

# *The Gardener's Cunning Wife*

Tales Of The Sun Or Folklore Of Southern India

Indian

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*Intermediate*

*6 min read*

In a certain village there lived with his wife a poor gardener who cultivated greens in a small patch in the backyard of his house. They were in thirty little beds, half of which he would water every day. This occupied him from the fifth to the fifteenth ghaṭikâ.

His wife used to cut a basketful of greens every evening, and he took them in the mornings to sell in the village. The sale brought him a measure or two of rice, and on this the family lived! If he could manage any extra work of an evening he got a few coppers which served to meet their other expenses.

Now in that village there was a temple to Kâlî, before which was a fine tank with a mango tree on its bank. The fish in the tank and the mangoes from the tree were dedicated to the goddess, and were strictly forbidden to the villagers. If any one was discovered cutting a mango or catching a fish, he was at once excommunicated from the village. So strict was the prohibition.

The gardener was returning home one morning after selling his greens and passed the temple. The mangoes, so carefully guarded by religious protection, were hanging on the tree in great numbers, and the gardener's eyes fell on them! His mouth watered. He looked round about him, and fortunately there was no one by, at least, as far as his eyes could reach. So he hastily plucked one of the mangoes and with nimble feet descended into the tank to wash it. Just then a most charming shoal of fish met his eyes. These protected dwellers in the tank had no notion of danger, and so were frolicking about at their ease. The gardener looked about him first

and finding no one by caught half a dozen stout fish at one plunge of his hand. He hid them and the mango underneath the rice in his basket and returned home, happy in the thought that he had not been caught. Now he had a special delight in fish, and when he reached his house he showed what he brought to his wife and asked her to prepare a dish with the newly caught fish and the never-till-then tasted mango.

Meanwhile he had to water his garden, and went to the backyard for the purpose. The watering was done by a pikôṭa. He used to run up and down the pole while a friend of his, the son of his neighbour, lifted the water and irrigated the garden.

Meanwhile his wife cooked the dish of mango and fish in a pan, and found the flavour so sweet that even while the fish was only half cooked she began to taste one bit of it after another till more than half had already gone down her throat! The dish was at last cooked, and the few remaining slices in the pan were taken off the fire, so she went into the verandah and from thence saw her husband running up and down the pikôṭa. She beckoned to him that the dish was ready and that he should come in and taste it. However, he never noticed her, but kept on running up and down the pikôṭa, and while running up and down he was obliged to wave his hands about, and this his wife mistook as an indication that she might eat up her portion of the dish. At any rate her imagination made her think so; and she went in and ate a slice, and then went out into the verandah again to call her husband who was still running up and down the pikôṭa. Again, her husband, so she thought, waved his hands in permission to go on with her dinner. Again she went in and had another slice. Thus it went on for a full ghaṭikâ till the last slice was consumed.

“Alas!” thought she, “With what great eagerness my husband fetched the fish and the mango, and how sadly, out of greediness, have I disappointed him. Surely his anger will know no bounds when he comes in. I must soon devise some means to save myself.”

So she brought the pan in which she cooked the fish and mango out of the house and covered it with another pan of similar size and sat down before it. Then she undid her hair and twisted it about her head until it was dishevelled. She then began to make a great noise. This action by a woman in an illiterate family of low caste is always supposed to indicate a visitation from a goddess and a demon; so when her husband from the pikôṭa tree saw the state of his wife, his guilty conscience smote him. The change in his wife alarmed him, and he came down suddenly and stood before her. As soon as she saw him she roared out at him:—

“Why have you injured me to-day by plundering my mango and fish? How dare you do such an irreligious act?”

You shall soon see the results of your impertinence!”

“The goddess has come upon my wife most terribly,” thought the poor man. “Her divine power may soon kill her! What shall I do?”

So he fell at the feet of the divine visitation as he thought it to be, and said:—

“My most holy goddess, your dog of a servant has this day deviated from the straight path. Excuse him this time, and he will never do so a second time.”

“Run then with the pan which contains the fruits of your robbery and dip it deep into my tank. Then shall the fish become alive and the mango shall take its place in the tree.”

The gardener received the order most submissively, and taking the pan in his hand flew to the tank. There he dipped it in the water and came back to his house fully believing that his sin that day had been forgiven, and that the cooked fish had become alive again and the mango a living one. Thus did the cunning wife save herself from her husband’s wrath!

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