

4. THE GIRL WHO ESCAPED FROM AMA-IRMI

Long, long ago there was a period of terrible drought, with no rain for many years. Everything was dried up, and most of the grass had been scorched by the blazing sun. At last there was only a small pool left with a little water in it, which all the people from far and wide had to share. One day some of them collected by the pool, and prayed:

"Dear Father Netlangw, let the rain pour down!"

Suddenly they felt as though someone were spraying them with water. They were afraid, and ran home. They told their friends of the strange thing that had happened to them, and next day a large crowd of people gathered by the pool. They recited the same prayer for rain that they had recited on the previous day. When they were sprayed once again with water, they were frightened, but one of them took courage and asked: "Who are you?" A voice answered from the depth of the pool: "I am ama-irmi. This water belongs to me and not to Netlangw." Then the people asked: "What do you want from us in return for providing us with sufficient water?"

Ama-irmi answered: "I desire nothing more than to have Saidi Mundare, who is the most beautiful girl in the whole district".

Then they all promised that ama-irmi's wish should be fulfilled. A meeting was held at which the demand was discussed. They decided that the girl would have to die, in order that the people should survive. Next day they told ama-irmi of their decision, and promised that on the following evening, at sundown, they would send Saidi Mundare out, and refuse to allow her to enter their huts. When the agreed time approached, Saidi's parents asked her to go out and fetch water. When the people saw Saidi set off with the calabash on her head in the direction of the pool, they all barred the doors of their huts. Not long afterwards Saidi came running back, pursued by ama-irmi. To her dismay she found that the door of her father's hut was barred and locked. Her pleas to be allowed to enter were unavailing. Saidi then ran to the next hut, and then to the one after that, and so on. Everywhere she found the doors barred and locked. As she ran from hut to hut she sang:

Alas, I am refused admission to my father's home,
because I am to be sacrificed to ama-irmi,
so that the people may have sufficient rain
and water to live.

Then the rain started pouring down, and a storm broke out such as the people had never seen the like

of. Ama-irmi, who all this time was pursuing the girl, kept on shouting:

The girl with the calabash on her head,
The girl with the calabash on her head
belongs to me, belongs to me.

At last Saidi reached the hut of her elder sister, but she, too, refused to open the door to her. Just as ama-irmi was about to catch up with her, her brother-in-law opened the door and admitted Saidi in the nick of time. "Just wait a moment," he said to ama-irmi, who was fuming with anger. "Saidi is just getting ready. She will be coming out straightaway," the brother-in-law continued, seizing a large tin of honey that stood behind the door. Then he told ama-irmi to shut its eyes and open its mouth. The monster, believing that it would now be given the girl, opened its jaws wide. In a trice the brother-in-law had thrown the tin of honey right into ama-irmi's mouth. When he realised that the monster was not satisfied with this, the brother-in-law took a big sleek billygoat with long, powerful horns and hurled the goat down the monster's throat. The large, sharp horns remained sticking in the gullet, so that ama-irmi choked and fell down dead after a short death agony. Thereupon the brother-in-law hid Saidi in his home and everyone naturally believed that she had been taken by ama-irmi, for the rain continued to pour down for several days and the people now had sufficient water for themselves, their animals, and their fields. The ground recovered from the drought, and in a short time there was a rich harvest of maize, beans, and millet.

Then one day a tribal dance was held. The brother-in-law had provided Saidi with beautiful clothes. When the villagers had gathered together in a large crowd, he sang this song:

You fools! How could you dare to sacrifice a
beloved daughter, just to save yourselves
from death?

The villagers were so angry when they heard this song that they crowded round him and started to beat him, but he called out: "Do not kill me! I shall find Saidi for you and bring her back alive". Then he called for Saidi. Suddenly there stood the beautiful girl they all thought had long since been killed for their sake by the monster. When the villagers saw Saidi again, they were filled with joy, as they were all ashamed at the decision they had made to sacrifice her. Saidi and her brother-in-law then told the people exactly what had happened, and that ama-irmi had been killed. The villagers gave him many rich gifts as a reward for the courage and resolution he had shown in resisting and killing the monster. They gave him hundreds of sheep, goats, and cows, and he was now able to live happily and in great wealth for the rest of his life.