# The Beggar and the Five Muffins

In a certain village there lived a poor beggar and his wife. The man used to go out every morning with a clean vessel in his hand, return home with rice enough for the day’s meal, and thus they lived on in extreme poverty.One day a poor Mádhava Brâhmiṇ invited the pair to a feast, and among Mádhavas muffins (tôśai) are always a part of the good things on festive occasions. So during the feast the beggar and his wife had their fill of muffins. They were so pleased with them, that the woman was extremely anxious to prepare some muffins in her own house, and began to save a little rice every day from what her husband brought her for the purpose. When enough had been thus collected she begged a poor neighbour’s wife to give her a little black pulse which the latter—praised be her charity—readily did. The faces of the beggar and his wife literally glowed with joy that day, for were they not to taste the long-desired muffins for a second time?The woman soon turned the rice she had been saving, and the black pulse she had obtained from her neighbour into a paste, and mixing it well with a little salt, green chillies, coriander seed and curds, set it in a pan on the fire; and with her mouth watering all the while, prepared five muffins! By the time her husband had returned from his collection of alms, she was just turning out of the pan the fifth muffin! And when she placed the whole five muffins before him his mouth, too, began to water. He kept two for himself and two he placed before his wife, but what was to be done with the fifth? He did not understand the way out of this difficulty. That half and half made one, and that each could take two and a half muffins was a question too hard for him to solve. The beloved muffins must not be torn in pieces; so he said to his wife that either he or she must take the remaining one. But how were they to decide which should be the lucky one?Proposed the husband:—“Let us both shut our eyes and stretch ourselves as if in sleep, each on a verandah on either side the kitchen. Whoever opens an eye and speaks first gets only two muffins; and the other gets three.”So great was the desire of each to get the three muffins, that they both abided by the agreement, and the woman, though her mouth watered for the muffins, resolved to go through the ordeal. She placed the five cakes in a pan and covered it over with another pan. She then carefully bolted the door inside and asking her husband to go into the east verandah, she lay down in the west one. Sleep she had none, and with closed eyes kept guard over her husband: for if he spoke first he would have only two muffins, and the other three would come to her share. Equally watchful was her husband over her.Thus passed one whole day—two—three! The house was never opened! No beggar came to receive the morning dole. The whole village began to enquire after the missing beggar. What had become of him? What had become of his wife?“See whether his house is locked on the outside and whether he has left us to go to some other village,” spoke the greyheads.So the village watchman came and tried to push the door open, but it would not open!“Surely,” said they, “it is locked on the inside! Some great calamity must have happened. Perhaps thieves have entered the house, and after plundering their property, murdered the inmates.”“But what property is a beggar likely to have?” thought the village assembly, and not liking to waste time in idle speculations, they sent two watchmen to climb the roof and open the latch from the inside.Meanwhile the whole village, men, women, and children, stood outside the beggar’s house to see what had taken place inside. The watchmen jumped into the house, and to their horror found the beggar and his wife stretched on opposite verandahs like two corpses. They opened the door, and the whole village rushed in. They, too, saw the beggar and his wife lying so still that they thought them to be dead. And though the beggar pair had heard everything that passed around them, neither would open an eye or speak. For whoever did it first would get only two muffins!At the public expense of the village two green litters of bamboo and cocoanut leaves were prepared on which to remove the unfortunate pair to the cremation ground.“How loving they must have been to have died together like this!” said some greybeards of the village.In time the cremation ground was reached, and village watchmen had collected a score of dried cowdung cakes and a bundle of firewood from each house, for the funeral pyre. From these charitable contributions two pyres had been prepared, one for the man and one for the woman. The pyre was then lighted, and when the fire approached his leg, the man thought it time to give up the ordeal and to be satisfied with only two muffins! So while the villagers were still continuing the funeral rites, they suddenly heard a voice:—“I shall be satisfied with two muffins!”Immediately another voice replied from the woman’s pyre:—“I have gained the day; let me have the three!”The villagers were amazed and ran away. One bold man alone stood face to face with the supposed dead husband and wife. He was a bold man, indeed for when a dead man or a man supposed to have died comes to life, village people consider him to be a ghost. However, this bold villager questioned the beggars until he came to know their story. He then went after the runaways and related to them the whole story of the five muffins to their great amazement.But what was to be done to the people who had thus voluntarily faced death out of love for muffins. Persons who had ascended the green litter and slept on the funeral pyre could never come back to the village! If they did the whole village would perish. So the elders built a small hut in a deserted meadow outside the village and made the beggar and his wife live there.Ever after that memorable day our hero and his wife were called the muffin beggar, and the muffin beggar’s wife, and many old ladies and young children from the village use to bring them muffins in the morning and evening, out of pity for them, for had they not loved muffin so much that they underwent death in life?

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