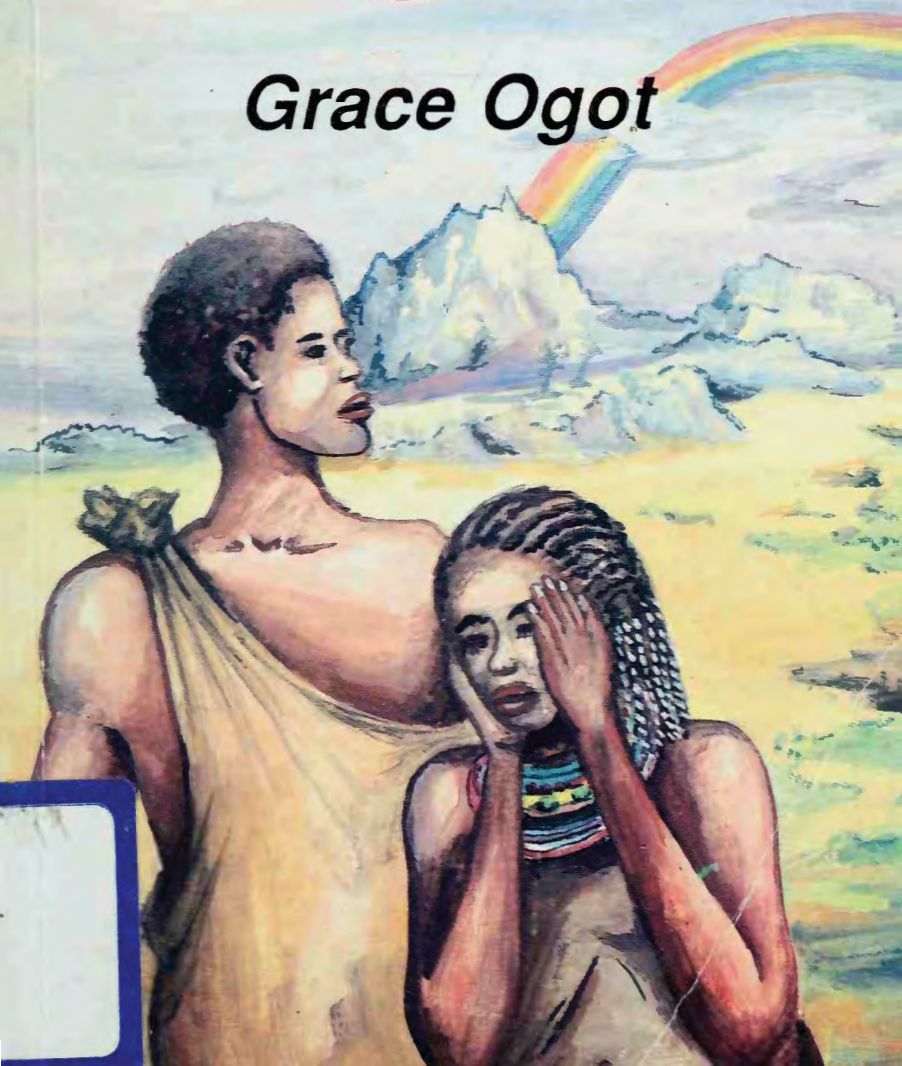


The **Strange Bride**

Grace Ogot



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THE STRANGE BRIDE

GRACE OGOT

Translated from Dholuo by Okoth Okombo



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CHAPTER ONE

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CHAPTER ONE

In the distant ancestral days, our god, Were Nyakalaga, lived on the earth with his own people. But no one could see him because he was a mysterious being whose essence spread all over the surface of the earth.

However, even though people could not see Were Nyakalaga, they were aware of his closeness to them. They saw his hand in lightning and heard his voice in thunder and the winds that blew around them.

People believed that Were Nyakalaga liked to live in the mountains. They therefore built him a small shrine — with a roof thatched with the *buoywe* grass — at the peak of Got Owaga. From there, they believed, Were Nyakalaga was able to look after all his people who lived in the big village that surrounded the mountain.

In those days there were no cows. People fed on crops like sorghum, millet, sesame and various kinds of beans. The crops were grown on large pieces of land that Were Nyakalaga had given to his people. Since the big village was built around the mountain, large farms extended from the foot of the mountain down to the banks of the rivers that surrounded the mountain a little farther down. There were fantastic harvests of sorghum— especially the red *ochuti* and the white *andiwo*. There were also very good harvests of finger millet, *nyim* (sesame), peas and beans.

But the greatest wonder of those days was that the people of Got Owaga did not work to cultivate their fields. Were Nyakalaga had given them an automatic metal hoe that would do all the cultivation they needed as long as they kept god's commandments governing the use of that hoe. Since they did not do any exhausting work, these people stayed young for a long time and lived much longer than the people of today. For this great favour, the people of Got Owaga remained very close to their god, obeying all his commandments, and always acting according to his will.

One of the elders of the people of Got Owaga was a man called Olum Ochak. This man was very healthy, and he was extremely handsome. He had a shiny, black skin that looked wonderful when

decorated with chalk and ochre. He was tall, with a proportional frame, and very white teeth, which made his smile really charming. This was the man that the people of Got Owaga made their chief.

Olum Ochak was a strong chief who had a lot of love for his people. Moreover, he was a great believer in justice; and he passed all his judgements without favour or prejudice. For that reason, his people liked him very much, and they had a lot of faith in him.

His first, and therefore senior wife was called Lwak, meaning 'mother of the nation'. Her father was called Kwang'a.

Lwak was of dark-brown complexion. She was of medium height and had short curly hair. There was not a single grey hair on her head.

Olum Ochak loved Lwak so much that he never addressed her by her name. He always called her *Ragwel* — the bow-legged one (traditionally, bow-legged women are considered very beautiful by Luo men) or *Nyar gi Thuondi* (daughter of the heroes).

Olum Ochak's duties as a chief were both administrative and religious. Every morning, at day-break, he climbed to the peak of Mt. Owaga to pay homage to Were Nyakalaga when the eye of the sun first shone over the mountain to wake up the mortals, who believed that the power of Were Nyakalaga was expressed in the heat and the dazzling rays of the sun. Thus they referred to the sun as "the eye of Were Nyakalaga". So, when the sun made its magnificent appearance over the horizon, Olum Ochak would spit in its direction, saying:

"*Thu!* May you bring good to us, and may your eye shine blessings on us for the whole of this day."

After that he came back home and waited until the evening when he went back to the peak of the mountain. At sunset, when the sun turned red, he bid it farewell by spitting and saying:

"*Thu!* May peace be with us until we see your eye again when you wake up tomorrow."

The people of Got Owaga believed that Olum Ochak had some charisma which made their loyalty to him spontaneous. When he arrived at a public gathering, his people settled down quietly and gave him their attention without being commanded to do so.

They also believed that he had some supernatural ability by

which he interpreted the messages that Were Nyakalaga sent through thunder, winds and the songs of the birds. He could also read the secrets that were carried by the clouds, the moon, and the stars. Above all, he was a genius at interpreting dreams.

As time went by the people of Got Owaga started to call him Were Ochak, and, with time, his other name Olum, disappeared and he was only known as Were Ochak (which meant that he was the first ruler of the nation).

Were Ochak and his wife, Lwak, had only two male children. The elder one was called Opii. He was of medium size and inherited his mother's dark-brown colour. But he was aggressive and very short-tempered.

Opii's wife was called Achola. Her father's name was Adede. Achola was a tall girl with a graceful neck. She too was of dark-brown complexion and had short curly hair. She was a quiet, polite girl, and this made her the most suitable woman for Opii.

There was a big difference between Opii and his younger brother, Owiny. The people of Got Owaga reckoned that it was Owiny who had taken after his father. In him, they saw all the qualities of his father. He was tall and strong, with muscular arms. Like his father he had a smooth, shiny, black skin and snow-white, closely-and-uniformly-spaced teeth. He was friendly and sociable, and he always played the role of a peacemaker among his peers. For that reason, his peers liked him so much that they addressed him fondly as *Bade Dongo* (The one with muscular arms).

Although Opii and Owiny did not have much in common, in terms of their natural endowments, they still liked each other very much. They cooperated quite well in helping their father look after his quail. The birds came in great numbers to Got Owaga after the harvest. They were caught and domesticated. Opii was particularly good at trapping the birds and making cages for them. And Owiny was very good at trapping ants, which were used to feed his family's large flock of chicken.

Just as Owiny was good at trapping ants, so was he at rearing chicken, which his father bartered for sorghum, beans or sesame.

Each morning, while Were Ochak went to the peak of Mt. Owaga to pray and pay homage to the sun as it rose above the

horizon, Opii and Owiny, his brother, went to erect the mast on which their quail were caged, after which they proceeded to set the traps so as to catch more quail. Then they returned home to wait for their father to come back from the mountain.

When their father came back, their mother, Lwak would pour some porridge into a red *mbiru* and give it to Opii's wife to take to the shade of the big *siala* tree, where Were Ochak used to meet those who called on him. That was also where he always had breakfast with his sons.

After breakfast, Owiny attended to their chicken. He left his brother, Opii, to help their father make the cages for the quail or make the *oserni* under which the chicken were kept (especially, at night). Meanwhile, he himself went to collect the ants that he had trapped the previous evening at the foot of an anthill. As he was successful in almost everything that he tried his hands on, when he trapped ants he caught them in large numbers. Sometimes, he could catch upto three basketfuls.

Lwak was very happy with Owiny's talents. She had noticed right from Owiny's childhood that his talents could bring wealth and glory not only to her family but even to all the people of Got Owaga. She, therefore, created a friendly relationship between Owiny and Opii's two sons so that they could accompany him when he went to trap or collect ants. But Lwak did not fully understand how beneficial this relationship was going to be to those children.

The two boys' names were Ochieng' and Oyoo. Ochieng' was eight harvests old, and Oyoo was six harvests old. Both of them were active and intelligent children. Since they were so fond of their uncle, Owiny, his work of trapping and collecting ants also became their favourite activities. They would always accompany him to his ant-traps, and all their dreams were about trapping and collecting ants.

Soon, Owiny had shown them all the shrubs that ants liked eating, and they helped him by finding those shrubs while he cut the grass which they used to cover the shrubs in an ant-trap.

After collecting the ants from the traps, the three of them went back home, each carrying a heavy load of ants. They left the holes in which the ants were trapped open to dry up until evening, when

Owiny would come back to prepare the traps again. As soon as they were back home, Ochieng' and Oyoo took brooms and swept the front yard clean so that the chicken could eat the ants in it.

Such good care made Owiny's chicken multiply tremendously. It became necessary to build a little hut for them to stay in at night, because they had become too many for the small partition that was allocated to them in Lwak's house.

Sometimes Ochieng' and Oyoo used to catch big warrior ants and make them fight. The ants fought until one of them was killed. The two boys enjoyed this game very much. An equally interesting game for them was cock-fighting. But they separated the cocks as soon as the fight became serious because Were Ochak, their grandfather, did not want cocks to hurt each other. Their other games included chasing grasshoppers and trapping or aiming at birds with sticks and stones.

When the morning sun got hot, Oyoo and Ochieng' accompanied the adults to inspect the quail-traps. They broke the wings of the trapped birds to make them unable to fly away, and took them home. However, the quail which had sweet voices were spared the ordeal of having their wings broken. Opai selected them so that they could be kept in a cage to sing and attract some other quail to come to the traps. When there were enough cages on one mast, a new one was brought for the newly captured birds.

Just as Were Ochak and his sons and grandsons worked hard on trapping quail, so did Lwak and Achola, her daughter-in-law, on preparing food for their quail by germinating millet grains in a damp trough. As soon as the grains started to germinate, they were removed from the damp trough as quickly as possible. The germinated grains, known as *thowi*, were aired on mats to get completely dry.

Then the grains were coarsely ground and fed to the quail either on mats or on a clean yard. The birds were brought in their cages and put down to stick their necks out and feed on the coarse flour of *thowi*.

Achola, was a hard working-woman and grinding grains (on a grindstone) was nothing to her. She, therefore, did not allow her mother-in-law to tire herself by grinding. She did all the grinding

herself, both to make food for the birds and to get the flour that the family used for making ugali and porridge. She had a good voice and she sang sweetly as she ground her grains.

In those days, there were no cows, and bride price was paid in baskets of sorgum. One big basket, of the type known as *rum*, was the equivalent of one cow. Opii had paid such baskets of sorgum to get his wife, Achola. And when it was time for Owiny to marry, he paid an unaccountable number of them because his fiancée, Nyawir, the daughter of Opolo, was the queen of beauty. Everyone marvelled at her lovely features. The slim-waisted girl was exceptionally brown, and her body was proportionally built. She had beautifully-shaped legs, a neck with natural rings, and a natural gap between the front two of her snow-white teeth. Her hair was combed out in long strands, decorated with cowries.

The people of Got Owaga were doubtful whether Owiny's wife, Nyawir, was actually the child of Opolo, the father of Omulo, and his wife Awino. It was rumoured that something mysterious happened to Nyawir between the time of her early childhood and the time she reached maturity.

The truth of the matter was as follows. It was, of course, true that Opolo and his wife had got a very beautiful baby girl whom they had named Nyawir. When Nyawir was born, her mother, Awino, had already lost two male children, and she became the only living child of her mother who, therefore, valued her very much.

One day, when four harvests had passed since Nyawir's birth, she woke up and found that her mother was not with her. She went out of the house to the yard, thinking that her mother was probably sweeping out there. But she did not find her in the yard. She went behind the house to check if her mother was probably in the garden, but she was not even there. Back in the house she realized that the water-pot which her mother usually used for fetching water was not among the others. She decided to go out again. This time she noticed her father, who was sitting by the granary, making a hen-cage. She moved closer to him and asked: "Where has mother gone to? I want her."

"Your mother went to fetch some water some time ago," replied her father. "She's about to come back. Just sit down there at the door;

she'll come and warm porridge for you."

After that brief talk with his daughter, Opolo concentrated on his work and forgot about the little girl's worries over her mother's absence. He did not realize that Nyawir did not want to be alone. She decided to sneak away so that she could go and meet her mother. She loved her mother very much.

A short while after Nyawir had sneaked away, Awino, her mother, arrived home balancing the water-pot on her head. She put the pot down and started to call her daughter:

"Nyawir, Nyawir yoo, come out and wash your face."

But there was no response. She went into the house, thinking that her child had probably fallen into a deep sleep. To her surprise, there was nobody on the hide on which Nyawir was supposed to be sleeping. She dashed out to ask her husband if he was aware of the child's whereabouts.

"Father of Omulo," she called, "Have you seen the child I left sleeping here in the house?"

"She was asking for you here a little while ago," replied Opolo. "I told her that you had gone to fetch water and she should sit there and wait for you because you were about to come. How come you haven't seen her?"

"The child is not here," said Awino, "I have looked in the house and in the garden but I haven't seen her."

On hearing that, Opolo abandoned his hen-cage and launched a thorough search for the child. He ran from place to place, calling and shouting. But all this was in vain. Nyawir was not to be seen.

Awino started lamenting pitifully. "Hmm.... what has befallen my child. What could take the child away from this compound when you are there?" she asked her husband. "Or could she have tried to follow me to the river and taken a wrong path? Father of Omulo, let me run back to the river and check if the child might be there."

Although both of them went back to the river, taking different routes to increase their chances of meeting the child, their efforts were fruitless. They became very nervous, and informed all their neighbours of Nyawir's disappearance. They also told them that they suspected the child had tried to follow the mother to the river

and lost her way.

A big search was mounted in the forest and in the bushes that surrounded the river. But by sunset there was still no success: the search continued the following day. But, not even a trace of her sisal skirt was detected. Eventually, Opolo gave up and told everyone to stop the search for his daughter.

"Daughter of my in-laws," he addressed his wife, "It appears that fate has taken away even the only child that you were left with, please stay at home and rest. I may lose you too if something hurts you in the forest. Your child is gone and there is no hope of getting her back."

On hearing that, Awino felt depleted. She saw nothing of value left in her life, and she started to lament the disappearance of her daughter:

"*Ayaye!* You've left me childless in my old age. *Ayaye*, my child, what misfortune has befallen you! To disappear just like that! And go completely... Oh! what misery you've brought to your father! He'll die like a baby... leaving no mark on the earth... as if he never existed! *Ayaye*, my child if only you had grown to have your own children! Even though my sons died, leaving no seeds to lift up your father's name, still my mother's grandchild ... you would have had a son. And that son of yours, although he would have belonged to another clan, still you would have named him Opolo, your father, so that the name... your father's name... might not varnish from this mountain."

Awino lamented painfully. Her husband realized that she was deeply hurt by Nyawir's disappearance. So, he tried to console her.

"Daughter of Podho," he addressed her, "The bitterness that I sense in your words will make you ill, and you will die and leave me here alone. Control your temper and be calm. Were Nyakalaga has given us everything that we need. He has given us plenty of food, rain, the sun to light up our days, and the moon to brighten our nights. Listen, daughter of Podho, from the days of our ancestors, death has always been part of man's nature. A child enters this world when its mother gives birth to it, but when it gets tired of the world and wants to go and rest with our ancestors, it is death that takes it from here. That is how death connects us to our unborn

children who exist as seeds in us. That is how generations succeed one another and the nation grows and becomes larger. The seed that is planted in the soil must first die, and it is by its death that it becomes alive again and produces many more seeds."

Ayaye, son of Ong'wen," Awino addressed her husband angrily, "Why should I be the sufferer among my fellow women? *Ayaye*, my mother's son-in-law, why couldn't Were Nyakalaga leave me even one child only to remain on the earth as your seed when you die, to keep your name alive among the people of Got Owaga? To make them say: *Tho!* Opolo, son of Owaga has died well. We can see his seed representing him in his clan. Those seeds of his will bear his grandchildren who will take and pass on his name to generations of the distant future."

As Opolo stood there, his chin resting on his stick, as he struggled with the reality of his wife's utterances, Awino held her two hands over her head and lamented even more bitterly, saying:

"This, for me, is the end of the road. My male children died and left no trace on the earth. And now my daughter has gone too, leaving no seed behind. When my husband joins our ancestors, his name will soon be forgotten. Only his generation of elders will remember him. And when they go, his name will go with them. Neither his name nor his good deeds will be remembered. For, it is only when you leave seeds behind that your name and your good deeds are remembered among your people."

Opolo got so upset that he caught himself shedding tears. "*Nyar Podho*," he addressed his wife sternly, "Those bitter words you are uttering may make our ancestors and Were Nyakalaga unhappy with us. Why can't you listen to my advice?"

But Awino did not listen to her husband. "Even our ancestors will be angry with you when you join them," she told him. "They'll blame you for having wasted all the seeds that they... left under your care, all the seeds from you that you stood mute while the birds of the air ate up, and then joining them without leaving even a single seed to build the clan."

Opolo did not know what to do with Awino, his wife. So, he appealed to her fellow women to try and calm her down. He himself invited his fellow elders and he performed all the rituals that one

was required to do when someone disappeared in such a mysterious manner. They took an unripe fruit of a sausage tree and dressed it like the corpse of a child who had died out in the forest. They made a passage through the fence of her father's compound and brought the 'corpse' into the compound through that passage. Then they dug a grave close to the fence and buried the 'corpse' there, according to the rules governing the burial of people who died outside their homes. After that, all the funeral rites were performed.

When the funeral rites were over, people started to forget Nyawir, and, in the long run, only her mother could not forget her. Nyawir's image remained clear in her mother's mind, and her mother had frequent dreams about her. These dreams went on until one day Nyawir's mother had one which was really terrifying.

In that dream she saw Nyawir chasing locusts on an endlessly large, open field. After catching the locusts, she ran back and gave them to an old woman who was sitting under a big *otho* tree, laughing and cheering her. Then Nyawir went back to chase more locusts as the old woman roasted the ones that were already captured on a fire which was burning under the tree.

Awino tried to recognize that old woman's face but she couldn't because there was a fog around where she was sitting.

When she woke up, Awino found her body drenched in sweat. She had been seriously disturbed by the dream. And, after getting a bit of her composure back, she told her husband about the dream.

As days went by, Nyawir began to appear to her mother in the form of a cloud surrounded by fog. But Awino's love for her daughter intensified so much that she composed for her the following song:

Sunrise finds the brown one outside
Sunset finds the brown one outside
The brown one deserves a song
Daughter of the women of Mt. Owaga,
My co-wife used to say
That a boy is a pole
And the big roof
Covering my mother's house.

A boy, indeed, is the shade
of a tree
With many branches
But where is the boy?
Where is Oloo Rapenda
The brother of Dulo?
And Ong'wen Ragama
The son of Podho's daughter?
The brown one showed me
That a girl is surely good.
How sad
That a basket full of sorgum
Has spilt!
The daughter of the women
Of Mt. Owaga
You wiped off my tears.

My grandmother used to say
That a boy was a pole
And a roof.
With many branches
Oo... ee – The brown one
Is the cold water
That falls from the roof.
The long reed that grows in the river

The beautiful bamboo
That catches the traveller's eye.

By thinking a lot about her child, Awino developed a new life style. She went to fetch water early in the morning before sunrise. At the river, she drew water with a calabash, put it into her mouth and then sprinkled it out, as the first rays of the sun were seen, saying:

"Thu, thu, may you bring me some good and remain friendly until evening. And, when you go back, take my greetings to my daughter who disappeared for ever."

That was the kind of life which Awino, the wife of Opolo, led, going to the river early in the morning everyday, except when she

was unwell, until she became an old woman.

One day Awino went to fetch water in the morning as usual. After sprinkling water in the sun's direction, she quickly filled her pot with water. But when she tried to put it on her head, she suddenly felt too weak to lift the pot. She knelt and tried to put the pot on her head, but after putting the balancing coil, *tach*, on her head, she realized that she was still unable to lift the pot.

"What's the matter with me!" she wondered. "What death wants to find me here alone! I've always put this pot on my head: What is happening to me? *Tho!* What misfortune is this!" She thought of pouring out the water so that the pot could be lighter. But she decided to wait until another woman came to the river. She would be helped with lifting the pot. Since she had no child to fetch water for her, she had to do the work herself. Otherwise, there would be nothing for her and her husband to drink at home.

CHAPTER TWO

When Awino was still standing at the river bank, waiting for someone to come and help her put the pot on her head, she suddenly saw a girl bathing at a rocky place on her left. She was very surprised and wondered what had made the girl go to the river so early in the morning. But she gathered some courage and moved closer to that girl.

"Good morning, my daughter", Awino greeted the girl. "Why have you come to bathe so early in the morning, when the water is still very cold?"

"Well. I just came early", replied the girl.

"Look", said Awino to the girl, "I am unable to put my pot on my head. Would you kindly help me with it when you've finished bathing? I don't want to go home with an empty pot; I have no child to fetch water for me."

"Then wait for me for a while; I'll soon come and help you," the girl replied quickly.

Awino stood there wondering why that little girl had come to the river so early in the morning and bathe in the cold water before it was warmed by the sun. Very soon, the girl stood on the rock and shook off water from her body. After that, she picked up her sisal-skirt from where she had placed it on the rock and put it on again, by tying it around her waist. Then she hurried to help Awino put the pot on her head.

When she moved closer, and Awino was able to see her unique beauty, it became clear to her that the girl was a stranger. This made Awino nervous. She could not imagine where this strange girl came from. Since she was born she had never heard of the existence of any other community of people apart from the people of Got Owaga. Was this a miracle?

"My child," she addressed her in a trembling voice, "who among the people of this mountain is your father? How come you don't look like our people? Are you a stranger?"

Seeing that Awino was so scared, the girl stood where she was and said:

"No, I'm not a stranger; I belong to this place."

Awino looked at the girl from head to toe and asked her: "But how come you look so strange? Whose daughter are you?"

"I'm Opolo's daughter," replied the girl in a very clear tone.

"Aaa!" exclaimed Awino, "But there are many people who have that name. Which Opolo is your father?"

Awino was so shocked that she felt extremely weak. She could not even see clearly. And she was still in that dizzy state, when she heard the girl talking as if she was addressing someone far away from her.

"I don't know my father's other name," she said.

Unconsciously, Awino continued to speak to the girl. "Do you know your mother's name?" she asked.

"My mother is called Awino, the daughter of Podho," replied the girl.

This response from the girl took away all the strength from Awino. She experienced a sudden loss of breath; and sat down near her pot. The girl noticed her fear and started to move closer in order to reassure her. Awino lifted her hand to keep the girl away from her. Sweating profusely, and with her hand still raised, she fearfully went on to ask the girl some more questions.

"What is your name, my child? I happen to know your parents whose names you've just mentioned but I didn't know that they had a girl as big as you?"

For a while, it looked as if the girl was reluctant to talk, appearing to be unwilling to disclose her name. But when she realized that the old woman was staring at her, she decided to answer her question.

"My name is Nyawir," she said.

That finished Awino completely! She put her hands on her head and started to cry, her whole body trembling. Her reaction shocked the girl so much that she ran and fell on her.

"My mother, have I said something terrible? What's the matter with you?"

But it appeared as if those words upset Awino even more. She cried bitterly:

"Who sent you to tease Opolo and his wife Awino, who will die

childless?" she cried. "Why do you tease them for nothing, since they have no child? Both of their sons died; and the girl they got after them also disappeared."

The girl was really moved! She quickly moved her hands from Awino, as if she had touched something hot; and moved away from her. For some time she stood there, dumbfounded, and only stared at the crying woman. She suddenly lost her composure and started to cry, tears running down her cheeks. As a flood of tears rushed down her face, she asked the old woman, her voice trembling:

"If Opolo and Awino are not my parents, then who are my parents? Why do you despise and reject me? Do you think I'm not fit to be their child? Aaa! If that's the case, I'll not leave you. I'll carry your pot and follow you until you take me home to my parents."

Immediately Awino realised that she was not dealing with an ordinary situation. Who had taught this girl to talk like that, she wondered? She stopped crying and stood at once. After looking at her carefully for a while, she held her at a distance with her hands, saying:

"No, little girl, don't touch my pot; if you can't tell me where you have come from, don't follow me. It's true that your parents are there, but I'll call our headman to come and take you to them."

Realizing that handling this old lady was not so easy, the girl debated within herself whether she should talk to her further or just insist on following her. She decided to be calm; and walked back to the rock on which she had been.

When the girl started walking away, Awino regained a little of her energy. She left her pot, calabash, and balancing coil there, at the river bank and hurried home. She was so much worried about her strange experience that she did not even mind the dew that covered the grass on her way. Her worries started to come out loudly:

"Aa-aa- Were Nyakalaga," she said, "what is this you've done to me? Aa, Podho, my father, how do I handle a matter of this kind? Could it be that this is my daughter, Nyawir, who disappeared a long time ago – when locusts invaded this mountain? And if she is the one, where could she have come from? And what has happened to her skin and hair? Mmm *mayie* daughter of Podho, this time I've entered the lion's den. Aa *yaye mama!*

At that time, the first rays of the sun were shooting above the horizon; and the birds were saying 'good morning' to one another with sweet songs all over the place. In their songs they seemed to be celebrating Awino's misfortune. They appeared to be saying:

"Awino has rejected her child!
Daughter of Podho has denied her child.
Awino, the world will curse you and jeer at you.
Daughter of Podho, the world will abandon you.
If water sweeps off the brown one
And takes her to the south;
E,e,e, the world will curse you;
E,e,e, the world will jeer at you.
Daughter of Podho the world will abandon you!"

Awino realised that she had stopped to listen to the birds. As she stood there, her outer ear heard the birds' song, but her inner ear heard human voices echoing the words to the song. She again started to utter her thoughts aloud:

"Could it be possible that the child I left at the river bank is Nyawir, my daughter who disappeared? Might it be that it is Were Nyakalaga and my father, Podho, who are speaking to me in strange voices of the birds?"

At the moment it suddenly occurred to her that she should hurry and reveal the matter to her husband before it was known to many people. She feared that it might turn out miraculously that the girl was actually her daughter. She realized that it would not be proper to inform the headman of what she experienced at the river before she revealed it to her husband. Her fellow old women might later rebuke her for her inability to handle a confidential matter maturely. They might ask her how she had run to tell the headman such an important thing before making her husband aware of it.

When she turned her eyes in the direction of the sun and saw its rays clearing off the morning mist, she started to move faster in her desire to reach home quickly and reveal the matter to her husband before other people set eyes on the girl and began to inquire whose daughter she was.

It happened that at that time Opolo was cutting shrubs for cleaning the yard, somewhere outside his compound. On seeing his wife, Opolo threw down the shrubs he had cut and hurried to meet her. Before he even got closer to her, he started to inquire what had happened to his wife.

"Daughter of Podho," he asked her loudly, "What is the matter? What has chased you from the river? What is making you run back home when you are so weak? And where have you left your pot?"

"Just come home, my mother's son-in-law," replied Awino. "I have seen a miracle at the river.... I even left my pot there."

Opolo did not ask any more questions. He quickly led Awino home. Then he stood by the fence and waited to hear more from his wife, who looked frightened and was sweating profusely. Awino immediately started to relate to him what she had experienced:

"I had already drawn water and was trying to put the pot on my head," she said. "But strangely enough, the pot felt too heavy for me to put on my head alone."

"I debated within myself whether I should pour out the water and come home with an empty pot or wait for another woman to come to the river and ask her to help me put the pot on my head. When I was still standing there, I saw a certain girl bathing while standing on the rocks near the fig tree. I was very surprised and wondered why the girl had come to the river so early in the morning, even before the sun rose. However, I gathered some courage and spoke to her. I requested her too come and help me with the pot when she finished bathing.

"When the girl came close to me, I realized that her beauty was unique and she didn't look like us at all. Her hair was long and decorated with white cowries, which went down to her neck."

At that point, Opolo interrupted Awino: "How often have I warned you daughter of Podho not to go to the river alone at dawn? How often have I warned you that this habit may one day put you in danger? See what you've come across today. Now what d'you want me to do about it?"

Awino drew a deep breath and pleaded with her husband: "I'm in trouble, son of Ong'wen. Just come with me to the river. What

that child uttered is too much for me to hear alone. Just take your stick and let's go quickly."

"Aaa... daughter of Podho, " grumbled Opolo, "You've put your feet in hot sand and now you want to drag me too into it! How often have I warned you against going to the river at dawn? Now look at what you've brought to us."

Awino moved closer to her husband and held both of his hands. "*Yaye jaduong'*, she pleaded, "The words which came out of that girl's mouth touched both of us. What a difficult man you are! Can't you listen to anything that I tell you?"

After hearing these strong words, Opolo was now more willing to discuss the matter with his wife. He pushed away from her hands and, to indicate that this matter was beyond his understanding, he turned up his hands.

"But how could this strange girl utter words which touch you and me?"

"Very strange, the girl just said it plainly that she was the daughter of Opolo, and that her mother's name was Awino, the daughter of Podho, and that she herself was called Nyawir!"

On hearing that, Opolo became frightened. He moved a few steps back, away from Awino, as if she had become something terrifying. And he felt genuinely afraid of her. "Daughter of Podho," he addressed her in an aggressive voice, "What are you telling me now? D'you want me to drop dead and leave this world? Or don't you know that death can easily come out of the kind of jokes you're now making?"

"D'you think I'm a child?" Awino asked him. "Can one joke in that manner? Please, do understand that I'm not joking. Don't you know that the girl insisted on coming with me? That she wanted to carry my pot and follow me so that I could show her her parents? And that's what made me run away, leaving both my pot and calabash at the river."

"Did you tell her you knew her parents?" asked her husband.

"I tried to explain to her that the people she claimed to be her parents are known here, but they don't have a child; that their two sons had died and the only daughter that was born after them, who was a girl had disappeared when she was a little girl. But when I told

her that she started to cry, saying that I was despising and rejecting her."

Opolo got scared and started to sweat. Then he began to tremble and forgot what he wanted to say, appearing to have lost the ability to think.

Awino noticed that her husband was puzzled by what she had related to him. She moved closer to him and pressed her right hand on his shoulder, as if to encourage him.

"My mother's brother-in-law," she addressed him, "Take a stick and let's go, so that you too may set your eyes on her and hear her voice. Could she be my child Nyawir whom the devil took away mysteriously?"

Those words gave Opolo some courage. "Then let me go and take my stick," he said. "We should both go so that I may see for myself before I come back to tell my brothers. We shall inform the headman afterwards."

As Opolo started walking towards the granary to get his stick, he stopped and turned around to face Awino.

"Daughter of Podho, he addressed her," D'you remember the black mark with which Nyawir was born under her left armpit? Or have you forgotten it?"

"Ayaye," exclaimed Awino. "What an important thing you've reminded me of! Oh... Old age is a terrible thing — I didn't remember that when the girl was standing near me at the river bank."

"Now I've shown you the trick, daughter of Podho," said Opolo, "If we find that girl still standing there, waiting for you, try to find that mark under her left armpit. And if you don't see anything then know that she's not your child; just leave her so that she may go and find her parents by herself."

Before Awino knew it, they were almost at the river bank. Opolo was walking very fast. From some distance away, they could see the pot, the calabash, and the balancing coil still lying where Awino left them. Awino's heart started to beat really hard. She was worried about how she would explain to her husband if they did not find the girl at the river. Her husband would be convinced that she had been joking, as he had suspected when she first told him the

story. He might even think that she was becoming insane. So, as soon as they reached the river bank, Awino went straight past her pot, and hurried towards the rock, where she had left the girl standing. Opolo hurried after her too. But when they got there, the rock stared at them bare, with absolutely nothing on it, let alone the girl. Awino's eyes blinked in great embarrassment.

"I left the girl here on this rock," said Awino, "where has she gone to?"

Opolo was extremely angry; so much so that his mouth shook violently. How could his wife have made such an irritating joke?

"Are you sure that you didn't just see your eyelashes, Awino?" Opolo asked. "How could the girl have disappeared here at this clear place?"

Awino was very much offended by her husband's words. Why did her husband believe that at her age she could come out with such a crazy story just to make a joke? She surely, was not insane.

"Son of Ong'wen", she addressed her husband, "I'm not sick. I left the girl here on the rock. Please, do understand that I'm telling you the truth about this matter."

But Opolo was not convinced that Awino was telling the truth. He talked to her in a ridiculing, manner, saying:

"Where is she then, if you left her here? All the other things you left are still where you left them. Your pot, calabash and balancing coil are still here."

Awino realized that her husband was ridiculing her. She got very angry and talked as if she was about to cry:

"Then go back home, I'll stay here and look for the girl. I'm sure that she's just hidden somewhere here. You just go back home, son of Ong'wen. I'll find you at home."

All the time, while Opolo and his wife were quarrelling, the girl they were looking for was hiding under the rock, listening to their quarrel. She had made up her mind to hide there until girls of her own age came to the river so that she could ask them if they knew her parents. She had resolved to let the old woman go back home in peace. But when she heard the old woman addressing the old man she was with as 'son of Ong'wen' she got a strong feeling that that name meant something to her. Although she could not immediately

recall where, she had certainly heard that name 'Ong'wen' somewhere. She doubted whether her father did not have a relative who had that name. She closed her eyes very hard and tried to remember her childhood experience in the days when she used to chase fowls with a cane all over her father's compound. As her mind went farther back into her childhood days, she could see her father sitting under the roof of the granary, making a hen-cage. She saw an old man enter their compound, supporting himself with a walking-stick and going towards her father. She heard her mother's voice shouting out greetings to the old man: "Good morning, father of Ong'wen," said her mother's voice. Then the old man moved closer to her father and sat with him under the roof. At that stage, the girl opened her eyes and decided to come out in the open and ask the old man who was standing by the rock if he knew her parents.

She quickly came out and climbed up on to the rock. When she was already on the rock, she noticed that the old man had started to walk home; and the old woman was again trying to lift the pot and put it on her head. She pitied the old woman and called out to her:

"Mother, I'm here, don't break the pot!"

When Awino heard the girl's voice, she turned quickly the pot still in her hand and faced the girl, thinking that she was probably dreaming. Then she hurriedly put the pot down and, in a trembling voice she said:

"Child of my fellow woman, you've saved me from the shame of being branded a liar. The old man I brought here to listen to your case could not imagine where you would suddenly have disappeared to; and therefore, believed that I must have told him a lie." Then she turned round to see how far Opolo had gone. But Opolo had also heard the girl's voice; and Awino found him standing not so far away from where she was, his chin resting on his walking-stick. He was tongue-tied after hearing the girl's voice. Awino beckoned him vigorously, saying: "Son of Ong'wen, didn't I tell you I wasn't insane? Don't you believe me now? Come back so that we may talk to her."

Opolo went and stood near his wife. Then Awino talked to the girl politely, "Child of my fellow woman, please, come down that

we may talk with this old man; he is the one who can take you to your parents; there's no one who lives anywhere around this mountain that he doesn't know."

Fortunately, the girl did not refuse. She immediately came down and stood near the old woman and her husband. Opolo was greatly surprised at the girl's beauty and strange hair style. He concluded at once that the girl was foreign to Got Owaga. She certainly must have been told by someone else that there were people around there who had the names which she had mentioned, like Opolo and Awino. Her appearance was absolutely different from that of Nyawir, his lost daughter. He decided to interview her.

"Little girl," he addressed her, "you told your mother that you belong to this mountain: Whose daughter are you?"

"Why is it that you can't find your home and you want someone to take you there? Did you go away on a long journey and are just coming back? Opolo inquired further.

Tears filled the girl's eyes. "I don't know what has happened to me," she said. "I used to belong to this place; and I can remember what I used to do when I was a child. But my memory fails when I try to remember what I did recently when I was a big girl".

Opolo marvelled at the girl's words, and proceeded to ask her some more questions.

"Can you remember where your home was built?"

"It's the way to it I can't remember. But I know that it was a small compound fenced with euphorbia trees. My mother's house was big; its walls were plastered with white chalk and the floor was decorated with patterns with white chalk and the thorny edges of cactus leaves. Its roof was thatched with the soft *buoywe* grass and it had a big, enclosed veranda, one side of which was used as a pen for our fowls and the other side used as a store for my mother's water-pots. Inside the house at the farthest end from the door, my mother neatly arranged the pots in which she stored beans and sesame."

"Can you remember whether there was some other houses in that compound?" Opolo asked her.

"There was a small house in the middle of the compound," said

the girl. "That's where my father used to sit with one old man who had a long walking stick. Sometimes they sat under the roof of a granary, where my father used to make hen-cages or hats made of small sticks."

Opolo drew a deep sigh, and went on with his questions: "And what made you leave your home when you were still such a little girl?"

"I left home to follow my mother, who had gone to the river to fetch water," said the girl. "After leaving home, I met an old woman who had lost quite a number of teeth and was using a reed as a walking stick. I was very much frightened of her; and, before I regained courage, she asked me where I was going, hoping that we could walk together. I told her that I was following my mother, who had gone to the river to fetch water."

"Your mother has just passed here; I'll show you where she followed," she told me. "And where did your father go to?" she asked.

"I left him sitting by the granary, making a hen-cage," I said.

"Did you tell him that you wanted to follow your mother?" she asked further.

"No, I just sneaked away. I told him I would sit by the door and wait for my mother," I added.

"But, strangely enough, after talking to that old woman, I suddenly lost my memory. And I kept on following her until we came to a river bank and went under a big rock. There we found a big hole which led deep down into the ground. At the bottom of the hole, there was a big under-ground path which we followed until we came to a land which had sunshine but no heat. After arriving at that place, I lost my memory completely!"

As the girl spoke, Awino and Opolo were frightened to death. Among the people of Got Owaga, there was only one woman who fitted in the description given by the girl — and that was Awinja, the daughter of Otin, Opolo's mother, who had died a long time ago. How strange! How could his mother have come back to Got Owaga and taken away their child? What a great miracle that would be!

"How, then did you manage to come back here?" Opolo asked

fearfully. "Who showed you this place?"

"It was the same old woman who brought me back," replied the girl. "But I can't remember the way we followed to this place. I suddenly realized that she had brought me and left me at the foot of that rock."

"When Opolo heard that, his body trembled vigorously. Awino was already weeping. Opolo moved closer to the girl and spoke to her.

"Everything that you say shows that you disappeared exactly in the same way that my daughter, Nyawir, did. But my daughter did not resemble you. She was not as brown as you are; and her hair was done shorter than yours. Above all, Nyawir had a natural black mark under her left armpit."

"My mother," said the girl quickly, addressing Awino, "I also have that mark. Look!" She lifted her left arm to reveal the mark. Awino and Opolo saw the mark, which ran from her arm pit on to the soft flesh under her arm. On seeing the mark, Awino fainted and fell down leaving Opolo standing still, perplexed.

Slowly, Awino regained consciousness. When she raised her eyes, she saw the girl kneeling beside her; and Opolo was still standing there, supporting himself on his walking-stick.

Moving her hand cautiously, Awino reached for the girl and touched her eyes, hair and neck.

"No doubt, you are my child," she said. "You are the child who disappeared from me. And that old woman who took you away was Awinja, my mother-in-law, who died before you were born. We don't know why she took you away in that mysterious manner; but we hope that will reveal itself to us later."

"Now that we've found you, you will lead a normal life with us. You are now a big girl and we can't keep you indoors, like a baby. You will move around here freely, just as the other girls do. And you will perform all the duties that girls of your age usually perform. But you must remember one thing: You must keep everything that has happened to you up to this moment in your heart; never utter a word about your strange experience to anyone."

Then Awino raised the girl's chin and looked straight into her eyes.

"Nyawir, my child," she said, "Your father and I have lived a very hard life in our old age, since the time you disappeared. But Were Nyakalaga has had mercy on us and brought you back to help us for sometime before we die... Are you listening to what I'm saying?"

Nyawir could not talk. She felt so sorry for her parents that if she opened her mouth to talk, she would cry. She fell onto her mother's bosom; and, for quite some time, leaned on her shoulder, weeping. Then she stopped leaning on her mother, and held her hands pressing them lovingly, to reassure her of her devotion to her. But she still could not talk. She only nodded to show her mother that she heard every single word of hers and she intended to keep them.

Then Nyawir took the balancing coil and put it on her head. After putting the waterpot on her head, she and her mother passed furtively through the sorgum stalks – left standing on the fields after harvesting – and went home straight. When they reached the gate, Opolo instructed them to wait there until he brought an old woman to give them *manyasi* – a cleansing medicine. This medicine was supposed to counter the effect of the burial rites that had been performed when Nyawir was declared dead.

The old woman Opolo brought was called *Min* Ogisa (mother of Ogisa). After being briefed by Opolo on what had happened to his daughter, *Min* Ogisa started to perform the cleansing ritual. She gave Nyawir *manyasi* to drink. Then she sprinkled ash on her. After that she led Nyawir to the gate, into the compound, and took her to the grave where the fruit of the sausage tree had been buried to represent her body. She then gave her some more *manyasi* to hold in her mouth and sprinkle on the grave. When Nyawir had done that, *Min* Ogisa gave her a hollow reed full of ash, and said to her:

"Shake the ash out of the reed onto the grave." Nyawir did as instructed. That done, *Min* Ogisa took Nyawir, to her mother's house. Soon, Nyawir had regained a good deal of her memory, though she was still unable to remember.

When *Min* Ogisa came out of the house, leaving Awino and her daughter, Nyawir, behind, Opolo called her aside and talked to her.

"My grandmother, there's something which is worrying me a lot. I'm puzzled by the way this child left us and came back on her

own after such a long time. If you have any secret knowledge about the disappearance and return of this child, please, don't hide it from me."

"Then let's go over there, near the granary, and listen to the voice of the divining-stones," said *Min Ogisa*. "If there is something hidden from us, Were Nyakalaga and our ancestors will reveal it to us."

Opolo went quickly inside the hut and brought a deer skin and spread it beside the granary for *Min Ogisa* to sit on as she did her divination. And after settling on the skin, *Min Ogisa* took out her divination equipment from a bag. She chose four white pebbles and put them in a small gourd. Then she shook the gourd, looking as if she was praying in the process. Finally, she poured the stones out on to the side of the skin on which she was not occupying. But, though she looked at them carefully, she did not get any message from them. She returned them into the gourd and went through the same procedure again. However, even this time there was no positive result; none of the stones stood up meaningfully.

Once again she put the stones back into the gourd and shook it. This time, when she poured the stones out, one of them danced and moved out of the skin, on to the bare ground. At once, *Min Ogisa* looked at Opolo, where he was sitting on a traditional stool, and said:

"It was Awinja, your mother, who died a long time ago, who came and took away your daughter because she was lonely and had no one to run errands or do small duties for her. I have seen her sitting under a tree while a little girl chases locusts and brings to her to roast. It shows that your mother loved this child very much; and that's why she came and took the child to go and keep her company."

Opolo was completely satisfied with the result of *Min Ogisa's* divination. He immediately remembered that soon after the girl's disappearance Awino had a dream in which she saw the girl chasing locusts on a big, open field while an old woman sat near a fire under a tree happily cheering the girl. However, Opolo did not tell *Min Ogisa* about the dream. He only interviewed her further.

"And now that the child has come back to her mother, does the

grandmother intend to come and take her away again?"

Min Ogisa nodded in the negative. "No, she will not take the girl away again. She's tired of Awino's daily lamentations. When she took the girl, she thought you would marry Awino's niece and, with her, get children to help Awino do the housework; but you didn't do that. That's why she allowed the girl to come back."

Opolo was dumbfounded.

When *Min Ogisa* noticed that he was dumb-founded, she tried to comfort him

"Such are the wonders of this world, son of Ong'wen," she said. "Have you forgotten that when Akeyo, the daughter of Obong'o, was mistreating the children of her dead co-wife the latter got angry and took away her children one by one until all four of them died? The dead can see what is going on among the living. Don't let anyone deceive you, son of Ong'wen. Tell everything that I've told you to the daughter of Podho; but it must remain a secret between the two of you and me. Don't reveal it to anyone else. Not even to your close cousins. Later, in the evening, you should take some sorgum grains which have stayed for a long time to the foot of the rock where Awino first saw this girl and, there, perform a thanksgiving ritual to Awinja, your mother, and Were Nyakalaga for the miracle which has happened to you."

After that, *Min Ogisa* went back to her home. From that day, Nyawir lived normally with her mother; but, each day, by sunset, she went to sleep in *Min Ogisa's* house.

CHAPTER THREE

When Awino and Nyawir were alone, she tried to send the girl here and there in order to see if she could still remember where various things were kept when she was still young. Awino could still not believe that she had really got her daughter, Nyawir. Giving her a calabash, she said: "Go to the pot in which sesame is stored and bring one calabashful so that I may pound it to make you sesame butter."

Nyawir took the calabash and hurried towards the far corner where storage pots were kept. She opened one red pot, in which sesame was stored, and took one calabashful of sesame to her mother. Then Awino gave her another calabash, saying:

"Now go and bring some *olayo* (green grams) to boil so that I can later roast it and make for you a special *ombedre* mixed with sesame."

Once again Nyawir took the calabash and hurried to the far corner. There she opened the pot in which *olayo* was stored, drew a little with the calabash and took it to her mother.

Awino sat there, motionless. Tears flowed down her cheeks as she spoke to her daughter. "Ayaye, my child. Where had Were Nyakalaga taken you to? Ayaye, daughter of Podho, the people of Got Owaga say that Were Nyakalaga is a mysterious being; and some people say that it's by travelling that one gets to see the wonders of the world. And this time, my mother's grandchild, I have seen the unbelievable! I'll never forget what Were Nyakalaga has done to me. Now, I believe that you are Nyawir, my child who disappeared."

"And what should I tell my age-mates, grandmothers, or my other elders if they ask me where I disappeared," asked Nyawir, looking at her mother anxiously.

"If you can't avoid the questions," replied her mother, "then say at once that you sneaked off and went to live with your maternal uncle; and that that is where you were until you came back recently, already a big girl."

Awino looked at her daughter carefully; and concluded that

even if the girl did not know where she had been, for her to become so beautiful, the climate of that place must have been very good for her body. Only one thing worried her about her daughter's appearance. Her unique hair style made her look like a stranger among the people of Got Owaga. Both women and girls in their community had short hair. She took courage and asked her about it.

"My mother's grandchild," she addressed her, "All the other girls of your age wear their hair short; and they will be surprised to see you wearing yours so long. From the days of our distant grandmothers, women and girls have never worn their hair in such long plaits. I feel that *Min* Ogisa should cut down your long hair to give it a chance to grow up afresh so that you can trim it and look like your peers. That will stop people from paying much attention to you and talking, ill of you. You know that such talk can bring misfortune to you. People's tongues are evil, my child."

When she heard that, Nyawir held both her mother's hands, and pleaded with her, saying:

"My hair style, with the cowrie decorations has become part of my nature. It's the basis of my beauty; and forcing me to cut my hair is like killing me. Fashions come and go, mother. Today girls and women may find it beautiful to wear their hair long, like mine."

"Aa, my child," said Awino, looking perplexed. "Who are you to try to change the ways of the world? All our grandmothers and mothers used to trim their hair short; and that is the custom that we are all following. And it will appear as if you are teaching your peers to abandon our traditional practices and despise our ancestors. I have an ominous feeling about your hair style, my child; my body senses danger. The people of Got Owaga have a saying that the child who does not listen to advice ends up walking on crutches."

Nyawir did not answer her mother. She only looked down, appearing as if she was annoyed. Since she had just come back after disappearing for a long time, Awino did not want to engage in a heated argument with her. She therefore, decided to drop the matter until the girl cooled down again. She comforted Nyawir, saying: "Okay, my mother's grandchild, don't be disgusted; I only tell you such things in an attempt to make you follow the customs of our people. We shall discuss this matter later."

At the same time, Opolo had a lot of worries in his mind. He unsuccessfully tried to settle down by the granary and complete an ant-collecting basket which he had been working on for some time. He then went to the place where there used to be a slow-burning dung-fire for the men to sit around, *duol*. He picked up his stool from there and went to sit near the door. But even there, he could not settle down; and he was soon up again, wondering what he should do about the frightening things he had been told by *Min* Ogisa. Was it in order to go and inform the headman that Nyawir, his daughter who had disappeared, had come back? No, he thought, that would start a lot of rumours about his child. He would keep quite about the matter. And if someone asked him who the young girl in his compound was, he would say that that was his young daughter who had gone to live with her maternal uncle and had now come back. But it was really difficult for him to keep the matter in his heart. He was actually beginning to have headaches over it. Finally, he concluded that matters kept secret were like hidden crimes; they made people unable to sleep and, subsequently, led to sickness.

After some deep thinking, Opolo called Awino and told her everything that *Min* Ogisa had revealed to him about Nyawir's disappearance.

"Daughter of Podho," he went on to tell her, "I think that this matter, which we've been trying to keep secret, can make us sick. You know, there are matters which are too heavy for a person to bear alone when his kinsmen are still alive. I think I should go and tell Were Ochak, our leader, that my daughter who disappeared when she was still a little girl has been brought back by Were Nyakalaga when she's a big girl. I have to take that matter out of my heart if I am to have some rest."

Awino felt nervous, "Aa, son of Ong'wen," she said, "Why don't you get the opinion of Rabala, your brother, first? Can't you discuss it with him before you can know whether or not it is proper for you to reveal the secret to our leader? Be patient. We should not do something that will make people start spreading malicious rumours about this child. It is great luck that Were Nyakalaga has brought her back into our hands; and I don't want anything that can bring her misfortune. But if your brother agrees with you, then you

can go to our leader together and put the matter before him."

"I've heard your voice, daughter of Podho," replied Opolo. "I, too, am anxious to find a safe way out of this situation. Only the two of us and *Min* Ogisa cannot handle this heavy matter. This child belongs to the whole of this community; and we are only her guardians since she is now back with us, I may one day find myself in a predicament when someone's son proposes to her. My kinsmen will ask me why they had not heard of the girl's return."

Awino understood her husband's point clearly.

"Then go ahead, my mother's son-in-law. If your brother supports that idea, just take the matter to our leader," she said.

Opolo did not even wait for his usual porridge. He set off immediately for his brother's home.

Rabala was a short old man. He and Opolo had one father but different mothers. His home was close to a bush of *ochwoga* trees, facing the *Ong'eché* River (river of monkeys). He was already at the gate carrying his ant-collecting basket, when, fortunately, Opolo arrived and met him there before he went away to his ant-traps. When he saw Opolo coming to him personally, he knew that there was something important to be discussed. In ordinary circumstances, he would be summoned through a messenger to go to Opolo's home. He was junior to Opolo, first, because he was younger in age, and secondly because his mother was junior to Opolo's mother, who was the first wife.

"How have you woken up on this side?" Opolo greeted his brother.

"We managed to get up and see the eye of the sun," replied his brother. "What forced you to appear personally and call me? I'm the one who is still young enough to move easily."

"No, my brother, the old man too must stretch his limbs to increase his days on earth. Laziness usually makes the body still. I had something heavy in my heart, which I wanted to share with you because I found it too heavy to bear alone. It is said that shyness killed the rabbit in its lair!"

On hearing that, Rabala led his elder brother to the shade of the *siala* tree that stood near his *duol*, where he used to sit with his visitors. His junior wife brought to Opolo some porridge in a big

calabash, *agwata wal*. The size of the calabash befitted Opolo's position as a senior brother-in-law.

After he had drunk enough porridge, Opolo told Rabala everything, without concealing even the slightest detail of it. He told him how Awino had gone to the river early in the morning, as she had always done since her daughter was declared dead; how she had met the girl, and the conversation that had taken place between them. He went on to give every detail of the events that followed until the moment at which he and Awino noticed the natural mark with which Nyawir was born under her armpit.

Rabala was surprised when he heard that report from his brother.

"What do you think we should do?" he asked Opolo. "I realize that this is, indeed, an affair that is too heavy for you to bear alone."

"All the necessary customary requirements have been taken care of by *Min Ogisa*," replied Opolo. "I thought that I should now go and inform our leader that my daughter who had disappeared when she was still a little girl has been brought back into our hands by Were Nyakalaga. But I saw that Awino was not happy about it. Mothers, you know, are always nervous about matters concerning children. She thought that by reporting it to the leader, I would be drawing too much attention to the child. That is what has brought me to you, my brother. I'm aware that I came into the world before you. I saw the sun's eye before you but learning never ends; it is the elder who listens to other elders' teaching whose home stands."

As Opolo talked, Rabala listened so attentively that he did not even bat an eyelid. With a lot of suppressed joy, he said to Opolo:

"My brother if Were Nyakalaga has returned into our hands this child, for whose disappearance and apparent death we lamented painfully, then, surely, he has done us a great favour — this is great luck to us! I am full of happiness and joy for what has happened."

"But my happiness is a private one, which I only show here in my compound. Nyawir was a child for whom we had a lot of love because she was the only child that Awino had after losing both of her two sons. The people of Got Owaga say that misfortune selects our favourite ones. That's what befell our family. There are many

children here, around Got Owaga; but it was none other than Awino's only child who disappeared and could not be traced."

Opolo interrupted his brother, saying, "It's very true what you're saying. That's why I came to seek your advice on this matter. Therefore, don't be shy to reveal anything that's on your heart; just speak with courage."

"My brother," declared Rabala, now speaking more openly, "I do share the opinion of Awino, the daughter of Podho. I'm against the idea of taking the matter to our leader. This child disappeared miraculously; and she has come back in an equally miraculous manner. This is an affair which we must guard as our family secret. And if someone asks us where the child has been, we shall say that she had fled to her maternal uncle's place after being thrashed by her mother. Whoever does not believe that will have to find what he wants to believe. We'll just ignore such people. At your age there's nothing anyone can do to force something out of you."

"You've talked well, my brother," said Opolo.

"My only fear was that our leader might be offended if he learnt that I had hidden something from him."

"Not at all," replied Rabala. "The leader would only be offended if it was something concerning the security of our land. Or concerning illness, a fight, a debt, or a robbery. But if your child who disappeared has luckily come back, that is your private affair. You'll only draw unnecessary attention to the child by reporting this matter to the leader."

"I've taken your advice, my brother," said Opolo. "We shall keep the matter in our hearts. After hearing your opinion, I now feel at peace. Although Opolo had told his brother everything about how the child had come back, he had remembered not to reveal to him what *Min* Ogisa had told him about the role his dead mother had played in the child's disappearance. And Rabala concluded his advice to Opolo by saying:

"Seek *Min* Ogisa's advice on the kind of crop that we should use in a thanks-giving ritual to Were Nyakalaga and Awinja, our mother, for bringing the lost child back into our hands."

Opolo went back to his home to tell Awino, his wife, what his brother's opinion was. Later, in the evening, he went down to the

river bank, close to the rock on which Nyawir had been standing, and bathing when Awino had first noticed her; and, there, he conducted the thanks-giving ritual as *Min* Ogisa had instructed him.

CHAPTER FOUR

In no time, the news spread like wild fire throughout Got Owaga. "The daughter of Opolo who disappeared when she was still a little girl has miraculously come back to her parents when she is now a marriageable girl," it was said.

"So Awino was just deceiving us!" some said.

"So she was the one who had beat up her daughter and made her run away to her maternal uncle's place! Ee! We hear that the girl came back with a marvellous body. She is as big and extremely beautiful!"

But many mothers were worried about her long hair. They feared that other girls would copy her hair style, and wear their hair long, abandoning their customs.

Whenever Nyawir went to fetch water from the river, the other girls looked at her with admiration. Some tried to touch her long, decorated hair and asked her to teach them how to decorate it with cowries. They followed her to the fields, where she went to gather greens for her family's meals. After a short time, many of her peers started to like her. She would now remove some cowries from her hair and teach the other girls how to plait and decorate their hair.

Soon, she thought it would be wise to teach them how to make holes through gems, *ngeta*, so that they could use them instead of cowries in decorating their hair. The girls of Got Owaga stopped cutting their hair short or trimming it. They left the hair to grow long, in the new fashion, so that it could be plaited and decorated with gems or the beautiful *ombulu* seeds. A hot, sharp metal, *riw*, normally used for decorating calabashes was now used also for making holes through the *ngeta* and *ombulu* that the girls needed for decorating their hair. Many parents were opposed to this new idea and they tried to prevent the girls from wearing their hair long, but the girls sneaked from home and went to Nyawir to plait and decorate their hair.

When the news of this girl's beauty reached the ears of Owiny, he at once decided that that was the girl he must marry. He was afraid to go and tell it personally to his father. So he kept it in his

heart until one day he approached his mother, Lwak, and said:

"My heart is yearning for this girl whose beauty the whole of Got Owaga is talking about. She's the girl I'd like to marry. Although I've not seen her personally, all my peers who have seen her have told me that she's perfect in appearance."

Shocked at what she heard from her son, Lwak answered him quickly.

"There are many other beautiful girls around this mountain — can't you approach one of them? Why do you have to go to this daughter of Opolo, who is still mysterious to our people? True, she is said to be very beautiful; even I have heard people praising her beauty. But the beauty of the body alone cannot make you marry a girl whose life we still don't understand. I have heard people whisper about that girl. Some people say that she disappeared mysteriously when she was a little girl; and others say that she sneaked off from her parents and went to her maternal uncle's place, where she stayed until she became a big girl. Now, where is the truth? Didn't Awino mourn the death of that girl? And, for all that time, if the girl was alive at her uncle's place, couldn't Awino's people have come to tell her that her child was alive? How many harvests, do you think, have passed since the girl disappeared? My heart does not readily accept your wish, *Rapando*. Think about it again."

"Mama, that is the girl I want to marry," replied Owiny, in a harsh voice. "I am aware that she disappeared for a long time; but she's the one my heart is yearning for."

Lwak sensed at once that if she pushed the matter harder, she would offend her son. That would make Owiny, out of anger insist on marrying the girl. She thought it wise to ease the tension by putting the matter before her husband, Were Ochak. She believed that Were Ochak, being an elder, would immediately see her point and openly tell Owiny to look for another girl. She, therefore, concluded her discussion with Owiny by saying:

"*Rapando*, it's alright; you've told me your wish. But let me discuss it with your father. If he agrees with you, you'll hear what comes out of his mouth."

As soon as Owiny left to go and prepare his ant-traps, Lwak

hurried to where Were Ochak was sitting on a stool, under an *oyieko* tree making a quail-cage. She spread the mat which used to be kept under the tree and sat on it. Since Were Ochak had been decorating calabashes he immediately knew that she had something to put to him.

"What is the matter, *Ragwel*?" he asked. "Your eyes show that you've got something heavy in your heart; what is it?"

"*Ragot*, Owiny has told me something which has really upset me," she replied. "He has told me openly that, having heard people's praises of the beauty of Opolo's daughter, he has decided that that is the girl he must marry. Isn't it terrible, son of Olenyo? That child scared me to death!"

Even Were Ochak was surprised to hear what his son had said; but he tried to hide his shock from his wife.

"And what did you tell him?" he asked her.

"I told him that there are many beautiful girls here, around Got Owaga; he should look for another one," she replied. "I clearly told him that he should have nothing to do with Opolo's daughter; there are different things said about her and no one knows where the truth lies. On the other hand, she's said to have disappeared; and on the other hand, she's claimed to have run away in protest and gone to live with her maternal uncle. I told Owiny that Got Owaga is a small place and there was nothing to stop Awino's people reporting that the child was with them. And I made it clear to him that I myself was against his idea, but I would come and put the matter before you so that you may see what should be done."

For a while, Were Ochak was unable to speak. But, when he saw Lwak looking at his face, he started to talk. "What answer did he give you?" he asked her.

Lwak raised her arm, in a swearing position. "Son of Olenyo, Owiny, my son, did not listen to me. He was firm on his decision to marry that girl. And I was terribly upset; that's why I came to you so that we can make a joint decision on this matter. You can then prepare to talk to him and tell him clearly that we are against his decision to marry that girl."

Supporting his chin on a stick and looking straight at Lwak, Were Ochak thought about the matter for some time and

said: "Ragwel, I've heard everything that you've told me and I'll try to talk to him. But let me tell you clearly, daughter of Kwang'a, that you must handle this matter with a lot of care. It is not usually easy to persuade a boy to forget a girl he already has his heart on. This is not a unique case. Don't you remember how difficult ours was? There came a time when I could not even listen to my father."

Lwak was not happy with her husband's comment. "Ragot," she addressed him in a serious tone, "Why should I bring something important before you and you treat it like a children's joke? Don't you know that if Owiny hears the kind of things you're saying, he'll not pay attention to anything that I'm telling him about this matter?"

Realizing that his wife was offended, Were Ochak lowered his voice and said: "Ragwel, let us, then, leave the matter as it is. Personally, to reveal what is in my heart, I wouldn't be happy to have anything to do with Opolo's daughter. I'm very suspicious of the way she disappeared for a long time and then suddenly came back to her parents."

"And look at the way she has introduced a new hair style to the girls of this mountain," Lwak added. Don't you see that all the girls have adopted her style?" she went on to say. "And when there were no cowrie shells for the other girls to use, didn't she invent a way of making holes through the *ngeta* and *ombulu*? And that's what the other girls are using to decorate their hair. That is exactly the kind of girl that I would not like Owiny, my son, to marry. You, as the leader our people know quite well that you should not encourage such mischievous behaviours, which will alter the customs that our ancestors left to us. Anyone who tries to alter the customs is like someone who despises Were Nyakalaga and our ancestors who were the fathers of this nation of Got Owaga. Were Nyakalaga made you a leader among our people. Imagine them getting angry with us!

Now, since Were Nyakalaga made you leader over our people, and our ancestors blessed your leadership, a girl, like Opolo's daughter, whose life is a mystery to people, should not become your daughter-in-law."

"Well said, Ragwel, I'll talk with him," said Were Ochak.

In the evening, when Were Ochak had had his evening meal, he called Owiny and spoke to him.

"*Bade Dongo*, he addressed his son, "I have been informed by your mother that you want to propose to that daughter of Opolo who disappeared and only came back recently. Is it true?"

"It is true," replied his son.

"Have you talked to her to hear her voice?"

"I've not personally heard her voice; but I have sent a message to her to inform her that my heart longs for her. I know that she'll not reject my proposal."

Then Were Ochak remained silent for a while, studying his son's mind. He started to talk to him very frankly.

"*Bade Dongo*, I have no objection to your wish to get married, if you think you're ready for it. But one thing I would like to make clear to you is that the girl you want to propose to has a life which is still mysterious to the people of Got Owaga. Even her kinsmen do not know her well because she disappeared when she was still a little girl and grew into a big girl away from home."

Owiny interrupted his father and said "Father, my heart is really longing for that girl; even if the people of Got Owaga do not know her well, she still belongs to this nation and they'll get to know her better when I marry her and she comes to live in this home."

Were Ochak sensed that Owiny had not fully understood his message – that a girl whose ancestry was not well known might create problems in a marriage. He, therefore, spoke to him in a more open manner saying: "*Rapando*, why don't you find a girl whose lineage is known to everyone and marry her. Your mother is not happy with that girl; and I'm not happy with her either."

What the old man said hurt Owiny very much. He could not understand why the old man was trying to dissuade him from proposing to a girl his heart was longing for. How could the old man talk in the same manner as Lwak, Owiny's mother, had talked! He gathered enough courage to talk to the old man.

"Father," he addressed him. "If you, my parents, refuse to let me marry the girl my heart has chosen, then I'll remain a bachelor throughout my life."

How terrible! Were Ochak got into a terrifying rage and spoke bitterly.

"What foolishness is getting into your head! Why do you talk as if you were taking an oath? You do know that oath-taking can ruin a home. From where have you taken the idea of remaining a bachelor? Don't you know that if a man remains a bachelor it is a bad curse to the whole community? A bachelor cannot lead his nation; and children cannot be named after him. He's an enigma to his people because his selfishness surpasses their understanding. For, such a man does not want his nation to grow and become stronger. *Bade Dongo*, can't you set your eyes on the girl first before taking oaths because of your love for her? Now you are a mature man, Owiny; I want you to be someone who takes advice, so that you may receive blessings from the hands of Were Nyakalaga."

In no time, Owiny had realized his mistake. "I'm sorry, father," he apologized. "It was not proper for me to show my anger to you. Since my childhood I've never ignored your advice. But I'm requesting you to humbly let me propose to that girl. She's the one for whom my heart is longing."

Were Ochak did not know how to respond to that. He did not want to disappoint his last son, whom he loved very much.

"Then get two or three of your age-mates so that you may go to that girl's home to see her and hear her opinion," he finally said.

"Tomorrow you should send someone to go and inform her parents that after three days you'll be their guests. Then you'll come and tell me what you've found out so that we can discuss the matter again."

Owiny left and went to his *simba* (a young man's cottage in his father's home). After that, Were Ochak went to Lwak's house, and told her that, apparently, Owiny had made up his mind to marry Nyawir, the daughter of Opolo. He went on to tell her how he had instructed Owiny to go with three of his age-mates and meet the girl and her parents so that they could come back with something concrete to put before him for further consideration.

"Oo!", exclaimed Lwak in surprise. "Now, you've tried to kill a tortoise by throwing it into the water. Handsome as your son Owiny is, do you really expect Opolo's daughter to reject him? In

fact, how many girls, do you think, would be happy to be the wife of Were Ochak's son? Owiny will certainly come back here to tell you that the girl has agreed and it is only a matter of paying the bride price for her to come."

"*Ragwel*, things that people swear about, such as this, might ruin a home," he said sullenly. "I realize that Owiny was not going to compromise on his desire. Let's wait and hear what they bring back."

Later, Opolo realized that Lwak's words to him had been quite prophetic. Owiny had chosen boys who, like him, were very handsome. There was Opii, his brother; Oyoo, the brother of Ajwang', who was very a handsome dark-brown boy, and there was Waga, the brother of Jura, a handsome black boy. When the news reached the girl's home, the people of Got Owaga picked it up and spread it in all directions.

"Oo!," they said, "It appears that Owiny wants to propose to that daughter of Opolo who wears her hair long."

"Oo!," some said, "Couldn't Owiny wait and see a bit more of that girl's life before he could decide whether that was the right girl to look after his house!"

"Ee, Opolo's daughter is very beautiful," said others. "Maybe Owiny thinks that if he delays someone else might get to her before him. Before a girl is engaged, you can't stop other boys from approaching her by merely saying that you love her."

That was the state of affairs when Owiny and his friends arrived at the home of Opolo, the son of Ong'wen.

Owiny and his friends decorated their bodies with chalk, and put red ochre on their hair. They wore animal skins which were beaten soft to be used as clothes. These skins covered their bodies well. In addition, Owiny, being the star of the occasion, wore a band of skin around his head and used it to hold beautiful long feathers round his head.

When they arrived, they found the girl equally prepared, together with her beautiful cousins. Nyawir's hair was decorated with cowries while that of her cousins was decorated with red *ombulu* seeds. They wore clean, white sisal skirts, which went down to their knees. In addition, they wore beads on their necks and

decorated their legs and arms with chalk.

When the boys arrived, Nyawir's cousins met them at the gate and led them to the shade of a big *siala* tree where chairs had been arranged for them. And when the visitors were all seated, the girls went to Awino's house and brought Nyawir from where she had been waiting, to greet her visitors.

Walking gracefully, the daughter of Opolo went to her visitors and greeted them one by one, feeling a mixture of pride and fear. When it came to Owiny's turn to shake Nyawir's hand, he held her hand and kept it in his for some time. And, as their eyes met, each of them sighed. Nyawir even felt her lips trembling. They both knew at once that they were in so much love with each other that only death would separate them. Owiny's friend's and the girls who surrounded Nyawir witnessed this immediate union of souls.

After noticing that the girl liked him, just as he liked her, Owiny together with his companions, refused to eat or even drink porridge before they got an opportunity to put their request to the parents of the girl whose hand they had come to ask for.

The matter was quickly taken to the elders, where they were sitting with Opolo around the dung-heap fire. They came under the tree and sat on their side, each on his stool. Since their culture did not allow them to shake hands with this category of visitors, they only greeted them verbally saying: *Okwe uru* (Let there be peace). And the boys replied in a similar manner, saying: *Okwe* (Peace).

After that, they went straight into serious business. Opii, Owiny's elder brother, put the matter before the elders by telling them that the major reason for this visit was to discuss Owiny's wish to engage Nyawir.

"When we left home," he continued, "we did not know what was ahead of us. But now that we've seen the girl, we feel completely satisfied with her. There is nothing in her that we are not happy with. Now we would like to formally disclose it to you who are the girl's kinsmen, that we want our brother and your daughter to be effectively engaged; and that this family and our family, back home, should become close friends. If that request is acceptable to you, we shall go back and tell our elders to come and meet you and discuss the arrangements for paying bride price, and also to try and

find out if there is any relation between our two families that could make it improper for these two young people to be engaged."

Opolo himself could not discuss his daughter's marriage. After the elders had heard the boys' request, it was Rabala who responded.

"My children," Rabala addressed them, "my words, today, will be very few. My time for talking has not come. As our people of Got Owaga say, even the tiny ant cannot be robbed of the termite which it has captured. This daughter of mine whom you've come to visit, is the owner of the termite that, today, has come out of the soil, onto the surface of the earth. If I make myself the owner of the occasion, I will have robbed her of her termite. Let's call her and hear her voice. If your brother caught her eyes at the time she came to greet you, we shall hear it from her own mouth. And we, as her parents, shall only go with what comes out of her mouth."

A child was then sent to go and call Nyawir from her mother's house to come to the elders. When her 'sisters' (female cousin's) were satisfied with her appearance, they escorted her to where the visitors were sitting. At that time, many of her 'mothers' (the wives of her uncle's) had come and sat on the mats beside the elders. Nyawir came out and stood among her fellow girls, her 'mothers' looking at her face. Rabala started to interrogate her. "My child, these visitors have come here with an important message; and that message is: That brother of theirs who is sitting in the middle has come here, to our home to ask for your hand. I have, therefore, called you here so that we may hear your voice on this matter openly when your mothers and fathers are listening. These visitors are yours and they are only waiting for what will come out of your mouth."

Nyawir was perplexed at what Rabala had said and stood there, speechless. Rabala decided to help her by asking more straight forward questions: "Do you agree to be engaged to this son of Were Ochak?" he asked her.

"It is so, my father," replied Nyawir.

"I hope you are aware that an agreement like this kind is a serious matter which is supposed to lead to marriage?" added Rabala.

"I know that, my father," she replied.

Apparently that was the reply Owiny had been waiting for. He stood up at once, took a container from his neck and opened it. He then took four red beads, and walking three steps to where Nyawir was standing among her 'sisters', he went and put the beads on Nyawir's neck, as a demonstration of his great love for her to everyone who was there. At that time, the two lover's eyes met again, and the girl in Nyawir's company happily responded with *sigalagala*, ululations.

The elders, having done their bit, returned to where they had been sitting. The women, too, did the same.

Now the visitors ate and drank. And it was not until around sunset that they went back to their own clan.

Were Ochak and Lwak were speechless when they heard what Opii told them. They decided to let Owiny go ahead and marry the girl, fearing that quarrelling over their son's marriage might bring misfortune to the son's family.

That evening, before Nyawir went to sleep at *Min* Ogisa's place, she took a little sesame in a calabash; and secretly went and scattered it over the grave of her grandmother, who died many years ago.

Then she prayed quietly, saying:

"How you've blessed me, oh grandmother!
The beauty of Owiny, my fiancé soothes my
heart, like the oil of *onyoso* (an edible insect).
Aa, the brother of Opii is handsome!"

CHAPTER FIVE

The engagement of Nyawir to Owiny, *Bade Dongo*, Were Ochak's last born, was a big matter among the people of Got Owaga. Wherever one went, there would be people asking one another: "Have you heard? Have you heard the news?"

Since this talk of 'have you heard' spread over the whole of Got Owaga, even the elders who wanted to go and approach Were Ochak and ask him to give an order stopping the girls from wearing their hair long and decorating it with *ombulu* seeds, now decided to be patient. One of the elders, by the name Yogo, went to another elder, called Okul, who had a leading role in the plan to approach Were Ochak, and cautioned him.

"My brother, let us not rush with this matter; Were Ochak is caught in a trap, and if we push this matter hard, we might cause tragedy."

"It appears that Owiny is serious about his wish to marry that girl," replied Okul. "If you think that we should handle it carefully, then go and talk to Were Ochak quietly and tell him to appeal to our ancestors. He should sacrifice to them in order to appease them so that nothing evil may come upon our land. I have misgivings about the fashion in which girls plait and wear their hair long."

"I'll certainly take this matter to him today," said Yogo to assure his fellow elder. "In any case, I think this fashion will disappear. The girls will get tired of maintaining long hair; and they'll go back to our traditional style."

All the gossip that was going on around finally reached the ears of Lwak and Were Ochak. But what filled their ears most of the time was the jubilation that came from all sides of people who happily waited for the day Owiny, would start paying his dowry for Opolo's beautiful daughter. "When will he start?" they asked in great excitement. And this showed Were Ochak that the people of Got Owaga were happy with the engagement between his son and Opolo's daughter. He, therefore, talked to Lwak and they decided that Owiny could start paying his dowry.

Soon Opii led Omach and four other elders to Opolo's home so that they could finalize matters over the paying of the dowry.

Since Owiny was not supposed to participate in these negotiations, he did not accompany the elders on that day.

When the elders arrived at Opolo's clan in the morning hours of the day, they found their fellow elders from Opolo's clan already seated, waiting for them. After the elders had greeted one another, Nyawir and her 'sisters' also greeted the visitors. She realized, from the happy expression on their faces, that the visiting elders were impressed with her appearance.

After that the visitors drank finger millet porridge; and then the negotiations started. Each side presented their case thoroughly and persuasively. Opolo's kinsmen said that an adequate compensation for their daughter would be ten baskets of sorgum three times. And Were Ochak's kinsmen refused, saying that what these people were asking for was too much to be paid for one girl. Couldn't it be at most ten big baskets two times? They argued back, appealing to their hosts' sense of fairness. But the girl's 'fathers' insisted and started to be sarcastic, saying that if the boy's kinsmen were not prepared they had better go back home and come back later when they were in a position to hold a serious discussion.

The visiting elders stood up and went outside the compound to have a discussion among themselves first. Once they were there Omach addressed Opii.

"Young man, you've heard how difficult the girl's 'fathers' are. Now, give us your opinion; you're the elder of the boy who wants to marry. Should we accept the demands of these people or shall we go back and inform your father before we can come back and complete this discussion?"

"My fathers," said Opii, "All of you are elders and you are well informed in matters relating to marriage. I've also personally seen the hard stand taken by the girl's fathers. I don't think their minds will change, even if we take the matter back to my father. I, therefore, think that we should go back and continue to argue with them; and whatever compromise we come to we shall leave it as the final word on this matter. And that is what we shall report to the old man."

The elders were satisfied with Opii's response. They went back and argued with the girl's kinsmen until Rabala, Opolo's brother, said that the dowry could be reduced to ten big baskets two times and five more on top of it. The baskets would have to be very big ones filled to the top with sorgum grains of the *andiwo* and *ochuti* types, already thrashed clean.

Since the visitors were getting tired, they decided to accept Rabala's demand. Beer was then brought in a red *mbiru*, pot, and placed between the visitors and their hosts. Each person was given his own drinking straw; and, after that, Opolo took a calabash which was in the red earth dish and drew a little beer with it. He held a little beer in his mouth and sprinkled it on to the ground for his ancestors to taste. After that he tasted the beer himself as an indication that there was nothing evil in it. Then the drinking straws were lowered into the beer pot and the visitors and their hosts drank together from the same pot after agreeing on the preliminaries of the marriage.

Although Opii was already married, he was still too young to drink beer with the elders. So he just held his drinking straw to symbolically fulfil the requirements of the occasion. Then he was given some more finger millet porridge to drink.

After this drinking, which was obligatory according to the customs of Got Owaga, the visitors were given a lot of food including finger millet ugali, chicken, and plenty of quail. Afterwards the visitors, having drank and eaten, went back to report the outcome of the mission to Were Ochak.

When Lwak and her husband received the news of the demands of their in-laws, Lwak marvelled, saying:

"Hm..., how great is the beauty of Opolo's daughter to warrant dowry of ten big baskets of sorgum two times and five more on top of it? Hm..., the daughter of Kwang'a, this is unheard of!"

Were Ochak, however, did not comment. The following day he told Lwak to get other women to help her thrash the sorgum. She was also supposed to quickly arrange how she was going to get new baskets of the required type, all made of *olando* (a special shrub for basket making), which would be used to take the sorgum to the girl's home. Were Ochak wanted this done quickly because he

wanted Owiny to bring home his new wife during the full moon, before people started to cultivate. Owiny was very happy with this arrangement. And he liked Opii very much for the part he was playing in this matter.

As arrangements were going on in Were Ochak's home for the payment of the dowry, there was a lot of gossip about it in the neighbourhood:

"Oo!" people said, "We hear that the dowry for Opolo's daughter is going to be paid in more baskets than has ever been paid for any woman," they said as they went about their daily chores like fetching water or gathering edible greens. This talk made Owiny's sister-in-law wait with a lot of anxiety to see how beautiful the girl was.

Lwak called Achola, Opii's wife, and said to her: "Daughter of Adede, as things stand now, the matter is left in our hands. Owiny likes you a lot; and since he has decided to bring you a co-wife, I shall leave the work of getting ready the big baskets of sorgum to you. Get some of your fellow young women today and start airing the sorgum. All the *ochuti* type I'll take from the old man's reserve granary *dero mar mondo* which lies in the middle of the homestead and give to you to prepare and put into baskets. It's those baskets that will be taken to the girl's home first. When you have prepared ten baskets of *ochuti* and five more on top of them, we shall begin to prepare the other ten baskets, which will be filled with *andiwo*. It's those that will be taken last."

Since Achola was happy with the idea of Owiny's marriage, she responded cheerfully: "Daughter of Kwang'a, you couldn't have made me happier. I like Owiny, my brother-in-law, so much and for a long time I've been waiting for the day he would marry. Let him bring me a co-wife to help me with the household work. This time I want you to sit down and rest like a queen. When there will be two of us, young women, in this home, no work will be too much, for us to do."

When Lwak heard her daughter-in-law talk so nicely, she revealed her inner thoughts to her and praised her.

"Daughter of Adede, it will be very hard to find a better daughter-in-law than you. Even my own daughter would not have

looked after me the way you have done. That spirit you have, daughter of Adede, oh, it would be wonderful if you could teach it to the daughter of Opolo, when Were Nyakalaga brings her here, to our home. It's only if you teach her good behaviour that she will not give you problems when my days on this earth are finished and I return to our ancestors."

Referring to Lwak as her 'grandmother' (as Luo women used to address their mothers-in-law), Achola laughed as she replied.

"My grandmother, the way people praise the beauty of Opolo's daughter, do you think she will listen to anyone? Anyway, if she comes and I find her willing to listen, no doubt, she and I will teach each other. It is the homes in which there is peace and love among the young women themselves and between them and their mother-in-law that get blessings which fall from the hands of Were Nyakalaga and those that come from our ancestors."

"Then start the work, Daughter of Adede," said Lwak happily. "Go and get your friends so that you start bringing out the mat to the yard; then I'll get the sorgum from the granary for you."

Since Owiny was very popular among the women of his clan, her sister-in-law and big 'sisters' (sisters and cousins) came at once as soon as Achola mentioned that she wanted people to help her prepare what was required for Owiny's dowry. Each of them took her thrashing-stick and hurried to Were Ochak's home. Some women took pestles and mortars to pound the sorgum heads which did not have many seeds on them. These were not included in the dowry package. The grains from them were used by the owner; and some given to those who helped with the work.

The early hours of the morning were spent on drawing sorgum from Were Ochak's reserve granaries and airing it on mats. In the afternoon, Achola and some of her friends started to thrash and pound the sorgum, while some of them cleaned the grains by pouring them from a raised container down into another container so that the loose chaff could be blown away by the wind. They used baskets and trays, *odheche*, for this work. The grains that were clean enough were put into the big baskets and packed somewhere at the far corner of Lwak's living room, ready to be taken to Nyawir's place. The women worked hard, performing the various functions

involved in preparing the sorgum, until sunset, when they went back to their respective homes so as to rest and come back to work the following day.

That evening, Owiny fully appreciated how much his sister-in-law, Achola, liked him, when he saw the work which Achola and her colleagues had done, preparing the sorgum for his fiancée's dowry. He brought three big guinea-fowls to his sister-in-law to thank her for the work. He went where Achola was cooking, near her veranda, *agola* and presented the birds to her, saying:

"*Law kwach* (leopard-skin cloth), I killed these guinea-fowls for you to barbeque so that you may eat them with your colleagues tomorrow when they come to help you prepare the sorgum for the dowry." The name *Law kwach* was an endearing title for a sister-in-law or brother-in-law. Achola, beaming with pleasure, stood up quickly to take in the baskets which the guinea-fowls were carried. She answered proudly.

"The way you love me is exactly the way I love you, *Bade Dongo*. Nowadays, all the praise-songs sang here, on Got Owaga are about you. Even this food I'm preparing is being cooked in your name. I told my husband today that he and the old man nowadays only eat in your name; you're the man for whom I cook these days."

"*Law kwach*," replied Owiny after laughing happily, "Oh, you really know how to flatter me! One day I'll make you a cloth out of a cheetah's skin so that you're indeed a leopard-skin cloth."

While Owiny and his sister-in-law were thus engaged in sharing jokes, Opii and Were Ochak were laughing beside the dung-heaped fire; and Lwak was sitting with her grand-children by the door of her house, as everyone waited for the food which Achola, the daughter of Adede, was cooking.

When ten big baskets of sorgum were ready, Lwak told Were Ochak to choose two of his elders to come with him and inspect the sorgum. If they certified that the work was well done, then a message would be sent to the girl's parents so that the bride price paying proceedings would go on as usual.

The people who inspected the sorgum with Were Ochak were two elders, Okul and Yogo, and Owiny, for whom all this was being done. After viewing the prepared sorgum at the far end of Lwak's

living room, Okul blessed the grains. He took a hollow reed, in which there was some ash, and shook a little ash on each basket as he prayed, saying:

"Oh, Were Nyakalaga
A woman, indeed, is a mystery to the world!
She is the mother of the land
And she is the man's eye
With which he sees things.
A bachelor feels uneasy in his bed
And turns from side to side
Until the day breaks
Because there is no one
To light a fire in his cold house.
Aa... Were Nyakalaga,
A woman, surely, is the strength of a man
because a woman is the house
And a woman is the home.
Bless this sorgum grains
So that tomorrow
Owiny's house may also find a fire-lighter
The potent fire which does not die out
Until the day breaks.
Aa... a woman, indeed, is a mystery of the world!"

When the grains had been blessed, a message was directly sent to the girl's people, informing them that they would have visitors after four days and those visitors would take them their daughter's bride wealth. Owiny was told to have ready three strong boys who would accompany the strong girls and women who are going to take the first package of bride wealth grains to the girl's home. Lwak and Achola, her daughter-in-law, were given the duty of selecting eight married women who were going to carry medium-sized basketfuls of sorgum.

After those women had been selected, Owiny and Opii, together with their father, would also give their approval. This was done; and the lot fell on Achola, the daughter of Adede, being the

wife of the elder son in Were Ochak's family, to be the leader of the girls who were going to take the first package of the dowry grains to the bride's home.

The preparation for this journey was wonderful! Owiny's kinsfolk intended to go and demonstrate their worth to the bride's people during that visit. They were going to show that their son, Owiny, *Bade Dongo* belonged to no ordinary family.

As the preparations went on among Owiny's people, the bride's people too, having received the message, started to prepare themselves equally thoroughly. They were ready to greet pomposity with pomposity, and arrogance with arrogance. And if it was songs accompanied with loud pronouncements of one's cherished values and personal favourites, *sigweya*, they too would not be wanting in that.

When the day came, the girls and women who were supposed to go on this journey decorated themselves ostentatiously with chalk. And they wore dense skirts which ended just above the knee. And boys who were to accompany them also decorated themselves with ochre and wore skins on their shoulders and feathers on their heads.

When they were ready to start the journey, the girls and the women stood on the front yard while the other women brought the medium-sized basketfuls of sorgum grains to the yard.

Then Were Ochak blessed them, saying:

"You are leaving this place as my messengers.

May you travel well

And may none of you stumble on the way

Until you complete this journey

Without any problem.

You are wives and daughters of the soil.

It is our good deeds

Which form the basis of our pride.

May Were Nyakalaga protect you on your way.

After that they started their journey. Owiny and some of his fellow boys escorted them until they passed the open field which separated the village from the forest. Then they left them to con-

tinue with their journey, walking between one boy, who led the way with a club in his hand, and two boys who guarded the rear. One of the girls sang for Owiny, and the others sang after her.

On the way, the girl's people had stationed their scouts to alert them of the visitors' approach. When the first scout saw them, he whistled to his colleagues, who passed the message in the same manner until it got to the last man, who ran home and informed the hosts that their guests were approaching and were now going over the hill on their way to the open field which bordered their village.

When the hosts got this message, their girls and women who had been waiting for the guests, started to trot in a jovial mood, singing along their way to meet the guests, as was demanded by custom. All of them wore sisal skirt and decorated themselves with ochre. The strange thing was that all the bride's 'sisters' decorated their long plaited hair with *ombulu* seeds and *ngeta* letting their hair drop over their necks. When they saw the guests appearing in the open field, the woman who led them started her *sigweya*, speaking in parables:

"My brother-in-law has stepped on a hard place
A hard place indeed.

Opii's brother has stepped on a very hard place.
Ee! The brown one, the daughter of the woman of
Got Owaga is beautiful indeed,
The slim, growing *ogada* reed
Which the traveller feels tempted to cut."

- And the leader of the guests, answered with her own *sigweya*:

"Take a look at the sister-in-law
Take a look at her co-wife
The bee has come itchy in its honey
Indeed the bee is itchy in its honey.
The brother of Opii is attractive to the eye.
The handsome one is the lover of the brownone,
The daughter of my mother-in-law."

This *sigweya* put the hosts in a festive mood. They trotted

rhythmically, shouting their own *sigweya*, accompanied with ululations. Some of them fanned the visitors who were carrying sorgum grains with whisks made of the thread from the tails of animals, until they entered the homestead and put down their baskets in front of the house of Awino the daughter of Podho, the bride's mother. Then the guests were led to the *siwandha*, the shade that had been made for them, as the hosts danced, praising the beauty and good up-bringing of their daughter.

When they were already seated, Nyawir and her 'sisters' came to greet them. The accompanying girls sang and ululated. On the other side, the guests sang and clapped.

There is no doubt that Achola and all her companions in this journey greatly appreciated the beauty of the girl Owiny had chosen. But they did not reveal it while they were still visitors in that home, because marvelling at a person's beauty in their presence can bring them misfortune. That was why the people of those days did not like someone who publicly marvelled at others' achievements. Praising someone's beauty was done secretly between lovers.

Since that was not a day for making speeches, the activities of the day included such things as *timo nyadhi* (showing your worth to the other party), and entertaining the guests by giving them food and doing all sort of things that showed the girl belonged to a well-to-do family.

After the initial stage of greetings and introductions, the visitors were treated to porridge brought in about five porridge-pots, *mbirni*. The porridge was served in clean calabashes with decorations on their backs. After the visitors had drunk the porridge; there were further celebrations consisting of singing and eating until late in the afternoon. All the time, the bride sat quietly among the other girls, without doing any work, because it was her day of showing off her dignity. Her body was beautifully decorated with chalk, *pundo*, and her hair with white cowries.

It was Awino, the bride's mother, and the young married women of the village who were in charge of the preparation of the food while the girls took the food to the visitors in red earth dishes and new flat baskets which were well-plastered. Awino was full of joy but she kept it within herself because it was unbelievable to her

that her only daughter could be so lucky—to marry into such a well-to-do family as that of Were Ochak, the leader of all people of Got Owaga!

Late in the afternoon, the visitors left for their clan and the women and girls of the village escorted them with a lot of joy, expressed through *sigweya* until they passed the open field and started entering the forest.

When they reached their village, the women and girls who had gone on this journey praised to the people the beauty of Opolo's daughter; and they told Were Ochak and Lwak of their reception and treatment during their visit to the home of Owiny's fiancée. Owiny was extremely happy to hear his sisters and sister-in-law praising his future wife's people. Achola, Opii's wife, went to Lwak when the latter was alone and spoke to her in confidence. "The daughter of Kwang'a, it is true that your daughter-in-law is extremely beautiful; the only thing we don't know is what is in her heart."

"You people are about to bring her," answered Lwak. "Let us wait and see her character when she has come here. Bad nature cannot be hidden for many days."

CHAPTER SIX

The people of Got Owaga believed in assessing things by comparing them with other things of the same kind. *Sembe ipimo mana gi nyamin* they said proverbially. But the joy and happiness which was at the home of Were Ochak on the day Nyawir, the daughter of Opolo, was to be the bride of Owiny, had no comparison at all.

Soon after the payment of bride price had started, Lwak got the news that Nyawir's parents had hidden her in the house of Min Ogisa, who was a grandmother to her. There she was fed on good food and her body was massaged with fine sesame butter because the oil of sesame made the body soft and revealed all of one's natural beauty. As the girl's body was being thus prepared, Owiny, was also preparing himself. The roof of his cottage was thatched with the soft *buoywe* grass; the floor of his cottage was decorated with cactus drawings; and the whole of the wall, both the inside and the outside, was plastered with white chalk soil.

And on the day of the bride's coming, the boys of the village, plus all the other girls and married women woke up early and prepared themselves thoroughly. Ochre and chalk were applied to the face, the arms and the legs as well. The boys wore hats made of very beautiful bird feathers and domestic fowls. And the girls wore ribbons of beads on their necks, waists, ankles and even arms.

During that time, Lwak and Achola showed the married young women all the food that was to be cooked while they still waited for the visitors. The food was cooked by the foot of the fence of the homestead in an enclosure made of mats, in which several fire-places were dug. There were many fire places to enable cooking for those who would accompany the bride. Beside the enclosure, there was a mat spread on the ground. It was there that were kept (neatly covered) red porridge calabashes, red earth dishes and new flat baskets that would be used as plates to serve ugali. Only the elders' beer was still kept in Lwak's house waiting for filtering time.

When Were Ochak came back from the mountain, where he had gone to worship Were Nyakalaga, he found all the preparations ready and his people were just waiting for the visitors. The elderly

women were sitting with Lwak in front of her door; some old men too had arrived and were seated at the foot of the *siala* tree, which had been prepared for them. Owiny and his companions were exchanging jokes on the front yard of his cottage, while Achola and her fellow young married women worked close to the guests' shade, *siwandha*. As they waited anxiously, they listened attentively in an attempt to detect the voices of girls who are supposed to be accompanying the bride.

Sometime during the late hours of the morning, the visitors' singing dominated the ears of Owiny's clansmen. The girls and women of his village, drew one another's attention to it, saying: "Listen, they're coming... they're coming!"

Soon, the girls and women, together with the boys, went out in front of the gate, celebrating with songs and ululations that went as high as the sun, as some of them trotted rhythmically to the tune of their songs.

And when the visitors saw the joy with which the hosts received them, their soloist sang loudly.

"Who has set that locust free?"

And her colleagues responded:

"It's Owiny, the muscular-armed, who has set it free! Haa... Haaa... uuaa! Hee... hee-uuu!"

Then they started singing *salu* songs, walking towards the gate and dancing happily while the bride walked ceremoniously among them until they reached the gate. At that point the bride refused to move farther and enter the homestead; and her companions stopped too and danced round and round by the gate.

When women, men and children of the village set their eyes on the bride they marvelled secretly among themselves, each trying to draw the others' attention to her. Some women stood aside and one of them said:

"Eee... that man's daughter was built, we can't refuse to acknowledge what our eyes are showing us... *tho!*"

Then Achola sent one of her colleagues to go and inform Lwak that the bride had refused to enter the homestead. And Lwak passed on the message to Were Ochak where he was sitting with his fellow elders under the *siala* tree. On receiving the message, Were Ochak

hurried to where Achola and Lwak and her fellow women were seated and said to her:

"*Ragwel*, I've got your message. Send six young women to take various kinds of millet at the gate; the bride will not agree to come in if your gift to her is not satisfactory."

Lwak was happy to hear that because it was said that the girl who had looked after herself well must be received with dignity so that her husband's people would know that she had not come from an ordinary home. So Lwak took some women in her house and gave them *ochuti* sorghum which was well thrashed in two medium-sized baskets. She also gave beans and the *andiwo* millet also of the same quantity; and one such basket of sesame.

With a lot of ceremony, the women took these gifts and put them in front of the bride, as songs and ululations rose to the sky. When the bride saw these gifts, happiness showed on her face and she bowed to show her gratitude; but without moving an inch from where she stood. Her people were very happy and they sang encouraging her to remain adamant. And the groom's people looked at each other in surprise wondering how the bride could still refuse to move after receiving such generous gifts.

A message was sent to Lwak saying: "The bride is happy with gifts but she is still unwilling to come in."

"Then let me take the matter to the old man," replied Lwak quickly. "It's beyond my ability."

She hurried to present the matter to the old man. Seeing that he had done his part to the utmost, he said to Lwak: "*Ragwel*, I've left this matter to the elders to go and inform Owiny, in his cottage, where he is with his colleagues, that there is a problem at the gate. He should come out, and save his name because his guests have refused to enter his homestead."

But this problem did not catch Owiny unawares. He had expected something like this to happen and was prepared to handle the situation. So, when he got the message, he took a big bag in which he had kept a present for his bride. He left his cottage, accompanied by his colleagues who were attending on him and went to the gate, as his 'sisters' sang cheerfully, with ululations.

When he got close to the bride, he opened his bag and took out

chains of small beads of various colours and put them around the girl's neck in a ceremonious moment in which ululations rose to the sun. When the groom and bride's eyes met, those who were present witnessed the sudden change on the bride's face – it started to look more cheerful. Owiny then stood beside her, on her right, and she started to walk into the homestead. Then the bride's co-wives (wives of her brothers-in-law) and her husband's sisters, who all this time had been waiting with the sesame in calabashes, started to throw the sesame on the bride and groom, as they walked along together, until they reached the visitors' reception shade, *siwandha*.

It was when the bride walked majestically into the homestead, that Lwak and Were Ochak saw their daughter-in-law for the first time. All the women who were sitting with Lwak spoke at once. "Ee... and her hair is long, plaited and decorated with beads! Ee, look how soft her skin-cloth is. And look at her sisters' sisal skirt! How white!"

Lwak smiled, pretending not to be moved, but internally she was overjoyed at the beauty of her son's wife. But she kept it in her heart.

When the bride got into the shade, the groom's 'sisters' and the women of the village brought her gifts of sisal-skirts, beads, calabashes, a water pot, a balancing coil, *tach*, a traditional tray, *odheru* and other household items.

And when she was already seated, with Owiny beside her, and greetings had ceased, the ceremony started with eating and dancing.

In those early days when a man got married, it was required by custom that his parent eat from one earth dish on the veranda of their house, so as to initiate their son into adulthood. In the evening of Owiny's wedding, when the hosts and their visitors had eaten and drunk, Were Ochak and Lwak sat in front of their house, each of them smoking a pipe, as they listened to the tune of the nyatiti music which came from the guests' reception shade where it was entertaining the bride. When Were Ochak turned his head and looked at Lwak, he was surprised to notice that she was gloomy.

"What makes you unhappy when your son, Owiny, has brought us such a beautiful girl; a girl who shines like the sun's

eye; who is as pretty as a copper ornament. Or didn't you look at her properly? I had quite a good view of her at the time she was entering the shade; and I felt my heart jumping because of her beauty. I was embarrassed at my reaction."

But it was exactly what Were Ochak mentioned now which had been worrying Lwak all this time, since her son's bride had stepped into their compound. She, therefore, spoke openly to the old man.

"It is beauty of my son's bride which makes me unhappy. I looked at her well at the time she was walking slowly towards the shade and I felt something was wrong— fear seized me immediately. There's something in that girl that does not please me at all."

Were Ochak looked at Lwak sternly and replied: "Ii, Lwak! What fear is that you want to plant in our heart? True. I also felt a little frightened when I looked at her; but I did not consider that as something serious. Opolo's daughter is, indeed, very beautiful — she's slender and very proportionally built. Her legs, arms, and the neck with natural rings! Aaa, she's built! It is only her nature and character that we still don't know." Lwak was shocked at the way the old man admired their new daughter-in-law. But she went on to talk to him.

"That beauty of hers even I have noticed and agree that she's very beautiful. But this beauty of my daughter-in-law does not seem to be for nothing; it's rather unusual. What kind of girl is this whose eyes don't seem to fear anything; and who appears to be seeing the deep secrets of your heart when she looks at you? Aa *Ragot*! Did you see her skin? A skin which glows like fire; like the sun which brings something dreadful — you will one day see! And yet she even looks rude. She keeps twisting her lips... I'm telling you she's head-strong, just wait you'll see one day."

For sure, Were Ochak was frightened when Lwak expressed her misgivings about Owiny's bride. He also found it odd in his heart the way he had reacted to the girl's appearance when he first saw her, as she was entering the reception shade; it was a taboo for such a thing to happen to a father-in-law, according to the customs of his people. But he did not reveal that matter to Lwak. He calmed her feelings, saying: "Okay, the daughter of Kwang'a, you have told me everything you saw in her. Now, let us look at her carefully. I am

also an elder, if she has some mystery about her, we will soon get to know. Indeed, your fears are not for nothing. The people of Got Owaga say that the beautiful one reveals ugliness in other ways. So, just keep that matter in your heart."

"I have heard you, *Ragot*," Lwak answered softly. "Let us take time, to look at her, I actually have no quarrel with her plaited hair. It is only her glowing skin that gives me an ominous feeling about her."

That evening Were Ochak spent the night in Lwak's house, as was required by custom, but he did not sleep throughout the night. He kept turning from side to side, as he tried to understand the hidden meaning of what Lwak had told him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The following day, early in the morning, four girls were chosen to stay behind and keep the bride company while she got used to her new home. The other girls, who brought the bride, left Were Ochak's home in a noisy, joyful mood. It was their singing which signalled to the people of Got Owaga, as their customs required, that their daughter had looked after herself well before she went into wedlock.

The voice of the soloist rose high up into the air, singing:

<i>Agoro ee,</i>	<i>Agoro ee</i>
<i>Agoro ee.....ee!</i>	<i>Agoro ee.....ee!</i>
<i>Oyude, ee,</i>	<i>It's found, ee,</i>
<i>Onwang'e ee.....ee!</i>	<i>It's discovered ee.....ee!</i>
<i>Wadiyo ee,</i>	<i>We've confined ee,</i>
<i>Wamiyo ee.....ee!</i>	<i>We've concealed ee.....ee!</i>
<i>Agoro ee,</i>	<i>Agoro ee.....ee</i>
<i>Agoro ee.....ee</i>	<i>Agoro ee.....ee</i>
<i>Walochi ee,</i>	<i>We've won ee</i>
<i>Walochi ee.....ee!</i>	<i>We've won ee.....ee!</i>

That morning, Owiny gave his wife an armlet as a reward for her having kept herself whole. And Achola, the bride's co-wife, *nyieke*, gave her a beautiful water-pot, a balancing coil, and two calabashes. Then she took the bride and her four 'sisters' to bathe in a river in those early hours of the morning, according to the customs of the land. And for four days, Nyawir, the daughter of Opolo, was treated with all the honour and dignity corresponding to her status as a bride. During this time, she did not work at all.

After that, Achola, having realized that Opolo's daughter was a kind hearted woman, who loved the people around her, got to like Nyawir and started to assign her light duties which she could do easily as she learnt to get along with the family members and the clansmen.

It was during that time that Ochieng', Opii's son, started to be

friends with her younger mother, Nyawir. At times, when Nyawir and her 'sisters' were seated, plaiting their hair, Ochieng' would move closer and touch his young mother's hair; sometimes he touched her legs, which were as soft as those of a little child. But secretly Ochieng' and his younger brother feared Nyawir. This became clear when one day Ochieng' went to his grandmother, Lwak, and said: "Grandmother, I really like my younger mother. But sometimes when her eyes and mine meet, I feel frightened. Why does that happen?"

Lwak was scared, and she answered Ochieng' saying: "Aaa... my grandson, with all that beauty, and love which Were Nyakalaga gave to your young mother, why should you be frightened of her?"

Ochieng' replied softly, "I don't know. But each time I'm near her, when our eyes meet, I always feel a sudden rush of cold blood in my body. Then I get frightened."

Lwak was quite aware of the fact that what her grandson was saying was true and could not be ignored. But it was not easy for her to reveal to this little child that she too had had similar experiences with that bride. She did not want to plant fear into his heart; and she would hate it to appear as if she was backbiting her new daughter-in-law with a little boy who could very easily repeat their conversation to other people and spread the matter. But, more than anything else, she was disturbed by the fact that Owiny, the groom, or Opii, her elder son, and even his wife, Achola, only focussed on the girl's beauty but did not see the ominous aspect of her nature. She realized that only her little grandson had seen the true nature of that bride.

It was wonderful that in the whole family only the three of them Were Ochak, Lwak herself, and the little boy, Ochieng' were seeing the hidden aspect of the bride's nature. But Lwak was hesitant to raise this matter with anybody, even with Were Ochak. She thought it was wise to hold on for a little while. A person of her age had to have the ability to be patient and keep secrets. The people of Got Owaga say that a person who warms up quickly like roast meat breaks an arm. She had to be careful, lest she should say something that would annoy Owiny, by giving the impression that she had a low opinion of his bride.

As Lwak struggled to keep this matter in her heart, the beauty

of Nyawir got more and more acclaim all over the clan. When the slender one, Nyawir, went to fetch water, the girls and women whom she found at the river would drop their own calabashes down and remain watching her. But slowly the matter began to embarrass Lwak. One day she heard some women gossiping about her daughter-in-law, saying:

"Really, Lwak's daughter-in-law is very beautiful; but those sparkling eyes! When that woman is looking at you, you feel as if she is seeing all the secrets in your innermost heart, *tho!*"

The other woman responded.

"Aa, my friend, leave alone her beauty, what really scares me is that glowing skin. How come her brownness glows like fire? *Tho jowa*, the beauty of that Opolo's daughter cannot be for nothing, one day you people will see it!"

As the clansmen thus marvelled at Nyawir's beauty, with time, the beauty began to be a source of embarrassment and not pride to Lwak, her mother-in-law. However, although Lwak was much disturbed by these gossip, the love between Nyawir and Owiny never decreased even a little. On occasions Owiny would flatter his wife by saying: "Aa, the daughter of my in-laws, you are the pupil of my eye with which I see!"

Since Achola, Opii's wife, and all her children, liked Nyawir, and so did Were Ochak, Lwak chose not to disturb the peace that existed in her home; she too would grow to like her new daughter-in-law.

The daughter of Opolo got on well with the other members of her new family, and people were now getting ready to start cultivating their land. Owiny told Nyawir that it was now proper for her 'sisters' who had stayed behind with her to go back to their homes. He, however, did not say it plainly that the girls should go back because people wanted to cultivate the land; he said it in a hidden way, lest the girls should think that he was chasing them away. He gave them a lot of presents and bid them farewell with all the appropriate ceremony; they then left for their place.

Soon the days of the full moon were over. Were Ochak said to Lwak: "*Ragwel*, put your hands into action so that you may prepare a small brew for opening the season of cultivation. I have seen the

signs of the new year. The year is quite warm; the *okwadha* birds are already flying over the open fields and the pain which I feel in my joints when the season changes is already there; we must be moving into a new year."

"You're right, *Ragot*," replied Lwak, "I also experience a lot of stiffness in my joints these days, especially at night; tomorrow I'll surely put the brewing seeds in a damp place to germinate."

The day the new moon appeared, Lwak was ready with the beer which the old man wanted. And in the evening of that day, an elder called Omach, beat the *nyilwong'* drum to mark the beginning of a new year. Since this drum was the voice with which Were Ochak communicated with his people, they knew that the time for going to pray at Mt. Owaga had come. All the people who had dressed themselves in readiness for the occasion and were only waiting for the voice of the drum and started walking hurriedly towards the mountain.

By the time the sun was about to set, all the people of Got Owaga had gathered in front of the shrine which had been built for Were Nyakalaga at the peak of the mountain. Men sat in one group and the women also sat in their own group. Lwak sat with her two daughters-in-law, Achola the wife of Opii and Nyawir the wife of Owiny. Lwak had already brought the beer in a red pot to the foot of a rock near the shrine. When everyone was completely quite, Were Ochak emerged from the middle of the inside of the shrine where he had gone to listen to the voices of Were Nyakalaga and the ancestors. Then he spoke to the crowd.

"Our people, the moon is already up and the whole of Got Owaga is ready to start tilling the land. And, in accordance with our tradition since the beginning of our nation, we have all come here to the top of the mountain and gathered in front of this shrine, so that we may pay homage to Were Nyakalaga and ask him humbly to stretch his arm so as to bless the earth in the rainy season which we shall enter when the sun rises in the morning. At the time I was in the shrine, Were Nyakalaga told me that the land is in good condition and we should go ahead and start cultivating it."

Then Were Ochak raised his voice and asked everyone thus:

"Are you happy with that message?"

"Yes we are happy!" they responded in unison.

Then Omach stood up quickly and said:

"Yes, it is so, our father. The wind is blowing from the top of the mountain, down on to our farms, as it entices the rain. We also see lightning at night, in the East; so this time, when the moon disappears again the rains will come."

The whole crowd stood up simultaneously and responded in one voice:

"That's the voice of Were Nyakalaga
We have seen the *okwadha* birds flying over the fields
That shows the rains are about to come."

Immediately, Were Ochak went into the shrine; and when he came out, they saw him carrying a hoe with a metal in his right hand, and an earth dish in which there was a barbecued chicken in his left hand. Then he put them on the flat rock in front of the shrine where at the foot of the rock, Lwak had already put a black pot of *manyasi* (cleansing medicine) on top of a new balancing coil, together with beer in a red pot which Achola had carried for her. At this time the sun was about to set, and its eye had already turned very red.

Were Ochak prayed in a loud voice, pleading with Were Nyakalaga and spitting towards the sun:

"*Thu*, may your setting bring us some good, so that we may sleep in peace.

And when you rise again tomorrow, may you bring us fortune, and shine blessings on us for the whole day.

You are Were Nyakalaga (the omni present), you permeate the whole universe

Our ancestors pleaded with you and worshipped you

Just as we worship you today.
We have all come here; and we have brought
you this sacrifice
You and our ancestors.
Aa....yaye, Were Nyakalaga
Stretch your arm and bless this land of ours
Open your eyes so that the rains may come
Blow your breath upon the land that the
crops may do well
As you did to us in the last harvest.
Aa, you indeed are Were Nyakalaga
You permeate the whole universe.

Then Were Ochak took a hoe with a metal head and held it under his arm. After that he took a flywhisk and dipped it into a medicine-pot, *aguch manyasi*. Then he went and stood in front of the shrine; and sprinkled the medicine onto the roof and the whole of the wall, saying:

"You indeed are Were Nyakalaga
We are sprinkling this medicine unto you
In order to keep away
The evil forces that may ruin the land
Before we start cultivating."

Then he turned and sprinkled the medicine onto all the people of Got Owaga who were standing there. After that he put the pot at the foot of the rock. Then he took a whole chicken that was in the red earth dish and tore off its limbs, including wings. The first piece he threw in the western direction, where the sun sets; and the second piece he threw in the eastern direction where the sun rises; the third one he threw towards the north; and the fourth one he threw towards south. He prayed thus:

"We roasted this chicken to eat it with you,
And with our ancestors
You indeed are Were Nyakalaga."

Immediately, when everyone was still standing Lwak came to

the foot of the rock; she took a wooden stirring rod and stirred the medicine which was kept at the foot of the rock in a red pot as she prayed:

"A.... Were Nyakalaga
In addition to what you have been given
I am stirring the medicine in this red pot for you,
Aa, may the medicine boil, and flow gently downhill
In the direction of our farms
so that we may have good harvest
Aa, you indeed are Were Nyakalaga."

And when Lwak saw the medicine boiling, and its froth rising and overflowing, she prayed thus:

"Thank you, thank you Were Nyakalaga
Your hand has blessed the medicine
It is flowing downwards
To bring us blessings
And to bless our land."

Then the crowd answered in chorus:

"Thank you, thank you Were Nyakalaga
And our ancestors."

Were Ochak said to all the people of Got Owaga:

"Our people, the work which brought us here
has ended well. Now you go back in peace.
But from this time let no one fight or offend another person.
And when you get back home, this evening every man
must spend the night in his house; let no man sleep
alone in his *dwol*, private hut, so that we may flourish
and multiply.

And all the people of Got Owaga answered:

"It is so
Thank you, thank you."

Were Ochak then raised his arm and blessed everyone, saying:
"Go in peace and reach your homes before darkness falls."

The multitude started to go down. Were Ochak and the other elders stayed behind for a while to eat the sacrificial chicken and to have a taste of the beer which Lwak had brought in a red pot. Immediately after that, the remaining beer was poured at the foot of the rock for the ancestors below; and bones of the chicken were thrown in the four corners of the earth. Then Were Ochak and the other elders went down the mountain, the former carrying a hoe as the latter walked on his left and right hand sides.

CHAPTER EIGHT

At around dusk, when Were Ochak reached home, Nyawir saw him carrying the hoe with a metal head, going straight into Lwak's house, where he would spend his night as was required by custom. Nyawir desired to touch that hoe with her hands because its head was sparkling and attractive. She tried very hard to remember how it had been in the world in which she had grown up. Did people cultivate their land by themselves or did Were Nyakalaga do it for them? But she could not recall anything she had seen in that world.

Later, at night, when every husband went into his house, Nyawir and Owiny also went into their cottage. And when they had lain down to sleep, Nyawir said to her husband: "Owiny, the son of my father-in-law, so you people wanted to start tilling the land and that's why you arranged for my companions to go back, eh?"

You're right," replied Owiny, "You know that our customs do not allow us to start tilling the land when there are visitors in a home; I'm sure you're also aware of that."

Then Nyawir smiled softly and said, "My mother's son-in-law, there's something I want to ask you as a secret between you and me; Please, swear that you'll tell me the truth, without deceiving me in any way, and that you'll not be unhappy with me."

Owiny laughed, saying: "Oh, surely, *Rapudo*, since you got married into this home, have you ever seen any sign that I can deceive you? And how can I be unhappy with you, *Rapudo*, knowing that you're the eye with which I see!"

Nyawir twisted her lips as if she was smiling and in the process being overtaken by fear. At that time the fire which was at the far corner, in the direction of their feet suddenly burst out noisily and burnt brightly, lighting up the house! Nyawir clasped Owiny's shoulder, and asked him: "Is it true that you people of Got Owaga do not till the land with your hands, that it is that metal-headed hoe which I saw the old man praying with which is taken to the farm, left there, and that it is that hoe which tills the land in each farm until it finishes all the farms in Got Owaga, and that it does all that with the power of Were Nyakalaga?"

Owiny was greatly shocked to hear his wife trying to open a discussion on a subject that was sacred in Got Owaga. He replied quickly: "*Rapudo*, we should not talk about such important matters which touch on the very existence of our community. Please, let's talk about other things!"

But this offended Nyawir: She protested hard: "You see? Now I'm sure that you only flatter me with empty words; but your inner heart is very far from me. It's true that you haven't started having faith in me as your wife. And, even if I ignore your own attitude, I have observed that since I came here to be your wife all your people, both your family and clansmen, look at me strangely as if I wasn't a human being. That matter really troubles my heart and I feel scared!"

Hm, Owiny wondered in his heart. So the conversation which had started as a joke had now developed into a quarrel! And yet the old man had warned them against having any violent disagreement with one another. He turned and held Nyawir's hands in his own as he tried to calm her, saying:

"Daughter of my in-laws, what kind of talk is that? Perhaps the clansmen look at you that way because your beauty attracts them, just as it attracts me."

Owiny's hand touched Nyawir's arm all the way up to her shoulders as he smiled. "Personally, I love you so much that only death will separate us. Aren't you aware of that in your inner heart, daughter of my mother-in-law?"

Truly speaking, Nyawir was aware that Owiny loved her very much; but she did not want to declare that awareness to him yet because Owiny had not answered her question. So she sulked, twisting her neck, as she said: "You're only deceiving me, *Bade Dongo*. If you really loved me and sincerely regarded me as your wife and as a wife of this home, you wouldn't have waited for me to ask you things about this place. You would have told me all the secrets of this village which I ought to know."

Owiny realised that this woman, who was still new in his home, was determined to push him into a hot argument. He wondered why she chose to talk about sacred matters in a way that, given his love for her, put him in a dilemma. How terrible! Owiny took

matters easy, as he said to Nyawir: "Please, daughter of my mother-in-law, there is nothing to show that I don't love you, is there? Is your temper that short? Can't you take a joke?"

But Nyawir protested further, saying: "Of course, I do take jokes; but there must be a limit; the people of Got Owaga have a saying that 'a joke is the hidden way of indicating desires'. In your joke you may be telling me the truth in your mind. Then Owiny pleaded. "Aa, *Rapudo*, will that small affair develop into a quarrel? Why do you push me like that?"

"Then answer me, if it is a small affair," replied Nyawir. "You must be the one who wants to change it into a big affair because you have refused to answer me."

Owiny got tired of arguing with his wife and said to her: "That hoe you saw the old man carrying while he prayed, it is the hoe with a metal head which Were Nyakalaga gave us so it could till the land for all the people of Got Owaga."

When Nyawir noticed that Owiny was becoming softer, she marvelled saying: "Hmm, what a strange thing! It's wonder!"

"What do you wonder at, daughter of my in-laws," Owiny asked his wife. "Why don't you talk well now?" he asked further.

"Well... no, there's nothing, my mother's son-in-law," replied Nyawir. "I was just thinking... well...let me not disturb you if you're tired. Let's sleep."

From Nyawir's manner of talking, Owiny knew in his inner heart that she was just pretending; she certainly had something in her heart which she didn't want to tell him.

He held her shoulders and pulled her seductively towards him, saying:

"Please *Rapudo*, what is the matter with you today? Why do you hide your mind from me while I talk to you openly? I will also start complaining that you don't love me."

That gave Nyawir more courage. She decided to reveal to him the idea which had troubled her secretly all the time when people had been praying on top of mount Owaga. She sat up and said: "There's something wrong with the idea of taking the metal-headed hoe to the farms and leaving it to till the land. But I feel that as the

world changes, and people reproduce and multiply here in Got Owaga, it might be a good idea if people tried to till the land, using their hands. That's when there would be more wealth on the earth. That's the kind of change we need. We cannot keep doing things by our ancestors' old method of leaving a hoe in the farms and waiting for it to till for them. If the people of Got Owaga can agree so that every family gets their own hoe, they can till large pieces of land and have bigger harvests than we have nowadays."

This time Nyawir had gone too far. Owiny did not even wait to let her finish. He got up at once, and scolded Nyawir angrily.

"*Rapudo*, how did such a terrible idea get into your mind? What kind of talk is that? I think you are crazy. Since the earth came into existence, there's no single person who has uttered or imagined such a terrible thing. Who are you to alter what Were Nyakalaga himself planned for our ancestors? I'm shocked by what has come out of your mouth."

Nyawir was deeply offended by what Owiny told her. She felt annoyed and bitter in her heart. How could Owiny scold her like that when she was still new in wedlock and was, therefore entitled to soft treatment?

She cried angrily, as she answered Owiny.

"Owiny, isn't it proper for me to reveal to you the secrets of my heart? You can talk to me like that when I'm still new in your home! What, then, will happen when I have given birth to your children and my beauty is gone? Today I've known for sure that you're just deceiving me with words, but your heart is away from me."

She knelt beside her husband. The fire was now burning brightly; and with the full moon, which was shining outside, the whole house was lit up. Owiny was holding both of Nyawir's shoulders, as he looked at her eyes, moved by her anger. He spoke to her softly.

"Listen, the daughter of the owner of the millet, I am not scolding you; I'm only trying to tell you that we should not do or touch anything that could bring a curse on the land. Our parents have stayed close to Were Nyakalaga since the very distant past; and for all that time they haven't experienced any famine, they have enough food for their needs. Now, what should make us wish to use

our hands in tilling the land? That would be terribly hard work, since our farms are really big!"

"I'm only trying to suggest something that can help our nation," replied Nyawir quickly. "But if you think what I have said is bad, then lets leave it at that point, so that you may not be unhappy with me."

Smiling, Owiny replied, "If you left the matter at that point, and forgot it completely, you would bring some good peace between you and me."

Nyawir embraced Owiny around the shoulders, in the attempt to hide the shame and secret anger which she still had in her heart.

"Alright, that's good, *Rateng'*," she said half-heartedly. "In fact, I was just joking; because truly speaking, I would not wish to dig; it is hard and it spoils one's body. Don't you see how the women of Got Owaga have soft bodies, just because they don't dig? In fact, one of the reasons why I agreed to be your wife is that here, around Got Owaga, people don't use their hands to till the land."

Touching Nyawir on the neck with his right hand, Owiny said: "Ah, you are full of jokes! However, I can't hide what I have seen. Of course, it's true that I love you, *Rapudo* ; but that does not mean that we can't quarrel or offend each other. It's through quarrelling that we teach each other."

Nyawir smiled sweetly and held Owiny round the waist, saying:

"*Bade Dongo*, now I know that you're not unhappy with me; you were only teasing me."

After that Owiny sat on the mat, his wife, Nyawir, sitting by his side.

"*Rapudo*," he addressed her, "Now you can ask me whatever you want to know about the metal-headed hoe and I'll tell you."

Suddenly, Nyawir became very happy; she was secretly full of happiness in her heart. She immediately started to ask him questions:

"Is it the one I saw the old man taking to my mother-in-law's house? And why did he bring it here, into our home?"

"Yes, that was the metal-headed hoe," replied Owiny. "After all the prayers and offerings on the mountain have come to an end, and

the season for cultivating is to be opened the following day, the old man takes the hoe from the hut on the mountain, where it is normally kept, and brings it to my mother's house where it is kept for the whole of the night, as it is required by the commandments of Were Nyakalaga. And very early in the morning, the following day, my mother brings it out secretly and takes it to the farms of other people, following the commandments of Were Nyakalaga."

After hearing that, Nyawir found her heart hard; but she tried not to let Owiny realize that she was shocked by what he had told her. Pretending to be alright, she said:

"Ee, I believe you people of Got Owaga are fortunate. Let us now sleep, my mother's brother-in-law, it is very late."

As he went to fasten the door, Owiny said: "I also feel tired; let's sleep then."

And, as Owiny was tired, he lay down and fell asleep immediately, even forgetting that he had a new wife by his side. But to Opolo's daughter this was a big advantage. She remained wide awake and kept turning from side to side. She thought that since she and her husband had quarrelled over the hoe, now she would not reveal whatever she thought or wanted to do concerning the hoe. She herself did not believe it was proper just to take the hoe and take it to farms and leave it there to cultivate the land. For what was man supposed to do with the tremendous energy which Were Nyakalaga had given him? Why couldn't the people of Got Owaga till their land using their hands?

She felt a strong urge to touch the hoe with a metal head. She clicked as she spoke softly to herself. "I, Nyawir, the daughter of Opolo, must touch that hoe with my hands; only then shall my heart rest."

"But how shall I find It, since it is kept in my mother-in-law's house, and she'll take it out early in the morning?" she thought again.

She turned and embraced Owiny and slowly she fell asleep.

CHAPTER NINE

The following day, very early in the morning, Were Ochak went close to Owiny's cottage and cleared his voice as a signal to Owiny that he was already up.

"Owiny, the son of Omolo's sister," he called, "are you still asleep?"

When Owiny recognized his father's voice, he answered quickly.

"No, I'm already awake."

"Then let's go," added the old man.

"*Rapudo*, are you still asleep?" Owiny asked Nyawir, shaking her gently. "I am leaving now. Today my father and I are going to pray on top of the mountain because it is a great day for us, a day on which we open the season of cultivation."

Nyawir yawned and said, "No, I'm not asleep. The whole night I was feeling very uncomfortable and was not able to sleep peacefully until morning; I am not sure that I won't get sick soon."

Owiny was already up and was starting to get dressed. He turned towards his new wife and asked her:

"But *Rapudo*, why didn't you wake me up so that we could talk or I could comfort you, instead of remaining awake alone the whole night?"

"Aa... Well," said Nyawir, "I feared that you might find it difficult to fall asleep again. I didn't want to offend you."

Owiny wanted to continue talking to his wife but when he heard the old man clearing his voice again, he excused himself.

"*Rapudo*, my father is waiting for me in the yard, let me go now while you try to get some sleep, we'll see each other when I come back."

Then Owiny took a club, opened the door quickly and dashed out, pulling the shutter behind him. He joined his father in the yard. And, after greeting him, both of them went through the gate, which the old man opened slightly, and they hurried towards the top of Mount Owaga.

When Nyawir guessed that Owiny and his father had left, she jumped up from where she had been lying, speaking to herself thus:

"Aa, the daughter of Opolo, can I fall asleep again? I'll go and sit right at the entrance of the veranda so that I may wait and see when my mother-in-law takes that metal-headed hoe to the farm."

But while she was still hiding there she realized that this place was so hidden that she would not be able to see well what her mother-in-law was doing in her house. She therefore decided to walk stealthily between the trees so that she would go and hide under the tree in front of her mother-in-law's house. She walked out of the cottage, making sure that she was not noticed by anyone and dodged her way between trees until she got to the target tree and hid behind it.

And it did not take long before she suddenly saw Lwak coming out of her house, carrying the metal-headed hoe in her right hand and a calabash of water in her left hand. Lwak went to the foot of the tree, put some water in her mouth and squirted it on to the hoe. She heard something disturbing the bush around the foot of the tree. She was very scared and asked loudly: "What is that?"

Nyawir jumped out of her hiding place, saying: "It's me my grandmother.* I'm sorry if I scared you."

She had scared her mother-in-law very badly. Lwak moved backwards, saying: "You have badly scared me! What's wrong in your house? Why have you woken up so early? Being a new person here, you should still be sleeping."

When she realized that her mother-in-law's voice was stern, Nyawir tried to smile and calm her mother-in-law by saying:

"Mother of Opii, I knew that today people start cultivating the land; that's why I got up early. Since you don't have a little daughter whom you can send, now it's me who will serve as your daughter. I thought there was something you might want me to do for you."

Lwak was suspicious of her daughter-in-law's rushness. She, therefore, spoke to her openly: "My child, what kind of work would you do for me so early in the morning, when people are still asleep? Just go back to sleep. A new woman like you should still be given a visitor's treatment by us. Why worry about much work? Give your body a rest you'll help me with work later."

* Traditionally, Luo women refer to their mothers-in-law as 'grandmother'.

But Lwak's voice would not alter the mind of her daughter-in-law. Nyawir lowered her voice and tried to persuade her mother-in-law saying: "My grandmother, being a new woman does not prevent me from working in this home. Would it really be proper for me to stay idle while you drudge until you put food before me to eat? Now that my 'sisters' have gone back, I have to help you with some light duties."

Lwak stood there, speechless, having a nasty feeling and looking at her out of the corner of her eye. She marvelled within herself; "Really, this daughter-in-law of mine! What exactly is wrong with you? Where is the work you're helping me with at this early hour, when everyone is still asleep?" Nyawir tried to argue back, pleading with her thus: "But, surely, my grandmother, it's you who should show me what to do for you because you're the controller of all the work in this household."

Realizing that her daughter-in-law was engaging her in difficult argument so early in the morning; and considering that she was delaying in performing an important function for her community, Lwak rebuked Nyawir, saying:

"My daughter-in-law, I don't want a hot argument with you so early in the morning. There's no work you can help me with at this time of the year. If you want to work, just wait until we open the season of cultivation then I'll see what you can do for me."

Then Lwak put some water in her mouth and sprinkled it on the head of the hoe, after which she started to walk towards the gate. But before she got away, Nyawir went and suddenly blocked her way, and quickly said to her:

"Let me take that metal-headed hoe to the farm for you. I knew that today you are opening the season of cultivation to all the people of Got Owaga, and you're taking the hoe to our big farm near River Mihoo."

When the daughter of Opolo revealed that secret information, Lwak stood where she was, astonished. Her heart started to beat hard; and she remembered how scared she had been when she first set eyes on her young daughter-in-law, as she walked towards the reception shade among the girls who had brought her. When Lwak started to talk, she found her voice trembling.

"Aa, daughter of Opolo," she asked in a rough voice, "Is that really so? Where did you get that kind of information? And, new as you are in this home, how have you known that our big farm is at the head* of River Mihoo? Moreover, who has told you the secrets concerning this metal-headed hoe?"

And while the daughter of Opolo was still tongue-tied, Lwak added angrily: "You're still a new wife in this family, daughter of Opolo; but you should know that I am the only woman in this home who touches this hoe because I am the senior wife who cleanses for all the people of Got Owaga. And I am the one who opens cultivation for all the people of Got Owaga. And you, being a new wife, should not talk about things you don't understand. Go back to sleep."

But Nyawir did not let Lwak breathe after she finished talking. With tears rolling down her cheeks, she moved towards Lwak, her arms wide open, and started to argue, saying: "Aa, mother of Opii, we belong to one community; and surely, as Owiny's first wife, I must use my intelligence to understand the life of the people of my village and to know where farms are situated. Please, just give me the hoe to take to the farm for you."

Lwak was scandalized. How could Nyawir talk like that when she was still a new bride in this home? She looked at her daughter-in-law from her feet to her head and realized that she actually feared her. She started to wonder how she was going to live with her in one home. The thought made her appreciate even more the good nature of Achola, Opii's wife. She was quite a queen! Ever since she got married into this family, Achola had never even mentioned anything about the opening of cultivation. Now, what kind of woman was Nyawir, Opolo's daughter?

As Lwak was battling with worries in her head, Nyawir sulked. Looking gloomy with tears hanging in her eyes. She said: "Mm...my grandmother, today I know for sure that you don't regard me as your child, you don't like me and you don't want me. And that's why you can't trust me even with a simple duty such as taking the hoe to the farm."

* Point where a (small) river disappears on land.

Lwak marveled at the misfortune she had woken up with, wondering what kind of wife his son had brought. Beating her thighs with the hands in which she was carrying a half-gourd, she wondered, saying: "The daughter of Opolo, what words are those you're uttering? Is it really proper for me to stand here in the yard, quarreling with you, my son's new wife? What a shame you are giving me! And how can you doubt my love? Those baskets of sorgum, and the finger millet, and the beans which were paid to your parents as dowry — where did they come from? Weren't they mine? Or, for the time that you've been here, have I ever shown low opinion of you, or slighted you in any way?"

Nyawir stood at a distance from Lwak, her neck stiff and her mouth pursed. Then she started talking peevishly:

"All that you have said I accept, but the important thing is trust. Even if you love me, my heart cannot be pleased if you don't trust me. Yesterday, I informed your son, Owiny, that since I became a wife in this home, whenever you see me your body shrinks in terror, and you look at me strangely, as if I'm a strange creature, different from you."

Lwak was apprehensive; then she became frightened and felt cold all over her body. But she maintained a firm grip on the hoe. Looking towards the east, she knew the red colour which had covered the sky was disappearing; the sun was about to emerge. Making a desperate gesture with her hands, she lamented, thus:

"Ah *yaye*, the daughter of Opolo, seeing that you're still new in this home, how come you have planted hatred in your heart by believing that I don't trust you? And that I don't love you as my child? No, my daughter-in-law, I refuse, you cannot touch the metal-headed hoe! You are a young man's wife but you are too ambitious—you want to touch the sacred hoe while Achola the wife of Opii hasn't, and she is the wife of the elder son? Ah! What a terrible idea!"

And the mention of Achola, the wife of Opii, made Opolo's daughter start to jabber like one possessed with spirits. She stared at her mother-in-law harshly, saying:

"You see! I talk with you as Owiny's wife; but you don't want to listen to me, your heart is only in Achola, the wife of Opii, whom

you dearly love. I have no interest in what Achola is going to do later, I'm only requesting you to give me the metal-headed hoe to take to the farm for you."

Terrible! Lwak marvelled in her heart, saying: "Hm... what really is this?" She moved two steps towards her daughter-in-law and said to her: "Look, the daughter of Opolo, you are demeaning yourself. Being new in this home, and a bride at that, it is proper that you respect me; only then can I also respect you. And respecting me means obeying my word. But this kind of stubbornness only breeds hatred between you and me; and brings shame upon us. Your stubbornness can surely bring catastrophe to this home. What kind of woman are you, my daughter-in-law? Do you want me to wake all the people of this home so that they may come and see how you are misbehaving before me in the yard?"

Nyawir was moved by Lwak's words. She hurried as if she wanted to hold Lwak's hand, and pleaded with her, saying:

"Aaa, my grandmother, please don't call anyone. This is a secret between the two of us. I am only requesting you, as your daughter-in-law to agree and give me the metal-headed hoe so that I may take it to the farm for you. Look, if you had shown me where I should take it, I would have gone and would almost be back again."

Although it was still early in the morning and rather cold, Lwak began to sweat all over her body. And, as if speaking to herself, she lamented, saying:

"You're pushing me into something I really don't like. My fellow woman's child, what kind of upbringing did you have? You're terribly obstinate! You know that when your people entrust you with this kind of heavy responsibility — a duty which has come from the hands of Were Nyakalaga — it is proper that you do it according to the commandments of Were Nyakalaga, and following the wish of the people. Yesterday you saw the people of Got Owaga, the whole lot of them, asking Were Nyakalaga our ancestors to bless the land and the opening of cultivation with this metal-headed hoe.

"And my daughter-in-law, after seeing all that you still want to force me to give you this hoe which only your father-in-law and I are allowed to touch; that you should be the person who takes it to the

farm! And yet you're still new in this home! Don't you see that you want to do a forbidden thing? You want to make me antagonize the people! You have shocked me, our daughter; and I'm not happy at all."

As Lwak spoke, Nyawir regained heart. She quickly realized that Lwak was giving in. She, therefore, gave a soft smile and continued to beg in a humble manner, saying:

"Look, my grandmother, I accept your words of wisdom; but, please, mother of Opii, just trust me. I too 'am a wife of this community. I cannot do anything that would spoil the good relationship between us and Were Nyakalaga and take us away from our ancestors."

Lwak stood there feeling very much embarrassed! Would she the mother of the community quarrel there in the open with her new daughter-in-law on the day of opening cultivation? Oh! and how badly that was messing her up!

So, though she was completely against the idea, she decided in her heart to avoid embarrassment and said to Nyawir: "You have put so much shame on my head, my daughter-in-law. Look, you're still new in this home. That makes it difficult for me to have a row with you; and I don't know how to reject your request. However, I feel uneasy about the idea of sending you to the farm, my daughter-in-law. You look like the sort of young woman who can cause trouble between us and Were Nyakalaga. But since you have argued with me for all this time, there is nothing I can do. Here, take the metal headed hoe."

Nyawir did not let her mother-in-law's tongue settle. She jumped at her and snatched the hoe from her hand, acting naughtily and happily saying:

"My grandmother, mother of Opii, thank you very, very much! It's now that I know you love me, and you surely trust me. You have really given me this metal-headed hoe to take to the farm! Thank you mother of Opii."

Then Lwak instructed Nyawir carefully, saying: "Now walk very fast until you reach the upper end of our big farm near Mihoo River. Go straight through the main gate; hurry until you pass the open field; then go into the big bush opposite the farms. And when

you get there you will see the log of a big tree near the anthill from which the farms begin. Put the metal-headed hoe on top of the log directly. After doing that, walk quickly back home; and don't look behind you. And even if you happen to meet someone on your way back, don't greet him or talk to him, do you hear?"

When the daughter of Opolo had received an okay from her mother-in-law, her happiness was beyond measure. She spoke to the old woman nervously: "Aaa, mother of Opii, aaa my grandmother: thank you, thank you very much. I'll not take time; I'll hurry, just as you have instructed me to do."

As soon as she finished talking, Nyawir started to trot towards the gate. By the time the East was already clear and the sun was about to rise. Lwak stood where she was, marvelling, until her naughty daughter-in-law went past the gate and disappeared from her sight. Then she started talking to herself:

"This daughter-in-law of mine! I wonder what will become of her! This woman is still very new in this home; and yet she has no restraint at all; and her eyes look at you without a wink. She talks to me without fear, as if I was her agemate! *Tho!* Daughter of Kwang'a, what an embarrassing affair!"

Lwak walked away, still marvelling – her calabash in the hand until she got into her house.

CHAPTER TEN

When Nyawir left the compound, she hurried until she passed the open field and entered the bush. Her legs were covered with cold dew but she did not mind. All her heart was on the metal-headed hoe which she had in her hand; and she was very anxious to get to the farms. All this time she was very happy; but she also seemed to have some hidden fear. For she felt that the birds were singing much louder than she usually heard them do when she was still in her cottage in the early hours of the day. But she also had a feeling that maybe it was her early arrival in the bush that had frightened those birds.

However, she soon took her attention from the birds and started to trot in an effort to get to the farms before the sun rose. She suddenly realized that she had come out on the other side of the big bush. Looking ahead, she saw big farms, going from near the bush down to the banks of Mihoo River, just as Owiny had told her the previous day. She hurried until she got near a fig-tree log with a forked stem, which stood at an isolated spot near an anthill. When she got there, she stood still, her eyes covering all the farms. She was attracted by the soil of their land; and she marvelled, saying:

"Wuolo...lo...Daughter of Opolo! How come Owiny, my mother's son-in-law, didn't tell me that this land is so wonderful! Ee, and all these farms belong to the people of Got Owaga! Now where could my family's farm be situated here? I cant remember where our farms used to be when I was a little girl. Oh, what fertile soil!"

Then Nyawir took a handful of soil and appeared to be examining it because the soil had a nice smell, like that of *ogue* soil after the rain. As she carried the soil in her hands, she felt a strong temptation in her heart to try and hit the land with the hoe — to see how soft it was. And, as the matter passed through her mind, she heard birds crying loudly, as if they were trying to pass across some message to her; but she did not heed their voices. She moved a few steps ahead and started to spill the soil through the air, like a woman winnowing millet. And when she felt the desire to dig that soil

increasing in her heart, she quickly decided to put the hoe at the place where her mother-in-law had instructed her to put it. But her inner mind did not approve of that decision. She caught herself talking aloud.

"Ee, these are the people Were Nyakalaga really loves. He has given them this wonderful soil; and he has, in addition, given them this metal-headed hoe to cultivate the land for them. *Tho*, the daughter of Opolo, I am irresistibly attracted to this black soil; I must try to dig it a little — only then shall my heart rest."

Then she walked slowly towards the place where her mother-in-law had instructed her to put the metal-headed hoe. But when she got near the fig-tree log, she stood for a long time, wondering what she ought to do, as she spoke her thoughts aloud.

"If a mere hoe can cultivate all these farms on its own, what a wonderful piece of work would be done on these farms if this metal hoe was controlled by human hands! Ee, and there would be a great harvest, such as has never been seen in the whole of this land of Got Owaga. Oh, no, I must have a go at it once with this hoe; then I'll put it near the fig-tree log as I was instructed by my mother-in-law. I'm still young, and my blood is still fresh, I have a lot of energy, I'll hit hard once, going haa! Then I'll see the soil which comes out!"

At that time, a voice like that of the wind gave her a stern warning, saying:

"Don't, don't, Nyawir don't touch the soil with that hoe. Don't violate a taboo on that soil. You would bring a curse upon the land!" But words slipped carelessly through Nyawir's mouth as she quarrelled, saying:

"And who are you that is talking to me from the air and knows my name so well?"

And the voice replied quickly: "You do not know me, because I'm the voice that sees all the secrets in the heart of man, even those that have not been uttered. And it is because I know the hidden pride in your heart that I warn you not to touch the soil with that metal-headed hoe."

But Nyawir retorted rudely. "Hm! I'm greatly attracted by this land. If you are a mere voice, which does not see, then my people will not know that I dug the land with the metal-headed hoe. But,

of course, if you feel like reporting that I dug this land just go ahead and report it. I personally feel so much attracted to this land that I must hit it once — kak!" But the voice warned Nyawir sternly again, saying:

"*Tho* ! We are warning you, the daughter of Opolo, don't touch the soil with that hoe. But if you don't listen, you will meet the tragedy of the firewood collector."

Immediately Nyawir saw many monkeys descending from the tops of trees and squatting near the bush, looking at her. She got so angry with those monkeys; and she took a stone and threw it hard at them. But the monkeys only went away briefly; hiding under the bush, then soon came out again and squatted right there, murmuring, as if they were laughing:

"Ha, ha, ha, ngu, ngu, ngu, koo, koo, koo, ngew, ngew, ngew."

Nyawir was very annoyed with those monkeys. She took stones and threw at them, but they just ducked without running away. Then she insulted them by mimicking them thus:

"Mm, nyo, nyo, nyo, gu, gu, gu, — of the dog. Go away; what will you female monkeys do to me? You lazy animals who only rest while people work, to come and eat when the harvest is ready, do you think you too can scare me?"

But, as Nyawir was scolding the monkeys, she started to sweat. She started to speak to herself thus: "Aa, Opolo my father, I feel rather scared. Or have I been frightened by those monkeys which can't talk? No...let me have courage, there's nothing they can do to me."

Then Nyawir *Rapudo*, the slender daughter of Opolo, held the metal-headed hoe with her two hands, not minding the ominous voice which had warned her not to hit the ground with that hoe. Nor did she heed the voice of the monkeys. The pride in her heart made her believe that what she wanted to do could bring such great prosperity as had never been seen in the land of Got Owaga as a whole.

After reaching the decision in her heart, Nyawir moved a little forward with the metal-headed hoe in her hand. Then she hit the ground with that hoe! When the metal-headed hoe hit the ground, a big fire flashed out of that place. And the force of that fire threw

Nyawir far away. She fell down at a distance, still holding the hoe in her hands. Then Nyawir cried out painfully:

"Aa *yaye mama, uwi, uwi, wuololo*. What fire was that which flamed so menacingly over me? And my eyes have gone blind! *Ayamy eyes, my eyes yawa*. Oh, the daughter of Opolo, I've surely become blind. Oh, my people what has happened to my eyes?"

As Nyawir trembled there, rubbing her eyes with her hands and sweating profusely, she heard the same voice which had warned her not to touch the ground with the metal-headed hoe, telling her:

We warned you, Nyawir we warned you
The daughter of Opolo
And now your obstinacy
Has brought calamity
Upon your family!
Tho, the daughter of Opolo
We warned you thoroughly
But you have reaped
The fruits of being wayward.

Nyawir was still crying, her hands hitting the ground desperately when she again heard the monkeys which she had mimicked crying and jeering all over the upper part of the farm near the bush, while the birds also cried frighteningly.

Now the whole forest was full of noise and Nyawir felt lost. She sat down and wept pitifully thus:

Ayaye, the daughter of Opolo
How death has come to me alone in the forest!
Oh, and I'm beginning to lose consciousness.
Really, where am I? Oh my people.
What witchcraft pushed me into this?
And what have I done to the hoe? *Mama yoo*
Oh, what a stigma I've put on my family,
and I'm still new in this clan!
Ayaye Were Nyakalaga,

I've broken your commandment
What shall I do?

But before her tongue settled, that voice from the air answered her immediately, saying:

Tho, the daughter of Opolo
It's true, it's true indeed
That you have broken the commandment
of Were Nyakalaga and our ancestors.
you've sinned, you've sinned, the daughter
of Opolo; but we warned you.
Tho, the daughter of Opolo
Your obstinacy has now brought a curse
upon the whole of the earth
And to all those who dwell on the earth.
Tho, the daughter of Opolo
From this day
That curse will be on your head
For ever and ever.

What that voice said broke Nyawir's heart completely. That she was now cursed forever! And she had brought a curse on all the people who lived on earth! She covered her mouth with one hand and wondered: What did that mean? What was supposed to be the effect of this curse on her? Was she going to die, or was she going to lose her mind? *Ayaye*, the daughter of Opolo. If at least, her eyes could open so that she would see what had happened at that place where fire had flamed menacingly!

She cried painfully, rubbing her eyes, and trying to appeal to that hidden voice.

I agree, I'm a sinner
I accept my offence!
But, please, you voice that is speaking
with me from the air
Forgive me
My eyes, my eyes have gone completely blind

Please, open my eyes for me
So that I can witness the extent
of my offence, please!

All of a sudden, Nyawir realized that her eyes had opened miraculously. Then she said at once:

"Tho! Ayaye. My eyes are open!"

However, as soon as Nyawir set her eyes on the metal-headed hoe, all the happiness she had because her eyes were open disappeared. She got up at once. Looking at the hoe more carefully, she noticed that the metal was bent to the point of breaking! Ee! Nyawir felt completely depleted. Her heart beat wildly in fear; and she cried out:

*Uwi mama . What shall I do?
Ayaye mama, this metal-headed hoe
has broken in my hands. Ayaye, I've
put my community in trouble
Aa mama, what shall I do?*

Then Nyawir looked into the sky, hoping to see the voice which had addressed her. And she cried, saying:

Voice, ayaye voice
Are you a man or Were Nyakalaga?
Can't you help me?
Look, I'm in deep trouble
I've broken the metal-headed hoe.

But the world was dead silent. Even the monkeys which had been mocking her now sat quietly at the foot of the bush. It appeared as if they were mourning. Nyawir stood there, looking helpless, her mind going from one thing to another: Should she go into the bush and walk up to *ka nyandguogi* (an unknown distant land where dogs are supposed to originate) so that she could disappear before Were Nyakalaga stretched his arm and caught her there?

She then said: "Mmm, it looks like no one has seen me. Let me hurry and put this hoe, though it is damaged, on top of the farm at

a point facing the fig-tree log, as my mother-in-law told me." She then walked stealthily and put the hoe near the log. Sweating and her knees knocking, she ran back home.

When Nyawir reached home, she found Lwak, her mother-in-law, spreading millet on a mat to dry out on the yard. She said to Lwak: "I've come back, my grandmother. I've put the metal-headed hoe where you told me to put it, on top of our farm, near the fig-tree log."

When Lwak set eyes on her daughter-in-law, she saw her body completely covered with sweat. She quickly asked her: "What's the matter, the daughter of Opolo? How come you look so frightened, did someone scare you on the way?"

But when Nyawir heard her mother-in-law's question, fear seized her; and she did not look straight into her mother-in-law's eyes. She answered unsteadily: "No, my grandmother, I didn't meet anyone at all on my way to or from the farm. And after putting the hoe where you had instructed me to put it, I just ran back. That's why my body is covered with sweat like this."

However, secretly Lwak felt suspicious of her daughter-in-law; but she ignored that suspicion. She said to her: "It's alright, the daughter of Opolo; now go and light a fire and start preparing lunch. Your father-in-law and your husband are now about to arrive back from the top of the mountain. There it is; you desired work, the daughter of other people."

Then Nyawir did as she was told by her mother-in-law. But secretly, in her heart, she was full of fear, and she was praying quietly that the big sin she had committed should remain unknown.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

It happened that at the time Nyawir *Rapudo* hit the ground with the metal-headed hoe and generated the frightening flame of fire, the sun was rising, its power dominating the mountain. And as Were Ochak spat at the sun, saying, "*Thu*, may you rise well for us!" he saw a big flame covering the eye of the sun completely, but only briefly, and then the flame disappeared. At the same time he felt the ground on which he was standing shaking under his feet. Terribly frightened, he asked Owiny:

"Did you feel the ground shaking under your feet?"

"No, father, I haven't felt anything like that," replied Owiny.

Then Were Ochak went on to ask him:

"And did you see any flash, like that of lightning, which covered the eye of the sun and then soon disappeared?"

But again Owiny replied: "No, Father, I haven't seen anything of that sort, only the big eye of the sun, red and round."

Owiny was moved and got suspicious, fearing that probably something terrible would happen. Since Were Nyakalaga had given Owiny's father the power to see things which were hidden to other people, perhaps, he thought, his father had seen some sign of a calamity that was going to befall the land.

After that, they started to come down towards home, quiet and saying nothing to each other. When they got home, Nyawir hurried to her house with porridge in a red pot. At the same time Achola, Opii's wife, took porridge to the old man under the *siala* tree.

When Nyawir got to her hut, she placed the red pot on a balancing coil; then she served some into a calabash and gave to her husband after tasting it for him (to show that it was alright). She kept her husband ignorant of her experiences while he was away. She did not tell him that it was her who took the metal-headed hoe to the farm, or that she did something terrible there.

And when Were Ochak saw that his son had entered into his hut, and Achola, his first son's wife, had also gone to her hut, he sneaked to the back yard, into the pumkin garden, and called Lwak:

"*Ragwel*, come over here."

"What is it, *Ragot*?" Lwak asked.

"While I was on the mountain, I saw something which perplexed me totally," replied Were Ochak. "I suddenly felt the ground shaking under my feet; and miraculously, I saw flames of fire on top of the farm near Mihoo river; then the fire covered the eye of the rising sun, and then quickly disappeared. Did you see anything strange like that when you took the metal-headed hoe to our farm?"

When Lwak heard that terrible question, her heart missed a beat, and she almost fell down. It was fear and worry which prevented her from telling the truth. She was very afraid of informing Were Ochak that it was her new daughter-in-law who had taken the metal-headed hoe to the farm. Her heart sank as she quickly answered Were Ochak:

"No, I didn't see anything strange at all. Perhaps Were Nyakalaga wants to reveal something to you? Or, could it be that some calamity is about to befall our community? Oh, what a terrible thing that would be!"

But Were Ochak answered softly: "Ee.... if Were Nyakalaga has sent us a sign, then we shall see its meaning soon; however, I feel really scared. I'm frightened, I think something unpleasant is going to happen."

Lwak tried to calm him by saying: "Have peace, *Ragot*. Let us just wait, we'll see what is going to happen. Now, just go back where you were under the *siala* tree; your daughter-in-law has taken porridge there."

Were Ochak went and sat under the *siala* tree, where he used to sit waiting for the morning meal. Lwak took the large earth bowl of porridge and put it near him on a balancing coil, and then covered the bowl with a calabash. Then she brought an eating basket-full of smashed boiled beans and put it there for him, she then said to him: "Take the porridge I've cooled it well."

Were Ochak took the drinking calabash, as he went on to speak to Lwak, "The daughter of Kwang'a, what I saw while I was on the mountain has completely depleted me. And what is even stranger, is that Owiny, who was with me, did not hear or see anything unusual. I really wonder!"

"Son of Olenyo, just be calm, remain attentive; if there is some-

thing, Were Nyakalaga will surely reveal it to you."

But before he even tasted the porridge, Were Ochak said to Lwak: "There is no doubt that I'm frightened, *Ragwel*. But let us just wait; I'll tell you what I may hear."

Secretly however, Lwak was so worried that she could not even take her porridge.

She said to Were Ochak: "*Ragot*, let me fetch some firewood from the garden so that my daughters-in-law may prepare some lunch for you people."

In no time, Lwak sneaked through the gate and went out to the open field behind their compound. Then she marvelled, saying: "Aa, what is this that Were is saying now? That the ground shook under his feet, and flames shot into the air; and yet Owiny, who was with him, did not see a thing! Hm... could it be that my new daughter-in-law did something improper at the farm where I had sent her? *Ayaye*, Mama!

These thoughts seized Lwak's heart at once. She started to walk hurriedly towards their farms. The sun was getting hot. And as she entered the forest, an owl scared her; and a crane flew over her head, ominously crying: *Ongo wang', Ongo wang'!*

However, Lwak hurried until she got out of the forest and reached the farms. She found many monkeys squatting mournfully. When she saw those monkeys, she knew that something important had gone amiss! She hurried towards her family's farm, saying: "Aa, aa- the daughter of Kwang'a what a day we have today! Look, the owl, which is a nocturnal bird, is crying in broad day light, even the woodpecker, and even the crane! And these monkeys are showing their teeth as if they were fighting me. *Mayo*, the daughter of Kwang'a what shall I do?"

While she was still away from the hoe, her eyes reached it and she noticed that its metal head was in the soil but the farm remained uncultivated! Her heart sank! She was really frightened of what she had noticed about the hoe. She jumped backwards and shouted:

Wuololo Ma! The hoe!

Ayaye jowa! What has bent

The head of this metal-headed hoe?

Then Lwak moved closer and knelt down, the whole of her body shaking. She took the hoe in her hands, filled with fear — looking like someone touching a snake, or something terrible that bites one's hand. Still trembling, she looked at the hoe; and confirmed that its head was truly bent upwards.

When Lwak lifted her eyes a little and looked at the farm, she saw a little shallow hole. "Did her daughter-in-law dig with the metal-headed hoe?"

Lwak felt as if the ground was turning round and round with her — as if she was going to be ill. With some effort, she managed to get up, the hoe in her hand. After a short while, she got very angry and cried loudly:

Uuwi..... ululu. Ayaye Were Nyakalaga. This woman has dug the soil! Oh, what a terrible affair! What a terrible deed!

Lwak did not wait there. She started to run towards home, with the bent hoe in her hand, crying and ululating, as she said:

My daughter-in-law has brought a disaster!

The bride has brought a disaster!

The bride has brought a curse upon

All the people of Got Owaga! *Uwi, uwi, uwi*, our people.

Come out all of you and see with your own eyes

What the bride has done.

Uwi uwi

What shall I do, the daughter of Kwang'a!

Nyawir, the daughter of Opolo, has cut

My umbilical cord!

Uwi, uwi ayaye Mama!

My son's bride has brought a disaster

The daughter of Opolo

Has violated a great taboo!

Ayaye Ma, my daughter-in-law

Has killed me!

Lwak's ululations in these early hours of the day covered the whole of Got Owaga. And those who heard her voice came out marvelling, as they said:

What has happened in Were Ochak's home? Why is Lwak crying so painfully?"

They started to trot towards Were Ochak's home. Within no time there was a big crowd in front of his gate. At that same time Were Ochak left home, hurrying, with his sons behind him.

Suddenly Nyawir felt unable to walk properly. Her knees were knocking against each other because she was perplexed by the state of affairs. She wondered how Lwak had found out the matter so soon. And what should she do? Should she run away and disappear completely?

But before she decided on what she ought to do, Lwak came out in the open field, ululating, and running towards where Were Ochak was. Were Ochak started to trot, going to meet Lwak, with the clansmen behind him. And Owiny, who got to Lwak before his father, asked her loudly:

"Mama, what has happened to you that is making you cry so painfully? What is it?"

Still crying, Lwak answered: "Your wife has brought a calamity, Owiny my child, your wife has brought a calamity! *Ayaye Ma.*"

Were Ochak noticed the hoe in Lwak's hand. He ran fast and pushed Owiny aside. "What is it, Lwak? What has happened?" he asked.

Lwak raised her voice and cried bitterly: "Ayaye, son of Olenyo; *ululu* our people, the bride has finished us! The daughter of Opolo has brought a tragedy here into our home!"

"Fellow villagers, look what Nyawir my daughter-in-law has done. Ochak son of Olenyo, the daughter of Opolo has dug the soil with this metal-headed hoe and broken its head. I've found this hoe with its bent head resting on the ground, but the farm remains uncultivated."

Then she lifted the hoe, saying: "Here, the people of Got Owaga, see what Opolo's daughter has done to me!"

When the people of Got Owaga saw the head of the metal-headed hoe thus bent, they cried together: "*Mayoo!* What a great tragedy! *Wuololo!*"

When Were Ochak heard those words and set his eyes on the hoe, his body trembled violently; and he lost consciousness. While

he was still in a stupor, he recalled what his wife told him when Nyawir had come to be a wife in their home.

"That body which flames like burning fire has something hidden. Just wait, one day you will see!"

Then he pushed his way out of the noisy crowd that surrounded him. He moved closer to Lwak and took the hoe from her, his whole body trembling. He turned towards Nyawir, where she had fallen down at the feet of her husband, Owiny, and, in a trembling voice, asked her: "Daughter of Opolo, you dug the soil with this metal-headed hoe, ee?"

Nyawir was tongue-tied. She was seized by great fear as the people of Got Owaga jeered and made spitting noises at her.

Then her father-in-law asked again: "Daughter of Opolo, answer me quickly: Did you dig the soil with this hoe?"

But Nyawir did not answer because of fear and shame – her heart was beating wildly and her body was covered with sweat.

When the clansmen saw that the new woman was tongue-tied, they knew that she had dug the soil holding the hoe in her hands.

They noisily passed judgement, shouting: "It is true that this evil woman dug the soil with her own hands. That is why she is tongue-tied and cannot answer the old man."

There was pushing in the crowd as each person tried to reach her with his hands, while they shouted loudly: "Give her to us. Nyawir the daughter of Opolo must be killed with our hands. She has put the community into trouble. She is evil; we must kill her so that she may pay for her big sin with her life. *Tho*, it is true that the beautiful one carries hidden evil."

When Owiny realized how very angry the people were, he fell on his new wife, so that, if necessary, he would die with her. It was that act of bravery on his part which restrained the people.

Then he pleaded with them saying:

"Ayaye, it is true my wife has sinned, but please, don't kill her. She is still a new wife; and what has happened cannot be undone. Now, if you kill her, will that give us back our metal-headed hoe, which is already broken? Aa, leave me this new wife, please I'm begging you!"

When the clansmen heard Owiny talking foolishly like that,

they got even angrier. They started shouting.

What tragedy is this, our people!
Owiny, this woman has put you under
A powerful spell. She has brought
Bad magic from her place.
She has robbed you of your mind.
This woman is a witch; and if you
Refuse to let us kill her, we can
Even kill the two of you together.

After saying that, they rushed onto them and started to beat up Nyawir with fists some even tried to kick her. It was terrible.

Then Were Ochak intervened, shouting "Our people! *Yaye!* Please listen to me, be peaceful. Wait a little so that we may discuss the matter!"

The crowd became a little peaceful. They listened to hear what their leader had to say. Owiny moved a little farther away, carrying his wife, to take her away from that angry mob.

Were Ochak took his fellow elders and stood with them in front of the crowd.

He told them: "Our people, I'm caught in a terrible situation. My new daughter-in-law has sinned; she has broken our agreement with Were Nyakalaga. Help me get the people together; let us all go to the top of Mount Owaga as we did yesterday, so that we may put our request to Were Nyakalaga. Let us sacrifice to him and cry to him in connection with our great offence."

One of the elders, called Omach, answered: "The old man has spoken well. But look, the top of the mountain is covered in a fog. How shall we go there; the prayer place is covered in a fog. Aa, personally, I feel afraid. Let us not go to the mountain."

Omach's point made people start mumbling, some in opposition and others in support.

Then one of the elders, called Yogo shouted loudly: "It's true that we can see a fog covering the mountain top. But Were Ochak has spoken well. This great sin which the daughter of Opolo has committed requires sacrifice and plea for forgiveness. Let us just go

to the top of the mountain as our leader has suggested, the fog will disappear while we are on our way up."

The clansmen responded in one voice: "We accept Were Ochak's word. Let us all go up and try to plead with Were Nyakalaga to forgive us."

Soon the people started to walk towards the mountain top where the shrine was. Were Ochak led the way, carrying the damaged hoe in his hands, while the elders and all the people of Got Owaga followed him. And when they started to climb up the mountain at the point directly below the shrine which they had built for Were Nyakalaga on top of the mountain, they suddenly realized that a strong whirlwind had started to blow. Immediately, stones started to move; trees got uprooted and rolled downwards towards the people. That miracle frightened Were Ochak and all his people. Then the people started to run away, shouting: "Let us go back home, our people. Were Nyakalaga is surely disgusted with us. He has set death on us!"

The people ran away, Lwak among them. But before she went far, Lwak tried to locate Were Ochak with her eyes; but she did not see him. Looking more carefully, bending slightly to have a better view, she saw Were Ochak standing alone somewhere below the top of the mountain – he appeared to be trying to plead with Were Nyakalaga.

She called out loudly: *Yaye jaduong!* (Please, old man). Come down, son of Olenyo; see, those stones have begun to roll down."

But Were Ochak did not answer her. Fear seized Lwak; she thought that the old man wanted to commit suicide because of anger. She started to hurry uphill so that she could go and hold his hand and lead him home. But before she moved even four steps, the wind became so strong that it could carry away a human being. Trees broke down and stones went loose! Lwak kept calling Were Ochak as she ran uphill until she got to him and held his hand:

"What's the matter with you; the people have run and left you alone. Don't you realize that the breaking trees and these stones are going to kill you?," she told him.

Were Ochak looked at Lwak like someone who had been sleeping and had just woken up. Then he started to walk downhill

without talking. On his sides, trees broke and stones went loose. And when the people had run and got to the foot of the hill, feeling very much afraid, Were Ochak also hurried towards them in order to go and calm their hearts.

But before he started to speak, Omach, one of the elders, beckoned at him, saying: "Were and the people of Got Owaga, look at the mountain top; see how the whole of the mountain top has turned completely dark, as if it is dusk, yet it is still morning!"

When Omach was still speaking like that, a huge rainbow cut right across the fog, its feet standing on the earth on both sides. How, the clansmen asked loudly:

Aa, what miracle is this!
Wuololo! We have never seen anything
like this before. Yaye, Were Ochak
What shall we do?

And when Were Ochak saw that all his people were seized by fear; and aware that the calamity had come out of his house, he opened his hands unto the people and spoke to them in a trembling voice:

I realize that Were Nyakalaga
had disowned us. That is why he has
sent us away from the mountain with
a violent wind which uproots both stones and trees.
Were Nyakalaga is disgusted with us
that is why he has now covered Mount
Owaga completely so that we may not
see his face.
True, I am your leader and you are my people
Now, tell me: what do you want me to do?

Those who were standing there answered in unison:

"Throw out to us that evil bride; so that the people may
stone her in order that she may die with all her sins on her
head. Nyawir we shall surely kill with our own hands,
because it is her who has brought Were Nyakalaga's curse

upon us. Nyawir the daughter of Opolo has done an evil deed; a deed we have never seen before. She should be killed so that she may disappear from people's eyes.

Owiny covered his wife with his own body once again, fearing that the clansmen would beat and kill her, as the people had started to push towards where he was standing.

When Were Ochak saw that the people were getting out of control, he tried to stop them by saying:

Our people, killing a human being is not a small matter; and if you kill this bride who has not even given birth, aren't you going to bring an even bigger curse upon the land? The blood of a human being is bitter, consider that matter seriously. Let us not rush.

There was tension as people stood in a heavy moment of indecision. Then Omach advised them, saying:

My kinsmen, Were Ochak has spoken well.

The day is still long, let us calm down

so that we may think of what to do

with this woman

But let's not kill her,

though she has brought such

A terrible calamity upon us.

For, truly, even if we kill her

perhaps the problem we now have

will remain on our hands.

So let us go back home and think

Over this matter;

Then we can come back later.

The people agreed to his suggestion; and they dispersed and went to their respective homes.

Around mid-day, a great rain, with terrible hailstones, fell furiously throughout Got Owaga. The storm was accompanied with earth-shaking thunder!

All that time Lwak sat in her house, weeping, while Achola, the wife of Opii, tried to calm her. At the men's resting place, Opii sat

near his father, neither of them uttering a word to the other. In Owiny's hut, Nyawir was lying right in the middle of the floor, crying and rolling on the floor, as she pleaded with Owiny not to let her be killed by the people.

The falling of the hailstones had shown everyone clearly that Were Nyakalaga was disgusted and tired of them. So, as the rain stopped – though there were heaps of hailstones on the ground – the people came back running to the foot of the *otho* tree which was in front of Were Ochak's gate. And when Were Ochak saw them and heard their violent utterances, he at once knew what they wanted.

He went out in front of the gate, followed by Lwak, Opii and Achola. But Owiny and his evil wife stood at a distance.

Now the clansmen shouted, saying: "Were, it is your evil daughter-in-law who has brought us a calamity. We don't want her to spend the night in this clan. Bring her out to us, so that we may touch her with our hands. See how she has created enmity between us and Were Nyakalaga. She has brought a curse upon the land! Nyawir the daughter of Opolo has ruined the earth. Look at the trees which have been uprooted, the stones as well. Did you all hear how the heavens were loudly rent as the earth trembled. *Thoo!* Nyawir we are surely killing."

CHAPTER TWELVE

When Owiny saw that matters were getting out of hand, he came out in the open. Then he told his parents and all the people who were gathered there:

"Our people, it's true that my wife has sinned, and she has embarrassed me greatly before my community, but please, don't kill my beautiful wife. If you feel that you must go ahead and kill her, then you should kill me as well. He who kills Nyawir the daughter of Opolo is like someone who scoops my eyes out!"

Owiny's speech moved everyone. Lwak was much hurt to hear that Owiny, her son, was ready to die for that evil girl. However, she found it hard to scold him before the people, but she felt in her heart that truly the offence was partly hers. If she had completely refused to give that metal-headed hoe to Nyawir, the great tragedy would not have occurred. And, moreover, deep inside, she felt that Were Ochak was also to blame. She remembered quickly how she had told Were Ochak that her body had sensed danger as soon as she saw that woman; that the girl could bring a calamity. But Were Ochak had argued that the woman was beautiful and would bring good 'seeds'. Could the old man now see the tragedy which the daughter of Opolo had brought?

Were Ochak stood there, indicating his helplessness, his head feeling ballooned in shame, among his fellow elders. He was pained by this terrible experience, and he reproached himself, wondering whether it would not have been wiser to let Owiny remain a bachelor, as he had threatened to, instead of allowing him to marry Opolo's wayward daughter; a girl whose kinship was not well known. Oh, the people of Got Owaga said that 'had I known' never preceded events! It would have been wise if he had listened to Lwak — he would have helped the community as a whole; he would have saved the whole of Got Owaga. Lwak had been cautious about that girl's affairs from the very beginning; she had objected, saying that a girl who had brought a new fashion which was going to force girls to abandon their ancestors' customs should not become her daughter.

ter-in-law, since she was a leader in the community. But he, Were Ochak, had thought that Lwak was unduly worried; and had persuaded her not to make noise over her son's marriage. Oh, if only he had listened to Lwak! Perhaps Were Nyakalaga had been trying to speak to him through Lwak's voice; but he had refused to listen!

While he was still going through the anguish, Were Ochak took his fellow elders aside. Then he spoke to them, turning his hands up helplessly:

"You have heard Owiny's voice with your own ears. It is true that I'm your leader, and I saw the sun's eye before most of you; but I am caught in a predicament. Now it's for you to see what we can do together, so that another calamity may not befall us."

Then Omach answered: "Our father, if Owiny, your son, has refused to leave his evil wife, then you people should let him take his wife away so that they may go and find their own land where they can live alone. The earth is large, let them go towards the north, the south, west or east. Because if we don't do that, this time Got Owaga, our community, will die; and our line will disappear completely. Nyawir the daughter of Opolo has done an evil deed, a forbidden act; and she has brought a big curse upon our community, which will follow our children and our grandchildren as well. Therefore, so long as she is still here among us, Were Nyakalaga and our ancestors cannot listen to our pleas, whatever big sacrifices we may offer them."

The other elders unanimously supported Omach: "Sure, the daughter of Opolo cannot spend another night here in Got Owaga. Let Owiny take that wife of his away; we don't want her here. It is only when she goes far away that Were Nyakalaga might pity us and forgive us."

Ee! When Lwak heard that her house was thus split into two – that her beloved son, Owiny the muscular-armed, her last born, had protested and was going out into the wilderness; that he could not abandon his evil wife, she raised her voice and cried in the true traditional Luo way in front of everybody. With both hands on her head she cried: "What wrong have I done among my fellow women? *Ayaye*, the daughter of Kwang'a what shall I do?"

As she cried painfully, something told her that she too should

leave and go and die in the wilderness with her beloved son; but another thought asked her what she was going to do with Were Ochak, her husband and Opii her elder son. Would she leave the old man alone at home and follow her son whose wife had brought a calamity and a big curse on the community? Lwak decided at once that she would not run away and leave the old man alone at home, while the sin which was now ruining Got Owaga had come from her house. She would let Owiny go; she would stay behind and suffer with the old man.

However, secretly in her heart, Lwak knew that Owiny's protest and his going to die in the wilderness because of a woman might bring her illness. Her heart loved Owiny very much because he had taken after his father, absolutely. This had made Lwak very happy because the people liked it when a male child took after his father. They said his father's nature would not disappear after his death. And, moreover, it was when your son resembled you that you were sure he was your true seed.

True, she loved Opii, her elder son; but Opii resembled her, and this matter gave Opii much shame when he heard people commenting that he resembled his mother. There was no male child who wanted people to say that he looked like his mother.

Some women of Got Owaga held Lwak's hand, calming her and wiping her tears.

But some of them said, "You people should let Lwak mourn her son who resembles her husband; Lwak has seen the impossible!"

There and then, all the clansmen started to shout, saying: "It's all over, our people. Owiny and that evil wife of his should take their belongings and leave; we don't want to see that evil woman here in this clan."

The atmosphere was tense! Seeing that the weather was cold and misty, the people felt very sorry; and Lwak was not listening to any words aimed at calming her mind.

Owiny put Nyawir in front of him, hurried and took a few things from their hut. Then they came back to the open where the people were gathered so that he could say good bye to Lwak and the people of Got Owaga, though they were disgusted with him. Lwak lifted her hand towards her son as she wept bitterly.

Were Ochak laid his hand on Owiny's shoulder and said to him: "What has come out of your house has, indeed, ruined the earth. Your wife has caused trouble for this community as a whole; Were Nyakalaga has protested and turned his back on us. Just go, but don't let the name of Were Nyakalaga disappear from your mouth; and don't forget to plead with our ancestors so that they may accept the offering from your hands. Now go, my child, may Were Nyakalaga protect you, because you are still our blood."

When Owiny looked up and saw his mother crying bitterly, he went close to her and held her hand, saying: "Don't cry so bitterly. Evil has occurred; and the community has decided that my wife and I should leave and go to a distant land. Just let us go."

Owiny was seized by anger, and he found his tears sneaking from his eyes. Then he looked down and held Nyawir's hand. He led her in front of him as they hurried in the direction of Mihoo river. Behind them the clansmen jeered at Nyawir, some spitting at her. But the two of them did not glance back.

Before they went far, Nyawir turned and asked her husband: Owiny, my father-law's son, now that we have been expelled from our home where shall we sleep? Let us go back so that you may ask your father for an axe, with which you will cut some poles and build me a shelter."

That suggestion from Nyawir really surprised Owiny. He wondered whether this woman was really normal. Then he answered her: "Nyawir, are you cursed? Seeing how narrowly we've escaped death, you are still not frightened – you still want us to go back to that big crowd which wants to kill you, in order to ask my father for an axe! *Tho*, if you want to die, go back to that crowd. As for me, I'm not going back to them, I'll break trees with my own hands and build a shelter."

Nyawir was very much annoyed at the realization of the kind of man she had married. Could a man be that cowardly! She scolded him: "Owiny, did I marry a fellow woman, or did I marry a man?" she asked. "Okay, if you're afraid, I'll go back to the old man and ask him for an axe."

She started to walk back, Owiny struggling to stop her. And the clansmen who saw them thought that Owiny, their son, had changed

his mind and was going back home; so that he could let Nyawir go back to her people or go and die alone in the wilderness. This idea made Lwak happy. She ran towards them and, standing some distance away, asked: "Owiny, the nephew of Jokomolo, what is it my father?"

Owiny replied: "Mama, do you think the old man can lend us an axe with which we can later cut poles for building? The wilderness is very cold, we can't sleep in the open air.

Although Lwak loved Owiny very much, she felt that his request was hard to grant. But she did not want to tell him so herself; therefore, she said to him "My child, go and put that request before your clansmen, so that they may deny you themselves. Take courage and approach your father."

When the clansmen heard that Owiny was asking for an axe they got very cross with him. They started to move down the field, where Owiny and Nyawir were standing, shouting: "Let Owiny and Nyawir go very far away.... The idea of giving them the axe is impossible. The people of Got Owaga have only one axe, which we cannot give away. Let Owiny just go; he'll see how to survive when he reaches the wilderness."

Owiny tried to move backwards in fear but Nyawir pushed him, saying: "Owiny just go to your father and ask him for the axe; we shall not manage without it."

Meanwhile the crowd continued to shout: "Impossible, impossible, impossible!" they said.

But it happened that all that time Opii was slowly getting angry. He jumped out of the crowd, saying: "Since my brother's bride caused a calamity in this home, I've been rendered speechless. That's why you haven't heard my voice. But what has made me angrier is this: Owiny, my brother, brought a witch, who has now ruined the whole of Got Owaga and has antagonized us with Were Nyakalaga. Surely, can't Owiny feel ashamed? He is still asking for the only axe which is used all over Got Owaga, so that he may go and damage that too! Aaa, old man; don't give Owiny the axe. He is going to lose it; and then the people of Got Owaga will remain helpless, with empty hands!"

It was that voice which the clansmen supported. Now they

shouted further, saying: "We are not giving him; no, he won't be given; Owiny we are not giving the axe."

Suddenly Lwak felt pained in the stomach. She was very angry with her elder son, Opii. Why did Opii deny his younger brother in front of the people? The people would say that it was perhaps the jealousy between Owiny and Opii that had brought a tragedy in Owiny's house.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

While Lwak was still standing in the middle, with the crowd on one side and Owiny and his wife, Nyawir, on the other side, she pleaded with the people of Got Owaga, saying:

"*A yaye*, what are you doing to me? You've already sent away my son who is my last born. You've thrown him out of the home, so that he may go and find his own place to live in with his evil wife. And now, if you refuse to give him the axe, how will he put up a home without an axe? Or, how will he cut poles? *Tho*, you want to treat me so cruelly, as if I am not the mother of this community."

Then Lwak wept bitterly: "*Ululu - ululu* the daughter of Kwang'a! I'm left standing alone in the open. How that evil woman has ruined my house!"

Lwak cried bitterly; and some women started to join her in her crying. Since Were Ochak loved Lwak very much, he found himself in a predicament; being the leader of the community, would he support Lwak and ignore the wish of the crowd? But if he went with the demand of the crowd and refused to give Owiny the axe, what would Lwak think of him?

As Were was struggling to make up his mind and put his idea before the people, Opii got worried because Lwak had spoken like someone opposing him. He went in front of the crowd and said to his mother: "*Tho*, my mother, you too have betrayed us. How did it happen that Owiny's evil wife managed to take the metal-headed hoe from your hand and went to dig the soil, yet it was you who was supposed to take the hoe to the farm as Were Nyakalaga instructed our father. Secondly, it was your excessive love for Owiny which made you allow him to marry a girl whose kinship was not well known. Her only value was too much beauty. *Tho*! As for me, I have refused here in front of the people that Owiny be given the axe. Nyawir his wife has sinned and separated us from Were Nyakalaga. Let them just go. The axe, they are not to be given."

Lwak's heart almost stopped beating when she heard the voice of Opii, her first-born, hitting hard at her before the people. Anger made her body begin to shake. Then many people started to

grumble, saying: "*Atho* ! Is that the extent of Opii's jealousy? Can this Opii really lead us when Were Ochak goes to join our ancestors?"

However, a few people were also grumbling aside: "*Tho*, our people, Opii has also spoken the truth. Let us not give the axe to Owiny; he is going to lose it."

Now there was a division among the people, some said that he ought to be given. That was why Omach got the courage to come forward before the crowd to address it:

"The people of Got Owaga, Nyawir the wife of Owiny has indeed violated a taboo; but her badness should not make us perform a forbidden act. If we refuse to give Owiny the axe and he goes ahead to build a home with empty hands, we too shall have broken Were Nyakalaga's commandment. Let us give Owiny the axe so that he may go and put up a home; he will return it to us tomorrow. It is that evil wife of his who should not come back to this clan."

When Omach spoke like that, people supported his suggestion, shouting: "Ecc, let us give him the axe!"

But some also shouted: "No, he's not to be given the axe."

Lwak soon realized that Were Ochak was unable to pass judgement on this matter, because she saw him standing helplessly, supporting his chin on a stick as if listening to hear Were Nyakalaga's voice in the blowing wind before he could pass judgement. Lwak immediately got to him and said: "Son of Olenyo, please, conclude this matter. Some people have agreed that we should give Owiny the axe so that he may go and build a home; but some have refused, saying he can't be given the axe."

After Lwak had thus spoken, most of the people shouted. "*Tho*, Lwak has spoken well; Lwak has said the truth. This matter is difficult to resolve. Were Ochak, we have left this matter in your hands."

It was that voice of many people which forced Were Ochak to resolve the issue at once, as a leader. He walked through the crowd and went in front of the people. Then he said to them: "The people of Got Owaga, I have heard all your various voices. It is indeed true that Were Nyakalaga has left us. Look, the fog still covers the top of

the mountain completely; and the rainbow still cuts across the top of the mountain. However, we should not lose our sense of good judgement. For if we lose it, we can bring greater division among our children and a big curse upon them and our still unborn grandchildren. Approach this matter with cool heads, my people. Reduce your anger; and let us give the axe to Owiny, so that he may go and meet the requirements of our customs. He will bring back the axe tomorrow. Only that the daughter of Opolo, who has put this clan in trouble, should not step back here. Let me go home and bring them the axe."

Then Were Ochak left his people, slowly, walking with a big stick. Achola, Opii's wife went and held Lwak's arm. Calming her and wiping off her tears, in the attempt to explain to her, in the full hearing of the clansmen, that she had nothing to do with the unkind utterances which Opii had made; that she loved Lwak so much that nothing would separate her from her mother-in-law.

Some women also came to appease Lwak. But some clansmen said: "Isn't Were ill! Have you seen how he walks!"

But others replied: "Were is not ill, he is very sad. Only his spirit is unwell."

A certain woman pulled her mates aside, saying: "I told you that the beauty of Owiny's wife had something hidden. The body of Opolo's daughter shines and her eyes glow like fire. Now, haven't you believed my words, which I told you, that the beauty of this girl would put this clan into trouble?"

Another woman pursed her lips disapprovingly and quickly answered; "All these things we said. Ee, this wife of Owiny will disappear completely. This woman is evil so much that even if she had been stoned to death here in the open I wouldn't have cared. People are disgusted with her. She has brought a curse on the community."

While people were still arguing noisily, with some saying this and others saying that, they suddenly saw Were Ochak hurrying back with the axe in his hand. They kept completely quite until Were Ochak got back with the axe and put it in the hands of his son, Owiny, where he stood, covering Nyawir behind him.

He told Owiny openly: "Owiny, I am giving you the axe so that

you may go and fulfil the customary requirements of putting up a new home. But you've heard the voice of your people; and you've heard the voice of your brother, the son of your mother himself. Don't lose this axe. When you finish your customary obligations tomorrow, bring back the axe here into my hand without fail. Have you heard?"

Owiny took the axe and answered: "I've heard, father, and I'm asking Were Nyakalaga and our ancestors to help me, so that I may, tomorrow, bring this axe back to your hand, before this crowd."

"Then go my child!", Were Ochak said.

And Owiny went, Nyawir his wife in front of him. They hurried towards the east; without a glance behind.

After Owiny and his wife, Nyawir, had entered the forest and disappeared from the people's eyes, a strong whirlwind started to blow. This matter disturbed the people of Got Owaga so much. They were seized by great fear. They started to ask themselves: "Now, where could that whirlwind have come from? Could it be that our giving of the axe to Owiny has further annoyed Were Nyakalaga? What shall we do so that what is in Were Nyakalaga's heart be revealed to us?"

Were Ochak knew that the answer to all these questions was supposed to come from him as the leader of the community. To restrain the people, he said: "The people of Got Owaga, all those questions which you ask I have heard. And the things you're saying have pierced my heart because I'm your leader. But since the daughter of Opolo sinned in this clan, it is clear that Were Nyakalaga has protested; and he has disowned us. Don't you see that the eye of the sun is hidden from us, while a fog has covered the whole of the mountain, including the shrine in which we worshipped Were Nyakalaga? And when we tried to go through that fog in order to get to the top of the mountain and present our plea to Were Nyakalaga in the shrine we built for him, you saw how a hurricane-like wind, which moved stones and uprooted trees, drove us away. And when we came back down this way, you saw how Were Nyakalaga put a big rainbow all across the mountain top, so that we might not move close to his shrine. Then, after that, Were Nyakalaga hit the earth with those terrible hailstones. Now, this is my opinion:

Let the rest of you sit here at the foot of the fig tree, while I, with the other elders, go to the foot of that *otho* tree, where meetings are normally held, so that we may discuss the issue among ourselves. And whatever we agree on we'll come back and tell you."

Then Were Ochak turned to where Opii was standing and said to him: "Opii, you too come with the elders; you are my elder son - and the only one now that Owiny has left."

The whole crowd supported Were Ochak's idea. And soon, the elders who usually sat at the leaders' deliberations came out of the crowd and stood near Were Ochak. Among them were elders such as Omach Rabora, who served as Were Ochak's deputy, Jaoko Silwal son of Kiseru, Nyamundhe Rateng' son of Gogo, and Oyoo Rabala son of Achoki.

But when the young men saw that Opii too was going to those elders, they grumbled audibly: "*Tho*, Opii does not have the heart for leadership. He has a bad temper; and he likes to give views which are injurious to his fellows. As for us, when Were Ochak goes to join our ancestors, the elders will choose for us another leader who is like Owiny 'the muscular-armed'."

Married and unmarried women also registered their disapproval by saying: "Mmm! Opii is too bad tempered even though Were Ochak is trying to establish him among the elders. He antagonizes people and is poor at negotiation. *Tho*! Opii will never lead us here in Got Owaga."

The grumbling and disorder within the crowd made Lwak try to restrain the people by saying: "Let's be peaceful. Achola the daughter of Adede lead us in singing; and let those who like *sigweya* also stand and entertain us with their *sigweya*. People's hearts are filled with fear. Sing sweet songs which will strengthen people's hearts. Got Owaga is standing at a critical place!"

Soon all the songs which had been sang to ridicule the bad people who wanted to ruin the community and who did not listen to Were Nyakalaga and the ancestors were altered to sing about Nyawir the daughter of Opolo, the evil woman, the strong headed, the mischievous, the misfortune-bringer who had broken the metal-headed hoe while trying to dig the land with her hands.

At that time, when the people of Got Owaga were singing, the

elders were gathered under the *otho* tree, with Were Ochak sitting on a stool while the elders sat on the ground near him. The lot fell on Omach Rabora, that he should be the man to make a proposal which would be discussed by the elders; then Were Ochak would give the final ruling on the matter.

And when the lot thus fell on Omach, he did not argue. He stood up at once and said to Were Ochak: "Our father, it is that idea you tried to explain to me when we were coming from the mountain top which you should put before the elders for discussion; so that your fellow elders may give you more ideas on it."

Were Ochak accepted that opinion. Then he said to his fellow elders: "Our people, Elder Omach has spoken well. The idea in my mind is this: I feel that since Were Nyakalaga has prevented us from going to pray and make him offerings on the mountain, let us build a grass hut here at the foot of the *otho* tree, where we usually meet; and it is in that hut where we should plead with him to forgive us and tell us what to do about the big calamity which has now befallen us."

When Were Ochak spoke in that manner, all the elders who were there said at once: "Were Ochak has spoken well; we support that suggestion; because the arms of Were Nyakalaga spread over the whole of the earth, and his eyes see everywhere."

Then Elder Omach continued too say: "Our people, as you have agreed with Were Ochak that we should build a hut under this tree, only elders will build that hut. It will be built with *olando* shrubs from the forest and grass only. And when we have built it, it is our leader, Were Ochak, who will go into it and sacrifice to Were Nyakalaga. After making the offering, the leader should just stay in that hut until Were Nyakalaga gives him the instructions to take to all those people, at the foot of the fig tree. During that time, the rest of us will go back to the people, at the foot of the fog tree, and sing with the rest to encourage them."

Then Elder Oyoo spoke: "As for me, I'm speaking on behalf of all my fellow elders who are seated here: that if Were Ochak agrees to the suggestions of Elder Omach, then we too support all those suggestions."

Then Were Ochak concluded the discussion by saying: "Our

people, it is true that I am your leader; but it is your views and wisdom which help me in looking after the community, and enables me to follow the commandments of Were Nyakalaga and our forefathers. Even here, where we are now sitting, he is near us."

After that brief meeting, Were Ochak and Elder Omach took the message to the people of Got Owaga who were now sitting under the fig tree. They told them what they had agreed on: that the elders should build a hut to serve as a shrine for Were Nyakalaga there at the foot of the *otho* tree. There they would sacrifice to him so that he would speak to the people of Got Owaga, telling them what they ought to do. While the hut was being built, the people would go on with the songs and *sigweya*.

All the people were happy with that resolution; and their fear and nervousness started to decrease.

All the elders then entered the bush. Some of them cut out *olando* shrubs while others uprooted grass, as other people of Got Owaga continued with their songs and *sigweya*. Soon the elders came back, each carrying his bundle in the arm. As the soil was still wet, Were Ochak took his stick and drew a circle on the ground to mark the circumference of the hut to be built at the foot of the *otho* tree. He marked the position of the doorway as well. After doing that, he prayed there as follows:

Yaye, Were Nyakalaga
Your arms embrace the whole of Got Owaga
And your eyes see every place
Even what is hidden in the heart of man
This hut we build for you
In order that we may sacrifice
To you in it
This hut we build for you
So that you may
Speak to your people in it
Aa... you indeed are Were Nyakalaga
It is you who connects us
With our forefathers.

And the elders responded in unison:

Thank you, thank you, Were Nyakalaga
And our forefathers.

Then the elders erected strong sticks in the ground along the mark made by Were Ochak, leaving the doorway. The sticks were erected close to each other; and soft sticks were passed between them, the way a hen-cage is woven. After that, two elders bent the top of those *olando* sticks and tied them together with grass like a rope. Then the hut was quickly thatched with grass from top to bottom. However, the sticks were left exposed to represent the *osuri* of the hut.

When that hut was almost complete, Were Ochak sent word to Lwak to hurry home and bring sorgum in a little *ondweto*, basket, one calabash of sesame, and one calabash of beans too. She had to go alone, not accompanied even by Achola, the wife of Opii.

Lwak got up quickly and went home as Were had instructed. She knew in her heart that as one of her daughter-in-law had put the community in trouble, Were Ochak did not want Opii's wife also to touch something to be offered as a sacrifice to Were Nyakalaga, so that another calamity might not befall them.

By the time Lwak had put all those things near Were Ochak's stool, the hut was ready. The eyes of all people of Got Owaga who were singing at the foot of the fog tree were looking at the hut's entrance only. They were full of anxiety.

Were Ochak took his stool and put it in his left arm; then he took the basket of sorgum, with the calabashes of sesame and beans in it, in his left hand. He then took his walking stick in his right hand; and he slowly supported himself, walking into that hut, while his fellow elders stood back.

As soon as Were Ochak got into that hut, even before he sat down, something really wonderful happened. The big rainbow which all that time had been hanging over the mountain, turned round quickly, like lightning, and hang over the hut, one of its feet in the east and the other in the west. The arm of that rainbow lit up the hut like a roofless enclosure, cutting right in the middle of it. It was clear to Were Ochak that that was the hand of Were Nyakalaga

which had stretched to kill him, so that he would die and counter-balance the big sin that his daughter-in-law had committed. He, therefore, tried hard to explain to Were Nyakalaga clearly that he, as the leader of the community, accepted responsibility for the offence of his daughter-in-law; and to explain to him that the people were not all offenders.

But when Were Ochak tried to speak words stuck in his throat, because his mouth was heavy and his tongue was numb. Now he thought that he should throw the sorgum, sesame, and beans on the floor of the hut built for Were Nyakalaga; but he suddenly realized that his arms had gone numb! Fear seized Were Ochak and he felt lost from that rainbow because the rainbow started to shake. A voice spoke to him:

Were Ochak, Nyawir the daughter of Opolo
Who is the wife of Owiny your son
Has dug the soil with the metal-headed hoe
which I put in your care, to cultivate
All the farms in Got Owaga.
Nyawir your daughter-in-law
Has bent the head of that hoe
And removed all its power.
Were Ochak, your new daughter-in-law
Has brought a curse on the soil
And she has brought a great curse
On all the people of Got Owaga
From you and your children
To your grandchildren as well!
Now, from this day
Tell all the People
Of Got Owaga that:
Let everyone go back to his home
And curve his own hoe; and
Make a head for his hoe.
Were Ochak, from this day
The people of Got Owaga
Will dig using their hands

Each person on his farm
And only what you sow
Shall you reap
On the day of harvest!

And as Were Ochak still stood there, puzzled, that voice disappeared; and soon the rainbow disappeared as well!

All that time, as they saw the rainbow dividing the hut in which Were Ochak was into two parts, the clansmen kept quiet, trembling. And when they heard that big voice talking to Were Ochak in the hut, they also felt numb in the body where they were sitting; so much so that they could not even ululate.

While they were still thus astonished, they suddenly saw Were Ochak coming out of that hut, staggering towards them, all the seeds with which he had still in his hands. When they saw that he was still alive, their energy came back.

They got up at once and started running to go and meet him, crying: *Aa yaye, wuololo, wuololo....aaa...*

How terrible this is! *Ayaye jowa !*

Then Elder Omach moved ahead and restrained them: "Please, be quiet, be quiet; be peaceful, so that we may hear our leader's word."

Then he turned and said to Were Ochak:

Our father, we've today heard
Were Nyakalaga's voice with
Our own ears. But our hearts are broken.
Oh, aa, Will you plead with him
On our behalf; so that
He may forgive us?
We don't know how
To curve hoes, and where
Shall we find metal
To make the hoe-heads?
And where shall we find the energy
To cultivate all these farms?

And the people of Got Owaga all said in unison:

Aa yaye, Were Ochak
Aa yaye, Our father,
Ask Were Nyakalaga to forgive us
Ask him to give us another hoe.

Then Were Ochak felt pained by the calamity that had befallen his people. But he knew that he could not go back into that hut. He told them: "My children: Look at my hands. See the sorgum and the sesame and beans which I had taken to make an offering to Were Nyakalaga. Don't you see that I've come back with them in my hands? The whole of my body got numb as soon as I entered the hut; even my tongue was too heavy to speak. That showed me clearly that Were Nyakalaga has protested and he has turned a deaf ear to us; he has even turned his back on us. Our country is cursed! That, is the state of affairs, terrible as it is! Now, let everyone go to his home, together with our wives and children, so that we may ponder seriously over this serious matter which has befallen us. And if I should find something new, I'll tell it to you tomorrow, without fail.

And when Were Ochak had spoken thus, the people started to scatter, going back to their homes. The women cried and the men engaged in *sigweya*: "How this woman has brought a terrible curse on us! *Aa yaye*, how our chest will ache! How our hands will be hurt! *Ayee!*" they said.

One elder engaged in *sigweya* saying:

Your sweat, my brother, your sweat
Aura's lover, your sweat
Aa, the lazy one is in trouble
The lazy one will knock down his granary
The lazy one will knock down his granary
Your sweat, your sweat, your sweat.
Aa, the lazy one is in trouble
The one with a good appetite
Whose sweat never drops
Is this time in big trouble!

That day the people of Got Owaga cried so much that no one

cooked. And when night came, Were Ochak had a dream. In that dream he heard someone telling him:

Were Ochak, tell your people
Not to waste time crying
The sin which has been committed
Is already committed.
Encourage them so that tomorrow
Each man make his hoe
So that you may start cultivating
And plant seeds during this rain
And tell them this:
The first crops to be ready
Be they beans, sesame, or pumpkin
In the gardens
Should be taken to the hut
Which you built at the foot of
That *otho* tree; so that you may
offer it to Were Nyakalaga
And your forefathers.

Were Ochak woke up, his body covered with sweat. He did not fall asleep again until morning came.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

When Owiny and Nyawir had crossed River Mihoo, they hurried towards the top of a certain small hill; and they reached there when the sun was about to set. Owiny chose a big tree; and it was at the foot of this tree where he built a little hut with grass and shrubs where they would spend the approaching night.

Nyawir said to her husband: "Owiny, my mother's son-in-law, today I've realized that you truly love me. Today I know that you are faithful to me and you can die with me. What you've done for me today, son of my father-in-law, I'll not forget for ever and ever!"

And when Owiny heard those words, he embraced Nyawir's shoulders, saying: "*Rapudo*, I married you because I love you with all my heart. Haven't I told you that you are the ball of my eye, with which I see? If you love me as much as I love you, *Rapudo*, then this relationship between us will not end; and it is only death which will separate us, my mother-in-law's daughter. That's why when you are involved in a public sin I could not deny you; if you had to die, I would have died with you."

These words reassured Nyawir, who had lost heart, fearing that Owiny would scold her for the big calamity she had caused. Therefore, she quickly turned towards Owiny and put her arms round his shoulders, telling him: "My mother's son-in-law, I also love you very much. So, though we've been banished from home, and now we are lonely in the wilderness, so long as I'm still with you, the muscular-armed, I don't have any fear. I know that tomorrow you'll build me a very good house!"

Owiny smiled softly and said: "Then find the fire which you carried in the pot and make a fire-place there, with stones, so that you may prepare some porridge. I'm taking the axe to the bush over there, so that it may fall building poles, which I'll go and bring tomorrow, morning and build you a house."

Owiny hurried and took the axe to the bush where there were good *olu* and *siala* trees. He left the axe at that place and came back to Nyawir as darkness approached. And, as they were extremely tired, they got into their shelter and sat beside a log-fire, drinking

the porridge which Nyawir had prepared when Owiny had taken the axe to the bush.

That night the moon did not rise, and the night was fearful indeed! Crickets cried threateningly even within the shelter. And the owl, the bird of the night, cried in a deep voice on the fig tree under which Owiny and his wife had shelter. When the owl stopped, they seemed to hear a hyena crying around the mouth of the river.

Then Nyawir asked Owiny: "The muscular-armed one I agree that I sinned and now I've brought a big problem for Were Ochak, my father-in-law, and Lwak, my mother-in-law. But look, Owiny, the people of Got Owaga have a saying that generations replace one another in the enjoyment of the pleasures of life. In my own mind, that saying means there must be change in the world. Meaning that when our elders' days are finished and they die, then those who are born after them become elders and take their places; and the youth also go the various stages of growth until they become adults and assume leadership."

"Now if those growing children only follow the practises of their forefathers, without bringing any changes, how can the world develop, if man does not use the intelligence which Were Nyakalaga gave him? Didn't Were Nyakalaga give man intelligence and strength to use for his own good?"

When Owiny heard Nyawir talking in that manner, fear seized him. Did Nyawir want to commit another sin, here in the wilderness?

He spoke to her sternly. "*Rapudo*, Were Nyakalaga gave our forefathers many laws with which to guide the world; and it is by the use of those laws that our fathers too have ensured the welfare of the world for all these years. And there has always been peace in the world; and that peace has enabled our community to live in love and harmony, wanting in nothing. Now, if our generation begins to change the customary laws with which our forefathers established the world, it will look as if we are rejecting our forefathers. It will appear as if we are belittling all the good deeds which our forefathers performed here in Got Owaga, so that our children may forget them.

"And if the children forget their forefathers, or if we make them despise the good things their forefathers did here, we'll be like people who are slowly cutting the roots of a tree. Since our childhood, we've known that a community is like a big fig tree. The roots of that tree are our forefathers; our parents are its stem; and our generation is its branches which bear fruits when it rains tomorrow. Those fruits are the children who are not yet born. And, as the roots are the strength of a fig tree; giving it life and energy, so our forefathers are the strength of our nation, because Were Nyakalaga put all the commandments which govern our nation in their hands. That is why when we try to alter our customs, we are breaking the commandments of Were Nyakalaga; and we are destroying the earth."

Nyawir did not appreciate Owiny's reasoning; and she cried thus: "*Ayaye* Owiny, why don't you realize that if man is not willing to use his intelligence which Were Nyakalaga gave him, one day Were Nyakalaga may take that intelligence from him? Personally, I think that it is when we help ourselves, instead of waiting for Were Nyakalaga to do everything for us, that we also help him; and that is when knowledge can increase in the world. The people of Got Owaga have a saying that 'Were Nyakalaga helps he who runs away from danger.' Doesn't that support what I'm trying to tell you Owiny? If some changes don't occur so that the people of Got Owaga have new ways of doing things, then one day Were Nyakalaga will get tired of men, and he will scatter them all over the world and leave them to fend for themselves."

Owiny marvelled at the words he heard Nyawir uttering. He quickly remembered the warning which his mother had given him; 'Owiny my child, all these beautiful girls here, in Got Owaga, couldn't you find another to marry, instead of this Opolo's daughter whose kinship people do not know well?'

He was soon seized with fear, wondering what could be wrong with his wife! That same day, in the morning, Nyawir had tried to use her own intelligence and, despising Were Nyakalaga, dug the soil with the metal-headed hoe, bending its head and, consequently, causing untold misery to all the people of Got Owaga for ever. How come Nyawir had, like a warthog, forgotten that terrible incident?

Nyawir was still argumentative, indicating clearly that she was not sorry about the terrible sin she had committed!

He therefore spoke angrily, saying: "*Rapudo*, don't you realize the embarrassment and anguish we left our parents and relatives because your heart yearned to bring a change from the commandments which Were Nyakalaga had left to our beloved parents, and curses and misery to all our people, cannot be good change. It appears that you can bring me more problems, until we disappear completely here in the jungle."

When Nyawir realized that Owiny's voice was becoming unfriendly and they were alone in the jungle, she put more wood in the fire. When the fire burnt more brightly, and she could see Owiny's face, she lifted her hands and rested them on his knee. Then she told him: "Owiny, I know that even you realize that the changes I want are not bad. But I know your worry. You are afraid of offending our parents, since they are now old, they don't want any change in our community, even those changes that can bring development. They see any suggestion from our generation that there should be some changes as a statement of despise for all the good things they have done here in Got Owaga throughout their life. And they think that the youth do not want to take advice from or respect the aged.

"But that is not true, Owiny. Generations succeed one another, implying that what an elder did when he was a child, his own child will one day try to do better and in an easier way than the way in which the elder had done it in his days. That, Owiny, is what development involves; and that is the increase in knowledge which builds a nation. I don't know why you can't agree with me on this? Look, I also love our parents and I have faith in our forefathers."

When Owiny saw that Nyawir was still argumentative and unyielding, he decided to leave her alone. He felt fear in his heart, feeling that perhaps there were some hidden things in his new wife's life that he hadn't known, but which he would slowly get to know as they lived alone there in the jungle.

He therefore, pretended to be sleepy, so that he could prevent a quarrel. He yawned pitifully and stretched his arms, saying: "*Rapudo*, I'm tired and I feel very sleepy, my eyes are aching with sleep!"

Nyawir answered with a smile, saying: "*Tho!* I'm tired of arguing. Now let's sleep, my mother's son-in-law. We'll have another day tomorrow."

Then Nyawir put some more logs in the fire and they slept on the mat she had brought along, their feet stretched towards the fire. Owiny fell asleep immediately because he was tired indeed. But the daughter of Opolo's eyes were wide awake. Her mind was busy formulating the question she would ask Owiny the following day as soon as morning came.

Meanwhile her other mind wondered whether her parents had received word of the calamity she had caused in the home where she had married recently. Yet another mind told her that perhaps Were Ochak had sent the elders to go and find her parents. And still another mind was telling her that as she had been banished from Got Owaga, perhaps there was no one who was going to waste his time looking for the parents of an evil girl who had caused calamity to the earth. And gradually, as dawn approached, sleep overcame the daughter of Opolo.

When the day broke, Owiny got up very early in the morning, when Nyawir was still asleep, to go to the forest where he had left the axe and bring poles. But when he reached the forest, he was very much shocked to see that the axe lay undisturbed where he had put it the previous day. Without having cut even a single tree!

He cried bitterly, saying: "Aa, I think there is something wrong here! The axe lies undisturbed where I left it yesterday, and not a single tree is cut. *Wuololo*, son of Ochak. Does that mean that this time Were Nyakalaga has disowned us completely? This one sin of Nyawir has made Were Nyakalaga stop everything from working for us! Were Nyakalaga has cursed everything; now man will have to work with his own hands. Aa! How our chests are going to be strained!"

Owiny stood wondering what to do now that a calamity had befallen his people. He immediately decided to try to cut trees with his own hands, so as to see what would happen. He held the handle of the axe with both hands, then he hit the sharp end of its head on the stem of a tree once, going *thep!* And, there and then, the axe broke at once into two pieces, its handle remaining in Owiny's hand while

the head fell at the foot of the tree Owiny was trying to cut.

His heart began to beat wildly in fear, and he cried bitterly: "What sort of affair is this? This axe breaks suddenly by itself in my hands, even before I cut the tree! *Ayaye*, Opii told my father not to give me the axe, saying that I would lose it. *Ayaye*, son of Ochak, I have now sinned just as my wife did yesterday!"

Then he moved to the foot of the trees where the head of the axe had dropped. But when he tried to catch it, he suddenly saw a hole opening in the ground, where the head of the axe had fallen. When he stretched his arm quickly to catch it, the head of the axe slipped from his hand. But he mysteriously managed to grab the head of the axe and pulled it out. As he hurried to get up and leave that place, he suddenly realized that the head of the axe had again slipped from his hand miraculously, and fallen into that hole, disappearing completely!

Owiny was surprised. Fear seized him, bringing with it the voice of Opii in the wind, in which Opii spoke to his father, saying: "Don't give the axe to Owiny. Owiny is careless; he may lose that axe in the forest."

Then Owiny heard that same voice in the cry of the birds, sounding as if the birds were imitating Opii's laughing at him. Then came the sound of the women of Got Owaga laughing at him too, so much that they went down on their bellies as they laughed.

Owiny bent and looked down into the hole, wondering by what miracle his axe had disappeared. But he only saw a bottomless abyss. As he bent, two major ideas crossed his mind.

First he thought of going back home to tell his father that the axe had dropped into a hole and disappeared from his sight. Alternately, he thought he should follow the axe down into the hole, even if it was where his death was going to come from.

In his innermost heart, he was inclined to go back home and tell his father that he had lost the axe. However when he considered the mockery he would get from the women at home, and the contempt with which his peers would treat him, he decided at once to follow the axe where it had fallen; and to die down there if he didn't find it, so that he might remove himself from the face of the earth.

After making that decision, Owiny lowered his right foot into

the hole, and then he lowered his left foot as well. In no time, he realized that the edge of the hole had fallen and his stomach felt hollow, like that of someone flying in an endless space! Feeling as if his heart was about to stop beating, he flew like that until he finally came down with a thud; and then his heart stopped completely!

It was after a very long time that Owiny suddenly felt as if he was surrounded by many people, who mumbled around him. He tried to open his eyes slowly, as he regained consciousness. Then he heard those people marvelling. "Look at him, he still has a flappy old skin with which he has come from the upper world."

And some of them said: "Ee, true, he looks like someone from above. Look how tattered his garments are...!"

When Owiny heard those people talking about him in such derogatory terms, fear seized him and his heart stopped again. Then these people brought some cold water and poured it on him and he began to regain life slowly. He heard someone's voice saying: "Just try and bring him back to life so that you may take him back where he came from; he cannot live among us here with that body from above."

That statement made Owiny realize that he was in the hands of strangers, who could kill him completely. He picked up some courage, lifted his head, and asked them: "Where am I?"

But those people did not answer him. They asked him in unison: "You, where have you come from? And what do you want here?"

Owiny tried to talk; but his lips would not move. So he only made intelligent signs with his hands, like a dumb person.

Later one of those people spoke to him in a rough voice: "We ask you questions and you don't answer: do you know that you have committed so many crimes in this community that you have to answer these questions?"

With some effort, Owiny managed to sit up. When he looked at the faces of the people who surrounded him, he noticed that there was not a single one of them who was old. Their bodies were soft and shiny, all of them, both men and women!

Then he asked them: "What country is this? Which nation do you people belong to?"

And they all responded at once: "Why do you answer our

question with a question? First, answer the question we have asked you, then we shall listen to your questions. Where have you come from? And whom do you want down here?"

Then Owiny answered. "I was cutting a tree to build my wife a house; and the axe of the people of Got Owaga, which my father had lent me to cut for me the poles, broke and fell from my hands, dropping into the hole, and dropped down here!"

And those people asked in unison. "What tree were you cutting with your own hands? Might you people have ignored the commandment of Were Nyakalaga in which he directed you not to dig with your hands?"

Owiny turned his face down and; in a trembling voice, said to them: "Yes we have sinned a little; but I did not do anything wrong. It was this bride, Nyawir the daughter of Opolo — whose dowry my father paid for me recently — it is her who my mother sent to take the metal-headed hoe to the farm, as is it required by our customs. And she dug the soil with the hoe, bending its head completely. And from yesterday, when that incident took place, all the implements which Were Nyakalaga gave us to work for us have refused to work."

Then one of these people scolded Owiny. "You man, that's not a small offence! That's a very big offence; and, remember, we know everything that has happened up in your world. Were Nyakalaga is very annoyed with you people because you have refused to heed his word, or even keep the commandments which he gave to your forefathers. But let's still leave that aside. Now, tell us what you want down here."

Owiny answered, saying: "I was chasing the axe which my father had given me to use in cutting building poles. Since it is the only axe which goes from person to person among all the people of Got Owaga, I know that now the people are very angry with me for having disappeared with their axe."

That man examined Owiny's mind, and then spoke to him briefly, "If you are that much concerned about the axe, then we'll take you to our king. He is the one who has power in this land," he said.

Those people then held Owiny's hands and got him to his feet.

When Owiny stood up and looked at those people's faces closely, he marvelled at their comeliness.

All the men and women wore soft skins, decorated with beads. But what he found most wonderful was the fact that all their faces were soft, like those of babies.

These people helped him walk slowly until they reached a big path which cut across a large open field. Then Owiny saw a big grazing field where long *buoywe* grass grew. In this grass he saw animals grazing – big animals with long sharp horns. Then Owiny asked those people: "What animals are those whose bodies look so nice?"

When those people heard Owiny's question, they laughed a lot and then asked him: "Are there no cows in your country? All these are the kings's cows; and it is the milk from them that we drink."

Owiny was tongue-tied, for he had heard stories about cows from his grandfathers, who told the children that once there had been cows in the world; but that those cows had in time gone to the top of Got Owaga and disappeared completely.

While they still stood there, Owiny saw the cows going down to the river to drink water. After that those people hurried with Owiny until they reached a place where many beautiful flowers grew; and he saw many bees and butterflies flying over the flowers. And he saw *ochwoga* trees with fruits on them, all over the place, most of the fruits beginning to get ripe. His heart was full of desire for those fruits, but he feared to go and pick them, though he was hungry.

Then they started to climb up a small hill. When they came to the top of the hill, and started to climb down on the other side, Owiny saw many houses, built close to one another, on both sides of the river. He realized that the houses looked like those of the people of Got Owaga, except that they were smaller. Farther away from those houses, he saw hills and valleys going indefinitely across that country. He marvelled at the beauty of that land. Its roads were big and swept clean. There were also birds of many different colours.

Owiny was getting tired, and he was hungry. And those people were hurrying him so much that they did not even talk; until they started going up yet another hill. Soon it started to get dark. By that

time Owiny was so tired that he couldn't walk. And those people encouraged him by saying: "Lift up your eyes and see the king's home up on the hill. Just keep up, we are about to get there."

Owiny strengthened his spirit, until, they got to the king's home at the top of the hill. By that time darkness had embraced the whole of the land; and clouds covered the sky so much that one could not see even a star!

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Although there was darkness everywhere in this land, the king's home was dazzling bright. There was a big fire in the yard. This light blinded Owiny; he could not even see the people who were gathered around the fire, though he could hear their voices. The people who had brought him helped him along slowly until they entered the king's house.

Then those people spoke to a man who was sitting on a chair: "King, we have a visitor. He says that he was cutting a tree with an axe; but the axe broke and fell into a hole, rolling right down here in our world. And when he tried to catch the axe, he too fell into that hole and dropped down here."

Owiny was seized by fear. True, he could see that man was sitting on a chair, but that king appeared to him like a shadow because his eyes could not see well. Then he saw a powerful light shining on the king's eye balls. Owiny thought that he was probably seeing a miracle; so he turned his face, lest he should see what ought not be seen by man!

While Owiny looked down, the king spoke to him in a voice like the wind, asking: "Why did you intentionally throw that sharp axe down here? You hurt many cows, together with herdsman."

That harsh voice frightened Owiny, because the king was accusing him falsely. So he pleaded in a trembling voice, saying: "I respect my father; and I respect Were Nyakalaga and our forefathers. But what took place happened to me as an accident. I was cutting a tree; and the axe which my father had lent me broke and fell into a hole. When I tried to catch that axe, I too fell into that hole; and I realized that I had dropped down here."

But the king responded immediately, asking: "And why were you cutting a tree with an axe? Why didn't the axe cut the tree by itself, according to the commandment of Were Nyakalaga?"

Then Owiny pleaded further, saying: "It is the bride whose dowry my father paid for me recently; she's the one who has put me into all this trouble. She dug the soil with the metal-headed hoe, which my mother had given her to take to the farm and leave there.

She bent its head. That's why the people of Got Owaga banished me from home—that my wife was evil and had brought a calamity upon the land."

But when Owiny started to accuse Nyawir in that manner the king cautioned him sternly, saying: "Peace, son of the earth, peace. Quarrelling or noise is not permitted here in my country. So you cannot accuse your kinsmen or that bride of yours. Here in my country, there is no quarrelling or discrimination, or even an attempt to prove someone guilty. I am, of course, aware that you people have broken the commandment of Were Nyakalaga and your forefathers."

While Owiny was still standing there, tongue-tied, the king asked him in a deep, awe-inspiring voice: "My friend, do your people know that there is another world down here? Tell me the truth, because I'll know if you lie to me."

Then Owiny answered fearfully, saying: "My people are aware that there is another world down here; but they don't know how it looks or who rules it."

The king kept quite for a long time without saying anything.

During that time, Owiny sweated profusely all over the body, until the sweat flowed like water on him.

Then the king said: "This world is different from the upper world. The people who come here from the upper world come with sharp implements which can hurt livestock and my people down here. Secondly, they bring straws and beer pots, but down here we don't have millet because we don't cultivate. Furthermore, your people come with shields; but we don't fight or loot other people's property. How can we tell your people to stop bringing such things down here?"

The king's speech made Owiny remember that he had not seen millet farms. Perhaps those people only ate the many fruits he had seen and drank milk. However, Owiny did not answer the king because the king's words perplexed him; and he feared to ask the king which country those people came from and exactly what sharp implements they had brought with them. He feared that he might have a slip of the tongue and ask an improper question. Soon, he found himself falling asleep where he was standing, even before he

pleaded with the king to give him the axe to take back to his people.

He suddenly felt weak everywhere in the body; so much so that he could not even move the muscles of his mouth, even his tongue felt heavy. Suddenly some people came and held his arms; then they started to take him out to the yard. After that he could not even recognize where they were taking him.

Holding him, they led him into a house and placed him on a mat. Owiny was too tired to know where he was. Gradually, he began to dream that he was going back home. He saw his wife Nyawir, crying on the bank of River Mihoo, looking for him. She combed the bushes near the grass hut he had built her. Looking across the river, he saw his mother on the other side, crying and searching for him in the reeds along the bank. He saw his father and all the other people of Got Owaga trying to make hoes. They worked so hard on the metal that they sweated profusely. The sweat was dropping onto the ground.

When he tried to call Lwak, his mother, so as to tell her that he was alive, a big wind blew his voice backwards. Then he tried to shout in a loud voice, as he said: "Mama, mama, don't cry so bitterly, I am down here. But Lwak didn't hear. And when he tried to run and go to Nyawir, he felt the earth running with him to the opposite direction. He cried out loud; and it was that cry which woke him up. He got up quickly and sat up. Then, slowly, he opened his eyes.

When he had regained consciousness, he realized that he was in a little hut whose walls had only poles, and no earth to fill in the spaces. Looking towards the east, he saw the sun rising. So it was already morning! He found this sun-rise a strange one; the sun rose where it normally sets. This made Owiny believe strongly that he was lost for ever; he would never see his family again. And when he made an attempt to remember what had happened the previous day, he found his head completely blocked. All his memory was lost!

It happened that while Owiny was in trouble down in the underworld, trying to find a way of going back to his people, matters were extremely tough in Got Owaga community. What had taken place was as follows.

When Owiny had told Nyawir, his wife, that he was to bring

building poles from the forest where he had left the axe the previous day to cut poles for him, Nyawir had been under the impression that Owiny was not going to take time in the forest. But when she waited for Owiny until sunset before he came back, she got panicky. As it was already dark, she feared to go and look for him in the forest, she spent the whole night seated in the grass hut, feeling very much frightened.

When dawn came, just as birds started to exchange greetings, she set out early for the forest. Sunrise found her already in the forest. She started to search, calling loudly: "Owiny, Owiny, where are you? Owiny!"

But she got no reply, except from the wind, which took her voice and sent it back to her in the form of an echo.

After searching for a long time, Nyawir suddenly saw a tree whose stem showed that someone had started to cut it. This sight filled her with fright. She hurried to the tree. Strangely enough, she saw splinters of the tree scattered under it. She began to marvel at that terrible sight. Looking around her, she suddenly set eyes on a broken handle of an axe. Nyawir then grabbed that broken handle. She pressed it against her bosom, crying: "Ma, ma, ma... What tragedy is this that has befallen me? Owiny has broken the axe? *Mayoo* (my mother), what shall I do?

Then she immediately began to wonder where Owiny could be, even if he had broken the axe. What might have happened to him? She began to cry bitterly thus: "Owiny, what tragedy has befallen you here in the forest? Has something hurt you?

While she still stood there she noticed a little shallow hole under that tree. But when she moved near it, she did not regard it as anything worth considering in these circumstances. Bending, as if to put her hand in the hole, she said: "Could Owiny really have fallen into that hole? How could Owiny fall into such a small hole? Oh, Owiny the handsome one, you've gone and left me with my enemies. Oh, Owiny!"

Then she left that place, walking along the river bank, and crying as she called Owiny. However, she did not see any sign of him.

Now, Nyawir knew for sure that some mystery had disap-

peared with Owiny. That is why she decided to keep on walking and looking for him, even if the search would take her out of the world of humans to *ka nyandguogi*, the land of the dogs. And if she should meet her death on the way, then it would be better for her to die. On the other hand, she thought that she would jump into that river so as to die and leave the world. But a voice in her warned her that if she disappeared without informing Lwak that her son had got lost in the forest, then she would be Were Nyakalaga's enemy on two counts, because it was due to her obstinacy that all these problems had come, not to mention the first sin.

Then Nyawir resolved once and for all that a person, be it a boy or a girl, is born only once and, similarly, dies only once. Owiny who had saved her from death only the previous day had now vanished through the wrath of Were Nyakalaga! Now, what was she herself left on the earth to do? With whom would she live in this frightening forest?

So she made a firm resolution to go back to Got Owaga and inform Lwak of what had taken place. After doing that, even if they killed her, she would have done her part by telling them what had befallen her and Owiny. She cried out loud once: "*Uuuuwi, ayaye Mama!* Owiny the handsome, my mother's son-in-law, has got lost in the jungle. *Ayaye*. Were Nyakalaga, you should have cut my leg or neck but left me Owiny, my husband — the handsome one, the son of Opii's mother."

After that Nyawir held the handle of the axe in her hand, and started to run towards Got Owaga, still wailing: "*Uuuuwi, ayaye Owiny!* Come out the people of Got Owaga. Owiny *Rapando* has disappeared in the jungle!"

When she came out of the forest and appeared in the open field bordering the villages, the people heard her voice. They came out of their homes, asking one another: "Whose wife is that ululating so terribly? What problem has arisen now? *Tho*, there will be no end to tragedies here in Got Owaga!"

While the people were still gathered to find out what was happening, they saw a young woman crossing the field, going directly towards Were Ochak's home. People touched and looked at each other as if passing some secret message.

Then one woman spoke, "Look, doesn't she resemble Nyawir the daughter of Opolo? Nyawir has come back here to Got Owaga!"

And another one replied quickly, "Perhaps the evil woman has killed Owiny in the jungle!"

But before their tongues settled after those utterances, Nyawir was heard wailing bitterly thus:

Come out, my mother-in-law!

Come out, Lwak!

Some miracle has disappeared in the jungle

With Owiny your son

Come out!

At this time, Lwak was threshing millet in a mortar and throwing some to the fowls. Were Ochak had gone somewhere behind his home to trap ants to feed the fowls. Nyawir's wailing made Lwak's heart sink. She threw the pestle down right there and started to run. On reaching the gate, she set her eyes on Nyawir the daughter of Opolo, carrying the broken axe-handle in her hand.

Soon she saw Were Ochak coming hurriedly with an ant-collecting basket in his hand, and a big crowd trotting after him.

Lwak was extremely nonplussed. She felt pain in her belly, fearing that her strong son, who was also her last-born, had died in the jungle. While the people were still tongue-tied, Lwak went and held Nyawir's hand, asking her loudly: "What has brought you back, to Got Owaga, the daughter of Opolo. Has Owiny, my son, been befallen by another tragedy there in the jungle?"

Nyawir cried, saying: "Owiny left me yesterday to go and bring building poles; and he spent the night outside in the forest. And when I went to the forest early in the morning to look for him, I didn't find him. While I was still searching, I suddenly came across this broken axe-handle near a tree which, it appeared, Owiny had tried to cut. But I saw no sign of Owiny himself!" The people rebuked her in unison, saying: "Go away, you evil woman. Perhaps it is you who killed Owiny there in the jungle and threw him into the forest; then you broke the axe. And now you come here to deceive us!"

Some women complained loudly saying: "We told you people that there is something ominous in this beauty of Owiny's wife.

now, don't you see? *Ayaye* Nyawir, the daughter of Opolo, this time you have done a horrible deed!"

What slanderous utterances! Nyawir opened her mouth to answer them; but she failed to talk, her lips only quivered.

Deeply moved by this affair, Lwak quickly asked Nyawir: "The daughter of Opolo, could what is being alleged about you be true? Might you have killed my last-born son there in the jungle? Please, be forthright."

Were Ochak abandoned the ant-basket down there, with the ants in it. Then he moved close to Nyawir. And since Nyawir feared him, she held out her hands desperately and cried pitiably, "My father-in-law, can I really use these hands of mine to hurt Owiny Rabala, who took me out of maidenhood and put a bride's crown on my head? I'm swearing in front of you, people of Got Owaga, that if these hands of mine have hurt Owiny, then Were Nyakalaga should send lightning and strike me right here, so that I may die and be gone! Indeed, I knew that you didn't like me; but if I hadn't come to inform you of Owiny's disappearance in the jungle, it would have appeared that I had denied you. Of course, it is true that I have sinned, but I'm still a wife to your community, and you are still my kinsmen."

Then Were Ochak took the broken axe-handle from Nyawir's hand and examined it carefully while everyone kept completely quiet. Some of the people moved closer.

After a careful examination of the axe-handle, Were Ochak said to the whole crowd: "This, indeed is the handle of the axe we gave to Owiny. With what bad luck did this female child marry into this home? Only recently she broke the metal-headed hoe; and now she has come with this axe-handle, bringing the strange news that Owiny broke the axe and disappeared in the jungle! What should I do? What does Owiny want from me?"

When the people realized that Were Ochak was very angry, Elder Omach tried to calm him saying: "Aa... Were, don't let anger overcome you. The jungle is a rough environment; we don't know what miracle might have occurred to Owiny there."

Elder Oyo supported him, saying: "The people of Got Owaga, let us then go to the jungle and investigate this matter."

They left for the jungle, jogging and trotting with Nyawir in front of them. After crossing the river, they came to the grass hut which Owiny had built; but they did not stay there for long. Nyawir led them to the foot of the tree where she had found the broken axe-handle.

Were Ochak took Elder Omach and Elder Nyamudhe, plus two other elders aside. They moved some distance ahead, watched by the rest of the people of Got Owaga. They found the tree whose stem had started to be cut, and a shallow hole under it.

Nyawir said to the elders: "This is where I found the broken axe-handle; and that's the stem I thought Owiny had been trying to cut. Now, when I saw that hole, I thought that Owiny had perhaps fallen into it."

Elder Omach spoke loudly, asking: "Our people, take a look at that hole; where is a hole here which a huge man like Owiny *Rapando* could have fallen? Listen, we have been befallen by a calamity whose nature we must investigate carefully. This matter has a deeper meaning, Were."

Then they took small shallow sticks and pushed them into the hole, confirming that it was truly so shallow that a man could not fall into it.

Then Elder Nyamudhe warned them loudly, saying: "Ee, our people, perhaps we are not treating this matter with the seriousness it deserves while, maybe, it is Were Nyakalaga's hand which has forced Owiny into this hole. Maybe it is Were Nyakalaga who has lost Owiny in this jungle. Were Ochak, this matter is heavy."

On hearing that, Lwak cried out loudly, holding her open hands up in a begging manner: "Aa, even if it is Were Nyakalaga, can't he give me some breathing space? All these many houses here in Got Owaga, is it only my house in which big calamities can camp? *Ayaye* . How my house is being ruined!"

The women who were there started to cry with Lwak, while the men clicked and made war-cries!

* * *

For three days the people of Got Owaga combed in search of Owiny Rabala but did not see him, or even find his footprints. On the third

day, Were Ochak was certain that it was Were Nyakalaga who had taken away his son. So he called all his people together and said to them: "Listen, we are starving; let's go back home. I realize that this is a heavy matter; perhaps it is Were Nyakalaga who has made Owiny disappear on account of the sin which his wife committed. Maybe, if we remain patient, we shall get a revelation from Were Nyakalaga. Secondly, I feel we should not leave the daughter of Opolo here in the jungle. Something might hurt her here. Let us take her back home. Or, what do you feel about it?"

The clansmen answered in unison: "Of course, we don't want this woman; but tragedy has befallen us – let's take her home with us to wait for any news concerning her husband."

They left that place and made for home, tired and worn out. On arrival, they built a little hut *okulko* * on the open field in front of Were Ochak's home. It was in that hut where Nyawir stayed temporarily while she still mourned the loss of Owiny, her husband.

* (A simple circular structure, usually built without a separate roof. The tops of the sticks used in building the walls are brought together to give it a dome shape.)

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Owiny's dream — that the people of Got Owaga were looking for him along the river-bank — was thus a revelation to him of what was actually happening.

When he woke up and found the sun rising in the wrong direction, he suddenly saw some people coming to him, saying: "Get up so that you may go and greet the sun!"

Scared Owiny got up. "But where am I? The axe, the axe of the people of Got Owaga?" he asked.

Slowly he remembered where he was. Then he went and spat towards the sun, saying: "*Thu - thu*, may you rise well for me; may you protect me and take me back to my people."

After that, those people gave Owiny a gourd of milk, and said to him: "Here, drink the milk we got from those animals you saw yesterday." After he had drunk the milk, they said to him: "Come with us, we're going to fish down there in the lake."

Fear seized Owiny because his people were not fishermen; so he didn't know how to fish. He therefore told them that he could not go with them because he didn't know how to fish.

And those people told him: "Oh, let's just go, we'll show you how to fish."

When they arrived at the shore, they found a big canoe waiting for them there. The fishermen spoke to their colleagues, saying: "Is this the guest who has come to visit us? But, how terrible he looks! *Ee*, my friend, where have you come from? And what do you eat in your country that makes you look so terrible?"

And Owiny answered: "I've come from the upper world, a long way from here!" Then those fishermen said: "*Tho!* This is marvellous!" Then they got into that canoe and paddled until they reached the middle of the lake. At that time, a strong hurricane came, and strong waves threw the canoe this way and that way and it appeared that the canoe was going to sink. Then Owiny saw the water of the lake going in circles, and the rotating middle part becoming a big valley; then the canoe went into the valley, and started to sink to the bottom of the lake. However, although they

sank into the water, no water went into their eyes. Slowly the canoe got to the bottom of the lake. Then Owiny saw very white sand down there; and also saw long shrubs, which looked like weeds. After that, he saw a big fish swimming towards the canoe on all sides, vomiting a lot of big, white beads, which were glittering and very beautiful.

While he was still puzzled, and feeling frightened, those fishermen got out of the canoe; and started to scoop those white beads with their hands, putting them in the canoe. When those people turned their backs on him, as they left the canoe for more beads, Owiny stretched out his hand and touched the beads. Their beauty attracted him so much, because all his life he had never seen such beautiful beads. He picked up some courage and asked them: "Are these the fish you were telling me about? Are they eaten? And what are you going to do with these many beads that they vomit and you collect?"

The fishermen laughed at Owiny, saying to him: "You people don't have fish in your country: you don't even know beads? We catch and eat fish; they are palatable. But the beads we take to the king's home; and the king gives them to his people, so as to make beautiful garments such as the ones we are wearing now."

Those fishermen did not stay there for a long time. When they had taken all the beads, Owiny suddenly saw the fish running away to hide under the weeds. Then they moved to another place, and it was there where they caught some medium-sized fish which they would eat. After that the fishermen went back into the canoe; and they returned to the surface of the water, from where they paddled hard until they reached the shore.

There they found men and women waiting for them with baskets in their hands. But they appeared shaddowy and were dead quiet. Owiny asked those fishermen: "Where are all these people going?"

And they Answered: "Some of them have to carry these beads to take to the king's home; and some have to carry these fish."

While Owiny waited anxiously to see how those people were going to scoop the beads, he suddenly began to feel heavy, as if he was sleepy. He battled hard not to fall asleep, but he didn't manage.

He suddenly fell down there in the canoe, unaware of what he was doing. He panicked, fearing that it was perhaps the smell of those white beads that was killing him. Then, gradually, he felt that those people were shaking him and trying to wake him up. But their voices sounded as if they were coming from a great distance. He tried hard to answer them, but his mouth was very heavy; and his eyes didn't see.

Soon those people stood him up, as they encouraged him, saying: "Stand, friend, stand. The king wants you. Open your eyes and see his messengers; they have come to take you."

Owiny was moved by this message, hoping that perhaps the king wanted to tell him that he could now go back to his people: "If the king wants me then...then...ta...ke...me...to...him."

Then those people held both hands, and encouraged him saying: "Then get up, friend. What kind of person are you? You're ugly, your body is rough, and, moreover, you are so weak!"

However, although they despised him thus, Owiny did not have the energy to answer them back. They supported him until they entered the king's home and took him into the big house. Then Owiny put in some effort and stood still, supported by those people. Standing there, he suddenly regained his strength; and his eyes opened up a little. It appeared to him that he saw a big king, sitting on a chair covered with an animal's skin. However, he could not tell whether it was a leopard skin or the skin of the kind of animals that he had seen the previous day. While he still saw faintly in that manner, the king's voice frightened him, as he spoke to him, saying: "Son of the upper world: since you came here you have been pleading with my people to let you take the axe back to your country, without considering your own life. I've heard your request, and I've agreed that you can go back, because it wasn't proper for you to come down here. You can't live here with that body you have. I want you to go back to your country and to your people. Now I have instructed my people to give you back the axe, so that you may go back to your family, according to your request."

When the king spoke in that manner, Owiny tried to open his eyes wide, so that he could see and thank the king for the kindness. But he could not; he did not even have the ability to utter a word. He

was like a drunk man. An idea came to him – that perhaps those people had deliberately taken away his mental ability, so that he might not see that king's face or what his home looked like.

And when he was still thus troubled, the king spoke to him in a deep voice, saying: "Son of the upper world, I've, no doubt, allowed you to go back to your homeland; but if you reveal to your people, for whatever reason, anything that you've seen in this country, you'll surely die on that very day. Everything in our country must remain a secret, known only to us. And, since I have told you not to, if you ever ignore my word and talk to someone about what you've seen here, then you'll certainly die! I've warned you."

Then the king said to his people: "He has woken up and heard everything. Take him out of this place!"

And to Owiny he said: "Now go to your homeland and return the axe to your father. I've instructed my people to escort you because you cannot find your way to your homeland on your own. Now go in peace. But don't ever come back here."

Indeed, Owiny heard the king's words clearly; but never saw his face. He also tried to thank him, but he failed completely because the whole of his body was very weak.

Those people walked him out of the king's house, and took him to the house where he had slept the night before. They put him down and brought him some milk in a gourd, as one of them said to him: "Drink this milk quickly; we have a long way to walk."

As he was hungry, Owiny took the gourd and drank all the milk. After drinking that milk, Owiny regained a little of his sight.

Then one of those people told him: "Here is the axe you were crying for. The king has said that we should give it back to you."

And Owiny answered: "Oh, thank you, thank you very much."

Then another man said to him: "Here, take this bag; the king has given you some of those beads so that you may take them with you to your homeland and show your people."

Then another man moved close to Owiny and said to him: "Look, the king has given you all these cattle — bulls and cows — so that you may go and start cattle-keeping. But he has said that if your hands are good at cattle-keeping, then you must take first the

bull that is born in your herd and sacrifice it, when it is still young, to Were Nyakalaga and your forefathers."

Then Owiny mustered all his energy and managed to thank the king's men, pointing to the cattle and saying: "All these cattle the king has given to me? I'm pleased and extremely grateful."

Finally, an elderly woman came carrying a bag of tobacco. She said to Owiny: "My son, the king has instructed me to give you this bag of tobacco to take to your father. But, remember, this tobacco is very strong; your people should not smoke or chew it during the day because it will make them drunk. Also, tell your father that I've put the tobacco seeds right in the middle of the bag should he want to plant those seeds when it rains."

Owiny thanked them heartily, and praised the king for his generosity.

One of the king's men explained their plan to him: "Son of the upper world, we'll set off right away, following that setting sun. When you see it rise on the other side, well shall have reached your homeland."

Owiny was puzzled by that statement, wondering how a man going on his feet could follow the setting sun. But he did not ask any other question. He took the axe in his hand, and also the bag of beads, including that of tobacco.

Meanwhile his four escorts stood there with the cows, Owiny in between them. Soon, the whole place became misty, except for a little light which showed on top of the mountain at a place which looked like the location of the king's house. They walked hurriedly, following the sun which formed a round red ball.

They walked for a long time until darkness covered the whole place, their only guide being the redness of the sun. Gradually, Owiny began to be tired and his feet started to swell. He pleaded with those people saying: "I'm tired, and my feet are swollen and aching. Let me sit down for a while. I'm exhausted!"

But the leader of those people replied: "Indeed, we know that you're tired; but if we rest the sun will disappear from us, you will not reach your homeland."

Owiny tried to persevere; but he did not have much strength left. After a fairly long time, he suddenly dropped down, his

strength completely finished. Then he heard someone say to the leader: "Let him rest for a short time; remember that he is not like us. If we keep him on a hard journey without rest and something hurts him while he is under our care the king will rebuke us."

So they allowed him to rest briefly. And they gave him the milk they had carried for him in a gourd.

After drinking the milk, he regained his strength. When they resumed their journey, Owiny asked the king's men: "Why do I get so exhausted while you people don't show any sign of tiredness?"

But those people only mumbled among themselves and kept quiet without answering the question. That showed Owiny they did not want him to know the nature of the people who lived down there, in the underworld, just as the king had told him that the affairs of that world were secret.

After walking for a very long time, Owiny suddenly realized that they had come to a big fort. At that time the sun, which they had been following, disappeared abruptly. They stopped at once, and the cattle stopped with them. Owiny thought that perhaps these people had deceived him by telling him that he was being taken back to his homeland, while in actual fact, they wanted to kill him at the fort. While he still stood there, frightened, those people held both his hands and moved with him slowly until they got near the big fort, which looked like a round rock. Then the leader of those people moved ahead and started to push that rock with his hands. The rock was extremely heavy. The man exerted tremendous energy as he pushed that rock, until they suddenly saw a section of the rock opening up. And when it opened, a big, bright light shone through that opening; and it momentarily blinded Owiny.

While Owiny's eyes were still unable to see, one of the king's men quickly said to him: "All your cattle have gone through this gate; now get ready so that you may also pass and go back to your people!"

Then their leader put the axe into Owiny's hand; and they hung the tobacco and beads bags round his neck. After that, they held him like a bundle of something and started forcing him through that gate until they pushed him out on the other side. During the time they were pushing him out he only saw faintly, like a man in a

dream, even unaware of what was happening to him, as if he were asleep.

Now he saw the rock fort moving slowly until it locked itself up. The rock sealed the opening where he had passed; and things became quiet and calm as if that rock had not cracked even a little bit!

Owiny fell asleep.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

When Owiny woke up and turned his eyes to the east, he saw the sun rising right at the peak of the mountain, warm and agreeable. He was surprised. Looking this way, he saw big cattle grazing near the river bank. Then he marvelled saying: "Surely, where am I? Have I been sleeping since the day before yesterday? I've slept as if I died for some time! I've dreamt so many dreams. Ee! And what's that looking like Mount Owaga?"

Slowly he lifted his eyes. "Where am I?" he went on to ask himself. "What am I doing under this tree? And where is Nyawir?"

Soon, he regained full consciousness. He remembered that he had been cutting the tree he was under. Immediately he noticed the axe in his hand; and it was that axe which reminded him that he had been trying to cut that tree on the day before the previous day. And that he had broken the axe! He was surprised, wondering what he was doing in the jungle so early in the morning if he had been cutting the tree two days before.

He stood up. He saw many cattle grazing on the field near the forest and he was surprised. But before he knew what all this meant, he saw a big bag hanging round his neck, with tobacco in it. When he opened the other bag, he found very white beads, so white that they dazzled him. He closed that bag quickly. Then Owiny tried hard to recollect his previous experiences, asking himself: "Where could I have just got all these things? My head is completely blocked. I can't remember anything, what state of affairs is this?"

Fortunately, after a short while his head started to clear up slowly. He thought of Nyawir and he remembered that he had built her a little grass hut near the river, because they had been banished from home when Nyawir broke the metal-headed hoe!

Owiny marvelled at this new awareness. "So I've come back to my homeland — it appears that I was lost."

He hurried until he reached the river bank where he had built Nyawir a hut. He found the hut had already collapsed.

Then Owiny remembered Lwak, his mother; Were Ochak, his old father, and all the people of the village. He started to call his wife:

"Nyawir yooo ! Nyawir where are you?" But he did not hear any response.

Then he said: "Let me go home. Let me take all these things home; perhaps Nyawir went back to our family."

He then took all the things he had and started to drive the cattle, walking straight along the river, until he found a shallow place and went across with his cattle.

When he had gone through the forest and arrived at his people's farm, he set eyes on the crops ready for weeding. He saw many people weeding, each person on his farm! He realized that he had stayed away for a long time and had come back to a changed world, in which the people of Got Owaga used their own hands!

He became afraid, fearing that the people would rebuke him and might perhaps even want to kill him.

Before Owiny could decide what to do, the cattle began to bellow when they saw people. Their bellowing scared all the clansmen, and they ran away, carrying their hoes in their hands.

But Opii looked closely at the man driving those animals. He realized that man was Owiny, his brother who had disappeared — whom he thought he would never see again. He said to the people: "It is Owiny. He walks like Owiny. I can recognize Owiny even at a distance."

Then Opii ran hard to break the news to his mother at the farm where she and Were Ochak were weeding.

He called Lwak loudly: "Hurry up, Mama, it is Owiny! He has come back with animals. Father, come and see, Owiny has come back."

On hearing that, Lwak dropped the hoe to the ground and started to run. Were Ochak also started to trot, still holding a hoe in his hand. There was great commotion in the whole clan, as the people asked one another; "What kind of animals are those with such sharp horns? Don't you think they can gore people?"

One old man answered: "There, Were Ochak is coming to tell us; but I think they look like cattle."

While they were still away from him, Lwak set eyes on her son who had been lost and her body trembled.

And when Were Ochak arrived, he forced his way through the

crowd and went where his son stood, already surrounded by people. Then he asked his son: "Where have you come from with these awesome cattle, son of Munde's daughter? Your mother has mourned for you painfully, fearing that you're dead out in the jungle."

But Owiny indicated his innocence with his hands, saying: "I don't know, I just woke up suddenly and found these cattle grazing near me; then I started to drive them this way."

And the clansmen answered in unison, saying: "What wonderful cattle, which Owiny doesn't know who gave him! And yet here in our nation there are no cattle. Will miracles ever end here in Got Owaga? Or is it Were Nyakalaga who made Owiny disappear. As people were still marvelling, Owiny gave his father a bag of very strong tobacco, telling him: "This bag contains the tobacco I was given to bring to you. This tobacco is stuffed into a pipe; there is a pipe too in this bag. Also, I've been given strict instructions that this tobacco should be smoked at night; don't smoke it during the day — it is very strong and can make you drunk. There are also seeds in that bag for you to plant when it rains."

Now, there was pushing in the crowd as each person tried to reach Were Ochak. "Please Were Ochak, let us see what tobacco looks like, let us see, please!"

Then Owiny gave the other bag to his father, telling him: "This bag contains beautiful, big beads, which are very white — here, look at it."

When Were Ochak opened that bag and poured some beads into his hand, they reflected the sun's rays and dazzled people. The people started to push, saying: "Please, Were Ochak, let us see, let us see."

Lwak also insisted on being given the things that her son had brought so that she could see them.

When Elder Omach saw the people pushing like that, he restrained them at a distance, saying: "Please be patient. Were Ochak will give each of you his share. Didn't I tell you to be patient about the case of Owiny *Rapando*? Now, don't you see that he has brought strange things?"

Others were saying: "Look, Owiny has brought cattle, he has

brought tobacco, and precious beads which can only bring much wealth when sold." But others demanded, "Owiny show us where you got these so that we can also go and get our own."

But Owiny turned his hands up helplessly to the people: "I don't know; I don't know the person who gave me all these things. I've lost my memory,"

Then Lwak restrained the people, saying: "Please, give this child time to rest, so that he may regain his memory. Gradually Were Nyakalaga will reveal things to him; then he can tell us where he found these things."

Although the people appreciated Lwak's words, they still put pressure on Owiny, saying: "Just try to remember, especially where you found these beads, you may think of the cattle and the tobacco later."

Closing his eyes hard, he saw something like a canoe in his mind. Then he said loudly: "It appears that I found the beads in a canoe in a lake!"

The people of Got Owaga responded in unison, saying: "But there are no canoes here in Got Owaga, Owiny, where did you see a canoe? There is even no lake in our country."

However seeing that he was only signalling ignorance and helplessness with his hands, they left him alone.

At that moment, Owiny asked in surprise: "Mother, father, where is Nyawir? Why hasn't she come to greet me? Where is she hiding?" Then Were Ochak drew Owiny aside and informed him of the terrible thing that happened while he was away. He said to him: "My child, your wife, Nyawir the daughter of Opolo, disappeared from here recently. After your disappearance in the jungle, she brought us the news. The courage of hers made the people forgive her; so we built her a hut out there, near our home. Your disappearance made her very ill and she used to cry all the time. She did not even eat—in the belief that you had died in the jungle. On the third day she told me that she was going to the top of Mount Owaga to see the face of Were Nyakalaga. She also wanted to ask him about you. But I forbade her, telling her that as we had offended Were Nyakalaga, she should not intrude upon his privacy like that. Were Nyakalaga would curse us again. When I spoke to her, she seemed

to heed my voice and stayed calm but she was only pretending. The following day, when we woke up, we did not find Nyawir in the house. When we followed her footprints slowly, we realized that the footprints led to the very top of the mountain where there was still a very heavy fog."

When Owiny got that terrible news, he stood up and wept, saying: "Oh, my beautiful wife! That pretty wife of mine has destroyed herself in the forest! Why have you broken my heart, *Rapudo* And for whom have I brought these attractive beads? Why didn't? *Rapudo* wait for me until I came back?"

Then Were Ochak placed his hand on his son's shoulder and told him: "On the day the daughter of Opolo disappeared we saw a miracle. We suddenly realized that the fog which had been covering the top of Mount Owaga had disappeared; and so had the rainbow."

Then Owiny wept further, saying: "Why didn't you people go to the top of Mount Owaga and look for her? You left my beautiful wife to disappear completely? Why didn't you, my father climb to the mountain top and hear Were Nyakalaga's voice?"

And Were Ochak answered: "The nephew of Jo Komolo, I've not gone up there because that strong wind carried the hut which we built for Were Nyakalaga at the peak of the mountain and disappeared with it completely. After that we got a revelation through a diviner that I should not go back to the top of Mount Owaga; but that I should go and build for Were Nyakalaga another shrine at the foot of Jina Rock. That is where we sacrifice to him nowadays. So, even you can't go to the top of Mount Owaga and look for the daughter of Opolo."

Now Owiny's peers supported and carried him until they got home. Owiny mourned for Nyawir *Rapudo* until sunset!

That night, Were Ochak had a terrible dream. In his dream he heard someone waking him up and telling him: "Were Ochak, why is Owiny your son weeping so much? A man whose tears drop in public usually plants fear in the hearts of children. Tell Owiny to stop crying. Inform him that Nyawir the daughter of Opolo walked straight towards the top of Mount Owaga, determined to go to the shrine which was built for Were Nyakalaga in order to ask him

about Owiny. However, she did not get to the top. Your fathers stopped her on the way and used her to cleanse the nation which her own hands had brought doom upon. So give Owiny a strong warning not to leave this home with the purpose of going to the top of Mount Owaga to look for the daughter of Opolo. But, should he be obstinate and ignore that warning, he may bring great enmity between your community and Were Nyakalaga. He will break the friendship which now exists between you and your forefathers."

When that voice spoke to him thus, Were Ochak was seized by fear, wondering what mysterious being was speaking to him, yet he could not see him. And when he tried to ask him who he was, that voice continued to tell him: "Were Ochak, of your two sons Opii is the elder one; however your forefathers have observed that it is Owiny upon whom the lot has fallen to look after your children and grandchildren when your days are over. So, tomorrow call all the people of Got Owaga together so that you may receive blessings from Jina Rock and pray for him there, in order that he may receive blessings from Were Nyakalaga and your forefathers. And don't take with you any grains, be it sorghum, sesame, or beaaaaa....a....ns! Only take cold water in a go...urd...!"

Then that voice disappeared completely. Were Ochak woke up and found the whole of his body covered in sweat. He remained silent for a long time, his heart beating hard in fear. When he regained strength, he walked hurriedly to Lwak's house, though it was still dark.

After Lwak had opened the door and lit a fire for him, he narrated the whole of his experience in the dream. Then he added: "*Ragwel*, I've lost heart. Since the daughter of Opolo sinned here in Got Owaga, I don't hear Were Nyakalaga's voice clearly, either in the air, in the voices of the birds, or in the thunder. I really don't know, but I think Were Nyakalaga is slowly moving back into the clouds!"

And when Lwak saw the old man thus troubled at heart, she calmed him by saying: "Aa *Ragot*, how can you say that when you've just heard Were Nyakalaga's voice in a dream, and he blessed Owiny, your son? Why aren't you happy? Why aren't you grateful?"

But Were Ochak replied, saying: "*Ragwel*, I am happy. Owiny the brave has come back alive, and has brought us wealth. However, there is fear in my heart. Of course I know that Were Nyakalaga's power covers the whole of Got Owaga; but since the daughter of Opolo sinned by violating commandments concerning the use of the metal-headed hoe and brought a curse upon the land, Were Nyakalaga's voice has been rather faint in my ears. It is our forefathers who are protecting us from alot that would have destroyed our nation. Just listen to what I'm saying, *Ragwel* . I'm an elder and I don't engage in loose talk."

Lwak replied softly, saying: "It's okay, my mother's son-in-law. I've heard you; let's just be patient and hope for the best."

At daybreak Were Ochak hurried to go and open the gate. He stood outside the gate when the sun rose, and spat towards the sun, saying:

Thu ! thu ! May you rise well to us

Thu ! May you bless Owiny, my son

When we take him for prayers

At the foot of Jina Rock.

Thu ! You are the eye of Were Nyakalaga

Thu ! You are our connection

To our forefathers.

After, Were Ochak came back home and beat the big drum himself. All those who heard the voice of the drum knew that there was something important. They washed their faces hurriedly and started to rush towards the foot of the fig tree in the open field in front of Were Ochak's home. Even Owiny and Opii, his brother, rushed to join the clansmen, unaware of what the old man had in mind. Only Lwak knew what was happening; so she carried some cold water in a new gourd. The people gathered together asking one another: "What has come up afresh? What is it?"

Were Ochak greeted everybody. Then he told them clearly about the voice which had spoken to him at cock crow in a dream. He told them: "The people of Got Owaga, this issue concerns this son who disappeared and came back with so much wealth. Were

Nyakalaga told me in a dream last night that we should take Owiny, your son, to the foot of Jina Rock, as early as this, so that we may pray for him there. I am to pour cold water on his head. Were Nyakalaga told me that your forefathers have chosen Owiny to look after my children and grandchildren when my days are over and I have to go and join the forefathers. That's why I've called you when your eyes are still heavy with sleep."

And while those who heard that news still stood tongue-tied, Elder Omach stepped forward and said:

Our beloved father
Aa.... Were Ochak
Who are we
To contradict Were Nyakalaga's voice?
Since you are wise
Judicious and generous
Hold Owiny's hand
And lead us on our way
To the foot of Jina Rock.

Now they left there in a big multitude, following Were Ochak, who held the hand of Owiny, his son

When they came close to Jina Rock, they stood a short distance away while Were Ochak and his son moved closer to the foot of a black, low rock, spreading over a wide area. Then Were Ochak said to Owiny: "Owiny, move in front there and kneel down; put your face on that rock." Owiny did that.

Elder Omach took the water gourd in his hand and passed it on to Were Ochak. Were Ochak, filled his mouth with some water and moved near the rock. Then he sprinkled the water on Owiny's head, until some of it rolled down onto the rock. After that he put the gourd on the rock. Then he lifted his hand and prayed:

Aa Were Nyakalaga
Our forefathers worshipped you
Just as we worship you now.
Our son who disappeared
You have brought back to us

With a lot of wealth
You have wiped off our tears!
And that same Owiny
We've now brought before you
And before our forefathers
So that he may learn
To be judicious, kind and loving,
A man whose eyes
Do not despise the poor!
I have followed the instructions
Which you gave me
Because you, indeed
Are Were Nyakalaga
Who connects us
With our forefathers.

Then the crowd responded in unison:

Thank you, thank you
Were Nyakalaga
And our forefathers.

As soon as the people of Got Owaga kept quiet, they saw Owiny suddenly jump up from where he was kneeling at the foot of that rock. Then he shouted, saying: "Father, the people of Got Owaga, I've had a revelation. I've seen a picture of a big canoe, steered with paddles in the middle of Mihoo River. There, I can also see big tilapia fish, vomiting very white beads right at the middle of Mihoo river."

When the people of Got Owaga heard that shocking news, they all asked at once, "Owiny, Owiny, what do you want us to do?"

Were Ochak asked, "What should we do?"

Owiny answered: "Father, let us all go to the bank of Mihoo River to cut *orinde* trees, so that I may show you how to make a canoe while the revelation is still clear in my mind." Then the people of Got Owaga started shouting:

Owiny, Owiny, Owiny *Rateng'*
Is good indeed.

The brother-in-law of Achola
The daughter of Gero!
Rateng' whose body
Agrees well with chalk and *atoya* !
Yesterday he brought white beads
Which shine like lightning
Together with tobacco and a pipe.
Ooo....the son of Opii's mother
Is indeed very good
My father who owns cattle
And owns the herd
Aaa Owiny, the muscular-armed, is good indeed.

Then Were Ochak removed his neck ornament and put it round Owiny's neck as the crowd rent the air with ululations.

When Opii saw what was going on, he removed a bangle from his arm and put it on Owiny's arm, showing all those who were there that he was not jealous. And those present said among themselves: "Opii has made an honourable gesture. He has sanctioned his younger brother's leadership." And others said: "Opii has returned blessings to his house. He has shown a spirit of love and respect."

What Opii did made Lwak's tears drop and fall onto her chest; it was marvellous that Were Nyakalaga had reunited her family.

After that, the people of Got Owaga — men, women, and girls — took off the cowries and beads which they wore round their necks, and put them round Owiny's neck, celebrating with ululations.

They left that place, Were Ochak leading with Owiny beside him, and the rest of the people dancing and trotting rhythmically all over the place, as the soloist led them in singing, until they reached the bank of Mihoo River.

Therefore the young men of Got Owaga started to cut *orinde* trees. With the help of Owiny *Rapando*, they made the very first canoe that was ever made in the land of Got Owaga!

Since that day the descendants of Owiny never stay away from a lake or a river. They are still fishing up to today, in the hope that

they will one day catch the mother tilapia, *min ngege* which their great grandfather Owiny saw vomiting pure white beads in the lake. And each evening, when the sun is about to set, you will hear them spitting towards the sun, saying:

Thu ! thu ! Set well to us.
Take greetings to our forefathers
Who are below
Until we see your eye again
When you wake up tomorrow.

TINDA

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THE STRANGE BRIDE

Grace Ogot was born in Kenya in 1930. She was educated at Ngiya High School and Butere Girls' High School. Thereafter, she trained as a nurse in Uganda and England. Mrs. Ogot is currently an Assistant Minister in the Kenya Government. She has previously written scripts for the BBC and worked as a Community Development Officer and as a Public Relations Officer. Among her earlier published works are *Land Without Thunder* (Heinemann), *The Promised Land* and *The Other Woman*.

The Strange Bride, first published in Dholuo as *Miaha* (1983), is an interpretation of a rich Luo myth. The people of Got Owaga lead a placid, almost idyllic, life-style until the glamorous and mysterious Nyawir suddenly appears from an unknown world. Mrs. Ogot demonstrates her powerful grasp of the Luo idiom in this book.



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