

Natalika

By Lafcadio Hearn

The story of a statue of sable stone among the ruins of Tirouvicaray, which are in the Land of Golconda that was When the body shall have mouldered even as the trunk of a dead tree, shall have crumbled to dust even as a clod of earth, the lovers of the dead will turn away their faces and depart; but Virtue, remaining faithful, will lead the soul beyond the darknesses. . . .

The yellow jungle-grasses are in the streets of the city; the hooded serpents are coiled about the marble legs of the gods. Bats suckle their young within the ears of the granite elephants; and the hairy spicier spins her web for ruby-throated humming-birds within the chambers of kings. The pythons breed within the sanctuaries, once ornate as the love-songs of Indian poets; the diamond eyes of the gods have been plucked out; lizards nestle in the lips of Siva; the centipedes writhe among the friezes; the droppings of birds whiten the altars. . . . But the sacred gateway of a temple still stands, as though preserved by the holiness of its inscriptions "The Self-existent is not of the universe. . . . Man may not take with him aught of his possessions beyond the grave; let him increase the greatness of his good deeds, even as the white ants do increase the height of their habitation. For neither father nor mother, neither sister nor brother, neither son nor wife, may accompany him to the other world; but Virtue only may be his comrade." . . . And these words, graven upon the stone, have survived the wreck of a thousand years.

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Now, among the broken limbs of the gods, and the jungle grasses, and the monstrous creeping plants that seem striving to strangle the elephants of stone, a learned traveller wandering in recent years came upon the statue of a maiden, in black granite, marvellously wrought. Her figure was nude and supple as those of the women of Krishna; on her head was the tiara of a princess, and from her joined hands escaped a cascade of flowers to fall upon the tablet supporting her exquisite feet. And on the tablet was the name NATALIKA; and above it a verse from the holy Ramayana, which signifies, in our tongue, these words:—

". . . For I have been witness of this marvel, that by crushing the flowers in her hands, she made them to exhale a sweeter perfume."

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And this is the story of Natalika, as it is told in the chronicle of the Moslem historian Ferista:—

More than a thousand years ago there was war between the Khalif Oualed and Dir-Rajah, of the Kingdom of Sindh. The Arab horsemen swept over the land like a typhoon; and their eagle-visaged hordes reddened the rivers with blood, and made the nights crimson with the burning of cities. Brahmanabad they consumed with fire, and Alan and Dinal, making captives of the women, and putting all males to the edge of the scimitar. The Rajah fought stoutly for his people and for his gods; but the Arabs prevailed, fearing nothing, remembering the words of the Prophet, that "Paradise may be found in the shadow of the crossing of swords." And at

Brahmanabad, Kassim, the zealous lieutenant of the Khalif, captured the daughter of the iRajah, and slew the Rajah and all his people.

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Her name was Natalika. When Kassim saw her, fairer than that Love-goddess born from a lotos-flower, her eyes softer than dew, her figure lithe as reeds, her blue-black tresses rippling to the gold rings upon her ankles,—he swore by the Prophet's beard that she was the comeliest ever born of woman, and that none should have her save the Khalif Oualed. So he commanded that a troop of picked horsemen should take her to Bagdad, with much costly booty,—jewelry delicate and light as feathers, ivory carving miraculously wrought (sculptured balls within sculptured balls), emeralds and turquoises, diamonds and rubies, woofs of cashmere, and elephants, and dromedaries. And whosoever might do hurt to Natalika by the way, would have to pay for it with his head, as surely as the words of the Koran were the words of God's Prophet.

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When Natalika came into the presence of the Khalif of Bagdad, the Commander of the Faithful could at first scarcely believe his eyes, seeing so beautiful a maiden; and starting from his throne without so much as looking at the elephants and the jewels and the slaves and the other gifts of Kassim, he raised the girl from her knees and kissed her in the presence of all the people, vowing that it rather behooved him to kneel before her than her to kneel before him. But she only wept, and answered not. . . .

And before many days the Khalif bade her know that he desired to make her his favorite wife; for since his eyes had first beheld her he could neither eat nor sleep for thinking of her. Therefore he prayed that she would cease her weeping, inasmuch as he would do more to make her happy than any other might do, save only the Prophet in his paradise.

Then Natalika wept more bitterly than before, and vowed herself unworthy to be the bride of the Khalif, although herself a king's daughter; for Kassim had done her a grievous wrong even sending her to Bagdad. . . .

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Oualed heard the tale, and his mustaches curled with wrath. He sent his swiftest messengers to India with a sealed parchment containing orders that Kassim should leave the land of Sindh forthwith and hasten to Bassora, there to await further commands. Natalika shut herself up alone in her chamber to weep; and the Khalif wondered that he could not comfort her. But Kassim, leaving Sindh, wondered much more why the Commander of the Faithful should have recalled him, notwithstanding the beauty of the gifts, the loveliness of the captives, the splendor of the elephants. Still marvelling, he rode into Bassora, and sought the governor of that place. Even while he was complaining there came forth mutes with bow-strings, and they strangled Kassim at the governor's feet.

Days went and came; and at last there rode into Bagdad a troop of fierce horsemen, to the Khalif's palace. Their leader, advancing into Oualcd's presence, saluted him, and laid at his feet a ghastly head with blood-bedabbled beard, the head of the great captain, Kassim.

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“Lo!” cried Oualed to Natalika, “I have avenged thy wrong; and now, I trust, thou wilt believe that I love thee, and truly desire to set thee over my household as my wife, my queen, my sweetly beloved!”

But Natalika commenced to laugh with a wild and terrible laugh. “Know, O deluded one,” she cried, “that Kassim was wholly innocent in that whereof I accused him, and that I sought only to avenge the death of my people, the murder of my brothers and sisters, the pillage of our homes, the sacrilegious destruction of the holy city Brahmanabad. Never shall I, the daughter of a Kshatrya king, ally myself with one of thy blood and creed. I have lived so long only that I might be avenged; and now that I am doubly avenged, by the death of our enemy, by thy hopeless dream of love for me, I die!” Piercing her bosom with a poniard, she fell at the Khalif’s feet.

But Natalika’s betrothed lover, Odayah-Rajah, avenged her even more, driving the circumcised conquerors from the land, and slaughtering all who fell into his hands. And the cruelties they had wrought he repaid them a hundred-fold.

Yet, growing weary of life by reason of Natalika’s death, he would not reign upon the throne to which he had hoped to lift her in the embrace of love; but, retiring from the world, he became a holy mendicant of the temple of Tirouvicaray.

And at last, feeling his end near, he dug himself a little grave under the walls of the temple and ordered the most skilful sculptors to make the marble statue of his beloved, and that the statue should be placed upon his grave. Thus they wrought Natalika’s statue as the statues of goddesses are wrought, but always according to his command, so that she seemeth to be crushing roses in her fingers. And when Odayah-Rajah passed away, they placed the statue of Natalika above him, so that her feet rest upon his heart.

“I have been witness of this marvel, that by crushing the flowers within her hands she made them to exhale a sweeter perfume!”

Were not those flowers the blossoming of her beautiful youth, made lovelier by its own sacrifice?

The temple and its ten thousand priests are gone. But even after the lapse of a thousand years a perfume still exhales from those roses of stone!