Ja 80 — Bhimasena 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

"You vaunted your prowess."—This story was told by the Master while at Jetavana, about a certain braggart among the Brethren. Tradition says that he used to gather round him Brethren of all ages, and go about deluding everyone with lying boasts about his noble descent. "Ah, Brethren," he would say, "there's no family so noble as mine, no lineage so peerless. I am a scion of the highest of princely lines; no man is my equal in birth or ancestral estate; there is absolutely no end to the gold and silver and other treasures we possess. Our very slaves and menials are fed on rice and meat-stews, and are clad in the best Benares cloth, with the choicest Benares perfumes to perfume themselves withal; whilst I, because I have joined the Brotherhood, [3561 have to content myself with this vile fare and this vile garb."

But another Brother, after enquiring into his family estate, exposed to the Brethren the emptiness of this pretension. So the Brethren met in the Hall of Truth, and talk began as to how that Brother, in spite of his vows to leave worldly things and cleave only to the saving Truth, was going about deluding the Brethren with his lying boasts. Whilst the fellow's sinfulness was being discussed, the Master entered and enquired what their topic was. And they told him. "This is not the first time, Brethren," said the Master, "that he has gone about boasting; in bygone days too he went about boasting and deluding people." And so saying, he told this story of the past.

Once on a time when Brahmadatta was reigning in Benares, the Bodhisatta was born a brahmin in a market-town in the North country, and when he was grown up he studied under a teacher of world-wide fame at Takkasila. There he learnt the Three Vedas and the Eighteen Branches of knowledge, and completed his education. And he became known as the sage Little Bowman. Leaving Takkasila, he came to the Andhra country in search of practical experience. Now, it happened that in this Birth the Bodhisatta was somewhat of a crooked little dwarf, and he thought to himself, "If I make my appearance before any king, he's sure to ask what a dwarf like me is good for; why should I not use a tall broad fellow as

my stalking-horse and earn my living in the shadow of his more imposing personality'?" So he betook himself to the weavers' quarter, and there espying a huge weaver named Bhimasena, saluted him, asking the man's name. "Bhimasena is my name," said the weaver. "And what makes a fine big man like you work at so sorry a trade?" "Because I can't get a living any other way." "Weave no more, friend. The whole continent can shew no such archer as I am; but kings would scorn me because I am a dwarf. And so you, friend, must be the man to vaunt your prowess with the bow, and the king will take you into his pay and make you ply your calling regularly. Meantime I shall be behind you to perform the duties that are laid upon you, and so shall earn my living in your shadow. In this manner we shall both of us thrive and prosper. Only do as I tell you." "Done with you," said the other.

Accordingly, the Bodhisatta took the weaver with him to Benares, acting as a little' page of the bow, and putting the other in the front; and when they were at the gates of the palace, he made him send word of his coming to the king. Being summoned into the royal presence, the pair entered together and bowing stood before the king. "What brings you here?" said the king. "I am a mighty archer," said Bhimasena; "there is no archer like me in the whole continent." "What pay would you want to enter my service?" "A thousand pieces a fortnight, sire." "What is this man of yours?" "He's my little page, sire." "Very well, enter my service."

So Bhimasena entered the king's service; but it was the Bodhisatta who did all his work for him. Now in those days there was a tiger in a forest in Kasi which blocked a frequented high-road and had devoured many victims. When this was reported to the king, he sent for Bhimasena and asked whether he could catch the tiger.

"How could I call myself an archer, sire, if I couldn't catch a tiger?" The king gave him largesse and sent him on the errand. And home to the Bodhisatta came Bhimasena with the news. "All right," said the Bodhisatta; "away you go, my friend." "But are you not coming too?" "No, I won't go; but I'll tell you a little plan." "Please do, my friend." "Well don't you be rash and approach the tiger's lair alone. What you will do is to muster a strong band of countryfolk to march to the spot with a thousand or two thousand bows; when you know that the tiger is aroused, you bolt into the thicket and lie down flat on your face. The countryfolk will beat the tiger to death; and as soon as he is quite dead, you bite off a creeper with your teeth, and draw near to the dead tiger, trailing the creeper in your hand. At the sight of the dead body of the brute, you will burst out with—'Who has killed the tiger? I meant to lead it by a creeper, like an ox, to the king, and with this intent had just stepped into the thicket to get a creeper. I must know who killed the tiger before I could get back with my creeper.' Then the countryfolk will be very frightened and bribe you heavily not to report them to the king; you will be credited with slaying the tiger; and the king too will give you lots of money."

"Very good," said Bhimasena; and off he went and slew the tiger just as the Bodhisatta had told him. Having thus made the road safe for travellers, back he came with a large following to Benares, and said to the king, "I have killed the tiger, sire; the forest is safe for travellers now." Well-pleased, the king loaded him with gifts.

Another day, tidings came that a certain road was infested with a buffalo, and the king sent Bhimasena to kill it. Following the Bodhisatta's directions, he killed the buffalo in the same way as the tiger, and returned to the king, who once more gave him lots of money. He was a great lord now. Intoxicated by his new honours, he treated the Bodhisatta with contempt, and scorned to follow his advice, saying, "I can get on without you. Do you think there's no man but yourself?" This and many other harsh things did he say to the Bodhisatta.

Now, a few days later, a hostile king marched upon Benares and beleaguered it, sending a message to the king summoning him either to surrender his kingdom or to do battle. And the king of Benares ordered Bhimasena out to fight him. So Bhimasena was armed cap-a-pie in soldierly fashion and mounted on a war-elephant sheathed in complete armour. And the Bodhisatta, who was seriously alarmed that, Bhimasena might get killed, armed himself cap-a-pie also and seated himself modestly behind Bhimasena. Surrounded by a host, the elephant passed out of the gates of the city and arrived in the forefront of the battle. At the first notes of the martial drum Bhimasena fell a-quaking with fear. "If you fall off now, you'll get killed," said the Bodhisatta, and accordingly fastened a cord round him, which he held tight, to prevent him from falling off the elephant. But the sight of the field of battle proved too much for Bhimasena, and the fear of death was so strong on him that he fouled the elephant's back. "Ah," said the Bodhisatta, "the present does not tally with the past. Then you affected the warrior; now your prowess is confined to befouling the elephant you ride on." And so saying, he uttered this stanza—

You vaunted your prowess, and loud was your boast;

You swore you would vanquish the foe!

But is it consistent, when faced with their host,

To vent your emotion, sir, so?

When the Bodhisatta had ended these taunts, he said, "But don't you be afraid, my friend. Am not I here to protect you?" Then he made Bhimasena get off the elephant and bade him wash himself and go home. "And now to win renown this day," said the Bodhisatta, raising his battle-cry as he dashed into the fight. Breaking through the king's camp, he dragged the king out and took him alive to Benares. In great joy at his prowess, his royal master loaded him with honours, and from that day forward all India was loud with the fame of the Sage Little Bowman. To Bhimasena he gave largesse, and sent him back to his own home; whilst he himself excelled in charity and all good works, and at his death passed away to fare according to his deserts.

"Thus, Brethren," said the Master, "this is not the first time that this Brother has been a braggart; he was just the same in bygone days too." His lesson ended, the Master shewed the connexion and identified the Birth by saying, "This braggart Brother was the Bhimasena of those days, and I myself the Sage Little Bowman."

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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