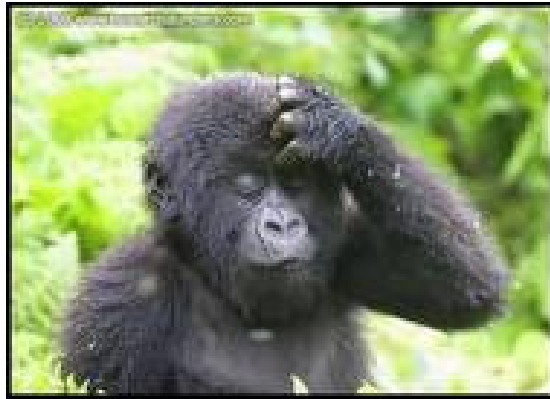


Who Is the Greatest?



Scratch your head

Once there were two kings. One of them had seven sons and the other had seven daughters. Though they were in different kingdoms and didn't know each other, they both decided it was time to get their offspring married. The king who had sons called his servants, gave them seven pictures of his seven sons, and asked them to search for proper well-born brides for each of them. The king who had seven daughters also called his servants, gave them pictures of his seven daughters, and sent them forth with orders to find suitable royal bridegrooms for them.

The servants of both kings wandered through the land in search of proper mates for their princes and princesses. Word traveled from one ear to another, and everyone in the land heard about this search.

In a village lived a gowda who also heard about it, and he decided to invite both parties to his place. With him as a mediator, the parties met, exchanged each other's pictures, and found that the matches were perfect. They went back to their respective kings, who were overjoyed to hear the good news. The whole capital set about making grand preparations for the sevenfold wedding. But, when they got together, soon after for the marriage negotiations, the gowda was also present. He said to them, "Don't arrange the wedding ceremony in this house or in that one. Arrange it in my village. We would be delighted to make the arrangements. Please let us."

The kings accepted his invitation and finished the betrothal ceremonies that day.

Each king brought seven cartloads of people and things for the wedding to the gowda's village. When they asked the gowda, he asked his men, "Where shall we hold the wedding?"

Then he answered his own question. "Go to my fields. Get a magi gourd that is neither at the top nor at the bottom of the creeper but in the middle. Pluck it and bring it here."

His men went to the fields and brought him the gourd. He made a hole in it and put all fourteen cartloads of people and their things in the gourd and said, "Go ahead and have the wedding in here."

The gowda's daughter had gone to the well to get a pitcher of water and came back to her father's house. She felt the need to make water. She went near the magi gourd, which was lying outside. She didn't know what was in it. She made water all around it. The force of that flood carried the gourd far away and finally to the sea. A fish in the sea gobbled it up in no time. Then a hovering sea crane swooped down, caught the fish, and swallowed it. A fisherman caught the bird with his net and took it to the farmers' market on Friday.

Now an old woman in another village called her daughter, gave her four or five rupees, and said, "Go to the farmers' market and buy me a chicken or a goose. With the rest of the money, buy some groceries. Don't dillydally. Come back soon."

On her way to the market, the old woman's daughter met the fisherman. She bought the sea crane from him, tied it round her waist, went to the market, bought some things there, and hurried home.

Her mother asked her, "Did you bring the bird?"

"Yes, I did. A nice sea crane," she said, and loosened the cloth around her lap, but there was no crane. It had vanished. A louse in her sari had swallowed the sea crane. Her mother thought she was telling lies and got into a rage. So she pulled out a stick and gave her daughter a good beating. The daughter couldn't bear it, and she began to menstruate. The mother, disgusted, called the washerman and gave him the daughter's soiled clothes to launder.

The washerman took them to the river and began to soak them and beat them on the stone. Then the louse split open and out came the sea crane. The astonished washerman took out the bird, pulled off the feathers, and cut it with a knife. In its crop, he found a fish, and inside the fish he found a gourd, which seemed to be hollow. He thought that the hollow gourd could be used as a lamp and so he

placed it on top of a pole outside his house. There was a big wind soon after, and the gourd was blown down. It fell and broke. At about this time, inside the gourd, the wedding of the seven princes and the seven princesses was finishing up. They, their clan, and all their guests came out one by one and began to find their way home.

Now, tell me: Which is the biggest of them all? Is it the gourd that can hold fourteen cartloads, or is it the gowda's daughter, who sent the gourd rushing to the sea by making water on it? Or is it the fish that gobbled up the gourd? Is it the sea crane that swallowed that fish that had gobbled up the gourd? Is the louse that devoured the sea crane bigger than all these, or is it the girl who tied the crane in the sari round her waist? Who is bigger? Is the washer man who bundled it all up and took it to the river the greatest of these?

ANSWER: It's quite possible that the gowda knew how to grow a gourd as big as that one. It's also possible that his daughter sent it rushing to the sea with the water she made. A fish could have eaten it, a crane could have eaten the fish, and certainly a fisherman could have caught the crane. But the old woman's daughter who had a louse that ate the crane that ate the fish that swallowed the gourd that had fourteen cartloads of men and things in it, that girl is the greatest. But what about the washer man who took her sari to the river with all these in it? That's nothing unusual. Washer men lug to the river bigger bundles of clothes than that.

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