

XVI. Back to the Villages.

Maringa was waiting for me at Kiziki ya Mzungu with enough stores to see us home and an Mbogo entirely restored to health and still cheeking his betters. Maringa was pleased to see us. The Giriama headman was pleased to see us. The local Wasani were now anxious to make our acquaintance. It was a most convivial occasion. The Wasani turned up in force the morning after our arrival. The men sat for hours in the space outside my tent; the women crowded inside. My tent bulged with Wasani ladies to such an extent that I thought it would collapse.

Conversation was as limited as usual, but the coughs were heart rending. The ladies had kept a sharp eye on their menfolk when they were having their round of medical treatment, and had concluded that coughs were a symptom that even the dumbest of white women could understand. They looked hopefully at the vast bottle of cough mixture that a chemist in Mombasa had given me before I set out. It was a good mixture, hot and strong. You could feel it warming you from throat to stomach, but it was not exactly suitable for children, and I was horrified to see a woman preparing to transfer her spoonful from her own mouth to that of the infant in her arms. I stopped her and the temperature in the tent fell several degrees. What was this? Was I poisoning them? I went to the tent door and shouted for Kiribi.

"Tell the women," I said, "That this is a powerful medicine for strong men and women. For little children I have another," and I went hastily out at the back of the tent to think one up. Fortunately Ali, who had a sweet tooth, had bought himself some honey from a Wasani who had been robbing a bee's nest. We mixed this with a little warm water, added a drop of lemon juice and I re-entered the tent with dignity. The children thought their cough mixture delicious and confidence was restored. But I was glad when my guests left. I found them a trifle exhausting.

The Wasani were back again in the evening, wading across

the river to hold an ngoma outside my tent, at which I sat enthroned as guest of honour. Being a hunting tribe it was a hunter's dance, the Dance of the Lion. It was most exciting, though, inevitably, repetitious. The women provided the music. They had only one drum, but marked the ^hrythm by clapping their hands. They also ~~and~~ sang in slightly nasal voices, not unpleasant unless they forced them in the crescendo passages.

I took it that the women represented the hunters. They stood in a group on one side of the dancing space and the men faced them in a long, arm-linked line. This line charged towards the women, retreated, charged again and retreated again, keeping up a low growling. It was an extraordinary sound to proceed from human throats, and my porters growled themselves hoarse trying to imitate it. The third time the men advanced they did so slowly, step by stealthy step, like a cat stalking its prey, and the growling rose to a ferocious roar. One or two of the women would then detach themselves from their group and advance towards them, hopping with both feet together, clapping their hands and making a sibilant sound between their teeth. When they reached the line of men the women turned and hopped back again, the men following them until, just before they reached the women's group, the men made two great leaps forward, presumably representing the spring of the lion. Then everybody burst out laughing, the line of men broke up and reformed, and they did it all over again.

Sometimes we had a solo performance of one man and one woman. Sometimes we had a pause, while some of the men made a melancholy tootling on little bamboo pipes, but mostly we had a full scale performance of the dance. After some hours of this I was told that the ngoma was officially at an end. The older men went away and I retired to my tent, but the young people went on for a long time after that. I lay on my camp bed and listened, finding that the ^hrythm had an increasingly hypnotic effect and that the gaiety of the dancers was infectious.

Next day I said goodbye to the guides and paid them off.

"Kua heri Kiribi. Kua Heri Kiongozi kingine."

"Kua heri," said Kiribi expansively, "If ever you come to our country again, just send for us and we will come and be your guides."

Other Guide, as usual, said nothing.

We were now back amongst the villages and could buy other luxuries than hippo meat to add to our spartan rations. Maize cobs were to be had, luscious pineapples, green paw-paws and pilipili hohq, The red peppers beloved of the porters. Baricho, had sprouted a shop since I was last there and we bought some bright blue, mottled soap and got so clean we did not know ourselves, but I was distressed to find that the standard of health was deteriorating. There were bouts of fever and stomach disorders, whereas out in the wilds we had had an amazingly clean bill of health. The septic sores, with which so many of the men started, had cleaned up completely and, though our united legs were crass-crossed with scratches from the thorn bushes, none of them had become infected. We were now well into our second month of travel and I suspect were all getting a little tired.

Our spirits reached their nadir the day we set out to look for a particular fossil mentioned by the geologist I had met in Mombasa. All the clue I had as to its whereabouts was an approximate latitude and longitude and the information that it was to be found in an exposure along one of the north bank tributaries of the Rare River. The name of these tributaries is legion and I had to give it up and start looking for water, so that we might make camp. Water and rivers are not always synonymous. When at long last we found it, it was brackish. I told the porters to boil it, but they could not be bothered and were all exceedingly sick. Only Ali and I, having made tea of ours, were unaffected and felt able to eat. The others wrapped themselves in their blankets and lay in depressed heaps round the camp fire.

I sat gloomily in my tent door and looked at them. Was that bundle Maringa, soul of correctitude, or reliable Salim with his drooping, stage Chinaman's moustaches, Homari, the ex hospital orderly, the guilelessly confiding Njogu, Ndogo, a highly intelligent

lad, who would, I felt, have profited by a secondary education though in fact he could neither read nor write. Or was it the disrespectful Mbogo, the gay young Wakamba, Atumbateli of the handsome rotundity and abounding energy, of Sayidi of the spindle shanks, who looked as if he must collapse beneath his load, but was in one of the staunchest carriers. I felt sorry for them. I felt responsible for them. My little store of drugs was exhausted and, if it had not been, I should not have known what remedy to give them. I wished I had something to read.

Ali bustled about his little cooking fire preparing my supper and his own. He went over to the huddled porters and spoke to them. The apathetic bundles were convulsed by an outburst of uproarious laughter and Ali approached me, grinning, with a plate of fruit in one hand and an empty tin in the other.

"You remember, Memsahib," he said, "The two tins of cherries you bought in Malindi? I opened one of them and it wasn't cherries at all. It was peaches. And now they are all guessing what will be in the other tin."

I looked at the empty tin, which said cherries clearly enough, and marvelled. I could not imagine a dispirited group of Europeans being enlivened by a joke of this calibre, but I have found, wherever I have been in Africa, that the people love to laugh, that laughter seems for them to be a positive good whatever its occasion. I cheered up myself. But I was glad of a rest in our bungalow in Mombasa with my Australian friend who was so unexacting a companion. I must soon leave Kenya; just one short safari further to the south and I was through.