



1

Arrive

The East African night was pitch dark except for a pool of light moving down the path towards my ramshackle tin-roofed house.

Daudi, my hospital assistant, put down his hurricane lantern outside the mosquito-proof door. '*Hodi?*' he called, 'May I come in?'

'*Karibu,*' I replied with one of the few Swahili words I knew. 'Welcome. Come in.'

Daudi did so and put his lamp on the table, newly-made from packing case timber.

'Daudi, am I glad to see you! I'm in trouble. I have been in your country only a matter of days. Look, I have a notebook to write down words if you will teach me.'

'I will gladly help, Bwana. Our language is not difficult. If you wish to help the women and the children of our tribe you must speak as we do. The part of Tanzania where we are living is the Ugogo

country – Gogoland. The people of the tribe are the Wagogo ...'

I broke in, 'And I suppose the language is Gogo language!'

'Right!' laughed Daudi. 'Chigogo we call it. It is not a thing of difficulty. Let us start with the words for doctors. There are two sorts: *muganga* – the medicine man who cooks roots and leaves and bark and berries. We call his medicine *miti*.'

I turned up the wick of the lantern. 'Daudi, have I not heard that *miti* means trees?'

'*Eheh*, *muganga* makes his medicines from trees – different parts of them. But there is also *muchawi*. He is not a good person. His work is witchcraft. He uses charms and spells, the powered bones of poisonous snakes and the dried intestines of crocodiles. He makes *miti mititu*, black magic.' He shuddered. 'He deals with fear and demands goats and cattle for his work.' Daudi raised his eyebrows. 'Do you understand? *Ukutanga?*'

Into my notebook went *ukutanga* – to understand.

A shout came from some distance up the path and in a moment a gasping voice called, '*Hodi*.'

It was a young man, his face twisted with pain. He poured out a torrent of words, heavy with anguish. He stretched out a large foot and pointed towards his big toe.

'*Koh*,' explained Daudi. 'His name is Mboga. He works at the hospital. He is bitten and says he has severe pain.'

'What bit him?'

'*Nje!*' Again a torrent of words.

'*Bwana*, he says he was bitten by *nje*, the scorpion.'



Arrive

I filled a syringe with local anaesthetic.

'Sit,' ordered Daudi, and held up the damaged foot. I swabbed the damaged toe and injected.

Mboga let out a deep sigh and breathed, '*Miti miswanu.*'

Daudi smiled at me. 'Good medicine. He says his pain is gone.'

Mboga blew gently on his foot. Daudi grinned. '*Mboga* means spinach or vegetable.'

Our patient stood up and wiggled his toes. He shook my hand vigorously and said slowly in English, 'Thank you very much, doctor.' Then in Chigogo, '*Asante muno muno.*' We all laughed.

Daudi picked up the hurricane lantern. 'You will soon speak our language, Bwana doctor. There is another important lesson for you to learn tonight. Here is a gift which could save your life. Never travel that path in darkness without a lantern in one hand and a knobkerrie in the other.'

He handed me a stick as long as my arm with a lump on the end of it the size of a tennis ball. 'You may travel that path a hundred times and not need it but then, *lunji*, perhaps ...'

'Come, let's walk together to the hospital and perhaps, *lunji* ...'

Daudi nodded. '*Chibite*, let us go.'

We set out along the path that led to the hospital. On each side were the corn stalks of last year's harvest. Doors opened and lights came on in the maternity ward. We could hear excited voices. For a moment we paused, looking at the silhouette of two big wards.

'*Wadala*, the old women, rejoice at the birth of a child,' explained Daudi.

We walked on under the huge centuries-old baobab trees and then beneath umbrella-like thorn trees.

Without warning Daudi gripped my arm and jerked me to one side. He grabbed my stick and crashed the knobbed end on a vague shadow coiled in the middle of the path.

'Puff adder,' he grunted. 'Truly, lamps have special usefulness.' Twice more he thumped the ground with the knobkerrie. 'Always make sure that snakes are properly dead for there is death in their mouths. Tread on him unawares and he strikes.'

We parted at the hospital gate and I turned and walked back to where I would live for some years on the thornbush plateau at the foot of the Great Rift Wall. The stars were brilliant. Here I was five hundred kilometres south of the equator. Near the horizon was the Southern Cross – a friendly sight indeed to an Australian.

From among the corn stalks came the eerie howl of a hyena. The dead snake was no longer on the path. Hyenas will eat anything. I felt profoundly thankful for the pool of light my hurricane lantern gave and for the beautifully balanced knobbed stick that I clutched firmly in my right hand. Africa certainly had its moments.