



The Lord of Death

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Indian

Intermediate
5 min read

Once upon a time there was a road, and every one who travelled along it died. Some folk said they were killed by a snake, others said by a scorpion, but certain it is they all died.

Now a very old man was travelling along the road, and being tired, sat down on a stone to rest; when suddenly, close beside him, he saw a scorpion as big as a cock, which, while he looked at it, changed into a horrible snake. He was wonderstruck, and as the creature glided away, he determined to follow it at a little distance, and so find out what it really was.

So the snake sped on day and night, and behind it followed the old man like a shadow. Once it went into an inn, and killed several travellers; another time it slid into the King's house and killed him. Then it crept up the waterspout to the Queen's palace, and killed the King's youngest daughter. So it passed on, and wherever it went the sound of weeping and wailing arose, and the old man followed it, silent as a shadow.

Suddenly the road became a broad, deep, swift river, on the banks of which sat some poor travellers who longed to cross over, but had no money to pay the ferry. Then the snake changed into a handsome buffalo, with a brass necklace and bells round its neck, and stood by the brink of the stream. When the poor travellers saw this, they said, 'This beast is going to swim to its home across the river; let us get on its back, and hold on to its tail, so that we too shall get over the stream.'

Then they climbed on its back and held by its tail, and the buffalo swam away with them bravely; but when it

reached the middle, it began to kick, until they tumbled off, or let go, and were all drowned.

When the old man, who had crossed the river in a boat, reached the other side, the buffalo had disappeared, and in its stead stood a beautiful ox. Seeing this handsome creature wandering about, a peasant, struck with covetousness, lured it to his home. It was very gentle, suffering itself to be tied up with the other cattle; but in the dead of night it changed into a snake, bit all the flocks and herds, and then, creeping into the house, killed all the sleeping folk, and crept away. But behind it the old man still followed, as silent as a shadow.

Presently they came to another river, where the snake changed itself into the likeness of a beautiful young girl, fair to see, and covered with costly jewels. After a while, two brothers, soldiers, came by, and as they approached the girl, she began to weep bitterly.

‘What is the matter?’ asked the brothers; ‘and why do you, so young and beautiful, sit by the river alone?’

Then the snake-girl answered, ‘My husband was even now taking me home; and going down to the stream to look for the ferry-boat, fell to washing his face, when he slipped in, and was drowned. So I have neither husband nor relations!’

‘Do not fear!’ cried the elder of the two brothers, who had become enamoured of her beauty; ‘come with me, and I will marry you.’

‘On one condition,’ answered the girl: ‘you must never ask me to do any household work; and no matter for what I ask, you must give it me.’

‘I will obey you like a slave!’ promised the young man.

‘Then go at once to the well, and fetch me a cup of water. Your brother can stay with me,’ quoth the girl.

But when the elder brother had gone, the snake-girl turned to the younger, saying, ‘Fly with me, for I love you! My promise to your brother was a trick to get him away!’

‘Not so!’ returned the young man; ‘you are his promised wife, and I look on you as my sister.’

On this the girl became angry, weeping and wailing, until the elder brother returned, when she called out, ‘O husband, what a villain is here! Your brother asked me to fly with him, and leave you!’

Then bitter wrath at this treachery arose in the elder brother’s heart, so that he drew his sword and challenged

the younger to battle. Then they fought all day long, until by evening they both lay dead upon the field, and then the girl took the form of a snake once more, and behind it followed the old man silent as a shadow. But at last it changed into the likeness of an old white-bearded man, and when he who had followed so long saw one like himself, he took courage, and laying hold of the white beard, asked, 'Who and what are you?'

Then the old man smiled and answered, 'Some call me the Lord of Death, because I go about bringing death to the world.'

'Give me death!' pleaded the other, 'for I have followed you far, silent as a shadow, and I am weary.'

But the Lord of Death shook his head, saying, 'Not so! I only give to those whose years are full, and you have sixty years of life to come!'

Then the old white-bearded man vanished, but whether he really was the Lord of Death, or a devil, who can tell?

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