

Lemayan's Safe, Warm World

'Help! Lemayan! Come here quickly! Come and hold this lamb for me,' an old woman called to her grandson urgently. Lemayan rushed to her rescue, snatched up the wriggling lamb and cuddled it in his arms, feeling very important, while his granny triumphantly filled her mug with frothy milk from the mother of the lamb. The trouble had been that the lamb and granny had been competing for milk from the same ewe at the same time!

It was 'the time of the buffalo,' as the Maasai call that part of the early morning when the first light of dawn streaks the sky. Life was beginning to wake in the homestead as people emerged one by one from their low houses, and the cattle, goats and sheep stirred in their thorn-branch enclosures.

Earlier, Lemayan had slithered off the cow-skin that was the communal bed for the small children of the family, fumbled for his stick and hurried outside. The stick was important. It was his identity. Girls never carried sticks. But all boys had them because they were the herders, those who cared for the livestock. Girls helped their mothers with the milking. They had their uses. But he was a boy. Small as he was, he must be careful always to carry his stick, even though he had as yet no use for it. He shivered and pulled

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the crumpled cloth, his scanty clothing, tighter around him. Inside the house it was still dark and quiet and stuffy-warm, but outside the air was fresh and a new day was about to start.

He had stood quietly, hugging himself in the cold, as he watched his mother bend, gourd in hand, to milk the first cow of this morning. That done, she straightened up and solemnly poured a little milk into the pointed skin cap that was the lid of the gourd. All the girls out to help with the morning milking, paused to watch her. She splashed the milk in the lid, up towards the sky and prayed. Looking up at the morning star she called out in a clear voice:

'You, who rises yonder, I pray to you, hear me.
Keep my cattle safe. Take care of our people.
Bless this home.'

Then the milking began in earnest. The smaller girls held back the calves, lambs and kids, so that the big girls and mothers could quickly fill the milk gourds before the desperate baby animals had their share.

Five years old now, Lemayan was awakening to the magic of the early mornings when the animals started stirring and the big folk began the daily bustle. Everyone had a job. Everyone except him! They said he was too small. Everyone else knew exactly what to do, what his place in the life of the village was. But he just darted around, getting in everyone's way, hoping they'd include him somehow in the busyness.

Now, with granny's summons, Lemayan's heart swelled with pride. He was needed! He had a job! He had a part in the care of these beautiful animals. She had trusted him! She had needed him to help

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her! He held the soft, silky squirming lamb firmly, but oh, so gently. He poured all the love of his little heart into that warm, fragrant scrap of life. Having finished taking her share of the milk from the ewe, his granny called to Lemayan to release the lamb, which then scampered away to its breakfast on wobbly legs. Lemayan gazed with pride at this greedy lamb – tail flicking, head butting its mother to ensure a good flow of milk. Satisfied, the lamb staggered off and Lemayan strolled about trying to get in the way of another job.

On that day his love for the home animals was born – cattle, goats and sheep, the pride of all true Maasai. He loved the sight, the feel and the smell of the cattle, and even of the goats. That smell was home, security and the whole of his life – he was a Maasai! He was a boy! One day he would be an 'olmorani,' one of those proud handsome glorious warriors, lords of creation! His cup was full. His name meant 'blessing' and truly he was a blessed one!

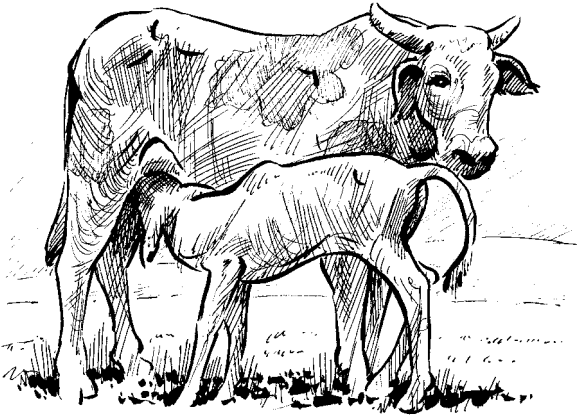
As the months went on he was given more and more jobs to match his eagerness. Other boys of his age were content to play around but Lemayan was happiest when sharing in a small way, the work with the cattle. He delighted in identifying the calf of a cow being milked, then quickly leading it to get its share of the milk from two teats while the woman stripped the other two. His mother wanted milk for the family but he knew that father was proud of his eager son who, so young, had recognised the supreme importance of the calves – the future of their herd.

'Lemayan lai,' his father called to him one wonderful day, 'drive these calves outside and

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tether them in the shade of the 'oltepesi' – a nearby acacia tree. Lemayan nearly burst with importance. His father had asked him, him alone, without a bigger boy to take the credit. He drove the calves proudly, making all the whistling, encouraging noises required to keep them together, and tethered them in the shade to rest. His little fingers knotted the stiff rawhide straps carefully just as he had seen his elders do. The calves were happy, their tummies satisfied. Their mothers would go far off to graze but the calves had to await their return.

When the calves were safely tied up, then came playtime. Sometimes they played 'raiding'. Each boy had a number of marked stones as his 'cattle'. Which they tried to steal from each other, while still faithfully protecting their own. They dreamed



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of the future when they would be warriors and go on glorious raids on the other tribes and drive home the booty. Lemayan, usually the youngest of the herders, lost most of his 'cattle'.

But when they played 'riddles' Lemayan often shone. He was a clever boy and when once he had heard a riddle he remembered it. He gained the respect of bigger boys as quite often he caught them out with riddles they couldn't answer but he seldom got caught out himself. This game became uproarious as they laughed at each other's attempts at answers, at the double meaning of the riddle and at the hidden humour.

'Life is good,' thought Lemayan. 'It must go on like this for ever.' Herding, playing, learning, growing – preparing for the life of a warrior, and eventually an elder, a respected man of his tribe.

'Father, please don't ever send me away to school,' asked Lemayan one day. 'I want to stay with you, and with our cattle always.' Thus he voiced his greatest fear to his father. Now six years old, he had recently lost the first of his baby teeth – the age when some boys were sent far away to school, into another life.

'My son,' his father smiled at him reassuringly, 'I will certainly not waste such a good herdsman as you on school. Let lazy boys go to school, disobedient boys, crippled ones or stupid. I'll keep you with me. You are skilled and precious to me.' So he built up a reputation for himself as a true Maasai, one who loved and valued what God had given to his people. He would never be sent to school. When the chief was required by the government to fill his quota of boys for school, he would always be overlooked. He was safe!

