BABOON SKINS

A SWAZI TALE
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A maiden's beauty causes her so many problems that she wraps herself in baboon skins and refuses to show her face.

Now in this story there is neither Fairy nor Inzimu; there is no one who wins a kingdom with secret spells. (Some little bags of pythonskin are mentioned, but you will see that they have no effect on anyone.) In fact the only magic used in this story is a woman's wit and kindness of heart; the oldest charms in the world.

Many years ago there lived a Chief who had many wives. Two of these were more distinguished than the others for each had a most beautiful daughter. In fact these two wives had families exactly alike, for each had a plain son too. I cannot tell you what became of the plain sons, though no doubt each had a history, for this tale concerns only the two beautiful daughters.

The name of one girl was Inkosesana, which means “the Young Lady.” Her mother was very proud of her and expected her to marry a great Chief, and Inkosesana was as conceited as possible as a result of this.
The name of the other maiden was Lalhiwe, which means “Thrown Away.” As you can imagine from her name, she was a much quieter and more modest girl than Inkosesana.

As time went on and both maidens grew into womanhood, suitors began to arrive. Each mother was hoping for great things for her daughter, and the rivalry between the two families became more and more bitter. It was all they could do to keep their constant quarrels from reaching the ears of the Chief.

Early one morning Lalhiwe’s mother awoke and went to prepare corn for the day’s food. To her horror, she discovered some animal blood and small pythonskin bags filled with charms, under the grinding stone.

“Lalhiwe!” she cried out, “come and see what bad fortune awaits us; cast your eyes upon this!”

Lalhiwe rushed to her mother and upon seeing the charms she nearly fainted. “It is witchcraft,” she said. “It must be some wickedness devised by Inkosesana and her mother. They will never rest until we come to harm. I know in my heart that these charms are meant to cast a spell over us so that we may fall ill and die.”

Lalhiwe’s mother nodded her head in agreement. And after a minute she begged Lalhiwe to run quickly to a neighbor, who was a Wise Woman, and to bring her back with the charms necessary to undo the evil that their rivals had intended for them.

After this had been accomplished, Lalhiwe sat down and spoke to her mother, saying, “Mother, I am tired of all this. How can I care about beauty when it has brought us only endless quarrels and bitter jealousies? To end this constant fighting, I have decided to cover myself with baboon skins, the ugliest skins of all. I shall wrap myself up in them and remain that way until Inkosesana has married. In that way, we shall all have peace.”

That very day she asked her brother to fetch two baboon skins for her
and to bring them with the heads and the limbs still on them. As soon as they were brought, she joined the two skins at the shoulders and at the heads. Then she slipped into them so that the heads completely covered her own head. Only her two bright eyes peeped out through the eyeholes she had cut. The rest of her face was completely hidden, and all that one could see was the mask of a grinning ape. The two skins hung down from her shoulders to her knees, in the back and in the front, but one could still see her legs which were pretty and well-shaped. She looked like a person suffering from some great deformity of the head or body, who had hidden herself from the gaze of men.

As soon as her rival’s mother heard what Lalhiwe had done, she laughed heartily and said, “This is the best news I have heard for many a long day. What a fool that girl must be! Surely she must be mad!”

And with this opinion, all of the women in the kraal agreed. For they had never heard of hiding a pretty face before, and it was impossible for them to believe that Lalhiwe would do this in order to find peace. But in spite of all their attempts to convince Lalhiwe of her error, she remained faithful to her idea. She wore the ugly baboon skins every day, and not once did she show her face, even to her dearest friends. Happily, her sacrifice proved to be worthwhile; for after the first few days, peace reigned in the kraal. There were no more quarrels, everyone seemed happier, and Inkosesana became the undisputed beauty of the countryside.

Then one day, many months after Lalhiwe had started wearing the baboon skins, there was a great stir in the kraal. Two ambassadors had arrived from a very mighty Chief, seeking not one bride, but two for their master. Both girls must be beautiful, for the Chief was very rich and he was prepared to give a magnificent marriage gift for each of the maidens. The two ambassadors sat and conversed with the head of the kraal, while the
women stood in small groups talking excitedly. Finally they were asked to come forward and the request of the great Chief was made known to them.

The mother of Inkosesana was the first to advance. She moved forward with an air of triumph. “Here,” she proclaimed, “is the bride that you are searching for,” and she brought forth Inkosesana, who did indeed look beautiful. She had thrown aside her cloak, and she stood there decked in all her prettiest beads, which set off her lovely black skin and graceful figure to full advantage. The ambassadors both agreed at once. “This is the most beautiful girl we have seen as yet. We accept her with pleasure; for we believe that our King could not wish for a more lovely maiden.” Then turning to the Chief they asked, “Have you another pretty daughter, so that we may see her too?”

The Chief did not answer, but the mother of Inkosesana, made bold with pride and longing to triumph yet further above her rival, called out, “Yes, there is another daughter, but she is always wrapped in baboon skins and she is of no importance at all.”

“Let us see her anyway,” insisted the ambassadors, whose curiosity was aroused by this bit of information.

And so Lalhiwe was brought forth, holding her skins tightly around her body. But though she was covered with baboon skins, nothing could take away from the grace of her movements; and the King’s messengers walked around her, longing to see her hidden face.

“Why are you hiding underneath those skins?” they asked her. “You have very pretty legs and you walk gracefully. What is wrong with you that you do not wish to show your face? We beg you to let us see your true appearance.”

“No,” replied Lalhiwe. “He who marries me must marry me for myself alone and not for my beauty.”
“Are you deformed then? Or are you so very ugly?”

“I did not say that,” answered Lalhiwe. “All I said was that he who marries me must marry me for myself alone.”

“But why is it that you behave so strangely?”

“To please myself,” retorted Lalhiwe.

“I cannot believe that you are not deformed,” said one of the men, hoping to arouse her anger.

“You may believe what you wish, but I tell you the truth,” repeated the girl; and although the ambassadors did all they could to provoke her into throwing off the skins, she did not get angry nor speak rudely to them.

Finally they realized that they could not make her reveal herself, and they held a conference with each other. Should they take Lalhiwe as well as the beautiful Inkosesana and risk the King's displeasure? True, they had both admired her wit and her good temper, but what was to be found underneath the skins? In a moment of weakness they decided to take a chance, and they asked for Lalhiwe also, praying that all would be well in the end.

Before returning to their King, the ambassadors went to the brothers of both maidens. The brother of Inkosesana they instructed to make a big kraal to receive the cattle in payment for his sister, as there was no doubt that their master would be delighted with her. To Lalhiwe's brother they said very little, aside from directing him to send his sister to their master. This brother, fearing that his sister would not be welcomed, did not bother to make a kraal at all for a marriage gift.

The messengers then returned to their King, who was delighted with the reports that they brought of Inkosesana. However, when he heard the tale of the second bride, the one who wore baboon skins, he became enraged. “No girl,” he shouted, “who has a pretty face would ever hide it. I am certain that she must be absolutely hideous; and remember, if that is the case,
you shall both pay the penalty of death. I cannot believe that I sent such fools on such an important mission!"

The ambassadors now regretted what they had done. They were terrified lest the second bride be hideous, for the King always kept his word. And while he awaited the arrival of the brides, the King sent twenty cattle for each one of them, less than was suitable; "We can easily send more if both are acceptable," said he; "and if they should not be, for I will not have an ugly bride, we shall not have to ask for a return of the marriage gift. The forty cattle will be proper payment for Inkosesana."

At the appointed time, the two brides said farewell to their kraal and set out on their journey together. They walked for many days, each attended by her own bridesmaids. Finally they reached their destination and were brought at once to the great Chief. With Inkosesana, he was pleased immediately; but at Lalhiwe, who still remained covered in her baboon skins, he looked with puzzled eyes. Noticing her graceful bearing, he began to admire her, longing to know her secret.

"I beg of you, my maiden," said he, "please let me see your face."

"No, great King," answered Lalhiwe in her usual quiet voice; "I cannot show my face to anyone until the wedding morning." And that was her last word on the matter.

The two brides then retired with their maids, each to her own hut, until all preparations for the wedding feast were completed. Among the women in the King's kraal, there was great gossip. For Inkosesana there was nothing but admiration, while for Lalhiwe there was only scorn for one who could be nothing but hideous. "She is undoubtedly the most ugly of women," they decided, "or she would surely show her face."

When the day of the wedding arrived, each bride left her hut and went down to the river to bathe. Since they went to separate pools, neither one could see the other.
Lalhiwe and her maids descended to a deep pool underneath a great rock, where it was pleasantly warm from the morning sun. Tall white lilies grew on the banks and fresh green ferns peeped out of every nook and cranny. Slipping off her baboon skins, Lalhiwe rolled them into a tight bundle and buried them in an animal hole near the pool. Then she and her maids laughed and chattered as they bathed in the clear pool, until the time came to array themselves for the wedding.

The bridesmaids decked themselves in their most beautiful beadwork; but Lalhiwe, as was the custom for a bride on her wedding morning, wore a skirt of deep black oxskins, the dress that was worn by married women. For an ornament, she wore just a girdle of bleached white beads encircling her waist, and in her hand she held an assegai. Though her dress was simple, when she stood there in the dazzling sun, her maids cried out, "Lalhiwe! You are infinitely more beautiful than you ever were! Indeed, you are far more lovely than Inkosesana."

And they were telling her the truth. For all of the months that Lalhiwe had been hidden from the sun, her beauty had increased; her skin had become as smooth and soft as a lily petal, and her every movement was a joy to behold.

The bridesmaids gathered behind Lalhiwe, and together they started up the path toward the kraal. As they walked, they sang a song, a sad song of farewell for a friend that would be playing with them no longer in their old home.

As they approached the gate of the kraal, they met Inkosesana and her maids, who proudly stepped in front so that they could meet the first glances of the wedding guests. All greeted Inkosesana with great approval, but in truth, their eyes looked beyond her, waiting anxiously to catch the first glimpse of her mysterious sister. When Lalhiwe finally appeared, perfect in every sense, loud shouts of surprise and joy came from all sides.
“She is so lovely!” cried all the guests. “There has never been one so beautiful in our land!”

At last the two brides appeared before the King and danced for him in the great cattle kraal, as was the custom. The King, dumbstruck with amazement, never once took his eyes from Lalhiwe. As soon as the wedding was over, he called his two ambassadors to him and gave each of them twenty beautiful oxen as a gift of appreciation. “You have shown yourselves to be wise and trustworthy men,” he said, “for Lalhiwe is beautiful beyond belief. Choose all of my finest young cattle and send them as a marriage gift to her father. Let the first herd that I send be the marriage gift for Inkosesana, but make sure that Lalhiwe has a marriage settlement such as has never before been given.”

The King’s commands were carried out at once by his relieved ambassadors. Lalhiwe’s mother, surprised and grateful, rejoiced for many days after the arrival of the marvelous herd of cattle. She, in truth, had never expected that such honor would come upon her child. Her rival, however, the mother of Inkosesana, hid herself in her hut, filled with bitter disappointment that she had not triumphed in the end. She sulked for many months and never again regained her old position in the tribe.