

# *The Ape, the Snake, and the Lion*

Zanzibar Tales

African

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*Intermediate*

*10 min read*

Long, long ago there lived, in a village called Keejee'jee, a woman whose husband died, leaving her with a little baby boy. She worked hard all day to get food for herself and child, but they lived very poorly and were most of the time half-starved.

When the boy, whose name was 'Mvoo' Laa'na, began to get big, he said to his mother, one day: "Mother, we are always hungry. What work did my father do to support us?"

His mother replied: "Your father was a hunter. He set traps, and we ate what he caught in them."

"Oho!" said 'Mvoo Laana; "that's not work; that's fun. I, too, will set traps, and see if we can't get enough to eat."

The next day he went into the forest and cut branches from the trees, and returned home in the evening.

The second day he spent making the branches into traps.

The third day he twisted coconut fiber into ropes.

The fourth day he set up as many traps as time would permit.

The fifth day he set up the remainder of the traps.

The sixth day he went to examine the traps, and they had caught so much game, beside what they needed for themselves, that he took a great quantity to the big town of Oongoo'ja, where he sold it and bought corn and other things, and the house was full of food; and, as this good fortune continued, he and his mother lived very comfortably.

But after a while, when he went to his traps he found nothing in them day after day.

One morning, however, he found that an ape had been caught in one of the traps, and he was about to kill it, when it said: "Son of Adam, I am Neea'nee, the ape; do not kill me. Take me out of this trap and let me go. Save me from the rain, that I may come and save you from the sun some day."

So 'Mvoo Laana took him out of the trap and let him go.

When Neeanee had climbed up in a tree, he sat on a branch and said to the youth: "For your kindness I will give you a piece of advice: Believe me, men are all bad. Never do a good turn for a man; if you do, he will do you harm at the first opportunity."

The second day, 'Mvoo Laana found a snake in the same trap. He started to the village to give the alarm, but the snake shouted: "Come back, son of Adam; don't call the people from the village to come and kill me. I am Neeo'ka, the snake. Let me out of this trap, I pray you. Save me from the rain to-day, that I may be able to save you from the sun to-morrow, if you should be in need of help."

So the youth let him go; and as he went he said, "I will return your kindness if I can, but do not trust any man; if you do him a kindness he will do you an injury in return at the first opportunity."

The third day, 'Mvoo Laana found a lion in the same trap that had caught the ape and the snake, and he was afraid to go near it. But the lion said: "Don't run away; I am Sim'ba Kong'way, the very old lion. Let me out of this trap, and I will not hurt you. Save me from the rain, that I may save you from the sun if you should need help."

So 'Mvoo Laana believed him and let him out of the trap, and Simba Kongway, before going his way, said: "Son

of Adam, you have been kind to me, and I will repay you with kindness if I can; but never do a kindness to a man, or he will pay you back with unkindness.”

The next day a man was caught in the same trap, and when the youth released him, he repeatedly assured him that he would never forget the service he had done him in restoring his liberty and saving his life.

Well, it seemed that he had caught all the game that could be taken in traps, and 'Mvoo Laana and his mother were hungry every day, with nothing to satisfy them, as they had been before. At last he said to his mother, one day: “Mother, make me seven cakes of the little meal we have left, and I will go hunting with my bow and arrows.” So she baked him the cakes, and he took them and his bow and arrows and went into the forest.

The youth walked and walked, but could see no game, and finally he found that he had lost his way, and had eaten all his cakes but one.

And he went on and on, not knowing whether he was going away from his home or toward it, until he came to the wildest and most desolate looking wood he had ever seen. He was so wretched and tired that he felt he must lie down and die, when suddenly he heard some one calling him, and looking up he saw Neeanee, the ape, who said, “Son of Adam, where are you going?”

“I don't know,” replied 'Mvoo Laana, sadly; “I'm lost.”

“Well, well,” said the ape; “don't worry. Just sit down here and rest yourself until I come back, and I will repay with kindness the kindness you once showed me.”

Then Neeanee went away off to some gardens and stole a whole lot of ripe paw-paws and bananas, and brought them to 'Mvoo Laana, and said: “Here's plenty of food for you. Is there anything else you want? Would you like a drink?” And before the youth could answer he ran off with a calabash and brought it back full of water. So the youth ate heartily, and drank all the water he needed, and then each said to the other, “Good-bye, till we meet again,” and went their separate ways.

When 'Mvoo Laana had walked a great deal farther without finding which way he should go, he met Simba Kongway, who asked, “Where are you going, son of Adam?”

And the youth answered, as dolefully as before, “I don't know; I'm lost.”

“Come, cheer up,” said the very old lion, “and rest yourself here a little. I want to repay with kindness to-day

the kindness you showed me on a former day.”

So 'Mvoo Laana sat down. Simba Kongway went away, but soon returned with some game he had caught, and then he brought some fire, and the young man cooked the game and ate it. When he had finished he felt a great deal better, and they bade each other good-bye for the present, and each went his way.

After he had traveled another very long distance the youth came to a farm, and was met by a very, very old woman, who said to him: “Stranger, my husband has been taken very sick, and I am looking for some one to make him some medicine. Won't you make it?” But he answered: “My good woman, I am not a doctor, I am a hunter, and never used medicine in my life. I can not help you.”

When he came to the road leading to the principal city he saw a well, with a bucket standing near it, and he said to himself: “That's just what I want. I'll take a drink of nice well-water. Let me see if the water can be reached.”

As he peeped over the edge of the well, to see if the water was high enough, what should he behold but a great big snake, which, directly it saw him, said, “Son of Adam, wait a moment.” Then it came out of the well and said: “How? Don't you know me?”

“I certainly do not,” said the youth, stepping back a little.

“Well, well!” said the snake; “I could never forget you. I am Neeoka, whom you released from the trap. You know I said, ‘Save me from the rain, and I will save you from the sun.’ Now, you are a stranger in the town to which you are going; therefore hand me your little bag, and I will place in it the things that will be of use to you when you arrive there.”

So 'Mvoo Laana gave Neeoka the little bag, and he filled it with chains of gold and silver, and told him to use them freely for his own benefit. Then they parted very cordially.

When the youth reached the city, the first man he met was he whom he had released from the trap, who invited him to go home with him, which he did, and the man's wife made him supper.

As soon as he could get away unobserved, the man went to the sultan and said: “There is a stranger come to my house with a bag full of chains of silver and gold, which he says he got from a snake that lives in a well. But although he pretends to be a man, I know that he is a snake who has power to look like a man.”

When the sultan heard this he sent some soldiers who brought 'Mvoo Laana and his little bag before him.

When they opened the little bag, the man who was released from the trap persuaded the people that some evil would come out of it, and affect the children of the sultan and the children of the vizir.

Then the people became excited, and tied the hands of 'Mvoo Laana behind him.

But the great snake had come out of the well and arrived at the town just about this time, and he went and lay at the feet of the man who had said all those bad things about 'Mvoo Laana, and when the people saw this they said to that man: "How is this? There is the great snake that lives in the well, and he stays by you. Tell him to go away."

But Neeoka would not stir. So they untied the young man's hands, and tried in every way to make amends for having suspected him of being a wizard.

Then the sultan asked him, "Why should this man invite you to his home and then speak ill of you?"

And 'Mvoo Laana related all that had happened to him, and how the ape, the snake, and the lion had cautioned him about the results of doing any kindness for a man.

And the sultan said: "Although men are often ungrateful, they are not always so; only the bad ones. As for this fellow, he deserves to be put in a sack and drowned in the sea. He was treated kindly, and returned evil for good."

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