Ja 126 — Asilakkhana Jātaka

English translation by Robert Chalmers.

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Edited by E. B. Cowell

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Pinned source revision: https://github.com/suttacentral/sc-data/commit/2d9ca8da858f94302ed6783e2717bf73d651881b

Scope: Complete numbered source article from the traditional Jātaka commentary; canonical verses appear in story context. This is not a verse-only edition.

Changes: Converted the pinned SuttaCentral HTML article to plain text; removed inline print page-reference labels and normalized whitespace. The original source retains references.

Text

“Our diverse fates.”—This story was told by the Master while at Jetavana, about a brahmin retained by the King of Kosala because of his power of telling whether swords were lucky or not. We are told that when the king’s smiths had forged a sword, this brahmin could by merely smelling it tell whether it was a lucky one or not. And he made it a rule only to commend the work of those smiths who gave him presents, while he rejected the work of those who did not bribe him.

Now a certain smith made a sword and put into the sheath with it some finely-ground pepper, and brought it in this state to the King, who at once handed it over to the brahmin to test. The brahmin unsheathed the blade and sniffed at it. The pepper got up his nose and made him sneeze, and that so violently that he slit his nose on the edge of the sword.

This mishap of the brahmin came to the Brethren’s ears, and one day they were talking about it in the Hall of Truth when the Master entered. On learning the subject of their talk, he said, “This is not the first time, Brethren, that this brahmin has slit his nose sniffing swords. The same fate befell him in former days.” So saying, he told this story of the past.

Once on a time when Brahmadatta was reigning in Benares, he had in his service a brahmin who professed to tell whether swords were lucky or not, and all came to pass as in the Introductory Story. And the king called in the surgeons and had him fitted with a false tip to his nose which was cunningly painted for all the world like a real nose; and then the brahmin resumed his duties again about the king. Now Brahmadatta had no son, only a daughter and a nephew, whom he had brought up under his own eye. And when these two grew up, they fell in love with one another. So the king sent for his councillors and said to them, “My nephew is heir to the throne. If I give him my daughter to wife, he shall be anointed king.”

But, on second thoughts, he decided that as in any case his nephew was like a son, he had better marry him to a foreign princess, and give his daughter to a prince of another royal house. For, he thought, this plan would give him more grandchildren and vest in his line the sceptres of two several kingdoms. And, after consulting with his councillors, he resolved to separate the two, and they were accordingly made to dwell apart from one another. Now they were sixteen years old and very much in love, and the young prince thought of nothing but how to carry off the princess from her father's palace. At last the plan struck him of sending for a wise woman, to whom he gave a pocketful of money.

"And what's this for?" said she.

Then he told her of his passion, and besought the wise woman to convey him to his dear princess.

And she promised him success, and said that she would tell the king that his daughter was under the influence of witchcraft, but that, as the demon had possessed her so long that he was off his guard, she would take the princess one day in a carriage to the cemetery with a strong escort under arms, and there in a magic circle lay the princess on a bed with a dead man under it, and with a hundred and eight douches of scented water wash the demon out of her. "And when on this pretext I bring the princess to the cemetery," continued the wise woman, "mind that you just reach the cemetery before us in your carriage with an armed escort, taking some ground pepper with you. Arrived at the cemetery, you will leave your carriage at the entrance, and despatch your men to the cemetery grove, while you will yourself go to the top of the mound and lie down as though dead. Then I will come and set up a bed over you on which I will lay the princess. Then will come the time when you must sniff at the pepper till you sneeze two or three times, and when you sneeze we will leave the princess and take to our heels. Thereon you and the princess must bathe all over, and you must take her home with you." "Capital," said the prince; "a most excellent device."

So away went the wise woman to the king, and he fell in with her idea, as did the princess when it was explained to her. When the day came, the old woman told the princess their errand, and said to the guards on the road in order to frighten them, "Listen. Under the bed that I shall set up, there will be a dead man; and that dead man will sneeze. And mark well that, so soon as he has sneezed, he will come out from under the bed and seize on the first person he finds. So be prepared, all of you."

Now the prince had already got to the place and got under the bed as had been arranged.

Next the crone led off the princess and laid her upon the bed, whispering to her not to be afraid. At once the prince sniffed at the pepper and fell a-sneezing. And scarce had he begun to sneeze before the wise woman left the princess and with a loud scream was off, quicker than ally of them. Not a man stood his ground; one and all they threw away their arms and bolted for dear life. Hereon the prince came forth and bore off the princess to his home, as had been before arranged. And the old woman made her way to the king and told him what had happened.

“Well,” thought the king, “I always intended her for him, and they’ve grown up together like ghee in rice-porridge.” So he didn’t fly into a passion, but in course of time made his nephew king of the land, with his daughter as queen-consort.

Now the new king kept on in his service the brahmin who professed to tell the temper of swords, and one day as he stood in the sun, the false tip to the brahmin’s nose got loose and fell off. And there he stood, hanging his head for very shame. “Never mind, never mind,” laughed the king. “Sneezing is good for some, but bad for others. One sneeze lost you your nose ; whilst I have to thank a sneeze for both my throne and queen.” So saying he uttered this stanza—

Our diverse fates this moral show,

—What brings me weal, may work you woe.

So spake the king, and after a life spent in charity and other good works, he passed away to fare according to his deserts.

In this wise did the Master teach the lesson that the world was wrong in thinking things were definitely and absolutely good or bad in all cases alike. Lastly, he identified the Birth by saying, “The same man that now professes to understand whether swords are lucky or not, professed the same skill in those days; and I was myself the prince who inherited his uncle’s kingdom.”

The Jātaka, or Stories of the Buddha’s Former Births, edited by E.B. Cowell, published by The Cambridge University Press.

Vol. 1, translated by Robert Chalmers, 1895.

Vol. 2, translated by W.H.D. Rouse, 1895.

Vol. 3, translated by H.T. Francis and R.A. Neil, 1897.

Vol. 4, translated by W.H.D. Rouse, 1901.

Vol. 5, translated by H.T. Francis, 1905.

Vol. 6, translated by E.B. Cowell and W.H.D. Rouse, 1907.

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Prepared for SuttaCentral by Bhikkhu Sujato.