

Cows and Lambs

Broken planks and withies lay scattered over the trampled grass. Nandi rubbed his eyes in disbelief then stared in dismay at the empty corral. Where had they gone?

Cows weren't in the habit of breaking out like that unless... a tiger? Had they been so terrified as to smash his handiwork to smithereens and run off in panic? Nandi swung his head around in all directions but couldn't see signs of the animals. Not one tip of a long horn peeked from forest vegetation or tea plantations; not a swish of a tail nor a distant moo were to be heard nor the sound of hooves shifting in undergrowth. His worried eyes scanned the grass around the empty corral and towards the forest entrance where a tiger would drag their prey. No blood, no browning of grass scraped from the roots by the weight of a dead carcass, or, Shiva forbid, the gory traces of a terrified animal struggling in the feline's enormous paws.

Nandi passed his forearm over his sweating brow and smelled the lingering scent of his wife's patchouli oil. The baby. He'd forgotten about the morning milk. She would need it when dawn broke and his five cows were nowhere to be seen. He had to find them but where had they gone? Perhaps it had been an elephant that had trampled the enclosure? There was a rogue bull in the area but Nandi doubted it would come this high up the exposed slopes striped with rows of tea-bushes. Or maybe a bull *gaur* excited by Nandi's domestic cows had raged out of the forest, nostrils flaring? That would have spooked the cows and those wide, powerful shoulders and horns were capable of destroying his enclosure in no time at all.

He moved swiftly to where the gate should have been, now lying in splinters and inspected the grass closely around the smashed corral. Yes, the trail appeared to lead down the slopes past the tea plantations and into the valley towards the town. He followed the crushed vegetation for a few yards and discovered the fresh, tell-tale cow-pat, still steaming faintly - but also a smaller turd nearby. Wild dogs, those crazy feral animals the English had brought, lost and left to form roaming packs that threatened even a man if he found himself in their way. A pack must have come out of the forest. He felt so angry and as he craned his neck to see down the slopes and over the thickets of rhododendrons, suddenly felt fear. His stomach twisted as he gazed down into the deep valley.

The English. If his cows trespassed into their valley and the cleared swathes of land they used to assemble for fox-hunting, his precious animals would be killed or confiscated and his livelihood would disappear forever. Nandi froze and swallowed the saliva rushing to his mouth as he noticed several dark dots on the common and made out the silent arrival of a carriage and some horsemen, all tiny specks in the distance but clear enough to boost his

adrenaline and make Nandi run at full speed back to their hut. He grabbed his herder's stave and halted in front of the flimsy wooden door, opening it very gently, pulling it up slightly on the leather hinges to prevent it scraping the beaten earth, all the while gulping down heavy breaths that heaved from his lungs.

His wife sprawled sound asleep on their pallet, her plump arms enclosing the baby. Nandi noticed the sheen of sweat on her brown skin. The sun wasn't completely up but heat was setting in for the day. The smell of yesterday evening's bamboo shoot curry still lingered, mixing with sweet patchouli. His home and family needed the cows.

Nandi tiptoed over to the other pallet and sharply prodded his son with the stave.

"Gujja, Gujja," he hissed in a stifled whisper through betel-red teeth. "Get up boy."

His son sat upright, rubbed his fists hard into the sockets and stared at his father with eyes still bleary from sleep.

"Appa, father?" he questioned. "Why so early?"

"Get up silently and come with me now." Nandi bent and roughly grabbed Gujja's upper arm to pull him off the pallet.

"Why? Where are we going?" the child mumbled.

"Don't ask, just come with me."

Gujja rose unsteadily on his feet, stretched his arms and let out a noisy yawn.

"No noise! Don't wake your mother or your sister and *not* the baby." Nandi hissed as he frantically pulled the child, stumbling, out of the hut and slowly replaced the latch on the door behind him.

Gujja blinked several times against the morning light, then protested as sleep finally left his brain. "Where are we going, appa?"

"Look hard. What do you see?" and Nandi spread his arms wide towards the broken enclosure.

"The cows aren't there anymore?" Gujja ventured.

"Cows have fled down into the valley and we must bring them back before the English begin their hunt. What can you see down there, eh? Tell me now?"

Gujja stood on tiptoes and tipped his body to peer through a break in the rhododendron thicket. "They come to hunt? This early, appa?"

"Of course, now take your stave and come with me quickly." Nandi began to trot in the direction of the tea plantation and down the steep slope towards the thickets and lush vegetation.

“But *appa*,” Gujja cried out after his father, “I’m in my *dhoti*, I need my robe and must go wash my mouth out.”

Nandi stopped in his tacks and turned back to Gujja. “Am I in my robes? Do you see me taking my time to wash my mouth out, to pray to Shiva? The cows, Gujja, the cows, we need to find them before they get slaughtered or even stolen. The English have already stolen our land. The cows are all we have left. Come now and fast or I’ll be by your side in an instant and beat you with my stave.”

Gujja tightened his loin-cloth and ran, tripping and stumbling until he reached his father. Gujja looked down. “*appa*, I don’t have my sandals to run all the way down there.”

“Run with me now and forget about your sandals. You’re not going to that Missionary school, boy. You’re a Badaga son helping his father and family. Bare feet will do. It will harden you.”

Gujja stared, rooted to the spot as his father set out at a fast trot. He looked again at his bare feet and then, ran again, as fast as he could, this time to follow Nandi.

Nandi was forging ahead and running alongside the tea bush rows, down the cleared land and towards the rhododendron thickets. Gujja’s spindly legs raced after his father down the steep slopes the best he could but the child began panting as he lost his breath. Gujja halted and clutching at one side of his ribcage, bent over to catch his breath before calling out to Nandi.

“*appa!*”

Nandi halted in his tracks. “What now?”

“I have stitch.”

Nandi looked back up the hillside at his son and shook his head.

“What ‘stitch’?”

“Pain in side of chest when I can’t breathe. It is English word, *appa*.”

A red flush crept under Nandi’s tanned skin.

“English words now? Do you have a needle and thread in your skin? Has your mother sewn something into your body? ‘Stitch’? Stupid. Come along quickly or I’ll bring my stick to you. The cows, Gujja, the cows.” Nandi waited an instant as Gujja straightened and began to trot hesitantly towards him. “Faster. The cows can’t wait.” then sped down towards the path through the thickets.

Gujja concentrated on maintaining a regular speed to follow his father into the thickets but as Nandi disappeared into the tall shrubs, he was obliged to run faster, his bare feet now thudding uncomfortably on dried twigs, branches and vegetation that filled the

narrow path. Leaves and branches thrashed his face as he plunged through the bushes; his arms were scratched and bleeding but Gujja ploughed on in his father's wake. The cows, the cows, he repeated to himself, hoping deep down that the animals would be found soon. The soles of his feet burned.

Gujja emerged from the thicket gasping for breath. His father waited several yards ahead, kneeling over and scrutinising a grass tuft.

"Come son. Tell me what you see here."

Gujja set his legs into action but stubbed his toes on a pile of rocks in his haste and flew flat on his stomach into the long grass.

Nandi jerked his head at Gujja's cry and leapt to his feet. He ran to his son's side and knelt down. "Gujja, my son, are you hurt?" The scent of crushed grass filled his nostrils as he gently turned Gujja over onto his back. Nandi saw the scratches on the bare body, the cuts on the soles of his feet and pulled his son to his chest.

"The cows, *appa*, the cows."

Nandi sighed with relief at the dazed boy's mumblings and stroked back the dark hair from Gujja's clammy forehead. "Come, son. I will carry you on my back a little way." Nandi lifted the child onto his back and hooked his arms under the boy's knees. "Hold tight onto my neck, now," and continued his descent towards the valley and the growing number of specks that now dotted the green carpet below. The cows, the cows, he mumbled with anxiety.

They were now on the hillock looking over the last stretch to the valley and Nandi stopped.

"Get down now and tell me if you see anything."

Gujja clambered off his father's back and lifted a hand to shield his eyes from the rising sun's glare.

Nandi didn't want to admit it, but he could see things far away more easily than nearby. His sight wasn't as good as it used to be and Gujja often served as his father's sight. Except when the boy was at that school. Not that he had any choice. The Governor had signed a compulsory education order and all the children, whether Toda, Badaga, Malayam or Hindu attended each morning to learn English, to read and write and arithmetic. Nandi couldn't see the point of it all. How were the parents supposed to tend to their fields and livestock if the children were absent? And what about usual chores such as fetching water or minding younger siblings?

"*appa*, I see the cows."

“Where are they, Gujja?” Nandi raised invisible hands to Shiva in the sky and prayed the animals were in the last thicket and not the valley near the road.

“On the road, *appa*.”

Nandi groaned and shook his head. “How many people are in the valley? Are there many more?”

“Oh yes, *appa*. The valley is full of people now. There are many carriages and sulkies and I can see dozens of people on horses. There are so many people, *appa*. What shall we do?”

Gujja lifted his face streaked with grime and sweat to his dumbstruck father. “The cows, *appa*, the cows.”

“Yes, we must go and fetch them, son, before the English begin hunting. Come with me but stay close and don’t talk out of turn, remember.”

As father and son descended the last stretch of rhododendron thicket, they both suddenly stopped to listen. From behind the hillock and further down the road in the direction of the barracks the sound of music drifted towards them with the breeze.

Nandi looked puzzled. “What instruments make such a sound, son?”

Gujja’s face lit up. “An army band, *appa*. It is splendid and the uniforms all braided with gold and silver buttons. The school took us once and you should see those metal horns with pistons you press to make the sound. It’s not a hunt!”

“And our cows are standing in the middle of the road, Gujja. Look!” Nandi pointed to where his animals waved long horns and swished tails in all serenity in the middle of the road lined with English.

“Come with me, *appa*. I have my stick and you have your stave. We can go quickly and try to move them off.” Gujja leapt down the embankment in a couple of bounds. “Sorry, sorry, sorry,” he repeated in English as he wiggled a path through the crowds.

Nandi followed at a hesitant pace. He wasn’t certain of the reaction so politely bowed his head and muttered excuses in Badaga, trying not to touch people. Most pulled away in disgust and surprise at his audacity but Nandi repeated in his head – “The cows, the cows, my family needs my cows.”

Gujja was already whacking rumps when Nandi finally put his feet on the road. They began herding the obstinate animals towards a clear space near the verge when the music suddenly broke the air.

From around the bend rode a dozen soldiers in bright uniforms, followed by the musicians. Behind them, as far as the eye could see, were lines and lines of marching

soldiers, Indians from every corner of the land, all in khaki uniforms, the only distinguishing feature being the headgear. Some with turbans, some Sikhs, some with Gurkha hats, others with British Army caps.

Nandi froze as hooves clattered to a standstill, less than a couple of yards from him, his son and his precious cows.

“What do we have here,” a brightly uniformed officer bellowed from atop his horse. “Out of our way, you savages.” The officer pulled his gun from the holster and aimed towards the animals.

“Sir, sorry sir,” Gujja said, head bowed, his whole body shaking.

Nandi stood, stave raised, unable to move, as he heard his son dare speak up. No good will come of this, he thought.

“I am very sorry, Sir. A tiger frightened our cows but we can move them quickly if you allow,” Gujja continued in English.

The officer’s hand was pushed to one side by another as he urged his horse forward.

“Put that away, Lieutenant. No need for that here.”

Gujja felt the horse’s hot breath snorted from the nostrils towering above him but stood his ground. The thought of saving the cows overrode the fear he felt.

“So, little man. You speak English very well.”

“Yes, Sir, I go to school every morning and learn.”

Gujja heard the creak of well-oiled leather as the officer inclined lower over the saddle.

“Well done, boy. We need young ones like you to join the army. Some education can take you far, you know.”

Gujja dared raised his head. “I think I will when I am grown, Sir. But I want to be an officer like you and go fight for the King.”

The officers all guffawed in unison. Nandi blanched. He looked on at his son speaking English and felt a nudge of admiration for the boy. But what was he saying to make the English laugh so loud? Nandi began to worry. Should he speak to Gujja? Or wait and see what would happen?

“And what’s so funny?” the officer shouted above the laughs. “The boy has ambition and we need natives like him in our ranks.”

Instant silence fell at the reprimand. Horses champed, snorted and the shuffle of arms being adjusted and soldiers shifting in the ranks snaking back along the road to the barracks were the only sounds as Gujja waited. Nandi too – with bated breath.

“We are going to war, boy, and you are too young for now. The next time perhaps? This one will be over in no time.”

“Are you going to France,” Gujja enquired.

“Yes we are. How do you know that?”

“I read the India Times at the Missionary school, Sir and all about the war against the Kaiser.”

The officer stared intently at Gujja. “You are certainly a bright boy. What do you know of the war over there?”

Gujja hesitated. It wasn't very good and he had already heard of villagers who had been killed. He knew the Indian units were always placed in the front lines. Should he be honest with this kind Englishman? He held his breath and felt his chest tighten.

“Many casualties, Sir.”

The officer sat straight in his saddle and frowned. Then he bent further down to Gujja and murmured so only they could hear.

“I was born in India, boy, and don't know anything about Europe. What I do know is I have orders to lead my men like lambs to the slaughter and it doesn't sit well with my conscience. Keep up with school and endeavour to become an officer. Our generals will need soldiers like you in future wars. What is your name?”

“Gujja, sir.”

“Well, Gujja, tell your father over there to take that terrified look off his face and say to him from me that I think he has a most courageous and intelligent son who he should be proud off. Now try and move your animals as quickly as possible. I must march my men to battle.”

Gujja gulped. “Yes, Sir, I will Sir, and thank you.”

“Thank me for what, may I ask?”

“For the advice, Sir. I learn a lesson from you for when I will be an officer – never lead my men like lambs to the slaughter.”

The officer laughed, reined in his impatient horse and turned back to his men.

“*appa*, we can move the cows but quickly,” Gujja shouted to Nandi and began tapping rumps to herd them towards the steep verge.

Once safely up onto the slope and the cows following the right direction towards home, Nandi stopped.

“You spoke a lot of English back there, son. What was so interesting for you to have a conversation with an Englishman?”

“He told me things, *appa*.”

Nandi stabbed his stave into the earth with impatience. “What things?”

“You should be proud of me. He said the army needs officers like me and to carry on with school.”

“Hmmm,” Nandi grumbled, begrudgingly admitting that school could be a good thing after all. It had saved his cows. If Gujja hadn’t spoken English and had a conversation with the officer, the outcome might have been different – disastrous, even.

“So you won’t be a Badaga cow-herder like me, then?”

Gujja turned and looked his father up and down. “*appa*, I will always be Badaga and a cow-herder but I will be a good officer who won’t lead his soldiers like lambs to the slaughter.”