

One morning I was shaving myself in the bathroom of our Dar es Salaam house, and as I lathered my face I was absent-mindedly gazing out of the window into the garden. I was watching Salimu, our shamba-boy, as he slowly and methodically raked the gravel on the front drive. Then I saw the snake. It was six feet long and thick as my arm and quite black. It was a mamba all right and there was no doubt that it had seen Salimu and was gliding fast over the gravel straight towards him.

I flung myself towards the open window and yelled in Swahili, 'Salimu! Salimu! Angalia nyoka kubwa! Nyuma wewe! Upesi upesi!', in other words, 'Salimu! Salimu! Beware huge snake! Behind you! Quickly quickly!'

The mamba was moving over the gravel at the speed of a running man and when Salimu turned and saw it, it could not have been more than fifteen paces away from him. There was nothing more I could do. There was not much Salimu could do either. He knew it was useless to run because a mamba at full speed could travel as fast as a galloping horse. And he certainly knew it was a mamba. Every native in Tanganyika knew what a mamba looked like and what to expect from it. It would reach him in another five seconds. I leant out of the window and held my breath. Salimu swung round and faced the snake. I saw

him go into a crouch. He crouched very low with one leg behind the other like a runner about to start a hundred yard sprint, and he was holding the long rake out in front of him. He raised it, but no higher than his shoulder, and he stood there for those long four or five seconds absolutely motionless, watching the great black deadly snake as it glided so quickly over the gravel towards him. Its small triangular snake's head was raised up in the air, and I could hear the soft rustling of the gravel as the body slid over the loose stones. I have the whole nightmarish picture of that scene still before my eyes – the morning sunshine on the garden, the massive baobab tree in the background, Salimu in his old khaki shorts and shirt and bare feet standing brave and absolutely still with the upraised rake in his hands, and to one side the long black snake gliding over the gravel straight towards him with its small poisonous head held high and ready to strike.

Salimu waited. He never moved or made a sound during the time it took the snake to reach him. He waited until the very last moment when the mamba was not more than five feet away and then *wham!* Salimu struck first. He brought the metal prongs of the rake down hard right on to the middle of the mamba's back and he held the rake there with all his weight, leaning forward now and jumping up and down to put more weight on the fork in an effort to pin the snake to the ground. I saw the blood spurt where the prongs had gone right into the snake's body and then I rushed downstairs absolutely naked, grabbing a golf club as I went through the hall, and outside on the drive Salimu was still there pressing with both hands on the rake and the great snake was writhing and twisting and throwing itself about, and I shouted to Salimu in Swahili, 'What shall I do?'

'It is all right now, bwana!' he shouted back. 'I have broken