



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Batcha and the dragon

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Once upon a time there was a shepherd named Batcha. Every summer he brought his flock of sheep up to the mountain top where he had a cabin.

One autumn day, he looked down the mountainside and saw something strange. Hundreds of snakes made their way to a rocky cliff not far from where he was. Arriving at the cliff, the snakes bit off the leaf of a plant that grew there. They touched the rock with the leaf and it opened. One by one the snakes crept in and after the last snake the rock closed again. Batcha rubbed his eyes. Had he seen this correctly? He thought he should take a closer look. It wasn't that far, and the dog was able to look after the sheep for a bit.



He walked to the cliff and looked at the mysterious plant. He had never seen this plant before. He took a leaf and touched the rock in the same place the snakes had done. Immediately the rock opened. Batcha crept in carefully. The cave closed behind him. The walls were covered in gold, silver and precious stones. There was a gold table in the center with a monstrous great kingsnake on it, fast asleep. Hundreds of snakes lay on the ground. They all slept soundly, for not one of them moved while Batcha walked about.

Batcha thought, "This is very strange indeed, but it's time for me to go back to my sheep."

But Batcha noticed he couldn't get out, because the rock was closed. There he was, trapped with hundreds of snakes. But down to earth as Batcha was, he said to himself: "It's all right, if I can't figure it out now, I better spend the night here. Then he pulled his cape around him, lay down, and soon fell asleep. He was awakened by a rustling murmur. At first he thought he was in his own cabin, but when he opened his eyes, he saw the glittering walls of the cave and remembered where he was.

The kingsnake was still on the golden table, but he was awake. The snakes around him were also awake and Batcha heard them say, "Is it time? Is it time?"

The kingsnake slowly raised his head and said with a deep sound, "Yes, it is time." Then the serpent stretched out and slid from the gold table toward the cave wall, followed by the other serpents. Batcha ran after them and thought to himself, "I'll just go after them." The kingsnake touched the wall with his tongue and the rock opened. Then he slid aside and the snakes crept out one by one. When the last snake was out, Batcha tried to follow him, but the rock slammed shut in his face and Batcha was trapped again. The kingsnake hissed at him, "You wretched human being, you cannot get out! You are here and you will stay here!"

"But I can't stay here," Batcha said. "You have to let me out. I have sheep in the pasture and a wife in the valley."

Batcha pleaded and tried everything to talk the snake into letting him out, until the old snake finally said, "Okay, I'll let you out, but not before you've sworn me a triple oath that you won't tell anyone how you got in."

Batcha promised, and three times he swore a mighty oath not to tell anyone how he had entered the cave. The serpent let him out, but warned Batcha, "If you break this oath, a terrible fate will befall you."

Batcha got away. Once outside, he looked around. He was amazed to see that everything looked so different. It was autumn when he went into the cave, but it looked like spring now. "What happened?" he cried. "Have I slept all winter? Oh, where are my sheep? And my wife, what will she say?"

He walked to his cabin with trembling knees. His wife was inside. Batcha wasn't quite sure what to say to her, so he hid in the bushes for a moment to come up with a story that would explain everything. As he sat there, he saw a neatly dressed gentleman approaching the door of the hut. He asked his wife where her husband was. The woman began to cry and explained to the stranger that her husband had suddenly disappeared one day in the previous autumn. He had taken his sheep to pasture, as usual, and never came back after that. "I think he was devoured by a wolf or witches did something terrible to him," she sobbed. "And now I am alone, a poor, forsaken widow! Oh woe, woe!"

Her grief was so great that Batcha jumped out of the bushes to comfort her.

"Dear wife," don't cry, "I'm back alive and well! I slept in the cabin. I must have slept all winter!"

At the sight of her husband, the woman stopped crying. Her grief turned to surprise and then to anger. "What have you been up to?" she cried. "What kind of shepherd are you, who forsakes his sheep and his wife? And that to laze around all winter, sleeping like a snake. Well, tell me, where have you been and what have you done?"

The stranger had to jump between them because the woman was about to attack Batcha. "Leave your husband to me," said the stranger, "I promise you that I will hear the truth from him."

When she was gone, the stranger turned into a hideous looking creature with a third eye, in the middle of his forehead.

"Great mercy," thought Batcha, "it is the Wizard of the Mountain! What will happen to me now?"

Batcha had often heard frightening stories about the wizard, including how he could take any form he wanted, and how he could change others into anything he wanted.

"Ah!" laughed the wizard. "I see you recognize me! Now no more lies! Tell me; where have you been all winter?"

Batcha remembered the threefold oath to the old king serpent and was afraid to break it. But the wizard asked the question a second time and a third time, and each time it grew bigger and more terrifying. It scared Batcha very much and out of fear the shepherd broke his promise and told the wizard everything.

"Come with me now," said the wizard. "Show me the cliff and the magical plants."

What could Batcha do but obey? He walked to the cliff and plucked a leaf from the magical plant.

"Open the rock!" roared the wizard.

Batcha laid the leaf against the cliff and immediately the rock opened.

"And now go in," cried the wizard.

But Batcha began to tremble and could barely move. The wizard took his magic book and began to read a spell from it. Suddenly the earth trembled, and thunder came from the sky. With a great hissing sound, a monster dragon flew out of the cave. It was the ancient king serpent who, after living as a serpent for seven years, had now turned into a flying dragon. From his huge mouth he breathed fire and smoke. With his long tail he swung left and right between the trees and these snapped and broke like twigs. The wizard, still reading a spell from his book, gave Batcha a rein.

"Throw this around his neck," he cried.

Batcha took the reins, but was terrified to throw the reins around the dragon's neck. The dragon turned and ducked under Batcha's body and before Batcha understood what was happening he was sitting on the dragon's back. And so they flew through the stars of heaven. The dragon slammed back and forth in anger, and Batcha clung to his back. The dragon seemed to punish Batcha for breaking his threefold oath and went higher and higher until they reached far above the mountains of the earth.



"What shall I do? What shall I do?" sobbed Batcha. "If I jump, I'll crush to earth! O dragon, have pity on me!"

But the dragon continued to whiz through the starry sky with Batcha on his back until it hung motionless in the air for a moment, what for Batcha was even more terrifying. Suddenly, Batcha heard the voice of a skylark soaring to the sky.

"Dear Skylark," Batcha called to the bird. "Help me, because I'm in big trouble. Fly to heaven and tell God that Batcha, the shepherd, hangs in the sky on the back of a dragon. Ask him that Batcha begs him to free him and I will always be a good man and obedient."

The skylark took the message to heaven and God took pity on the poor shepherd. He wrote some gold letters on birch leaf, put it in the skylark's beak, and told the bird to drop the birch leaf on the dragon's head. The skylark returned from heaven and dropped the leaf on the dragon's head. The dragon immediately sank to Earth, so fast that Batcha passed out. When Batcha came to, he was sitting in front of his own hut. He looked around. The dragon's cliff was gone. Everything was the same. It was late afternoon and the dog was driving the sheep home. A woman came up the mountain path.

Batcha took a deep breath. "Thank God I'm back," he told himself. "It's nice to hear the dog barking. And here comes my wife. Maybe she's still mad at me and would prefer to slap me. But even if she does, how happy I am to see her!"

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