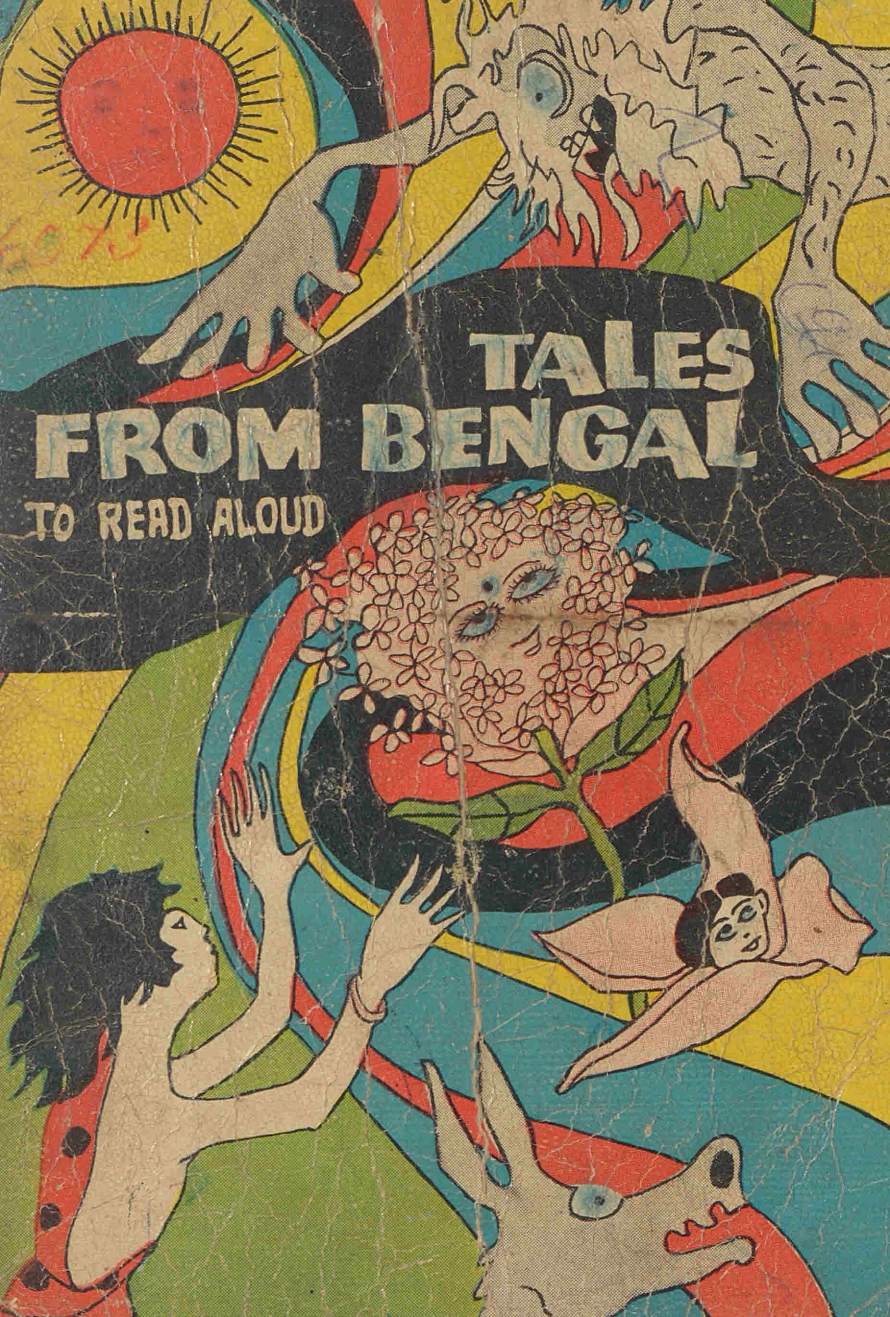

TALES
FROM BENGAL
TO READ ALOUD

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# TALES FROM BENGAL

*Retold by:* Rani Sircar

*Illustrations by:* Milon Mukherjee






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Tales from Bengal.

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## PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Every different region of India has a treasure of stories for the tiny tots. These stories were generally told by the grand parents in olden times. Now a days many children are deprived of this pleasure due to changed circumstances. This book, and many others that will follow in this series, will compensate for it and provide, entertainment to the young readers.

# ABOUT THESE STORIES

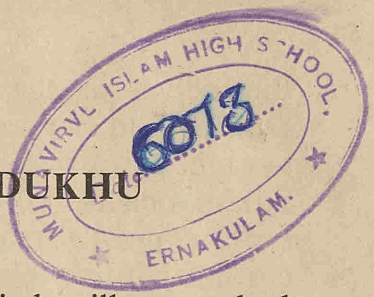
The tales in this book are women's tales – told by the ladies in middle-class homes. These are called "*Roop Katha*" and "*Rash Katha*" in Bengali; that is, tales of wonder and tales of wit and humour. These tales go back many generations and have several variants.

Nowadays, alas, story-time is not a regular every-day feature in our homes. There is no time. Even so, these tales are familiar to most Bengali children in one form or another. But picture the scene as it used to be : It is evening and the children (some grown-ups too) gather round Grandmother or possibly an old aunt. Eyes are round and sometimes a little mouth is open as the story is told. "When I was a child.....," says the old lady, and gives verisimilitude to what follows. Morals and ideals are deftly slipped in — the good prosper, the evildoer suffers, cleverness is often its own reward.

The tales may have foreign counterparts. Certain Greek and French tales are similar. But nevertheless, these stories are native to the soil of Bengal and are not adaptations. The familiar European fairy god-mother is absent. But the many kinds of witch abound: "dainis", "pethnis", "shankchunnis" and many others, lurk behind every corner. Ghouls, "bhuts" and "preths" are also very numerous.

The tales of Bengal have been written down only within the last two generations, having survived the years by word of mouth. So far these tales have not been transcribed in English although tales from the North and South of India have appeared in books in English.

The envoy at the end of the book, is a free translation of a jingle which used to be repeated at the end of every story.




# SUKHU AND DUKHU

Once long ago, in a little village tucked away in a forgotten corner of Bengal, there lived a weaver. This weaver had two wives. One wife had a daughter called Sukhu; the other wife had a daughter called Dukhu. The weaver loved both his wives and both his daughters, but it was not a particularly loving or happy family.

Sukhu and her mother were rather an overbearing and quick tempered pair; grasping too. They dominated Dukhu and her mother, bossed them around and made them do all the chores of the house, while they sat about lazily themselves. Dukhu and her mother did not really mind much because they were both meek and patient.

Time passed, this state of affairs continued, and then the weaver died. After his death, life became really difficult and miserable for Dukhu and her mother. The other two quickly took over whatever money and jewels the weaver had left and established

themselves as the mistresses of the house. Dukhu and her mother were banished to a wretched outhouse, and were given only Sukhu's cast-off clothes to wear. They spun cotton into thread all day, and wove it into cloth far into the night. It was a grim life.

One morning, Dukhu's mother put a heap of cotton in the sun and went off for a bath. The South Wind who had always pitied the poor woman and her daughter, saw his chance to put a little plan of his into action. He sent a small breeze which blew the heap of cotton over the fence and away.

Dukhu looked up from her spinning and saw her mother's cotton flying merrily over some distant fields. She dropped her work and ran after it. She ran and she ran, but was not able to get near enough to get the cotton in her grasp. The South Wind saw to it that it was always just beyond her reach.

Through the fields and the meadows beyond, Dukhu chased after the cotton. Across the river she went and past a farm. A cow called out to her: "Dukhu, Dukhu. Please come and clear up my shed." Kindh-earted Dukhu stopped her chase, stepped aside and cleared and tidied up the cowshed.



Then off she sped again. A little further on, a banana tree called out:

"Dukhu, Dukhu. Please clear away the creepers and vines that are choking me." Dukhu stopped and cleared away the suffocating tangle around the banana tree, then raced off after the cotton. She had not gone very far when a *peepul* tree hailed her:

"Dukhu, Dukhu. Please clear away the rubbish around my roots."

Again Dukhu stopped and did as she was asked. Then on again, after the cotton. She was getting tired now and wondered why she was not able to catch up with it. She stopped a minute to get her breath and a horse standing under some trees said:

"Please get me some fresh bundles of hay, Dukhu."

Dukhu looked around and found some hay and gave it to the horse, and went on again. She almost had the cotton in her grasp when it blew on, and she saw it disappearing into a gleaming, white house just ahead.

Not stopping to think, Dukhu went into the house; and there in a magnificent shining hall, she saw an old lady spinning. She was

a beautiful old lady, with hair the colour of sea-foam on a full-moon night. Dukhu knew at once that she was the Lady of the Moon.

The Lady of the Moon looked up and smiled at Dukhu.

"Come, child," she said. "How tired you look! You must bathe and eat before you go home with your mother's cotton. Go there into that room and take what you need for a bath and step down to the pool outside. Then in that kitchen, you'll find something to eat."

Dukhu went into the room the Lady had pointed out and found luxurious oils and perfume and soaps. Thick fluffy towels were piled on a stool and beautiful clothes to change into, were also there.

Dukhu smeared a little of the least expensive oil she could find over herself, and went off to the pool. Her first dip made her surpassingly beautiful. When she went down a second time she come up covered with gorgeous jewels. Embarassed, Dukhu dressed in the most worn, shabby sari that she could find, and went into the kitchen. There, she found a feast spread out, the like of which she had never seen before. She helped herself

to a very little and then went and stood before the Lady.

"Ah Dukhu, my child," said the Lady. "You look a little better now. As you go out of the door you will find your mother's cotton. But first go into the little room on the right and pick up any one of the bundles there and take it home. Good-bye, child."

Dukhu picked up the lightest and smallest bundle from the room on the right, found the heap of cotton just outside the door and started home. She went as fast as she could go, so as to be home before dark. When she passed the horse he called out to her and gave her a little golden-coloured, winged foal so that she could ride home. Dukhu mounted the baby horse and it flew along. On the way, the *peepul* tree and the banana tree and the cow, all gave her presents. The *peepul* tree gave her a bag full of gold pieces, the banana tree a branch of solid gold bananas, and the cow a gold pitcher. Dukhu thanked them all prettily and arrived home, just as her mother, frantic with worry was setting out in search of her.

"Dukhu, my baby, where have you been, and what is all this gold you have with you?

And just look at the darling little winged horse!" exclaimed the mother, in one breath; rushing forward to hug her child "Tell me everything," she said.

Dukhu told her mother all that had happened to her as they went into their poor dwelling, with their arms around each other. That night, Dukhu's mother forgetting all the slights and insults she had suffered, went in to show Sukhu and her mother the gifts of gold her daughter had given to her, and offered to share the stuff with Sukhu.

"No, thank you," said that jealous woman stiffly. But all the while she was planning to send Sukhu off to the Lady of the Moon.

Now in the excitement of returning home after her adventure, and admiring her presents of gold, and bedding down the winged horse for the night, Dukhu forgot all about the little bundle the Lady of the Moon had given her. Just before going to bed she remembered, and opened it. A cloud of dust flew up which quickly came together as a handsome prince. He smiled at Dukhu and said: "Marry me tomorrow Dukhu, I will take you and your mother away, to live with me in my palace."

So they planned the wedding, and the Prince rode away on the winged horse, arranging to come back next day.

Early next morning, Sukhu set off to find the Lady of the Moon. Dukhu had described every thing so well, that Sukhu had no difficulty in finding the way. She went along and passed the cow, the banana tree, the *peepul* tree and the horse. They all asked for help, but Sukhu was so intent on getting to the Lady of the Moon that she turned a deaf ear to their requests and sped on her way.

She came to the glimmering shining, white house; went in, and saw the beautiful Lady. The Lady smiled charmingly at Sukhu, told her where she would find perfumed oil and scents for her bath, and where the kitchen was.

Sukhu rushed off madly, grabbed the biggest phial of scent there was and the most expensive oils and went down to the pool. She too bobbed up from the water once, exceedingly beautiful. Once more and she was covered with jewels. Greedy girl that she was, she could not help going down a third time. But when she came up, gone

were the jewels and her new beauty. She was covered with dirty sores. Unable to do anything about it she wrapped a gorgeous sari around herself and went into the kitchen. There she ate hugely of the feast spread out.

The Lady of the Moon gave a tinkling laugh when she saw Sukhu:

"You bobbed under the water three times, I notice," she said. "Never mind. Take one of the bundles you will find in that room on the right and go home."

Of course Sukhu chose the largest, heaviest, bundle there was and set off for home. She was covered with sores that her sari could not hide, and was weighed down by her large bundle. When she came to the horse he suddenly kicked Sukhu in the stomach with his hind leg. Crying with pain she came to the *peepul* tree which lowered a branch and scratched her badly across the face. The banana tree let down a loan of rotten fruit on her head. The cow butted her behind, very, very hard. Footsore and weary, scratched and hurt and bleeding, Sukhu hobbled home.

Her mother was aghast when she saw her.

"Sukhu, child, what's happened?" she asked.

Throwing the heavy bundle into a corner, Sukhu flung herself on to a bed and sobbed. The music from Dukhu's wedding could be heard nearby; the laughter of guests and their rejoicing. Sukhu and her mother sat in the dark.

Unnoticed by them, a huge snake wriggled out of Sukhu's bundle, stung her, and her mother, and slid out into the darkness.

# THE RISE OF THE FOOLISH BRAHMIN

Once upon a time, in a middle-sized village in North Bengal, lived a Brahmin and his wife. The Brahmin was a stupid old man, and his wife had a hard time of it, putting up with her husband's silly ways. To make matters worse, the Brahmin had hardly any money. So his wife had to exercise all her wit and ingenuity to make ends meet. How she managed to do it, was a marvel to all the neighbours.

One morning, the lady sat winnowing some rice. Her husband shuffled up and said, "winnowing rice I see, my dear. How nice of you to think of making rice cakes for me!"

"Rice cakes! Rice cakes! I'll give you rice cakes you goosey old man!" shouted his wife. "The rice bin is empty. The pot's full of holes. There's no fuel. And you blab about rice cakes. Bah. Get out of my way." And she threw her winnow at him.

The Brahmin walked sadly out of the house. "What a shame," he said to himself. "Rice cakes would have been so nice. But she threw the winnow at me. I certainly won't go home for a bit. That'll teach her."

He walked on and soon found himself in a dense forest where he met a mendicant.

"I've left home," he told the mendicant proudly. "My wife threw her winnow at me."

"That's too bad," said the mendicant. "But never mind, you can stay with me in this forest, and I'll teach you what I know."

The Brahmin lived with the mendicant for some time. The mendicant tried to teach him all kinds of mystic lore; charms and spells. The Brahmin learnt it all, but being such a witless person he learnt everything backwards and sideways. But he was very proud of his learning, gibberish though it really was.

One day, he decided he knew enough to set up as an astrologer and scholar for himself in the nearest town. He set off with a bundle of books on his back. When he came to the outskirts of his village, he slowed down a little. "Of course, I shall set up in town

and be famous and earn lots of money," he thought. "Why, even the King, I'm sure, will send for me. But now that I'm so near home, I think I shall just go and see my old woman, show her how much I know, and teach her a thing or two."

ISLAM HIGH S
ERNAKULAM.

So he set off again and soon reached his house. A smell of frying came to his nose. He sniffed hungrily.

"Fried sesame cakes," he thought. "It's been a long time since I've eaten some. May be I shall stay here after all. There's plenty of time to go to town later."

He listened carefully at the door and counted each little sesame cake by the oil hiss and splutter it made in the pan.

"Five. . . . Ten. . . . Fifteen. . . . Twenty. . . . Twenty-one," he counted and smacked his lips.

Her frying done, the Brahmin's wife stepped out and saw her husband.

"So you're back," she said drily. "And where have you been all this time?"

"Never mind about that," he answered, "I'm a little hungry, why don't you give me one of your sesame cakes for a start?"

"Sesame cakes! how did you know?"

"One of my secrets, my dear," he said. "You'll be surprised at how much I know these days! What would you say if I told you, you've made twenty-one little cakes?"

The Brahmin's wife was quite taken in, and could not do enough for her husband. She gave him water to wash, and set out a splendid meal for him. While he ate, she hurried off to tell the neighbours of her husband's return and how wise he had become. The neighbours were as excited as she was, and were very happy that such a learned man would now be their village astrologer.

The Brahmin set up for business the very next day. He read palms, cast horoscopes, and gave good advice. Everyone was much impressed, especially when they heard him recite sacred texts and holy words. They were not to know it was all gibberish.

One day Moti, the washerman, came to the Brahmin in great distress. His donkey had strayed and was lost, and he did not know how to find her.

"Leave it to me," said the Brahmin. Moti was so happy that he sat on the

doorstep all day, waiting for the Brahmin to call back his donkey by magic.

The Brahmin sneaked out from the back door with his umbrella, and went looking for Moti's donkey all over the village. He realised that all his fame and prestige would vanish if he failed to get the creature back. But at nightfall he returned tired and disappointed.

"Moti," he said, "go home. Your donkey has strayed so far that I shall have to use very powerful magic to get her back. It will take time. Go home and sleep."

Moti went home to bed. The Brahmin also went to bed, but very troubled about the donkey and his future. About midnight, he heard odd sounds outside. He woke his wife.

"Wife," he quavered nervously, "Wife, wake up and hide me. There's a thief outside."

"Rubbish!" said his wife. "Whoever heard of a learned man like you hiding from a thief? I'll light a lamp; take it and catch the rascal."

There was no help. The Brahmin took the lamp and stumbled outside the door. The odd noises became odder, and he shivered with fear. Suddenly his feet got caught in a rope and he fell in a heap on something that felt like a furry body. He heard a loud "He-haw, He-haw" and fainted dead away. His lamp clattered down with him. His wife rushed out screaming. The neighbours rushed out too. "What's happened?" they cried. "What's happened?"

The Brahmin's wife saw the donkey and realised the situation at once.

"My husband stayed up till midnight willing the donkey to come back, with his powerful magic," she said, "the effort exhausted him, and he fainted with weariness when the donkey returned."

Moti led the donkey home. He was overjoyed to have her back. The Brahmin was carried into bed. The next day the whole village came to do him honour and praise him.

Time passed. The Brahmin's fame spread. It reached the ears of the King, who had a problem. The princess had lost a diamond necklace costing a hundred thousand rupees.


It is a very good book

No wise man in the palace was able to tell where it could be found. So the king sent soldiers to bring the Brahmin to him.

The Brahmin trembled before the king. "Find the Princess's diamond necklace," said the king, "and I will reward you. Fail to find it and I will kill you."

"It will take two days, at least, your Majesty," said the Brahmin, praying for time.

"Very well," said the king. "But mind, no fooling. I want the necklace."

The Brahmin was placed in a little room to figure things out. He moaned. He prayed aloud to his favourite goddess. "Durga, Oh Durga, to what a pass have you brought me! Durga, help me find the diamond necklace!"

The gardener's wife was passing just outside the window. She heard the words "Durga" and "diamond necklace!" Her name was Durga, and she was the thief. Rushing in she fell on her knees and clasped the Brahmin's feet.

"Oh, what a wise man you are!" she cried. "Yes, I am the thief. I'll return the necklace

to you, but please don't give me away. Please don't tell the King that I stole the necklace. I will serve you always, but protect me from the king's wrath."

"There, there, Woman," said the Brahmin, realising what had happened, "Of course, I won't give you away. Now this is what you have to do. Put the necklace in an earthen jar and hide the jar among the reeds around the lake, which I see there in the palace garden."

"It shall be done, Sir," said the gardener's wife, and she fled.

The next morning the Brahmin walked into the king's audience room as proud and as bold as he could be.

"Search among the reeds that grow around your lake," he said in a loud voice to the king. "There, hidden in an earthen jar you will find the Princess's necklace."

Soldiers hurried away to search. When they found the necklace, just as the Brahmin had predicted, there was great jubilation in the palace.

The King ordered a great feast in the Brahmin's honour. There was music and

fireworks. The Brahmin was installed as the Court Astrologer. His wife was given presents of silk and jewels. The king consulted the Brahmin on all matters of state and policy. The Queen could not make enough of him as her personal adviser.

The Brahmin and his wife prospered so greatly that they could hardly contain their joy. His wife now fed the Brahmin with rice cakes to his heart's content. They were always his favourite food.

## THE BARBER AND THE GHOUL

The Barber and his wife were poor, very poor. They were not poor in the way that people are, when they have to spend a great deal on a large household—hordes of children, in-laws, dependents and so on. No. There were just the Barber and his wife, only the two of them. But times were very difficult, and poor Mrs. Barber was hard put to it to cook a meal at the end of the day.

They lived on the edge of their village in a miserable little hut. The roof needed re-thatching badly, the walls were peeling, the mud floors were pitted. But how could they afford the repairs, when they had hardly anything to eat? The rice bin and the spice tins were almost empty. The wood-pile was so low you could hardly see it. Oh, the Barber and his wife were wretchedly poor!

Every morning the Barber would draw up a bucket of water from the well, and wash his tired face. Then he would check his little barber's box carefully to see that he had everything he needed and that his razor was sharp. He would walk slowly through the

village till he came to the market square. There, under a large, shady tree, he would sit; waiting patiently for business.

One or two villagers would come for a hair-cut, a few men would get a shave. The Barber would walk back wearily at sunset, his head bent, his feet shuffling along in the dust. If there were enough coins with him, he would buy a potato or two, and perhaps an onion, to take home for his dinner.

Mrs. Barber was sometimes able to beg a cup of rice, a little oil and a few chillies from a kind neighbour. She would cook the potato and the rice together, and season the mess with the oil and chillies. Often however, the Barber did not earn enough even to buy a potato, and the neighbours did not give his wife anything. When this happened, the two would go to bed hungry, hoping that the morrow would be better.

But one hungry night Mrs. Barber could stand it no longer. With hands on hips she raved at her wretched husband. "Did you marry me just to make me miserable?" she stormed. "In my father's house, I ate well, I had fine clothes, I had jewels. There were clean sheets on the beds, and plenty of provisions in the store-room. Look at me

now: dressed in rags; with not even a nose ring! Can you remember when we had our last proper meal? I can't. It was ages ago. What a horrid rotten life I lead. What a horrid, rotten husband you are to me." She burst into tears then, and rushing at her husband struck him hard on the face, on both cheeks: Slap. Slap. The Barber did not say a word. He just picked up his little business box and walked out of the house.

"Not much work comes my way," he said to himself. "I do my best. I can't help it if I don't take a great deal of money home. But poor though I am, I will not be beaten by my wife!" He walked and walked, not quite knowing where he was going, and presently found himself in a dark wood. He walked a little way in the wood and came to a large banyan tree. He sat down to rest and think things out.

Now, unknown to the Barber, the banyan tree was the home of a wicked man-eating Ghoul. This Ghoul chuckled evilly to himself. "My, My," he thought, "see what the night has brought to my doorstep! A good dinner all ready to eat." And he came near the Barber.

"Ho-Ho-Ho!" chortled the Ghoul. "Ha, Ha, Ha. What a good meal you will make. Oh, Ho, Ho, Ha, Ha," and he licked his chops with glee. He might have been poor, he was certainly hungry, but the Barber was extremely quick witted.

"Oh you great, silly Ghoul!" said the Barber. "Imagine thinking you can eat me: me, the great killer of ghouls. Wait a moment, and I shall add you to my bag. Just half an hour ago I killed a ghoul bigger than you are and put him in my box."

"Rubbish," said the Ghoul. "Do you think I could believe such a tale? Show me this ghoul in your box, will you?"

"Here you are then," yelled the Barber, and whipped out his little barber's mirror, "see for yourself." The Ghoul peered into the mirror and saw a great grinning Ghoul. He was so brainless that he did not realise he was looking at his own reflection.

"Dear me," said the Ghoul. "Oh, dear me. Please don't kill me and put me into your box, Barber! Please don't. I 'll do whatever you wish, I promise. But don't kill me."



"Whoever heard of a Ghoul that would keep a promise?" asked the Barber in reply.

"Try me, Barber," said the ghoul, kneeling before the Barber. "I'll give you whatever you wish. Ask. Just ask me."

"All right. I'll give you a chance, Ghoul." said the Barber. "But mind, if you fail I shall kill you forthwith, and put you in my box. Now, first I want a large sack of gold pieces placed in my living room. Then, I want you to fill my rice bin to the brim. After that we'll see."

"It shall be done, Barber," said the Ghoul and he disappeared.

The Barber walked home as fast as he could. He opened his door, and there in front of him was a tremendous sack of gold pieces. He woke his wife. "Come and see what I've brought," he shouted.

All in a dither and with eyes as large as saucers, Mrs. Barber watched her husband carelessly picking up gold pieces from the sack and letting them run through his fingers.

"Put it away safely," he said with a nonchalant air.

From dawn to nightfall Mrs. Barber carefully counted and put away the gold pieces. In old pots and a battered trunk she stored the wealth. She thought she had never done a happier job.

At night the Ghoul was hurrying to the Barber's hut with a huge load of rice on his back, when he met his uncle. "Where to, with so much rice, Nephew?" he was asked. The Ghoul told his Uncle about the terrible Barber who had spared his life on condition that he fulfil his wishes.

"Rot. Nonsense. Foolishness!" roared Uncle Ghoul. "No barber can kill us ghouls! I'll go with you and see, and kill him too, without a doubt."

Together they went, Uncle and Nephew Ghoul, to the Barber's hut. The Nephew went in with his load of rice, the Uncle peered through the window and rattled the latch. The Barber woke up with a start, and seeing him grinning at the window, rushed at him with the mirror.

"Come in," he yelled, "come in. Thirteen hundred and thirty six ghouls I've slaughtered in three nights. Can I let you go when you

come conveniently home to me? I'll kill you in a trice and put you in my little box."

Uncle Ghoul saw his reflection in the mirror and believed the Barber's words, for he was just as stupid as his nephew. He trembled and shook with fear. "No, Barber, No!" he wept. "I'll do your bidding. Don't kill me, I beg."

"Very well," said the Barber. "Off you go and fill my flour bin with flour."

"Immediately," said Uncle Ghoul. The rice bin had been filled, and there was enough in the sacks for two more bins. The flour bin was filled, and there was flour enough still in the sacks for two more bins. The Ghouls went away scared, but relieved to have escaped the fate of the other thirteen hundred and thirty six ghouls. They promised to help again if asked.

Mr. and Mrs. Barber prospered. Mrs. Barber wore silks. She had jewels on her arms and in her ears and round her neck. Their hut became the prettiest and best-kept one in the village. Mr. Barber was very happy. In time they had seven sturdy sons and a lovely daughter, and they all lived happily ever after.

# OPIUM

The hermit lived in a hut on the banks of the river Ganges. It was a very lonely spot, far from human habitation, but very beautiful and restful. Indeed it was the perfect setting for a hermitage. The river flowed by, the birds warbled in the nearby wood. There were plenty of wild fruit trees around to give the hermit all he wanted of fruit. Villagers from not too distant villages, sometimes came to hear him talk about God and His goodness. They brought the hermit gifts of puffed rice and home-grown vegetables.

Late in the evening, while the hermit ate his simple meal, a little she-mouse which lived in a cranny of the hermitage would come out and scamper about. She was a dear little mouse and the hermit liked having her around to pet and stroke.

Now the hermit had meditated greatly for years; and his life of simple austerity had given him tremendous power over nature. One night he gave the little she-mouse the

gift of speech. After that, the hermit and the mouse would chat lightly at night. They talked of this and that and the mouse would confide all the little happenings of her day to the hermit. She called him always, "Dear Father".

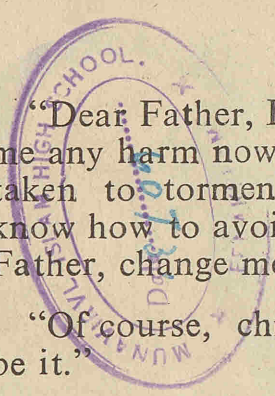
One night when the hermit asked if his dear little mouse-child had had a happy day, the mouse burst out with:

"Dear Father, Dear Father. You have been so very good to me. So very kind. I hate to tell you of my little trouble. But out of your goodness and kindness of heart, I know you will help me. A huge tabby cat has been making my life miserable for the past week or so. She appeared out of nowhere and now I don't have a moment's peace. She watches me all the time, and chases me till I am breathless. I don't know where to hide. Today, she almost bit my tail off. Dear Father, Dear Father, change me into a tabby cat, so I don't have to fear her."

"Of course, child," said the hermit. "So be it."

And there was a sleek tabby cat in place of the little she-mouse. Days went by and then one night:





"Dear Father, Dear Father. No cat can do me any harm now, but a great, big dog has taken to tormenting me. I simply do not know how to avoid him. Dear Father, Dear Father, change me into a dog."

"Of course, child," said the hermit. "So be it."

And there was a magnificent hound in place of the sleek tabby cat. Days went by and then one night:

"Dear Father, Dear Father, I hate to say this, but the leavings of puffed rice, and fruit that you give me are not enough; and I'm very, very, hungry. There isn't any food around the hermitage, fit for a hound like me. But in the trees along the river I see that the monkeys have no trouble. There's plenty of fruit around for a monkey. Dear Father, Dear Father, change me into a monkey."

"Of course, Child," said the hermit. "So be it."

And there was a winsome girl monkey in place of the magnificent hound. Days went by and then one night:

"Dear Father, Dear Father. I'm in trouble again! A family of boars has moved out of the wood and taken to wallowing in the mud-banks along the river. They do not let any monkey go near enough the water to drink. I'm dying of thirst. Dear Father, Dear Father, change me into a boar."

"Of course, Child," said the hermit. "So be it."

And there was a beauty of a she-boar in place of the winsome girl-monkey. Days went by and then one night:

"Dear Father, Dear Father, such a terrible thing happened today! I'm still a-quiver with the danger I've narrowly escaped. A party of hunters came out of the woods today and shot arrows at the boars. So many were killed. I barely avoided the sharp arrows. But Dear Father, Dear Father, the King was one of the hunters. And oh, the beautifully caparisoned elephant he mounted! The gorgeous howdah, the trappings! Dear Father, Dear Father, change me into an elephant, please."

"Of course, Child," said the hermit. "So be it."

And there was a superb tame she-elephant in place of the beauty of a she-boar. Days went by and then one night:

"Dear Father, Dear Father. There's so much I have to tell you. I went into the woods and lived happily on saplings, and wild sugar-cane. Then one day some horsemen came. They had been sent by the king to capture a wild elephant for his stables. I was so gentle and tame, they took me without difficulty. Life at the palace was very fine. The King made quite a pet of me. Oh the bliss of being decked out and carrying him! But today. The shame of it! I was dressed more gaily than ever before. They put a magnificent jewelled howdah on my back. But it was the Queen who mounted me. The Queen. Dear Father, Dear Father, the Queen I cannot, I shall not bear. I was difficult to manage. I pawed and trumpeted and swayed so greatly, that the Queen fell off. They fettered me in disgrace. But in the darkness I broke my shackles and came here. Dear Father, Dear Father, I love the King. Dear Father, Dear Father, please change me into the Queen."

"Child, Child," said the hermit slightly disturbed. "Child, I cannot change you into

the Queen, only into an ordinary maiden, if you wish."

"Dear Father, Dear Father, change me into an ordinary maiden, then."

"So be it Child," said the hermit with a sigh.

The beautiful maiden lived in the hermitage and looked after the hermit's simple wants. She grew more beautiful day by day. The hermit loved her dearly and prayed that she would be happy.

One day the king passed by the hermitage. He had been in the woods looking for the elephant that had got away. He was tired, and regretful that he had not found her. Dusty and weary he sat on the hermitage steps. The beautiful maiden hurried out with water to wash the King's feet. But he drew back urgently.

"You a hermit's daughter, a Brahmin girl, wash the feet of a Kshatriya? Never. Never. What a sin would be mine if I allow it !"

"Oh Sire, but I'm not a Brahmin girl. The hermit is my foster-father. This is what he has told me of my birth. My father

was a Kshatriya, a King. He lost a battle and fled to these woods you can see from here. He died of his battle-wounds. My mother had fled with him, and when he died, her sorrow hastened my birth. But she died too. Fate had placed a bee-hive just above where I lay. The honey dripped from it into my mouth; and so I lived; until the hermit found me and brought me home."

The King smiled happily at this glib, invented story. The beautiful maiden washed his feet, and brought him some fruit to eat. They looked at each other with great tenderness and waited. In the evening the hermit returned home after his day of contemplation in the woods. As soon as the hermit had washed and eaten, the King asked him to give him the beautiful maiden's hand in marriage.

The hermit smiled sadly. He hated having to part with the beautiful maiden, his dear child. But he knew it was her heart's desire to marry the King so he performed the wedding rites. The couple went to live at the palace.

The King loved the beautiful maiden very very dearly. He hardly spent any time with

his old Queen. She ruled as Queen, but the beautiful maiden was ruler of the King's heart.

One fateful afternoon, the beautiful maiden was standing beside a well when she was seized by a fearful giddiness and fell into the water and died. The King was beside himself with grief, but what could he do? He sent for the hermit who consoled him as best as he could.

"Know, Oh, King," the hermit said, "no one can avoid fate. The wife whom you loved is dead, so go back and try to love your old Queen. Perhaps if I tell you the story of your dead wife, you will forget her a little more easily. She was born a she-mouse. Yes, she was. I changed her from mouse to cat to dog to monkey to boar to elephant to maiden. But let me keep her memory alive in this fashion. We will fill up the well, and from the beautiful maiden's remains will spring up a plant with a beautiful flower—a red flower which men will call Poppy. The flower at a certain time will exude a sticky milk from which people will make a substance called Opium. They will smoke opium and will take it in other ways as well. All who use opium will, as opium users, have the

characteristics of all the creatures that the maiden has been in turn. They will nibble at food like the mouse; drink milk like the cat; be quarrelsome like the dog; dirty like the monkey; obstinate like the boar; wise like the elephant; and capricious like the maiden."

The hermit went away. The well was filled up, and the Poppy plant grew. And as we all know, in time men discovered the awful terrible pleasure of Opium.

# SEVEN CHAMPAKS AND A CAMELIA

There is no trace of the old kingdom now. It has vanished, vanished like so many things that once were. But in its hey-day it extended as far as you could go, in all directions. It was bounded by the sea on one side, and by high mountains on the other. Everything about the kingdom was on a large scale, and all that happened there was wondrous like the happenings in the tale that I shall tell you now.

A great king ruled there in those days. He lived in a magnificent palace, such as had not been seen before. He was such a great king and his palace was so splendid, that he did not think it proper to have only one queen like other kings. He had seven queens.

The six elder queens were so proud and haughty, so overbearing in their ways, that it does not bear thinking about. The Seventh

and the youngest Queen was sweet and gracious and kind. It goes without saying, that the king loved his Seventh Queen best of all, and spent most of his time with her.

For a long time, it was the King's greatest sorrow that none of his queens had any children. The kingdom needed an heir, and he worried himself sick about it. When, after some years, it was known that the Seventh Queen was going to have a child, the King felt that a great darkness had lifted from about him and his joy knew no bounds.

He gave orders to all in the palace that his beloved Seventh Queen was to be pampered in every way, in order that her time of waiting would be as happy as possible. So her slightest wish was obeyed instantly and everything was done to keep her merry and amused.

All this attention to and fussing around the Seventh Queen, drove the six elder queens wild with jealousy. They disliked her more than ever before, and were barely polite when they spoke to her. But the Seventh Queen was so happy that she was going to give the King an heir, that she paid

no attention to the other queens' rudeness and ill-behaviour.

When the time came for the Seventh Queen to have her baby, the King had a bell-pull fixed in her bed-chamber, that rang a bell in his audience hall. He told the elder queens who were attending, to pull the cord as soon as the Seventh Queen gave birth to the heir, so that he could come up at once.

Now the six elder queens were in attendance on the Seventh Queen not because they too were excited about an heir, but because they had planned a great wickedness. They whispered together and laughed mockingly in a corner of the Seventh Queen's bed chamber.

In due course the Seventh Queen gave birth to seven boys and a girl. The children were the fairest, dearest, little ones that had ever been born in the palace. But the elder queens cackled rudely.

"Just as we thought," they said. "All this fuss and coddling, and all you produce is seven ugly frogs and a rat. Bah. What a fraud you are."

The Youngest Queen turned over and faced the wall. Huge tears welled out of her

eyes. The elder queens quickly stuffed the eight lovely children into a large earthen pot and buried the pot in the ash heap behind the kitchen. Such cruelty!

The King waited a long time for the bell to ring in his audience hall. He waited in vain. When he finished with his affairs of state, he hurried up to see what had happened. Without a word, the six elder queens showed him seven ugly frogs and a rat. In his tremendous disappointment, the King acted like a devil. He banished his dearly loved Seventh Queen to the kitchen and the outhouses.

The elder queens could barely conceal their satisfaction and glee. This is what they had planned—the disgrace of the Seventh Queen. But the King did not love them any better, now that his favourite Queen was not around. He sat by himself in the throne room, and saw no one.

Now the horrible, cruel deed of the six elder queens all unknown to them, brought a curse on the palace and all the people in it. Everybody, without knowing why, was heavy-hearted and sad. The flowers withered in the garden. The fruit trees did not

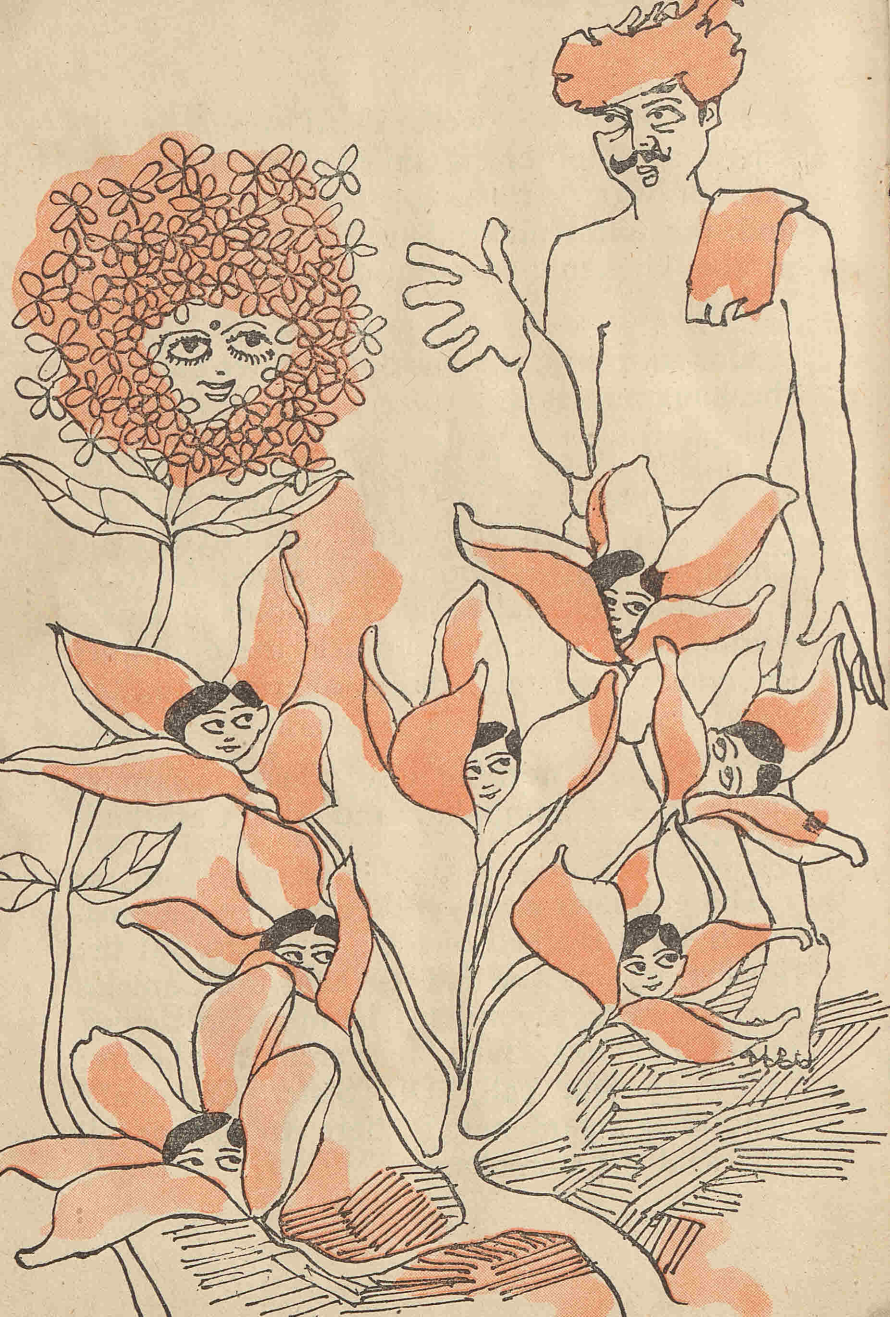
bear fruit. The wells dried up. In the kingdom, the crops failed and there was talk of war. It was a sad, unhappy time, and the unfortunate Seventh Queen slaved in the kitchen and outhouses, desolate and forlorn.

One morning, the head gardener came to the King and said:

"Sire, there is not a single flower or any growing thing in all the palace gardens. Only in the ash heap behind the kitchen is a Champak plant a-bloom with seven fragrant yellow flowers, and beside it blooms a single white Camelia. Shall I pluck these flowers for your majesty's daily offering to the gods?"

"If there's nothing else, then you must pluck the Champaks and the Camelia," said the king.

The gardener went off to cut the blooms. When he stretched out his hand to cut the flowers, he was startled to hear the Camelia say: "Awake, my seven Champak brothers." The Champaks, then answered in chorus: "Why do you call, Oh Sister Camelia?" "The King's gardener is here to cut us all off," said the Camelia.



The seven Champak flowers climbed higher up the plant, so the gardener could not reach them. They said: "Let the king come first."

The gardener rushed off amazed, to call the King. The King hurried behind the kitchen, when he heard the strange tale. Seeing him near, the Camelia again said: "Awake, my seven Champak brothers," and the Champaks again asked in chorus: "Why do you call, Oh Sister Camelia?"

The King heard the Camelia answer that the King was there, and the Champaks reply: "Let the first queen be called."

And so it went on. The first queen came, and then the second queen, and the third, till all the six elder queens and the King, and the gardener were gathered around. Then the Champaks said: "Let the Seventh Queen, who is now a servant in the kitchen and the outhouses be called."

The Seventh Queen, all dirty and dishevelled stood there with the King, the six elder queens and the gardener. A marvellous thing happened. Out of the seven Champak flowers, stepped out seven handsome Princes,

and out of the Camelia came a ravishingly beautiful Princess. The Princes and Princess gathered round the wretched looking Seventh Queen, and in chorus told the King about the infamous deed of the six elder queens.

The six elder queens realising that their sin had caught up with them, did not know where to look. The King listened with tears in his eyes, and wondered how he could have been so blind and foolish.

He gathered his eight children and their mother into his arms and took them with him into the palace. He gave orders that the six elder queens be exiled forever to a desert land. His courtiers joyfully carried out his orders.

The flowers bloomed again, the trees put forth fresh leaves. The birds sang. The harvests were fine ones. All was joy and gladness in the palace and the kingdom. The king, and the Seventh Queen and her children, lived very happily ever after.

# ENVOY

*The tale is ended, the sapling withers.*

*Why do you wither, O Sapling tree,*
*Fine and sturdy you used to be ?*

*Ah, what can I say to thee—*
*I wither, for the goat eats me.*

*Why, O Goat, this silly, deed—*
*Are saplings now goats' chosen feed ?*

*I eat whatever I can get —*
*The goatherd has not fed me yet.*

*Why is the goat not fed by you*
*Goatherd ? Here's a Howdy-do !*

*By my wife I am not fed—*
*These nights I hungry go to bed.*

*Why don't you feed the goatherd, Wife ?*
*I warn you, this will lead to strife !*

*He eats off a banana leaf —*
*No leaves from tree, that is my grief.*

*You used to give your leaves for free*
*Why have you stopped, Banana-tree ?*

*I give no leaves till the rains fall*
*I watch the skies, and that is all.*

*Why do you not pour, O Rain,*
*When will the monsoon come again ?*

*I wait for the frog's croak, and so*
*As he does not, away I go.*

*Why, O Frog, do you not croak —*
*And call the rains the earth to soak ?*

*Our numbers have decreased of late*
*To be snakes' food is our sad fate.*

*Why d'you eat the frog, O Snake*
*In the waters of your lake ?*

*What's food I eat with little trouble:*
*I'll hide too, in your hubble-bubble !*

*The tale is ended, the sapling withers!*

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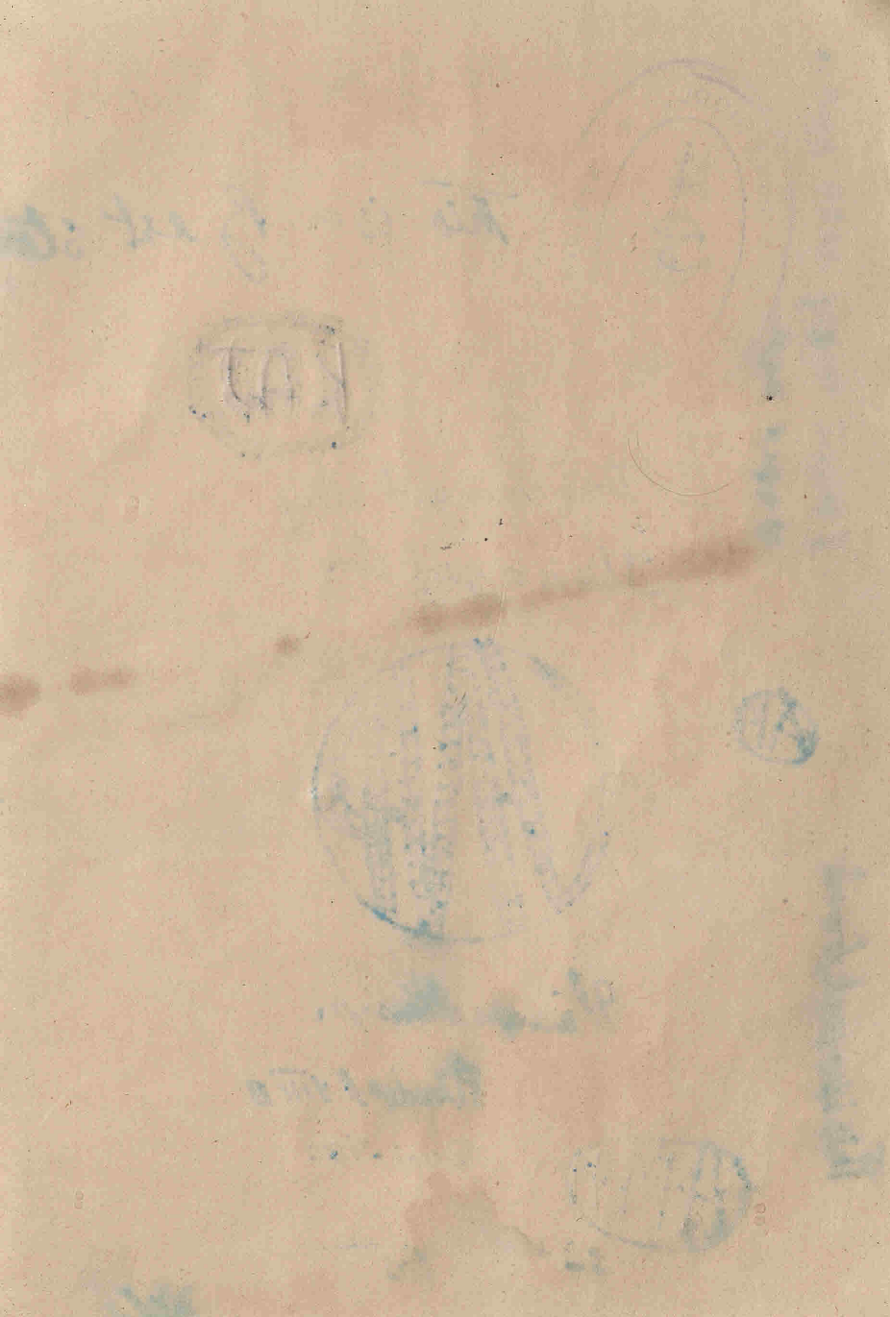
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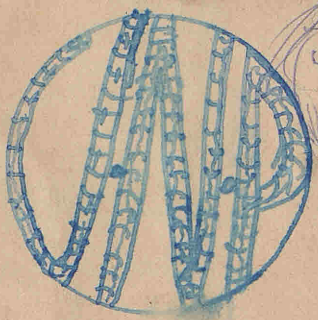


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