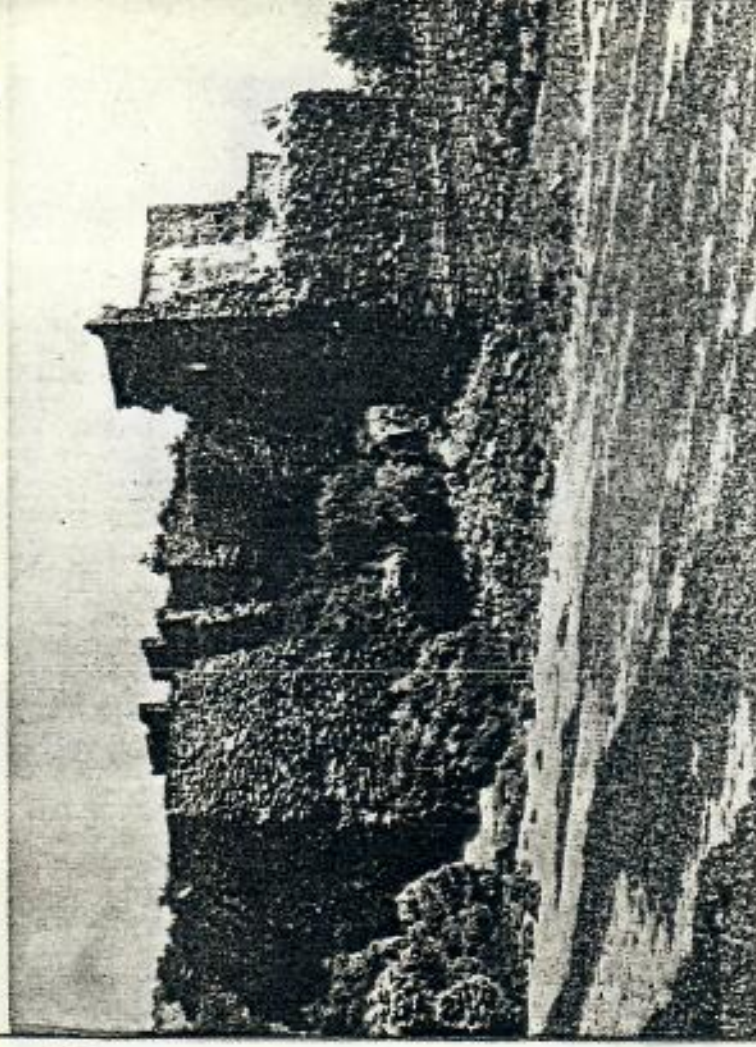
As far as Saidi was concerned, he would swallow no medicine of any kind, not even a glass of water for his great thirst unless we all three swore that it did not contain anything to make him sleep. Further, no liquid must we put in his blood or dilute it in any way. Finally, we must promise not to cut off his leg.

As each of these specific injunctions were passed on, the doctor grew madder and madder: 'He tells me what I must and must not do! Is he the doctor and I the patient? Tell this great *stupido* that if I do not put this anti-toxin into his blood then he dies! Pouff! like that,' and he snapped his fingers in the air and marched up and down some more.

Still the fisherman was adamant. If he died, he died, but his blood

11. KANDERSHEIKH. The ruined and deserted township

12. SOMALIA. The goban (coastal plateau), with the oasis of Gander-sherikh



would be pure and his body unutilated. The rest was with God. Ointments and unguents, yes. Even powders and stones (by which he meant crystals like the permanganate), but no dilution of his blood and no cutting away of his flesh. Then he thought some more and went on to say that his food must be cooked in clean dishes, not soiled with the fat of pigs and that no alcohol must be given him. Also that the woman who prepared his food must be a good Mohammedan and not suffering from her menstrual period at that time. And if he was put in a room without windows the direction in which Mecca lay must be shown and his bed arranged so that he might turn his face to the city of his faith should he die. Most of these utterances neither the nurse nor myself dared reveal to the little physician, lest he die of apoplexy on the spot. Eventually, this long-suffering man washed his hands of the whole affair, but very decently gave me leave to put Saidi into a ward and said that the orderly and myself might treat him as best we could, but that no responsibility for the fisherman's life or death could rest with the hospital.

Once the doctor had left the room our semi-delirious patient became calmer and before long he was sufficiently reassured to allow us to clean out and treat the infected wound, this time by washing it out with sterilized water and dusting it with sulphanilamide powder. After this we moved him into an empty ward and made him drink some tea and take four 'Aspros', the only tablets he knew and would accept. By evening Saidi had fallen into a coma and that night I slept in the room beside him. At one time I thought he was dying, for his leg was still enormous, his groin was striated with the inroads of the poison, his pulse became fluttery and his breathing very laboured. Gently I turned his face upon the pillow toward the general direction of Mecca and sat back and waited. Just before dawn he fell into a deep, healthy sleep and with the light I saw that the marks of the poison were fading upon his body, that the skin on his thigh seemed less taut and that his breathing was normal. At mid-day, satisfied that he was out of immediate danger, I left the hospital and went to tell his kinsmen the good news. Surprisingly, in Saidi's absence they had carried on with the netting and when I asked them why, the men said that of course the new work would prove successful, for had not Saidi's wound 'blessed' their initiation with blood, a sure sign of divine approval. Proof of this was the four turtles they had taken that night, and when they had seen them struggling in the nets they knew that Saidi was now all right and they worried no more.

K

13. CAMEL-GIRL, with usual kettle of drinking water in her hand

14. Somali nomads on the move through the bush. The curved sticks on the camel's back make up the basic hut-frames for the coming night's encampment



Within a week their leader was back with them. For almost a month he could not walk, but controlled the nettings from a couch of mangrove poles and sacking which we prepared for him by the shore. Over this we spread a sail as an awning and made a wind break around it out of the old turtle carapaces. Water and provisions I brought in by Landrover and with time the scene of his convalescence developed unintentionally into a small camp. One of the fishermen coined a name for it, and this soon eclipsed the original title of the headland. They called it 'The Sickness-House of the Turtle' in honour of Saidi's suffering and the new work. Even when he was on his feet at last, his leg was still a sorry sight, for the flesh had not knitted together properly but had formed a puckered mouth of bloodless, blistered lips. Deep within this small pits of pus remained, and even a year later poisonous matter sometimes oozed from it, so lasting were the effects of the poison. Having seen the work of the sting-ray's defensive weapon I understood why, 3,000 years ago, the Trojans in their high-walled city feared the great Achilles above all other Greeks, for his long lance did not bear a head of bronze as most, but was tipped with the same deadly sting-ray spine.

As the weeks passed so the surrounding countryside became more and more burnt-up by the dry wind. Camped right on the coast, and living in and feeding off the sea, I did not realize how serious the situation was until I heard the news at Gobwen: the much-feared 'seventh' had stricken the land. Every seven years, more or less, one season of rains was sparse and finished early and the subsequent ones were late. Sometimes this happened once in five years, sometimes once in ten, but on the average the great drought would come every seven years. I first noticed it by the increase in the nomads who came to the well at Munghia. Previously these people had come in small family groups bringing their camels and cattle to the water source and usually they then settled down in the neighbourhood for a few weeks, resting themselves whilst their stock browsed over the bush-clad slopes of the escarpment.

These 'stop-overs' of theirs were very useful to us for, freed from much of their normal labour, the nomads could be persuaded to go wood-gathering on our behalf to satisfy our incessant need of boiler fuel. The *badawin* liked this work for two reasons. Firstly, it gave them a change, and secondly, they were able to earn actual cash, a rare but in those days an increasingly necessary commodity in their lives. Once this work started it was surprising how quickly

the news of our need for firewood spread, and before we had been long at Munghia we no longer had to seek out each fresh contingent of wanderers as they arrived in the district, for they came to the camp already informed as to our exact requirements in log shapes and sizes and the prices we were prepared to pay. Usually, their contracts with us would last only a week or so before they moved on, having earned the money they required. For convenience during this period they would set up their little skin tents close by and I thus came to learn much of their daily routines.

In appearance these nomads were very striking. Tall and gaunt, their big feet seemed to flap loosely at the ankles like the feet of the camels they tended. They had fine, straight noses, beautifully-formed wide mouths, big white teeth that often protruded too far by our standards of beauty, and fierce, dark smouldering eyes. Their hands were long and graceful and their skin a smooth copper that darkened and crisped to a charcoal shade under the hot winds of the desert. The men wore their hair 'fuzzy-wuzzy', in great back-combed bee-hives of considerable complexity. The dandies amongst them ornamented their coiffures with porcupine quills, slivers of bone and even beads or flowers. Their great feet were shod with coarse leather sandals, the straps of which were sometimes half-an-inch thick. Around their bodies they wore a single garment, a white cotton *maro* arranged like a Roman toga over one shoulder but caught up between the legs to allow them to stride out.

The woman used the same basic garment but in a more complicated form. Their *maros* consisted of an endless 'roller-towel' piece of material, 12 to 14 feet long, which they used in a hundred differing ways. They had one draped style when they were leading a camel, allowing an arm and shoulder free to pull on a halter without fear of allowing the dress to slip. They had a different way of folding it for pulling up water buckets, and another for carrying children, yet another for cooking; while there were distinct styles for indicating they were single or widowed or were expectant mothers. Out of her *maro* a woman could make a carry-cot to nurse her children, a tent for the night, a screen within which she might wash in private and a boudoir in which she could enjoy her lover in secrecy. Having no rooms inside her house she constructed and furnished compartments from her own garment. To the nomad woman her *maro* was the medium through which she could express herself; she might spend hours and days in devising new styles, allowing the mystery of her female personality to flower through its folds.

In accordance with the rigours of the nomad's hard life, water was not used for washing except on rare occasions. Instead their skins were scoured with fine sand and anointed with a little oil. Teeth and gums were cleaned with splayed twigs of a certain type of bush and this activity occupied much of their leisure moments. On the occasions when a white man might smoke a cigarette, the nomad would brush his teeth, a pleasant time-consuming habit with which to fill the odd five-minute periods of his life. To darken their gums and whiten the enamel the nomads chewed walnut-bark, a practice not to be indulged in too frequently, for the strong juices blistered the tongue and made the mouth sore.

To beautify themselves the women relied mainly upon eye-cosmetics, making use of a blue clay and, more rarely, kohl for the lids and outlining the edges of the lashes with charcoal sticks. Occasionally they enlivened the tear-ducts with red dye. Scent, as such, they did not know. Instead they smoked their bodies over little fires on to which they threw certain twigs, dried woods and resinous compounds which gave off the required aromatic smoke. Their word for both the process and the materials used was *salafala*, and the little bundles containing the necessary ingredients were among their most treasured possessions.

A *salafala*-party was a great occasion. The women would all congregate, usually in the afternoon or just before dusk, and would go out into the desert a little way. Here they would build a fire and whilst waiting for it to form a bed of embers they would sit around chatting, primping and gossiping. When the coals were judged ready they would strip and dance around, throwing on the smoke-producing fuel and fanning the cinders into new life with their discarded *maras*. As the pungent clouds rose they would weave in and out of them, twisting and gyrating with sinuous motions of arms and bodies. Their robes sufficiently scented, these would be dropped in a heap on the ground to let the fibres steep in the vapours. Then with loosened hair and quickening movements the dance would become wilder, each of the women in turn straddling the fire, raising herself on tip-toe and bending backwards so that her flowing hair was deep within the smoke. In this position, unable to move her legs to the rhythm of the measure, the muscles on her body danced instead, ripples and shivers running up her body from knee to fingertips and then back again whilst her sister maenads urged her on with savage ululations and swift hand-clappings. The ritual over, the pores on the hard smooth bodies choked with *salafala* and the embers

cold and black upon the sand, the party of women would return to their encampment, as mentally revitalized and as gay as their sisters in Europe after a successful visit to the hairdresser.

The nomads' staple diet was camel milk, pasteurized over wood fires. This gave the liquid its smokey taste and also killed the bacteria in it which brought on diarrhoea. As a standard purgative they drank the raw milk to which had been added sheep fat or beef dripping. The camels, of course, were their life, far too precious to be ridden. Since earliest times Somalia has been the breeding and rearing grounds of camels for the whole of Arabia, so the animals were their 'gold standard' by which everything, even human life, was valued. As settlement of a blood-feud the price of a man's death was 100 camels and a woman's fifty.

But though much of the interior was given over entirely to raising camels, here along the *gobon* or dry coastal plateau and also in the north cattle had become the prime form of stock. Camels satisfied a man's needs for himself and his family, but for trading and increase cattle were now necessary—not the straight-backed Texan type of bush cattle, but the imperious zebu, with magnificent downward-arching horns and massive humped shoulders. Individually, many of these splendid beasts were identical to those shown in ancient Egyptian bas-reliefs, white oxen of the sun, the pure lineage unsullied through four millenniums. Several times I had been delighted to see bulls with horns so long and earth-raking that, when grazing off the ground, the animals were compelled to walk backwards lest they snag in the vegetation. Pliny, 2,000 years ago, described this engaging habit and was promptly labelled a liar in consequence!

There was one other direct link between these Somali herders and the builders of the pyramids. Travelling incessantly, so that their stock might find sufficient nourishment among the bare scrublands, these people could carry few permanent possessions. But there was one 'luxury' item which provided the link. Inside the bundles of hides which formed their tent coverings Egyptian 'pillows' would often be found. These were small neck-rests, carved from a single piece of wood and often richly ornamented. In shape they were like champagne goblets when viewed from the side, having a graceful shallow cup at the top connected to a wide base by a slender stem. In use these 'pillows' supported the back of the head when asleep, keeping the complex male coiffures off the earth and preventing it from becoming disarranged during the night. Identical neck-rests were found in the Valley of Kings within the

tomb of Tutankhamen, even the ornamentation being similar. The Somalis, along with the Masai and Turkana of Kenya, are all remnants of those Nilo-hamatic migrations untold centuries ago, and both their cattle and their 'pillows' remain as witnesses to their origins.

But to return to the well at Munghia at the time of the drought. Previously, having made the long journey from the interior, the nomads had been content to stay for a while, rejoicing in the plentiful water and allowing their cattle to graze at liberty over the low hills. Now the wanderers came down from the north-west in greater numbers, spent but a few hours beside the water source and then moved on, taking with them all that they could carry of it in their varied bottles, kettles and skins. When I asked why they no longer loitered I was told that with the drought the herbage along the escarpment was not sufficient for their stock unless they kept them constantly on the move, a strain on both men and beasts but necessary lest they die. Even to my unskilled eyes these herdsfolk seemed close to the boundaries of survival, without an ounce of fat upon their stick-like bodies, and with eyes that smouldered darkly within cavernous sockets. Their cattle, too, were in poor shape, the flesh burnt down to their bones by starvation and with muzzles and eyes dry in the desert wind that followed them in scorching puffs. For weeks the pitiful procession flowed past us, but hard at work as we were we took scant notice of their peregrinations and they, on their side, no longer came to our camp, but kept apart and barely responded to our greetings and our summary attempts at communication.

One morning, wishing to get away from the enslaving routine of the camp, I decided to take the Landrover and drive south, ostensibly to tag egg-laying turtles in the El Afuen region so that their subsequent movements might become traceable. In fact, there was no hope of my ever reaching El Afuen on account of the intervening terrain, as well I knew before setting out. Yet I felt I must escape from the interminable butchery and this formed a convenient excuse.

By mid-day I was well and truly lost, for the alternating areas of ravine-scarred rock and soft sands had forced me far inland, up into the coastal hills, and I had long since lost sight of the beaches. Coming to a halt under a solitary thorn tree I switched off the ignition and sat back to let the stillness and silence flood over me. But the peaceful quietude I had expected was not there. At least, not entirely. From over the crest of a nearby dune there was borne on

the hot still air an unmistakable sound: the hiccupping wail of a baby.

Somali children seldom cry, and when they do it is usually only a momentary outburst, so that when several minutes had gone by and the cries were unchecked I clambered stiffly down from my seat and walked up to the top of the dune to see what could have happened. Arriving at the summit I found myself on the rim of a large 'dust-bowl', the inner slopes of which ran shallowly down on all sides for 100 yards or so before flattening out. The crater was desolate and devoid of any living thing save that in the exact centre of its saucer, blacker than my own shadow upon hot white sand, squirmed a tiny fragment of pathetic, sobbing humanity! Running, stumbling and finally sliding down across the loose surface, I reached the child before I had even thought of what I might do once there. It crouched face-downwards on the sand floor, its skinny buttocks raised in the air, its thin arms clasped around a shaven head. When I lifted it up to wrap it in my bush shirt, it seemed too light to be a living creature, more like an empty seedpod or a discarded eggshell. For a second the thin squalling stopped and I caught a glimpse of a sand-besmirched face and swollen, staring eyes as the wobbly head turned round and up to look at me. Then with a new cry, this time of horror, presumably at my white skin and unfamiliar smell, the infant buried itself in the darkness of my garment and howled anew. Thinking that its parents must be near at hand, I scrambled back up the slope with the sobbing bundle slung hammock-wise in my jacket, and from the crest I looked out across the surrounding country.

But no sign of life could be seen, not a movement amongst the sparse vegetation nor a cloud of dust over the sand dunes. The land was empty, bare and seemingly bereft of any other living thing. Not even a cicada shrilled in the thickets and no hawk cast its shadow upon the bare ground. Tracks there were, both of men and stock, but which were old and which were new I had no way of telling, for the dry air had preserved them equally. I called and shouted, but could not even raise an echo and both my own and the child's cries went unanswered. Back in the shade of the Landrover I cleaned up the little girl as best I could, gave her some water to drink and a sodden biscuit to chew, and as soon as she slipped off to sleep, worn out by her sorrows, sat back to debate my next move.

Obviously her kinsfolk had not missed her and equally obviously they would hardly know where exactly to look for her when they did —though how the toddler, whom I judged to be about a year old,

had got herself into the centre of the sand-bowl other than by rolling down into it, I could not think. For me to try to look for her people was sheer folly, since my vehicle would not cover the same terrain that they could, nor had I any idea as to which way they had gone. My best course of action seemed to be to take the child to the police, who might be able to locate its parents or would at least be better equipped to handle the situation than I.

Accordingly, I turned and drove back along the way I had come, avoiding our camp at Munghia, and eventually reached Merca. At the police post I related my story to the major in charge, who listened in silence and then sighed and said that he would take charge of the child. Sensing a reluctance in his acquiescence, I asked if he thought that the parents would be traced and he replied that he thought not, for the land was very big and people moved fast these days. Then he cheered up and told me not to worry and that at the worst a foster-home would be found for the baby and that he personally would attend to it. Having known the man for some time, and having come to respect him, I left the matter at that and went away reassured, having seen the terrified mite safely delivered into the arms of a massive matron, wife of one of his men.

Barely a week later I came across another child in the wilderness. This time there was no cry to attract me to the scene but just a black blob lying on the ground which I would have passed by, had I not thought it the corpse of some unfamiliar animal and had drawn up to examine it. It was not quite a corpse, not quite; though it had but a slender hold on life and drifted in and out from unconsciousness to dim-eyed half-wakefulness many times on the long road back to Merca. There I went straight to the hospital before telephoning the police commandant, whilst the duty medical officer pumped water and glucose into the comatose waif. When the major arrived he hardly looked at the child at all, but drew me into an empty ward and sat me on a bed whilst he walked up and down in complete silence for a little while. Eventually he stopped, perched himself on a bed along the opposite wall and began.

'To you, a stranger, our country must sometimes appear very primitive and very poor. But it is a hard land, as you have seen, and many of our peoples have a long way to go before they have any what you would call "security" in their lives. You must not judge us too quickly, nor look at us wholly through your eyes. And now I have to tell you something you will find hard to understand.' He paused, fumbled, sought for suitable words, and then continued.

'When next you hear a child's cry in the lonely places, pay no heed, but turn aside and walk away. When next you see a baby abandoned in the dunes, turn aside and drive by. When next you see crows and jackals gather in such places, turn aside and do not look. These are not things for you, for they are private sorrows and you can do nothing about them.'

'You mean to tell me that the children that I have brought in have been abandoned deliberately? Alivel Out *shere!* But why? The *badawin* love their children. Are they not "drops of blood", to use their own words. . . ?'

'Yes, they love them and they weep blood within their hearts when they do this thing. But have you not heard of the "seventh"? . . . and the police chief went on to tell me more of the great drought and how it affected the nomads. As the vegetation wilted and died so the herdsmen were forced to drive their cattle further each day. It was no good staying near water holes and wells, it was the grazing that mattered. In times like the 'seventh' the beasts must be moved some twenty miles daily, so that they might gather sufficient nourishment to be strong enough to walk perhaps twenty-five miles on the morrow, should the scarcity of vegetation require it. This continual extension of their normal range had to be kept up according to the dictates of the drought. Once the animals were no longer able to cope with these long daily marches then the whole unit of men and stock was doomed, for the nomads would never leave their flocks but would die with them out in the burning *goban*. To deal with these grim migrations the nomads had stripped their way of life down to the hard kernel of necessity. Nothing superfluous did they carry, no unnecessary labour did they indulge in. But the 'seventh', for all their care, could prove their undoing unless they pruned still further down into their stark lives. On continual daily treks of thirty miles they could still just survive, but once this limit was exceeded there was something which held them back and endangered the whole unit: the young women, nursing babies of up to two years of age.

Above the age of two the mother/infant pair did not threaten the group, for the child was by then more self-sufficient, could walk a little of the long way, did not require his mother's milk, and left her free to carry more burdens. Thus the caravan could extend its range again and all might then survive till the rain's swift release.

A fertile woman was of more value than her baby and their

beliefs could not countenance the blood-guilt of child murder. But for all to live the extra load must be shed, and so when the 'seventh' made its terrible demand the two-and-unders were discarded and left behind, whilst the others struggled on across the wasteland, per-chance to die as well, perchance to live, but having wrung from their harsh land a brief respite through their bitter sacrifice.

'But cannot these people be persuaded to give their unwanted children in? To a police post perhaps, or to a hospital?' I asked.

'How can they do that? Their life is in the wilderness with their cattle. Besides, slavery and capture is all too recent a thing in the land and no mother will surrender her child to a stranger! These *badawin* are the proudest of us all in this matter. No, better the burdensome child should die. We all feel this way, even I. How can we save them? We have no money for foster-parents, no homes for orphans. We can barely feed and clothe our own!'

'But what of the orphanages that the Italians have near Mogadishu and down near the Guiba? I know they are Catholic but that cannot be helped and a life is a life. . . .'

'Look! Those orphanages are for half-castes only. The sons and daughters that the Italians have had on our women and then deserted! That is why their Church takes them. That is their doing and their responsibility. No Somali child would pass their gates. . . . This matter of the cattle-folk is our business and only we can deal with it in our own way. . . . The child you brought in the other day: it is now in the house of one of my sergeants, whose wife you saw take the girl. I cannot authorize any money for the foundling and the man has several children already. We Somalis are proud of our blood, proud of our lineage. To take in a stranger's child causes trouble and gives offence. Now you have brought in another! What am I to do with it? Shall I place it in the road? Will you take it back and leave it in the wilderness? Or shall I take it into my house and cause unhappiness in my family? Or will *you* take it with you, back to England, to explain it to your people and foist the burden on to your kinsfolk? Leave it, I say! Don't meddle! Leave us, I pray you, to do as we must! Do not be like those Americans we see here who rush around thinking they will solve all our problems with a new tractor and a bottle of Coca Cola. I tell you these things as a friend and not in anger. . . . All right, do not worry any more now. Look, I will arrange about the new child. Never fear, I will find a home somehow, somewhere. . . . Do not disturb yourself on that account, but remember, above all else, remember, and bring no more babies

to me nor to anyone else here! Close your eyes to what you may see on your path these days. Buy yourself a radio to drown out small cries in the desert, and if you still find a child out there and would be merciful, strangle it with your hands if your religion allows you to do such a thing, *but do not bring it in*. . . .

On the way back to Mungia I thought of all those gaunt and weary nomads I had seen in the last few weeks. How many of those families had been forced to leave children behind or, as I passed them, were contemplating doing so. One group in particular I remembered. They had appeared like spectral figures through the wall of dust that their cattle had raised; two men, a boy of perhaps ten, a little girl and two women bent with burdens. As the ragged little caravan tottered by, one of the women adjusted the fold of her *waro*, which she held between her teeth, and I caught a glimpse of her face. She was young, very young, and her features had the classic beauty and serenity of an Egyptian death-mask, with smooth-drawn skin, finely shaped nose and delicate bird's-wing brows. But her eyes! All that could be seen were the sockets, so deep sunken were they, and no life seemed to lie within them. She turned her head towards me and for an instant of time I saw deep down within the black pits two filmy orbs containing all the suffering, pain and anguish of the world. Then she passed on and was lost in the dust.

Had she, perhaps, walked that very morning away from something that wailed and tried to crawl after her? Did the noise of the Landrover's engine blot out the feeble cries as I went by unheeding? I had no way of knowing.

Ten days later the rains broke and in the space of a few hours the parched land was turned into a shallow lake. Dragonflies emerged from chrysalises long hidden in the dry soil; birds sang again, the parched bush sprouted miraculously and tiny flowers carpeted the earth. The first downpour flooded the dry riverbeds, cut new channels down the hillsides and swept away part of our camp. It was time to retreat to Chismaio before the Guiba rose and flooded all the intervening land. Hastily we ferried all the gear and produce to Merca, whence the lorries might take it on. The big thatched hut we left for next season and stowed within it those boats we were leaving behind as well. Eventually all was done and I drove off in the Landrover, back to the cannery, happy to think that the first of our camps had been such a success, and already planning in my mind the chain of these that should be extended northwards along the 1,700 miles

of coastline that remained. But there was one thought that turned in my brain like an evil worm and spoilt my happiness.

What exactly would I have done had I come across another abandoned child? The rains had saved me from facing such a decision; but what, just what, would I have done? To this day I do not know the answer to that question.

CHAPTER NINE

Live Myth and Dead Desert

*'I swear by the Declining Day,
verily, man's lot is cast amid destruction.'*

Sura 103

On my return I found that though the output of the cannery had been tapered off to fit in with the rainy season there still remained much to be done. Geoff and Tony were busy overhauling the machinery and vehicles and I was left in relative peace to deal with the backlog of correspondence relating to present and future orders. Luckily, I was able to see Knud once or twice and between us we programmed the work for the coming year and such further development of the factory as seemed necessary. For a long time past we had toyed with the idea of running a cold-storage and deep-freeze plant in conjunction with the cannery, so that we might deal in frozen crayfish, guinea-fowl, and other high-priced export food-stuffs. Here the main problem to solve was that of electrical power, for Chisimaio was served by an ancient dusk-to-dawn DC generator, a wartime relic, that could not supply our small present needs, let alone such a major item as a freezing plant. To install our own power station was a big step, and possibly one that would soon be wasted, for among the ancillary projects of the new port constructions upon which Knud was engaged was one for the provision of the whole district with AC power. In view of this we decided it would be wiser to wait another year at any rate before committing ourselves and we re-shaped our plans accordingly.

During the first year we had found that the hand-operated canning machinery was quite adequate for our needs and that mechanization was not only unnecessary but uneconomic, in view of the simple work required and the local low wage structure. All this meant that, now everything was installed and working satisfactorily, the presence of a skilled engineer in the factory was rather pointless.

The little remaining technical work could easily be handled by Geoff and his own mechanics. That really left no place for Tony and we agreed to part company. For him this was, in a sense, a great relief, since he made no pretence of liking Somalia, and speaking no other language than English he found the problem of communication well nigh insupportable. On leaving, he went to Australia, where he and we felt he would be much happier and have no difficulty in finding employment.

One of the useful aspects of the seasonal closure of the cannery during the rains was that we had the place to ourselves to experiment and potter as we wished. Previously, thinking we would be installing a freezing plant at this stage, we had given little consideration to the canning of crayfish, but now we thought that we might at least make some experiments and allotted ourselves a week in which to conduct trials. The canning of both crab and crayfish was, we knew, a very difficult process, due to the strong acids and arsenical compounds in these creatures that either reacted unfavourably with the lining of the tin or affected the meat itself when cooked under pressure. Once again we had little data to go on, for the canners who are successful understandably keep their methods to themselves. All we could do therefore was to produce a series of batches to differing formulae in the hope of evolving a successful system. I sent word down the chain of Barjun islands that we would accept all crayfish brought in to us throughout the period allocated providing that they were live, were not carrying eggs and were above a certain size. The fishermen, bored with the end of turtling, responded magnificently. On the first day over 500 crayfish arrived, a number far exceeding our expectation or our capacity for storage, and by the time the processing began the whole water-sliced floor of the cannery room was a crawling mass of clicking, 'chirruping' crayfish through which we moved apprehensively, our bare legs sheathed in wellington boots hastily acquired to meet the emergency.

At the end of the week Geoff and I had at last hit upon a method that seemed right, though our initial attempts had been sorry in the extreme, with tins bulging, buckling and corroding or the contents turning blue-black and poisonous, all with monotonous regularity. However, what tests we could carry out ourselves indicated that our final batch was all right and certainly the taste was excellent.

In high hopes I cadged a lift on an American aircraft that had called in at Chisimaio on its way to Mogadishu, taking some crates of the precious crayfish with me. Following our usual practice I

sent off these samples by air from Mogadishu to our various buyers and sat back to await their reaction, using up my time before returning to Chisimaio in making the rounds of the Ministries to check that our work and presence in Somalia was still welcome. All the officials seemed very friendly and reassuring, even though at that time there was a resurgence of anti-British feeling in Mogadishu due to the deteriorating situation on the Kenya border. Whilst I was there two Italians were killed in the streets by Somalis under cover of this political unrest, but these stabbings were probably the settlement of private grudges for which the rioting crowds formed good cover. A friend of mine, a hale and bluff Norwegian, working for the UN and attached as an adviser to the Somali Ministry of Commerce, was mistaken by the crowd as an Englishman and was roughly man-handled in consequence. Being completely irrefragable he thought this a tremendous joke, pretending that he considered the implied insult unpardonable. For myself, whenever I saw signs of a crowd gathering I changed my route to avoid it and experienced no unpleasantness. Most of this unrest was stirred up by Egyptian political agitators, present in Somalia in large numbers under the guise of 'educational advisers'. Such incidents were not severely dealt with by the government since they served to divert attention away from internal problems and criticisms, of which there were many.

Whilst I was in the capital I watched the annual parade in honour of Independence, which took place in the wide boulevard of the Lungo Mare, that brave section of the promenade previously housing the Italian offices of government and, since the war, largely unoccupied.

I noticed a new and ominous aspect to this ceremony. Others that I had attended here had been remarkable for the delightful *laissez-faire* which permeated the proceedings. Leaders of contingents, smart and well-drilled though they might be, on seeing friends in the crowd would wave and smile, sometimes even breaking ranks to shake hands with their acquaintances. In the past these affairs had adhered to the original celebrative concept; laughter and joy intermingled freely with the pride of the young nation showing off its paces. This time it was different, the faces of the participating troops stern and over-disciplined; the pace was faster and the music more martial. From a holiday it had become a demonstration of armed strength and there was little room for laughter in the crowd. Slogans were everywhere and they too echoed a change of purpose.

Previously these had expressed the most sincere and reasoned exhortation, the best I had ever seen in emergent Africa: 'Tribalism is the enemy of Somalia.' 'To raise your hand against another is to raise your hand against God.' 'The evils that beset us are disease and famine, the children of ignorance.'

Now their place was taken by one standard banner: 'The emblem star of United Somalia has five points, one for each of our territories. Of these Italian Somaliland and British Somaliland are now free and form the nucleus of the nation. There remain French Somaliland, the Ogaden groaning under Ethiopia and the NFD. These too shall be liberated. These too shall be free Somalia awake!'

Down in the port, crates of Russian arms, weapons for the army that was being forged, formed great dumps. The Russian Embassy had recently increased its staff to 144, fully three-quarters of which were advisers and technicians in the military field. The Chinese Peoples' Republic contingent was increasing daily and from my hotel window that overlooked the block of flats which they had leased I watched each morning as they held their drill and unarmed combat exercises in its gardens, screened from the public eye by the high wall that surrounded it. But in spite of all this undercover activity in the capital, officialdom seemed bent on impressing me with reassurances that the field of politics was a thing apart, a game which Somalia must play for appearance's sake, but that none of it was really serious and that their prime consideration was the economic development of their country and for that reason I should not worry. The Ministry of the Interior, in fact, suggested that after my two qualifying years of residence were up, I should apply for Somali citizenship and that they would object in no way to my holding dual nationality, even though temporarily they were estranged from Britain. Since this was something that many Italian residents in the country had tried to effect, but with little success, I left Mogadishu feeling sure that our fisheries industry would be encouraged to expand as fast as it could.

The journey back to Chisimaio was a nightmare, for it took twelve days and cost the lives of two of the three vehicles I rode in. The first, a lorry carrying drums of fuel for the oil-thirsty south, after having bogged down innumerable times in the mud, finally came to grief through attempting to carve its way along a hillside to escape the lowland marshes. Having made the ascent, the driver turned parallel to the crest only to find that the slope was too great for the

stability of the vehicle, and what started out as a long downhill slide, during which the passengers successively leapt out as they were able, ended in complete disaster when it turned completely over and rolled the rest of the way, shedding drums and bodywork as it went. We camped by the wreckage for two miserable days until a post office Landrover, carrying pay-sacks for the government in Chisimaio, came by. On this I bribed a lift and all went well until we came to the flooded Guiba river. Here the driver, not wishing to enter the thickets that bordered it, strayed too close to the bank which, undercut by the swollen river, gave way and down we dived into it. Again we all got out in time, though sitting in the back I was the last and had to swim for it, for I delayed a second too long in throwing my valise out ahead of me. With sound Islamic common sense, so contrary to our Western ideas of 'responsibility', we were all delighted at our safe deliverance and no one gave a second thought to the money bags and the Landrover now at the bottom of the Guiba. Eventually we were able to cross the river by raft and continued our way to Chisimaio on a police truck without further mishap.

On arrival I found awaiting me several long reports concerning the cans of crayfish tails. Our samples were still not satisfactory, it appeared, and further work would have to be done before serious production could be attempted. However, the same bunch of mail brought news that the price of canned crayfish was falling rapidly, due to Cuba unloading large quantities on to the European market following a United States embargo on all her produce. Plainly, to try to enter the market now would be foolish and we decided to wait till the following year brought us our freezing plant and we would then be able to concentrate on the frozen tails, a simpler process altogether.

A month later, the rains over and future production orders of turtle having been sorted out, I was on my way back to Merca with a fresh camp convoy. This time I intended striking further north still, leaving the Munghia district to Saidi and his henchmen. Accordingly, I stopped off at Gobwen, sending the others on ahead to wait for me at the coast. At his village I found Saidi still limping from the effect of his sting-ray accident, but otherwise fit and anxious to start work. I gave him enough netting, twine and other gear to ensure he would be adequately equipped, suggested that he use the big hut we had left at Munghia as his base and told him he might make free use of the large *mashour* we had stored within it. This was the big ten-man canoe I had purchased from Sheamina and which

I had decided a long while back would be just the craft for Saidi with his indomitable drive; nor was I mistaken in this, as his subsequent catches proved. Naming a day a week ahead on which I would come to install my butchers and start the work there, I pushed on in the wake of my troupe, leaving the handsome, imperious man as near in an excited dither as ever I saw him.

At Merca I had a little difficulty in unearthing my fishermen from the cafés, brothels, and markets in which they had ensconced themselves, but after the loss of only one day we set off northward out of the town along the beach. On my recent air trip up the coast I had seen what appeared an excellent area some twenty miles to the north of Merca and towards this I now strove. From aloft it had seemed a deserted town in miniature, stone-built upon a headland, to seaward of which the surf creamed upon a ribbon of reef. To get to it now meant passing first through a coastal village of which I had already heard, named Gelib as was the river township on the Guiba. This 'little' Gelib was of a village type I had not encountered before in Somalia and consisted of a ring of wattle beehive huts surrounded by a heavy stockade, the gates of which were barred with mounds of loose thornbush, such as the nomads use to keep marauding lions from their encampments. At a distance this tall stockade appeared to be banded in wide stripes of paint; silver, henna-red, mantle-green and black. It was only when I approached closely that I saw that these bands were of differing coloured threads, wound *en-masse* around the whole village. This was the work of Gelib apparently, for which its people were famous, for they spun wool from camel and goat, buying the raw hair from the nomads. But more than the spinning of the thread, they were skilled in using dyes; more so than anywhere throughout Somalia.

Originally the earth of the hill on which this village stood had been rich in madder and it was this that had caused their settlement to thrive, but that was centuries ago and now none remained. More recently they had found a supply source at Tajurrah in the far north and thus they still used, shipping it down by camel. For their other colours they purchased dyes from India, since these they judged the best, but this trade route was difficult to keep open and nowadays they were forced to buy inferior dyes from Italy. The colours they fixed with alum and the threads were then spun out round and round the stockade, using the whole village as a giant bobbin, in order for the yarn to shrink and for the colours to become fast. Though Gelib fronted the sea, the township metaphorically turned its back upon it,

having neither boats nor fishermen; and their gates faced inland, opening on to the dry *goban*¹ across which the nomads on whom they relied must come. Entranced by this riot of colour and the friendliness of its inhabitants, I camped the night there, making friends with the chief, a short, tubby man with laughing grey eyes who was justly proud of his people. Though he did not understand my interest in the sea and especially turtles, he gave me leave to come and go through his province as I wished, telling me to take no notice of other villages in the area which housed evil people who would do me harm if they could.

The following morning, as we were about to move off, the headman came and suggested we stay, for he had just received word that the big annual nomadic caravan was coming that afternoon and that we ought not to miss the battle. Asked what he meant, he said that generations ago his people had made enemies with the camel herders over a quarrel in wool prices. Gelib had been besieged by fuzzy-haired *badawin* and many had been killed on both sides until peace had been restored by a wandering mullah who asked for gold from each side to settle the quarrel and then threw his fee into the sea as the combatants looked on, to show how worthless mere coins and their dispute over them were. In memory of this occasion and as a reminder against displaying any violence in the bargaining that would follow, a yearly mock battle was fought on the first arrival of the caravan.

That afternoon, we heard the sound of drums among the dunes and harsh cries and the stamping of many feet. A few banners, green or black, appeared over the hill-crest as the advancing 'army' made their way towards the village under cover of a defile. There followed a brief silence as they grouped for the charge behind a spur of sand, and then with great whoops and yells a motley gang, some 200 strong, tumbled out into the open, racing down the intervening slope on long spindly legs to ford the dry river bed and lurch up the hillock to where the population of Gelib waited for them, banging drums and stamping the dust high in the air. Behind the palisade the women of the village gave vent to the trilling ululation of battle, a continuous shrill, unearthly Red-Indian yowling aimed at raising the blood-lust in their menfolk. As the eye-rolling, scraggy mob scrambled up towards us they threw their spears away, which I for one was glad to see, and the old scimitars and curved Omani daggers with which our side was armed were likewise discarded, as the

¹ *Goban*: dry coastal plateau, without vegetation and largely uninhabited.

villagers ran to meet their opponents. The two waves met, reared and toppled, and in an instant the battle line had become a medley of sweating and embracing figures, grinning hugely and gabbling nineteen to the dozen. Then they all sat down where they were, whilst the boys of each side went around collecting up the weapons and returning them to their owners.

The military aspect restored, a long 'conga-line' of villagers and nomads alternately was formed and the dance-of-welcome wound its serpent-like way through the gates and between the huts of the village, chanting, stamping and laughing to the clapping accompaniment of the women, who stood in the doorways and who lined the open spaces. Under cover of this parade the nomad women and children brought up the camel train, seating the beasts in a huge circle on an open space below the village. Later, with the onset of dusk, meat for the feast was taken to the dry river bed, where fires were being made ready. The visitors gave five camels and ten goats, whilst the villagers provided seven oxen and 100 chickens, and soon the smell and smoke of the roasting carcasses rose up to us where we watched from the hilltop. I wished to buy an ox to give as our contribution, but the thick-set chief would not hear of it, saying that we were his guests. That night my Barjunis ate more meat than I thought possible, until the skin on their stomachs was stretched and straining and they could not move without groaning. All night long the feast continued, and by the morning light it looked as though indeed there had been a battle, for bodies lay scattered across the ground like chaff, intermingling with the ashes of many fires and the half-picked bones over which the village dogs now fought. Knowing very well that by mid-day a 'morning-after-the-night-before' feast would be in the offing, I collected my men; still unsure of themselves in these strange surroundings they had obligingly gone to sleep around the Landrover, and left soon after sunrise.

In my talks with the headman the previous day I had described the ruined settlement where I aimed to set up my next camp and asked if the trucks could reach it easily. In replying that they could, he had warned me of a quicksand on the path, but even with this foreknowledge I nearly lost my vehicle in it, for the surface there appeared no different from its surroundings. Luckily, I was not travelling at more than thirty miles an hour at the time; even so, on striking it the front end of the Landrover dropped like a stone and we came to a complete halt within a space of 10 feet. By then the top

of the bonnet had sunk in flush with the ground, though the rear wheels were not even up to the rims. Before I could stop them some of the fishermen jumped out, only to sink waist deep themselves into the yielding sand; though dry it gave to the touch like warm, thick liquid. Getting clear of this took us six hours and was only achieved by harnessing the trucks like a span of oxen to the bogged vehicle and pulling her free through sheer brute force. Reconnoitring these sinking sands, I marked the periphery with stakes for future reference; but I need not have bothered, for on our return half of them had been swallowed up as the sand bog shifted. Thereafter, on approaching the area I always had someone run on ahead to test the ground, or if alone I did this myself, leaving the Landrover to chug along in its lowest gear behind me, like a well-trained dog running to heel.

As a result of this delay we did not come in sight of the deserted township till almost dusk and, knowing the superstitious awe with which my Barjunis viewed such old habitations, I did not go any further but camped for the night on the hard sand of the beach that led up to it. By the morning's light I saw that, inland from the ruins, across the miniature causeway that joined the headland to the shore, a thick grove of coconut palm concealed a drab wattle village. Since this appeared occupied, I drove there first and asked for the headman. On his arrival I took an instinctive dislike to him, for Sheikh Omar, as he grandly called himself, had the air of a bully and mean rapacious eyes. Telling him our purpose and showing him our permits, I asked his aid with regard to water, goods from his village store and men to help around the camp. He immediately showed his greed, replying that we should pay him for use of the village well (and not make a donation to the mosque as was customary) and that he would look after the distribution of the wages. Also that we could not use the old town across the causeway, for it was his, unless I cared to buy it from him outright. So I thanked him and withdrew and spent the day in preparing our camp site by the side of a ravine a mile away from his village, for in my absence the Barjunis had surveyed the shoreline and found signs of many turtles, and I was not going to be driven from such an area by the presence of an unfriendly village. Before the day was through, several of the locals had wandered out to see what we were up to and from some of them we gathered that Gandersheikh, for that was the name of the settlement, was riven with blood feuds and discontent and that Sheikh Omar was an upstart, a passer-by who had married a wealthy

widow of the village and had assumed the empty office of headman arbitrarily. However, being experienced in worldly matters, he had clinched the usurpation by registering his title with the District Commissioner in Merca, so that no one could force him out now. The village itself was dying, with what young people there were deserting it as soon as they could. If they ever returned it was to find that in their absence the new headman had taken over their land and most of the tiny plots now lay under his hand. The town on the tiny headland had never been theirs but was a thing of long ago and later, when I had time to explore it, I found that it was an Arab trading station of the thirteenth century, in perfect condition but for a few roofs. What the old town had dealt in was obvious by the deep spacious dungeons and little landing stages built into the cliffs leading to them. 'Black Ivory', slaves for the sprawling Arab world of Haroum-el-Raschid and his successors, had been their merchandise.

Judging from all this that there would be trouble should my Barjunis enter the village other than of necessity, I called them together and asked them to keep away from Gandersheikh and said that we would buy such provisions as we needed from Gelib, the village of dyes. As for water, we had found a well nearby, hidden in the sands and used by the nomads, which would serve us very well. The fishermen were quite happy about this arrangement, for the atmosphere of Gandersheikh had already made itself felt and they had no wish to become a cause of *fetima*.¹ But one thing about this ban perturbed them, for they knew that if the catching went well they would be there for four or more months. That was the question of women, or rather the lack of women. Not knowing how to deal with this I asked *Mzee* Saleh, with the experience of many years behind him, what might best be arranged.

The old net-maker thought a while and then replied that if I approved he would go back to Merca and there put the problem before the Q'uadi and his committee of venerable elders. They would look about and find a decent, respectable widow of poor means but good appearance and one that was not given to fornication and evil company. If we built a small annexe to our big hut she could live there. Then each of the men might share her house for two days each month and would be at peace. Moreover, the widow would receive a little money and find herself a useful place in the

¹ *Fetima*: a dispute of a social or communal nature. One of the most common words, unfortunately, in Somalia.

world and the poor of Merca would also benefit, for the fishermen would pay a tithe to the Q'uadi for this service. To me such an arrangement sounded a little far-fetched and even more likely to cause trouble, but trusting Saleh's judgement I gave permission and off he went on his errand. He returned a few days later with a squat bundle of animated black clothes, the standard form of a respectable Mohammedan woman-at-large, who turned out to be a quiet, cheerful soul with a chubby face, friendly eyes and a soft laugh. Throughout her stay with us she never once intruded upon camp life, nor was there any jealousy amongst the men, who lived in her hut their allotted term and then returned to our dormitory existence without embarrassment or apparent reluctance. The whole thing was so discreetly and sensibly managed that I would forget the woman's presence for days on end, till a giggle in the night might remind me of it.

Once I asked *Mzee* what would happen should she conceive, but he said that such a thing would not occur, for the widow would be sure to insert a wad of oiled paper into her vagina (the standard East African method of contraception) before she lay with a man, but that if she did become pregnant the child would become a ward of the mosque and carry no shame, since his mother was not a whore, but a good woman living dutifully and charitably within the Law to relieve her poverty. From my point of view the arrangement had an even greater advantage in that I was now spared the chore of for ever curing the men of the gonorrhoea they invariably caught each time they visited the towns. Naturally, the presence of the woman did not end the homosexuality that went on among some of the fishermen, but then most of the Barjunis were or could be ambisexual as the need took them.

It was a standard practice amongst them that when a young boy first started as a fisherman he would be apprenticed as a junior to an older man and that such an apprenticeship included a homosexual relationship whilst away from their village. In fact, for a while the boy would not be allowed to take any active part in the seawork at all, but would fulfil the duties of a young wife in preparing food, keeping house and serving the other man's bodily needs. Only when the youngster had learnt the basic trade of fishing and seamanship by watching and living with it was he allowed to take part, but his eventual participation in the work in no way altered his original duties to his tutor. Such a relationship might continue for years and sometimes even long after the boy had become a man and had his own

boat and crew. There was no stigma attached to this, nor did the sexual ambiguity seem to leave much imprint on the youth concerned, who would grow up and retain his normal heterosexuality; he would marry and beget children of his own when he came of age. Of course, this system of tutelage was on a different plane from the appetite of a man who, quite plainly, liked little boys as bedmates and did not care for women. For this the Barjunis had nothing but amused disgust and their appellation *shogo* for such a person ranked next in insult to *fesi* (hyena).

The camp we now built in Gandersheikh embodied many refinements which we had learnt from the Munghia site, such as frames for net drying, large plastic bins of differing colours for differing products and a small forge and anvil on which I could hammer out the knives, anchors, spearheads, and other gear of which we were in continuous need. There were better butchering tables, proper fire-stones for building good fireplaces on which to set the cauldrons, a boat repair kit, cloth for spare sails, storage boxes for *taza*, sacks of salt for preparing dried shark meat and dozens of other items which we had found necessary. In spite of all these innovations the camp was in operation in less time than it had taken us to make ready at Munghia, and within ten days of our arrival the catching was in full swing. But it was not long before we struck a serious snag and one that puzzled us for some while before we ascertained its cause.

On the second night of laying we lost two complete nets, gone without a trace. For a while I thought that perhaps they had been too hastily rigged or set, that their floats had come adrift and the nets themselves had sunk to the bottom in consequence. However, an examination of the seabed proved fruitless and we were forced to look elsewhere for the cause. Some of the Barjunis suspected the covetous Omar, who was quite capable of stealing other people's goods, as he had already shown to his own villagers, but a surreptitious search of Gandersheikh produced no evidence of boats by which the theft might have been effected. Shelving the matter temporarily in the face of all the other work at hand, I returned to camp to see that those nets about to be laid that night were correctly rigged and sufficiently anchored. The next morning brought further loss, for besides the turtle we had taken, two other nets had gaping tears in them which the others claimed to be the work of tiger sharks; secretly I did not agree, for the ragged nylon strands showed signs of parting under strain rather than having been severed by teeth.

Whilst the processing work was going on I took the binoculars and

walked inland, across the sunbaked plateau and up the sloping escarpment until I reached the wind-blown, razored crest. From there the whole coast lay like an open atlas before me and, using the glasses, I began a detailed examination of the inshore waters and the reef itself which, from this elevation, showed up as clearly as dry land. I had no exact idea of what I was searching for but as soon as the magnified circle of my vision touched them, passed over, corrected and swung back to centre on them, I knew the hunt was over. There they were, four enormous sombre black shapes rocking beneath the surface, close to the reef! The same ominous silhouettes I had seen on my long walk up the coast and which I had never identified. Big, as big as large sharks, but bulkier, showing no distinctive fins and with great bull's heads, blunt and humped. A thorough examination of the area brought to light a further fifteen of the creatures, some very big indeed and others much smaller. All of them were pointing in more or less the same direction, but none of them seemed to move, or if so, very slowly. Thoughtfully, I returned to camp, realizing that whatever these sea-beasts were they must be first identified before any steps to destroy or deter them could be taken. Seeking out Salch I told him what I had seen and explained my plan, and for the rest of that day we two sat and worked side by side on the clean swept floor of the long hut whilst the rest of the men busied themselves with their routine labours.

By the evening it was done, a three-fold thickness of net, the centre layer of which was finer, looser and far more baggy so as to enfold and engulf anything that forced its way through the first panel. Head-and-foot-ropes were the strongest that our stores boasted and for anchors we used clumps of grapnels that would hold a battleship. Taking one of the boats and a few helpers we laid this formidable barrier across the path the creatures must take if during the night they came up into our area from the place where I had seen them that morning. Behind this protective shield the other teams then set their own nets and we all returned to camp, happy that at least something had been attempted to avert further loss.

The light was still not on the sea when we returned, but though the darkness blanketed us we knew while we were still far off that something big had fallen into our trap, for heavy splashing and thumpings could be felt as shocks upon the canoe's timbers. As we drew nearer, strange sighs and whistlings reached us from across the water. Not wishing to tangle with an unknown creature of this size or even with our own net in the false light of the pre-dawn, we

lay off until daybreak had made plain to us what it was we had to face. The great net lay tangled on the surface, twisted into a long rope of nylon, buoys, cordage and broken strands. At one point along this elongated cocoon the roll bulged and rose out of the sea; under the grey-green lattice a great bulk of apparent blackness heaved and strained. It shuddered and fought and, as it did so, small clouds of vapour rose into the air. Whatever it was, it breathed through lungs not gills. Swiftly I went over in my mind those whales I knew, seeking to classify the beast among them, but nothing I could think of fitted in with what I now saw.

The others were equally puzzled and not a little frightened, and it was not until we had approached within 10 yards that old Saleh rose up in the boat in his excitement crying out, '*Ungwa! Ungwa!*' Seeing me look at him uncomprehendingly, not knowing the word, he then added in plain Swahili, 'Man-of-the-Seal', 'Man-of-the-Seal'!

Man of the sea? Sailor? No! Sea-man? No. Merman? Yes! Mermaid! The male mermaid of legend, the fabulous siren, the real life, nearly extinct dugong! The monsters of my fears were mere sea cows!

The old bull, for such he proved to be, had rendered himself quite harmless, so tightly had he rolled in the net and we were able to come right up alongside him without difficulty. Once we were in position, I was able to examine him whilst the others were busy breaking the net anchors loose and making ready to tow the net and its occupant ashore.

This particular dugong was about 14 foot long, with a massive lozenge-shaped barrel of a body. His colouring, which had appeared matt black at a distance, proved to be a matt pale grey. It was this texture of 'mattness' that caused the illusion of blackness, for little light was reflected from his tough elephantine hide and, when only just awash, all paleness faded to give way to a shadowed obscurity. Tied up in the nets as he was, little else could be seen of his forepart, for he carried his head low, angled downwards and hidden beneath the humped muscles of his huge shoulders. Towards the rear end of his body the trunk tapered, finally terminating in two wide horizontal 'flukes', similar to those of a porpoise.

On the way back to the beach the excited Barjunis discussed their catch, for, other than *Mzee Saleh*, none of them had seen a dugong before. I already knew that this specimen would, according to custom, provide a feast for them by way of paying for the damage its relatives had done, and I was thankful that it was a bull and old

at that and that we had not snared a cow with her calf instead. At the anchorage the creature still gave little sign of life, having presumably exhausted itself in its pre-dawn struggles. Even when it was rolled, like a huge pneumatic mattress, across the shallows and up on to the firm sand, it did not protest but lay comatose whilst we cut and unwound the netting from it. Only when we had finished and the final restricting mesh had been removed did it react and then in a most astounding way that set us all laughing. The huge beast suddenly bowed its trunk like a bent sapling, lifting its arched centre part high in the air and resting on flukes and muzzle. Suddenly it reversed the curve, crashing down on to the sand with a grunt and rebounding several feet straight into the air. The noise it made in so doing was like the bouncing of an immense beach-ball—a ringing 'boeing' of sound that you felt upwards through your legs. The dugong repeated this strange and awe-inspiring feat several times and then was quiet. All this time it was but a yard away from the water and if it could not have crawled there, using its tiny seal-like flippers, it might easily have rolled its barrel body sideways into it. But no, it made no attempt to leave or move other than by this extraordinary muscular flexing. Seeing it throw its ton-plus body into the air showed us how easily its great strength could tear up any normal turtle nets and enable it to escape through or with them.

There was now no doubt in my mind about the fate of our missing equipment. Since there was no alternative, and secretly hoping that the fishermen would find the ancient bull so tough as to deter them from eating dugongs in the future, I told the men to bring the knives and bowls and make an end of the poor beast without further delay. Whilst they were away preparing for the slaughter I sat down quietly near the dugong's muzzle and proceeded to study his head in detail. Truly, the dugong could never be called an attractive animal. The face was heavy and lugubrious, with a high domed skull like a spaniel's. The eyes were tiny, deep set on either side of the head, with lashless lids and no expression within them. The mouth was hideous, cleft, a gigantic travesty of a hare lip, the two halves of the upper muzzle being split up to the small nostrils and with each whiskered flange capable of independent movement, both of them twitching continually and 'reaching-out' in a rather revolting way. From the corners of the mouth two 'tusks' of yellowed ivory jutted, each perhaps 5 or 6 inches long and cigar thick. These were not of any assistance in eating nor were they, I suspected, intended for

defence, but merely a useless sexual adornment of the adult male.

Suddenly the giant lifted his chinless head from off the sand, the grotesque mouth quivered, nostrils fluttered and a chorus of shrill mouse-like squeaks was emitted. These were so faint as to be lost to the ear more than a yard away, yet they were the sole real sounds the dugong was capable of uttering even *in extremis*. Whenever the chirrupers were uttered the body quivered and the heavy flukes beat a short tattoo upon the sand, before the whole hulk sank into lethargy again.

Once the men returned I made short work of killing the pathetic leviathan in the most merciful way and then left them to their butchery. Returning after the initial excited revengeful hackings, I was able to examine the corpse at leisure whilst the choicest joints were being carefully carved by the cooks. The outer hide was about an eighth of an inch thick and was backed by a layer of hard white 'blubber', extremely dense and tough, in places an inch in depth. Below that lay rich, red meat, indistinguishable at first glance from prime Scotch beef, having similar colour and grain. The intestinal cavity was enormous, indeed, the whole body seemed merely a shell built around the guts, with the lung cage and clavicle girdle taking up but little space. The male organ was singularly fashioned, being as long as a bull's but wound in a shallow spiral and tipped with a great arrow-head of flesh. Saleh told me that the Chinese prized this dried organ highly as an aphrodisiac and indeed, from an Eastern source that took our shark fins and tortoiseshell, I was offered at a later date the sum of £5 an inch for every dried dugong pizzle I could obtain! Luckily, neither this demand nor the price the commodity fetches is well known in Somalia, for since a single male dugong can yield 40 inches of member, the poor creatures would certainly be hunted to extinction.

Long before the cutting up of the carcase was completed it was obvious that the amount of meat it provided was far in excess of anything we might consume, even allowing for salting down an ample supply. I therefore sent word to the village that those who were in need should come and take what they wished. This was a mistake, for everyone turned out in force and soon the remains of our *gilman'ya*¹ were blotted out by a mob of shouting, yelling Somalis, their faces evil and bestial as they fought among themselves over the choicest bits. It was the first and last time that I saw Somalis behave in such a fashion; but Gandersheikh was a miserable, decadent and

¹ Dugong (Somali).

squalid settlement with little laughter and no pride. After two of the quarrelling throng had slashed each other with their knives and more bloodshed seemed imminent, I drove the lot of them from off the remains and then reluctantly sent for the head man, Sheikh Omar. When he arrived I asked him to take charge of the distribution of the meat, saying it was a gift to the mosque for the old, the poor and the sick. He promised to see that it was distributed fairly, unnecessarily invoking God and the Prophet as his witness, so that I knew he lied and had no intention of so doing. Later that day, on passing through Gandersheikh, I saw that he had installed a 'butcher's barrow' outside his home and was selling the meat at a high price. Thereafter I did not try to distribute any surplus out of our catches to his village, for the *fetina* that it caused made it not worth while. Instead, I sent such excesses to my tubby friend at Gelib, where the food was fairly distributed amongst the sick and the poor.

Although the Barjunis would have been quite happy to go on catching dugong and feasting themselves on the rich red meat for the rest of their lives, I could see that if any serious turtle work was to be done either the sea-cows or ourselves must leave the area. To move northward again would have overextended the link between the camp of Saidi at Munghia and ourselves; besides, Gandersheikh was proving very rich in turtles, so it had to be the dugongs that moved if they and our nets were to be saved at all. This was not so unfair as it might sound, for they, even more than the turtles, were creatures that roamed continually, grazing upon the 'turtle-grass' or another allied form of seed-plant called 'manatee-weed'. So I decided to 'herd' these great aquatic browsers, to turn them south out of our area, and for the next ten days two boats were deployed on this task. During this time I learnt much concerning their lives, most of which was at complete variance with what I had read. Many authorities regard the dugong as an inhabitant of swamp and estuary, shunning the open sea and existing only in backwaters and in small family groups. Yet here, off the open coast, with the nearest swamp 300 miles to the south, I found huge herds, sometimes as many as 500 strong, swimming freely within and without the reef. They were neither elusive nor shy; being great dumb sea-oxen that only responded when you whacked their backs with a paddle, blew conch-shell horns, or clapped the water with oarblades. During the afternoon the young calves of up to 4 feet long would leave the herd and form a nursery close to the sandy beaches. Here they would play like slow, clumsy puppies. Wading amongst them, they would dive

between my legs, brush against my side and generally use me as pivot point and scratching post. The lives of the adults seemed dull in the extreme. A continual process of tearing up weed with their flexible lips, chewing and excreting, and as they went they fouled the water to such an extent that, if it were calm and currentless, the heavy odour of their dung emanated from the sea itself. The females possessed very humanoid bodies, having two breasts between their stumpy forelegs. Unless suckling or near to giving birth these were hardly visible other than by a close inspection, but when nursing they became as round and as full as those of a girl of fourteen. Whereas whales have a valved nipple, enabling them to feed their young under water, dugongs have not and the mother must 'stand' vertically in the sea with her shoulders, foreflippers and breasts exposed, cradling her calf above the surface so that he may draw her milk. This posture gave rise to the legend of the mermaid; but those sailors that told of them must have had very bad eyesight or else have been a long time from port to confuse the bristle-snouted, wheezing, cleft-lipped mother dugong with a svelte fishy-tailed maiden crooning to her merchild. Once I saw a female feeding her offspring in shallow water close by a sand bar, and on this occasion she lay on her side aground and half exposed. Nearby, a pair of adult dugongs were coupling, also on their sides in the shallows. Previously, I had only seen this act take place in deeper water with the bull face-downwards on top of the female, who lay on her back at a shallow angle, her shoulders supported by the water.

Of these creatures *Mzee Saleh* was able to tell me much of interest, though most of it was inaccurate, being compounded of legend and cabalistic fantasy. The Coast Arabs, he told me, considered that the dugong belonged to a special class of beings; neither animal, nor djinn, nor human; a sort of abhuman beast, somewhat like the witch-hyena. However, they were not malevolent creatures, but they possessed 'powers' of which they themselves were not aware and by their aid man might have insight into the sea-kingdom and speak with sea-djinn and other mysterious beings of the oceans and of the air. That was why the 'people-of-the-sea' (dugongs) were sought out by necromancers, black priests and other followers of the Left-hand Path. For this very reason, down at Lamu, which the dugong sometimes visited and where there were many old Arabs who studied magic and other forbidden lore, when a 'woman-of-the-sea' was trapped in the nets, she must be examined by the Q'adi before being offered for sale in the market as lawful meat, because one of the

ways of securing forbidden 'powers' over a creature-other-than-man (i.e. angel, djinn or fiend) was by taking the dugong to wife, whereupon the human 'husband' would benefit by her powers, becoming wealthier, wiser and able to share her sovereignty. To ensure that such an event had not already happened the Q'adi must inspect the creature and examine her womb after slaughter lest she bear a man-child and her flesh be tainted in consequence. Sometimes, added Saleh, it happened thus. So widespread was this belief that, should we net other dugongs and they be female, then they should never be left alive in the attendance of one fisherman alone lest he be tempted and violate her privately in order to benefit from her powers.

Fanciful perhaps, and reminiscent of a dark and distant age. Yet there would not be much superficial difference, I would imagine, between an embryonic human and a dugong and thus credence could be given to the belief. We in Europe have much the same folk-stories too. The 'Sea-Wyf', for example, who aided her fisherman husband for many long years till she returned to the sea, taking her children with her, and was seen no more. From ancient days (cf. Greek myths) the benefits that accrue to humans who lie with gods have been propounded. The only difference between the Barjuns and ourselves is that they believe in this as an accepted fact and it therefore affects their daily lives.

By the end of ten days I had succeeded in moving the 'flocks' of dugong some fifteen miles to the south and this I reckoned was far enough for the time being. A visit to Saidi at Munghia, to check how the work was proceeding down there and as to how the butchering team I had sent them was settling down, was long overdue. Arriving at the camp, I was surprised to hear that they too had feasted on dugong, for I had seen none in that neighbourhood previously. Then they went on to say that they had watched this one swim straight through the reef and head for shore where it grounded and lay still. On rushing up to it they had found the big cow (for unfortunately, so she was) to be festooned in turtle nets other than their own, in which she was inextricably enmeshed. One look at the remains told me that these nets belonged to our camp at Gander-sheikh, being a portion of those that were missing. Even more interesting was the fact that I knew the exact hour that these nets had been uprooted, for the Barjuns that morning had heard the sounds of struggling cease as they had approached; on arrival net and quarry had gone. Assuming that the frightened sea-cow had fled straight out to sea and in a direct line to Munghia before casting herself on

the beach gave a mean speed of some nine knots for the journey. This was very fast indeed, seeing that she was trailing nets and cordage behind her, and though I had seen dugongs lash out in sudden bursts of energy when aroused, I had no idea that they might be capable of such sustained effort.

Finding all going well at Mungahia, I loaded the drums of turtle oil and sacks of calipee that they had ready for me and returned to Merca, where I arranged for the shipment of the produce and collected the mail that was waiting for me. Amongst the letters was one of particular interest, for it contained news I had been waiting for from one of our German buyers concerning shipments of dried turtle meat with which we had been experimenting. Our client now wished to place a large order for it but, not being entirely satisfied as to the freedom of the product from insect-pests during the processing, stipulated that we must dust the dry meat with a 6 per cent gammexene powder before boxing and then leave it to air in the open for a few days before sealing. Not being a chemist or a bacteriologist I could not argue with their laboratory technicians, who had done a great deal of experimentation before accepting our samples. Yet I felt that such treatment, considering the aseptic condition of the desert in which we worked, was not only unnecessary but might be very harmful. However, such an order for dried meat was what I had long worked to achieve, and meant that my aim of utilizing the whole turtle, even when working under primitive field conditions, was realized. Accordingly, I motored up to Mogadishu to buy a barrel of the powerful raw insecticide from the only supplier in Somalia, and with this in the Landrover returned to Gandersheikh to start this new work alongside the old.

Still not happy in my mind over the customer's stipulations, I set aside a special compound for the dusting of the meat, well away from the camp and in the opposite direction to the village. Prior to beginning the treatment the area chosen was similar in every respect to the rest of the terrain, with creeper and marram grass carpeting the sand, along with a host of small desert flowers, over which clouds of tiny butterflies gathered. The first inkling I had that all was not as it should be was when the ghost crabs in the vicinity were stricken. One morning I noticed that a number of these were still wandering aimlessly around long after sun-up, a most unusual state of affairs. The ones I met on the path did not scuttle to safety on hearing my footsteps, but seemed perplexed, apparently engrossed in cleaning their eye-stalks with their forelegs. It was only after I picked up

one of these pale, brittle creatures that I realized that it was blind and that so were all the others. By mid-day most of them were dead, lying on their backs and roasting in the sun, for these crabs can only survive on land if their gill fronds are periodically moistened by the sea. With their sight and possibly their sense of smell destroyed they could not find their way to the life-giving ocean and so suffocated and died. Within a day or so all the butterflies had gone. Then I found some dead birds: two desert larks by the foreshore and a hooded crow in a ravine nearby. Three days later the first shoals of dying fish, immature mullet and other fry, made their appearance and soon the edge of the sea was outlined with a rim of silver as the pathetic bodies were left there by the receding tide.

By this time I had realized that the damage was being done by the gammexene and had stopped all dusting of the meat. But the mischief was done and the poison, perhaps even more deadly in such virgin surroundings, continued to eat its way into the whole ecology of the neighbourhood. Lying on the surface of the land it attacked those creatures that trod on it, but by the time they succumbed they might be many miles away; beneath the sea, perched in trees or hiding in burrows. Their bodies in turn were devoured by scavengers, who themselves were slain by it, their poisoned remains polluting other areas. Thus the deadly chain went on. Leached out of the sand by the next monsoon's rains, the particles might sink deep into the ground, but even then they would not be neutralized but might gather in limestone pockets which the nomads tapped for their flocks. Who knows what devastation these few pounds of powder caused and might be causing as I write this account. Throughout my stay in Somalia the area where the dusting compound had been was plainly visible, a moon-dead scar upon the earth that slowly spread outwards like a revolting eczema. Months later the toll was still mounting and the bodies of mongoose, hawk and even hyena were found littering the countryside. Yet the technicians in their laboratories in far-off Europe had required that the meat be treated thus and, when I wrote informing them that I could not carry out their instructions in view of the danger, replied that the danger of polluted meat was even greater.

But they never told me how or if they made sure the gammexene-dusted meat was safe for human consumption.

CHAPTER TEN

The Land of Give-Me-Something

*'Of what ask they of one another?
Of the Great News!'*

Sura 78

Once the camps at Munglia and Gandersheikh had been firmly established and the flow of their produce had begun, I thought it expedient to set off on further explorations, this time driving right to the far north, up past Raf Hafun, round Cape Guardafui and along the Gulf of Aden coast towards Berbera. There were several reasons for my wanting to do this. Firstly, having built up the camps, I needed to see that they were capable of operating entirely without supervision. Secondly, I had already been approached by a group of Somalis from the northern province suggesting that we should open a subsidiary company near Berbera. Before taking the matter further I wished to scout out the area on my own. At this time, too, the roads, such as they were, would be at their best and if I did not take advantage of the present season then I might well have to wait a whole year before another attempt would be possible.

Estimating that the round trip would take a month, I packed such spares, gear and provisions as I might need in the back of my Land-rover and set off. My first objective was the coastal area just north of Mogadishu, for I had heard from Saidi of two places there where turtles were reputedly plentiful. If this information was correct then I figured that the next leap northwards in the chain of our camps would be there. At the first of these, Uarschieh, I found little evidence of turtles, but the villagers directed me to a reef-fringed promontory a few miles southwards, called H'wai, which indeed looked very promising. From H'wai I drove to Itala, about fifty miles northward as the crow flies, but thrice that distance by the

dust road which led me far inland before returning to the coast. At Itala I found the only evidence of the hunting of wild life for profit that I came across in Somalia. At the market place there, the stalls were laden with what first I took to be skinned rabbits, which on closer inspection proved to be dik-dik, the shy and dainty mouse-deer that frequents the sparsely clad fringes of the desert. Over 1,000 of the pathetic, delicate corpses were sent daily by lorry to Mogadishu I was told. This slaughter had been going on for generations, so these dwarf-deer must have been extremely plentiful somewhere in that vicinity, though on the road I had seen no more than the usual number.

Leaving Itala I began the long haul up to Obbia, again being forced inland by the complete absence of roads along the coast. Had I the time I would have repeated my earlier tactics and covered this stage on foot and indeed I thought that in the future I might attempt the trek. At Obbia I found few turtles, but to the south of the airstrip there I came across a stretch of coast that seemed incredibly rich in crayfish; the empty carapaces of those that had died of old age littered the beaches and lay in heaps in the rock pools. Swimming out at random points I saw submarine terraces wholly covered with these rock-lobsters, their white antennae thick as reed-beds on the dark rock floor. If ever we established a crayfish freezing plant, this was the place to do it.

The next leg of the journey was the longest, for with Itala I had come to the end of our probable extensions in southern Somalia. Now there was a big gap, since the central section of Somalia's coast is completely unapproachable, right up the very horn of Africa, Cape Guardafui. To get there I had to retrace my route for some distance before I was able to join up with the sole track that linked Mogadishu with the northern section of the country.

To the Arabs of old, Somalia was known as *Bilad-aa-Issi*, the 'Land of Give-Me-Something', and it was only on my way up northwards that I began to realize the reason for this name. I suppose that to a person who has nothing anything seems valuable, and without possessions there exists no possessiveness. Consequently if another person has something there is no shame in asking him for it; since the idea that the more fortunate may want the thing for its own sake, does not in fact occur to the asker. At least that was how I now tried to excuse the incessant demands that were made upon me by every passer-by. It was definitely not begging. No cringing, no wheedling, but a straight out claim. Bowling along the

dusty road a pin-man figure would appear from the bushes some distance ahead, who would strut into the centre of the road, stop, raise an imperious hand in an arrogant gesture of command and wait for you to pull up. The lanky apparition, often so black-burnt as to seem one dimensional against the pulsating glare, would then deign to saunter round to the open window and state his demand, usually in one unquestioning word: 'cigarette!' or 'matches!' or 'cloth!', or whatever it might be that he had decided he required. The only answer to this was 'No!', whereupon the petitioner would scowl darkly and repeat 'matches!' in a more demanding way. One answered 'no!' with equal intensity. With eyebrows writhing like tormented serpents and head lowered menacingly, so that his breath was hot upon your face, he would burst out yet again: 'matches!' 'No!' With a hrm-umph of resignation that often seemed to contain a note of pleasure in being rejected, the nomad would then switch to the real reason for his halting you.

'What news of the south?'—or wherever you had come from. Sometimes it was just the one word 'news!'

Against this inevitable question I had learnt a number of phrases which covered most contingencies. These dealt with such basic matters as rain or the lack of it; grazing or the lack of it; death; famine; fighting; the movements of other people, and the number of camels and cattle which I had seen during the day. Of course, such bare information was not really satisfactory, but my Somali was very rudimentary and often even the simplest message was difficult to get across. In fact, as I progressed northward communication became more and more impossible, with not only accents, but common words seeming to change entirely. Even so it made little difference to these chance contacts of the journey, for to me, even as to them, there was something very comforting about the mere sight of a fellow human in the desolation of that lost and empty land, and each occasion afforded me fresh spiritual assurance.

The recognition and acceptance of other people as human beings is something which we in the West have largely forgotten. In hundreds of cities throughout the world the commuting crowds erect their barriers of newspapers as shields before their faces, not because they wish to read, but as a defence against the awful actuality of having to sit opposite a member of the same species, perchance to catch his or her eye and then to be forced into recognition of their existence. Lonely in our crowds, we stare through passers-by; seeing the walls, the streets, the vehicles, but determinedly oblivious of the

human flesh and, behind the flesh, the spirit. The Somali, at one with his lost wildernesses, unlonely in the loneliness, mentally reaches out towards every other human being that he may come across. This is always the glint of recognition, the quick and confiding glance that establishes you both as fellow-conspirators against the world at large. As we instinctively recoil from human contact, so he embraces it. How wonderful is this inborn attitude of recognition, and how satisfying! Meeting a herd of cattle on the road you stop to let them pass and out of the dust-cloud that follows the beasts appear two skinny, big-footed nomads who, seeing you parked there, saunter up, stick their fuzzy heads through the window, grin hugely and start gabbling nineteen to the dozen. That you do not understand them matters not one bit, nor the fact that when you reply neither do they. Contact has been made. An act of communication has been attempted. The recognition of that fact is mutual. Still smiling they stand back from the window, having first shaken hands, in the Somali fashion (a grip, an inter-lock of thumbs, a further grip) and wave you on, and on you go, never to meet again, though with your roles as human beings acted out in full in this momentary encounter.

This question of the handshake is a typical Somali gesture. In their folk-lore there is a legendary Wanderer, a being half-man, half-god, who travels over the earth talking to everyone he meets, forever testing the current breed of Adam. To those that shelter or help him comes good fortune, to those who deal harshly with him, so will nature deal with them. He can assume any guise or any race, but there is one deformity by which you can always recognize him. The thumb of his right hand is double-jointed, so that if you shake hands with him and then grasp his thumb, it will bend back as you bear upon it with your own. If you should come across the Wanderer in this fashion you must not let go of his hand, for whilst you hold it he is compelled to grant any one request that you may make. And so this test is made on every meeting, and should neither of you turn out to be the Wanderer, this again forms a bond between you, for you are both clearly ordinary men, and so unable to grant each others wishes; just 'bin-Adam', common sons of a common forefather.

Driving steadily northwards, I did not strike the sea again for many days and when I finally crossed the high plateau and dropped down over the edge of the Warsangeleh escarpment it was the Gulf of Aden that met my eyes and not the familiar Indian Ocean. With-

out pausing, I turned east and followed the coast until forced up into the mountains again by a headland having the exact shape of a monstrous stone elephant and whose slopes ran precipitously down into the sea without leaving any beach for me to drive along. After several hours of tortuous zig-zags the pot-holed road broke through this last barrier and Ras Alula, the northernmost point of land in Somalia, lay before me. The coastal waters around Alula were of particular interest to me for I had heard that besides turtle in great numbers, streams of oceanic tunny passed close inshore and that a cannery to deal with these fish was under construction there. When I did discover the location of this factory it was to find it closed down, since apparently the season had not yet opened. However, the compound gate was open and I walked in only to be accosted by a European whom I took at first to be Italian, but whom I realized as soon as he spoke was a Russian. Since we had no language in common we could not get very far and, interested as he was in myself and my Landrover, I was even more interested in the two Russian 'trawlers' which I now saw lying at anchor close in. Trawlers they might originally have been, but from the array of wireless and radar aerials which feathered their superstructure I thought it far more likely that they were now floating communication or broadcast centres. Knowing that odd things were afoot in Somalia at that time I did not pursue the matter, but left hurriedly before my chance acquaintance called up some of his friends.

Exploring as much of this northern coast as I could in the time available, I came across many interesting things which I never dreamt existed. What caught my imagination most were the 'ambergris' villages. Ambergris is a strange substance which originates in the digestive tract of sperm whales. These whales, unlike most others, are carnivorous, feeding mainly upon large quantities of squid and cuttlefish. Both these molluscs possess sharp parrot-like beaks which the sperm whale find difficult to void. In order to cope with this exigency the whale manufactures within itself a hard waxy substance in which the sharp beak fragments become embedded. Thus sheathed, they can either be passed without harm through the intestine or pushed into some remote corner of the stomach and stored for a while. On leaving the whale's body among the excrement or in its dissolution after death, these waxen lumps rise to the surface, for they are much lighter than the surrounding water. Borne along by the ocean currents they eventually arrive on some remote shore where they join the rest of the beach litter on the

tide line. Nowadays, the bulk of the remaining world population of sperm whales inhabits the desolate regions of the Indian Ocean, still the loneliest and least exploited of the five great sea masses. Here, under the influence of the south-east monsoon, a steady air flow of seven months' duration, nearly all the pieces of ambergris jettisoned from the whales eventually find their way up into the north-west corner of the ocean, the bottle-neck formed by Somalia and the peninsula of southern Arabia.

The use of ambergris as a fixative for scents and unguents has been known since earliest times, and it still remains the only satisfactory agent for holding an otherwise evaporating essence in an alcohol base and no satisfactory substitute has ever been discovered for it. The value of ambergris lies then in this unique property, though admittedly in the Arab world it is still used for both medicinal and aphrodisiacal purposes, and also as an additive to incense. The value of ambergris fluctuates in the international market and with its quality, but prices have been as high as £7 per ounce. Though the average piece will weigh only 4 to 8 ounces yet great blocks of the substance have been washed ashore on rare occasions, one weighing over 160 pounds. Such a find would bring in a fortune to the beach-comber who came across it, even at the low rate which he would sell it to the Arab or Indian dealer.

Along those parts of the Somali coast washed by the ocean currents are certain localities where the floatsam of the sea is more easily cast up than at other places. There the 'ambergris villages' have become established, the occupants of which earn their entire livelihood by collecting the valuable wax as it is deposited on their doorsteps by the obliging waves. In these settlements a section of the beach is allocated to each family, with the sole right of collection. Like plots of precious farmland they are zealously tended and handed down from father to son together with certain laws which have been evolved with regard to their tenure. These sea frontages may be cleaned or cleared as the owners wish, but they may not alter their original profiles nor build dykes or other devices to deviate the natural sweep of the current. Should a piece of ambergris be seen bobbing in the water just off shore from a person's 'strip', then that person has the right to try and reach it so long as he stays within his boundaries, does not use a boat or raft to aid him and does not have to go out of his depth to recover it. It often happens that a plot owner may sit and watch while his possible sole income for the next six months goes floating by to finish up in his neighbour's out-

stretched hand, and he helpless to do anything about it. I am sure that only a people whose religion is based on complete submission to the seemingly capricious whims of God would tolerate such restrictions and self-discipline.

At the ambergris villages I was shown selections of the year's harvest to date. These ranged from poor quality, flaky chocolate-coloured lumps to the richer, 'marbled' white and rose variety. Coming in such divergent forms, with both colours and shapes covering a wide range, there is ample scope for the production of fake ambergris, usually made of a mixture of beeswax, resin and earth. To avoid being taken in by these, the dealers employed certain standard tests upon the pieces brought to them for sale. First, there was the smell: a faint but penetrating dry muskiness, not unlike sandalwood. Should this be judged correct, then a needle was heated over a candle flame and pressed gently into the substance. If it were indeed ambergris the hot steel would penetrate easily, with no gritty feeling. Also a fine blue smoke would be given off, the muskiness of which would be far greater than the scent of the lump itself. Finally, around the edges of the needle hole the surface would turn black and become tacky like pitch, yet the needle when withdrawn would be clean, without crumbs or stain.

At Ras Hafun I found another group of Somalis eking out their lotus-eating lives. Before the war there had been various attempts by the Italian Government to develop this peninsula, whose unique shape gave the only shelter to shipping from Berbera to Mogadishu. A fish meal plant had been established there, a cannery and an ice factory. There was even an embryonic railway, though what was its destination I do not know. During the British military occupation of the territory all these installations lay idle, as they had throughout the war, and since then the whole complex had been the subject of a lengthy legal wrangle in Italy concerning compensation for the initial investors. As this was still unresolved the courts had ordained that proper custodians be left in charge and a small corps of locals had been recruited as watchmen. In the shade of rusting heaps of valueless scrap and war-torn debris these guardians now lolled, secure in the knowledge that their wages would be paid regularly each month and with no cares other than debating how long the patch of shade in which they sat would last before the blinding sunlight forced them to wander dazedly a few steps to seeking another cool spot. Some of these men had been employed in this work since the buildings were first constructed, and one old boy who had been a watchman since

1937 had yet to see that which he guarded function. Being old he had in fact given up his arduous duties, though he still nominally held tenure and naturally collected the salary. Nowadays he sent his sister's son in his stead, keeping one eye on the youth from the doorway of his house. This was built out of petrol cans and abutted the gateway by the factory wall, in the shade of which his underling squatted, carrying on the family traditional service. A steady income for twenty-five years, to watch over a pile of junk that had long since fused together under the metallic arthritis of all-enveloping rust! No wonder that to these people the actions of Europeans seem past comprehension; but this fact does not bother them too much so long as the money rolls in. God is very merciful, brother, even if His ways are strange past understanding.

From Hafun I drove back again up to the northern coast and then westwards towards Berbera. Already I had seen that there were excellent prospects for setting up turtling stations in this region, though the local turtle population did seem to suffer from greater seasonal fluctuations than those which we experienced in the Chisimaio area. But besides further checks on this factor and looking into the question of other possible forms of marine produce, I had a personal, more secret motive for wanting to explore this coastline.

Sometime previously through a source which I considered eminently reliable, I had come across some information and evidence which I found intriguing for many reasons. One of these was that I had already tracked down certain threads of the trail in distant Kilwa a few years beforehand. These new details merely supplemented my original findings, throwing the time-misty picture into sharper relief.

East Africa has been subjected to many 'boom' periods in her long history, all of which have been originated by outside stimuli, usually in the form of commercial exploitation, milking her vast territories of the enormous riches. Perhaps the greatest age was that which culminated in the Queen of Saba's rule. This legendary and temporary consort of Solomon had her kingdom, not in Ethiopia, but in a part of southern Arabia which nurtured many successive civilizations and of which the tales and remnants were so inspiring that the Romans, 1,000 years later, called the whole area 'Arabia Felix'. Though the land was itself rich, it was of the transport of frankincense from Dhauhar to Egypt and Syria that the real wealth of Saba was amassed. This work gave the Sabaeans the liking for trade rather than for farming, so that from the remoteness of their inland king-

dom they gradually spun a gigantic web of commerce, stretching from Asia Minor in the north to Mozambique in the south. Eventually it was along the threads of this web that flowed the apes, gold and ivory of Africa for their queen. The gold was mainly in the form of alluvial dust, collected from riverbeds, and brought in little skin bags down from the interior to the Sabacan outpost of Kilwa and thence by the sea route to Mukulla. The ivory came from the lost fastnesses of Mozambique, today the last stronghold of the great tuskers.

But there was one other item on the long list of riches out of Africa that puzzled latterday researchers, and that was emeralds! It was Saba that controlled the entire known supply of these precious stones and no one knew whence they came. After the overthrow of their kingdom by the Himyarites the plexus of their trade routes vanished, to become, in the course of years, a thing of legend, until the very things that they dealt in were denied existence. So it was with Saba's emeralds, or almost. For though the existence of the mines was repudiated, a few of the stones still remained and were handed down in pendant or in necklace form, uncut smooth lobes of rich, dark-green still extant.

Today, comparable emeralds are only found in the high Andes, near Bogota, on the other side of the world. Some inferior gems originate from Ceylon and Kashmir, but none of these areas could have produced those that Saba dealt in, for their trade routes did not extend so far. Besides, the records speak of the stones coming out of Africa, and however much the existence of emeralds may be denied, yet Saba had dealt in them. This information had been lying almost forgotten at the back of my mind for some years, and was only resurrected when a man I had befriended in Somalia showed me some rough but beautiful emeralds, which he said he had found in his wanderings. This person felt under an obligation to me for various reasons, and being poor sought to make some return in a way which he knew I would appreciate, for he gave me freely of his great knowledge of the country and the peoples of Somalia. In fact, his help in this fashion was of a value far more real than anything I might have done for him and I was always the true gainer in our exchanges. On this occasion he showed me the stones merely as proof of what he said, and he then told me the location of the lost mine, saying that I could use the information as I wished; for he was too old and too near death to do anything about it now and had no kindred left.

Thinking my old friend might have confused facts and localities with the passage of the years, as he sometimes inadvertently did, I next went and rummaged through the archives of Mogadishu and eventually found what I was looking for, a detailed geological survey map of Somalia dating from the early 1930s. Emeralds are only found in certain obscure rock formations, in volcanic limestone schists and it was for these rocks that I sought. Sure enough, the only point in the whole of the country where this geological formation occurred was at the exact point on the coast off which the lost mine lay, according to my confidant. For this was the secret, the reason for the disappearance of the mine for all these centuries: the emerald-bearing rock now lay under the seal. However, though the waters of the Gulf of Aden now covered the workings, the remains of the open-cast mine lay along a sunken natural causeway that linked several tiny islets to the shore. Over this ridge the depth of water was not great, being less than 20 feet, or so my friend said.

It was this locality that I now sought, and though the presence of other similar off-shore islets and rocks in the neighbourhood caused me several days of vain exploration. I eventually found the submerged mine which, to give the old man credit, corresponded exactly with the description he gave me. Luckily, along the sunken crest but little coral had lodged, nor had much weed taken root, except on the lower, deeper slopes which I did not examine. The rock itself was neither jagged nor excessively hard, but roughly smooth in texture, flowing in long whorls. In places it was fissured and gave way to other formations that seemed to thrust up through it, and it was along the edge of such an extrusion that I found my first emerald. Underwater, this showed up as a small dark oval, smoother than the surrounding limestone. At first I thought it was a small chiton or a flattened limpet, but when I saw that it was buried in the rock itself I laboriously chiselled round it, finally breaking out a lump of limestone as big as my fist. Bearing my prize to the surface, I returned to the shore and attacked the mass with a file and a hack-saw and, though I ruined both in the process, after several hours work I had succeeded in cutting away enough of the surround to reveal the precious stone lying in the open womb of the rock. My emerald was of a magnificent and uniform clouded green, a frozen lozenge of thick colour, equal in size to the top joint of my index finger! It was cool and smooth and altogether lovely and it was also, in fact, the best that I brought to light in the four days of my submarine 'diggings'.

Once I had satisfied myself as to the existence of the mine, if it can be called such, and the fact that it still housed at least a part of its treasure in gems, I spent much of my remaining time in exploring the vicinity for traces of past encampments and construction. I knew that I could not possibly work the lode at present and doubted if I could ever obtain a concession to do so, once I revealed its presence. More likely by far, I thought, that if our fishing activities brought us up to the north as a permanent industry, then some profitable under-sea excavation, using modern diving techniques, might be carried on as an undercover sideline. In consequence, most of my activities around the workings were directed to finding out how best this might be managed and how the emeralds had been recovered in the past. However, I was never able to decide in my own mind as to whether or not the ridge of limestone had originally been above the level of the sea and thus allowed working 'in the dry'. There were signs that led me to believe that this was so, whilst other evidence contradicted the supposition. With regard to archaeological traces, all that I was able to trace were the remnants of an old breakwater of rubble that ran out from one of the islets and which once would have provided a modicum of shelter in northerly gales. Apart from that the only other signs of human endeavour were some ancient stone foundations upon a hillside several miles away, but to what era these belonged I had no way of telling.

My time running out, I dropped the seven emeralds that my excavation had yielded into a small chamois leather pouch and started back on the long return journey to Gandersheikh. This soft satchette contained all the other treasures of my trip; a small collection of pearls from Alula, a piece of musty ambergris from another village, a handful of jet beads which I had found in a cave, some good pieces of amber and a beautiful fragment of onyx.

'Bilad-wa-Issi' the Arabs called this strange, lost country. Well, that was how it appeared to them, perhaps. For me it was just the reverse, being 'The-Land-that-gave-me-Something'. But the most valuable of its gifts were not material objects such as those that lay in their leather purse on the seat beside me as I drove down the dusty length of Somalia back to camp that time. Those precious things are lost now, scattered who knows whither, but the real wealth of that distant time is with me still and cannot be taken from me.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Flare-Up

*'And if God lay the touch of trouble upon Thee
None can deliver Thee from it but He.'*

Sura 10

Arriving back at Mogadishu, I called in at the Ministry of Commerce before continuing to Gandersheikh. I had two reasons for doing this. As a result of my now completed survey of the green turtle population throughout Somalia, I wanted to place before the authorities certain recommendations for the conservation of these creatures. These were based on the principle of dividing the entire coastline into 'blocks' and only allowing turtle catching to take place within certain of these blocks and according to a set rotation in time. In this fashion not only would the turtles be able to survive much as they were at present but other commercial fisheries that developed alongside the turtling business would also expand evenly and fairly. In addition to presenting this report, I wished to drop a few hints concerning the Russian 'trawlers' I had seen and find out if the Somali Government was aware of their presence.

But as soon as I entered the office of the First Secretary I was not left in much doubt on the latter point.

'What was your business at Alula? Why did you go there? You have no right to poke your nose into things that do not concern you! Your licence covers the Chisimaio district only and you must not travel about our country like this. There have been complaints about you and you have caused much embarrassment to the Ministry.'

I pointed out that, whilst it was true that at present our licence to operate a cannery was limited to Southern Somalia, it had been his own Ministry that had suggested the idea of a turtle population survey and he himself had been pestering me continually for the past year to complete it. How could I do this without touring the coast? After a further display of pique, the First Secretary calmed down a little. With Russian and Chinese influences growing daily, the Ministry of the Interior was under constant pressure from certain

politicians and it was through some of these gentlemen that the complaint concerning myself had come. Anyway, I knew now that not only had the Russians acted quickly and surely in identifying me, but that they effectively controlled the necessary political channels through which they could act as well. Since there was little likelihood of our being able to establish ourselves in the north for some time, there was no point in risking further clashes at the moment, and I spent the rest of the morning soothing down the ruffled feathers of the Secretary, and then went and saw the friendly general in charge of the police force, the one who had come down to Mungghia at the time of Somalia's political break with Britain. Having reassured both Ministries as to the lack of sinister motives and intentions on my part, and having received reassurances all round as to our continued welcome in their country. I returned to camp relieved that the incident was sorted out, resolving to avoid like the plague all such Russian and Chinese infiltration as I might come across.

At Gandersheikh I found all well, with only a few problems as a result of my long absence. There was a stack of mail from Chisimaio and from this I learnt that everything was running smoothly, that certain orders had been fulfilled and that in addition some new orders now needed my acceptance and confirmation. This correspondence and other routine chores dealt with, I began such new projects as I had in mind. The first of these was to find a quicker and easier route to Mogadishu, for now I needed to make frequent visits to the capital, expediting the shipping of our produce, consigning documents through the bank, purchasing stores and so forth. Before long I hoped to train a general factotum to do all this routine work, but for the moment there was none but myself. Normally, to get to Mogadishu from Gandersheikh meant backtracking to Merca and then taking the main inland road, a drive of some eight hours. If a direct route could be found this time might be halved and the return trip could therefore be completed in the space of one day.

With time now to spare for reconnaissance, I set off in my long-suffering Landrover and, after two days spent mainly digging myself free of various sand drifts, succeeded in forcing a passage straight up the coast. In fact, much to my surprise it was only the first twelve miles northwards from Gandersheikh that proved difficult. After a number of abortive attempts at path finding on this stretch, I was compelled to wait for low tide and then make a headlong dash along the beach, skirting the rocks and small promontories that the receding

water had bared. Thereafter I found myself a well-established inland track which began at the next village of Danane and led straight to Mogadishu. Actually the road from Danane began south of the village in a most unlikely fashion.

Driven up from the beach by the incoming tide, I plunged straight into an area of deep aeolian dunes, across whose soft surface I was sure the Landrover could not plough. The poor shuddering vehicle was already labouring to a halt when, for no apparent reason, the front wheels lifted, gripped and away we accelerated with tyres apparently barely touching the ground. Then one wheel sank again, the front end slewed round and we were stuck in a drift. Getting out and recovering my tracks I found to my amazement that a broad arrow-straight road of stone lay just a few inches under the sand. It was this I had inadvertently hit and followed before losing it again, for to the eye it was invisible. My highway proved to be some 12 feet wide and was made of uncemented stone cobbles. In every detail it was a perfect replica of an ancient Roman road, yet certainly it did not belong to those ancient times. It was a far better road than any I had seen in Somalia. What was it doing beneath these desolate dunes on this deserted coast? Apparently it came from nowhere and led straight into the sea! Determined to discover its origin I drove carefully along it, using a stick as a probe in doubtful places. In some spots the cobbles had been covered to a depth of several feet by the fretful sands and at others they lay bare and shimmering. But buried deep or naked in the sunlight, the strange road led me on across the dunes, without a hint as to its purpose or its origins. For seven miles I travelled thus before breaking free of the sand, and with the sand's death the road died too, leaving me to wind my way down a narrow stock-trail towards a village that was built above a dry ravine. This, I discovered, was Danane and there I stopped to ask if anyone knew the why's and wherefore's of that monumental but useless highway.

My questions caused much mirth at the store where I made my enquiries and, without answering me, some of the elders pressed me to go with them to see something. Obediently I followed them and they took me on a circular tour of the approaches to their village. At seven different points along this are they pointed out where, in all, seven great roadways began, radiating into the surrounding *gobaw* like spokes from a hub. Then we returned to the village and they showed me over the remains of a huge stone building which I had taken to be a ruined fortress. This, they said, in pre-war times was

the great penal colony of the Italians for both Somalia and Ethiopia; their Alcatraz, which housed only those Africans condemned to life imprisonment for murder, manslaughter and other crimes of violence. From here the wretched beings, shackled ankle-to-ankle in long files were marched out into the burning sands to build useless roads in expiation of their past misdeeds. These chain gangs were composed of many strange and differing peoples: wild Galla and haughty Hara, pale Gudabirsi from the Eritrean highlands, swarthy Yabir skilled as blacksmiths, who crushed their enemies' skulls with their little hammers and fed off their still-pulsating brains, and fierce Danokils who collected human testicles as avidly as missionaries collect converts. All these and members of many other savage tribes were represented. Hundreds of these prisoners had died—of homesickness, of captivity, of sun-madness by day and of strangulation by night. With the outbreak of war, no more had come to swell their diminishing ranks. Then in 1940 or 1941 the prison had been bombed, British aircraft mistaking it for a fortress, even as I had done. Many of the warders and prisoners were killed in the raid. After the aircraft had gone the convicts broke out through the bomb-shattered walls and few of the warders survived that day as old scores were settled. That night the Yabir again held their grisly feasts and the Danakil displayed their bloody trophies of the day's sport.

And then a surprising thing happened. The violence over, their liberation effected, the convicts found themselves at a loss. Few, if any, knew where they were on the world's surface, and still fewer knew how to return to their homelands. So they sat and talked among themselves in the lingua franca forced upon them by their imprisonment. They talked and talked, and they thought and thought, and in the end they drew up a word-of-mouth constitution amongst themselves, incorporating various aspects of their differing customs, more or less satisfying all their requirements as regards law and order, creed and responsibility. Then they set to work, building a new village from the rubble of the bombardment, for they did not wish to begin their new lives roofed by the symbol of their past torments. Taking over the former garden of the guards, they grew crops of mealies; combining their various skills they made implements and sewed hides. These they bartered with neighbouring villages for the things they needed and, more important still, purchased brides. The war passed them by and when civilization reached them again the murderers, rapists and other erstwhile transgressors had completed their metamorphosis, becoming settled villagers, renowned for

their industry, tolerance and communal pride. Those cheerful elders who told me all this were the founders of the new Danane, and bore upon their ankles the proud proof of their origins, the bone-deep scars of their leg-irons. Later, from the commandant of the police force in Merca, I learnt that Danane was the most law-abiding village in the whole district, completely foreign territory to him and his men since they had never had any occasion to visit it.

One day, on my way back from Mungahia, I saw a familiar figure in the market place of Merca. It was Sh'ali, the *nahoda* of the *Lipi* whom I still employed to carry out our turtle deliveries down at Chisimaio. He had come to Merca to see me, for he was in great trouble. As he said this he raised his head and pointed to his bulging eyes. These, I now saw, were veiled with cataracts and watered continuously. For the past year they had given him trouble, it appeared, steadily restricting his range of vision, until now he could scarcely see five paces and could no longer captain his vessel. What should he do about them? If he sold the *Lipi*, would I give him a job as a night watchman perhaps, where his blindness would not matter so much. He came to me not for sympathy but to explain in person why he must leave the work I had set him. There was no whining at fate, no discontent, just a wry acceptance of the situation. Smilingly, he related how, when the blindness first veiled the outline of the sun, he had had his eyes spat into by every professing healer in the Barjun islands; but when this certain cure had failed all they could think of was carrying out their second standard treatment for all illnesses, the application of a red-hot iron to the afflicted area!

The following day I drove with Sh'ali up to Mogadishu to see an Italian eye specialist of whom I had heard. This young man, who had a prosperous private practice, when I had explained the position, examined Sh'ali that same day, got him admitted into hospital and operated on his eyes the next day. Throughout the time the *nahoda* was there he took great interest in his case, and when he finally left he asked us both to his house where, using me as an interpreter, he explained to Sh'ali the exact state of his eyes. The cataracts had been removed, a malevolent condition of the tear ducts arrested and his sight was now restored. But—and here the man showed his worth, for he told Sh'ali the truth so gently and simply that all shock was taken from his statement—the optic nerves were damaged, probably through the unchecked ravages of malaria. Within two years Sh'ali would go blind, and when he did it would be suddenly, completely and permanently. Sh'ali would do well to prepare himself for the

event. After my translation, the tough Barjun smiled, asked me to thank the doctor and to tell him that there was no need of preparation, for he was ready in his mind for this thing. In the meantime, as long as his sight lasted he would use it, thanking God. On bidding us farewell the specialist refused to take any fee whatever, saying he could not profit through another man's misfortune. Somalia could well have done with several hundred Europeans of this man's calibre.

On the way back to Merca Sh'ali was jubilant, shouting like an excited child at each new panorama his restored sight revealed to him. Before I put him on a lorry bound for Chisimaio I told him that when the day came that brought no sunrise there would always be a place for him with us and to have no worries on that score. But though at the time I knew it not, it was not to turn out that way.

During the next few weeks Merca became the centre for a 'cultural drive' sponsored by the Egyptian Government, which had undertaken the politically rewarding work of providing schools and teachers for the new republic. To reach the uneducated section of the population this 'Educational Corps' relied on public address vans, mobile cinemas and garish posters, all virulently anti-Western and devoted to revealing Gamel Nasser as the heroic defender of Islam against the depredation of Europeans who, to judge from the lurid cartoons that were given out, were only happy when indulging in an orgy of rape, murder and theft inflicted upon long-suffering and prostrate Mohammedans. The prize mobile exhibit was a lorry-borne 'float'. This vast caravanserai accommodated four people: two actors, a driver and a compère, who explained the symbolism of the charade to the assembled crowd. It always went down extremely well, at least on the occasions I saw it, but not for the reasons the organizers intended.

In practice, the 'float' would lumber into the market place, a path through the crowd having been cleared for it in advance by the long-suffering police. Here it would stop, martial Arabian music blaring from its loudspeakers, until the compère substituted his wild words for the discordant notes. His peroration concluded, he would press a hidden button, whereupon the sides of the truck would drop to reveal a sinister tableau. Lying on the floor of the vehicle was a Somali, daubed liberally with red paint to represent wounds of such ghastly proportion as to cause instant death to their bearer. However, to guard against any possible resurrection on the part of the recumbent figure, both his ankles and wrists were securely bound with chains. Above the victim crouched the villain of the piece: a heavily-armed stormtrooper with flour-whitened face, sporting white gloves

to indicate his European origin. Even more specifically, he was clad in a British army battledress topped by a regulation steel helmet. To clinch the matter, he had a Union Jack sewn upside down on his chest. This brutal John Bull held a rifle in his hands, the bayonet of which hovered menacingly near his fettered foe's throat. It was all very grim and very earnest. Above the static pair a splendid banner proclaimed that Somalia would and must be free from British tyranny and that God would not allow the Faithful to suffer these calamities any longer. But the climax of this show came with its exit. At least it did both times I witnessed it. Under cover of the amplified scream of nasal music the driver started his engine and moved slowly out of the marketplace. Unfortunately the ground was very uneven thereabouts, being pot-holed and criss-crossed with open drains, and as the lorry gathered momentum it lurched and swayed alarmingly in consequence. With the first bump, the aggressor's bayonet lunged forward to stab in no gentle fashion the prostrate figure at his feet. With an oath and a yell 'captive' Somalia responded by lashing his tormentor's shins with his chains. At the next instant the second pot-hole caught perfidious Albion right off balance and he tottered forward, dropping his rifle in self-preservation as he sought to keep from falling off the truck. The discarded weapon fetched Somalia a nasty crack across the nose, causing this member to spout real blood in no uncertain fashion. Clutching his dripping nostrils the sufferer brought his head up, catching Her Majesty's representative neatly in the crutch. This brought the armed might of Europe to his knees and he was last seen being stoutly belaboured by his chain-swinging captive as the truck disappeared round a corner. Everyone in the marketplace considered it was the best entertainment they had seen for years.

The repeat performance was even better. This time, to guard against accidents, the bayonet was missing from the props. Nevertheless, the second bump caused Thomas Atkins' tin hat to fall off and the steel brim struck the captive squarely behind the ear, laying him out cold. Aghast at his own act of aggression, the stormtrooper took a pace back, right off the side of the truck and fell with a crash of bursting timbers onto a meat stall, where he lay protesting his innocence to the irate butcher, who wanted to work him over with his cleaver there and then! But unintentionally hilarious as they were, these parades had their sinister side, as I soon found out.

It was after the second of these spectacles that the trouble began. Until then the business of obtaining firewood for the boilers had

gone smoothly, for I had only to make our need of kindling known to passing camel drivers and at once a foray-route into the interior was set up. The nomads had few ways of earning actual cash and an offer to buy for 10 shillings a camel-load of dry wood that could be collected in four hours was not to be ignored. But suddenly our supply train ceased. For several days I was not worried, since we had ample reserves and I thought that sickness or death, those natural hazards, had temporarily interrupted the flow. However, seeing one of our suppliers in the distance leading a file of unloaded camels along the shore, I set off to intercept him and to ask what had happened and when we might expect further loads. At my greeting he scowled, looked away and beat the ground with his staff. Foolishly I ignored these signs of displeasure, putting them down to churlishness and personal pique at returning with empty saddle packs. He muttered something with head averted. I persisted and then he turned upon me, his invective harsh in the air. Who was I, with my white skin, to speak? We whites, we Ingresi, were holding Somals in slavery, preventing the rightful movement of their cattle, withholding water, putting guns in the hands of monkeys (Kenya Africans), un-believers and defilers of mothers. His voice rose and his shoulders started shaking. He had dropped the camel halter and one hand hovered uncertainly in front of the fold in his garment which concealed his knife.

I turned and walked slowly away, for I desperately wished to avoid a fracas. But I did so with an eye to the terrain and brought his shadow, made long on the ground by the declining sun, ahead of me that I might have forewarning of his attack, if it came to that. I sauntered on along the shore as nonchalantly as I could, but seething inwardly. What an evil thing to do, to corrupt the minds of unsophisticated men in this way, causing them to hate strangers, to brood on imaginary wrongs, clouding their instinctive judgement with fearsome lies!

The nomad was screaming now and his shadow danced upon the sand before me, pirouetting and prancing as he stamped out his wrath. My retreat was serving no purpose. His wild, incoherent shouting and frenetic movements showed he was past reason, and only a violent shock could break the web of violence he was weaving. If I turned unexpectedly and closed with him, one of us would be killed there on the empty beach—probably me, since my heart was not in the quarrel and I could summon no anger against him. If I did nothing soon, very soon now, the hidden knife would lick out

like a serpent's tongue and shadow-warning or no, I would fall under its stroke. Something had to be done.

I slowed, stopped, and half-turned very deliberately towards the sea. At the same time I lifted the hem of the *kesu* that I wore, adjusted myself and began to urinate on the sand. The ranting died in a sudden gurgle as though the nomad's throat had been slit. He stood poised in a ridiculous attitude, with one foot raised in the air and a sinewy black arm outstretched for counterbalance. For a long moment he hung there, a haggard ebony hob-goblin, wild eyes wide in unbelief. Then he snorted in disgust, turning away as he did so, spat on the ground, and stalked off a few yards. Wheeling, he opened his mouth to shout something, saw I was still urinating (indeed, I could not stop), closed it again, clicked his fingers in the empty air to ward off devils and returned to where his camels stood like blind witnesses, gazing vacantly over the landscape. By violating his most rigid law of human behaviour and social etiquette I had averted the fight he sought. Admittedly, by so doing I had also forfeited all respect in his eyes, but that I felt was of small consideration.

Amongst the Somals all acts of nature are functions of the utmost personal privacy. A man wishing to relieve himself will stray away from his associates for half a mile or more and then seek out a fold in the ground and squat within it, arranging the folds of his clothing around him like a small tent for further concealment. Should one inadvertently come across a person thus engaged, either one retreats hastily or, if too late to escape notice, gives the widest possible berth to the squatter, looking hard in the opposite direction at the same time. To fulfil a bodily need in the open whilst in company with another and *standing-up*, comprise an unheard of series of unforgivable acts against decent society. What, in fact, had given me the idea was a true anecdote then circulating.

Some months previously the better tutored Somals from what had been British Somaliland, feeling down-trodden and unjustly served in their new united independence by their lesser-trained but politically powerful southern kinsmen who held the reins in Mogadishu, had staged a token revolt. This was soon put down and the ringleaders brought in chains to the capital. Here they were tried for treason, and whilst most were given prison sentences, two were condemned to death. The laws of the new republic being still in formation, there existed no formula for the death penalty, and after much arguing it was decided to hand the condemned men over to the army for execution. But no place of execution could be found and eventually the

pair were taken out by lorry into the deserted countryside near Mogadishu, along with their firing squad. A suitable baobab tree was chosen; one of the prisoners, now unfettered, was placed in front of it; the riflemen took their positions. The captain in charge then asked the victim if he had any last request, to which the man replied that the whole proceeding was making him very nervous and could he please relieve his bladder first, otherwise he might do something shameful. In accordance with normal convention the officer immediately marched his men off a little way, faced them about and himself turned his back to smoke a cigarette. A few minutes later, hearing no sound, he coughed a few times to signify his intentions and then turned round. One tall baobab tree; one shackled prisoner; an otherwise empty clearing and away, away—already many hundreds of yards off, a small figure racing for the hills. The firing squad were provided with only two rounds apiece. Their volleys missed and the rebel got clean away, never to be caught. It is said that the second man, at his late execution, asked the same favour, but that this time it was refused, the officer assuring him that if he could only wait a *little* longer everything would be all right.

From the day of that narrowly averted tragedy involving the camel-driver and myself I kept aloof from all the firewood transactions, delegating a Barjun or a Somali in each camp to deal with this. Thus I regretfully severed contact with those I had come to like best and respect most in Somalia and thereafter did not speak with any nomad saving those who greeted me in a clearly friendly fashion.

With Saidi exploiting the Mungahia area to the full, I thought the time was fast approaching when he might expand his territory to include Gandersheikh as well. That would leave my Barjuns and me to make the next 'hop' up to Uarschieh, where I hoped to find other poorly equipped but keen fishermen who might be trained to open up their portion of the coast to feed our growing demands. But before this move could be started, Geoff should have a rest from running the cannery at Chisimaio. He was long overdue for leave anyway and wished to visit friends in Kenya, which I thought was a good idea. Accordingly it was arranged that on his departure I would see to such business as might be outstanding in Mogadishu and then return to Chisimaio to supervise the routine of the factory in his absence.

But other forces were at work which prevented me from doing so.

FINALE

'The Far Gone Wandering'

'... Their works are like ashes which the wind scattereth on a stormy day; no advantage shall they gain from them. This is the far gone wandering.'

Sura 14

I had left camp at Gandersheikh before dawn for Mogadishu in order to take advantage of the low tide which would allow me to drive along the beach for part of the way and so avoid the road's long detour. In this manner I hoped to complete my business there that day and to return by nightfall, before setting off on the long drive down to Chisimaio. Besides the usual load of calipee and sharks' fins I carried some samples of shark-liver oil for analysis and a small piece of ambergris which one of the fisherman had found on the shore a few days previously and which he wished me to sell for him. I also had my passport since my visa was due for routine renewal, which meant calling in at the Immigration Department.

Having forgotten to check the water in the radiator before leaving, at sunrise I stopped at a well. Here a party of nomads were watering their camels, the animals themselves waiting a little way off with the women whilst the men drew up the water in their soft, black buckets which, as usual, leaked copiously through the stitching of the seams. Each camel, on being called, shambled to the well, where one of the men standing on the raised stone parapet lifted the rubber *guraaf* to the level of the animal's head so that it might drink in comfort.

Not wishing to disturb the beasts and unsure of my reception, I had parked the Landrover a little way off, which action had not escaped the notice of the herdsmen for, having finished with their camels, they beckoned me forward and held out their buckets in readiness. When the radiator was filled, I asked them to pour some water into my cupped hands that I might drink, but they demurred and shouted across to the women, whereupon one young girl detached herself from the group and came to me carrying a wooden

bowl of camel's milk, which she silently offered. As I drank from it her obsidian eyes met mine over its rim. In lifting the dish towards me her threadbare, ochre-coloured *maro* had slipped off her shoulder baring her poised hard breasts with their purple nipples like small blackberries. Unconcernedly, and with her doe's eyes still holding mine, she now readjusted the robe, raising one coppery arm above her head as she did so, revealing for an instant the shadowed, petal-smooth armpit, and I caught the musky scent of her *salafala*-smoked body. The milk finished, I thanked her and returned the bowl. She inclined her head in acknowledgement, turned and walked back to her companions with that sensuous and queenly grace that is the hall-mark of the true Somali woman.

Before leaving, I offered my tin of tobacco paste around and most of the men accepted, scooping out a little with hooked index fingers and lodging it between gum and cheek. As they were passing it from one to the other my attention was caught by the elaborate coiffure of one of the younger men, whose beehive hair-style was effectively ornamented with a fine selection of porcupine quills. Seeing my interest, he plucked one of these out and, grinning hugely, planted it in my beard (which must have seemed as outlandish to him as his own hair-do was to me), in imitation of his own dandyism. I started to remove it in order to give it back to him, but he would not have it, so with the quill still in place I eventually climbed back into the Landrover and drove on. As I passed the women, busy now in loading up the camels, their soft voices chorused after me: '*Nabat gelyo, . . . nabat gelyo, . . .*'

Arriving in Mogadishu I was able to get through all my chores in good time and was therefore annoyed at being told by the Immigration Department that my visa could not be approved till the next day, but that if I left my passport with them and called the following morning, it would be ready. There was nothing I could do about this and accordingly I went along to the Seebeli Hotel, since I kept there some clothes and night-things against any such unexpected stop-over. Later, soaking in my bath, I realized that the delay did not really matter and I began to look forward to having a pleasant, relaxed evening in 'normal' surroundings. And so, approaching midnight, I was sitting in a little café having a late brandy when a Somali street-hawker came up and gave me three Marie Therese silver dollars. The man knew that I collected these old coins and used to save them for me when he came across any. This time he

was in a hurry and would not wait for me to get some change from the waiter to pay him, saying that he would see me when next I came to town. On my way back to the hotel I passed a small shop that was still open and smelt incense being burnt within, which reminded me that we needed some sandalwood chips for the evening prayer-sessions at camp. I entered and asked, but there were none in stock. However, when he had learnt for what purpose I needed them, the Indian shopkeeper produced a box of spills coated with myrrh and frankincense and gave me them, refusing payment, saying, 'Why should men pay for giving respect to God?'

The following morning I presented myself at the immigration office and asked the clerk for my visa. He told me to wait and disappeared into an inner room. Returning, he threw the passport across the counter at me.

'Your visa is not being renewed and your presence in Somalia is now illegal. You will leave today—there is a plane in about two hours. I am instructed to advise you to be on it!'

'But why . . .?' Dumbfounded, I left the sentence dangle in mid-air.

'British people are no longer welcome in Somalia. Your government has betrayed our friendship and tries to enslave our people and steal our land in the NFD. . . .' He went on in this vein, getting more and more excited, the situation rapidly became ridiculous.

'Listen! I would like to see the Minister of the Interior, is he in?'

'He is in, but I have been told that you are not to be admitted. Please go now.'

I went.

At the office of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry I met with the same blank wall of officialdom, but again the instruction to be on the eleven o'clock aircraft was repeated. Whatever avenue I tried the result was the same. I was British, my visa was therefore not to be renewed. I must leave. I asked in vain for a few days' grace in order to settle some of the more important and immediate problems brought about by their decision. The fact that my fishermen, their countrymen, were waiting for my return to give them their latest earnings did not interest the authorities. Politics, *féina* on a national scale—the curse and ruin of Somalia—overshadowed all other issues. It was no good and there was nothing I could do about it.

The 'Fasten-your-seat-belts' sign blinked and went out as the aircraft turned and climbed away from Mogadishu airport. Out of the

narrow window I could see the long sweep of beach that ran southwards towards Gandersheikh, Munghia and El Afuen, past Brava, past Chisimaio with our now never-to-be-completed factory, and on along that glorious, wild, lost coast that led down to the Kenya border and the mangrove swamps of Lamu.

Far below, across the dun-coloured *goban*, I could see a file of camels marching ponderously who-knew-whither, and in my mind I heard the 'tonk, tonk' of the leader's bell. Off the coast there lay a dhow, deep laden with a cargo she might have been carrying before Christ was born.

The clouds swallowed us up and I was thankful, for I did not wish to see any more. But in my mouth there was the smoky taste of camel's milk and in my nostrils hung the scent of *salafala*.

I opened my brief-case to check my papers. In the bottom of it lay four items, and for me all of Somalia was bound up in them. A lump of ambergris, a porcupine quill, three silver coins and a box of incense.

The fisherman Haji, whose beach-treasure I had forgotten to sell, would never really understand why I had left, but now his ambergris would stay with me always, its muskiness a perpetual reminder of the old lost things of his strange country. Luckily I had managed to leave some money for him with a friend before leaving, so he would not lose.

I fingered the quill and remembered the white teeth of the camel-drover and the soft voices of the *badawin* women were in my ears.

The coins chinked, bell-like, in my palm, and I wondered how many other hands they had passed through during the last 200 years. Herdsmen, slave-traders, merchants, fishermen, Somal, Arab, Indian, Barjun. Carried in saddle-bags, locked in carved chests, hidden in turbans. Bartered for hides, for cattle or for cloth. Used as a bribe, as the price of a woman, given as blood-money. . . . Now those heavy dollars were returning to Europe, their birthplace, whilst back in Mogadishu my friend the street-hawker would wonder for some while what had become of me till eventually he shrugged off his loss, as he had done all other calamities throughout his life, submitting to the capricious will of God in accordance with the dictates of his religion.

Opening the box of incense sticks I took one out and lit it without thinking.

Tonight, in camp, Ibrahim would lead the prayers and perhaps speculate as to why I was delayed and if I had remembered the

sandalwood. For how long would the fishermen remain there by the shore till the news filtered down to them? And afterwards, who would occupy the long thatched huts there on the lonely beaches? The drying racks would soon rot and crumble and the grass grow over the furrows worn by the Landrovers across the desolate landscape. Soon nothing would remain of our efforts except for a large stone building on the shore at Chisimaio and the memory of an unfinished tale in the minds of a few hundred Barjuns and Somalis.

Musing, I watched the thin whisp of perfumed blue smoke coil upwards, shiver in pale eddies and then dissolve into nothingness—as had my dream of a long-shore fisheries industry in Somalia. No more would the fishermen find outlets for their produce and the dread pall of poverty would again cloak the coast in its chill mist.

What was the glorious song that had brought the Somali Republic into being? How did it go?

*'Somalia awake!
Unite the warring tribes.
Give help unto the poor
And strength unto the weak.
If one of your camels is stolen
To save it you risk your lives,
But for your whole lost land
No man even raises a cry . . .'*

A small voice had been raised—and now it had been silenced.

Anyway, the turtles would be at peace, and for that I was thankful.

WILLIAM TRAVIS

Beyond the Reefs

Even flying can pull, so William Travis abandoned his career in the air to go diving for saleable shell amongst the minute, remote but lovely islands of the Seychelles group in the Indian Ocean. Having selected and trained a number of illiterate Creoles as aqualung divers, by methods as unorthodox as they were effective, he sailed with this collection of ripe personalities in a tiny schooner into empty sunlit seas.

This was a world of its own, remote from anything we have ever read about before, and each chapter seems to have its own unexpected twist—the 'coffin canoe' in which a shipwrecked American of extraordinary courage saved himself from a Robinson Crusoe existence; the frequent encounters with ferocious sharks, at eye level with their own element; the sea-birds on an unexplored isle; the extraordinary beauties of the underwater coral and its multitudinous inhabitants or the desolation where it has been killed by a tornado; the horror of the abyss where the reef falls away to cold unfathomable depths; the five unexplained graves on an uninhabited island.

This young man can deliberately work for a day diving in and out of a shoal of killer sharks because he coolly calculates from their movements that they are not hungry—but remembers to swim lazily as they are swimming—and modestly admits that he fell asleep over his supper with nervous exhaustion. A man who uses his brain and makes interesting observations about his motley crew, but yet feels for them as human beings, and has a very human sense of humour.

Shark for Sale

Far out in the Indian Ocean lie the lonely islands of the Seychelles and around them are scattered the sun-warmed shallows that are the breeding grounds for giant sharks of many species. To these fabulous banks came William Travis, drawn thither by the lure of adventure as offered by the life of a shark fisherman. Equipped with a little sailing cutter and accompanied by a crew of colourful Creole seamen, he set out to develop new methods of taking these huge and savage fishes that had been regarded hitherto as the inviolate lords of the tropic seas, too big and dangerous to tackle.

EDWIN FERDON

One Man's Log

One Man's Log is the 'story behind the story'. If you thrilled to Thor Heyerdahl's best selling *Aku-Aku*, and its exciting accounts of momentous discoveries on Easter Island, you will want to read *One Man's Log*. Its author, a scientific member of Heyerdahl's famous Norwegian expedition to Easter Island, takes you behind the scenes of the great adventures recounted in *Aku-Aku*. Here the author shares his personal, and at times intimate, observations and experiences on the dozen South Pacific Islands visited during the long voyage. Much of the life of the expedition is recounted—the hilarious events of Christmas Eve on Easter Island, the sheer delight of an exotic Tahitian hula party, the long weeks of weary excavating and nerve-wracking 'togetherness'. Loneliness too has its place in the author's log, as does the thrill of native dances on Mangareva, and the joy of living with the happy people of Pitcairn Island. The highly readable personal account of the life and customs of modern Easter Islanders brings still another dimension to this interesting volume.

PETER AND CONSUELO ALLEN

The Curve of Earth's Shoulder

Peter and Consuelo Allen have covered three-quarters of a million miles since the War ended, half a million by air and the rest by other available forms of transport, the one most favoured when time allowed being the footplate of a steam engine.

These journeys, on business for ICI or its Canadian descendant CIL, or on holiday or in the pursuit of pleasure, have taken the Allens to all the corners of the earth and to some remote and unusual places, from Dawson City in the Yukon to Alice Springs in Central Australia, from Sable Island to Samarkand.

Peter Allen's earlier books have all dealt with railways, though written with the traveller's rather than the technician's eye. He has, however, written for magazines on many other topics also. His Spanish wife, whose grandfather was a famous playwright, has also written for magazines, but this is her first full-length book.

The title of the book comes from that strange far-sighted poem by Rudyard Kipling, 'Hymn of the triumphant Airman—(Flying East to West at 1,000 mph)', written as long ago as 1929.

THE VOICE OF THE TURTLE

by

William Travis

1967