



‘Doctor, Doctor’

The first day, the children asked, ‘Ajji, how do you know so many stories?’

Ajji smiled and answered, ‘My grandmother told me many stories. Some I read in books. A few I learnt from youngsters like you, and the rest from your Ajja.’ Then Ajji paused and said, ‘I see all of you have grown a lot since the last time I saw you. So before I start telling any stories, I want to know what each of you want to be when you grow up.’

Raghu, who was eleven years old, and the oldest of all, said immediately, ‘I want to be an environment scientist.’ Meenu, who was nine, said, ‘I have not decided, maybe a computer person like my dad.’ Anand, who was ten, said, ‘I want to be an astronaut,’ and his twin sister Krishna firmly said, ‘I want to become a fashion designer.’ Ajji smiled. ‘I am glad all of you have thought about this. We should always have some aim in life which we must try to achieve while being of help to others. Now let me tell you a story of a person who learnt just such a lesson.’

Shall we, too, join Ajji and her gang of young friends and hear the story?



On a blazing hot summer afternoon, an old man came walking down a narrow village path. He was tired and thirsty. Right by the road, he spotted a tiny grocery store. It had a tin roof and mud walls. The shopkeeper sat inside fanning himself and shooing away the flies that were buzzing around in the stifling heat. There was a little bench in front of the store where the villagers met when evening came and the land had cooled down. The old man flopped

down on the bench. He was so tired that for a while he could not speak. Finally, he opened his mouth and uttered one word, 'Water!'



Now, this village had been facing a horrible problem for a long time. It was near a great desert and the rains came only once a year to fill its ponds and wells. But the rains had disappeared for the last two years, and the villagers had been making do with water from a faraway stream. Every morning groups of men and women walked a long distance, filled their pots from the little stream and used that the whole day. Naturally, no one wanted to waste even a drop of this precious water.

Yet how do you say no to a thirsty, tired old man when he asks for water? Without a second thought, the shopkeeper, Ravi, who was very kindhearted, poured out a tumbler of water from his pot and gave it to the old man. The man drank it up greedily. Then he said one more word: 'More!' And without waiting for Ravi to give it to him, he lunged for the pot, picked it up and lifting it to his lips drank up Ravi's entire day's supply of water!

Poor Ravi, what could he do? He just stared in dismay. Then he told himself, 'Never mind. After all, I did help someone in need.'

The stranger, meanwhile, now seemed to feel better. He handed the pot back to Ravi, gave a smile that filled Ravi's heart with warmth and said, 'My son, always be kind like this. Help everyone who comes to you like you helped me, and you will be blessed.' Then he picked up his stick and slowly hobbled down the road. Ravi watched the strange old man disappear into the distance, then returned to his shop.

The afternoon heat grew worse. After a while Ravi felt his head was about to burst with a headache. His lips were parched and his throat hurt, it was so dry. He really needed a drink of water. But the visitor had finished it all up! Hoping to coax a drop or two out of the pot, Ravi lifted it to his lips and tilted it. Imagine his surprise when a gush of water ran down his face! It was sweet, refreshing water which not only quenched his thirst, but wiped out his headache too.

Ravi was staring at the water pot, trying to figure out what had just happened, when Karim limped into his shop. Karim was a young man who had hurt his leg in an accident many years ago which had left him with a limp. When he was unwell or tired, his limp became worse. Karim, too, flopped down on the bench in front of the store and caught his breath, like the old man. Then he fished out a shopping list from his pocket and handed it to Ravi. As Ravi started packing up the items listed on the paper, Karim opened a little bundle of food and ate his lunch sitting on the bench. Finally he wiped his

mouth on his scarf and pointed to Ravi's pot of water. 'Mind if I take a little sip? It is so hot after all.'

Ravi was busy measuring out some dal. He said without looking up, 'I would be happy to offer you some, but someone's already had most of it. Then I was feeling unwell and I think I finished the last of it.'

'What are you saying, my friend? I can clearly see the pot brimming over with water!'

Ravi looked up and stared in disbelief. In front of his eyes, Karim poured out a tumblerful of water and drank it. Then he paid for all his groceries and left the store.

Did his limp look as if it was nearly gone? Ravi watched him for a while trying to figure out, then decided the heat was playing tricks on his mind and went back into the cool comfort of his shop and dozed off.

He woke with a start as someone was calling his name urgently. He opened his eyes to find Karim back. This time he was holding by the hand his little sister Fatima. 'Brother, wake up. We need your help,' Karim urged.

'Wh-what? Is something wrong?'

'Fatima is burning up with fever!'

'Then go to a doctor, why have you got her to a grocery shop?'

Karim stared at him and said, 'You mean you don't know how you just helped me? My leg, which has been troubling me for the last many years, healed up on its own as soon as I drank the water from your magic pitcher! Give Fatima a drink from it, too. I am sure her fever will disappear in no time.'

Ravi was astounded. Magic pitcher? Healing water? What was Karim going on about? Nonetheless he passed the pot to Fatima. She drank a bit, then sat down to rest. Within minutes she lifted her head and said, 'It is true, brothers! I am indeed cured of the fever!'

Soon the news spread in the village like wildfire. Ravi, the quiet, kind grocery storekeeper, was now the owner of a magic pitcher, the waters from which could heal anyone of any disease. Every night Ravi left the pitcher in the store, and in the morning it would be filled to the brim with sweet, cool water. Daily, a queue of sick people and their relatives collected in front of his shop. To each one Ravi gave a drink of the water, and they went away saying they were now better. The pot was never empty. Ravi realized the old man he had helped must have given him this gift in gratitude. Ravi understood what a great gift it was and thanked him daily in his mind.

Soon his little store turned into a hospital. Ravi did not charge a paisa for the water. People would leave some money, some gifts for him, and others did not pay him anything but he was still happy with that.

One day, a rich landlord's servant appeared at his doorstep and said, 'My master is unwell. Come with me and give him a drink of your water.'

Ravi replied, 'See the crowd of people behind you, waiting for their turn. How can I leave without helping them and go to your master? Do you think these sick people can stand in the sun for long? Tell your master to come to me instead and I will give him the water here.'

The servant said, 'Ravi, what will you get by helping these poor people? A few rupees? Some rice and dal? Come to my master's house. He will shower you with money and gifts. Your worries about making ends meet will be over for at least a month.'

Ravi was tempted. It was true, why not cure one rich man and get some help in buying his daily needs? Ravi told the people waiting outside to come back the next day and went with the servant to the landlord.

Slowly, in this way, Ravi changed. Where once he could not bear to see the pain and sadness of the sick and poor people, he now started each day hoping he would get one rich patient at least, who would pay him handsomely.

Days passed thus. Seasons changed and it was summer once more. Ravi was in his old store, writing up his accounts, when the voice of an old man quavered in his ear, 'Son, water!'

Startled, he looked up. Was it the same old man who had given him the gift of the magic pitcher? But right behind the visitor was none other than the king's messenger. 'Come quickly!' the messenger shouted. 'The queen has been bitten by a mosquito!'

'Water!' the old man repeated.

'The queen is unwell!' the messenger shouted again.

Ravi looked from one to the other. One was a grubby old man who may or may not be the same person who gave him the pitcher. On the other side a messenger from the king himself! He pictured the gold coins showering down on him once his healing water soothed the queen's mosquito bites. The choice was clear.

He picked up his pitcher and said to the stranger, 'Wait right here, Uncle, I'll be back soon.'

The king's swift-footed horses took him to the palace. There he rushed to the queen who was staring in dismay at the mosquito bites on her arm. He

tilted the pitcher to pour some water into a tumbler, but nothing came! Again and again he tilted the pitcher. He turned it upside down and stared into its depths. It was dry as a bone.

‘You cheat!’ the king roared. ‘So this is how you have been fooling the people of my kingdom! Get out, and never let me hear that you have acquired magical healing powers. If you claim such a thing again I will banish you forever from the village.’ Then he turned to comfort his queen who was splashing tears on the bump on her arm.

Ravi slowly walked back to his village. He went to his shop. No one was there. He searched for the old man who had asked for water. He was nowhere to be seen. He called out, ‘Uncle, I am sorry. I made a mistake. Please do come. I will give you water.’ But there was no reply. Now he realized this was the same old man whom he met a year back.

He remembered the people he had healed once out of kindness and compassion and how much they had blessed and loved him in return. He remembered their little acts of generosity, sparing him a few coins, a bundle of vegetables from their garden in return for the water. When did he become so selfish and greedy that he would neglect the people who had needed him the most? The old man had taken back his powers when he sensed Ravi had misused the gift.

Never mind, Ravi smiled to himself. He would use the money he had received for the water to help bring a real doctor to the village, someone who would help the people with his knowledge of medicines and diseases, so that they need not wait for a magician to cure them of their illnesses.

From that day onwards Ravi filled his pitcher with ordinary water from the stream and carried it back carefully to his little store and waited for the old man. Maybe one day he would be back, but till then, Ravi was determined to bring a real medicine man to his village.



Ajji finished her story and looked around at the four little faces around her. Raghu was deep in thought. Ajji smiled at him. Then the children shouted, ‘Ajji, tell one more story!’

‘Ah ha,’ Ajji said, ‘too many stories a day are not good either. One laddoo is very sweet, very delicious but if you eat laddoos all the time it’s no fun. Go

and play outside. Tomorrow I will tell you another story.' With that she got up and went to the kitchen to supervise the dinner.



Kavery and the Thief

The children had gone with their Ajja to the paddy fields that morning. They were all city kids and did not know a thing about farming! On the way, Anand was surprised to see a bird's nest on top of the tree. He said to Ajja, 'I wonder how birds decide where and how to make their nests!' Ajja said, 'The straw in the nest is from the paddy field. Do you know, farming helps human beings as well as birds?' Krishna replied, 'Ajja, I thought wheat and rice can be just plucked from trees, like mangoes. But today I realized there is so much work in farming.'

That afternoon, after lunch, when they gathered around Ajji for the day's story, she looked sharply at the children. They had enjoyed learning about farming activities like cleaning seeds and separating the straw from paddy. In the city everything came from the supermarket, but here they had seen how things were really produced.

Ajji said, 'Farming is very important. If farmers do not grow any food, what will we all eat?'

Anand said thoughtfully, 'If farmers do such important work, why are they so poor?'

'That's true, my dear,' Ajji sighed, fanning herself. 'Of course there are rich farmers too, people who own lots of land. But many in our country till small pieces of land, and so make less money.'

Then seeing the kids' crestfallen faces, she put down her fan, sat up and said, 'But I can tell you of a poor farmer woman who did not remain very poor. All due to her sharp wit!'

‘Tell Ajji! Do tell!’ the kids yelled. So Ajji started her story.



Kavery’s lazy husband annoyed her no end. There she was working like a donkey in the fields, ploughing and watering and tending a hard, dry piece of land, while her husband snored away happily at home! Why, once when a stranger came asking for some food and water, he just pointed towards the kitchen and went back to sleep. The stranger, thankfully, was an honest man and took only enough for himself and his horse. Not that there was much to steal in Kavery’s little house. They were poor farmers with only a patch of land where nothing seemed to grow. Somehow Kavery tilled the land, did some odd jobs in the neighbourhood, and made ends meet.

The land was right next to a temple. On some days her husband would come along with her on the pretext of helping her, but no sooner would her back be turned than she would find him stretched out near the temple courtyard gossiping with passing villagers.

One day, as she was working in the field, trying to dig up the ground so she could sow some seeds, a thin man with a big moustache appeared beside her. He was a thief, and up to no good. Kavery, of course, did not know this. She greeted him politely and went back to her work. Now the thief wanted to steal the coins that were given as offerings in the temple and perhaps even the ornaments on the idol. The only way into the temple was by digging his way in from Kavery’s land. But how could he do anything there, with this tough, no-nonsense woman working away?

Guessing Kavery was hard up for money, he whispered to her, ‘Sister, why are you working so hard on this barren land? I will give you one thousand rupees, sell it to me.’

Kavery raised her eyebrows; why did he want to buy the land for so much money? Surely something was wrong . . .

The thief sensed she was not about to sell it to him, so he raised his price: ‘A thousand and fifty? No? Two thousand? No again? FIVE THOUSAND? No?’

Kavery kept shaking her head. She did not like this odd-looking man who was offering her so much money for the field. Clearly he had some evil plans. Finally, to keep him quiet, she made up a story. ‘I will never sell this land. You see, it belonged to my ancestors. Now we are poor, but I am told that once our family was very rich. Though we lost a lot of our money, much of it

was also buried here, in this field by one ancestor, to keep it safe from robbers. Then people forgot about it for years and years. My husband found a clue to the location of the hidden treasure just a few days back. Why do you think I am digging this hard earth? Not to sow seeds, oh no, that's just what everyone thinks. I am actually looking for hidden treasure!'

The thief was stunned. He felt this woman was really innocent, giving such important information to a stranger. He thought, why should I not take advantage of this situation? Here he was, hoping to steal a few coins from the temple, and this woman was telling him about hidden treasure! He replied in a very humble way, 'Yes sister, I understand; after all it is your family treasure. Only you should get it.' He pretended to walk away, and went and hid himself a little way down the road.

Night fell; Kavery packed up her tools and headed home. The temple, too, emptied out and the priest locked it up for the night. Then at midnight, when all was quiet and the night creatures were coming out of their homes, the thief crept into the field.

All night he dug and dug, looking for treasure, but of course there was no sign of it as there never had been any treasure to begin with! By the time dawn broke he realized Kavery had made a fool of him and all he could do now was get away from the field fast.

When Kavery reached the field she grinned to herself. Just as she had expected, the thief had spent the night digging up the land nicely for her. All she needed to do now was sow the seeds. She worked hard in the field for the next few months and managed to grow a good crop. She sold those and finally they had some money. With a part of this money Kavery bought some jewellery.



Many months later, the thief decided to show his face in the village again. He was careful to disguise himself, though. He trimmed his long moustaches, tied a colourful turban and pretended to be a travelling salesman. No sooner had he stepped into the village than he saw Kavery going about her work. But what is this . . . Instead of the simple, unadorned lady he saw last year, she was now wearing jewellery which looked as though it had been in the family for years! Surely she must have located that missing treasure finally! He was determined to look in her house and find the rest of her money and treasure.

That night, he appeared at Kavery's house and said to her husband, 'I am a traveller and don't have a place to spend the night. Please give me shelter for the night.'

Kavery's husband agreed immediately. Kavery, however, glimpsed the man from inside the house and saw through his disguise. She knew he must be planning some robbery, so she said in a loud voice, making sure the visitor heard her, 'Oh dear, your dear aunt is all alone at night and has asked us to come stay with her. You know how the dark scares her when your uncle is not there. Come, let us go there for the night.' Then lowering her voice a bit, yet making sure she was heard clearly, she continued, 'Don't worry about the jewels. I have hidden them in little holes in the house walls. No one will suspect the hiding spot.' Then she came out and in her normal voice told the thief, 'Brother, you can sleep in the veranda. The house will be locked. Here is some food and water for you. We will come tomorrow morning.' The thief smiled to himself at Kavery's foolishness.

Her husband, meanwhile, stared at her with an open mouth, wondering which aunt and what jewels she was talking about. When she firmly walked off, he followed obediently.

The thief could not believe his luck. He had the entire night to comb through the house, tap all the walls and look for the hidden stash of gold ornaments. So he started. Tap tap tap. Kick, punch and shove. He prowled and he tapped, he kicked and he pushed the walls, hoping to spot the jewels. Finally he tore down all the walls. But, of course, there was nothing he could find. Exhausted he fell asleep and woke only with the crowing of the cock as the sun rose. Quickly he found his little bundle of things and ran off. Within minutes Kavery and her husband returned.

'Oh Kavery, see what the bad man has done to our house! You gave him food and shelter and made me come with you leaving the man alone in the night,' her husband wailed. But Kavery was smiling! Then she broke into

peals of laughter and said, 'Don't worry. I had planned this all along. You see, I saved money from our last crop to rebuild the house. I needed to call in some labourers to help tear it down, but our guest has done it for us! Now we can make a larger house for ourselves, just the way we always wanted.'

The whole village heard the story and started marvelling at her intelligence. Many months flew by. The thief was burning to take revenge. How dare that village woman trick him, that too not once but twice! He realized that she was very clever.

One day, he dressed up as a bangle seller and started wandering in the village. Kavery spotted him and knew who he was at once. She said to her friends who were crowding around the bangle seller, 'Oh dear, I would have loved to get some for myself. But ever since that good-for-nothing thief tried to steal all our money by tearing down our house, I have hidden everything in a little hole in a tree in the woods.'

'Which tree?' her friends asked.

'Oh no, I am not saying which tree, but it is at last safe and sound out in the forest.'

The thief looked at her. Yes Kavery was wearing an ordinary sari with no ornaments at all.

Her friends turned around in astonishment at the crash with which the bangle seller flung down his collection of bangles and made off for the forest. Only Kavery watched with a grin on her face.

Out in the forest, the thief searched high and low for the jewels. He climbed trees, poked around in bushes, got bitten, scratched and growled at, but he would not give up. The jewels were there somewhere and he had to find them.

So that is where we will leave him, prowling around in the forest, looking for money and gold that don't belong to him. Everyone praised Kavery for her quick wit in ridding the village of the thief. She continued to work hard and made more money from her farming and became a rich old lady. Even her husband was shamed into giving up his lazy ways and helping her. As for the thief, who knows, perhaps he is still in that forest, looking for what was never his. Now if only he had learnt to work hard like Kavery—he would have been as rich!



The children laughed and laughed when the story was over. 'The poor thief!' Meenu and Krishna giggled. 'Maybe he got eaten by a tiger!'

Ajji grinned. 'See,' she told Anand, 'sometimes with a bit of luck and lots of pluck, people can change any situation in which they find themselves!'



Who Was the Happiest of Them All?

Meenu was upset. She pouted and sulked and would not talk to Ajji. But how can any child be angry with Ajji for very long? Their grandmother was just too loving and affectionate for anyone to not tell her what was wrong.

‘Ajji, it’s been three days, and you have not told a story about a king yet!’ Meenu grumbled.

Ajji nodded. ‘It’s true, Meenu. That was my fault; I should have told you a story about a king right away!’

‘And I want a good, nice king, who does good, nice things for his people—not horrible things like punishing them and jailing them,’ Meenu sat straight and demanded.

‘All right, dear. Here’s a king, just as you wanted . . .’

And Ajji began her story.



King Amrit loved his people and looked after the affairs of his kingdom well. His minister, Chandan, was a wise man who helped the king in his work tirelessly.

One day, King Amrit and Chandan were taking a walk on the terrace of the palace. The terrace offered beautiful views of the surroundings, and they could see far into the distance. They spotted the weekly market from up there, with people in colourful clothes buying and selling all kinds of things. There was plenty to buy and people had money to buy, too. There were no poor people to be seen anywhere. The king watched with a smile on his face. He

was delighted to see the prosperity of his kingdom. Like any good ruler he was happy when his people were happy.

He turned to Chandan and said, 'See how contented my people are. But I want to check this first-hand by talking to them. Tomorrow, summon people from all walks of life to the court, and I will ask them myself how they are doing.' Chandan was used to the king's strange requests, so he nodded and went off to carry out this order.

The next day, the king arrived in court humming a happy tune to himself. Seeing all the people gathered there waiting for him, he was even more pleased. He cleared his throat and said in a loud voice, 'I have called you here to ask you a very important question. As your king, I need to know if all of you are contented. Do you have enough for your needs? Do you know anyone who is not happy about anything?'

The citizens looked at each other, thought for a while and slowly one by one they came forward to answer. One after the other they all said how happy they were—their kitchens had enough food, their trades and businesses were doing well, the king had made them feel safe. The farmers had grown good crops and the rivers and ponds were full of fish. What more could they ask for?

The king became more and more pleased as he heard this. Only Chandan, his minister, watched and heard everything with a frown on his face. Why? What was wrong? Soon he walked up to the king and whispered something in his ear. King Amrit's eyebrows rose up in astonishment. Surely, Chandan could not be serious! But he looked at the minister's face and found no trace of this being a joke.

He turned back to the court and made a most unusual announcement. 'I am delighted that all of you have said you are happy. But I want to test this. Tomorrow, I want all the happy people of this kingdom to come and meet me in the royal gardens. But I have a condition. All of you will have to enter the garden from the main gate, walk across and meet me by the gate at the rear of the garden. I will wait for you there. When you enter the garden you will be given a sack each and you can pick whatever fruits or flowers your heart desires.'

An excited buzz broke out among the crowd. It sounded like a lot of fun. No one was usually allowed to enter the king's special garden. He had planted trees from all over the world in that garden and it was said to be filled with all kinds of beautiful and strange plants.

Right on time the next day, everyone gathered at the gate of the garden. At the time the king had told them, the guards opened the gates and handed out the sacks. Men, women and children started roaming around the beautiful garden. They spotted juicy apples and plump mangoes hanging from trees. They picked these till they saw ripe pomegranates bursting with juice, grapes and colourful flowers no one had seen before. People went about picking whatever they wished for and filling their sacks with them.

But as they walked further into the garden it became wilder, more like a forest, and there they saw trees laden with apples of gold, mangoes of silver and flowers studded with gems and jewels!

Everyone emptied their sacks of the fruits they had collected earlier and started madly filling them up with these precious fruits and flowers. They all forgot that they had said they had more than enough for their needs at home. Greed took over, their minds and all they could think about was adding more and more valuables to their sacks. The fruits which they had picked earlier, and had tasted to be as sweet as nectar, now lay in heaps around the garden—forgotten and left to rot.

Then with their sacks filled right to the top, the citizens made their way to the rear gate of the garden where the king was waiting. But what was this? To their astonishment they found a raging stream stopping their way. Water gushed down from behind some rocks and rushed over pebbles and big boulders through the garden. The stream was narrow, but the current was strong. There were no boats to take the people across. Clearly, the only way was to swim. But how could they swim with such heavy sacks filled with gold and silver fruits?



The people stood by the stream for a long time scratching their heads. Then one young man did what they all knew needed to be done. He simply abandoned his sack by the stream, waded into the water, then swam across to the other side. Slowly the others, too, followed suit. Sadly, some wailing in distress, they left their sacks filled with what they had thought was the riches of a lifetime, and dived into the stream. Then they walked up to their king—wet, unhappy and angry.

King Amrit and Chandan watched them trudge up in their soaking clothes. Chandan had a small smile on his lips, while the king looked sad. When they had assembled in front of him, he said, ‘When I asked you yesterday if you were happy with your lives, all of you said you were contented and did not need anything more. Yet, today I can see the sadness in your faces when you had to leave behind the riches you had gathered in my garden. If you were really happy with your lives, why did you gather the jewel fruits, and why are you so sad now?’

Everyone looked down, ashamed at their behaviour. Only the young man who was the first to cross the stream after leaving his sack behind seemed to be unconcerned. Chandan spotted his cheerful face in the crowd and beckoned him forward. Then he asked, ‘Tell me, are you not sad you had to leave behind so much of wealth that suddenly came your way?’

The man said, ‘I didn’t pick the jewelled fruits and flowers. I had picked some of the lovely, tasty fruits and had eaten my fill of them. In my sack I had kept some others for my little daughter who is at home. I had thought she would enjoy these tasty apples and mangoes. But when I saw there was no other way to go across the stream, I did not think twice about leaving my sack by the river. My little girl can get tasty fruits from some other garden, too! But I am so happy the king let us all wander around his garden, looking at the trees and plants and animals. He is a great king for having created this place of beauty, and it was a pleasure walking around there.’

Finally a smile appeared on King Amrit’s face. Chandan turned to him and said, ‘Your Majesty, I hope you now realize that people’s contentment does not end with having enough food or money. They also need to be truly happy inside. Only then will they not be swayed when they gain or lose wealth. That is a lesson that everyone—whether a king or a commoner—needs to remember.’

The king nodded, as did his subjects. This was a lesson they would not forget in a hurry!



‘Did you like the story, Meenu?’ Raghu asked.

‘Oh yes,’ Meenu nodded. ‘But I liked the minister more than the king!’

‘That’s true, Meenu,’ Ajji agreed. ‘Kings did need intelligent ministers to show them the right path sometimes. Remember Akbar had Birbal, and Krishnadevaraya had Tenali Rama? Why just kings, we all need someone to tell us if what we are doing is wrong. It could be our parents, grandparents, teachers or even our best friend. The important thing is to listen to them and change our ways when needed.’



The Enchanted Scorpions

What an exciting morning the children had had that day! Ajja had asked for their help in cleaning up his old storeroom. Ajja loved to keep all kinds of old things in that room, much to Ajji's annoyance. She firmly believed the room was the principle attraction for all the cockroaches, mice, termites and other such bugs in the house. Every summer holiday the children spent a day clearing out the room, exclaiming over all the treasures they had unearthed. Ajja even let them keep some of the odds and ends they found. That didn't please their mothers too much though!

Today they had found an old wooden box. It was a big box, beautifully carved all over with flowers, and vines and leaves. Inside, it had little compartments to keep all manner of things. Now these compartments were empty, but Raghu, who had been reading *Treasure Island*, imagined that once these were full of gold and silver coins, gems as big as eggs and all kinds of fantastic jewels.

After examining the box thoroughly, the children decided that the day's story had to be about lost treasure. Ajji, who knew a story about anything under the sun, started right away.



Siddharth was a young, good-natured merchant. Looking for work, he arrived in a village. He liked the people of the village so much that he decided to use all his savings, buy a house and live there forever. While searching for a house, he met Uday.

Uday was a poor man. His family had once been extremely wealthy landowners but were now not so well off. Uday was looking to sell his old family mansion in order to pay off his family's loans.

Siddharth loved the house Uday showed him and bought it immediately. Then he set about repairing the mansion, which was in ruins. As he dug out the old flooring, he found a sealed box buried underground. When he opened it, to his surprise, he saw it was filled with scorpions. He flung the box away in fright.



That evening, he went to visit the wisest man in the village and asked him about the box of scorpions. The wise man thought for a while, then said, 'Perhaps Uday's ancestors hid some money in that box and buried it, to be used when someone in the family needed the money. Over the years they must have forgotten about the existence of the box.'

Siddharth was still puzzled. 'But the box contained scorpions,' he said, 'not money.'

The old man smiled. 'The box is protected by an old spell. If it is opened by anyone other than a family member, it will appear as if it is swarming with scorpions. Only a true family member will be able to see that the box contains money.'

Siddharth was sad to hear this story. He remembered the tears that had sprung up in Uday's eyes as he had looked back at his ancestral house for one last time before leaving the village. If only he had known about the hidden treasure, he would not have had to sell the house. When Siddharth reached home, he decided to keep the box safely till someone from Uday's family came to claim it. To make sure that the box was taken only by a true descendant of Uday's family, he took four scorpions from the box and hung them in four corners of his newly opened shop.

All his customers would comment when they entered the shop. 'Siddharth, are you mad? Why have you hung dangerous insects in your shop? Do you want to scare away shoppers?'

Siddharth would only smile. He knew his goods were the best for miles around, and people would come to shop at his store, scorpions or not. Gradually the shop came to be known as the Scorpion Shop and the villagers laughed at him behind his back. But Siddharth did not care.

Many years passed. Siddharth was now a middle-aged man with a wife and children and enough money. But he had one regret. No one had come to claim that box.

One day, a young boy walked into the shop and said, 'Sir, I have heard from many people in the village that you are wealthy and often help those in need. I had to stop going to school because I could no longer pay my fees. Could you please lend me some money so I can finish my studies?'

Siddharth shook his head sadly. 'The villagers have exaggerated about my wealth,' he said. 'Yes, I am earning enough, but not so much that I can help you or lend you money, though I would have loved to do so.'

The boy flared up in anger when he heard this. 'Sir, if you do not want to help me, please say so openly. Why do you lie? You have so much money that you don't know what to do with it. Why else have you hung gold coins in the four corners of your shop? Surely you can spare some coins to help a poor student like me.'

Siddharth stared at him in astonishment. 'Wh-what? What did you just say?' he asked, his eyes bulging in excitement.

'I said if you don't want to help . . .' the boy repeated.

'Yes, yes, I heard that,' Siddharth cut him short. 'But what did you say after that, about the gold coins in my shop?'

The boy now looked at Siddharth doubtfully, afraid that perhaps this excited old man was a bit mad. 'I said you are so wealthy that you have hung gold coins in the four corners of the shop. There they are, for the world to see!' And the boy pointed to what appeared to Siddharth as four writhing scorpions.

Siddharth gave a happy whoop of laughter. He rushed forward and hugged the boy.

'Are you related to Uday Kamalakar? Did your family ever live in this village?' he nearly shouted into the boy's ears.

The young man stepped back in alarm. Perhaps this rich man was mad and dangerous after all. 'Y-yes, my name is Uday. I was named after my grandfather. His family lived here for many generations. Then, when they fell on hard times, my grandfather sold his old house and moved. He never recovered from the grief of having to sell his ancestral property and died heartbroken.'

Siddharth wiped away the tears from his eyes. 'Wait here, my son,' he said. Rushing to his house, he came back with the old box and gave it to the young boy. 'Go on, open it and tell me what you see,' he chuckled.

The boy opened the box and his eyes nearly fell out of his head. For he held in his hands more treasure than he could dream about in his wildest fantasies. The box was filled with gold and silver coins and jewels!

He looked up in astonishment at Siddharth, who was grinning broadly. 'Yes, it belongs to you,' Siddharth explained. 'I have held it safe for many years, hoping someone from Uday's family will come to claim it. Your troubles are now over. Go home, use the wealth of your ancestors judiciously and do well in life.'

Then he told the boy the story of how he had found the box which appeared to be filled with scorpions to anyone who did not belong to Uday's family.

Uday was amazed when he heard the story. He offered Siddharth half his wealth in gratitude. But Siddharth would hear none of it. 'This is yours,' he insisted. 'Go, enjoy your life.'

Uday went away with the box, and all his life he remembered the funny, honest old man who had kept his wealth safely for him.



'How lovely, Ajji!' Krishna gasped. 'If only we had such a shopkeeper in this town!' All the children agreed that that would have been such fun. Ajji laughed at their dreamy faces. Then she shooed them out to play in the garden. And do you know what they played till late in the evening? Treasure hunt, of course!



The Horse Trap

The next day, there was a surprise summer shower. The land smelled beautiful. The thirsty earth had soaked in every drop of rainwater. The children had been very busy shifting the puppies and kittens, who were roaming in the back and front yards, into the house so that they did not get drenched in the rain. Their respective mothers were very busy shifting the pappadams left to dry on the terrace. Summer is the season when, under Ajji's leadership, pickles and pappadams were made.

Meenu started a calculation. 'Everyone needs at least five pappadams per day. For the next one month 600 pappadams will be needed. Tomorrow our neighbour Vishnu Kaka's three grandchildren are coming. They will also eat with us these tasty pappadams. We may have to keep five per head . . . That means Ajji has to prepare $600 + 50$ pappadams.' When Ajji listened to Meenu's mathematics, she laughed and said, 'Don't calculate that way. It may be true today that we will all eat five pappadams a day, but this may not be true for every day. After eating pappadams for three days, one may get bored. There is a wedding in my brother's house and we all might go there. So we may not eat any pappadam those days. The way you are calculating, reminds me of the man who calculated the number of horses, once in England . . .'

All the children immediately gathered around her. 'Oh Ajji, you must tell us this story of how the horses were counted.'

So Ajji had to stop what she was doing right there and tell them the story.



Many many years ago, in England, there lived a great thinker and scholar called George Smith. He thought a lot about how it would be in the future, and advised the prime minister about many things. He researched how many people would live in the country in twenty years' time, he calculated how many schools, hospitals and roads needed to be built, or how much food needed to be grown or bought from other places to feed all these people.

His calculations helped the government immensely in planning for the future.

George often needed to visit the prime minister's office to talk to him about some new project and advise him. One day, the prime minister had invited him for a meeting, so he hopped into his horse carriage and set off for the office. Now George was always deep in thought and rarely noticed what was happening around him. Today, too, he sat in his carriage thinking about farms and ships and houses. But suddenly his carriage stopped with a jolt and he was shaken out of his thoughts. There was some commotion on the road and all carriages had stopped around him. Normally George would have just sunk back into his thoughts again, but today something stopped him. A horrible, strong smell. A smell that hung in the air and made you cover your nose with a hanky if you were not a scholar wrapped up in your own world.

Today, somehow, George was not able to disconnect himself from what was going on around him. The smell kept wafting into his nose and taking his mind away from the problem he was tackling. He called out to his coachman, 'Hi John, what is this extraordinary smell?'

John the coachman was used to his master's absent-minded ways, and he replied briefly, 'Horse dung.'

Horse dung! Now that was something George had never given a thought to. Somehow, he could now think of nothing else. Soon his carriage pulled up in front of the prime minister's office. But George kept sitting inside, lost in thought. Finally John tapped on the window to tell his master that they had reached their destination.

George walked to the visitor's room still thinking. He was sitting there, reflecting on horses and their dung, when the prime minister's secretary came to meet him. Now Adam, the secretary, was not as learned as George, but he was very sharp and intelligent. He greeted George and said to him apologetically, 'The PM had to make time for another important meeting, and will be late in seeing you. I hope you don't mind waiting.'



George kept staring out of the window, watching yet more horse-drawn carriages rushing up and down the road. Thinking he had perhaps not heard him, Adam cleared his throat and repeated loudly, 'Mr Smith, the PM . . .'

'Yes, I heard you, Adam,' George mumbled.

Worried that this great thinker of the country was in some trouble, Adam asked gingerly, 'Is something bothering you? Perhaps I could help . . .?'

George looked at him excitedly, 'You know, I just looked into the future and realized we will all die in about a hundred years. Our country will be destroyed, our way of life gone forever. And do you know why? All because of horses . . . and their dung!'

Adam stared at George, puzzled. Surely he could not be serious?

George continued, 'See, now we use horses as the principal mode of transport in the country. They are used to draw carriages, in the king's stables, even in the farms.'

Adam nodded. This was true.

'So how many horses are there now? Let's assume that there are 500 rich families who can afford to own a horse carriage. If each family has at least two children and all of them are rich enough to own carriages, that will mean a minimum of two more carriages in a few years. Each carriage would require two horses. So, each rich family would be using four horses at the least. So then there will be 2,000 horses. If you add our king's cavalry, and the number of horses in the farms, the numbers increase substantially.'

Adam nodded. Yes, this sounded true enough, but what was George's point?

'How do we get rid of the dung they generate now?'

Adam answered patiently, 'We dig pits and empty the dung into them.'

George nodded, 'Now that's my point. Imagine the scene a hundred years from now. 2,000 horses would have increased to 400,000, given the way the population is increasing. This will mean more dung! And what will we do with all this dung? Humans will need more space and houses and farming to sustain themselves. Where will we find open land to dig up and bury the dung? It will lie unattended everywhere and cause horrible diseases. If they make their way into the water sources it will be even worse. We will end up poisoning ourselves and our environment. We will become sick, and our country will become poor just by tending to so many sick people, and finally our way of life will just die out—as we all will. All because of horses!'

Adam sat and thought about this for some time. George's thoughts and the grim picture he had painted of the future was scary indeed. But . . . here Adam's practical thinking kicked in; what if things did not work exactly the way George was seeing it? He turned to his friend and said, 'Mr Smith, you are not taking into account one very important bit into your calculations—the ability humans have to innovate and adapt. Many years ago there were no carts or carriages, we went everywhere by foot. Then once we started domesticating animals we realized we could use them for transport too. But do you think humans will rest with this achievement? Who knows, in a hundred years what other modes of transport we would have invented so that we may not require horse for transport at all. Perhaps we will even be able to fly like birds!'

George never solved this problem in his lifetime. Neither did Adam live to see how true his thoughts about the future had been. Man went on to invent so many new ways of moving from place to place that horses are no longer used in the numbers they once were. James Watt invented the steam engine, which led to the invention of railways. Then cars were invented by Karl F. Benz and became widely used in cities for transport. Finally the Wright brothers showed that humans could fly—in aeroplanes! With all these great inventions, the horse and other animal-drawn carts and carriages are now a thing of the past.

Truly, if man did not innovate and experiment, our species would have died out—just like George had predicted!



Everyone was very happy this story. They all teased Meenu. 'You are the George Smith of our house. Who knows one day nobody will eat pappadams and Amma may not prepare that many pappadams. We may even buy directly from the shops if it is a small number.'

Meenu felt very embarrassed. She hid her face with a pillow. Ajji said, 'Don't make fun of her. Foresight is very important. If you don't have foresight, then you will land up in trouble like Ramu.'

'Who is Ramu?' the children immediately asked Ajji.

'I will tell the story of Ramu only tomorrow.' And Ajji bustled off. The children knew she would tell only one story a day, so they eagerly waited for the next day to hear Ramu's story.



A Treasure for Ramu

Vishnu Kaka's grandchildren had come to visit him. Vishnu Kaka was a very good friend of Ajja's. They had lived next door to each other for years. Unfortunately, his wife Vasanthi Kaki had died a few years back. Though there was a cook, his grandchildren—Sharan, Suma and Divya—always preferred to eat in Ajji's house, which Ajji also welcomed.

With seven hungry children to feed, Ajji realized telling a story would be a good way to keep them quiet till the food got cooked. Ajji started the story while peeling the cucumbers.



Did you know that sometimes even the gods in heaven can get into an argument? That's what happened once when Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, found herself cornered by all the other gods. Together, they accused her of one thing—that she never stayed in one place for too long! 'No sooner are you comfortably settled in one house, do you decide to leave it, and off you go elsewhere!' they said to her.

Lakshmi sniffed and said, 'That's not true. I stay in a house as long as I am welcome. If people think ahead, work sincerely and spend money wisely, I stay with them forever. Unfortunately often when I am in one place for a while, people behave strangely, and I have no choice but to leave.'

The other gods pooh-poohed this and refused to believe her. Poor Lakshmi decided she needed to show them proof of what she had just said. Here is what she did to show that she was correct. Remember, many human years

make only a second in god years. So what took years to happen on earth, the gods could see in only a few minutes.



Ramu and Rani were farmers. They worked hard in their fields and earned enough money to feed their children and meet their other needs. They were not rich and sometimes had to make do with fewer new clothes and not very nice food.

One day, Rani was digging a corner of her garden in order to plant a tree. As she dug deeper, there was a loud clang! Her shovel had hit something metallic hidden underground. Excited, she dug faster, till she pulled out a large metal box. When she opened it she could not believe her eyes. It was filled with gold and silver jewels! For a while Rani stood dumbstruck. Then she did a happy whoop and ran home with the box under her arm.

‘Ramu, Ramu, see what I found buried in our garden!’ she yelled.

Ramu was writing up the accounts for the month, and for a while paid no attention to his wife. Only when she came up to him and did a happy jig around him did he look up. Imagine how his mouth fell open in surprise when he saw the box of jewels.



Soon Ramu and Rani were the richest people in the village. They stopped going to work—after all, what was the need, they told each other. Why work in the hot sun when they had piles of money at home? They left their small cottage and moved into the biggest house in the village. They had servants who worked day and night doing every small job, so the two did not need to lift even a finger. There was a cook who cooked delicious meals, a person to serve it, another just to clean shoes and one person to even fan Ramu as he sat on his bed the whole day and gossiped with his newfound friends.

Then Ramu decided village life was too boring and they moved to the big city. There they had another big house, more servants and lots of fun at various parties. Slowly they forgot the good things that had once made them a well-loved family. They forgot to work hard, to help others in their need, or to just be nice people. They thought that with money they could buy anything, including respect. They behaved rudely to others. They spent more and more money on clothes and parties, and as they did no work at all, the money started dwindling. They started borrowing from others which they soon could not pay back.

One day, Ramu looked sadly at his account book. It was now filled with numbers that showed he only needed to pay others; there was hardly anything left for himself. In a heavy voice he called out to his wife, ‘Rani dear, the good days are over. I think we forgot to be the kind of people Goddess Lakshmi likes. She has gone elsewhere, and we are left with nothing.’

Rani stood silently for a while, then replied, ‘Never mind, Ramu. We have learnt our lesson. I now think of the days when I would work all day long and go to sleep a tired person and sleep soundly. I would fall into a deep slumber as soon as I lay down on the bed. Now I lie awake all night, wondering which sari to wear the next day and what to do with our money. I am too fat to even dig, like I did when I found the treasure!’

Ramu smiled and hugged his wife. ‘We’ll go back to our village, and to our old ways. We will work hard like we did once, and we will help everyone around us. Maybe that will make Lakshmi come back to us one day. And even if she doesn’t, we will try and be happy with what we have.’

So Ramu and his family went back to their old home. And do you know what? They did live happily ever after!



The gods watched what was happening with Ramu and Rani from the heavens as Lakshmi entered and then left their house. They had to agree with her—if the people of the house she entered became nasty, then what could she do except leave, and hope they saw the error of their ways?



The Donkey and the Stick

Ajji was on an outing with her daughter and daughter-in-law, Sumati and Subhadra. One lived in Bangalore and the other in Mumbai. They were returning the next day as they had used up all the leaves their offices had given. The children would remain at Shiggaon though, with their grandparents. Everyone was looking forward to this stage of the holidays. The children because there would be no parents telling them what to do, to Ajji's delicious food and to fun outings with Ajja. The grandparents, too, were looking forward to having the children to themselves. The rest of the year it was only the two of them in the house.

As Ajji walked with the two younger women, they talked about how difficult it was for them to manage their office work and the children. Ajji listened silently. Then Sumati said, 'But they are so good when they are with you, Amma. How do you manage them so well?' Subhadra nodded. 'I have read so many books and articles to find out about this, but nothing works the way it is written in books.'

Now Ajji said, 'Do not always go by what you read in books. Learn to use your life's experiences, read between the lines.' Then she grinned and said, 'Otherwise you will become like the people in the story about the donkey and the stick!'

Sumati and Subhadra forgot they were at the temple and clamoured together, 'What is this story? Tell us!' Ajji shook her head. 'Now you are behaving like children. But you are my children after all. All right, come join us at night when I tell today's story.'

That night the two mothers were the first to appear to listen to the stories. The children were surprised to see their mums, and Ajji started her story.



Aruna Marg was a busy road. It connected a number of villages to each other and many people, animals and carts used it every day. Walking along that road, a group of students discovered a rock which no one had bothered to look at in many years. 'Look!' they told each other in excitement, 'there is something written on the rock. What can it mean?'

They called out to their teacher. When they examined the rock carefully, they found the markings were actually little drawings. One showed a stick, and the other a donkey.

By now a large crowd had gathered. Everyone was puzzled. What could these strange drawings mean, they asked, scratching their heads. They decided to go to the ashram of a wise sage nearby and ask him. But when they trooped into the ashram, they found to their disappointment that the sage had gone on a long pilgrimage. Only his young disciple was there, looking after the cows and calves.

They asked the disciple if he could throw some light on the strange drawings. Now this young man was not very bright. But like many foolish people he loved to put on an air of learning and pretend to be very clever. He examined the drawings carefully and minutely. Then he proclaimed, 'It is very simple. This is the drawing of a magic stick. The man with the stick is the hero of this place. He died protecting this village centuries back. Each person using this road must worship the rock and make an offering to it. The one who ignores it will become a donkey!'



The villagers were astonished to hear this strange explanation. But they were devout people and on that very day they set up a shrine around the rock. They installed the foolish disciple as head priest in charge of taking offerings from passing travellers. The disciple was pleased with his brainwave. Of course he did not know what the silly drawings meant, but he no longer had to run after calves and get kicked by angry cows in the ashram! He could sit by the rock the whole day, taking his pick of the offerings to the rock and mutter a few mumbo-jumbo prayers.

His happiness lasted a few months—till the wise old sage returned to the ashram. The old sage was annoyed to find his disciple missing and his beloved animals roaming around, uncared for. Then he looked into the distance and saw a large crowd gathered by the road. He went to investigate, and found his missing disciple there, looking happy and well fed, busy accepting offerings for a rock. He stood watching for a while. Then he walked up to the rock and closely examined the pictures. Without saying a word, he picked up a stout iron rod and, to the astonishment of the gathered crowd, started moving the rock. Many came forward to help him and when they had been able to move the rock, they found a pot of gold under it!

The sage said to the people gathered around him: ‘The pictures meant you had to move the rock with an iron rod and find the hidden money. If you didn’t, you were all like donkeys. You should not follow rituals and the words of others blindly. Think for yourselves and understand why you are doing what you do. If you had given this some thought, you would have recovered this treasure many months ago. Instead, you wasted your time and money making offerings to a rock and helping this greedy disciple of mine become fat and make fools of you. This treasure belongs to all of us. Let’s use it to keep this road in good repair so everyone can use it and go about their work in peace.’

The villagers hung their heads in shame for they realized how foolish they had been. As for the disciple, he had to clean the cowsheds for many months to atone for his greed.