

XIII Mombasa.

I left Kenya in March 1929, and was back again a year later collecting more fossils. Before I left I gave a dinner party to my European acquaintances, at which Ali produced a menu of all Swahili dishes. He had a local reputation as a cook, and was much in demand for funeral feasts. In fact, after he had buried his fifth grandmother, I protested. Even in a polygamous society he seemed to me to be overdoing it, but he explained that he found English terms of relationship difficult, and simply divided his numerous relations into age groups; over a certain age you automatically became a grand parent. We did not keep the festivity up very late, but it was after 10.30 p.m. when Ali walked back to his home, and the police picked him up for not having a light. To make it worse he was not carrying his registration form. He spent the night in jail, and was in a slightly outraged state when I rescued him next morning. Since he was working for a European he was excused not having a light, but they fined him 2/- for not having his papers on him. How many of us, during the war, always had our identity cards on our persons? When I knew I was returning to Kenya, I wrote to him saying that, if he was out of a job, I would be pleased to have him with me again. I received a reply, written in beautiful copperplate by a professional letter writer, saying that he would be waiting for me on the quayside. He was not. Instead there was a letter mentioning "difficulties", but saying he would come as soon as he could. It was only later, when I met his indignant ex-mistress, that I realised that Ali had gone up in the world, and was working as a houseboy to an exalted government official. It is a heinous crime to lure away a woman's domestic staff, but my intentions were quite innocent, and the choice between a good, settled job and a merely temporary job wandering round the bush was, after all, Ali's choice. I was glad to have him with me again. We were used to each other's ways.

Even in the space of a year Mombasa had changed. Quite a few new buildings had gone up, and they were constructing a road bridge to join the island to the mainland. The chief difference I noticed,

however, was the atmosphere. The shadow of the economic depression of the thirties lay over the country, and Africans as well as Europeans were affected. Subsistence farming offers a lean livelihood, subject to flood and drought, to plant disease and insect pests, but wage earning can also have its drawbacks. I found that I could get all the porters I wanted at any time without going outside Mombasa. But it was my boarding house that depressed me most. I had left it an apparently flourishing affair; I returned to find it inhabited by a handful of guests all of whom seemed to be finding life in the tropics too much for them. The bar was the centre of the house and a kind of alcoholic haze hung over the whole establishment. Apart from my hostess I was the only woman there, the Australian friend I had hoped to find having moved to a hotel. Luckily we had the offer of a bungalow, whose occupants were going on leave, and we set up housekeeping together. The house was part of a pleasant little colony of temporary bungalows strewn casually over a piece of railway land for which at the moment they had no use. It had a communal garden, bright with flowers and shaded by trees, and you could drop down into the harbour for a swim. Its only drawback was that ours was the end bungalow next to the Moslem burial ground, and the lamentations lasted far into the night. I would not have minded this if our neighbours had not tried to drown the sound by playing a gramophone non stop. Dirges in our left ear and jazz in our right was a trifle distracting.

I had received another commission; to collect live shells for a man interested in ecology, and the foreshore from the old fort to Kilindini harbour offered a good collecting site. I found this an idyllic existence, half in and half out of the warm sea, tracing the sea creatures from zone to zone, treading delicately in the cove where sea urchins spread their spines, watching for Tridacna shells that lay buried in the sand with their serrated jaws agape ready to snap shut at a touch. The first lot of shells I collected I dumped casually in a corner of my bedroom, waking in the night to hear a curious scabbling sound. I

switched on the light, and saw shells pouring out of the bag in which I had placed them, and scuttling across the floor. A somewhat nightmare effect due simply to hermit crabs. After that I examined all the gasteropod shells I picked up to see whether they were inhabited or not. Once I found a baby octopus. I used to whistle to my shells in the ~~belief~~ belief that this made the crabs protrude their heads, but this may only have been imagination. Crabs were an entertainment in themselves. There were wraithlike sand crabs, that would pop out of a hole with an armful of sand, throw it away with a brisk whisk and pop back for more. On an incoming tide they would dance on the edge of a receding wave only to be bowled heads over heels by the next. Further out a greenish crab scuttled away at your approach, holding its claws stiffly aloft, till he found a convenient niche ~~in a rock~~ in a rock, from which he made a defiant popping sound. And, where the mangroves came down, there were the black Fiddler crabs, whose male has one large scarlet claw, Here too one found the Mud Skippers, a curious little fish of the goby family, that skips over the surface of the water, crawls on the mud, using its pectoral fins as legs, or climbs onto a mangrove root to rest.

Sometimes an African would wander past searching for a large cowrie that they liked to eat, but often the marine life and I had the shore to ourselves. There were starfish aplenty, an elegant one with long slender arms, a garish one mottled with red, a portly pentagonal fellow looking a little like a dissipated currant bun. As you swam out towards the reef you might pick up a Holothurian, a plump sea ~~cucumber~~ cucumber, that turned disgustingly limp and ~~slabby~~ <sup>slabby</sup> when you took it out of the water, or you might meet a jelly fish. Seeing a tiny fish in imminent danger of being engulfed by a large jelly fish, I rescued it, thereby showing my ignorance. It looked at me with hostility and ~~darted~~ <sup>darted</sup> back ~~amongst~~ to take refuge with its host, and, on investigation, I found that the jelly fish housed a whole colony of little fish and crustaceans.

But what I liked best of all were the little, sandy bottomed rock pools, fringed with seaweed and sea anenomes and full of

colourful fish, delicate little creatures, one of them with frilly tail and fins, beautifully camouflaged as a piece of golden brown seaweed, and another that seemed to have discovered the secret of perpetual motion. It had a yellow nose, fins and tail, and broad blue stripes on its side, and it ducked, it bowed, it pranced, it curvetted, always on the same spot. If you stretched out your hand, it was gone, but a moment later it was back again as lively as before.

One day, as I stood there, a cloud of white butterflies came drifting in from the sea. From a few moments the air was full of butterflies. When I mentioned this to Ali, he said,

"We Swahili have a saying that the white butterflies go out to sea to be coloured."

"This lot was not very successful," I told him, "They came back as white as they went."

But he only grinned. He had a fondness for "we Swahili". Once, as we stood staring up at a starry sky, he pointed to Orion's belt and said,

"We Swahili say those three stars mean Money, Life and Death."

"How peaceful it is," I said, slapping at a mosquito on my wrist.

"I wish," said Ali, "obliterating another, "That I could always be on safari, far from the troublings of troublesome men.

This was on one of our excursions up the pipe line that brought the water to Mombasa. The pipe crossed many gullies and the Africans used it as a bridge to avoid the exertion of climbing down and up again. I followed suit, nervously at first, but gaining confidence, and thankful that I had a good head for heights. I was not going to be outdone in the matter of balance, and it was a large pipe. We spent some time searching for a fossil of which I had previously only found an immature specimen lying loose on the ground. I finally found mature specimens in situ, but it was the most uncomfortable collecting I ever did. Ali and I plodded interminably through a mangrove swamp till we reached a steep shale slope. The only way to work was to dig footholds and lie spread-

eagled on the shale while mosquitos made a meal off the unprotected parts of your anatomy. On subsequent visits we took a Flit gun and Ali conscientiously enveloped us both in a cloud of Flit, but the moaquitos rather seemed to enjoy it than otherwise. And at night ~~then-Anelpe~~ the Anopheles mosquitos ate us. I acquired my one and only attack of malaria, but I waited to develop it till we were on a brief visit to Zanzibar and Pemba island. I did not see as much of Zznzibar as I would have wished, but retain a most grateful recollection of the kindnesses the European residents heaped upon this stranger in their midst, and of the hospital as an oasis of peace after the rather ~~noisy-hotel~~ noisy hotel. I had a cool room, facing the sea front, and there was no sound but the sighing of the wind in the palms and the lap of waves on the shore. Deft, silent Zanzibari nurses waited on me, with one of the busy white sisters looking in from time to time. I am not a gregarious patient, some people might have found it almost too quiet.

The only other time I was laid up I acquired a pet. Some sort of insect, possibly a spider, had bitten me, ~~causing-my~~ causing my leg to swell enormously. I took my bed out onto the veranda of our bungalow, and a land crab walked in. The houseboy indignantly swept it out again, but, the moment his back was turned, it came back ~~again~~, and it haunted the place all the time I was sleeping there, disappearing as soon as I went on safari. I doubt if it came for ~~the~~ the pleasure of my company, but it did not seem interested in any of the food I offered it. Meanwhile I was planning a more extensive journey into the bush than I had as yet attempted. One of the major changes in my first and second visit to Kenya was a change of personnel. All the administrative officers I had know previously were either on leave, or had moved to another diatricht, and I found the new officials more difficult. Perhaps they thought I was getting too independent.