

TIBETAN FOLK TALES

~ Delightful Stories for All Ages ~

TRANSLATED BY

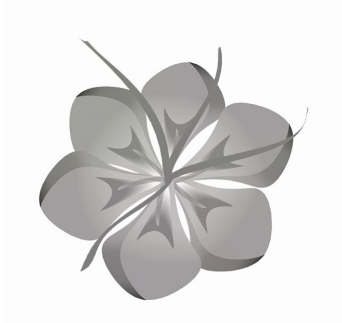
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AZAFRAN BOOKS

PREFACE

Tales are rarely only ever tales for entertainment – or, at least, not in their original intention. They have always served to supply us with that something else; be it a moral, a teaching, a way of behaviour, or to show us a state of mind. It is telling that there are no nations or communities of people who do not have their own stories – they are universal, like the air we breathe. They may amuse and entertain, yet they are also excellent vessels for the transmission of deeper, and often more subtle, messages.

Tales and stories have many forms: mythological, humorous, historical, cultural, etc; as well as many and varied uses. They may offer stimulation to the imagination, or a means to transmit certain cultural mores and norms of behaviour. And they may also allow for the transmission of permanent teachings. Some people even believe that the recitation of certain tales will bring them good fortune and luck. Who are we to say otherwise?

The fact of the matter is that all tales and stories function on different levels. For many people, we are conditioned to respond to stories by trying to ‘interpret’ them through our associations; to try to relate them to something in our own lives. Other times we allow ourselves to be influenced by their emotional content – we *want* to enjoy them. Whether the reader seeks intellectual or emotional satisfaction, the readings of tales have a canny way of placing themselves into

our memory. We may forget about them until they magically spring up into our mind at some opportune moment. Why did I just remember that story of the tiger and the rabbit?

Perhaps the most famous collection of tales is Aesop's Fables, which is filled with animals and their odd behaviour. Many of these fables are now classic tales that we remember throughout our lives – who does not know of the famous race between the tortoise and the hare? As children we loved such tales, unknowing that they also served other, deeper functions. And yet we don't need to know about such 'other levels' in order to enjoy a good tale. If we wish to, let's just enjoy them!

The tales in this lively collection were all gathered from among the Tibetans by Dr. A. L. Shelton on his trips, as the following introduction states. We may today find some of these tales a little 'politically incorrect' for people are killed, beaten, and sometimes even eaten! Yet we must remember that these animated and colourful tales are cultural reflections, and allow us a window upon the Tibetan landscape. We should not be so rash to judge – or judge at all! – for a story, after all, is just that: a story. Is it not?

And so, dear reader, may a story or two guide you upon your travels through the winding paths of this world.

Solomon James

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TIBETAN FOLK TALES

ONE: The Wise Bat

If you are a parable unto yourself--there exists no evil.

Tibetan Proverb

A LONG time ago, a very long time ago, when men and animals spoke to each other and understood the languages of one another, there lived a very powerful king. He lived far off in a corner of the world and alone ruled all the animals and men in his jurisdiction. Around his grounds and palace were great forests and in these forests many birds and animals lived. Every one seemed happy, except the king's wife, and she said that so many birds singing at the same time made such frightful discord that it worried her. One day she asked the king to call them all in and cut off their bills so they couldn't sing any more.

"All right," the king said. "We will do that in a few days."

Now, hanging under the eaves of the palace, close to the queen's room, was a little bat, and though he seemed to be asleep, he heard and understood everything the queen had said. He said to himself, "This is very bad indeed. I wonder what I can do to help all the birds."

The next day the king sent letters by runners into every corner of the kingdom, telling all the birds that by the third

day at noon--and it mustn't be forgotten, so put this word down in the center of their hearts--that all of them were to assemble at the palace.

The bat heard the order, but because he was very wise and understood everything he sat very still thinking and thinking about what the queen had said and didn't go to the king's audience on the third day, but waited until the fourth. When he entered, the king said angrily:

“What do you mean by coming on the fourth day when I ordered every one to be here on the third day!” Oh, he was very angry indeed.

The bat replied, “All these birds have no business and can come whenever the king calls, but I have many affairs to look after. My father worked and I too must work. My duty is to keep the death rate from ever exceeding what it should be, in order to govern the sex question, by keeping the men and women of equal numbers.”

The king, much surprised, said, “I never heard of all this business before. How does it come that you can do this?”

The bat answered, “I have to keep the day and night equal as well.”

The king, more surprised, asked, “How do you do that? You must be a very busy and powerful subject to attend to all these matters. Please explain how you do it.”

“Well,” the bat replied, “when the nights are short I take a little off the morning, and when the nights are long I take a little off the evening and so keep the day and night equal. Besides, the people don’t die fast enough. I have to make the lame and the blind to die at the proper time in order to keep the birth and death rate in proportion. Then sometimes there are more men than women, and some of these men say, ‘Yes, yes,’ to everything a woman asks them to do and think they must do everything a woman says. These men I just turn into women and so keep the sexes even.”

The king understood very well what the bat meant, but didn’t allow him to know it. He was very angry with himself because he had agreed to do so quickly what the queen had asked, and thought perhaps the bat might change him into a woman.

“I am not a good king,” he thought, “when I listen to a woman’s words and yield so easily, and I am terribly ashamed to have given this order. I’ll just not do what my wife asks, but send these birds all back home and not cut off their bills.”

So he called the birds all to him and said, “Heretofore, men haven’t known how to mete out punishment and laws for

you, but now I am going to make the Cuckoo your king, and what I called you up to-day for is this: I wanted to ask your King and the prime minister, the Hoopoe, to rule wisely, judge justly, and not oppress the people. If big or little come to you in a law-suit you must judge rightly between them and not favor either rich or poor. Now, you may all return to your homes.”

But the king in his heart was still angry at the bat because he hadn't obeyed him and came the fourth day instead of the third, and to show him he was the ruler and to be instantly obeyed he gave him a light spanking for his disobedience and then turned him loose.

TWO: The Tiger and the Frog

The tall strong pine is a great help, for with its support the weak vine may climb as high.

Tibetan Proverb

ONCE upon a time, in the days when the world was young and all animals understood each other's languages, an old, old tiger named Tsuden went out hunting for some food. As he was creeping quietly along the banks of a stream a frog saw him and was badly scared. He thought, "This tiger is coming to eat me up." He climbed up on a little bunch of sod and when the tiger came near, called out, "Hello, where are you going?"

The tiger answered, "I am going up into the forest to hunt something to eat. I haven't had any food for two or three days and I am very weak and hungry. I guess I'll eat you up. You're awfully small, but I can't find anything else. Who are you, anyway?"

The frog replied, swelling up as big as he could, "I am the king of the frogs. I can jump any distance and can do anything. Here's a river, let's see who can jump across."

The tiger answered, "All right," and as he crouched ready to jump, the frog slipped up and got hold of the end of his tail with his mouth, and when the tiger jumped he was thrown away up the bank across the river. After Tsuden got across

he turned around and looked and looked into the river for the frog. But as the tiger turned, the frog let loose of his tail and said, "What are you looking for, old tiger, down there?"

The tiger whirled quickly, very much surprised to see the frog away up the bank behind him.

Said the frog, "Now I beat you in that test, let's try another. Suppose we both vomit." The tiger being empty could only throw up a little water, but the frog spit up some tiger hair. The tiger much astonished asked, "How do you happen to be able to do that?" The frog replied, "Oh, yesterday I killed a tiger and ate him, and these are just a few of the hairs that aren't yet digested."

The tiger began to think to himself, "He must be very strong. Yesterday he killed and ate a tiger, and now he has jumped farther than I did over the river. Guess I'd better slip away before he eats me." Then he sidled away a little piece, quickly turned and began to run away as fast as he could, up the mountain.

He met a fox coming down who asked, "What's the matter, why are you running away so fast?"

"Say," the old tiger said, "I met the king of all the frogs, who is very strong. Why, he has been eating tigers and he jumped across the river and landed farther up the bank than I did."

The fox laughed at him and said, “What, are you running away from that little frog? He is nothing at all. I am only a little fox, but I could put my foot on him and kill him.”

The tiger answered, “I know what this frog can do, but if you think you can kill him, I’ll go back with you. I am afraid you will get frightened and run away, however, so we must tie our tails together.”

So they tied their tails fast in a lot of knots and went down to see the frog, who still sat on his piece of sod, looking as important as he could. He saw them coming and called out to the fox, “You’re a great fox. You haven’t paid your toll to the king to-day nor brought any meat either. Is that a dog you’ve got tied to your tail and are you bringing him for my dinner?”

Then the tiger was frightened, for he thought the fox was taking him to the king to be eaten. So he turned and ran and ran as fast as he could go, dragging the poor fox with him, and if they are not dead, they are still running to-day.

THREE: The Rabbit Who Got into Bad Company

If you are without kindness, you will meet no kindness in return.

Tibetan Proverb

ONCE upon a time, a long, long time ago, when the world was young and new and the mountain tops were all peaks and the garden of Eden had not been pushed up towards the sky by the big high mountains of Central Tibet, men and animals understood each other. In a desert place, away among the mountains, was a little hut of mud and stone, and in this little hut with its dirt floor dwelt an old Lama. His house furnishings were very meager. There was a small piece of beaten felt upon which he slept at night and sat on cross-legged most of the day. He had no clothing and no covering at night except the one gown that he wore. He had some baskets of grain and sacks of tsamba, an earthen-ware pot for tea, and a small wooden bowl from which he ate. He dwelt in this house away from people that he might meditate and pray a good deal, and so acquire holiness. Every day he sat pondering the questions of life, and thinking about the little animals as well.

There was a rabbit by the name of Susha and a rat by the name of Mukjong. These two were great friends and cronies, and both pretended to be friends with the old Lama, but at night when he was asleep for a little while, they would sneak into his hut and steal all the grain they could find. One day the Lama decided that these two were not really his friends,

but were just pretending to be, and that they came to see him every day to discover what he had in the hut and then plan to come back at night and steal it. He said, "I'll just set a trap and catch them." So he fixed one of his round baskets into a little drop trap and that night caught them both. Next morning he found them, cut off their whiskers, ears and tails and turned them loose. They were very angry and said to him, "We belong to the Aberrang, and that is a class that doesn't lie, nor steal nor do any bad or dishonest thing. And you know we are your friends and have not stolen your stuff at all. We just wanted to see what you had in your basket and now see what you've done to us. Well, we're going to our own kings and ask them to send an army to take your grain for sure. So you better make a lot of traps to catch us all when we come."

The rat, very much ashamed of his condition, went to the king and showed him what had been done to him, telling him that he was innocent and asking that his king organize an army and attack the old Lama as a punishment for what had been done to him. The king, who was an old man, agreed to do so at once if the king of the rabbits would aid him. But when he asked the king of the rabbit he refused to help, as he knew the rat had been guilty. After the delegation had gone, the king of the rabbits called the rabbit to him, who came, looking very much ashamed, and told what had happened to him. The king said, "You only got what you deserved. When you are found in bad company you are judged as guilty as they. The rats are thieves and robbers and

have been since the beginning of time, and when you are found with that kind of people you are thought to be just as bad as they. The rabbits are not a thieving folk, as you well know, and my advice to you is never to be found in the company of the rat or his kind of people again.”