

# The Story of Prince Sobur

By the Rev. Lal Behari Day

Once upon a time there lived a certain merchant who had seven daughters. One day the merchant put to his daughters the question: "By whose fortune do you get your living?" The eldest daughter answered—"Papa, I get my living by your fortune." The same answer was given by the second daughter, the third, the fourth, the fifth, and the sixth; but his youngest daughter said—"I get my living by my own fortune." The merchant got very angry with the youngest daughter, and said to her—"As you are so ungrateful as to say that you get your living by your own fortune, let me see how you fare alone. This very day you shall leave my house without a pice in your pocket." He forthwith called his palki-bearers, and ordered them to take away the girl and leave her in the midst of a forest. The girl begged hard to be allowed to take with her her work-box containing her needles and threads. She was allowed to do so. She then got into the palki, which the bearers lifted on their shoulders. The bearers had not gone many hundred yards to the tune of "Hoon! boon! hoon! hoon! hoon! hoon!" when an old woman bawled out to them and bid them stop. On coming up to the palki, she said, "Where are you taking away my daughter?" for she was the nurse of the merchant's youngest child. The bearers replied, "The merchant has ordered us to take her away and leave her in the midst of a forest; and we are going to do his bidding." "I must go with her," said the old woman. "How will you be able to keep pace with us, as we must needs run?" said the bearers. "Anyhow I must go where my daughter goes," rejoined the old woman. The upshot was that, at the entreaty of the merchant's youngest daughter, the old woman was put inside the palki along with her. In the afternoon the palki-bearers reached a dense forest. They went far into it; and towards sunset they put down the girl and the old woman at the foot of a large tree, and retraced their steps homewards.

The case of the merchant's youngest daughter was truly pitiable. She was scarcely fourteen years old; she had been bred in the lap of luxury; and she was now here at sundown in the heart of what seemed an interminable forest, with not a penny in her pocket, and with no other protection than what could be given her by an old, decrepit, imbecile woman. The very trees of the forest looked upon her with pity. The gigantic tree, at whose foot she was mingling her tears with those of the old woman, said to her (for trees could speak in those days)—"Unhappy girl! I much pity you. In a short time the wild beasts of the forest will come out of their lairs and roam about for their prey; and they are sure to devour you and your companion. But I can help you; I will make an opening for you in my trunk. When you see the opening go into it; I will then close it up; and you will remain safe inside; nor can the wild beasts touch you." In a moment the trunk of the tree was split into two. The merchant's daughter and the old woman went inside the hollow, on which the tree resumed its natural shape. When the shades of night darkened the forest the wild beasts came out of their lairs. The fierce tiger was there; the wild bear was there; the hard-skinned rhinoceros was there the bushy bear was there; the musty elephant was there; and the horned buffalo was there. They all growled round about the tree, for they got the scent of human blood. The merchant's daughter and the old woman heard from within the tree the growl of the beasts. The beasts came dashing

against the tree; they broke its branches; they pierced its trunk with their horns; they scratched its bark with their claws: but in vain. The merchant's daughter and her old nurse were safe within. Towards dawn the wild beasts went away. After sunrise the good tree said to her two inmates, "Unhappy women, the wild beasts have gone into their lairs after greatly tormenting me. The sun is up; you can now come out. So saying the tree split itself into two, and the merchant's daughter and the old woman came out. They saw the extent of the mischief done by the wild beasts to the tree. Many of its branches had been broken down; in many places the trunk had been pierced; and in other places the bark had been stripped off. The merchant's daughter said to the tree, "Good mother, you are truly good to give us shelter at such a fearful cost. You must be in great pain from the torture to which the wild beasts subjected you last night." So saying she went to the tank which was near the tree, and bringing thence a quantity of mud, she besmeared the trunk with it, especially those parts which had been pierced and scratched. After she had done this, the tree said, "Thank you, my good girl, I am now greatly relieved of my pain. I am, however, concerned not so much about myself as about you both. You must be hungry, not having eaten the whole of yesterday. And what can I give you? I have no fruit of my own to give you. Give to the old woman whatever money you have, and let her go into the city hard by and buy some food." They said they had no money. On searching, however, in the work-box she found five *cowries*.<sup>1</sup> The tree then told the old woman to go with the *cowries* to the city and buy some *khai*.<sup>2</sup> The old woman went to the city, which was not far, and said to one confectioner, "Please give me five *cowries*' worth of *khai*." The confectioner laughed at her and said, "Be off, you old hag, do you think *khai* can be had for five *cowries*?" She tried another shop, and the shop-keeper, thinking the woman to be in great distress, compassionately gave her a large quantity of *khai* for the five *cowries*.

When the old woman returned with the *khai*, the tree said to the merchant's daughter, "Each of you eat a little of the *khai*, lay by more than half, and strew the rest on the embankments of the tank all round." They did as they were bidden, though they did not understand the reason why they were told to scatter the *khai* on the sides of the tank. They spent the day in bewailing their fate, and at night they were housed inside the trunk of the tree as on the previous night. The wild beasts came as before, further mutilated the tree, and tortured it as in the preceding night. But during the night a scene was being enacted on the embankments of the tank of which the two women saw the outcome only on the following morning. Hundreds of peacocks of gorgeous plumes came to the embankments to eat the *khai* which had been strewed on them; and as they strove with each other for the tempting food many of their plumes fell off their bodies. Early in the morning the tree told the two women to gather the plumes together, out of which the merchant's daughter made a beautiful fan. This fan was taken into the city to the palace, where the son of the king admired it greatly and paid for it a large sum of money. As each morning a quantity of plumes was collected, every day one fan was made and sold. So that in a short time the two women got rich. The tree then advised them to employ men in building a house for them to live in. Accordingly bricks were burnt, trees were cut down for beams and rafters, bricks were reduced to powder, lime was manufactured, and in a few months a stately, palace-like house was built for the merchant's daughter and her old

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<sup>1</sup> Shells used as money, one hundred and sixty of which could have been got a few years ago for one pice.

<sup>2</sup> Fried paddy.

nurse. It was thought advisable to lay out the adjoining grounds as a garden, and to dig a tank for supplying them with water.

In the meantime the merchant himself with his wife and six daughters had been frowned upon by the goddess of wealth. By a sudden stroke of misfortune he lost all his money, his house and property were sold, and he, his wife, and six daughters, were turned adrift penniless into the world. It so happened that they lived in a village not far from the place where the two strange women had built a palace and were digging a tank. As the once rich merchant was now supporting his family by the pittance which he obtained every day for his manual labour, he bethought himself of employing himself as a day labourer in digging the tank of the strange lady on the skirts of the forest. His wife said she would also go to dig the tank with him. So one day while the strange lady was amusing herself from the window of her palace with looking at the labourers digging her tank, to her utter surprise she saw her father and mother coming towards the palace, apparently to engage themselves as day labourers. Tears ran down her cheeks as she looked at them, for they were clothed in rags. She immediately sent servants to bring them inside the house. The poor man and woman were frightened beyond measure. They saw that the tank was all ready; and as it was customary in those days to offer a human sacrifice when the digging was over, they thought that they were called inside in order to be sacrificed. Their fears increased when they were told to throw away their rags and to put on fine clothes which were given to them. The strange lady of the palace, however, soon dispelled their fears; for she told them that she was their daughter, fell on their necks and wept. The rich daughter related her adventures, and the father felt she was right when she said that she lived upon her own fortune and not on that of her father. She gave her father a large fortune, which enabled him to go to the city in which he formerly lived, and to set himself up again as a merchant.

The merchant now bethought himself of going in his ship to distant countries for purposes of trade. All was ready. He got on board, ready to start, but, strange to say, the ship would not move. The merchant was at a loss what to make of this. At last the idea occurred to him that he had asked each of his six daughters, who were living with him, what thing she wished he should bring for her; but he had not asked that question of his seventh daughter who had made him rich. He therefore immediately despatched a messenger to his youngest daughter, asking her what she wished her father to bring for her on his return from his mercantile travels. When the messenger arrived she was engaged in her devotions, and hearing that a messenger had arrived from her father she said to him “Sobur,” meaning “wait.” The messenger understood that she wanted her father to bring for her something called *Sobur*. He returned to the merchant and told him that she wanted him to bring for her *Sobur*. The ship now moved of itself, and the merchant started on his travels. He visited many ports, and by selling his goods obtained immense profit. The things his six daughters wanted him to bring for them he easily got, but *Sobur*, the thing which he understood his youngest daughter wished to have, he could get nowhere. He asked at every port whether *Sobur* could be had there, but the merchants all told him that they had never heard of such an article of commerce. At the last port he went through the streets bawling out—“Wanted *Sobur!* wanted *Sobur!*” The cry attracted the notice of the son of the king of that country whose name was Sobur. The prince, hearing from the merchant that his daughter wanted *Sobur*, said that he had the article in question, and bringing out a small box of wood containing a magical fan with a looking-

glass in it, said—"This is *Sobur* which your daughter wishes to have." The merchant having obtained the long-wished-for *Sobur* weighed anchor, and sailed for his native land. On his arrival he sent to his youngest daughter the said wonderful box. The daughter, thinking it to be a common wooden box, laid it aside. Some days after when she was at leisure she bethought herself of opening the box which her father had sent her. When she opened it she saw in it a beautiful fan, and in it a looking-glass. As she shook the fan, in a moment the Prince Sobur stood before her, and said—"You called me, here I am. What's your wish?" The merchant's daughter, astonished at the sudden appearance of a prince of such exquisite beauty, asked who he was, and how he had made his appearance there. The prince told her of the circumstances under which he gave the box to her father, and informed her of the secret that whenever the fan would be shaken he would make his appearance. The prince lived for a day or two in the house of the merchant's daughter, who entertained him hospitably. The upshot was, that they fell in love with each other, and vowed to each other to be husband and wife. The prince returned to his royal father and told him that he had selected a wife for himself. The day for the wedding was fixed. The merchant and his six daughters were invited. The nuptial knot was tied. But there was death in the marriage-bed. The six daughters of the merchant, envying the happy lot of their youngest sister, had determined to put an end to the life of her newly-wedded husband. They broke several bottles, reduced the broken pieces into fine powder, and scattered it profusely on the bed. The prince, suspecting no danger, laid himself down in the bed; but he had scarcely been there two minutes when he felt acute pain through his whole system, for the fine bottle-powder had gone through every pore of his body. As the prince became restless through pain, and was shrieking aloud, his attendants hastily took him away to his own country.

The king and queen, the parents of Prince Sobur, consulted all the physicians and surgeons of the kingdom; but in vain. The young prince was day and night screaming with pain, and no one could ascertain the disease, far less give him relief. The grief of the merchant's daughter may be imagined. The marriage knot had been scarcely tied when her husband was attacked, as she thought, by a terrible disease and carried away many hundreds of miles off. Though she had never seen her husband's country she determined to go there and nurse him. She put on the garb of a Sannyasi, and with a dagger in her hand set out on her journey. Of tender years, and unaccustomed to make long journeys on foot, she soon got weary and sat under a tree to rest. On the top of the tree was the nest of the divine bird Bihangama and his mate Bihangami. They were not in their nest at the time, but two of their young ones were in it. Suddenly the young ones on the top of the tree gave a scream which roused the half-drowsy merchant's daughter whom we shall now call the young Sannyasi. He saw near him a huge serpent raising its hood and about to climb into the tree. In a moment he cut the serpent into two, on which the young birds left off screaming. Shortly after the Bihangama and Bihangami came sailing through the air; and the latter said to the former—"I suppose our offspring as usual have been devoured by our great enemy the serpent. Ah me! I do not hear the cries of my young ones." On nearing the nest, however, they were agreeably surprised to find their offspring alive. The young ones told their dams how the young Sannyasi under the tree had destroyed the serpent. And sure enough the snake was lying there cut into two.

The Bihangami then said to her mate—"The young Sannyasi has saved our offspring from death, I wish we could do him some service in return. The Bihangama replied, "We

shall presently do her service, for the person under the tree is not a man but a woman. She got married only last night to Prince Sobur, who, a few hours after, when jumping into his bed, had every pore of his body pierced with fine particles of ground bottles which had been spread over his bed by his envious sisters-in-law. He is still suffering pain in his native land, and, indeed, is at the point of death. And his heroic bride taking the garb of a Sannyasi is going to nurse him." "But," asked the Bihanprince-gami, "is there no cure for the?" "Yes, there is," replied the Bihangama "if out dung which is lying on the ground round about, and which is hardened, be reduced to powder, and applied by means of a brush to the body of the prince after bathing him seven times with seven jars of water and seven jars of milk Prince Sobur will undoubtedly get well." "But," asked the Bihangami, "how can the poor daughter of the merchant walk such a distance? It must take her many days, by which time the poor prince will have died." "I can," replied the Bihangama, "take the young lady on my back, and put her in the capital of Prince Sobur, and bring her back, provided she does not take any presents there." The merchant's daughter, in the garb of a Sannyasi, heard this conversation between the two birds, and begged the Bihangama to take her on his back. To this the bird readily consented. Before mounting on her aerial car she gathered a quantity of birds' dung and reduced it to fine powder. Armed with this potent drug she got up on the back of the kind bird, and sailing through the air with the rapidity of lightning, soon reached the capital of Prince Sobur. The young Sannyasi went up to the gate of the palace, and sent word to the king that he was acquainted with potent drugs and would cure the prince in a few hours. The king, who had tried all the best doctors in the kingdom without success, looked upon the Sannyasi as a mere pretender, but on the advice of his councillors agreed to give him a trial. The Sannyasi ordered seven jars of water and seven jars of milk to be brought to him. He poured the contents of all the jars on the body of the prince. He then applied, by means of a feather, the dung-powder he had already prepared to every pore of the prince's body. Thereafter seven jars of water and seven jars of milk were again six times poured upon him. When the prince's body was wiped, he felt perfectly well. The king ordered that the richest treasures he had should be presented to the wonderful doctor; but the Sannyasi refused to take any. He only wanted a ring from the prince's finger to preserve as a memorial. The ring was readily given him. The merchant's daughter hastened to the sea-shore where the Bihangama was awaiting her. In a moment they reached the tree of the divine birds. Hence the young bride walked to her house on the skirts of the forest. The following day she shook the magical fan, and forthwith Prince Sobur appeared before her. When the lady showed him the ring, he learnt with infinite surprise that his own wife was the doctor that cured him. The prince took away his bride to his palace in his far-off kingdom, forgave his sisters-in-law, lived happily for scores of years, and was blessed with children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

*Thus my story endeth,  
The Natiya-thorn withereth, etc.*