



The Traveller's Adventure

Folk-Lore And Legends: Oriental

Arabic

Intermediate
8 min read

It is related that a man, mounted upon a camel, in the course of travelling arrived at a place where others from the same caravan had lighted a fire before proceeding on their journey. The fan-like wind, breathing on the embers, had produced a flame; and the sparks, flying over the jungle, the dry wood had become ignited, and the whole plain glowed like a bed of tulips.

In the midst of this was an enormous snake, which, encircled by the flames, possessed no means of escape, and was about to be broiled like a fish, or kabobed like a partridge for the table. Blood oozed from its poison-charged eyes; and, seeing the man and the camel, it thus supplicated for assistance—

“What if in kindness thou vouchsafe me thy pity; Loosen the knot with which my affairs are entangled.”

Now the traveller was a good man, and one who feared God. When he heard the complaint of the snake, and saw its pitiable condition, he reasoned thus with himself: “This snake is, indeed, the enemy of man, but being in trouble and perplexity, it would be most commendable in me to drop the seed of compassion, the fruit of which is prosperity in this world, and exaltation in the next.” Thus convinced, he fastened one of his saddle-bags to the end of his spear, and extended it to the snake, which, delighted at escape, entered the bag, and was rescued from the flames. The man then opening the mouth of the bag, addressed it thus: “Depart whither thou wilt, but forget not to offer up thanksgiving for thy preservation; henceforth seek the corner of retirement, and cease to afflict mankind, for they who do so are dishonest in this world and the next—

Fear God—distress no one; This indeed is true salvation.”

The snake replied, “O young man, hold thy peace, for truly I will not depart until I have wounded both thee and this camel.”

The man cried out, “But how is this? Have I not rendered thee a benefit? Why, then, is such to be my recompense? On my part there was faithfulness, Why then this injustice upon thine?”

The snake said, “True, thou hast shown mercy, but it was to an unworthy object; thou knowest me to be an agent of injury to mankind, consequently, when thou savedst me from destruction, thou subjectedst thyself to the same rule that applies to the punishment due for an evil act committed against a worthy object.

“Again, between the snake and man there is a long-standing enmity, and they who employ foresight hold it as a maxim of wisdom to bruise the head of an enemy; to thy security my destruction was necessary, but, in showing mercy, thou hast forfeited vigilance. It is now necessary that I should wound thee, that others may learn by thy example.”

The man cried, “O snake, call but in the counsel of justice; in what creed is it written, or what practice declares, that evil should be returned for good, or that the pleasure of conferring benefits should be returned by injury and affliction?”

The snake replied, “Such is the practice amongst men. I act according to thy own decree; the same commodity of retribution I have purchased from thee I also sell. Buy for one moment that which thou sell'st for years.”

In vain did the traveller entreat, the snake ever replying, “I do but treat thee after the manner of men.” This the man denied.

“But,” said he, “let us call witnesses: if thou prove thy assertion, I will yield to thy will.” The snake, looking round, saw a cow grazing at a distance, and said, “Come, we will ask this cow the rights of the question.” When they came up to the cow, the snake, opening its mouth, said, “O cow, what is the recompense for benefits received?”

The cow said, “If thou ask me after the manner of men, the return of good is always evil. For instance, I was for

a long time in the service of a farmer; yearly I brought forth a calf; I supplied his house with milk and ghee; his sustenance, and the life of his children, depended upon me. When I became old, and no longer produced young, he ceased to shelter me, and thrust me forth to die in a jungle. After finding forage, and roaming at my ease, I grew fat, and my old master, seeing my plump condition, yesterday brought with him a butcher, to whom he has sold me, and to-day is appointed for my slaughter.”

The snake said, “Thou hast heard the cow; prepare to die quickly.” The man cried, “It is not lawful to decide a case on the evidence of one witness, let us then call another.” The snake looked about and saw a tree, leafless and bare, flinging up its wild branches to the sky. “Let us,” said it, “appeal to this tree.” They proceeded together to the tree; and the snake, opening its mouth, said, “O tree, what is the recompense for good?”

The tree said, “Amongst men, for benefits are returned evil and injury. I will give you a proof of what I assert. I am a tree which, though growing on one leg in this sad waste, was once flourishing and green, performing service to every one. When any of the human race, overcome with heat and travel, came this way, they rested beneath my shade, and slept beneath my branches; when the weight of repose abandoned their eyelids, they cast up their eyes to me, and said to each other, ‘Yon twig would do well for an arrow; that branch would serve for a plough; and from the trunk of this tree what beautiful planks might be made!’ If they had an axe or a saw, they selected my branches, and carried them away. Thus they to whom I gave ease and rest rewarded me only with pain and affliction.

Whilst my care overshadows him in perplexity, He meditates only how best to root me up.”

“Well,” said the snake, “here are two witnesses; therefore, form thy resolution, for I must wound thee.”

The man said, “True; but the love of life is powerful, and while strength remains, it is difficult to root the love of it from the heart. Call but one more witness, and then I pledge myself to submit to his decree.” Now it so wonderfully happened that a fox, who had been standing by, had heard all the argument, and now came forward.

The snake on seeing it exclaimed, “Behold this fox, let us ask it.”

But before the man could speak the fox cried out, “Dost thou not know that the recompense for good is always evil? But what good hast thou done in behalf of this snake, to render thee worthy of punishment?” The man

related his story.

The fox replied, "Thou seemest an intelligent person, why then dost thou tell me an untruth? How can it be proper for him that is wise to speak falsely? How can it become an intelligent man to state an untruth?"

The snake said, "The man speaks truly, for behold the bag in which he rescued me."

The fox, putting on the garb of astonishment, said, "How can I believe this thing? How could a large snake such as thou be contained in so small a space?" The snake said, "If thou doubt me, I will again enter the bag to prove it." The fox said, "Truly if I saw thee there, I could believe it, and afterwards settle the dispute between thee and this man."

On this the traveller opened the bag, and the snake, annoyed at the disbelief of the fox, entered it; which observing, the fox cried out, "O young man, when thou hast caught thine enemy, show him no quarter. When an enemy is vanquished, and in thy power, It is the maxim of the wise to show him no mercy."

The traveller took the hint of the fox, fastened the mouth of the bag, and, dashing it against a stone, destroyed the snake, and thus saved mankind from the evil effects of its wicked propensities.

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