Ja 181 — Asadisa Jātaka

English translation by W. H. D. Rouse.

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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

“Prince Peerless, skilled in archers’ craft,” etc.—This story the Master told at Jetavana, about the Great Renunciation. The Master said, “Not now alone, Brethren, has the Tathagata made the Great Renunciation: in other days he also renounced the white parasol of royalty, and did the same.” And he told a story of the past.

Once upon a time, when Brahmadatta was king of Benares, the Bodhisatta was conceived as the son of the Queen Consort. She was safely delivered; and on his nameday they gave him the name of Asadisa-Kumara, Prince Peerless. About the time he was able to walk, the Queen conceived one who was also to be a wise being. She was safely delivered, and on the nameday they called the babe Brahmadatta-Kumara, or Prince Heaven-sent.

When Prince Peerless was sixteen, he went to Takkasila for his education. There at the feet of a world-famed teacher he learnt the Three Vedas and the Eighteen Accomplishments; in the science of archery he was peerless; then he returned to Benares.

When the king was on his deathbed he commanded that Prince Peerless should he king in his stead, and Prince Brahmadatta heir apparent. Then he died; after which the kingship was offered to Peerless, who refused, saying that he cared not for it. So they consecrated Brahmadatta to be king by sprinkling him. Peerless cared nothing for glory, and wanted nothing.

While the younger brother ruled, Peerless lived in all royal state. The slaves came and slandered him to his brother; “Prince Peerless wants to be king!” said they. Brahmadatta believed them, and allowed himself to be deceived; he sent some men to take Peerless prisoner.

One of Prince Peerless’ attendants told him what was afoot. He waxed angry with his brother, and went away into another country. When he was arrived there, he sent in word

to the king that an archer was come, and awaited him. “What wages does he ask?” the king enquired. “A hundred thousand a year.” “Good,” said the king; “let him enter.”

Peerless came into the presence, and stood waiting. “Are you the archer?” asked the king. “Yes, Sire.” “Very well, I take you into my service.” After that Peerless remained in the service of this king. But the old archers were annoyed at the wage which was given him; “Too much,” they grumbled.

One day it so happened that the king went out into his park. There, at foot of a mango tree, where a screen had been put up before a certain stone seat of ceremony, he reclined upon a magnificent couch. He happened to look up, and there right at the treetop he saw a cluster of mango fruit. “It is too high to climb for,” thought he; so summoning his archers, he asked them whether they could cut off yon cluster with an arrow, and bring it down for him. “Oh,” said they, “that is not much for us to do. But your majesty has seen our skill often enough. The newcomer is so much better paid than we, that perhaps you might make him bring down the fruit.”

Then the king sent for Peerless, and asked him if he could do it. “Oh yes, your Majesty, if I may choose my position.” “What position do you want?” “The place where your couch stands.” The king had the couch removed, and gave place.

Peerless had no bow in his hand; he used to carry it underneath his body-cloth; so he must needs have a screen. The king ordered a screen to be brought and spread for him, and our archer went in. He doffed the white cloth which he wore over all, and put on a red cloth next his skin; then he fastened his girdle, and donned a red waistcloth. From a bag he took out a sword in pieces, which he put together and girt on his left side. Next he put on a mailcoat of gold, fastened his bow-case over his back, and took out his great ramshorn bow, made in several pieces, which he fitted together, fixed the bowstring, red as coral; put a turban upon his head; twirling the arrow with his nails, he threw open the screen and came out, looking like a serpent prince just emerging from the riven ground. He went to the place of shooting, arrow set to bow, and then put this question to the king. “Your Majesty,” said he, “am I to bring this fruit down with an upward shot, or by dropping the arrow upon it?”

“My son,” said the king, “I have often seen a mark brought down by the upward shot, but never one taken in the fall. You had better make the shaft fall on it.”

“Your Majesty,” said the archer, “this arrow will fly high. Up to the heaven of the Four Great Kings it will fly, and then return of itself. You must please be patient till it returns.” The king promised. Then the archer said again, “Your Majesty, this arrow in its upshot will pierce the stalk exactly in the middle; and when it comes down, it will not swerve a hair’s-breadth either way, but hit the same spot to a nicety, and bring down the cluster with it.” Then he sped the arrow forth swiftly. As the arrow went up it pierced the exact centre of the mango stalk. By the time the archer knew his arrow had reached the place of the Four Great Kings, he let fly another arrow with greater speed than the first. This struck the feather of the first arrow, and turned it back; then itself went up as far as the heaven of the Thirty-three

Archangels. There the deities caught and kept it.

The sound of the falling arrow as it cleft the air was as the sound of a thunderbolt. “What is that noise?” asked every man. “That is the arrow falling,” our archer replied. The bystanders were all frightened to death, for fear the arrow should fall on them; but Peerless comforted them. “Fear nothing,” said he, “and I will see that it does not fall on the earth.” Down came the arrow, not a hairbreadth out either way, but neatly cut through the stalk of the mango cluster. The archer caught the arrow in one hand and the fruit in the other, so that they should not fall upon the ground. “We never saw such a thing before!” cried the onlookers, at this marvel. How they praised the great man! how they cheered and clapped and snapped their fingers, thousands of kerchiefs waving in the air! In their joy and delight the courtiers gave presents to Peerless amounting to ten millions of money. And the king too showered gifts and honours upon him like rain.

While the Bodhisatta was receiving such glory and honour at the hands of this king, seven kings, who knew that there was no Prince Peerless in Benares, drew a leaguer around the city, and summoned its king to fight or yield. The king was frightened out of his life. “Where is my brother?” he asked. “He is in the service of a neighbouring king,” was the reply. “If my dear brother does not come,” said he, “I am a dead man. Go, fall at his feet in my name, appease him, bring him hither!” His messengers came and did their errand. Peerless took leave of his master, and returned to Benares. He comforted his brother and bade him fear nothing; then scratched a message upon an arrow to this effect: “I, Prince Peerless, am returned. I mean to kill you all with one arrow which I will shoot at you. Let those who care for life make their escape.” This he shot so that it fell upon the very middle of a golden dish, from which the seven kings were eating together. When they read the writing they all fled, half-dead with fright.

Thus did our Prince put to flight seven kings, without shedding even so much blood as a little fly might drink; then, looking upon his younger brother, he renounced his lusts, and forsook the world, cultivated the Faculties and the Attainments, and at his life’s end came to Brahma’s heaven.

“And this is the way,” said the Master, “that Prince Peerless routed seven kings and won the battle; after which he took up the religious life.” Then becoming perfectly enlightened he uttered these two verses:

“Prince Peerless, skilled in archers’ craft, a doughty chief was he;

Swift as the lightning sped his shaft great warriors’ bane to be.

“Among his foes what havoc done! yet hurt he not a soul;

He saved his brother; and he won the grace of self-control.”

When the Master had ended this discourse, he identified the Birth: “Ananda was then the younger brother, and I was myself the elder.”

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.

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

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