

Keep it for the Beggar

Tales Of The Sun Or Folklore Of Southern India

Indian

Intermediate

6 min read

When anything sweet is prepared in the house on a particular night, and when the children, after feeding to their fill, say to the mother:—

“Ammâ, this pudding is sweet; keep it for the morning,” the mother says at once:—

“Ask me to keep it for the beggar, and I shall do it.”

“Why should I not say keep it for the morning, Ammâ,” ask the curious children, and the South Indian mother gives to her listening children the following story:—

In a certain village there lived an affectionate husband and wife. The husband would go to look after the fields and garden and return home with abundance of vegetables. The wife would cook and serve her lord to his fill. Before going out in the morning the husband used to take whatever of last night’s dishes were left cold to remain for his breakfast.

The husband was a great eater of dhâl(Indian grain) soup. Every night the wife used to prepare a large quantity of it and leave a good portion of it to stand for the morning’s breakfast of her lord. And he, too, owing to his taste for the cold rice, used to warn his wife—though she was very careful—and say:—

“Keep me some of this soup for the next morning.”

The wife used to say: "Yes, my dear husband, I shall do so."

This went on for several years. Every day the dhâl soup was invariably prepared for the night meal and a good portion of it was reserved for the cold rice. Every night, the husband, without forgetting for even a single day, used to ask his wife to reserve a portion. Thus passed on several years, as we have already said.

One night this husband had his supper. The wife had sat at her husband's leaf to take her supper after her lord had had his. That night, too, our hero, as usual, repeated:—

"Keep, my dear, some of this soup for the morning."

At once a gurgling laughter was heard near the doorsill of their house. The pair were astonished, and searched their whole house. No one was discovered. Again the husband said:—

"Keep, my dear, some of this soup for the morning."

Again the laughter was heard. Finding that the laughter immediately followed his order, the husband repeated it a third time. A third time also the laughter broke out. They were astonished. Three times had laughter been heard in their house, and still they could see no one. Thinking that some one must have mocked him from the neighbouring houses, he made careful inquiries and satisfied himself that none of his neighbours had mocked him. He was afraid at the laughter which thrice proceeded from a part of his house, as he had heard it distinctly.

That very night our hero had a sudden and unforeseen calamity, and just as he was dragging the latch of his backyard door a serpent stung him in his finger. Neighbours hearing of the venomous reptile in their next house, ran there with a stout cudgel. Already the master of the house, who was passionately fond of the dhâl soup, had swooned away. His wife was mourning by his side, saying:—

"My dear husband. How did you forget your soup so soon and leave us all for the other world? Just now you gave me the order, and before tasting it even you have died."

The neighbours began to search for the snake; but they did not succeed. And again a voice exclaimed from vacuum:—

"This husband's fate ended at the twelfth ghaṅikâ of this night. Yama ordered me to go and fetch him to his

world. I came down and reached this house at the eighth ghaṅikâ when the husband was giving the order to reserve for the morning meal his dear dhâl soup. I could not contain my laughter, and so broke out with a gurgling noise. As I am divine no one could perceive me. And so none ever found me in this house after they heard the laughter. Then I transformed myself into a serpent and waited for the hour to do my death-dealing duty. The poor man is now no more. Four ghaṅikâs ago he was of opinion that he would live and eat his cold rice to-morrow morning. How very sanguine people are in this world of uncertainty. The cause for my laughter was the husband's certainty when he issued that order to reserve the dhâl soup for the breakfast."

Thus ended the messenger, and vanished of course to inform his master how he had executed his orders.

And from that day, my children, it was fixed that our life in this world is always uncertain, and that one who lives at this moment cannot be sure of doing so at the next moment. While such is the case, how can you say, "Keep the pudding for to-morrow morning." Since you saw in the story just related to you, that we can never be certain of our life, you must say, instead of "for to-morrow morning, for the beggar." If we keep it for the beggar, and if we fortunately live till to-morrow morning, we shall use a portion of it and give the remainder to the beggar. Hence you must always, hereafter, say when any supper from overnight is to be left for the morning, "Keep it for the beggar, Ammâ."

"Yes, mother. We shall do so hereafter," replied the children.

In India, among Brâhmiṅs, the wife must never take her food before her lord, unless she is pregnant or sick. In these two cases even on the days when it is possible to avoid the meal before her lord, the wife invariably does it; on other days she cannot probably help it when she is physically unable. And in taking her meal, the wife sits in front of the leaf (dish) from which her husband has eaten. Most husbands generally leave their leaves clean, some out of pure affection to their wives and out of a good intention of not injuring the feelings of their wives. But there are others, who, as they are unclean in their other habits, are also unclean in their eating. The appearance of their leaves after they have left off eating, is like those thrown out in the streets and mutilated by crows and dogs. But their wives, cursing their lot to have married such husbands, must, as long as they are orthodox, eat out of those leaves.

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