

Tulsah

By M. P. Shiel

[*Translation of a Scorched Hindoo MS.*]

Most wonderful, I often think, must have been the dower of vitality originally vouchsafed me. The passage of one hundred and twenty years has not availed to bleach a single hair of these raven masses. My memory is still, as it was, almost more than that of men. Undimmed is my eye. Yet the end is surely near. A hundred and twenty was the age at which the great Boodh, prince of Oude, passed into unending muckut; at such age, too, died he whom they called my father, and, they say, *his* father also; and, for what I know—but such speculations are frivolous.

It is singular that none of my subjects ever heard of, or even suspected, the undoubted connection which exists between Boodh and my race. He was one of its sons, and one of its fathers. Here in the profundity and gloom of this subterrene, I now for the first time in modern days commit this tremendous secret to parchment.

I have spoken of my memory: yet on one side at least the tree is bare of blossom or leaf. All my first youth has passed from me as completely as though I never *had* a first youth. Many and many are the days which I have spent, unconscious of the universe, rapt in contemplation of this mystery. But no intensest effort could bring one ray of remembrance. I can recall, indeed, the circumstance of my awaking to self-knowledge; but as to all that preceded it, there is the blackness of darkness. In a chamber hollowed out of the face of the natural rock I opened my eyes. I lay on my back in a coffin of red stone. A reddish cloth, studded with jewels, enwrapped my body, but the convolutions extended far below my feet, as though the swaddling had been intended for one of much greater stature than I. The coffin itself was large enough to contain the body of a man. Long I lay, first in listless dream, then with the burgeoning consciousness of entity. I rose from the coffin; I cast off the cerements; I crawled from the chamber of rock. I looked at my limbs, the limbs of a well-grown boy, and saw that they were perfect, and withy, and beautifully brown. I could have exclaimed at all the marvel and delight. But the lion's voice broke upon my ear. I at once felt terror, understanding him an enemy. The sun was setting. I was in the midst of the jungle of the unfathomable forest.

I passed during the night through the million-fold life of the wild. I exulted when I eluded the mad elephant and the prowling tiger-cat by the sinuousness of my limbs; I looked without fear upon the ape and the untamed zebu; but when I saw the *serpent*—heinously leprous—then hatred and loathing thrilled me, and I climbed, breathless in panic, to the branches of a tree.

With the light of the morning I came, on the edge of the forest, to a stately town, full of aëry edifices, traceried light as vision; it lay in a valley enclosed by a circle of high blue mountains, down which brawled many a rill; the whole mirrored in an oval lake which nearly occupied the rest of the valley. It was at this sight that, so far as I can now remember, the conception of *Time* first arose in my brain: I went back æon upon æon, and connected this city with memories, penumbral but real, and old, it seemed, as the world. The town is situated in the centre of Hindostan, is exceedingly ancient, a kingdom by itself, unvisited.

An aged priest met me on the outskirts. He looked with a quick intentness upon my face, and spoke some words to me. I did not understand, nor could I answer him. He led me to the temple where he ministered, and for three years concealed me in its recesses from the eyes of all. At the end of this time he made me lead him to the chamber of rock, and commanded me to point out

the coffin in which I had opened my eyes. This satisfied him fully: it was the coffin of the maharajah of the city, who, he told me, had died a year before my awaking. The maharajah was then very old; he had acquired, it was said, the sum of human wisdom. His people had, by his own explicit directions, instead of burning the body, laid it to its rest in the sarcophagus, at the spot where conscious life, as far as I could recollect, was first born within me. Adjeebah, the Brahmin *gooroo* who had instructed me, announced me as the son, hidden by him till then, of the dead rajah. None could doubt it: to doubt would have been the insanity of unbelief: I was the living likeness of the dead! A day came when I mounted the throne of the palace as sovereign of Lovanah amid the acclamations of the people.

Among the first things I learned was that all my ancestors had been known and revered during life as men who had attained the holy calm of yug; that a long tradition had handed it down that, without exception, they had left the cares of durbar (or state) to their ministers, in order to muse in the interior palace upon the deep things of wisdom. The same instinct rose spontaneously and irresistibly within me. I became a species of Yati, resolving to search out knowledge and the nature of things, if so be I might arrive at the comprehension of the ultimate mystery. The years fled rapidly. Many languages I learned; the wisdom of the Hellenes; the zoomorphism of the Egyptians; the heights of the pyramids of Chufu and Shafra. In intense meditations passed my leaden days. I read in the Hebrew scroll of that Melchisedec, King of Salem, priest of the Most High God, without father, without mother, having neither beginning of days nor end of life. I learned how Boodh, too, who was of my kin, was delivered of his mother Maia in a manner most marvellous. I was convulsed at the thrilling secrets of the world; my tongue shuddered, my eye rolled, in ecstasy on ecstasy. I tracked the vanity and sublimity of Man to their hiding-place; I sought out the meanings of religions, whence they come, whither they go.

I lighted, many years after my accession to the kingdom, upon a document, deep among the mouldering archives, and yellow with the accumulation of ages. Having read it, I swooned upon the agate floor, and lay through the long day and night as dead. It was a narrative inscribed on papyrus, and by it I learned the dark fate which befel the first of my race. He was called Obal, and went out from his home a century before ever that Abram, from whom the Hebrews sprang as the sands of the sea, had yet departed out of Haran. The object of his pilgrimage was to know wisdom, and learn the modes of men. He travelled onward till he reached Hur of the Chaldees, one of the first cities built by the hand of the mason and the smith. It was in Mesopotamia, which was called Naharaïm. Here dwelled the votaries of that Zabaism from which is derived the Parsee hierology. The doctrine has its origins deep in the roots of the universe. Loosely allied to it is phallic, and—very much more intimately—serpent, worship: for, inasmuch as the mist of constellations in the farthest heaven assumes the form of a *serpent* in its uneasy writhings, here have we a connection—profound enough, terrible enough—between Flame and the Serpent; and since Flame is torture, so is the Serpent the fit emblem of Hell. Hence the wisdom of the Hebrew serpent-myth of the temptation and fall of man; and hence, too, came it, that the Zabians, worshipping in the first instance the heavenly hosts of fire, were also worshippers of the snaky uncleanness. At Hur the heart of Obal was seduced by the specious beauty of Star and Moon: he became a devotee to the fire and the serpent. For many years he lived there a life of study and peace; not till he was a very old man did the consummation of Fate overtake him. In a forecourt of a temple of Ashtoreth he saw a maiden priestess whose loveliness kindled his sere heart. Her name was Tamar. She was vowed to chastity. How foul the crime to draw her from the service of the Goddess Obal knew. But he seems to have been a man of daring eye and headlong lust. He

found occasion to speak with the maiden; the abomination of love became mutual between them; he wedded her. Had he not been a great man in Hur, he, with the apostate woman, would without doubt have been stoned to death. But they lived—so long, and so securely—that it seemed as though the heavens were oblivious of the sacrilege. At last Tamar died. Obal was full of years. On the night preceding her journey to the tomb, the patriarch slept by her side—for the last time—on the couch of ivory where she stiffly lay. He slept. In the morning his eunuchs, coming to the chamber, found him dead. His face, his staring eyes, were black with imprisoned blood. Around his throat had coiled itself a serpent, red of colour, as though a flame perfused its veins. The body of Tamar was not seen.

I have said that I swooned upon the floor, and lay as dead. This was singular, for I had so far travelled upon the road of knowledge as to be aware of the ancientness and universality of superstition, manifesting itself always by a certain historical metabolism. The tendency of my mind was indeed toward the exact. While the Jookaja believes that nothing exists but knowledge, things being only the forms thereof; and the Medheemuck that both knowledge and things, are *sun*, or cipher, and the All itself but a visionary vesture half concealing the eternal Glare; I, admitting the seemliness of these syntheses of dogma, must say that my own mental trend was the other way, toward a full belief in matter, and the truthfulness of the senses. I was therefore more and more inclined to assert that no impression of life is explicable save by facts in their essence “natural.” *And yet* this unauthenticated tale of the old and vanished world rent my soul, “like a veil,” in twain. Let me not attempt to explain this mystery. Here is a secret too dark—too dark—for speech. The nations of the far West blab of a Deity who travails and travails and travails for ever—just as though the bursting brain of a man could realize that thought and live! The yellow Brahmin, on the other hand, shaves his head, and with light heart full of craft, discusses a lazy Brimmah, omniscient, but clothed in inertia as in a mantle. I will say nothing. It is a subject *full* of fear. In the one doctrine at least is safety: in the other—could it be realized—is the frenzy eternal. Let me not therefore be understood to maintain this other: for who would believe if I say that *memory* was the secret of the effect which the tale of Obal wrought upon me? Would I not sputter the babblings of a maniac, did I assert that—vaguely, but really—afar off, but with no dubiety—I remembered—from beginning to end—ah! but at *this* mystery let silence cover with her hand the mouth of rashness!

I now set myself diligently to the study of the race of kings who had reigned since the beginnings of the over Lovanah. The facts which confronted me were startling. It was then that I first learned that the Boodh, who, like Obal, had left his home mad with the passion for wisdom, was of us. Of fifty kings in the direct line I found that all had lived to ages far beyond the ordinary span of human life; that more than half had taken as wives, not Hindoos, but believers in the Zend-Avesta, followers of Zoroaster, *fire-worshippers*; that at least ten had deserted their kingdom, and wandered far over Asia—in obscurity, poor—hounded by the criminal lust of our race for the *cabala* of knowledge; that at least twenty-five—among them my own predecessor—had met their death by the stings of venomous serpents; that all of them had married; and that the death of not one of them had preceded in order of time the death of his consort.

It was when I had understood the sinister meaning of these things that, in the dim chamber which I had made my abode, I fell upon my face to the ground, and swore in my heart three oaths, to which I called every power of the Universe to witness; I would moderate, and, if necessary, quench, the zeal to know which inflamed me; I would never for any purpose wander abroad from the land, from the house in which I then found myself; no daughter of man would I

ever espouse. This I swore, and thus did I resolve to break in my person the continuity of that destiny which hunted my race.

I called to my presence my *dewan* and two other ministers of state, and ordered them to publish abroad a proclamation offering a reward of ten rupees of silver to the slayer of every serpent within my dominion.

“Your father published the identical proclamation,” answered the chief minister.

I started.

“And,” said another, “its only visible result was an enormous increase in the number of serpents in the district.”

“An increase,” added the third, “which was above all conspicuous in the multiplication of an unknown species, distinguished by its very remarkable colour, and extreme rancour.”

These announcements did not fail to have their full effect upon me. I had then arrived at the age of perhaps fifty. From thenceforth I shut myself from mankind with even greater-persistence than ever, and to lull into quiescence my too restive brain, I now abandoned my body to the delight of the lotus pipe, and the peace of the sleepy *bhang*. As the Jain, tangled in a mesh of religious frivolities, never slaying a living thing, seeks by strong crying to Parswanath, and the practice of self-torment, to enter forcibly into *nirvana*; so I, by another and a broader gate, entered the *nirvana* of vision. Thirty years passed over me as a watch in the night, opaline with vague prismic hues. I was a confirmed hermit: in a year hardly two of my servants saw my face: the active memory of me passed from men. I still studied—sought—thought—but over the intensity of research was shed the appeasing glamour of the long, long, trance, the hyperborean dream.

I walked one night in an out-court of the palace, and admired that “crooked serpent” which trails in everlasting length athwart the heaven. It was the first time for many years that I had passed from the gloom of my chamber. I was alone. The sound of voices in a neighbouring field reached my ear. I walked pensive toward a gate, and chanced to see a concourse of people standing some little distance away. Long it was since I had mingled with my fellow: I walked quietly toward the crowd, and saw it grouped round a funeral-pile, on which lay stretched the body of a man. It was a *suttee*. In their midst stood a very young woman—most god-like tall—surpassing lovely—delirious with opiates; her body perfumed; her head sprinkled with sandal-powder; the wife of the dead maim, who had devoted herself to the flames which were to consume him. Tulsah!—dame of my life—sovereign mistress of my destiny—Tulsah! then first, under the moon, did my eye light upon that serpentine form, that iridescent grace! I beheld how with wavy ease she ascended the pyre—the imponderable limbs of spirit composed themselves beside the shape of the dead—her eyes closed; from a corner of the resinous pile I saw the red flame dart upward, upward! Already I was aged—but strong too, and lithe: I dashed forward—with victorious energy I tore her from the lick of the tongues of the fire, and to the murmuring mob I cried aloud:

“Back, fools—I am the Maharajah!”

I know not what extremity of change now accomplished itself within me. My disenchained spirit danced and danced in the ecstasy of a new youth. True, I had vowed—I had vowed. But Tulsah had that dear quality of the eyes to which the Greek artists gave the name *ôü ýãñüüí*, ‘liquidity.’ This impression they produced in their statues by a slight raising of the underlid. Man is folly itself. Let this one fact only be considered: those same Greeks believed that they alone of the nations possessed the thing they called *philosophia*—the love of the subtleties of wisdom; and even while they were thus believing, the Vedic Hymns had been sung; the Brahmin had

codified the intricate activities of the Attributes Sut, Raj, and Tum; and the Boodh had denied that Brahma, Vishnu, and Mahadeva were emanations of the Spirit of God. Such is the inborn vanity and shallowness of man.

And I, too, was vain and shallow! My oath I flung to the winds. The passions of a youth, intensified a million-fold, pulsated within my bosom. My zenana, so long tenantless, at last received an inmate—and her name was Tulsah!

Little cared I for the prejudices—deep, religious, though they were—of my uncultured people, who declared that I had robbed her from the dead. I loved to recline through the sluggish hours by her side, and watch the ichor that swelled and swelled her veins. Surely her skin was not the skin of the Hindoos: but I cannot remember that I ever definitely learned her origin. I know only that Tulsah adored me. We passed our lives together in the twilight of a perfect and happy solitude; and never did I surfeit of her ethereal presence, or tire of gazing upon the strangely delicate streaks of reddish hue which mingled with her jet-black hair, or upon the torpidly-indolent and sinuous movements of her exquisitely soft, and supple, and undulating form.

In an evil hour one day, when, heavy with opiates, I lay in waking trance, by her side I revealed to her the history of the tragedy of the patriarch Obal.

She listened to the whole with agitation, with heaving bosom, and an intense alertness for which I could not account.

“He seduced her,” she said after a long time, speaking bitingly, and gazing afar—“he seduced her from her devotion to the heavenly hosts—”

“Ay!—Tulsah!—he snatched her from her ministry upon the eternal flames—”

“And you—”

“I, my Tulsah? *!! !!*”

“Yes—you—*you* snatched me, a devotee to the flames, from the very flames themselves—”

I folded her panting to my lean bosom.

“Angel! angel!” I shrieked, “yet does the Power not live whose craft could prevail to change thy dear perfection into the viper’s tooth!”

In such manner we spent our life. The years multiplied themselves and passed. Tulsah approached the borders of age. Her beauty waned—markedly waned. As she grew older the sinuosity of her muscular and osseous systems became, I must say it, too pronounced to be longer fascinating. A singular affection of the skin covered her body with a multitude of regularly-shaped small dull-red erythemata. Her eyes reddened, uttering a rheumy mucus. I looked for the whitening of her hair. My disappointment was bitter. The heavy surges which, once black, billowed like a torrent to her feet, and wide overflowed the floor like the surf of a sea of ink, gradually at first—then rapidly—took on the gorgeous, and the *farouche*, and the unhuman semblance of a mantle of vivid flame.

She died. With my own hand I swaddled her corpse, and helped to place it upon the pyre. Death among our Eastern nations is surely never a comely sight: yet it was with sorrow rather than with loathing that I looked for the last time upon the wan face of my Tulsah.

We were alone together in a court of the palace. The fulsome gloat of moon and stars shone over and about us. I held a torch to the pile: a sheet of flame shot up, crackling, around the beloved sacrifice.

To this day I know not how it was: either the fire consumed its victim with a rapidity inconceivable, or a suspension of consciousness, due to the anodynes which I had that day freely imbibed, deprived me of sight: but from the moment when I applied the torch to the moment when I again looked at the pile was an interval which seemed so short as to be inappreciable; and

yet within it, in sharp disproof of my estimate of its length, both the pyre and its occupant had passed, utterly consumed, from before my eyes.

I stood amazed, gazing at the column of blue smoke which rolled up from the very small heap of ashes into the air: and now a new impression—born perhaps of my own fantasy—or born of the despotism of drugs—or born of the more dread despotism of reality—an impression this the of absolute terror—forced itself upon my mind. I beheld, or thought so—the blue of the ascending reek turn to the sanguine hue of Sardius; and now with a spasmodic jerk the whole high and solid pillar of the reddened smoke split itself into innumerable dismemberment; and I saw every wreath, and curl, and tortured tendril stand apart in definite isolation, and shape itself into a changing snaky form, till the whole vast nest, coalescing, writhed together in infinite implication, with hollow eye, and extruded fang.

Aghast at the illusion, I hurried from the spot. I entered the palace. Through a secret corridor I passed to the chamber where Tulsah and I had spent the years of our love. A light shed itself from a vessel of oil in the ceiling. I sank doddering to a seat, and covered my face. Hours went by, and still I sat. All the past was around me—she herself. How like a dream the whole mystery of her coming, her abiding, her going! Tulsah!—I groaned her name. I lifted up my voice weeping. “Where now remote in some green sanctity of ocean cave or azure fold of space broods thy ethereal presence?” I rose to throw my despairs upon the couch where she had been wont to lie, when, in the gloom, I saw—within the palsy of horror saw—coiled thick upon the bed, with gorge erect above a foul vast base of clotted wreaths, and palpitant through all its mucous swelth, the fat and lazar loathliness of a monstrous Snake, whose ruby eyes regarded me.

I ran from the palace! A secret portal led me to the borders of the forest. Here I came upon the traces of a highway, the windings of which I followed. The rising sun of the next day found me still fugitive—hasting in wildest panic—already many a mile from the towers of Lovanah.

I had thus broken the second of my vows, which bound me to my home. It was not till long afterwards that this thought occurred to me. But there remained the third: never, by my own seeking, to penetrate the ultimate secret of the world: and by this I have faithfully abided.

* * *

Ten years passed and left me, as they found me, vagabond over India. I journeyed from city to city, meditating on the manners of men, and begging my bread from the charitable. I have wandered in the streets of that Benares to which Boodh first retired from the world; I have stood beneath the great granite mosque of Jumna Musjid at Delhi; and through all the cities of the north I have passed.

But my pilgrimage was very far from purposeless. I sought with intense scrupulousness—as for hid treasures—after something. I hoped to find a retreat in which, with absolute security from the designs of destiny, I might lay me down, and die the natural death of the rest of men.

I came at last, in the vale of Cashmere, to a lonely Hindoo temple—one of the great vihâras—consisting of a long oblong chamber. The roof was supported by two rows of huge stone pillars connected by vaulted architraves, and at the farthest end, semicircular in shape, stood a colossus of the seated Boodh. The temple had been chiselled out of the base of the Himalaya.

Through a burning lamp hung from a pillar, the sanctuary seemed deserted. I entered, and passed up the broad central nave. At the extremity, near the statue, where the vihâra might be expected to end, I happened to find an open door. I walked through it, and descended a long stairway which brought me to a second temple; all was now the intensity of darkness; but

happening to meet with another door-way, I descended still farther—down and down—until, in this way, I had traversed six stair-ways of equal descent. I must by this time have travelled a very considerable distance both into the interior of the mountain and the depths of the earth.

Yet another series of steps, and I came to a passage, at the end of which was a circular apartment: here was clearly the termination of this great excavation. From its roof hung a lamp which distilled a vermilion light. I could see from the appearance of the chamber that it had been unvisited perhaps for ages, and I was unable to conjecture by what means the lamp was kept alive, except it were by means of feeding pipes from the far outermost temple of all; but, at any rate, it showed me that the key-contrivance of the door of the chamber was *on the outside*. With the deliberate purpose of there ending my days, I passed into the apartment, and pulled the door toward me. I heard with joy the click of the fastening which sealed my fate.

In the room is a small stone table and a stool. I had brought with me parchment, and the materials for writing. This history, as far as it has now gone, has by these means been recorded. I shall leave it to moulder beside my bones. As the half-pleasurable pangs of hunger, and the languor of coming disease, invade my body, I may add yet a phrase or two.

* * *

I have now observed that this chamber is not of stone, as far at least as its interior lining is concerned. It is certainly extraordinary; but there can be no doubt that the flooring and ceiling are of wood, and that the circular sides are of old iron-plate panelled at regular intervals with narrow wooden laminæ. The faintness of the lamp's scarlet glow doubtless prevented me from noticing this singularity from the first.

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I have brought with me a quantity of opium. On the lap of an ocean of rainbows will I embark when the great hour comes.

* * *

The opium works well in stanching the current of the blood, and in overdriving the spent heart to its final throbbings. It will thus quicken the action of the hunger. The past five or six hours I have spent in a coma full of luxuriousness.

* * *

Spare me! Spare me! frail man that I am! This chamber, in which—with my own hand—I have imprisoned myself, *is the nethermost hell itself!* Happening to rise from my seat, I saw—in the shadow thrown by the table—a sight! the skeleton of a man; having a burnt appearance; old as the mountain; dismembered now in the lower limbs, the ribs in fragments; but the cervical vertebræ still cohering, and around them—coiled—in perfect preservation, in hideous symmetry, the vertebræ of a great—No! not that word again! I dashed my body against the door of my prison; for a full hour of frenzy beat my life against its adamant: then fell to the ground.

* * *

As I lay on the floor, my senses having returned to me, I seemed to hear a very faint sound, proceeding apparently from beneath the casing of wood. I bent down my ear. It was a gentle crepitant sound, as though a rat gnawed the wood.

But this it could hardly have been which made me leap up with an alacrity so frantic. The action was involuntary; but I soon recognized its reason. On placing the palm of my hand upon the boarding, a marked degree of *warmth* communicated itself to my skin. I have also touched the iron casing of the chamber all round, and find the same condition.

This apartment must be at a great depth in the bowels of the earth. Can it be that huge geologic forces, volcanic in character, are tumbling in Acherontic travail around me? The heat of the floor and walls slowly but steadily increases.

* * *

Seventy years ago I made a threefold vow. Forty years ago I broke the first, and wedded. Ten years ago I broke the second, and left my home. Three days ago I broke, thou seeing God, the third, when, within my own hand, I closed upon me this tomb of woe. For now—at last!—I know—with clear precision—the ultimate, the flaming, the maddening secret of being.

It is old: it has been heard from the beginning; but heard as an incredible tale. Upon no heart of man has its intolerable incubus ever rested as now it rests upon mine; no eyeball has its excess of light so scorched and blasted into ashes. And this I say in foolish and feeble words; that there is knowledge, and there may be things; but gibbering spectres of this One Thing only: *an Eye that glares and glares for ever!* And wise are they who call it Hammon, Brimmah, Zeu-Ya, and Ra, and Allah; but wiser they who say *Saranyû* (*i.e.* “Eninyes,” Counteraction).

* * *

I will write even to the bitter and fiery end.

* * *

The scraping and gnawing sound has multiplied itself a million-fold, amid is now clamorous and constant. At every point beneath the flooring—along the length of every wooden panel—over all the wooden ceiling, it is heard. An army of creatures boring, *boring* their invincible way to reach me. . . .

* * *

The floor I can no longer touch with my feet; the table of stone itself grows hot; the iron casing of the chamber, even under the scarlet gleam of the lamp, now emits the redding glow of heated metal. . . .

Tulsah!—that name again!—the fiery furnace of intensest hell—ah bitter, *bitter* love! to the centre it blazes. And now—ah now—from a thousand apertures—around, above, beneath—a thousand small and crimson serpent-heads extrude! convulsive—O bile of God!—in ecstasy—they expel and retract their salamandrine necks! Crimson, crimson, is their name! But what a Babel of hissing! Once, in sleep, did I not see her tongue loll black and long—And now—wage,

wage of lawless love!—now—O Majesty—they come—that flaming fault in worms—now—ten thousand forked and jagged (three words of doubtful meaning follow).