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## JOHNNY LINGO'S 8-COW WIFE

When I sailed to Kiniwata, an island in the Pacific, I took along a notebook. After I got back it was filled with descriptions of flora and fauna, native customs and costumes. But the only note that still interests me is the one that says: "Johnny Lingo gave eight cows to Sarita's father." And I don't need to have it in writing. I'm reminded of it every time I see a woman belittling her husband or a wife withering under her husband's scorn. I want to say to them, "You should know why Johnny Lingo paid eight cows for his wife."

Johnny Lingo wasn't exactly his name. But that's what Shenkin, the manager of the guest house on Kiniwata called him. Shenkin was from Chicago and had a habit of Americanizing the names of the islanders. But Johnny was mentioned by many people in many connections. If I wanted to spend a few days on the neighboring island of Nurabandi, Johnny Lingo could put me up. If I wanted to fish, he could show me where the biting was best. If it was pearls I sought, he would bring me the best buys. The people of Kiniwata all spoke highly of Johnny Lingo. Yet when they spoke they smiled, and the smiles were slightly mocking.

"Get Johnny Lingo to help you find what you want and let him do the bargaining," advised Shenkin. "Johnny knows how to make a deal."

"Johnny Lingo!" A boy seated nearby hooted the name and rocked with laughter.

"What goes on?" I demanded. "Everybody tells me to get in touch with Johnny Lingo and then breaks up. Let me in on the Joke."

"Oh the people love to laugh," Shenkin said, shrugging. "Johnny's the brightest, the strongest young man in the islands. And for his age, the richest."

"But if he's all you say, what is there to laugh about?"

"Only one thing. Five months ago, at fall festival, Johnny came to Kiniwata and found himself a wife. He paid her father eight cows!"

I knew enough about island customs to be impressed. Two or three cows would buy a fair-to-middling wife, four or five a highly satisfactory one.

"Good Lord!" I said, "Eight cows! She must have beauty that takes your breath away."

"She's not ugly," he conceded, and smiled a little. "But the kindest could only call Sarita plain. Sam Karoo, her father, was afraid she'd be left on his hands."

"But then he got eight cows for her? Isn't that extraordinary?"

"Never been paid before."

"Yet you call Johnny's wife plain?"

"I said it would be kindness to call her plain. She was skinny. She walked with her shoulders hunched and her head ducked. She was scared of her own shadow."

"Well, I said, "I guess there's no accounting for love."

"True enough," agreed the man. "And that's why the villagers grin when they talk about Johnny. They get special satisfaction from the fact that the sharpest trader in the islands was bested by dull old Sam Karoo."

"But how?"

"No one knows and everyone wonders. All the cousins were urging Sam to ask for three cows and hold for two until he was sure Johnny'd pay only one. Then Johnny came to Sam Karoo and said 'Father of Sarita, I offer eight cows for your daughter.'"

"Eight cows," I murmured. "I'd like to meet this Johnny Lingo."

I wanted fish. I wanted pearls. So the next afternoon I beached my boat at Nurabandi. And I noticed as I asked directions to Johnny's house that his name brought no sly smile to the lips of his fellow

Nurabandians. And when I met the slim, serious young man, when he welcomed me with grace to his home, I was glad that from his own people he had respect unmingled with mockery. We sat in his house and talked. Then he asked “You come here from Kiniwata?”

“Yes.”

“They speak of me on that island?”

“They say there’s nothing I might want that you can’t help me get.”

He smiled gently. “My wife is from Kiniwata.”

“Yes, I know.”

“They speak of her.”

“A little.”

“What do they say?”

“Why, just...” The question caught me off balance. “They told me you were married at festival time.”

“Nothing more?” The curve of his eyebrows told me he knew there had to be more.

“They also say the marriage settlement was eight cows.” I paused. “They wonder why.”

“They ask that?” His eyes lighted with pleasure. “Everyone in Kiniwata knows about the eight cows?”

I nodded.

“And in Nurabandi everyone knows it too.” His chest expanded with satisfaction. “Always and forever, when they speak of marriage settlements, it will be remembered that Johnny Lingo paid eight cows for Sarita.”

So that’s the answer, I thought: vanity.

And then I saw her. I watched her enter the room to place flowers on the table. She stood a moment to smile at the young man beside me. Then she went swiftly out again. She was the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. The lift of her shoulders, the tilt of her chin, the sparkle of her eyes all spelled a pride to which no one could deny her the right.

I turned back to Johnny Lingo and found him looking at me. “You admire her?” he murmured.

“She...she’s glorious. But she’s not Sarita from Kiniwata,” I said.

“There’s only one Sarita. Perhaps she does not look the way they say she looked in Kiniwata.”

“She doesn’t. I heard she was homely. They all make fun of you because you let yourself be cheated by Sam Karoo.”

“You think eight cows were too many?” A smile slid over his lips.

“No. But how can she be so different?”

“Do you ever think,” he asked, “what it must mean to a woman to know that her husband has settled on the lowest price for which she can be bought? An then later, when the women talk, the boast of what their husbands paid for them. One says four cows, another maybe six. How does she feel, the woman who was sold for one or two? This could not happen to my Sarita.”

“Then you did this just to make your wife happy?”

“I wanted Sarita to be happy, yes. But I wanted more than that. You say she is different. This is true. Many things can change a woman. Things happen inside, things happen outside. But the thing that matters most is what she thinks of herself. In Kiniwata, Sarita believed she was worth nothing. Now she knows she is worth more than any other woman in the islands.”

“Then you wanted—”

“I wanted to marry Sarita. I loved her and no other woman.”

“But—” I was close to understanding.

“But,” he finished softly, “I wanted an eight-cow wife.”

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