

NONA FREEMAN

UNSEEN
HANDS

Unseen Hands

by Nona Freeman

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Time and Again

“Swimmer! Call a swimmer! A boy is drowning in the river!” The woman ran toward the village yelling at the top of her voice. Then hurrying back to the river with the man who responded to her call for help, she explained what had happened.

“While I was doing my wash, I saw Tekle herding his father’s cattle near the flooded river bank. Suddenly, a strange man grabbed him and flung him into the rolling waters and ran away. Oh, sir, can you save him?”

“I’ll try,” he answered as he tossed his clothes on the sand and plunged into the water.

Word of the happening swept the village, and an anxious crowd gathered on the bank. Just when they gave up hope and thought the raging river had claimed both lives, the swimmer crawled out with the ten-year-old slung over his shoulder and dropped him at their feet.

“Sorry,” he panted, spewing water. “Too late—took so long to find him.” He sprawled exhausted on the sand. Neighbors and family formed a silent circle around the

lad's lifeless body. As they stood numbed by shock, a choking gasp brought hope.

"He's alive!" they shouted in glad surprise, and lifting his arms they pounded him on the back. "Look! He lives!"

Two years later Tekle climbed a sycamore tree to pick nuts. He saw the best ones in thick array at the very top of the tree. He climbed higher and higher. Suddenly, the branch he stood on snapped, plummeting him to the rocky ground far below. He lay unconscious for half an hour before he revived with a painful souvenir of his fall—a broken nose.

The same year, village leaders sent him to the summit of a nearby hill to crack a whip loudly, which (according to their custom) signaled the beginning of a festive occasion. As he snapped the whip with all of his might, it curled around a tree stump, causing him to lose his balance and fall on the stump. A dead branch of two fingers width pierced his stomach. Villagers heard his screams and carried him down the incline to his parents' hut.

Without a doctor or clinic available, they helplessly listened to his groans as he lay on a grass mat. When his father finally decided to pull the six-inch-long stick from his abdomen, he found that fatty tissue had prevented intestinal rupture. The wound slowly healed.

Not long after, in 1951, a devastating epidemic of typhoid swept the district. Tekle's mother nursed him through four months of acute illness. When he had partially recovered, she, along with several members of the family, was stricken with the disease. Now Tekle took his turn caring for those too ill to fend for themselves.

One day when he went for firewood to cook oatmeal, a hyena attacked him. He beat it off, but the slant-backed creature furiously charged him again. This time a flood of weakness engulfed him, and he could only huddle trembling on the grass. The hyena circled him, sniffing several times, before it trotted away.

The total absence of medical help cost the lives of ninety percent of the villagers. The remaining ill and dying could not bury their dead. Tekle decided that if he could move his ailing family to a higher elevation on the mountainside, away from the putrid air, they might survive.

The fourteen-year-old fashioned a crude hut of leafy branches, and with considerable effort he half carried, half dragged his patients to this shelter. By the time the repulsive hyenas found them, some of the men had recovered enough to cut poles for a more substantial abode. Though weakness prevented the men from plastering the gaps with mud as they usually did, the hyenas could do nothing more than stick their repugnant snouts through the cracks and sniff. Only one child died after they moved to the mountain.

Because of contaminated water and no crops in their village, the family moved to another district. The joy of the first harvest on their new farm turned to consternation when Tekle screamed. As he sat on a rock and held a small child, an extremely poisonous snake crawled behind him and bit him on the hip. His uncle hurried to his aid and with a sharp blade cut out the affected flesh. Gushing blood carried the venom out of his system.

While recovering, Tekle and a friend played with a machine gun that he had found in his uncle's house. They thought the bullets had been used and tossed them into