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Till the Teeth Come

'Three ounces less than last time.'

Perisi lifted the baby from the scales and put it into the African mother's arms. At the same time she picked up a blue pencil, steadily drew a down-going blue line on the child's weight-card and, looking up at the mother, who was swinging the baby on to her back, said:

'Heh – remember, no porridge until the teeth come.'

An old woman pushed forward. *'Hongo,'* she said in a wrathful voice, 'what do you know about it, you who have had no children?'

'Ho,' said Perisi, smiling all over her face, 'does one have to lay an egg to know whether it is a good one or a bad one?'



The old woman let flow a flood of words.

The African nurses who were sitting on the veranda near to me, mending surgical gloves, had a shocked expression on their faces.

The old woman shuffled off, laughing in a high-pitched cackle.

For a few moments there was one of those silences that you could almost feel; then one nurse said:

'*Huh*, those are the words of *mahala matitu*, of black wisdom; *huh*, it is an evil thing.'

Perisi went on unconcernedly weighing babies and marking up baby weight-cards. It was Tuesday afternoon at our hospital, and the day when baby welfare was the order of proceedings.



Mothers by the score had come; mothers whose infants had been born in the ward just across the way by the grove of frangipani trees; mothers who came for advice, for medicine; mothers who were attracted by the friendship and comradeship and the Christian influence of the C.M.S. Hospital at Mvumi in the Central Plains of Tanganyika.



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The routine went on, babies were weighed, weight-cards marked, medicine handed out, and instructions given as to how to deal with this sore, or about the drops to be put into the babies' eyes or ears. Not once but a dozen times I heard: 'Now don't forget, only milk until the teeth appear. That is the way to keep the red marks going up and up on your card, and to make your baby stronger. That is the right way.'

It was quite late that same afternoon, and time to inspect that day's batch of babies.

'A quiet day, Bwana,' said Sechelela, the old African head nurse, 'four very ordinary babies. But then, of course, their mothers came to the hospital for many months to drink our medicine, and all these mothers know the ways of feeding a baby; they are all our people.'

'You know, Sech, it's so much easier when people will follow the ways of wisdom.'

'*Heh,*' said the old woman, 'but if someone came to you and said: "To eat bacon and eggs for breakfast is not a way of wisdom; to have a bath every day is bad for you; to wear shoes on your feet is not the right way to live," what would you say?'

'Perhaps, Sech, I would not agree with them, and then I would tell them that this is the way that I live.'

'Well, Bwana, don't you see that's what our women say when you come along? You say to them: "Come and drink the hospital's medicine," but they have never been used to doing that. You say to them: "Put the baby in a cot, don't leave him on the floor," but they have never been used to doing that. You say: "Give the baby no porridge to eat till he has teeth," but they say: "Did not my mother do that, and my grandmother,

and my grandmother's grandmother? Why should I change our custom?" And you see, Bwana, you don't hear the stories that the people tell about you.'

'Tell me, Sech; what do they say? I would love to know.'

'Bwana,' said the old woman, driving home her points by tapping me with her forefinger on the shoulder, 'they say that in the hospital we break all the customs of the tribe. They tell stories of what you do that make their hearers shake with fright.'

'But, Sech, they can come and see what we do – everything is open for them to see.'

'Yes, Bwana, but they tell strange things, nonetheless. You put drops in the babies' eyes, and what do they say? "You pull out the baby's eye, draw it out long, squeeze it, and put it back again."'

'*Hongo*, Sech, that's absurd! It's silly; that's only an eye-dropper. Pull out a baby's eye and squeeze it! What rot!'

The old woman nodded her head.

'To you and to me, yes, Bwana; but what of the old women who used to make their money through helping the mothers? Is it not a good way to keep people from the hospital?'

'But are we not beginning to beat these evil old women and their weird stories? Surely more and more mothers are arriving each month and there seems no end to the number of babies being born here.'

Again she nodded. 'Are we not training women of the tribe to be nurses? Are we not gaining the confidence of the people themselves, and they are seeing that the new way is the better way?'



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From inside the ward came the sound of singing.

'It's the Good News, Sech, that makes all the difference. Do you know that tune?'

The old woman nodded. 'It's "Tell me the old, old story of Jesus and His love."'

'Well, what we try to do here, you know, is to do the former and to show the latter.'

Sechelela nodded slowly. 'Bwana, all goes well these days here. Perisi works with good wisdom. But do not forget that in three short months she will be starting the new clinic at Makali.'

'I know it only too well. Simba, her husband, has been telling me a long story about all sorts of trouble he's going to meet; but I think he's only lonely without Perisi.'

Sechelela laughed. 'And who is there to cook his food while his wife is here dealing with babies?'

Suddenly, she was serious. '*Kah*, Bwana, and I, too, can feel within me that feeling of something that is going to happen' – she shivered – 'I had it before the famine, and before Bibi nearly died.'

I picked up my topee. '*Hongo*, Sech, cheer up, it is merely that you need some quinine; malaria is upon you.'

She shook her head and smiled wryly; together we went into the ward.

Perisi stood ready with the temperature book.

I bent over the first bed. '*Lusona!* Congratulations!'

The tired face of the mother smiled back at me.

'Lulo. Thank you, Bwana.' And then in a quiet voice: 'My seventh child, Bwana, and the only one born alive.'

Jungle Doctor to the Rescue

'Eight-and-a-half pounds,' said the African nurse, in a matter of fact way. 'A boy with a powerful voice.'

'He's a great little chap; we'll help you to keep him well,' I said to the mother.

She smiled at her small son as he lay in his cot at the end of the bed.

I visited the eighteen beds in the ward, and the ten patients on the veranda, looking at babies, checking temperatures, or exchanging a few words with the folk.



These means – simple advice and modern medicines – gave us the chance to save the lives of literally hundreds of babies.

One woman was swinging her child on to her back.

'Now, Mamvula, don't you give that child porridge till after the days of harvest.'

'Yoh?' said the woman, taken aback.

'Heeee!' said Perisi, behind me. 'Whoever saw a cow feed its calf on porridge?'

'Am I a cow?' replied the woman indignantly.

There was a gust of laughter from the women.

'No,' said Perisi, 'but at least have the wisdom of one!'

Coming to another group, my companion remarked:

'Milk's the thing. In milk is the vitamin, the small creature of great strength that doesn't live in porridge.'

'Yoh!' said one woman, 'is it a sort of caterpillar?'

'No,' smiled the African girl, 'it is not a *dudu*, an insect. It is strength. A baby full of milk is stronger than a baby full of porridge. See,' said she, pointing with her chin towards a married woman who swung her own child into view of everybody, 'milk, and no porridge. Look at hers.' She pointed with her chin to a woman carrying a six-months-old infant who was wasted, and utterly miserable-looking, 'That child was fed on porridge from its birth.'

At this moment a junior nurse came out.

'Bwana, Mamvula's baby is being very sick.'

I went back into the ward. The baby was being violently ill. Mentally, I saw a red light. This was the sort of case that, at home, sent you hot-foot for a specialist. But here, in Tanganyika, there was only one doctor, and he was specialist, builder, transport commission, post office, physician, police force, plumber and jack-of-all-trades.

I made a careful examination of the child and decided that the only thing to do was to wait for twenty-four hours and watch. At the end of twelve I was sure that I had to perform a major operation that I had never attempted before on a three-day-old baby. This surgical procedure was one of those

finicky, dangerous sorts, when a slip meant death, and clumsiness might mean a life of ill-health.

After twenty-four hours I was certain that unless we operated, and did it quickly, there could be no hope. I sat in my office with a surgery manual before me, and checked over the operation, point by point. I had closed the book, when I heard a voice at the door.

'*Hodi, Bwana?*' There was the mother, wrapped in a sheet.

'Bwana, can you save him? *Yoh!* My heart is heavy. How I have longed for a living child, and now . . .' She put her head in her hands and wept.

I waited quietly until she was more composed. Then she looked up at the great book that I had reopened.

'Here,' I said, 'is a book that tells me how to help your child, how to relieve your baby of that thing that is killing him. See,' I pointed to a picture, 'it is as though he was being strangled inside.'

The mother nodded vaguely.

I reached over the surgery manual and pulled out a cheerful-looking little volume with a red cover. It was my hard-worked and well-worn Bible.

'Mamvula,' I said, 'this book I use more than the big one. It tells me how to get rid of the troubles of my soul, and of my spirit. It is the Word of God, and when you know the One who wrote it, you understand the meaning of His message to you. Listen!' I pointed to some words underlined. "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my right hand."

She nodded. 'So, Bwana, soon, when your knife and your iron tools are in your hand, you will know

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that you are not alone, but you have strength.' She nodded upwards.

We knelt down, and very simply I prayed, asking God for strength and skill to save the life of that wee scrap of African humanity.

Now midday is not an ideal time to operate anywhere, but in the scorching heat of Central Tanganyika the theatre was almost unbearable.

The operation was halfway through; the vital stage was reached. I pointed to a thick, tough area.

'There,' I said, 'is the trouble.' And turning to the Australian nurse: 'Sister, if I cut an eighth of an inch too deeply, it is all up; and if I do not cut deeply enough, the operation is futile.'

I took up the knife. There was a hush. Two minutes later, with a sigh of relief, I looked at a job which I knew would go well.

But our troubles were not over. The African lad giving the anaesthetic said:

'Bwana, he is not breathing.'

With my mouth to his mouth, a gauze swab separating our lips, I breathed into his lungs. I suppose it was only a minute, but it seemed like

an hour before the child coughed and started to breathe again. Hastily, I did all the sewing up necessary, and watched Perisi carry the baby back to the ward. Very quietly I said: 'Thank God, that's over,' and I meant it. I knew that I had not been working alone.

Daudi brought me back to the very day when he said:

'Bwana, your sewing is much better since you have begun to darn your own socks while you listen to the BBC news.'

I laughed, and putting on my topee went to the ward.

But trouble was still just around the corner. That evening, just after sunset, the child collapsed. A blood transfusion had to be given. The preliminaries were fixed up at an amazing rate – for Africa – and by the light of the hurricane lantern I watched the mother's blood run into the veins of her child. The little fellow responded almost at once.

Mamvula bent over him: 'Bwana, I'd give my life for this child.'

I nodded. 'Yes, I can see that.' And then, as I cut a square of sticking plaster: 'Mamvula, do you realize that God loves you like that? That He gave His life and died a criminal's death, to pay the price of your wrongdoing?'

She nodded her head. 'I am understanding it now, Bwana.'

She put out her hand and stroked the baby's arm. 'I think I understand it more clearly than ever, after today.'

Perisi looked at me and smiled.