

CHAPTER VII

MAHOMED FARA

As body servant—Safari troubles—Mahomed of the lion's heart
—Mahomed to the rescue—The duel—Mahomed on field
service—The parting.

It is more than twelve years ago now since I first met him at Adas-Ababa. I wanted a servant, a strong fellow. Mahomed Fara, Somal, was nineteen years of age, tall and slender; looked delicate, and bore traces of having suffered from smallpox; not enough to disfigure him, for he was a nice looking boy. He wanted to get out of Abyssinia; I do not know how he came there. He also wanted to see the world. I was going on to the Bahr-En-Nil, which was new country to him, and whether that was the chief attraction, or whether, as I like to believe, he had acquired a sneaking regard for my person, only Mahomed knows, but he asked for the vacant post. Physically he was far from the type of man I required, but he had good manners and impressed me. Looking back on the years that have passed I know now why Mahomed impressed me sufficiently to engage him for a trip I feared he

might not be up to. It was because he was a gentleman at heart; there was more in him than the good manners I liked so well.

My impression that he was delicate soon became a certainty, but the boy had the heart of a lion, and whatever he turned his hand to was done with the best that was in him. We had a rough trip. Crossing the low Abyssinian territory that borders on the Soudan we found the whole country in flood, and covered with elephant grass ten to fifteen feet high. The transport animals could not, and the transport drivers would not, go on. Somals and Abyssinians alike put their feet down and said we were mad to continue. We only replied that, as far as we were concerned, there was no turning back, but that if they wished to do so we acquiesced. My friend, with whom I was travelling, had some Bantu servants, and a couple of Arabs, who stayed by him, and of all the others I was left only with Mahomed Fara. There was no hesitation or doubt on his part.

"Do you wish to return or will you follow me, Mahomed? You have a free choice."

"I shall follow you," said Mahomed.

Stores were thrown away and burnt, and our sadly diminished little party pushed on. What happened does not greatly concern this story, but, among other things, we ran short of food, and passed through

mostly uninhabited country. It was a miserable trek, and we were nearly always hungry. Once, when we met with natives, we purchased dug-out canoes, and as the country was one mass of water-ways it looked as if our troubles might be nearing an end. But the canoes were heavy and there was little current to help them along. Sometimes, when worn out with the day's paddling and we wished to camp, not a dry spot could be found for miles and miles. When we found it it was nearly always infested with red ants that resented our intrusion, and made our lives a hell upon earth. When there were no red ants there were mosquitoes. As we pushed through the long grass, seeking something dry to burn, these latter attacked us in swarms. Then the day came when we were all on edge, and little unimportant things began to look out of all proportion to their size. As for Mahomed he was nearing collapse.

We were paddling down stream, my friend with a couple of Bantu in one canoe, Mahomed, an Arab, and I in another. The canoes were almost side by side, and the Bantus jeeringly called our attention to Mahomed, who, with closed eyes and limp body, was automatically dipping his paddle in-and-out of the water.

I looked at him. When a man has been suffering pure, unadulterated misery for days and nights on

end the devils that are in his heart wax strong, and on the slightest excuse take charge. The sight of the fororn, delicate Mahomed, instead of exciting pity within my breast, made me see red. Why should my man be flopping about like a dying duck in a thunderstorm, whilst these other fellows were still putting their backs into it? It was disgraceful!

"Curse you, and curse you, and curse you again! Pull yourself together, you apology for a man, and try at least to look like one!"

Mahomed was done—all in—but there was a something in the fellow that kept those lean arms moving spasmodically, and gripped the thin fingers to the paddle-handle. There was no gallery there to play to remember. If he had put the paddle down and said, "I am beaten; I can't go on," nothing would have happened. But he just carried on. That there was no change in his attitude annoyed me, and the Bantus laughed. Then, to my eternal shame, I sprang forward and struck him; struck him savagely as I would not strike a horse were it as tired as he. He did not flinch from the blow, but just pulled himself together and looked at me. The incident is twelve years old, but I have never forgotten that look. When I think of it I feel as ashamed of myself now as I did when I faced it.

The next day we camped on a dry piece of ground, and it was a case of shooting something for the pot. We had our choice of two varieties of game, doves and elephant, both with the rifle. There was no other animal-life fit for food. Mahomed and I found an elephant standing near an ant heap in long grass. I could not shoot from the side as the grass hid the animal when I stood on the ground, and when I sat on the ant heap his head was at an angle slightly pointing away from me. The one shot offering any hope of success was the frontal head one. This offered but a poor chance of success, but I wanted to get it over, and decided to take it. Mahomed stood behind me with a spare .303, and I, with a .318 in my hand, watched the big brute swaying on his legs as he dozed in the sun. On his head lay a great bunch of grass, which now and then fell to the ground, only to be picked up in his trunk and sleepily returned to its place as head-covering.

Then I fired, and as I had feared, the bullet struck at too great an angle and lodged harmlessly in the mass of forehead-bone. Then things moved. The brute saw me: I whipped back the bolt of my magazine rifle, and, as I pushed it home, the end of a bandage I was wearing on my hand fouled, with the inevitable consequence—a jam. So there I was, perched on an ant heap, in full view of an infuriated

elephant, who, with uplifted trunk, came to investigate. The rifle was worse than jammed, because it was fast to my hand with a bandage that seemed to have the strength of a hundred ropes. Mahomed was behind and below with the spare rifle, and could neither see nor do anything. There was room for but one man on the heap to which I stuck, trying frantically to clear my hand. With a shout of "Hold on," Mahomed reached up, tore clear the rifle, bandage and all, and passed the .303 just in time. When it was all over—it was a matter of seconds—I came down and looked at him. Just looked at him, for I could not speak. Mahomed Fara looked back and smiled. We were even. In return for the cowardly blow I had dealt him yesterday he had, by his coolness and presence of mind, saved my life. When I did find my tongue I said, "By God, you are a man," and that closed the incident between us for ever.

Long afterwards, whilst Mahomed was still my servant, we met again one of the Bantus who had laughed at him from the canoe. It was Christmas day, I remember, but he and Mahomed broke the peace outside my bungalow. My friend, he of the canoe, and I ran out together to separate them, but the native head-man told us we would only delay matters by interfering. They had to fight until one was broken.

"Let them fight," said my friend, "let them fight it out."

I looked at Mahomed and saw that he was as thin and delicate as ever, and, to my mind, it seemed his nine stone of flesh and blood must be beaten to pulp by the fourteen stone brute who stood before him.

"Aye, let us fight it out, Sahib," said Mahomed, reading my thoughts, "things have gone too far; we *must* fight."

"Very well," I reluctantly assented, "but your blood be on your own head."

As I expected the Bantu simply smothered the Somal. Although we barred sticks, knives, or stone-throwing (don't smile, Africans use those things in preference to bare fists) there were many foul blows given and received—more often received by Mahomed—until at last the weaker man was in dire straits. Again and again he staggered to his feet only to hit the ground immediately afterwards.

"Stop. Give in, Mahomed. He's a better man physically, and he'll kill you!"

"I shall never give in," replied Mahomed. "He is a slave and I am his master!"

And then the spirit in him began to triumph over his adversary, who, though quite unhurt, now showed signs of fear. Once he fell to the ground, and, seizing Mahomed's leg bit it to the bone. For this

act he was rewarded by a kick on the face that gave him the wished-for excuse to "play possum." The battered Mahomed now began to kick his adversary feebly on the body with bare feet, and the latter cried out to us to save him.

"Admit you are beaten!" said Mahomed.

"I am beaten!" said the Bantu.

Afterwards I married. The change of life from the single to the blessed state affects not only the European dweller in Africa, but also his servant. Where a wipe here and a flick there with a duster, in the old days, constituted tidying up the house, everything now must be cleaned and polished with scrupulous care. There are also ever so many things that were never done in the old times more than twice a year—and that a record year—that now call for attention every day. A bachelor's servants rarely remain long with him after he marries. But Mahomed was one of the exceptions. When the first baby came he was as delighted as I, and when others followed he seemed to share the heavy cares of family life equally with me. I can pay him the greatest compliment a white man can pay the native. Wherever the children might be I felt that if Mahomed were there, and alive, they were safe. His own marriage to an older woman was unhappy, and one day, yielding to her importunities, he allowed her to go. She left him a young son. His

mother had been rendered destitute as the outcome of a wild raid by the Mad Mullah, and Mahomed brought her, and a young brother, to Jubaland, where we lived. I had then an opportunity of learning that he was a good son.

When war broke out in August, 1914, Mahomed and I, for the first few days, took little heed. We were too far removed from the European world to realise what was coming. But, soon afterwards, I left Mahomed to help bring up the children, whilst I went off to join the King's African Rifles.

Later it was so arranged, by collusion with *some-one* who ought not to have been so unselfish, that he might again taste the joys and discomforts of the old wild free life on the veldt. So Mahomed came to be my servant in the M.I. Wherever I went he followed, though he was cautioned again and again that his duty was with the horses, or in the column, and not in following me round like a dog, even to the firing line. M.I. work in the early days of the G.E.A. campaign was more than exciting, and the men could not understand why Mahomed never failed to accompany them if he had the chance, instead of staying behind with the crowd. But we had a secret, he and I. It was something about a letter that had to be delivered by him under certain contingencies; contingencies that occurred in the

careers of many good men; alas, only, too often in those days.

Then; one day in March, 1915, at Mwaika Hill in German East Africa, the M.I. ran right into it. For five minutes it was touch and go. I was commanding Somals, and it was the first doubtful corner we had been in together. I was not sure of them for the moment. Let me hasten to say that I am now, sure of, and proud to have commanded them. But on that occasion we were a bit mixed, just a little in the air, and it was vital that we should hold a bad position whilst the column behind, deployed for action. There were swarms of bullets about, and I had a suspicion that, mixed up as we were with the Hun askaris, some of those same bullets were coming from our own side. I had joined in a short rush, and was lying ready to order another, when someone came with a run and threw himself beside me. It was Mahomed, and a fine old storm of bullets he brought with him.

"What are you doing here, Mahomed? You ought to be back at the horses."

"Sahib, I promised the Mem-Sahib to look after you, and I've come to warn you that you are not taking cover properly. These people are shooting straight and shooting to kill the officers. It is foolish for you to keep moving about. Please take cover properly."

“Well, now you are here at the Mem-Sahib's orders, do you think you can do anything? Can you catch one of these bullets in your hand? It is you who are foolish.”

But all the same after that warning I was more careful to take cover.

We were sending back for ammunition, and Mahomed was told off to accompany the messenger, more to get him out of danger than anything else. But the messenger was killed on the way, and, meanwhile, we were relieved, and received orders to get back to the horses and mount. On our way we met Mahomed again, returning with an ammunition mule whose syce had also been killed; and it seemed to him as if the German and British forces had combined to pick him off, and the wretched mule with him. He had been “through it,” and there was a look on his face that reminded me of the day I had struck him on the river. Two men relieved him of his charge, and we dragged the disobedient Mahomed back with us, the men keeping an eye on him to see that he ran into no further danger. He was not a soldier, but he was out to risk his life to keep a promise he had made to the Mem-Sahib, and no one would want to accuse him of being a medal-hunter for doing it.

Then Mahomed and I parted, and it was a great breaking-up. The kiddies to England, and he and

I missed one another, and did not meet again for more than two years. It was just luck. After the armistice I was on my way home, and, as the train was about to pull out of Nairobi station, we met again. Mahomed hurried on to the platform with a basket of fruit, for he had heard I was ill. He jumped into the carriage, and in a few seconds had arranged my few belongings comfortably. It was a kindly thought, that little service, and worth to me more than the gift of fruit. The memory of it is still sweet. Mahomed, even in the stress and rush of a railway parting, where he had to stand back whilst I spoke to more important people than him, could find pleasure in doing little things for his old master. He had a long memory, had Mahomed.

"If you return I wish to enter your service again," he said, when I had time to give him a moment.

"You are a millionaire now, Mahomed. You are drawing exactly twice the pay I can afford to give you."

"Never mind that; I want to come back on the old pay."

But Mahomed and I are getting on in life, and he has responsibilities. I could not permit him to make such a sacrifice, and so we parted.

Such is the tale of Mahomed Farz, Mahomed the

Soma. I do not deny that there were occasions when he kicked over the traces; that he had within him the wild strain of his breed responsive to injury, real or imagined, even as a barrel of gunpowder to a red-hot poker. But I have just pictured him as I found him, and, although he is black and I am white, I am proud to call him "friend."