

Brâhmaṇ's Wife and the Mongoose

Tales Of The Sun Or Folklore Of Southern India

Indian

*Advanced
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Third Part

At the end of the third watch of the night, Bodhavyapaka, the Third Minister of king Alakesa, went to see whether the royal bedchamber was properly guarded, and the king, summoning him to his presence, told him of the First Minister's crime, upon which Bodhavyapaka, after making due obeisance, thus spake:—

“Most noble king, such a grave crime should be severely punished, but it behoves us not to act before having ascertained that he is guilty beyond doubt, for evil are the consequences of precipitation, in proof of which I know a story which I will relate, with your Majesty's leave.”

Story of the Brâhmaṇ's Wife and the Mongoose.

On the banks of the Ganges, which also flows by the most holy city of Banaras, there is a town named Mithila, where dwelt a very poor Brâhmaṇ called Vidyadhara. He had no children, and to compensate for this want, he and his wife tenderly nourished in their house a mongoose—a species of weasel. It was their all in all—their younger son, their elder daughter—their elder son, their younger daughter, so fondly did they regard that little creature. The god Visvesvara and his spouse Visalakshi observed this, and had pity for the unhappy pair; so by

their divine power they blessed them with a son. This most welcome addition to their family did not alienate the affections of the Brâhmaṇ and his wife from the mungoose; on the contrary, their attachment increased, for they believed that it was because of their having adopted the pet that a son had been born to them. So the child and the mungoose were brought up together, as twin brothers, in the same cradle.

It happened one day when the Brâhmaṇ had gone out to beg alms of the pious and charitable, that his wife went into the garden to cull some pot-herbs, leaving the child asleep in his cradle, and by his side the mungoose kept guard. An old serpent, which was living in the well in the garden, crept into the house and under the cradle, and was beginning to climb into it to bite the child when the mungoose fiercely attacked it and tore it into several pieces, thus saving the life of the Brâhmaṇ's little son, and the venomous snake, that came to slay, itself lay dead beneath the cradle.

Pleased at having performed such an exploit, the mungoose ran into the garden to show the Brâhmaṇ's wife its blood-smearred mouth, but she rashly mistook the deliverer of her child for his destroyer, and with one stroke of the knife in her hand with which she was cutting herbs she killed the faithful creature, and then hastened into the house to see her dead son. But there she found the child in his cradle alive and well, only crying at the absence of his little companion, the mungoose, and under the cradle lay the great serpent cut to pieces. The real state of affairs was now evident, and the Brâhmaṇ presently returning home, his wife told him of her rash act and then put an end to her life. The Brâhmaṇ, in his turn, disconsolate at the death of the mungoose and his wife, first slew his child and then killed himself.

“And thus,” added the Third Minister, “by one rash act four creatures perished, so true is it that precipitation results in a series of calamities. Do not, then, condemn Bodhaditya before his guilt is clearly proved.” Alakesa, having given Bodhachandra the signal to retire, he quitted the presence and went home.

When the watch of the Fourth Minister, Bodhavibhishana, was terminated, he visited the private apartments of the king (who had been meanwhile pondering over the stories he had heard), and was called into the sleeping chamber by Alakesa, and informed of his colleague's unpardonable offence. The Minister, after due prostration, thus addressed his royal master:—

“Great king, I can scarcely bring myself to believe that Bodhaditya could ever be guilty of such a crime, and I would respectfully remind your Majesty that it would not be consistent with your world-wide reputation for wisdom and justice were you to pronounce judgment in this case without having inquired into all the

circumstances. Evil and injustice result from hasty decisions and actions, of which a striking illustration is furnished in the Story of the Faithless Wife and the Ungrateful Blind Man.

Next: VI. The Faithless Wife and the Ungrateful Blind Man

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In the town of Mithila there lived a young Brâhmaṇ who, having had a quarrel with his father-in-law, set out on a pilgrimage to Banaras. Going through a forest he met a blind man, whose wife was leading him by means of a stick, one end of which she held in her hand, and her husband holding the other end was following her. She was young and fair of face, and the pilgrim made signs to her that she should go with him and leave her blind husband behind. The proposal thus signified pleased this wanton woman, so she bade her husband sit under a tree for a few minutes while she went and plucked him a ripe mango. The blind man sat down accordingly, and his wife went away with the Brâhmaṇ. After waiting a long time in expectation of his wife's return, and no person coming near him, (for it was an unfrequented place), her infidelity became painfully apparent to him, and he bitterly cursed both her and the villain who had enticed her away from him. For six days he remained at the foot of the tree, in woeful condition, without a morsel of rice or a drop of water, and he was well nigh dead, when at length he heard the sound of footsteps near him, and cried faintly for help. A man of the Setti caste and his wife came up to him, and inquired how he happened to be in such a plight. The blind man told them how his wife had deserted him, and gone away with a young Brâhmaṇ whom they had met, leaving him there alone and helpless. His story excited the compassion of the Setti and his wife. They gave him to eat of the small quantity of rice they had with them, and, having supplied him with water to quench his thirst, the Setti bade his wife lead him with his stick. The woman, though somewhat reluctant to walk thus in company with a man who was not her husband, yet, reflecting that charitable actions ought never to be left undone, complied with her lord's request, and began to lead the blind man. After travelling in this manner for a day, the three reached a town, and took up their abode for the night in the house of a friend of the Setti, where the latter and his wife gave the blind man a share of their rice before tasting a morsel themselves. At daybreak the next morning they advised him to try to provide for himself in some way in that town, and prepared to resume their journey. But the blind man, forgetting all the kindness they had shown him, began to raise an alarm, crying out:—

“Is there no king in this city to protect me and give me my rights? Here is a Setti rascal taking away my wife with him! As I am blind, she denies that I am her husband, and follows that rogue! But will not the king give

me justice?”

The people in the street at once reported these words to the king, who caused inquiry to be made into the matter. The fact of the Setti's wife having led the blind man, seemed to indicate that the latter, and not the Setti, was the woman's husband, and foolishly concluded that both the Setti and his wife were the real criminals. Accordingly he sentenced the Setti to the gallows, because he attempted to entice away a married woman, and his wife to be burnt in the kiln, as she wished to forsake her husband, and he a blind man. When these sentences were pronounced the blind man was thunder-struck. The thought that by a deliberate lie he had caused the death of two innocent persons now stung him to the heart. By this lie he expected that the Setti only should be punished, and that his wife would be made over to him as his own wife, but now he found she also was condemned to death.

“Vile wretch that I am!” said he; “I do not know what sins I committed in my former life to be thus blind now. My real wife, too, deserted me; and I, heaping sins upon sins, have now by a false report sent to death an innocent man and his wife, who rescued me from a horrible fate and tended to all my wants last night. O, Mahêśvara! what punishment you have in reserve for me I know not.”

This soliloquy, being overheard by some by-standers, was communicated to the king, who bitterly reproaching himself for having acted so rashly, at once released the good Setti and his wife, and caused the ungrateful blind man to be burnt in the kiln.

“Thus, you see, my lord,” added the fourth Minister, “how nearly that king had plunged himself into a gulf of crime by his rashness. Therefore, my most noble king, I would respectfully and humbly request you to consider well the case of Bodhaditya, and punish him severely if he be found really guilty.”

Having thus spoken, the Fourth Minister obtained leave to depart.

Next: V. The Wonderful Mango Fruit

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