

Kashmiri Folktales

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1 Introduction

Nine hundred years ago a remarkable collection of stories called *Kathasaritsagara*, the "Ocean of Stories", was produced in Kashmir. Somadeva, its author, is said to have included in this tome many stories which he had heard from others and which, in fact, had their origin in folk-literature. The *Kathasaritsagara*, which may justly be called a treasure of folk tales, has had considerable influence on countries which were in close touch with India during the Middle Ages.

The first collection of Kashmiri folk tales in English was brought out by the late Rev. John Hinton Knowles towards the end of the last century. Sometime later, a renowned scholar, the late Sir Auriel Stein, published another collection of this kind. *Hatim's Tales*, as this latter is called, is a collection of tales in verse and prose recited in Kashmiri for the savant by one Hatim who was an oilman by profession. These two works can by no means be said to exhaust the harvest of tales garnered in the fertile minds of the people. The present editor has endeavoured to collect some of the more interesting tales current in the valley of Kashmir which, but for two exceptions, have not appeared earlier.

Tales, myths, sagas and other narratives comprise perhaps the most interesting part of the literature named "Folklore", a term coined in 1846 by W.J. Thoms to designate the traditional learning of the uncultured classes of civilized nations. This is not the place to go into minute details on the subject. Suffice it to say that folk tales comprise a respectable volume of literature in all languages which is being explored with increasing interest everywhere. The earliest tales of this kind are traced to about 2800 B.C. in Egypt.

There is an unmistakable similarity in many folk tales of countries as far apart as Kashmir and France or China and Sweden. The obvious conclusion is that they have all been influenced by a common stock of tales which appear as variants in different languages. Apart from this there is the same affinity between the folk tales of different countries as in their fables, legends, myths, apologues, etc. There is, therefore, nothing to be surprised at if some of the folk tales of Kashmir have close parallels in other countries.

Several tales in this section are based on incidents centering on real persons. By and large, however, the tales portray a large variety of men and women, both individuals and types, and project peoples' beliefs, customs, ideals, preferences and prejudices in all their rich variety as few other literary forms can do. As a matter of fact they impart meaning and substance to culture as it is crystallized in our day-to-day living. In this sense they are allied to myths. "Myths," according to the *Encyclopaedia of Religion. and Ethics*, "are not created out of nothing It [a myth] is always the covering, the shell, to a kernel of truth contained inside Folk tales are the myths of the race." Many tales in this volume could without doubt be called the myths of the race living in this land.

References

Reference Number	Reference Name
1.	Folk Tales from Kashmir by S. L. Sadhu
2.	An Introduction to Spoken Kashmiri by Braj B. Kachru
3.	Koshur Samachar

2 Mahadev bishta

A Clever Thief

Braj B. Kachru



Mahadev bishta: A Clever Thief

Kashmiri mothers often tell their children the stories of Mahadev at bedtime. It is said that during the reign of Maharaja Partap Singh, Mahadev was considered the leader of thieves in Kashmir. He was never caught in the act of stealing. Mahadev had perplexed both the police and the government. Whenever Mahadev went out to steal, he would do so like a cat, without making a sound. They say that is why he was called Mahadev bishta. Kashmiri children refer to a cat as bishti. Mahadev would even mew to make people think that it was a cat. They would shout "bishti, bishti" - a sound made to scare away cats - while Mahadev took off with the loot.

It is indeed a fact that Mahadev was a well-known thief. It is also true that he would rob people of their property and wealth. But, in spite of that, people used to sing his praises. The people loved Mahadev because he would steal from the wealthy to provide for the needy.

There is a particularly well-known story about Mahadev. One day the thieves decided that even though Mahadev was, without a doubt, their leader, he would still have to undergo a test. In a meeting, they also agreed upon the way he would be tested. We shall now tell you the story of this test.

One day Mahadev was invited to a gathering of all the thieves. One thief stood up and addressed Mahadev thus: "Hey, Mahdevju:, we all consider you to be our leader. We are all in awe of you. But, in order to prove your superiority, we would like you to take a test. If you agree, it will enhance your reputation and our trust in you will increase." Mahadev became very serious and replied: "Yes, of course, I am ready for a test." As soon as the thieves heard this reply, they blushed. One thief slowly stood up and said: "All right, Mahdevju:, we want you to make our Maharaja take off his trousers. These trousers should then be presented to this gathering. The Maharaja should know nothing about it " Mahadev smiled and said: "All right, if that is what you want, so be it. It is not a difficult task." On hearing this the thieves were delighted and the conference of thieves came to an end.

After this it took Mahadev four or five days to think. He went to Shergadi to observe several things. First, he found out the location of the Maharaja's bedroom, and the location of the palace guards. He also found a way to reach the Maharaja's bedroom without causing suspicion. After observing all these things, he started his preparations.

First, Mahadev went out and filled a piece of reed with vicious red ants. Then he came home and had his body massaged with oil. He then put on a *lango:t* (loincloth) and looked at himself in the mirror. He was very pleased with himself. And with a mischievous smile, he left for Shergadi. It was midnight and pitch dark when he arrived. Mahadev swam across the kitikol. Then, after reaching the royal palace, he entered the bathroom of the Maharaja through a pipe. From there, like a cat, he entered the bedroom of the Maharaja.

Mahdev saw that the Maharaja was sound asleep. He slowly took out the reed and dropped the ants near the Maharaja's feet. These vicious ants spread all over the Maharaja's legs. They made him miserable with their bites. The Maharaja started scratching his legs with both of his hands. He was so uncomfortable that, in his sleep, he took off his trousers and threw them aside. Mahadev was delighted. He quietly picked up the trousers, and, again like a cat, walked out through the pipe through which he had entered.

The next day Mahadev went to the gathering of the thieves with the Maharaja's trousers. When Mahadev arrived, the thieves were impatient to know if he had been successful in obtaining the trousers. Mahadev haltingly opened a bundle, took out the trousers, and placed them on a *co:ki:* with a smile. On seeing this, all the thieves stood up clapping their hands and singing the praises of Mahadev bishta. Mahadev was deeply pleased. The thieves again accepted him as their clever leader. There are many other stories about Mahadev bishta which entertain the Kashmiri children.

Source:

An Introduction to Spoken Kashmiri

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3 The Tale of Bib Garazmaej

K. N. Kaul

Folk-tales encapsulate our unrecorded past and listening to them enables us to go on sort of a voyage of self discovery. These tales connect the past with the present, showing us glimpses of our forefathers, their passions and prejudices, joys and heartaches, their sufferings and sorrows. Being their latest editions, we, of the present generation are keen and equally curious to meet them and listen to them. Brushing off these tales as cheap and puerile stuff will deprive us and our coming generations of a rich source material of our social history and cut us as under from our cultural mores and traditions.

The characters in these tales are thumb-nail sketches, hurriedly drawn, as it were, but their outlines are recognisable. The situations are down-to-earth though somewhat constricted in scope and development. Having travelled over the centuries from the mouth to the ear and again from the ear to the mouth, the stories have, surprisingly, retained their charm even to this day. Some sparkle with wit and humour while others end up as tragedies, mostly comedies, all evocative of our own times, now long past.

Repository of Ethos

Folklore, legends, ballads, fables, mythological stories and even proverbs are repositories of ethos of a particular ethnic group, shaped by its cultural uniqueness, regional geographic limitations and political vicissitudes over the times, but the themes and messages are universal. We may, if we like, sift the realities from the supernatural elements or intervention of divine personages and fairies and elves which have found their way in these tales, but these do not in any way garble the basic essentials of the cultural mores of the specific group. After reading these tales, a picture emerges, crisp and clear, of the tapestry of life of those ages. Lest we lose touch with our own cultural heritage, currently known as 'Kashmiriat' whatever that stands for, an attempt is made to retell these tales, retaining their original form.

The tale of Bib Garazmaej

To begin with, the tale of Bib Garazmaj that follows will surely be told on the occasion of the annual 'Pann' in Kashmiri Hindu households, which falls in the lunar fortnight of Bhadoon (August/September), by the matriarch of the family, to those present at the Pooja. The tale is an emphatic assertion of the intervention of divine mercy in the reversal of misfortunes of those who have faith and submit but inflicts terrible retribution to those who are haughty, arrogant or non-believers. The characters in this tale, mother and daughter, specimen of simple rural folk, wallowing in extreme poverty and misery on the one hand, and on the other a king, haughty and credulous, are painted in simple black and white with no sophistication. Fortune takes twists and turns with sudden jerks and everything turns green after a long drought.

Long, long ago, in a certain village, situated at the foot of hillock on the outskirts of the city of Srinagar, Kashmir, there lived a woman with her unmarried daughter. There in the village no one was poorer than his neighbours and as the saying goes, each family had a bit of land and livestock - under their nails and in their hair. But this woman (no name has been assigned either to the woman or to her daughter in the tale) was so poor that life for her had become a purposeless endurance and an agony that showed in distorted mouths and famished eyes of both, mother and daughter. In fair weather, they would collect firewood from the nearby jungle and by selling the same keep off the wolf from the door which had broken down long ago.

It was the month of Bhadoon. On a Sunday falling on Vinayak Chaturthi, while in the jungle collecting wood, they saw some smoke curling up at some distance. Curious, they approached the place and there found a small group of men, women and children baking/frying 'Roths' (sweet cakes). Both, mother and daughter sat at a distance and observed with interest prayers being offered to goddess Bib Garazmaej by

the group. They were surprised when some cakes were offered to them also by way of 'Prashad'. On enquiry, they were told that whosoever celebrated 'Pann' on Vinayak Chaturthi, the fourth day of lunar fortnight of Bhadoon with devotion, goddess Bib Garazmaej blessed him or her and rid her devotees of all troubles and misfortunes.

Mother and daughter on reaching home were lost in thought. Both were united against their common enemy - hunger and poverty and both had found the magic wand to overcome it. But the lack of means to celebrate the function brought to their hearts feelings of shame, impotence and despondency which belong to the persecuted and dispossessed. Dogged persistence and perseverance sometimes are born of these emotions. Not wanting to let go the auspicious day, they went to the royal stables the same day and after collecting some horsedung, washed it and sieved it. Thus they were able to collect just a handful of grains of wheat. Lambent pleasure at this find goaded them on and presently they were able to bake a small 'roth' which is called 'Kanknivor' and other cakes they made of cowdung. Surrendering their will entirely to the divine power, they covered the cakes with a piece of cloth and bowed their heads to Bib Garazmaej, the divine motha offering grass for flowers. Lo and behold! When they uncovered the cakes, they had all turned into gold.

Mother and daughter now turned the corner and the tide in their fortunes led them on to the golden gates of the palace of the king of Kashmir (again, no name has been assigned to him in the story), who, bewitched by the beauty of the girl offered himself as a suitor. The mother was too happy to refuse the proposal and the marriage was celebrated with royal pomp and show.

On the next Vinayak Chaturthi, the lady, now that she was the chief queen, sought permission to celebrate 'pann' from the king, who promptly granted the request. After the Pooja, prashad was sent to the king, who was sitting at that time in the company of lesser queens. These queens were jealous of the new queen and found the opportunity as Godsend. They told the king to throw away the cake as the pooja smelt of witchcraft meant to harm him. It was only due to her black magic that the new queen was able to attain such an exalted position. The credulous king was convinced and in a fit of rage threw away the 'Prashad' and even trampled upon it.

Retribution

Swift retribution followed. A rebellion by the army dethroned the king, who found himself behind bars. The poor queen escaped to the village to her mother and was back to wherefrom she had started. Mother and daughter sat like lifeless cargo at the threshold of their hut remembering goddess Bib Garazmaej in their hour of distress.

The king saw goddess Bib Garazmaej in a dream whose angry countenance was too much for him to bear. The apparition rebuked him for showing disrespect to the holy 'Prashad' - a grave sacrilege committed by him. The king begged for forgiveness and was told to celebrate 'Pann' with reverence which alone would atone for his sin. The king sent a message secretly to his queen, who promptly performed Pooja. Soon, with the help of his loyal soldiers, the king was able to snuff the rebellion and restore his power over his kingdom.

Here the story ends.

May the omnipresent Goddess Bib Garazmaej restore us our honour and selfrespect, our homes and hearths the way she in Her charity, benevolence and kindness did to the king.

If we accept the existence of Evil as a fact of life which we cannot explain, surely we must accept God's mercy which too descends upon us mysteriously.

Source: Koshur Samachar

4 Game of the Name

K. N. Kaul

The game of inventing a name, a label for a particular person that sums up in one word all that he stands for, his idiosyncracies, his follies, warts and all, is played to perfection in Kashmir. This appellation is usually a funny word, crisp and tasty on the tongue. It is a compound of humour and abuse, the ratio of the mix varying according to the reactions of the person on whom it is plastered. It is not only his identification but also his caricature, honestly and accurately conveyed in just a single word. The epithet is inherited by the family of the person down to many generations. If the family fortune is in the ascendant, this irritant attains a respectability of its own kind.

How the name gets coined is a mystery. But once in the air, it is adopted by the street urchins who give it a wide publicity by shouting the name in unison once they spot out the person to whom it belongs. God help him if he dare try to retaliate by shouting back at them. Prudence lies in a quick escape into some nearby lane. But the echo of the chorus pursues the hapless person right up to the doorsteps of his home like a friend.

Pearce Gervis in his book "This Is Kashmir", has this to add:

"Even the wit in the Kashmiri was not stifled and showed itself on many occasions. He is fond of nicknames. In 1825 Kripa Ram was made the Governor. Of him it is written that he was a mild self-indulgent man who was fond of boating-boatwomen. The nickname he earned for himself was 'Kripa Shroin', meaning the sound of the dip of the boat paddle".

One such victim to this old Kashmiri pastime was one Mohammad living in the city of Srinagar. His name was affectionately rounded off to mere Momma (a word which incidently stands for a woman's breast) by his father. Now this young boy was an odd-job man for all the families living in the vicinity of his home. So long as his father was alive, he never thought of learning a trade to earn a living for himself. But now when he grew into an adult and a soft little growth sprouted above his upper lip and a fine little goatee on his chin, he stopped obliging those who had taken him for granted.

God had blessed Momma with a keen sense of self-respect which did not allow him to live off the leftovers of his patrons after his father's death. He started as a coolie at the local vegetable market and graduated into a hand-cart puller. But not used to hard work, physical strain involved in the work was too heavy for him to bear. He thought of choosing some other trade, less cumbersome but more profitable.

The local grocer, at whose shop Momma used to have a few quick pulls at the hubble-bubble now and then, was his chief counsellor. To him he confided all his woes and secrets. The grocer in his eagerness to help suggested him to start raising poultry at the backyard of his house. He offered his shop as an outlet for sale till such time as he could own a shop of his own.

The offer of the grocer was tempting and Momma started with a single hen with white plumage. The hen proved to be the harbinger of good fortune, for Momma was the proud owner of a Little poultry farm in about a year's time earning a respectable living. In the mean time he had earned the ire of his neighbours by describing to them the virtues of his hen and her antics. In his eagerness to impress he had not observed the frown on their faces, their snivellings and their yawns. His boorishness gave birth to a silly nickname. From Momma he began to be known as "Momma Kokker" for all. The shock of being reduced to the status of a hen while he was striving to gain a little social status in his neighbourhood was unbearable. Shouts of the children following him and their mirthful cries brought forth unspeakable depravities to his mind. He could not shake them off no matter what he said or did to them. A numb frozen loneliness came over him and overpowered him. He realised that he had to live with the nickname for the rest of his born days. The euphoria of the success in his new business venture evaporated and with that his old habit of lauding his dear hen to his friends and acquaintances too. The die had been cast and he was unable to do anything to save his name which was already corroded and reduced to a minimum. In

a fit of frenzy he slit the slender throat of his beloved hen throwing the carcass away for dogs to feast upon. He cursed both his luck and his friend who had suggested poultry business to him.

Not being able to face up to the onslaught of satires, sneers and sniggers of insensitive people, poor Momma's days of milk and honey were over. He felt like a stranger in his own neighbourhood. His entire being got buttoned up with anger, despair and humiliation. Ducking into the lanes and byroads whenever the urchins got hold of him was no permanent solution. The only way out was an escape to some alien land where past regrets and future fears would not assail him. How he wished to be far away from the reach of his persecutors and pursuers!

At last no longer able to bite into life and tear it apart, he decided to quit. That night all through and into the next dawn he was not able to sleep, partly because of rumblings of distant thunder storm and particularly because of leaden despair that had sunk into his soul. Unable to struggle any longer with his gloom, he got up at dead of night and struggled into an old woollen sweater. His life was not by any means over, he thought, while combing his hair with his fingers. Gathering some of his earthly belongings into a bundle, he came out of his hut straight on to the darkness and emptiness of the night. Leaving the door ajar he looked anxiously around and walked away with firm steps without looking back even once. Only the crisp breeze whispered 'Khuda Hafiz' repeatedly into his ears.

Many years flew by silently. The alien soil had granted many boons to our Momma, now known by a respectable name of Khan Mohammad. He had in the mean time found a wife for himself after settling in life with a comfortable income leaving his past far, far behind. But not quite. Often when alone, he would close his eyes with a sigh and find himself roaming in the good old dirty lanes of his native place. It was some nameless sorrow, sharp and painful. Then he wanted to cry and get it out of his heart. It took many shapes in his mind depending upon the mood of his vagrant thoughts. Sometimes it brought to his mind the heady fragrance of almond blossom and the smell of mint and clover, and sometimes the taste of his favourite dinner consisting of 'Hak' and boiled rice roused his tastebuds. Again, sometimes it brought back to him the echoes of the shouts of those street urchins who now looked playful and humless at that point of time. And then the image of his much coddled hen with white plumage would materialise out of the dense mist of the past. How heartlessly he had slit her tender creamy throat and how he hated himself for that!

One day overcome by a savage impulse of visiting his native place just once, he packed his best clothes in a tin box and left for his old home on a pilgrimage of love. Two days of travel by rail and bus did not wear him down. On reaching his destination the familiar surroundings took hold of him and he walked on as if in a trance, hoping to be received by his old friends and acquaintances with the same warmth which he felt for them.

It was now late in the afternoon when he came upon the old chinar tree near the crossing. It seemed to have gained in girth and he sat at its foot trying to calm down his heart which was fluttering wildly in his breast. He spotted two young men coming along followed by an old woman. They passed him by without taking any notice of him, but a low 'pst' from the woman stopped them. Her ancient eyes looked intently at him trying to respond to some impulses of recognition.

"Who are you, son?" she asked Momma, whose heart quailed for a moment at this unexpected encounter.

A pause.

The old woman continued hesitantly. "I think I know you but can't place you. Damn my old eyes."

The woman looked up at the waving chinar leaves and then out at the sky.

A longer pause, and then she got it.

"You young rascal, don't you recognise your old aunt?" she said. A mesh of wrinkles like the bark of the old chinar broke into a smile and lit the face of the woman. Coming closer she slapped out a hard one at his shoulder. Turning to the two young men whose inquisitive looks seemed to strip off Momma's clothes, she said, in a tone of irrepressible happiness those fatal words which almost knocked him down.

"Don't you know your old friend Momma? I mean, Momma Kokker, my old little one now grown up into a man."

Turning to Momma she said, "Where have you been all these years? Stand up so that I may embrace you."

Knowing not where to hide from shame, Momma looked pleadingly first at the woman and then at the two young men who had by now recognised him. The mousey old woman had unwound all that had taken him years to bury. With the alertness of a fox used to being hunted, he gave out a forced smile, stood up and hugged the woman wishing to break every bone of her ancient body.

"Yes grandma, I am Momma, your old son, having come to meet you all after all these years. Shall see you in the morning," he blurted out with great difficulty.

So saying, Momma moved on towards the village trying to distance himself from them as quickly as possible. His homecoming was in shambles and his heart empty like a nest deserted by a bird. He felt cheated and bruised by fate. He walked on, barely touching the earth. At the nearest turning he waited till the silhouette of the three persons melted into the distance and disappeared. He retraced his steps to the bus terminus hoping to board the last bus but not before casting a lingering, sorrowful look at the mighty chinar.

A stain of saffron had by now appeared in the west lending a glow to the dying day. Against this background the leaves of the chinar fluttering in the evening breeze seemed to whisper final 'Khuda Hafiz' to Khan Mohammad, a scene which he bore away in his heart never to forget.

Source: Koshur Samachar

5 A King's Metamorphosis

K. N. Kaul

Historical events of catastrophic magnitude give birth to historical folktales in which the fictional characters are made contemporaries with the historical personages of the times. The former are supposed to be eyewitnesses to the events and so lend credibility to the narrative. In tales such as these, the reader can feel the pulse of the bruised soul of these times and uncover the raw and bleeding wounds on its body buried deep under the debris of different garbled versions of chroniclers. Fiction, paradoxically, observes and records faithfully the truth at the grassroot level which History, in its cynicism overlooks. It is correctly remarked that nothing is true in History except names and dates, but everything is true in fiction except names and dates.

This fanciful tale centres round one of the illustrious kings of Kashmir, Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin (1423-1474 A.D.) fondly named 'Badshah', the great king, by his loving subjects and remembered with love and reverence by the posterity even to this day. His benign reign spread over half a century ushered in peace and prosperity and provided a special healing touch to his Hindu subjects who had suffered everything that hell possessed during the preceding one hundred years. A proud and highly civilised race had been vanquished, dispossessed, humbled and disgraced and finally all but exterminated systematically. Those left alive, had, over the years drawn themselves inwards into a protective shell of make-believe, prejudices and imbecile morality. It was here in this shell that this folktale was born and nursed and then given to the people as an opiate. Since mind and not the body registers feelings, it has to be drugged with fanciful and wishful anecdotes so as to allow the body and mind to resuscitate. This folktale of ours is an apt illustration to this fact.

What happened during those one hundred years or so before Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin appeared on the scene is a tragic saga of Evil perpetrated upon the people of the kingdom, who were first let down by their rulers and then forsaken by their luck. Starting with the prolonged rape of the entire length and breadth of the valley by Dulacha or Oulcha, a Tartar chief from Turkistan in 1319 A.D. who laid waste the land, and another by Achala, another Turkish leader soon after a year or so ruined its people entirely. What little was left to complete the picture of death and destruction was taken over by Sultan Sikander (1389-1412 A.D.) hatefully known as 'Sikander But-shikan' (the iconoclast), father of Zain-ul-Abidin. Assisted by Suha Bhatt, his Prime Minister, a neo-convert to Islam, assuming the name of Saifud-Din, the king in mad frenzy of skewed religious fanaticism and bigotry surpassed even the greatest tyrants of History. Putting hundreds and thousands of his Hindu subjects, mostly Brahmins, to sword, desecrating, plundering and destroying all the famous temples and libraries, forcibly converting some to Islam, inflicting all possible cruelties upon them, the king stopped short at nothing. His equally ruthless soldiers tired of wielding their swords dragged their hapless victims to the Dal Lake and drowned them in it at a place which is still known by the name of 'Bhatta Mazar' meaning the graveyard of the Hindus. Those who yielded, got converted; those who could, escaped to the subcontinent; but those who resisted, perished.

To these people it must have been impossible to believe that a Muslim king and the son of an arch tyrant (Sultan Sikander) at that, could be so generous, so kind-hearted, secular and large-hearted as to allow them the same freedom and privileges as his Muslim subjects enjoyed. The only explanation for this incredible phenomenon that could readily occur to them must have been the intervention of some divine or supernatural power affecting the thinking and psyche of the king. This tale that has mystified its hero, has come down to us in the shape of this folktale. Here it is:

The day was sullen as before. Sable gray clouds behaved like unwelcome guests having come to stay. Late winter seemed to linger on in the valley adding to the woes of the people. The morning brought no let up in the weather. Pandit Shri Bhatt, a local Vaid (physician) sitting in the ground floor room of his house which served as his clinic, was pulling hard at his Hukkah (hubble-bubble) while feeling the pulse of one of his patients. The charcoals in the Chillum (the small earthen pot atop the Hukkah) refused to

ignite. In disgust he threw down the long wooden pipe and hurriedly scribbled a prescription for the patient. His face was anxious and worried. Apparently he had something on his mind. He had received the other day, through one of his Muslim friends, a courtier, a detailed report about King Zain-ul-Abidin's illness and also the inability of all the royal physicians to cure him. He was anxious to prove his worth as a physician and his friend had already recommended his name to the king. He was asked to reach the palace at noon that day and now that he had finished with his patients, he took his medicine box with him and left for the palace.

The guard at the palace gate escorted Shri Bhatt to the main building. Here silence prevailed everywhere and men and soldiers talked in hushed tones. The king's illness had engulfed everyone with deep anxiety. Even the appearance of a brief sun winking coldly behind the clouds did not remove some of the gloom. Straightening the loose folds of his gown he walked with a light foot trying to avoid the sound of his footsteps. Presently he found himself at the doorstep of the king's bedroom.

Shri Bhatt, head bent, approached the vast bedstead upon which the king was reclining. Two royal physicians were changing the bandage of his infected wound which a sinister looking boil at his back had turned into. Saluting the Sultan, he stood at a respectful distance. The royal physician addressed the king, "Your Majesty, Shri Bhatt is here. May we give him a try?"

The Sultan made a noise of disgust. "Do what you think best, Shri Bhatt. We are in great pain," he said, throwing the back of his hand to him.

A chill caution of a trained physician entered Shri Bhatt's mind. He unbandaged the wound and touched lightly the skin round it which looked red and tender. He applied some medicine on it covering it with a bit of cotton wool and then bandaged it securely. "Tonight Your Majesty will enjoy sound sleep and within three days, God willing, sit up completely cured", he addressed his king.

The king's emaciated face gave back a bald and bland smile in reply.

That night in the fenceless borderland between sleep and wakefulness the king felt his back relieved of much of the pain and it was late in the morning when he opened his eyes feeling refreshed after peaceful sleep. Whether it was the efficacy of Shri Bhatt's medicine or his good fortune that did the trick none can tell. But after a few days the king, completely cured, did attend the court as predicted by Shri Bhatt. Sitting on his throne, he looked around for his benefactor and spotted him standing in a corner. He motioned him to his presence. Words came to him slowly as if he had to choose from a difficult dialect long forgotten. Short pauses in between expressed his gratefulness more eloquently than the words he spoke.

The king asked Shri Bhatt to name anything in the world and that would be granted to him. Shri Bhatt expressed his gratitude for the magnanimous offer and said that His Majesty's recovery was all that he desired. Prompted by the king to speak out his mind as he was keen to do something for him, Shri Bhatt kept silent. He felt like a prize winner who does not know how to carry his unwieldy trophy home. The king's eyes bored into his face as if trying to find a path leading to his mind. This time Shri Bhatt looked straight into his eyes and saw in them a deep sea of generosity. Encouraged by the stately inclination of his head and the indulgent smile playing on his lips, he prayed that his Hindu subjects be let off the hook of tyranny and religious persecution so that their honour and religious freedom could be restored. Pleased with the reply, the king granted him his wish with a nod. That day after the Darbar was over, Shri Bhatt walking along the narrow paths leading to his home felt a strange insidious warmth engulfing his being after a long, long time. A flirting wind brushed his face lightly as if in thanksgiving on behalf of his suffering brethren. Tears of relief welled up in his heart and dribbled down his beard.

The single streak of good fortune was God's last gift to Shri Bhatt, as the king, after some time, was again down with a disease with this time neither he nor the royal physicians could diagnose or cure. Each day that passed seemed to sap his life force drop by drop, inch by inch. Demented with prolonged fever, the king looked prematurely senile and his face took an ashen hue. His royal head, once so robust and youthful, looked inadequate even to support his beard. Gloom enveloped the city and the desperate people prayed for divine mercy.

Shri Bhatt's failure to find out an effective cure for the king's illness made him desperate. He was weighted down by great anxiety. He loved his king and did not want to lose him. Now his reputation as a physician was at stake. But more than that the decrees issued by the king had not been yet implemented. His untimely demise would undo all that he had achieved so far.

That day Shri Bhatt went for an early dip at the Vitasta direct from the palace where he had spent the whole night beside the king's bed. It was predawn and the bathing ghat was deserted. Only a lonely star beamed at him from the sky. While on way back he saw a figure approaching him. It was a Sadhu, six foot two and Shri Bhatt had not seen a Sadhu in the city for a long time. Folding his hands in reverence he touched his feet. The Sadhu's dim profile was now discernible in the early light of the dawn. His head with long matted hair, thick as a thatch, matched perfectly with his long flowing beard. But the sight of his bloodshot eyes giving out flares of hate gave him gooseflesh. "You are the first Brahman that I have seen since yesterday. I have been roaming all day and night to find a temple for a day's rest but I have not seen any. Have my eyes deceived me?" he said to Shri Bhatt without any preliminaries. Shri Bhatt looked at him like a bird that has been shot and parrying the question requested him to accept his hospitality as his house was just nearby. At home he offered him some food and sat before him not knowing how to explain the disaster that had overtaken the place, and its people. Obviously the Sadhu did not belong to those parts and had come from the south of the sub-continent. He summed up briefly the tragedy that had overtaken his people and told him about the desperate situation he was in at the moment. The Sadhu listened with rapt attention with his eyes closed. "Your king has finished with this world and there is nothing one can do now," he said.

"But the promise he made to relieve my people of their miseries will soon be forgotten. Justice will not then be done. If only the king could live for a few months more!" Shri Bhatt said throwing his hands in despair.

Something lit up the Sadhu's face. He opened his eyes and pulled viciously at his beard as if to soften the impact of the idea that had hit him like a bolt. He opened up in measured tones, "Listen carefully. I can animate your king by my own Atman for hundred days immediately after he breathes his last. I hope that much time should be enough to get your plans in action. During that time I shall be leaving my mortal shell here and you must promise to preserve it safely for me."

It took some time for the strange scheme to sink into Shri Bhatt's mind. He thought the Sadhu was playing a cruel joke on him. But the tone of the Sadhu's voice reassured him. His adam's apple moved convulsively. He looked him up and down, not knowing what to say.

Shri Bhatt changed gear. "Am I not putting you to a great risk? What if something unusual happens? No, no, it is asking too much," he said hovering between despondency and hope.

Without answering back, the Sadhu now sat cross-legged and closed his eyes softly. He did not even wait to elicit from Shri Bhatt the assurance asked for and went into a deep trance. Slowly his breathing stopped altogether and he looked like a statue.

Shri Bhatt raced out of the room locking it up from outside. He flew to the palace and went straight into the King's bedroom. He found the king's face deathly pale, cold sweat dotting his brow. Presently his whole body convulsed and he phewed out a long sigh and lay still and stiff. The king was no more. Shri Bhatt was all eyes now. He wanted to be the witness to the miracle promised by the Sadhu. Yes, the miracle did occur. The king's face began to regain its colour and very soon his body began to move. He asked for water in a feeble voice for the first time after many days. The Sadhu's soul had taken over while that of the king had made its tryst with his Maker.

Shri Bhatt was now fully convinced that the Sadhu's soul had animated the body of the king. But it would take more than a hundred days for the king to regain his shattered health completely. The period was too short to get his plan implemented. A thought, a blend of devilment and intrigue passed through his mind. "If the Sadhu's body is disposed of for good, his soul would remain stay put where it is now. Better to cremate him here and now than risk our future, " he argued with his conscience, and his conscience

agreed with what he proposed. So he got the Sadhu's body cremated with due religious ceremonies in his own presence and earned the gratitude of his people.

As the pyre got engulfed in flames, Shri Bhatt was heard saying to himself." After all, in the end, it is nothing but the ashes for every one of us, tomorrow if not today. Why not today?"

Up above in the evening sky a faint honking of the wild geese seemed to echo his thoughts, as if saying, "Yes, we know."

Source: Koshur Samachar

6 The Birth of Lake Sheshnag

K. N. Kaul

[../KoshSam/index.html](#)For Visakha, a Brahman youth of about twenty one, it was a close encounter with death. Caught unawares between the charging cavalry columns of king Nara of Kashmir, who descended upon the place like wolves upon a fold, he, in utter confusion, panicked and fled for his life. The gathering thunder of a thousand galloping horses, the glint of a thousand naked swords shimmering menacingly in the sun and the full-throated battle-cry of a thousand soldiers - all combined, made him swoon. He somehow managed to scurry and bolt across the road like a rabbit for its hole and hid himself in a corner of a half-broken outer wall of an old house. Here he tried to smother the sickening gurgling in his stomach with his one hand and with the other he touched the top of his head to see if it was still there. The fright seemed to squeeze him dry of all blood. His eyes closed as if in slow motion and a blankness overpowered him. He felt there was nothing left in him and then he passed out.

King Nara, who ruled over Kashmir about more than a thousand years ago, was a young, tall figure, erect as a lance. He was known in the kingdom as an Aphrodite on the prowl. Year in and year out he seemed to be in a state of perpetual infatuation for this or that girl. Only recently he had fallen for the daughter of a courtier whose vivacious gait and swimming large eyes, which looked larger due to the outline of kohl around them, had hooked him fast. It was a face that got fixed in his mind but his advances were spurned as the maid had already sold out her heart to some recondite Buddhist priest. In one of her unguided moments the girl had confessed to the king her attachment to the priest, which was enough to turn his milk sour. For him now the only way to possess her was to remove the priest from his path for which he issued secret instructions to his trusted guards. But before they could carry out their nefarious scheme, the priest, sensing danger, had hoisted his sail at midnight and vanished without trace along with his lady love. Learning that his quarry had given him a slip a glowering devil seemed to rage within the king's heart, raising dark and savage gall. In a mad fit of frenzy he ordered his royal guards to wipe out all the Buddhist Viharas in the kingdom along with the inmates, a job, which they accomplished perfectly well. It was in this maelstrom that Visakha was caught but luckily saved by a mere chance.

It was a little before noon when Visakha came to himself again. The soldiers had gone away leaving a trail of destruction behind. Smoke was bellowing up at many places as the entire village had been torched. No man or beast was moving around. It was as if a great mantle of death had descended and hung over the place. Visakha felt his limbs still trembling with fear. He had left his home in the morning to see his maternal grand parents who lived in an adjacent village. But now he dared not take the highway for fear of the soldiers. He turned left and took the bridlepath stretching over the hillock like a ribbon in order to make a detour to avoid any encounter with them.

It was now approaching noon and Visakha treadled along inhaling the fragrance of honeysuckle and lilac bushes. The lush green all around seemed to invite him to the delights of the open air to which he surrendered himself. Pure liquid trills of a Bulbul coming from some nearby tree bought a smile of delight to his lips. It was an infectious melody which brought involuntary echoes from his throat almost similar in tone and sweetness. Again, a throaty call of a thrush came from some distance, pure and clear, which was promptly echoed by its mate. A crisp wind sent the fallen leaves scurrying and now while coming down the incline he broke into a trot after them. It was wonderful to be alive and young on that sunny day after a close brush with death.

A small pool of water nestling under the shade of a couple of mulberry trees offered a tempting invitation to the jaded nerves of Visakha. He felt hungry and thirsty. He had his 'Sattu' (a mix of flour and jaggery) with him, which he now intended to eat. He had just cupped his hands to draw out a drink from the pool when he pricked his ears on hearing somebody talking. The desolate place was hardly a place fit for people to sit and talk. He thought that the Nagas must be living somewhere in the vicinity as their habitats were usually lakes, ponds and springs. He had not met or seen anyone so far but he had heard of

their mysterious powers like flying in the air, causing hail, rain or snow or even a blizzard at will. He got apprehensive of a possible encounter with them for which he was not prepared, at least not that day.

Fear overcame hunger and Visakha forgot to eat his 'Sattu'. He began walking on tiptoes in the direction wherefrom the human voice was coming, curiosity getting the better of him. With bated breath and pounding heart he walked softly trying to make his footfalls as light as possible. At a little distance he was startled to find two young maidens sitting under a huge fir tree eating something resembling grass. He circled noiselessly round the bushes in order to have a close look at their faces. The maidens in their prime of youth were stunningly beautiful, their almond shaped eyes adding a strange unearthly charm to their faces. He had not seen such slanting and sparkling eyes in any woman's face before. Dressed in their finest and bedecked with gold jewellery, their appearance seemed at odds in that uninhabited place. Visakha felt like a singing in his ears and his heart seemed to melt with a warmth he had not felt before. What impressed him was a kind of solemn dignity about them matching with the solemnity with which they were eating the food meant for herbivorous animals - 'kacchaguccha' pods to be precise. He stood spell-bound, gazing at them the way one would at an apparition suddenly materialising out of the blue. He felt he could gaze on for ever.

The maidens had sensed the presence of a stranger and without looking towards him, they suddenly stopped eating.

"Civilised men do not violate the privacy of others. Why should someone sneak in like a coward or a thief and ogle at us" said the one with a necklace of sparkling rubies decorating her long slender neck, in an offending tone loud enough to reach Visakha's ears.

Visakha felt as if he was caught with his pants down. He could neither run away because they had seen him, nor come out of his hiding, feeling terribly embarrassed. He cursed his luck. It was a day full of disasters one after the other. He stood rooted at the spot like a person caught red-handed stealing his own money.

"How low have the Aryan youth fallen!" retorted the other maiden, the invective obviously meant for Visakha. "No dignity, no morals, no character," she blew out the words like a spit.

Visakha sagged in with the effect that the unwarranted aspersions had upon his mind. For a moment he floundered and looked like a murder victim. Drops of sweat streaked down his spine for he had indeed violated the norms of Aryan decency. Presently, overcoming the initial shock, he shook himself out of the torpor as the stinging accusations left him no other alternative but to defend and clear himself. Inwardly angry at his own foolishness, he stepped out of his hiding dropping all pretence of concealment. He approached the young girls but stood at some respectable distance from them.

"I am no vulgar sneaker. One cannot expect people sitting and talking in this desolate place and that is what made me curious to look," he stammered a reply with honest reproach in his voice, "But pray tell me, why are you eating 'kacchaguccha' pods. I have sweet 'Sattu' with me and will be happy to share it with you, that is, if you like to," he added, his words ringing with genuine sincerity.

The maidens kept on looking at him and then at each other in order to gauge their reactions to the offer. They surveyed him from head to foot with a blank expression, giving out nothing.

Emboldened a bit, Visakha came a few steps closer, as if attracted by some invisible magnetic force.

"I am Visakha, the son of a Brahman priest living in that village," he addressed the maidens with an honest face and friendly smile. "I have just escaped with my life in the morning when the king's soldiers swooped upon the village. In order to avoid them I came over this hillock and here I find you eating this," he said.

Visakha's honest countenance and the genuine anguish in his words had the desired effect. The young girls seemed to struggle for the remnants of their dignity and finally gave in. With a gracious and slightly condescending smile the one with the glittering necklace beckoned him to sit.

"Won't you introduce yourselves?" said he.

"I am Chandralekha and this is my elder sister Iravati. We are the daughters of the Naga Chief", said Chandralekha, throwing her head up.

"I am glad to hear it. But why do you eat this food?" he said pointing to the 'kacchaguccha' pods.

"That we cannot tell you. But if you are keen to know, you can ask our father who will be coming for the pilgrimage of Taksaka the next week. You may ask him as many questions as you like. You can single him out even in a crowd. With his long plaited hair he is too conspicuous to be missed," said Chandralekha with eyes smiling.

Then both the young girls vanished into the thin air. The sudden appearance and equally sudden disappearance of the maidens was too much mind boggling for young Visakha. It took him some time to collect his wits. Of one thing he was certain. The face of Chandralekha had left a deep indelible impress on his virgin mind but at the same time he was apprehensive of the mirage that might vanish for good.

A shrill ping of the mosquitoes in Visakha's ears brought him out of the depths of reverie and with the determination of a champion athlete, his dark young eyes were smouldering with a purpose. He vowed to himself to be as near to Chandralekha as possible. That was the ultimate he could think of about the gates of paradise which he wanted to be opened to him.

Visakha was among the first pilgrims to reach the shrine on the auspicious day. Roaming about aimlessly among the thickening crowd he spotted the two maidens flanking a stout man with two long plaits of hair decorating his front. He bowed his head respectfully and wished him. Iravati recognised Visakha and introduced him to her father. The Naga chief gazed rather loftily with his meditative look and tried to size him up. There was a faint tightening of his nostrils but presently he shook his head like an old horse. The honest innocent look of Visakha clicked a favourable response in his heart.

"My daughters have told me about your concern for our predicament," said the Naga chief. There was a reflective pause and a tinge of sorrow and reproach in his voice. "We are harmless people but at present victims of unforgivable inequity", he continued, but stopped on seeing Chandralekha's face. Her face was tense and eyes about to overflow with sorrow.

The chief wiped Chandralekha's tears with his finger and continued." A spell has been cast upon our standing crop by an ascetic who indulges in black magic and so we cannot reap the yellowing corn. If only he would eat a few grains from this crop, the spell would break and we could satisfy the painful rumblings of our empty stomachs. What else is there for us to eat except the lowly 'kacchaguccha' pods till then? Look, there he is sitting on the river bank chanting spells on simple folk like us," he concluded pointing towards the man.

Visakha looked at the wide reflective eyes of Chandralekha and then resolved to do something to help the family out of the impasse. The ascetic was indeed guilty almost to the point of heartless cruelty toward those who had done nothing to earn his wrath.

"Please wait for me here and I shall be soon back," he said to the chief.

The ascetic's inhuman torture of the Naga family and his crazy way of showing off supernatural powers, destructive in intent was disgusting. Visakha saw the ascetic sitting crosslegged on the river bank. He plucked a sheaf of the yellow corn and entered into his hut where he saw a pot of rice boiling. He put the grains of corn into the pot and hurried out as stealthily as he had entered. Hiding behind a cluster of poplars, he sat down to wait.

Visakha was determined to see the end of the ascetic's wickedness. He saw him entering the hot and taking the contents of the pot on a plate, after which he sat down to eat. The spell existed no more. The Naga chief was overjoyed to hear the good news. He and his people started reaping the harvest.

The Naga chief invited Visakha to his place and granted him a boon. He very coyly asked for the hand of Chandralekha which was granted and the wedding took place at Narpora, a beautiful village nearby.

One day while sitting on the terrace of her house, Chandralekha found a horse eating corn that was laid out in the sun to dry. She hurried down the terrace and slapped the horse on his croup, leaving a golden imprint of her slim tapering fingers on it. King Nara heard of the strange phenomena and as usual, the

devil in him poked him. He asked his sycophants to seduce the lady. He sent his agents, emissaries to her with fabulous temptations but the virtuous lady rebuffed them, one and all. The king now threatened Visskha with death if he did not surrender his wife to him. He along with his wife rushed to the Naga chief and narrated their tale of woe. With a wave of his hand, the Naga Chief turned the day into night by hiding the sun under thick layers of clouds. A strong gale swept the Valley which turned into a hurricane and started uprooting everything. Thunderbolts leaped with deafening crash burning everything on the ground. King Nara's palace was ablaze and then a rain of big boulders coming from above crashed the fleeing people to death. The apocalyptic devastation consumed the entire place. The Naga King's sister living on the Ramanaya mountain came to his rescue and showered more boulders on the city. Five yojnas of best land now lay waste, strewn with huge boulders which no man could dislodge.

Seeing the extent of devastation, the Naga king felt great remorse for having over-reacted to the king's foolishness. He abandoned the locality and with the help of his supernatural powers he made water gush out from the bosom of the earth forming a huge lake in the depression. Pilgrims on way to Swami Amarnath cave can see this lake, named the Sheshnag, its bluish waters reflecting the snowcapped mountains around it and sometimes the passing clouds as clearly as in a mirror.

After the demise of the Naga chief, Visakha, having now become a Naga, ascended the throne. He got another lake made in the vicinity of the Sheshnag, popularly known as the 'Zamturnag' meaning 'the lake of the son-in-law.'

Source: Koshur Samachar

7 *Sankisar*

K. N. Kaul

Once upon a time in a certain village in Kashmir, there lived a happy family - an old couple with their two children, a daughter and a son. The girl named **Sankisar** (the golden bead) was about to blossom into a beauty. She was the darling of her parents who loved her as much for her good looks as for her bold, inventive and rumbustious spirit. She had a streak of boyishness about her, ever ready for any adventure, any escapade. Besides helping her mother in household chores, she would help her father too in his fields. It was as always hard work for girls at home whereas boys were pampered and given favoured treatment which many did not deserve. The boy, a lad of about thirteen would cash upon his budding male ego. His faults would often be ignored and the parents would seldom, if ever, snub him for his foolishness.

One day when the boy came home from school famished, his mother immediately served him with food consisting of boiled rice and vegetables. In the midst of eating, he sighted a strand of hair entangled in the food. The sight of the hair tickled his adolescent mind opening up a small window to unknown pleasures. Brash and thoughtless as he was, he declared, pulling out the strand of hair, "O, I shall marry the girl whom this hair belongs to." The old woman recognised that the strand of hair was Sankisar's. The thoughtless utterance of her son was too stupid to be taken cognizance of. She looked into his eyes trying to see if youth had suddenly and prematurely dawned upon him without she being aware of it. But her indulgence silenced her curiosity. "I shall marry the girl whom this hair belongs to," the boy repeated to the consternation of his mother. This time, a little alarmed, the mother upbraided him. "How can you marry your own sister, you stupid fool? Don't you see it is Sankisar's hair", she exploded. The sudden pull-up made him persist in his obstinacy and he repeated the line with relish as if it was the burden of a popular song. The words rolling down his tongue were giving him vicarious pleasure. Remonstrations from his mother followed, now in a loud voice which brought Sankisar out of the kitchen. Perfidious words coming out of her brother's mouth were received in utter disbelief. The utterance was by implication incestuous and so too painful for a sensitive maiden like her to bear. A savage impulse to run away from home seized her. She wanted to run away from life itself as her virgin mind refused to believe that of all the people in the world, her own brother could degrade himself to the extent as to persist in repeating the satanic line over and over again. The world exploded around her and like a frightened gazelle before a panther she flew, shutting out her ears with her palms so as not to hear what her brother was now repeating with gusto. On and on she ran distancing herself from home as far as possible. Now out of breath, she could hear the poundings of her little heart. Slowly she composed herself and for the first time looked round.

In the gloom of the late afternoon the shadows had lengthened and the air was languid and still. The silence was frightening. She sat under a big chinar tree and tried to recollect what her brother had uttered. She wanted to fathom the significance of his words. Everything was revolting and under the circumstances she vowed not to go back to her home. She took courage by the thought that one day, sooner or later, one has to set sail and float out to the sea.

While deep in thought, Sankisar saw a Sadhu appearing from nowhere coming straight towards her. In those good old days Sadhus were Sadhus - selfless benefactors of society. She was not now alone in that desolate place and the presence of a holy man brought a flood of tears to her eyes. The Sadhu calmed her taut nerves. "What ails you, my child? Why are you here alone in this jungle and crying?" he asked. She narrated to him all that had happened to her and repeated her resolve to stay anywhere in the world except in her parental house.

The Sadhu was visibly moved by what the girl told him. Combing his long beard with his fingers, he looked straight into the eyes of the girl trying to read her future. After thinking awhile, he dipped his hand into his bag and brought out some seeds. Giving them to the girl he said, "Here, take these seven seeds

and sow them. Very soon seven tall trees will grow and if you climb any of the trees, no one can touch even your shadow." The Sadhu, then disappeared.

The girl looked thoughtfully at the small round seeds and having nothing better to do, dug seven small holes sowing one seed in each hole. The seeds, surprisingly after a few minutes sprouted into tender shoots, from shoots to seedlings and very soon started gaining in height and girth until all the seven seedlings grew into tall trees, taller than any tree Sankisar had seen. Selecting one a bit taller than the rest, she climbed upon it and very soon reached the highest branch and was glad to sit on it away from the disgraceful utterances of her brother. Being tired, her eyelids began to close softly in the cool air and very soon she fell asleep.

It was now fully dark and the old couple got worried about Sankisar's absence from home. She had never behaved so recklessly. They came out in search of her. After roaming about in the village they directed their feet towards the jungle. The full moon bathed the landscape with its soft milky light. The seven tall trees attracted their attention and looking up found Sankisar perched comfortably on its branches.

"Come down, come down, O Sankisar. This is no place to sleep," shouted the old man. "Come down, come down, O Sankisar. This is no place to sleep," echoed the old woman. Sankisar opened her eyes and thought it prudent not to respond. The wily father started cutting down the tree but the resourceful girl jumped on to the other and then to another, and in the process, all but one tree got hewed down. Now Sankisar found herself on the last remaining tree and seeing no way out, she looked up to the mother Moon in desperation and prayed her for urgent help.

"O mother Moon, mother Moon, zoon maj zooni open your door and let me climb up to you," she cried in distress. The magnanimous Moon had witnessed all that had happened in the day. She threw out a strong single moonbeam at her upon which Sankisar climbed and soon found herself in the Moonland. Here she heaved a sigh of relief being far, far away from her home. The parents were dismayed at her disappearance and they retraced their steps to their hut more in anger than in sorrow.

Sankisar lived happily with mother Moon, her foster mother for many days. One day the Moon asked to comb her hair, at the same time cautioning her to avoid the top of her scalp. There even a light brush of the comb would give her a bald patch. Sankisar was happy to be of some service and did the job diligently and with care. One day her comb got entangled in the Moon's hair at the top of her scalp inadvertently and out came thick strands of her hair leaving the area bald as her palm. This was more than mother Moon could bear. She scolded the girl harshly. Sankisar buttoned up her lips from crying which irritated her foster mother all the more. On a strong sliding moonbeam she pushed Sankisar down to the earth, and that was the end of her short honeymoon on the moon.

The free fall from the moon to the earth was breathtaking for the little girl. Sankisar lost her consciousness while in flight but surprisingly landed in the nest of a crow. The old crow was at that time trying to smoothen his ruffled feathers preparing for a comfortable night's rest. The unexpected sight of a girl spreadeagled in his nest made him sit up in surprise.

"Who are you, my dear? Where are you coming from?" he cawed, trying to bring the girl to senses.

Sankisar was by this time sobbing hysterically, the fall having knocked the wind out of her. She saw the kind and gentle face of the crow. It was more than enough that she was alive.

"O father crow (kaw mole), help me. My naughty brother wants to make me his wife. I escaped to mother Moon but even she has now deserted me. I have nowhere to go, no one, to help me and I am feeling so hungry," she wailed.

The old crow was moved. He brought some sweet apples for Sankisar to eat. "Eat these apples, my daughter. You may live in this nest with me as long as you like," reassured the crow. For the first time since the crash-landing, Sankisar felt her eyelids closing in a slow motion.

One day Sankisar's mother spotted her out sitting in the nest. In a pleading voice she said, "O my daughter, this is no place to live. Come home with me and I shall give you beautiful dolls to play with."

The old crow could not bear to look small before his foster daughter. Out he flew and brought beautiful dolls for Sankisar.

The next day Sankisar's father came to take her home. "O my daughter, this is no place to live. Come home with me and I shall buy you a beautiful spinning wheel," said he, thinking that the offer would surely tempt her. Out flew the crow and brought a beautiful spinning wheel for Sankisar.

The third day Sankisar's brother came to take her home. "O my sister, this is no place to live. Come home with me and I shall give you a beautiful bridal dress to wear", pleaded he.

Out flew the crow-and brought a beautiful spangled bridal dress studded with pearls.

Sankisar was very happy at the windfall. She put on the beautiful dress and began to spin thread as fine as gossamer. The old crow loolced on feeling happy at her craftsmanship. The pink bridal dress had added colour to her roses and she looked extremely channing in the mild autumn sun." She is flt to sit on the fluone of this country," muttered the crow to himself.

The crow's words were prophetic. The next day, it so happened that the king on a hunting expedition, happened to pass by the same jungle. Seeing a beautiful girl attired in a bridal dress and spinning in a nest was a sight too real to be true. He took her to be a fairy of the jungle. The soft liltng tune of some ditty which she was humming to herself at that time tinkled little silver beUs in his heart.

"O fairy, this is not the place to spin. Come to my palace and I will make you my queen," he said to Sankisar.

Sankisar was surprised out of her reverie. The face of the young king impressed her. It was her heart and not her voice that spoke," How can I go with you without the permission of my father crow?"

The winsome smile of the girl convinced the king that she was much too willing to come. But the Wazir could not brook this insolence from a girl towards his king. He ordered the hunting party to chop down the tree. Sankisar requested the king to leave the tree unhanned and picked her way down to the earth. The king pleased at the stratagem of his Wazir, came forward and put his own ring on the girl's finger. Thus was Sankisar's marriage performed in a kingly-style and for the king the hunt had got him the most beautiful catch he could dream of.

The king had already six wives living in his palace. The new bride was now put to match the combined wisdom of the six women. The king, one day gave an equal quantity of paddy to all his seven wives and said, "The one who husks the lot first will be my chief queen. So on to the work."

Sankisar looked about her not knowing what to do. She had never husked paddy before. She sat down in dismay but harsh cawing of father crow kindled some hope in her heart. She requested him to help her out of the difficulty. Out flew the crow and after some time returned with thousands of birds and crows who husked the paddy within minutes for her. Looking at the neat pile of rice, all the six queens were surprised. "How did you do it?", asked one of them. She replied. "I threw the paddy, the mortar and the pestle into the Vitasta and up floated the rice". The queens tried to do what Sankisar had told them but lost their paddy, atong with their pestles and mortars in the bargain.

The king wanted to give six queens another chance. "The queen whose room presents the best picture shall be my chief queen," he declared. The old crow brought thousands of birds and crows with herbs and flowers in their beaks. They smeared the walls of Sankisar's room with pink roses which gave her room fragrant rosy colour. "How did you do it?", said one of the queens to Sankisar. "That was simple. I got cow dung and cow piss and smeared the walls with the solution," she replied. The king now wanted to give his six queens a last chance. "The one who cooks the most delicious dish will be my chief queen," he declared.

The old faithful crow would not let her foster daughter be dethroned. Out he flew and returned with many birds and crows who had brought all the ingredients and fragrant spices with them. When the dish was ready, its fragrance spread. "How did you do it ?" asked one of the queens. "I cooked 'trumbi' (some inedible herb) in cow dung for spices and cow piss for oil", answered Sankisar.

The result of the third test convinced the king that all his six wives were no match for Sankisar. He divorced them and made Sankisar his queen.

Source: **Koshur Samachar**

8 The Precious Present



This story takes the reader to a village on the bank of the Wular, one of the largest fresh water lakes in India. Many years ago the only approach to the village was over mountain tracks or across the lake which though alluring to the eye when placid is impassable when otherwise. Consequently the village was practically cut off and no outsider visited it unless it was absolutely indispensable for him to do so. Nor were the villagers very curious about the rest of the world. God had given them enough land to grow maize, pulses, and a few vegetables and the lake supplied them fish and water-nuts (caltrops), the kernels of which formed their staple diet. There were the old shops exchanging salt and cloth for dried fish, caltrops, maize and ghee, and currency was hardly necessary. Coins were not in circulation in this remote

corner, and if ever they were, they were mostly of copper, or other lower denominations. It was an age when even government officials were paid their salaries mostly in kind, in terms of *khirwars* (ass-loads) of cereals. In short, nobody in the village had ever seen the silver rupee with the effigy of Victoria, Queen of Britain and Empress of India.

It so happened that by some mysterious process a silver rupee of the above description found its way into the village. It caused a great sensation there and everybody was eager to have a sight of it. Before long the matter came to the notice of the *nambardar*, the headman, and the coin was handed over to him for safe custody till he decided how to deal with this novelty. He pondered over it for a day and a night, a pretty long day and a dark sleepless night, and announced his decision the next morning.

"Brethren," he said, "this is the first coin of the kind that has ever been seen by any one of us. It is stamped with the figure of our most respected ruler. (At this his hand went involuntarily to his forehead by way of saluting the ruler, listeners following suit.) God grant our ruler prosperity and victory always, and humiliation to our enemies! It is most befitting that we make a present of this respected and honoured token to His Highness in person.... "

The proposal was no sooner made than accepted. The headman of the village was regarded as the wisest man. He gave them full details as to how such a present should be placed before the ruler for his acceptance. The gift was to be placed in a palanquin carried by six worthy elders of the village whom he nominated. They got a really dainty palanquin and decorated it with whatever choice cloth they could get. Spreading a finely woven blanket inside they covered it with a piece of silk that somebody possessed. The headman then called all the village elders to the palanquin. Young men and little urchins were there already. In the presence of such an august gathering they placed the rupee inside the palanquin and drew the curtains as if it carried a delicate bride on her way to her husband's home. The capital was to be reached by boat. A *doongha* stood ready at the quay equipped with all requirements for the journey. The palanquin was lifted to the accompaniment of delightful songs, portending success, sung by village women and deposited gently in the *doongha*. The boatman pushed off and made for the south where the capital lay, the villagers shouted their good wishes after it and the headman gesticulated *au revoir* when the boat reached the mouth of the river.

It is a tiresome journey going upstream. The palanquin was given a seat of honour and nobody could sit or stand with his back to it. At night they lit a lamp and kept it alight till the dawn, and took their turns at the watch. Whoever asked them the purpose of their journey south was told that they were carrying a precious present for His Highness. They did not reveal the nature of it at all.

On the morning of the third day when they came to the outskirts of the capital they decided to dispense with the boat and carry the palanquin on their shoulders. Barefoot, with legs wrapped tightly with woollen *puttees*, and their backs with cotton scarves in the manner of ancient courtiers, four of them lifted the palanquin on their shoulders while one preceded it with a flag. The headman walked humbly behind. They were all merry as befitted a deputation waiting upon the ruler with a precious present and impressed every passerby with their festive appearance. At the octroi-post the tax-collectors wanted to have a look into the palanquin but the headman protested, saying, "Nobody except His Highness will cast a look inside"; and the guards gave in.

The small procession had to pass through the principal streets of the capital before they could reach Shergarhi, the palatial residence of the ruler, built on the left bank of the Jhelum. The news had spread fairly quick throughout the city and many people were curious to know what precious gift it was that had brought these doughty folk over such a long distance. The village folk reached the palace gate and made their purpose known to the guards. The captain of the guards got orders from His Highness to admit them within and to show utmost hospitality. With loud shouts wishing victory and prosperity to His Highness the little procession entered the gate of the palace. They felt amply recompensed when treated as the guests of their ruler.

Within the palace premises they, of course, displayed greater solicitude in according respect and obeisance to the precious but secret gift inside the palanquin. The guards and other palace officials were

highly intrigued about the secret but dared not ask them for fear of offending their sense of etiquette. Meanwhile, the villagers fully basked in the lavish sunshine of the ruler's hospitality and were keenly conscious of the honour which had schuss fallen to their lot. "What reward will His Highness feel too high for us when he receives us in audience and accepts the gift?" whispered the headman into the ears of the gratified elders.

In the afternoon His Highness got up from his siesta and: desired the elders to be admitted to his presence. The -minister-in-waiting, the prime minister and other dignitaries of the State were in attendance. The headman entered barefoot and made obeisance. He was followed-': by the elders bearing the palanquin. "Sire!" began the headman "this humble servant who has the signal honour of standing before his ruler and father is the *nambardark* of the village...on the bank of the Wular lake, famous for its fish, caltrops and deadly waves. Along with these men -who are worthy elders of the said village this loyal servant has covered the distance with a happy heart on account of the pleasant and honourable duty before us. We crave your permission, our liege and father, to place this *nazar* at your Highness' blessed feet."

"Our good men," returned the ruler, "we are touched hype your affection and loyalty which prompted you to come from such a distant place to offer your *nazar*. We desire that it be placed before us."

The headman drew the curtain and thrust his hand into the palanquin. He appeared to be somewhat perplexed) and raised all the four curtains. Whispers were exchanged by all the elders who began to fumble in the folds of theft blanket and rummage into the corners of the palanquin) The *nazar* was not forthcoming. Quite a few minuted passed thus while the villagers completed a thorough search for the coin inside the palanquin. The primp minister said, "Be quick rustics, His Highness has urgent matters of State to attend to." But the rustics could not help the matter. In their rustic hilarity they had so carried the palanquin as to suffer the precious gift to slip somewhere. It was too late now to mend their folly and the headman made the submission: "Our liege and father, we have unfortunately dropped the *nazar* somewhere unwittingly."

The situation thus took a serious turn. The ministers were of one mind in looking upon the incident as an insult to the person and throne of the ruler. Punishment could easily be awarded for such an act. "What astounds me," declared the prime minister, "is the daring of these uncouth rustics. To come right to the august presence of His Highness and try to cover their crime under the frivolous excuse that they had dropped the *nazar* somewhere! Your Highness, let them be taken to the prison and dealt with according to law," he submitted.

The village elders looked like sheep at the gate of the shambles though the headman bore this sorrow with exemplary fortitude. "My head upon your Highness' feet!" declared the headman turning towards the ruler, "make but a gesture and this humble servant will offer his heart for you to feed upon. Who is there so unworthy of his salt as to harbour anything but esteem, honour and affection for our lord, liege and father! Who can be so daring as to put his head into the mouth of a lion! Our Holy Book says that God Almighty is *Karim* (merciful). I invoke your mercy, our respected father, and seek permission to explain the whole case."

The ruler was gifted with a good deal of commonsense. He saw at once that they were simple but good-natured folk who had come from a remote village and meant nothing but loyalty and affection. On the insistence of his councillors he devised a plan to test their intentions. The villagers were placed in a cell and were supplied with all requirements to enable them to cook their food. Instead of being given a burning faggot or live coal they were given a box of safety matches. They did not know what a match stick was and could not cook their meal. They ate part of the rations raw and the rest was kept intact.

When the ruler heard this news through the captain of the guards he was convinced of their innocence. He called the villagers, heard the whole story and had a hearty laugh at their simple faith. He assured the headman that the gift was as good as accepted. In fact he gave them a rupee and received it back as *nazar*. The villagers felt highly gratified. Further, they were treated as guests once again and dismissed the next morning with suitable gifts. In addition, the land rent in their village was reduced. The villagers departed merrily shouting slogans. Back in the village they narrated the tale about how they had been saved from

the very brink of destruction. The tale spread to neighbouring villages and to remote ones till it was imprinted on the minds of men.

Source: **Folk Tales from Kashmir** by S. L. Sadhu

9 The Devil Outwitted

Once there lived a young man in a village. He had no land of his own but worked on the farms of several landlords one after another and thus picked up a living. He was handsome and industrious and entered into matrimony as could be expected. Fortunately his wife was an uncommonly good one. She had attractive features, a strong physique and a sweet disposition - a rare combination. She shared the burdens of her husband and made him happy and somewhat prosperous.

Once, while she was returning from the spring with two pitchers of water - one upon another - on her head in the company of several other women, she and her husband came in for a poignant taunt from her companions. How and why it started is needless to state but in effect they told her that they were landless beggars and had little stake in the village. When she reported the matter to her husband the "earth seemed to slip from under his feet." He had all along been feeling that the landed class, even those petty peasants who could not pay their rent to the State, did not treat him as an equal because he had no land to call his own. The land gave a subtle but respectable status to a tiller of the soil. Minus a piece of land of his own he was like a woman unable to get a husband. Apart from his own feelings on the subject, he was now upset that his wife had got hurt by the unsophisticated though callous observations of the village women-folk.

The peasant was gifted with youth, health and strength. Said he to his wife, "Is that what is worrying you? I never thought that my wife would be upset by such idle gossip. Anyway, before the year is out, you will also be the owner of a small farm of your own."

She felt somewhat reassured but could not see how it would be possible for him to implement what he said. "May be," she thought, "he has some resources unknown to me." She had grounds for her fears because, as far as she knew, he had had no savings. As a cultivator he was entitled to a share ranging from one half to one third of the produce of the farm he worked on. But prices of agricultural produce were low and did not leave anything by way of surplus. His savings had gone away on the occasion of his marriage when he had to make a settlement on his wife. She also helped her husband in earning their living, but soon came extra mouths to feed in the shape of their offspring and their affairs did not go far on the road to prosperity.

The peasant approached the local *patwari* with a present and told him everything. The *patwari* was mighty glad that this latest client would bring him a little money in one form or another.

"I shall make you a peasant-owner" he assured him.

"But I have nothing to purchase it with" rejoined the peasant.

"Don't worry", said the *patwari*. "When I have given you my word, I shall prove true to it."

The *patwari* explained to him how he could become a landholder without having to pay the price on the understanding, of course, that the young man would render adequate service to the official. There was a piece of land on the outskirts of the village which was entered as barren in the revenue records. The *patwari* advised the young man to reclaim it and assured him that he would help him in owning it in course of time.

The young peasant set about his task with might and main. He was helped by his wife and in a few weeks the land was practically fit for cultivation. The peasant was making preparations for sowing seeds. Late one night he was about to return home from this newly-acquired farm when he found a hen with a number of chicks occupying his path. Surprised to see this brood at such a late hour he was about to make his way when a flock of sheep came within his sight, and he was obliged to go from one side to another and suffer much inconvenience on this account. He walked thus for quite a long time, up hill and down dale, getting his clothes rent by brambles, or suffering from a fall now and then, but he nowhere got near his house. It was dark and he could not make out whereabouts he had been led astray. After a while he saw three or four men coming with a lantern from a distance. He came to know through them that he had strayed quite a few miles from his home to which they escorted him. "It is the devil's doing," they told him.

The next evening when he was about to start from his [arm he had some more experiences which the devil alone could cause. He planted his pocket-knife into the ground and sat down. Lo ! the devil came forward in the guise of a man with his heels in front and toes pointing backward. The young peasant did not in the least lose his presence of mind.

"What can I do for you, my dear Sir ?" he addressed the visitant.

"You have been tilling my farm," replied the other.

"Is that so, but the *patwari*...."

"To hell with the dishonest rogue!"

"Never mind, my dear Sir, I have all my life been cultivating land for people. Could your honour get a better tenant than this humble servant?"

The devil obviously felt flattered with the respectful attitude of the peasant. "I have no special prejudice against you. Only I thought that a tenant would take the permission of the owner," said he.

"For that transgression I crave the indulgence of your honour's generosity," submitted the peasant. "And what rent may this humble servant be commanded to pay?" he asked.

Oblivious of the ironical attitude of the peasant, the devil was taken in and demanded the same rent as other well-known landlords.

"Indeed, Sir, I shall feel it a great honour to render unto your worship one half of the crop, but which half it would please your highness to accept, I pray this humble servant may be commanded, the upper half or the lower half."

"Of course, the upper half," said the devil ingenuously.

"By all means, your highness. When the crop is about to be harvested, will it please you to come and have your share?"

The devil was mighty pleased and disappeared. The peasant left for home with a light heart.

He did not tell anything about the visitation to his wife but decided to raise turnips on his land. The seed was sown and in good time the leaves raised their head from the earth. The devil saw it thus and felt pleased that at last through his wisdom he was making a fortune through labour not his own. Then came harvest time. The peasant was up and doing, cutting with his sickle the leaves from turnips. A big heap of leaves he piled for the devil and the turnips his wife carried home. While the devil was deliberating how best to dispose of the produce of his land, the leaves started turning yellow and brown. He carried them to the market but the prospective customers only winked to each other or grinned at the wisdom of the seller. "Is it a conspiracy or what?" said the devil to himself, deliberating over his failure to dispose of the turnip leaves.

He came to know ultimately that he had cut a sorry figure on account of his ignorance of farming. "For once this young peasant has scored over me. But none of this more. I shall teach him a lesson now," thought he.

The next sowing season came and the peasant once again asked the devil "Which part of the crop will it please your honour to have?" The devil did not like to give the peasant the impression that he had been worsened and that he was smarting under the discomfiture.

He simply told him that he would take the lower portion. "By all means, your worship, and this humble servant shall work with utmost zeal to his entire capacity to win the approbation of your honour," said the peasant.

The devil was highly pleased with this unctuous verbiage.

This time the peasant sowed barley and in due course the entire farm was full of green waving crop. It pleased the devil to watch this emerald spot, particularly when the wind forced it to bow to him in courtesy. Gradually the virgin stalks were heavy with ears, and the crop turned yellowish and golden. It was a bumper crop that the peasant raised.

Once again he and his wife got busy with harvesting. They plied their sickles deftly and did a good job of it. Sowing the stalks into two the peasant took all the ears and the grain leaving the stubble and the roots for the devil. When the latter came to collect it, the peasant respectfully submitted that the entire share was kept for the rightful owner, untouched. And the devil was so glad! But in the market they laughed at his stupidity and he understood that he had been duped once more.

"I must teach this fellow a lesson" said he to himself and he felt relieved to throw the bundle of stubble into the stream. By experience he had found that it was either the root or the top that mattered. To eliminate all risks he determined to have both as his share and leave the middle of the crop to the peasant. And he communicated it to him.

The peasant agreed unhesitatingly. The devil was sure to trip him up. But the peasant had his own plans. This time he sowed maize. The crop was rich and luscious. The stalks grew tall and full of white milky cobs. In time the grains of maize became brown and strong on the cobs. The devil came and got his due, the roots and the lofty crowns; and the peasant bundled together all the stalks in between with the rich cobs growing on them.

The devil soon realized that even the third time he had been defeated. "He is more than a match for me," he came to the conclusion. He called the peasant.

"What is your highness's pleasure?" submitted the latter courteously.

"Pleasure, indeed!" the devil replied. "It is too much for me," he added, "the land and its problems. From this time forth I have absolutely no claim upon your farm and you can do with it what you like."

"Your highness, I am much grateful to you!"

There is a French variant in which the peasant sowed pole-beans on the third occasion. Afterwards they hold a contest in wit, the last one of its kind, in which, of course, the devil is defeated.

Source: Folk Tales from Kashmir by S. L. Sadhu

10 Just a Nickname

When all is said and done a nickname is a name, a concrete appellation standing like an unshakable rock in an angry ocean which demolishes and engulfs reputations. Think of such names as William Rufus or Single Speech Hamilton! The nickname enables us not only to pin-point the particular man from among the billions of the dead but also unrolls for our perusal the whole record of his character. What a great boon it, therefore, is for the unknowing!

Nicknames have had a glorious career in Kashmir. They were invented and applied owing to an inherent necessity of spotting out men and women, or families. With the exception of a few cases what are family names today were but nicknames once. These nicknames have gradually come into their own and attained respectability quite at par with the original family surnames. Surnames like Trambhu (meaning pock marked), Braru (a cat), Dand (a bull), Tak (an earthenware plate), Alma (unbaked), Kotru (pigeon), Kantru (a male sparrow), Khar (an ass), are proudly professed by hundreds of families today. The list could be multiplied a thousand fold. Human deformities like Loung (lame), Shanglu (with six fingers), Kana (with a deformed ear) give rise to many family names today, while other bodily characteristics are responsible for many more like Mota (corpulent one), Nika (a slender one) Chhot (a pygmy), Dandan (one with teeth dropped), Khosa (a beardless one), Khor (one with scabies). These families are regarded to be as proud and good as any, and yet nicknames have made many a person miserable.

There was once a peasant in a Kashmir village. He had not much of land and was obliged to spend several months of the year in the city as a domestic servant in one family or another. It was by no means a pleasant experience for him to be at the mercy of his employer and his numerous encumbrances including an aunt, two wives and an indistinguishable brood of children. Getting up early in the morning he, to use his own words, would "get . into the harness like the pony dragging a cart." Sweeping the house, several speedy trips to the market, the usual drudgery in the scullery, tending the children, cleaning utensils, washing clothes, making beds, and quite a good deal more was his usual routine. And all the time he had had no tidings from his wife and children throughout the long winter months.

Is it surprising that he complained of his unenviable lot to many? Among these latter was a shopkeeper from whom this peasant-cum-domestic servant would make purchases for the household of his master. He seemed to be a sympathetic man and offered the other the tube of his bubble bubble at which he would give a few pulls with his ample lungs. "Will you take my advice if I place an inexpensive plan before you of supplementing your meagre income?" said the shopkeeper once. The other jumped at the idea as he was in need of nothing else more earnestly than the means to get rid of the drudgery of domestic service. "All that you need do," said the shopkeeper, "is to buy a hen. She can be fed with a few crumbs and will lay eggs. I undertake to make the sale of your eggs for a nominal commission."

The idea of raising poultry was nothing novel for the peasant but he always found it difficult to negotiate a.: price for the produce. The village shopkeeper got eggs almost for nothing from unsophisticated peasants. Therefore, though rearing of poultry did not cost anything, it meant a lot of bother for little gain, and hence the hesitation in the mind of the peasant to undertake it.

As the shopkeeper promised the peasant to arrange the sale of the produce, the biggest stile in the way of this new undertaking was overcome. Though he had no ready cash he managed to borrow some money to purchase a hen. In due course of time the hen laid eggs and brought a little sum to the peasant. The peasant invested the proceeds in the same business and added to his stock of poultry. His business expanded steadily till by the next fall of winter the peasant felt that he could manage to live without having to go to the city in search of service. It was such a blessing to be spared the drudgery of a domestic servant and the shame of it. The peasant was grateful to his stock of poultry and particularly the first hen with which he made a start.

The first hen happened to be whitish in colour. It was not bright dazzling white but rather the faint pale white left after the other colours had been washed out. The peasant regarded this hen as the harbinger of good fortune to him and wherever he went or whomever he talked to, he had something to say about his white hen, how it started crowing early in the morning, how it would sometimes strut or cut a graceful

caper.... Never did he miss an occasion to say something about the white hen. In course of time the white hen became the talk of the village and the surrounding ones too.

The next stage was to identify the peasant as the owner of the white hen: "M --- has been responsible for such and such an act."

"Which M --- ?"

"The one who owns the white hen."

Not long after, however, they omitted to mention the ownership entirely and called him by this very name, the "white hen." This name spread like wild fire in the manner of all nicknames which are always catching. Urchins in the streets and old men near the bank of the stream began to call him by this very name, and this was very irritating. Every time he heard the urchins shouting "white hen" he felt provoked and angry. He was easily put out and wished to crush them to a jelly and retorted with abuse and vituperation. This tickled the urchins and encouraged them to further fire works. Even the grown-ups felt a peculiar pleasure in provoking him.

His susceptibility to excitement on account of the nickname increased tenfold. If he saw two men talking together he suspected that they were plotting to shout "the white hen" behind his back. If he saw people smiling he ran to the conclusion that they were doing so at his expense. This gave people opportunities more and more to fling the nickname at him either in his face or behind his back.

This excitement affected his nerves. "They are bent upon driving me mad," he would blurt out now and then.

"Look here," a good friend would tell him, "you are a grown-up man, you should exercise self-restraint and not get upset like a girl of sixteen."

"Self-restraint! Do you talk of self-restraint? Who can exercise it to a greater degree than I do? But how long can I exercise self-restraint when they are bent upon downright abuse? Didn't you hear them shouting 'the white hen'? Rascals. I'll make an example of them," and down he would rush with a stone in his hand against an imaginary foe raising the provocative slogan.

A simple matter took thus a grave and tragic turn. Several times in the day he would imagine people shouting the nickname and out of his house he rushed, set upon "teaching the rogues a lesson." Physicians and sane men came to only one conclusion and that was that a change in the environment alone could save him. He was advised to go out of the village again for some time.

He could have gone to the city to his former employer. But he preferred to go to the plains beyond the mountain walls encircling the valley. He joined one of the gangs of peasants who go out to the plains in the winter to supplement their earning on their lands. He earned a pretty little sum everyday which pleased his heart. But, above all, he was happy because no one in the plains knew the nickname which had almost driven him mad. Those terrible moods of excitement, moments of temporary insanity or depression became a matter of the past and he came almost to believe that life was not so bad.

Several winters passed. In the plains the idea of his former nickname had practically disappeared from his mind, what with the change in the environment and the savings from his wages which had accumulated. The thought of returning home began to stir his heart. This craving became stronger every day till he could no longer resist it. He decided to visit home.

The return journey was quicker and easier, for he could afford to come in a bus. Money was jingling in his pockets. He came to the road crossing whence his village was but a couple of miles distant. He saw several men going to the surrounding villages and they fell a talking.

"Hello! I seem to have seen you and known you but can't place you," said one.

"Indeed so do I. But methinks I saw him several years back," joined another.

"Sure enough, for I am coming from the plains after several years."

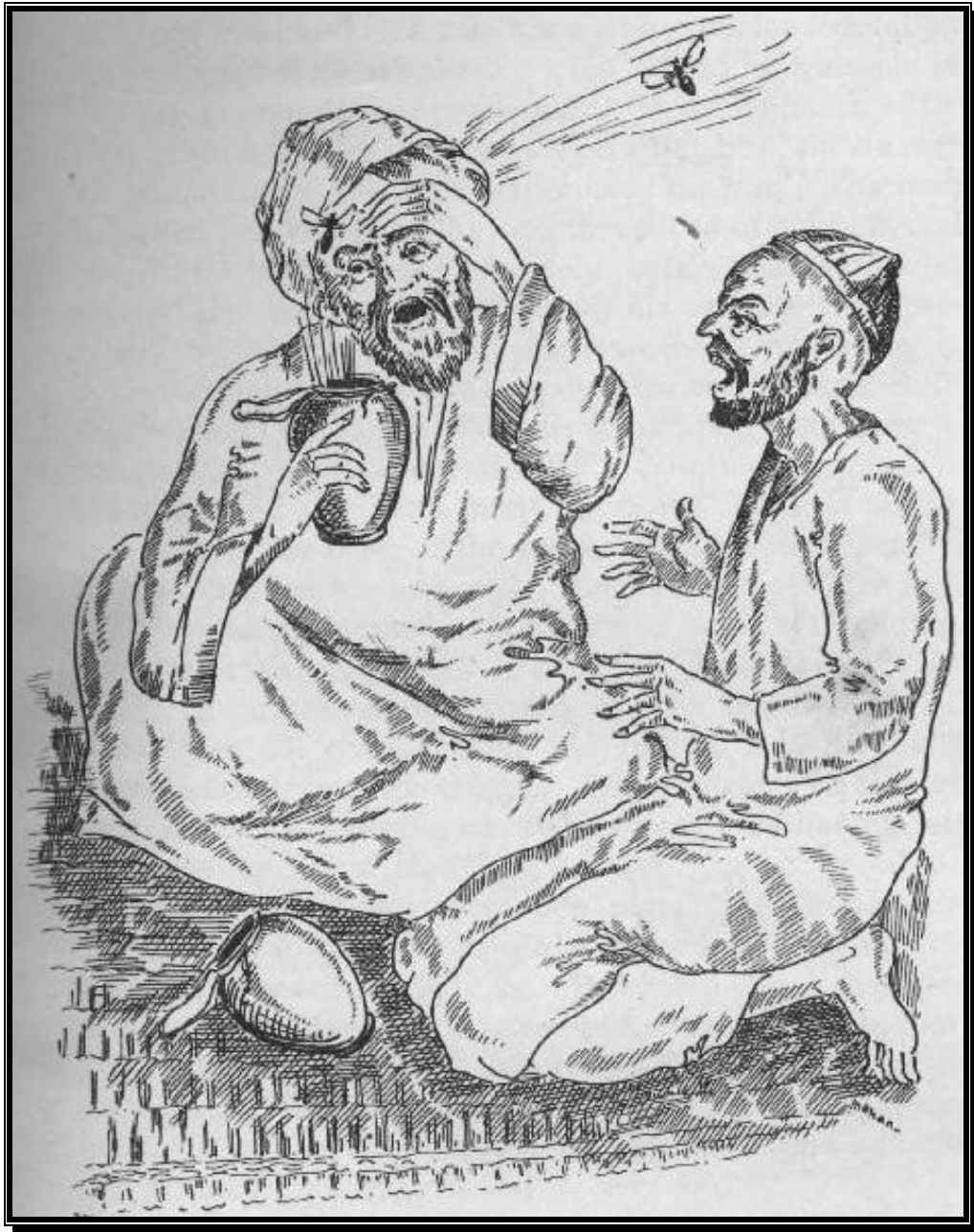
"I used to know a fellow who couldn't stand a nickname and left the village. Your face very much reminds me of him. Are you by any means the same fellow whom they nicknamed 'The white hen'? He has been missing for many a year now."

"Lord! they are starting it with a vengeance," he thought "Good friends," he told them, "yes, I am the man who could not stand the nickname 'the white hen' and slipped out to the plains. The craving for my home brought me back. You have restarted the game right now when I have not even stepped into my village. I will go back to the plains and I wish you joy of your homes. Such a place is not for me."

He retraced his steps right then and came back to the plains. And the nickname "the white hen" languished and died.

Source: Folk Tales from Kashmir by S. L. Sadhu

11 Eh! Oh!



Away from the ocean the sailor is never in his element. He falls D prey to the sharp practices of swindlers and city sharks; he becomes the laughing stock of the townsmen. Likewise is the peasant when he is off his land. Clever people exploit his simplicity, his ingenuousness and his capacity to work. He may be made the butt of many a jest, or the victim of a practical joke, and he bears his cross on his ample shoulders patiently.

Owing to the rigour of the climate in Kashmir, the peasant has to pass through a period of unemployment for nearly five months in a year. The well-to-do farmers can afford to enjoy this enforced rest, consuming cooked rice, lentils, turnips and pickled knol-kohl to their hearts' content. Those who are not so well-off supplement their slender incomes by working on cottage looms arid turning out woollen blankets. Others,

standing at the lowest rung of the ladder, hire themselves out as domestic servants in the larger towns, or the metropolis of Srinagar. Aziz Buth belonged to this last class.

Many, many years ago when the corn was abundant to the extent of superfluity, Aziz Buth could not stretch his harvest so far as to cover the needs of the family all the year round. He was the father of two children, and in spite of the labours of the whole family—even the elder child would sometimes contribute his mite—he ran into debt. He was, therefore, compelled to drift towards the city in search of temporary employment as a domestic servant.

Untutored in the ways of the world as he was, he did not think it would be easy for him to find some employment in the city. He spent the first night in a mosque wrapped in a blanket, for he knew of no secular habitation where he could obtain shelter. He feasted on a couple of dry loaves and sincere prayers rose from his heart. The next morning had a pleasant surprise for him, for he met an acquaintance—a rare experience for him. The man belonged to a village in the neighbourhood of his own, and they knew each other moderately well. Aziz Buth considered his night well-spent when his acquaintance promised to get him the sort of employment he was after.

The acquaintance was as good as his word. Aziz Buth was taken to the house of a man who appeared to be very prosperous. There were already a couple of servants in the house and Aziz Buth made the third. Khwaja Saheb, that is how the head of the house was designated, called him to his presence and said, "Many people proudly seek my service for the consideration of free board and lodging. Will that satisfy you?"

Aziz Buth was so overawed by the manner of the Khwaja in his costly shawl and turban that he found words missing from his tongue. With difficulty he seemed to stammer out: "Noble sir, I am a poor man having left little ones in the village."

Khwaja Saheb was thereupon pleased to fix half-an-ass load of paddy as his monthly wages besides the privilege of free board and lodging. "But, mind you, if ever one of my servants is not able to complete a task given to him, he is subjected to a fine," said he, half in jest and half in seriousness. Aziz Buth's companion only laughed "ha! ha" by way of taking the sting out of these words and he himself grinned bashfully.

The winter was on and Aziz Buth gave his best to the employer. Late at night before he went to his bed Aziza had the privilege of being admitted to the bed chamber of his employer. He was asked to massage the legs of the Khwaja with his strong muscular hands, for he found sleep evading him until he was subjected to this process. Early in the morning, sometimes even before the cock crew, the Khwaja would shout "Aziza" and the latter was expected to be ready with the hubble-bubble, refilled with fresh water from the river, with tobacco and live coal to enable his employer to fumigate his interior to his fill. He was the favourite of the harem in so far as he would be entrusted with all tasks requiring personal attention. His colleagues—the fellow servants in the house—encouraged him in this belief, for otherwise such tasks would fall to their own lot. This encouragement lightened their own tasks, for Aziza could easily be got into the right frame of mind so as to volunteer to undertake what all shirked.

The winter turned out to be extra severe. Householders, who could afford to do so, avoided leaving their homes as far as possible. But domestics like Aziza had no choice in matters like these. In fact the comforts available in the home of the Khwaja Saheb depended a great deal upon the exertions of men like Aziza, and the latter was modestly proud of the part he played in this respect.

At the end of a period of about four months Aziza thought of going home. He had not seen his family all the while and soon his farm would claim his attention. He made a request to the great Khwaja, the first of its kind. The latter did not seem to relish it, and with a face beaming with a mischievous smile he said, "Aziza ! I shall certainly pay all your dues. But before I do so, go to the market and get me two things, wai (eh!) and wai (oh!). Your wages will be paid to you only when you get the things." "Eh and Oh!" ejaculated Aziza in utter amazement, for he had never heard of such things. However, he had not the face to articulate his suspicions lest it be only his ignorance. So he set out.

Long he roamed and far, but never did any shopkeeper seem to deal in these substances. Some laughed outright, others pricked their ears while some came to regard him light in the head. "Should I fail in this last task?" cried he. "All these months I worked to the utter satisfaction of everybody' arid now this last straw seems to be too much for me And the big man will probably eat up my wages if I fail to satisfy him.... "

He was walking abstractedly, with these thoughts pressing upon his mind. He went from shop to shop. At the seventh or the seventeenth shop he met with a different response to his inquiry. 'And what do you require them for, my good man?" asked the shopkeeper, an oldish man with a rich stubble on his face. Aziza told his tale.

"And if you fail to place them before him you won't get our pay, your hard-earned dues, is that it?"

"Exactly; that is what the man threatens me with."

The old man soon found out that the Khwaja was trading upon the simplicity of the peasant. He was himself something of a sport and he thought of playing the game for the fun of it.

"I can give it to you provided you hand it over directly to the Khwaja himself without showing it to any one else. Do you agree?"

Aziza agreed.

"It is meant for Khwaja Saheb. Do not spoil it by examining it yourself or fingering it," the shopkeeper insisted.

"Not at all, sir; and God bless you for coming to my rescue. I went over from shop to shop but nobody seems to stock it," said Aziza with a feeling of relief.

"Such precious things are not found with every grocer. Even I keep it in a godown. You will wait here for me."

He returned after half-an-hour and gave Aziza a package covered in an old newspaper bound with a dried weed. He got eight annas for his pains and Aziza was glad that he could now keep his head high in the presence of all the other servants in that he had not failed in his errand.

The Khwaja expected Aziza to return and report failure and crave his mercy, for when God created this universe out of His bounty, he forgot to give a corporeal frame to "eh!" and "oh !". According to the verbal agreement which, of course, was morally binding upon Aziza the latter's failure to work up to the satisfaction of the master would result in forfeiting his wages. The Khwaja was thus looking forward to a lot of fun: his verdict that Aziza was no longer entitled to his wages would bring Aziza prostrate before him, but that he would stick to his word till ultimately he would condescend to release part of the amount....

The Khwaja was in a very rosy mood when Aziza appeared before him. The tube of the hubble-bubble passed from one mouth to another. Seeing Aziza he simulated an angry mood. "Where, in the name of God Almighty, have you been all this while," he shouted. "I sent you on a little errand and you seem to have been lazing at your grandmother's. How fat you have grown eating my cooked rice here!"

"Respected sir, I have been roaming from street to street in search of it and my legs are aching with the fatigue," replied Aziza.

"If your legs are so delicate, why did you take the trouble of coming over here for employment? Did you not get the thing?"

"Respected sir, I have got it," submitted Aziza.

The Khwaja relaxed as he now expected to fill the little assembly with theatrical laughter by declaring what Aziza had got as spurious. "What have you got? Let me see it," he said in an over-weening tone.

Aziza submitted the little package. The whole gathering was intrigued. The outer chord of dry weed was unfastened and the wrapping removed. Two small earthenware receptacles, no bigger than a medium sized ink pot, were discovered. Each had a wide mouth closed over with a piece of paper pasted with gum. Their inquisitiveness was piqued.

The paper covering of one of the vessels was broken through and the Khwaja peered into it. It appeared to be empty. While he was about to throw it away out came a bee which buzzed along the hand of the Khwaja who could not help crying "oh!" So far so good.

The paper lid of the other vessel was broken through. But before the Khwaja could say anything, from its interior darted a wasp who perched directly on his brow and involuntarily a painful "oh!" escaped from his lips.

The assembly realized that Aziza had after all not failed to get the rare commodity!

Source: Folk Tales from Kashmir by S. L. Sadhu

12 The Son-in-Law

Qadira lived in the house of the great Sheikh as did his father. The latter was first employed in the household as a groom. His wife died in the village to which the family belonged and the stable-man brought the little boy to live in the house of the nobleman. Here he assisted his father in the stable and sometimes was entrusted with errands by the ladies of the household. His chief claim to his board and lodge with the illustrious family was his companionship with the young Sheikh, the nobleman's son. The latter was practically of the same age and grew so fond of the urchin that he would never brook separation from him except when the former was engaged in assisting his father in cleaning the stables or grooming the ponies.

Though Qadira had to remove horse-dung from the stable or to attend to other unpleasant duties he kept himself unusually clean. His father persuaded him to wash his clothes frequently. In winter when it was cold he went to the bath and made free use of the warm water in the boiler after other members of the household went to bed. Those who did not know him could hardly suspect that he was a stable-boy. Those who saw him frequently always quoted the Kashmiri adage that one should wash one's hands clean before touching him.

Well, Qadira was a groom and errand-boy in the house of the Sheikh and a companion of the nobleman's son. It was never intended, that Qadira should receive any bookish education. But being exposed to it in the company of the young Sheikh he could not help remembering the same lessons and picking up literacy. His blue blooded companion was a boy of varied interests as befitted the scion of the great house; he could, therefore, pay only scant attention to his studies. Qadira's mind, on the other hand, seemed to be so constituted that letters, sentences and whole lessons found a fertile soil there. If the money spent over the young master of the house did not yield result commensurate with its magnitude, it at least made up through the education of the rustic urchin.

Qadira grew into a shrewd lad. He could strike a good bargain and gained advantage by his boldness and dash where faint-hearted men older in age failed. Before very long he was promoted to assist the bailiff and keep accounts. This was a signal advance in his position which delighted his father but filled other domestics with pangs of jealousy. He discharged his duties admirably and his master was pleased with him mighty well. He never made any secret of his appreciation of Qadira's ability.

One day Qadira's father saw his master in a jovial mood and was assiduous in keeping his exalted spirits aloft. When he perceived that the moment was opportune, he said, "Sire, may I make a humble request?"

"Do so, for I am much indebted to you and your son for your faithful service. What do you want?"

"Father," said the servant, "I have grown grey eating your salt. It is my great good fortune. My son has bloomed into a young man eating your bread. While it is my ambition to lay down my life in your service, I request you to seek a job in the administration for your slave, my son. I do not quite relish his being here."

He told his master how other servants in his household felt jealous of father and son, and cursed them behind their backs. "I can stand anything except a curse against my only son." His words moved the heart of the Sheikh, who himself had only one son. In his own heart he had an additional motive and that was to gain respectability in the eyes of society. Before long the Sheikh, a big feudal lord got Ghulam Qadir, the son of his trusted servant appointed as a clerk in the office of the district collector who was only too pleased to embrace a chance to oblige a big landlord like the influential Sheikh.

Ghulam Qadir was an intelligent clerk and came to have a reputation for efficient work. He disposed of the work allotted to him in no time every day and was also able to assist other clerks in the disposal of their cases. Consequently he got to know the work in all sections of the office which gave him a sort of a key-position. Other clerks sought his advice when baffled with difficulties. Intricate cases could not be attended to without his consultation and apparently insurmountable difficulties were smoothed out by him in no time. The district collector was pleased with him and appointed him as his own *Munshi* or confidential clerk.

Munshi Ghulam Qadir, or Munshi Ji as he came to be called now, had learnt another precious lesson by instinct kind that was that "more things are wrought by establishing proper public relations than this world dreams of." Accordingly he went to the residence of the collector now and then with a case of choice luscious apples, fine walnuts or a *khirwar* of *mushkbudji* rice. The collector would not accept such a present from his humble clerk, but he had no hesitation when he heard that it came from the great Sheikh. There was, therefore, little doubt that the Munshi would race along the roads to prosperity along which others were panting on leaden feet or merely limping. In a year or so the Munshi found himself transferred to the executive line as a *girdawar* with a score of *patwaris* under him.

Ghulam Qadir now found it necessary to come to the notice of the *hakim-e-ala* or the provincial governor and he sought the good offices of his erstwhile master, the Sheikh. Not long after, the governor went on a tour of the part of the country where the Sheikh had his estate. It was in his own interest for the latter to entertain the governor. At a dinner held in honour of the governor the Sheikh commended his protege to the kind attention of his august guest. Munshi Ji was in need of just this introduction. He won his place nearer and nearer to the heart of the governor by the efficient discharge of his duties. The governor also received occasional presents from the Sheikh and he was intelligent enough to understand that the latter would feel obliged if he pushed up Ghulam Qadir. In a couple of years, therefore, he got him appointed as a *naib-tehsildar*.

The old groom in the house of the Sheikh was beside himself with joy and urged his son to take steps to settle himself in married life. Ghulam Qadir, however, was not satisfied yet and considered such a development premature. He had a higher ambition and marriage, he felt, would hinder rather than help its realization. He picked up the ins and outs of his new job till he felt confident that he could hold his own against even the veterans amongst his subordinates. He prepared to win the good graces of the *mashir-i-mal*, the supreme head of the revenue administration of the State. This time he did not trouble the Sheikh himself but played his cards so well that the governor offered his good offices to introduce him to the *mashir-i-mal* as a relative of the great Sheikh. This done, the *mashir-i-mal* found the young man very useful. If eminent people came from outside the State as guests of the administrator, Ghulam Qadir saw to it that they were comfortably lodged and looked after; if there was a wedding or a festival in his house, Ghulam Qadir lost no time in making arrangements for the purchase of commodities of the finest quality. Besides, the Sheikh was eminent enough to include the administrator in the circle of his friends and suitable gifts were gratefully accepted by him from the former. It was, of course, Ghulam Qadir through whom such gifts were received and the latter's name had therefore grown familiar to the *mashir-i-mal*.

The Sheikh once called on the *mashir-i-mal* and Ghulam Qadir too figured in the conversation. "I have not been able to do anything for your kinsman," said the minister. The Sheikh spoke courteously meaning that it was never too late to begin. A couple of days later when Ghulam Qadir saw the *mashir-i-mal* in the course of his official duty the former put him the question: "How are you related to the Sheikh?" After a slight demur he replied "I am his son-in-law, sir."

"Oh really!" observed the minister. "I am very sorry. I have not been able to do anything for you. Please convey my apologies to your father-in-law. I shall try my utmost to find a way to help you."

In a week or so Ghulam Qadir became a *tehsildar*. The minister sent a message to the Sheikh expressing the hope that he would feel somewhat satisfied at the promotion of his relation, adding that he had learnt of their intimacy only a few days earlier.

When Ghulam Qadir met the Sheikh next he asked him how he had described his relationship with himself. Ghulam Qadir was silent. The Sheikh reiterated his question but the other was still hesitant. "You had better kill me sir," replied Ghulam Qadir. But the Sheikh was eager and promised to forgive him. It was then that Ghulam Qadir revealed the truth.

"Son . . . in . . . law!" His face turned red in anger. But that was not for long, for he added, "You have reached your present position through hard work and intelligence while my own son has come to no good. I really could not get a better son-in-law. You are my son-in-law indeed," and he determined to entrust his daughter to him.

Thus did the groom's son marry the daughter of his master It was a proud day for the groom and prouder still for the Sheikh.

Source: Folk Tales from Kashmir by **S. L. Sadhu**