

# STRONG MEDICINE

*There are some subjects too horrendous to talk about. But they are not too horrendous to write, or to read about. The chief character in this story was caught up by events which he could not handle. But for hundreds of people events such as these are commonplace. In Africa there is a substantial trade in children for use as black magic victims; an even larger trade for their use to provide good luck charms. A comparatively tiny number of Africans live in England, for instance. But recently Scotland Yard announced that it was currently unable to trace some 300 little African boys — from amongst those who had been brought to England quite legally. An unknown number more arrives after being smuggled in by phony aunts and uncles. It would not be unreasonable to suppose that the number of missing children in Africa itself is quite considerably higher. But we don't like to talk about it, do we? If they were white children being traded for their body parts we would never hear the last of it, would we?*



Samuti lay on his back, letting his eyes wander lazily above the rafters where the pitch of the roof was deep in shadow. Bunches of dried herbs hung among the cobwebs and darkened wisps of thatch that moved slightly as the smoke rose, like bats stirring in their sleep.

"Samuti! Samuti!"

He sat up quickly and swung his legs down from the couch. Earlier, he had been pounding some dried *mahobohobo*, and he seized the pestle again and rattled it in the mortar, so as not to seem idle.

"Come in."

He recognized a woman from a nearby village as she shuffled in respectfully on her knees. They clapped their hands softly in the traditional routine, with all the familiar polite inquiries. Samuti liked to keep up the old standards.

"And what can I do for you?"

Her husband, it seemed, was having a nasty bout of malaria, and she went on at some length about his symptoms.

He tut-tutted quietly. "Have you given him anything for it?"

"I took him home some *muwanga* leaves to chew."

He nodded approval. "It will help his headache, but it's not enough," he said. "The fever is in his blood. Just a moment ..."

Malaria was a common complaint, and he turned to his stock of gourds and earthen jars confidently. In Samuti's language the words for 'medicine' and 'tree' are the same. He liked to make sure that he was always well prepared by collecting ingredients from each tree or herb as it came into season.

"Spread your shawl on the floor," he said briskly.

She shook out the cloth and he arranged the dried herbs, explaining how she should mix and prepare them. She had a large family to feed, with no money coming in, so he charged her one chicken, to be delivered when her husband recovered. Samuti was not a greedy man.

No sooner had the woman left when he heard a vehicle pull up on the dirt road outside and two more visitors arrived. This time they were not so welcome, and they were not so polite either, for they carried a message from President Mupedza: "Come!"

This could mean trouble, but Samuti had no choice. He grabbed his jeweled headband, the symbol of his trade, threw his ceremonial cloak over his shoulders, and followed the men to the large off-roader parked outside. A two-hours drive brought them to the capital and Samuti was ushered into the presidential palace.

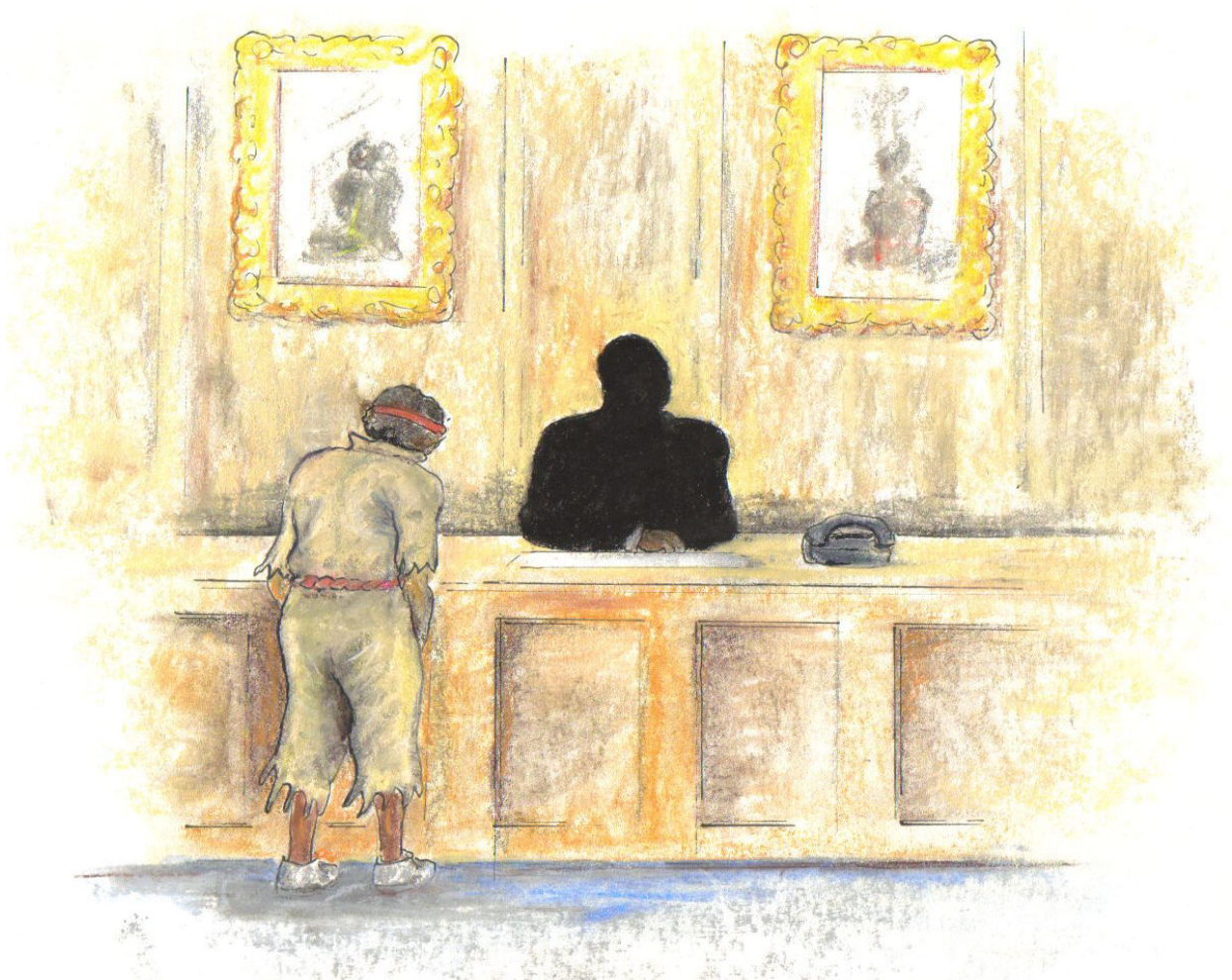
Mupedza as usual looked pleased with himself, and he beamed as he saw the herbalist approaching.

"Ah, Samuti! Come and stand here, next to me."

*"Mambo!"*

Mupedza gestured to his bodyguards. "You lot, go and amuse yourselves for five minutes while I talk to this gentleman!"

Alone with the president, Samuti stood with downcast eyes and trepidation in his heart. Whatever Mupedza wanted, it probably meant bad news for Samuti himself. Mupedza quickly got down to business.





"Listen, Samuti," he said. "I will not beat about the bush. I am an old man, and realize I cannot live forever. But I am also a powerful man: I have great power. It was I who put an end to white rule in this land. What could be more powerful than that? Okay, the whites still hold the balance of power in the world, despite the fact that most of them are disgusting homosexuals and paedophiles who should be put to death! But in this country, I am the one who holds the reins of power, and I want it to stay that way. That is why you are here, Samuti!"

The herbalist shifted uncomfortably, guessing what was coming next.

"Yes, I want to retain my power, both while I live and after I am dead. I want to be able to avenge myself on any who have given me trouble in the past. Above all, I must stay in power despite our democratic election process. Now I am asking you, as a wise man, to tell me how I can do that."

Samuti knew only too well that things would not go well with him if he refused the president's demand. Yes, of course he knew how the things he required could be brought about; but it meant great danger for himself.

"It will need strong medicine. The *mambo* will know that medicine such as this is very difficult to obtain."

"Tell me!"

"I am a herbalist, *mambo*." Samuti's tongue was still wary. "And the medicine the *mambo* needs is far stronger than anything a mere herbalist can provide ..."

"Why do you think I brought you here? Because I have heard about you, and we both know what you have done in the past, and what you can do now. You can command the spirits of medicine; and after all, Samuti, you have your own future to think about."

"Yes, I am familiar with the spirits of medicine. But these spirits are of different colours, as men are. The spirit that governs my medicine is a red spirit: the spirit of trees and herbs."

He touched the red gemstone on his headband. The sweat had gathered on his forehead and his touch set the headband dripping. He paused to mop his forehead and wipe the sweat out of his eyes.

"The kind of medicine that the *mambo* needs is governed by a black spirit," he continued. "It is not easy for me to command it."

Mupedza was watching him closely now. "Well, will you do it," he demanded impatiently. "Or do I need to make other arrangements?"

Samuti was in an impossible situation. Red medicine is of a finer, higher nature than black. To practice black magic would set his own destiny at risk. But if he refused ...

The president had grown impatient, and helped him to make up his mind. "Listen, Samuti," he said. "Everyone knows I do not think too kindly of opposition; either you are for me or against me, a friend or an enemy. However, I shall quite understand if you don't want to do it. Tell me now and I shall call my guards to escort you safely back home."

Samuti started to speak, but the president interrupted him. "Oh, by the way, do you have a son, Samuti?"

"Sadly, no," replied Samuti, knowing and fearing what he knew Mupedza was about to say.

"Well, I heard that your wife gave birth to twin boys a few years back, and you put them in a pot and buried them alive in the marsh?" There was a hint of amusement in the president's voice. "Can that be true?"

"We had to follow the custom of our tribe." Samuti felt drained.

"But, as you know, infanticide is a crime nowadays, tribal custom or no tribal custom. I wouldn't have mentioned it, but ..."

"I'll do it, of course," said Samuti hurriedly. "I shall work strong medicine that will make the president totally powerful, unchangeable, and vengeful even after death."

"Tell me about it."

"As always, there is a ceremony which we must follow. The *mambo* must drink a brew that I will prepare from the orifices of an innocent child, freshly killed. There is no stronger medicine than that."

"Then see to it."

As Samuti moved towards the door, the president called after him: "We shall hold the ceremony here, as soon as you have gathered all the things you need." He rang a bell to summon his bodyguard. "Waste no time. My guards will drive you home."

Samuti sat silent and withdrawn on the journey home. It was a task he dreaded, having to select a victim for Mupedza's ceremony. Horrendous at best, it was all the more dangerous being against the law — the law that the president himself enforced. He was at the mercy of Mupedza whatever he did, and he knew no

good would come of it.

The guard dropped him off in his village. "I shall call back for you this day next week," he said.

Left alone, Samuti lay on his couch worrying and trying to plan his course of action. The thought of running away entered his mind, but he dismissed the idea. Where would he go? What would he do? Who would dare provide him with shelter?

One thought came to his mind: Mupedza would not know what his potion contained. He could merely pretend to have obtained the correct ingredients. But the murder of a child would certainly be reported, and if there were no such report, his ruse would become obvious. It had to be done! There was no alternative but to turn his attention to the task in hand, and this was what he did.

It was essential for his own immediate safety, he decided, to obtain what he needed as far away from home as possible. He took his clubbed hatchet, and with heavy heart set off across the hills towards Nguni territory a few hours' walk away. There, he hoped, he would not be recognized.

Finding a likely spot near one of the villages he lay in wait among the bushes until a suitable child came along. With pounding heart he rushed out and clubbed the boy over the head before he could run or cry out, carried the body into thick bush, and began cutting out the parts he needed.

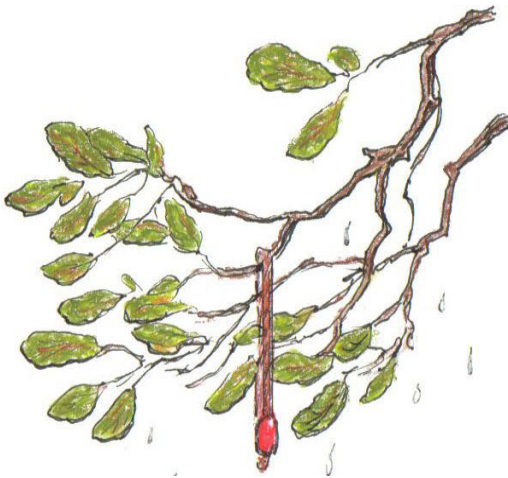
With lips and eyelids gone, the child seemed to stare at him through a mask of blood. Samuti tried to avoid those accusing eyes as he turned his attention to the other orifices. When all were cut out and wrapped in Samuti's pouch, the child moved his limbs and moaned. In a panic, the herbalist clubbed him over the head, again and again, and turned his face away from the scene.

Suddenly another child's voice called out shrilly from above the thicket, and Samuti jumped in alarm. A witness was something he could not afford, and he started towards the second child stealthily, but this one sensed his purpose and started to run, crying out. Samuti could have caught him, but they were in view of the village now, and he had no choice but to turn back. Gathering his hatchet and the pouch with its grisly contents, he began to run from the scene, crouching low like an animal, his head down.

In his flight, the low, tangled branches of a tree caught him round the throat, and in twisting free he all but dropped the pouch. It might take some time for the villagers to discover the dead child, but when they did they would be on his trail. He ran until he came in sight of his own village, then, trying to breathe normally, he walked as casually as he could to avoid suspicion.

As soon as he arrived home, Samuti began to prepare the medicine without delay. There were other non-human ingredients to assemble, and he gathered them carefully. Then as the brew bubbled in its pot on the fire he concentrated his thoughts on Mupedza, and began to conjure.

Any witchdoctor worth his salt knows when his conjuring has been successful, and Samuti knew that he was successful now. The dark side of his own nature, black and heavy enough to be almost tangible, had emerged and stood waiting. His victim, as intended, had been innocent of personal shadow, but he too had carried the weight of inheritance from his ancestors, and this dark shell joined his own, and strengthened its nature.



Samuti added metal to the brew — red iron ore enough, he hoped, to weigh the president into the earth. In Samuti's mental image of him, as he stirred the pot, Mupedza seemed to sink and submerge until his legs were out of sight.

The day before the president's men were due to call back, all was prepared. Samuti put down the pestle, the ladle and other implements, and fingered his neck, wondering vaguely why it was sore. Then he remembered the tree that had caught him round the throat,

chafing the skin. He remembered too what he had been too distraught to think about at the time — that it was a rain tree, *umcitamuzi*. Why, his own pestle was made from the yellow-grained wood of a rain tree. It was held in high respect and some awe by the local people, and not merely by the herbalists of his own tribe. This was the tree that, seemingly miraculously, drips copious raindrops at the hottest time of the year, just before the real rains arrive. To misuse or offend this tree is to risk sorrow, death, and the destruction of your family

Well, he had no family now. His wife had died of fever during the previous year's rains, and neither herbs nor conventional medicines, nor yet magic spells, could save her. The only people he could call family now were his apprentices in the herbal arts, three young men upon whom he could rely to assist when he was called upon to conduct a healing ceremony. Nobody knew more about herbal remedies than Samuti himself, but the three apprentices —Nguwa, Wurombe and Nderere — were learning fast.

Frowning with his thoughts, Samuti poured the magic mixture into a gourd and wrapped it in the traditional snakeskin and feathers. Then he went to make ready his ceremonial robe and head-dress.

It was only then that he missed his headband with its red gemstone. After a feverish search, he realized he must have lost it whilst fleeing from the Nguni village. He could think only of the rain tree, silent witness to his crime; that was where the headband must be. He knew that he had betrayed the red spirit of herbal medicine. He dared not return to the scene to look for the headband; he had no choice now but to carry on without it. Sadly, he went out to fetch his three assistants to give them their instructions for the following day.

In the morning the president's car arrived early, and Samuti, carrying his gourd, and the apprentices, carrying their drums and rattles, climbed in. Samuti was well aware that the living fetch that he had conjured the previous day was there too, invisible to the other occupants of the vehicle, though they might well have sensed its dark presence. Despite the worry of losing the incriminating headband, without the darkest side of his nature to weigh him down — though it could not stray far from him — he felt oddly light and unencumbered.

At the presidential palace Mupedza had already announced that he was holding a private gathering that day. His personal bodyguard and members of his household were banished to another part of the palace, and as Samuti and his assistants came in he locked the door behind them to ensure privacy. Then he ordered the ceremony to begin without delay.

The three apprentices set up their drums and began to beat out each his own separate rhythm. The black shape of the conjured fetch was much clearer and darker now, as it stood before the president, waiting. The three drummers could see it now, too, and they watched it with awe. Whether Mupedza could see it or not, they did not know, but he would have to accept it wholeheartedly before any part of it could enter into him. Samuti lifted the gourd in its nest of feathered snakeskin and held it aloft, dancing slowly to the triple rhythm of the drums.

Most magic ceremonies, it must be said, are aimed at driving away dark, heavy things. Honourable red medicine is intended chiefly for purging, cleansing. It is rare for herbalists to supply poison deliberately to do people harm. But this was black magic. Its purpose was not to repel but to attract influences that most people would call evil.

Samuti chanted as he danced, naming each ingredient in turn, calling their secret names, speaking aloud the occult functions, the going in and coming out, of each human orifice, the dark, hidden nature of the animal ingredients, along with the herbs and the metal ore which the brew contained.

"*Mambo* Mupedza, greatly respected and feared here and now in this life, be held in deepest dread for all eternity through this magic brew. Take this and drink it, and accept as your own this occult creature that stands before you awaiting your command, able to control and wreak vengeance on those who would



displease you."

As Mupedza took the gourd and drank greedily, that part of the fetch that was composed of all the characteristics the child would have inherited from his ancestors moved forward and took its place in his own dark soul. Samuti's mental image of the president seemed to sink lower and lower through the floor, through the ground beneath, until he thought he could see the fires which heated sulphureous springs, deep in the earth. But that part of the fetch which Samuti had conjured from his own being would not enter the president. Perhaps he himself was unwilling to let it go.

When the ceremony was over the president said: "Samuti, go now with your assistants. You will all be amply rewarded."

Samuti doubted that.. He doubted it very strongly indeed, and found himself hoping that Mupedza would discover that he had in fact paid very dearly for this ceremony. Full of occult strength, unchangeable and vengeful, he would certainly strike terror into men's hearts, as he often did now. But, after death at least, his vengeance would find no outlet as he toasted his toes forever in the sulphureous fires, deep below the surface of the earth.

Two presidential guards accompanied the herbalists in the vehicle. They dropped Samuti off at his house and, very obligingly, volunteered to take the three young apprentices home too, Samuti made himself a meal and was glad to get to bed that night. He knew that his own dark shadow had followed him home, and just before first light it entered him again. Strangely enough he welcomed it, though he had previously wished it gone.

The morning was still young when he was visited by a delegation of women, wives and mothers.

"You are back home, Samuti. But where is Nguwa?"

"And Wurombe, has my son got back safely?"

"And Nderere, where is he? We expected him last night."

Samuti's heart sank, suspecting the worst, guessing what had happened to the three young men. He knew now what his own fate would be. Unable to help, he could offer no words of reassurance to the anxious womenfolk.

Later that day, a neighbour called with the news. Apparently the three men had, quite inexplicably, left the president's luxury vehicle and driven off in an ancient Land Rover, which then met with an appalling accident. It had left the road and fallen into a ravine, shattering on the rocks in the *gwasha* below, and killing all three occupants.

Samuti had only one thought now — to leave everything behind and run away as far as he could get; leave the country, even. He began to sort feverishly through his belongings, bundling up anything he might need to help him survive. But it was too late.

A police vehicle drew up outside. They had indeed wasted no time. Samuti was still clutching his bundle when the inspector walked in followed by his constables.

"Were you thinking of going somewhere, Samuti?"

Samuti dropped the bundle and pretended to laugh. "Why no ..."

"Well, don't worry. We only came to return some lost property."

He produced Samuti's headband with its red stone, and held it out mockingly.



Samuti made as if to take the headband, then, casting reason aside, he seized his chance and dashed through the doorway, shouldering past the men and running fast up the hill. He did not get very far. As he lay on the grass with the inspector's bullet in him, he heard the man say:

"Resisting arrest, eh? That was foolish of you, Samuti."

Samuti was aware of his own dark fetch standing beside him on the hillside, watching him die.

