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CHAPTER XIII

THE YIBIR

His characteristics—Gulaid Abokr and his Yibir—The first Yibir and his talents—A "makran."

BEFORE the war I lived in Southern Somaliland, where the "Sab," or outcast tribes of Northern Somaliland, are seldom met with, and it so happened that the first representative of the hunter people—the Midgans—whom I came across was the old pot-woman of Zeila. And as for my first Yibir, it was here I met and nearly passed him by. It is customary for the Midgan, who live by hunting, to attach themselves to a Somal family for protection, for which they pay by acting as hewers of wood and drawers of water. The Yibirs are much more sophisticated, and prefer, if possible, to live by their wits instead of soiling their hands by honest toil. Somals will not mix, or inter-marry, with either tribe, and look upon them as of inferior caste to themselves.

This is how I nearly missed my Yibir.

My cook and I had been going through the weekly accounts. He accused me of eating twelve eggs

and three pounds of meat every single day of my life, and I accused him of carelessness in his method of handling the truth, and of extravagance in managing my commissariat. One ever gets but little change out of a cook, and when mine proved he was an honest man, and that I was a glutton, to his own satisfaction and my stupefaction, it was a bad moment for Gulaid Abokr to choose to come to me to borrow money. He came and stood below my veranda, coughing to attract my attention. He did—but he would *not* go away.

“Sahib, I am in trouble, I *must* see you.”

“Gulaid Abokr,” I replied, “the trouble you are in now is nothing to that you’ll find yourself in presently if you don’t go right now and take that villainous-looking companion of yours with you right out of my compound.”

“I can’t take him away, Sahib, he is a Yibir and is the cause of my trouble. I *must* see you.”

I was so foolishly angry that I nearly fell over the veranda. I had barely recovered myself when I heard Gulaid say, “Sahib, I’ve just had a baby.” It was really so funny that I had to forget the cook and my bad temper in a hearty laugh.

“Come up here, you freak,” I said, “and tell me all about it.”

He came.

“Sahib,” he said, “I’ve just had a baby boy, and

the Yibir has come. I have not a rupee in the house: will you lend me four, please?"

Now, thanks to the cook episode I was in a suspicious mood and not inclined to part with four silver rupees, without proper investigation, so I called Mahomed the interpreter at once, together with Buralli, who came with several other uninvited guests, to assist in providing me with the following true *facts*. Even Buralli is prepared to take a divorce oath that they are true.

The first Yibir that ever was, was a sorcerer, and used to say there was nothing God would not do for him, nor enable him to do. He lived ever so long ago, in the time of Sheikh Ishaak, a noble Arab who fled to Somaliland from Mecca six hundred years ago, and who is the founder of one of the most powerful Somal divisions. The Yibir did so many wonderful things that the Sheikh sent for him to come to a small hill between Berbera and Hargeisa, but nearer to Hargeisa than Berbera, and there the two men met.

Said Sheikh Ishaak to the Yibir, "Is this true, all I hear concerning you, that there is nothing you cannot do?"

"It is true," said the Yibir.

"Now I am not disputing with you," said the Sheikh, "but I'd like to see a demonstration. Can you go through that hill?"

"I can," said the Yibir, and he went into the hill and came out on the other side.

The Sheikh was astounded, and said, "Let me see you do it again," and the obliging Yibir did it again.

The Sheikh thought and thought, and scratched his head, but could think of nothing better to say than, "Let me see you do it once more," and of course the Yibir, who was highly flattered by the impression he had made on such a great man as the Sheikh, went into the hill again, but, before he could get through, the Sheikh held up his hands to heaven and said quickly, "Oh God, don't let him come out."

And the Yibir never came out.

Now the Yibir had a son who came to the Sheikh and said, "What's this I hear about you and my father? Is it true?"

"It is quite true, my boy," said the Sheikh.

"Well now you have killed him, what about the compensation, dia, that is coming to me for his death?"

The Sheikh agreed the boy ought to receive some compensation, and further that as he had killed the sorcerer in the interests of the community the community ought to pay. So he decreed, this holy man, that whenever a Somal married he was to pay a skin to a Yibir as part of the dia due to that people for the killing of their ancestor. Further, when-

ever a male child was born its father was to pay another skin. Now in those days there was no money, that was why the Sheikh said the Yibirs were to be paid in skins, but nowadays it is more convenient to give them money. "Four rupees—~~six~~ rupees, something like that."

So, when a baby boy is born a Yibir comes along with a long stick, which he balances on ~~the~~ back of his hand. Then the stick runs along his arm and balances on his shoulder. When the father of the baby sees this, he knows the man before him is a Yibir, without doubt, and he pays him, "four rupees, —six rupees, something like that." After some incantations the Yibir goes to the bush and cuts some tiny sticks, which he sews up in a bit of skin. He is very partizular as to the number of these sticks, they must be more than two and less than four, and when they are made up in the skin he hands them to the child's parents, who tie the package on baby's arm. It is called a "makran," and if any other Yibir come along the mother shows it to them and they know they will not get anything more for *that* baby. But if a new baby boy comes, and the parents cheat the Yibir out of his dues, something dreadful is bound to happen.

Now as Gulaid Abokr's wife has just presented him with a bouncing boy, and as Gulaid and all his friends have spent more this New Year than they

can afford, and are out of cash, and as, after a careful search, I find the cook has left me with four rupees in hand, it would be a pity if anything were to happen to the baby, so I lend the money.

Mahomed then confides a tremendous secret to me.

"I tell you, sir, what I am going to tell you now is a fact, and I am prepared to pass my oath on the Koran that it is true. This same Yibir came to my house last night and said, 'Let me tell you your luck!' I said, 'Good!' He told me to take a new loin cloth and four rupees from my box and accompany him to another house. I went with him, taking the articles, for I feared a trick. When we entered a house he said, 'Spread the cloth on the ground.' I spread it on the ground, and he said, 'Now put the four rupees on it.' I put them on.

"He then took a thread from the cloth I was wearing and rolled it into a ball, which he kept in the palm of his hand. He said, 'If your luck is good this thread will turn into a lock of human hair. If it is bad it will turn into a human eye.' I watched him very closely, for I still feared a trick. He closed his hand, opened it quickly, and, 'Wallahi,' the thread had turned into human hair. Then he picked up the new cloth and the four rupees saying, 'As your luck is good this is my commission.' Now what do you think of that, sir?"

"I think, Mahomèd," said I, "that there are as indifferent rascals, and just as big fools, in Somaliland as any other part of the world."

This morning I passed Gulaid Abokr's slim young wife, and noticed the baby she carried on her back was wearing a neat new "makran" on his arm. Said I to myself, "I wonder who pays the Yibir his fee for that makran—baby's father or I? I have my doubts." But baby's mother looked so happy, and smiled so sweetly, that I'll forgive Gulaid Abokr if he never pays me back.