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Mgulu Arrives



'Yah, Bwana, it hurts there.'

'Here?'

'No, Bwana.'

'There?'

'Y-ooooooh! Eeeeeeh! Kah!'

The small African boy clenched his teeth tightly.

'How about this side of your neck, Mgulu?' I asked, gently examining the ugly mass of swollen glands there.

'Kah, it throbs and throbs at night, and even now ...'

He winced at the pressure of my fingers.

I smiled down at him.

'Stand on those scales for a minute.'

I recorded 3 st. 9 1/2 lbs.

Suddenly I glanced up, conscious of the grave face of his father looking questioningly at me. In English, I said:

‘Jonathan, I don’t like the look of it. There are a number of things his trouble could be, but I’m afraid it’s tuberculosis.’

The African teacher shook his head. ‘That’s very serious, Bwana. Do you think he can recover?’

The small boy touched his hand and said in Chigogo, the language of the Central Plains of Tanganyika:

‘Why do you talk to the Bwana in English? Is – is my sickness a very bad one?’

I put my hand on his shoulder.

‘Yes, Mgulu, it is not good. You’ll have to stay with us in hospital for many days and drink much medicine.’

‘The Bwana will look after you, old chap,’ said his father. ‘Did he not help me greatly when I had *ihoma*, pneumonia?’

The little lad nodded. Tears obviously were not far away.

‘But, perhaps, father, it will mean injections and Bwana’s sharp little knife?’


Jonathan nodded. ‘Yes, it may mean all that.’

Mgulu looked pathetically at us, his big brown eyes fearful.

‘Bwana, Bwana,’ came a voice from outside. ‘Bwana, *nghusaka sukari*.’

I smiled up at Jonathan.

‘This will help,’ I said softly, in English.



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'Bwana, *nghusaka sukari*. Sir, I want sugar, came the insistent voice, and a small figure appeared in the doorway, with one arm encased in plaster-of-Paris, and a rakish-looking eye-shade on the side of his curly head.

'Hullo,' I said, 'what do you want?'

'*Sukari*, sugar,' he smiled.

'Listen, Majilanga, first I want you to tell the *Mwalimu*, teacher, the story of your arm. If you do it well, your wages will be a lump of *sukari guru*, brown sugar.'

The small boy walked over to Jonathan, and displayed with pride his plaster-covered arm.

'It's the Bwana's work,' he laughed. 'I fell down, and *yah!* Didn't it hurt! The bones were broken. The *muganga*, witchdoctor, was unable to stop the pain.'

'The old wretch burnt the little chap's forearm with a glowing stick,' said I, interrupting the narration.

Jonathan nodded. He well knew the wiles and wickedness of the witchdoctor.

The small boy continued:

'But the Bwana fixed it up. His medicine stopped the pain, and his strong white earth stops the bone from moving.' He waved his arm in the air to demonstrate.

Little Mgulu was laughing, his fears forgotten.

'Come here, children,' I said. 'Give me your hands.'

Majilanga pushed his fat little palm in front of me. It was pinkish white. I took up my pen and wrote on it *sukari*.

The back of Mgulu's hand was coal black, but his palm was white, with a pallor that I well knew meant

chronic disease. Shyly he presented it for me to write on. Once again the magic word *sukari* was written, and the two little fellows trotted off hand in hand to find Sechelela, the old African matron.

Out-patients finished, I went across to the office. I noted Mgulu's particulars in the Admission Book, and wrote down the symptoms and signs of his trouble. Daudi, my African assistant, read them as I wrote.

'What is his sickness, Bwana, and what will be the outlook?' he asked.

'I'm afraid it's tuberculosis, Daudi, and it will be a fight to save him. We'll use all our weapons – sunbaths, operations, medicines, injections, everything.'

He shook his head.

'*Kah*, Bwana, those tuberculosis *dudus* are worse than lions. They have small but very dangerous teeth. How will you start the treatment?'

As Daudi asked this question, we were walking towards the ward. The lad's father came up, so I put all my facts before him.

'It will mean removing one of those swollen glands, Jonathan, and getting it examined under a microscope. Then we'll give all sorts of medicines and make him strong.'

'Is it very serious, Bwana?'

'Well, yes, but actually I feel that if Almighty God takes a hand, he will get much better.'

'Well, Bwana, we have every right to ask God's help. We've both given our lives to Him and are obeying His commands.'

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'Truly, Jonathan, and here is our chance to prove God's help.'

We paused under a pomegranate tree and asked our Heavenly Father to bless the medicines, to guide my judgement, and to heal little Mgulu. As we gripped hands, the little fellows ran up, their faces covered with the remnants of their feast.

'Uze, Baba, unlanje nyumba ya Wadodo. Come father, and see the children's ward,' said Mgulu.

We peered through the door into a cheerful room with eight cots in it. They were painted bright green and had colourful patchwork quilts spread over them.

'This, Mgulu,' said his new-found friend, 'is my cot. It's the best in the ward.'

In one corner was a baby girl propped up on pillows. An African nurse was feeding her with a spoon.

'Pneumonia,' I explained, 'she's nearly better now.'

In the next bed was a wretched-looking child, so utterly thin that one would have thought him incapable of living.

'Kah, Bwana,' said my companion; 'you'll lose him.'

'No fear. We'll have him as fat as a cook boy in a few months.'

'Bwana, what does it cost?'

'We charge ten cents (1d)* a day, Jonathan, but these cots have been given, or rather, some of them have, by people in my own country. They gave them in memory of someone they loved who had passed

* Britain abandoned the old penny (1d) on 15th February 1971 when one pound sterling became divided into 100 new pence.

on, because they felt that the best way to keep their memory alive was to help save lives in these cots.'

'What do they pay, Bwana?'

'Five pounds a year, in English money, Jonathan, and more often than not it means a very real sacrifice.'

'But, Bwana, it's worth it to save three children's lives.'

'Three! Why, it's nearer a dozen. Once we saved six lives in one month in that cot over there by the window. That one was given by a mother whose five-year-old son died from pneumonia, and in it we've avenged his death twenty times.'

There was a splashing noise going on in the bathroom, followed by laughter. The ward nurse, armed with a watering can, was vigorously dealing with young Mgulu, while Majilanga gave instructions about keeping soap out of his eyes.

I wrote the treatment in the Ward Book, and left the tall African teacher to say 'goodbye' to his small son.

A week later, the boy came to my office:

'Bwana, am I better yet?'

'Off with your pyjamas, Mgulu,' I ordered, 'and jump on those scales, and we'll see.'

'Three stone ten pounds, Bwana,' he answered.

'Mmmm, you've put on just half a pound. You've got to put on a stone, Mgulu. It'll take time, months perhaps.'

He hung his head and put his hand in mine.



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'Bwana, I have sadness, because I cannot greet my mother and father, who are far away. Majilanga goes home tomorrow, and ...'

I could see the tears were near, so I said:

'Look here Mgulu, you've learnt to read, haven't you?'

'Yes, Bwana, at the C.M.S. School at Dodoma.'

'Well, I want to give you a job. You'll be one of the staff, and your job is to read to the children here and interest them, to tell them the stories you know about Jesus. I'll give you a cent a day (there are 100 cents in a shilling*), and you'll be paid when everyone else is, on the last day of the month.'

'*Kumbe*, Bwana, that's fine.' His little face beamed.

Then came the day when I took him aside and said, gently:

'Listen, old chap, today I'm going to operate on your neck.'

He gripped the side of the table and said, 'Yes, Bwana.'

'It's only a little job, but it may hurt a bit.'

He nodded bravely, but his eyes told another tale, for a big tear rolled down his face.

An hour before the time I had planned to operate, I selected seven variously-coloured jelly beans from a bottle, and a little yellow capsule that looked a first cousin of the sweets. I gave him a blue jelly bean. He bit it with glee. Then I produced the capsule.

'Swallow this, and the other six are yours.'

* A shilling was replaced by a five pence coin worth one twentieth of a pound on 15th February 1971




With a delighted grin, he took the pill, which contained a very strong sedative. Suddenly we heard the sound of a lorry. Mgulu listened, pill in one hand and a glass of water poised in the other. The capsule disappeared upon its mission, and the little chap looked up at me.

'Perhaps it's my father, Bwana.'

We looked through the window, and there, crouched in the back of the Indian trader's swaying vehicle, we saw Jonathan.

The little fellow's delight at seeing his father was most touching. They talked for a while till the drug made Mgulu drowsy. Then Jonathan took him on his knee, and, when he was asleep, carried him to the theatre, where, under a local anaesthetic, I removed a gland. It was the size of a pigeon's egg. The little lad opened his eyes halfway, but didn't let out a whimper.

'Yah!' whispered the father. '*Yali samba mbeka*. He's as brave as a lion.'



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The scar healed, but my operation was not so much for cure as for diagnosis. Soon the gland was on its 400-mile journey to the laboratory on the East African Coast, and, at long last, the result came back. It read: Gland typical of tuberculosis.

Week after week went by. It was a solemn ritual each Saturday morning for Mgulu to be weighed. We kept a card, and drew a graph of happenings. If his weight went up, then a red line moved upwards on the card. If there was a blue line going downwards, there were tears and great efforts with the cod-liver-oil bottle.

In Mguli's general health, there was a distinct upward trend, but the great swelling of his neck worried him, and he longed for rapid results. One day, after the usual weighings, he said:

'Bwana, will I never get better? Will my neck never become small again?'

I looked up from the card. The red pencil had moved up to 4 st. 1lb. 'When that red line reaches 4 st. 4 lbs, I will make your neck well with an operation.'