

## CHAPTER V

### THE TWO WIVES .

Indelicate expression—The narrative of No. 1—Interruptions—  
The narrative of No. 2—Buralli speaks the epilogue.

THIS is a truthful record of a scene that occurred in my court to-day. If some of the expressions used are rather indelicate I can only excuse myself for repeating them on the plea that they are not to be compared with some other expressions used, but not repeated. Africans call spades "spades," and talk without embarrassment about subjects that are taboo in our drawing-rooms. This morning, without any warning, two Somal ladies were ushered into my presence at court. Ushered, did I say? Rather, two ladies burst into the court dragging at their tails a squad of perspiring policemen, who showed signs of having been engaged in an unsuccessful argument with the women.

The imperturbable Somal sub-inspector of police guided one woman into the witness-box, the other into the prisoners' stand.

"Well, madam," said I to the one in the witness-box, "what is your trouble?"

Both women began to shout. Cries of "Silence" interrupted them, and Buralli, the police inspector, was able to make a little speech.

"Sahib, these two women have been fighting like devils. At first I thought the town was afire. We have put this one in the witness-box to keep them apart. As sure as they are within reach of one another they fight like tigers, and attack anyone attempting to drag them apart. They are both prisoners."

"Very good. This," pointing my finger at the fat woman in the prisoners' stand, "is accused No. 1. This," at the long gaunt woman in the witness-box, "is accused No. 2. No. 2 will explain what she means by such outrageous conduct."

Meanwhile No. 1 lets down her petticoat, which I observe is girded round her loins for other than peaceful, housekeeping purposes. No. 1, with a snort and a toss of her head, allowed the petticoat to fall, and made other adjustments to her dress and person which enabled me to have a closer look at her without blushing. No. 2 proceeded with her story.

"My second last husband died some two years ago, since when, until a few months ago, I have been a lone respectable widow. Never a word of scandal has been breathed against me until to-day. Four months it is since Ali Hosh began to take an

interest in me, and asked my hand in marriage. I refused at first to have anything to do with him, but he pestered me so, that, for the sake of peace, I married him. He had already one wife, the woman present in court, who resented the marriage, and laid herself out to make my life unbearable. At the end of one month I was tired of the perpetual bickering, and begged Ali to divorce me. Though loath to part with me he saw it was the best thing to do, and agreed. Three times he renounced me before witnesses, and I am now a single woman again. This morning his wife came to my house and made use of the most shocking language. She called me a — and many other bad names. I begged her to go away, but on her making use of the bad expression I have told you of, for a second time, in connection with myself—Me! Me! Me! a most respectable woman—I lost my temper and sailed into her in fine style. I made use of no bad language whatever, and I am at a loss to understand why I have been arrested. I wish you to realise I am the complainant in this case. I demand that this woman be sent to chowky.<sup>1</sup> She is a bad woman, ripe for murder, and my life is unsafe whilst she is at large. What's the use of the British government if it can be flouted by one fat old woman like this!"

Further remarks of accused No. 2 were interrupted

<sup>1</sup> Prison.

woman was on the verge of a fit. Whenever she opened her mouth three policemen shouted into it. A most effective way of quietening her, but trying to my nerves. Remember the temperature was ninety-eight degrees in the shade.

"Accused No. 2! Have you really finished?"

"Yes, Sahib!"

"Bring a Koran and make her swear she has nothing more to say; and, madam, before you pass your oath, let me assure you that you cannot, like Hastings Sahib, stand astounded at your own moderation. For blasphemous, immodest, immoderate language I have, in the course of a vast experience, only once met your equal, and by a strange coincidence she happens to be accused No. 1. I would caution you that if, in the depths of your bowels, there are any bad words or scurrilous statements left unsaid they had better remain there. One more word from you and I will send you to jail for a month without the option of a fine. Now swear and be careful afterwards to keep your mouth shut!"

She swore.

"Constables! Cast off accused No. 1—let her talk!"

And she did talk. It was like a mad woman praying.

"I have been married to Ali for nineteen years. Some few months ago he became infatuated with

this objectionable person, and married her. I called my neighbours and pointed out that Ali was not earning sufficient money to support me and his two children, let alone a new wife, a strumpet who was stealing my husband, and the bread from my children's mouths."

"Madam," I interrupted, seeing that No. 2 was on the verge of hysterics, "try and tell your sad story without calling the other lady's names."

"She is everything I have called her and worse, Sahib. Wait until I tell you her private history!"

"No! no! Please get on with your story."

"She is a——"

"Will you be quiet?"

"And every day before she married Ali, and every day since he divorced her——"

"Buralli, for God's sake make this awful woman behave."

Buralli used a few expressions to the lady that I pretended not to understand, but which secretly gave me the greatest inward satisfaction. The woman was actually shocked into getting on with her story. She proceeded:

"Well, the neighbours talked Ali round. He did the right thing, and divorced her. Yesterday I heard he had sent to her for a praying mat. 'What does he want with a praying mat from her,' I said to myself; 'I'll go and see about it.' He works in

a little hut beyond the market, and there, sure enough, I found the mat. I took it away and cut it into strips. I carried the strips to this woman's house and I said, 'There's your mat.' I threw the pieces in her face like this—I wish they had been stones. I said to her: 'Take your mat; when my husband wants a praying mat I'll make him a better one than you can. When he wants good food I'll prepare it for him better than you can. When he wants——'"

"Buralli! Stop her!"

"No, Sahib, who can stop a Somal woman? Drown her. Murder her—yes, but as long as she has breath in her body she'll talk."

"Well," I said, "I am going to finish this case. Let her proceed."

On and on she raved. "This is a government office, and here I hope to get justice from an English Sahib, etc., etc." At last she was talked out. I seized my opportunity.

"Do these women live in the same quarter of the town?"

"No, Sahib, in different quarters."

"Well the order of this court is that they be each escorted forth from this building by three police constables to their separate homes. The part of the town in which accused No. 1 lives is out of bounds to No. 2, and she enters therein at peril of being

on the Gulf of Aden, and the mouth of the Juba River. The Somal tribes south of the mouth of the Juba, and west of that river, ultimately came under the jurisdiction of the British East African government; so that, nowadays, we have, from north to south, Eritrea, French Somaliland, British Somaliland, Italian Somaliland, and that part of East Africa inhabited by Somals and known as Jubaland.

Somaliland, French, English, and Italian, is peopled by a race possessed of such peculiar and contradictory temperamental characteristics, that, were the accident or influence of environment entirely ignored, and this people judged by purely European standards, it might well be classed as a race of maniacs. To bear out the truth of this statement is Burton's description of the Somals who live in the vicinity of Zeila. "In character the Esas are childish and docile, cunning and deficient in judgment, kind and fickle, good-humoured and irascible, warm-hearted and infamous for cruelty and treachery." This description, which cannot be contradicted, might well be applied to the whole Somal race, and it describes a people whose psychology it is impossible for a European mind, with no experience of them, to understand and explain. To the average European, and nearly all other African tribes, the name of Somal is anathema.

It follows that Somals are a people who require very careful handling, and, fortunately for them, the three powers with whom they are most directly concerned have followed the more humane method, when dealing with these brave *difficile* people, of interfering as little as possible with native custom—even where this custom is sometimes contrary to European ideas of right—so long as it affects only themselves, in preference to an endeavour to enforce European standards by the employment of force.

As Englishmen, Frenchmen, and Italians alike have lost their lives by acts of treachery that can only be described as the acts of madmen, the lesson learned has been that, no matter how safe things may appear on the surface, it is never wise to relax ordinary precaution. The Somal has no sense of reverence, if I may use the expression, and considers himself as good a man, and, like all madmen, as sane a man as anyone else in the world. One may expect no supine servility from him, and the man who looks for it will only find trouble instead. In dealing with Eastern natives the European is not unlikely to become somewhat "spoiled," and, unless he has a very level head, may quite easily lose a due sense of proportion as to his relative importance with other peoples in this world.

To-day I received this note from an Indian clerk:



“SIR,—I respectfully request your merciful honour to arrange for myself and Mr —— two riding camels to go to the garden this Saturday at three p.m. For which act of kindness we shall be highly obliged.”

Of course I let him have the camels, and was thanked so profusely that I began to feel I was a rather wonderful fellow, and had done something really magnanimous. But my conceit was about to receive a rude shock.

Shortly after the camel incident a dirty old Akil walked into my office, and, with an abrupt “salaam,” held out a grimy paw for me to shake. I shook.

The old gentleman had come in from the bush to draw his salary, which I was prepared to pay him as condescendingly as I had lent camels to the clerk. It is hard to explain what a pleasant sensation of exaltation even the most modest of men may feel when seated on a dais behind a desk, with an inspector of police—who bows every time he is looked at—on his left; an interpreter on his right, who would lick his boots for a rise of pay; a clerk who stands up, and says “Sir” as if he meant it, every time he is spoken to; and a real live savage in front of him who has come to ask for pay, and who is an inferior to whom one can grant favours.

I asked after the Akil's health and his cattle,

endeavouring to convey I was not above taking an interest in his affairs. Had there been good rain, and was the grazing good out his way? Was the political situation quite satisfactory? He answered all my questions with civility, and after some little time turned to the interpreter and said: "I've been nearly thirty years an Akil and this is the first time I have been asked immediately on arrival in Zeila for the news of the district. This officer is unlike the other sahibs."

I took this remark as a great compliment to my keenness. For there have been some very clever sahibs stationed here during the past thirty years, all of whom the old boy before me must have met and had dealings with. I was so flattered that I fairly oozed condescension.

"Ask him why I am different to the other sahibs," I said.

"You are different to the other sahibs," explained the old man, "because they knew their work and you don't know yours. They knew that when a man comes from the interior he is tired and thirsty. They gave me my pay immediately I arrived. They did not keep me standing about answering questions, but said: 'Here is a rupee bakshish, go and drink tea with it, and when you are rested and refreshed come back and tell us all the news.'"

That sort of thing may be very trying, but it *does*

keep one from over-developing a sense of self-importance.

The old gentleman was paid his salary, which he counted carefully as if he were making sure we had not cheated him nor given him a bad rupee, then, with an independent "salaam," and a salute that might quite easily have been an attempt to brush a fly off his ear, he went off to drink tea—at his own expense! My one miserable score.

That there have been some exciting incidents in dealing with such people can easily be imagined, and the following description of one such, that happened a few years ago to a European, is illustrative of their treachery. He had left his camp and escort, and with his orderly had gone to shoot birds. Having fired away all his cartridges he was returning to camp, when he met, amongst a party of Somals, a man who had some petty personal grievance against him. I shall let him tell the story in his own words, and, if I may hazard an opinion, he was a lucky man to live to write the lines I quote.

"In a small clearing, perhaps about a hundred yards away, we came upon a party of some fifteen armed Somals who stood directly in our path. For a moment I hesitated. I was completely unarmed, and it struck me that these might be hostile. I questioned my orderly, and he drew my attention to the fact that an Akil, whom I knew, led the

party. Recognising the Akil I felt reassured, exchanged with him the salutation of 'peace,' and stepped forward to shake hands.

"As I did this, and addressed an inquiry in the vernacular with regard to his health, a man who was standing behind him drove at me with his spear. The point took me on the right side of the ribs, inflicting a bad but not serious wound, while the force of the blow sent me to my knees. My assailant still pressed me backwards, and I instinctively grasped the blade with both hands. My orderly caught the shaft. The weapon was instantly withdrawn, lacerating both my hands severely and slightly grazing that of the orderly. The latter then passed me my empty shot gun and drew his bilawa.<sup>1</sup>

"All this was the work of a moment. Of what happened next I have but a hazy recollection. I lost sight of my orderly, who was doubtless being attended to. I saw the Akil's face, and it was that of a man who knew what was afoot. But I was, then, too busy parrying spear-thrusts to think of anything else. Finally I got away into the bush."

This incident is one of many that have occurred to Europeans, French, English, and Italians, aye, and even Greeks and Russians, in Greater Somaliland. But few such incidents have ended like this one, and there have, nearly always, been no

<sup>1</sup> Dagger.

survivors to tell tales. Such are generally affairs of a few seconds—seconds in which death is dealt out with lightning speed by madmen who are incapable of counting the cost and consequences of their deed.