

The Lost Cow

Keyangak sat on his low camp bed under the African night sky. The stars shone so brightly that he could see his friend Ewoi lying beside him in the sand with his head supported on a little wooden stool and his main garment - an old sheet - tied over one shoulder and thrust aside to bare his chest to the warm air. They had eaten rather a lot of roasted goat meat and washed it down with sweet tea.

Keyangak listened to the sounds of Ewoi cleaning his teeth with a stick from the tooth-brush tree. The scraping noise stopped. Keyangak asked a question which had



puzzled him for a long time. He said, “Ewoi, I want to know how your people came to live in this hot, desert land and why they called themselves by such a strange name. Please tell me.”

Ewoi lay quietly for a few moments. “I’ve heard different stories, and I don’t know which is true. But this is the way I think it happened. One evening a young boy - let’s call him Esunyun - approached his home just as the stars began to appear. All day he had helped his two older brothers herd his father’s cattle. Normally they returned to the village as the sun set, but today they had experienced trouble. They had lost a cow. Esunyun’s stomach twitched with fear as he thought of his father’s anger. He said to himself, ‘Maybe Father will blame me because I’m small and like to play a lot’.



He could dimly see his father seated on his stool as he and his brothers directed the animals into the shelter of a thick wall of thorn branches which protected them from leopards, jackals and even a lion. His mother and sisters moved in among the cows to begin milking. Then he heard his father's angry voice calling, 'You boys come here.' Trembling, Esunyun obeyed.

The old man bellowed at them like a bull, 'A cow is missing. It's White-Eye. Now go and look for her.'

After a drink of warm, fresh milk Esunyun and his brothers set off. The stars shone so brightly that they could just see where the hoofs of the herd had stirred up the sand. But when they arrived at the place where the cows had scattered in search of grass, there was no sign of White-Eye. They built a fire and lay down in the soft sand. Esunyun thought sadly about the lost red cow. He heard a hyena cackle close-by and shuddered as he thought of this fierce creature, like a big dog, hunting stray animals. He knew the fire would keep wild beasts



away from himself and his brothers; but what would protect White-Eye?

At the first glimmer of daylight they started searching for a set of hoof-marks going off alone into the bushes. Quick eyes soon picked up the tracks. They climbed down and down until they reached a sandy plain. Still the tracks led them on.

The sun rose with scorching heat. In the distance tall trees marked a river-bed winding across the dry land. When they reached it they longed for water to quench their thirst but the river-bed was as dry as the desert all around. The tracks marched in a line along the sandy river.

They struggled on until the sun stood high in the sky and their throats ached with dryness. Going round a bend, the hoof-marks suddenly wandered off to the bank, where branches of a tree swept low over the sand. Deep in the shade Esunyun saw a movement. 'Enemies,' he whispered. They halted and raised their spears.

Suddenly a woman laughed. 'You idiots,' she called out in their own language; 'when were young men like you afraid of an old woman? Come here and get something to drink.' Now they saw a small well dug in the sand close to the bank. The old lady came out from the shade with a wooden bowl in her hands. They could tell from the way she dressed that she belonged to their own tribe and they relaxed. Gracefully pulling her goat-skin skirt around her she climbed down into the well and handed them up a drink of clear, cool water.

'Now come with me,' she commanded. She led them through some bushes to a rocky hillside. Passing a small tree they suddenly saw the entrance to a cave. Esunyun ducked to get through the low entrance. Inside, the cave seemed no different from his mother's hut back in the hills. A few kitchen implements made from leather and

wood hung from pegs in the rocky walls and a folded cowhide showed where the old lady slept. 'Sit down and drink some milk,' she said.

As they passed the huge mug from hand to hand she told her story. 'I once lived in the hills like you,' she began. 'A great drought struck the land. First our cattle died. Then my family followed until only I remained. I came to this river looking for food. I found plenty of berries on the trees. And here, close to my cave, I can always get water by digging in the sand.' She paused with a naughty smile on her face (because she had already guessed why the youths had come) and added, 'Now see what God brought me last night.' She took them into another cave and there stood White-Eye.

Esunyun flung his arms around the cow's neck and said, 'I thought that milk tasted specially good.'"

Ewoi stopped his tale, plucked his toothbrush from behind his ear where he kept it between meals and started scraping again inside his mouth. Keyangak said nothing, waiting to see if the story might continue.

Sure enough Ewoi replaced the brush and went on, "When they got home their Dad saw White-Eye and his anger faded. A few days later he called all the family heads together. They met under the special Tree of the Elders. Some sat on their wooden stools; others just lolled around on the ground. The really old men spoke first. Everyone listened respectfully even if they had little to say. Then the Father of Esunyun stood up and greeted his fellow elders. 'I want you to hear these lads,' he said. 'They went to seek my lost cow. As well as finding the animal, they also discovered an old woman. I think that lady has a lesson for us.'

After Esunyun's brothers had told their story, Father of Esunyun spoke again: 'We have too many people living here in these hills. God has given us many cows. They can no

longer find enough grass. I think we should allow some of our young men to move to the river where my sons found our cow and make their homes in those caves.”

Ewoi paused. Keyangak heard the tooth brush scrape again. “You know,” Ewoi went on; “our word for cave is ‘turkana’. Because our fathers dwelt in caves long ago, people call us ‘the Cave People - the Turkana.’”

Keyangak lay down beneath a net he had hung over his bed to keep out mosquitos but sleep did not come quickly. He thought of the Lord Jesus who left his home on a dangerous journey, not to rescue a valuable cow but to save people who are much more precious. As he listened to the buzz of the thirsty insects flying around his net a verse came into his mind, “The Son of Man [another name for Jesus] came to look for and to save people who are lost.” (Luke 19:10) As he closed his eyes he murmured, “Thank you Lord for finding me. Help me to look for others who feel lost and to bring them to you.”

