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We Smell a Lion

Daudi stopped, and sniffed.

'Bwana, there's been a lion about here. Is your nose awake to that strange musty smell?' He held the hurricane lantern close to the ground, and there, clearly visible in the loose sand, were the paw-marks of a lion.'

'*Kah,*' said my African dispenser, 'Bwana, it is recent too, for do you not see where the dust has been wet by the dew? Behold, are not the lion's paw-marks clearly cut?'

Huskily I whispered, 'Listen, Daudi, what's that?'

He lifted the lantern head-high. For five yards around we could see something of the Central African jungle: thornbush, close up to the path along which we were walking. Weird shadows cast by the light of the lantern did nothing to make us feel more comfortable. Then suddenly from the ghostly arms of

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a baobab tree which stretched above us leafless, came a dark something to crash into the lantern. We were in darkness. Hastily I struck a match just in time to see a wide span of wings disappearing into the night.

Daudi picked up the lantern. 'Bwana, that was *ituwi, the owl.*'

Fortunately the glass of the lantern was not broken. I proceeded to light the wick again.

'*Koh,*' said Daudi, 'behold, Bwana, here in Tanganyika the owl is said to be a bird of witchcraft. Was I not frightened when that happened? *Yoh,* I'm not scared of witchcraft much, Bwana, but suddenly to be in darkness – *eeh!*'

I smiled. 'Yes, Daudi, I know how it feels – all the little hairs at the back of my head stood straight up when that happened.'

'*Koh,*' said Daudi. 'Well, Bwana, I suppose nothing else will happen to us. I'm only thankful, though, that we've got the lantern.'

The thornbush suddenly gave place to breast-high scrub, and outlined in front of us in the starlight was a hill that seemed to rise for no apparent reason from the plains. Great outcrops of granite, some of them as big as a house, were silhouetted against the skyline. I drew Daudi's attention to one particular group of enormous rocks balanced one upon the other, reaching some fifty feet into the air.

'*Yoh,*' said Daudi. 'Bwana, in our tribe we have a story about those rocks. It is said ...' The path suddenly sloped down and our feet sank into the sand of a dry river-bed.

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Abruptly Daudi stopped. 'Koh,' he said. 'Bwana, there's that smell again.' On the cool breeze that comes before dawn again there was the rank smell of musk. Daudi did not seem disposed to go on. I cleared my throat and broke a very uncomfortable silence.

'Daudi, didn't you once tell me that when you hear lions roaring not far away from you, you need have no fear, for no lion would roar unless he had been fed?'

'H-e-e-e...'
said the African, 'that's just it, Bwana. Can you hear lions roaring now?'


I could see the whites of his eyes standing out in marked contrast to his dark face. Gripping the knobbed stick that he carried in his right hand he moved forward slowly, and then stopped.

'Bwana,' he said, 'do you see it?'

There, clearly marked in the sand, was the paw-mark of a lion. Carefully we followed the spoor from



the river-bed, up the side of the bank, and along a narrow path flanked by vicious-looking thornbush. Again the path broadened out into a clearing, and by the light of the lantern I could see the trampled



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stalks of what a little while before had been a first-class millet crop. In front of me Daudi stopped and was examining the ground carefully with the lantern. Together we peered at the dust. The crop had been broken down in what must have been a tremendous struggle, and then my African dispenser bent down, pointing to a dark stain.

'Bwana, that's blood.'

Clearly marked were the lion's paw-marks and the imprint of bare feet. Near the edge of the clearing we found parts of a broken spear. The track leading away towards the village was covered with recent footmarks.

'What does the sand tell you, Daudi?'

The African drew in his breath sharply. 'There must have been a fight, Bwana, it looks to me as though the lion was killed and probably the man as well. See, many feet have during the night returned to the village of Ng'ombe.'

'And what about the lion; wouldn't they leave it here?'

'*Hongo*, Bwana, do not those of our tribe say that lion's fat is a very good medicine indeed?' He wrinkled up his nose and with deep scorn said, '*Eeh*, it is medicine of strength, is lion fat.'

I grasped his shoulder.

'Come on, Daudi, let's hurry. It may be that we can do some good in the village over there. The man may not yet be dead.'

I patted the hip pocket of my shorts where was a hypodermic syringe, and an emergency case of



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injectable drugs. I only wished I had some surgical instruments with me, but the nearest approach that I had to anything of this sort was a safety-razor blade which I kept in the back of my New Testament, which I always carried round with me in the pocket of my shirt.

Daudi was saying something as he walked along briskly ahead of me.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I didn't hear what you said. Would you mind saying it again?'

'Bwana, I was telling you how *Muganga*, the witchdoctor, uses lion fat as a medicine amongst the people of our tribe. Suppose, Bwana, you have a pain in your chest, and the witchdoctor is called, then he will take a pair of sandals, spit on them, and throw them on the ground. He then will examine them and tell you the cause of your trouble, and then perhaps after you have paid a bowl of grain for his work with the sandals, he will say, "Will I not be given a cow if I make powerful medicine?"

'What then, Daudi, if they pay over the cow?'

'*Hongo*, Bwana! *Muganga* gathers herbs and mixes them with lion fat. That is the *miti*, the medicine, that is rubbed in. *Yoh*, Bwana, see how it is supposed to work. The strength of the lion comes into you, and out goes your pain, and *Kumbe*, if the pain doesn't go from your chest, *Muganga* says the spell against you must have been a very strong one.'

'*Kumbe*, Daudi.' I raised my eyebrows. 'A cow for that!'

The African dispenser nodded. 'Perhaps also, Bwana, the pain is in your stomach, and you have taken many

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medicines. Then in the end they will say 'Ah, well, this is a bad thing, it will take a very strong medicine!' and again the sore spot is rubbed with lion's fat, but, *Hongo!* The pain remains, unless, of course, Bwana, it exists in a man's head and not in his stomach.'

'*Koh,*' I said, 'and again you pay a cow, eh?'

'Truly, Bwana,' said Daudi, 'that is the way of our tribe. Behold, until the hospitals came here there was no other medicine. They knew of no other way.'

We walked on in silence for a moment, and then Daudi said: 'Do you remember the meningitis epidemic, Bwana?'

'Do I?' I replied. 'Was I ever so tired in my life?'

'The only medicine which the Muganga has to treat meningitis with is lion fat, Bwana. Our people call this disease "the disease of death", and truly, such it is, for although the medicine is rubbed into your forehead and down your spine,' Daudi shrugged his shoulders, 'you die all the same.'

'But it's a different story now, Daudi, since we started using the sulpha drugs?'

It was gradually getting lighter, and I could see Daudi vigorously nodding his head.

'*Kweli,* Bwana, truly. We have gained much confidence by our hospitals and operations and medicines that work, and by our Christian teaching and preaching. *Yoh,* Bwana, it has made all the difference.'