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The umbrella turned inside out. A flash of lightning revealed Mboga splashing up to the hospital door.



I nudged Daudi. ‘Sorry about the loss of your umbrella, Mboga; you mustn’t be upset. Think rather of the crops and the harvest and this magnificent rain.’

Daudi grinned as Mboga wiped water out of his eyes and said slyly, ‘I will have courage, Bwana. What makes this less difficult is the thought that it was your umbrella.’ Solemnly he handed me the wreckage.

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I smiled. 'If this is all the damage it won't be so bad. Last year the first storm of the rainy season brought us a cracked skull and two broken arms.'

Daudi stood up and peered out into the darkness. 'It was a night very much like this. *Kah!* How would you like to make a *safari* on foot tonight?'

Mboga rolled his eyes as again lightning flashed blindingly. Daudi's voice was half blotted out by the crash of thunder. All I heard was '... Look!'

We peered over his shoulder, but the night was dark as pitch. Again for a split second forked lightning turned the landscape into a vivid black-and-white picture. Two men were struggling up the hill. One of them was Gideon, who ran the local bus.

'*Heh!*' said Mboga. 'That second man is Malatu. He comes from Kongwa. *Heeh!* A man of strength – he can carry a load on his shoulders as big as a man.'

Daudi opened the door. Light flooded through. Squelching through the rain came the two figures, broad smiles on their faces. '*Hodi?* – May we come in?' shouted Gideon above the noise of the rain.

'*Karibu* – Come in.'

He shook his head. '*Ng'o*, perhaps it is better for you to come outside – all of you – and to come fast.'

'Outside? *Hongo!* – Why?'

'My bus is three miles away, on the far side of much flood water. In it is Petro...'

Malatu broke in. 'Your Petro with the swollen feet who was lent to our hospital for a year. He walked miles to our village because of the illness of his child, and behold, he was gripped by sickness. The best way

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to help was to cause him to arrive here, so I carried him on my shoulders till we came to the road – *Yoh! A safari* of many miles through much water and more mud.’ He rubbed his neck, and then went on, ‘We were given a ride in the lorry of Suliman, the Indian, but behold, on the way we overtook Gideon here, and we have come with speed until...’ He pointed with his chin into the darkness.

‘*Heeh!*’ grinned Gideon. ‘Even if my bus were a ship it could not have finished the journey. But we can still bring Petro to hospital tonight if we travel with care. I will make the preparations.’ He hurried off in the direction of his home.

I turned to Malatu. ‘What’s wrong with Petro?’

‘His legs swell, Bwana. His body shakes with fever. He says there is poison in his blood. We started yesterday soon after sunrise, and behold, for more than a day we have travelled with difficulty to come forty miles.’

Gideon came hurrying back carrying a coil of rope and an inflated inner tube from his truck.

Daudi and I pressed on in the darkness through the rain and the flooded river to the bus. Inside, covered by a soaking overcoat, lay a very sick Petro. His pulse raced; he had a high fever. Daudi pulled the coat back, and revealed an ugly egg-sized swelling on his shin. It dwarfed the other lumps which had made Petro lame for years. I lifted the sick man’s head. ‘Petro, swallow these...’

His eyes opened, his mouth followed suit, and down went the capsules. Slowly he took in the surroundings. ‘*Kah!* Bwana, I have been sleeping.’

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'Truly, but this is no place to sleep. We have a *safari* of no small difficulty before us. It is a thing of importance that you should be in bed, and warm, so that we may fight your sickness with wisdom. But between us and those lights that you see on the hill is a distance of three miles, and the place of danger has water up to my armpits; water that moves with speed.'

Petro's teeth chattered, '*Kah!* I cannot swim!'

'Can you use your feet at all, Petro?'

'*Ng'o*. They have been refusing to walk these days, Bwana. Also, *Kumbe!* They have no joy in cold water.'

A good half mile away we could see a light swinging to and fro, and soon Malatu came up to us carrying a lantern and the coil of rope. 'Carry this, Bwana. I'll carry him. Gideon comes with the truck tube.'

The water was knee deep as we started our *safari* back.

A hundred yards ahead of us a torch beam shone and Mboga's voice yelled, 'Over this way!'

Fast-moving brown water banked up around our legs. The path was dangerously slippery. A figure loomed up out of the darkness. It was Gideon, holding above his head the blown up tube, which looked like a king-sized lifebuoy.

'Put Petro into this,' he shouted.

Daudi and I did so. 'Gently now,' roared Gideon. 'We'll tie short ropes to it. Malatu, you stand here and hold this end of the long rope. Mboga has the other end. He is by the majifu bushes on the other side of the deepest channel. Daudi and I will walk each side of Petro and float him across, while you

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keep his head above water, Bwana.'

'Hongo!' shivered Petro. 'Remember, my nose breathes better above water.'

'Kumbe!' came Daudi's voice in my ear. 'We must travel with care. He could be drowned in a minute in this fierceness of water.'

We set Petro as comfortably as we could through the centre of the tube, and struggled on through the swirling water. It was a comfort to see the light on the far side of the flood, and to feel the steady pull on the rope coming from that direction.

We came to a shallower place. 'Things are going pretty well, Daudi,' I shouted.

'Eheh!' he gulped as water splashed into his face. 'But be careful. There are some big holes about here. They...'

Unexpectedly my head disappeared beneath the surface. I was tossed downstream like a cork until



my hand grasped the branch of a small tree. I came gasping to the surface.

'Is everything all right with Petro?'

'*Eheh!*' shouted Daudi.

I battled upstream and found myself above our makeshift ambulance. In turning, both my feet slipped. It was like being shot out of a catapult. Then I was pulled up with a jerk – my head completely under water. I swam a couple of strokes and surfaced. Petro's voice came, '*Yoh-heeh!* I have him by the leg!'

'*Heeh!*' I spluttered. 'You have indeed!'

'*Kah!*' came Daudi's voice, full of laughter. 'It's not many who have the opportunity of pulling the Bwana's leg.'

'*Hongo!*' groaned Malatu as we struggled up the hill to the hospital, 'My legs have within them the strong desire to cramp.'

'Have no fear,' said Daudi. 'We have the answer to that. Cramps have no teeth while we have a bottle of bitter-tasting pills in the cupboard.'

'My legs,' grunted Gideon, 'have a high desire to fall off. *Kumbe!* I'm tired beyond all words.'

'Speaking of legs,' came Petro's faint voice, 'I would willingly exchange mine with anybody. But be careful before you agree. They will not work if you try to walk on them. Stand on them and they ache without stopping. Lie on them and they throb. And bump them! *Heeh!* It is strong pain. *Kumbe!* They aren't even food for the eye to look at.'

'*Hongo!*' came Malatu's tired voice. 'You'd be better without them.' Then, realising what he'd said, he clamped his hand over his mouth.

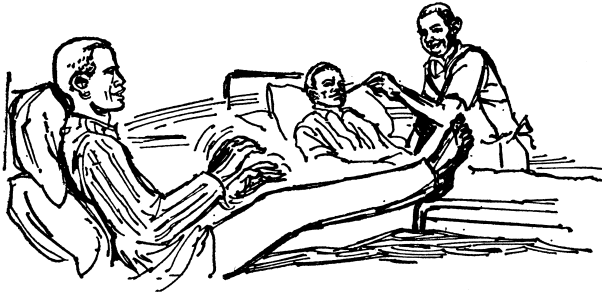
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'You have spoken words of great truth,' muttered Petro. '*Koh!*' he turned to me, 'Bwana, if I ever needed the help of medicines and doctors who operate, it's these days.'

The following day at the hospital Mboga put the thermometer into Petro's mouth, '*Yoh-heeh!* Last night we had food for the memory.'

Baruti drummed on his plaster-covered leg. 'Tell us.'

Mboga took out the thermometer, read it without moving a muscle, and started. 'Petro was sitting in one of the tubes from Gideon's large truck – you know



how big it is! He sat through the hole in the middle and we pulled him across the river. All was well until the Bwana disappeared ... splash! Gulp! But before you could breathe twice, there he was amongst the bushes. He struggled to his feet and we could see his head moving towards us with water splashing over it. He found a shallow place, stepped over the rope, and was bending down to hold the tube steady when the mud deceived his feet and ... he was gone again!

Petro's voice came weakly, 'I was not sitting on that tube, but THROUGH it, and *yoh!* I was kicked! I put out my hand, and there was Bwana's leg, so I grabbed it!'



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'*Eheh!*' chuckled Baruti, 'and held his head under?'

'A little only,' whispered Petro. 'He swam, his head came up, his legs went down, and behold, we were soon over on the other bank.'

I stood beside Petro's bed. Mboga silently passed the thermometer to me. It read 103.4°.


'So far, it's a case of too much water outside and not enough inside, Petro. *Eheh!* And you must have more pills. Drink plenty of fluid – even more than I swallowed in that river – and take the pills every four hours, day and night. Now for your legs.'

Mali, the nurse in charge of the ward, drew back the blankets, and I looked at a pair of legs which were no strangers to me. Years ago I had first seen them when Petro had been carried in by a group of reluctant relatives who had demanded a cow for their labours. Mali handed me a card. It was dated seven years back:

Petro Chilango. Disease: Madura Foot.

I remembered vividly his painful, swollen feet, gnarled and warty like artichokes. I glanced at the card; the tests we had made were all recorded with their results, and at the bottom was the ominous verdict: 'Amputation recommended.' I looked down at Petro, remembering the day we had spoken together about this. His reply had been full of steady faith, 'Bwana, let us give God a chance first. Maybe He will choose to make them better...'

We had used all available treatments – hot foot-baths, injections, and scores of bottles of medicine. Six months went by and he had not stirred out of bed. His legs were no worse, but they certainly were not even



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the slightest bit better. The one thing that happened was that a change came over the whole ward. Petro, sitting there in bed, had been, as someone put it, 'Like a lamp with a trimmed wick, and a glass that had no soot upon it.' He had been a burning and a shining light for God.

While these thoughts were going through my mind I was automatically examining his leg. The hot area on the back of his heel was spreading, and under his knee there was a hard swelling. I listened to his chest, and then sat down, covering up his legs.

'It is even as I thought, Petro. Germs have entered your body from your inflamed foot. They have attacked the veins under your knee.'

The sick man spoke quietly, 'There is no way to help me? They have to go?'

I nodded.

'When?'

'Petro,' I spoke more slowly than usual, 'it's not your legs only that I'm worried about; it's your life!'

A slow, weary smile came over the African's good-looking face. '*Heeh! Bwana!*' he sighed. 'There are times when it would be a comfort to leave this body behind, and go straight through to be with Jesus.'

'Supposing God has more for you to do in this life?'

'What can I do?' he asked bitterly. 'My days are full of pain. I can't even think clearly.' He made a despairing movement with his hands. 'Bwana, I'm only a burden. I have had words of hot anger with my wife Hewa and her relations. They say, what use is a man who cannot

walk? They say it again and again...there is truth in their words! If my legs must go, that is worse still. It's better for me to die.'

'Do not try to make decisions when you are tired or sick or angry, Petro. What we must do now is fight these *dudus* in your body before we do anything for your legs. And the first thing is rest – and plenty of it.'

Mali handed me some pills. 'Here they are, one for the germs, one for the pain and one for sleep.'


Petro slowly lifted himself up on his elbow. He took the pills and swallowed them. 'Thank you, Bwana.' He sank back on the pillow. Then in a voice that only I could hear, '*Kah!* It is easy to tangle your thoughts when your leg throbs and keeps on throbbing, and a helper of Shaitan the Devil comes and spends his time telling you with each throb of pain, 'God doesn't care. God doesn't care...'

'The answer to that, Petro, is simple. Don't be polite to the devil – tell him he is a liar.'

He smiled bleakly. 'I'll tell him, Bwana.'

When I finished my round I moved quietly to Petro's bed. He was asleep. One arm lay over the edge of the bed and on the floor his Bible was open where it had fallen. I picked it up. A verse was underlined and I read, 'Happy is the man whose strength is in Thee; the man who when he passes through the valley of tears, uses it for a well.'

I remembered the last time Petro had been a patient; the valley of tears had been very real in those days, but



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Petro had 'filled his water bottle' in that valley, and many had been refreshed. As I gently lifted his arm and tucked the blanket around him I prayed, 'Lord, help him to fill his water bottle again, this time.'

Baruti hobbled down the path from the hospital early next morning, using a broom for a crutch. He paused outside my door. '*Hodi, Bwana?*'

'Karibu – come in. Habari, Baruti?'

'The news is good, but Petro slept badly and Mwendwa says his temperature is higher and that his stomach had no joy in the medicine. Listen, Bwana, his troubles are many, and they are not only his feet, but his family. You heard him say he had words of strong anger with his wife and her family? Bwana, listen to my words.'

I grinned. Baruti had his own way of telling things. He could never start a story in the middle – he was certain to re-travel every step of the road. I sat down beside him, prepared to listen. He started:

'Ihowe, the crow, had been invited to two feasts. Hyena had said to him, "Near the buyu tree at the hour of sunset there will be food that will bring joy to your beak. Come with appetite when you hear the beating of the drums." Hyena had scarcely walked away when Jackal and two members of his tribe came along and said, "Good-day, Crow, today at the time when the clouds become red there will be a sikuku (celebration) under the shadow of the kuyu tree. When you hear the drums beat, come with an expectant stomach."

'Crow's mind was full of the comforting thoughts of food, and as the sun went on its journey he walked through the jungle looking at the kuyu tree, which was



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north, and at the buyu tree, which was south. He came to a place where the road forked. On the right hand it went to the kuyu tree, on the left hand it went to the buyu tree. He heard the drums of the hyenas calling him. His right foot stepped along the path that led in that direction. His inner crow told him of his need. He looked towards the place where hyenas ate flesh with enthusiasm. His right leg moved further down this path. But he turned his head in the other direction for the sound of the drums of the jackals was louder. His left leg moved in that direction. Hunger rumbled within him...'

I chuckled. 'Go on, Baruti. Tell me what happened. I know you will have at least six different yarns why he took a bit bigger step to the right, and why he took a bit bigger step to the left.'

Baruti nodded quietly. '*Heeh*, Bwana, but such was the wisdom of crow that he could not decide which way to go; he could not make up his mind, and the strain was too great and he was torn in two pieces!'

'Horrid yarn before breakfast. Come with me to the hospital.'

Baruti limped along beside me. 'Bwana, think again of the whole matter. You remember when Petro married he had no interest in the ways of God. He lived in a way that caused much talking behind hands. He chose his wife because she danced those dances which face towards lust and not towards laughter. *Kumbe!* And she brewed beer with a skill that brought much praise from her uncle Miti. You remember that when Petro heard the words of God he chose to travel God's way – uphill, and that Hewa followed him, but with only half

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her mind? And though we all prayed with strength that she would follow whole-heartedly the ways of God, she hasn't. It is as though she has one foot in Petro's house and one foot in the house of her relations. And *kumbe!* They are a family of trouble.'

'The medicine man, Miti, we know only too well, Baruti. What an uncle to have!'

'She has another who is little better, Kuguni, the Bug.'

'Before Petro first came to the hospital, wasn't there a story of the tragic death of his small daughter?'

Baruti nodded. 'Behold, Hewa went on a visit to her uncle's house. They were brewing beer in a great clay pot. There was a quarrel. The pot was pushed over and the child, Lutu, was scalded with boiling beer, and died from very bad burns. In those days the words of Miti were that spells had been cast against Hewa and Petro because he had turned his back on the old ways. Miti said he could have protected them with charms, but...'

Baruti shrugged his shoulders.

'That was years ago. For a long time Hewa had sadness because she was childless. We gave her many injections and then Aramu was born.'

He nodded. 'There has been quietness till these days when Hewa went with little Aramu to visit more of her relations. He became ill with a great cough like the song of *nzogolo* – the rooster; it was as though someone choked him, and his nose bled and his eyes went red.'

'Probably whooping-cough, Baruti. An ugly disease unless you treat it fast and thoroughly.'



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‘That was the beginning of this matter. It was only when they feared the child would die that they called Petro. That very day the dry season broke in that part of the country. There was no way to travel but on foot and Petro walked miles on those dreadful feet with worry in his head and anger in his heart. There was a quarrel and strong words. Petro blamed Hewa for not taking the boy to hospital, and for using charms and native medicines. Hewa screamed at him. The knowing ones of her family looked for an excuse for the child not recovering – even as they did when Lutu died – so again they started the rumour that Petro had made trouble and a spell had been cast.’ Baruti shrugged. ‘Hewa has run away and taken the sick child with her. Petro doesn’t know where they are, and...’

I finished for him, ‘And Petro blames himself?’

Baruti nodded. ‘That is the difficulty.’

We came into the ward and stood at the end of Petro’s bed. He was exhausted. ‘It’s no good, Bwana,’ he muttered, ‘I can’t keep the medicines down. I feel as though I’m on fire, and my head won’t work. And the pain...’

‘We’ll fix that problem with some penicillin injections, Petro. Lie quietly.’ I turned to Mwendwa, ‘Give him a million units at once, please.’