

## Vikram and Betaal

*(Based on Indian folktale)*

I had been sitting atop the oldest banyan tree in the remotest corner of the graveyard for 300 years. I used to watch that wicked yogi hide his loot under the tree. I knew he was up to no good. He had an evil plan. He wanted to usurp the kingdom from Vikramaditya, our most benevolent king. To do that he had to sacrifice me first. But how was he going to get me?

The cunning yogi used his guile to convince Vikram himself, to bring me to him. He told him he needed to perform some form of exorcism on me, to free the kingdom of any future problems. He forced Vikram to a vow of silence; he was not to reveal his plan to me. For the benefit of his subjects, the king was willing to do anything.

The yogi was evil, but I was clever. I happily jumped onto Vikram's shoulder when he came for me. I told him that I would relate a story to him every day and ask him a question at the end of it. If he had been attentive, he would know the right answer. But if he did not answer correctly, I would smash his head into a million pieces. If he did answer correctly, I would fly back to the top of a tree and he would have to come and get me. I wanted to prolong the journey as much as possible.

The king with an ancient man on his shoulder, walking through the forest must have been a sight to behold! Passersby would fold their hands and bow their heads out of respect for their king. Through the stories, our companionship blossomed. Vikram would listen carefully and give his answer to my question. No sooner did he do that, than I would be gone to my treetop perch. He'd have to hunt me out, climb up and get me. Again and again!

By the time we reached my 25th story I had come to the conclusion that Vikram was indeed a good and wise king. I could trust him. So I divulged the yogi's evil plan to him. Vikram was shocked and could not believe that he had not seen through the yogi's evil intent. He decided to play along, but now he and I were a team!

We reached the yogi's abode late one evening. All preparations had been set up for the exorcism. Vikram was greeted effusively and given a seat of honour. Fruit and saffron milk were served. I perched myself beside Vikram and watched nonchalantly. The yogi could not hide his delight at how well his plan was working out. But just as the rituals and chanting started and the yogi sat in a trance with his eyes closed, Vikram pulled out his sword and very swiftly killed him.

Since then, on my friend Vikram's insistence, I sit atop the banyan tree in his own courtyard. Needless to say he reaches out to me whenever he runs into a difficult problem. But I never give him a straight answer. I tell him a story that leads him to the right answer!

*Anjali Kusurkar*  
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