

On the Mountains of Death

Darkness blanketed the thick forests on the Kolli Malai mountain range of southern India. In the remote mission settlement high on a mountain a single lamp shone from inside the mission house. Paul and his young sister, Connie, had already been sent to their beds. Paul could hear Connie's soft breathing as she slept. From under the tent of mosquito netting over his bed he lay listening to the night sounds. Only a week ago a large cheetah had stolen one of the goats from the mission corral. Paul pictured his father camped out in one of the isolated mountain villages, listening to some of the same sounds. His father had been gone now for four days, tending the sick, teaching about Jesus, and helping the villagers. Paul wished he was there camping out by his father's side with Connie and his mother the way they often did when he took them along to help, but this time he had ridden off on his horse by himself. Paul and his sister and mother were alone in the mission compound. Besides his family, there were no other white-skinned people in any of these mountains.

The scratching of his mother's pen on paper caught his attention. Paul's father had built their

house like a long train and from each room one could look into the next. From the bedroom Paul could see to the kitchen where his mother sat at the table writing letters. The letters she wrote would be mailed back to a place called England where his parents had lived before they became missionaries to India. Many were letters to family that neither Paul nor Connie had ever seen. They had never seen England either. Paul didn't mind. He loved the mountains, had plenty of friends, all of them dark-skinned, and this was his home here in India.

A sudden knock at the door brought Paul sitting straight up. A man stood in the doorway, the light of the torch in his hand showed his dark-skinned face. Paul listened as his mother and the villager spoke in Tamil, the language of the people of the Kolli Hills. Paul knew Tamil well. His mother quickly began to pack her medical bag.

"Someone in his village needs help," she said as Paul came to stand beside her. "I need to go, but God will take care of you, and you must help him by taking care of your sister, Connie." In a moment his mother was gone, disappearing down the twisting mountain path until Paul could no longer see the light of the torch held by the villager or his mother's lantern. His five-year-old heart beat fast as he watched the darkness fill the path where his mother and her guide had been. Paul glanced at his three-year-old sister, Connie, sleeping soundly under the heavy mosquito netting over her bed.

The buzz of a mosquito sent Paul running to the shelter of his own bed and its protective netting. Here in the Kolli Malai or Mountains of Death, the people's name for this mountain range, all had reason to fear the dreaded mosquitoes. By sunset swarms of mosquitoes that carried malaria appeared. There were other terrible diseases here too like blackwater fever and dysentery that attacked both the Tamil people of the hills and those who chose to come there. Few chose to come that did not live there.

As he lay huddled on his bed Paul thought he heard animal footsteps outside, perhaps a cheetah? Fear sent a shiver through him. He knew his mother had gone because nothing was more important than helping the people come to know Jesus. That meant taking care of the sick, the wounded, and even pulling rotted teeth, a continual need among the people. His parents did all those things. Paul glanced at the sleeping Connie. The two of them had already agreed that when they were older that was what they would do too, teach about Jesus. He could hear mosquitoes whining about his bed making him glad he was under the thick netting. His eyelids felt heavy but he mustn't sleep. He needed to stay awake and watch for Connie and himself. Propped against his pillow he wondered which animals might come too close to the house on their hunt for food. Weary but awake he listened hard for signals of any danger near. It felt to him that hours had dragged by, broken only by sudden noises

that brought him wide awake to listen until they faded away. Paul knew he would not forget this night, alone waiting and wondering, listening, afraid to close his eyes and fall asleep.

A hard rain began to fall, slapping against the tin roof of the house and splatting on the stone veranda. Before long it drummed against everything, shutting out all the other noises. Paul yawned mightily. The next thing he knew the sun was shining and his mother was home singing a song as she prepared breakfast. Young as he was then, Paul was right; he would always remember his night alone on the Kollis with his little sister.

There were many things he needed to remember, like the tiny scorpions that lived under the bark of certain trees or the larger ones that roamed at night near the outhouse. Neither Paul nor Connie or any of their Tamil friends wore shoes. Paul's foot had been stung once by a small scorpion, a painful memory. Now he watched carefully which trees he climbed and where he stepped at night. Snakes were another thing to remember and his father had taught him to respect and avoid those like the cobras, vipers, and deadly adders. One snake, the eleven step cobra, his father said was called that because once a man was bitten by it he would get no farther than eleven steps before falling dead. Like his Tamil Indian friends, Paul did not let fears keep him from climbing the highest trees, swinging from the vines, exploring the forests, and

sometimes taking wild rides through the rice fields on the water buffalo. Connie, who was his constant shadow, had soon learned to do whatever things her small chubby legs could handle and was just as fearless.

The morning mountain air felt clear and cool, and Paul longed to be off running with his friends, but his mother was already preparing his schoolwork. With a basket, a rope, and his lesson book she marched Paul outside. Together they walked to the tall tree Paul called his school. Handing him one end of the rope to tie around his waist, she attached the basket holding his school supplies to the other end. "Up you go," she said. "When you think you have them done correctly, let down the basket and I will check them. If you are right you may come down, but if not I will send them back up to you to do again." When Paul couldn't concentrate on his lessons seated at the kitchen table, his mother had come up with the idea of doing them in his favorite place: high in a tree. It proved to be a grand solution, and Paul minded less doing his schoolwork perched in his tree.

The lessons he did enjoy, and Connie too, were the ones that came from his beloved father who studied nature and loved sharing his findings with his children. Every camping trip, each hike into the forest brought new things to explore. His tall, cheerful father always had some new thing to tell them about. One time his father opened a giant ant mound to show them the insides of the nests. Paul learned about army ants,

cricket hunters, curious plant traps, and the endless wonders of India's forests and animals. His father's keen observations and curiosity made him Paul's favorite teacher. Today his father was headed to a remote mountain village and taking Paul and Connie along to help with the work.

Connie had stopped to pick up a fallen breadfruit. Her hands were sticky with its sap-like juice. "Oh, oh," she said, and threw it from her. As she wiped her hands on a patch of grass, Paul shook his head. Both of them would need to scrub their hands once their father started treating wounds. It would be their job to hand him bandages and ointment, and whatever else he needed.

"You suppose Papa will have to use his knife today?" Connie asked in a small voice. She hated the sight of the knife and would turn her face away each time their father had to use it on a patient.

"Girls are sissies," Paul said. "You don't see me turning my eyes away." He didn't add that he too wished he never had to watch his father operate on a wound again. But it was not to be.

In the distance ahead of them were the clusters of round thatched-roof houses and the fields of green rice paddies that stretched behind the village. They were still a ways from the village when an older man leaning heavily on the shoulder of a young man came limping towards them. Paul stared at the man's hugely swollen leg. The man groaned with each step he took.

Paul's father hurried to meet them, his medical bag already in his hands. He was kneeling and examining the leg when Connie and Paul reached them.

His father spoke in Tamil to the men, and pointed to a grassy spot off the trail. Turning to Paul and Connie he said, "I'll need you to hold the bandages and ointment, children. We'll set up supplies under that tree over there, Paul, and you can bring the bag with the bandages." Paul nodded.

Connie stood still biting her lip as Paul arranged their traveling packs and selected the one with the rolls of bandages. He placed one hand on her shoulder. "Come on. Let's just get this over," he said. In the few moments ahead as his father operated on the man's leg, Paul felt himself gag and wanted to turn away. The leg was badly infected. As he watched, sickened by the sight and wishing for it to be over quickly, he wondered how his father could operate in spite of the patient's terrible moans.

His father had nothing to keep a patient from feeling the pain as he operated. Usually the patient would cling hard to a relative or friend until it was over. This time the man had cried out as the knife came down into the swollen leg releasing a torrent of pus and blood such as Paul had never seen before. The smell of infection was overpowering. When it was finally over and Paul could turn away he knew for certain that he would never ever become a doctor. He hated the things that went with it: sewing up wounds,

cutting out infections, the blood, the disgusting sight and smell of infection, the suffering.

They had not been back at the mission long before Paul was certain he had made the right decision never to become a doctor. It wasn't just how disgusting and awful it could be; treating some diseases could be dangerous.

Paul and Connie had both finished their schoolwork for the day and were heading towards the forest of trees nearby when their mother's voice brought them to a standstill. "Paul, Connie, go into the house immediately and stay there until I come for you." As usual Connie, who could be counted on to obey, turned back to the house. Paul followed slowly, ready to question his mother until he saw what his mother had already seen: three strangers, their feet wrapped in bloody rags, coming up the trail to the mission. The men lifted their hands in the Indian greeting palms together, and Paul gasped. Where some fingers should have been were small stubs or none at all and the others were bent into claw-like shapes. Whatever was the matter with these men it was so bad that Paul's mother would not allow them to even stay and watch their father work on them as they usually did. Quickly Paul hid behind the corner of the house where he could still see and not be seen.

Paul's father hurried toward the men greeting them in Tamil. His father had brought a bucket of water to cleanse their feet and fresh bandages, but as

he worked Paul saw that he wore gloves. Paul shifted his weight quietly. His father was kneeling near the men as Paul had so often seen him do with his patients. Only this time his father did not probe their wounds. As he unwrapped their bloody bandages, Paul saw the missing toes, the stubs of feet, and the terrible infected ulcers. His father's gloved hands did not actually touch their feet without the thick pad of bandages he held. He seemed to be wasting bandages, layering them thickly between himself and the men's skin. When he was finished he did not pick up the soiled pads but left them lying in a heap on the ground where he had dropped them. Finally, his father stood and let the gloves slip from his hands onto the pile, spoke something softly and turned away towards the washing shed holding his hands before him.

Now would be the time Paul knew his mother would offer the men food before they left for their village. This time she came from the house holding a basket of fruit and bread and set it down a few feet away from the men. "You may keep the basket," she called to them. Curious, Paul wondered why his mother would give them one of her few baskets and why she did not sit with them as she usually did with those who came for help.

Still in his hiding place, Paul watched as the men ate. His father too stood nearby watching. Why wasn't he sitting with the men and talking to them, Paul wondered. When the patients had eaten, they stood,

thanked his father in the Tamil way and left. They did not take the basket.

Paul couldn't wait any longer. "Father," he called as he came towards the spot where the men had been sitting, "who were those men?"

"Stop right where you are, Paul," his father commanded sternly. "Neither you or Connie are to play anywhere near that spot. You are not to walk or sit where those men sat. You must obey me in this, son." As he spoke his father set the small pile of soiled bandages on fire and then the empty basket. "The men are lepers, son, and anything they touched must be burned. Leprosy is a terrible disease, dangerous to anyone who comes in contact with it. Do you understand, Paul?"

"Yes," Paul replied. "I promise not to go anywhere near that place, and I'll see to it that Connie doesn't either." Paul thought of the Bible stories about lepers. How awful leprosy was and it was a dangerous and ugly disease. Paul wanted nothing to do with it.

With a shiver Paul turned back to the house to fetch Connie. He would gladly be a missionary, but not a doctor, not ever. There were plenty of other things to do. He would not mind so much pulling teeth for the villagers. Tooth pain was terrible and people came wanting their teeth pulled. Often the crowds applauded when the tooth came out because they knew the pain would stop. Even his mother, small as she was, would help pull the villagers' aching teeth. Usually the patient

would help her by pulling away from her as she gripped her forceps around the bad tooth. Her motto was “place the forceps down as far as you can around the bad tooth and don’t let go.” Paul would gladly give out medicines and bandages, but someone else could do the operating and care for the lepers. He could even be a builder like his father who had built their house and all the buildings they had needed.

Connie met him at the door. “Are they gone yet?” she asked looking up at Paul. He knew she wanted him to explain everything that had happened. He did, and sitting at the kitchen table Paul went on to assure her that when they were old enough to be missionaries there were lots of things they would do. They could teach the people still unreached in the mountains around them how to farm better and keep their wells clean, lots of good things. “The most important thing we need to do,” Paul said, “is to tell them about Jesus.” Paul stood up and beckoned Connie to the window. “Look out there,” he said pointing to the mountain peaks rising around their own mountain top. “All those mountains” he said, “have hidden villages where no missionary has gone yet. That’s where we’ll go.” Connie nodded her agreement. She was content with their plans. Paul drew in a deep breath of mountain air. He and Connie had never dreamed of living anywhere else but here in India, or of being anything else but missionaries. He just wouldn’t be a doctor.