

The Death and Burial of Poor- Sparrow

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Indian

Intermediate
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Once upon a time there lived a cock-sparrow and his wife, who were both growing old. But despite his years the cock-sparrow was a gay, festive old bird, who plumed himself upon his appearance, and was quite a ladies' man. So he cast his eyes on a lively young hen, and determined to marry her, for he was tired of his sober old wife. The wedding was a mighty grand affair, and everybody as jolly and merry as could be, except of course the poor old wife, who crept away from all the noise and fun to sit disconsolately on a quiet branch just under a crow's nest, where she could be as melancholy as she liked without anybody poking fun at her.

Now while she sat there it began to rain, and after a while the drops, soaking through the crow's nest, came drip-dripping on to her feathers; she, however, was far too miserable to care, and sat there all huddled up and peepy till the shower was over. Now it so happened that the crow had used some scraps of dyed cloth in lining its nest, and as these became wet the colours ran, and dripping down on to the poor old hen-sparrow beneath, dyed her feathers until she was as gay as a peacock.

Fine feathers make fine birds, we all know, and she really looked quite spruce; so much so, that when she flew home, the new wife nearly burst with envy, and asked her at once where she had found such a lovely dress.

‘Easily enough,’ replied the old wife; ‘I just went into the dyer’s vat.’

The bride instantly determined to go there also. She could not endure the notion of the old thing being better dressed than she was, so she flew off at once to the dyer’s, and being in a great hurry, went pop into the middle of the vat, without waiting to see if it was hot or cold. It turned out to be just scalding; consequently the poor thing was half boiled before she managed to scramble out. Meanwhile, the gay old cock, not finding his bride at home, flew about distractedly in search of her, and you may imagine what bitter tears he wept when he found her, half drowned and half boiled, with her feathers all awry, lying by the dyer’s vat.

‘What has happened?’ quoth he.

But the poor bedraggled thing could only gasp out feebly—

‘The old wife was dyed—

The nasty old cat!

And I, the gay bride,

Fell into the vat!’

Whereupon the cock-sparrow took her up tenderly in his bill, and flew away home with his precious burden.

Now, just as he was crossing the big river in front of his house, the old hen-sparrow, in her gay dress, looked out of the window, and when she saw her old husband bringing home his young bride in such a sorry plight, she burst out laughing shrilly, and called aloud, ‘That is right! that is right! Remember what the song says—

‘Old wives must scramble through water and mud,

But young wives are carried dry-shod o’er the flood.’

This allusion so enraged her husband that he could not contain himself, but cried out, ‘Hold your tongue, you shameless old cat!’

Of course, when he opened his mouth to speak, the poor draggled bride fell out, and going plump into the river, was drowned. Whereupon the cock-sparrow was so distracted with grief that he picked off all his feathers until he was as bare as a ploughed field. Then, going to a pîpal tree, he sat all naked and forlorn on the branches, sobbing and sighing.

‘What has happened?’ cried the pîpal tree, aghast at the sight.

‘Don’t ask me!’ wailed the cock-sparrow; ‘it isn’t manners to ask questions when a body is in deep mourning.’

But the pîpal would not be satisfied without an answer, so at last poor bereaved cock-sparrow replied---

‘The ugly hen painted.

By jealousy tainted,

The pretty hen dyed.

Lamenting his bride,

The cock, bald and bare,

Sobs loud in despair!’

On hearing this sad tale, the pîpal became overwhelmed with grief, and declaring it must mourn also, shed all its leaves on the spot.

By and by a buffalo, coming in the heat of the day to rest in the shade of the pîpal tree, was astonished to find nothing but bare twigs.

‘What has happened?’ cried the buffalo; ‘you were as green as possible yesterday!’

‘Don’t ask me!’ whimpered the pîpal. ‘Where are your manners? Don’t you know it isn’t decent to ask questions when people are in mourning?’

But the buffalo insisted on having an answer, so at last, with many sobs and sighs, the pîpal replied---

‘The ugly hen painted.

By jealousy tainted,

The pretty hen dyed.

Bewailing his bride,

The cock, bald and bare,

Sobs loud in despair;

The pîpal tree grieves

By shedding its leaves!’

‘Oh dear me!’ cried the buffalo, ‘how very sad! I really must mourn too!’ So she immediately cast her horns, and

began to weep and wail. After a while, becoming thirsty, she went to drink at the river-side.

‘Goodness gracious!’ cried the river, ‘what is the matter? and what have you done with your horns?’

‘How rude you are!’ wept the buffalo. ‘Can’t you see I am in deep mourning? and it isn’t polite to ask questions.’

But the river persisted, until the buffalo, with many groans, replied—

‘The ugly hen painted.

By jealousy tainted,

The pretty hen dyed.

Lamenting his bride,

The cock, bald and bare,

Sobs loud in despair;

The pîpal tree grieves

By shedding its leaves;

The buffalo mourns

By casting her horns!’

‘Dreadful!’ cried the river, and wept so fast that its water became quite salt.

By and by a cuckoo, coming to bathe in the stream, called out, ‘Why, river! what has happened? You are as salt as tears!’

‘Don’t ask me!’ mourned the stream; ‘it is too dreadful for words!’

Nevertheless, when the cuckoo would take no denial, the river replied—

‘The ugly hen painted.

By jealousy tainted,

The pretty hen dyed.

Lamenting his bride,

The cock, bald and bare,

Sobs loud in despair;

The pîpal tree grieves

By shedding its leaves;

The buffalo mourns

By casting her horns;

The stream, weeping fast,

Grows briny at last!

'Oh dear! oh dear me!' cried the cuckoo, 'how very very sad! I must mourn too!' So it plucked out an eye, and going to a corn-merchant's shop, sat on the doorstep and wept.

'Why, little cuckoo! what's the matter?' cried Bhagtu the shopkeeper. 'You are generally the pertest of birds, and to-day you are as dull as ditchwater!'

'Don't ask me!' snivelled the cuckoo; 'it is such terrible grief! such dreadful sorrow! such—such horrible pain!'

However, when Bhagtu persisted, the cuckoo, wiping its one eye on its wing, replied—

'The ugly hen painted.

By jealousy tainted,

The pretty hen dyed.

Lamenting his bride,

The cock, bald and bare,

Sobs loud in despair;

The pîpal tree grieves

By shedding its leaves;

The buffalo mourns

By casting her horns;

The stream, weeping fast,

Grows briny at last;

The cuckoo with sighs

Blinds one of its eyes!

'Bless my heart!' cried Bhagtu, 'but that is simply the most heartrending tale I ever heard in my life! I must really mourn likewise!' Whereupon he wept, and wailed, and beat his breast, until he went completely out of his mind; and when the Queen's maidservant came to buy of him, he gave her pepper instead of turmeric,

onion instead of garlic, and wheat instead of pulse.

‘Dear me, friend Bhagtu!’ quoth the maid-^{*} servant, ‘your wits are wool-gathering! What’s the matter?’

‘Don’t! please don’t!’ cried Bhagtu; ‘I wish you wouldn’t ask me, for I am trying to forget all about it. It is too dreadful—too too terrible!’

At last, however, yielding to the maid’s entreaties, he replied, with many sobs and tears—

‘The ugly hen painted.

By jealousy tainted,

The pretty hen dyed.

Lamenting his bride,

The cock, bald and bare,

Sobs loud in despair;

The pîpal tree grieves

By shedding its leaves;

The buffalo mourns

By casting her horns;

The stream, weeping fast,

Grows briny at last;

The cuckoo with sighs

Blinds one of its eyes;

Bhagtu’s grief so intense is,

He loses his senses!’

‘How very sad!’ exclaimed the maidservant. ‘I don’t wonder at your distress; but it is always so in this miserable world!—everything goes wrong!’

Whereupon she fell to railing at everybody and everything in the world, until the Queen said to her, ‘What is the matter, my child? What distresses you?’

‘Oh!’ replied the maidservant, ‘the old story! every one is miserable, and I most of all! Such dreadful news!—

‘The ugly hen painted.

By jealousy tainted,
The pretty hen dyed.
Lamenting his bride,
The cock, bald and bare,
Sobs loud in despair;
The pîpal tree grieves
By shedding its leaves;
The buffalo mourns
By casting her horns;
The stream, weeping fast,
Grows briny at last;
The cuckoo with sighs
Blinds one of its eyes;
Bhagtu's grief so intense is,
He loses his senses;
The maidservant wailing
Has taken to railing!
'Too true!' wept the Queen, 'too true! The world is a vale of tears! There is nothing for it but to try and forget!
Whereupon she set to work dancing away as hard as she could.

By and by in came the Prince, who, seeing her twirling about, said, 'Why, mother! what is the matter?'

The Queen, without stopping, gasped out—

'The ugly hen painted.

By jealousy tainted,

The pretty hen dyed.

Lamenting his bride,

The cock, bald and bare,

Sobs loud in despair;

The pîpal tree grieves

By shedding its leaves;
The buffalo mourns
By casting her horns;
The stream, weeping fast,
Grows briny at last;
The cuckoo with sighs
Blinds one of its eyes;
Bhagtu's grief so intense is,
He loses his senses;
The maidservant wailing
Has taken to railing;
The Queen, joy enhancing,
Takes refuge in dancing!
'If that is your mourning, I'll mourn too!' cried the Prince, and seizing his tambourine, he began to thump on it with a will. Hearing the noise, the King came in, and asked what was the matter.

'This is the matter!' cried the Prince, drumming away with all his might—

'The ugly hen painted.

By jealousy tainted,

The pretty hen dyed.

Lamenting his bride,

The cock, bald and bare,

Sobs loud in despair;

The pîpal tree grieves

By shedding its leaves;

The buffalo mourns

By casting her horns;

The stream, weeping fast,

Grows briny at last;

The cuckoo with sighs

Blinds one of its eyes;
Bhagtu's grief so intense is,
He loses his senses;
The maidservant wailing
Has taken to railing;
The Queen, joy enhancing,
Takes refuge in dancing;
To aid the mirth coming,
The Prince begins drumming!
'Capital! capital!' cried the King, 'that's the way to do it!' so, seizing his zither, he began to thrum away like one possessed.

And as they danced, the Queen, the King, the Prince, and the maidservant sang---

'The ugly hen painted.
By jealousy tainted,
The pretty hen dyed.
Bewailing his bride,
The cock, bald and bare,
Sobs loud in despair;
The pîpal tree grieves
By shedding its leaves;
The buffalo mourns
By casting her horns;
The stream, weeping fast,
Grows briny at last;
The cuckoo with sighs
Blinds one of its eyes;
Bhagtu's grief so intense is,
He loses his senses;

The maidservant wailing

Has taken to railing;

The Queen, joy enhancing,

Takes refuge in dancing;

To aid the mirth coming,

The Prince begins drumming;

To join in it with her

The King strums the zither!

So they danced and sang till they were tired, and that was how every one mourned poor cock-sparrow's pretty bride.

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