Once upon a time there were two brothers who were very poor and lived only by begging and gleaning. One day at harvest time they went out to glean. On their way they came to a stream with muddy banks, and in the mud a cow had stuck fast and was unable to get out. The young brother proposed that they should help it out, but the elder brother objected, saying they might be accused of theft. The younger brother persisted and so they pulled the cow out of the mud. The cow followed them home and shortly afterwards produced a calf.

In a few years the cow and her descendants multiplied in a marvelous manner so that the brothers became rich by selling the milk. They became so rich that the elder brother was able to marry. He lived at home with his wife, and the younger brother lived in the jungle grazing the cattle. The elder brother’s son went every day to take his uncle’s dinner to the jungle. This was not necessary, for the cow used to supply her master with all sorts of delicious food to eat. When his nephew brought out the rice, the younger brother would give the boy some of the sweets that the cow gave him and told him not to tell his parents about this and not to take any home.

But one day the boy hid some of the sweets and took them home and showed them to his mother. His mother had never seen such sweets before and thought her brother-in-law wished to poison her son. The next day, she took the dinner to him herself, and after he had eaten, she said she would comb his hair, so he put his head on her lap. As she combed his hair, he fell asleep. When she saw that he was asleep, the woman took out a knife and cut off his head. Then she got up, leaving the head and body lying there. But the cow had seen what happened, and with her horns she pushed the head along until it joined the neck, and the man immediately came to life again.

The younger brother drove his herd of cattle to a distant part of the jungle and let them take their midday rest at the foot of a bodhi tree. One day, the bodhi tree spoke to the cowherd, saying, “If you pour milk every day at my roots, you will receive a boon.” The cowherd poured milk each day upon the roots of the tree, and after some time, he saw a crack in the ground. He imagined that the roots of the tree were cracking the earth, but in truth there was a snake buried there, and as it increased in size from drinking the milk, it made the ground split.
One day, the snake suddenly came forth from the crack. The cowherd was filled with terror. He was sure that the snake would devour him. But the snake said, "Do not fear! I was imprisoned in the underworld, and you have rescued me. To show my gratitude, I will grant you any wish."

The cowherd answered that the snake should choose what he would give him, and so the snake bade him come closer and breathed on the cowherd's long hair. The hair became glistening like gold!

"Your golden hair will obtain you a wife," said the snake. "In addition, you will become a very powerful man, and whatever you say will come true."

The cowherd asked him what sort of things would come true, and the snake answered, "If you say a creature shall die, it will die, and if you say it shall come to life, it will come to life. But you must not tell this to anyone, not even your wife when you marry. If you do, the power will vanish."

Some time later, it happened that the cowherd was bathing in the river, and as he bathed, one of his hairs came out, and he had a fancy to wrap it in a leaf and set it afloat on the current. Lower down on the river, a princess was bathing with her attendants, and they saw the leaf come floating by and tried to stop it. But it floated straight to the princess, and she took it, and opened it, and found the hair inside. It shone like gold, and when they measured it, it was twelve fathoms long. So the princess tied it up in a cloth and went home, and shut herself in her room, and would neither eat nor drink nor speak to anyone. Her mother sent two of her companions to find out what was the matter, and at last she told them that she would not eat or leave her chamber until they found the person to whom the golden hair belonged. If it were the hair of a man, he should be her husband.

When the Raja and Rani heard this, they sent messengers upstream to search for the owner of the golden hair. The messengers followed the banks of the stream and asked in all the villages, and they questioned everyone they met in order to find the golden-haired one. But their search was in vain and without news. Then, holy men were sent forth to search, but they also returned unsuccessful.
Then the princess said, “If you cannot find the owner of the golden hair, I will hang myself!” At this, her parrot and her tame crow said to her, “You will never be able to find the man with the golden hair. He lives in the depths of the forest, and we alone can fetch him for you. Unfasten our chains, and we will go in search of him.”

The Raja ordered that the birds be unchained, and he gave them a good meal before starting. Then the crow and the parrot flew out the window, and rose into the air, and followed the river, until at last they spied the cowherd, resting with his cattle under the bodhi tree. Down they flew, and settled on the trees branches, and consulted as to how they could lure him to the palace. They decided that the crow should fly down and carry off the cowherd’s flute, which was lying on the ground. So the crow pounced on the flute and carried it off in its beak. When the cowherd saw this, he ran after the crow to recover his flute, and the crow tempted him on by just fluttering from tree to tree. The cowherd kept following, and when the crow was tired, the parrot took the flute from him. Thus they led the cowherd to the city, and into the Raja’s palace, and at last to the chamber of the princess, where they dropped the flute into her hand.

The cowherd asked the princess to return his flute, but she said that she would only give it to him if he promised to marry her. He was surprised and asked how she could wish to marry him when she had just seen him for the first time and they had never been betrothed.

“Do you remember one day tying a hair in a leaf and setting it afloat on the river?” she asked him. “Well, that hair has been the go-between that has arranged our betrothal.”

Then the cowherd remembered how the snake had told him that his hair would find him a wife, and he asked to see the hair that the princess had found. She brought it out, and they found that it was long and bright and was indeed his.

“We belong to each other,” he said.

The princess called for the door to be opened, and brought the cowherd to her father and mother, and told them that her heart’s desire was fulfilled. If they did not allow the wedding, she told them, she would run away with the cowherd.

So a day was fixed for the wedding, and they were married. The cowherd soon became so much in love with his bride that he forgot all about his herd of cattle, which he had left behind without anyone to look after them. So he told the princess that he must return to his cattle, whether she came with him or not. She said that she would
take leave of her parents and go with him. Then the Raja gave them a feast, and handed over half of his kingdom to the cowherd, and gave him a son's share of his elephants, and horses, and flocks and herds, and said to him, "You are free to do as you like. You can stay here, or go to your own home. But if you decide to stay here, I will never turn you out."

The cowherd thought about this and decided he would live with his father-in-law. But first, he would go and take care of the cattle that he had abandoned without anyone to look after them. So the next day, he and the princess set off. When they reached the jungle they found that all the cattle were lying dead. At this, the cowherd was filled with grief and began to weep—but then he remembered the promise of the snake. He gathered herbs and held them under the noses of the dead animals, pretending that it was medicine. "Come to life," he whispered. And behold, one by one the cows all got up and began lowing to their calves. In gratitude to the snake, the cowherd filled a large vessel with milk and poured it at the foot of the bodhi tree. The snake came out and breathed on the hair of the princess, and it too became as bright as gold.

They next day they collected the cows and drove them back to the princess's home. The cowherd and his wife lived happily there, ruling half the kingdom.

After some years, the cowherd reflected that the snake had been a father and mother to him, and yet he had never taken a proper farewell of the creature. So he set forth to see if it was still there. But he could not find it. In vain he spoke to the bodhi tree, but there was no answer, and he had to return home disappointed.