

**September 30, 1984**

Last month I was in Kenya to visit the Quakers of the Elgon Religious Society of Friends. In order to get from the capital city of Nairobi to where the Friends are located, it was necessary for me to traverse a sparsely populated, semi-desert region inhabited only by a few people known as the Maasai. The Maasai are an ethnic group which has actively resisted the head-long plunge toward modernization which seems to have the rest of the country in its grip. They cling to an ancient way of life, semi-nomadic in character, responding to the grazing needs of the cattle which form the basis of their economy and much of their culture.

I had to drive a long way through their territory on a dirt road. The Maasai people seemed to avoid the road, so I could only see them in the distance across the steppe or savannah. Sometimes they were near their temporary settlements, which appeared long and low near the horizon, constructed as they were of earthen igloos surrounded by protective corrals for the cattle, the borders of which were formed of uprooted bushes and brambles. Occasionally I would see two or three Maasai people walking across the savannah, seemingly going from nowhere to nowhere. The one thing I could see from the distance was that the men all carried long spears, which was a little off-putting to a solitary traveler in the middle of the trackless wilderness.

Eventually it occurred that a Maasai warrior carrying his spear and wearing the Maasai's characteristic red-colored toga-like garment was standing by the side of the road hitching a ride. I hesitated, but as I drew close I saw that he was actually an elderly gentleman, and so I stopped the car, he piled in, and we drove off with one end of the spear across his lap and the other sticking out the side front window. The ice thus broken, once I had deposited him several kilometers down the road where he wanted to go, I then, on two or three occasions, on seeing some Maasai people in the distance across the plain, turned off the road and bounced across the steppe to within three or four hundred feet of where they were, stopping the car to see if they would come over for a visit, which they invariably did.

The people I met were usually tall, and invariably dignified, but also amiable toward a visiting stranger. The same red color with which they dyed their garments is also mixed with animal fat and used as a cosmetic paint on their faces. Additionally, they decorate themselves by cutting holes in their ears and inserting wooden plugs in the holes so as to stretch the ear tissues to form large loops, from which they hang a dazzling array of beads and trinkets. I would have been fascinated to know how they think, to learn a little bit about how their culture works, and sense how they regard the encroachments of the twentieth century on their ancient way of life. However, like the French, they seem loathe to learn to speak English, and so our communication was limited in every case to a few gestures and some ritual picture taking.

What startled me in one of these encounters was that, as I looked closely at one of the gentlemen, I saw that, amid all the red paint and the beads, his ears were being stretched, instead of by the usual wooden plugs, by very familiar-looking Kodak film canisters!

Now one thinks of the whole panoply of cameras and photography and films as one of the manifestations of modern technological society's permeation of the knooks and crannies of our households and our very lives. It was startling to find evidence of something so typically modern in the middle of the seemingly ageless savannah. Yet here was this artifact of industrialism—but applied to a purpose which was uniquely the wearer's own!

Often we lament our own helplessness in the face of the trends of modern life. We worry about the impact upon us of television, of war toys, of our seduction by gadgetry and materialism. And yet if we really think about it, we are the victims only of ourselves. For we have within us a Light; we have within us something of God, which implies wisdom, discernment and love. It is we who can decide what it is which shall rule our lives. And so, whenever I hear people sounding helpless in the face of the prevailing conditions of modern society, I will think of the Maasai people clinging to their ancient ways, and I will think especially of the Maasai warrior with the Kodak film canisters in his ears.