

## BUTTOO<sup>1</sup>

“Ho! Master of the wondrous art!  
Instruct me in fair archery,  
And buy for aye,<sup>o</sup>—a grateful heart *ever*  
That will not grudge to give thy fee.”  
5 Thus spoke a lad with kindling eyes,  
A hunter’s low-born son was he,—  
To Dronacharjya<sup>2</sup>, great and wise,  
Who sat with princes round his knee.

10 Up Time’s fair stream far back,—oh far,  
The great wise teacher must be sought!  
The Kurus had not yet in war  
With the Pandava brethren fought.<sup>3</sup>  
In peace, at Dronacharjya’s feet,  
15 Magic and archery they learned,  
A complex science, which we meet  
No more, with ages past inured.

“And who art thou,” the teacher said,  
“My science brave to learn so fain?<sup>o</sup> *eagerly*  
Which many kings who wear the thread  
20 Have asked to learn of me in vain.”  
“My name is Buttoo,” said the youth,  
“A hunter’s son, I know not Fear;”  
The teacher answered, smiling smooth,  
“Then know him from this time, my dear.”

25 Unseen the magic arrow came,  
Amidst the laughter and the scorn  
Of royal youths,—like lightning flame  
Sudden and sharp. They blew the horn,  
As down upon the ground he fell,  
30 Not hurt, but made a jest and game;—  
He rose,—and waved a proud farewell,  
But cheek and brow grew red with shame.

And lo,—a single, single tear

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<sup>1</sup> “Buttoo” is a tale based on the legend of Ekalavya, which is found in the *Mahabharata*. Ekalavya was the son of Hiranyadhanus, a forest king.

<sup>2</sup> Dronacharjya (Dronacarya or, simply, Drona) was a great teacher and warrior, famed above all for his skill in archery. Interestingly, Drona himself was quite poor until he made a name for himself.

<sup>3</sup> The Kurus (Kauravas) and the Pandavas are two rival royal families descended from the same line. Much of the *Mahabharata* tells the story of their contests and battles. The Pandavas, who had Krishna on their side, eventually are victorious. Dronacharjya instructed both sides in archery.

35 Dropped from his eyelash as he past,  
“My place I gather is not here;  
No matter,—what is rank or caste?<sup>4</sup>  
In us is honour, or disgrace,  
Not out of us,” ‘twas thus he mused,  
40 “The question is,—not wealth or place,  
But gifts well used, or gifts abused.

And I shall do my best to gain  
The science that man will not teach,  
For life is as a shadow vain,  
Until the utmost goal we reach  
45 To which the soul points. I shall try  
To realize my waking dream,  
And what if I should chance to die?  
None miss one bubble from a stream.”

50 So thinking, on and on he went,  
Till he attained the forest’s verge,  
The garish day was well-nigh spent,  
Birds had already raised its dirge.  
Oh what a scene! How sweet and calm!  
It soothed at once his wounded pride,  
55 And on his spirit shed a balm  
That all its yearnings purified.

What glorious trees! The sombre saul<sup>5</sup>  
On which the eye delights to rest,  
The betel-nut,<sup>6</sup>—a pillar tall,  
60 With feathery branches for a crest,  
The light-leaved tamarind<sup>7</sup> spreading wide,  
The pale faint-scented bitter neem,<sup>8</sup>  
The seemul,<sup>9</sup> gorgeous as a bride,

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<sup>4</sup> Hindu society was seen as divided into four main castes, or classes, determined by one’s birth. Brahmans (Brahmins, Bramins) were members of the highest caste, made up of holy sages and philosophers. Kshatriyas were next, the rulers and the warriors. Third were the Vaisyas, the farmers and the merchants. Lastly, the Sudras were the workers. All of these castes had many subdivisions. There also were some who fell outside the caste system, most notably those regarded as outcasts, the “Untouchables” (now called the Dalits), and those belonging to India’s original indigenous peoples, the Atavikas (now called the Adivasis)

<sup>5</sup> The saul (sal) is one of the most valuable timber trees in India.

<sup>6</sup> Betel-nuts are actually the nuts of the areca palm wrapped and chewed in the leaves of the betel plant, so the tree referred to here is actually the areca palm.

<sup>7</sup> The tamarind (imli) is a large tree that also is known as the Indian date tree or the Indian date palm.

<sup>8</sup> The neem (nim) is a medium large tree that also is known as the Indian lilac. Its bitter bark had many ceremonial and remedial uses.

<sup>9</sup> The seemul (semul, simal) is the largest Indian tree. Also known as the silk cotton tree, it has beautiful red flowers.

With flowers that have the ruby's gleam,  
65 The Indian fig's pavilion tent<sup>10</sup>  
In which whole armies might repose,  
With here and there a little rent,  
The sunset's beauty to disclose,  
70 The bamboo boughs that sway and swing  
'Neath bulbuls<sup>11</sup> as the south wind blows,  
The mangoe-tope,<sup>12</sup> a close dark ring,  
Home of the rooks and clamorous crows,  
The champac,<sup>13</sup> bok, and South-sea pine,  
75 The nagessur<sup>14</sup> with pendant flowers  
Like ear-rings,—and the forest vine  
That clinging over all, embowers,  
The sirish<sup>15</sup> famed in Sanscrit song  
Which rural maidens love to wear,  
The peepul<sup>16</sup> giant-like and strong,  
80 The bramble with its matted hair,  
All these, and thousands, thousands more,  
With helmet red, or golden crown,  
Or green tiara, rose before  
The youth in evening's shadows brown.  
85 He passed into the forest,—there  
New sights of wonder met his view,  
A waving Pampas<sup>17</sup> green and fair  
All glistening with the evening dew.  
How vivid was the breast-high grass!  
90 Here waved in patches, forest corn,<sup>o</sup>— *grain*  
Here intervened a deep morass,—  
Here arid spots of verdure shorn  
Lay open,—rock or barren sand,—  
And here again the trees arose

<sup>10</sup> The Indian fig tree is the banyan (barh, burr), famous as a huge shade tree (hence, the “pavilion tent / In which whole armies might repose”).

<sup>11</sup> Bulbuls are a whole family of songbirds, related to the thrush. The name derives from the Persian, where the bird served as the equivalent of the nightingale.

<sup>12</sup> The mango tree (aam) is, of course, famous for its fruit. A tope is a grove, or cluster, of trees.

<sup>13</sup> The champac (champaka, chumpuk) is a sacred ornamental tree. A kind of magnolia, it is famous for its fragrant flowers, which are used for ceremonial purposes.

<sup>14</sup> The nagessur (nagesar, nagkesar) is a small to medium tree, also known as the Indian rose chestnut, with fragrant flowers.

<sup>15</sup> The sirish (siris) is a shade tree, also known as the mountain cedar wattle.

<sup>16</sup> The peepul (pipal) is one of the great fig trees of India. With a strong resemblance to poplar trees, especially the aspen, it often was in a prominent place in a village or near a temple.

<sup>17</sup> Dutt's allusion here is to the South American Pampas (or, plains) famed for its tall, dense pampas grass.

95 Thick clustering,—a glorious band  
Their tops still bright with sunset glows.—

Stirred in the breeze the crowding boughs,  
And seemed to welcome him with signs,  
Onwards and on,—till Buttoo's brows  
100 Are gemmed with pearls, and day declines.  
Then in a grassy open space  
He sits and leans against a tree,  
To let the wind blow on his face  
And look around him leisurely.

105 Herds, and still herds, of timid deer  
Were feeding in the solitude,  
They knew not man, and felt no fear,  
And heeded not his neighbourhood,  
Some young ones with large eyes and sweet  
110 Came close, and rubbed their foreheads smooth  
Against his arms, and licked his feet,  
As if they wished his cares to soothe.

“They touch me,” he exclaimed with joy,  
“They have no pride of caste like men,  
115 They shrink not from the hunter-boy,  
Should not my home be with them then?  
Here in this forest let me dwell,  
With these companions innocent,  
And learn each science and each spell  
120 All by myself in banishment.

A calm, calm life,—and it shall be  
Its own exceeding great reward!  
No thoughts to vex in all I see,  
No jeers to bear or disregard;—  
125 All creatures and inanimate things  
Shall be my tutors: I shall learn  
From beast, and fish, and bird with wings,  
And rock, and stream, and tree, and fern.”

With this resolve, he soon began  
130 To build a hut, of reeds and leaves,  
And when that needful work was done  
He gathered in his store, the sheaves  
Of forest corn, and all the fruit,  
Date, plum, guava, he could find,  
135 And every pleasant nut and root

By Providence for man designed.

A statue next of earth he made,  
An image of the teacher wise,  
So deft he laid, the light and shade,  
140 On figure, forehead, face and eyes,  
That any one who chanced to view  
That image tall might soothly<sup>o</sup> swear,  
If he great Dronacharjya knew,  
The teacher in his flesh was there.

*truly*

145 Then at the statue's feet he placed  
A bow, and arrows tipped with steel,  
With wild-flower garlands interlaced,  
And hailed the figure in his zeal  
As Master, and his head he bowed,  
150 A pupil reverent from that hour  
Of one who late had disallowed  
The claim, in pride of place and power.

By strained sense, by constant prayer,  
By steadfastness of heart and will,  
155 By courage to confront and dare,  
All obstacles he conquered still;  
A conscience clear,—a ready hand,  
Joined to a meek humility,  
Success must everywhere command,  
160 How could he fail who had all three!

And now, by tests assured, he knows  
His own God-gifted wondrous might,  
Nothing to any man he owes,  
Unaided he has won the fight;  
165 Equal to gods themselves,—above  
Wishmo and Drona,<sup>18</sup>—for his worth  
His name, he feels, shall be with love  
Reckoned with great names of the earth.

Yet lacks he not, in reverence  
170 To Dronacharjya, who declined  
To teach him,—nay, with e'en offence  
That well might wound a noble mind,  
Drove him away;—for in his heart  
Meek, placable, and ever kind,

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<sup>18</sup> Drona is Dronacharjya (see note 2). Wishmo, better known as Bhishma, is another major character from the *Mahabharata*; like Drona, he was a great archer.

175     Resentment had not any part,  
       And Malice never was enshrined.

       One evening, on his work intent,  
       Alone he practised Archery,  
       When lo! the bow proved false and sent  
180     The arrow from its mark awry;  
       Again he tried,—and failed again;  
       Why was it? Hark!—A wild dog’s bark!  
       An evil omen:—it was plain  
       Some evil on his path hung dark!

185     Thus many times he tried and failed,  
       And still that lean, persistent dog  
       At distance, like some spirit wailed,  
       Safe in the cover of a fog.  
       His nerves unstrung, with many a shout  
190     He strove to frighten it away,  
       It would not go,—but roamed about,  
       Howling, as wolves howl for their prey.

       Worried and almost in a rage,  
       One magic shaft at last he sent,  
195     A sample of his science sage,  
       To quiet but the noises meant.  
       Unerring to its goal it flew,  
       No death ensued, no blood was dropped,  
       But by the hush the young man knew  
200     At last that howling noise had stopped.

       It happened on this very day  
       That the Pandava princes came  
       With all the Kuru princes gay  
       To beat the woods and hunt the game.  
205     Parted from others in the chase,  
       Arjuna<sup>19</sup> brave the wild dog found,—  
       Stuck still the shaft,—but not a trace  
       Of hurt, though tongue and lip were bound.

210     “Wonder of wonders! Didst not thou  
       O Dronacharya, promise me  
       Thy crown in time should deck my brow  
       And I be first in archery?

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<sup>19</sup> Arjuna, another major character from the *Mahabharata*, was Dronacharya’s star pupil and eventually the greatest archer of all. One of the five Pandava princes, he is best known as Krishna’s addressee in the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Lo! here, some other thou hast taught  
A magic spell,—to all unknown;  
215 Who has in secret from thee bought  
The knowledge, in this arrow shown!”

Indignant thus Arjuna spake  
To his great Master when they met—  
“My word, my honour, is at stake,  
220 Judge not, Arjuna, judge not yet.  
Come, let us see the dog,”—and straight  
They followed up the creature’s trace.  
They found it, in the selfsame state,  
Dumb, yet unhurt,—near Buttoo’s place.

A hut,—a statue,—and a youth  
In the dim forest,—what mean these?  
They gazed in wonder, for in sooth<sup>o</sup>  
The thing seemed full of mysteries.  
“Now who art thou that dar’st to raise  
230 Mine image in the wilderness?  
Is it for worship and for praise?  
What is thine object? speak, confess.”

*truth*

“Oh Master, unto thee I came  
To learn thy science. Name or pelf<sup>o</sup>  
235 I had not, so was driven with shame,  
And here I learn all by myself.  
But still as Master thee revere,  
For who so great in archery!  
Lo, all my inspiration here,  
240 And all my knowledge is from thee.”

*riches*

“If I am Master, now thou hast  
Finished thy course, give me my due.  
Let all the past be dead and past,  
Henceforth be ties between us new.”  
245 “All that I have, O Master mine,  
All I shall conquer by my skill,  
Gladly shall I to thee resign,  
Let me but know thy gracious will.”

“Is it a promise?” “Yea, I swear  
250 So long as I have breath and life  
To give thee all thou wilt.” “Beware!  
Rash promise ever ends in strife.”  
“Thou art my Master,—ask! oh ask!

255 From thee my inspiration came,  
Thou canst not set too hard a task,  
Nor aught<sup>o</sup> refuse I, free from blame.”

*anything*

“If it be so,—Arjuna hear!”  
Arjuna and the youth were dumb,  
“For thy sake, loud I ask and clear,  
260 Give me, O youth, thy right-hand thumb.  
I promised in my faithfulness  
No equal ever shall there be  
To thee, Arjuna,—and I press  
For this sad recompense—for thee.”

265 Glanced the sharp knife one moment high,  
The severed thumb was on the sod,  
There was no tear in Buttoo’s eye,  
He left the matter with his God.  
“For this,”—said Dronacharjya,—“Fame  
270 Shall sound thy praise from sea to sea,  
And men shall ever link thy name  
With Self-help, Truth, and Modesty.”