

The King's Secret

A Santali folktale

There once lived a king who had a son with the ears of an ox. The king was ashamed of him, and kept the prince hidden away in a secluded room in the palace. Soon the time came for the prince's head-shaving ceremony.

The king called the royal barber from another kingdom and the ceremony was held in secret. When it was finished, the king summoned the barber to his personal chamber and warned him. "Never tell anyone about the prince's ears. If you do, I will throw you into the dungeon!" The barber promised not to say a word about it to anyone.

But alas, he was very bad at keeping secrets. Days passed and his stomach began to swell. "I must tell someone or else my stomach will explode!" thought the barber. Just then a splendid idea crossed his mind. He walked up to an old tree and quickly whispered the secret to it. His stomach immediately shrank back to its normal size, and he felt much better. "The tree will definitely keep the king's secret safe," said the barber to himself.

A few days later a drummer came in search of some good wood to make a new drum. He stopped in front of the same tree the barber had whispered his secret to. "This is exactly what I'm looking for!" he thought to himself, looking at the tree. He soon made himself a new drum and went to the palace to sing in front of the king.



The guard at the gate was happy to see him. "Sing something to please the king. He's in a bad mood today," said the guard. Suddenly the drum began to sing on its own. "I have a secret no one should hear. The king's son has ox's ears!" The guard quickly grabbed the drum and shouted at the drummer, "Nobody can reveal the king's secret! Run away before someone catches you!" But it was too late.

The king had heard the song and ordered the drummer to be brought in. The poor drummer was dragged into court. "Throw him in the dungeon!" thundered the king. "But he didn't do it," said the guard. "It was his drum, Your Majesty." "Then throw the drum in the dungeon too. And punish all those who heard my secret!" roared the king. He was so angry that his mustache quivered.

The guard boldly stepped forward. "Then you'd better throw your whole kingdom into the dungeon, Your Majesty, because we all know your secret." The king was stunned. He looked at his most trusted minister. "Is this true?" he asked. "Yes, Your Majesty. We never said anything because we didn't want to upset you," replied the minister. The king felt ashamed.

He realised what a cruel father he had been to keep his son hidden away for so many years. The next day, the king declared a holiday. He held a special parade and proudly took his son around the kingdom. Everyone cheered and waved at the young prince in spite of his ox's ears. The guard led the procession, followed by the drummer, who played his new drum.

THE END

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