

Of Crows And Owls

This third part of the Panchatantra begins with a verse:

Trust not even a close friend
Who earlier was your enemy.

This is the story of how the crows burnt the home of a trusting pack of owls.



Once upon a time all the crows in a town called Mahilaropya made a huge banyan tree their home. The tree had hundreds of branches. Their king, known as Meghavarna, set up strong fortifications to ensure security for his brood. Similarly, the owls of the town made a nearby cave their colony. They also had a king, called Arimardana, who ruled with the help of a strong and cunning army.

The owl king kept a close eye on the banyan tree and on account of previous enmity killed every night any crow he sighted outside the tree. Slowly, the owl king managed to kill all crows that could be seen outside the tree. That is why wise men had always said that whoever neglects disease or the enemy perishes in their hands.



Alarmed at the loss of his flock, Meghavarna assembled his ministers and asked them to prepare a plan to fight the owls. He placed before them six strategies and asked them to name the best of the six. The first minister suggested compromise as a tactic because one had first to survive to gather strength and later destroy the enemy. The elders have said,

“Bend to the enemy when he is strong
Attack him when he is vulnerable.
Don’t wage a war if it doesn’t bring
Power, or wealth or friendship.”

The second minister ruled out compromise and offered trickery as a formula. He cited the example of how Bheema in the Mahabharata had killed Keechaka in the disguise of a woman. He also quoted elders saying,

“Never accept peace with
An enemy who is not just

For, he will break his word
And stab you in the back.”

The minister referred to the learned as saying that it is easy to defeat an enemy who is a tyrant, a miser, an idler, a liar, a coward and a fool. Words of peace will only inflame an enemy blinded by anger.

The third minister said, “O lord, our enemy is not only strong but also wicked. Neither compromise nor trickery will work with him. Exile is the best way. We shall wait and strike when the enemy becomes weak.”

“Neither peace nor bravado
Can subdue a strong enemy
Where these two do not work
Flight is the best alternative.”

The fourth minister opposed all these tactics and suggested the king of crows should stay in his own fort, mobilize support from friends and then attack the enemy. He quoted the learned as saying,

“A king who flees is like
A cobra without fangs.
A crocodile in water
Can haul an elephant.”

Therefore, the minister said, “An ally is what wind is to fire. The king must stay where he is and gather allies for support.”

The fifth minister offered a strategy similar to that of the fourth and said, “Stay in your fort and seek the help of an ally stronger than the enemy. It also pays to form an axis of less strong allies.”

After listening to all the ministers, Meghavarna turned to the wisest and senior most among his counsels, Sthirajeevi, and asked him for his advice. The wise man told Meghavarna,

“Oh, king of crows, this is the time to use duplicity to finish the enemy. You can thus keep your throne.”

“But learned sir, we have no idea of where Arimardana lives and of what his failings are.”

“That is not difficult. Send your spies and gather information on the key men advising the king of owls. The next step is to divide them by setting one against the other.”

“Tell me why did the crows and owls fall out in the first place,” asked Meghavarna.

Sthirajeevi said, “That is another story. Long, long ago all the birds in the jungle—swans, parrots, cranes, nightingales, owls, peacocks, pigeons, pheasants, sparrows, crows etc.—assembled and expressed anguish that their king Garuda had become indifferent to their welfare and failed to save them from poachers. Believing that people without a protector were like passengers in a ship without a captain, they decided to elect a new king. They chose an owl as their king.

As the owl was being crowned, a crow flew into the assembly and asked them why and what they were celebrating. When the birds told him the details, the crow told them, the owl is a wicked and ugly bird and it is unwise to choose another leader when Garuda is still alive. To crush enemies it is enough if you mentioned Garuda’s name or for that matter the name of anyone who is great. That was how the hares managed to live happily by taking the name of the moon.”

The birds asked the visiting crow, “Tell us how this has happened.”

“I will tell you,” said the crow and began telling them the story of the hares and the elephants.

Elephants and Hares



Once upon a time a great elephant called Chaturdanta ruled over a vast stretch of forest as the king of his subjects. They were not happy because for several years there had been no rains and all the lakes, tanks, ponds and water holes in the forest became arid. The subjects went in a delegation to the king and appealed to him, “O mighty king, there is no water to drink in the forest. Many of the younger ones are on the verge of extinction. Please look for a lake full of water and save us.”

The king told them, “I know of a hidden lake that is always full of water. Let us go there and save ourselves.”

The elephants then set off for the hidden lake and after plodding through the jungle for five nights reached the great lake. They colonised the land around the lake and once again started their revelry in water. But as the elephants daily marched their way to the lake, they trampled upon hundreds of hares that made the land around the lake their home. Hundreds of them died and thousands more were maimed.

One day the hares assembled to chalk out a plan to save themselves from the menace of the wayward elephants. An older one among them said, “these elephants will come every day and every day many of us will die. We must find a solution to this problem.”

A wiser one among them said, “The great Manu had said that it was better to abandon a person to save the whole community, abandon the community to save the village and abandon the village to save the country. Even if the land were fertile, a wise king would abandon it if it were in the interests of his subjects.”

But the other hares protested and said, “How can we do that? We have been living here for several generations. Let us find an alternative. Let us see if we can scare the elephants by some means.”

Some of them said, “We know of a trick that works with the elephants. However, we need a very intelligent person.”



Pressed to reveal the plan, they said, “Our ruler Vijayadatta lives in the lunar sphere. Let us send a messenger to the elephant king. The plan is to tell the elephant king that the Moon does not like the elephants visiting the lake

for water because they are killing and maiming hundreds of hares. The Moon has declared the lake out of bounds for the elephants.”

Some others agreed and said, “Yes, there is a hare whose name is Lambakarna. He is an expert negotiator. He can do the job with success.”

After a lot of discussions, the hares decided to send Lambakarna to the elephant king. Addressing the king, Lambakarna said, “O heartless king, I live in the lunar sphere. The Moon has sent me as envoy to you. This lake belongs to the Moon. He has forbidden all of you from drinking water from the lake. So, go back.”

“But where is your lord, the Moon,” asked the elephant king.

Lambakarna said, “He is very much in this lake. He has come to console the survivors of your rampage.”

“Then, let me see him,” the elephant king challenged the envoy.

“Come alone with me, I will show you.”

“Let us go then,” said the elephant.

Lambakarna took the elephant king one night to the lake and showed the reflection of the Moon in the lake and said,

“Here he is, our King, the Moon. He is lost in meditation. Move quietly and salute him. Otherwise, you will disturb his meditation and bring upon you his wrath.”

Taking him for the real Moon, the elephant king saluted him and left quietly. The hares breathed a sigh of relief and lived happily ever after.

The crow told the birds gathered to elect a leader, “that is why it is important to choose a wise and experienced person as your leader. If you do not, listen to this story of how a hare and a partridge destroyed themselves because they chose a wicked mediator.”

“Very interesting,” said the birds and asked the visiting crow to tell them the account of the mediator.

The visiting crow began narrating the story:

The Cunning Mediator



A sparrow was living in the hollow of a big tree that I had made my home. His name was Kapinjala. We became good friends and used to spend our time discussing characters in our literature and the unusual things

we saw in our travels. One day, my friend left the tree with other sparrows in search of food and did not return even after nightfall. I began to worry. "What happened to him? Did any hunter take him away? He never leaves my company even for a while."

Days passed without any trace of my friend Kapinjala. One fine morning, a hare named Sighragha, came and silently occupied the hollow that my friend made his home. It did not worry me because there was no word about Kapinjala and I had lost all hopes of his return. But one day, he returned looking healthier than he was when he had left and found that the hare had taken his place.

Kapinjala told the hare, "O hare, what you have done is improper. You have displaced me. Leave the place immediately."

Sighragha hit back saying, "What are you talking? This is my place. Haven't you heard the elders saying that nobody has rights over a public well, a temple, a pond and a tree? Whoever enjoys land for more than ten years also becomes its owner. That needs no evidence or documents of proof. This place is not yours any more."

The sparrow told him, "Oh, you are quoting legal scriptures! Let us go to an expert in law and ethics. We will abide by his ruling."



The hare agreed to this proposal and both of them went in search of an expert. Curious to see what would happen, I also followed them. Meanwhile, word about their quarrel had reached a wicked and wild cat. Knowing the route that the hare and the sparrow would take, the cat set up a camp on the way. He spread a mat of grass on the ground and went into a posture of meditation. Facing the sun and raising his hands in worship, the cat began reciting scriptures,

"This world has no essence. Life is passing. All liaisons with lovers are like a dream. Your ties with the family are illusory. There is no alternative to following the right path. The learned have said,"

"This wretched body will soon perish

Material wealth is not permanent

Death is knocking at your door

Free thyself from earthly chains

He who abandons the right path

Is the same as the living dead."

"I will end this long discourse and tell you in a nutshell what the right path is. Doing good to others is virtue. Tormenting others is vice. This is the essence of our philosophy. I am in the service of God and have given up all desires. I will not do you any harm. After hearing your account, I will decide who among you is the rightful owner of the place in the tree. But I am now very old and cannot hear you properly. So, please come close to me and narrate your story."

When the poor and innocent sparrow and hare came within the reach of the cat, he pounced on them and grabbed the sparrow in his teeth and slashed the body of the hare with his jaws and killed them.

The visiting crow then told the birds, "That is why I tell you if you rest your faith in this wicked and blind owl, you will meet the same end as the hare and the sparrow." The birds then dispersed, deciding to discuss the matter again carefully before electing the owl as the king.

Meanwhile, the owl was sitting restlessly on the throne waiting for his coronation.

He asked his wife Krikalika, "What is all this delay in crowning me."

The wife told him, "My lord, it is this crow which has sabotaged the coronation. All the birds have dispersed. Only this crow is lingering here. Come, let us go. I will take you home."

Furious, the owl shouted at the crow, "You wicked crow, what harm have I done to you? You have wrecked the coronation. This is enough reason that from today there shall be enmity between owls and crows. One can heal wounds inflicted on the body but not the heart."

Dejected, the owl went home with his wife.

The crow began reflecting, "Oh, what a foolish thing have I done? Unnecessarily, I have made enemies. I should not have advised the birds not to elect the owl as the king. Elders have aptly said,

"Words out of tune with times
Words that bring grief in the end
Words that bring pain to others
Are, any day, as good as poison."

Regretting what he had said and done, the visiting crow also went home. This is how enmity began between the owls and the crows.

After listening to the story, Meghavarna asked Sthirajeevi, "What should we do in such a situation? Sthirajeevi, the wise crow, told him, "There is a strategy better than the six I had already told you. With its help, I will myself go and conquer the owl king. The learned have said that men with great common sense and a little bit of cunning can subdue stronger enemies like the tricksters who cheated the gullible Brahmin of his lamb."

On Meghavarna's request, Sthirajeevi began telling him the Brahmin's story.

The Brahmin and The Crooks

Mitra Sarma was a Brahmin living in a small village. He used to daily worship Fire. It was the month of Magha (February). The sky was full of clouds and it had already started raining. Sarma left for a neighbouring village at that time to seek the gift of a sacrificial lamb from some rich man. He called on a well-to-do man in the village and requested him to make him a gift of a healthy lamb for sacrifice to Gods. The wealthy man gave him one of the well-fed lambs he had.



Carrying the lamb on his shoulders, the Brahmin began his homeward journey. Three crooks, very hungry and emaciated, crossed his path and seeing the healthy lamb on the Brahmin's shoulders thought, "Ah, God has sent us good food. Let us trick the Brahmin into parting with it and free us from hunger and cold." At once, they began to act.

One of them changed into a disguise, and overtaking the Brahmin by another route, stopped him and said, "O what a fool you are? Such a great worshipper of Fire, why are you carrying this dog on your shoulders? This will bring you ridicule. Don't you know that it is a sin to touch a dog, or a rooster, or a donkey?"

The Brahmin lost his temper and said, "You stupid fellow, are you blind? Why do you call a lamb a dog?"

The first crook replied, "Don't be angry, if you think he is not a dog, please carry on. I have no objection."

The Brahmin hardly walked a little distance when the second crook greeted him and said,

"O respected sir, it is highly regrettable that you are carrying a dead calf on your shoulders, however dear it is to you. The man who touches dead animals or birds has to undergo purification rites."

The Brahmin challenged him, "Are you too blind? This is a live sacrificial lamb and you say he is a dead calf."

The second crook said, "All right, sir. Please excuse me. I am an ignorant fool. Do as it pleases you."

Now it was the turn of the third crook to cross the Brahmin's path.



Turning to the Brahmin, the crook said, "Sir, it is highly improper. You are carrying a donkey on your shoulders. This is not done. The elders have said he who touches a donkey, knowingly or otherwise, has to take a bath fully dressed. So, please leave him before anybody notices it."

Thinking that he was really carrying a donkey, the poor Brahmin threw the lamb to the ground and went home. Sthirajeevi, continuing his advice to Meghavarna, said,

"There is hardly any person
Who is not misled by
The servility of a new servant or
The sweet words of a guest or
The mock tears of a wily woman."

"Also, remember not to quarrel with weak men when they are united because they cannot be defeated. See, for example, how a deadly snake becomes prey of a united army of ants. That is why I want to tell you a few words of caution. Follow them."

"We shall do as you command us," said Meghavarna.

Sthirajeevi then began revealing his plan, "Apart from the four strategies I had told you, there is a fifth one. In the presence of everyone, abuse me and punish me branding me as the friend of your enemy. That will convince the spies of our enemy that you don't trust me any more. Bring some blood and spray it on my body. Then exile to the Rishyamooka hills."

"I shall remain here bruised and when the enemy comes, I will try to earn his mercy and trust by blaming you. You stay in the hills till I find their fort and give you a signal when all the owls are sleeping in the day. Then you can come and with the help of your army kill all the owls. This plan is the result of great thought. We have no alternative."

On Meghavarna approving the plan, Sthirajeevi started a mock fight with the king of crows. The king's men and others, mistaking it for a real duel, were ready to kill Sthirajeevi when Meghavarna told them, "Don't interfere. Go away. I will have the pleasure of punishing this unfaithful fellow." Meghavarna then pretended to attack Sthirajeevi with his beak and doused him in blood he brought with him and left for the hills.

Then Krikalika, wife of the pretender who was spying on the crow camp, carried this news of the assault on minister Sthirajeevi and the king's departure for the hills, to the owl king Arimardana. Soon after sunset, the owl king, accompanied by his ministers and followers, set out to kill all the crows. They reached the tree, home of the crows, and surrounded it.

Not finding a single crow there and happy for that reason, Arimardana told his men to look for the crows so that they could chase them and kill them. Meanwhile, Sthirajeevi, who suffered mock injuries, began weakly moaning to attract the attention of the owls.

When the owls saw this and rushed to kill him, he pleaded, "Sir, my name is Sthirajeevi and I am minister of Meghavarna, the king of crows. Before you kill me, I have something to convey to your king."

Arimardana came to see the minister at once and asked him the reason for his plight. Sthirajeevi told him, "Our king wanted to avenge the massacre of his subjects by your men. When I knew he was bent upon waging a war with you, I advised him not to be rash and not go to war with you. I asked him to sign peace with you. My king thought that I was on your side and in great anger inflicted these injuries on me. As soon as I recover, I will show you where he and his men are hiding. You can destroy them."

The king of owls called a meeting of his elders and his five ministers for consultations. He asked his first minister, Raktaksha, "Friend, our enemy's minister is in our custody. What shall we do with him?"

The minister said, "What is there to discuss? Kill him instantly without hesitation. It is always better to destroy the enemy before he acquires strength. Such opportunities come once in a while. If you lose it now, you will never get it back. Don't be carried away by Meghavarna's minister's show of affection. Because once lost, love never returns."

To drive home the point, Raktaksha related to the king of owls [the story of a cobra and a Brahmin](#).

The Brahmin and The Cobra

Haridatta was a Brahmin living in a hamlet. He was a farmer but the piece of land he cultivated gave him very little to survive. One day, unable to stand the heat of the summer sun, he went to a big tree in his land to rest for a while. Before he could spread himself on the ground he saw in the nearby anthill a huge cobra swaying with his hood open.



He thought, "This cobra must really be the Goddess of this land. I have never worshipped her, which is why I am not able to get anything from the land. From today, I will worship her."

At once he went back to his village and returned with a glass full of milk.

He poured it in a bowl and turning to the anthill said, "O ruler of the land, I did not know you were living in this anthill. That is why I have not paid my tribute to you. Please excuse me and accept this humble offering."

He then placed the bowl of milk at the anthill and left the place.

Next day when the Brahmin came to his land before the Sun was up, he saw a gold coin in the bowl he had left at the anthill. Henceforth, he came alone every dawn, collected the coin, offered the milk in the bowl and left. One day the Brahmin, leaving for another village on business, asked his son to go to the anthill and offer milk. When the son went the next day, he found a gold coin in the bowl.

He collected the coin and thought, "This anthill must be full of gold. If I kill the cobra, I can collect all the gold in one go instead of coming here every day."



He then struck the cobra with a big stick. But the cobra deftly dodged the blow but stung the son to death with his poisonous fangs. Returning to his village the next day, Haridatta heard the story of his son's death and at once realised that greed was behind it.

The Brahmin went to the anthill the day after his son's cremation and offered milk to the cobra. Without coming out of his hole, the cobra told Haridatta,

"You have come here for gold forgetting that you had lost a son and that you were in mourning. The reason is greed, pure greed. From today, there is no meaning in our relationship. Blinded by his youth, your son has struck me and I bit him back. How can I forget that blow? How can you suffer the grief of your son's death? Finally, I am giving you this diamond, don't come back again."

Ending the story of the Brahmin and the cobra, Raktaksha told Arimardana, "The lesson is that love once betrayed cannot be regained. If you kill this minister (Sthirajeevi) you will have no problems left."

After listening to Raktaksha patiently, the king of owls turned to his second minister Kruraksha and asked him for his opinion.

The second minister said, "O my lord, I don't agree with the advice Raktaksha gave you. It is very unkind. We should never kill a person seeking asylum. There is a fine story about how, knowing that a hunter who sought shelter had in fact come to kill him, a dove offered himself as food to the hunter."

On the king asking him to relate that story, Kruraksha told him the following tale.

Once upon a time there lived a merciless hunter in the heart of a forest, terrorizing birds and animals. Because of his cruel nature he had no friends or relatives. The elders have said,

"It is unwise to be close to
Men who are wicked and cruel.
Avoid such heinous persons as
You avoid poisonous snakes."

The hunter went out into the forest every morning with a stick and net. One day, he threw his net and trapped a female dove in it. Soon, thick and black clouds appeared in the sky and it began raining cats and dogs. Scared and shivering, the hunter looked for shelter and found it under a huge banyan tree. The rain and wind stopped suddenly. The skies became clear with stars shining. The hunter said loudly,

"If there is anyone on the tree, I seek shelter and food from him. I am hungry and may faint any moment. Please save me."

At the same time, a dove that had his nest on the same tree was worried that his wife who had gone out had not come back. He prayed to Gods that his wife should not come to any harm in this wind and rain. He began telling himself,

"Blessed and happy is the man
With a caring and loving wife.
A home is not a home without a wife;
A wifeless home is like a jungle."

The wife trapped in the hunter's net heard her husband's sorrowful words and, happy that her husband loved her so much, thought,

"Don't call her a woman
Whose husband is unhappy;
Where happy husbands live
Heavens shower blessings."

Later, addressing her husband, the female dove said, "Listen to me, my dear. Even at the cost of your life, you must come to the rescue of someone seeking shelter. This hunter is suffering from cold and hunger and has sought shelter under our tree. You must serve him with devotion. Don't hate him because he has trapped your beloved wife. In reality, the strings of destiny have bound me. Give up all thoughts of revenge and serve the hunter with care."

In accordance with his wife's desire, the dove suppressed grief and told the hunter, "Sir, you are welcome to our modest home. Please let me know what I can do for you. Treat this as own home and feel free to command me."

The hunter told the dove that he was suffering from cold and needed relief. The dove flew out, brought fire from somewhere and a lit a small fire with dry twigs and asked the hunter to warm himself.

The dove told the hunter, "Because of my past deeds, I am born poor and unfortunate and do not have enough to feed myself. What is the point in a host living if he cannot entertain a guest? It is better he renounce this world."

Yet he thought that it was better to die than say no to a host. Determined to die, the dove told the hunter to wait for a while and that soon he will have food. Then circling over the fire, the dove jumped into the fire he lit for the benefit of the hunter.

Moved by this sacrifice, the hunter told himself, "I am responsible for this tragedy. I will no doubt go to hell. This dove is a great soul, he has shown me the right path. Hereafter, I will give up all wants and desires and slowly destroy this body. Nothing, neither cold nor sun nor wind, matters to me. I will fast and see my slow end."

The hunter then threw his net and stick and released the female dove from the net.

The wife then saw how her husband had jumped into the fire to provide food for the hunter. She thought that life without her husband was worse than death and at once jumped into the same fire that consumed her husband. After her death, she saw her husband in the heaven wearing royal regalia.

On seeing her, the husband said, "O my darling, you have done well to follow me into the fire. Women like you live happily with their husbands for 35 million years."

The dove couple lived happily ever after. The hunter, shunning worldly pleasures, went to a forest for realising God. As penance had cleansed him of all desires, the hunter burnt himself in a forest fire and attained nirvana.

After Kruraksha ended telling the king the hunter's story, Arimardana asked a third minister, Deeptaksha for his advice on dealing with Sthirajeevi.

The minister told the king, "My lord, Sthirajeevi does not deserve to be killed. He will be of use to us in revealing the secrets of the enemy. There is this story of how even a thief could help an old man."

On the king commanding him, Deeptaksha began telling him the story of the old man, his young wife and the thief.

The Old Man, His Young Wife and The Thief



There lived an old widowed merchant in a city in the south. Though old, he did not give up his desire for another wife. Therefore, he gave lots of money to a poor merchant and married his young daughter. She never loved her old husband. One day, when the husband and wife were sleeping on different sides of the bed, a thief entered their house. Shocked by the sight of the thief, the wife embraced her husband in fear.

The husband was both thrilled and surprised by the embrace and began thinking about what made her do so. He searched every nook and corner of the house and at last found the thief lurking in a corner. He then realised that his wife had embraced him because the thief had frightened her. The husband told the thief, "My dear young man, today I had the fortune of being hugged by my wife. Thanks to you. Take away whatever you want."

The thief replied, "My dear sir, I do not find anything in your house that I could take with me. But I will come back soon and see if there is anything to carry away. Or, you could call whenever you need love from your wife."

"That is why," Deeptaksha said, "when even a thief could do some good for someone, why not this Sthirajeevi who has sought asylum? He will give us useful information about the handicaps of the enemy. Therefore, in my view he should not be killed."

Then Arimardana turned to another minister, Vakranasa, and asked him, "Tell me what should we do with this crow?" Vakranasa told him that "the refugee's life should be spared because it may benefit us when two rivals fight each other like the quarrel between a thief and a monster had saved the life of a Brahmin and his two calves."

"How was that?" asked the owl king.

Vakranasa narrated him the following story.

Drona was a poor Brahmin who was living in a small town. He was so poor that he never wore good clothes, or used cosmetics, or indulged in the luxury of eating a *paan* (betel leaves). He had matted hair, an unshaven beard and uncut nails. He was extremely weak and emaciated because he had no cover from cold, sun or wind or rain. Taking pity on him, a rich man donated two calves to him.

With all care and love, he fed them well with butter oil and grass. The calves grew into two fine and healthy animals. A thief set his eyes on them and decided that he should somehow steal them. As he set out for the Brahmin's house, he saw on the way an awesome figure with loose teeth as long and sharp as fangs, an arched nose and blood-red eyes. He had a lean body with varicose veins and his hair and beard looked like two torches.

Though he was frightened, the thief asked him, "Who are you, sir?"

"I am Satyavachana, a monster. Let me know who you are."

"I am a thief. My name is Kroorakarma. I am going to steal the calves of the Brahmin."

The monster trusted the words of the thief and told him that he took only one meal a day in the evening and that he would kill the Brahmin for his dinner.

Both of them went to the Brahmin's house that night and waited for the Brahmin to go to sleep. When they were sure that the Brahmin had slept, the monster stepped in to kill the poor Brahmin. The thief held him back saying it was unjust to kill the Brahmin before he (the thief) could take away the two calves.

The monster said, "If the sound of the resisting calves disturbs the sleep of the Brahmin, all our effort will be in vain."

The thief replied, "Suppose there is some obstacle in your killing him, I cannot take the calves. Therefore, wait till I finish my job first."

The thief and the monster began quarrelling about who should be the first to finish his job.

The Brahmin woke up due to the commotion they were making and asked them who they were and what was the matter.

The thief told him, "This monster wants to kill you."

The monster denied and said, "O Brahmin, this thief wants to steal your calves."

The Brahmin then invoked his deity through prayer and the power of the prayer forced the monster to flee. The Brahmin then took a stick and drove off the thief.

"That is why," Vakranasa said, "I had told you that if two rivals quarrel among themselves, we would be the beneficiaries." Then the king asked his fourth minister, Prakarakarna for his opinion.

The minister said, "My lord, I think we should spare the life of the crow. It is possible that he will co-operate with us and that will be a gain for us. Where there is no co-operation, people will perish like the two snakes."

The king said, "In that case, let us hear that story."

The Tale of Two Snakes

Once upon a time there was a king named Devasakti. He had a son who was very weak and growing weaker by the day. It was found that he had a snake in his stomach. Experts, physicians and surgeons tried to nurse him back to health without success. Dejected, the son left his palace one night and took shelter in a lonely and dilapidated temple in another town ruled by a monarch called Bali. Every day, the son would go out to beg and return to the temple in the night.

King Bali had two daughters who came of age. Following a tradition, the two daughters would get up every dawn and touch the feet of their father in reverence.

One day, after paying respects to the king one of his daughters said, "Victory to the king. We are happy in every way."

The second daughter said, "O king, reap the harvest of your actions."

The king, very angry at the words of the second daughter, called his ministers and told them, "Take this foul-mouthed woman away and marry her off to some stranger. Let her reap the consequences of her actions."

In compliance with the orders of the king, the ministers took her away and married her without pomp or ceremony to Devasakti's son living in the old temple. The daughter considered the king's son as God's gift and after persuading him, left for another country.

The princess and the son of Devasakti reached a city where they camped close to a lake. She asked her husband to take care of the camp and went into the city with her maids to buy daily needs like rice, salt, butter oil and vegetables. After shopping, she returned to the lake where she saw a surprising spectacle.

The prince was sleeping, resting his head on an anthill. The serpent in his stomach came out to breath fresh air. Then another serpent emerged from the anthill for the same reason. Both of them glared at each other.

The anthill inmate said, "You wicked creature, why do you torment such a handsome prince."

The other serpent retorted, "Why are you polluting the two golden urns in your hole."

Thus in their row, they revealed the secrets of each other.



The serpent in the anthill told the other serpent, "Don't be arrogant. Who does not know the secret of your death? If the prince drinks a concoction made of gruel and mustard you will die unsung".

"Oh, is that so? You will also perish if someone pours hot oil or hot water in your anthill. Don't be too proud," said the serpent in the prince's stomach.

The princess, who heard all that passed between the two serpents, poured hot oil into the anthill and took the two golden urns and gave the mustard concoction to her husband and killed the serpent inside his stomach. Both Divyasakti's son and his daughter-in-law returned to his kingdom and lived happily ever after.

After listening to this story, owl king Arimardana accepted his advice that Sthirajeevi's life should be spared.

Raktaksha, the first minister, was sad and told the ministers, "You have misled the king by giving wrong advice and paved the way for his destruction. The learned have said that where wicked men are honoured and wise men are insulted, there will be fear, famine and death."

Disregarding the warning of Raktaksha, the king's men set out to take Sthirajeevi to their fortress.

On the way, Sthirajeevi said, "My lord, in my condition, I cannot be of any help to you. Why do you unnecessarily carry me to the fortress? I will jump into a fire and perish. Please permit me to do that."

Sensing his internal thoughts, Raktaksha asked him why he would want to end up in fire.

Sthirajeevi said, "It is for your cause I met this fate in the hands of Meghavarna."

Raktaksha said, "You are a cheat, good at spinning words. You were really born as a crow and even if you are born as an owl in your next birth, you will still be a crow in nature. Haven't you heard the story of the mouse, which even when she was born as a girl in another birth, chose to marry not a human being but another male mouse?"

The ministers and other king's men pressed Raktaksha to tell them that story.

There was a hermitage belonging to the sage Salankayana. He went one morning to river Ganga to bathe. As he was reciting stanzas in praise of the Sun, he saw a kite carrying a mouse in its claws. At once, the sage aimed a stone at the kite. Hit by the stone, the kite released its prey and the mouse at once ran to the sage asking him for protection.

The kite addressed Salankayana and said, "O sage, you have hit me with a stone, which is not proper. Are you not afraid of God? Surrender that mouse to me or you will go to hell."

The sage said, "You wretched bird, my duty is to save God's creations, to punish the wicked, to respect the good, to honour the teacher and worship the Gods. Why do you preach all those irrelevant rules of conduct to me?"

The kite delivered a big lecture to the sage on the right path. "You have no idea of what is good and what is bad. God created all of us and at the time of creation also prescribed what should be our food. God has marked mice, other rodents and insects to be food for us. Why do you blame me for seeking what God has meant for me? There is nothing wrong for anyone to eat the food marked for him. The danger comes when one eats what is not food for him. What is meat for someone is poison for someone else."

"It is not proper for sages to be violent. They are not presumed to notice what is happening around them. They are detached from this world. Nothing that happens in the material world should interest them. They should not discriminate between vice and virtue. They are above everything. But by your deed today you have lost all the gains of your penance. Learn from this story of [three brothers how to attain that state of detachment.](#)"

Salankayana asked the kite to relate that story to him. The kite told him the following story.

The Wedding of The Mouse

Once upon a time, three sages, who were also brothers, chose a riverbank to do penance. Their names were Ekata, Dwita and Trita. The clothes they washed every day used to dry in the sky without a clothesline lest they should drop and become soiled. One day a kite was carrying a female frog like I (the kite) carried a female mouse.

Ekata saw this and shouted at the kite, "Leave it, Leave it."

At once his clothes drying in the sky dropped down to the ground.

When Dwita saw this, he shouted at the kite, "Don't leave it, Don't leave it" and soon his clothes also came down hurtling.



When Trita saw that the clothes of his elder brothers fell down, he thought it would be better not to say anything and remained silent. That is why it is better not to notice the happenings around and concentrate on self.

The sage Salankayana replied, "O foolish kite, your story has happened in the Age of Truth when even if you spoke to a wicked person you became a sinner. The clothes came down because the first two sages addressed the wicked kite. We are now living in the Age of Kali, an age in which everyone is a born sinner. In this age only those who commit a sin become sinners and not those who speak to sinners. Now, don't waste my time. Disperse or face my curse."

The kite flew away disappointed.

The female mouse then prayed Salankayana, "O sage, please give me shelter in your hermitage. Otherwise, some wicked bird will kill me. I will spend the rest of my life with whatever leftovers you choose to feed me with."

The female mouse's prayer moved the sage but he thought that if he took her home, people would laugh at him. So, he turned the mouse into a beautiful girl and took her home.

"What is this you have brought," asked the sage's wife. Where did you bring this girl from?"



"She is a female mouse. She needed protection from wicked birds. That's why I turned her into a girl and brought her home. You will need to shower all care on her. I will make her a mouse again," said the sage.

"Please don't do that," pleaded his wife, "You have saved her life and therefore you have become her father. I don't have a child. Since you are her father, she becomes my daughter." The sage accepted her plea.

The girl grew into a beautiful woman and became an eligible bride. Salankayana told his wife, "The girl has come of age. It is not proper for her to remain in our house. The learned have said,

He who keeps an eligible bride in his house
Forfeits a place in heaven. So do his ancestors.

"It's all right. Look for a boy," said his wife.

Salankayana immediately summoned the Sun and told him, "This is my daughter. If she is willing to marry you, get ready to marry her."

He then showed the Sun to his daughter and asked her if she would marry him. She said that the Sun was very hot and she would prefer someone else. The sage then summoned the God of Clouds, the God of Wind and the God of Mountains. The girl rejected every one of them on one ground or the other.

Then the God of Mountains told the sage, "The most suitable candidate for your daughter is a mouse. He is more powerful than I am."

The sage then turned her into a mouse and gave her away to a king of mice in marriage.

"That's why," Raktaksha resumed, "I want you know that a crow is a crow and cannot become an owl."

Yet, disregarding Raktaksha's warnings, the king's men took away Sthirajeevi to their fortress not knowing that they were bringing ruin upon themselves and the king. Sthirajeevi thought on the way to his destination, "This man (Raktaksha) alone advised the king to kill me. Of all of the king's men he alone knows statecraft. If they had heeded his word and killed me the king would have escaped disaster."

When Sthirajeevi's procession arrived at the entrance of the fortress, king Arimardana ordered his men to accommodate him in a comfortable place of his choice. But Sthirajeevi had other ideas. If he had to hatch a plan to kill the king, it was not possible within the fort because he and his movements would be constantly under watch. That would alert his hosts. So, he thought, it was better to be outside the fort.

He told the king, "My lord, I am grateful for your generosity. But I am a politician and belong to the enemy camp. Yet I am your devotee and faithful servant. It does not become of me to live inside the palace. I will stay at the entrance of the fort and every day sanctify my body with the dust of your feet."

The king of owls accepted his request and let him stay where he wanted to. The king's men took extraordinary care of his needs and very soon Sthirajeevi became as strong as a wrestler. Seeing Sthirajeevi's new personality, Raktaksha told the king and other ministers, "I regard all of you as very unwise. Haven't you heard the learned often repeating the words of the bird Sindhuka? The bird used to say, "First, I am a fool. Then the hunter and then the king and his ministers."

"How was that?" asked the ministers and Raktaksha began telling them [the story of Sindhuka](#).

Tale of The Golden Droppings



On a big tree in the lap of a mountain lived a bird named Sindhuka. His droppings used to turn into gold as soon as they hit the ground. One day, a hunter came to the tree in search of prey and saw Sindhuka's droppings hit the ground and turn into gold.

The hunter, struck by wonder, thought, "I have been hunting birds and small animals since I was a boy. I am now eighty years old. I have never seen in my life this kind of miracle."

He decided to get the bird some how and set a noose for him. Not aware of the trap, the bird stayed on the branch merrily singing. Soon, the noose tightened and the hunter caught the bird and pushed him into his cage.

The hunter took it home and considered, "If the king comes to know of this wonder, he will certainly take away the bird from me. Instead, I will go to the king and present the unique bird to him."



The hunter took the bird the following day to the king and presented it to him with great reverence. The king was extremely happy and told his men to keep the bird in safe custody and feed him with the best bird food. But his minister was reluctant to accept the bird.

He said, "O Rajah, There is no use in trusting the word of this hunter and accepting the bird. Has anyone seen a bird dropping gold? Therefore, I request you to release the bird from the cage."

The king ordered the bird to be set free. As soon as the door of the cage opened, the bird perched himself on a nearby doorway and defecated. The dropping immediately turned into gold. Sindhuka then recited that line about fools, "First, I was a fool. Then the hunter and then the king and his ministers."

Raktaksha continued, "That's why I tell you that we are all fools in sparing the life of this minister of the crows, Sthirajeevi." Despite Raktaksha's warnings, the owls continued to look after Sthirajeevi with great devotion. The crow minister became strong and powerful. Giving up all hopes of reforming his king and ministers, Raktaksha called his close colleagues and told them,

"Friends, our king and his men are beyond reform. We have given whatever advice a minister has to give. We shall now leave this dangerous place and pitch our tents elsewhere. The elders have said, "He prospers who anticipates danger and escapes it. He who does not destroys himself." I have been living in this jungle for so long, I have become old. Yet, in all my life I have never heard a cave speaking like a human being."

"What, a cave speaking like a human being! Surprising. We have never heard of it. Please tell us all about it," asked his followers.

Raktaksha then told them the following story.

Deep in the rain forest lived a lion named Kharanakara. One day, he was very hungry and looked for a prey in every nook and corner of the forest. There was no animal, big or small, as far as he could see. As he was wandering in search of food he found a big cave and thought, "There must be some animal living here. If so, it is bound to return to the cave in the evening. I will hide myself in the cave and when the animal returns, pounce on him and have a good meal."

Then as sun began to set, Dadhiputchha, a jackal, came to the cave that was his home and saw the footprints of the lion entering the cave. There were, however, no traces of footprints to show that the lion had left. Scared, the jackal wanted to make sure that it was a lion or some big animal that went into the cave. But how should he know? He hit upon a brilliant idea.

The jackal went near the cave and began shouting, "Hello cave, I am your friend here." There was no reply from the cave. He did not know what to do. He again shouted, "Hello cave, don't you remember the arrangement we made? I have to shout when I arrive at the cave and you will ask me to come in. Without your green signal I do not enter the cave. Since you are silent, I will go to some other cave."

The lion heard the jackal speaking and thought, "Ah, there seems to be an arrangement between the cave and this animal. Let me get him into my trap. I will shout back a welcome to him and he will walk in happily."

The lion then roared, "Hi jackal, come in. You are welcome."

The jackal at once knew it was a lion inside the cave and hurriedly fled the place, remembering the lines of the learned,

"He survives who anticipates a danger and acts to avert it,
He who does not comes to grief."

Raktaksha said, "That is how we must also anticipate danger and act. Let us leave now before it is too late."

Listening to his advice, his ministers and others followed him to a far off place.

Seeing that the main obstacle in his way has disappeared and that the remaining king's men were all stupid, Sthirajeevi began piling up twigs on the pretext of building a nest. He heaped them at the entrance of the cave in which the king and other owls lived. When the pile was big enough, he waited for daybreak when the owls would become blind. Then he flew off to Meghavarna and told him that before word could reach the enemy camp of this plan, he and his followers should accompany him (Sthirajeevi) each carrying a piece of burning wood.

Accordingly, Meghavarna and his men followed Sthirajeevi, each carrying a burning twig in his beak. When they reached the entrance of the cave, which was now blocked by the pile of twigs Sthirajeevi built, they threw the burning twigs on the pile, which began to burn fiercely killing all the owls trapped inside.

When Megahvarna and his men returned to their kingdom, he asked Sthirajeevi to tell him how he could plan to kill the enemy.

Sthirajeevi said, "It was not an easy job living in the enemy camp. Luckily, except Raktaksha, every one of Arimardana's ministers was a fool. Yet it was like walking on the edge of a sword. But if you want to achieve your goal you will have to put up with all inconvenience and discomfort like the snake which carried the frogs on its back."

Frogs That Rode a Snake

A black snake named Mandavishya lived in a forest on the Varuna hills. He was becoming old and worried that he would not be able to snare frogs any more and that would make him weak and bring his end closer. With a plan in his head, he went to a lake and resting on its edge pretended that he had lost all interest in worldly matters.

A frog in the lake came out and asked him, "Uncle, why are you not preying for food as used you to do in the past?"

The snake said, "Listen, my son, I am very unfortunate. How can I have any fervour for food? Last night when I was on my rounds looking for food I sighted a frog. When I tried to get at him, he jumped into the middle of a group of Brahmins reciting the Vedas. I could not track him. But soon I saw something like a frog near the Brahmins and at once jumped at him and bit him. It turned out to be the thumb of a Brahmin boy. The boy died immediately."

"When his father found that I had killed his son, he cursed me, "You wicked snake, you have killed my innocent son. From now onwards you will serve as a vehicle for all frogs. Your life will be at their mercy." I have now decided to serve my sentence. That is why I am here," said the snake.

The frog ran into the lake and told every one about the snake and his offer to serve as a vehicle. Happy at the prospect, all the frogs went and met their king Jalapada and told him about the snake. "What a wonderful news," thought the king and trooped out of the lake with his ministers and subjects. The king was the first to get on to the hood of the snake, followed by his ministers. In the order of seniority and prominence, the kings' subjects also climbed the back of the snake. Those unfortunate frogs that could not find space on the vehicle followed the snake in a procession. To entertain them, Mandavishya showed several feats he could do.



Thrilled by the experience of riding a deadly snake, Jalapada, the king of the frogs, thought that the ride had no parallel. No ride, whether on an elephant or a horse or a chariot or a palanquin, can match this experience, he thought.

On the second day, Mandavishya slowed down the pace of his haul. Noticing the change of pace, Jalapada asked the snake why he was not moving as briskly as he used to. The snake told the king of frogs that he had no food that day and being weak he was not able to carry so much load.

Jalapada, taking pity on the snake, said, "You can have the younger frogs for your food."



Thrilled at this offer, the snake said, "O king of frogs, my plight is due to the curse the Brahmin gave me. Your magnanimous concession has released me today from the curse. I am so happy."

The snake thus began eating a few frogs every day and soon became strong and healthy. He was also worried that if he began eating the frogs at that rate there would not be any frogs left for him in the future.

Meanwhile, a big cobra chanced to come that way and seeing the snake carrying the frogs and struck by wonder asked the snake, "This is very unique though unnatural. How is it you have become a vehicle for frogs which are our natural food?"

"That's a long story resembling the story of the Brahmin who pretended to have become blind after eating the good food his wife had made," said Mandavishya.

The cobra asked the snake to relate that story.

Once upon a time, a Brahmin named Yagnadatta lived in a city. He had a wife who was not trustworthy. She had a lover to whom she would secretly send every day delicious food she made. One day, her husband found out what she was doing.

He asked her, "My dear, you are making every day some special dish or the other and taking it out of the house. Tell me, what is the truth?"

With great presence of mind, she told Yagnadatta, "Every day I am fasting and taking this food to offer to the Goddess." To allay suspicion, she collected food and telling her husband that she was leaving for the temple, left home. The husband began following her secretly and when she went to the tank to bathe, he went to the temple of the Goddess and hid behind the idol.

After taking bath in the tank, the Brahmin's wife came to the temple from the tank and began praying the Goddess, "O mother, tell me how can I render my husband blind?"

The Brahmin, hiding behind the idol, changed his voice and said, "O great devotee, you feed your husband daily with good and delicious food. Very soon he will become blind."

From then onwards, the wife began feeding her husband with delicacies. Soon, the Brahmin complained to the wife that he was not able to see clearly. The wife thought that the Goddess had at last fulfilled her desire.

Encouraged by the Brahmin's blindness, his wife's lover began visiting her without any fear. One day, Yagnadatta saw him and his wife together. The lover ignored him thinking the Brahmin was blind. Yagnadatta then thrashed the lover so hard that he died. The Brahmin then cut the nose of his wife.

"That's why," Mandavishya told the cobra, "I am pretending to be friendly with the frogs." Jalapada, the king of frogs overheard this conversation and asked Mandavishya if what he had heard was true. The snake at once realised his mistake and told the king of frogs that it was all fun. The king of frogs foolishly believed the words of the snake and the snake slowly swallowed all the frogs.

Sthirajeevi told Meghavarna that he followed the tactics of Mandavishya in misleading his enemies. Pleased, the king of crows said, "What you have said is correct. Great men do not give up what they have begun even in the face of obstacles. Cowards, afraid of failure, do not venture at all. There are some that begin a task and give it up when there is a problem. But courageous people do not give up whatever dangers they face."

"You (Sthirajeevi) have crushed the enemies and brought security to my kingdom. The learned have said,

"It is dangerous to leave

A fire unextinguished

A debt unredeemed

An enemy uncrushed and

A disease untreated."

Sthirajeevi said, "My lord, virtue belongs to him who is charitable, learned, courageous and friendly. Virtue brings wealth. Wealth brings power. It is a king with these qualities who can rule and expand his kingdom. I have done my duty. I need rest. But I humbly seek to offer one word of advice. All this power should not go to your head. Follow the path of duty and rule your subjects for a hundred years. May God bless you."

This is the end of the third strategy Vishnu Sarma disclosed to his royal wards.