

The Corpse-Demon

By Lafcadio Hearn

There is a book written in the ancient tongue of India, and called Vetalapantchavinsati, signifying "The Twenty-five Tales of a Demon." . . . And these tales are marvellous above all stories told by man; for wondrous are the words of Demons, and everlasting. . . . Now this Demon dwelt within a corpse, and spoke with the tongue of the corpse, and gazed with the eyes of the corpse. And the corpse was suspended by its feet from a tree overshadowing tombs.

Now on the fourteenth of the moonless half of the month Bhadon, the Kshatrya king Vikramaditya was commanded by a designing Yogi that he should cut down the corpse and bring the same to him. For the Yogi thus designed to destroy the king in the night.

And when the king cut down the corpse, the Demon which was in the corpse laughed and said: "If thou shouldst speak once upon the way, I go not with thee, but return onto my tree." Then the Demon began to tell to the king stories so strange that he could not but listen. And at the end of each story the Demon would ask hard questions, threatening to devour Vikramaditya should he not answer; and the king, rightly answering, indeed avoided destruction, yet, by speaking, perforce enabled the Demon to return to the tree . . . Now listen to one of those tales which the Demon told:—

O king, there once was a city called Dharmpur, whose rajah Dharmshil built a glorious temple to Devi, the goddess with a thousand shapes and a thousand names. In marble was the statue of the goddess wrought, so that she appeared seated cross-legged upon the cup of a monstrous lotos, two of her four hands being joined in prayer, and the other two uplifting on either side of her fountain basins, in each of which stood an elephant spouting perfumed spray. And there was exceeding great devotion at this temple; and the people never wearied of presenting to the goddess sandalwood, unbroken rice, consecrated food, flowers, and lamps burning odorous oil.

Now from a certain city there came one day in pilgrimage to Devi's temple, a washerman and a friend with him. Even as he was ascending the steps of the temple, he beheld a damsel descending toward him, unrobed above the hips, after the fashion of her people. Sweet as the moon was her face; her hair was like a beautiful dark cloud; her eyes were liquid and large as a wild deer's; her brows were arched like bows well bent; her delicate nose was curved like a falcon's beak; her neck was comely as a dove's; her teeth were like pomegranate seeds; her lips ruddy as the crimson gourd; her hands and feet soft as lotos-leaves. Golden-yellow was her skin, like the petals of the champa-flowers; and the pilgrim saw that she was graceful-waisted as a leopard. And while the tinkling of the gold rings about her round ankles receded beyond his hearing, his sight became dim for love, and he prayed his friend to discover for him who the maiden might be. . . . Now she was the daughter of a washerman.

Then did the pilgrim enter into the presence of the goddess, having his mind filled wholly by the vision of that girl; and prostrating himself he vowed a strange vow, saying: "O Devi, Mahadevi,—Mother of Gods and Monster-slayer,—before whom all the divinities bow down, thou hast delivered the earth from its burdens! thou hast delivered those that worshipped thee from a thousand misfortunes! Now I pray thee, O Mother Devi, that thou wilt be my helper also, and fulfil the desire of my heart. And if by thy favor I be enabled to marry that loveliest of women, O Devi, verily I will make a sacrifice of my own head to thee." Such was the vow which he vowed.

But having returned unto his city and to his home, the torment of being separated from his beloved so wrought upon him that he became grievously sick, knowing neither sleep nor hunger nor thirst, inasmuch as love causes men to forget all these things. And it seemed that he might shortly die. Then, indeed, his friend, being alarmed, went to the father of the youth, and told him all so that the father also became fearful for his son. Therefore, accompanied by his son's friend, he went to that city, and sought out the father of the girl, and said to him: "Lo! I am of thy caste and calling, and I have a favor to ask of thee. It has come to pass that my son is so enamored of thy daughter that unless she be wedded to him he will surely die. Give me, therefore, the hand of thy daughter for my dear son." And the other was not at all displeased at these words; but, sending for a Brahman, he decided upon a day of good omen for the marriage to be celebrated. And he said: "Friend, bring thy son hither. I shall rub her hands with turmeric, that all men may know she is betrothed."

Thus was the marriage arranged; and in due time the father of the youth came with his son to the city; and after the ceremony had been fulfilled, he returned to his own people with his son and his daughter-in-law. Now the love these young people held each for the other waxed greater day by day; and there was no shadow on the young man's happiness saving the memory of his vow. But his wife so caressed and fondled him that at last the recollection of the oath faded utterly away.

After many days it happened that the husband and wife were both invited to a feast at Dharmapur; and they went thither with the friend who had before accompanied the youth upon his pilgrimage. Even as they neared the city, they saw from afar off the peaked and gilded summits of Devi's temple. Then the remembrance of his oath came back with great anguish to that young husband. "Verily," he thought within his heart, "I am most shameless and wicked among all perjurers, having been false in my vow even to Devi, Mother of Gods!"

And he said to his friend: "I pray thee, remain thou here with my wife while I go to prostrate myself before Devi." So he departed to the temple, and bathed himself in the sacred pool, and bowed himself before the statue with joined hands. And having performed the rites ordained, he struck himself with a sword a mighty blow upon his neck, so that his head, being separated from his body, rolled even to the pillared stem of the marble lotos upon which Devi sat.

Now after the wife and the dead man's friend had long waited vainly, the friend said: "Surely he hath been gone a great time; remain thou here while I go to bring him back!" So he went to the temple, and entering it beheld his friend's body lying in blood, and the severed head beneath the feet of Devi. And he said to his own heart: "Verily this world is hard to live in! . . . Should I now return, the people would say that I had murdered this man for the sake of his wife's exceeding beauty." Therefore he likewise bathed in the sacred pool, and performed the rites prescribed, and smote himself upon the neck so that his head also was severed from his body and rolled in like manner unto Devi's feet.

Now, after the young wife had waited in vain alone for a long while, she became much tormented by fear for her husband's sake, and went also to the temple. And when she beheld the corpses and the reeking swords, she wept with unspeakable anguish, and said to her own heart:

Surely this world is hard to live in at best; and what is life now worth to me without my husband? Moreover, people will say that I, being a wicked woman, murdered them both, in order to live wickedly without restraint. Let me therefore also make a sacrifice!" . . .

Saying these words, she departed to the sacred pool and bathed therein, and, having performed the holy rites, lifted a sword to her own smooth throat that she might slay herself. But even as she lifted the sword a mighty hand of marble stayed her arm; while the deep pavement quivered

to the tread of Devi's feet. For the Mother of Gods had arisen, and descended from her lotos seat, and stood beside her. And a divine voice issued from the grim lips of stone, saying, "O daughter! dear last thou made thyself to me! ask now a boon of Devi!" But she answered, all-tremblingly, "Divinest Mother, I pray only that these men maybe restored to life." Then said the goddess, "Put their heads upon their bodies."

And the beautiful wife sought to do according to the divine command; but love and hope and the fear of Devi made dizzy her brain, so that she placed her husband's head upon the friend's neck, and the head of the friend upon the neck of her husband. And the goddess sprinkled the bodies with the nectar of immortality, and they stood up, alive and well, indeed, yet with heads wonderfully exchanged.

Then said the Demon: "O King Vikramaditya! to which of these two was she wife? Verily, if thou dost not rightly answer, I shall devour thee." And Vikramaditya answered: "Listen! in the holy Shastra it is said that as the Ganges is chief among rivers, and Sumeru chief among mountains, and the Tree of Paradise chief among trees, so is the head chief among the parts of the body. Therefore she was the wife of that one to whose body her husband's head was joined." . . . Having answered rightly, the king suffered no hurt; but inasmuch as he had spoken, it was permitted the corpse-demon to return to the tree, and hang suspended therefrom above the tombs.

. . . And many times, in like manner, was the Demon enabled to return to the tree; and even so many times did Vikramaditya take down and bind and bear away the Demon; and each time the Demon would relate to the king a story so wild, so wonderful, that he could not choose but hear. . . . Now this is another of those tales which the Demon told:—

O king, in the city of Dharmasthal there lived a Brahman, called Kesav; and his daughter, who was beautiful as an Apsara, had rightly been named Sweet Jasmine-Flower, Madhumalati. And so soon as she was nubile, her father and her mother and her brothers were all greatly anxious to find her a worthy husband.

Now one day the father and the brother and the mother of the girl each promised her hand to a different suitor. For the good Kesav, while absent upon a holy visit, met a certain Brahman youth, who so pleased him that Kesav promised him Madhumalati; and even the same day, the brother, who was a student of the Shastras, met at the house of his spiritual teacher another student who so pleased him that he promised him Madhumalati; and in the mean time there visited Kesav's home another young Brahman, who so delighted the mother that she promised him Madhumalati. And the three youths thus betrothed to the girl were all equal in beauty, in strength, in accomplishments, and even in years, so that it would not have been possible to have preferred any one of them above the rest. Thus, when the father returned home, he found the three youths there before him; and he was greatly troubled upon learning all that had taken place. "Verily," he exclaimed, "there is but one girl and three bridegrooms, and to all of the three has our word been pledged; to whom shall I give Madhumalati?" And he knew not what to do.

But even as he was thinking, and gazing from one to the other of the three youths, a hooded serpent bit the girl, so that she died.

Forthwith the father sent out for magicians and holy men, that they might give back life to his daughter; and the holy men came together with the magicians. But the enchanters said that, by reason of the period of the moon, it was not possible for them to do aught; and the holy men avowed that even Brahma himself could not restore life to one bitten by a serpent. With sore

lamentation, accordingly, the Brahman performed the funeral rites; and a pyre was built, and the body of Madhumalati consumed thereupon.

Now those three youths had beheld the girl in her living beauty, and all of them had been madly enamoured of her; and each one, because he had loved and lost her, resolved thenceforth to abandon the world and forego all pleasure in this life. All visited the funeral pyre; and one of them gathered up all the girl's bones while they were yet warm from the flame, and tied them within a bag, and then went his way to become a fakir. Another collected the ashes of her body, and took them with him into the recesses of a forest, where he built a hut and began to live alone with the memory of her. The last indeed took no relic of Madhumalati, but, having prayed a prayer, assumed the garb of a Yogi, and departed to beg his way through the world. Now his name was Madhusudam.

Long after these things had happened, Madhusudam one day entered the house of a Brahman, to beg for alms; and the Brahman invited him to partake of the family repast. So Madhusudam, having washed his hands and his feet, sate him down to eat beside the Brahman; and the Brahman's wife waited upon them. Now it came to pass, when the meal was still but half served, that the Brahman's little boy asked for food; and being bidden to wait, he clung to the skirt of his mother's dress, so that she was hindered in her duties of hospitality. Becoming angry, therefore, she seized her boy, and threw him into the fireplace where a great fire was; and the boy was burned to ashes in a moment. But the Brahman continued to eat as if nothing had happened; and his wife continued to serve the repast with a kindly smile upon her countenance.

And being horror-stricken at these sights, Madhusudam arose from his sitting-place, leaving his meal unfinished, and directed his way toward the door. Then the Brahman kindly questioned him, saying: "O friend, how comes it that thou dost not eat? Surely both I and my wife have done what we could to please thee!"

And Madhusudam, astonished and wroth, answered: "How dost thou dare ask me why I do not eat? how might any being, excepting a Rakshasa, eat in the house of one by whom such a demon-deed hath been committed?" But the Brahman smiled, and rose up and went to another part of the house, and returned speedily with a book of incantations,—a book of the science of resurrection. And he read but one incantation therefrom, when, lo! the boy that had been burned came alive and unscorched from the fire, and ran to his mother, crying and clinging to her dress as before.

Then Madhusudam thought within himself:

"Had I that wondrous book, how readily might I restore my beloved to life!" And he sat down again, and, having finished his repast, remained in that house as a guest. But in the middle of the night he arose stealthily, and purloined the magical book, and fled away to his own city.

And after many days he went upon a pilgrimage of love to the place where the body of Madhumalati had been burned (for it was the anniversary of her death), and arriving he found that the other two who had been betrothed to her were also there before him. And lifting up their voices, they cried out: "O Madhusudam! thou hast been gone many years and last seen much. What hast thou learned of science?"

But he answered: "I have learned the science that restores the dead to life." Then they prayed him, saying, "Revive thou Madhumalati!" And he told them: "Gather ye her bones together, and her ashes, and I will give her life."

And they having so done, Madhusudam produced the book and read a charm therefrom; and the heap of ashes and cindered bones shaped itself to the command, and changed color, and

lived, and became a beautiful woman, sweet as a jasmine-flower,—Madhumalati even as she was before the snake had bitten her!

But the three youths, beholding her smile, were blinded by love, so that they began to wrangle fiercely together for the sake of her. . . .

Then the Demon said: “O Vikramaditya to which of these was she wife? Answer rightly, lest I devour thee.”

And the king answered: “Truly she was the wife of him who had collected her ashes, and taken them with him into the recesses of the forest, where he built a hut and dwelt alone with the memory of her.”

“Nay!” said the Demon, “how could she have been restored to life had not the other also preserved her bones? and despite the piety of those two, how could she have been resurrected but for the third?”

But the king replied: “Even as the son’s duty is to preserve the bones of his parents, so did he who preserved the bones of Madhumalati stand to her only in the place of a son. Even as a father giveth life, so did he who reanimated Madhumalati stand to her only in the place of a father. But he who collected her ashes and took them with him into the recesses of the forest, where he built a hut and dwelt alone with the memory of her, he was truly her lover and rightful husband.”

* * *

Many other hard questions the Demon also asked, concerning men who by magic turned themselves into women, and concerning corpses animated by evil spirits; but the king answered all of them save one, which indeed admitted of no answer:—

O Vikramaditya, when Mahabal was rajah of Dharmpur, another monarch strove against him, and destroyed his army in a great battle, and slew him. And the wife and daughter of the dead king fled to the forest for safety, and wandered there alone. At that time the rajah Chandrasen was hunting in the forest, and his son with him; and they beheld the prints of women’s feet upon the ground. Then said Chandrasen: “Surely the feet of those who have passed here are delicate and beautiful, like those of women yet I marvel exceedingly that there should be women in this desolate place. Let us pursue after them; and if they be beautiful, I shall take to wife her whose feet have made the smallest of these tracks, and thou shalt wed the other.”

So they came up with the women, and were much charmed with their beauty; and the rajah Chandrasen married the daughter of the dead Mahabal, and Chandrasen’s son took Mahabal’s widow to wife. So that the father married the daughter of the mother, and the son the mother of the daughter.

And the Demon asked: “O Vikramaditya,, in what manner were the children of Chandrasen and his son related by these marriages?” But the king could not answer. And because he remained silent the Demon was pleased, and befriended him in a strange and unexpected manner, as it is written in the Vetlapantchavinsati.