

The farmer's wife and the tiger

A tale from Pakistan

One day a farmer went with his oxen to plough his field. He had just turned the first furrow when a tiger walked up and said: 'Peace be with you, friend. How are you this fine morning?'

'The same to you, my lord, and I am pretty well, thank you,' replied the farmer, quaking with fear but thinking it wisest to be polite.

'I am glad to hear it, because Heaven has sent me to eat your two oxen,' said the tiger cheerfully. 'You are a God-fearing man, I know, so make haste and unyoke them.'

'Aren't you making a mistake, my lord?' asked the farmer. His courage had returned now that he knew the tiger was only proposing to gobble up his oxen, not him. 'Heaven sent me to plough this field, and in order to do so, I must have oxen. Hadn't you better go and make further enquiries?'

'There is no need to delay, and I should be sorry to keep you waiting,' said the tiger. 'If you'll unyoke the oxen, I'll be ready in a moment to eat them.' With that the tiger began to sharpen his teeth and claws in a very frightening manner.

The farmer begged and prayed that his oxen might not be eaten and promised that, if the tiger would spare them, he would give in exchange a fine fat young milk cow of his wife's.

To this the tiger agreed, and taking the oxen with him for safety, the farmer hurried home. Seeing him return so early from the fields, his wife, who was an energetic, hard-working woman, called out: 'What! Lazy bones! Back already and my work just beginning!'

The farmer explained how he had met the tiger and how, to save his oxen, he had promised the cow in exchange. At this his wife began to shout, saying: 'A likely story indeed! What do you mean by saving your stupid oxen at the expense of my beautiful cow! Where will the children get milk? How can I cook without butter?'

'All very fine, wife,' retorted the farmer, 'but how can we make bread without grain? How can we have grain without oxen to plough the fields? It's surely better to do without milk and butter than without bread. So make haste and untie the cow.'

'You great silly!' scolded his wife. 'If you had an ounce of sense in your brain, you'd think of some plan to get us out of our difficulty!'

'Think of one yourself!' cried her husband in a rage.

'So I will!' replied his wife. 'But if I do the thinking, you must obey me, for I can't do both. Go back to the tiger and tell him that the cow wouldn't come with you, but that your wife is bringing it.'

The farmer, who was a great coward, didn't like the idea of going back empty-handed to the tiger, but as he could not think of any other plan, he did as he was told. He found the tiger still sharpening his claws and teeth, he was so hungry. When he heard that he had to wait still longer for his dinner, he began to growl and lash his tail and curl his whiskers in a most terrible manner causing the poor farmer's knees to knock together with terror. Now, when the farmer had left the house, his wife went out to the stable and saddled the pony. Then she put on her husband's best clothes, tied the turban high so as to look as tall as possible, jumped astride the pony, and set off to the field where the tiger

She rode along, swaggering like a man, till she came to where the lane turned into the field, and there she called out as bold as brass: 'Now, please the powers I may find a tiger in the field! I haven't tasted tiger since yesterday when I ate three for breakfast.'

Hearing these words and seeing the speaker ride boldly toward him, the tiger was so alarmed that he turned tail and bolted into the forest. He went at such a headlong pace that he nearly knocked down his own jackal – tigers always have a jackal of their own to clear away the bones after they have finished eating.

'My lord! My lord!' cried the jackal. 'Where are you going so fast?'

'Run! Run!' panted the tiger. 'There's the very devil of a horseman in yonder field who thinks nothing of eating three tigers for breakfast!'

At this the jackal laughed behind his paw. 'My dear master,' he said, 'the sun has dazzled your eyes! That was no horseman, but only the farmer's wife dressed up as a man!'

'Are you quite sure?' asked the tiger, pausing in his flight.

'Quite sure, my lord,' said the jackal, 'and if your lordship's eyes had not been dazzled – ahem – by the sun, your lordship would have seen the woman's pigtail hanging down behind her.'

'But you may be mistaken,' persisted the cowardly tiger, 'she was the very devil of a horseman to look at!'

'Who's afraid!' replied the jackal. 'Come! Don't give up your dinner because of a woman! We'll go together.'

'No! You might take me there and then run away and leave me!' said the tiger fearfully.

'Well, let us tie our tails together then, so that I can't!' suggested the cunning jackal. He was determined not to be done out of his bones at the end of the feast.

To this the tiger agreed, and having tied their tails together in a reef knot, the pair set off arm in arm.

Now the farmer and his wife had remained in the field, laughing over the trick they had played on the tiger. Suddenly, lo and behold, what should they see but the tiger and the jackal coming toward them with their tails tied together.

'Run!' cried the farmer. 'We are lost! We are lost!'

'Nothing of the kind, you great baby,' answered his wife coolly. 'Stop that noise! I can't hear myself speak!'

She waited until the pair of animals was within hail, then called out politely: 'How very kind of you, dear Mr Jackal, to bring me such a nice fat tiger! I shan't be a moment finishing off my share of him, and then you can have the bones.'

At these words the tiger became wild with fright and, quite forgetting the jackal and the reef knot in their tails, he bolted away full tilt, dragging the jackal behind him. Bumpety, bump, bump, over the stones! Scritch, scratch, scramble, through the thorny bushes!

In vain the poor jackal howled and shrieked to the tiger to stop, but the noise behind him only frightened the coward more. Away he went, helter-skelter, hurry-scurry, over hill and dale, till he was nearly dead with fatigue, and the jackal was quite dead from bumps and bruises.

And the farmer and his wife were never troubled by the tiger again.

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