



CHURA AND MARWE

an African folktale as told by Humphrey Harman

Far to the east there is a great mountain, whose top is lacquered with silver every month of the year. Upon the slopes of this once lived a boy and a girl. He was called Chura and she Marwe and they were slave children, got cheap and kept by a household of the Chagga people to watch crops and herd goats.

Now Chura had a face like a toad's and Marwe was so beautiful that when people saw them together they exclaimed, "Eh! How is it that God could make two so different?"

That, however, was not how Marwe saw it. Chura was her companion and the only one she had. They loved each other dearly, were happy together and only when they were together, for they had little else to be happy about.

One day they were sent to watch a field and keep the monkeys from eating the beans. The place was on the lower slopes of the mountain, a clearing in the forest, and there all day the children sat beating a pot with a stick whenever they heard a monkey chatter thievishly behind the wall of leaves. Hemmed in with tall trees, the field was airless and hot, and by late afternoon they could stand their thirst no longer. They slipped off to where a stream, cold from the snows above, fell noisily down a cliff into a pool. The water there was deep and upon its dark surface one leaf floated in a circle all day.

lacquered: coated with a glossy finish
thievishly: in a thief-like way; sneakily
hemmed in: surrounded by

Here they drank hastily, washed the tiredness from their faces, then ran back to the field. Alas, in the little time they had been away the monkeys had stripped it.

Marwe wept and Chura stared at the plundered bean plants with a bleak face. The folk they worked for were harsh and the children knew they would be beaten. Chura tried to comfort his friend, but there was little of that he could give her and at last, in despair, she ran into the forest. Chura followed, calling for her to stop, and was just in time to see her throw herself into the pool where, at once, she sank from sight.

Chura could not swim and he knew the pool to be deep. He ran round the edge calling, but it was no use. The dark water quietened, the leaf again circled placidly, and Marwe was gone.

Chura went back to the household and told those who owned him of the loss of Marwe and the crop. They followed him to the pool, where nothing was to be seen, and then to the field, where the sight of ruined plants made them angry. They beat Chura, and some days later, grieving for Marwe and tired of ill-treatment, he ran away and the Chagga never saw him again.

Soon another pair of children watched the crops or herded goats, and whether they found life better than Chura and Marwe had is unknown.

When Marwe flung herself into the pool she sank slowly through water which changed from bright light of noon to

plundered: stolen; taken by force
bleak: gloomy; without hope
placidly: calmly



the deep blue of late evening and finally to the darkness of a night with neither moon nor stars. And there she stepped out into the Underworld, shook water from her hair and wandered, chilled to the heart by the grayness of the place.

Presently she came to a hut on the slope of a hill, with an old woman outside preparing supper for the small children playing on the swept earth at her feet. Beyond the hut, just where the hill curved over and away, was a village that seemed as if it had just been built, for the logs of the stockade were white as if the bark had been stripped from them that day and the thatch of the houses was new-dried and trim.

The old woman asked Marwe where she was going, and Marwe replied timidly that she was a stranger and alone and wanted to go to the village she saw above, to ask for food and perhaps work so that she could live her life.

"It's not yet time to go there," said the woman. "Stay with me and work here. You'll not go hungry or lack a place by the fire if you do so."

So Marwe accepted this offer and lived with the old woman. She cared for the children, fetched water from the stream, and weeded a garden. Her new mistress was kind and so life for Marwe went on without hardship.

Only sometimes she pined for the sunlight and birdsong of the world above, for here it was never anything but gray. And always she longed for Chura.

And now let us follow what happened to him.

He drifted from village to village of the Chagga, asking for food and work but, because of his ugliness, no one would take him in. Food they offered hastily and then they told him

stockade: a line of posts surrounding a village

pined: yearned; longed for

uneasily to go. It seemed to men and even more to women that such an ill-favored face must have been earned by great evil and could only bring with it worse luck. So, wandering from hamlet to village, gradually inching his way round the mountain, he was fed by unwilling charity or, more often, by what small game he could kill or field he could rob. As the years passed he grew strong and hard but no better looking.

One day he left the forest and the tall grass of the foothills and walked north into the sun-bitten plain. Here the trees were bleached and shrunken, standing wide apart, their thin leaves throwing little shade. Between them the ants built red towers and covered every dead leaf or stick with a crust of dry earth.

A juiceless land where grass was scarce and water more so, and here lived the Masai.

They are a people who greatly love three things: children, cattle, and war. Standing like storks upon one leg, holding spears with blades long as an arm, and shields blazing with color, they guarded their cattle and looked with amused indifference upon the lives of other men.

They found Chura wandering and thirsty, carelessly decided not to kill him, and made him a servant. At his ugliness they only laughed.

"What's it to us if you look like a toad?" they shouted. "All men other than Masai are animals anyway. And usually look like them."

So Chura milked cows, mended cattle fences, and made himself useful until one night a lion attacked the calves. Then he took a spear from a hut and went out and killed it.

hamlet: a small town or village

indifference: the state of being unconcerned, of not caring one way or another

"Wah!" said the Masai when they came running and found Chura with the great beast dead at his feet. "Alone and without a shield! This is a new light you show yourself in. Well, you weren't born Masai, though plainly some mistake's been made by the gods over that. Somewhere within you there must be a Masai of sorts, otherwise you couldn't have done this. We'll accept you for one."

So they gave him the spear he had borrowed, and a shield whose weight made him stagger. When the lion's skin had been cured they made from it a headdress that framed Chura's face in a circle of long tawny hair and added two feet to his height.

"There, now you look almost human," they said. "Only something must be done about that name of yours. It means *toad* and no Masai could live with it."

"Well then, what am I to be called?" asked Chura.

"Hm. Punda Malia (Donkey)?" suggested one.

"No, no, Kifaru (Rhino)," said another.

"What about Nguruwe (Pig)?" threw in another.

"If you can't be civil..." began Chura, taking a firm grip on his spear.

"Heh! Keep your temper, Brother. We mean no harm. Now, what can your name be?"

They spent a happy evening making suggestions and falling about with laughter at their own wit. But finally they pulled themselves together and found for Chura a name which seemed to them far more suitable than the one he had brought with him.

When Marwe had lived for a number of years in the Underworld and grown to be as beautiful a woman as she

civil: polite; courteous

had been a child, she became homesick. The old woman noticed her sadness and asked what caused it. Marwe hesitated, because she did not want to seem ungrateful for the kindness that had been given to her but, in the end, she said that she pined to go back to her own world. The old woman was not offended.

"Ah," she said, "then it's time you went to the village. In this matter I can't help, but they may."

Next day Marwe climbed the hill and waited at the village gate. When she had sat there for some time a number of old men came out. They were dressed in cotton robes that shone through the gloom about, and they greeted her and asked what she wanted. Marwe replied that she wished to return to the world above.

"Hm," they said. "We'll see, yes, we'll see."

Then one who seemed the most important among them asked, "Child, which would you sooner have, the warm or the cold?"

The question bewildered Marwe. "I don't understand," she replied.

Shadows seemed to cross their faces and their voices grew fainter. "That's nothing to us," they said. "You've heard our question and we can do nothing unless you answer. Which would you prefer, the warm or the cold?"

Marwe understood that this was a test which it must be important for her to consider with care.

"Warmth ... or cold?" she pondered. "Well, everyone would sooner have warmth than cold because cold is bitter and difficult to endure, while warmth is life itself. Yet surely their riddle can't be as easy as that."

When she had thought again, as deeply as she could, it seemed that if the choice was between what is usually thought to be good and bad, her life pointed the other way.

"For," said she, "Chura was ugly and unwanted, yet he was kind and I loved him. And the Underworld is feared by everyone, yet here I've met greater kindness than I ever knew in the sunlit world above."

And she made up her mind and said, "No matter what others believe, I'll trust my own wisdom and choose the cold."

The old men listened to her answer with faces from which she could read nothing, and they offered her two pots. From the mouth of one rose steam, while the other sent out a chill that struck to the bone of a hand brought near it.

"Choose as you've chosen," they urged her and so, faithful to her own belief, she dipped a hand into the cold pot and brought it out covered to the elbow with richly-made bracelets.

"Don't hesitate to take more," they urged her. "Neither we nor the pots will be offended."

So she reached in her other arm and in turn both her feet, and came out heavy with bangles and anklets, heavy precious things made from copper and gold, ornaments worth more than the tribute of a whole tribe.

The old men smiled and told her that she had chosen well and been wise. And still they loaded her with treasures, necklaces of shell, rings, and eardrops. They brought her a fine kilt worked all over with gold wire and beads that glowed blue as the skies she remembered from the world above.

"Now," they said, "we've one more gift: a piece of advice. When you are back in your own world you'll wish in time to

tribute: a payment, usually from one ruler or nation to another, for protection or service

kilt: a knee-length skirt

marry and there'll be no shortage of those who'll ask for you. Go softly, don't hasten. Wait for someone with the name of Simba to ask, and choose him."

Then, gathering their robes clear of their feet, the old ones led her to the pool. Gently they urged her in and she rose like a thought until she broke the sunlit surface, where the leaf still circled and birds sang in the trees about.

She left the water, sat upon the bank with the light dancing on her finery, and waited for the world to find her.

And very soon it did.

News spread that beside a pool in the forest sat a woman, rich and of amazing beauty, waiting for a husband. They flocked to her with offers, handsome young men, rich landowners, daring hunters, great warriors, even powerful chiefs. And all singing much the same tune, "Here's fame or wealth or power or glory or beauty or... if only you'll marry me!"

She pointed at each one of them the same sharp little question, "What's your name?"

"Name! Why, it's Nyati or Mamba or Tembo or Ndovu or..." and so on. No end of names and at all she shook her head and replied, "I'm sorry, but that will not be the name of my husband."

Now the news flew even as far as the plain, down where the cattle trudge through the dust, the lion hunts, and the vulture sits upon the thorn. At last it reached Chura, and at once he took spear and shield and came tirelessly running and his heart singing, "Marwe's back from the Underworld and I'll see her!"

finery: fancy clothing and jewelry

When he came to where she sat beside her pool and cried "Marwe!" she recognized his ugliness even framed as it was by a lion's mane. Part of her laughed and the rest wept.

"Oh, Chura," she cried. "Why is life so unkind? I shall never love anyone but you, yet my fate says that we can't marry."

"Then who can you marry?" he demanded.

"Only a man named Simba."

"But that's my name," he roared. "Simba! Lion! The Masai named me that when I killed a lion."

So, of course, they were married. What was there to stop them? It would have been striking fate across the face not to marry. But everyone marveled that so beautiful a woman should choose so ugly a husband.

They paid no attention to them and—it's a strange thing and scarcely to be believed—but, do you know, the moment they were married something happened to his ugly toad's face and he became good to look at.

Well, passable.

So they say.

I don't imagine for one moment that Marwe cared either way.