

The Story of a Mouse Merchant **A folktale from India**

Some people start with only a little money and gain great wealth. But I built up my large fortune by starting with nothing at all. Listen, and you shall hear how I did it.

My father died before I was born, and my mother's wicked relatives robbed her of all she owned. In fear for her life, she fled and took refuge at the home of one of my father's friends. There I was born, and as I grew, I became my mother's protector. Meanwhile she supported our lives by the little she earned through hard work. But, poor as we were, she found a teacher to teach me reading, writing, and keeping accounts.

One day my mother said to me, "My son, your father was a merchant. The time has come for you also to engage in trade. The richest merchant in our city is the money changer, Visakhila. I hear that he lends money to the poor sons of good families to start them in business. Go to him and ask him for such a loan."

Right away I went to Visakhila, and found him angrily scolding another merchant's son, to whom he had loaned money: "See that dead mouse upon the ground?" he said. "A clever man could start with a dead mouse and make a fortune. But no matter how much money I lend you, I barely get back the interest on it."

Hearing that, I turned to Visakhila and said, "I will accept the dead mouse as capital to start me in business!"

With these words, I picked up the mouse and went on my way, leaving the money changer roaring with laughter.

I sold the mouse to another merchant as cat food, for two handfuls of peas. I ground the peas, put them in a sack, and hurried away from the city. I stopped beside a road by the banks of a stream and sat in the shade of a spreading tree. There, many weary wood-cutters passed by, carrying their wood to market. I politely offered a drink of cool water and a portion of the peas to each one. Every wood-cutter gratefully paid me with a couple of sticks of wood. At the end of the day, I took these sticks and sold them in the market. Then with a small part of that money, I bought a new supply of peas. So, on the second day, I obtained more sticks from the woodcutters.

In the course of a few days I had built up a nice handful of coins. I bought from the wood-cutters all the wood that they could cut in three days. Soon afterwards there was heavy rain and a great lack of wood in the market. I was able to sell all my wood, making a large profit. With this money I set up a shop, and I soon became wealthy.

Then I went to a goldsmith and had him make me a mouse of solid gold. This mouse I presented to Visakhila as payment of the loan. Soon afterward, I married his daughter. Because of this story I am known to the world as Mushika, the Mouse. So it was that without any capital to build on, I made a fortune.