

Story of the Faithless Wife and the Ungrateful Blind

Man

Tales Of The Sun Or Folklore Of Southern India

Indian

*Advanced
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In the town of Mithila there lived a young Brâhmaṅ 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 Brâhmaṅ. 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 Brâhma~~x~~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, Mahêvara! 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.

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The night was now over: darkness, the harbourer of vice, fled away; the day dawned. King Alakesa left his bedchamber, bathed and made his religious ablutions, and, after breakfasting, summoned a council of all his father’s old ministers and advisers. Alakesa took his seat in the midst of the assembly; anger was clearly visible in his countenance; his eyes had lost their natural expression and had turned very red; his breath was as hot as that of a furnace. He thus addressed them:—

“Know ye all, the ministers of my father and of myself, that last night, during the first watch, my First Minister, Bodhaditya, while I and my queen were asleep in our chamber, came and touched with his finger the bosom of my queen. Consider well the gravity of this crime, and express your opinions as to what punishment he merits.”

Thus spake king Alakesa, but all the ministers, not knowing what answer to return, hung down their heads in silence. Among those present was an aged minister named Manuniti, who called Bodhaditya to his side and privately learned the whole story. He then humbly bowed before the king, and thus spake:—

“Most noble king, men are not always all-wise, and, before replying to your Majesty’s question, I beg permission to relate in your presence the story of a king in whose reign a certain benevolent action was repaid with disgrace and ignominy:—

Story of the Wonderful Mango Fruit.

On the banks of the Kâvêrî there was a city called Tiruvidaimarudur, where ruled a king named Chakraditya. In that city there lived a poor Brâhma×and his wife, who, having no children, brought up in their house a young parrot as tenderly as if it had been their own offspring. One day the parrot was sitting on the roof of the house, basking itself in the morning sun, when a large flock of parrots flew past, talking to each other about certain mango fruits. The Brâhma×s parrot asked them what were the peculiar properties of those fruits, and was informed that beyond the seven oceans there was a great mango tree, the fruit of which gave perpetual youth to the person who ate of it, however old and infirm he might be. On hearing of this wonder the Brâhma×s parrot requested permission to accompany them, which being granted, they all continued their flight. When at length they arrived at the mango tree, all ate of its fruit; but the Brâhma×s parrot reflected:—

“It would not be right for me to eat this fruit; I am young, while my adopted parents, the poor Brâhma×and his wife are very old. So I shall give them this fruit, and they will become young and blooming by eating it.”

And that same evening the good parrot brought the fruit to the Brâhma×, and explained to him its extraordinary properties. But the Brâhma×thought within himself:—

“I am a beggar. What matters it if I become young and live for ever, or else die this very moment? Our king is very good and charitable. If such a great man should eat of this fruit and renew his youth, he would confer the greatest benefit on mankind. Therefore I will give this mango to our good king.”

In pursuance of this self-denying resolution, the poor Brâhma×proceeded to the palace and presented the fruit to the king, at the same time relating how he had obtained it and its qualities. The king richly rewarded the

Brâhma×for his gift, and sent him away. Then he began to reflect thus:—

“Here is a fruit which can bestow perpetual youth on the person who eats it. I should gain this great boon for myself alone, and what happiness could I expect under such circumstances unless shared by my friends and subjects? I shall therefore not eat this mango-fruit, but plant it carefully in my garden, and it will in time become a tree, which will bear much fruit having the same wonderful virtue, and my subjects shall, every one, eat of the fruit, and, with myself, be endowed with everlasting youth.”

So, calling his gardener, the king gave him the fruit, and he planted it in the royal presence. In due course of time the fruit grew into a fine tree, and during the spring season it began to bud and blossom and bear fruit. The king, having fixed upon an auspicious day for cutting one of the mango-fruits, gave it to his domestic chaplain, who was ninety years old, in order that his youth should be renewed. But no sooner had the priest tasted it than he fell down dead. At this unexpected calamity the king was both astonished and deeply grieved. When the old priest’s wife heard of her husband’s sudden death she came and prayed the king to allow her to perform sati with him on the same funeral pyre, which increased the king’s sorrow; but he gave her the desired permission, and himself superintended all the ceremonies of the cremation. King Chakraditya then sent for the poor Brâhma×, and demanded of him how he had dared to present a poisonous fruit to his king. The Brâhma×replied:—

“My lord, I brought up a young parrot in my house, in order to console me for having no son. That parrot brought me the fruit one day, and told me of its wonderful properties. Believing that the parrot spoke the truth, I presented it to your Majesty, never for a moment suspecting it to be poisonous.”

The king listened to the poor Brâhma×’s words, but thought that the poor priest’s death should be avenged. So he consulted his ministers who recommended, as a slight punishment, that the Brâhma×should be deprived of his left eye. This was done accordingly, and, on his return home, when his wife saw his condition, she asked the reason of such mutilation.

“My dear,” said she, “the parrot we have fostered so tenderly is the cause of this.”

And they resolved to break the neck of the treacherous bird. But the parrot, having overheard their conversation, thus addressed them:—

“My kind foster parents, everyone must be rewarded for the good actions or punished for the evil deeds of his previous life. I brought you the fruit with a good intention, but my sins in my former life have given it a different effect. Therefore I pray you to kill me and bury me with a little milk in a pit. And, after my funeral ceremony is over, I request you to undertake a pilgrimage to Banaras to expiate your own sins.”

So the old Brâhma and his wife killed their pet parrot and buried it as directed, after which, overcome with grief, they set out on a pilgrimage to the Holy City.

Meanwhile the king commanded his gardener to set guards over the poison-tree, and to allow no one to eat of its fruit; and all the inhabitants soon came to know that the king had a mango tree in his garden, the fruit of which was deadly poison. Now, there was in the city an old washerwoman, who had frequent quarrels with her daughter-in-law, and one day, being weary of life, she left the house, threatening to eat of the poison tree and die.

The young parrot who was killed for having brought the poisonous mango-fruit was re-born as a green parrot, and was waiting for an opportunity to demonstrate the harmless nature of the tree; and when he saw the old woman approach with a determination to put an end to her life by eating of its fruit, he plucked one with his beak and dropped it down before her. The old woman rejoiced that fate sanctioned her death, and greedily ate the fruit, when lo! instead of dying she became young and blooming again. Those who had seen her leave the house a woman over sixty years of age were astonished on seeing her return as a handsome girl of sixteen and learning that the wonderful transformation was caused by the supposed poisonous mango-tree.

The strange news soon reached the king, who, in order to test the tree still further, ordered another fruit of it to be brought and gave it to a goldsmith of more than ninety years of age, who had embezzled some gold which had been entrusted to him to make into ornaments for the ladies of the palace, and was on that account undergoing imprisonment. When he had eaten the fruit, he, in his turn, became a young man of sixteen. The king was now convinced that the fruit of the mango-tree, so far from being poisonous, had the power of converting decrepit age into lusty and perennial youth. But how had the old priest died by eating of it?

It was by a mere accident. One day a huge serpent was sleeping on a branch of the mango-tree, and its head hung over one of the fruit; poison dropped from its mouth and fell on the rind of that fruit; the gardener, who had no knowledge of this, when asked to bring a fruit for the priest, happened to bring the one on which the poison had fallen, and the priest having eaten it, died.

And now the king caused proclamation to be made throughout his kingdom that all who pleased might come and partake of the mango-fruit, and everyone ate of it and became young. But king Chakaraditya's heart burnt within him at the remembrance of his ill-treatment of the poor Brâhma×, who had returned with his wife from Banaras. So he sent for him, explained his mistake, and gave him a fruit to eat, which, having tasted, the aged Brâhma× became young and his eye was also restored to him. But the greatest loss of all, that of the parrot who brought the fruit from beyond the seven oceans, remained irreparable.

“Thus, my lord,” continued the old minister, Manuniti, “it behoves us not to act precipitately in this affair of Bodhaditya, which we must carefully sift before expressing our opinion as to the punishment he may deserve at your majesty's hands.”

Next: VI. The Poisoned Food

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