



The Wise Jackal

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Indian

Intermediate

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Once there were two princesses whose father, the Rajah, was too busy with affairs of state to look after them. They were lonely and neglected, for they had a stepmother who treated them very cruelly. They lived in a beautiful palace, but nothing was done to make them happy or contented, for even the servants were afraid of the Rajah's second wife.

"I am going to run away," said the elder princess to her sister. "Will you go with me, Dehra!"

"Where can we go?" replied Dehra.

"There are a great many places where we can go," said Nala, "but first we will go into the jungle. We will make a little house of tree branches and have beds of grass and flowers and there will be plenty of fruit to eat."

"I will put on my blue silk saree," said Dehra, "and my pearl necklace, and you must wear your yellow silk and your rubies, and then if we meet any one they will know we are princesses."

"If we wear our jewels people may steal us," replied Nala. "We would better tie them in a corner of our sarees. We will wear our bangles, though, for all girls wear them."

The sarees that the princesses wore were long lengths of silk which they wound about their waists and then brought over their heads. They were not at all like the dresses American girls wear, but they were of beautiful material and Nala and Dehra looked very fine in them.

So the little princesses went a long way into the jungle, where they found all the fruit they wished to eat, and were happier than they had been for a long time, watching the green parrots flash in and out between the trees and the monkeys chattering as they swung from bough to bough.

After a while they came to a beautiful white marble palace with a great gateway standing wide open, and over it was written in golden letters:

“Enter, Nala, do not fear;
Silver and gold await you here.”

But the words changed as soon as they had read them into these:

“Follow her, Dehra; you shall see
How kind and cruel Fate can be.”

The sisters looked at each other, and then Dehra said, “I do not think mine is as nice a verse as yours, Nala. It makes me feel shivery.”

“It frightens me a little, too,” replied Nala. “I wonder if this palace belongs to a Rakshas.”

Now a Rakshas is a kind of ogre, and no one but a Rakshas would have built such a beautiful palace in the middle of a jungle.

“If it does, he may come back at any time and eat us up,” said Dehra, more alarmed than ever. “Let us go away.”

“The Rakshas has gone away,” said a little jackal with a friendly face, who came running up to the princesses, “and you can stay in his palace for quite a while. I will let you know when he is coming back.”

So the princesses went through the great gateway and across the courtyard into the palace, where they found gold and jewels and lovely silk dresses, and a beautiful marble tank filled with the clearest of water, where they could bathe every day.

Red lotus leaves floated on the water, and the sisters twined some of them in their hair, for the red lotus is a royal flower and princesses may wear them.

“If any stranger comes here,” said Nala, “and asks for food or a drink of water, when you are alone in the house, be sure to smear your face with charcoal and put on some ragged clothes to make yourself look ugly before you let them in.”

“Why must I do this?” asked Dehra.

“Because if they see how pretty you are they will take you away and we shall not see each other any more.”

“You must do the same then,” said Dehra, “for you are prettier than I,” and then the princesses looked over the edge of the tank at their reflections in the water. Both were lovely, but Nala was a little taller than her sister and a little more graceful. Both had beautiful complexions, with teeth like pearls and eyes that shone like stars.

One day while Dehra was in the jungle talking to their friend the jackal, a prince who had been out hunting came to the palace and asked for water, as he and his attendants were very hot and thirsty. But before Nala went to see what they wanted she covered her silk dress with a ragged one and made her face dirty with charcoal.

When the Prince’s attendants saw a dirty-faced, ragged girl admit them to such a beautiful palace, they laughed outright, but the Prince said to himself, “If her face and hands were clean and her clothes mended, she would be a very pretty girl.”

Neither Nala nor the Prince could understand each other, but at last she made out that he was thirsty, so she hastened to bring him a pitcher of water. But instead of drinking the water, the Prince threw a part of it over Nala’s head and face!

Very much surprised, Nala cried out, “Oh, oh!” and started back, but the charcoal was washed from her face, and there she stood, the loveliest maiden the Prince had ever seen, even in her ragged dress, and he fell in love with her at once.

He unfastened the ragged dress and it fell off, leaving her prettier than ever in her yellow saree and a string of great rubies around her neck.

“My father is a Rajah,” said the Prince, “and I am going to take you to his palace, and you shall be my wife.”

Then a beautiful palanquin was brought and Nala was carefully placed in it and carried away from the Rakshas' palace. On they went through the jungle, and the frightened Princess could only pull aside the curtains and look out upon the Prince riding ahead on his white horse, while the monkeys swung from the boughs and the parrots darted in and out among the branches as they had done on the day when she and her sister had run away from their cruel stepmother.

She was very unhappy and sobbed out, “Oh, Dehra, Dehra! I want you, and what will you do without me?”

And then Nala began to think how she should let her sister know the way the Prince had taken her, so she tore a little piece off her saree and wrapped one of her rubies in it and dropped it on the ground.

She kept on doing this every little while until only one ruby was left, but they had now come to the palace of the Rajah and Ranee, the Prince's father and mother.

“Follow her, Dehra,” she remembered the golden letters had said, and so Nala dropped the last of her rubies just outside the palace, saying to herself, “If Dehra does follow me, the rubies will lead her to me.”

The Prince's father and mother welcomed the beautiful Princess very gladly. The Rajah gave her a new ruby necklace and the Ranee was delighted at the prospect of such a beautiful daughter-in-law. In a week they were married and every one was very kind to Nala.

But poor Dehra sat in the Rakshas' palace crying as if her heart would break. “Nala, Nala! where are you?” she cried over and over again, but no one answered her.

Then she went out of the palace, past the tank where the red lotus flowers lay on the clear water, saying to herself, “Some one has stolen her.”

Then she looked at the golden letters over the gate.

“Follow her, Dehra; you shall see

How kind and cruel Fate can be.”

“Half of it is surely true,” she said aloud, and suddenly, from behind her, the jackal asked, “Which half is true?”

“Fate has not been kind yet, so it must be the last part,” sobbed Dehra.

“I think that is very ungrateful of you,” said the jackal. “Here you have been living comfortably in a beautiful palace for some time. I am not sure that it is nice of you to complain that you have had no luck at all.”

Dehra began to cry.

“But that is not what I came to tell you,” the jackal added. “The Rakshas is on his way home and you will have to go away.”

He was a very wise jackal, so he went on. “It is sure to come out all right, and I will help you to find your sister.”

So they went, right away, into the jungle, and pretty soon the jackal’s sharp eyes saw the first ruby, wrapped in its yellow silk, lying on the grass. And soon after that they found another, and then another, and by and by they came out of the jungle.

“I shall have to leave you here,” said the jackal. “There are towns out here in the open country, and where there are towns there are men, and men do not like jackals.”

“But what shall I do?” asked Dehra.

“I will help you to make yourself look like an old woman,” replied the jackal. “You will have to do something of the kind or some one will carry you off and you will never find your sister.”

Then the jackal showed Dehra a plant which she rubbed on her face and made it an ugly brown, and then he showed her how to make her face look wrinkled. Then he went to a little house not far away and stole a coarse red saree which an old woman had hung on a bush to dry after washing it.

“Where did you get this?” asked Dehra, as the jackal brought it to her in his mouth; and the jackal told her it was growing on a bush. So Dehra put it on and went slowly along the road like an old woman.

Every little while she found one of Nala’s rubies, and then they would be a long way apart, but at last she came to the city where Nala was, and found the last ruby by the gate of the Rajah’s palace. Then she sat down not very far away and wondered how she could get inside the palace.

As night came on, the wife of a laboring man took pity on the poor old woman, as she supposed Dehra to be,

and let her sleep in a hut in her garden. Now this garden was very near the palace grounds, in which was a marble bathing-tank covered with red lotus flowers.

When Dehra saw this beautiful place, she said to herself, "I will bathe there every morning. I will go very early, so as not to be seen."

So Dehra left her hut very early and bathed in the beautiful tank, and all the brown stain and all the wrinkles came off her face. She washed the old saree and hung it on a tree, and then put on her own blue silk saree and her necklace of pearls. Then she sat on the steps of the tank and twined some of the red lotus flowers in her hair.

"It makes me feel like myself again," she thought, as she looked down at her reflection in the water. But the royal lotus flowers made her think of Nala, and she longed more than ever to see her.

After Dehra had bathed in the palace gardens for several mornings, his servants told the Rajah that some of his beautiful lotus flowers disappeared each day before sunrise. This made the Rajah very angry and he said he would offer a reward for the capture of this thief.

Then the Rajah's second son, who was a very handsome young prince, said to his father, "You need not do that. I will capture the thief without any reward."

"He will do it easily," said the Ranees, who was very proud of her son.

So that night the Prince walked about the palace garden for a long time, but at last he was so sleepy that he lay down near the bathing-place and did not awake until the sun was just rising.

Leaning against the steps of the marble tank was a lovely girl dressed in blue silk with a chain of pearls around her neck and red lotus flowers in her hair.

The Prince jumped up quickly, exclaiming, "You cannot be the thief!"

"I did not mean to be a thief," faltered Dehra.

"They are my father's flowers and you can have more of them if you wish," said the Prince without taking his eyes off her lovely face.

“Oh, no!” said Dehra, running to get the old red cotton saree. “Please do not tell any one you have seen me.”

“You must have come from Nala’s country,” replied the Prince, “for you talk as she does.”

The old woman’s dress dropped from Dehra’s hands.

“Is Nala here, and do you talk to her?” she asked. It had been so long since she had heard her sister’s name spoken that it seemed like listening to sweet music.

“Indeed, Nala is here,” said the Prince. “She is my brother’s wife and we all love her. She is so beautiful that she is called the ‘Star of the Palace,’ but you are prettier than she is.”

At these words all Dehra’s fear left her, and when the Prince said, “Let us go and find Nala,” she let him take her hand and lead her into the palace, where every one said, “She is exactly like our young Rajah’s wife!”

Then the Prince led Dehra into the presence of the Rajah and Ranee, and there she told them that she was Nala’s sister and how she had come a long, weary way in search of her. Then the Prince asked permission to marry Dehra, and his father and mother were so pleased with the beautiful girl that they said he might do so as soon as he liked.

Then Dehra was taken to a beautiful room, hung with silk curtains and lighted by jewelled lamps. Nala was dressed in the richest silks and jewels, as the wife of a young Rajah should be, but there was a look of sadness on her beautiful face, for she was thinking of the sister from whom she had been separated so long.

“Oh, Dehra!” she said, as she looked up and saw her sister standing before her. “Oh, Dehra! Fate has been kind at last.” And then the sisters kissed each other again and again, and when Nala heard that Dehra was to marry her husband’s brother and all live together in the palace, she could hardly believe that it was true.

Then Dehra said, “The jackal told me that everything would come out right in the end, and so it has.”

“He is a nice jackal,” replied Nala. “The golden letters over the gateway to the Rakshas’ palace ought to be changed to:

‘Seek long, seek far, and you shall find

To patient seekers Fate is kind’

and if he were here I would ask him to have it done.”

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