

# **‘A LONG-BOW STORY’ INDIAN TALE**

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# ‘A LONG-BOW STORY’<sup>[0]</sup>

One day a bunniah<sup>[1]</sup>, or banker, was walking along a country road when he overtook a farmer going in the same direction. Now the bunniah was very grasping, like most of his class, and was lamenting that he had had no chance of making any money that day; but at the sight of the man in front he brightened up wonderfully.

‘That is a piece of luck,’ he said to himself. ‘Let me see if this farmer is not good for something’; and he hastened his steps.

After they had bid one another good day very politely, the bunniah said to the farmer:

‘I was just thinking how dull I felt, when I beheld you, but since we are going the same way, I shall find the road quite short in such agreeable company.’

‘With all my heart,’ replied the farmer; ‘but what shall we talk about? A city man like you will not care to hear about cattle and crops.’

‘Oh,’ said the bunniah, ‘I’ll tell you what we will do. We will each tell the other the wildest tale we can imagine, and he who first throws doubt on the other’s story shall pay him a hundred rupees.’

To this the farmer agreed, and begged the bunniah to begin, as he was the bigger man of the two; and privately he made up his mind that, however improbable it might be, nothing should induce him to hint that he did not believe in the bunniah’s tale. Thus politely pressed the great man started:

‘I was going along this road one day, when I met a merchant travelling with a great train of camels laden with merchandise—’

‘Very likely,’ murmured the farmer; ‘I’ve seen that kind of thing myself.’

‘No less than one hundred and one camels,’ continued the bunniah, ‘all tied together by their nose strings—nose to tail—and stretching along the road for almost half a mile—’

‘Well?’ said the farmer.

‘Well, a kite swooped down on the foremost camel and bore him off, struggling, into the air, and by reason of them all being tied together the other hundred camels had to follow—’

‘Amazing, the strength of that kite!’ said the farmer. ‘But—well—yes, doubtless, yes—well—one hundred and one camels—and what did he do with them?’

‘You doubt it?’ demanded the bunniah.

‘Not a bit!’ said the farmer heartily.

‘Well,’ continued the bunniah, ‘it happened that the princess of a neighbouring kingdom was sitting in her private garden, having her hair combed by her maid, and she was looking upward, with her head thrown back, whilst the maid tugged away at the comb, when that wretched kite, with its prey, went soaring overhead; and, as luck would have it, the camels gave an extra kick just then, the kite lost his hold, and the whole hundred and one camels dropped right into the princess’s left eye!’

‘Poor thing!’ said the farmer; ‘it’s so painful having anything in one’s eye.’

‘Well,’ said the bunniah, who was now warming to his task, ‘the princess shook her head, and sprang up, clapping her hand on her eye. “Oh dear!” she cried, “I’ve got something in my eye, and how it *does* smart!”’

‘It always does,’ observed the farmer; ‘perfectly true. Well, what did the poor thing do?’

‘At the sound of her cries, the maid came running to her assistance. “Let me look,” said she; and with that she gave the princess’s eyelid a twitch, and out came a camel, which the maid put in her pocket’—(‘Ah!’ grunted the farmer)—‘and then she just twisted up the corner of her headcloth and fished a hundred more of them out of the princess’s eye, and popped them all into her pocket with the other.’

Here the bunniah gasped as one who is out of breath, but the farmer looked at him slowly. ‘Well?’ said he.

‘I can’t think of anything more now,’ replied the bunniah. ‘Besides, that is the end; what do you say to it?’

‘Wonderful,’ replied the farmer, ‘and no doubt perfectly true!’

‘Well, it is your turn,’ said the bunniah. ‘I am so anxious to hear your story. I am sure it will be very interesting.’

‘Yes, I think it will,’ answered the farmer, and he began:

‘My father was a very prosperous man. Five cows he had, and three yoke of oxen, and half a dozen buffaloes, and goats in abundance; but of all his possessions the thing he loved best was a mare. A well-bred mare she was—oh, a very fine mare!’

‘Yes, yes,’ interrupted the bunniah, ‘get on!’

‘I’m getting on,’ said the farmer; ‘don’t you hurry me! Well, one day, as ill-luck would have it, he rode that mare to market with a torn saddle, which galled her so, that when they got home she had a sore on her back as big as the palm of your hand.’

‘Yes,’ said the bunniah impatiently, ‘what next?’

‘It was June,’ said the farmer, ‘and you know how, in June, the air is full of dust-storms with rain at times? Well, the poor beast got dust in that wound, and what’s more, with the dust some grains of wheat, and, what with the dust and the heat and the wet, that wheat sprouted and began to grow!’

‘Wheat does when it gets a fair chance,’ said the bunniah.

‘Yes; and the next thing we knew was that there was a crop of wheat on that horse’s back as big as anything you ever saw in a hundred-acre field, and we had to hire twenty men to help reap it!’

‘One generally has to hire extra hands for reaping,’ said the bunniah.

‘And we got four hundred maunds of wheat off that mare’s back!’ continued the farmer.

‘A good crop!’ murmured the bunniah.

‘And your father,’ said the farmer, ‘a poor wretch, with hardly enough to keep body and soul together—(the bunniah snorted, but was silent)—came to my father, and he said, putting his hands together as humble as could be—’

The bunniah here flashed a furious glance at his companion, but bit his lips and held his peace.

“‘I haven’t tasted food for a week. Oh! great master, let me have the loan of sixteen maunds of wheat from your store, and I will repay you.’”

“‘Certainly, neighbour,’ answered my father; ‘take what you need, and repay it as you can.’”

‘Well?’ demanded the bunniah with fury in his eye.

‘Well, he took the wheat away with him,’ replied the farmer; ‘but he never repaid it, and it’s a debt to this day. Sometimes I wonder whether I shall not go to law about it.’

Then the bunniah began running his thumb quickly up and down the fingers of his right hand, and his lips moved in quick calculation.

‘What is the matter?’ asked the farmer.

‘The wheat is the cheaper; I’ll pay you for the wheat,’ said the bunniah, with the calmness of despair, as he remembered that by his own arrangement he was bound to give the farmer a hundred rupees.

And to this day they say in those parts, when a man owes a debt: ‘Give me the money; or, if not that, give me at least the wheat.’

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[0] This is from oral tradition. ↑

[1] Grain merchant and banker, and generally a very greedy man. ↑

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