

The Thanksgiving of the Wazir

Andrew Lang'S Fairy Books

Indian

*Intermediate
8 min read*

Once upon a time there lived in Hindustan two kings whose countries bordered upon each other; but, as they were rivals in wealth and power, and one was a Hindu rajah and the other a Mohammedan bādshah, they were not good friends at all. In order, however, to escape continual quarrels, the rajah and the bādshah had drawn up an agreement, stamped and signed, declaring that if any of their subjects, from the least to the greatest, crossed the boundary between the two kingdoms, he might be seized and punished.

One morning the bādshah and his chief wazir, or prime minister, were just about to begin, their morning's work over the affairs of the kingdom, and the bādshah had taken up a pen and was cutting it to his liking with a sharp knife, when the knife slipped and cut off the tip of his finger.

'Oh-he, wazir ! ' cried the king, 'I've cut the tip of my finger off !'

'That is good hearing !' said the wazir in answer.

'Insolent one,' exclaimed the king. 'Do you take pleasure in the misfortunes of others, and in mine also ? Take him away, my guards, and put him in the court prison until I have time to punish him as he deserves !'

Instantly the officers in attendance seized upon the luckless wazir, and dragged him out of the king's presence towards the narrow doorway, through which unhappy criminals were wont to be led to prison or execution.

As the door opened to receive him, the wazir muttered something into his great white beard which the soldiers could not hear.

'What said the rascal?' shouted the angry king.

He says, 'he thanks your majesty,' replied one of the gaolers. And at his words, the king stared at the closing door, in anger and amazement.

'He must be mad,' he cried, 'for he is grateful, not only for the misfortunes of others, but for his own; surely something has turned his head!'

Now the king was very fond of his old wazir, and although the court physician came and bound up his injured finger with cool and healing ointment, and soothed the pain, he could not soothe the soreness of the king's heart, nor could any of all his ministers and courtiers, who found his majesty very cross all the day long.

Early next morning the king ordered his horse and declared that he would go hunting. Instantly all was bustle and preparation in stable and hail, and by the time he was ready a score of ministers and huntsmen stood ready to mount and accompany him; but to their astonishment the king would have none of them. Indeed, he glared at them so fiercely that they were glad to leave him. So away and away he wandered, over field and through forest, so moody and thoughtful that many a fat buck and gaudy pheasant escaped without notice, and so careless was he whither he was going that he strayed without perceiving it over into the rajah's territory, and only discovered the fact when, suddenly, men stepped from all sides out of a thicket, and there was nothing left but surrender. Then the poor bādshah was seized and bound and taken to the rajah's prison, thinking most of the time of his wazir, who was suffering a similar fate, and wishing that, like the wazir, he could feel that there was something to give thanks for.

That night the rajah held a special council to consider what should be done to his rival who had thus given himself into his hands. All the Brahmans were sent for — fat priests who understood all about everything, and what days were lucky and what unlucky — and, whilst all the rest of the rajah's councillors were offering him different advice until he was nearly crazy with anger and indecision, the chief Brahman was squatting in a corner figuring out sums and signs to himself with an admiring group of lesser priests around him. At last he

arose, and advanced towards the throne.

‘Well,’ said the rajah anxiously, ‘what have you to advise?’

‘A very unlucky day!’ exclaimed the chief Brahman. ‘Oh, a very unlucky day! The god Devi is full of wrath, and commands that to-morrow you must chop off this bādshah’s head and offer it in to him in sacrifice.’

‘Ah, well,’ said the rajah, ‘let it be done. I leave it to you to carry out the sentence.’ And he bowed to the priests and left the room.

Before dawn great preparations were being made for a grand festival in honour of the great idol Devi. Hundreds of banners waved, hundreds of drummers drummed, hundreds of singers chanted chants, hundreds of priests, well washed and anointed, performed their sacred rites, whilst the rajah sat, nervous and ill at ease, amongst hundreds of courtiers and servants, wishing it were all well over. At last the time came for the sacrifice to be offered, and the poor bādshah was led out bound, to have his head chopped off.

The chief Brahman came along with a smile on his face, and a big sword in his hand, when, suddenly, he noticed that the bādshah’s finger was tied up in a bit of rag. Instantly he dropped the sword, and, with his eyes starting out of his head with excitement, pounced upon the rag and tore it off, and there he saw that the tip of his victim’s finger was missing. At this he got very red and angry indeed, and he led the bādshah up to where the rajah sat wondering.

‘Behold! O rajah,’ he said, ‘this sacrifice is useless, the tip of his finger is gone! A sacrifice is no sacrifice unless it is complete.’ And he began to weep with rage and mortification.

But instead of wailing likewise, the rajah gave a sigh of relief, and answered: ‘Well, that settles the matter. If it had been anyone else I should not have minded; but, somehow — a king and all — well, it doesn’t seem quite right to sacrifice a king.’ And with that he jumped up and with his jewelled dagger cut the bādshah’s cords, and marched with him out of the temple back to the palace.

After having bathed and refreshed his guest, the rajah loaded him with gifts, and himself accompanied him with a large escort as far as the frontier between their kingdoms, where, amidst salutes and great rejoicings, they tore up the old agreement and drew up another in which each king promised welcome and safe conduct to any of the other's people, from the least to the greatest, who came over the border on any errand whatever. And so they embraced, and each went his own way.

When the bādshah got home that very evening he sent for his imprisoned wazir.

'Well, O wazir !' he said, when the old man had been brought before him, 'what think you has been happening to me ?'

'How can a man in prison know what is happening outside it ?' answered the wazir.

Then the bādshah told him all his adventures. And when he had reached the end he added:

'I have made up my mind, as a token of gratitude for my escape, to pardon you freely, if you will tell me why you gave thanks when I cut off the tip of my finger.'

'Sire,' replied the old wazir, 'am I not right in thinking that it was a very lucky thing for you that you did cut off the tip of your finger, for otherwise you would certainly have lost your head. And to lose a scrap of one's finger is surely the least of the two evils.'

'Very true,' answered the king, touching his head as he spoke, as if to make quite certain that it was still there, 'but yet — why did you likewise give thanks when I put you into prison ?'

'I gave thanks,' said the wazir, 'because it is good always to give thanks. And had I known that my being in prison was to prevent the god Devi claiming me instead of your majesty, as a perfect offering, I should have given greater thanks still.'

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