

Chandralêkhâ and the Eight Robbers

Tales Of The Sun Or Folklore Of Southern India

Indian

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There was an ancient city named Kaivalyam, in the Pânxiya country, and in that city there lived a dancing girl named Muttumôhanâ. She was an excellent gem of womankind, for though born of the dancing-girls' caste, she was a very learned and pious woman, and never would she taste her food without first going and worshipping in the temple of xiiva. She moved in the society of kings, ministers, and Brâhmi>s, and never mingled with low people, however rich they might be. She had a daughter named Chandralêkhâ, whom she put to school with the sons of kings, ministers and Brâhmi>s. Chandralêkhâ showed signs of very great intelligence, even when she was beginning her alphabet, so that the master took the greatest care with her tuition, and in less than four years she began her lessons and became a great pa>îtâ(learned woman). However, as she was only a dancing-girl by birth, there was no objection to her attending to her studies in open school till she attained to maturity, and, accordingly, up to that age she attended the school and mastered the four Vêdas and xâstras and the sixty-four varieties of knowledge.

She then ceased to attend the school, and Muttumôhanâ said to her:—

“My darling daughter, for the last seven or eight years you have been taking lessons under the Brâhmi>x, your master, in the various departments of knowledge, and you must now pay a large fee to remunerate your master's labours in having taught you so much. You are at liberty to take as much money as you please from my hoard.”

So saying she handed over the key to her daughter, and Chandralêkhâ, delighted at her mother's sound advice,

filled up five baskets with five thousand mohars in each, and setting them on the heads of five maid-servants, went to her master's house with betel leaves, areca nut, flowers and cocoanuts in a platter in her hand, to be presented along with the money. The servants placed the baskets before the master and stood outside the house, while Chandralêkhâ took the dish of betel leaves, nuts, &c., and humbly prostrated herself on the ground before him. Then, rising up, she said:—

“My most holy gurû (master), great are the pains your holiness undertook in instructing me, and thus destroying the darkness of my ignorance. For the last eight years I have been a regular student under your holiness, and all the branches of knowledge hath your holiness taught me. Though what I offer might be insufficient for the pains your holiness took in my case, still I humbly request your holiness to accept what I have brought.”

Thus said she, and respectfully pushed the baskets of mohars and the betel-nut platter towards the Brâhmi. She expected to hear benedictions from her tutor, but in that we shall see she was soon disappointed.

Replied the wretched Brâhmi:—

“My dear Chandralêkhâ, do you not know that I am the tutor of the prince, the minister's son and several others of great wealth in Kaivalyam? Of money I have more than enough. I do not want a single mohar from you, but what I want is that you should marry me.”

Thus spoke the shameless teacher, and Chandralêkhâ's face changed colour. She was horrified to hear such a suggestion from one whom she had thought till then to be an incarnation of perfection. But, still hoping to convince him of the unjustness of the request, she said:—

“My most holy master! The deep respect I entertain towards your holy feet is such that, though your holiness's words are plain, I am led to think that they are merely uttered to test my character. Does not your holiness know the rules by which a preceptor is to be regarded as a father, and that I thus stand in the relationship of a daughter to your holiness? So kindly forget all that your holiness has said, and accepting what I have brought in my humble state, permit me to go home.”

But the wretched teacher never meant anything of the sort. He had spoken in earnest, and his silence now and lascivious look at once convinced the dancing-girl's daughter of what was passing in his mind. So she quickly

went out and told her servants to take back the money.

At home Muttumôhanâ was anxiously awaiting the return of her daughter, and as soon as Chandralêkhâ came in without the usual cheerfulness in her face, and without having given the presents, her mother suspected that something had gone wrong, and inquired of her daughter the cause of her gloom. She then related to her mother the whole story of her interview with her old master. Muttumôhanâ was glad to find such a firm heart in her daughter, and blessed her, saying that she would be wedded to a young husband, and lead a chaste life, though born of the dancing-girls' caste. The money she safely locked up in her room.

Now, the Brâhmi, in consequence of his disappointment, was very angry with Chandralêkhâ, and, that no young and wealthy gentleman might visit her house, he spread reports that Chandralêkhâ was possessed of a demon (kuichchatti). So no one approached Chandralêkhâ's house to win her love, and her mother was much vexed. Her great wish was that some respectable young man should secure her daughter's affections, but the master's rumours stood in the way. And thus a year passed, and the belief that a kuichchatti had possessed Chandralêkhâ gained firm ground.

After what seemed to these two to be a long period, a sage happened to visit Muttumôhanâ's house, and she related to him all her daughter's story. He listened and said:—

“Since the belief that a demon has taken possession of your daughter has taken firm hold of the citizens, it is but necessary now that she should perform (pûjâ) worship to the demon-king on the night of the new moon of this month in the cremation-ground. Let her do this and she will be all right, for then some worthy young man can secure her affections.”

So saying the sage went away, and his advice seemed to be reasonable to the mother. She very well knew that no such demon had possessed her daughter, but that it was all the master's idle report. But still, to wipe away any evil notion in the minds of the people she publicly proclaimed that her daughter would perform pûjâ in the cremation-ground at midnight at the next new moon. Now, it is always the rule in such rites that the person who is possessed should go alone to the cremation-ground, and, accordingly, on the night of the next new moon, Chandralêkhâ went to the burning-ground with a basket containing all the necessary things for worship, and a light.

Near Kaivalyam, at a distance of five kôś from it, was a great forest called Khâ᳚᳚avam. In it there dwelt eight robbers, who used to commit the greatest havoc in the country round. At the time that Chandralêkhâ proceeded to the cremation-ground, these eight robbers also happened to go there to conceal what they had stolen in the earlier part of that night. Then, being relieved of their burden, they determined to go to some other place to plunder during the latter half of the night also. When Chandralêkhâ heard the sound of footsteps at a distance she feared something wrong, and, covering up her glittering light by means of her empty basket, concealed herself in a hollow place. The thieves came and looked round about them. They found nobody, but, fearing that some one might be near, one of them took out an instrument called kannakkôl, and, whirling it round his head, threw it towards the east. This kannakkôl is the instrument by which these robbers bore holes in walls and enter buildings, and some robbers say they get it from a thunderbolt. During a stormy day they make a large heap of cow-dung, into which a thunderbolt falls and leaves a rod in the middle, which is so powerful that it can bore even through stone walls without making any noise. It has also the attribute of obeying its master's orders. So when the chief of the eight robbers threw his kannakkôl towards the east, true to its nature, it fell into the hole in which Chandralêkhâ was hiding, and began to pierce her in the back. As soon as she felt it, she dragged it out by both her hands without making the slightest noise, and, throwing it under her feet, stood firmly over it. The robbers, having concealed the eight boxes of wealth they had brought with them in the sands near the cremation-ground, went away to spend the remaining part of the night usefully in their own fashion.

As soon as the robbers had left the place Chandralêkhâ came out, and, taking possession of the robbers' rod, took out the eight boxes that the robbers had buried. With these she quickly hastened home, where her mother was awaiting her return. She soon made her appearance, and related all that had occurred during the night to her mother. They soon removed the contents of the boxes and locked them up safely. Then, taking the empty boxes, she filled them up with stones, old iron and other useless materials, and, arranging them two and two by the side of each leg of her cot, went to sleep on it.

As the night was drawing to a close, the robbers, with still more booty, came to the ground, and were thunderstruck when they missed their boxes. But as the day was dawning they went away into the jungle, leaving the investigation of the matter to the next night. They were astonished at the trick that had been played upon them and were very anxious to find out the thief who had outwitted thieves. Now they were sure that

their boring-rod, which they had aimed against the unknown person who might be lurking in the smaṅnam (cremation-ground), must have wounded him. So one of them assumed the guise of an ointment-seller, and, with some ointment in a cocoanut-bottle, began to walk the streets of Kaivalyam city, crying out:—

“Ointment to sell. The best of ointments to cure new wounds and old sores. Please buy my ointment.”

And the other seven thieves assumed seven different disguises and also went wandering round the streets of the city. A maid-servant of Chandralêkhâ had seen that her mistress was suffering from the effects of a wound in her back, and never suspecting a thief in the medicine seller, called out to the ointment-man and took him inside the house. She then informed Chandralêkhâ that she had brought in an ointment-man, and that she would do well to buy a little of his medicine for her wound. The clever Chandralêkhâ at once recognised the thief in the medicine vendor, and he too, as he was a very cunning brute, recognised in the young lady the thief of his boxes, and found her wound to be that made by his boring-rod. They soon parted company. The lady bought a little ointment, and the thief in disguise, gladly giving a little of his precious stuff from his cocoanut-bottle, went away. The eight thieves had appointed a place outside Kaivalyam for their rendezvous, and there they learnt who had robbed them of their treasure. Not wishing to remain idle, they chose that very night both to break into Chandralêkhâ's house and bring away herself and their boxes.

Chandralêkhâ, too, was very careful. She locked up all the treasures and kept the eight boxes filled with rubbish, so as to correspond with their original weights, under the cot on which she slept, or rather pretended to sleep, that night. The thieves in due course made a hole into her bedroom and entered. They found her to all appearance sound asleep, and to their still greater joy, they found beneath her cot their eight boxes.

“The vixen is asleep. Let us come to-morrow night and take her away; but first let us remove our boxes.”

So saying to each other, they took their boxes, each placing one on his head, and returned in haste to their cave, which they reached early in the morning. But when they opened the boxes to sort out their booty, astonishment of astonishments, their eyes met only broken pieces of stone, lumps of iron, and other such rubbish. Every one of them placed his forefinger at right angles to the tip of his nose, and exclaimed:—

“Ah! A very clever girl. She has managed to deceive us all. But let this day pass. We shall see whether she will not fall into our hands to-night.”

Thus, in wonder and amazement, they spent the whole day. Nor was Chandralêkhâ idle at her own house. She was sure she would again see the robbers in her room that night, and, in order to be prepared for the occasion, she made a small sharp knife out of the robber’s rod, and kept it beneath her pillow, in the place where she was accustomed to keep her purse containing a few betel leaves, nuts, chu×am, &c., to chew. The night came on. Early Chandralêkhâ had her supper and retired to bed. Sleep she could not, but she cunningly kept eyelids closed and pretended to sleep. Even before it was midnight the eight thieves broke into her room, saying to themselves:—

“This clever lady-thief sleeps soundly. We will do her no mischief here. Let us range ourselves two and two at each leg of her cot, and carry her away unconscious to the woods. There we can kill her.”

Thus thinking, the eight thieves ranged themselves at the side of the four legs of the cot, and, without the slightest shaking, removed the cot with the sleeper on it outside the town. Their joy in thus having brought away their enemy was very great, and, not fearing for the safe custody of their prisoner, they marched to their cave. Meanwhile Chandralêkhâ was not idle on the cot. The way to the jungle was through a long and fine avenue of mango trees. It was the mango season, and all the branches were hanging with bunches of ripe and unripe fruit. To make up for her weight on the cot she kept plucking mango bunches and heaping them on it, and as soon as a quantity which she thought would make up her weight was upon her cot, she without the slightest noise took hold of a branch and swung herself off it. The thieves walked on as before, the weight on their heads not apparently diminishing, leaving our heroine safely seated on a mango branch to pass the few remaining gha×ikâs of that anxious night there. The thieves reached their cave just at daybreak, and when they placed their burden down their eyes met only bunches of ripe mangoes, and not the lady they looked for.

“Is she a woman of flesh and blood, or is she a devil?” asked the chief of the next in rank.

“My lord! she is a woman fast enough, and if we search in the wood we shall find her,” replied he, and at once all the eight robbers after a light breakfast began to search for her.

Meanwhile the morning dawned upon Chandralêkhâ and let her see that she was in the midst of a thick jungle.

She feared to escape in the daytime as the way was long, and she was sure that the robbers would soon be after her. So she resolved to conceal herself in some deep ambush and wait for the night. Before she left the cot for the mango branch she had secured in her hip the small knife she had made for herself out of the robbers' rod and the purse containing the materials for chewing betel; and near the tree into which she had climbed she saw a deep hollow surrounded by impenetrable reeds on all sides. So she slowly let herself down from the tree into this hollow, and anxiously waited there for the night.

All this time the eight thieves were searching for her in different places, and one of them came to the spot where Chandralêkhâ had sat in the tree, and the dense bushes near made him suspect that she was hidden there; so he proceeded to examine the place by climbing up the tree. When Chandralêkhâ saw the thief on the tree she gave up all hopes of life. But suddenly a bright thought came into her mind, just as the man up above saw her. Putting on a most cheerful countenance she slowly spoke to him.

“My dear husband, for I must term you so from this moment, since God has elevated you now to that position, do not raise an alarm. Come down here gently, that we may be happy in each other's company. You are my husband and I am your wife from this moment.”

So spoke the clever Chandralêkhâ, and the head of the thief began to turn with joy when he heard so sweet a speech, and forgetting all her previous conduct to himself and his brethren, he leapt into the hollow. She welcomed him with a smiling face, in which the eager heart of the robber read sincere affection, and gave him some betel-nut to chew and chewed some herself merrily. Now redness of the tongue after chewing betel is always an indication of the mutual affection of a husband and wife among the illiterate of Hindu society. So while the betel-leaf was being chewed she put out her tongue to show the thief how red it was, letting him see thereby how deeply she loved him: and he, to show in return how deeply he loved her, put out his tongue too. And she, as if examining it closely, clutched it in her left hand, while with her right hand in the twinkling of an eye cut off the tongue and nose of the robber, and taking advantage of the confusion that came over him she cut his throat and left him dead.

By this time evening was fast approaching, and the other seven robbers, after fruitless search, returned to their cave, feeling sure that the eighth man must have discovered Chandralêkhâ. They waited and waited the whole night, but no one returned, for how could a man who had been killed come back?

Our heroine, meanwhile, as soon as evening set in started homewards, being emboldened by the occasion and the circumstances in which she was placed. She reached home safely at midnight and related all her adventures to her mother. Overcome by exhaustion she slept the rest of the night, and as soon as morning dawned began to strengthen the walls of her bedroom by iron plates. To her most useful pocket-knife she now added a bagful of powdered chillies, and went to bed, not to sleep, but to watch for the robbers. Just as she expected, a small hole was bored in the east wall of her bedroom, and one of the seven robbers thrust in his head. As soon as she saw the hole our heroine stood by the side of it with the powder and knife, and with the latter she cut off the nose of the man who peeped in and thrust the powder into the wound. Unable to bear the burning pain he dragged himself back, uttering “×a, ×a, ×a, ×a,” having now no nose to pronounce properly with. A second thief, abusing the former for having lost his nose so carelessly, went in, and the bold lady inside dealt in the same way with his nose, and he too, dragged himself back in the same way, calling out “×a, ×a, ×a, ×a.” A third thief abused the second in his turn, and going in lost his nose also. Thus all the seven thieves lost their noses, and, fearing to be discovered if they remained, ran off to the forest, where they had to take a few days’ rest from their plundering habits to cure their mutilated noses.

Chandralêkhâ had thus three or four times disappointed the thieves. The more she disappointed them the more she feared for her own safety, especially as she had now inflicted a life-long shame on them.

“The thieves will surely come as soon as their noses are cured and kill me in some way or other. I am, after all, only a girl,” she thought to herself. So she went at once to the palace and reported all her adventures with the eight robbers to the prince, who had been her former class-mate. The prince was astonished at the bravery of Chandralêkhâ, and promised the next time the robbers came to lend her his assistance. So every night a spy from the palace slept in Chandralêkhâ’s house to carry the news of the arrival of the robbers to the prince, should they ever go there. But the robbers were terribly afraid of approaching Chandralêkhâ’s house, after they came to know that she had a knife made out of the boring-rod. But they devised among themselves a plan of inviting Chandralêkhâ to the forest under the pretence of holding a nautch, and sent to her house a servant for

that purpose. The servant came, and, entering Chandralêkhâ's house, spoke thus to her:—

“My dear young lady, whoever you may be, you have now a chance of enriching yourself. I see plainly from the situation of your house that you are one of the dancing-girls' caste. My masters in the forest have made a plan to give a nautch to their relatives on the occasion of a wedding which is to take place there the day after tomorrow. If you come there they will reward you with a karô of mohars for every nimisha (minute) of your performance.”

Thus spoke the servant, and Chandralêkhâ, knowing that the mission was from the thieves, agreed to perform the nautch, and, asking the man to come and take her and her party the next morning to the forest, sent him away.

In order to lose no time she went at once to the prince and told him all about the nautch. Said she:—

“I know very well that this is a scheme of the thieves to kill me, but before they can do that we must try to kill them. A way suggests itself to me in this wise. To make up a nautch party more than seven persons are required. One must play the drum; a second must sound the cymbals; a third must blow upon the nâgasvara pipe, etc., etc. So I request you to give me seven of your strongest men to accompany me disguised as men of my party, and some of your troops must secretly lie in ambush in readiness to take the robbers prisoners when a signal is given to them.”

Thus Chandralêkhâ spoke, and all her advice the prince received with great admiration. He himself offered to follow her as her drummer for the nautch, and he chose six of the ablest commanders from his army, and asked them to disguise themselves as fiddlers, pipers, etc., and he directed an army of a thousand men to follow their footsteps at a distance of two ghaikâs' march, and to lie in ambush near the place where they were going to perform the nautch, ready for a call. Thus everything was arranged and all were ready by the morning to start from Chandralêkhâ's house.

Before the third ghaṅikâ of the morning was over, the robbers' servant came to conduct Chandralêkhâ with her party to the forest, where the prince and six of his strongest men disguised as her followers, were waiting for him. Chandralêkhâ with all her followers accompanied him, but as soon as she left her house a spy ran off to the army, which, as ordered by the prince, began to follow her party at a distance of two ghaṅikâs.

After travelling a long way Chandralêkhâ and her party reached the nautch pavilion at about five ghaṅikâs before sunset. All their hosts were without their noses, and some still had their noses bandaged up. When they saw that Chandralêkhâ's followers had a fine and prepossessing appearance, even the hard hearts of the robbers softened a little.

“Let us have a look at her performance. She is now entirely in our possession. Instead of murdering her now, we will witness her performance for a ghaṅikâ,” said the robbers to each other; and all with one voice said “agreed,” and at once the order for the performance was given.

Chandralêkhâ, who was clever in every department of knowledge, began her performance, and, by the most exquisite movement of her limbs, held the audience spell-bound, when suddenly tâ tai, tôm clashed the cymbals. This was the signal for the destruction of the robbers, as well as the sign of the close of a part of the nautch. In the twinkling of an eye the seven disguised followers of the dancing-girl had thrown down the thieves and were upon them. Before the servants of the robbers could come to the help of their masters the footsteps of an army near were heard, and in no time the prince's one thousand men were on the spot and took all the robbers and their followers prisoners.

So great had been the ravages of these robbers in and round Kaivalyam that, without any mercy being shown to them, they and their followers were all ordered to be beheaded, and the prince was so much won over by the excellent qualities of Chandralêkhâ that, notwithstanding her birth as a dancing-girl, he regarded her as a gem of womankind and married her.

“Buy a girl in a bâzâr” (kanniyai ka~~ai~~yir ko~~o~~) is a proverb. What matter where a girl is born provided she is virtuous! And Chandralêkhâ, by her excellent virtue, won a prince for her lord. And when that lord came to know of the real nature of his teacher, who was also the teacher of Chandralêkhâ, he banished him from his kingdom, as a merciful punishment, in consideration of his previous services.

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