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# A Song and a Scorpion

I peered into the enormous mouth open in front of me. A large black finger pointed somewhat east of a not particularly entertaining looking tonsil, and a deep voice said:

'Bwana, it was there that great sorrow existed until the day when you with your weapons of iron caused it to cease.'

'Hongo,' said I politely, 'and how was it that this was attained, Tadayo?'

Nothing loth, the tall, very solid African in front of me went on with his story.

'Yah, Bwana, I came into the hospital over there.' He pointed with his chin, beyond an avenue of flame trees, to the C.M.S. Hospital. 'Yah, Bwana, my hand was on my jaw, and behold it ached and ached. I came and I told you my story. You put me on a stool. You gave me medicine the colour of the sunset to



wash my mouth with. I washed it for a long time, Bwana.'

How many times had I seen this thing! A dozen people armed with jam-tins full of purple solution, washing out their mouths, and ejecting with tremendous energy and surprising accuracy a squirt of purple fluid. Any black-beetle had a torrid time if it happened to come within range of my dental patients.

Tadayo was going on: '*Yah*, Bwana, and then you came with your tongs of iron and you said to me, "Open wide." Behold, I did, and you grasped my enemy firmly and fought with him. *Kah*, Bwana, how you fought! My hands firmly grasped the side of *igoda*, the stool. My neck was as strong as the trunk of a palm tree, and behold, Bwana, still you fought. *Hongo*, you fought with subtlety and strength. Did I not feel your wrist move this way and that way, but, behold, my enemy stuck to my jaw as *nhembo*, the elephant, stands with his feet firmly in a swamp. And, then Bwana, *heh*, when I thought all was lost, suddenly, *yah*, the victory was won! I saw him held in your tongs, Bwana, but sweat bathed my eyes, and the very tongs quivered in your hand because of your exertion.'

'*Hongo*,' said Daudi behind me, 'you're a man of many words. Did not the Bwana take his special forceps, and go "Hi!" and "Ho!" and there it was?'

'*Hongo*,' said Tadayo, 'do not the people say that I am the expert who tells the stories of the tribe, with great strength?'

'*Kumbe*, Bwana,' Daudi broke in, 'surely, Tadayo is indeed a *fundi*, an expert, when it comes to words.'

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I looked at the smiling African before me. He was well into middle age. He seemed to ooze an air of cheerfulness. His eyes twinkled, but there was seriousness in his voice.

'Bwana, not only do I sing the songs of Tanganyika, but also I make up the songs of God. *Heh!* Many will listen to me sing, and behold, do I not suddenly bring in the songs of God, and they say "what words are these?" And then, behold, do I not tell them some stories from God's Book? Do I not tell them how Jesus came, how He lived? *Heh,* and they listen, for are not the words of God with great strength, and are they not as full of interest as is *iganha*, the egg, with food? Listen, Bwana, to our song.'

He turned to the people clustered round him. '*Alenyi wimbenyi* – all together, sing.'




As they sang on, my eye took in the scene. The sky had a brazen look about it. The morning sun beat down upon the trees of the marketplace of this Central African town of Kilimatinde. In the background was the purple of bougainvillea creeping over the whitewashed walls, while the deep green of the mango trees showed near the market, where, beside a huge granite boulder, the usual bargaining was going on for beeswax, fat-tailed sheep, gaudy beads, kerosene and onions. A crow with beady eyes swung uncertainly on the bare branch of a flame tree, while a monkey on the broad limb of a baobab tree made an unhurried search in the hairs of its chest.

Suddenly, round the corner came an old man, dressed in a black cloth swung over his shoulder, and in his hand a long stick. He was being led by a small boy. Down the path they came towards us, the old man's feet feeling their way carefully before making each step. He came slowly up between the group of singers, stopped, groping with his hand, and then squatted down in the shade of the wall. The song came to an end.

*'Hongo, Bwana,'* said Tadayo, *'behold, one has come who is a master of singing. Is it not Ng'wagu who brings food to the ears of many at night round the fire? Behold, he knows all the songs of the tribe. Heheh!* He sings them with energy.'

I put out my hand to the old man, who made no effort to shake it. I looked down at him. His eyes looked towards me, then vaguely his hand came out towards me. I gripped it in both of mine.



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*'Mbukwa, Ng'wagu, Good day,'* I said, 'behold I have joy that you have visited us.'

My attention was riveted by his eyes. He had advanced cataract, the stark white centre of his eye speaking of eye lenses thickened, frosted and blocking out all but the full glare of the sun. Tadayo stood with his foot upon a large black stone on which he'd been sitting.

'Come,' he said, 'we sing again.'

The old man sang on. Tadayo came close to me, his amazingly large and flat toe pushing the stone upon which he had been sitting.

'Bwana,' he whispered, 'Ng'wagu is one to whom I have told the words of God. He has half understood them. Behold, this may be the other half.'

He stopped suddenly. His eyes rolled and he let out a roar, dragging his foot away from the stone, and at the same time bringing his knobbed stick down with a crash on the place where his toe had been, and I saw a scorpion in its death struggle. Tadayo was in acute pain. A scorpion bite is always agonising.

The singing broke up suddenly, and I said, 'Wait, I have medicine which will cure the pain.'

Tadayo followed me through the crowd of people, the small boys pressing behind to see what would happen. He sat on the step of the mission house while I anointed the spot with ointment, and then went inside to load a syringe of local anaesthetic. I was just sterilising a needle when a roar came from outside, and then the shrill danger signal. Daudi came running through the door.

'Bwana, great trouble! Great trouble! Your special medicine quickly!'

The alarm signal of the tribe rang out again. I picked up the sterilised syringe and a box of emergency injections and ran to the front steps of the mission house. People were standing there looking with horror at the broad form of Tadayo. He was leaning against the wall, fighting for breath, his lips an ugly blue colour and strangely swollen. A weird puffiness seemed to have come over one side of his face; his eye seemed to stick out.


'*Yayagwe, yayagwe,*' screamed an old African woman wringing her hands, 'this is the work of *wuchawi*, witchcraft!'

Some of the audience had taken to their heels. My hand was on Tadayo's pulse. I forced him into a sitting position and pushed his head down between his knees. I seized a small, sealed glass bottle from my medical emergency bag. Breaking the top off, I filled the syringe hurriedly and plunged the needle home into Tadayo's arm, injecting half the contents into his broad arm, and then turned to Daudi, saying in English:

'Get the largest spoon you can find and be very quick.'

He rushed off. I spoke quietly to Tadayo.

'This is a bad thing. It is because of the bite that you have received from *Nje*, the scorpion. Behold, we call this *allergy*. Is there not a swelling across the place where you make your words, and in the large path that the breath comes to and from your lungs? The medicine that I am giving you will overcome this trouble. Do not struggle. If your wisdom seems



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small and your head reels, still keep quiet, keep calm. Soon I will put the wrong end of a large spoon into your mouth. We will open the way for air to go in. Have small fear. Have we not the medicines of great strength? They will bring safety and security and they will keep life within your body.'

Daudi was at my side with a spoon. 'Take the syringe,' I ordered, 'and inject one drop every minute. Count sixty slowly. When you reach that number, inject.'

The African dispenser nodded.

I bent down and sitting on one of the steps, was able to force Tadayo's teeth apart and to push his tongue back. There was a little gulp of air. I spoke on reassuringly.

'All is well. We are overcoming it. Behold, before long, *heh*, all will be itself again. It is like the thunderstorm rushing across the sky, making such a noise.'

I saw Daudi's finger move on the plunger. A shudder went through Tadayo's body. The swelling round his lips became less. His great hand was on my bare knee. He squeezed.

'*Heh*,' I said, 'it's coming right.'

Beneath me, old Ng'wagu the African singer was standing, his head at an unusual angle. His eyes being out of commission, his ears were playing almost a double role. He was tense, taking in every happening.

Again Daudi's fingers moved. Tadayo's eye seemed to have gone back more into position. He put his hand on my arm, trying to tell me that he wanted the spoon removed from his mouth.

I did so.

His lips were moving, and I caught the word.

'*Malenga*, water.'

I motioned for this to be brought. Again Daudi moved his finger on the plunger.

'Bwana, that is all the injections.'

'Right. Out with the needle. Rub the spot; rub it hard.' Daudi did so.

The water was brought. Tadayo drank and then drew in air with a long, hesitant breath.

'*Hongo*,' he gasped, 'Bwana, *heh*, I thought I had passed through the gates of death.'

'Truly, my friend, you came close to them, but fortunately I was here, and I had the medicine. *Hongo*, keep away from scorpions! That *dudu* has not only a poison in his tail which brings pain, but he's got a very special poison that does very strange things to you.'

I took the cotton wool from Daudi's hand and rubbed vigorously where the injection had been given, and then speaking in a tone that only my patient could hear, I said:

'Perhaps within your life, Tadayo, there is a special sin, a pet, favourite sin, and may not this very amazing happening be a warning to you from God?'

The tall African turned to me. 'Bwana, how did you know?' And then he realised what he had said. He looked down at the ground. 'Bwana,' he said, 'your words are words of truth. Behold this *is* a warning. I have preached many words but inside me was evil.' He shook his head.

Ng'wagu's deep voice came from just behind us.



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'Bwana,' he said, 'tell me. What is happening? What has happened? Tell me it all; I want to know.'

I took him by the arm, noticing that his ear lobe was vastly pierced and full of all sorts of ornaments, mainly beadwork, threaded on giraffe hairs. Ornaments made from solder and ornaments cut from native wood were there. His hair was in tight curls, some of them grey, some of them black. There was a long scar over his shoulder, a knife wound. I placed my hand near this scar.



'Great One, behold, this is the word of strange sickness. Tadayo had his foot beside a flat stone. He pushed it with his toe. *Nje*, the scorpion, was beneath that stone. It objected to Tadayo's disturbing it, and behold, it bit his toe.'

'*Hongo!*' Ng'wagu nodded vigorously.

'And, behold, the bite of *Nje*, the scorpion, is full of pain.'

'*Eh, eh,*' said Tadayo, 'those words are true. But behold, the Bwana had medicine to put on it which quickly stopped the pain; it was medicine of strength.'

'Truly,' I said, 'but the poison of *Nje* not only produced pain at the place where it bit you, but did it not upset all of you?'

'*Hongo,*' Tadayo nodded vigorously, 'it was weird. Suddenly my tongue swelled, my lips swelled, my eye would not go back within the cover of its lid, and I felt as though strong hands were pressing upon my windpipe. I fought for breath. I thought death would come. But, behold, Bwana, you came and pushed my head down, and then, *heh,* the bite of the needle, and you talked quiet words.'

'*Hongo,*' said Ng'wagu, 'I heard all of this, but I did not see. Many will think it is the work of evil spirits.'

'*Heh,*' I said, 'or perhaps a very strong spell, eh? It isn't though. We have a strong medicine that cures it.'

The old man's hand came round. He looked at me with his unseeing eyes.

'Bwana,' he said, 'have you other strong medicines for bad diseases?'


'It is even so.'

'Bwana, behold, I walk in darkness. I cannot see. Is... is... there... anything...?'

'*Heeh,* we can help you. There are many others who have suffered as you suffer, and they have been helped. But sit down upon the steps here. Behold, we will drink tea and talk of these things.'

'*Heeh,*' grunted Tadayo, 'I could drink tea.'

The people were slowly coming round us again. My tea and Tadayo's came in cups, but they had put Ng'wagu's in a gourd. The old man put it to his lips and drank with a sucking noise. I smiled and turned to the people.



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'Behold, is there any fear in the disease which may be conquered by a medicine which is still stronger?'

'Bwana,' they said, 'there is no fear in this.'

Tadayo was seated just behind me.

'Bwana, behold, there is one here upon whose eye you operated, as you will work on the eye of Ng'wagu, if he will permit you. Behold, he has words.'

The old blind man sat hunched up, scratching the sole of his foot.

'Great One,' I said, 'behold, there is one here who will bring joy to your ears. This is Naphthali.'

Ng'wagu sat upright. '*Nhawule*, how can this be?'

'What are your words, Naphthali?'

The African leant forward. 'Behold, Bwana, in the days when you first came here was I not one of the blind? Did I not walk in darkness? But, behold, things are different now, since you worked on my eye with your instruments.'

Ng'wagu was on his feet. He stumbled forward. 'I would know the truth of these words,' he said. 'I would know them.'