

FRANCIS BAIN

THE ASHES OF
A GOD

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The Ashes of a God:

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PREFACE

That mischief-making deity, the god of Love, who delights in getting others into trouble, got himself, once upon a time, if we may trust the poets, into trouble of no ordinary kind. For seeing, as he thought, his opportunity, he attempted to inflame Maheshwara himself with passion for the virgin Daughter of the Snow, who was standing shyly just in front of him, like an incarnation of irresistible seduction, raised to the highest power by the contrast between her coarse bark garments and the perfect beauty of the figure they enclosed. And then it was that the biter was bit, and Love himself was suddenly reduced to ashes for his impudence by a pulverising glance from the angry Maheshwara's terrible third eye, that opened for an instant, for unhappy Love's discomfiture, like the door of a blast-furnace upon a moth. And the pale young Moon looked out upon it all, from the hair of the angry god; the pale new Moon, that very Digit, who gives the title to our story, being therein described as so superlatively lovely, as to be capable of causing the very god of Love to rise from his own ashes.

For it is to be remembered that Love's ashes are no common

ashes: they have in them something of the phoenix; they are always ready to revive. The beautiful lament of Rati (Love's wife), over the ashes of her husband (overheard by Kálidás), was really, had she only known, superfluous. He was sure to come to life again. Or, to speak plain English, a great passion is immortal: its very ashes are never absolutely dead. Breathe close upon them, and, as one of our own poets has said, it may be flame will leap. And this is the solid reason why the old Hindoo sages denoted both Love and Recollection by one and the same word. Memory, remembrance, regret, reminiscence; – all these are clearly closely akin, near relatives of Love. What is indifferent to us we soon forget; but we remember what we love, and the longer, in proportion as we love it more. And thus it comes about, that the most formidable obstacle to the would-be sage, the candidate for honours, as we might call him, in renunciation of the world, is his own recollection, his memory of the past. The object of the sage, according to the old Hindoo doctrine, is to become absolute master of himself (*jítátmá*), to render himself completely superior, or rather indifferent, to the "attachment" of all mundane clogs. The ordinary mortal is a prisoner, tied, bound in bondage, or *attached* (*sakta*), to and by the objects of delusion and sense. Whoever aims at emancipation must first, by a long and strenuous course of penance and austerity, sever these attachments, till even though he still remains among them, they run off him like water from a duck; and he goes on living, according to the classic formula, like a wheel that continues to

revolve when the original impetus has ceased, or like a branch that goes on swaying after the departure of the bird. He is awake, as opposed to those who still remain blinded by illusion; he is *free*, as contrasted with the bound; his soul is unattached. But now, there is one thing, from which it may very well be doubted, whether even any sage, no matter what his elevation, was ever wholly free – regret. The strongest soul possesses the most powerful recollection, and unless madness intervene, to cut the thread by obliterating memory, there are things that refuse to be forgotten. And where recollection is, there is sure to be were it but a vestige of regret; for memory is love. And what, then, is it, that is of all things most peculiarly the object of regret; that laughs at all efforts to reduce it to oblivion and nonentity; that refuses to be driven into the *oubliettes* of any soul? Needless to say, a woman. And therefore it is, that she is regarded, in Oriental mysticism, as beyond all other things the enemy of emancipation; the clog *par excellence*; the fetter of the soul; the everlastingly regretted, the unforgettable and unforgotten; the irreducible residuum; the inextinguishable spark among the ashes of the past. Was it not Swift, among whose papers, after his death, was found a packet, labelled in his own handwriting: *Only a woman's hair*? And did not Coriolanus find in this the thing to thwart him, the obstacle that stood between his resolution and the overthrow of Rome? But we need not go to history or fiction to prove a thing endorsed by the experience of almost every man and woman since the beginning of the world. Everybody knows,

what one has said, that youth is a blunder: manhood a struggle: old age a regret. Death is preceded by a sigh; did ever anybody die, who had absolutely nothing to regret? And regret, in the language of the old Hindoos, is nothing but the ashes of dead love, not utterly extinct; and therefore, since all love is more or less divine, *the ashes of a god*.

The ethical value of India's beautiful mythology is not sufficiently appreciated in Europe, whose people seem to think that virtue was discovered by themselves, and have learned from Xenophanes and Plato, S. Paul, S. Augustine, and other shallow politicians to deny all morality to polytheism,[¹] condemning the whole of antiquity for the vices of the old metropolis of Rome, which itself was no worse than many modern cities. And India is a survival from antiquity. But it is not, as some suppose, a sink of immorality; nor a barbarous *tabula rasa*, as others seem to think, with everything to learn in ethics, on which anything may be written that you please. The arrogance of ignorance is the cause of these misunderstandings. The Hindoos have a fable that the *chakora*, a legendary partridge, subsists on the beams of the moon: and the bird is no bad emblem of themselves. In the ruin of

¹ The old argument: there is immorality in the stones of the gods; *ergo*, the men must be the same, is a monotheist calumny. Books like Kingsley's *Roman and Teuton*, where all the vice is imputed to the Roman, and all the virtue to the Teuton, are merely an inversion of the fact. "The truth is," says Professor Lewis Campbell on Æschylus, "that while religious custom lay upon the Greeks with a weight almost as deep as life, the changing clouds of mythology rested lightly on their minds, and were in their very nature, to some extent, the sport of fancy and imagination." This is equally true of the Hindoos.

all their ancient glories, the one thing that remains to them is the thesaurus of religion and mythology preserved, like palæozoic flies in amber, in the crystal of their ancient tongue, whose presiding genius is the moon. For with them it is not as with us. Here, in the young nations of the West, literature and religion are not one thing, but two, with essences and origins altogether different and distinct, though now and then, a Milton or a Dante may, by welding them together, produce something more analogous to Indian poetry. For in India religion and literature are inseparable: they look back not to Greece on the one hand and Judæa on the other, but to a sacred compound of the two, all the nearer because it is their very own, whereas to us both Greece and Judæa are foreign, not only the places but the tongues, and likely in the immediate future to become still stranger than they are. This is why nobody can possibly understand anything of India who is ignorant of Sanskrit, which is the key to India, and from which all the modern local idioms, be they Aryan or not, borrow almost everything literary, religious, or philosophical that they contain.^[2] And this is just where all the missionaries stumble. Few or none of them realise what it is they have against them: an obstacle which even Ganesha could hardly overcome. You must obliterate the languages of India, ancient and modern,

² The *dictum* of Mr. Rudyard Kipling, whose India is merely a misrepresented Anglo-India, that *there ain't no Ten Commandments* there, is superficially a truism, and essentially a foolish libel. No man has done more to caricature and misinterpret India, in the interests of military vulgarity, than this popular writer, to whom Hindoo India is a book with seven seals.

before you can alter its religion. It will not be easy, for when you have succeeded in consigning to oblivion both Sanskrit and Páli, which seems every day less probable, you will still have to reckon with the vernaculars, with Tulsi Das and Tukarám, Kabir, and a score of other Bibles of the Hindoo peoples, not to mention the legion of their legends, stories, proverbs, festivals, and songs. Fed, like his own *chakora*, upon these, the Hindoo of good caste finds it impossible to reconcile his traditional conception of saintliness, always ascetic, and based on renunciation, with the spectacle of comfortable missionaries, admirably housed, riding good horses and possessing coquettish wives whose ample wardrobes savour not of sanctity but of Paris. Buddha, the missionary *par excellence*, was no low-caste man, making a living out of his profession, but an aristocrat who turned his back upon the world; and a dozen English dukes or earls coming out to India to practise voluntary asceticism would do more to convince the Hindoos of Christian religion and sincerity than any number of missionary conferences, in which the real obstacle to missionary effort, the fact, well known to the Hindoo, that he is invited to accede to a religion abandoned by the intelligence of Europe, is scrupulously hidden out of sight. From every line of his old literature the Hindoo learns the essence of religion better than any missionary can teach him. It is devotion: of a woman, to her husband; of a man, to his duty, his *dharma*; his ancestors, his family, his mother-tongue. Nothing ever will persuade a sane Hindoo of reputable family to belong to a religion which

bids him, by injunction, sanction, or example, to abandon his ancestors, desert his family, eat beef, drink spirits, and apply to the divorce court. So it is that we see in India at the present day the very same phenomenon that was exhibited in the agony of the ancient world, when Christianity was an asylum for the outcaste and the criminal and the pariah, a refuge for the destitute, like Romulean Rome in Livy's legend.

This old Sanskrit language, then, in which dwells the spirit of a classic paganism not less beautiful, and holier than Hellas, pre-Christian, idolatrous,[³] preserves among other things opposed to Western modernism an element of charm, which in Europe too much knowledge is destroying: the element of distance, of the unknown, of that which is outside the map, beyond, afar. For us, the time is gone, when, as Plutarch says, geographers filled up the emptinesses beyond the limits known with bogs or deserts or wild beasts. But Hindoo stories move in an enchanted land, a thing to dream over like "the world as known to Homer," or the scraps of mythological geography in Pindar's Odes, when, for example, Rhodes was not an island, but lay lurking, before the gods divided earth, in the briny hollows of the sea.[⁴] And as we pore on it, we feel ready to murmur with Voltaire, that error has its worth as well as truth. Did the discovery of America make up for the lost

³ The observations of Mr. Theophilus G. Pinches, on the means by which, in ancient Babylon, "an enlightened monotheism and the grossest polytheism could, and did, exist side by side," apply accurately to India. (*The Old Testament in the Light of the Historical Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, p. 10.)

⁴ Olymp. vii.

mystery that brooded like the spirit over the waters of the dim Atlantic, when even Hibernia was half a myth, *ultra quam ad occasum nulla invenitur habitabilis terra, nisi miranda loca quæ vidit S. Brandanus in Oceano?*^[5] The old literature of India, its epics and *itihases*, are the very home of mythical geography, of lotus lands, white islands, seas of milk, and distant hills behind which, far beyond the sea, the suns go down to die, which never even Sindbad saw. It is all one gigantic dream, fairy tale reduced to a kind of system, where wild imagination is reality, and the commonplace is not. Teach the Hindoo the earth goes round the sun; it may be so: but in his heart there echoes some scrap of ancient poetry, where every sun descends to rest behind the western hill. Would you blame him for choosing rather to err with Kálidás and Walmiki, than go right with some elementary manual of geography? For him, the dream is the reality; and the spell is in the language in which these things are written: who does not know the language cannot understand the spell. Your Mill^[6] and your Macaulay argue on these matters like blind men reasoning on colour. Only that grows never old, which never lived. You cannot kill a dream, because it is already dead.

Down in the west of England, on the very edge of the sea, I know a hill, which had it been in India, pagan India, would have

⁵ *Apud Bocharti Phaleg.* p. 184.

⁶ James Mill's criticism of the Indian ethic is a criminal offence, a sin against literature. The coryphæus of the Inductive Philosophy, dogmatising on a language of which he could not even read a single word!

been sacred long ago to the Daughter of the Snow; so exactly does its giant sweep of smooth green turf resemble the outline of a colossal woman's breast. And there on a yellow evening, I lay and mused. And I said to my own soul: This is not quite the golden glow of my Indian Eve, for it is just a little chilly; and yet, yonder is a hill worthy to be haunted by Párwati herself. Only the flowers would all be strange to her; for certainly she would not recognise these primroses and buttercups, this gorse. And yet, some things might deceive her; for surely she would take Lundy Island for the very western mountain, behind which at this very moment the sun is going down.

And as I pondered on her and her husband, all at once I exclaimed: O Wearer of the Moony Tire, who art thyself the Past, the Present, and the Future, didst thou for all thy knowledge of Time's secrets ever dream, that one day thy worshippers would all fall under the direction of this misty little island in a far-off northern sea? Was it irony in the Creator, who makes and ruins even worlds in sport, to subject thy dreaming millions to the Western men of business, less like them than any other people on the surface of the earth? Had India's gods deserted her, as once Judæa's did, or wert thou buried in a thousand years of Yóg, when the Moguls and Maráthas, the Clives and the Dupleix were fighting for the heavy crown glittering with barbaric pearl and gold? And yet, what use in asking, since doubtless thou art far away among thy own Himálaya's still undiscovered snows.

And as I spoke, I looked, and lo! there before me was the

almost imperceptible Digit of the Moon, hanging low in the evening sky just over Lundy Island and the sea. And instantly I exclaimed: Aha! Maheshwara, I was wrong, and I utterly forgot thy quality of universal presence, for sure I am that where thy Digit is, thou art thyself not far away. So then tell me, was it thy wish to punish thy devotees, or was it by thy negligence they fell? And what shall be the end?

And as I gazed upon the Moon, I heard the laughter of the deity in the thunder of the waves. And presently he said: Foolish Western, there are many other things thou hast forgotten, as well as my ubiquity. Dost thou not remember what one of thy own philosophers has said: [Greek: Θεὸς ἀναίτιος, αἰτία δ' ἑλωμένου]? Or hast thou actually forgotten the wisdom of all my own old Hindoo sages, that thou wouldst saddle the responsibility for the ripening of the fruit of works, on me? As my people's works have been, so is their condition: they are but gathering the fruit of the tree of their own wrong-doing in a previous existence. And the crimes of a former birth dog them like death, and lie on them like a shadow: they only have themselves to blame, and now there is no help for it, but in themselves. And they must work out their own emancipation, not by petulance and violence, but by penance and austerity.

And I listened in silence to the deity, and when he finished, I looked up. And after a while, I said to myself: Now, surely, that crystal moon is the diadem of deity; and the voice of God is the murmur of the sea.

Christmas, 1910.

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A MOUNTAIN OF MERIT

*Where the Snows that fall on the Icy Wall
Leave all the tall peaks bare, I heard the
Mountain Spirits call
That travel upon the air.*

CHAITYA

A MOUNTAIN OF MERIT

INVOCATION

Sinking in the waves of time, O skull-adorned demolisher of Daksha,[⁷] we cling to the worship of the beauty of thy moony tire, whose silver lustre steals like a woman of good family fearfully through the shadows of the forest of thy hair, to fall at last like a blue and ashy benediction upon the mountain-backs of the three great worlds, lying prostrate in a sáshtánga[⁸] devotion at thy feet.

I

Far away in the northern quarter, half-hidden in Himálaya's shaggy sides, there lies a holy bathing-place and favoured haunt of Hara, where Gangá leaps down through a rocky chasm in the Lord of Hills, and rushes out into the plain, white as it were with foamy laughter at the thought of her coming union with Yamuná and the sea. And there one evening long ago it happened, that two Brahmans were engaged in a dispute upon the

⁷ *i. e.* Maheshwara.

⁸ That is, so as to touch the ground *with all eight parts of the body* at once.

bank of that very sacred stream, having quarrelled on a question of precedence. And long they wrangled idly, each claiming a superiority in status which neither would allow. And finally one said: Enough of this absurdity! Who but a blind man argues as to the shining of the sun at noon? Or how can thy family contend in excellence with mine, which is in the *gotra* of Agastya? Then said the other scornfully: Thou art the proof of thy own asseveration, and as I think, the very Balákhilyas^[9] must have been the original progenitors of such a pigmy as thyself. And the other answered angrily: Better the pigmy body of Agastya than a pigmy soul enclosed in the worthless bulk of such a *pashu*^[10] as thyself. And immediately his opponent ran upon him, and gave him a kick. And he exclaimed: Ha! dost thou call me *pashu*? then taste my hoof. But as to thy Agastya, a fig for him! What is he to me, who am just about to earn emancipation by a series of extraordinary penances, worthy to extort the admiration of Pashupati^[11] himself?

So as those boobies wrangled, it happened, by the decree of destiny, that that very Lord of Creatures animate and inanimate was passing in the air, only just above them, as he roamed towards Kailàs with Gauri in his arms, on his way back from a visit to Ujjayini, one of his earthly homes, whose palaces seem to laugh at their rivals in the sky. And as he listened to the

⁹ Legendary dwarfs. Agastya was a very little man.

¹⁰ *i. e.* an animal, a brute; a synonym for the absence of all culture and intelligence.

¹¹ The Lord of Animals, *i. e.* Shiwa, is the ascetic *par excellence*.

squabble, all at once he uttered a solitary shout of laughter. And instantly, those two very foolish disputants took to their heels, and fled away at full speed in opposite directions, taking his laughter for a thunderbolt. And seeing them go, the Daughter of the Mountain said to her lord: Well might thy laughter be aroused by the exceedingly contemptible behaviour of that pair of silly Brahmans. Then said Maheshwara: Nay, it was not that which caused my laughter. For these ridiculous mortals commonly dispute in precisely this manner, making use of abuse, and even blows, instead of reasoning, blinded by vanity and arrogance and passion. And if I were to laugh at every instance of the kind, I should never stop laughing, night or day. For there is no end to just such arguments as these. Then said Párwati: At what then didst thou laugh? And the moony-crowned god said slowly: I laughed, to think of the amazing self-ignorance of that big boasting Brahman. For he is the very man, who in one of his former incarnations so egregiously failed, in exactly such an effort of asceticism as that which he described himself now just about to undergo, though he has utterly forgotten all about it, and never even dreams that he is travelling fast, not towards emancipation, but away from it: since all his acts in recent births are nothing but so many steps downward into the abyss of reincarnation, out of which he will not find it so easy, again to reascend. For when a soul is on the downward path, nothing in the world is so difficult as to alter its direction into that of the ascent, or even to stop at all; seeing that every fresh

error adds weight to its burden, and impetus to its speed. And if he only knew it, this down-goer would be utterly appalled at the prospect of the innumerable myriads of years that lie before him, stretching away like a never-ending desert of waterless sand, through which he must absolutely pass, in birth after birth, each terminated by a death, before he will succeed in changing his tendency to darkness. For the waves of the sea of works are over his head, and he resembles a stone, sinking continuously down, down, in a bottomless and clammy slough of evil, created by himself.

Then said Párwati: And what then was this old endeavour, the very recollection of whose contrast with his brag so moved thy laughter? And the god said: It is a long story, and travelling at this pace, if I begin it, we shall arrive at Kailàs long before it ends. But if, as it seems, I must absolutely tell thee all about it, I will regulate the speed of our advance, so as to keep pace with the movement of the tale, ordering matters so, as to arrive at Kailàs and the conclusion of the tale exactly at the same moment. Moreover, it would be a shame to hurry. For I love to watch the lustre of my moon, noiselessly stealing like a thief into the shadowy gorges of thy father's huge valleys, and stripping from his sides that carpet of rich colour which the setting sun bestows upon them, to spread over them instead that cold and melancholy pallor of her own, which resembles an atmosphere of the camphor of death.

II

Know then, O thou Snowy One, that long ago, in a former birth, this boaster was a Brahman, and his name was Trishodadhi,^[12] and he was, by hereditary descent, the minister of a king, named Ruru. And as it happened, King Ruru was a spoiled child. And then, being betrayed by his queen in his youth, he fell into a violent hatred of all women, that, strange to say! exhibited itself in the form of love. For wishing as it were to wreak his vengeance on the whole sex for the crime of one, he began like a mad bee to rove furiously from flower to flower, making love to every woman in the world that took his fancy, and then throwing her away as soon as won – taking all possible pains to obtain the love of each, only to flout her, the moment it was his. And like a deadly plague, he gradually corrupted the women of his kingdom, who nearly all found him irresistible, not merely because he was a king, but still more because of his extraordinary beauty, being as he was a good thing changed and converted into evil by the misconduct of his wife. And he was dreaded by the husbands and fathers of his kingdom, and above all by his minister, Trishodadhi. For Trishodadhi possessed a wife much younger than himself, and recently married, named

¹² *i. e.* an ocean of thirst. This thirst, *trishá*, is the technical name for what Schopenhauer calls the *will to live* (*vitai semper hiantes*).

Watsatari.[¹³] And she was well named, resembling, in youth and beauty, the horns of the new moon; and she hovered between the charm of the woman and the child, as the moon does between the two incomparable moments of delicate epiphany and round perfection. And yet, unlike the moon, she was always invisible to everybody, save only himself. For his natural jealousy, which was extreme, was accentuated by her extraordinary beauty, and his own age. And fearing all the men in the world, above all he feared the king, and passed his life perpetually trembling lest Ruru should set eyes on her; and he kept her very scrupulously hidden, like a priceless pearl, from all eyes but his own. And though he doted on her, yet against his will he was obliged to leave her much alone, for all the burden of the state was thrown upon his shoulders by the king, who utterly neglected all affairs, intent on nothing but pursuing his amours. And being thus preoccupied, Trishodadhi had only his intervals of leisure for his wife. And yet, all the while he was not near her, he was everlastingly tormented by his jealousy and fear, which like busy painters drew him endless rows of pictures of his wife, surrounded in his absence by innumerable lovers, created out of nothing by his own imagination, and all, as it were, but so many copies of the king; as if, like the slayer of Kamsa,[¹⁴] King Ruru

¹³ *Watsa* is a term of endearment, equivalent to our "darling"; the whole word means "a heifer." [Pronounce each *a* like the *u* in hut.]

¹⁴ *i. e.* Krishna; who solved Plato's old difficulty of the One and the Many, by "keeping company" with each of his love-sick milkmaids at once.

possessed the power of self-multiplication, appearing in just as many bodies as he pleased. And though Watsatarí was in reality purer than a tear, he was haunted by a swarm of suspicions, which like bees buzzed for ever in the ear of his uneasy soul, and drove him almost into madness, while like a gardener he strove to preserve his blue honey-laden lotus from the onslaughts of their importunate and greedy troops. And in order to place her as far as possible beyond the reach of any danger, he kept her in a residence that resembled a fortress, and shut her in a garden, surrounded by a lofty wall. And he never went to see her without quivering with anxiety, lest he should discover, on arriving, that what he was always fearing had actually come to pass. And so in fact it did. For one day, returning from his duties long before he was accustomed, as if destiny had determined to gratify his apprehensions, when he entered the garden, where his wife was in the habit of wandering for her diversion, he looked, and saw her, in the very arms of the king.

So when he saw it, Trishodadhi stood for a single instant, silent, gazing at that pair with eyes that were suddenly filled to the very brim, first with amazement, and then with anguish, and next with anger, and finally with ice. And then he turned away, saying slowly to himself: Miserable wretches, what after all is the use of astonishment, or pity for myself, or even wrath with you? It is not you that are to blame, obeying as ye do the incorrigible instincts of your sex and your depravity, and rewarding one who has loaded both of you with benefits with

the blackness of ingratitude. But it is rather I myself who am to blame, for putting any faith whatever, were it fleeting as a jot of time, in this treacherous and unsubstantial world, filled full to the very brim with lovers and women, snakes and tigers, and betrayers and betrayed; on which I will this very instant turn my back for ever, as indeed, had I not been utterly blinded by passion and delusion, I should have done already, long ago. And even as he said, so he did. And he went straight away, there and then, never to return. And abandoning his wife and his office and his home, counting them all as grass, he threw away his skin, like a snake, and becoming a pilgrim, turned his steps, without losing a single instant, to the wilderness of the Windhya hills.

And as he went along, that very miserable Brahman said angrily to himself, with tears in his eyes: Ha! what was the Creator about, in creating such a world as this, where evil-doers prosper, and virtue comes to ruin, and fidelity and service and devotion gain nothing in reward, but villainous ingratitude, and bitter disappointment? Surely it was a blunder; and why, then, do the rulers of the world allow it to continue? And all at once, rage rushed into his soul against the very constitution of the world,^[15] as if that, rather than himself, were the author of his misery. And he exclaimed, in an ecstasy of grief: Ha! Did not Wishwamitra, when he found this world not according to his taste, create another of his own? And by what means did he

¹⁵ *Sthiti*, the established world-order, is one of the three terms of the universe, as opposed to *sarga*, its creation, and *pralaya*, its destruction and end.

acquire the power that enabled him to perform his extraordinary feats of world-creating and other such miracles, but by penance and asceticism? Did he not prove, by his own example, that nothing is impossible to perfect asceticism? And cannot others do what he did, by the very selfsame means, provided only that their resolution is thorough and complete? So then, now, I also will rival and surpass him, and by means of the intensity of my extraordinary penance bend the very gods to my will, and compel them to obey me, and change the established constitution of the world, whether they will or no. Aye, my resolution is fixed, and adamant, and unalterable. I will begin this very moment, and heap up for myself a very mountain of merit, till its towering mass shall overbalance and obliterate the united forces of the inhabitants of heaven.

So then he resolved, in the bitter agony of disappointment. And like one looking down into a forest pool created by a shower of rain, and mistaking its shallowness for an infinity of depth, deceived by the imitation of the illimitable abyss of heaven in the mirror of its glass, so he mistook his own pique at the world arising from the wound inflicted by the conduct of his wife, and proving, by its very violence, the strength of his attachment to the objects of sense that he pretended to despise, for real renunciation based on perfect knowledge, and undertook rashly, in imitation of that bull among ascetics, Wishwamitra, a task beyond the limits of his strength; not having understood, that those only are equal to the terrible strain of true renunciation

whose soul is pure, unstained by any tincture of egoism, and resembling a well of the crystal liquor of perfect mastery of self. And yet even so, he commenced his undertaking confidently, and counting beforehand on success, and burning with the fire of preliminary zeal, ignorant of the presence of that element in his soul, which was destined in the future to upset his calculations, and bring about his utter destruction, on the very brink of ultimate success. And going to the farthest recesses of the forest, he discovered in its heart a remote and lonely cemetery,[¹⁶] on the outskirts of a long deserted and forgotten town. And he entered it, and having discovered a suitable spot, he remained and dwelt there, as motionless as a tree. And collecting from the relics of burning funeral pyres a quantity of bare and empty skulls, divested of their flesh by fire, and time, and the troops of night-walking, flesh-devouring wild beasts and Rákshasas and Wetálas,[¹⁷] by which that gloomy cemetery was infested, he made of them a rosary for himself, like mine,[¹⁸] and began to mutter spells. And so he continued, night and day, year after year, muttering incessantly, living all the while like a serpent on nothing but air and his own undaunted resolution, till at last he had completed a century of years.

And then at last, being pleased with his perseverance, such as

¹⁶ The *smashána* is rather a burning-ground than a cemetery. But it is often called *pitrighi*— "the home of the fathers," and thus cemetery may stand, as an equivalent.

¹⁷ i. e. goblins and vampires.

¹⁸ Maheshwara, who is speaking, wears a necklace of skulls.

it was, I appeared to him one day in the guise of a *digambara*, [19] and granted him a boon. Thereupon that indomitable Trishodadhi replied: O Shankara, I ask for absolutely nothing, but permission to continue my devotions. If therefore I must perforce select a boon, grant me as much time as I require, so as to continue, muttering on, till I abandon my assiduity of my own accord. So I left him, muttering diligently away, just as before, though I foresaw the end, and knew that he carried within him, unsuspected by himself, the seed of the fruit of his own undoing, which time would ripen, dooming him to undergo the punishment that lies in wait for all, who plunge, without due consideration, into enterprises above their strength.[20] And so the boon I offered him was wasted, and the chance was thrown away. For had he only had knowledge of himself, it might have saved him after all, by ensuring him oblivion of the past. For his memory was his ruin, as the story will show thee, O Daughter of the Snow.

And he in the meantime muttered on unflaggingly, wholly intent on nothing else, till at length the mound of his accumulated merit began to rival in dimension yonder hill, whose top the evening sun is now touching with the colour of affection, as if loth to leave it to be swallowed by the dark.

¹⁹ *i. e.* a naked mendicant ascetic.

²⁰ *Nemo potest supra seipsum*, said the Schoolmen – a profound observation exactly in harmony with old Hindoo ideas on moral force.

III

And then at last one day it happened, that Mátali arrived in Indra's palace, having returned to heaven from a visit to the earth. And as soon as he entered, he exclaimed: O punisher of Páka, [21] and the rest, what are you all about? Are you asleep, or have you actually abandoned all care whether of your own pre-eminence or the established order of the world? For away below on earth, there is an old Brahman, in a deserted cemetery in the forest of the Windhya hills, who by his interminable muttering continued through the centuries has accumulated so gigantic a heap of merit,[22] that it threatens destruction to the three worlds. And now, unless something is done very speedily to stop him, and reduce it, this merit of his, beyond a doubt, will disturb the equilibrium of the universe, and wreck the established order of the worlds, and hurl you from your thrones.

And hearing him, Indra said: There is no difficulty in this. I will go myself, and bribe him to discontinue his proceedings. And he went down himself accordingly to earth, to examine and investigate that Brahman, and see what could be done. And after considering him awhile, and admiring his extraordinary

²¹ *i. e.* Indra. Mátali is his messenger, the Hindoo Mercury.

²² This singular idea, familiar now to Europe, in the form of the prayer-wheels of Tibet, is not wholly without parallels in the West. The only difference is, that the Hindoos are a very logical people, and carry the absurd to its extreme.

obstinacy, he set to work to tempt him, and induce him, by offering bribes of various descriptions, to desist. And he offered him accordingly mountains of gold, and oceans of jewels, and everlasting youth, and many kinds of magic power, and finally he racked his brains, to find something or other that would move that obdurate Trishodadhi, and draw him from his vow. But in vain. For Trishodadhi paid no more attention to his offers and himself, than the moon does to the barking of a dog; continuing to mutter, all the time he spoke, just as if he was not there.

So finding all his efforts vain, after a while, that baffled lover of Ahalyá^[23] returned to heaven. And summoning the gods, he laid the case before them, and requested their advice. And after deliberation, they determined to seduce him by sending down a heavenly nymph, saying to themselves: Did not Menaká, and Tilottamá, and others of their kind, prove too strong for the asceticism of even mighty sages, so that their merit melted, like a lump of snow, in the flame of their desire, and their self-control vanished like stubble in a forest conflagration? Nay, did not even Brahma assume his name,^[24] becoming four-faced, in order to gratify his intolerable thirst to behold the beauty of Tilottamá performing a pradakshina around him, though he would not turn his head? Therefore it is not to be doubted that in this case also, the irresistible amber of feminine attraction will prove its power,

²³ The wife of the sage Gautama, with whom Indra had an intrigue that covered him with shame, in more ways than one.

²⁴ *Chaturmukha*.

and draw this grass in the form of a Brahman any way it will, snapping like thread the resolution which would chain him to his muttering, as soon as it is seen.

And accordingly they drew up before them in a row the chorus of Indra's heavenly dancers. And they chose out of them all that Apsaras who seemed to them the least easily to be resisted, by reason of her rounded arms and dainty ankles, and sent her down to earth with suitable instructions, to seduce that Brahman from his muttering as quickly as she could. But she, to her amazement, found on her arrival, that, do what she might, she could not even so much as succeed in inducing him to look at her sideways even for a moment. So, after a while, she left him, and flew back to heaven in a pet. And they sent instead of her another, who presently returned, having found herself as ineffectual as the first. And they tried again, and sent, one after another, the whole of Indra's chorus, pelting as it were that stony-hearted old ascetic with a very shower of celestial flowers, and gaining the very opposite of the end at which they aimed. For inasmuch as he never ceased muttering even for a moment, all their efforts to corrupt him and reduce his stock of merit only added to its heap, making its mountainous proportions more formidable than before.

And finally Indra exclaimed in despair: We are conquered by this *awatâr* of obstinacy in the form of an ascetic, on whose rock the waves of this very sea of beauty beat in vain. And now there is

no refuge for us but in the sole of the foot of the Burner^[25] of the Bodiless God. For he alone is stronger than Love, whose power seems to fail us in this pinch, rendered nugatory by the intractable composition of this exasperating mutterer. And if even he can devise no remedy for this disease, it is incurable; and then will this incorruptible old devotee have us all at his mercy,^[26] and bring heaven to its knees, and turn, if he pleases, the three worlds upside down.

And then, led by Indra, they came altogether in a body to me; and placing the difficulty before me, they waited with anxiety to hear what I should say. And I looked there and then into the future, and saw in its dark mirror, like a picture, the ruin of that old ambitious Brahman, and the means by which it was destined to be accomplished. And after a while, I said slowly: All diseases are not able to be remedied by the same medicine, and notwithstanding the omnipotence of feminine attraction, this is a case wherein heavenly nymphs are impotent, and utterly without avail. For all these heavenly nymphs do nothing but dance and sing and attitudinise and ogle, imagining that as in the case of

²⁵ *i. e.* Maheshwara himself, who burned Love with fire from his eye.

²⁶ Max Müller, to whom students of the Rig-Weda owe so much, was nevertheless essentially mistaken in saying that the word *weda* means *knowledge*. It does not mean knowledge, in our sense of the word, scientific, Baconian, Aristotelian; an idea quite alien to that of the old *hotris*. By *weda* they meant *magical knowledge*, *spells*; which being sung or muttered had power to compel the deities: thus the Brahman who possessed the "knowledge" (in the phrase of the Brahmanas, *yah ewam weda*) was the master of the world.

Menaká Tilottamá, Rambhá, and the rest, they have only to show themselves to gain at once their end, trusting only to the body and its beauty, and very shallow coquetry and artifices to sharpen the edge of its effect, such as wind that stirs their clothing, or water that causes it to cling to the outline of their limbs and reveal, as if by accident, the thing that it pretends and is intended to conceal, and other such devices. But this Trishodadhi is a fish that, as I perceive, will not easily be caught by the bait of mere meretricious beauty, and in his case, the hook must be hidden in a lure of quite another kind. But there is a Daitya, named Aparapaksha,^[27] living at the very bottom of the sea, who has a hundred daughters. And were beauty the necessary weapon in this instance, any one of them would serve the turn, since all of them have bodies formed as it were of ocean-foam, with lips of coral, and eyes like pools, and hair longer than themselves, and voices like the echo of the waves; and only lately I heard them singing all together as I passed, on an island shore, and was myself all but bewitched, so that unawares I paused, hanging in the air to listen, waylaid as it were by the magic and the spell of that melancholy sound, forgetting my journey for the sake of their refrain. But now, since something more is necessary, you must abandon all the others, and betake you to the youngest of them all, who is rightly named Kalánidhi, though she is the ugliest and cleverest woman in the three worlds, for she is a very ocean

²⁷ *i. e.* the dark half of the lunar month.

of craft and trickery and guile,[²⁸

²⁸ There is a pun in her name, which as applied to the moon, means *a store of digits*, but also signifies *an ocean of wiles*.

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