

A Kohistani folktale, “The Button-Prince”

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Informant: Ropi Jan, age 52
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Note: As this text is very long, not all of it has been translated. A synopsis has been provided of the untranslated sections.

A poor man encounters a snake and gets a treasure

God so ordered that there was once a poor and lazy man, and his wife, just the two of them. All day long they used to sit and watch the water-mill turning and turning. People would come, grind their flour and take it away, otherwise the water-mill was unattended.

Now isn't there dust all around a water-mill, we call it 'flour-dust', right? Look: they're making a little whisk-broom from the grass which is spread on the floor of the mosque, and sweeping up the flour-dust. Sometimes they would get a small bread loaf out of it, sometimes a whole loaf. They would divide it between themselves and live like that. Every dawn they would come back to the mill and sit there. By the will of God they did this day in and day out.

One day the wife said, “Husband, this is no way to live. You're a man, after all, go up the mountain, bring down a bundle of wood and sell it, and buy flour with the proceeds. This flour-dust is killing us.”

He replied, “I'll bring wood, but what about the water-mill? If the wood doesn't bring in any flour, then what?”

“I'll go to the water-mill,” she said. “I'll keep on sweeping flour dust, and once you've brought flour a couple of times, maybe God will bring about a complete change.”

“Okay, I'll go,” he said, and go he did. “God willing, I'll go with the hatchet and some rope, and we'll have whatever subsistence God provides. And indeed he he went to the forest and cut wood. The very first day, although he'd never chopped any wood before, he did cut wood.

Now he's made a bundle, tied it up, hefted it on his back and he's starting back down, hatchet in hand, when a voice comes: “For God's sake, anyone who might be a Muslim, rescue me!” Sure enough, he heard a voice, but he kept on walking. He paid no attention, thinking, “who could there be way up here?”

Yes, he's still in the forest, struggling to get the bundle of wood on his back, when the voice came again: “For God's sake, if there is any of God's Muslims, or a human being, come and rescue me!”

This startled him. “What's all this hullabaloo?” he said, sat down in confusion, and looked around, but didn't see any other human being. Once again he hefted his load, struggling to get it up on his back, when once again the voice came: “For God's sake, anyone who might be a Muslim rescue me! In the name of God, rescue me as an act of charity!”

He looked all around, but there was nothing to be seen, and seeing nothing, he told himself, “Maybe there are just funny sounds up here.” But he was getting nervous as he once again hefted the load, and no sooner had he done it then the voice came a third time. Turning in the direction from which the voice had come, he said, “O God, it is as you willed, that is my fate, but this time please let me go!” And he slipped away to a place with more cover. But

just as he reached there, it called out even nearer at hand. Looking he saw two trees growing from a single trunk, and where they forked, there was caught a very thin, very smooth snake.

Now he's come closer, and as he approaches, she says "For God's sake, rescue me!" He's passing the tree, and as he turns his head to look, the snake is beseeching him in God's name. This was the time when everything used to speak. Trees used to speak. Stones and forests also spoke, everything had something to say.

"Snake, if I rescue you," said he, "you will make a morsel of me. You are my enemy. As for me, I can't kill *you*."

"For God's sake, rescue me!" she said. "If you rescue me, there is no question of killing you!"

"How should I rescue you?"

"I swear by God, I will come to your benefit," she said, "only save me from this place! My enemies approach from behind."

"Snake, how could I rescue you?" he asked. "What benefit will you bring me? You will make a bite of me. Promises mean nothing to you, you are a wild animal. Swear a solemn pledge to me."

She replied, "I will first swear to God, then to you. This time I will bring you no harm, I will bring you benefit. Save me, but save me like this: once you've rescued me, get away fast, don't hang around close to me, because I'm bound to get angry."

So he said the Kalima, rescued the snake from the fork in the tree and made a fast getaway. Even as he ran, she took off after him.

He took fright. "I knew it, she just got out of there so she could eat me!" With the poor man ahead and the snake behind, they plunged down the mountain at breakneck speed. As they descended, she called out, "You poor man, you wretch, no wonder you're unlucky! This is no way to save me! Spread out that chadar you have over your shoulder, step back, I'll coil up in the chadar. Then come and make a bundle of the chadar and carry it."

So he spread out the chadar, and stepped way back. "I can't believe I'm spreading this chadar. I'm crazy. If this thing gets within reach of me, it will have me for dinner ... but why not? I could make a bundle of it, carry it down to my wife, and throw it at her. It would eat my wife, and then I'd have the flour-dust loaves all to myself. Wood? Why should I walk around for wood? I could live by myself on flour-dust."

His mind made up, he has now spread out the chadar, and jumped way back. The snake coiled up inside the chadar and called out, "Come and take me away. Take me away, I am certainly not going to eat you."

He came, wrapped the chadar into a bundle, slung it over his back and went down the mountain. Down the mountain he went, and reaching his door, he said, "Are you satisfied now, wife?"

"Husband, have you brought flour?" she blurted out.

Yes," he said, "I've brought flour! Hurry up, I'm leaving, I have work somewhere else."

She blurted out, "Husband, wait, there's no pot!" She began to rummage frantically but found no pot, nothing at all.

"Can't she even find a pot?" Now he's thrown the chadar to the ground, closed the door, and stepped way back. He waited for a while, then lost patience. "Let me go see what's become of my wife." As he came back and opened the door, she said, "O forgotten by God, what are all these rocks and pieces and wood and potsherds you've brought? Take all these potsherds and throw them away! Is this any way to do things? There's neither any flour, nor more than the little bit of flour dust I wore myself out to fetch. But we'll manage today. You good-for-nothing!" And she gave him a good scolding.

Then he came out and threw away the potsherds. As he threw them away, he found there

a button of the type used to fasten shirts at the neck. She picked out the button, saying, “Wow, husband, this is gorgeous! Look how it shines and lights up the house! Don’t throw this away.” He took the button she had picked up and threw the rest away. Indeed the button shone like daylight at night.

“Take this,” she said, “and barter it with someone for some flour, so that we can live – so that you can live! What’s the use of just one button anyway?”

“All *right*,” he said, “I’ll take it.

“Take it and sell it,” the wife told her husband. “Show it to the travelling merchant, he might give you some flour, oh yes, he’ll give you some flour. What will I do with one button anyway, one needs two to fasten a shirt, and here we are eating flour-dust!”

So he took it to a shop. They asked him, “What are you doing?” (This was a time of truthful people.) They said, “Poor man, what are you up to? If you barter this with us, we’ll give you enough flour to live on for a few days. Take it to a certain travelling merchant.”

So he took it to the travelling merchant. “Here, take this and give me some provisions,” he said.

The merchant replied, “Are you crazy? I’ll barter this for provisions for a month, even for a year, but why should I trick you? Take it back, it’s unique, matchless. Take it and give it to the king over yonder. He has a daughter, he’ll give it to his daughter. What treasures he’ll give you! This is nothing ordinary, take it.”

“Excuse me?” said the poor man.

“Take this to the king, over yonder,” replied the merchant.

He set off in a hurry to the king, over yonder to the king he hastened. The king is over there in his court. The poor man made his *salaam*.

The king greeted him in return. “What is the matter, O poor man?”

“Your highness, I have brought you something unique,” he said.

“What unique thing? Show it to me.”

He showed it to him: a button to beat all buttons, a special button used to fasten coats, the largest and showiest of buttons. The king reached out and took it. “Wow! O man, this is ...” He proclaimed, “This is a magnificent thing which he has brought. Give him seven camel-loads of treasures. Take these treasures to his home.”

The poor man’s eyes bugged out in astonishment. Now imagine how much treasure seven camel-loads is, filling the the bags with gold powder and golden ashrafi coins, the king’s men took them jingling all the way to the poor man’s door, dumped them there and so came back.

A princess receives a button and gets a son

That king, they say, lived luxuriously. Once a year he used to go and visit his daughter, who lived with her women friends in her own bungalow, of course, in another kingdom. She was betrothed to a prince, and had reached full adulthood. He went, although he had returned from a visit to her only two months ago.

“I really should go next year,” he said with button in hand, “but let me go to my daughter now taking this button and present it to her, and tell her to fasten it on the neck of her shirt. So he set out to her fort, to his daughter’s fort. She’s living inside with her friends. He went and met her.

His daughter greeted him. “Yes father, what’s the reason you came so soon, way ahead of schedule? You just went back a little while ago.”

He replied, “Daughter, I’ve brought you a gift, I came to bring it to you.”

“What gift have you brought, father? Oh give it to me, for God’s sake!”

“Here, take it, I’ve brought you a button, a magnificent button.”

She grabbed it impatiently. “But father, you’ve only brought the one button. Bring the

other one too, please!”

“I’ll ask the poor man about the other one later,” he said. “Wherever he got the first one, he’ll also bring the second one to you, my daughter. And now I’m leaving, you fasten it at your neck.”

She fastened at the neck of her shirt.

“Daughter, it looks very nice,” he said. “But I’ll bring the other one too.” He came out and left.

They say she danced in circles for joy. In the evening she went to sleep. Then they say that much time passed. While she was lost in sleep, most of the night passed. As dawn approached it seemed that hands and feet were jerking this way and that in front of her face. It got lighter, and in full daylight she saw a child in the house, right in front of her.

A one-year old child!

“O God, I have drowned!” Automatically she grabbed the neck of her shirt, but the button was nowhere to be found. Stunned, the princess was overwhelmed with worry. Her eyes widened in astonishment. “O God, what’s happened?,” she said horrified. “That gift has done this to me! Now what will I do?”

Her girlfriends got up. One got up, looked and said, “O princess, your highness has a one year-old child over there.”

“O sisters, what are you saying? Look here, where is the button?” Another got up, then another, then the others, making a commotion.

“May God make you flourish,” said the princess. “There’s a one year-old or two year-old child over there. He’s gotten up and he’s walking. What a big child he is! In the evening father brought the button and I fastened it at my neck. In the morning when I woke up this child was right in front of me and there was no trace of the button.”

Sure enough there’s a one year-old child who can walk, big enough to hold on to a finger and walk, but there’s no more difference between him and the princess than between two halves of a walnut. By the power of God, he looks just like her.

Her friends said, “O princess, you’re not at fault. We’ll all look after him together. For God’s sake, he does have to be fed, what else?”

“He’s motherless,” she said. “Both you and I will take care of him. I’m not the only one who has to look after him, we must all look after him.”

“Agreed,” said her hundred friends – all one hundred of them. They say that she was the most beautiful of one hundred.

So that’s how it was for a whole year, during which her father did not come. The year drew to a close, when yonder the child turned two, her father came. Her father thought, “Let me go and see how things are with my daughter. As for the other button, neither did I find it, nor did the poor man come back after taking away the treasure. So let me go to visit my daughter, go to the court, to the bungalow.”

By God’s power, he arrived, and just as he opened the door and came in, his daughter chanced to come out of her living room with the child holding on to her finger. She hasn’t seen him!

“She’s drowned me!” He jumped back out.

Now his daughter saw him. “Wait a minute, father, where are you going?”

“Daughter, you’ve pushed me beyond the limits of waiting a minute! You’ve *drowned* me!”

“Father, stop, how have I drowned you, stop and listen for a few minutes!”

He turned his back to her and said, “Say what you have to. I’m not setting eyes on you, but I’m listening.”

“O father, this child is no problem for you. He hasn’t been born from my body, father.

That button that you brought, the child was born from that button. Until I lay down at night, it was a button. During the night it turned into a one year-old child. By the time you came he turned two, now he talks to me and eats by himself. Before I was feeding him. We were all feeding him.”

“Daughter, whatever you have done, enough said. You are no longer to be kept.”

“Very well, father,” she said. “I am not to be kept. Why don’t you marry me off and send me away? Send the message to the king – but also tell him to have the palanquin made big. Say your daughter’s body is very strong.”

“All right,” he said, and left. In his wrath, he straightaway sent a messenger yonder to that king to come and collect the princess himself: “I am alone, so he may collect his person himself, but the palanquin should be made large because my daughter’s body is very strong.”

To make a long story short, they came rejoicing, with drum and flute and took away that girl. She put the child in the palanquin, and took him along when she went. There, they used to give separate bungalows to their sons, and they took her to a bungalow.

It is said that the wedding party dispersed at night, and then the prince came, came to the door, and unfortunately the child got to the door ahead of the princess.

The prince jumped back, and as he jumped, she said, “Don’t jump back, turn around!”

“Princess, I’m finished with you. Why has your father given you to me like this? What was I supposed to do?”

“O prince, turn around, I’ll tell you the story.”

“Now and in the hereafter, you will be my sister,” he said. “I release you.”

“No, no!” she protested, but the words were already out of his mouth. “You are my sister in the faith and in the world. Go ahead and tell me the story.”

She told him the story from beginning to end. He replied, “No matter what you say, I have made you my sister.”

“Then you have made me a promise, you have made me your sister, and that is what I am, and you may not refuse what I am about to ask.”

“I will not, ask it.”

“First, you will not tell others that you have made me your sister. Second, way over there, there at the edge of the village on level ground, in a deserted place you will build strong fortress walls, enclosing as much room as a polo pony needs to make a complete circuit of a polo field after a polo stick is swung. You will give me such a spacious fort,” she said. “In the center, you will give me a bungalow to live in, surrounded on all sides by the fort walls. You will do this for me, and you will give me a horse, sword, shield and polo equipment. Yes, you will give me these things too.”

“I will give them,” he said, “I’ll give them to you now.”

“Agreed,” she said. “Now I am in God’s protection, and then in your protection. Go, and tell people that your wife is inside this house. In fact, I am your sister, so go.”

In the morning he got up and transported load after load of stone, gravel and cement, and started construction on the fort.

His father the king is happy, they say, he is delighted: “Now my son is building his own home!” Such a big fort he made, fortress walls on all four sides, so huge that a horse has to cover a lot of ground before it comes back to the same place. The construction went on for quite a while, then he finished it, finished all of it, and then the little family moved to the fort under the cover of darkness. There the princess and the Button Prince disappeared from sight. The little prince did nothing but play, but from then on the princess restricted him to playing inside the fort, and did not let anyone outside see the prince. She did not show him to anyone outside. He plays inside, and that’s that.

First, she taught the prince to play polo. From there she went on to teach him wrestling,

how to ride a horse, mount it and dismount it. Moreover, she taught him every royal art and taught him every royal skill, but inside the fort, always inside. By God's power, he became a teenager and started to keep the fast.

When he was grown to adulthood, she said, "O prince, what will you do now? You cannot remain confined inside forever. And now you are a young man and I will not restrict you any more. Tomorrow I will make a feast, and you will invite the king, the minister, the judge and the maulvi. You will also invite the crown prince. You may tell them that tomorrow I am inviting them, their meal is at our house.

The Button Prince said, "What do I know of the king, the maulvi, the judge, yes, the minister, not to mention the crown prince? Where are they? I have no idea."

"You go straight," she said. "Keep going, and when you reach their fort way over there, you will step into that king's court."

"Agreed," he said. In the morning she got up and got busy cooking food. She ordered laborers to spread out cotton wool and silk inside the entire fort. "From over there where they enter – the king, the minister, the judge, the maulvi and the crown prince – right up to here, their feet should not touch the earth," she said. "Spread out silk everywhere."

By God, that they did, and the Button Prince set out. Walking and walking, he arrived. It happened that the king was gazing at his son's fort, lamenting as usual that his son had no issue. "By God, what's going on?" As he watched, a prince, a fine-looking lad, came out of the fort.

He was astonished. "O God," he said, "how did this boy come out of my son's home?"

The crown prince is sitting with the king. "How did he come out of the fort," thought the king, who is he?"

This was a time of restraint and modesty. The king just goes on watching.

The Button Prince came straight as an arrow to the king's court, stepped in and greeted him. "And peace upon you," they replied. He sat down, and prepared a waterpipe and tobacco for them, then served it to them. Calmly serving them, he said, "Long live your highness! Should my head remain safe, I might say a word."

"Say it, child, say whatever you have in mind. You have come here to say something," he said, with a sidewise glance at his son.

"Your highness, you, the minister, the crown prince and the maulvi are invited to a meal at our house."

Surprised, he agreed. When he asked when it was to take place, the Button Prince told him that they should accompany him there and then. Now the crown prince was wondering why a maulvi had been invited, as he had no good opinion of the princess, but he sent a messenger to get the maulvi.

The minister and the judge are here too, they say. The five of them are following the Button Prince, walking, walking, until they come to a point where the king finds his feet falling on silk, so that they do not touch the ground. When he opened the door of the fort, the king found silk spread everywhere. Yonder a place had been made for serving food. Amazed, the king could hardly believe all the food she had made, and as if that wasn't enough, the princess kept making new dishes and sending them all the time.

She had told the Button Prince to remain standing and wait on them. "Do not on any account let them lack for anything! But when they're completely finished eating, you will tell the king: 'Please wait. I will come back after taking away the pots. Please wait while I take away the pots. Come and tell me, then let me say a few words to the king.'"

"All right," he said, and started waiting on them.

The king couldn't figure out what was going on. Here was the crown prince sitting eating

right along with them, while some strange child served them!¹ “Who is this child?” He was seething with anger at his son, but decided to wait until everyone had left and ask his son about it.

They ate and ate, while the Button Prince never sat down, serving more food to this one, water to that one. When they finally finished eating, he said, “Your highness,” – and picking up the pots – “Would you please wait a little bit, while I take away these pots and come back?” Then he came with the pots to the princess and said, “Princess, they have finished eating.”

“Did you tell them to wait?”

“Yes, I did.”

She covered her face and put on a veil, went and touched the king’s feet. She touched his feet as though he were her father, and sat down. “Your highness, I will now disclose my story. Until now, it has been my duty to keep it secret, now I bring this story to an open field.”

“What story? Tell it,” he said.

“This is the story. Because of this child, I left my father’s house. Because of this child, I broke my engagement with this your son.”

At that, the king’s eyes grew wide in amazement. “Is that true, son?”

“Yes,” said the crown prince.

She went on, “Maulvi sahib, please answer this question. My father brought me a button. I fastened that button at my neck, and slept with it fastened at my neck. In the morning when I woke this child was right in front of me, maulvi sahib, this same lad. Since then I have been together with this child. I have licked my fingers after feeding him and eaten his leftovers. The water which I fed him, I also drank myself, but I brought up this child. I became the means for God to bring him up. Until today, I have not let this child out of the fort. Today his highness has seen him, you have all seen him. But your highness, he has not been born from my womb. There should be a ruling of Islamic law about this boy. If I may be married to him, then do the wedding ceremony. I will neither give him to another, nor will I take another myself. If marriage is not legal, then I am helpless, and he will remain with me as he is now.

The maulvi said, “No one else could be a legal partner for him to the extent that you are. That’s that, I will do the wedding ceremony. Marriage can not be excluded on the basis of eating someone’s leftovers.” And right away they did the wedding ceremony. The king arranged a wedding with drum and flute, and the whole story came out. He arranged the wedding, and told the princess, “From now on, daughter, you will live under my protection right here in this fort. The [Button] Prince will come to me, he is my second son, he is a prince. Now I have two sons. Now you may stay, you are still my daughter-in-law. Continue to live as you are.”

“Your highness,” she said, “I will also stay, I am a miserable exile, I have left my parents and am homeless. Nor does he have any idea where his parents are – nobody knows. But Lord God made me a means for him, and now God has also made me legal for him. Now we live in God’s protection, then in your protection.

And they lived like that for a long time. God knows that they abridge stories.

Synopsis, parts 3-4

The prince is bewitched, and turned into a ram

The princess tells her husband that it is a disgrace that he does not have a fort, court or kingdom of his own, but live as dependents of the king. Everybody knows that she has taken

¹As the king’s junior, the crown prince was supposed to serve the king.

as husband a child she has brought up herself. She suggests that they go to some other kingdom. The Button Prince agrees. She puts a gemstone in her pocket, and they leave on horseback under cover of night, with the princess disguised as a man. They travel a long way through forests, and at dawn approach a town.

The princess is very hungry. She gives her husband the gemstone and asks him to bring food from the town.

In the town, the Button Prince is bewitched by an old woman, turned into a ram and tied up. When he fails to return, the princess goes to the town, finds the old woman and realizes that her husband has become the victim of foul play. Disguised, she stays in a carvanserai in the town, working for a maize-roaster to earn her keep.

The minister in that kingdom figures out from the stranger's way of walking that she is a woman, and tells the king. The king has no son, and the minister proposes to marry the woman to the king so that he may get a son. The king is quite unconvinced that she is a woman, but tells the minister to bring the person by hook or crook, offering him employment in the court.

The princess turns down the offer of employment in the court, but finally the minister brings her there. The king asks her to stay in the court like his own son. The princess says that she is an exile, and does not stay long in any one place. The king insists, so the princess agrees on condition that on a day of her choosing, the king will turn over the throne to her and allow her to run the kingdom for a day. The king agrees, and the princess promises to stay. Every day she comes to the court.

The minister and the king still cannot make out whether this is a man or a woman. The minister, still sure that the stranger is a woman, suggests that the king marries his daughter to her, and in this way the truth will come out. The princess protests that she is a traveller and no suitable bridegroom for a princess, but to no avail.

The king's daughter soon gets fed up when her new husband sneaks out all the time and never comes home until the wee hours. Finally she confronts him, there is a showdown and she gets the truth out of him: her "husband" is a princess, whose real husband has been bewitched by an old woman. The princess promises that if she manages to get him back in his true form, the king's daughter is welcome to marry him too. Meanwhile she asks her not to reveal the real state of affairs, or she will be finished and no one will rescue her bewitched husband. With these arguments she gets the king's daughter on her side.

The king is despondent when he not only fails to get the truth out of his daughter, but his daughter is now lost to him. The minister continues to insist that the mysterious stranger is a woman, and to pacify the king, he offers to marry his own daughter to her, for his daughter is well-behaved and does not hide anything from her father.

The princess objects: "Enough is enough," but the marriage takes place. The princess tells her first "wife" that now it's her job to get the minister's daughter on side. In the end, the minister fails to get the truth out of his own daughter either.

The minister continues to insist that the stranger is a woman, and that she has somehow persuaded both daughters to support her charade. The king comes to the conclusion that the mysterious stranger has fooled them all, and they have lost their daughters. After long thought, the minister suggests a way to find out the truth: a wrestling match will be held among twelve princes, wearing only shorts. Since only men can wrestle, if the mysterious stranger is a woman, she will be found out. The king is delighted, but threatens that if the stranger turns out to be a prince, the minister will pay with his life.

When the king announces the wrestling match, the princess tells him it is time to keep his promise. Without a second thought, the king turns over his throne to the princess, who proclaims that today all the rams present in the town will be collected and made to fight with

their horns. The wrestling match will be held tomorrow.

So all the rams are collected, but when the princess looks closely she does not find the old woman's ram. The king's men are sent to bring it, but she refuses and makes excuses. Then the princess orders the king's men to bring the old woman and her ram along by order of the king, and she and her ram are dragged to the wrestling field, where the bewitched Button Prince makes short work of all the other rams. He takes a quick look at the princess and makes "deep red eyes", at which point the princess calls a halt to the ram fight.

The princess praises the old woman for bringing up such a fine ram, and invites her and the ram home to dinner. The king asks where she is going – has she had enough of running the kingdom? The princess says she has done what she needed to, and takes the recalcitrant old woman and the ram home.

At home they make food, and the princess applies gum to the seat of a wooden stool. Tears are streaming from the ram's eyes, while the old woman tries to reestablish her authority over it. When the old woman tries to get up, she finds herself stuck to the chair. The princess makes a joke of it, insisting that they will both stay the night. Finally the princess asks the old woman to make the ram a prince. "How have you made my prince a ram?" The old woman denies everything. The princess threatens to tear the old woman to pieces. Upon the old woman's continued objections, she reveals herself as a princess. The old woman blows on the ram and it becomes a prince again.

The prince grabs the old woman, kills her and tears her to bits, and buries her there, inside the house. The princess then insists that he eat something, as tomorrow he will have to wrestle with princes.

The prince is sent in the princess' own uniform to the court. When he throws aside his clothing and enters the wrestling field in shorts, the king tells the wazir: "Actually he was a man. Screw your mother, is that a woman?" The minister is stunned. "I have drowned! What has happened? My vision has never let me down! I've never said the wrong thing!"

The prince is wreaking mayhem on the other princes, until the king calls off the fight. The prince goes home, and the king gathers wood to burn the minister and his wife. The wazir sends a message to his daughter: "Daughter, come here! Today is our last day." His daughter goes, and the wazir tells him how she and the king's daughter have been married to the "prince" in the firm belief that the "prince" was a disguised woman, and now the truth has come out.

The wazir's daughter rushes to the princess to ask for help. The Button Prince tells the princess to go to the court, but wearing a veil and covering her face, not disguised as she used to go. "Now you are my wife ... you will show your face only to the king." She goes to the king, tells him the whole story, and tells him that the wazir has been right all along, therefore her marriages to his daughter and to the wazir's daughter are null and void, since a woman can not be married to a woman. They should take back their daughters, and she will stay with her husband. If the king does not wish to keep them at the court, they will leave.

The king tells her they may stay, and decides to marry the two daughters to the Button Prince. He refuses to take his daughter back.

The prince turns into a snake and how the princess gets him back

The four of them live happily for a while. The minister's daughter, being the youngest, does the housework. It happens that the prince comes in from outside, and she somehow says something that annoys him. As soon as she says it, he turns into a snake and disappears into the wall. Alerted by the cries of the minister's daughter, the princess comes. "You've drowned me, I only just got him back, now look what you've done." She tells her co-wives to return to their fathers, but they insist on staying until they find out how it turns out.

The princess settles down at the octroi post at the junction of three roads and begins to give alms. She makes each traveller tell his story, and gives a hundred ashrafis to each. Somewhere, a poor and lazy man hears about it, and decides to go there in the morning.

When he gets ready to leave, his son insists on coming along. Finally his father agrees. They walk all day and decide to spend the night on the edge of a grassy plain under a boulder.

Translation continues

What time is it? Is it midnight, or early night? There's a full moon, and light all around. He looked, and saw a flock of snakes appearing. Both the father and the son are awake. In the forefront there is a snake, a big snake, and on the back of that snake, a soft, delicate snake, long and thin, is coming zigzag zigzag. Behind them are coming the rest of the snakes. The father automatically covered the boy's face – Did you listen? – lest the boy become afraid, he covered his face.

On came the snakes, giving him a fright – will they bite? On they came, into the plain, but they didn't move towards him, they just came out on the plain and the big snake put down the small snake and they played with it, all of them. The poor man stared at them and his son stared too, between his father's fingers, which his father doesn't know. He thinks he's got the boy's face covered.

And so it went until daybreak, when the little snake jumped on the back of the big one, who led the flock away. So they ate some of the bread they had tied up in a cloth, and continued their journey to the princess.

There they are, they've arrived. The princess was delighted: "Today someone has come from a great distance, he'll tell a very good story. God will bring out some clue or another."

She gave them food, they say, fine food, and when that was done she sat down and said, "O brother, what do you do? You are a traveller, you will suddenly get up and leave, won't you. So tell at least one story to your sister. I'm very lonely, sitting here at this three-road junction."

"O sister, what story should I tell you?"

"Just tell a story. Tell something you've seen with your own eyes, something that happened to you, these two stories. Don't tell hearsay – that is false."

"By God, O princess," he said, "what I've seen ... wait ... let me see ..."

His son interrupted, "O father, tell the story of the snakes! What a fine story that is."

"Go away," he replied, "That's no story, that's just two words. If a person tells a story he should tell it properly."

"Tell me exactly that story of the snakes," said the princess. Don't tell me any other story."

He tried his utmost. "God is one, O brother," she said. "Even if it is only one word long, tell me that story of the snakes."

He began. "Well, it was like this. We came to such and such a place and spent the night. There was a big boulder. We stayed at the base of that boulder. And the snakes came like this. A flock of snakes came. There was a moon, it was night," he said. Now what time was it? Midnight, or a little later. A flock of snakes came. At its head was a snake – a big one. I suppose it was old. On top of it was a soft, slippery snake – on its back. I had covered the boy's face. How did he see it? I thought he would be afraid, and I was afraid myself, I thought they would bite. But they came into that plain and the little snake got down from the big snake's back. It was night, princess. I was surprised. I'd never seen anything like it, and I'd never heard of any such thing either. I saw it with my own eyes. They all played with that snake. One of them would throw it to another, then he'd throw it to another, and another. The

night passed, and at last the little snake climbed on the back of the big snake again. It led the way and the others formed a line behind him.”

“That’s it,” she said, “For God’s sake, take me to that place and leave me there.”

“O princess, for God’s sake, it’s a wilderness there. There’s no way I can stay with you there.”

“Just leave me there and go away,” she said. “There’s no need for you to stay.” And right away she gave him a hundred ashrafis before he could get away, and gave his son a hundred ashrafis as well. She also gave each of them a suit of clothes and got proper meals packed for the journey, for them as well as for herself.

So they set off. They say that he took her there in the evening. They reached there the same day and he showed her the boulder. “This is the boulder I sat under. The snakes come into the plain this way. Whether they come today or not depends on your fate. But since they came yesterday, if they don’t come today they will come tomorrow, and if they don’t come tomorrow they will come the day after tomorrow. They definitely come to this place. It’s their playground, look at all the dust from their last visit.”

“Yes, you have leave to go, brother,” she said. “You have leave to go, but as for me, I’m staying here. Now please leave.” And he got up and left, they say.

And after he left she sat down at the base of the rock. And by the power of God, because God so ordered, the snakes came at exactly the same time and in the same way.

She suspected that the snake was her husband, but she sat there silently, and sat, and sat.

After he’d been playing for a while, the prince noticed that a woman was sitting under the rock, and thought, “Now she knows. My wife is looking for me.” Straightaway the prince jumped on his mother’s back. O God, somehow or another, by blowing on her, he turned the princess into a needle and took her along. Somehow or another he took the princess to Snake Town. The snakes dispersed. Then the snake mother immediately changed her form and came to her full beauty, for she is a fairy, in fact all of them are fairy-born.

“Human-smell, human smell!” she said straightaway. “Fairy-son, you have done something you shouldn’t have!”

“Mother, may my head be safe,” he said, “I have something to tell you.”

“What?”

“This is my wife.”

“Immediately the princess joined her hands and fell at her mother-in-law’s feet, and said, “Mother, it’s a long story. I have borne great hardships with this your son. For his sake I’ve made my life dust, and afterwards, this misfortune happened, and that hardship occurred. I had barely gotten him, when I lost him again, and since then I’ve been searching for him. Now, mother, what you do to me is between you and your God. Whatever you decide for me, do it. Please either send him with me, or kill me, if my death will please you, you fairies please join together and kill me. Otherwise, since your son left you at a tender age, give him leave to go with me.”

She said, “O princess! I have been patient on account of my son. Thankfully things have turned out as they did. With you by his side as his wife, I have nothing to worry about. Before, I was worried. I thought that my enemies had taken him somewhere and killed him. My enemies, my cousins,² took him away from me as soon as he was born, to where, I hadn’t a clue. Only few days ago, my son turned up after having been lost to me. But stay and wait now, and somehow or the other I will send him with you.”

They say she stayed. How long did she stay (I don’t know)? When she accepted the condition of staying and waiting, the fairy told the princess what to do.

²*pechaá*, a male cousin in the paternal descent line, with whom one is likely to have disputes over land.

Now whenever anyone came around saying “human-smell, human-smell,” she would reply, “What human smell? My son has come to me, what other human smell could there be?”

They say that when the snakes take him for a walk, the fairy blows on the princess and turns her into a button-needle,³ and after they leave, she turns her back into a princess right away, and they sit down and have a nice chat. They take it easy all day, and in the evening, the fairy turns her into a button-needle again.

The snakes came back, they say, and a wind and rain storm broke. They came back and said “human-smell, human-smell.”

“What human smell are you talking about,” she said. “Your brother has stayed among humans. Of course he has a human smell on him. You belong to the race of jinns. Who else is with me? There is just me and my button-needle here, if you want to eat us, eat us. I have this button needle with me, and nothing else.”

When she told them this, they said, “Love to you and love to your button-needle, mother.” Then they stayed for a while, going out at night. In the morning they become a flock of snakes and the prince sits on her back as usual, while the princess is transformed to a needle. As usual, he rides on the snake mother’s back. They go to the plain, and play and play, play and play. As soon as dawn breaks, they come back, and after resting awhile, they turn their brother into a flower and take him out again. They take him to a lake to play.

In the meanwhile, how many days passed? When the snakes arrive, the fairy turns her daughter-in-law into a button-needle, and when they leave, she blows on her and turns her into a princess and has a good chat with her. When again the wind and rain storm breaks in the evening she blows on her and turns her into a button-needle. Then the snakes again say “human-smell, human-smell,” and she responds as before, “There is just me and my button-needle here,” and they reply, “Love to you and love to your button-needle.”

So a day passed, two days passed, three days passed. The princess happened to say, “Mother, what’s the story? Don’t delay me. You may ask me to stay as long as you want. You are the mother, you can’t let us leave so quickly. But for me, back there I face a necessity. One is the minister’s daughter, and another is the king’s daughter, both of whom I left when I came. If the king came to know, and the minister came to know, word would get around in my absence. It would be better if you let us go.”

So she said, “Stay now, so that somehow or another, by degrees, I bring them around this evening. Then in the morning I will arrange for you to leave if possible.”

“All right.”

They say that in the evening again a wind and rain storm broke. When it did, the fairy again made her a button-needle by blowing on her.

The snakes arrived, and on arrival, said, “Human-smell, human-smell.” In reply, she said, “There is just me and my button-needle here. “What human smell, human-smell are you talking about? Every day you talk about human-smell. Is there anything with me? Go ahead and take a good look and see if there is anything inside.”

“Love to you and love to your button-needle.”

Some time passed. How much time passed? Now the time came for them to leave. “Let’s go,” the snakes said.

In reply, she said, “Let’s not go today, let’s stay home today. We’ll have a chat today. Let’s just stay home tonight. You have him to yourself all day by turning him into a flower, and come back in the evening. You stay here only a short while, restoring him to his beauty,

³Women in Kohistan usually keep a threaded needle in their hat or shirt to repair their clothing in case it is torn by thorns, so that they may preserve their modesty. A ‘button-needle’ is a small needle used to sew on buttons.

his original form, then you blow on him and it's off to play again. I've never had a one on one conversation with my son. So please stay today. You can go and take a nap while we chat, or you can stay if you want.

They say they stayed. They hung around and hung around. How much time passed before they went off and took a nap.

"They really hung around quite a while," she said.

"Now what will we do?" said the princess.

"In the morning I will make an arrangement for you," replied the fairy. And so at bedtime, she told the snakes, "Here's what we'll do. Today we aren't going anywhere. And tomorrow when you go out you'll leave the prince with me. He's my son, you won't take him along tomorrow."

"What are you doing?" said the snakes. "We've stayed back here long enough, what's all this about stopping him tomorrow as well? We're spending our life with you anyway, what difference does a few hours make? We're taking him. We can't go without him."

"No, by God, tomorrow you will not take him. Tomorrow you will leave him with me. It's breaking my heart, sitting here alone all day. I hardly ever get to see him."

"We'll talk about it later," they said.

"Then please go to sleep," she replied.

So it went until dawn broke. When dawn broke they came and ate and drank and so on. When they got up to leave, she said, "You will not take the boy along, you'll leave him with me."

"We'll leave the boy with you. But if anything untoward happens, if anything goes amiss, then don't count on your life, mother. Remember that he has someplace to go to if he runs away. If anything happens to him, by God, we will tear you to bits. We only just found our brother."

"Nothing is going to happen to him," she said.

Then they went, leaving that prince (are you listening?). The moment they disappeared, she blew on the needle and turned it into the princess.

"Get away!" But first she gave her these things: soaps, combs, needles, ashes, beads and bread. She gave her all these things, and showed her how to use them.

"First of all you will throw a comb," she said. "As soon as they come they will shout a war cry. But stick to the middle path! Throw the comb, and when thrown, it will become a forest. When it becomes a forest they will come biting, bringing down and felling, biting, bringing down and felling. By the time they catch up, you will cover a good distance. When they make a war cry, you straightaway throw the needles. When thrown, they will become berry-trees. The thorns will catch them, and they'll go along getting their clothes torn to pieces and pulling themselves free. By the time they catch up and make a war cry, throw the soap. That's the way, that's the way you'll stay ahead of them. But if they cry out, 'Just get our brother to take a look at us,' don't by any means let him look at them. Watch out! He'll say, 'Let me take a look.' The soap will be turned into a precipice, a sheer precipice, and you'll throw the ashes. The wind will blow it into their eyes, and they'll be rubbing, rubbing, rubbing their eyes while you get way ahead of them. Afterwards throw the dung-cakes. When thrown, they'll turn into piles of dung. There will be dung everywhere. They run far away from these piles of manure, and while they're running, running, running, there will be plenty of time before they come out on your trail. Finally, throw the beads. They're tiny. The snakes will feel so bad they'll stop and pick them up. 'Oh, too bad! Look, people are throwing away perfectly good beads, let's pick them up and make a necklace,' and each and everyone will fall over each other picking up the beads. It will collect quite a crowd, and they will all come after you, but by the time they catch up you'll have covered a good distance. When they

make a war cry, start crumbling the bread, breaking off bits as you go. When they reach the bread, they'll make a war cry, but when they look, they'll see bread. 'Too bad, too bad! They have drowned us from vanity!'⁴ They can't help but pick up that bread with their nails, going along and picking up, going along and picking up. While they are picking it up you leap inside and slam the door. You'll be beyond their reach.⁵ And then you go somewhere else, Don't stay in that city, all right?

"Good," she said.

"May God bring you safely home. Now go." They got up and took leave, and she made food for the journey. After making everything she gave them leave to go.

"Be sure to stay on the middle path," she said. "Avoid the path at the top, avoid the lower path. Take the middle path." And so they left.

The snakes came home ahead of time! They arrived way ahead of schedule, came early. When they arrived they called their mother. "Human-smell, whose human-smell is it? Mother, what have you done? Go and get the prince."

"O sons, come inside and take a rest. A person is supposed to take a rest before asking someone questions. The minute you reach the door, you shout at me! You're pressurizing me. Come inside.

"We'll come inside only when you show us where our brother is. Where the hell is our brother?"

"You're crazy. He's probably gone to the radish garden. He felt like taking a walk to the gardens. Go over yonder, he must be in that garden. I suppose he's sleeping under a tree somewhere, or is somewhere around the garden. He's not familiar with those gardens, most likely he's lost track of himself looking at them. He's probably out for a walk."

They turned around and rushed out. (In the stories, one brother is saying, 'Mother has sent him away, he's not here any more.) In the garden, they looked all over, pointing here and there. Nothing to be found.

They came back, and said, "Out with it, mother, or we'll tear you to shreds, to bits. Show us where you have sent our brother. Something fishy has happened, you've sent our brother away. You've been going on about your button-needle, and where is it now? Show it to us. I bet there aren't any needles for any buttons here now!"

"O son, I haven't sent him anywhere. He might be in that garden. Where could he have gone? He's around somewhere."

"No," they insisted. They pressurized her, until she said, "Take the path along the top. If he's gone anywhere, that's where he's gone."

Puffing and panting, they took the path along the top, puffing and panting, going and going, on and on, they took the path at the top. Went, went, as far as they could go, they found not a damned trace of him, nothing. They turned back, and returning, yelled at their mother. They came to her door and demanded to know what she had done. "Which path did you send him by?"

"Why, son, wasn't he there?"

When they replied, "No," she told them, take the lower path."

Going and going, puffing and panting, they rushed along the lower path as far as they could go. God knows how much distance they covered. Found nothing, not even a trace, turned around and came back.

"Out with it, mother, "Which path did you send him by?"

Whereupon she said, "If I tell the truth, I sent them by the middle path. That's it. Go as you wish. I know my death has arrived. You will kill me. You will not let me go. I sent my

⁴A taboo: one who finds bread on the floor must avoid stepping on it, out of respect for bread.

⁵The snakes are actually fairies, and fairies cannot go into human houses.

son and my daughter-in-law by the middle path. Go. God will do as he wills.

They immediately killed their mother. "God has done it? No mother, you have done this to us. We had barely gotten our brother back." Killing her, by God, away they went.

Synopsis of conclusion

There is a thrilling chase, in which events transpire as predicted by the fairy mother. When the princess and the Button-prince reach home just ahead of the fairies and bar the door, they find the daughters of the king and the minister waiting for them. They have a consultation, and the Button-prince divorces them and sends them home. "It's not going to work out with the four of us."

Then the princess disguises herself again and they once again set out, wife and husband.