



The Son of Seven Mothers

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Indian

Advanced
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Once upon a time there lived a King who had seven wives, but no children. This was a great grief to him, especially when he remembered that on his death there would be no heir to inherit the kingdom.

Now, one day, a poor old *fakîr* or religious devotee, came to the King and said, 'Your prayers are heard, your desire shall be accomplished, and each of your seven queens shall bear a son.'

The King's delight at this promise knew no bounds, and he gave orders for appropriate festivities to be prepared against the coming event throughout the length and breadth of the land.

Meanwhile the seven Queens lived luxuriously in a splendid palace, attended by hundreds of female slaves, and fed to their hearts' content on sweetmeats and confectionery.

Now the King was very fond of hunting, and one day, before he started, the seven Queens sent him a message saying, 'May it please our dearest lord not to hunt towards the north to-day, for we have dreamt bad dreams, and fear lest evil should befall you.'

The King, to allay their anxiety, promised regard for their wishes, and set out towards the south; but as luck would have it, although he hunted diligently, he found no game. Nor had he greater success to the east or west, so that, being a keen sportsman, and determined not to go home empty-handed, he forgot all about his

promise, and turned to the north. Here also he met at first with no reward, but just as he had made up his mind to give up for that day, a white hind with golden horns and silver hoofs flashed past him into a thicket. So quickly did it pass, that he scarcely saw it; nevertheless a burning desire to capture and possess the beautiful strange creature filled his breast. He instantly ordered his attendants to form a ring round the thicket, and so encircle the hind; then, gradually narrowing the circle, he pressed forward till he could distinctly see the white hind panting in the midst. Nearer and nearer he advanced, when, just as he thought to lay hold of the beautiful strange creature, it gave one mighty bound, leapt clean over the King's head, and fled towards the mountains. Forgetful of all else, the King, setting spurs to his horse, followed at full speed. On, on he galloped, leaving his retinue far behind, but keeping the white hind in view, and never drawing bridle, until, finding himself in a narrow ravine with no outlet, he reined in his steed. Before him stood a miserable hovel, into which, being tired after his long unsuccessful chase, he entered to ask for a drink of water. An old woman, seated in the hut at a spinning-wheel, answered his request by calling to her daughter, and immediately from an inner room came a maiden so lovely and charming, so white-skinned and golden-haired, that the King was transfixed by astonishment at seeing so beautiful a sight in the wretched hovel.

She held the vessel of water to the King's lips, and as he drank he looked into her eyes, and then it became clear to him that the girl was no other than the white hind with the golden horns and silver feet he had chased so far.

Her beauty bewitched him completely, and he fell on his knees, begging her to return with him as his bride; but she only laughed, saying seven Queens were quite enough even for a King to manage. However, when he would take no refusal, but implored her to have pity on him, and promised her everything she could desire, she replied, 'Give me the eyes of your seven wives, and then perhaps I may believe that you mean what you say.'

The King was so carried away by the glamour of the white hind's magical beauty, that he went home at once, had the eyes of his seven Queens taken out, and, after throwing the poor blind creatures into a noisome dungeon whence they could not escape, set off once more for the hovel in the ravine, bearing with him his loathsome offering. But the white hind only laughed cruelly when she saw the fourteen eyes, and threading them as a necklace, flung it round her mother's neck, saying, 'Wear that, little mother, as a keepsake, whilst I am away in the King's palace.'

Then she went back with the bewitched monarch as his bride, and he gave her the seven Queens' rich clothes

and jewels to wear, the seven Queens' palace to live in, and the seven Queens' slaves to wait upon her; so that she really had everything even a witch could desire.

Now, very soon after the seven wretched, hapless Queens were cast into prison, the first Queen's baby was born. It was a handsome boy, but the Queens were so desperately hungry that they killed the child at once, and, dividing it into seven portions, ate it. All except the youngest Queen, who saved her portion secretly.

The next day the second Queen's baby was born, and they did the same with it, and with all the babies in turn, one after the other, until the seventh and youngest Queen's baby was born on the seventh day. But when the other six Queens came to the young mother, and wanted to take it away, saying, 'Give us your child to eat, as you have eaten ours!' she produced the six pieces of the other babies untouched, and answered, 'Not so! here are six pieces for you; eat them, and leave my child alone. You cannot complain, for you have each your fair share, neither more nor less.'

Now, though the other Queens were very jealous that the youngest amongst them should by forethought and self-denial have saved her baby's life, they could say nothing; for, as the young mother had told them, they received their full share. And though at first they disliked the handsome little boy, he soon proved so useful to them, that ere long they all looked on him as their son. Almost as soon as he was born he began scraping at the mud wall of their dungeon, and in an incredibly short space of time had made a hole big enough for him to crawl through. Through this he disappeared, returning in an hour or so laden with sweetmeats, which he divided equally amongst the seven blind Queens.

As he grew older he enlarged the hole, and slipped out two or three times every day to play with the little nobles in the town. No one knew who the tiny boy was, but everybody liked him, and he was so full of funny tricks and antics, so merry and bright, that he was sure to be rewarded by some girdle-cakes, a handful of parched grain, or some sweetmeats. All these things he brought home to his seven mothers, as he loved to call the seven blind Queens, who by his help lived on in their dungeon when all the world thought they had starved to death ages before.

At last, when he was quite a big lad, he one day took his bow and arrow, and went out to seek for game. Coming by chance upon the palace where the white hind lived in wicked splendour and magnificence, he saw some pigeons fluttering round the white marble turrets, and, taking good aim, shot one dead. It came

tumbling past the very window where the white Queen was sitting; she rose to see what was the matter, and looked out. At the first glance at the handsome young lad standing there bow in hand, she knew by witchcraft that it was the King's son.

She nearly died of envy and spite, determining to destroy the lad without delay; therefore, sending a servant to bring him to her presence, she asked him if he would sell her the pigeon he had just shot.

'No,' replied the sturdy lad, 'the pigeon is for my seven blind mothers, who live in the noisome dungeon, and who would die if I did not bring them food.'

'Poor souls!' cried the cunning white witch; 'would you not like to bring them their eyes again? Give me the pigeon, my dear, and I faithfully promise to show you where to find them.'

Hearing this, the lad was delighted beyond measure, and gave up the pigeon at once. Whereupon the white Queen told him to seek her mother without delay, and ask for the eyes which she wore as a necklace.

'She will not fail to give them,' said the cruel Queen, 'if you show her this token on which I have written what I want done.'

So saying, she gave the lad a piece of broken potsherd, with these words inscribed on it—'Kill the bearer at once, and sprinkle his blood like water!'

Now, as the son of seven mothers could not read, he took the fatal message cheerfully, and set off to find the white Queen's mother.

But while he was journeying he passed through a town, where every one of the inhabitants looked so sad that he could not help asking what was the matter. They told him it was because the King's only daughter refused to marry; so when her father died there would be no heir to the throne. They greatly feared she must be out of her mind, for though every good-looking young man in the kingdom had been shown to her, she declared she would only marry one who was the son of seven mothers, and of course no one had ever heard of such a thing. Still the King, in despair, had ordered every man who entered the city gates to be led before the Princess in case she might relent. So, much to the lad's impatience, for he was in an immense hurry to find his mothers' eyes, he was dragged into the presence-chamber.

No sooner did the Princess catch sight of him than she blushed, and, turning to the King, said, 'Dear father, this is my choice!'

Never were such rejoicings as these few words produced. The inhabitants nearly went wild with joy, but the son of seven mothers said he would not marry the Princess unless they first let him recover his mothers' eyes. Now when the beautiful bride heard his story, she asked to see the potsherd, for she was very learned and clever; so much so that on seeing the treacherous words, she said nothing, but taking another similarly-shaped bit of potsherd, wrote on it these words—'Take care of this lad, give him all he desires,' and returned it to the son of seven mothers, who, none the wiser, set off on his quest.

Ere long, he arrived at the hovel in the ravine, where the white witch's mother, a hideous old creature, grumbled dreadfully on reading the message, especially when the lad asked for the necklace of eyes. Nevertheless she took it off, and gave it him, saying, 'There are only thirteen of 'em now, for I ate one last week, when I was hungry.'

The lad, however, was only too glad to get any at all, so he hurried home as fast as he could to his seven mothers, and gave two eyes apiece to the six elder Queens; but to the youngest he gave one, saying, 'Dearest little mother!—I will be your other eye always!'

After this he set off to marry the Princess, as he had promised, but when passing by the white Queen's palace he again saw some pigeons on the roof. Drawing his bow, he shot one, and again it came fluttering past the window. Then the white hind looked out, and lo! there was the King's son alive and well.

She cried with hatred and disgust, but sending for the lad, asked him how he had returned so soon, and when she heard how he had brought home the thirteen eyes, and given them to the seven blind Queens, she could hardly restrain her rage. Nevertheless she pretended to be charmed with his success, and told him that if he would give her this pigeon also, she would reward him with the Jôgi's wonderful cow, whose milk flows all day long, and makes a pond as big as a kingdom. The lad, nothing loath, gave her the pigeon; whereupon, as before, she bade him go ask her mother for the cow, and gave him a potsherd whereon was written—'Kill this lad without fail, and sprinkle his blood like water!'

But on the way, the son of seven mothers looked in on the Princess, just to tell her how he came to be delayed, and she, after reading the message on the potsherd, gave him another in its stead; so that when the lad reached the old hag's hut and asked her for the Jôgi's cow, she could not refuse, but told the boy how to find it; and, bidding him of all things not to be afraid of the eighteen thousand demons who kept watch and ward over the treasure, told him to be off before she became too angry at her daughter's foolishness in thus giving away so many good things.

Then the lad did as he had been told bravely. He journeyed on and on till he came to a milk-white pond, guarded by the eighteen thousand demons. They were really frightful to behold, but, plucking up courage, he whistled a tune as he walked through them, looking neither to the right nor the left. By and by he came upon the Jôgi's cow, tall, white, and beautiful, while the Jôgi himself, who was king of all the demons, sat milking her day and night, and the milk streamed from her udder, filling the milk-white tank.

The Jôgi, seeing the lad, called out fiercely, 'What do you want here?'

Then the lad answered, according to the old hag's bidding, 'I want your skin, for King Indra is making a new kettledrum, and says your skin is nice and tough.'

Upon this the Jôgi began to shiver and shake (for no Jinn or Jôgi dares disobey King Indra's command), and, falling at the lad's feet, cried, 'If you will spare me I will give you anything I possess, even my beautiful white

cow!

To this, the son of seven mothers, after a little pretended hesitation, agreed, saying that after all it would not be difficult to find a nice tough skin like the Jôgi's elsewhere; so, driving the wonderful cow before him, he set off homewards. The seven Queens were delighted to possess so marvellous an animal, and though they toiled from morning till night making curds and whey, besides selling milk to the confectioners, they could not use half the cow gave, and became richer and richer day by day.

Seeing them so comfortably off, the son of seven mothers started with a light heart to marry the Princess; but when passing the white hind's palace he could not resist sending a bolt at some pigeons which were cooing on the parapet, and for the third time one fell dead just beneath the window where the white Queen was sitting. Looking out, she saw the lad hale and hearty standing before her, and grew whiter than ever with rage and spite.

[Illustration: The son demanding the Jôgi's cow]

She sent for him to ask how he had returned so soon, and when she heard how kindly her mother had received him, she very nearly had a fit; however, she dissembled her feelings as well as she could, and, smiling sweetly, said she was glad to have been able to fulfil her promise, and that if he would give her this third pigeon, she would do yet more for him than she had done before, by giving him the million-fold rice, which ripens in one night.

The lad was of course delighted at the very idea, and, giving up the pigeon, set off on his quest, armed as before with a potsherd, on which was written, 'Do not fail this time. Kill the lad, and sprinkle his blood like water!'

But when he looked in on his Princess, just to prevent her becoming anxious about him, she asked to see the potsherd as usual, and substituted another, on which was written, 'Yet again give this lad all he requires, for his blood shall be as your blood!'

Now when the old hag saw this, and heard how the lad wanted the million-fold rice which ripens in a single night, she fell into the most furious rage, but being terribly afraid of her daughter, she controlled herself, and bade the boy go and find the field guarded by eighteen millions of demons, warning him on no account to look back after having plucked the tallest spike of rice, which grew in the centre.

So the son of seven mothers set off, and soon came to the field where, guarded by eighteen millions of demons, the million-fold rice grew. He walked on bravely, looking neither to the right nor left, till he reached the centre and plucked the tallest ear; but as he turned homewards a thousand sweet voices rose behind him, crying in tenderest accents, 'Pluck me too! oh, please pluck me too!' He looked back, and lo! there was nothing left of him but a little heap of ashes!

Now as time passed by and the lad did not return, the old hag grew uneasy, remembering the message 'his blood shall be as your blood'; so she set off to see what had happened.

Soon she came to the heap of ashes, and knowing by her arts what it was, she took a little water, and kneading the ashes into a paste, formed it into the likeness of a man; then, putting a drop of blood from her little finger into its mouth, she blew on it, and instantly the son of seven mothers started up as well as ever.

'Don't you disobey orders again!' grumbled the old hag, 'or next time I'll leave you alone. Now be off, before I repent of my kindness!'

So the son of seven mothers returned joyfully to the seven Queens, who, by the aid of the million-fold rice, soon became the richest people in the kingdom. Then they celebrated their son's marriage to the clever Princess with all imaginable pomp; but the bride was so clever, she would not rest until she had made known her husband to his father, and punished the wicked white witch. So she made her husband build a palace exactly like the one in which the seven Queens had lived, and in which the white witch now dwelt in splendour. Then, when all was prepared, she bade her husband give a grand feast to the King. Now the King had heard much of the mysterious son of seven mothers, and his marvellous wealth, so he gladly accepted the invitation; but what was his astonishment when on entering the palace he found it was a facsimile of his own in every particular! And when his host, richly attired, led him straight to the private hall, where on royal thrones sat the seven Queens, dressed as he had last seen them, he was speechless with surprise, until the Princess, coming

forward, threw herself at his feet, and told him the whole story. Then the King awoke from his enchantment, and his anger rose against the wicked white hind who had bewitched him so long, until he could not contain himself. So she was put to death, and her grave ploughed over, and after that the seven Queens returned to their own splendid palace, and everybody lived happily.

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