

The Brahman and His Brahmani

By Lafcadio Hearn

The wise will not attach themselves unto women; for women sport with the hearts of those who love them, even as with ravens whose wing-feathers have been plucked out. . . . There is honey in the tongues of women; there is nought in their heart save the venom halahala. . . . Their nature is mobile as the eddies of the sea their affection endures no longer than the glow of gold above the place of sunset all venom within, all fair without, women are like unto the fruit of the goundja. . . . Therefore the experienced and wise do avoid women, even as they shun the water-vessels that are placed within the cemeteries. . . .

In the "Pantchopakhyana," and also in that "Ocean of the Rivers of Legend," which is called in the ancient Indian tongue "Kathasaritsagara," may be found this story of a Brahman and his Brahmani:—

. . . . Never did the light that is in the eyes of lovers shine more tenderly than in the eyes of the Brahman who gave his life for the life of the woman under whose lotos-feet he laid his heart. Yet what man lives that hath not once in his time been a prey to the madness inspired by woman? . . .

He alone loved her; his family being loath to endure her presence,—for in her tongue was the subtle poison that excites sister against brother, friend against friend. But so much did he love her that for her sake he abandoned father and mother, brother and sister, and departed with his Brahmani to seek fortune in other parts. Happily his guardian Deva accompanied him,—for he was indeed a holy man, having no fault but the folly of loving too much; and the Deva, by reason of spiritual sight, foresaw all that would come to pass.

As they were journeying together through the elephant-haunted forest, the young woman said to her husband: "O thou son of a venerable man, thy Brahmani dies of thirst; fetch her, she humbly prays thee, a little water from the nearest spring." And the Brahman forthwith hastened to the running brook, with the gourd in his hand but when he had returned with the water, he found his beloved lying dead upon a heap of heavens. Now this death was indeed the unseen work of the good Deva.

So, casting the gourd from him, the Brahman burst into tears, and sobbed as though his soul would pass from him, and kissed the beautiful dead face and the slender dead feet and the golden throat of his Brahmani, shrieking betimes in his misery, and daring to question the gods as to why they had so afflicted him. But even as he lamented, a voice answered him in syllables clear as the notes of a singing bird: "Foolish man I wilt thou give half of thy life in order that thy Brahmani shall live again?"

And he, in whom love had slain all fear, answered untremblingly to the Invisible: "Yea, O Narayana, half of my life will I give unto her gladly." Then spake the Invisible: "Foolish man pronounce the three mystic syllables." And he pronounced them; and the Brahmani, as if awaking from a dream, unclosed her jewel-eyes, and wound her round arms about her husband's neck, and with her fresh lips drank the rain of his tears as the lips of a blossom drink in the dews of the night.

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So, having eaten of fruits and refreshed themselves, both proceeded upon their way; and at last, leaving the forest, they came to a great stretch of gardens lying without a white city,—gardens rainbow-colored with flowers of marvellous perfume, and made cool by fountains flowing from the lips of gods in stone and from the trunks of elephants of rock. Then said the loving husband to his Brahmani: “Remain here a little while, thou too sweet one, that I may hasten on to return to thee sooner with fruits and refreshing drink.” . . .

Now in that place of gardens dwelt a youth, employed to draw up water by the turning of a great wheel, and to cleanse the mouths of the fountains; and although a youth, he had been long consumed by one of those maladies that make men tremble with cold beneath a sky of fire, so that there was little of his youthfulness left to him excepting his voice. But with that voice he charmed the hearts of women, as the juggler charms the hooded serpent; and, seeing the wife of the Brahman, he sang that she might hear.

He sang as the birds sing in the woods in pairing time, as the waters sing that lip the curves of summered banks, as the Apsaras sang in other kalpas; and he sang the songs of Amarou,—Amarou, sweetest of all singers, whose soul had passed through a century of transmigrations in the bodies of a hundred fairest women, until he became the world’s master in all mysteries of love. And as the Brahmani listened, Kama transpierced her heart with his flower-pointed arrows, so that, approaching the youth, she pressed her lips upon his lips, and murmured, “If thou lovest me not, I die.”

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Therefore, when the Brahman returned with fruits and drink, she coaxed him that he should share these with the youth, and even prayed him that he should bring the youth along as a travelling companion or as a domestic.

“Behold!” answered the Brahman, “this young man is too feeble to bear hardship; and if he fall by the wayside, I shall not be strong enough to carry him.” But the Brahmani answered, “Nay should he fall, then will I myself carry him in my basket, upon my head;” and the Brahman yielded to her request, although marvelling exceedingly. So they all travelled on together.

Now one day, as they were reposing by a deep well, the Brahmani, beholding her husband asleep, pushed him so that he fell into the well; and she departed, taking the youth with her. Soon after this had happened, they came to a great city where a famous and holy king hived, who loved all Brahmans and had built them a temple surrounded by rich lands, paying for the land by laying golden elephant-feet in lines round about it. And the cunning Brahmani, when arrested by the toll-collectors and taken before this king,—still bearing the sick youth upon her head in a basket,—boldly spake to the king, saying: “This, most holy of kings, is my dearest husband, a righteous Brahman, who has met with affliction while performing the good works ordained for such as he; and inasmuch as heirs sought his life, I have concealed him in this basket and brought him hither.” Then the king, being filled with compassion, bestowed upon the Brahmani and her pretended husband the revenues of two villages and the freedom thereof, saying: “Thou shalt be henceforth as my sister, thou comeliest and truest of women.”

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But the poor Brahman was not dead; for his good Deva had preserved his life within the well-pit, and certain travellers passing by drew him up and gave him to eat. Thus it happened that he presently came to the same village in which the wicked Brahmani dwelt; and, fearing with an exceeding great fear, she hastened to the king, and said, "Lo! the enemy who seeketh to kill my husband pursueth after us."

Then said the king, "Let him be trampled under foot by the elephants!"

But the Brahman, struggling in the grasp of the king's men, cried out, with a bitter cry: "O king I art thou indeed called just, who will not hearken to the voice of the accused? This fair but wicked woman is indeed my own wife; ere I be condemned, let her first give back to me that which I gave her!"

And the king bade his men stay their hands. "Give him back," he commanded, in a voice of tempest, "that which belongs to him!"

But the Brahmani protested, saying, "My lord, I have nought which belongs to him." So the king's brow darkened with the frown of a maharajah.

"Give me back," cried the Brahman, "the life which I gave thee, my own life given to thee with the utterance of the three mystic syllables,—the half of my own years."

Then, through exceeding fear of the king, she murmured, "Yea, I render it up to thee, the life thou gavest me with the utterance of the three mystic syllables,—and fell dead at the king's feet.

Thus the truth was made manifest; and hence the proverb arose:—

"She for whom I gave up family, home, and even, the half of my life, hath abandoned me, the heartless one! What man may put faith in women!"