

CHAPTER III

PERSONAGES

Mahomed the Interpreter—Mahomed as magistrate—Mahomed as author—Mahomed's reason for Ramathan—Mahomed as fighting man—Buralli Robleh, policeman and gentleman—Buralli's domestic affairs—Mohamed Auwit, petition writer.

I

MAHOMED is the court interpreter, a personage of considerable importance and would-be dignity. In spite of a decidedly perverse sense of proportion, leading him at times to confuse the duties of interpreter with those of magistrate, he is not a bad fellow. He has certain peculiarities and some aggravating ways, all of which I readily condone by admitting that Mahomed means well. But though meaning well a man may still do badly, and I suspect that our Mahomed is not the tremendous success he imagines himself to be. The day may come—though I doubt it—when he will decide to discard the turban for a hat, in which case, should he find one large enough to fit his head, and if by any chance there lies within his nature a spark of humour capable of asserting itself, the great Mahomed will become quite a human, lovable character.

I have learned much from him, among other things the respect and honour due to a court inter-

preter. Upon these points my education, I regret to say, had been sadly neglected, but Mahomed has done his best. My first mistake was regrettable. I had occasion to interview an Indian shopkeeper. Mahomed was not present, and I did not send for him. I plead in self-defence that the matter was trivial, but, later on in the day, Mahomed pointed out what a serious thing it would be if magistrates, were allowed to glean information through other than the official channel, the interpreter. I felt that to apologise, as I should like to have done, would show Mahomed how deeply ashamed I was of myself, and, that out of consideration for my feelings, he might never reprimand me again. But I wanted to learn.

An occasion arose for him to speak to me a second time. Mahomed was trying a case in his official capacity as interpreter, I was assisting in mine of magistrate. An old Arab had died, leaving some property to be divided amongst several sons; as yet this had not been done; the property was in charge of the deceased's brother and stored in his house. One of the heirs was in a hurry to pouch his share, and removed a hubble-bubble without mentioning the matter to the others. He was ordered to return it, and to wait until a proper distribution of the property could be made. But the fellow was a bad lot; he broke into his uncle's house and stole a beautifully carved old bed, and some mats. I was

examining a witness, concerning this theft, who had apparently contradicted herself. It was all about the bed—these people know everything concerning one another's beds, which are heirlooms. The woman giving evidence stated, in the first instance, that the bed produced in court had been given to the accused's aunt by her father-in-law as a wedding present. The father-in-law was the accused's grandfather. Further on in her statement the witness said it had been given to the accused's aunt by a woman. I asked her, through Mahomed, to explain the discrepancy. Mahomed refused to put the question. It was quite unnecessary, he said. He knew the woman referred to was the accused's grandmother, and the bed was a joint present from her and her husband—quite simple.

"But," I said quietly, "I should like the witness, who is on oath, to tell me that, not you. Please put my question!"

"But I have already explained to you, it is quite unnecessary to ask the woman!"

I insisted.

Mahomed turned to the inspector of police and said in aggrieved tones, "The Sahib doubts my word. It is useless my interpreting in this court."

I felt that on this occasion I must apologise. I cleared the court and asked Mahomed to stand in the prisoner's cage so that he could hear every word

I said. I told him how sorry I was—for him. He accepted my apology. He begged that I would not give the matter another thought, that I would forget all about it. He realised that his reputation would suffer if people knew how badly I had been trained at his hands. To save his reputation I agreed to push my apology no further. But I know Mahomed will not trouble to teach me any more. I am hopeless.

Mahomed has written a book. He told me so himself. Later on in the conversation he said that he had written it in collaboration with a European Sahib. He told the Sahib the names of all the insects and animals in Somaliland, the Sahib wrote them down, and they are in the book.

Mahomed has psychic powers. I asked him the other day why he, and all good Mahomedans, fasted during the month of Ramathan. He did not know. I expressed surprise. Up to that moment I believed Mahomed knew everything. He said he would find out and let me know, as he was sure my version of the origin of the fast was a wrong one. That evening he came to me and said that, during his midday's siesta, it had come to him in a dream why he and his friends fasted. When Adam eat the apple in the garden of Eden it disagreed with him; it was a green apple and stayed in his belly. Mahomed never uses other than good old English words.

When Adam went to heaven he fasted for a month, at the end of which time the apple was digested. That is why all good Mahomedans fast at Ramathan — according to Mahomed's vision. I advised him to write another book; it would be interesting.

But I have said Mahomed is not a bad fellow. I really meant that. I have only been depicting a type, taking Mahomed as a sample, Mahomed the interpreter. Mahomed the private individual holds testimonials of faithful service, rendered over long periods to European masters, that any man might well be proud to hold. Once, when he was very young, in the fight against the Mad Mullah at Erego, he was placed in charge of the camel carrying the British officers' water chaguls. In the course of the action he and the camel got into a very warm corner, and the poor camel lost its life. Mahomed was only a servant, but he removed a couple of water bags from the corpse, together with a bottle of whisky someone had stowed away in the pack, and made his way back to the British line, where, sitting under a tree, he found his thirsty master and some friends. To them he quietly presented the water and whisky he had risked his life to bring them. Of course they were grateful, but that was a long, long time ago, and most of the officers who sat under that tree are dead. I wonder if those who are alive still remember Mahomed.

II

A human head sculptured from a block of Welsh slate, an exact miniature replica of a sphinx, and you have sub-inspector of police, Buralli Robleh, to the life. Inscrutable but kindly; gentlemanly, with just a touch of fire to warn careless people that he is not a man to be played with. Buralli is one of the most likeable natives I have met in Zeila. For thirty years he has served the government faithfully and well, and the general impression is that even when he be retired on pension he will continue so to serve. He is the terror of all criminals, and the despair of people who intrigue. He sees that the caravans, as they approach the town, are not besieged by a crowd of howling brokers and their satellites, but are allowed to enter the market-place in peace; that the police are doing their duty, and that their lines and equipment are kept clean; that the D.C. hears the other side of the story as opposed to that presented by careless and lazy Akils. He knows the private history of all the litigants who appear in the District Court, and whether they are trying to bring up a claim that has been tried fourteen years ago. He knows whether the poor woman in rags, pleading for a rupee to buy food for her starving child, is what she seems to be, or a humbug

who is quite well off. Rarely, does he give an opinion until asked, more rarely still is that opinion challenged, and never on the ground that it is not an honest opinion. During his service Buralli has served under many Sahibs, some of whom are now famous men; and Buralli has learned much, among other things the psychology of the Sahib.

He is not a detective; criminal investigation is not in his line; but the prevention of crime is. Yet I have heard him confess that, under certain circumstances, he is prepared to break the law himself. These were the circumstances. Last night a man returning home at midnight found a stranger in his house talking to his wife. He beat the trespasser on the head with a stick, and was arrested by Buralli. Buralli pressed his case hard. "Unless you punish this man, Sahib, there will be trouble between his section and the injured man's section!"

"Buralli," I said, "had you been in the accused's place what would you have done?"

"I should have put my knife into the other fellow," said Buralli, "but, had I done so, I should have deserved punishment."

To-day a mail arrived bringing a circular instructing the sons of all Somal notabilities desirous of undergoing a course of instruction at Gordon College, Khartoum, to present themselves at Berbera, not later than the end of the month, for

examination as to fitness for selection. The only candidate in this district is Buralli's eldest son.

"Better get that boy away at once, Buralli," I said, "or he will be too late."

"He must wait," said Buralli.

"Why, don't you wish him to go?"

"Ha, Sahib, I wish him to go more than anything else in the world, but his mother is very ill. She is deeply attached to the boy, and it would upset her to part with him just now. When she is a little better I shall tell her, and the boy can go."

And, do you know, I believe Buralli is deeply attached to his sick wife. He is the first Somali I have ever met who could show such tender consideration for a woman.

III

Mahomed Auwit, Arab, is the court petition writer. The son of an influential Arab resident of Aden, who died many years ago leaving Mahomed a handsome legacy. He belongs to the upper ten of Zeila society. Rumour has it that the residuum of Mahomed's legacy is buried in the floor of his house. He is a scholar, and reads and writes not only Arabic but also English passing well.

It is customary for people with a plaint to engage the services of Mahomed to write it all down in English, in what is called a petition. The defendant

and plaintiff in the same case may each write a petition, which is handed up, with the other documents, when the case comes on for trial. A very excellent plan, giving the magistrate some idea of what the dispute is all about. Mahomed is a past master at writing petitions, and some of his epistles might well have been taken straight out of the Old Testament.

He is a most estimable, unassuming character, wears glasses, has a pronounced stoop, and in appearance is not at all unlike a tall thin old woman with a large nose, dressed only in a turban, her night-dress, and a pair of sandals.

Mahomed the interpreter, Buralli, and Mahomed Auwit are the three most important personages in Zeila district court.