

A Parable Buddhistic

By Lafcadio Hearn

. . . Like to earthen vessels wrought in a potter's mill so are the lives of men; howsoever carefully formed, all are doomed to destruction. Nought that exists shalt endure; life is as the waters of a river that flow away, but never return. Therefore may happiness only be obtained by concealing the Six Appetites, as the tortoise withdraws its six extremities into its shell; by guarding the thoughts from desire and from grief even as the city is guarded by its ditches and its walls. . . .

So spoke in gathas Sakya-Mouni. And this parable, doubtless by him narrated of old, and translated from a lost Indian manuscript into the Chinese tongue, may be found in the fifty-first book of the "Fa-youen-tchou-lin."

. . . A father and his son were laboring together in the field during the season of serpents, and a hooded serpent bit the young man, so that he presently died. For there is no remedy known to man which may annul the venom of the hooded snake, filling the eyes with sudden darkness and stilling the motion of the heart. But the father, seeing his son lying dead, and the ants commencing to gather, returned to his work and ceased not placidly to labor as before.

Then a Brahman passing that way, seeing what had happened, wondered that the father continued to toil, and yet more at observing that his eyes were tearless. Therefore he questioned him, asking: "Whose son was that youth who is dead?"

"He was mine own son," returned the laborer, ceasing not to labor.

"Yet, being thy son, how do I find thee tearless and impassive?"

"Folly!" answered the laborer;—"even the instant that a man is born into the world, so soon doth he make his first step in the direction of death; and the ripeness of his strength is also the beginning of its decline. For the well-doing there is indeed a recompense; for the wicked there is likewise punishment. What avail, therefore, tears and grief? in no wise can they serve the dead. . . . Perchance, good Brahman, thou art on thy way to the city. If so, I pray thee to pass by my house, and to tell my wife that my son is dead, so that she may send hither my noonday repast."

"Ah! what manner of man is this?" thought the Brahman to himself. "His son is dead, yet he does not weep; the corpse lies under the sun, yet he ceases not to labor; the ants gather about it, yet he coldly demands his noonday meal! Surely there is no compassion, no human feeling, within his entrails!" These things the Brahman thought to himself; yet, being stirred by curiosity, he proceeded none the less to the house of the laborer, and beholding the mother said unto her: "Woman, thy son is dead, having been stricken by a hooded snake; and thy tearless husband bade me tell thee to send him his noonday repast. . . . And now I perceive thou art also insensible to the death of thy son, for thou dost not weep!"

But the mother of the dead answered him with comparisons, saying: "Sir, that son had indeed received only a passing life from his parents; therefore I called him not my son. Now he hath passed away from me, nor was it in my feeble power to retain him. He was only as a traveller halting at a tavern; the traveller rests and passes on; shall the tavern-keeper restrain him? Such is indeed the relation of mother and son. Whether the son go or come, whether he remain or pass on, I have no power over his being; my son has fulfilled the destiny appointed, and from that destiny none could save him. Why, therefore, lament that which is inevitable?"

And wondering still more, the Brahman turned unto the eldest sister of the dead youth, a maiden in the lotos bloom of her maidenhood, and asked her, saying: "Thy brother is dead, and wilt thou not weep?"

But the maiden also answered him with comparisons, saying: "Sometimes a strong woodman enters the forest of trees, and hews them down with mighty axe-strokes, and binds them together into a great raft, and launches the raft into the vast river. But a furious wind arises and excites the waves to dash the raft hither and thither, so that it breaks asunder, and the currents separate the foremost logs from those behind, and all are whirled away never again to be united. Even such has been the fate of my young brother. We were bound together by destiny in the one family; we have been separated forever. There is no fixed tune of life or deaths; whether our existence be long or short, we are united only for a period, to be separated forevermore. My brother has ended his allotted career; each of us is following a destiny that may not be changed. To me it was not given to protect and to save him. Wherefore should I weep for that which could not be prevented?"

Then wondering still more, the Brahman addressed himself to the beautiful wife of the dead youth, saying: "And thou, on whose bosom he slept, dost thou not weep for him, thy comely husband, cut off in the summer of his manhood?"

But she answered him also with comparisons, saying: "Even as two birds, flying one from the east and one from the south, meet and look into each other's eyes, and circle about each other, and seek the same summit of tree or temple, and sleep together until the dawn, so was our own fate. When the golden light breaks in the east, the two birds, leaving their temple perch or their tree, fly in opposite ways each to seek its food. They meet again if destiny wills; if not, they never behold each other more. Such was the fate of my husband and myself; when death sought him his destiny was accomplished, and it was not in my power to save him. Therefore, why should I weep?"

Then wondering more than ever, the Brahman questioned the slave of the dead man, asking him: "Thy master is dead; why dost thou not weep?" But the slave also answered him with comparisons, saying: "My master and I were united by the will of destiny; I was only as the little calf which follows the great bull. The great bull is slain: the little calf could not save him from the axe of the butcher; its cries and bleatings could avail nothing. Wherefore should I weep, not knowing how soon indeed my own hour may come?"

And the Brahman, silent with wonder, watched the slender figures of the women moving swiftly to and fro athwart the glow of golden light from without, preparing the noonday repast for the tearless laborer in the field.