The Rain Came  By Grace Ogot

The chief was still far from the gate when his daughter Oganda saw him. She ran to meet him. Breathlessly she asked her father, “What is the news, great chief? Everyone in the village is anxiously waiting to hear when it will rain.” Labong’o held out his hands for his daughter but he did not say a word. Puzzled by her father’s cold attitude Oganda ran back to the village to warn the others that the chief was back.

The atmosphere in the village was tense and confused. Everyone moved aimlessly and fussed in the yard without actually doing any work. A young woman whispered to her co-wife, “If they have not solved this rain business today, the chief will crack.” They had watched him getting thinner and thinner as the people kept on pestering him. “Our cattle lie dying in the fields,” they reported. “Soon it will be our children and then ourselves. Tell us what to do to save our lives, oh great Chief.” So the chief had daily prayed with the Almighty through the ancestors to deliver them from their distress.

Instead of calling the family together and giving them the news immediately, Labong’o went to his own hut, a sign that he was not to be disturbed. Having replaced the shutter, he sat in the dimly-lit hut to contemplate.

It was no longer a question of being the chief of hunger-stricken people that weighed Labong’o’s heart. It was the life of his only daughter that was at stake. At the time when Oganda came to meet him, he saw the glittering chain shining around her waist. The prophecy was complete. “It is Oganda, Oganda, my only daughter, who must die so young.” Labong’o burst into tears before finishing the sentence. The chief must not weep. Society had declared him the bravest of men. But Labong’o did not care any more. He assumed the position of a simple father and wept bitterly. He loved his people, the Luo (a tribe in Northern Kenya and Uganda), but what were the Luo for him without Oganda? Her life had bought a new life in Labong’o’s world and he ruled better than he could remember. How would the spirit of the village survive his beautiful daughter? “There are so many homes and so many parents who have daughters. Why choose this one? She is all I have.” Labong’o spoke as if the ancestors were there, warning him to remember his promise on the day he was enthroned when he said aloud, before the elders, “I will lay down life, if necessary, and the life of my household, to save this tribe from the hands of the enemy.” “Deny! Deny! He could hear the voice of his forefathers mocking him.

When Labong’o was consecrated chief he was only a young man. Unlike his father, he ruled for many ears with only one wife. But people rebuked him because his only wife did not bear him a daughter. He married a second, a third, and a fourth wife. But they all gave birth to male children. When Labong’o married a fifth wife she bore him a daughter. They called her Oganda, meaning “beans,” because her skin was very fair. Out of Labong’o’s twenty children, Oganda was the only girl. Though she was the chief’s favorite, her mother’s co-wives swallowed their jealous feeling and showered her with love. After all, they said, Oganda was a female child whose days
in the royal family were numbered. She would soon marry at a tender age and leave the enviable position to someone else.

Never in his life had he been faced with such an impossible decision. Refusing to yield to the rainmaker’s request would mean sacrificing the whole tribe, putting the interests of the individual above those of the society. More than that. It would mean disobeying the ancestors, and most probably wiping the Luo people from the surface of the earth. On the other hand, to let Oganda die as a ransom for the people would permanently cripple Labong’o spiritually. He knew he would never be the same chief again.

The words of Ndithi, the medicine man, still echoed in his ears. “Podho, the ancestor of the Luo, appeared to me in a dream last night, and he asked me to speak to the chief and the people,” Ndithi had said to the gathering of tribesmen. “A young woman who has not known a man must die so that the country may have rain. While Podho was still talking to me, I saw a young woman standing at the lakeside, her hands raised, above her head. Her skin was as fair as the skin of a young deer in the wilderness. Her tall slender figure stood as a lonely reed at the river bank. Her sleepy eyes wore a sad look like that of a bereaved mother. She wore a gold ring on her left ear, and a glittering brass chain around her waist. As I still marveled at the beauty of this young woman, Podho told me, ‘Out of all the women in this land, we have chosen this one. Let her offer herself a sacrifice to the lake monster! And on that day, the rain will come down in torrents. Let everyone stay at home on that day, lest he be carried away by the floods.’”

Outside there was a strange stillness, except for the thirsty birds that sang lazily on the dying trees. The blinding mid-day heat had forced the people to retire to their huts. Not far away from the chief’s hut, tow guards were snoring away quietly. Labong’o removed his crown and the large eagle-head that hung loosely on his shoulders. He left the hut, and instead of asking Nyabog’o the messenger to beat the drum, he went straight and beat it himself. In not time the whole household had assembled under the siala tree where he usually addressed them. He told Oganda to wait a while in her grandmother’s hut.

When Labong’o stood to address his household, his voice was hoarse and the tears choked him. He started to speak, but words refused to leave his lips. His wives and sons knew there was great danger.. Perhaps their enemies had declared war on them. Labong’o’s eyes were red, and they could see he had been weeping. At last he told them. “One whom we love and treasure must be taken away from us. Oganda is to die.” Labong’o’s voice was so faint, that he could not hear it himself. But he continued, “The ancestors have chosen her as a sacrifice to the lake monster in order that we may have rain.”

They were completely stunned. As a confused murmur broke out, Oganda’s mother fainted and was carried off to her own hut. But the other people rejoiced. They
danced around singing and chanting, “Oganda is the lucky one to die for the people. If it is to save the people, let Oganda go.”

In her grandmother’s hut Oganda wondered what the whole family were discussing about her that she could not hear. Her grandmother’s hut was well away from the chief’s court and, much as she strained her ears, she could not hear what was said. “it must be marriage,” she concluded. It was an accepted custom for the family to discuss their daughter’s future marriage behind her back. A faint smile played on Oganda’s lips as she thought of the several young men who swallowed saliva at the mere mention of her name.

There was Kech, the son of a neighboring clan elder. Kech was very handsome. He had sweet meek eyes and a roaring laughter. He would make a wonderful father, Oganda thought. But they would not be a good match. Kech was a bit too short to be her husband. It would humiliate her to have to look down at Kech each time she spoke to him. Then she thought of Dimo. The tall young man who had already distinguished himself as a brave warrior and an outstanding wrestler. Dimo adored Oganda, but Oganda thought he would make a cruel husband, always quarreling and ready to fight. No, she did not like him. Oganda fingered the glittering chain on her waist as she thought of Osinda. A long time ago when she was quite young Osinda had given her that chain, and instead of wearing it around her neck several times, she wore it around her waist where it could stay permanently. She heard her heart pounding so loudly as the thought of him. She whispered, “Let it be you they are discussing, Osinda, the lovely one. Come now and take me away...”

The lean figure in the doorway startled Oganda who was rapt in thought about the man she loved. “You have frightened me, Grandma,” said Oganda laughing. “Tell me, is it my marriage you were discussing? You can take it from me that I won’t marry any of them.” A smile played on her lips again. She was coaxing the old lady to tell her quickly, to tell her they were pleased with Osinda.

In the open space outside the excited relatives were dancing and singing. They were coming to the hut now, each carrying a gift to put at Oganda’s feet. As their singing got nearer Oganda was able to hear what they were saying: “It is to save the people, if it is to give us rain, let Oganda go. Let Oganda die for her people, and for her ancestors,” Was she mad to think that they were singing about her? Ho could she die? She found the lean figure of her grandmother barring the door. She could not get out. The look on her grandmother’s face warned her that there was danger around the corner. “Mother, it is not marriage then?” Oganda asked urgently. She suddenly felt panicky like a mouse cornered by a hungry cat. Forgetting that there was only one door in the hut Oganda fought desperately to find another exit. She must fight for her life. But there was none.

She closed her eyes, leapt like a wild tiger through the door, knocking her grandmother flat to the ground. There outside in mourning garments Labong’o stood motionless, his hands folded at the back. He held his daughter’s hand and led
her away from the excited crowd to the little red-painted hut where her mother was resting. Here he broke the news officially to his daughter.

For a long time the three souls who loved on another dearly sat in darkness. It was not good speaking. And even if they tried, the words could not have come out. In the past they had been like three cooking stones, sharing their burdens. Taking Oganda away from them would leave two useless stones which would not hold a cooking pot.

News that the beautiful daughter of the chief was to be sacrificed to give the people rain spread across the country like wind. At sunset the chief’s village was full of relatives and friends who had come to congratulate Oganda. Many more were on their way coming, carrying their gifts. They would prepare her a big farewell feast. All these relatives thought it a great honor to be selected by the spirits to die in order that the society may live. “Oganda’s name will always remain a living name among us,” they boasted.

But was it maternal love that prevented Minya from rejoicing with the other women? Was it the memory of the agony and pain of childbirth that made her feel so sorrowful? Or was it the deep warmth and understanding that passes between a suckling babe and her mother that made Oganda part of her life, her flesh? Of course it was an honor, a great honor, for her daughter to be chosen to die for the country. But what could she gain once her only daughter was blown away by the wind? There were so many other women in the land, why choose her daughter, her only child! Had human life any meaning at all – other women had houses full of children while she, Minya, had to lose her only child!

In the cloudless sky the moon shone brightly, and the numerous stars glittered with a bewitching beauty. The dancers of all age-groups assembled to dance before Oganda, who sat close to her mother, sobbing quietly. All these years she had been with her people she thought she understood them. But now she discovered that she was a stranger among them. If they loved her as they had always professed why were they not making any attempt to save her? Did her people really understand what it felt like to die young? Unable to restrain her emotions any longer, she sobbed loudly as her age-group got up to dance. They were young and beautiful and very soon they would marry and have their own children. They would have husbands to love and little huts for themselves. They would have reached maturity. Oganda touched the chain around her waist as she thought of Osinda. She wished Osinda was there too, among her friends. “Perhaps he is ill,” she thought gravely. The chain comforted Oganda – she would die with it around her waist and wear it in the underground world.

In the morning a big feast was prepared for Oganda. The women prepared many different tasty dishes so that she could pick and choose. “People don’t eat after death,” they said. Delicious though the food looked, Oganda touched none of it. Let the happy people eat. She contented herself with sips of water from a little calabash.
The time for her departure was drawing near, and each minute was precious. It was a day's journey to the lake. She was to walk all night, passing through the great forest. She was already anointed with sacred oil. From the time Oganda received the sad news she had expected Osinda to appear any moment. But he was not there. A relative told her that Osinda was away on a private visit. Oganda realized that she would never see her beloved again.

In the afternoon the whole village stood at the gate to say goodbye and to see her for the last time. Her mother wept on her neck for a long time. The great chief in a mourning skin came to the gate bare-footed, and mingled with the people – a simple father in grief. He took off his wrist bracelet and put it on his daughter’s wrist saying, “You will always live among us. The spirit of our forefathers is with you.”

Tongue-tied and unbelieving Oganda stood there before the people. She had nothing to say. She looked at her home once more. She could hear her heart beating so painfully within her. All her childhood plans were coming to an end. She felt like a flower nipped in the bud never to enjoy the morning dew again. She looked at her weeping mother, and whispered, “Whenever you want to see me, always look at the sunset. I will be there.”

Oganda turned southwards to start her trek to the lake. Her parents, relatives, friends and admirers stood at the gate and watched her go.

Her beautiful slender figure grew smaller and smaller till she mingled with the thin dry trees in the forest. As Oganda walked the lonely path that wound its way in the wilderness, she sang a song, and her own voice kept her company.

The ancestors have said Oganda must die

The daughter of the chief must be sacrificed

When the lake monster feeds on my flesh

The people will have rain.

Yes, the rain will come down in torrents.

And the floods will wash away the sandy beaches

When the daughter of the chief dies in the lake.

My age-group has consented

My parents have consented
So have my friends and relatives.

Let Oganda die to give us rain.

My age-group are young and ripe,

Ripe for womanhood and motherhood

But Oganda must die young,

Oganda must sleep with the ancestors.

Yes, rain will come down in torrents.

The red rays of the setting sun embraced Oganda, and she looked like a burning candle in the wilderness.

The people who came to hear her sad song were touched by her beauty. But they all said the same thing: “If it is to save the people, if it is to give us rain, then be not afraid. Your name will live forever among us.”

At midnight Oganda was tired and weary. She could walk not more. She sat under a big tree, and having sipped water from her calabash, she rested her head on the tree trunk and slept.

When Oganda woke up in the morning the sun was high in the sky. After walking for many hours, she reached the ton’, a strip of land that separated the inhabited part of the country from the sacred place (karlamo). No layman could enter this place and come out alive – only those who had direct contact with the spirits and the Almighty were allowed to enter this holy of holies. But Oganda had to pass through this sacred land on her way to the lake, which she had to reach at sunset.

A large crowd gathered to see her for the last time. Her voice was now hoarse and painful, but there was not need to worry any more. Soon she would not have to sing. The crowd looked at Oganda sympathetically, mumbling words she could not hear. But none of them broke loose from the crowd, and ran towards her. The child took a small earring from her sweaty hands and gave it to Oganda saying, “When you reach the world of the dead, give this earring to my sister. She died last week. She forgot this ring.” Oganda, taken aback by the strange request, took the little ring, and handed her precious water and food to the child. She did not need them now. Oganda did not know whether to laugh or cry. She had heard mourners sending their love to their sweethearts, long dead, but his idea of sending gifts was new to her.

Oganda held her breath as she crossed the barrier to enter the sacred land. She looked appealingly at the crowd, but there was no response. Their minds were too
preoccupied with their own survival. Rain was the precious medicine they were longing for, and the sooner Oganda could get to her destination the better.

A strange feeling possessed Oganda as she picked her way in the sacred land. There were strange noises that often startled her, and her fist reaction was to take to her heels. But she remembered that she had to fulfill the wish of her people. She was exhausted, but the path was still winding. Then suddenly the path ended on sandy land. The water had retreated miles away from the shore leaving a wide stretch of sand. Beyond this was the vast expanse of water.

Oganda felt afraid. She wanted to picture the size and shape of the monster, but fear would not let her. The society did not talk about it, nor did the crying children who were silenced by the mention of its name. The sun was still up, but it was not longer hot. For a long time Oganda walked ankle-deep in the sand. She was exhausted and longed desperately for her calabash of water. As she moved on, she had a strange feeling that something was following her. Was it the monster? Her hair stood erect, and a cold paralyzing feeling ran along her spine. She looked behind, sideways and in front, but there was nothing, except a cloud of dust.

Oganda pulled up and hurried but the feeling did not leave her, and her whole body became saturated with perspiration.

The sun was going down fast and the lake shore seemed to move along with it.

Oganda started to run. She must be at the lake before sunset. As she ran she heard a noise coming from behind. She looked back sharply, and something resembling a moving bush was frantically running after her. It was about to catch up with her.

Oganda ran with all her strength. She was now determined to throw herself into the water even before sunset. She did not look back, but the creature was upon her. She made an effort to cry out, as in a nightmare, but she could not hear her own voice. The creature caught up with Oganda. In the utter confusion, as Oganda came face to face with the unidentified creature, a strong hand grabbed her. But she fell flat on the ground and fainted.

When the lake breeze brought her back to consciousness, a man was bending over her.”……!” Oganda opened her mouth to speak, but she had lost her voice. She swallowed a mouthful of water poured into her mouth by the stranger.

“Osinda, Osinda! Please let me die. Let me run, the sun is going down. Let me die, let them have rain.” Osinda fondled the glittering chain around Oganda’s waist and wiped the tears from her face.

“We must escape quickly to the unknown land,” Osinda said urgently. “We must run away from the wrath of the ancestors and the retaliation of the monster.”
“But the curse if upon me, Osinda, I am no good to you any more. And moreover the eyes of the ancestors will follow us everywhere and bad luck will befall us. Nor can we escape from the monster.”

Oganda broke loose, afraid to escape, but Osinda grabbed her hands again.

“Listen to me, Oganda! Listen! Here are two coats!” He then covered the whole of Oganda’s body, except her eyes, with a leafy attire made from twigs of Bwombwe. “These will protect us from the eyes of the ancestors and the wrath of the monster. Now let us run out of here.” He held Oganda’s hand and they ran from the sacred land, avoiding the path that Oganda had followed.

The bush was thick, and the long grass entangled their feet as they ran. Halfway through the sacred land they stopped and looked back. The sun was almost touching the surface of the water. They were frightened. They continued to run, now faster to avoid the sinking sun.

“Have faith, Oganda – that thing will not reach us.”

When they reached the barrier and looked behind them trembling, only a tip of the sun could be seen above the water’s surface.

“It is gone! It is gone!” Oganda wept, hiding her face in her hands.

“Weep not, daughter of the chief. Let us run, let us escape.”

There was bright lightening. They looked up, frightened. Above them black furious clouds started to gather. They began to run. Then the thunder roared, and the rain came down in torrents.