

The Jackal's Lawsuit

An African (Ethiopian) Tale

Leopard and Jackal went out together to hunt. On the edge of the village where Man lived they captured some game. Leopard captured a goat, but Jackal captured a cow. They drove their prizes home and put them in the field to pasture.

Leopard was not happy that Jackal's animal was so much larger than his own. In the night he went again to look at them in the pasture, and he found that Jackal's cow had given birth to a calf. He was overcome with envy. So he took the calf away from the cow and tethered it with his goat.

In the morning he went to Jackal and said: "How lucky I am! This morning I went to the field, and what do you think? My goat has given birth to a calf!"

"That can't be," Jackal said, "for a goat can only give birth to a kid."

"Come for the proof," Leopard said. He took Jackal to the field where the calf was tethered with his goat.

"Now you can see for yourself I have spoken the truth," Leopard said.

"Since only a cow can give birth to a calf, the calf is mine," Jackal said.

"Do you see the proof and continue to argue?" Leopard said. "Can't you see the calf with my goat?"

"Yes, I see her," Jackal said. "But even if I saw her standing with an elephant, still she would be mine."

They argued this way until at last Leopard said, "Let us be judged! Others will recognize that justice is on my side!"

So they went in search of judges, and the first one they found was Gazelle. Leopard told his story, and Jackal told his, but Gazelle was afraid of Leopard, as were most animals of the bush.

"You see how it is," Jackal said. "It is clear that the calf is mine."

Gazelle looked at Leopard and was frightened. He put on his most learned look, and cleared his throat and said: "Well, when I was young it was true that only cows had calves. But times have changed. The world moves on. Now, as you can see, it is possible for goats to have calves. This is my judgment, as Heaven is my witness!"

They went then to Hyena, and told their story again. But Hyena, too, was afraid of Leopard, so when Jackal was through making his complaint, Hyena said, with an anxious look on his face:

"I have come to the conclusion that ordinary goats cannot have calves, but goats that are owned by leopards can. That is my judgment, as Heaven is my witness!"

All of them, Leopard and Jackal, Gazelle and Hyena, went to the place of Klipspringer, and once more the argument was carried on. Klipspringer listened in worried silence, and when they were through he said with a learned air:

"Once it was the law of all living things that each one should bear only his own kind. Lions bore lions, goats bore goats, and camels bore camels. But the law has been changed. It is now permitted for goats to bear calves. This is the truth, as Heaven is my witness!"

"Since there are no more judges, the calf is clearly mine," Leopard said.

"There is still Baboon," Jackal said, so all of them went together to the rocky place where Baboon lived.

They found him turning over stones to get at the ants and grubs that lived there.

"Judge our case," Leopard said, and then both Leopard and Jackal told their stories. Baboon listened with a far-off look in his eyes. When they were through they waited for his judgment. He slowly climbed to a high rock and looked down at them. But he said nothing. He held a small stone in his hand and plucked at it with his fingers.

"Well?" Leopard said impatiently. "You see how it is. What is your verdict?"

"Wait," Baboon said. "Can't you see I am busy?"

"What are you doing?" Leopard asked.

"I have eaten my meal, and now I must play a little music before I judge," Baboon said.

"Music? What music?" all the animals asked.

"Here, the music I am playing on this instrument!" Baboon replied with irritation.

"Ha! He plucks upon a stone!" Leopard said. "Look what a stupid person we have asked to judge for us! No music can come from a stone!" Baboon looked at Leopard.

"If a calf can come from a goat, surely sweet music can come from a stone?" he asked. Leopard was embarrassed.

"Hm. What lovely music," he said.

But the other animals shouted: "It is true! As Heaven is our witness, only a cow can have a calf!"

And so because the community was united against him, Leopard returned the calf to Jackal.