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—R. Shreevatsa



**Part I**

**Introductions**



# Chapter 1

## Translator's Introduction

### 1.1 I

One Vishnusharman, shrewdly gleaned  
All worldly wisdom's inner meaning,  
In these five books the charm compresses  
Of all such books the world possesses.

—INTRODUCTION TO THE *Panchatantra*

The *Panchatantra* contains the most widely known stories in the world. If it were further declared that the *Panchatantra* is the best collection of stories in the world, the assertion could hardly be disproved, and would probably command the assent of those possessing the knowledge for a judgment. Assuming varied forms in their native India, then traveling in translations, and translations of translations, through Persia, Arabia, Syria, and the civilized countries of Europe, these stories have, for more than twenty centuries, brought delight to hundreds of millions.

Since the stories gathered in the *Panchatantra* are very ancient, and since they can no longer be ascribed to their respective authors, it is not possible to give an accurate report of their genesis, while much in their subsequent history will always remain obscure. Dr. Hertel, the learned and painstaking editor of the text used by the present translator, believes that the original work was composed in Kashmir, about 200 B.C. At this date, however, many of the individual stories were already ancient. He then enumerates no less than twenty-five recensions of the work in India. The text here translated is late, dating from the year 1199 A.D.

It is not here intended to summarize the history of these stories in India, nor their travels through the Near East and through Europe. The story is attractive—whose interest is not awakened by learning, for example, that in this work he makes the acquaintance of one of La Fontaine's important sources? Yet here, as elsewhere, the work of the "scholars" has been of somewhat doubtful value, diverting attention from the primary to the secondary, from literature

itself to facts, more or less important, about literature. The present version has not been made by a scholar, but by the opposite of a scholar, a lover of good books, eager, so far as his powers permit, to extend an accurate and joyful acquaintance with the world's masterpieces. He will therefore not endeavor to tell the history of the *Panchatantra*, but to tell what the *Panchatantra* is.

## 1.2 II

Whoever learns the work by heart,  
Or through the story-teller's art  
Becomes acquainted,  
His life by sad defeat—although  
The king of heaven be his foe—  
Is never tainted.

—INTRODUCTION TO THE *Panchatantra*

The *Panchatantra* is a *niti-shastra*, or textbook of *niti*. The word *niti* means roughly “the wise conduct of life.” Western civilization must endure a certain shame in realizing that no precise equivalent of the term is found in English, French, Latin, or Greek. Many words are therefore necessary to explain what *niti* is, though the idea, once grasped, is clear, important, and satisfying.

First of all, *niti* presupposes that one has considered, and rejected, the possibility of living as a saint. It can be practiced only by a social being, and represents an admirable attempt to answer the insistent question how to win the utmost possible joy from life in the world of men.

The negative foundation is security. For example, if one is a mouse, his dwelling must contain recesses beyond the reach of a cat's paw. Pleasant stanzas concerning the necessity of security are scattered throughout the work. Thus:

The poor are in peculiar need  
Of being secret when they feed;  
The lion killed the ram who could  
Not check his appetite for food.

or again:

In houses where no snakes are found,  
One sleeps; or where the snakes are bound:  
But perfect rest is hard to win  
With serpents bobbing out and in.

The mere negative foundation of security requires a considerable exercise of intelligence, since the world swarms with rascals, and no sensible man can imagine them capable of reformation.

Caress a rascal as you will,  
He was and is a rascal still:  
All salve- and sweating-treatments fail  
To take the kink from doggy's tail.

Yet roguery can be defeated; for by its nature it is stupid.

Since scamp and sneak and snake  
So often undertake  
A plan that does not thrive,  
The world wags on, alive.

Having made provision for security, in the realization that

A man to thrive  
Must keep alive,

one faces the necessity of having money. The *Panchatantra*, being very wise, never falls into the vulgar error of supposing money to be important. Money must be there, in reasonable amount, because it is unimportant, and what wise man permits things unimportant to occupy his mind? Time and again the *Panchatantra* insists on the misery of poverty, with greatest detail in the story of “Gold’s Gloom” in the second book, never perhaps with more point than in the stanza:

A beggar to the graveyard hied  
And there “Friend corpse, arise,” he cried;  
“One moment lift my heavy weight  
Of poverty; for I of late  
Grow weary, and desire instead  
Your comfort; you are good and dead.”  
The corpse was silent. He was sure  
’Twas better to be dead than poor.

Needless to say, worldly property need not be, indeed should not be, too extensive, since it has no value in possession, but only in use:

In case of horse or book or sword,  
Of woman, man or lute or word,  
The use or uselessness depends  
On qualities the user lends.

Now for the positive content of *niti*. Granted security and freedom from degrading worry, then joy results from three occupations—from resolute, yet circumspect, use of the active powers; from intercourse with like-minded friends; and above all, from worthy exercise of the intelligence.

Necessary, to begin with, for the experience of true joy in the world of men, is resolute action. The difficulties are not blinked:

There is no toy  
Called easy joy;  
But man must strain  
To body’s pain.

Time and again this note is struck—the difficulty and the inestimable reward of sturdy action. Perhaps the most splendid expression of this essential part of *niti* is found in the third book, in the words which the crow, Live-Strong, addresses to his king, Cloudy:

A noble purpose to attain  
Desiderates extended pain,  
Asks man's full greatness, pluck, and care,  
And loved ones aiding with a prayer.  
Yet if it climb to heart's desire,  
What man of pride and fighting fire,  
Of passion and of self-esteem  
Can bear the unaccomplished dream?  
His heart indignantly is bent  
(Through its achievement) on content.

Equal stress is laid upon the winning and holding of intelligent friends. The very name of the second book is “The Winning of Friends”; the name of the first book is “The Loss of Friends.” Throughout the whole work, we are never permitted to be long oblivious of the rarity, the necessity, and the pricelessness of friendship with the excellent. For, indeed,

The days when meetings do not fail  
With wise and good  
Are lovely clearings on the trail  
Through life's wild wood.

So speaks Slow, the turtle; and Swift, the crow, expresses it thus:

They taste the best of bliss, are good,  
And find life's truest ends,  
Who, glad and gladdening, rejoice  
In love, with loving friends.

Last of all, and in a sense including all else, is the use of the intelligence. Without it, no human joy is possible, nothing beyond animal happiness.

For if there be no mind  
Debating good and ill,  
And if religion send  
No challenge to the will,  
If only greed be there  
For some material feast,  
How draw a line between  
The man-beast and the beast?

One must have at disposal all valid results of scholarship, yet one must not be a scholar. For



Scholarship is less than sense;  
Therefore seek intelligence.

One must command a wealth of detailed fact, ever alert to the deceptiveness of seeming fact, since often-times

The firefly seems a fire, the sky looks flat;  
Yet sky and fly are neither this nor that.

One must understand that there is no substitute for judgment, and no end to the reward of discriminating judgment:

To know oneself is hard, to know  
Wise effort, effort vain;  
But accurate self-critics are  
Secure in times of strain.

One must be ever conscious of the past, yet only as it offers material for wisdom, never as an object of brooding regret:

For lost and dead and past  
The wise have no laments:  
Between the wise and fools  
Is just this difference.

This is the lofty consolation offered by a woodpecker to a hen-sparrow whose eggs have been crushed by an elephant with the spring fever. And the whole matter finds its most admirable expression in the noble words of Cheek, the jackal:

What is learning whose attaining  
Sees no passion wane, no reigning  
Love and self-control?  
Does not make the mind a menial,  
Finds in virtue no congenial  
Path and final goal?  
Whose attaining is but straining  
For a name, and never gaining  
Fame or peace of soul?

This is *niti*, the harmonious development of the powers of man, a life in which security, prosperity, resolute action, friendship, and good learning are so combined as to produce joy. It is a noble ideal, shaming many tawdry ambitions, many vulgar catch-words of our day. And this noble ideal is presented in an artistic form of perfect fitness, in five books of wise and witty stories, in most of which the actors are animals.

### 1.3 III

Better with the learned dwell,  
 Even though it be in hell  
 Than with vulgar spirits roam;  
 Palaces that gods call home.

—*Panchatantra*, Book II

The word *Panchatantra* means the “Five Books,” the Pentateuch. Each of the five books is independent, consisting of a framing story with numerous inserted stories, told, as fit circumstances arise, by one or another of the characters in the main narrative. Thus, the first book relates the broken friendship of the lion Rusty and the bull Lively, with some thirty inserted stories, told for the most part by the two jackals, Victor and Cheek. The second book has as its framing story the tale of the friendship of the crow, the mouse, the turtle, and the deer, whose names are Swift, Gold, Slow, and Spot. The third book has as framing story the war between crows and owls.

These three books are of considerable length and show great skill in construction. A somewhat different impression is left by Books IV and V. The framing story of Book IV, the tale of the monkey and the crocodile, has less interest than the inserted stories, while Book V can hardly be said to have a framing story, and it ends with a couple of grotesque tales, somewhat different in character from the others. These two shorter books, in spite of the charm of their contents, have the appearance of being addenda, and in some of the older recensions are reduced in bulk to the verge of extinction.

The device of the framing story is familiar in oriental works, the instance best known to Europeans being that of the Arabian Nights. Equally characteristic is the use of epigrammatic verses by the actors in the various tales. These verses are for the most part quoted from sacred writings or other sources of dignity and authority. It is as if the animals in some English beast-fable were to justify their actions by quotations from Shakespeare and the Bible. These wise verses it is which make the real character of the *Panchatantra*. The stories, indeed, are charming when regarded as pure narrative; but it is the beauty, wisdom, and wit of the verses which lift the *Panchatantra* far above the level of the best story-books. It hardly needs to be added that in the present version, verse is always rendered by verse, prose by prose. The titles of the individual stories, however, have been supplied by the translator, since the original has none.

The large majority of the actors are animals, who have, of course, a fairly constant character. Thus, the lion is strong but dull of wit, the jackal crafty, the heron stupid, the cat a hypocrite. The animal actors present, far more vividly and more urbanely than men could do, the view of life here recommended—a view shrewd, undeceived, and free of all sentimentality; a view that, piercing the humbug of every false ideal, reveals with incomparable wit the sources of lasting joy.

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Berkeley, California  
 July, 1925