

## JOGADHYA UMA<sup>1</sup>

“Shell-bracelets<sup>2</sup> ho! Shell-bracelets ho!  
Fair maids and matrons come and buy!”  
Along the road, in morning’s glow,  
The pedlar raised his wonted<sup>o</sup> cry. *usual*

5 The road ran straight, a red, red line,  
To Khirogram,<sup>3</sup> for cream renowned,  
Through pasture-meadows where the kine,<sup>o</sup> *cattle*  
In knee-deep grass, stood magic bound  
And half awake, involved in mist,  
10 That floated in dun coils profound,  
Till by the sudden sunbeams kist<sup>o</sup> *kissed*  
Rich rainbow hues broke all around.

“Shell-bracelets ho! Shell-bracelets ho!”  
The roadside trees still dripped with dew,  
15 And hung their blossoms like a show.  
Who heard the cry? ‘Twas but a few,  
A ragged herd-boy, here and there,  
With his long stick and naked feet;  
A ploughman wending<sup>o</sup> to his care, *making his way*

20 The field from which he hopes the wheat;  
An early traveller, hurrying fast  
To the next town; an urchin slow  
Bound for the school; these heard and past,  
Unheeding all,—“Shell-bracelets ho!”

25 Pellucid<sup>o</sup> spread a lake-like tank *clear*  
Beside the road now lonelier still,  
High on three sides arose the bank  
Which fruit-trees shadowed at their will;  
Upon the fourth side was the Ghat,<sup>4</sup>

30 With its broad stairs of marble white,  
And at the entrance-arch there sat,  
Full face against the morning light,  
A fair young woman with large eyes,  
And dark hair falling to her zone,<sup>o</sup> *belt*

35 She heard the pedlar’s cry arise,

<sup>1</sup> This legend is from Bengali folklore rather than ancient Hindu texts. Uma, or Parvati, is the wife of Shiva (Siva), one of gods of the Hindu trinity. Uma traditionally is associated with beauty, light, and wisdom. Jogadhya (jugaadya) refers to a temple or sati pitha (shakti peetha), a seat of goddess worship, at Khirogram (Khirgram) in West Bengal.

<sup>2</sup> Shell-bracelets were worn by Bengali women as markers of good fortune or of their married status. Bengal is still famous for its shell-bracelets.

<sup>3</sup> See note 1.

<sup>4</sup> A ghat here is a place where one may access stairs that lead down to a bathing-place.

And eager seemed his ware to own.

“Shell-bracelets ho! See, maiden, see!  
The rich enamel sunbeam-kist!  
Happy, oh happy, shalt thou be,  
40 Let them but clasp that slender wrist;  
These bracelets are a mighty charm,  
They keep a lover ever true,  
And widowhood avert, and harm,  
Buy them, and thou shalt never rue.  
45 Just try them on!”—She stretched her hand,  
“Oh what a nice and lovely fit!  
No fairer hand, in all the land,  
And lo! the bracelet matches it.”

Dazzled the pedlar on her gazed  
50 Till came the shadow of a fear,  
While she the bracelet arm upraised  
Against the sun to view more clear.  
Oh she was lovely, but her look  
Had something of a high command  
55 That filled with awe. Aside she shook  
Intruding curls by breezes fanned  
And blown across her brows and face,  
And asked the price, which when she heard  
She nodded, and with quiet grace  
60 For payment to her home referred.

“And where, O maiden, is thy house?  
But no, that wrist-ring has a tongue,  
No maiden art thou, but a spouse,  
Happy, and rich, and fair, and young.”  
65 “Far otherwise, my lord is poor,  
And him at home thou shalt not find;  
Ask for my father; at the door  
Knock loudly; he is deaf, but kind.  
Seest thou that lofty gilded spire  
70 Above these tufts of foliage green?  
That is our place; its point of fire  
Will guide thee o’er the tract between.”

“That is the temple spire.”—“Yes, there  
We live; my father is the priest,  
75 The manse<sup>o</sup> is near, a building fair  
But lowly, to the temple’s east.  
When thou hast knocked, and seen him, say,

*house*

His daughter, at Dhamaser Ghat,  
Shell-bracelets bought from thee to-day,  
80 And he must pay so much for that.  
Be sure, he will not let thee pass  
Without the value, and a meal,  
If he demur, or cry alas!  
No money hath he,—then reveal,  
85 Within the small box, marked with streaks  
Of bright vermilion, by the shrine,  
The key whereof has lain for weeks  
Untouched, he'll find some coin,—'tis mine.  
That will enable him to pay  
90 The bracelet's price, now fare thee well!"  
She spoke, the pedlar went away,  
Charmed with her voice, as by some spell;  
While she, left lonely there, prepared  
To plunge into the water pure,  
95 And like a rose her beauty bared,  
From all observance quite secure.

Not weak she seemed, nor delicate,  
Strong was each limb of flexile<sup>o</sup> grace,  
And full the bust; the mien<sup>o</sup> elate,  
100 Like hers, the goddess of the chase  
On Latmos hill,<sup>5</sup>—and oh, the face  
Framed in its cloud of floating hair,  
No painter's hand might hope to trace  
The beauty and the glory there!  
105 Well might the pedlar look with awe,  
For though her eyes were soft, a ray  
Lit them at times, which kings who saw  
Would never dare to disobey.

Onwards through groves the pedlar sped  
110 Till full in front the sunlit spire  
Arose before him. Paths which led  
To gardens trim in gay attire  
Lay all around. And lo! the manse,  
Humble but neat with open door!  
115 He paused, and blest the lucky chance  
That brought his bark<sup>o</sup> to such a shore.  
Huge straw ricks,<sup>o</sup> log huts full of grain,  
Sleek cattle, flowers, a tinkling bell,

*supple  
look*

*boat  
haystacks*

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<sup>5</sup> Latmos (in modern Turkey) is the home of Endymion, who in Greek mythology falls in love with Cynthia (or, Selene), the moon goddess who is also known as Artemis (or, Diana), the goddess of the hunt.

120 Spoke in a language sweet and plain,  
“Here smiling Peace and Plenty dwell.”

Unconsciously he raised his cry,  
“Shell-bracelets ho!” And at his voice  
Looked out the priest, with eager eye,  
And made his heart at once rejoice.  
125 “Ho, *Sankha*<sup>6</sup> pedlar! Pass not by,  
But step thou in, and share the food  
Just offered on our altar high,  
If thou art in a hungry mood.  
Welcome are all to this repast!<sup>o</sup>  
130 The rich and poor, the high and low!  
Come, wash thy feet, and break thy fast,  
Then on thy journey strengthened go.”

*meal*

“Oh thanks, good priest! Observance due  
And greetings! May thy name be blest!  
135 I came on business, but I knew,  
Here might be had both food and rest  
Without a charge; for all the poor  
Ten miles around thy sacred shrine  
Know that thou keepest open door,  
140 And praise that generous hand of thine:  
But let my errand first be told,  
For bracelets sold to thine this day,  
So much thou owest me in gold,  
Hast thou the ready cash to pay?

145 The bracelets were enamelled,—so  
The price is high.”—“How! Sold to mine?  
Who bought them, I should like to know.”  
“Thy daughter, with the large black eyne,<sup>o</sup>  
Now bathing at the marble ghat.”  
150 Loud laughed the priest at this reply,  
“I shall not put up, friend, with that;  
No daughter in the world have I,  
An only son is all my stay;  
Some minx has played a trick, no doubt,  
155 But cheer up, let thy heart be gay.  
Be sure that I shall find her out.”

*eyes*

“Nay, nay, good father, such a face  
Could not deceive, I must aver;<sup>o</sup>  
At all events, she knows thy place,

*assert*

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<sup>6</sup> *Sankha* is Sanskrit for conch-shell.

160 ‘And if my father should demur  
To pay thee,’—thus she said,—‘or cry  
He has no money, tell him straight  
The box vermilion-streaked to try,  
That’s near the shrine.’” “Well, wait, friend, wait!”  
165 The priest said thoughtful, and he ran  
And with the open box came back,  
“Here is the price exact, my man,  
No surplus over, and no lack.

How strange! how strange! Oh blest art thou  
170 To have beheld her, touched her hand,  
Before whom Vishnu’s self must bow,  
And Brahma and his heavenly band!<sup>7</sup>  
Here have I worshipped her for years  
And never seen the vision bright;  
175 Vigils and fasts and secret tears  
Have almost quenched my outward sight;  
And yet that dazzling form and face  
I have not seen, and thou, dear friend,  
To thee, unsought for, comes the grace,  
180 What may its purport be, and end?

How strange! How strange! Oh happy thou!  
And couldst thou ask no other boon<sup>o</sup>  
Than thy poor bracelet’s price? That brow  
Resplendent as the autumn moon  
185 Must have bewildered thee, I trow,<sup>o</sup>  
And made thee lose thy senses all.”  
A dim light on the pedlar now  
Began to dawn; and he let fall  
His bracelet basket in his haste,  
190 And backward ran the way he came;  
What meant the vision fair and chaste,  
Whose eyes were they,—those eyes of flame?

*favor/reward*

*believe*

Swift ran the pedlar as a hind,<sup>o</sup>  
The old priest followed on his trace,  
195 They reached the Ghat but could not find  
The lady of the noble face.  
The birds were silent in the wood,  
The lotus flowers<sup>8</sup> exhaled a smell  
Faint, over all the solitude,

*deer*

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<sup>7</sup> The Hindu trinity consists of Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver, and Shiva (Siva) the Destroyer. Uma (Parvati), the goddess the pedlar has seen, is the wife of Shiva (see note 1).

<sup>8</sup> The lotus, a large water-lily, is a sacred flower in Hinduism.

200 A heron as a sentinel  
Stood by the bank. They called,—in vain,  
No answer came from hill or fell,  
The landscape lay in slumber's chain,  
E'en Echo slept within her cell.<sup>9</sup>

205 Broad sunshine, yet a hush profound!  
They turned with saddened hearts to go;  
Then from afar there came a sound  
Of silver bells;—the priest said low,  
“O Mother, Mother, deign to hear,  
210 The worship-hour has rung; we wait  
In meek humility and fear.  
Must we return home desolate?  
Oh come, as late thou cam'st unsought,  
Or was it but an idle dream?  
215 Give us some sign if it was not,  
A word, a breath, or passing gleam.”

Sudden from out the water sprung  
A rounded arm, on which they saw  
As high the lotus buds among  
220 It rose, the bracelet white, with awe.  
Then a wide ripple tost and swung  
The blossoms on that liquid plain,  
And lo! the arm so fair and young  
Sank in the waters down again.  
225 They bowed before the mystic Power,  
And as they home returned in thought,  
Each took from thence a lotus flower  
In memory of the day and spot.

Years, centuries, have passed away,  
230 And still before the temple shrine  
Descendants of the pedlar pay  
Shell-bracelets of the old design  
As annual tribute. Much they own  
In lands and gold,—but they confess  
235 From that eventful day alone  
Dawned on their industry,—success. . . .  
Absurd may be the tale I tell,  
Ill-suited to the marching times,  
I loved the lips from which it fell,  
240 So let it stand among my rhymes.

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<sup>9</sup> Literally, the line means there is no sound to echo, but the line also clearly invokes Echo, the Greek nymph from whose name the word derives. She is primarily famous for falling in love with Narcissus.