How the Peacock got His Beautiful Feathers (Meghalaya)

Many years ago, when the world was young and animals and birds could speak, U Klew, a peacock, lived among the birds. He had nothing extraordinary to boast of. He had no pretensions to beauty. But he used to strut about, proud and arrogant, because his tuft was much more erect than that of any other bird, and his tail was longer and carried about with more grace than that of any other bird. Other birds considered him their unaccommodating neighbour, and jeered and sneered at him for his boastfulness; they had nothing to do with his boastfulness.

His tail was so big and unwieldy he could not enter the houses of the lowly birds, and chose to attend the courts of great birds. He was entertained by one or two great birds when they observed some festivals in the jungle and this enhanced his pride and haughtiness more.

In venting their dislike for the peacock the lowly birds often flattered and praised him so inordinately that the peacock's heart swelled and inflated with pride.

One day, so disgusted with the boasting of the peacock U Klew, the lowly birds gathered together in a meeting to discuss how to teach him a good lesson so that he wouldn't ever dare belittle other ordinary birds, and so devised a plan. According to the plan the birds went over to U Klew and the leader of the bird said to him, 'We have just returned from a great durbar of birds. We did not find you in the meeting! Were you not invited to the meeting?' To hide his ignorance U Klew said,'I was invited, but could not attend the durbar, because I was busy otherwise. Tell me what the durbar was held about.' "The Durbar was held about sending an ambassador up to Blue Realm to present to the beautiful maiden, Ka Sngi who ruled it, greetings on behalf of the birds,' the bird leader said, inwardly chuckling. 'The birds present at the durbar unanimously decided to send you up to the Blue Sky as an ambassador to present to Ka Sngi greetings from the birds.'

U Klew was elated at being appointed an ambassador by the birds to present to Ka Sngi, ruler of the Blue Realm, greetings from the birds. The birds returned home, chuckling at the thought that the gullible peacock had accepted the bait. They knew for certain that he would not dare fly up as far as the blue sky, for he was a heavy-bodied bird, and they had never seen him fly higher than a tree-top.

On the fixed day, U Klew started on the perilous journey upwards to the utter dismay of the birds who had gathered to bid him farewell. They knew the haughty and proud peacock would die tired and fatigued, while flying upwards to the Blue Realm. But to their surprise he gradually flew upwards out of sight. His pride and boastfulness propelled him into flying on until he had reached the Blue Realm and alighted in the palace of Ka Sngi.

Ka Sngi was living alone in the palace and was fed up of the loneliness. When she heard that a bird was standing at one of the gates, intending to see her, she was delighted. She herself went over there to welcome him with a finely-tuned sensibility. When U Klew informed her of his errand she was much delighted and intended to make him her companion. When she voiced her intention, U Klew accepted her offer, for he was enchanted by her exquisite and unparalleled beauty. Ka Sngi smiled in gratitude upon the world.

But Ka Sngi's love and his living in the realm of light and sunshine did not cast aside his pride and hauteur. On the contrary, the comforts and the love made his selfishness more pronounced and he became surly and cross when Ka Sngi could not find time to attend upon him, when she was busy smiling upon the world. Ka angi, on the other hand, bestowed upon U Klew
unstinted love, kindness and attention which he received with cold indifference, for he thought he merited all the love, kindness and attention.

Prior to U Klew’s coming up to the Blue Realm, Ka Sngi had found one of the outlets of her munificence in shedding warm rays upon the earth. Now that all her time was absorbed by U Klew, she could not come out of her palace to send rays down to the earth, so much so that the earth became cold, dark and dreary. The birds in the jungle became cheerless, their feathers drooped and they ceased singing. U Slap, the rain, asserted his power upon the earth and came in torrents, throwing their nests off the trees, killing birdlings. U Lyob, the mist, brought the dark clouds and had them hang over the rice fields so that no grain ripened. Ka Eriong, the storm, started dancing on the trees, destroying all the fruits. The birds, displaced from their nests, wandered about, starving.

In their great misery they sought the help of mankind whom they considered wiser than themselves and animals. By means of divinations mankind put their misery down to the selfishness of U Klew who was staying with K Sngi as her companion. His selfishness prevented her bestowing her light and her smiles upon the earth. ‘The only way to save the earth and yourselves,’ mankind said, ‘is to lure U Klew back to the earth.’ The leader of the birds asked, ‘How can we lure him back to the earth?’ ‘In the farthest corner of the jungle there lives a cunning woman,’ mankind said. ‘Go over to her and ask her to help in luring U Klew back to the earth. She is a very cunning woman and she can help you. Her name is Ka Sabuit.’

Acting on the advice of mankind, the birds went over to the cunning woman who was living in the farthest corner of the jungle. Ka Sabuit was living in acute poverty. She had nothing to eat; she was just living on wild roots. She had a garden of her own and she had no seed to sow in the garden except a handful of mustard seeds, the cheapest and most common of all seeds but she couldn’t do so. Even she could not dare sow a gourdful of mustard seeds for fear of the hungry birds. When the birds approached her about effecting the return of U Klew to the earth from the Blue Realm, she seized upon this opportunity. ‘I shall bring him back from the Blue Realm within thirteen moons under two conditions,’ she said. ‘What are the two conditions?’ the leader of the birds asked. ‘One of them is that you should refrain from pecking at the seeds,’ Ka Sabuit said. ‘The other is that you should prevent animals from eating crops and trampling on the land.’ These two conditions were easy for the birds to accept.

Ka Sabuit’s garden was in the open part of the jungle and could be seen from the hilltops. She started digging a hole into the ground. Her neighbours asked her why she was doing so. She did not deign to reply to their query and went on digging the hole. The birds were keeping guard around her so that no animal would encroached upon her garden.

When she had finished digging the hole to her satisfaction, she put the mustard seeds in such a way that the bed of the mustard seeds looked like a woman. This incited her neighbours to a guffaw of laughter and they put it down to her madness. But Ka Sabuit did not bother about what her neighbours were thinking about her.

In course of time the seeds sprouted and the plot of land got covered with glistening green leaves, while the birds were watching over them from around the garden.

In no time small flowers appeared on all the mustard plants so that the plot of land shaped like a woman looked from a distance like a woman of paramount beauty, wearing a gorgeous mantle of gold that dazzled the eyes. When her neighbours saw it, they could not help wondering at the beauty of
the plot and admiring Ka Sabuit.

It so happened that U Klew grew tired of living in the Blue Realm. The memories of his old homes and his old companions kept on tormenting him. The unflinching love and care Ka Sngi bestowed upon him did not keep him happy.

One day he came out from the precincts of the palace to view his old haunts on the earth. His eyes fell on a beautiful woman, dressed in gold, lying asleep in a garden in a corner of the jungle, guarded by all the birds. He instantly fell in love with the woman and forgot his allegiance to Ka Sngi who had given him so much love and attention.

When he informed Ka Sngi of his decision to go back to the earth, she burst out into a paroxysm of crying and begged him not to go back, leaving her alone. U Klew was so selfish, conceited and so hard-hearted her crying did touch his heart. His mind was on the beautiful woman sleeping in Ka Sabuit’s garden, and beside her beauty the beauty of Ka Sngi paled into insignificance. All Ka Sngi’s sobbing and cajoling did not change his decision and he made his departure.

Ka Sngi watched him going down to the earth and was Weeping. As she wept, drops of tears fell down and bedewed the feathers of U Klew as he was flying down to the earth, transforming them into all the colours of the rainbow. Some larger drops falling on to his tail were turned into brilliant-hued spots which are called ‘Ummat Ka Sngi’ (the sun’s tears) by Khasis still today. These were the marks of love of Ka Sngi.

When U Klew returned to the jungle, other birds were struck with wonder at seeing his beautiful feathers and asked him why he came back from the Blue Realm. He said that he had seen from the Blue Realm a beautiful woman lying asleep in a garden in the farthest corner of the jungle, so he came down in quest of the woman. On hearing this, the birds understood why the cunning woman, Ka Sabuit, had made the mustard seed bed into the shape of a woman. They told U Klew to follow them to the garden where he would see the woman dressed in gold. He delightedly followed the birds, thinking that he would marry the woman.

When he reached the garden with the birds, he saw a mustard seed bed instead of woman. He bent his head down in shame and humiliation and repented having left the Blue Realm. He tried to fly once again upwards to the Blue Realm, but he could not fly higher. So he had no alternative but to resign himself to the jungle life.

Every morning, it is said, the peacock can be seen stretching forth his neck towards the sky and flapping his wings to greet the coming of Ka Sngi. His only happiness lies in spreading his lovely feathers to catch the beams which Ka Sngi once more sheds upon the earth.