

Pundari

By Lafcadio Hearn

A story of the Buddha, who filled with light the world, the soles of whose feet were like unto the faces of two blazing suns, for that he trod in the Perfect Paths.

. . . In those days Buddha was residing upon the summit of the mountain Gridhrakuta, overlooking that ancient and vanished city called Rajagriha,—then a glorious vision of white streets and fretted arcades, and milky palaces so mightily carved that they seemed light as woofs of Cashmere, delicate as frost! There was the cry of elephants heard; there the air quivered with amorous music; there the flowers of a thousand gardens exhaled incense to heaven, and there women sweeter than the flowers moved their braceleted ankles to the notes of harps and flutes. . . But, above all, the summit of the mountain glowed with a glory greater than day,—with a vast and rosy light signalling the presence of the Buddha.

Now in that city dwelt a bayadere, most lovely among women, with whom in grace no other being could compare; and she had become weary of the dance and the jewels and the flowers,—weary of her corselets of crimson and golden silk, and her robes light as air, diaphanous as mist,—weary, also, of the princes who rode to her dwelling upon elephants, bearing her gifts of jewels and perfumes and vessels strangely wrought in countries distant ten years' journey. And her heart whispered her to seek out Buddha, that she might obtain knowledge and rest, becoming even as a Bikshuni.

Therefore, bidding farewell to the beautiful city, she began to ascend the hilly paths to where the great and rosy glory beamed above. Fierce was the heat of the sun, and rough the dizzy paths; and the thirst and weariness of deserts came upon her. So that, having but half ascended the mountain, she paused to drink and rest at a spring clear and bright like diamond, that had wrought a wondrous basin for itself in the heart of the rock.

But as the bayadere bent above the fountain to drink, she beheld in its silver-bright mirror the black glory of her hair, and the lotos softness of her silky-shadowed eyes, and the rose-budding of her honey-sweet mouth, and her complexion golden as sunlight, and the polished suppleness of her waist, and her slender limbs rounder than an elephant's trunk, and the gold-engirdled grace of her ankles. And a mist of tears gathered before her sight. "Shall I, indeed, cast away this beauty?" she murmured. "Shall I mask this loveliness, that hath allured rajahs and maharajahs, beneath the coarse garb of a recluse? Shall I behold my youth and grace fade away in solitude as dreams of the past? Wherefore, then, should I have been born so beautiful? Nay! let those without grace and without youth abandon all to seek the Five Paths!" And she turned her face again toward the white-glimmering Rajagriha, whence ascended the breath of flowers, and the liquid melody of flutes, and the wanton laughter of dancing girls. . . .

But far above, in the rosiness, omniscient Buddha looked into her heart, and, pitying her weakness, changed himself by utterance of the Word into a girl far comelier and yet more lissome than even Pundari the bayadere. So that Pundari, descending, suddenly and in much astonishment became aware of the loveliest of companions at her side, and asked: "O thou fairest one! whence comest thou? Who may the kindred be of one so lovely?"

And the sweet stranger answered, in tones softer than of flutes of gold: "I also, lovely one, am returning to the white city Rajagriha; let us journey together, that we may comfort each other by the way."

And Pundari answered: "Yea, O fairest maiden! thy beauty draws me to thee as the flower the bee, and thy heart must surely be precious as is thy incomparable face!"

So they journeyed on; but the lovely stranger became weary at last, and Pundari, sitting down, made a pillow of her round knees for the dainty head, and kissed her comrade to sleep, and stroked the silky magnificence of her hair, and fondled the ripe beauty of the golden face slumbering, and a great love for the stranger swelled ripening in her heart.

Yet while she gazed the face upon her smooth knees changed, even as a golden fruit withers and wrinkles, so wizened became the curved cheeks: strange hollows darkened and deepened about the eyes; the silky lashes vanished with their shadows; the splendid hair whitened like the ashes of altar fires; shrunken and shrivelled grew the lips; toothless yawned the once rosy mouth; and the bones of the face, made salient, fore-shaped the gibbering outlines of a skull. The perfume of youth was gone; but there arose odors insufferable of death, and with them came the ghastly creeping things that death fattens, and the livid colors and blotches that his shadowy fingers leave. And Pundari, shrieking, fled to the presence of Buddha, and related unto him the things which she had seen.

And the World-honored comforted her, and spake:—

"O Pundari, life is but as the fruit; loveliness but as the flower! Of what use is the fairest body that lieth rotting beside the flowings of the Ganges? Old age and death none of us may escape; yet there are worse than these,—the new births which are to this life as the echo to the voice in the cavern, as the great footprints to the steps of the elephant.

"From desire cometh woe; by desire is begotten all evil. The body itself is a creation of the mind only, of the foolish thirst of the heart for pleasure. As the shadows of dreams are dissipated with the awakening of the sleeper, even so shall sorrow vanish and evil pass away from the heart of whosoever shall learn to conquer desire and quench the heart's thirst; even so shall the body itself vanish for those who tread well in the Five Paths.

"O Pundari, there is no burning greater than desire; no joy like unto the destruction of the body! Even as the white stork standing alone beside the dried-up lily-pool, so shall those be whose youth passes from them in the fierce heat of foolish passion; and when the great change shall come, they will surely be born again unto foolishness and tears.

"Those only who have found delight in the wilderness where others behold horror; those who have extinguished all longings; those self-made passionless by meditation on life and death,—only such do attain to happiness, and, preventing the second birth, enter into the blessedness of Nirvana." . . .

And the bayadere, cutting off her hair, and casting from her all gifts of trinkets and jewels, abandoned everything to enter the Five Paths. And the Devas, rejoicing, made radiant the mountains above the white city, and filled the air with a rain of strange flowers. And whosoever would know more of Buddha, let him read the marvellous book "Fah-Kheu-King,"—the Book "Dhammapada."