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# A Rumour and a Blind Boy

Daudi and I walked through the hospital's hyaena-proof gate. Coming towards us was an African boy. He stumbled and nearly fell, clutching at the cornstalks growing on each side of the winding path. He steadied himself for a moment, then walked uncertainly forward.

I sprang towards him, 'What's the matter? Can I help?'

For a moment he stood silent and then exclaimed in a voice thick from crying, 'Bwana, the others will not let me help push the car because I am Mubofu, the blind one, and...' He turned and began to shuffle back the way he had come, his shoulders drooping and his hands groping in front of him.

Daudi put down the baskets of medicines and instruments he was carrying. 'Bwana, let's take him with us to Dodoma. It would bring him considerable joy.'



## Jungle Doctor's Enemies

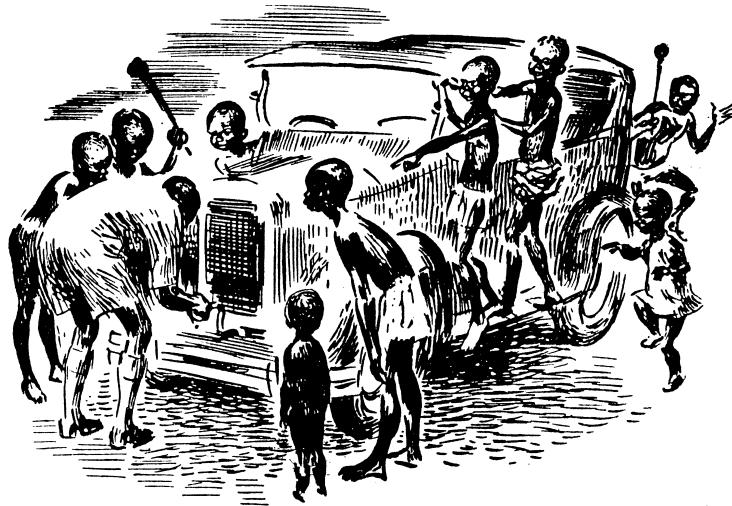
I nodded in agreement. As the boy turned towards us, I glimpsed his face. It bore the stamp of tragedy. Two empty eye sockets told the story of hopeless native medicine. He clutched my arm. 'Bwana, I can push, even though I live in *utitu* – the land of darkness.'

'But what if you trip over as the car moves downhill?'

'Kah, Bwana, I am no stranger to falling. I have no fear of a bruise. Will you not allow me to help?'

The path curved round the trunk of a huge baobab tree. He unerringly followed the centre of the track to where Samson, the hospital handyman, was cranking on an A-model Ford. A group of small boys danced up and down and chanted, '*Na vilungo gwe, na vilungo gwe* – go to it with strength!'

Samson straightened up and wiped his brow. '*Hongo, Bwana*, the battery is sleeping.'





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I grinned. 'The row these *wadodo* – little people – are making should wake it, surely.'

'*Kah*, our car is not called Sukuma for nothing.' (*Sukuma* is the Swahili word for push.)

'Bwana, we'll push,' shouted the small boys, rushing forward.

'*Viswanu* – right – but you must wait for a moment till Daudi and I are ready.'

Changing from Chigogo, the language of the Central Plains of Tanzania, to English I said, 'Samson, we'll take that blind boy to Dodoma. Daudi and I think it would be a red-letter day in his life to go on safari with us. You can bring him back later on when we've caught the train.'

My African friend's reply was thoughtful. 'We can be eyes for him today and tell him all we see along the road and in the town.'

Mubofu was crouching in the shade of the mud-brick shed that was Sukuma's home. On the wall above him were three many-coloured lizards busily hunting flies. As I walked over to him he rose to his feet.

'Bwana, you'll let me help push?'

'How did you know it was I coming towards you?'

'*Hongo*.' His whole face lit up, his smile accentuating the hollows where his eyes should have been. '*Kah*, Bwana, I heard your shoes in the sand and I know no African who walks like you do.'

I whistled. 'What ears you've got!'

'Bwana, my ears have to be my eyes as well.' He put his hand on my sleeve. 'Bwana, please will you let me push?'

'No, Mubofu, I will not allow you to push.'

All the joy left his face. Before he could speak I said, 'But I wondered if perhaps you would like to come on safari with us today to Dodoma.'

'Kah,' exclaimed the boy, 'in the car, in Sukuma?'

'Heya – yes.'

'Yoh, Bwana, it has been my strong wish for many days to travel in a car. Kah!'

He proceeded to do a little dance which sent the lizards clambering up the trunk of the baobab tree. I went to collect my luggage and say my goodbyes.

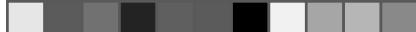
As we walked back to the car I questioned Daudi. 'Tell me about Mubofu. What is his story?'

'His people are dead. He sleeps in the tribal house of his relations in a village which has no time for the ways of God. I have heard it said that they feed him only because they think he will die before long anyhow, and it is a thing of small wisdom to upset the spirits of the ancestors.'

Mubofu was running his fingers over the radiator and bonnet of the car. We wedged him into the front seat between Samson and Daudi. Letting off the hand-brake I called out, '*Alu sukuma – come on, push!*'

Slowly we moved forward under twenty-boy power. The old machine gained speed as we rolled down the stony track from the hospital. I let in the clutch. Sukuma backfired noisily. Shrieking, the children scampered away. Then the engine started and we were on the first lap of a medical safari to the top of the Great Rift Wall.

We moved cautiously down a crazily cut track running through a dry river bed.



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Mubofu spoke excitedly, 'It's on the hill beyond the fourth river that I live. Do I not know this part of the road very well indeed?'

'Truly,' said Daudi, 'he travels this road as well as anybody. His feet seem to know every rock and rut.'

'It was here, Bwana, at Chibaya, that I was born. It was here that I lost my eyes.'

'How did it happen, Mubofu?'

The blind boy held up four fingers. 'It was four years ago, Bwana, when *serenyenyi* came into our village.'

I looked at Daudi. His lips framed the word measles.

'*Hongo*,' continued Mubofu, 'those were days of sorrow, Bwana. First my nose and then my eyes ran. *Ehh*, how I coughed! My *wandugu* – relations – would not let me sleep. They beat tins and shouted and shook me. "You must not sleep or you'll die," they said. Then, Bwana, my eyes became filled with pain because of the glare and the flies. When they put me inside the house the smoke of the cooking fires made my eyes worse still.'

He sat up suddenly and pointed with his chin towards a group of huts. 'There is my house. There, Bwana, is where it all happened.'

'*Kah*,' said Samson, 'how do you know we've come to your house?'

'*Kumbe*,' explained the boy, 'is my nose not awake? Shall I not know the smell of my own village?'

There was silence for a while and then he said, 'Bwana, there was pain, fiery pain. In my eyes were ulcers. But there was no-one to help me.'



## Jungle Doctor's Enemies

Something was moving in the jungle beside the road. Samson shouted, 'Look, Bwana, *mpala...*' A buck the size of a Shetland pony sprang up from a thornbush thicket and bounded away in great leaps.

'What was it?' asked Mubofu, his hand on my shoulder.

'A beautiful buck. See, there behind it is another.'

As the words passed my lips I tried to stop them from slipping out, but the boy's face was aglow. 'I can see it, Bwana, in my mind. *Yoh*, how they jump.'

The road wound in and out through thornbush country. My thoughts were about measles, remembering that worldwide epidemics occurred every five years. Another was due shortly if the wretched disease came on schedule.

We crossed a dry riverbed which in the wet season could be a muddy torrent. 'Daudi, we must be prepared





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for another measles epidemic and not let this sort of thing happen again.'

Daudi nodded, 'They don't only go blind when measles attacks. Hundreds and hundreds of children die. Behold, in our own country it is a disease of trouble and death and sorrow, especially for children.'

I looked at the pitiful face beside me and thought of the torment that small boy must have suffered. He, however, was not thinking of measles and was tense with excitement. Each stage of that journey had its own particular interest to him. He amazed me as time and again he described what we had passed. His senses were unusually quick. He sat there alert as Sukuma sputtered and skidded along the Great North Road.

We were climbing a steep hill on which cactus flourished. Immediately below was a patch of dark green mango trees growing round the sandy riverbed; amongst them were the white buildings of a large boys' school. We turned off the road and drove through a peanut garden and past a carpentry workshop where schoolboys were busy making tables.

I stopped the car in the shade of a great kikuyu tree. 'It's time for food. Later we'll drive to the railway station.'

I heard from my friend, the principal of the school, that a measles epidemic had actually started. It was way up in the north in the Sudan and Kenya. 'There's no news of it in Tanzania – yet.'

The station-master, a tall Indian, informed us that the train was six hours late. He told me of a severe epidemic in his home town, Hyderabad. It sounded suspiciously like measles to me.



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Samson was pumping up Sukuma's tyres. He looked up enquiringly as I came through the station gate.

'The train is six hours late,' I told them.

Mubofu laughed. '*Hongo, Bwana*, that is good. Behold, you will have time to tell me many things about Dodoma. I will see in my mind what you see with your eyes. I have never been in a place where there are so many people.'

