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THE BEGGAR AND THE DIAMOND

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: This little story—a Hindu parable in its original form—was first told to me by Mr. Surendra Patel, of Scarsdale, New York. I have adapted it freely and apologize to those who know it in its true form, where Lord Shiva and his wife, Parvati, are the major characters.

One day the archangel Uriel came to God with a downcast face. “What troubles you?” God asked.

“I have seen something very sad,” Uriel replied, and then pointed between his feet. “Down there.”

“On earth?” God asked with a smile. “Oh! No shortage of sadness there! Well, let us see.”

They bent over together. Far below they saw a ragged figure trudging slowly along a country road on the outskirts of Chandrapur. He was very thin, this figure, and his legs and arms were covered with sores. Dogs frequently chased after him, barking, but the figure never turned to strike at them with his staff even when they nipped at his heels; he simply trudged onward, favoring his right leg as he walked. At one point a number of handsome, well-fed children with wicked smiling faces boiled out of a large house and threw stones at the ragged man when he held his empty begging bowl out to them.

“Go away, you nasty thing!” one of them cried. “Go away into the fields and die!”

At this, the archangel Uriel burst into tears.

“Now, now,” God said, clapping him on the shoulder. “I thought you were made of sterner stuff.”

“Yes, no doubt,” Uriel said, drying his eyes. “It’s just that the fellow down there seems to sum up everything which has ever gone wrong for all the sons and daughters of the earth.”

“Of course he does,” God replied. “That is Ramu, and that is his job. When he dies, another will hold it. It is an honorable job.”

“Perhaps,” Uriel said, covering his eyes with a shudder, “but I cannot bear to watch him do it. His sorrow fills my heart with darkness.”

“Darkness is not allowed here,” said God, “and therefore I must take steps to change what has brought it to you. Look here, my good archangel.”

Uriel looked and saw that God was holding a diamond as big as a peacock’s egg.

“A diamond of this size and quality will feed Ramu for the rest of his life, and keep his descendants unto the seventh generation,” God remarked. “It is, in fact, the finest on the earth. Now... let us see ...” He leaned forward on His hands and knees, held the diamond out between two gauzy clouds, and let it drop. He and Uriel marked its fall closely, watching as it struck the center of the road upon which Ramu walked.

The diamond was so large and so heavy that Ramu would no doubt have heard it strike the earth had he been a younger man, but his hearing had failed quite severely in the last few years, along with his lungs and his back and his kidneys. Only his eyesight remained as keen as it had been when he was one-and-twenty.

As he struggled up a rise in the road, unaware of the huge diamond which lay gleaming and flashing on the far side in the hazy sunshine, Ramu sighed deeply ... then stopped, bent over his staff, as his sigh turned into a fit of coughing. He held onto his staff with both hands, trying to weather the fit, and just as it was easing, the staff—old and dry and almost as worn-out as Ramu himself—snapped with a dry crack, pitching Ramu into the dust.

He lay there, looking up at the sky and wondering why God was so cruel. “I have outlived all those I loved the most,” he thought, “but not those I hate. I have grown so old and ugly that the dogs bark at me

and the children throw stones at me. I have had nothing but scraps to eat these last three months, and no decent meal with family and friends for ten years or more. I am a wanderer on the face of the earth with no home to call my own; tonight I will sleep under a tree or a hedge with no roof to keep the rain off. I am covered with sores, my back aches, and when I pass water I see blood where no blood should be. My heart is as empty as my begging bowl.”

Ramu slowly got to his feet, unaware that less than sixty feet and a dry bulge of land hid his still-keen glance from the world’s largest diamond, and looked up at the hazy blue sky. “God, I am unlucky,” he said. “I do not hate You, but I fear You are not my friend, nor any man’s friend.”

Having said this, he felt a little better and resumed his trudge, pausing only to pick up the longer piece of his broken staff. As he walked, he began to reproach himself for his self-pity and for his ungrateful prayer.

“For I do have a few things to be grateful for,” he reasoned. “The day is extraordinarily beautiful, for one thing, and although I have failed in many respects, my vision remains keen. Think how terrible it would be if I were blind!”

To prove this to himself, Ramu closed his eyes tightly and shuffled along with his broken staff stretched out in front of him, as a blind man uses his cane. The darkness was terrible, stifling, and disorienting. He soon had no idea if he was moving on as he had been, or if he was wandering off to one side of the road or the other, and might soon go tumbling into the ditch. The thought of what could happen to his old, brittle bones in such a fall frightened him, but he kept his eyes firmly shut and continued to forge ahead.

“This is just the thing to cure you of your ingratitude, old fellow!” he told himself. “You will spend the rest of the day remembering that you may be a beggar, but at least you are not a blind beggar, and you will be happy!”

Ramu did not walk into the ditch on either side, but he did begin to drift off to the right of the road as he topped the rise and started down the far side, and this was how he walked past the huge diamond which lay glowing in the dust; his left foot missed it by less than two inches.

Thirty yards or so farther on, Ramu opened his eyes. Bright summer sunshine flooded them, and seemed to flood his mind, as well. He looked with gladness at the dusty blue sky, the dusty yellow fields, the beaten-silver track of the road upon which he walked. He marked the passage of a bird from one tree to the next with laughter, and although he never turned once to see the huge diamond which lay close behind him, his sores and his aching back were forgotten.

“Thank God for sight!” he cried. “Thank God for that, at least! Perhaps I shall see something of value on the road—an old bottle worth money in the bazaar, or even a coin—but even if I do not, I shall look my fill. Thank God for sight! Thank God for God!”

And, well satisfied, he set off again, leaving the diamond behind. God then reached down and scooped it up, replacing it beneath the mountain in Africa from which He had taken it. Almost as an afterthought (if God can be said to have afterthoughts), He plucked up an ironwood branch from the veldt and dropped it onto the Chandrapur Road, as He had dropped the diamond.

“The difference is,” God told Uriel, “our friend Ramu will find the branch, and it will serve him as a staff for the rest of his days.”

Uriel looked at God (as nearly as anyone—even an archangel—can look at that burning face, at least) uncertainly. “Have You given me a lesson, Lord?”

“I don’t know,” God responded blandly. “Have I?”