

CHAPTER VI

CONCERNING SOMALS

Tribal location—European Protectorates—Characteristics—The old Akil—A tale of treachery.

FROM Egypt to the Juba River the whole north-east African coast is held by three powers, Italy, France, and England. The Italian colony, now known as Eritrea, grew from a small settlement at, or near, Assab, where the Italian flag was hoisted for the first time in 1879. Excepting that most of the coast-line in this colony is populated—in places very sparsely—by the Danakil, a tribe closely resembling the Somal tribe in temperament, customs, and religion, it has no concern with Somali-land. The Danakil territory extends as far south as the Issa Somal's northern grazing grounds, near Tajura in French territory. From Tajura to almost the mouth of the Tana River, in British East Africa, the coast lands, and much of the interior, are held by the Somals.

In 1888 the Italians turned their attention to Southern Somali-land, and by 1894 had established a protectorate over the whole coast between Biaso,

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.¹

"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

¹ 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.