

Bakawali

By Lafcadio Hearn

There is in the Hindustan language a marvellous tale written by a Moslem, but treating nevertheless of the ancient gods of India, and of the Apsaras and of the Rakshasas. "The Rose of Bakawali" it is called. Therein also may be found many strange histories of fountains filled with magical waters, changing the sex of those who bathe therein; and histories of flowers created by witchcraft—never fading—whose perfumes give sight to the blind; and, above all, this history of love human and superhuman, for which a parallel may not be found.

In days when the great Rajah Zain-ulmuluk reigned over the eastern kingdoms of Hindostan, it came to pass that Bakawali, the Apsara, fell in love with a mortal youth who was none other than the son of the Rajah. For the lad was beautiful as a girl, beautiful even as the god Kama, and seemingly created for love. Now in that land all living things are sensitive to loveliness, even the plants themselves,—like the Asoka that bursts into odorous blossom when touched even by the foot of a comely maiden. Yet was Bakawali fairer than any earthly creature, being a daughter of the immortals; and those who had seen her, believing her born of mortal woman, would answer when interrogated concerning her, "Ask not us I rather ask thou the nightingale to sing of her beauty."

Never had the youth Taj-ulmuluk guessed that his beloved was not of mortal race, having encountered her as by hazard, and being secretly united to her after the Gandharva fashion. But he knew that her eyes were preternaturally large and dark, and the odor of her hair like Tartary musk; and there seemed to transpire from her when she moved such a light and such a perfume that he remained bereft of utterance, while watching her, and immobile as a figure painted upon a wall. And the lamp of love being enkindled in the heart of Bakawali, her wisdom, like a golden moth, consumed itself in the flame thereof, so that she forgot her people utterly, and her immortality, and even the courts of heaven wherein she was wont to dwell.

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In the sacred books of the Hindus there is much written concerning the eternal city Armanagar, whose inhabitants are immortal. There Indra, azure-bearded, dwells in sleepless pleasure, surrounded by his never-slumbering court of celestial bayaderes, circling about him as the constellations of heaven circle in their golden dance about Surya, the sun. And this was Bakawali's home, that she had abandoned for the love of a man.

So it came to pass one night, a night of perfume and of pleasure, that Indra started up from his couch like one suddenly remembering a thing long forgotten, and asked of those about him: "How happens it that Bakawali, daughter of Firoz, no more appears before us?" And one of them made answer, saying: "O great Indra, that pretty fish hath been caught in the net of human love I Like the nightingale, never does she cease to complain because it is not possible for her to love even more; intoxicated is she with the perishable youth and beauty of her mortal lover; and she lives only for him and in him, so that even her own kindred are now forgotten or have become to her objects of aversion. And it is because of him, O Lord of Suras and Devas, that the rosy one no longer presents herself before thy court."

Then was Indra wroth; and he commanded that Bakawali be perforce brought before him, that she might render account of her amorous folly. And the Devas, awaking her, placed her in their cloud-chariot, and brought her into the presence of Indra, her lips still humid with mortal kisses, and on her throat red-blossom marks left by human lips. And she knelt before him, with fingers joined as in prayer; while the Lord of the firmament gazed at her in silent anger, with such a frown as he was wont to wear when riding to battle upon his elephant triple-trunked. Then said he to the Devas about him: "Let her be purified by fire, inasmuch as I discern about her an odor of mortality offensive to immortal sense. And even so often as she returns to her folly, so often let her be consumed in my sight." . . .

Accordingly they bound the fairest of Apsaras, and cast her into a furnace furious as the fires of the sun, so that within a moment her body was changed to a white heap of ashes. But over the ashes was magical water sprinkled; and out of the furnace Bakawali arose, nude as one newly born, but more perfect in rosy beauty even than before. And Indra commanded her to dance before him, as she was wont to do in other days.

So she danced all those dances known in the courts of heaven, curving herself as flowers curve under a perfumed breeze, as water serpentine under the light; and she circled before them rapidly as a leaf-whirling wind, lightly as a bee, with myriad variations of delirious grace, with ever-shifting enchantment of motion, until the hearts of all who looked upon her were beneath those shining feet, and all cried aloud: "O flower-body! O rose-body! O marvel of the Garden of Grace! blossom of daintiness! O flower-body!"

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Thus was she each night obliged to appear before Indra at Armanagar, and each night to suffer the fiercest purification of fire, forasmuch as she would not forsake her folly; and each night also did she return to her mortal lover, and take her wonted place beside him without awaking him, having first bathed her in the great fountain of rosewater within the court.

But once it happened that Taj-ulmuluk awoke in the night, and reaching out his arms found she was not there. Only the perfume of her bead upon the pillow, and odorous garments flung in charming formlessness upon every divan.

When she returned, seemingly fairer than before, the youth uttered no reproach, but on the night following he slit up the tip of his finger with a sharp knife, and filled the wound with salt that he might not sleep. Then, when the aerial chariot descended all noiselessly, like some, long cloud moon-silvered, he arose and followed Bakawali unperceived. Clinging underneath the chariot, he was borne above winds even to Armanagar, and into the jewelled courts and into the presence of Indra. But Indra knew not, for his senses were dizzy with sights of beauty and the fumes of soma-wine.

Then did Taj-ulmuluk, standing in the shadow of a pillar, behold beauty such as he had never before seen—save in Bakawali—and hear music sweeter than mortal musician may ever learn. Splendors bewildered his eyes; and the crossing of the fretted and jewelled archwork above him seemed an intercrossing and interblending of innumerable rainbows. But when it was given to him, all unexpectedly, to view the awful purification of Bakawali, his heart felt like ice within him, and he shrieked. Nor could he have refrained from casting himself also into that burst of white fire, had not the magical words been pronounced and the wizard-water sprinkled before he was able to move a limb. Then did he behold Bakawali rising from her snowy anders,—shining like an image of the goddess Lakshmi in the fairest of her thousand forms,—more radiant than

before, like some comet returning from the embraces of the sun with brighter curves of form and longer glories of luminous hair. . . .

And Bakawali danced and departed, Tajulmuluk likewise returning even as he had come. . . .

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But when he told her, in the dawn of the morning, that he had accompanied her in her voyage and had surprised her secret, Bakawali wept and trembled for fear. "Alas! alas! what hast thou done?" she sobbed; "thou hast become thine own greatest enemy. Never canst thou know all that I have suffered for thy sake,—the maledictions of my kindred, the insults of all belonging to my race. Yet rather than turn away my face from thy love, I suffered nightly the agonies of burning; I have died a myriad deaths rather than lose thee. Thou hast seen it with thine own eyes! . . . But none of mankind may visit unbidden the dwelling of the gods and return with impunity. Now, alas! the evil hath been done; nor can I devise any plan by which to avert thy danger, save that of bringing thee again secretly to Armanagar and charming Indra in such wise that he may pardon all." . . .

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So Bakawali the Apsara suffered once more the agony of fire, and danced before the gods, not only as she had danced before, but so that the eyes of all beholding her became dim in watching the varying curves of her limbs, the dizzy speed of her white feet, the tossing light of her hair. And the charm of her beauty bewitched the tongues of all there, so that the cry, "O flower-body!" fainted into indistinguishable whispers, and the fingers of the musicians were numbed with languor, and the music weakened tremblingly, quiveringly, dying down into an amorous swoon.

And out of the great silence broke the soft thunder of Indra's pleased voice: "O Bakawali! ask me for whatever thou wilt, and it shall be accorded thee. By the Trimurti, I swear!" . . . But she, kneeling before him, with bosom still fluttering from the dance, murmured: "I pray thee, divine One, only that thou wilt allow me to depart hence, and dwell with this mortal whom I love during all the years of life allotted unto him." And she gazed upon the youth Taj-ulmuluk.

But Indra, hearing these words, and looking also at Taj-ulmuluk, frowned so darkly that gloom filled all the courts of heaven. And he said: "Thou, also, son of man, wouldst doubtless make the same prayer; yet think not thou mayst take hence an Apsara like Bakawali to make her thy wife without grief to thyself! And as for thee, O shameless Bakawali, thou mayst depart with him, indeed, since I have sworn; but I swear also to thee that from thy waist unto thy feet thou shalt remain a woman of marble for the space of twelve years. . . Now let thy lover rejoice in thee!" . . .

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. . . And Bakawali was placed in the chamber of a ruined pagoda, deep-buried within the forests of Ceylon; and there did she pass the years, sitting upon a seat of stone, herself stone from feet to waist. But Taj-ulmuluk found her and ministered unto her as to the statue of a goddess; and he waited for her through the long years.

The ruined pavement, grass-disjointed, trembled to the passing tread of wild elephants; often did tigers peer through the pillared entrance, with eyes flaming like emeralds; but Taj-ulmuluk was never weary nor afraid, and he waited by her through all the weary and fearful years.

Gem-eyed lizards clung and wondered; serpents watched with marvellous chrysolite gaze; vast spiders wove their silvered lace above the head of the human statue; sunset-feathered birds, with huge and flesh-colored beaks, hatched their young in peace tunder the eyes of Bakawali. . . . Until it came to pass at the close of the eleventh year,—Taj-ulmuluk being in search of food,—that the great ruin fell, burying the helpless Apsara under a ponderous and monstrous destruction beyond the power of any single arm to remove. . . .Then Taj-ulmuluk wept; but he still waited, knowing that the immortals could not die.

And out of the shapeless mass of ruins there soon grew a marvellous tree, graceful, dainty, round-limbed like a woman; and Taj-ulmuluk watched it waxing tall under the mighty heat of the summer, bearing flowers lovelier than that narcissus whose blossoms have been compared to the eyes of Oriental girls, and rosy fruit as smooth-skinned as maiden flesh.

So the twelfth year passed. And with the passing of its last moon, a great fruit parted itself, and therefrom issued the body of a woman, slender and exquisite, whose supple limbs had been folded up within the fruit as a butterfly is folded up within its chrysalis, comely as an Indian dawn, deeper-eyed than ever woman of earth,—being indeed an immortal, being an Apsara,—Bakawali reincarnated for her lover, and relieved from the malediction of the gods.