

THE MAGIC PITCHER



*From Hindu Tales from the Sanskrit
For Children*

Translated by S. M. Mitra
Adapted by Mrs. Arthur Bell

INTRODUCTORY NOTE.

Thanks to Mr. S. M. Mitra, the well-known Hindu psychologist and politician, who has done so much to draw more closely together the land of his birth and that of his adoption, I am able to bring within reach of English children a number of typical Hindu Tales, translated by him from the Sanskrit, some of them culled from the ancient classics of India, others from widely separated sources. The latter have hitherto been quite inaccessible to western students, as they are not yet embodied in literature, but have been transmitted orally from generation to generation for many centuries.

These tales are not only of a kind to enchain the attention of children. They also illustrate well the close affinity between the two chief branches of the great Aryan race, and are of considerable ethical value, reflecting, as they do, the philosophy of self-realisation which lies at the root of Hindu culture. They have been used from time immemorial by the best teachers of India as a means of building up the personalities of the young and maintaining the efficiency of the adult. They serve in fact as text-books of the unique system of Mind-Training which has been in use in India from remote Vedic times, the root principle of which is as simple as it is effective.

Hindu children become familiar at their mothers' knees with these stories, and are trained to answer questions on them, subtly chosen to suit their ages and call into action their mental faculties. Appealing to them as an amusing game, in which they vie with each other in trying to solve the problems presented for their consideration, the boys and girls, who are educated together till they are ten or twelve years old, early learn to concentrate their attention; whilst the simultaneous development of all their powers is encouraged and they are, imperceptibly to themselves led to control their thoughts and emotions from within, instead of having to obey orders which they do not understand from without. They realize indeed, whilst still in the nursery, the ideal suggested by the sage Vidura in the Mahabharata: "Seek to know thyself by means of thyself, keeping thy mind, intellect and senses, under control; for self is thy friend as it is also thy foe."

Nancy Bell.

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The Magic Pitcher.

CHAPTER I

Long, long ago there lived far away in India a woodcutter called Subha Datta and his family, who were all very happy together. The father went every day to the forest near his home to get supplies of wood, which he sold to his neighbours, earning by that means quite enough to give his wife and children all that they needed. Sometimes he took his three boys with him, and now and then, as a special treat, his two little girls were allowed to trot along beside him. Some of the boys and girls longed to be allowed to chop wood for themselves, and their father told them that as soon as they were old enough he would give each of them a little axe of their own. This will show you what a kind father he was, and you will be very sorry for him when you hear about his troubles.

All went well with Subha Datta for a long time. Each of the boys had his own little axe at last, and each of the girls had a little pair of scissors to cut off twigs; and very proud they all were when they brought some wood home to their mother to use in the house. One day, however, their father told them they could none of them come with him, for he meant to go a very long way into the forest, to see if he could find better wood there than nearer home. Vainly the boys entreated him to take them with him. "Not to-day," he said, "you would be too tired to go all the way, and would lose yourselves coming back alone. You must help your mother today and play with your sisters." They had to be content, for although Hindu children are as fond of asking questions as English boys and girls, they are very obedient to their parents and do all they are told without making any fuss about it.

Of course, they expected their father would come back the day he started for the depths of the forest, although they knew he would be late. What then was their surprise when darkness came and there was no sign of him! Again and again their mother went to the door to look for him, expecting every moment to see him coming along the beaten path which led to their door. Again and again she mistook the cry of some night-bird for his voice

calling to her. She was obliged at last to go to bed with a heavy heart, fearing some wild beast had killed him and that she would never see him again.



1. What do you think had become of Subha Datta?
2. What would you have done when he did not come back?

CHAPTER II

When Subha Datta started for the forest, he fully intended to come back the same evening; but as he was busy cutting down a tree, he suddenly had a feeling that he was no longer alone. He looked up, and there, quite close to him, in a little clearing where the trees had been cut down by some other woodcutter, he saw five beautiful young girls looking like fairies in their thin summer dresses and with their long hair flowing down their backs, dancing round and round, holding each other's hands. Subha Datta was so astonished at the sight that he let his axe fall, and the noise startled the dancers, who all stood still and stared at him.

The woodcutter could not say a word, but just gazed and gazed at them, till one of them said to him: "Who are you, and what are you doing in the very depths of the forest where we have never before seen a man?"

"I am only a poor woodcutter," he replied, "come to get some wood to sell, so as to give my wife and children something to eat and some clothes to wear."

"That is a very stupid thing to do," said one of the girls. "You can't get much money that way. If you will only stop with us we will have your wife and children looked after for you much better than you can do it yourself."



3. What would you have said if you had been the woodcutter?
4. Do you think the fairies really meant that they could do as they offered?

CHAPTER III

Subha Datta, though he certainly did love his wife and children, was so tempted at the idea of stopping in the forest with the beautiful girls that, after hesitating a little while, he said, "Yes, I will stop with you, if you are quite sure all will be well with my dear ones."

"You need not be afraid about that," said another of the girls. "We are fairies, you see, and we can do all sorts of wonderful things. It isn't even necessary for us to go where your dear ones are. We shall just wish them everything they want, and they will get it. And the first thing to be done is to give you some food. You must work for us in return, of course."

Subha Datta at once replied, "I will do anything you wish."

"Well, begin by sweeping away all the dead leaves from the clearing, and then we will all sit down and eat together."

Subha Datta was very glad that what he was asked to do was so easy. He began by cutting a branch from a tree, and with it he swept the floor of what was to be the dining-room. Then he looked about for the food, but he could see nothing but a great big pitcher standing in the shade of a tree, the branches of which hung over the clearing. So he said to one of the fairies, "Will you show me where the food is, and exactly where you would like me to set it out?"

At these questions all the fairies began to laugh, and the sound of their laughter was like the tinkling of a number of bells.



5. What was there to laugh at in the questions of Subha Datta?
6. What is your idea of a fairy?

CHAPTER IV

When the fairies saw how astonished Subha Datta was at the way they laughed, it made them laugh still more, and they seized each other's hands again and whirled round and round, laughing all the time.

Poor Subha Datta, who was very tired and hungry, began to get unhappy and to wish he had gone straight home after all. He stooped down to pick up his axe, and was just about to turn away with it, when the fairies stopped their mad whirl and cried to him to stop. So he waited, and one of them said:

“*We* don't have to bother about fetching this and fetching that. You see that big pitcher. Well, we get all our food and everything else we want out of it. We just have to wish as we put our hands in, and there it is. It's a magic pitcher—the only one there is in the whole wide world. You get the food you would like to have first, and then we'll tell you what *we* want.”

Subha Datta could hardly believe his ears when he heard that. Down he threw his axe, and hastened to put his hand in the pitcher, wishing for the food he was used to. He loved curried rice and milk, lentils, fruit and vegetables, and very soon he had a beautiful meal spread out for himself on the ground. Then the fairies called out, one after the other, what they wanted for food, things the woodcutter had never heard of or seen, which made him quite discontented with what he had chosen for himself.



7. What would you have wished for if you had had a magic pitcher?
8. Would it be a good thing, do you think, to be able to get food without working for it or paying for it?

CHAPTER V

The next few days passed away like a dream, and at first Subha Datta thought he had never been so happy in his life. The fairies often went off together leaving him alone, only coming back to the clearing when they wanted something out of the pitcher. The woodcutter got all kinds of things he fancied for himself, but presently he began to wish he had his wife and children with him to share his wonderful meals. He began to miss them terribly, and he missed his work too. It was no good cutting trees down and chopping up wood when all the food was ready cooked. Sometimes he thought he would slip off home when the fairies were away, but when he looked at the pitcher he could not bear the thought of leaving it.

9. What sort of man do you think Subha Datta was from what this story tells you about him?
10. What do you think was the chief cause of his becoming discontented after he had been in the service of the fairies for a few days?

CHAPTER VI

Soon Subha Datta could not sleep well for thinking of the wife and children he had deserted. Suppose they were hungry when he had plenty to eat! It even came into his head that he might steal the pitcher and take it home with him when the fairies were away. But he had not after all the courage to do this; for even when the beautiful girls were not in sight, he had a feeling that they would know if he tried to go off with the pitcher, and that they would be able to punish him in some terrible way. One night he had a dream that troubled him very much. He saw his wife sitting crying bitterly in the little home he used to love, holding the youngest child on her knee whilst the other three stood beside her looking at her very, very sadly. He started up from the ground on which he lay, determined to go home at once; but at a little distance off he saw the fairies dancing in the moonlight, and somehow he felt again he could not leave them and the pitcher. The next day, however, he was so miserable that the fairies noticed it, and one of them said to him: "Whatever is the matter? We don't care to keep unhappy people here. If you can't enjoy life as we do, you had better go home."

Then Subha Datta was very much frightened lest they should really send him away; so he told them about his dream and that he was afraid his dear ones were starving for want of the money he used to earn for them.

"Don't worry about them," was the reply: "we will let your wife know what keeps you away. We will whisper in her ear when she is asleep, and she will be so glad to think of your happiness that she will forget her own troubles."

11. Do you think what the fairies said to the woodcutter was likely to comfort him about his wife and children?

12. If you had been in Subha Datta's place what would you have said to the fairies when they made this promise?

CHAPTER VII

Subha Datta was very much cheered by the sympathy of the fairies, so much so that he decided to stop with them for a little longer at least. Now and then he felt restless, but on the whole the time passed pleasantly, and the pitcher was a daily delight to him.

Meanwhile his poor wife was at her wits' end how to feed her dear children. If it had not been that the two boys were brave, plucky little chaps, she really would have been in despair. When their father did not come back and all their efforts to find him were in vain, these boys set to work to help their mother. They could not cut down trees, but they could climb them and chop off small branches with their axes; and this they did, making up bundles of faggots and selling them to their neighbours. These neighbours were touched by the courage they showed, and not only paid them well for the wood but often gave them milk and rice and other little things to help them. In time they actually got used to being without Subha Datta, and the little girls nearly forgot all about him. Little did they dream of the change that was soon to come into their lives.

13. Was it a good or a bad thing for the boys that their father did not come back?

14. If you think it was a good thing, will you explain why? and if it was a bad thing, why you think it was?

CHAPTER VIII

A month passed peacefully away in the depths of the forest, Subha Datta waiting on the fairies and becoming every day more selfish and bent on enjoying himself. Then he had another dream, in which he saw his wife and children in the old home with plenty of food, and evidently so happy without him that he felt quite determined to go and show them he was still alive. When he woke he said to the fairies, "I will not stop with you any longer. I have had a good time here, but I am tired of this life away from my own people."

The fairies saw he was really in earnest this time, so they consented to let him go; but they were kind-hearted people and felt they ought to pay him in some way for all he had done for them. They consulted together, and then one of them told him they wished to make him a present before he went away, and they would give him whatever he asked for.

15. What do you think it was that made Subha Datta determine to go home when he found his wife and children could do without him?
16. What would you have chosen if the fairies had told you you could have anything you liked?

CHAPTER IX

Directly the woodcutter heard he could have anything he asked for, he cried, "I will have the magic pitcher."

You can just imagine what a shock this was to the fairies! You know, of course, that fairies always keep their word. If they could not persuade Subha Datta to choose something else, they would have to give him their beloved, their precious pitcher and would have to seek their food for themselves. They all tried all they could to persuade the woodcutter to choose something else. They took him to their own secret treasure-house, in an old, old tree with a hollow trunk, even the entrance to which no mortal had ever been allowed to see. They blindfolded him before they started, so that he could never reveal the way, and one of them led him by the hand, telling him where the steps going down from the tree began. When at last the bandage was taken from his eyes, he found himself in a lofty hall with an opening in the roof through which the light came. Piled up on the floor were sparkling stones worth a great deal of gold and silver money, and on the walls hung beautiful robes. Subha Datta was quite dazed with all he saw, but he was only an ignorant woodcutter and did not realize the value of the jewels and clothes. So when the fairies, said to him, "Choose anything you like here and let us keep our pitcher," he shook his head and said: "No! no! no! The pitcher! I will have the pitcher!" One fairy after another picked up the rubies and diamonds and other precious stones and held them in the light, that the woodcutter might see how lovely they were; and when he still only shook his head, they got down the robes and tried to make him put one of them on. "No! the pitcher! the pitcher!" he said, and at last they had to give it up. They bound his eyes again and led him back to the clearing and the pitcher.



17. Would you have been tempted to give up the pitcher when you saw the jewels and the robes?

18. What made Subha Datta so determined to have the pitcher?

CHAPTER X

Even when they were all back again in the clearing the fairies did not quite give up hope of keeping their pitcher. This time they gave other reasons why Subha Datta should not have it. “It will break very easily,” they told him, “and then it will be no good to you or any one else. But if you take some of the money, you can buy anything you like with it. If you take some of the jewels you can sell them for lots of money.”

“No! no! no!” cried the woodcutter. “The pitcher! the pitcher! I will have the pitcher!”

“Very well then, take, the pitcher,” they sadly answered, “and never let us see your face again!”

So Subha Datta took the pitcher, carrying it very, very carefully, lest he should drop it and break it before he got home. He did not think at all of what a cruel thing it was to take it away from the fairies, and leave them either to starve or to seek for food for themselves. The poor fairies watched him till he was out of sight, and then they began to weep and wring their hands. “He might at least have waited whilst we got some food out for a few days,” one of them said. “He was too selfish to think of that,” said another. “Come, let us forget all about him and go and look for some fruit.”

So they all left off crying and went away hand in hand. Fairies do not want very much to eat. They can live on fruit and dew, and they never let anything make them sad for long at a time. They go out of this story now, but you need not be unhappy about them, because you may be very sure that they got no real harm from their generosity to Subha Datta in letting him take the pitcher.

19. Do you think the woodcutter was wrong to ask for the pitcher?

20. What would have been the best thing for Subha Datta to ask for, if he had decided to let the fairies keep their pitcher?

CHAPTER XI

You can just imagine what a surprise it was to Subha Datta's wife and children when they saw him coming along the path leading to his home. He did not bring the pitcher with him, but had hidden it in a hollow tree in the wood near his cottage, for he did not mean any one to know that he had it. He told his wife that he had lost his way in the forest, and had been afraid he would never see her or his children again, but he said nothing about the fairies. When his wife asked him how he had got food, he told her a long story about the fruits he had found, and she believed all he said, and determined to make up to him now for all she thought he had suffered. When she called the little girls to come and help her get a nice meal for their father, Subha Datta said: "Oh, don't bother about that! I've brought something back with me. I'll go and fetch it, but no one is to come with me."

Subha Datta's wife was sorely disappointed at this, because she loved her husband so much that it was a joy to her to work for him. The children too wanted, of course, to go with their father, but he ordered them to stop where they were. He seized a big basket which was full of fuel for the fire, tumbled all the wood in it on the floor, and went off alone to the pitcher. Very soon he was back again with his basket full of all sorts of good things, the very names of which his wife and children had no idea of. "There!" he cried; "what do you think of that? Am I not a clever father to have found all that in the forest? Those are the 'fruits' I meant when I told Mother about them."

21. What would you have thought about this wonderful supply of food, if you had been one of the woodcutter's children?
22. Was it a good thing for those children to have all this food without working for it? If not, why was it not a good thing?

CHAPTER XII

Life was now, of course, completely changed for the family in the forest. Subha Datta no longer went to cut wood to be sold, and the boys also left off doing so. Every day their father fetched food for them all, and the greatest desire of each one of the family was to find out where it came from. They never could do so, for Subha Datta managed to make them afraid to follow him when he went forth with his basket. The secret he kept from the wife to whom he used to tell everything soon began to spoil the happiness of the home. The children who had no longer anything to do quarrelled with each other. Their mother got sadder and sadder, and at last decided to tell Subha Datta that, unless he would let her know where the food came from, she would go away from him and take the children with her. She really did mean to do this, but something soon happened to change everything again. Of course, the neighbours in the wood, who had bought the fuel from the boys and helped them by giving them fruit and rice, heard of the return of their father and of the wonderful change in their lot. Now the whole family had plenty to eat every day, though none of them knew where it all came from. Subha Datta was very fond of showing off what he could do, and sometimes asked his old friends amongst the woodcutters to come and have a meal with him. When they arrived they would find all sorts of good things spread out on the ground and different kinds of wines in beautiful bottles.



This went on for some months, Subha Datta getting prouder and prouder of all that he could do, and it seemed likely that his secret would never be discovered. Everybody tried to find it out, and many followed him secretly when he set forth into the woods; but he was very clever at dodging them, hiding his treasure constantly in a new place in the dead of the night. If he had only been content with getting food out of his pitcher and drinking pure water, all would most likely have been well with him. But that was just what he could not do. Till he had his pitcher he had never drunk anything but water, but now he often took too much wine. It was this which led to the misfortune of losing his beloved pitcher. He began to boast of his cleverness, telling his friends there was nothing they wanted that he could not get for them; and one day when he had given them a very grand feast, in which were several rare kinds of food they had asked for, he drank too much wine—so much that he no longer knew what he was saying.

This was the chance his guests wanted. They began teasing him, telling him they believed he was really a wicked robber, who had stolen the food or the money to buy it. He got angry, and at last was actually silly enough to tell them all to come with him, and he would show them he was no robber. When his wife heard this, she was half pleased to think that now at last the secret would come out of where the food came from, and half afraid that something terrible would happen. The children too were greatly excited, and went with the rest of the party, who followed their father to the last hiding-place of the precious pitcher.

When they all got very near the place, however, some idea began to come into Subha Datta's head that he was doing a very foolish thing. He stopped suddenly, turned round facing the crowd that followed him, and said he would not go a step further till they all went back to the cottage. His wife begged him to let her at least go with him, and the children all clamoured not to be sent back, but it was no good. Back they all had to go, the woodcutter watching till they were out of sight.

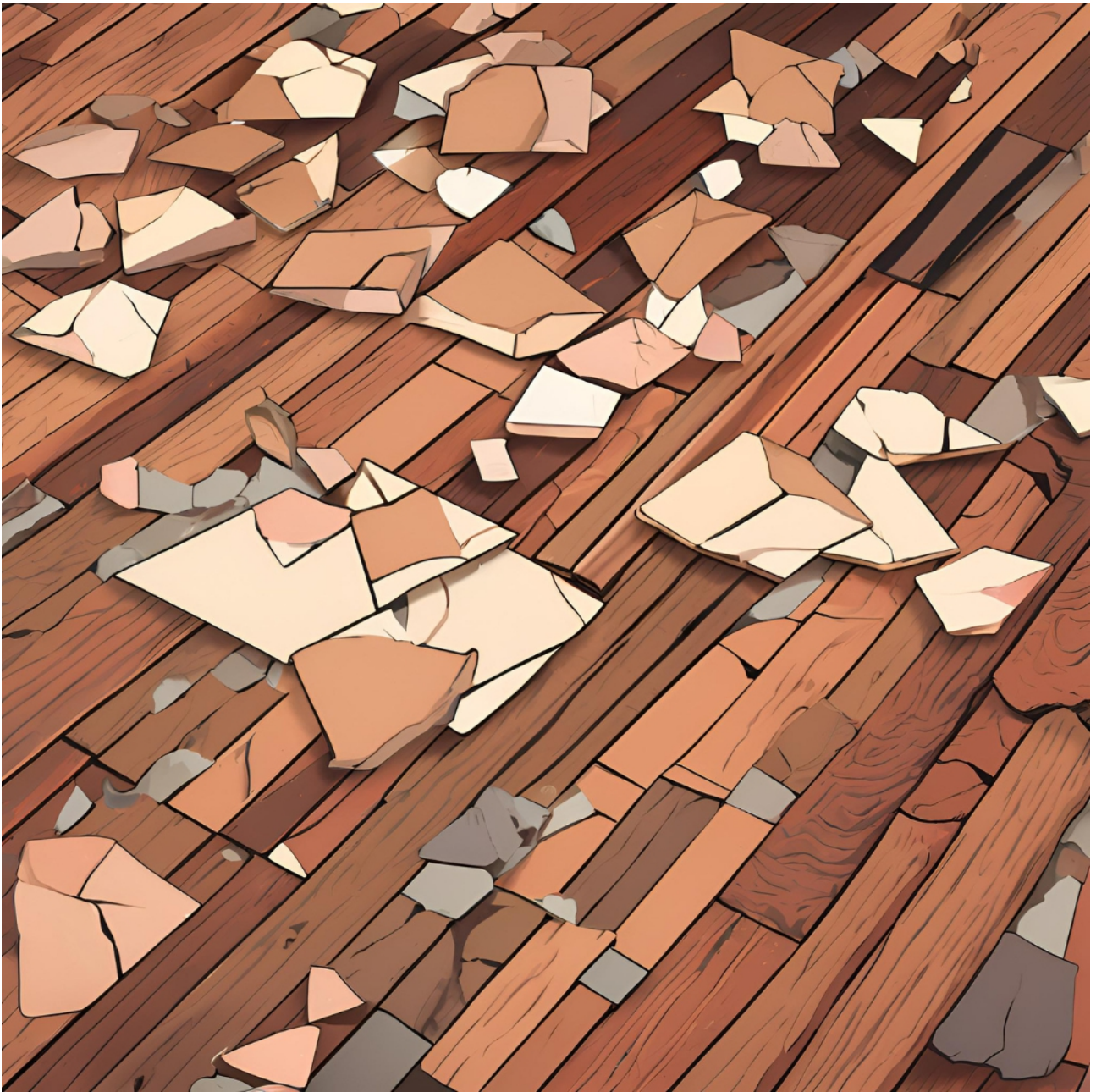


23. Would Subha Datta have been wise if he had told his wife about the pitcher?
24. Do you think it would have been a good or a bad thing for the secret to be found out?

CHAPTER XIII

When the woodcutter was quite sure that every one was gone and nobody could see where he had hidden the pitcher, he took it from the hole in which it lay and carried it carefully to his home. You can imagine how everybody rushed out to meet him when he came in sight, and crowded round him, so that there was danger of the pitcher being thrown to the ground and broken. Subha Datta however managed to get into the cottage without any accident, and then he began to take things out of the pitcher and fling them on the ground, shouting, "Am I a robber? Am I a robber? Who dared to call me a robber?" Then, getting more and more excited, he picked up the pitcher, and holding it on his shoulder began to dance wildly about. His wife called out to him, "Oh, take care, take care! You will drop it!" But he paid no attention to her. Suddenly, however, he began to feel giddy and fell to the ground, dropping the pitcher as he did so. It was broken to pieces, and a great cry of sorrow went up from all who saw the accident. The woodcutter himself was broken-hearted, for he knew that he had done the mischief himself, and that if only he had resisted the temptation to drink the wine he would still have his treasure.

He was going to pick up the pieces to see if they could be stuck together, but to his very great surprise he could not touch them. He heard a silvery laugh, and what sounded like children clapping their hands, and he thought he also heard the words, "Our pitcher is ours again!" Could it all have been a dream? No: for there on the ground were the fruits and cakes that had been in the pitcher, and there were his wife, his children and his friends, all looking sadly and angrily at him. One by one the friends went away, leaving Subha Datta alone with his family.



25. If you had been Subha Datta's wife, what would you have done when this misfortune came to her husband?

26. What would you have done if you had been the woodcutter?

CHAPTER XIV

This is the end of the story of the Magic Pitcher, but it was the beginning of a new chapter in the lives of Subha Datta and his family. They never forgot the wonder-working pitcher, and the children were never tired of hearing the story of how their father came to get it. They often wandered about in the forest, hoping that they too would meet with some wonderful adventure, but they never saw the fairies or found a magic pitcher. By slow degrees the woodcutter returned to his old ways, but he had learnt one lesson. He never again kept a secret from his wife; because he felt sure that, if he had told her the truth about the pitcher when he first came home, she would have helped him to save the precious treasure.

27. What lesson can be learnt from this story?
28. Do you think it is easier for a boy or a girl to keep a secret?
29. Why is it wrong to let out a secret you have been told?
30. What do you think was the chief fault in the character of Subha Datta?

- THE END -



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