





The Liar and the Robbers

This is an old story. In a village in the west of Nepal lived a young boy, a pathological liar, with his mother. Theirs had been a rich family but they were now paupers with only a huge house to live in, an old donkey, and no money to their names. But they had kept up the facade of prosperity and people imagined they had lots of wealth stashed away.

The village, in those days, was the special target of a gang of robbers who had made a nearby forest their lair. Every house had been targeted in turn and it looked like the robbers had kept the biggest house for the last, to ransack at leisure. It had been some time since the last raid and the young liar was sure that by nightfall, the thieves would attack his house. He was afraid that when they found nothing of value, they would torture him and his mother for a treasure which did not exist. He thought up a plan. He took the final few rupees he had and went to the village market. There he exchanged the notes for coins and came back home. That night, before he went to bed, he went to



the donkey shed and spread some coins in the donkey dung. He also pushed some coins up the donkey's rectum.

Sure enough, the robbers roused him from a deep slumber in the middle of the night. They had already searched the house from top to bottom and found nothing. The robbers were very angry and told the liar that if he did not tell them where all their wealth was stashed, their lives were forfeit. The boy told the robbers the truth, a rare occurrence for him: he and his mother had nothing except the crumbling house and an old donkey. The robbers, to have at least something to show for the night's labours, decided to take the donkey. At this, the liar cried, if anything, the robbers could take him and make him their slave but his old mother could not survive without the donkey. Now their interest was tickled: what was so special about a mangy old donkey that his mother could not live without it? They asked the boy to lead them to the animal. In the shed they lit a *tuki*, a lamp. The donkey seemed ordinary. The robbers asked the boy to tell them what was special about the animal and so with great reluctance, under threat of physical violence, he told the robbers that the donkey shat coins.



When they heard this, the robbers poked about in the dung and found some of the coins the boy had secreted. The robbers then asked the boy to prove to them that the donkey shat coins. He beat the animal and in fear, the animal dropped some dung. The droppings were flecked with coins of various denominations. The robbers had hit the jackpot. As they led the donkey away the liar set up yet another howl of protest which earned him a slap. The robbers told him that he should consider it a matter of great good fortune that his life was being spared. After all, they were leaving behind the dung that the donkey had already dropped. A crisis had been averted but the liar was sure that when the robbers found they had been duped, they would come for him. He set out to make preparations. That very night he went to the forest. The next morning the liar came back with two wolf cubs he had trapped. He gave one to his mother and told her to hide it somewhere. He then instructed her that if the robbers came, she should send them to him in the forest and then prepare some food.

The robbers came to the liar's house the next day and asked his mother about him. She said that he was in the

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forest. The robbers found him lazing under a tree and playing with the cub. The robbers were angry with the liar. Not only did the donkey not shit any more coins, when they had beaten it, it died. The liar began to weep. The donkey had supported his family now it was dead. The animal was old and the robbers should have only pretended to beat it; it took some time and familiarity with new owners for the donkey to give coins. When the robbers told the liar to shut up and threatened to kill him, he told them that nothing could come of his murder. If the robbers let him live, he would give them the coins that they had left behind for him and any and all food that was cooked in his house. He then turned to the cub and told the little creature to run home and tell the liar's mother to prepare a feast for the robbers. When the liar untied the cub, it promptly scampered off into the forest. The robbers were wonder-struck; first a donkey which shat coins and now this: a wolf cub that understood human speech. Curious, they followed the liar home.

They reached the liar's house to find a feast laid out for them in the courtyard. They wanted to know if it was indeed the cub which had brought the news home. The



liar told his mother to bring the cub around, explaining casually to the robbers that it had the unfortunate habit of interrupting their meals. The robbers had found something to show for their labours. But when they asked the liar, he told them that after they had mistreated and killed his donkey, he was loath to give them the cub; even on pain of death. He would much rather let it go free. But the robbers; instead of threatening someone who obviously knew magic, tried to bargain with him. They would let him keep the money the donkey had produced; they would also pay him more money. With much feigned reluctance, the liar agreed. After the deal was struck, they ate; the robbers paid the liar and walked away with the cub.

The robbers had run out of houses to rob so they decided to rob another village. Half the gang stayed behind. The other half took the cub along intending to send it back with a message if they wanted food ready on their return. They reached the outskirts of the village by dusk and waited. The whole village was singing *bhajans*, sitting under a pipal tree. There was no question of robbing any house. They decided to wait and carefully

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told the cub to go back to the hideout and tell the others to prepare food for them. The cub ran off into the undergrowth. The robbers at the hideout decided that the others would not need food so they ate and went to sleep.

Late at night, the robbers came back from an unsuccessful expedition; the singing didn't stop and they were feeling hungry. The hideout was dark and everyone was sleeping. They woke everyone up and demanded to know where the food was. Those staying behind said that the cub had never come home. And, they wanted to know why they were empty handed. Was it because they had hidden the loot elsewhere? A serious argument began to brew and was about to become a scuffle when one of the robbers pointed out that the wolf cub was nowhere to be seen. The discussion took on a new direction; perhaps they had been made fools of. Full of wrath brought on by interrupted sleep, hunger and a wasted day, they went to the liar's house.

When they knocked on the door, they found it unlocked. They went inside and saw the liar pacing furiously from room to room muttering, 'Now where did I keep that herb?' His mother was lying on a cot,



apparently dead. When he saw the robbers, he began to cry, 'I am an orphan. My mother is dead.' The robbers were caught off guard and said nothing. The boy continued to rummage through the house and soon came out of a room, triumphantly holding up some dried herbs. Without saying anything to the robbers he went to the kitchen and came out holding a glass of murky water. He wet the lips of his dead mother and opening her mouth, put a few drops of the water on her tongue. Miraculously, the old lady came to life. The robbers forgot all about the lost cub and asked the boy what he had given his mother. He told them that these were herbs which not only brought the dead back from life but also granted immortality. The robbers obviously wanted it. They threatened and bargained till the boy finally decided to give them some in return for money.

The robbers walked away, happy that they could now steal for all of eternity. They divided the herbs into equal parts, everyone took it and promptly fell dead; the herbs were poison. Rid of the thieves, the liar, his mother and the entire village lived happily till the end of their days.

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