



Batcha and the Dragon: The Story of a Shepherd Who Slept All Winter

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Easy
12 min read

Once upon a time there was a shepherd who was called Batcha. During the summer he pastured his flocks high up on the mountain where he had a little hut and a sheepfold.

One day in autumn while he was lying on the ground, idly blowing his pipes, he chanced to look down the mountain slope. There he saw a most amazing sight. A great army of snakes, hundreds and hundreds in number, was slowly crawling to a rocky cliff not far from where he was lying.

When they reached the cliff, every serpent bit off a leaf from a plant that was growing there. They then touched the cliff with the leaves and the rock opened. One by one they crawled inside. When the last one had disappeared, the rock closed.

Batcha blinked his eyes in bewilderment.

“What can this mean?” he asked himself. “Where are they gone? I think I’ll have to climb up there myself and

see what that plant is. I wonder will the rock open for me?"

He whistled to Dunay, his dog, and left him in charge of the sheep. Then he made his way over to the cliff and examined the mysterious plant. It was something he had never seen before.

He picked a leaf and touched the cliff in the same place where the serpents had touched it. Instantly the rock opened.

Batcha stepped inside. He found himself in a huge cavern the walls of which glittered with gold and silver and precious stones. A golden table stood in the center and upon it a monster serpent, a very king of serpents, lay coiled up fast asleep. The other serpents, hundreds and hundreds of them, lay on the ground around the table. They also were fast asleep. As Batcha walked about, not one of them stirred.

Batcha sauntered here and there examining the walls and the golden table and the sleeping serpents. When he had seen everything he thought to himself:

"It's very strange and interesting and all that, but now it's time for me to get back to my sheep."

It's easy to say: "Now I'm going," but when Batcha tried to go he found he couldn't, for the rock had closed. So there he was locked in with the serpents.

He was a philosophical fellow and so, after puzzling a moment, he shrugged his shoulders and said:

"Well, if I can't get out I suppose I'll have to stay here for the night."

With that he drew his cape about him, lay down, and was soon fast asleep.

He was awakened by a rustling murmur. Thinking that he was in his own hut, he sat up and rubbed his eyes. Then he saw the glittering walls of the cavern and remembered his adventure.

The old king serpent still lay on the golden table but no longer asleep. A movement like a slow wave was rippling his great coils. All the other serpents on the ground were facing the golden table and with darting tongues were hissing:

"Is it time? Is it time?"

The old king serpent slowly lifted his head and with a deep murmurous hiss said:

“Yes, it is time.”

He stretched out his long body, slipped off the golden table, and glided away to the wall of the cavern. All the smaller serpents wriggled after him.

Batcha followed them, thinking to himself:

“I’ll go out the way they go.”

The old king serpent touched the wall with his tongue and the rock opened. Then he glided aside and the serpents crawled out, one by one. When the last one was out, Batcha tried to follow, but the rock swung shut in his face, again locking him in.

The old king serpent hissed at him in a deep breathy voice:

“Hah, you miserable man creature, you can’t get out! You’re here and here you stay!”

“But I can’t stay here,” Batcha said. “What can I do in here? I can’t sleep forever! You must let me out! I have sheep at pasture and a scolding wife at home in the valley. She’ll have a thing or two to say if I’m late in getting back!”

Batcha pleaded and argued until at last the old serpent said:

“Very well, I’ll let you out, but not until you have made me a triple oath that you won’t tell any one how you came in.”

Batcha agreed to this. Three times he swore a mighty oath not to tell any one how he had entered the cavern.

“I warn you,” the old serpent said, as he opened the wall, “if you break this oath a terrible fate will overtake you!”

Without another word Batcha hurried through the opening.

Once outside he looked about him in surprise. Everything seemed changed. It was autumn when he had followed the serpents into the cavern. Now it was spring!

“What has happened?” he cried in fright. “Oh, what an unfortunate fellow I am! Have I slept through the

winter? Where are my sheep? And my wife—what will she say?”

With trembling knees he made his way to his hut. His wife was busy inside. He could see her through the open door. He didn't know what to say to her at first, so he slipped into the sheepfold and hid himself while he tried to think out some likely story.

While he was crouching there, he saw a finely dressed gentleman come to the door of the hut and ask his wife where her husband was.

The woman burst into tears and explained to the stranger that one day in the previous autumn her husband had taken out his sheep as usual and had never come back.

“Dunay, the dog,” she said, “drove home the sheep and from that day to this nothing has ever been heard of my poor husband. I suppose a wolf devoured him, or the witches caught him and tore him to pieces and scattered him over the mountain. And here I am left, a poor forsaken widow! Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear!”

Her grief was so great that Batcha leaped out of the sheepfold to comfort her.

“There, there, dear wife, don't cry! Here I am, alive and well! No wolf ate me, no witches caught me. I've been asleep in the sheepfold—that's all. I must have slept all winter long!”

At sight and sound of her husband, the woman stopped crying. Her grief changed to surprise, then to fury.

“You wretch!” she cried. “You lazy, good-for-nothing loafer! A nice kind of shepherd you are to desert your sheep and yourself to idle away the winter sleeping like a serpent! That's a fine story, isn't it, and I suppose you think me fool enough to believe it! Oh, you—you sheep's tick, where have you been and what have you been doing?”

She flew at Batcha with both hands and there's no telling what she would have done to him if the stranger hadn't interfered.

“There, there,” he said, “no use getting excited! Of course he hasn't been sleeping here in the sheepfold all winter. The question is, where has he been? Here is some money for you. Take it and go along home to your cottage in the valley. Leave Batcha to me and I promise you I'll get the truth out of him.”

The woman abused her husband some more and then, pocketing the money, went off.

As soon as she was gone, the stranger changed into a horrible looking creature with a third eye in the middle of his forehead.

“Good heavens!” Batcha gasped in fright. “He’s the wizard of the mountain! Now what’s going to happen to me!”

Batcha had often heard terrifying stories of the wizard, how he could himself take any form he wished and how he could turn a man into a ram.

“Aha!” the wizard laughed. “I see you know me! Now then, no more lies! Tell me: where have you been all winter long?”

At first Batcha remembered his triple oath to the old king serpent and he feared to break it. But when the wizard thundered out the same question a second time and a third time, and grew bigger and more horrible looking each time he spoke, Batcha forgot his oath and confessed everything.

“Now come with me,” the wizard said. “Show me the cliff. Show me the magic plant.”

What could Batcha do but obey? He led the wizard to the cliff and picked a leaf of the magic plant.

“Open the rock,” the wizard commanded.

Batcha laid the leaf against the cliff and instantly the rock opened.

“Go inside!” the wizard ordered.

But Batcha’s trembling legs refused to move.

The wizard took out a book and began mumbling an incantation. Suddenly the earth trembled, the sky thundered, and with a great hissing whistling sound a monster dragon flew out of the cavern. It was the old king serpent whose seven years were up and who was now become a flying dragon. From his huge mouth he breathed out fire and smoke. With his long tail he swished right and left among the forest trees and these snapped and broke like little twigs.

The wizard, still mumbling from his book, handed Batcha a bridle.

“Throw this around his neck!” he commanded.

Batcha took the bridle but was too terrified to act. The wizard spoke again and Batcha made one uncertain step in the dragon’s direction. He lifted his arm to throw the bridle over the dragon’s head, when the dragon suddenly turned on him, swooped under him, and before Batcha knew what was happening he found himself on the dragon’s back and he felt himself being lifted up, up, up, above the tops of the forest trees, above the very mountains themselves.

For a moment the sky was so dark that only the fire, spurting from the dragon’s eyes and mouth, lighted them on their way.

The dragon lashed this way and that in fury, he belched forth great floods of boiling water, he hissed, he roared, until Batcha, clinging to his back, was half dead with fright.

Then gradually his anger cooled. He ceased belching forth boiling water, he stopped breathing fire, his hisses grew less terrifying.

“Thank God!” Batcha gasped. “Perhaps now he’ll sink to earth and let me go.”



“On, on they went, whizzing through the stars of heaven.” Illustration by Jan Matulka, published in *The Shoemaker’s Apron* by Parker Fillmore (1920), Harcourt, Brace and Company.

But the dragon was not yet finished with punishing Batcha for breaking his oath. He rose still higher until the mountains of the earth looked like tiny ant-hills, still up until even these had disappeared. On, on they went, whizzing through the stars of heaven.

At last the dragon stopped flying and hung motionless in the firmament. To Batcha this was even more terrifying than moving.

“What shall I do? What shall I do?” he wept in agony. “If I jump down to earth I’ll kill myself and I can’t fly on up to heaven! Oh, dragon, have mercy on me! Fly back to earth and let me go and I swear before God that never again until death will I offend you!”

Batcha’s pleading would have moved a stone to pity but the dragon, with an angry shake of his tail, only hardened his heart.

Suddenly Batcha heard the sweet voice of the skylark that was mounting to heaven.

“Skylark!” he called. “Dear skylark, bird that God loves, help me, for I am in great trouble! Fly up to heaven and tell God Almighty that Batcha, the shepherd, is hung in midair on a dragon’s back. Tell Him that Batcha praises Him forever and begs Him to deliver him.”

The skylark carried this message to heaven and God Almighty, pitying the poor shepherd, took some birch leaves and wrote on them in letters of gold. He put them in the skylark’s bill and told the skylark to drop them on the dragon’s head.

So the skylark returned from heaven and, hovering over Batcha, dropped the birch leaves on the dragon’s head.

The dragon instantly sank to earth, so fast that Batcha lost consciousness.

When he came to himself he was sitting before his own hut. He looked about him. The dragon’s cliff had disappeared. Otherwise everything was the same.

It was late afternoon and Dunay, the dog, was driving home the sheep. There was a woman coming up the mountain path.

Batcha heaved a great sigh.

“Thank God I’m back!” he said to himself. “How fine it is to hear Dunay’s bark! And here comes my wife, God bless her! She’ll scold me, I know, but even if she does, how glad I am to see her!”

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