



The Sacred Milk of Koumongoe

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*Intermediate
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Far way, in a very hot country, there once lived a man and woman who had two children, a son named Koane and a daughter called Thakane.

Early in the morning and late in the evenings the parents worked hard in the fields, resting, when the sun was high, under the shade of some tree. While they were absent the little girl kept house alone, for her brother always got up before the dawn, when the air was fresh and cool, and drove out the cattle to the sweetest patches of grass he could find.

One day, when Koane had slept later than usual, his father and mother went to their work before him, and there was only Thakane to be seen busy making the bread for supper.

'Thakane,' he said, 'I am thirsty. Give me a drink from the tree Koumongoe, which has the best milk in the world.'

'Oh, Koane,' cried his sister, 'you know that we are forbidden to touch that tree. What would father say when he came home? For he would be sure to know.'

‘Nonsense,’ replied Koane, ‘there is so much milk in Koumongoe that he will never miss a little. If you won’t give it to me, I sha’n’t take the cattle out. They will just have to stay all day in the hut, and you know that they will starve.’ And he turned from her in a rage, and sat down in the corner.

After a while Thakane said to him: ‘It is getting hot, had you better drive out the cattle now?’

But Koane only answered sulkily: ‘I told you I am not going to drive them out at all. If I have to do without milk, they shall do without grass.’

Thakane did not know what to do. She was afraid to disobey her parents, who would most likely beat her, yet the beasts would be sure to suffer if they were kept in, and she would perhaps be beaten for that too. So at last she took an axe and a tiny earthen bowl, she cut a very small hole in the side of Koumongoe, and out gushed enough milk to fill the bowl.

‘Here is the milk you wanted,’ said she, going up to Koane, who was still sulking in his corner.

‘What is the use of that?’ grumbled Koane; ‘why, there is not enough to drown a fly. Go and get me three times as much!’

Trembling with fright, Thakane returned to the tree, and struck it a sharp blow with the axe. In an instant there poured forth such a stream of milk that it ran like a river into the hut.

‘Koane! Koane!’ cried she, ‘come and help me to plug up the hole. There will be no milk left for our father and mother.’ But Koane could not stop it any more than Thakane, and soon the milk was flowing through the hut downhill towards their parents in the fields below.

The man saw a white stream a long way off, and guessed what had happened.

‘Wife, wife,’ he called loudly to the woman, who was working at a little distance: ‘Do you see Koumongoe running fast down the hill? That is some mischief of the children’s, I am sure. I must go home and find out what is the matter.’ And they both threw down their hoes and hurried to the side of Koumongoe.

Kneeling on the grass, the man and his wife made a cup of their hands and drank the milk from it. And no sooner had they done this, than Koumongoe flowed back again up the hill, and entered the hut.

‘Thakane,’ said the parents, severely, when they reached home panting from the heat of the sun, ‘what have you

been doing? Why did Koumongoe come to us in the fields instead of staying in the garden?’

‘It was Koane’s fault,’ answered Thakane. ‘He would not take the cattle to feed until he drank some of the milk from Koumongoe. So, as I did not know what else to do, I gave it to him.’

The father listened to Thakane’s words, but made no answer. Instead, he went outside and brought in two sheepskins, which he stained red and sent for a blacksmith to forge some iron rings. The rings were then passed over Thakane’s arms and legs and neck, and the skins fastened on her before and behind. When all was ready, the man sent for his servants and said:

‘I am going to get rid of Thakane.’

‘Get rid of your only daughter?’ they answered, in surprise. ‘But why?’

‘Because she has eaten what she ought not to have eaten. She has touched the sacred tree which belongs to her mother and me alone.’ And, turning his back, he called to Thakane to follow him, and they went down the road which led to the dwelling of an ogre.

They were passing along some fields where the corn was ripening, when a rabbit suddenly sprang out at their feet, and standing on its hind legs, it sang:

Why do you give to the ogre Your child, so fair, so fair?

‘You had better ask her,’ replied the man, ‘she is old enough to give you an answer.’

Then, in her turn, Thakane sang:

I gave Koumongoe to Koane, Koumongoe to the keeper of beasts; For without Koumongoe they could not go to the meadows: Without Koumongoe they would starve in the hut; That was why I gave him the Koumongoe of my father.

And when the rabbit heard that, he cried: ‘Wretched man! it is you whom the ogre should eat, and not your beautiful daughter.’

But the father paid no heed to what the rabbit said, and only walked on the faster, bidding Thakane to keep close behind him. By-and-by they met with a troop of great deer, called elands, and they stopped when they saw Thakane and sang:

Why do you give to the ogre Your child, so fair, so fair?

'You had better ask her, replied the man, 'she is old enough to give you an answer.'

Then, in her turn, Thakane sang:

I gave Koumongoe to Koane, Koumongoe to the keeper of beasts; For without Koumongoe they could not go to the meadows: Without Koumongoe they would starve in the hut; That was why I gave him the Koumongoe of my father.

And the elands all cried: 'Wretched man! it is you whom the ogre should eat, and not your beautiful daughter.'

By this time it was nearly dark, and the father said they could travel no further that night, and must go to sleep where they were. Thakane was thankful indeed when she heard this, for she was very tired, and found the two skins fastened round her almost too heavy to carry. So, in spite of her dread of the ogre, she slept till dawn, when her father woke her, and told her roughly that he was ready to continue their journey.

Crossing the plain, the girl and her father passed a herd of gazelles feeding. They lifted their heads, wondering who was out so early, and when they caught sight of Thakane, they sang:

Why do you give to the ogre Your child, so fair, so fair?

'You had better ask her, replied the man, 'she is old enough to answer for herself.'

Then, in her turn, Thakane sang:

I gave Koumongoe to Koane, Koumongoe to the keeper of beasts; For without Koumongoe they could not go to the meadows: Without Koumongoe they would starve in the hut; That was why I gave him the Koumongoe of my father.

And the gazelles all cried: 'Wretched man! it is you whom the ogre should eat, and not your beautiful daughter.'

At last they arrived at the village where the ogre lived, and they went straight to his hut. He was nowhere to be

seen, but in his place was his son Masilo, who was not an ogre at all, but a very polite young man. He ordered his servants to bring a pile of skins for Thakane to sit on, but told her father he must sit on the ground. Then, catching sight of the girl's face, which she had kept down, he was struck by its beauty, and put the same question that the rabbit, and the elands, and the gazelles had done.

Thakane answered him as before, and he instantly commanded that she should be taken to the hut of his mother, and placed under her care, while the man should be led to his father. Directly the ogre saw him he bade the servant throw him into the great pot which always stood ready on the fire, and in five minutes he was done to a turn. After that the servant returned to Masilo and related all that had happened.

Now Masilo had fallen in love with Thakane the moment he saw her. At first he did not know what to make of this strange feeling, for all his life he had hated women, and had refused several brides whom his parents had chosen for him. However, they were so anxious that he should marry, that they willingly accepted Thakane as their daughter-in-law, though she did bring any marriage portion with her.

After some time a baby was born to her, and Thakane thought it was the most beautiful baby that ever was seen. But when her mother-in-law saw it was a girl, she wrung her hands and wept, saying:

'O miserable mother! Miserable child! Alas for you! why were you not a boy!'

Thakane, in great surprise, asked the meaning of her distress; and the old woman told her that it was the custom in that country that all the girls who were born should be given to the ogre to eat.

Then Thakane clasped the baby tightly in her arms, and cried:

'But it is not the custom in MY country! There, when children die, they are buried in the earth. No one shall take my baby from me.'

That night, when everyone in the hut was asleep, Thakane rose, and carrying her baby on her back, went down to a place where the river spread itself out into a large lake, with tall willows all round the bank. Here, hidden from everyone, she sat down on a stone and began to think what she should do to save her child.

Suddenly she heard a rustling among the willows, and an old woman appeared before her.

'What are you crying for, my dear?' said she.

And Thakane answered: 'I was crying for my baby—I cannot hide her for ever, and if the ogre sees her, he will eat her; and I would rather she was drowned than that.'

'What you say is true,' replied the old woman. 'Give me your child, and let me take care of it. And if you will fix a day to meet me here I will bring the baby.'

Then Thakane dried her eyes, and gladly accepted the old woman's offer. When she got home she told her husband she had thrown it in the river, and as he had watched her go in that direction he never thought of doubting what she said.

On the appointed day, Thakane slipped out when everybody was busy, and ran down the path that led to the lake. As soon as she got there, she crouched down among the willows, and sang softly:

Bring to me Dilah, Dilah the rejected one, Dilah, whom her father Masilo cast out!

And in a moment the old woman appeared holding the baby in her arms. Dilah had become so big and strong, that Thakane's heart was filled with joy and gratitude, and she stayed as long as she dared, playing with her baby. At last she felt she must return to the village, lest she should be missed, and the child was handed back to the old woman, who vanished with her into the lake.

Children grow up very quickly when they live under water, and in less time than anyone could suppose, Dilah had changed from a baby to a woman. Her mother came to visit her whenever she was able, and one day, when they were sitting talking together, they were spied out by a man who had come to cut willows to weave into baskets. He was so surprised to see how like the face of the girl was to Masilo, that he left his work and returned to the village.

'Masilo,' he said, as he entered the hut, 'I have just beheld your wife near the river with a girl who must be your daughter, she is so like you. We have been deceived, for we all thought she was dead.'

When he heard this, Masilo tried to look shocked because his wife had broken the law; but in his heart he was very glad.

'But what shall we do now?' asked he.

'Make sure for yourself that I am speaking the truth by hiding among the bushes the first time Thakane says

she is going to bathe in the river, and waiting till the girl appears.'

For some days Thakane stayed quietly at home, and her husband began to think that the man had been mistaken; but at last she said to her husband: 'I am going to bathe in the river.'

'Well, you can go,' answered he. But he ran down quickly by another path, and got there first, and hid himself in the bushes. An instant later, Thakane arrived, and standing on the bank, she sang:

Bring to me Dilah, Dilah the rejected one, Dilah, whom her father Masilo cast out!

Then the old woman came out of the water, holding the girl, now tall and slender, by the hand. And as Masilo looked, he saw that she was indeed his daughter, and he wept for joy that she was not lying dead in the bottom of the lake. The old woman, however, seemed uneasy, and said to Thakane: 'I feel as if someone was watching us. I will not leave the girl to-day, but will take her back with me'; and sinking beneath the surface, she drew the girl after her. After they had gone, Thakane returned to the village, which Masilo had managed to reach before her.

All the rest of the day he sat in a corner weeping, and his mother who came in asked: 'Why are you weeping so bitterly, my son?'

'My head aches,' he answered; 'it aches very badly.' And his mother passed on, and left him alone.

In the evening he said to his wife: 'I have seen my daughter, in the place where you told me you had drowned her. Instead, she lives at the bottom of the lake, and has now grown into a young woman.'

'I don't know what you are talking about,' replied Thakane. 'I buried my child under the sand on the beach.'

Then Masilo implored her to give the child back to him; but she would not listen, and only answered: 'If I were to give her back you would only obey the laws of your country and take her to your father, the ogre, and she would be eaten.'

But Masilo promised that he would never let his father see her, and that now she was a woman no one would try to hurt her; so Thakane's heart melted, and she went down to the lake to consult the old woman.

'What am I to do?' she asked, when, after clapping her hands, the old woman appeared before her. 'Yesterday Masilo beheld Dilah, and ever since he has entreated me to give him back his daughter.'

'If I let her go he must pay me a thousand head of cattle in exchange,' replied the old woman. And Thakane carried her answer back to Masilo.

'Why, I would gladly give her two thousand!' cried he, 'for she has saved my daughter.' And he bade messengers hasten to all the neighbouring villages, and tell his people to send him at once all the cattle he possessed. When they were all assembled he chose a thousand of the finest bulls and cows, and drove them down to the river, followed by a great crowd wondering what would happen.

Then Thakane stepped forward in front of the cattle and sang:

Bring to me Dilah, Dilah the rejected one, Dilah, whom her father Masilo cast out!

And Dilah came from the waters holding out her hands to Masilo and Thakane, and in her place the cattle sank into the lake, and were driven by the old woman to the great city filled with people, which lies at the bottom.

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