Seven

Prudence

“GOOD shot!” The cry rang out as the young Indian let fly his arrow and hit his mark.

“Yes,” someone said, “but it is broad daylight. The archer can see his target. He is not so skilled as Dasaratha.”

“And what does Dasaratha do?”

“He is Sabdabhedi.”

“What is that?”

“He shoots by sound.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, he can shoot in the dark. At night he goes out into the jungle and listens, and when he has judged, from the sound of wings or footsteps, what kind of game he has encountered he lets fly his arrow and hits it as surely as if he had shot by day.”

Thus the reputation of Dasaratha, prince of the city of Ayodhya, was noised abroad.

He was proud of his skill as Sabdabhedi, and pleased with the praise of the people. At dusk he would go out alone in his chariot to lie in wait in the heart of the forest. Now he would hear the tread of a buffalo or an elephant coming to drink at the river, now the light-footed deer or the stealthy approach of a tiger.

One night as he lay among the bushes, listening for the sound of leaves or water, he suddenly heard something moving on the shore of the lake. He could see nothing in the darkness, but was not Dasaratha a Sabdabhedi? The sound was enough for him: it was most certainly an elephant. He shot an arrow. Immediately a cry rang out which made him leap up.

“Help! Help! Someone has shot me!”
The bow fell from Dasaratha’s hands; he suddenly felt dizzy with horror. What had he done? Wounded a human being instead of a wild beast? He rushed through the jungle towards the lake. On the bank a young man was lying in his own blood, all dishevelled, holding in his hand a pitcher which he had just been filling.

“O sir,” he groaned, “was it you who shot the fatal arrow? What harm have I done you that you should treat me so? I am a hermit’s son. My aged parents are blind; I look after them and provide for their needs. I came to draw water for them, and now I shall no longer be able to serve them! Follow this path to their hut and tell them what has happened. But first pull out this shaft from my breast, for it gives me great pain.”

Dasaratha removed the arrow from the wound. The young man breathed a last sigh and died.

Then the prince filled the pitcher with water and followed the path the dying youth had shown him. As he came near, the father called out:

“My son, why have you taken so long? Was it to swim in the lake? We feared that some harm had befallen you. But why do you not answer?”

With a trembling voice Dasaratha said:

“I am not your son, O holy hermit. I am a Kshatriya, and until now I was proud of my skill with a bow. This night as I lay in wait I thought I heard an elephant drinking at the water’s edge. I shot my arrow. Alas! It was your son I struck. Oh, tell me how to atone for my fault.”

Then the old couple cried out and wept. They bade the prince lead them to the spot where their son lay, their only son. They recited sacred hymns over his body and sprinkled the water of the funeral rites. Then the hermit said:

“Listen, Dasaratha! Through your fault we shed tears over our dear son. One day, you also shall weep over a beloved son. Before that many years will pass; but the punishment shall surely come.”

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They made a pyre to burn the dead body, then threw themselves into the flames and perished also.

Time passed. Dasaratha became king of Ayodhya and married the lady Kausalya. And his son was the glorious Rama.

Rama was loved by all in the city, except Queen Kaikeyi, the king's second wife, and her maid. These two women plotted the downfall of noble Rama, and because of them he was sent into exile for fourteen years.

Then Dasaratha mourned his son, as the aged parents had mourned in the jungle for the young man who had died at midnight by the lakeside.

Dasaratha had once been so proud of his skill that he had lacked prudence and given no thought to the risk of wounding someone in the darkness. It would have been better for him only to draw his bow in full daylight than to trust so rashly in his skill as Sabdabhedi. He meant no harm, but he lacked foresight.

A merchant of the city of Benares once took pity on two old vultures who were poor and miserable. He took them to a dry place, lit a fire and fed them with pieces of meat from the pyre where people burnt dead cattle.

When the rainy season came, the vultures, now strong and well, flew away towards the mountains.

But in their gratitude to the merchant of Benares, they decided to pick up all the clothes they could find lying about so as to give them to their kindly friend. They flew from house to house, from village to village, snatched up all the garments drying out in the open and took them to the merchant's house.

He appreciated their good intentions, but he neither used nor sold the stolen clothes; he simply put them away carefully.

However, traps had been set everywhere for the two vultures, and one of them was caught. He was brought before the king, who asked him:
“Why are you robbing my subjects?”

“One day a merchant saved the lives of my brother and myself; in order to repay our debt, we have collected these clothes for him,” the bird replied.

The merchant was summoned before the king and questioned in his turn.

“Sire,” he said, “the vultures did indeed bring me many clothes, but I have kept them all safely and I am ready to give them back to their owners.”

The king pardoned the vultures, for they had acted out of gratitude, though without discernment; and thanks to his prudence, the merchant too was spared.

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The Japanese have a picturesque way of expressing their idea of prudence.

They have in one of their temples an image of a meditating Buddha seated on a lotus-blossom. In front of him are three little monkeys, one with its hands over its eyes, another over its ears, and the third covering its mouth. What do these three monkeys signify? By its gesture the first one says:

“I do not see evil and folly.”

The second one says:

“I do not hear them.”

And the third:

“I do not speak them.”

In the same way, the wise man is prudent in what he looks at, in what he listens to, and in what he says.

He considers the consequences, thinks of the morrow, and if he does not know his way, he asks.