

XIV Drought.

I intended to return to the Sabaki River area, where there were good exposure of limestone, and where the locusts had so impeded my movements when I was there before. On the way north I thought I would take a look at the Voi River valley. My Mombasa acquaintances dissented strongly.

"What do you want with the Voi River? Nobody ever goes up the Voi River. There is nothing to go up the Voi River for. It isn't even a proper river with a continuous flow of water. It is just a dry river bed with holes that hold a little water during the rainy season. This year the rains have failed on the coast, You will soon run out of water, and what will you do then?"

"Turn back again," I said, as I thought reasonably.

"There are lions at Voi," said a man gloomily, "Don't forget the maneaters that plagued them when they were building the railway."

"That was a long time ago, and I'm not going as far as Voi. The sedimentary rocks peter out long before then."

"The natives stick poisoned arrows upright in the ground. Tread on one of them, and you've had it. Besides which you can't trust the modern porter. It's not like the good old days."

All the same I went. I started from Vitangeni where there was a silver lead mine, whose owner was said to dislike visitors and to be of uncertain temper. Fortunately he was absent, recruiting labour, the local inhabitants having refused to work for him any more. This gave me a chance to explore the mine. The main shaft was several feet deep in water, and I almost took a plunge into it, having slipped on some loose scree and started a small avalanche. I slid down helplessly side by side with a bright green snake, and we came to rest ~~side~~ still side by side. I could have put out a hand and touched its writhing coils. Not being a herpetologist I treat snakes with a certain reserve, and this one was feeling much abused. I removed myself before it had ceased tying itself into knots, but it was probably quite

harmless. The first snake I met in Kenya was a python. Seeing a long line of caterpillars humping themselves along nose to tail, I jumped into a ditch to get a better look at them, and immediately there rose before me foot after foot of python till its head was on a level with mine and we looked into each other's eyes. Then, taking fright simultaneously, we each fled up our own side of the ditch.

There was an Arab shop and godown at Vitengeni, and I left most of the stores I had brought with me locked up in the godown, taking only what I thought we would need for a short trip up the Voi valley. We set out light of load and light of heart. Perhaps I was wishing my own mood onto the porters, but you do not trudge for miles alone with a bunch of porters without learning to some extent to gauge their uplift or depression of spirits. The youngsters were particularly frolicsome, Njugu Njogu, a charming Mundia lad, whom we subsequently took on as houseboy at the bungalow, and two lively young Wakamba, who did acrobatic dances of an evening to let off surplus steam. The country was bone dry with tufts of sunscorched grass and the thorny vegetation of arid country. It was new to all of us except our Giriama guide and the porters' eyes were everywhere. They continually brought things to show me, a plant good for fever, another excellent for use in poultices. Or they warned me.

"Take care, Memsahib, that tree is poisonous. See."

And they split open the twin seed pods to show two rows of grey black seeds and a ~~fine~~ lining of fine hairs, which caused an irritation of the skin. Their attentions could be embarrassing. One day I was so ill advised as to admire a black and vermillion spider with horns on its back and possessed of remarkable saltatory powers. For the rest of the day they pursued me with spiders, large spiders, small spiders, hairy spiders, smooth spiders. The spider is not my favourite form of animal life, and I began to feel acrawl with spiders. To divert them I said,

"Find me the plant that travellers seek when they find themselves without water. I have heard that such a plant exists."

This took them some time, but one evening Njogu and one

of the young Wakamba appeared at my tent door and said that they had found it. They stood there triumphant, hand in hand, and led me me gleefully to the spot. It was a curious plant. All that was visible above ground was a stiff spike of narrowly linear leaves, but, if you dug far enough down into the soil, you came on an enormous tuber full of juice.

I could well believe that Europeans did not go up the Voi River valley for the inhabitants of the first village we came to all ran away and hid themselves in the bush.

"Wanyka!" said the Giriama guide disgustedly, "Shenzi folk. When you come to the villages of my people they will not behave like this." Nor did they. The guide disappeared into the bush and returned an hour later with the villagers trailing sheepishly behind him, but after that we all got quite friendly.

We came to the point ~~where~~^{where} I had been told, officially, that all water would cease and found that, at some past date, the P.W.D. had caused a reservoir to be constructed there. The water was not inviting, having a milky appearance even when boiled, and the jug Ali left me had an inch deposit on the bottom by morning. The village seemed well supplied with goats and chicken.

The Wakamba thought out a new idea for my entertainment. They made fire with a firestick. This required two sticks, one with a rounded end and the other with holes into which the other stick fitted. A rapid twirling of the stick in a hole, ~~and~~ a little dry grass to catch fire, and they soon had a blaze. They then had a lovely time watching me trying to do it.

Maringa, the headman, also known as Simba, began to show his potentialities. Amongst my rag tag and bobtail following, dressed in a rare assortment of clothes, he stood out for the neatness of his appearance, whether in khaki shorts and bush shirt, or in his long orange kanzu. He was a serious man and a strict Mohammedan, and he fascinated me by the unhurrying deftness of his movements. To watch him arrange a fire was like watching a well trained parlourmaid laying a table. The Wakamba had an idea that a proper fire should be carefully tied together with ropes of dried grass. In view of the combustibility of dried grass, this did not

seem to me a terribly bright idea, but they stuck to it.

At last we came to Jovuni, and here the water supply really did give out in the stretch of arid country that had proved such a nuisance to early travellers making their way on foot into the interior.

"If you do not wish to return by the way you came," said the Mzee, "You can go south to Gutu and return from there. The maize crop at Gutu ~~was~~ failed in the drought, and all the people have gone away except for one old man and his wife. He has replanted his maize."

"What does he do for water?" I asked.

"He is a wise old man. When he was south near the railway he saw British engineers boring for water in rock very like the rock round his own village. So he thought, what they can do, I can do. Before all the others went away they helped him to dig a well, and he found water. Not very much, but enough for him and his wife and his goats and chickens. You should go and see the old man of Gutu."

The elders left, the medicine queue came and went, and the women arrived in force. The only other white person they could remember in the village was an engineer, who had come all the way down the Voi River valley. The women too left and Ali brought my supper and with it a message. They proposed to hold an ngoma to celebrate the occasion. The ngoma was for them what the ballet is to us, a combination of drama, music and dancing. In it they expressed their experience of life, dancing only one dance throughout the evening and that dance appropriate to some particular occasion. I was curious to know ~~at~~ what dance they would think appropriate to the sudden appearance in their midst of a solitary European woman. As we walked down to the dancing ground Ali whispered to me that in my honour they had chosen a European theme, the King's African Rifles, but I was much more delighted to discover that, in view presumably of my being a woman, the whole thing was a kind of children's party. The only adult performers were the band of four drums and the Master of Ceremonies. The chorus of little girls stood on one side of the wide space of

beaten earth, carefully wrapped up against the evening chill, and close to a gigantic bonfire stood a group of little boys, waiting impatiently for their turn to perform as solo dancers. Moonlight and firelight combined to illuminate the scene, and a benevolent audience of mammas and papas sat round in a circle, in which I took my place sitting on a solid little Giriama stool.

The Master of Ceremonies marched up to the group of girls with a boy strutting behind him.

"Are you soldier women?" he asked, and they chorussed,

"We are."

"Are you able to fight?"

"We are able."

"Are you ready to fight?"

"We are ready."

And so on. How are you ready to fight, who are you ready to fight, and, finally,

"Is this the truth, or is it a lie?"

Nine times out of ten they said it was the truth, but the sometimes, by way of a joke, they said it was a lie, and the audience dutifully laughed.

Then the Master of Ceremonies walked round in a circle with the boy behind him while the drums played and the girls sang. The music rose to a climax, the Master of Ceremonies stepped aside, and the boy dancer was left alone...marking time. I doubt whether the King's African Rifles would have recognised themselves. The youngsters marked time with such vigour that their bony little knees nearly touched their chins, and their pointed elbows worked like pistons. Big boys, medium sized boys and baby boys capering gleefully without a stitch of clothing.

Half way through they said they were going to do another dance. Two or three of the bigger boys disappeared in the direction of the village and we had an interval for conversation. Then the boys came back dressed in finery their elders had brought back from visits to sophistication. Shirts they had and white trousers

and they had tied coloured rags round their elbows, which flapped like wings, but the dance they did was exactly the same as before. One boy's trousers were too tight and burst with the vigour of his dancing, so that he retired discomfited amidst hoots of laughter. An ngoma may go on till the small hours, but this was a children's dance and it ended reasonably about midnight. Performers and audience drifted chattily back to the village in the pleasantly sentimental mood induced by watching little children enjoying themselves, and I felt that my visit to this village had been a success.

Next day we went to Gutu to the considerable surprise of the old man. He showed us his well with pride. It was a shallow well dug through some three feet of soil into a black, sandy shale, and it was astonishingly full of frogs. All that remained of the village were two huts in reasonable repair and some ruins. There was also a little "devil house", for protection. His replanted maize plot was looking well, and he said that he was quite content to live there alone except for the leopards. There had been elephant too, but they had done no harm, whereas the leopards were a constant worry. My porters looked thoughtful, and that night Maringa called round to borrow all my geological hammers. He pointed out that I had the gun, which had once more been pressed upon me, and which I kept in my tent at night for fear of accidents. I was left wondering whether I with the gun, or the porters with the geological hammers would have proved least effective against a leopard.

At our next village of Balaga we were still off the map and they were still afraid of leopards for they had enclosed the village in a stiff stockade of brushwood and thorn bushes. Their water supply was a muddy puddle some ten by fifteen feet, dug two years previously, and filled by rainwater. When that gave out they would have to walk miles for water, or abandon the village, and move elsewhere. The more southerly route we were following showed more clearly the dry nature of the country, long, hot, dusty marches chasing a monotonous horizon. Sometimes I walked behind the porters, ~~hypnotized~~ hypnotized by watching the play of muscle on the bare, brown back in front of me. Sometimes I walked in front in a

somnolent trance of heat, dust, thirst and fatigued muscles. One is, however, not so comatose as one imagines on these occasions. On one march something much have impinged on my outer field of vision for I found myself leaping wildly into the air without conscious volition, and looking down I saw a long black streak whizz past just above ground level.

"Mamba!" said the porters on a long shuddering breath.

They assured me earnestly that it was indeed that dreaded snake, the black mamba, and that the female of the species, if she had young nearby, would attack without any other provocation. Was it a black mamba?

We struck the road to Vitangani and plodded for miles along its soft, sandy surface. By the time we reached Mirikani, a cluster of huts by the roadside with a semi permanent water hole, all our tongues were hanging out with thirst. The porters were for throwing themselves down and drinking forthwith, but I noticed the warning sign, the little stick with the Achatina shell on top, and said it would only be polite to ask permission first. So they sat, eying me reproachfully, till an elder was fetched. He immediately gave us permission to drink, removing the Achatina shell, and addressing a few words to the water. The pool, he said, had proved so attractive to other villages that they had had to take steps to protect it. I enquired as to the particular magic used in the Achatina spell, and was told that it varied. In this case a root had been dried, reduced to charcoal, and powdered between the hands before being placed in the shell.

"Shenzi folk," said Ali, and went on to another piece of local superstition. The were wolf was here replaced by the lion man. Some Giriama proclaimed themselves sceptical, but others thought this incautious.

"It is well that we shall be in Vitangani tonight," said Maringa, "There is no food left." We had allowed some for emergencies, but we had got further up the Voi River than I had expected. We thought contentedly of the stores we had left with the Arab. I had another reason for wanting to get to Vitangani since one of the porters was obviously sickening for something.

His name was Mbogo, and he was by way of being the bad boy of the party. He cheeked his betters. At the moment his bound face looked sadly woebegone, and his squashed hat more squashed than usual. Even his baggy trousers and the shirt tails ganging down behind looked dejected. He was, in fact, in for a bad bout of malaria.

Maringa and I went round to the Arab store and found it locked. The Arab we were told had gone out in his lorry and had not returned. Probably it had broken down, it often did. When would he be back? That was in the hands of Allah. We wandered round seeking a means of effecting a burglarious entry, but there wasn't a hope, so I sent Maringa to try to buy a sheep, and went myself to the Indian store, which was the Arab's unsuccessful rival. The proprietor looked ill, and said he was only waiting for a lorry to take him to hospital in Mombasa. He could do nothing for us, but I lingered to watch him serving his customers. A whole family of Africans was assembled there with a few friends to give advice. A strip of cloth to make a new skirt for Madame. Prolonged pause. Half a pound of salt. A male discussion ending in the purchase of a loin cloth with a purple stripe for the master of the household. Eyes wandering round in search of other ideas as the family lingered on. I made an inventory of the contents of the shop. Two tins of fruit, one of bully beef and several of tea and condensed milk. Bolts of cloth, shirts and khaki trousers. Flour in woven baskets and a bunch of green bananas. Six wooden "chop" boxes, two kettles, two hatchets many pangas, the curved, many purpose knife, rope, wire, enamel mugs, cigarettes, a pair of scales and a bundle of newspapers. I felt sorry for that Indian shopkeeper.

I dosed the melancholy Mbogo with quinine and thought he was yielding nicely to treatment when one evening I was fetched in a hurry because he was sure he was dying. Aghast I rushed to his side, my medicine chest under my arm, and, to my uninstructed eye, he seemed much as before. Having had malaria myself, however, I remembered the sinking sensation I had experienced during the early stages of recovery, and thought that a mild stimulant in the shape of a cup of

hot beef tea might do him good, so I dissolved an Oxo cube in a cup of water. The effect was staggering. Mbogo rose from the dead, and imperiously summoned all the porters to see the miracle that had taken place, and from then on the "brown" medicine was regarded as a cure for all ills. They felt better at the mere thought of it, and I had to reserve it for serious cases. Even when I was back in Mombasa two of them turned up to be treated.

"Why come to me," I asked them, "When there is a proper hospital where you can get treatment from real doctors?"

"The hospital is all right," they said, "But it doesn't give you the brown medicine."

A day passed, and another, and still the Arab did not come back, nor did the lorry come to fetch the sick Indian. The Arab appeared at last, but he had not got the extra rations he had promised. Mbogo was much better, but still wobbly, it seemed best to leave Maringa with some of the porters to bring up the extra stores, while the rest of us went on ahead. The longer we stayed in Vitengeni the more food we ate. I regretted Maringa since I now had to keep the safari moving myself. The porters seemed to feel that we were now really going to the back of beyond, and some of them asked for a few cents of their pay to buy themselves little luxuries. They appeared one by one and I ticked them off on my official list, taken from their registration papers, and giving their full tribal name. A good many of them I knew only by their nicknames. One of them hadn't a clue as to what he was supposed to be called. He had lost his registration papers and borrowed some from a friend and he did not know his friend's tribal name. It was most embarrassing for him.