

Nagarani (Serpent Queen)

A king had no children. He and his queen did everything possible, made vows and offerings, said hundreds of prayers, undertook pilgrimages, did anything anyone suggested. Finally, on someone's advice, the queen devoted herself to worshipping snake-stones. She circumambulated every snake-stone she saw on the roadside. She prayed ceaselessly.

One day, while she circumambulated a snake-stone and offered milk to the image, a real cobra appeared and sipped the milk in the saucer.

“O Lord of Snakes, take pity on me,” she pleaded.

The cobra said, “Yes, my daughter. I know what you want. You'll have a child. But you'll have to give the child to me, whether it is a son or daughter. Promise now.”

She wanted to escape the brand of barrenness. She wanted no one to call her “Barren Queen” anymore. So she promised at once. She was soon big with child.

After a term of nine days and nine months, she gave birth to a girl. The little one was a beauty. The king and queen doted on her, couldn't take their eyes off her all day. In her joy, the queen forgot her promise to the Lord of Snakes. He was angry, came to her bedside one day and stung the queen, who foamed in her mouth and died in minutes. He didn't touch the king, because he hadn't given his word, but the cobra's anger smoldered.

The little girl grew up and became a young woman. One day the king and his daughter went for a walk to the flower garden outside town. There an old hag was feeding eggs to a baby snake. The sight disgusted the king. So he scolded the old hag, “You crone, what the hell are you doing?” She flared at him and cursed him. “Look who's talking? You got a daughter by promising her to the Lord of Snakes. But you don't recognize him when you see him! You too will change into a snake!” The princess was about to plead with her and say, “Please, please, granny! Wait a second!” But before she could utter a word, the hag had flourished a magic wand and thrown it at the king, who changed into a snake that instant and began to creep about. He hissed and circled round and round his daughter, unable to leave her. The princess was furious. She called the servants to arrest the old woman and take her to prison. The old woman gave her a venomous look. “If anything happens to me, you too will become a snake like your father,” she threatened. The princess was in a panic now. She sank to her knees, shivered uncontrollably, and couldn't stop her stream of tears. The old woman's heart melted. She tried to console the young thing by saying, “Don't be afraid, nothing will happen to you.” The princess fell at her feet and begged, “Give me back my father. Change him back into a man!”

The old woman said, "Princess, your mother got you by promising you to the cobra. But after you were born, she was so proud of your beauty, she forgot her promise and ignored him. That's why he killed your mother, and has now made your father like himself. But now, make a gold ring and put it around your father. When it slips off by itself he will become himself again. If anyone keeps that ring in their house, the house will not want for grain. Their cows will not get sick. Silver and gold will pour into their laps." So saying, she vanished. The princess returned to the palace and got the goldsmiths to make a gold ring to fit the snake's body. The snake slithered away with the ring around it.

Some time after that, a farmer was returning home, tired after a day's work. He was thirsty. So he climbed down a well to drink water. There he saw that a huge cobra had left a gold ring on a rock, and was playing in the water. The farmer made no noise and tiptoed to the rock, picked up the ring, and ran with it. The cobra chased him. Hissing, he was at his heels till the farmer ran up a tree. As the cobra was about to go up the tree, an old hag appeared from nowhere. The cobra turned to her, became mild, and began to play with her. The farmer observed this change from the tree and spoke to the old woman.

"You're like my mother. At home we have no elders. Come and live with us. I'll look after you in your old age. Just send this cobra away, and come with me." The old woman seemed pleased with the farmer's words. So she put a spell on the cobra, sent it away, and went with him. The ring brought the farmer hoards of gold and silver. Even his rice fields had silver and gold pebbles. He became a millionaire. But he didn't suspect that the old witch too was after the gold ring, though she feigned indifference. One day, when the farmer was not home, she searched for it all over his house and found it. She grabbed it and left the house in a hurry. The farmer came home, searched for the old woman everywhere, but she was nowhere to be found.

The old woman slept in a midwife's house one night. When everyone was asleep, the glow of the ring filled the house with a strange light. The midwife, who got up in the middle of the night for something, saw the glowing ring and stole it at once. In the morning, the old woman looked for it in her clothes. It was missing. She screamed at the midwife. "You've taken my ring. Return it, or else!" The midwife had hidden it in a grain bin. "I don't know what you are talking about. You can search for it, if you wish," said she. The old woman looked for it everywhere, in corners, behind boxes, in cracks and in tiles, but she couldn't find it. She left the house downscast and baffled. As soon as she left, the midwife looked in her grain bin and found that all the grain had turned to pure gold. In her joy, she began to dance, forgetting even her slipping

clothes.

Meanwhile, the cobra that had lost its ring came there, looking for it. When the midwife saw it, she shrieked in terror, dropped the ring, and ran out of the house half-naked. At once the cobra slipped into the ring and went creeping towards the palace.

It took a long time, a whole three months, to reach the palace. The time for the snake's molting was near. It hurried into the palace, crept straight to the princess's room, and began molting. As he shed his skin, the ring slipped out by itself. At once, the snake vanished and the king sat up in its place. The princess was ecstatic.

The king renamed his daughter Nagarani ("Queen of Snakes") and got her married to a suitable prince. As she treasured the snake's ring, she didn't lack for a thing all her life.