

STARTING IN BUSINESS IN KISII

by Richard Gethin

When work on the Maasai move from Laikipia to the Southern Reserve ended early in 1913, Richard Gethin's temporary service with the Administration also came to an end. Rupert Hemsted, the officer in charge of the Maasai Reserve, suggested to him that he might form a small company, buy a power mill (to grind flour) and a few transport donkeys, and then set up in business in Kisii to trade with the Maasai, who would be only thirty to forty miles away at the nearest point. After some leave, Gethin followed this advice, ordering his equipment from America. Until it arrived he took another temporary job running a farm for B. F. Webb at Songhor.

I left Songhor at the beginning of 1914 and, after visiting Kisii for a few days, left again and went to Nairobi to arrange for the purchase of donkeys and to collect the engine and mill which had arrived from the States. It was some weeks before I returned.

On my second visit to Kisii, in March 1914, I landed at Homa Bay from the Government Tug. On the tug I had my Fairbanks Morse engine and Williams Mill, also my personal kit and one Nandi servant called Juma. On the same tug was Father Ross, a big Irish priest, about 6 ft. 3 in. and some 15 stone. He had played rugby for Ireland and had just arrived in the country, being posted to Nyabururu Mission on his first tour.

We arrived at Homa Bay very early one morning after calling at different ports such as Asembo Bay where I shot a hippo from the tug. Father Ross was very interested in the hippo as he said it greatly reminded him of an old aunt he had left in Ireland, God bless her soul. On arrival at Homa Bay there was no difficulty in getting the engine and mill off the tug as the engine was mounted on a chassis with four wheels, but the difficulty arose in finding something that would pull the chassis with engine and mill to Kisii, a distance of 32 miles. After some delay, I managed to find an Indian trader who had a Scotch cart and four oxen, which I hired from him for 40 rupees. Two of the oxen were yoked to the chassis and the mill placed on the cart with my baggage, and also that of Father Ross.

The safari started off at about 9 a.m., with Father Ross and myself walking, though neither of us had the faintest idea what the country was like, but we heard at Homa Bay from the Indian traders that there was a Catholic Mission some 14 miles along the road that had recently been opened. We decided to call in at the Mission and see if we could stay the night as neither of us felt like a 32 mile walk and the oxen certainly would not have done the long journey in one day. After a hot and tiring walk we reached the Mission at 1 p.m. We found the Mission to consist of a few round grass huts with a Father in charge who introduced himself as Father Scheffer and the Mission was known as Asumbi Catholic Mission. Father Scheffer was very pleased to see us and insisted on us staying the night which we were only too pleased to do.

The following morning it was decided that Father Ross would remain at Asumbi for a few days as he was not feeling too well, so I started off on my own with Juma. We now got into hilly country, but much cooler as we were rising all the time. After covering some eight miles we came to a trading centre with a few dukas called Riana and, as I was passing, a Goan woman came out of one of the shops and was very interested to know where I was going. She struck me as being very poor as she was bare footed and badly dressed, but she very kindly asked me to come in and have a cup of tea, which I did. She was most interesting, and gave me all the news about Kisii and the District and was quite certain I wouldn't stick it long as the Kisii were the biggest thieves on earth and would take everything off me including the engine and mill. That Goan lady is now one of the wealthiest people in Nyanza, with house property in Kisumu, Kisii and many other trading centres. However, I felt rather depressed when I left her for the last lap of the journey to Kisii, which I reached at about 4 p.m.

'The evening I arrived in the township I went to call on the D.C., but he was away on safari. When he returned two days later I found him most helpful, as he had heard from Long Horne, the P.C., asking him to take an interest in me and help me as much as possible, which Spencer certainly did. I don't know what I would have done without his help. Labour was produced to build huts for me. The Kisii were advised to bring their produce to me for sale and I was given guides to explore a track to the Maasai Reserve, through Manga and Sotik, as it was my intention to trade with the Maasai by donkey safari if things worked out as I hoped they would.

'In 1914 Kisii was a very small place with three Government houses, which are still occupied although condemned some twenty years ago, four Indian dukas, and no hospital, but a very old-looking store with an older-looking Compounder in charge. He had one cure for everything—a large dose of castor oil followed by a nip of Nubian Gin. For this magic he charged one rupee, and was doing quite well. The principal duka was owned by a very fat Indian called Tumbo who weighed 19 stone. But no European provisions were available in any of these dukas, all food, drink, etc, coming from Kisumu by Government sailing boat and being carried in head loads from Kendu to Kisii; this was twice weekly.

'Some two months before coming to Kisii I had arranged with a Somali trader to buy for me 25 donkeys which I required for the purpose of transporting the flour of Wimbi and Mtama (finger-millet and sorghum) to the Maasai Reserve, which was some thirty-five miles from Kisii. I had sent two of my old herd boys, Juma and Hamisi, both of whom had been with me on the Maasai Move, with the Somali, and they were to bring the donkeys to Kisii. As my capital did not run to this outlay, each donkey costing about sixty rupees, I borrowed some money from B. F. Webb, who I had worked for at Muhoroni. These donkeys now arrived at Kisii and caused much amusement amongst the natives, who had never seen these animals before. The difficulty was getting hold of the most suitable saddle. Saddles were made of gunny bags and stuffed with straw, but these proved expensive as with lion, rhino and buffalo frequently stampeding the donkeys while on safari in the Maasai, the saddles became torn and the loads lost in the high elephant grass which bordered the track. Both the Xandi, Juma and Hamisi, did a wonderful job of work on these safaris, but the Kisii herdboys seldom completed the safari, generally deserting on the first stampede. It is to their credit that only two donkeys were lost during the four months I was trading with the Maasai.

'Although it was a hard life I enjoyed the safaris to the Maasai. I met a number of old friends whom I had brought down from Rumuruti in 1912, including Chief Masacondi. The Maasai were hungry and their women and children were only too pleased to have the flour, for which they paid from 30 to 40 rupees a 60 lb. load. The shooting was good and in those days big tuskers were plentiful, while the price of ivory was approximately 17/- per lb.

'About June 1914 I began to get on my feet and money was coming in. I was developing a cattle trade with farmers at Kibos, Fort Ternan, etc which was most profitable, as Kisii heifers and cows had a very good reputation as milkers. Also at this time the Kisii grew a large quantity of good wheat, which Spencer encouraged to be brought to me for sale. I ground this wheat and sold it to the Indians in Kisii, also in Kisumu. It became very popular with Europeans in Kisumu for making brown bread. The growing of wheat by the Kisii appears to have gone out completely as I haven't seen any for years in this district.

T now invested in a Scotch cart which I ordered from Hawley & Co., Nairobi. This was the first wheeled vehicle of this sort in South Kavirondo. It was drawn by six oxen and immediately became popular with the Indian traders in carrying their produce to Kendu and trade goods to Kisii instead of using porters' heads, as porters were becoming increasingly hard to recruit.

'While it never occurred to any of us that we would be at war in the very near future, the fateful day was rapidly approaching. I am not certain how we heard that war had broken out. I think the news was received by runner from Kericho.'