



1

Invitation to the Feast

'Bwana, doctor, they're delicious roasted!'

Five heads nodded.

'Will you come and eat with us, Bwana?'

'Truly, Great One, it's a *sikuku* of great merit.'

Another voice chimed in. 'There is no meat as sweet to the palate as that of Panya.'

Out of the corner of my mouth I asked my African assistant. 'As the meat of what, Daudi?'

'Panya, the rat, Bwana,' he murmured, barely moving his mouth but rolling his eyes understandingly.

Louder he said, 'In the days of initiation into the tribe there is no greater delicacy than the roasted flesh of Panya.'

I turned to the boys. 'This is an invitation of great kindness but I would not rob you of your feast.'

A chorus of answers came:





Jungle Doctor on the Hop

'Ng'o, Bwana, there is plenty for all.'

'We caught a great heap of them.'

'There are eighty-seven, Bwana.'

'It would bring joy to your stomach.'

'Truly, they're delicious roasted.'

It was hard to keep a straight face.

'Yoh, behold it's a thing of sadness to me that the flesh of Panya, the rat, brings little joy to my stomach. Rather than reduce the size of your feast, let me add to it with another bringer of happiness.'

'Sukari guru,' came a voice, and they trooped off as Daudi picked up a saw and, in the room where we made medicines, cut a great block of brown, sticky, crude sugar into hunks the size of a closed fist. He picked up one of these, turned it over and prised out a cockroach which he flicked contemptuously aside.

'Eighty-seven rats is good hunting, Bwana. There is no shortness of food. Are you sure you will not come?'

I was sure.

At that moment, south of my ribs, I felt a fear growing that all was not well in the plains of Tanzania. Apparently I showed it for Daudi raised his eyebrows. 'Bwana, you feel that way too? It is well that Simba, the hunter, is with us.'

'Eheh, there is danger in the air – or at least something that smells like it. There must be thousands of rats about.'

'Truly, but that is because of the rainy season and the growth of the corn. There is food all over the place.'





Invitation to the Feast

As he spoke a hawk swooped down on the peanut garden and was in the air again in a second, clutching a rat in its talons.

That evening the ominous voice was still loud within me. There were some clues that needed careful sifting. I took a book from the shelf, started to read the latest medical information on tropical disease and made page after page of notes. From outside came some loud yelling and from the cornstalk hut where Simba's initiation boys were camped echoed shouts of delight. Daudi came to the door to give me the night report of the hospital.

'Zo'sweru, Daudi – good evening, Bwana.'

'Zo wusweru gwe gwe – good evening to you, Bwana.'

'What's all the excitement?'

'Koh, these are big days in the life of an African boy, Bwana, these days of initiation. Listen. Simba teaches them special things. They rub their bodies with white pipe clay and they have a deep feeling of considerable importance within them. Are they not leaving childhood and becoming members of the tribe?'

'They may have joy, Daudi, but I have a hollow feeling as though something ugly is about to happen. I don't know what it is, but I'm convinced that it's my responsibility to stop it. If this vague threat isn't traced and stamped out, there could be terrible trouble.'

Daudi nodded. 'I too have this feeling inside me and it gives me no joy.'

I agreed. 'Perhaps the biggest thing that Christians can share is talking with God.'

Jungle Doctor on the Hop

Again Daudi nodded. Together we knelt and told God about it, asking for his wisdom and for keen minds to cope with any situation that might arise.

As Daudi walked back to the hospital, I settled down to read a chapter from the Bible, but I did not absorb much of it. It was about the Philistines fighting with Israel, but it did not seem to have any bearing on the problem. Rather abruptly I closed the book and prepared to go to bed.

Simba and his charges were still sitting round the fire outside their hut. He had obviously been telling them a story, for little gusts of laughter came on the evening air, followed by quiet singing. He was not only teaching them the ways of the tribe, but introducing them to the ways of the kingdom of God.

As I tucked in the mosquito net there was nothing to be heard outside but the voices of crickets.

It was a hot, windless night. I tossed about, thinking of this and that and planning the next day's operations. At long last came drowsiness, brushed suddenly out of the way by the grunting of a lion.

Shouting came from Simba's cabin. '*Mbera, mbera, lete wuzeru* – quickly, bring a light!'

A handful of grass was thrown on the embers of



the fire. The blaze showed up a large tawny-maned lion between the camp and the hospital. More grass was heaped on the fire and a hundred anxious eyes watched the great beast walk slowly back through a gap in the thornbush.

For the next hour his grunting and roaring could be heard. For me, sleep had disappeared. I lit the lamp and tried to work out a chess problem, but a procession of African creatures kept moving through my thoughts. Strangely enough, none of them was a lion.

'*Hodi?*' came a voice at the door, speaking in Swahili. 'May I enter?'

'*Karibu, Simba. Come in.*'

The broad-shouldered hunter entered.

'We seem to have visitors tonight.'

'*Eheh, Bwana. Make no mistake, he will return. Not tonight, but some other time. I have examined his footprints carefully. He is a lion that limps – an old one. He no longer hunts buck and wildebeest and zebra. He goes for less nimble game.*'

'Like you and me.'

Simba grinned. 'And the children, Bwana. What are we going to do about it?'

'There is my old rifle.' I pointed to an ancient .22, a most inaccurate firearm. 'But that would not even bend his skin!'

'*Eheh, and if you wound a lion his rage is great. Lions are shy in the daytime, but at night they have no fear.*'

'Did you not kill a lion once with a spear?'

'Truly, Bwana, but it is the sort of thing that you

have no desire to do twice. I have had thoughts.'

'Have you? So have I. Nothing but thoughts all night long.'

Simba grinned again. 'Is it that lions scare you?'

'They do, but that isn't what scares me most. There is something vague and threatening that I can feel but I don't understand yet.'

'Bwana, let us then first deal with the lion.'

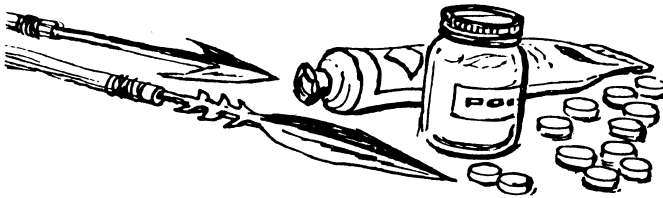
'*Viswanu* – right. What are your ideas?'

'I have arrows. I can shoot and not miss.'

'*Yoh*, but if you do, or if you merely wound?'

'Bwana, I will not miss but probably I will only wound. This is where I want your help. The lion must die quickly or people will. What I need is a poisoned arrow, one tipped with poison of strength.'

'We have what you want in my special cupboard with the skull and crossbones on it. But surely this is more a task for a medicine man than for me?'



The hunter grinned. 'We want to kill with certainty and speed, Bwana.'

I unlocked the poison cupboard. From a blue bottle I poured some white powder and took a dozen small pills from a glass phial. I ground these into a fine powder and mixed the lot into a paste with lanoline.

Invitation to the Feast

Simba went to the door and came back with his bow and three arrows. Carefully this deadly ointment was smeared over the barb of each arrow.

‘Watch that stuff. It’s a mixture of two powerful poisons, strychnine and cyanide. If any of your hunters were to get some of that into them it would be the end – and quickly.’

Simba nodded. ‘I will guard those arrows with care. Listen, Bwana.’

From further out in the thornbush came the roar of a lion. ‘*Hongo*, the walls of his stomach kiss each other, and he has no joy.’

‘You think he will not return tonight, but the hearts of many people will beat more quickly than usual because of tonight’s happenings?’

‘*Ngheeh*, Bwana, and many will place outside their houses the special medicine they think keeps lions from entering. Behold, it is a good night for witchdoctors and darkness and creatures that slink.’ Simba spat. ‘Can you not feel that tonight is a night of fear and danger?’

