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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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Story of the wonderful mango fruit

On the banks of the Kâvêrî there was a city called Tiruvidaimarudur, where ruled a king named Chakraditya. In that city there lived a poor Brâhman and his wife, who, having no children, brought up in their house a young parrot as tenderly as if it had been their own offspring. One day the parrot was sitting on the roof of the house, basking itself in the morning sun, when a large flock of parrots flew past, talking to each other about certain mango fruits. The Brâhman's parrot asked them what were the peculiar properties of those fruits, and was informed that beyond the seven oceans there was a great mango tree, the fruit of which gave perpetual youth to the person who ate of it, however old and infirm he might be. On hearing of this wonder the Brâhman's parrot requested permission to accompany them, which being granted, they all continued their flight. When at length they arrived at the mango tree, all ate of its fruit; but the Brâhman's parrot reflected:—

“It would not be right for me to eat this fruit; I am young, while my adopted parents, the poor Brâhman and his wife are very old. So I shall give them this fruit, and they will become young and blooming by eating it.”

And that same evening the good parrot brought the fruit to the Brâhman, and explained to him its extraordinary properties. But the Brâhman thought within himself:—“I am a beggar. What matters it if I become young and live for ever, or else die this very moment? Our king is very good and charitable. If such a great man should eat of this fruit and renew his youth, he would confer the greatest benefit on mankind. Therefore I will give this mango to our good king.”

In pursuance of this self-denying resolution, the poor Brâhman proceeded to the palace and presented the fruit to the king, at the same time relating how he had obtained it and its qualities. The king richly rewarded the Brâhman for his gift, and sent him away. Then he began to reflect thus:—“Here is a fruit which can bestow perpetual youth on the person who eats it. I should gain this great boon for myself alone, and what happiness could I expect under such circumstances unless shared by my friends and subjects? I shall therefore not eat this mango-fruit, but plant it carefully in my garden, and it will in time become a tree, which will bear much fruit having the same wonderful virtue, and my subjects shall, every one, eat of the fruit, and, with myself, be endowed with everlasting youth.”

So, calling his gardener, the king gave him the fruit, and he planted it in the royal presence. In due course of time the fruit grew into a fine tree, and during the spring season it began to bud and blossom and bear fruit. The king, having fixed upon an auspicious day for cutting one of the mango-fruits, gave it to his domestic

chaplain, who was ninety years old, in order that his youth should be renewed. But no sooner had the priest tasted it than he fell down dead. At this unexpected calamity the king was both astonished and deeply grieved. When the old priest's wife heard of her husband's sudden death she came and prayed the king to allow her to perform sati with him on the same funeral pyre, which increased the king's sorrow; but he gave her the desired permission, and himself superintended all the ceremonies of the cremation. King Chakraditya then sent for the poor Brâhman, and demanded of him how he had dared to present a poisonous fruit to his king. The Brâhman replied:— "My lord, I brought up a young parrot in my house, in order to console me for having no son. That parrot brought me the fruit one day, and told me of its wonderful properties. Believing that the parrot spoke the truth, I presented it to your Majesty, never for a moment suspecting it to be poisonous."

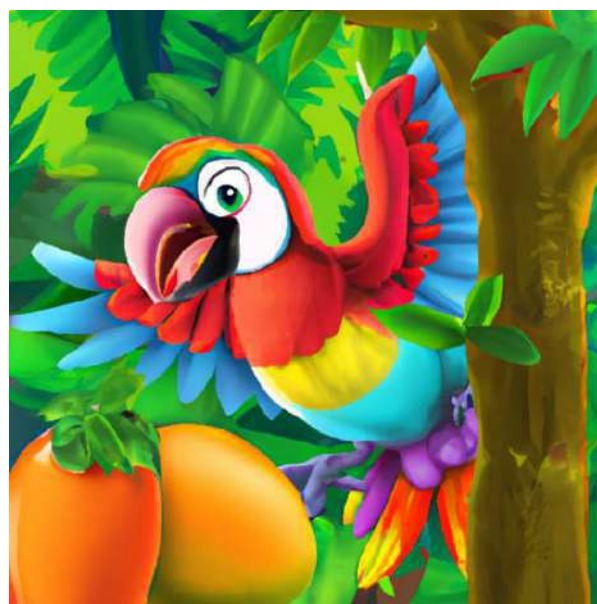
The king listened to the poor Brâhman's words, but thought that the poor priest's death should be avenged. So he consulted his ministers who recommended, as a slight punishment, that the Brâhman should be deprived of his left eye. This was done accordingly, and, on his return home, when his wife saw his condition, she asked the reason of such mutilation.

"My dear," said she, "the parrot we have fostered so tenderly is the cause of this."

And they resolved to break the neck of the treacherous bird. But the parrot, having overheard their conversation, thus addressed them:— "My kind foster

parents, everyone must be rewarded for the good actions or punished for the evil deeds of his previous life. I brought you the fruit with a good intention, but my sins in my former life have given it a different effect. Therefore I pray you to kill me and bury me with a little milk in a pit. And, after my funeral ceremony is over, I request you to undertake a pilgrimage to Banaras to expiate your own sins.”

So the old Brâhmaṇ and his wife killed their pet parrot and buried it as directed, after which, overcome with grief, they set out on a pilgrimage to the Holy City. Meanwhile the king



commanded his gardener to set guards over the poison-tree, and to allow no one to eat of its fruit; and all the inhabitants soon came to know that the king had a mango tree in his garden, the fruit of which was deadly poison. Now, there was in the city an old washerwoman, who had frequent quarrels with her daughter-in-law, and one day, being weary of life, she left the house, threatening to eat of the poison tree and die.

The young parrot who was killed for having brought the poisonous mango-fruit was re-born as a green parrot, and was waiting for an opportunity to demonstrate the harmless nature of the tree; and when he saw the old woman approach with a determination to put an end to her life by eating of its fruit, he plucked one with his

beak and dropped it down before her. The old woman rejoiced that fate sanctioned her death, and greedily ate the fruit, when lo! instead of dying she became young and blooming again. Those who had seen her leave the house a woman over sixty years of age were astonished on seeing her return as a handsome girl of sixteen and learning that the wonderful transformation was caused by the supposed poisonous mango-tree.

The strange news soon reached the king, who, in order to test the tree still further, ordered another fruit of it to be brought and gave it to a goldsmith of more than ninety years of age, who had embezzled some gold which had been entrusted to him to make into ornaments for the ladies of the palace, and was on that account undergoing imprisonment. When he had eaten the fruit, he, in his turn, became a young man of sixteen. The king was now convinced that the fruit of the mango-tree, so far from being poisonous, had the power of converting decrepit age into lusty and perennial youth. But how had the old priest died by eating of it?

It was by a mere accident. One day a huge serpent was sleeping on a branch of the mango-tree, and its head hung over one of the fruit; poison dropped from its mouth and fell on the rind of that fruit; the gardener, who had no knowledge of this, when asked to bring a fruit for the priest, happened to bring the one on which the poison had fallen, and the priest having eaten it, died.

And now the king caused proclamation to be made throughout his kingdom that all who pleased might come and partake of the mango-fruit, and everyone ate of it and became young. But king Chakaraditya's heart burnt within him at the remembrance of his ill-treatment of the poor Brâhmaṇ, who had returned with his wife from Banaras. So he sent for him, explained his mistake, and gave him a fruit to eat, which, having tasted, the aged Brâhmaṇ became young and his eye was also restored to him. But the greatest loss of all, that of the parrot who brought the fruit from beyond the seven oceans, remained irreparable.