

The Story of a Brahmadaitya¹

By the Rev. Lal Behari Day

Once on a time there lived a poor Brahman who had a wife. As he had no means of livelihood, he used every day to beg from door to door, and thus got some rice which they boiled and ate, together with some greens which they gleaned from the fields. After some time it chanced that the village changed its owner, and the Brahman bethought himself of asking some boon of the new laird. So one morning the Brahman went to the laird's house to pay him court. It so happened that at that time the laird was making inquiries of his servants about the village and its various parts. The laird was told that a certain banyan-tree in the outskirts of the village was haunted by a number of ghosts; and that no man had ever the boldness to go to that tree at night. In bygone days some rash fellows went to the tree at night, but the necks of them all were wrung, and they all died. Since that time no man had ventured to go to the tree at night, though in the day some neat-herds took their cows to the spot. The new laird on hearing this said, that if any one would go at night to the tree, cut one of its branches and bring it to him, he would make him a present of a hundred *bighas*² of rent-free land. None of the servants of the laird accepted the challenge, as they were sure they would be throttled by the ghosts. The Brahman, who was sitting there, thought within himself thus—"I am almost starved to death now, as I never get my bellyful. If I go to the tree at night and succeed in cutting off one of its branches I shall get one hundred *bighas* of rent-free land, and become independent for life. If the ghosts kill me, my case will not be worse, for to die of hunger is no better than to be killed by ghosts." He then offered to go to the tree and cut off a branch that night. The laird renewed his promise⁵ and said to the Brahman that if he succeeded in bringing one of the branches of that haunted tree at night he would certainly give him one hundred *bighas* of rent-free land.

In the course of the day when the people of the village heard of the laird's promise and of the Brahman's offer, they all pitied the poor man. They blamed him for his foolhardiness, as they were sure the ghosts would kill him, as they had killed so many before. His wife tried to dissuade him from the rash undertaking; but in vain. He said he would die in any case; but there was some chance of his escaping, and of thus becoming independent for life. Accordingly one hour after sundown, the Brahman set out. He went to the outskirts of the village without the slightest fear as far as a certain *vakula-tree* (*Mimusops Elengi*), from which the haunted tree was about one rope distant. But under the *vakula-tree* the Brahman's heart misgave him. He began to quake with fear, and the heaving of his heart was like the upward and downward motion of the paddy-husking pedal. The *vakula-tree* was the haunt of a Brahmadaitya, who, seeing the Brahman stop under the tree, spoke to him, and said, "Are you afraid, Brahman? Tell me what you wish to do, and I'll help you. I am a Brahmadaitya." The Brahman replied, "O blessed spirit, I wish to go to yonder banyan-tree, and cut off one of its branches for the zemindar, who has promised to give me one hundred *bighas* of rent-free land for it. But my courage is

¹ The ghost of a Brahman who dies unmarried.

² A *bigha* is about the third part of an acre.

failing me. I shall thank you very much for helping me.” The Brahmadaitya answered, “Certainly I’ll help you, Brahman. Go on towards the tree, and I’ll come with you.” The Brahman, relying on the supernatural strength of his invisible patron, who is the object of the fear and reverence of common ghosts, fearlessly walked towards the haunted tree, on reaching which he began to cut a branch with the bill which was in his hand. But the moment the first stroke was given, a great many ghosts rushed towards the Brahman, who would have been torn to pieces but for the interference of the Brahmadaitya. The Brahmadaitya said in a commanding tone, “Ghosts, listen. This is a poor Brahman. He wishes to get a branch of this tree which will be of great use to him. It is my will that you let him cut a branch.” The ghosts, hearing the voice of the Brahmadaitya, replied, “Be it according to thy will, lord. At thy bidding we are ready to do anything. Let not the Brahman take the trouble of cutting; we ourselves will cut a branch for him.” So saying, in the twinkling of an eye, the ghosts put into the hands of the Brahman a branch of the tree, with which he went as fast as his legs could carry him to the house of the zemindar. The zemindar and his people were not a little surprised to see the branch; but he said, “Well, I must see to-morrow whether this branch is a branch of the haunted tree or not; if it be, you will get the promised reward.” Next morning the zemindar himself went along with his servants to the haunted tree, and found to their infinite surprise that the branch in their hands was really a branch of that tree, as they saw the part from which it had been cut off. Being thus satisfied, the zemindar ordered a deed to be drawn up, by which he gave to the Brahman for ever one hundred *bighas* of rent-free land. Thus in one night the Brahman became a rich man. It so happened that the fields, of which the Brahman became the owner, were covered with ripe paddy, ready for the sickle. But the Brahman had not the means to reap the golden harvest. He had not a pice in his pocket for paying the wages of the reapers. What was the Brahman to do? He went to his spirit-friend the Brahmadaitya, and said, “Oh, Brahmadaitya, I am in great distress. Through your kindness I got the rent-free land all covered with ripe paddy. But I have not the means of cutting the paddy, as I am a poor man. What shall I do?” The kind Brahmadaitya answered, “Oh, Brahman, don’t be troubled in your mind about the matter. I’ll see to it that the paddy is not only cut, but that the corn is threshed and stored up in granaries, and the straw piled up in ricks. Only you do one thing. Borrow from men in the village one hundred sickles, and put them all at the foot of this tree at night. Prepare also the exact spot on which the grain and the straw are to be stored up.”

The joy of the Brahman knew no bounds. He easily got a hundred sickles, as the husbandmen of the village, knowing that he had become rich, readily lent him what he wanted. At sunset he took the hundred sickles and put them beneath the *vakula-tree*. He also selected a spot of ground near his hut for his magazine of paddy and for his ricks of straw; and washed the spot with a solution of cow-dung and water. After making these preparations he went to sleep.

In the meantime, soon after nightfall, when the villagers had all retired to their houses, the Brahmadaitya called to him the ghosts of the haunted tree, who were one hundred in number, and said to them, “You must to-night do some work for the poor Brahman whom I am befriending. The hundred *bighas* of land which he has got from the zemindar are all covered with standing ripe corn. He has not the means to reap it. This night you all must do the work for him. Here are, you see, a hundred sickles; let each of you take a sickle in hand and come to the field I shall show him. There are a hundred of you. Let each ghost

cut the paddy of one *bigha*, bring the sheaves on his back to the Brahman's house, thresh the corn, put the corn in one large granary, and pile up the straw in separate ricks. Now, don't lose time. You must do it all this very night." The hundred ghosts at once said to the Brahmadaitya, "We are ready to do whatever your lordship commands us." The Brahmadaitya showed the ghosts the Brahman's house, and the spot prepared for receiving the grain and the straw, and then took them to the Brahman's fields, all waving with the golden harvest. The ghosts at once fell to it. A ghost harvest-reaper is different from a human harvest-reaper. What a man cuts in a whole day, a ghost cuts in a minute. *Mash, mash, mash*, the sickles went round, and the long stalks of paddy fell to the ground. The reaping over, the ghosts took up the sheaves on their huge backs and carried them all to the Brahman's house. The ghosts then separated the grain from the straw, stored up the grain in one huge store—house, and piled up the straw in many a fantastic rick. It was full two hours before sunrise when the ghosts finished their work and retired to rest on their tree. No words can tell either the joy of the Brahman and his wife when early next morning they opened the door of their hut, or the surprise of the villagers, when they saw the huge granary and the fantastic ricks of straw. The villagers did not understand it. They at once ascribed it to the gods.

A few days after this the Brahman went to the *vakula-tree*, and said to the Brahmadaitya, "I have one more favour to ask of you, Brahmadaitya. As the gods have been very gracious to me, I wish to feed one thousand Brahmins; and I shall thank you for providing me with the materials of the feast." "With the greatest pleasure," said the polite Brahmadaitya; "I'll supply you with the requirements of a feast for a thousand Brahmins only show me the cellars in which the provisions are to be stored away." The Brahman improvised a store-room. The day before the feast the storeroom was overflowing with provisions. There were one hundred jars of *ghi* (clarified butter), one hill of flour, one hundred jars of sugar, one hundred jars of milk, curds, and congealed milk, and the other thousand and one things required in a great Brahmanical feast. The next morning one hundred Brahman pastrycooks were employed the thousand Brahmins ate their fill; but the host, the Brahman of the story, did not eat. He thought he would eat with the Brahmadaitya. But the Brahmadaitya, who was present there though unseen, told him that he could not gratify him on that point, as by befriending the Brahman the Brahmadaitya's allotted period had come to an end, and the *pushpaka*³ chariot had been sent to him from heaven. The Brahmadaitya, being released from his ghostly life, was taken up into heaven; and the Brahman lived happily for many years, begetting sons and grandsons.

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

³ The chariot of Kuvera, the Hindu god of riches.