

The Soothsayer's Son

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Indian

Intermediate

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A soothsayer when on his deathbed wrote out the horoscope of his second son, whose name was Gangazara, and bequeathed it to him as his only property, leaving the whole of his estate to his eldest son. The second son thought over the horoscope, and said to himself:

“Alas! am I born to this only in the world? The sayings of my father never failed. I have seen them prove true to the last word while he was living; and how has he fixed my horoscope! ‘FROM MY BIRTH POVERTY!’ Nor is that my only fate. ‘FOR TEN YEARS, IMPRISONMENT’—a fate harder than poverty; and what comes next? ‘DEATH ON THE SEA-SHORE’; which means that I must die away from home, far from friends and relatives on a sea-coast. Now comes the most curious part of the horoscope, that I am to ‘HAVE SOME HAPPINESS AFTERWARDS!’ What this happiness is, is an enigma to me.”

Thus thought he, and after all the funeral obsequies of his father were over, took leave of his elder brother, and started for Benares. He went by the middle of the Deccan, avoiding both the coasts, and went on journeying and journeying for weeks and months, till at last he reached the Vindhya mountains. While passing that desert he had to journey for a couple of days through a sandy plain, with no signs of life or vegetation. The little store of provision with which he was provided for a couple of days, at last was exhausted. The chombu, which he carried always full, filling it with the sweet water from the flowing rivulet or plenteous tank, he had exhausted in the heat of the desert. There was not a morsel in his hand to eat; nor a drop of water to drink. Turn his eyes wherever he might he found a vast desert, out of which he saw no means of escape. Still he thought within

himself, "Surely my father's prophecy never proved untrue. I must survive this calamity to find my death on some sea-coast." So thought he, and this thought gave him strength of mind to walk fast and try to find a drop of water somewhere to slake his dry throat.

At last he succeeded; heaven threw in his way a ruined well. He thought he could collect some water if he let down his chombu with the string that he always carried noosed to the neck of it. Accordingly he let it down; it went some way and stopped, and the following words came from the well: "Oh, relieve me! I am the king of tigers, dying here of hunger. For the last three days I have had nothing. Fortune has sent you here. If you assist me now you will find a sure help in me throughout your life. Do not think that I am a beast of prey. When you have become my deliverer I will never touch you. Pray, kindly lift me up." Gangazara thought: "Shall I take him out or not? If I take him out he may make me the first morsel of his hungry mouth. No; that he will not do. For my father's prophecy never came untrue. I must die on a sea coast, and not by a tiger." Thus thinking, he asked the tiger-king to hold tight to the vessel, which he accordingly did, and he lifted him up slowly. The tiger reached the top of the well and felt himself on safe ground. True to his word, he did no harm to Gangazara. On the other hand, he walked round his patron three times, and standing before him, humbly spoke the following words: "My life-giver, my benefactor! I shall never forget this day, when I regained my life through your kind hands. In return for this kind assistance I pledge my oath to stand by you in all calamities. Whenever you are in any difficulty just think of me. I am there with you ready to oblige you by all the means that I can. To tell you briefly how I came in here: Three days ago I was roaming in yonder forest, when I saw a goldsmith passing through it. I chased him. He, finding it impossible to escape my claws, jumped into this well, and is living to this moment in the very bottom of it. I also jumped in, but found myself on the first ledge of the well; he is on the last and fourth ledge. In the second lives a serpent half-famished with hunger. On the third lies a rat, also half-famished, and when you again begin to draw water these may request you first to release them. In the same way the goldsmith also may ask you. I beg you, as your bosom friend, never assist that wretched man, though he is your relation as a human being. Goldsmiths are never to be trusted. You can place more faith in me, a tiger, though I feast sometimes upon men, in a serpent, whose sting makes your blood cold the very next moment, or in a rat, which does a thousand pieces of mischief in your house. But never trust a goldsmith. Do not release him; and if you do, you shall surely repent of it one day or other." Thus advising, the hungry tiger went away without waiting for an answer.

Gangazara thought several times of the eloquent way in which the tiger spoke, and admired his fluency of speech. But still his thirst was not quenched. So he let down his vessel again, which was now caught hold of by

the serpent, who addressed him thus: "Oh, my protector! Lift me up. I am the king of serpents, and the son of Adishesha, who is now pining away in agony for my disappearance. Release me now. I shall ever remain your servant, remember your assistance, and help you throughout life in all possible ways. Oblige me: I am dying." Gangazara, calling again to mind the "DEATH ON THE SEA-SHORE" of the prophecy lifted him up. He, like the tiger-king, walked round him thrice, and prostrating himself before him spoke thus: "Oh, my life-giver, my father, for so I must call you, as you have given me another birth. I was three days ago basking myself in the morning sun, when I saw a rat running before me. I chased him. He fell into this well. I followed him, but instead of falling on the third storey where he is now lying, I fell into the second. I am going away now to see my father. Whenever you are in any difficulty just think of me. I will be there by your side to assist you by all possible means." So saying, the Nagaraja glided away in zigzag movements, and was out of sight in a moment.

The poor son of the Soothsayer, who was now almost dying of thirst, let down his vessel for a third time. The rat caught hold of it, and without discussing he lifted up the poor animal at once. But it would not go away without showing its gratitude: "Oh, life of my life! My benefactor! I am the king of rats. Whenever you are in any calamity just think of me. I will come to you, and assist you. My keen ears overheard all that the tiger-king told you about the goldsmith, who is in the fourth storey. It is nothing but a sad truth that goldsmiths ought never to be trusted. Therefore, never assist him as you have done to us all. And if you do, you will suffer for it. I am hungry; let me go for the present." Thus taking leave of his benefactor, the rat, too, ran away.

Gangazara for a while thought upon the repeated advice given by the three animals about releasing the goldsmith: "What wrong would there be in my assisting him? Why should I not release him also?" So thinking to himself, Gangazara let down the vessel again. The goldsmith caught hold of it, and demanded help. The Soothsayer's son had no time to lose; he was himself dying of thirst.

Therefore he lifted the goldsmith up, who now began his story. "Stop for a while," said Gangazara, and after quenching his thirst by letting down his vessel for the fifth time, still fearing that some one might remain in the well and demand his assistance, he listened to the goldsmith, who began as follows: "My dear friend, my protector, what a deal of nonsense these brutes have been talking to you about me; I am glad you have not followed their advice. I am just now dying of hunger. Permit me to go away. My name is Manikkasari. I live in the East main street of Ujjaini, which is twenty kas to the south of this place, and so lies on your way when you return from Benares. Do not forget to come to me and receive my kind remembrances of your assistance, on your way back to your country." So saying, the goldsmith took his leave, and Gangazara also pursued his way

north after the above adventures.

He reached Benares, and lived there for more than ten years, and quite forgot the tiger, serpent, rat, and goldsmith. After ten years of religious life, thoughts of home and of his brother rushed into his mind. "I have secured enough merit now by my religious observances. Let me return home." Thus thought Gangazara within himself, and very soon he was on his way back to his country. Remembering the prophecy of his father he returned by the same way by which he went to Benares ten years before. While thus retracing his steps he reached the ruined well where he had released the three brute kings and the gold smith. At once the old recollections rushed into his mind, and he thought of the tiger to test his fidelity. Only a moment passed, and the tiger-king came running before him carrying a large crown in his mouth, the glitter of the diamonds of which for a time outshone even the bright rays of the sun. He dropped the crown at his life-giver's feet, and, putting aside all his pride, humbled himself like a pet cat to the strokes of his protector, and began in the following words: "My life-giver! How is it that you have forgotten me, your poor servant, for such a long time? I am glad to find that I still occupy a corner in your mind. I can never forget the day when I owed my life to your lotus hands. I have several jewels with me of little value. This crown, being the best of all, I have brought here as a single ornament of great value, which you can carry with you and dispose of in your own country."

Gangazara looked at the crown, examined it over and over, counted and recounted the gems, and thought within himself that he would become the richest of men by separating the diamonds and gold, and selling them in his own country. He took leave of the tiger-king, and after his disappearance thought of the kings of serpents and rats, who came in their turn with their presents, and after the usual greetings and exchange of words took their leave. Gangazara was extremely delighted at the faithfulness with which the brute beasts behaved, and went on his way to the south. While going along he spoke to himself thus: "These beasts have been very faithful in their assistance. Much more, therefore, must Manikkasari be faithful. I do not want anything from him now. If I take this crown with me as it is, it occupies much space in my bundle. It may also excite the curiosity of some robbers on the way. I will go now to Ujjaini on my way. Manikkasari requested me to see him without failure on my return journey. I shall do so, and request him to have the crown melted, the diamonds and gold separated. He must do that kindness at least for me. I shall then roll up these diamonds and gold ball in my rags, and wend my way homewards." Thus thinking and thinking, he reached Ujjaini. At once he inquired for the house of his goldsmith friend, and found him without difficulty. Manikkasari was extremely delighted to find on his threshold him who ten years before, notwithstanding the advice repeatedly given him by the sage-looking tiger, serpent, and rat, had relieved him from the pit of death. Gangazara at

once showed him the crown that he received from the tiger-king, told him how he got it, and requested his kind assistance to separate the gold and diamonds. Manikkasari agreed to do so, and meanwhile asked his friend to rest himself for a while to have his bath and meals; and Gangazara, who was very observant of his religious ceremonies, went direct to the river to bathe.

How came the crown in the jaws of the tiger? The king of Ujjaini had a week before gone with all his hunters on a hunting expedition. All of a sudden the tiger-king started from the wood, seized the king, and vanished.

When the king's attendants informed the prince about the death of his father he wept and wailed, and gave notice that he would give half of his kingdom to any one who should bring him news about the murderer of his father. The goldsmith knew full well that it was a tiger that killed the king, and not any hunter's hands, since he had heard from Gangazara how he obtained the crown. Still, he resolved to denounce Gangazara as the king's murderer, so, hiding the crown under his garments, he flew to the palace. He went before the prince and informed him that the assassin was caught, and placed the crown before him.

The prince took it into his hands, examined it, and at once gave half the kingdom to Manikkasari, and then inquired about the murderer. "He is bathing in the river, and is of such and such appearance," was the reply. At once four armed soldiers flew to the river, and bound the poor Brahman hand and foot, while he, sitting in meditation, was without any knowledge of the fate that hung over him. They brought Gangazara to the presence of the prince, who turned his face away from the supposed murderer, and asked his soldiers to throw him into a dungeon. In a minute, without knowing the cause, the poor Brahman found himself in the dark dungeon.

It was a dark cellar underground, built with strong stone walls, into which any criminal guilty of a capital offence was ushered to breathe his last there without food and drink. Such was the cellar into which Gangazara was thrust. What were his thoughts when he reached that place? "It is of no use to accuse either the goldsmith or the prince now. We are all the children of fate. We must obey her commands. This is but the first day of my father's prophecy. So far his statement is true. But how am I going to pass ten years here? Perhaps without anything to sustain life I may drag on my existence for a day or two. But how pass ten years? That cannot be, and I must die. Before death comes let me think of my faithful brute friends."

So pondered Gangazara in the dark cell underground, and at that moment thought of his three friends. The tiger-king, serpent-king, and rat-king assembled at once with their armies at a garden near the dungeon, and

for a while did not know what to do. They held their council, and decided to make an underground passage from the inside of a ruined well to the dungeon. The rat raja issued an order at once to that effect to his army. They, with their teeth, bored the ground a long way to the walls of the prison. After reaching it they found that their teeth could not work on the hard stones. The bandicoots were then specially ordered for the business; they, with their hard teeth, made a small slit in the wall for a rat to pass and re-pass without difficulty. Thus a passage was effected.

The rat raja entered first to condole with his protector on his misfortune, and undertook to supply his protector with provisions. "Whatever sweetmeats or bread are prepared in any house, one and all of you must try to bring whatever you can to our benefactor. Whatever clothes you find hanging in a house, cut down, dip the pieces in water, and bring the wet bits to our benefactor. He will squeeze them and gather water for drink! and the bread and sweetmeats shall form his food." Having issued these orders, the king of the rats took leave of Gangazara. They, in obedience to their king's order, continued to supply him with provisions and water.

The snake-king said: "I sincerely condole with you in your calamity; the tiger-king also fully sympathises with you, and wants me to tell you so, as he cannot drag his huge body here as we have done with our small ones. The king of the rats has promised to do his best to provide you with food. We would now do what we can for your release. From this day we shall issue orders to our armies to oppress all the subjects of this kingdom. The deaths by snake-bite and tigers shall increase a hundredfold from this day, and day by day it shall continue to increase till your release. Whenever you hear people near you, you had better bawl out so as to be heard by them: 'The wretched prince imprisoned me on the false charge of having killed his father, while it was a tiger that killed him. From that day these calamities have broken out in his dominions. If I were released I would save all by my powers of healing poisonous wounds and by incantations.' Some one may report this to the king, and if he knows it, you will obtain your liberty." Thus comforting his protector in trouble, he advised him to pluck up courage, and took leave of him. From that day tigers and serpents, acting under the orders of their kings, united in killing as many persons and cattle as possible. Every day people were carried away by tigers or bitten by serpents. Thus passed months and years. Gangazara sat in the dark cellar, without the sun's light falling upon him, and feasted upon the breadcrumbs and sweetmeats that the rats so kindly supplied him with. These delicacies had completely changed his body into a red, stout, huge, unwieldy mass of flesh. Thus passed full ten years, as prophesied in the horoscope.

Ten complete years rolled away in close imprisonment. On the last evening of the tenth year one of the serpents

got into the bed-chamber of the princess and sucked her life. She breathed her last. She was the only daughter of the king. The king at once sent for all the snake-bite curers. He promised half his kingdom and his daughter's hand to him who would restore her to life. Now a servant of the king who had several times overheard Gangazara's cries, reported the matter to him. The king at once ordered the cell to be examined. There was the man sitting in it. How had he managed to live so long in the cell? Some whispered that he must be a divine being. Thus they discussed, while they brought Gangazara to the king.

The king no sooner saw Gangazara than he fell on the ground. He was struck by the majesty and grandeur of his person. His ten years' imprisonment in the deep cell underground had given a sort of lustre to his body. His hair had first to be cut before his face could be seen. The king begged forgiveness for his former fault, and requested him to revive his daughter.

"Bring me within an hour all the corpses of men and cattle, dying and dead, that remain unburnt or unburied within the range of your dominions; I shall revive them all," were the only words that Gangazara spoke.

Cartloads of corpses of men and cattle began to come in every minute. Even graves, it is said, were broken open, and corpses buried a day or two before were taken out and sent for their revival. As soon as all were ready, Gangazara took a vessel full of water and sprinkled it over them all, thinking only of his snake-king and tiger-king. All rose up as if from deep slumber, and went to their respective homes. The princess, too, was restored to life. The joy of the king knew no bounds. He cursed the day on which he imprisoned him, blamed himself for having believed the word of a goldsmith, and offered him the hand of his daughter and the whole kingdom, instead of half, as he promised. Gangazara would not accept anything, but asked the king to assemble all his subjects in a wood near the town. "I shall there call in all the tigers and serpents, and give them a general order."

When the whole town was assembled, just at the dusk of evening, Gangazara sat dumb for a moment, and thought upon the Tiger King and the Serpent King, who came with all their armies. People began to take to their heels at the sight of tigers. Gangazara assured them of safety, and stopped them.

The grey light of the evening, the pumpkin colour of Gangazara, the holy ashes scattered lavishly over his body, the tigers and snakes humbling themselves at his feet, gave him the true majesty of the god Gangazara. For who else by a single word could thus command vast armies of tigers and serpents, said some among the people. "Care not for it; it may be by magic. That is not a great thing. That he revived cartloads of corpses

shows him to be surely Gangazara,” said others.

“Why should you, my children, thus trouble these poor subjects of Ujjaini? Reply to me, and henceforth desist from your ravages.” Thus said the Soothsayer’s son, and the following reply came from the king of the tigers: “Why should this base king imprison your honour, believing the mere word of a goldsmith that your honour killed his father? All the hunters told him that his father was carried away by a tiger. I was the messenger of death sent to deal the blow on his neck. I did it, and gave the crown to your honour. The prince makes no inquiry, and at once imprisons your honour. How can we expect justice from such a stupid king as that? Unless he adopt a better standard of justice we will go on with our destruction.”

The king heard, cursed the day on which he believed in the word of a goldsmith, beat his head, tore his hair, wept and wailed for his crime, asked a thousand pardons, and swore to rule in a just way from that day. The serpent-king and tiger-king also promised to observe their oath as long as justice prevailed, and took their leave. The gold-smith fled for his life. He was caught by the soldiers of the king, and was pardoned by the generous Gangazara, whose voice now reigned supreme. All returned to their homes. The king again pressed Gangazara to accept the hand of his daughter. He agreed to do so, not then, but some time afterwards. He wished to go and see his elder brother first, and then to return and marry the princess. The king agreed; and Gangazara left the city that very day on his way home.

It so happened that unwittingly he took a wrong road, and had to pass near a sea-coast. His elder brother was also on his way up to Benares by that very same route. They met and recognised each other, even at a distance. They flew into each other’s arms. Both remained still for a time almost unconscious with joy. The pleasure of Gangazara was so great that he died of joy.

The elder brother was a devout worshipper of Ganesa. That was a Friday, a day very sacred to that god. The elder brother took the corpse to the nearest Ganesa temple and called upon him. The god came, and asked him what he wanted. “My poor brother is dead and gone; and this is his corpse. Kindly keep it in your charge till I finish worshipping you. If I leave it anywhere else the devils may snatch it away when I am absent worshipping you; after finishing the rites I shall burn him.” Thus said the elder brother, and, giving the corpse to the god Ganesa, he went to prepare himself for that deity’s ceremonials. Ganesa made over the corpse to his Ganas, asking them to watch over it carefully. But instead of that they devoured it.

The elder brother, after finishing the puja, demanded his brother’s corpse of the god. The god called his Ganas,

who came to the front blinking, and fearing the anger of their master. The god was greatly enraged. The elder brother was very angry. When the corpse was not forthcoming he cuttingly remarked, "Is this, after all, the return for my deep belief in you? You are unable even to return my brother's corpse." Ganesa was much ashamed at the remark. So he, by his divine power, gave him a living Gangazara instead of the dead corpse. Thus was the second son of the Soothsayer restored to life.

The brothers had a long talk about each other's adventures. They both went to Ujjaini, where Gangazara married the princess, and succeeded to the throne of that kingdom. He reigned for a long time, conferring several benefits upon his brother. And so the horoscope was fully fulfilled.

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