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Two Fevers

'Bwana, I have a famine inside.'

'Never mind your famine,' said I, putting my stethoscope to my ears. 'Take another deep breath.'

My patient rejoiced in the name of Mboga (spinach). When I had finished my examination, he said, with a broad grin on his face:

'Bwana, I have still got a famine.'

I called my African assistant.

'Daudi, does Mboga get his food regularly?'

'Yoh,' said Daudi, raising his eyebrows expressively.

'Yoh,' came from the patient in the bed next door, 'Bwana, if I didn't watch him, he'd eat my food too. He has the appetite of a hyena.'

The grin spread over Mboga's face.

'I'm better now I can walk and do things – Bwana, I have a famine inside.'

'Oh, feed him, Daudi, give him anything that's left over, send him down to my cook, anything to quell that famine.'

I grinned; but it was hard business to grin that day. My head throbbed and a bell seemed to be ringing in my ears. Quinine may be a valuable drug to kill the malaria parasite but it's a most uncomfortable business to have inside you. All that morning I just drove myself to do the things that had to be done. A strikingly unsavoury collection they were, too: a huge abscess, two lepers whose wounds had not been dressed for weeks, and then an old man with a horrid mouth of decayed teeth. I looked with relief at the clock – a quarter to twelve – a few more minutes and it would be all over for the morning and I could sleep.

In the blistering heat of the East African midday I crawled under my mosquito net. How long I slept I don't know but suddenly before me were two staring eyes and a horrid pair of clutching hands gripping my throat and pressing on the windpipe. It was harder and harder to breathe; the eyes stood out and glared at me with something of devilment about them. I let out a shuddering shriek and sat up in bed. The eyes had disappeared and so had the hands. I gazed around apprehensively and then groaned ruefully. It was nothing more than a nightmare at midday produced by an attack of asthma on top of whatever else I had.

I swallowed a small white pill and placed a thermometer under my tongue. I was shivering so hard that it was hard to keep what the Africans call 'the glass nail' in place. I sat down, putting both elbows on the table, and held hard on to my jaw. My face felt



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burning hot and yet my body seemed bitterly cold. The back of my neck seemed unbearable and aches just careered hither and thither through the whole of my system. Once when malaria had just been a textbook disease to me, I had read: 'The onset is characterized by general muscular pain, followed by rigors.' The text book description that morning had taken on a wealth of colour ... not the type of colour I appreciate.

With a hand that shook I removed the thermometer. It was so wobbly that I could barely read the silver line of mercury that pointed up to 103.4. From each of two bottles in a drawer of my desk I withdrew two white pills. My teeth were chattering and it was difficult to swallow the bitter quinine pills and the not-so-uncomfortable flavoured aspirin tablets. The shivering was so severe that I was quite unable to control my teeth. For safety I placed them in a cup of water on the floor beside the armchair before wrapping myself up in a blanket and sitting there to rest my back, which seemed fiendishly sore.

How long I sat there hunched up in the miseries of the fever I don't know, but suddenly I was aware of a figure looking through the door. It was Mboga.

'*Hodi, Bwana*,' he said, '*hodi*.'

Then, seeing me hunched up, he came closer.

Not thinking how strange I must look to the African lad without my dentures, I opened my mouth to speak. He had one look at me, let out a horrified '*OOOH!*' and fled, banging the door in a way that sent waves of pain through my head. I shuddered and gripped the arms of the chair to control my hands, which were all a-tremble.



Again, I was quite unconscious of time until I heard voices; one was Daudi's.

'Yah,' he said, 'you have fear for no cause whatsoever. Kah, the Bwana's all right. Perhaps he has *mhungo* – malaria.'

And then came Mboga's voice, very worried indeed.

'But I tell you I saw him lying there wrapped up in a blanket. His face had fallen in. His teeth were no more.'

I groped for the cup and Daudi and Mboga just appeared on the scene in time to see me replacing what I regarded as a triumph of dental engineering. Mboga's eyes stuck out like organ stops.

'Yah,' he said, 'did you see that?'

'Heheeh!' said Daudi, 'I saw that. Those are merely the Bwana's teeth made of china. They are artificial



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like the legs of Benjamini, which were made of metal. This is not witchcraft, it is merely the mechanical skill of the doctors in the country where the Bwana learned to make his medicines.'

'*Hongo*,' said Mboga, 'this is a thing of wonder.'

I leaned forward in the chair.

'Daudi, I'm sick. Behold, within my blood there are as many *dudus* of malaria as there are frogs in the great swamp. *Heh*, and I have no joy in my muscles.'

'*Kumbe*, Bwana,' said Daudi. 'I would not worry you but for the fact that Simba has come to the hospital with Perisi. Behold, they bring their child, little Yohanna, for whose life you worked so hard. *Hongo*, Bwana, I have great fears within me as I look at the child; he has a great sickness.'

'Well, Daudi, sick or not sick, I must do what I can to help. Will you get Simba to bring the little chap down here?'

I pulled the blanket more closely round my shoulders. The tropical sun beat down on the corrugated iron roof and the whole atmosphere shimmered with heat outside, but I felt intolerably cold. Simba and Perisi came down the path and stopped outside my door.

'*Hodi*, Bwana,' they called.

'*Karibu* – Come in.'

They came over to where I sat. Perisi went down on one knee and held in her arms her small son who, as a premature baby, had caused a tremendous stir in the whole country. The African girl was speaking.

'Bwana, my little son was well this morning but, *kumbe, saa tano*, at eleven o'clock, he became burning

hot. *Yah, Bwana, I have fear in my heart ...his eyes point in different ways ...'*

I eased myself up out of the chair and, although my ears rang and there was a sort of mist in front of my eyes, I managed to carry out a clinical examination of the little fellow. Gently I stroked his foot and the big toe came upwards, but the smaller toes stayed down. I took a pencil from my pocket and pulled up his neatly-knitted small shirt which covered a rather ample tummy. The pencil point moved gently over the velvet-like black skin, but there was no response – no ripple of the skin as you would react if similarly tickled.

I could see vaguely in front of me two anxious African faces.

'*Yoh, Perisi, we must face facts; it looks very bad to me. This can only be meningitis, and meningitis coming on as quickly as this is serious, very serious.'*

I gave Daudi some technical instructions as to what instruments to boil up, because it was vital that we should examine fluid from the small boy's spine at the first possible moment, but before he commenced, we all knelt round that ramshackle armchair and asked Almighty God for His help in a matter which was rapidly getting beyond man's help.

'Bwana,' said Perisi, 'many of the folk from our village are saying many words and making much trouble. They say spells have been cast; there are those that tell me that there will be danger and death to my child. *Yoh!* And then this happens, but, Bwana, I believe that God is stronger than death and disease.'



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'Heeh, Perisi, you're right, have we not seen it before, and *hongo*, we will see it again. Behold, sometimes God lets the devil have freedom, but he can go only so far.'

'Yoh, Bwana,' said the girl, 'you, yourself, have great sickness.'

Somehow I managed to get up to the hospital and saw little Yohanna put to bed in one of the cots of the children's ward. A few minutes later Kefa appeared with the instruments. The small boy was unconscious. Soon the delicate operation was over and the fluid from the spine was obtained. Looking at it in a test tube, diagnosis was beyond doubt. It was meningitis and was coming on like a bush fire.

For perhaps a quarter of an hour, we busied ourselves with microscope and slides in our jungle laboratory and then, with the actual germ causing the trouble known, we gave the heaviest possible dose of the sulpha drug which is specific for the disease.

I sat beside the bed. You could almost see the thing progress. The temperature climbed – 102, 102.5, 103, 104, and then it stayed consistently at 105.5. With infinite tenderness, Perisi sponged down the hot little body. I drew the blanket around me and waited. The medicines apparently were having their own effect and, without knowing it, I dropped into a troubled sleep, to be suddenly wakened by Perisi.

'Bwana,' she said, her hand on my arm, 'look at him.'

The small boy's body was rigid, the neck had gone back, his eyes stared and his breath seemed to come gaspingly. I looked at my watch. It was ten o'clock at

night – time for another injection. With a trembling hand, I felt his pulse. It was fluttering at the wrist. With a hand that trembled still more, another injection was given. It seemed bitterly hard to do what was normally ordinary. There was a burning pain in the back of my own head now, and all I could see was the small boy in front. Every energy I had was centred on saving his life.

'Perisi,' I said, 'I'm going to lie down on the couch in my office. Call me again at midnight.'

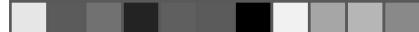
Outside was the cool calm of a beautiful African night. Over the way I could see a light in the maternity ward and the night nurse carrying a kerosene-tin full of water on her head. Behind the hospital a donkey brayed. The key chattered in the hole as I unlocked the door of my office and lit a hurricane lantern. Taking up a piece of paper I wrote in the local language, 'Instructions to staff if I get meningitis.' Carefully I drew up a programme of symptoms that might be expected and of injections and other treatment. I checked the whole thing over carefully, thinking in an impersonal sort of way that if this was carried out properly, my life might well depend upon what I had written down.

Daudi was at the door.

'Bwana, what are you doing here?'

'I don't quite know what's up, Daudi, but this isn't ordinary malaria. I might well be getting meningitis. Take this note and if tomorrow I'm unconscious, then follow out exactly what it says.'

'Koh,' said Daudi. 'Bwana, you must go to bed at once.'



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I shook my head.

'I must deal with that small boy if it is the last thing I do.'

'*Yoh*, at any rate you shall spend some time in bed.'

He took my arm and I walked unsteadily through the darkness to my home.

He opened the door.

'Bwana, I will call you again later. Behold, I will help you to the hospital.'

Fully dressed, I crawled under my mosquito net and almost at once went to sleep, to wake suddenly with a vicious pain in the back of my head, while from outside came a voice:

'Bwana, Bwana – it's time. Will you come and see Yohanna?'

I staggered into my shoes and made my way to the hospital. Daudi had his arm round my shoulder.

One look at the little boy, and I feared the worst. As I bent down to feel his pulse, everything whirled around and suddenly went black.