

The Three Calamities

Tales Of The Sun Or Folklore Of Southern India

Indian

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From that time these four young men became the confidential advisers of king Alakesa in all important affairs of state, and, as night is the house of sins, they in turn kept a regular watch in the city of Alakapuri, each patrolling the streets during three hours of the night. Thus they continued to faithfully serve king Alakesa, till one night, the First Minister, when his watch was over, proceeded as usual, to see whether the royal bedchamber was properly guarded; after which he went to the temple of the goddess Kâlî, where he heard what seemed to him the voice of a woman, lamenting and sobbing in great distress. Concealing himself behind the vad-tree of the temple, he called out:—

“Who are you, poor woman? and why do you thus weep?”

At once the cries ceased, and a voice from the temple inquired:—

“Who art thou that thus questionest me?”

Then the minister knew that it was Kâlî herself who wept; so he threw himself on the ground, and, rising up, exclaimed:—

“O, my mother!—Kâlî!—Sambhavi!—Mahamayi! Why should you thus weep?” quoth Kâlî.

“What is the use of my revealing it to thee? Canst thou render any assistance?”

The minister said that, if he had but her favour, there was nothing he could not do. Then the goddess told him that a calamity was about to come upon the king, and fearing that such a good monarch was soon to disappear from the world, she wept.

The thought of such a misfortune caused the minister to tremble; he fell down before the goddess, and with tears streaming from his eyes besought her to save him. Kâlî was much gratified to observe his devotion to his master, and thus addressed him:—

“Know, then, that your king will be in danger of three calamities to-morrow, any one of which will be sufficient to cause his death. First of all, early in the morning, there will come to the palace several carts containing newly-reaped paddy grains. The king will be delighted at this, and immediately order a measure of the paddy to be shelled and cooked for his morning meal. Now, the field in which that paddy grew is the abode of serpents, two of which were fighting together one day, when they emitted poison, which has permeated those grains. Therefore, the morning meal of your king will contain poison, but only in the first handful will it take effect and he will die. Should he escape, another calamity is in store for him at noon. The king of Vijayanagara will send to-morrow some baskets of sweetmeats; in the first basket he has concealed arrows. King Alakesa, suspecting no treachery, will order the first basket to be opened in his presence, and will meet his death by that device. And even should he escape this second calamity, a third will put an end to his life to-morrow night. A deadly serpent will descend into his bed room, by means of the chain of his hanging bed, and bite him. But, should he be saved from this last misfortune, Alakesa will live long and prosperously, till he attains the age of a hundred and twenty years.”

Thus spake Kâlî, in tones of sorrow, for she feared that the king would lose his life by one of these three calamities. The Minister prostrated himself on the ground, and said that if the goddess would grant him her favour he was confident he could contrive to avert all the threatened evils from the king. Kâlî smiled and disappeared; and the Minister, taking her kind smile as a token of her favour, returned home and slept soundly.

As soon as morning dawned, the First Minister arose, and having made the customary ablutions, proceeded to the palace. He took care to reveal to no one the important secret communicated to him by the goddess—not

even to his three colleagues. The sun was not yet two ghaṅikâs (an Indian hour = 24 min.) above the horizon when several carts containing the finest paddy grains, specially selected for the king's use, came into the courtyard of the palace. Alakesa was present, and ordered a measure of it to be at once shelled and cooked. The coming in of the carts and the king's order so exactly coincided with Kâlî's words that the Minister began to fear that he was quite unequal to the task of averting the fatality; yet the recollection of the smile of the goddess inspired him with fresh resolution, and he at once went to the palace-kitchen and requested the servants to inform him when the king was about to go to dinner. After issuing orders for the storing of the grain, king Alakesa retired to perform his morning ablutions and other religious duties.

Meanwhile a carriage containing the jars of sweetmeats sent by the king of Vijayanagara drove up to the palace, and the emissary who accompanied the present, told the royal servants that his master had commanded him to deliver it to king Alakesa in person. The First Minister well understood the meaning of this, and, promising to bring the king, went into the palace, caused one of the servants to be dressed like Alakesa, and conducted him to the carriage. The officer of the Vijayanagara king placed the first jar before the supposed Alakesa, who at once opened it, when lo! there darted forth several arrows, one of which pierced his heart, and he fell dead on the spot. In an instant the emissary was seized and bound, and the officers began to lament the death of their good king. But the fatal occurrence spread rapidly through the palace, and soon the real Alakesa made his appearance on the scene. The officers now beheld one Alakesa dead and fallen to the ground, pierced by the arrow, and another standing there alive and well. The First Minister then related how, suspecting treachery, he brought out a servant of the palace dressed like the king, and how he had been slain in place of his royal master. Alakesa thanked the Minister for having so ingeniously saved his life, and went into the palace. Thus was one of the three calamities to the king averted by the faithful Bodhaditya.

When it was the hour for dinner, the king and his courtiers all sat down, with the exception of the First Minister, who remained standing, without having taken a leaf for his own use. The king, observing this, with a smile pointed out a leaf to him, but Bodhaditya would not sit; he wished to be near the king and to abstain from eating on that occasion. So the king allowed him to have his own way. The food having been served on the leaves, the hands of all, including the king, were mingling the rice, ghî, and dhâl for the first course. Near the king stood his faithful Minister Bodhaditya, and, when the king raised the first handful to his mouth, "Stop, my master," cried he, "I have long hoped for this handful as a present to me from your royal hands. I pray you

give it to me, and feast upon the rest of the rice on your leaf.”

This was uttered more in a tone of command than of request, and the king was highly incensed at what he naturally considered as insolence on the part of the Minister. For such a request, especially when made to a king, is deemed nothing less than an insult, while to refuse it is equally offensive. So, whatever thoughts may have passed through Alakesa's mind, recollecting how the Minister had that morning saved his life, he gave him the handful of rice, which Bodhaditya received with delight, feeling grateful for the favour of the goddess in being the means of averting this second calamity.

Far different, however, were the sentiments of the king and the assembled company. One and all declared Bodhaditya to be an insolent, proud fellow; but the king, while secretly blaming himself for having allowed him to use so much familiarity, suppressed his anger, in consideration of the important service the Minister had rendered him.

On the approach of night the heart of the First Minister throbbed violently, for the third calamity predicted by the goddess was yet to be encountered. His watch being ended, before retiring to rest, he went to examine the royal bedroom, where he saw the light burning brightly, and the king and queen asleep side by side in the ornamented swing cot, which was suspended from the roof by four chains. Presently, he perceived, with horror, a fierce black snake, the smell of which is enough to kill a man, slowly gliding down the chain near the head of the queen. The Minister noiselessly went forward, and with a single stroke of his sharp sword, cut the venomous brute in two. Bodhaditya, to avoid disturbing any person at such an hour of the night, threw the pieces over the canopy of the bed, rejoicing at having thus averted the third and last calamity. But a fresh horror then met his eyes; a drop of the snake's poison had fallen on the bosom of the queen, which was exposed in the carelessness of slumber.

“Alas, sacred goddess,” he muttered, “why do you thus raise up new obstacles in my efforts to avert the evil which you predicted? I have done what I could to save the king, and in this last attempt I have killed his beloved queen. What shall I do?”

Having thus briefly reflected, he wiped off the poison from the queen's bosom with the tip of his little finger, and, lest the contact of the venom with his finger should endanger his own life, he cut the tip of it off and threw it on the canopy. Just then the queen awoke, and perceiving a man hastily leaving the room, she cried: “Who

are you?"

The Minister respectfully answered: "Most venerable mother! I am your son, Bodhaditya," and at once retired.

Upon this the queen thought within herself: "Alas! is there such a thing as a good man in the world? Hitherto I have regarded this Bodhaditya as my son; but now he has basely taken the opportunity of thus disgracing me when my lord and I were sound asleep. I shall inform the king of this, and have that wretch's head struck off before the morning."

Accordingly she gently awakened the king, and with tears trickling down her beauteous face, she told him what had occurred, and concluded with these words:—"Till now, my lord, I considered that I was wife to you alone; but this night your First Minister has made me doubt it, since to my question, 'Who are you?' he answered, without any shame, 'I am Bodhaditya,' and went away."

On hearing of this violation of the sanctity of his bedchamber, Alakesa was greatly enraged, and determined to put to death such an unprincipled servant, but first to communicate the affair to his three other Ministers.

Second Part

When the Second Minister's watch was over, he went to inspect the guard at the royal bedchamber, and Alakesa hearing his footsteps inquired who was there.

"Your servant, Bodhachandra, most royal lord," was the reply.

"Enter, Bodhachandra," said the king; "I have somewhat to communicate to you."

Then Alakesa, almost choking with rage, told him of the gross offence of which his colleague the First Minister had been guilty, and demanded to know whether any punishment could be too severe. Bodhachandra humbled himself before the king, and thus replied—

"My lord, such a crime merits a heavy requital. Can one tie up fire in one's cloth and think that as it is but a small spark it will do us no harm? How, then, can we excuse even slight deviations from the rules of propriety? Therefore, if Bodhaditya be really guilty, he must be signally punished. But permit me to represent to your Majesty the advisability of carefully inquiring into this matter before proceeding to judgment. We ought to

ascertain what reasons he had for such a breach of the harem rules; for should we, carried away by anger, act rashly in this affair, we may repent when repentance is of no avail. As an example, I shall, with your Majesty's permission relate a story." The king having at once given his consent, the Second Minister began to relate the Story of the Honest but Rash Hunter and His Faithful Dog.

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