



# Her Wit was Her Guard

*Folktale from Tamil Nadu*

Rendered into English by P. Raja

There was a poor man who borrowed some money from a moneylender. He hoped that some day there would be a windfall in his life and he would be able to repay his debt.

The moneylender continued helping the poor man. But he did so only with a selfish motive. The poor man had a beautiful daughter. The villagers called her a nymph and everyone loved to talk to her. The moneylender was no exception. But he had a rosy dream - that was to marry the village nymph. He waited while the amount of interest on the money borrowed by the poor man grew bigger and bigger.

A time came when the moneylender found that the amount had become too big for the poor man to repay. One day he went to the house of the poor man and demanded his money. The poor man could do nothing but shed tears. The moneylender pretended to take pity on him and proposed a solution.

"If you are unable to repay my money, you can marry off your daughter to me. Remember, you can never dream of a more wealthy son-in-law!" he said.

The poor man and his daughter

were shocked. Sensing that they were not ready to accept the offer straight-away, the moneylender planned to play a trick on them.

"Well! Let us leave the matter to the gods. I will put a black pebble and a white pebble into an empty bag. Let your daughter pick out one of the two pebbles. If she picks the black pebble, she becomes my wife and I cancel your debt. If she picks out the white one, she need not marry me but I still forget your debt. If you refuse to agree to this proposal, I will not hesitate to see that you are thrown into jail."

The poor man had to agree to the proposal. They called a few witnesses and all went out into the field. The ground abounded in pebbles. The old moneylender stooped down to pick up two. The poor man closed his eyes in prayer. The witnesses looked on vaguely. But the village nymph did not fail to notice that the moneylender picked up two black pebbles, instead of one black and one white, and put

them into his bag. He then asked the girl to pick out one of the two.

The girl alone knew what a problem she faced. If she exposed the moneylender by claiming that both the pebbles in his bag were black, she would annoy him. He might throw her father into prison. If she refused to participate in the game, the moneylender would do the same. And if she took out one of the two black pebbles, she must become the wife of the loath-some fellow.

She prayed to God. Something in her mind told of another way to solve the problem. "Trick for trick," she muttered. "That's the way to solve the problem."

The girl put her hand into the bag and drew out a pebble. Next moment she let it slip from her hand. It fell on the ground and was lost among the numerous pebbles.

"What a fool I am!" cried out the girl. "The chosen pebble is lost. What to do now?" She paused and then said, "But that doesn't matter. If we look into the bag, we can find out which pebble is left. That will inform us which one I had taken out!"

"That's right, child!" agreed the witnesses.

The moneylender was at his wit's end. He stood there with a long miserable face. His bag showed a black pebble. The witnesses concluded that the girl had chosen the white one.

The village nymph not only saved herself from the moneylender's ugly clutches, but also saved her father from the burden of his debt. □

