

# THE TWISTED THREAD

*Short stories by Mark Bastable*



## Ba-alzay and the Forgotten Prince

Mark Bastable

*“Gather about me, little ones, close to the fire, and I shall tell you the story of how a great spirit was brought low by revenge.”*

*The children pressed in and hunkered down, cross-legged, wide-eyed. Dhotis were tucked between thighs. Saris were smoothed over knees. The soft dark settled on the village black and silent, like a crow’s feather.*

*“Once,” the old man said, “in the middle of an endless desert, there was a garden...”*

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It had been built by a wealthy prince for his pleasure - a place of lotuses and exotic fruits; of water lilies and scudding dragonflies; of yams and mangoes and grapes and pomegranates. In the midst of eternal dry sand, the walled garden was kept green and lush by a spring that bubbled from beneath a clear, blue rock beside an ancient banyan tree. From time to time the prince would drink a cupful of water from the spring – for it sustained not only the garden but also the prince himself. The magical spring water kept his skin clear, his hair lustrous, his limbs strong. He had lived in the garden for a hundred years and he had not aged a single day.

One morning the prince was walking in his garden, admiring the hanging fruit, smelling the fragrant blooms, when he saw a bright-eyed creature sitting on the rock from under which the bubbling spring burst forth. The creature's smooth skin was coloured in a thousand shades of green, like a fabulous emerald in candlelight. Wise sapphire eyes regarded the prince calmly as nimble fingers wove an intricate necklace from vine stems and clematis.

"Get out of my garden," the prince yelled. "You have no business here."

The creature smiled, unconcerned, fingers plaiting the vine. "Oh, I do."

"This is my garden," the prince said. "How did you get in?"

"I have always been here," said the creature. "I have been here as long as this clear rock, as long as this ancient banyan, as long as this lively spring. I was here before this garden existed, and I shall be here, I hope, long after these cultivated flowers wither and die."

The prince was impressed but too proud to show it. "Who are you?"

"My name is Ba-alzay. I am the eternal spirit of the sacred water."

"You may have been here a thousand years," the prince said, "but this place was nothing until I built the garden. Just a muddy oasis in the desert. Now look at it!"

"It's very nice," Ba-alzay admitted. He tipped his head to one side. "But a little lonely, hm?"

And it was true. The prince was lonely.

"To get the best from this garden, you must share it," Ba-alzay said. He stood up on his rock and leaned forward to hoop the vine necklace over the Prince's head. "You need companions." And before the prince could answer, he turned, slipped down behind the banyan and disappeared.

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The prince had a young couple brought in from a village beyond the desert. They were simple, honest folk - uninquisitive and biddable. And they were grateful to be allowed to live in the beautiful garden. The prince built them a bungalow with a veranda that overlooked a citrus grove and with doors that opened into the shadow of the banyan tree, where rose the spring that kept the garden green and lush.

"You may eat any fruit you can find," the prince told them. "And you can drink from any of the fountains, the brooks, the pools. But you must never drink the water that springs from under the clear blue rock. *Never*. Do you understand?"

Every morning the young man played sitar to entertain the prince, and the young woman danced. At the scorching height of the day the young man would fan the prince as he reclined in the shade of palms, and the young woman sang sweet songs. In the evening the young woman prepared tempting fruit for the prince, who passed the hours teaching the young man to play backgammon.

And when it was time to go to part for the night the prince would remind them of the rules that governed their tenancy of the garden. “You are as free as you could wish to be – fed and cared for in the lap of my generous mercy. But you must never drink from the stream that bubbles from beneath the clear blue rock beside the ancient banyan tree.”

Years passed. The couple were no longer so young. The man’s fingers became too stiff to play the sitar. The woman’s voice became hoarse and she could no longer sing sweet songs. The prince visited the bungalow less frequently.

One evening the couple were sitting in the shade of the banyan tree when on top of the clear blue rock there appeared an emerald green creature with wise sapphire eyes and nimble, lithe fingers that were weaving necklaces from honeysuckle and passionflower. It was Ba-alzay, of course

“Why so downhearted?” he asked the couple.

“We are no longer of use to the prince,” the young man explained. “I cannot play sitar as I once did, and my wife’s voice isn’t sweet anymore. We wish only to serve him, but we’re too old now.”

Ba-alzay laughed. “Is that all?” He looped the honeysuckle necklaces over the heads of the couple. “Listen – drink from the spring. Soon you’ll be young again and you can serve the prince as well as ever.”

“We’re forbidden to drink from that spring,” the woman said. “The prince doesn’t allow it.”

“The prince doesn’t allow it?” Ba-alzay said. “Who is he to make such rules? The spring doesn’t belong to him. It doesn’t even belong to me. It wells up from the earth and spills out here for anyone to drink.”

“But he’ll be furious,” said the man. He glanced at his wife.

“Let him be furious,” the woman said – and she cupped her hand into the flow of the spring water and drank deeply. Her face became smooth. Her hair regained its lustre. Her body tightened and grew firm again. She lifted a handful of water to her husband and he – hesitating a moment – drank too.

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The prince had not visited the bungalow for many months. The young couple, without their master’s needs to occupy their time, found other outlets for their youthful energy. The young man cultivated fruit trees, grafting this branch to that root to produce stronger, more vigorous plants. The young woman made yarn and sewed garments and painted pictures with pigments ground from fruit-pits and flower petals. And each day they both drank from the spring and became more limber, more curious, more inventive.

One evening, as the young couple were sitting together in the shade of the banyan tree weaving a rug, they heard the prince calling them as he approached the bungalow through the citrus grove.

“Hello!” he shouted. “Is anyone there?”

He came around the side of the bungalow and stopped in mid-stride when he saw the young couple.

“I...” he stammered. “I thought you’d be dead by now.”

“Never felt better,” the young man said, smiling. “Can I offer you some wine?”

The prince’s face grew dark. “Have you drunk from the spring that I prohibited?” he demanded.

“Yes,” said the young woman, getting to her feet. “Ba-alzay said that we could.”

“You disobeyed me! I gave you all you could ever need – and you disobeyed me!”

With that the prince banished the young couple from the garden, throwing them out into the desert without clothes or food or water. They took from the garden only the honeysuckle necklaces that Ba-alzay had made for them. They fled weeping, not knowing how they would survive.

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“Ba-alzay! Ba-alzay!”

The prince stood beneath the banyan tree screaming at the top of his voice.

“Yes?”

The emerald green creature appeared on top of the clear, blue rock. His lithe, delicate fingers were plaiting jasmine into an exquisite belt.

“You told them to drink from the water of the spring. Why did you do that?”

“Why not? They have the right - just as you do, just as I do, just as the ancient banyan tree does – to live and be happy.”

“Now I can never allow people into the garden – they’ll all want to drink from the spring.”

“Then let them. Are you afraid that, given eternity in which to learn and develop, they’d become equal to you?”

The prince drew his sword. “How dare you speak to me like that,” he cried, and with swift, expert flicks of his blade he cut off Ba-alzay’s nimble legs and his graceful, lissom arms. “As a punishment for defying me, you will crawl on your belly and eat dust for all time, despised and feared.”

He picked up Ba-alzay’s writhing body and tossed him over the wall of the garden into the desert. And Ba-alzay, without arms or legs, could not climb back into the garden, although he

could hear the running water of the spring beyond the wall and he could taste its moisture on the air when he flicked out his tongue.

And still to this day, little ones, Ba-alzay flicks his tongue in the hope of tasting the sweet healing water of the spring beneath the banyan tree.

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*“It wasn’t fair to do that to Ba-alzay, was it, uncle-ji?” said a small boy at the front of the group.*

*“The prince wanted vengeance, as princes often do,” said the old man.*

*“But Ba-alzay didn’t do anything wrong. It’s not fair!”*

*“Well, wait. The story isn’t over. Ba-alzay wanted revenge in his turn.”*

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Ba-alzay crawled across the desert, moving only by moonlight, resting beneath rocks during the day. He searched for many months, until one dark midnight he found the young couple huddled in a makeshift hut at the banks of a meagre stream, gnawing at roots dug from the muddy bank.

The woman shrieked when Ba-alzay slithered into the hut, leaping to her feet as her husband grabbed a branch and raised it above his head.

“It’s me,” Ba-alzay said. “Look.”

He explained what had happened to him and why.

“I am cursed now to be despised,” he said. “But as long as you wear the necklaces I gave you, you will know me for who I really am. You will remember me, and you will remember the garden and you will remember the prince. As long as you wear the honeysuckle necklaces you will know the truth.”

“We’ll never take them off,” the young couple declared. “We’ll always remember – we promise.”

That night Ba-alzay lay between them, kept warm in the chill night by their bodies – loved and appreciated. At dawn, with a heavy heart, he awoke. He slithered up between the young man and the young woman and he bit through the plaited honeysuckle. He coiled his body around a rock and tugged the necklaces free. He dragged them out to the desert and left them there to shrivel and die. He returned to look at the sleeping couple, and then, sadly, he slithered away to hide until dark.

But for many months he stayed close by, watching from beneath rocks and behind scrubby bushes as the young couple built a home, dug irrigation ditches from the creek to the pasture, cultivated corn and fruit trees, husbanded goats. Sometimes Ba-alzay was spotted dozing on a

warm rock, and he had to wriggle swiftly away as the panicking and oblivious young man went for him with a stick, fear and murder in his eyes.

At last came the day that Ba-alzay had been waiting for. As dusk was falling over the homestead, the prince appeared on horseback from the desert and approached the farm. Ba-alzay slithered into the undergrowth near the door and watched as the prince knocked.

“Yes?” said the young man, his pregnant wife peering suspiciously from over his shoulder.

“I was hasty,” said the prince. “You weren’t to blame. I’ll say sorry. You say sorry. Everything forgiven. Come back to the garden.”

“Who are you?” the young man said.

“I’m offering you paradise,” the prince said. “No need to work the soil. No need to labour in the fields. Just come and serve me again – like before. Remember how happy you were?”

“He’s selling something,” the young woman said. “I don’t trust him.”

“I have no idea who you are,” said the young man, “but we’re perfectly content here. We’ve got our bit of land. We have enough to eat; we’re not afraid of hard work; there’s a baby on the way. We’re fine.”

And he shut the door.

“But I’m lonely!” wailed the prince.

He turned and trudged back down the path, disconsolate. As he mounted his horse, he noticed Ba-alzay.

“This is your fault,” he said. “Everything was perfect until you interfered.”

“They’re happy now,” Ba-alzay said. “Only you and I have lost out.”

“You more than me. Look at you, grubbing around in the mud, hated by everyone.”

Ba-alzay flicked out his tongue. The taste of the healing spring hung about the prince, and the serpent could pick up the faintest sweet tang of it.

“They hate me, yes,” he admitted. “They despise me. I am the symbol of all that is loathsome to them.” His sapphire eyes gleamed and he raised himself up, his hood extended, his jade scales glimmering in the light of the rising moon. “But, my prince, although they revile me now, they have me constantly in mind.”

He opened his mouth, fangs dripping with vengeful venom.

“Whatever they may think of me, they do at least acknowledge me,” Ba-alzay hissed triumphantly, quivering and rigid. “They have no doubt that *I exist*.”

He struck sharply at the horse's legs, and the stallion reared up in fear. The prince, crying out, fell backwards and landed with a breathless thud in the dirt. He lay there gasping and bruised.

But no one came from the farmhouse to help him. They hadn't heard him shout, they hadn't heard him fall, and they had already forgotten that he was ever at their door.