

FOLK-TALES OF LADAKH



Veena Mehta



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THE CLEVER MINISTER

LONG, LONG ago, in Marpori, there lived the great king, Strontsan Gampo. He built himself a strong fort. Now he wanted for himself a beautiful wife.

Just across his borders was the kingdom of China. Gampo wanted to make friends with China and also marry the king's daughter. He sent for his minister, Garpa, and said, "We want you to prepare for a very long and difficult journey. We will give you many presents to carry with you. You must be careful of robbers on the way. And, most of all, when you reach China, you must do your best, for we want to marry the beautiful princess, Wong Shen Konjo."

Then King Gampo gave Garpa lots and lots of beautiful presents for Tai Tung, the king of China. He also gave him a beautiful ring to be presented to Wong Shen.

Garpa went home and prepared a caravan. On horses and yaks he loaded all these goods. Then,

dressed in beautiful silks, he sat in his palanquin. The rosewood palanquin had velvet curtains on it and lovely rugs from Bokhara.

After offering prayers and saying his goodbyes, Garpa left on his difficult mission.

After long days of difficult travel, Garpa reached the borders of China. He put up his tents near a stream and sent a messenger to Tai Tung.

The messenger rode a fast horse and was soon admitted to the king's presence. "Your Majesty, I come as a messenger of my king, Strontsan Gampo. My king is a great warrior and just. He is feared by all. Even the grass that grows has its points towards the Tibetan fort. My king desires the hand of the honourable Wong Shen Konjo. He will give you many presents in return. Above all, he will give you his friendship."

Now Tai Tung had heard all about the brave and fearless Tibetan king and his army. He was scared the Tibetan armies would march on him if he said, no. Yet, he did not want to send his beloved daughter so far away.

He said to his ministers, "Go and escort the noble Garpa from his camp. We shall speak with him."

The next day Garpa came riding a sleek white horse. He offered his greetings, and his servants marched in with the numerous presents he had brought.

After the proper greetings, Tai Tung said, "We

have received your message. But there is a custom in our land. Whosoever would marry the princess will first have to pass four tests.”

Garpa said, “No test can be hard enough for my king. But if he comes, he will not come alone. He will come with his armies.”

Tai Tung replied, “Your great king does not have to come himself. As you represent him, you can take the tests instead.”

The next day the tests were to begin. Great crowds gathered. They all believed that the minister of a savage country would not be able to pass the tests—he would certainly fail.

A trumpeteer announced the first test. On either side of a wall were a hundred foals and a hundred mares. Each foal was to be united with his own mother.

Garpó, who was very clever indeed, noticed a door in the wall. With his foot he kicked the lock aside and opened the door. Neighing with delight, the foals all scampered and frisked through it, each rushing to its mother.

A great cheer went up from among the crowd. But they still felt Garpa would never pass all the tests.

Next, Garpa was taken to a building with a hundred chambers. Each room was identical to the other. Garpa was taken in at night and brought back while it was still dark the next morning. He was then asked to find the room he had spent the night in.





The minister had carried in his pocket a piece of musk, the scent his country was famous for. While leaving the room, he had broken off a piece and left it in a corner. When led back from room to room, Garpa could easily find it again by the powerful scent.

Again, he had passed a test. Now, Tai Tung sent a coral bead to Garpa, with instructions that he should thread it. It looked simple enough. But the bead had a twisting, crooked and tiny hole in it through which no needle could pass.

While thinking of a method, Garpa noticed some ants in his room. With a smile he tenderly picked up an ant. He then tied the thread to the leg of the ant and put it inside the bead. While crawling out at the other end, the ant pulled the thread behind it, and the bead was threaded.

Now came the last and most difficult of all the tests. Out of a hundred young girls he was to recognise the princess Wong Shen Konjo. Garpa had never seen the princess. He did not know how he would know her.

The maid-servant who cleaned Garpa's room was working when he walked in. Taking out a lovely turquoise ring, he gave it to the girl. He asked her to tell him something by which he could recognise the princess. She said, "I have heard that all the girls will wear flowers in their hair. Only the princess will have real flowers. The rest will all have paper flowers. Because you people do not



have flowers in your country, you will not be able to tell the difference.”

The next day, everyone gathered in the court. A hundred beautiful young girls dressed in lovely silks walked in. Each had flowers in her hair.

For some time, Garpa was very confused. He did not know what to do. Everyone was looking at him. The king was sure he would fail and he wouldn't have to send his daughter away.

But just then a bee flew in. Garpa watched it hovering around. Soon it went and sat on the flowers in the princess's hair. Garpa immediately ran towards the girl. He bent before her and said, “My greetings to the future queen of Tibet.”

So, all the tests were passed. And Wong Shen Konjo was married with great pomp to Strontsan Gampo.

THE LAMA AND THE FISH

THE KING'S son, Sengge, the minister's son Trisong, and the merchant's son, Rabsel, were very great friends. They played together, read together and learnt to shoot with bow and arrows from the same teacher.

One day, while the three were playing on the banks of the Indus, they started throwing stones in the river. A shoal of fishes, which was sleeping under a rock, was disturbed and swam out. The leader of the shoal was a huge fish. The boys, when they saw it, tried to hit the big fish with stones.

Sengge, the king's son, said, "Let us hit the fish on its head. Because the life of the fish is in its head."

Immediately, Trisong, the minister's son, said, "Oh no! My mother told me that the life of a fish is in its stomach. We should hit it there."

Rabsel, who was the youngest of the three, very quietly said, "My grandfather is the oldest man in the city, he knows everything. He told me the life

of a fish is in its tail. We should hit the tail if we want to kill it.”

The three friends got into a fight, and in the meantime the fish had swum away.

When they saw this, they burst out laughing. They decided to go to the lama and ask him to settle their fight. They were to go and see him in two days, when the lama met people who wanted to see him.

When the evening prayer bell rang in the monastery, Sengge, Trisong and Rabsel ran home. The prince asked his old servant to come along with him to the monastery the same night. Sengge offered his prayer to God Manjusri and gave a gold coin to the lama. Then he told the lama about his discussion with his friends. He also asked the lama to say that the life of a fish was in its head, when they all came together.

The next morning, Trisong came to the lama with a sword. He laid the beautiful bejewelled sword at the lama's feet and said, “My lord, I have had a discussion with my friends. Please be kind enough to tell them that the life of a fish is in its stomach.” The lama smiled and promised to say so.

That evening found Rabsel climbing the hill to the monastery. In his hands he carried some meat wrapped in a skin. He offered his gift to the lama and expressed his wish. “Please sir, tell my friends, when we come to you, that the life of a fish is in its tail.”

The day of the weekly feast dawned bright and clear. Wearing their best clothes, the three friends climbed the hill.

With hands folded above their heads, they entered the monastery. Then they brought their joined palms in front of their chests. After which, they touched the ground with their heads in front of the beautiful bronze image. Lighting some incense, they went to the lama.

Sengge, once again, told the lama about their discussion and said, "Sir, like gold is hidden in rocks, but sunlight brings out its glimmer, so also please tell us the golden truth, so that we can come out of the darkness of ignorance."

Trisong said, "Like the sword cuts in a neat straight stroke, so also let the truth come out neat and straight."

Rabsel said, "Uncleaned meat is covered with skin and hair, but to be eaten, it has to be taken out of its covering and cleaned, so also take the truth out of its cover of untruth."

In this manner, all the three reminded the lama of the presents they had given him. Each wanted his own stand to be proclaimed as truth.

The lama was a very shrewd man. He had accepted all the three presents and said, "Each one of you is saying the truth."

Sengge, Trisong and Rabsel looked at one another and said, "But how can that be?"

The lama said, "There are three kinds of fish in



this world. One has its life in the head, the second in its stomach and the third in its tail.”

So saying, he satisfied the three boys, who believed him to be telling the truth. And, the lama had three wonderful presents for himself—a gold coin, a bejewelled sword and many days’ supply of meat!

DROWA-SANGMO COMES TO KHAM

THE KING of Kham went out hunting very often. One day, while returning from the hunt, he stopped at a creek to drink some tea and to wash his horse.

After he had finished his tea, he called his courtiers to move on. Just then, he heard a beautiful song. The king had never heard such soulful music. Immediately he got off his horse and went to look for the bird.

Behind a rock he saw a little bird. The wings and tail of the bird were of all the colours of a rainbow. Its beak and claws were of gold. Its eyes shone like two brilliant rubies.

The king was amazed and delighted at his discovery. He went carefully, so as not to frighten off the bird, towards it. He found the bird was hurt and could not fly.

With crooning soft words of love, the king held some *sattoo* in his hand. Slowly and carefully he approached the bird. The bird looked around. Then with infinite trust it hopped towards the outstretched palm and pecked at it.

the food.

The next moment, the bird had vanished. In its place stood an extremely beautiful young girl. She had a shining and radiant face, with dancing almond eyes. Her hair waved to her ankles. She was dressed in the most gorgeous silks and decked with precious stones.

The king was so startled that he forgot to shut his open mouth.

Smiling softly, the young girl held out her hand and said, "Hail my Saviour. You have most kindly broken the spell on me. Now I belong to you."

The king still could not believe what he saw. He said, "Who are you?"

She smiled again, her pearly white teeth flashed from her golden face and she said, "I am Drowa Sangmo. Now I am your wife."

Overjoyed, the king put Sangmo on his own horse and took her to his palace.

Then followed a very happy time for the king and the new queen. They had two little children, Deldan and Dolma.

One night Sangmo awakened to find the king's other wife dancing a weird dance in her room—cursing her all the while.

Fearing a fight in the family, Sangmo did not mention this to the king. Now the older wife took to harassing Sangmo all the time.

One day, feeling sick with this world, Sangmo turned into a bird again and flew away. The older



wife was overjoyed. She now mixed a powder she had got from the witch-doctor in the king's bowl of tea.

The king, who was very sad because he had lost Sangmo, did not notice the bitter taste of the tea. He drank the whole bowl. Soon after, the powder affected him and he became mad.

The older queen, who was a very wicked woman, had the king locked in a cell. She put her son on the throne and became the queen-mother.

She now started ill-treating Deldan and Dolma. These children had inherited their mother's beauty and some supernatural power. The boy Deldan grew taller within a day than others grow within a month. Dolma was growing to be a beauty.

The wicked queen could not bear the sight of them. She hired two butchers and asked them to take the children to the mountains, kill them and leave the bodies for the vultures to eat.

The butchers, being kind-hearted, spared them. But one wicked man who had followed the butchers came and told the queen that the children were still alive. Furious, she sent her guards and had Deldan and Dolma captured.

One morning she woke up Deldan, had him handcuffed and took him to the top of a very high mountain. She dragged him to the brink and pushed him down.

As Deldan hurtled down, a pair of arms swooped out and caught him. They were his mother's arms.

She had been watching over him.

Sangmo took Deldan to a land where the meadows were green and the rivers blue; where the rising sun poured gold over all the roofs, and made him a king.

One day, when Deldan was standing at a window of his palace, he saw a young girl begging at his gates. The girl was wearing rags and her hair was matted. But she was beautiful.

Deldan went out to see who it was. To his joy and surprise, he saw it was his sister, Dolma, with a begging-bowl.

Immediately he took his sister in. She was washed in perfumes and dressed in the softest silks and given a hot meal to eat.

Deldan and Dolma were now very happy. Their only sorrow was that Sangmo could not change from a bird again.

The exquisite bird never left the palace and always kept watch on her children.

One day, the wicked queen marched into their land with her army. She had heard from traders about the riches of Deldan. With her she also brought her witch-doctor.

Deldan and Dolma, on hearing all the noise, came out to see what was happening.

The witch-doctor mumbled something over an arrow and shot it at Deldan. But, Sangmo's power turned the arrow back. Here, it burst into a flame and burnt to death the queen and her witch-



doctor.

Deldan went back to Kham. He brought his poor mad father out of the prison cell. And they all lived happily ever after.

NYATRI TSAMPO

THE QUEEN of Kosala (in Bihar) gave birth to a son. The maid-servant, who came and broke the news to King Prasenjit, was rewarded with a pearl necklace. The brahmins waiting in the courtyard were given handfuls of gold coins. From the roof of the palace a copper-plate was rung, and everyone knew a prince was born.

The prince was called Buddhashri. The royal astrologer was sent for. He came with his charts and papers. Sitting till very late in the night, he calculated. But every time, he would tear off the papers and begin again. He was scared to tell King Prasenjit what he saw in his charts and calendars.

The king was asked to come and see his son. He went to his wife's chambers. When the midwife brought the child to him, the king could barely stop a scream.

The baby had blue eyebrows, he had a full set of teeth, and his fingers were webbed, joined like



duck.

Prasenjit ran to the astrologer and said, "What do your charts say? Tell me quick. This child of mine is a strange sight. Surely he can't be human!"

The astrologer stood shaking before the king. He would not speak. The king said, "Speak, no harm shall befall you."

The astrologer now spoke, "My lord, this prince is destined to be a king in your lifetime. For, he is destined to reign before his father's death."

Prasenjit was very worried. He imagined people laughing at his funny-looking son. He also thought, "He will reign by killing either me or his brothers." He asked the astrologer for a solution.

All the great brahmins got together and prophesied. "If we send him to the snowy northern country, he will be of benefit to living beings," they said.

The king sent for four of his fastest runners. A throne was placed on their necks. The child was put on it and sent away.

Crossing plains and mountains, the runners reached Tibet, the land of perpetual snows. In the hollow of a mountain, they put the throne down and left Buddhashri there.

Soon the wind blew hard, the sun was about to set and the hills became purple in the evening. The little boy sat on his throne very calmly, waiting.

Some hunters, returning home, passed that way. Seeing the strange child on a golden throne, they

stopped. "Who are you ? Tell us where you come from."

The boy did not understand a word of what they said. He merely pointed towards the sky.

A lot of people now gathered around him. Every time he was asked where he came from—he pointed skyward. The people of the country thought he was some holy personage descended from heaven.

The Tibetans had no king of their own. They thought God Himself had sent them one on a throne so that they could know him.

Four men placed the throne on their necks and carried the prince to the city.

He was known as Nyatri-Tsampo or the 'Neck-Enthroned King'. He grew up to be a very wise and just king and everyone was very happy in his kingdom.

NAMGYAL GOES a-begging

ONCE UPON a time, in the land of Rudok, there lived a lama in a monastery. One day, the lama sent a young man, Namgyal, to the village to beg.

From house to house Namgyal went a-begging, till he reached a broken old hut in the village, and asked for alms. The door opened and an old woman peered out. Seeing a beautiful young man with his begging-bowl, she broke into a toothless grin and ran inside to bring some *sattoo* for him. While pouring it in his bowl, she put her *sattoo*-covered hand on his shawl and said, "Oh! what a lovely boy you are! What a handsome son!"

When Namgyal went back to the monastery, he had an imprint of the woman's hand on his shawl.

Happily, the boy set his collection in front of his master, and waited for his orders for the night. The lama finished his prayer, picked up a bowl of his buttered-tea, sipped it and looked up. He kept staring at Namgyal and then said, "My son! A grave disaster is about to befall you to-

night. Be careful. Do what I say and by the grace of Buddha, you will escape.”

The lama said, “Go and hide yourself in the last tent in the village.” He also gave him a cord to wear around his neck. On this cord the old lama tied seven knots.

The evening was very dark. The mountains, high and cold, were covered with snow and their peaks were lost in the clouds. The wind nearly blew Namgyal off his feet as he fought his way to the tent. His head wrapped in his shawl, he stood shivering outside. A dog heard him and began to bark. The lady in the tent, who was weaving, came out and said, “What do you want, my son?”

Namgyal said, “I wanted to reach my monastery but I am weak with hunger. I can’t walk further in this cold.”

The woman, who seemed very kind, took him inside near the slowly burning fire. She gave him a bowl of tea and some *sattoo* mixed with cheese to eat.

After a while, Namgyal’s teeth stopped chattering. He said, “Amma, I am very tired and sleepy. Can I go to sleep now?”

Chorol, for that was the name of the woman, said, “I am expecting some more guests later on. They will disturb your sleep, if you sleep here the open.” She opened a great big wooden box and asked Namgyal to sleep in it. Namgyal, pretending to be very sleepy, climbed inside and Chorol closed



the lid.

The wind outside was howling like a sick dog. The walls of the tent shook. Soon there were a lot of voices in the tent. Namgyal put an eye to a crack in the box and peered out. There were lots of women in their fancy clothes. Making no noise at all, Namgyal looked, fascinated by what he saw.

Before Namgyal's bewildered eyes, the tent began to expand. Like a balloon being filled with air, it kept growing till it became as large as a field. The women moved about in it freely, talking and laughing. Every now and then they would look at the door, as if they were waiting for someone.

Just then the tent flap moved and an old woman came rushing in. Her hair was covered with snowflakes and she looked very distressed.

Namgyal recognised her at once. She was the one who had given him *sattoo* as alms in the morning and had put the mark of *sattoo* on his shawl.

The lady of this tent, who seemed to be the leader, now sat on the box in which Namgyal was hidden. Then she took the attendance. Suddenly, she was screaming at the old woman. "Why didn't you bring him! It was your turn to arrange it. How could you forget?"

The old woman was in tears and she said, "I did find a suitable one. Even marked him. I have been looking from monastery to monastery. I have looked into every house except this tent. I can't find him anywhere."

Nobody believed her. All the women were shouting at once. Chorol asked everyone to be quiet and asked the old woman to swear.

As was the custom, the old woman picked up the edge of her apron and shook it out six times, to swear that she was telling the truth.

Every time the woman shook her apron, one knot from Nagyal's cord opened out, till there was only one knot left. Terrified, he prayed the woman wouldn't shake her apron any more, or all the seven knots would open and Namgyal would have to come out. But God heard his prayer, and he was saved.

Chorol now asked the old woman to bring another one. Desperate, she went home and mixed some medicine in her husband's tea. Immediately the old man became unconscious. Then she dragged him to Chorol's tent.

The moment the women saw a man, they screamed with delight and fell upon him. Tearing him, limb from limb, they ate up every bit of him.

After some time, everyone left. When Chorol was asleep, Namgyal slipped out of the box and ran for his life.

The next morning everyone visited the old woman, saying, "The poor woman, she's all alone now. Her husband died suddenly last night."





SERBAL AND YURBAL

IN KOKONOR, the blue lake, there once lived two frogs. One was golden-coloured—Serbal, and the other turquoise-coloured—Yurbal.

The two frogs controlled the source of the water. They would not release the water unless a man was sacrificed in the lake every year. Even the king had to send members of his family when his turn came.

Now it so happened that it was the turn of the king's family. Everyone collected in the prayer-room. The lama wrote all the names of the family on pieces of paper, tied a piece of cloth on his eyes, and out of a bowl picked out a slip.

To the king's horror, the slip pulled out had Prince Jigme's name on it. The queen let out a shriek and fell down in a faint.

The king said, "I am growing old. The country needs Jigme after me. So, I will take my son's turn and sacrifice myself."

But the prince was adamant. He said, "My dear

father, I must go for the good of the country. Otherwise the frogs won't release the water and there will be a terrible famine." With great reluctance, the king permitted Jigme to go to the lake.

Jigme first went to a broken-down hut. His closest friend, Wangdus, lived there. Though poor, Wangdus was a very clever boy.

He told Wangdus that he had been chosen as the sacrifice and had come to say goodbye.

Wangdus insisted, "My dear friend, let me go to the lake instead of you."

But Jigme would not agree. After a lot of discussion, both the friends set out for the lake. It was decided that whosoever of them woke first early next morning and leapt into the lake would be the sacrifice.

It was late in the evening when Jigme and Wangdus reached the lake. They found some shelter under a rock and lay down.

Soon, they saw a strange sight. Two enormous frogs, golden and turquoise in colour, came out of the lake. Serbal said to Yurbal, "Two young men have come for the sacrifice this time. They look very strong. If they attack us together and kill us, I will vomit gold and you turquoise."

Yurbal said, "Yes, and if they swallow that gold and turquoise, they will also acquire this power. They will be able to vomit gold and turquoise when they wish."

The frogs looked very scared and depressed.



The two friends, who were not asleep, had heard everything. Quietly they got up and attacked the frogs. With their power and skill, they soon killed the two frogs. Serbal vomitted gold and Yurbal vomitted turquoise.

Jigme and Wangdus each swallowed a piece. To their delight, they saw they could also vomit gold and turquoise at will.

Jigme said, "If we go back to the city, people will think some ghosts have come and will hurl stones and curses at us. Let us not go back."

The two friends then set out in search of a new country.

One day, they reached a village. In the village square, some boys were fighting over a cap. "What is so wonderful about this cap?" they asked.

The boys said, "This is a wonder-cap. The wearer becomes invisible."

Wangdus asked them to run to the distant *chorten*. The winner would get the cap. But the moment their backs were turned, Wangdus put on the cap.

Surprised, Jigme, too, kept looking for his friend all the time. The boys came back and found both the cap and Wangdus gone. They realised that they had been tricked. After some time, all the boys went home.

Jigme was still looking for his friend. Someone tapped him on his shoulder. Turning around, he saw a laughing Wangdus with the cap in his hand.

Again they moved on and reached another village. Some men were fighting over a pair of beautifully embroidered shoes. On enquiry, the friends found that the wearer of these magical shoes could reach anywhere he wished in an instant.

Once more, the friends offered to settle the dispute. When the men ran towards a *chorten*, Jigme

and Wangdus put on one shoe each and disappeared.

The two now wished to be in a country which needed a new king. In an instant, they reached a strange new country. A big crowd had gathered in a field.

A man told them that their king, who had only one daughter, had died. Now they were looking for a new king. He said, "Today the princess is coming and she will carry a *Stroma*—a figure made of *sattoo*. While moving among the crowd, she will throw the figure. Whoever is struck by it will become her husband and the new king of the country."

The boys were very tired. They went and sat in the hollow of a *shingkushoo* tree and fell asleep.

Soon, the princess arrived. When she threw the figure, it struck the *shingkushoo* tree. Everyone rushed to the tree and saw two strangers sleeping in there. The noise and the commotion woke them up.

Now, the people were hesitant about selecting a stranger as the new king. So the head lama put them to another test. In the shortest time possible, they were asked to present the princess with a fabulous fortune.

Jigme stood up and vomitted.

Wangdus stood up and vomitted.

The people were awestruck to see rapidly growing piles of gold and turquoise.

The decision was taken. The prince, Jigme, was



selected as the bridegroom for the princess.

. He was crowned king. Jigme appointed his friend the chief minister. Wangdus would put on the cap which made him invisible, and the shoes which carried him everywhere. In this manner, he could go and hear about everything that was happening in the country, without being seen. He would then tell Jigme all about it, and together they would try to improve what was lacking and punish the evil ones. Jigme ruled the country justly and ably for a very long time.

YANGCHEN AND THE WEAVER

ONCE UPON a time in Sage Toshiga, there lived a beautiful girl named Yangchen. She lived in a small house with her old mother and father.

They were very poor people. They never had enough to eat. But, both Funchuk, the father, and Dolma, the mother, gave whatever they could find to eat to Yangchen.

When Yangchen was three years old, her father, Funchuk, died. Now it was even more difficult for the mother and the daughter to find food. Dolma had a few ornaments. She sold these and, with the money, bought food for herself and Yangchen. Dolma used to think "I am an old woman now. I can't work. When Yangchen is older, she can find work in some rich man's house and then we will eat properly."

Some years later, Dolma took young Yangchen to the headman's house and asked him to keep her as his servant. The headman felt very sorry for them and promised to keep Yangchen in his house.



Yangchen was very happy to get the job. There was not much work, she looked after the headman's little son. And she would eat as much as she liked. She had never seen or eaten this kind of food before. The headman's wife gave her a few clothes also.

Yangchen thought, "I don't have to spend money for my food and clothes. I will give some money to my mother and, with the rest, I will get some ornaments made."

The headman was very happy with Yangchen's work. Once a week, he let her go and see her mother.

But, as time passed, she stopped going to meet her mother. She only cared about her own food, clothes and ornaments. Yangchen was a very pretty girl. She became proud of her good looks, and never went to visit her mother who was old and ugly.

Dolma waited for her daughter to come home, but Yangchen did not go. Finally, when Dolma had not eaten anything for many days, she died. When Yangchen heard this, the wicked girl was very happy. For now she would never have to go home and look after the old mother.

She began now to deck herself up in new clothes and did no work. One day she gathered all her belongings and ran away.

She had been walking for many days and was very tired. She put down her things and lay down



to rest at the foot of a mountain.

While Yangchen was lying there, a very handsome young man came there on horseback. Boldly she asked him, "Who are you? Where have you come from and where are you going?"

The stranger said, "I am the prince of this country. I came out for a hunt and now I am going back to my palace."

The greedy Yangchen wanted to marry this prince and get all his riches. She knew she was a very beautiful young girl. She got up and with tears in her eyes said, "Sir, I have no one in the world. If you take me home with you, I will be

our slave and work for you.”

The prince was very kind-hearted. He asked Yangchen to get on the horse and he took her to the king and the queen. The queen liked the pretty girl, and immediately gave her a job.

In a very short time, Yangchen came to know all about the king, the queen and the palace.

She saw that the people of the country always came to the palace, as and when they liked. Yangchen put a stop to this. The poor people used to get food and money from the king's treasury. Yangchen stopped this also.

After some time, the prince married Yangchen. The celebrations had gone on for a month. Everyone brought presents for them.

Yangchen became a very cruel woman. She even stopped giving food and drink to the king and queen. She controlled the food and clothing of the prince, and spent all her time and money on her clothes and ornaments.

One day she asked the prince to get her some very fine cloth. She wanted to make new gowns for herself. The prince still loved Yangchen a lot. He went immediately to the city and brought the best weaver of the country to the palace.

The weaver was very scared because he had heard how cruel Yangchen was. He offered something to her, so she could approve it. Yangchen became very angry when she saw the small piece of cloth. She abused the weaver and hit him with

a stick.

The weaver became very angry too. He had worked very hard while weaving the cloth. He had Yangchen and ran away with all her ornaments. Yangchen ran after him, shouting and screaming all the time.

Yangchen ran barefoot. Her feet got cut on the stones as she ran. She went on running, but could not find the weaver anywhere. Soon she was running without looking where she was going. She ran up a hill and the next moment fell down and died. The people of the country were very happy.



THE KING AND THE JEWEL

ONCE UPON a time there lived in Nubra, an old woman and her son. The son's name was Tundup. Every morning he went out looking for wood. This he would cut and then sell.

One day, when he was digging under a bush, Tundup saw a big hole there. There were some steps down the hole. Surprised, Tundup went down and saw a beautiful palace.

Now, Tundup wanted to go inside the palace because he had never seen one before. He had only heard stories about them. Quietly, he slipped inside. In a big hall, which had beautiful curtains and carpets, a fairy sat on a golden throne. She was crying because she was lonely and nobody would come and talk to her. The tears that fell from her eyes became jewels.

Tundup sat for a long time and told her all about himself. The fairy gave one tear-jewel to Tundup when he was going back. She also asked him to come again.

Tundup brought the jewel home and gave it to his mother. She said, "It is very nice, but of no use to us. Go and present it to the king. He will surely give us some food in return."

Tundup went to the city and gave the jewel to the king. The king had a very beautiful queen. He went for the goldsmith and asked him to make a brooch for the queen and to set the jewel in it.

When the ornament was ready, the king ordered everyone to come to the court for the queen was to wear the ornament that day.

When the king and the queen were coming to the court, a crow came and sat on the horse's head. The crow said, "Tundup gave the jewel because he wants to marry the queen."

The king was very angry and he took the queen back to the palace. He sent for Tundup and asked him why he had given the jewel.

Poor Tundup was very scared, he said, "Your Majesty, I only wanted something to eat for myself and my mother."

The king was very greedy, he wanted many more such jewels. He ordered Tundup to bring more jewels or he would be punished.

Crying, Tundup went home and quarrelled with his mother, "Why did you send me to the king? How will I get the jewels from? The king will surely hang me."

Tundup's mother asked him to go and meet the fairy again. So Tundup went down the same



le once more. Crying, he told her everything.

The fairy felt sorry for Tundup and gave him no more jewels out of a box beside her.

Tundup ran all the way and gave the jewels to the king. The king was very happy to get two jewels this time. He gave Tundup three yak-loads of food.

Again, the king gave the jewels to the goldsmith and asked him to make earrings for the queen. Once again he ordered everyone to come to the court. And once again, the same crow appeared and said, "Tundup wants to marry the queen, so she has given her the jewels." Again the king and the queen went back to the palace and Tundup was sent for.

The king was very angry. He shouted and waved his stick at Tundup. "How dare you give jewels to the queen? I will have you killed."

Tundup cried and cried, "My lord, I told you before, I only wanted food. I am a poor man, why would I want to marry the queen?"

But the king did not believe him. He asked Tundup to get ready to fight a duel.

Tundup said, "Sir, I am just a poor man. I have no weapons. Nor do I have any forces. If you want to kill me, then do so."

The king asked him to come to the maidan in a week's time.

Once again, Tundup's mother sent him to the fairy, and he told her everything.

This time the fairy gave Tundup a box. It was

a beautiful box made of shell. She blew on it and asked him to keep it in his pocket. She said, "If you keep this box in your pocket, no one will be able to kill you or even hurt you." Thanking the fairy, Tundup came home.

After a week, the king's forces collected in the maidan. Tundup, too, went there with his box in his pocket. He saluted the king and said, "My lord, I have no forces, I am alone. Shoot 'me if you want to."

The king was very surprised. He ordered his chief minister to have boiling oil poured on Tundup. But nothing happened.

Tundup was then thrown from the top of a mountain. Still, Tundup was unhurt.

The king walked upto Tundup and said, "You are surely some magician. I will kill you myself."

Then Tundup opened his box. Seven giants came out and killed everyone. Tundup then really married the queen and ruled over the country.

THE SNAKE-PRINCE

DONYO DORJE and Belsa were forever quarrelling between themselves. The old woman would hurl her pots and pans at him and he would catch hold of her and give her a sound thrashing.

One day he brought some cloth and showed it to Belsa. She shouted and screamed and flung it on his head. "What a waster you are," she said. "There is no food in the house and all you think of bringing home is this expensive piece of cloth."

Shouting and stamping his feet with the empty bag in his hand, Donyo rushed out of the hut and went and lay under a tree. Soon he fell asleep.

A duststorm swirling around him woke him up after some time. The moment he opened his eyes, he jumped three feet in the air, his eyes popping out with fright. In his bag sat a big black snake.

As he watched, the snake slithered out of the bag and entered his hut. Fascinated, Donyo followed it inside, forgetting he had promised that he would never come back while Belsa was



live. Hearing him come in, Belsa came to do some more shouting, but was struck dumb when she saw her husband following a snake.

The snake went straight into the store.

After some time, Donyo and Belsa summoned up enough courage to peep in. They nearly fell in surprise at what they saw inside. On the floor sat a rosy-cheeked, fat, little dimpled boy. His round black eyes were dancing with mischief as he said, "Why are you looking at me like that?"

It took quite some time for the normally shouting couple to open their mouths, and, when they did, a miserable squeak came out.

The boy Tsarong spoke again, "Amma, abba, have come to live with you."

Donyo and Belsa had no children of their own. This lovely child delighted them. They soon forgot their quarrels, picked up the boy and danced around in joy. No one ever heard them quarrelling or even yelling after that.

The boy Tsarong grew up very fast. In a week's time he had grown into a young man. But, most of the time he would crawl into his snake skin and sleep in the store.

One day he said to his father, "Go to the king and ask for his daughter's hand in marriage for me."

Donyo was horrified at the thought. "But my dear son," he said, "we have spent a lifetime begging for food and you now ask me to ask the king for his daughter! You must think I am mad!"

But Tsarong was determined. He asked his father to go and try at least.

Quaking with fear and with his mouth dry, Donyo reached the palace.

He sought permission to speak to the king, then said, "My lord, I do not know how to say this, but my son whom I got in my old age has asked me for an impossible thing. He wants to marry the Princess Drolma." So saying Donyo hung his head, fearing it would be chopped off any moment.

The king was livid with rage, he had Donyo thrown out of the palace.

The poor man limped home and told Tsarong all that had happened. The young man did not say anything but slithered out of the house.

The next day, there was a great uproar in the country. All the springs, lakes and rivers dried up. Not a drop of water was available. The people went to the palace and demanded a supply of water.

All the lamas got together and prayed for days, but there was still no water. They could hear it rushing underground, but none could see even a drop of it. The largest spring had a great boulder stuck in it. Everyone joined in to roll it away. But in vain.

The king and his family stood around the spring, begging the spirit of the spring for water. A voice answered, "You will not get a drop of water till

you give your daughter's hand in marriage.”

The king now readily agreed. The boulder rolled off on its own and there was water in the land again.

The wedding preparations went on at a hectic pace. Then one day a messenger from the king came to Donyo and he said, “The king has asked me to tell you that you will be required to bring rich presents for everyone in the palace, only then will the princess come and live with you.”

Donyo was very worried. He, who never knew where the next meal was coming from, how could he present such treasures? He wished he had never adopted Tsarong.

Tsarong heard of this and asked his father not to worry at all. He asked him to carry three bags full of stones, hay, and broken cups and plates.

The wedding procession left for the palace. The king demanded his presents. He first said, “I want scarves.” Tsarong dipped into the bag full of hay and pulled out an endless stream of scarves. The king next asked for gold and silver. Tsarong pulled out unlimited quantities from the bag of broken crockery and when the king wanted precious stones, the bag of stones provided him with more than he could imagine.

Satisfied, the king performed the wedding and Princess Drolma went to live in her husband's home.

One day there was to be a great fair in the



neighbouring city. Tsarong asked his parents and wife to go. He said, "What will a snake do there?"

When everyone had gone, Tsarong got out of his snake skin and hurried to the fair. People were dazzled to see the handsome young man riding a white horse. Before the fair was over for the day, the man and his horse vanished.

Excited by the hectic day, Drolma, Donyo and Belsa got home late at night. They found Tsarong sleeping in his room.

In the morning Tsarong asked his wife, what she thought was the best sight at the fair. She said, "Towards the afternoon, there suddenly appeared a very handsome man on a white horse. He looked almost like a god. But he left as mysteriously as he had come. No one knows who he was. I think he was the most fascinating sight there." Tsarong said nothing, just smiled to himself.

His parents and wife left for the fair again, leaving Tsarong asleep. Again, the wonderful stranger reached the fair.

Drolma asked an old woman if she knew who it was. The old woman said, "Shame on you! Don't you know your own husband when you see him?"

Drolma sighed and said sadly, "But you are mistaken, for my husband is a snake."

The woman then told Drolma about her husband's secret. She asked her to go home while the man was at the fair, and burn the skin.

Drolma rushed home and found the snake skin in the store. She quickly put it in the fire. Now, as the skin burned, Tsarong, who was at the fair, felt an awful burning all over him. He could bear it no longer and fell down in a faint. Donyo and Belsa were grief-stricken, but the old woman sprinkled milk on Tsarong's body and he was soon conscious.

Drolma had meanwhile come back to the fair. She told the handsome young stranger what she had done.

He smiled and said, "I know what you have done. You have burned the curse off me, my beautiful wife. Now I shall always remain as you see me now."

They then lived happily together. The king died and Tsarong was proclaimed the heir. He ruled over the country for many years.

THE KOKONOR STORY

THE KING of Lhasa wanted to build a temple. The temple was to house a mighty idol of Lord Buddha.

Thousands of skilled workers gathered, the best building material was sent for, and under the guidance of a very able architect, the work began.

Day by day, the graceful walls began to rise. The king and the queen were happy and the architect was excited. Plans to cover it with the most exquisite murals and painted scrolls were formed.

But, one morning when the workmen reached the temple site, they saw their work lying in a tumbled heap of rubble. The gracefully rising walls had been reduced to nothing. A horrified messenger was sent to the architect who rushed to the spot, dishevelled as he was. One look at the ruin and he fell down in a faint.

The king heard of the disaster and in a rage sent for the unfortunate architect. The poor man was weeping and wailing, for he knew the king would

surely punish him. And he would never get any more work.

The king ordered the architect's hands to be cut off. then turned him into the wilderness of snowy mountains.

Another architect was sent for and the work begun. Again the foundations were laid, the walls began to soar, and expectations rose high. But again, the same thing happened. Once more, the workers found their fine building lying like a crumpled paper bag.

One after another, six architects tried to build the fine temple, and six times the building collapsed.

The king then went to the oracle to find out the reason for this inexplicable happening. He wanted to know if they could change the site. The oracle said, "You must build the temple only on this site. Do not change the place."

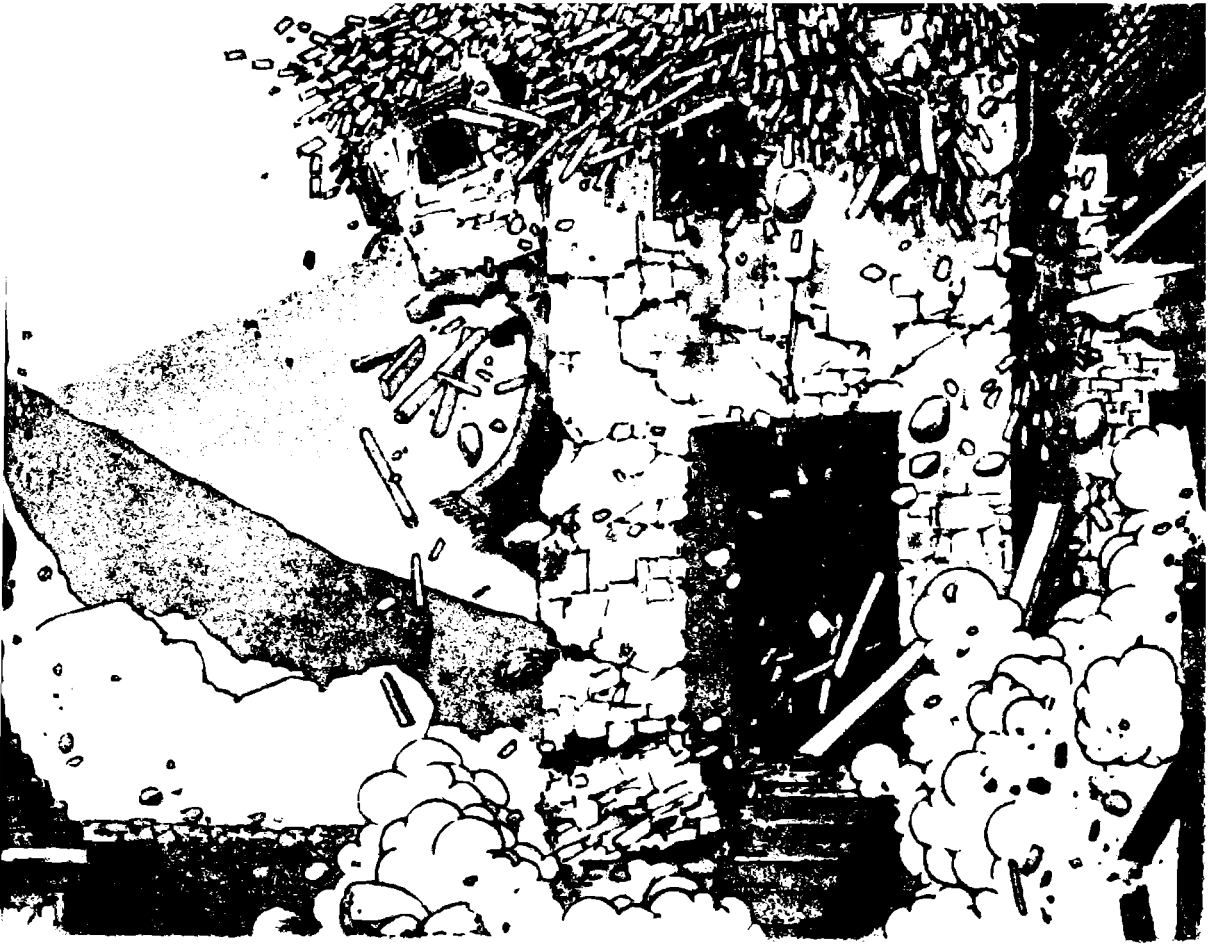
The king said, "But, my holy father, some curse seems to have befallen this place. Before completion, the construction collapses for no reason."

The oracle now said, "In the east, there lives an old sage, only he can tell you the secret."

Even the oracle could not tell the king the name of the sage.

Search parties were sent out by the king to look for the man. They were ordered to comb every inch of the land.

For days and months. all these men looked for the sage, but no one found him. Having failed in



their mission, they were scared to go and face the king. But they had to go, for they had promised to do so.

One of them, Koncho, lagged behind. He was returning from Amdo when the girth of his saddle broke and he slipped off the horse. Cursing his luck, he set out to find someone who could help him in this wilderness.

Very soon he saw a little hut. Koncho tied his horse to a tree and walked inside. An old and blind man sat on a mat. The blind man had a

prayer-wheel in his hand which he revolved continuously, and said his prayers.

Hearing a step, the old man looked up and asked the stranger who he was. Koncho lied, "I am a lama from the east and am going to visit my relatives. I am forced to seek your shelter and help, I would not have troubled you otherwise."

The old man heard him out and said, "You are welcome to stay. There is also a spare strap somewhere in the house—you are welcome to have it if it serves your purpose."

After Koncho had found the strap, he settled down near the old man for the night. Soon they were talking. The old man said, "You are a fortunate man, you live in the east, the land of temples. But the poor people of the west—the land of the snows—will never be able to build beautiful temples."

Breathlessly Koncho listened.

The old man continued, "Even now the western king is engaged in a folly. He keeps building the falling temple. He doesn't know that there is an ocean lying under the site of the temple. The ocean licks up the foundation of the building, that's why it crumbles."

Koncho's heart beat fast with excitement. But still he kept quiet. The old man said, "Are you asleep already? Listen, this secret I told you just now is never to be repeated to any western teacher."

Koncho asked him why.

The sage said, "The tiny lake you see outside is connected to that ocean. There is a curse on it. If I reveal the secret to a westerner, the ocean will leave its present site and the hidden waters will flood this lake and the land we are on."

Koncho leapt up, grasped the strap and rushed out. While running he called out: "Old man, save yourself if you can. For you have just revealed the secret of the hidden water to a teacher from the west." So saying, he secured the saddle, leapt on the horse and rode away, leaving behind a cloud of dust.

The old man cried for him to stop. His cries brought his son, Gyatso, running.

The old sage could hardly speak for anger and fright.

After some time, he asked Gyatso to chase the rider who had just left, taking away the *sangwa*. Gyatso was very intrigued at his father's agitation. The stranger had only taken away a strap. Nevertheless, he got on to his horse and rode after Koncho.

Now, in Ladakh, *sangwa* is the name for both strap and secret. Gyatso thought Koncho had taken away only a strap, while his father was worried about the secret.

Very soon Gyatso caught up with Koncho and said, "I beg your pardon, but my father is agitated by your taking away the strap. I can't understand why, but he asked me even to kill you if you don't give it back."





Koncho could well understand which *sangwa* the old man meant. Quietly he undid the strap and handed it to Gyatso, who was still perplexed and scratching his head.

Koncho undid his sash and tying the saddle with it rode away as fast as he could.

Gyatso came and handed the strap to his father. The old man beat his head with his hands. Pulling his hair and wailing, he asked Gyatso to run for his life as fast as he could. The earth beneath their feet had begun to rumble like an angry dragon. It soon cracked and disappeared from sight. The little lake had begun to swell, growing larger every moment till all the land for miles around was submerged.

After some time the great roaring waves subsided and gentle blue waves rippled on the expanse of a mighty lake ringed by mountains. This lake is now known as Koko Nor or Blue Lake.

The site of the temple was now firm. A magnificent temple was built there and Koncho amply rewarded.

NAWANG AND THE GEM

THE TAMZE (pandit) in Chuskot had a simple-minded son. God seemed to have forgotten to give him his share of brains. The very little brain and intelligence he had often led him into trouble. Nawang, for that was the boy's name, was a constant worry to his father.

All day long Nawang would stand near a *chorten* on the hillside, biting his nails and watching the coloured prayer flags flutter and the Indus flow. He would not read, work in the fields, take the sheep for grazing nor even come home to eat, unless his father came looking for him.

The *Tamze* one day asked Nawang what he would like to do in life. The boy said he only wanted to go far away, over the mountains.

One day the *Tamze*, while returning home late in the evening, was attacked by a wolf and killed. Now poor Nawang had no one. He howled and cried and begged his father to come back, promising he would be a better man. But the dead

Tamze did not arise.

Nawang was absolutely helpless. He did not know how to milk the yak or light a fire, or do anything worthwhile at all. Disgusted, he went to the headman and said, "I do not want the house, the land or the animals. Please sell them for me."

The headman was a greedy man. He also knew what a simpleton the boy was. He quickly promised to sell all the property. "What would you want in return?"

"Three blankets," said Nawang.

Surprised at the strange request, the headman brought out three blankets from a room and transferred all Nawang's property to his own name.

With the blankets as his entire worldly possessions and a small bundle of *sattoo*, Nawang set off the next morning towards the distant mountains.

While crossing the Indus, Nawang saw a group of little boys torturing a sparrow they had caught.

Nawang was a very kind-hearted boy and he loved all birds and beasts. Standing alone near the *chorten*, he had learnt to talk to them. He was very pained to see the helpless sparrow. He asked the boys to let it fly away. But the naughty boys were enjoying themselves, so they did not want to release it.

Then Nawang said, "See, I have a beautiful warm blanket. I will give it to you if you let the bird go."

Immediately the boys let the sparrow loose and a quarrel arose among them, as to who would take the blanket.

Leaving them to their fight, Nawang crossed the bridge with two blankets on his shoulder. Talking and singing, Nawang reached the village of Shakti in the evening. Again he saw a group of boys. This group had somehow captured a sick bear and had tethered it to a pole. They were hurling stones at it and laughing madly at the roans and howls of the poor animal.

Nawang was again moved by this terrible sight. He requested the boys to leave the bear in peace, but the boys would not. Once more Nawang started with a blanket, freed the bear and left the boys quarrelling.

As it was getting dark, Nawang decided to stop in Shakti and cross the pass in the morning. He found food and shelter in the *Compa* and slept the night peacefully with his remaining blanket rapped around him.

Dawn broke and with it the lamas in the monastery woke to their prayers. A soft tinkling of bells, whorls of incense, mumbled prayers and a clatter of teacups woke Nawang. After some tea and a little breakfast, he set out to climb the high mountain and go over the pass.

Towards the afternoon Nawang came across another group of little boys. They had a little monkey tied to a rope, and were making it dance.

When the frightened animal stopped, they beat it with sticks and stones. The little monkey had a cut on its head, and the blood was trickling into his eyes. Again, Nawang intervened. And again he had to lose a blanket for his pains. The boys, of course, immediately fell to quarrelling over the blanket.

Now he was left with nothing. He had no blanket which he could trade for food. Cold and hungry, he went about looking for food.

The king of the country was visiting and had set up camp. A great deal of hustle and bustle went on around the encampment and the most tantalising smells wafted out, striking the hungry boy's nose. Like flies to a piece of candy, he was drawn towards the kitchen tent.

Nawang peered inside and saw an array of pots and pans and kettles, hissing and bubbling on so many fires. The gold, silver and copper cups and plates glowed in the dim light of the tent. He also saw that there was no one inside. He slinked in and began to tie all sorts of food in a cloth. For good measure, he threw in a couple of gold cups. But, when he turned to leave, his foot got caught in a rope. He tripped and fell. The awful clatter brought several people running. Nawang looked up and saw a furious queen staring down at him.

The guards bound his hands and feet. The queen was a very bad-tempered woman. She ordered her guard to put the boy in a wooden box



and throw the box into the river.

Nawang begged and cried to be released, but no one would hear him.

With a loud splash, the box was hurled into the river, and the current carried it down the Shyok river.

Now the sparrow whom Nawang had released had been following him all the time. It saw Nawang being thrown into the river. It flew in and settled on the top of the box; softly it spoke to Nawang through a hole. "Don't be scared, my friend. All will be well, I will go and call the bear and the monkey. Then we will save you."

Nawang could only groan helplessly. Soon the sparrow came back with the bear and the monkey. The box was stuck behind a boulder in the river. The monkey looked for two powerful sticks. With these in its hand, it leapt on the box, and paddled it towards the bank. The bear put out its powerful arms and pulled the box ashore. The sparrow was all the while twittering encouraging words.

With the box ashore, the three friends quickly opened the box and were shocked to see Nawang almost dead.

The sparrow brought some water in its beak and poured it on the boy's face. The monkey bounded up a tree and brought down some fruits, which it put into Nawang's mouth. The bear had a secret cache of honey somewhere. It brought some

and gave it to the now reviving boy. Nawang felt his strength returning. He awoke and thanked his new friends.

Soon it was night again. The four friends kept walking in the moonlight. Suddenly the monkey saw something bright and shining on the ground. He said, "Look! A piece of the moon has fallen off." The friends rushed towards it and saw it was a gem.

Nawang picked it up. He wiped the mud off it with his sleeve. While he rubbed, a voice came from the gem, "My master, what can I do for you?" The friends were shocked to hear the gem speaking. They thought it was a ghost. Just for fun, the monkey said, "Your master wants a fine palace, huge gardens and a river of his own."

The gem said, "It will be done."

Nawang, the sparrow, the bear and the monkey suddenly felt very sleepy and dropped where they were.

Chattering and chirping birds woke them up the next morning. When Nawang opened his eyes, he could scarcely believe what he saw. He was sleeping in the most comfortable bed ever, in a fabulous room. A servant was playing the *rubarb*, while another stood ready with a cup of steaming tea. The windows opened on to a luxurious garden, and he could see the river sparkling in the morning sun. Beautiful paintings and scrolls adorned the walls and ceilings, while priceless rugs covered the floor.

Nawang looked at himself, he was dressed in the softest of silks with precious rings on his fingers.

The four friends led a life of great luxury. The gem would give them all they wanted.

Then one day a trader passed by. He rubbed his eyes again and again when he saw the splendid palace and garden. A month ago when he had passed this place it had been just a vast and vacant barren plain, with not a soul to be seen. Mystified, he decided to go in and find out all about it.

Now, as luck would have it, the sparrow, the bear and the monkey had gone out for a walk. Nawang was alone in the palace.

The trader sat in the reception hall, green with envy for the priceless things. He wanted to own them all. He was received with great courtesy by Nawang. Very soon, the cunning trader had ferreted out of the simpleton the secret of all his splendour. He also took away the gem in return for all his possessions in the caravan.

After giving away the gem, Nawang went back to sleep, for he had eaten a very heavy breakfast. He had hardly slept for some time when he heard the bear calling out his name and shaking him.

Slowly Nawang opened his eyes and saw that he was sleeping on the ground, out in the open, and all he had around him was a barren plain and rags on his body. His beautiful palace and garden had vanished. His friends were all talking at once, asking him to bring out the gem.

Nawang said, "I gave it away."

The three friends stood there with their mouths gape at his foolishness.

Soon, they set out to find the cheating trader.

Very soon they saw their palace again. The trader had ordered the gem to bring Nawang's palace and garden and set it up in his own village.

The friends circled around the palace, but were disappointed to see that the trader had locked all possible entrances. No one could get in. While lying around, the sparrow found a hole in the ceiling through which it could wriggle in. It went inside and after a lot of searching saw the gem. But on both sides of the gem sat two ferocious cats. Scared out of its wits, the sparrow flew back to the waiting friends and told them about it.

The monkey hung from a tree by his tail and scratched its head. After deep contemplation, it asked the bird to cut off the trader's hair while he was still asleep.

The sparrow, though not understanding why, did so.

When the trader awoke, he was in a rage to see his pigtail lying on the ground. Looking up, he saw the sparrow flying away. The trader got the two cats and put them in his own room.

The friends were delighted. The monkey's plan had worked. The sparrow was sent back to fetch the now unguarded gem.

But alas! When it reached inside, the sparrow

found it could not lift the heavy gem by itself.

Again, it went back. And again the monkey thought of a plan, while the bear dozed and Nawang watched the fish in the river.

The sparrow flew in with a thread this time, tied an end to the gem and then to itself. The monkey was sitting on the roof with the other end. It slowly pulled the bird out. Chuckling with delight, they took the gem back.

Nawang got his palace back and the four friends lived in it happily for a very long time. The monkey hid the gem and would bring it out only when Nawang wanted to ask for something, never letting it out of sight.

THE ASTROLOGER

ONCE UPON a time there lived in Khalsi, a very poor couple—Dechot and Pumo. Dechot's father had left a bit of money and a little house when he died. But Dechot, who was a very lazy man, finished everything soon. He would stuff tuff into his nose, and with a little pellet of opium in his mouth, doze under the tree the whole day. Poor Pumo had to go hungry many a winter.

Sometimes, Pumo would spin wool for her neighbours or work in their fields and thus earn some money. They also had a little apricot tree in their compound. Pumo would dry the fruit and hide it like a squirrel, taking out some in extreme need.

One day, while Dechot was as usual snoozing under the tree, Pumo went up and shook him. "I have not had a proper meal for a week. If you don't wake up and find some work soon, I will leave you and become a *chomo* (nun)."

This scared Dechot out of his wits. He rubbed the sleep away from his eyes and promised Pumo

he would find a job.

Pumo who was angry that day said, "I am sick of your promises, you never keep them. Just climb up on the roof and look around you. Everyone around has a little field in which they work hard. They always have enough even in winter, when the winds howl and the clouds come down to earth as drifts of snow."

Dechot got up and climbed the stairs to get away from the grumbling Pumo.

Looking around, Dechot saw a lot of crows gathered at a place in the distance. Some had settled down, while the others were still whirling in the sky. Curious as to what had attracted so many crows, he went towards the spot.

Munching a few apricots he had sneaked into his pocket when Pumo was not looking, Dechot reached the bank of the Indus. There he saw the crows flocked around something.

He shooed the crows away and saw something which was heavenly to his sight. Some nomads, while breaking camp, had left behind a great big sheepskin bag. This bag was full of gleaming golden butter. The lazy Dechot hoisted the bag on his shoulder and set off homeward.

Yelling at Pumo, he put the bag down in his room and said, "Don't stand gaping like the door of a deserted monastery. Your man has brought home his first earnings. Go and make me some butter-tea."

Pumo was delighted. She said, "See, if one day's work can give you such a return, how much you could earn at a steady one. You must definitely go out to far-off places and look for work. No one in this village will give you any as they know how lazy you are."

Dehot agreed to go job-hunting. But he said, "To make a favourable impression, I must have a horse and a saddle, a new woollen cloak, a cap, a dog and some food in my bag."

Poor Pumo sold some jewellery and collected all the things. Satisfied, Dehot set out.

While riding over the mountain trails, Dehot saw a fox darting behind the boulders. He thought, "If I can kill this fox, I will have a beautiful new cap made of the silver fur."

He got off the horse and tied his dog to its reins. Feeling he would soil his new cloak, he took it off and put it on the saddle.

The fox had meanwhile run into its lair. Dehot put his cap on the mouth of the lair and began to throw stones inside. The fox got very scared and shot out. While running off, its head got stuck in the cap, with which it ran away. When the dog saw a fox running by, it flew off to chase it. The horse, which was tied to the dog's collar, was dragged off too.

Dehot got up from behind the boulder, only to see a cloud of dust in the direction all the animals had taken.



Shivering helplessly in the cold, Dechot kept shaking his fist in anger. But nothing would bring back all his possessions. Warily he trudged on till he reached the palace of the king. He wanted to complain to the king that animals in his kingdom had cheated a poor traveller. But as it was growing dark when he reached there, he slipped into the stable, lay down and covered himself with straw.

Soon there was a noise at the door. Dechot peered out and saw the queen entering the stable. The queen was on her nightly round to check that all was well in all corners of the palace.

While she looked around, the jade from her necklace fell down. She did not hear it falling on the soft earth. But Dechot had seen it.

The queen then left with her servants and went back to the royal chambers. Just then, a yak walking across dropped his dung on top of the jewel.

This, too, Dechot saw. He remained hidden.

The next morning, the maid-servant who kept the stables clean came. She swept the floor, collected the dung and plastered dung-cakes on the wall. She, too, did not notice or find the gem. Dechot remained hidden for he could not go out, as he had no clothes.

Then it was evening again. A very worried maid-servant came into the stables. Dechot was getting under the straw, but was not quick enough and she saw him.



Seeing a stranger there, she was about to scream and collect a crowd when Dechot spoke, "Do not shout, silly girl. I am a great astrologer. I know your queen has lost a precious gem and you are being blamed. If you take me to the king, I will tell him where to find it. Then both of us will be rewarded."

The girl's mouth dropped open. For, this was exactly what had happened. She promptly fell to her knees and requested Dechot to come with her.

He said he could not, for he did not have the proper clothes on. She left the stable and soon brought back a handsome gown.

Dressed in silks and feeling very confident, Dechot marched to the king.

The whole palace was in an uproar. For, the gem had been a priceless one. The king had given it to the queen as an engagement gift.

Dechot greeted the king and offered to help. He asked for a stick, a string of prayer-flags and the head of a sheep. For three days he locked himself in a room, apparently deep in prayer.

On the fourth day, he came out with the stick in his hand and asked the king to get all the villagers to court. When all were assembled, he walked up to each. He would look the person in the eye, mumble something, shake his stick and utter, "No. You have not stolen it."

Soon everyone was pushed aside, apparently none of them had stolen the gem. Now with his

eyes shut, Dechot moved towards the stable, pointing with the stick all the while. Entering the stable, he walked up to the wall and banged at the particular dung-cake with his stick. The dung-cake broke and out rolled the gem.

A cheer went up, the king and the queen were very pleased. The king said, "We are very happy and would like to reward you."

Dechot said, "Your Majesty, I had a horse, a new cloak and cap, a dog and some food. My horse and my dog ran off with them. I want them back."

Everyone burst out laughing at this mad request.

The king ordered his chief minister to give him all these things and also eight yak-loads of food and clothes as gifts.


Dressed in the best silks from China, riding his horse with the dog at his heels and a caravan of eight loaded yaks behind him, Dechot reached Khalsi. The whole village turned out to have a look. Pumo danced with joy and invited everyone to have a look at all the treasures. Dechot killed a sheep. Everyone ate meat and drank beer for a long time, while Dechot told them fantastic stories of his travels and the palace.

Pumo looked after the treasures Dechot had brought home carefully. They did not want for anything and lived happily for many years.

The author, Veena Mehta, lived for a while in the uplands of Ladakh, where she came in contact with a people—untouched and unspoiled—living among the towering grandeur of the world's highest mountains. A people steeped in the supernatural, in whose lives the sprites, fairies, gods and demons jostle each other; where kings and lamas peer over the shoulder while crinkle-eyed grandmothers weave tales for goggle-eyed children.

The enchantment of the mores and customs of Ladakh so stirred the author, that she began visiting the local families, won their confidence and garnered a fund of these stories which have been told for centuries to children huddled around smoky fires in homes, in ribos, dotted in the endless stretches of wilderness, while long winters rage and howl outside, making the stories sound more than true.

Veena Mehta began writing while still at school, and has continued to write and contribute articles and stories to various journals and newspapers. She is married to a Government officer.


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