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A Car, a Cataract and the Cow's Husband

'Higher, Samson! ... Half an inch up! ... More! ... A little more! ... Right!'

I lay at full length under the old box-bodied Ford.

From my vantage point, I could see Tanganyika from an unusual angle. On one side, set wide apart, were two stalwart African legs. Samson was using his great strength to lift the whole of the left side of the car off the ground while I slipped the jack into place. I watched his muscles relax as he gently lowered the chassis. He grunted, and moved off to get the spare.

Directly in front lay the apology for a road. Framed between the front wheels was a typical picture of Central African life. There was a squat Gogo house, mud-and-wattle walled, with a bundle of grass and some pumpkins and gourds on the roof, and beyond it a small boy, armed with a knobbed stick, was watching a few hungry-looking hump-backed cattle and a mixed assortment of goats and fat-tailed sheep.

The quiet of the tropical midday was broken by the shrill whistle of the Tanganyika Express, labouring inland on its 700-mile journey from Dar-es-Salaam on the Indian Ocean coast to the Great Lakes. The unusual sound startled hundreds of ibis, who had been sedately stalking amongst the young millet crop, picking up caterpillars. With a swirl of wings, they flew into the air and skimmed around in great circles. Through a break in the thornbush we watched the train, its third-class carriages packed with Africans, Indians and Arabs. Limp-looking Europeans gazed out at the wide sweep of the Central Plain. The train rattled away into the desert.

Samson blew up the punctured tube and placed it on a patch of smooth dust. Carefully he lifted it, and a small crater in the dust showed him where the puncture was. He marked it quickly, and, running his hand round inside the tyre cover, deftly produced



an iron-hard two-inch thorn that had caused the puncture. Ten minutes later we were on safari again.

We negotiated four rivers, and crossed the railway line before driving through Kikombo, with its market place and dingy, mud-brick shops. Beyond the town was a stretch of country that in the eight months' dry season was brown, barren plain covered with stunted undergrowth and straggly thornbush, but in the rains it was utterly changed. There had been heavy thunder showers, and the whole face of the land was a mass of blue, yellow and pink convolvulus growing broadcast. Tall native holly-hocks, purple, yellow and red, grew in profusion on a hill that sloped down to the river bank. The river itself was a quarter-of-a-mile wide, and its bed was hard, wet sand, since only the night before it had been a raging torrent as the storm water had rushed down from the hills on the horizon.

Before attempting to cross, Samson pulled up and pointed with his chin to the far bank, where the road ended in a sheer drop of six feet to the river level. Thousands of tons of soil had been eroded in the flood of storm water which had turned a quarter-of-a-mile stretch of sand into a raging torrent. He and Daudi took hoes from the back of the car and set to work to level down the bank sufficiently for us to get on our way.

I was about to help with a spade, when I saw three cattle being driven up the river bank by an old man and two small boys. The old man peered at me. He shaded his eyes, and all at once his face broke into a smile, and he hurried across to me.

'Mbukwa, Bwana.'

'Mbukwa,' I replied.

Firmly we shook hands, and I recognised him as one of my star patients. His feet and legs had been extensively burnt, and both of his eyes bore the mark of cataract operations.

'Well, Mulewa,' I said, *'how are you?'*

'Mulewa?' he said. *'My name is not Mulewa!'*

'Oh, yes, it is,' I replied. *'Did I not treat your burns when you were blind and walked into the fire? And did I not operate on your eyes and give you back your sight?'*

'Yes, Bwana, you did all that, but my name is not Mulewa' – and then he laughed. 'It used to be, but now it is Benjamin. Behold!' From round his neck he took a little wooden bottle, pulled out the cork, and shook into his hand two little bits of tissue that looked like shop-soiled split peas. They were his eye lenses.

He thrust these at me, and said: *'For ten years, Bwana, those stopped me from seeing. I could not get rid of them, nor could the witchdoctor, nor my relatives, but you did with your little knife, and, behold, I understood how Jesus could take away sin, the cataract of the soul. So I became a Christian. Now my name is Benjamin, and I am taking these three cows to Buigiri as my thank-offering to God.'*

Very carefully he put his cataracts back in the bottle, and hung it round his neck again.

'Truly,' said he, *'you preached much better with your knife than with your tongue.'*

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It was only the day before that Samson had reminded me of a famous sermon that I had once preached, when, in all sincerity, I had told the congregation how, in the jungle, I had seen buffaloes leaping from limb to limb, and agilely swinging themselves about by their tails. When you realise that in Swahili *nyani* means a monkey, and *nyati* is a buffalo, you can understand how mistakes arise.

'How are you, these days, Benjamin, have you strength in your body?'

'Yes, Bwana, much strength, but I have small pain in my chest.'

He unwrapped a great cotton blanket from his shoulder and seated himself on a boulder in the middle of the river.

'Bwana, if you have your *cihulicizizo*, stethoscope, I would have great joy if you would listen to my chest.'

I tapped and listened.



It is useless to ask an African to say 'ninety-nine' during this proceeding, so I had chosen '*Ngombe*' to take its place. This word means 'cow' in Chigogo, the local language.

The old man was taking deep breaths, and then saying *ngombe* while I listened intently. Little did I realise that, before the day was out, I would have real trouble with that word, cow. I reassured the old man, and promised him medicine later on in the day at the hospital. He said farewell, and drove his cows on. Before long, we had levelled down the river bank sufficiently to continue our safari.

Nearing Buigiri, we saw numbers of people coming along, each driving a hump-backed cow towards the church. It is more usual to see people carrying grain in great conical baskets – the women placing them expertly on their heads, while the men carry them on their shoulders – but today it was a matter of cattle.

We pulled up outside the hospital. The old African clergyman and the village school teacher hurried forward to shake hands.

'Mbukwa, Bwana,' said they.

'Ale Mbukwenyi,' I replied.

'Bwana, there are big doings this year. Our people have decided that, as a thank-offering to God for good crops, each household will bring a cow.'

I could hear behind the church the stamping and lowing of cattle. The service of offering their gifts to God was a very impressive one. My mind was full of schemes. I could see all sorts of possibilities. There would be a herd of some forty cattle, and, although

these hardy desert creatures produced only a pint or so of milk a day, we could do a lot with forty pints. The children at hospital could get fresh milk daily – this would strike a death blow at rickets. Then I thought of the calves, and of the change a little veal would be to the usual routine of tough, twopenny Tanganyikan chicken. All sorts of rosy ideas rushed through my brain.

I buttonholed the old clergyman and said: 'Pastor, this is a splendid thing. With all these *ngombe*, cows, we will be able to make the children strong, and help them to overcome disease. Then we can teach the people how to milk the cows in a clean way.'

The old man covered his face with his hands, but I still kept on.

'We will teach them to sterilise their buckets. We will have a model dairy. Indeed, this is a great forward step in improving the welfare of the tribe.'

He did his best to cover his smiles.

The school teacher had a severe bout of coughing, and Daudi hurriedly went to fill the radiator.

Samson stood his ground, but his eyes twinkled merrily. He turned to me and said:


'Have you inspected the herd, Bwana?'

'Not yet, Samson. Why?'

'Well, let's go and have a look at it.'

The teacher's cough must have been infectious, because the pastor was coughing, and tears were running out of his eyes.

Daudi was filling a kerosene tin with water on the other side of the Mission House, and I could hear roar upon roar of laughter coming from that direction.



Jungle Doctor on Safari

I looked at my companion questioningly:

‘What’s up, Samson? What’s the joke?’

We had just come within sight of the thornbush enclosure and the cattle inside it.

‘What are they laughing at? What have I said wrong this time?’

‘Nothing, Bwana, your language is all right, but perhaps you do not yet quite understand the word “*Ngombe*”.

‘But I do, Samson. “*Ngombe*” means “Cow”.’

Then I looked at the beasts, and light dawned.

Samson saw my look of amazement, and burst out laughing.

‘You see, Bwana, “*Ngombe*” does not only mean a cow. It also means the husband of a cow, and, behold, Bwana, are they not all husbands?’

I sat down on the running-board of the car and laughed and laughed and laughed.