

THE ROYAL ASCETIC AND THE HIND¹

From the Vishnu Purana. Book II. Chap. XIII

MAITREYA.² Of old thou gav'st a promise to relate
The deeds of Bharat,³ that great hermit-king:
Beloved Master, now the occasion suits,
And I am all attention.
PARASARA.⁴ Brahman,⁵ hear.
5 With a mind fixed intently on his gods
Long reigned in Saligram⁶ of ancient fame,
The mighty monarch of the wide, wide world.
Chief of the virtuous, never in his life
Harmed he, or strove to harm, his fellow-man,
10 Or any creature sentient. But he left
His kingdom in the forest-shades to dwell,
And changed his sceptre for a hermit's staff,
And with ascetic^o rites, privations^o rude, *austere / deprivations*
And constant prayers, endeavoured to attain
15 Perfect dominion on his soul. At morn,
Fuel, and flowers, and fruit, and holy grass,
He gathered for oblations;^o and he passed *offerings*
In stern devotions all his other hours;
Of the world heedless, and its myriad cares,
20 And heedless too of wealth, and love, and fame.

Once on a time, while living thus, he went
To bathe where through the wood the river flows:
And his ablutions^o done, he sat him down *cleansings*
Upon the shelving^o bank to muse and pray. *sloping*
25 Thither^o impelled by thirst a graceful hind, *to that place*

Big with its young, came fearlessly to drink.
Sudden, while yet she drank, the lion's roar,⁷
Feared by all creatures, like a thunder-clap

¹ This is one of only two poems from *Ancient Ballads* that appeared in print during Dutt's lifetime. It was published in *The Calcutta Review* in January 1877. This legend is, as indicated, from the *Vishnu Purana*, a set of religious texts that promote the worship of Vishnu, the Preserver (one of the gods of the Hindu trinity). It tells the tale of Bharat (Bharata, the royal ascetic), a king who gave up his kingdom to live a solitary life of devotion in the forest. He was diverted from his devotions by his love for the hind (deer). This Bharat (Bharata) should not be confused with Rama's half-brother Bharata.

² Maitreya is the student and disciple of Parasara (see note 4).

³ See note 1.

⁴ Parasara is the sage who taught the *Vishnu Purana* to Maitreya.

⁵ Hindu society was seen as divided into four main castes, or classes, determined by one's birth. Brahmins (Brahmins, Bramins) are members of the highest caste, made up of holy sages and philosophers.

⁶ In northern India, by the Gandaki River.

⁷ *Lion* here refers to the Asiatic (or, Indian) lion.

Burst in that solitude from a thicket nigh.^o
30 Startled, the hind leapt up, and from her womb
Her offspring tumbled in the rushing stream.
Whelmed by the hissing waves and carried far
By the strong current swol'n by recent rain,
The tiny thing still struggled for its life,
35 While its poor mother, in her fright and pain,
Fell down upon the bank, and breathed her last.
Up rose the hermit-monarch at the sight
Full of keen anguish; with his pilgrim staff
He drew the new-born creature from the wave;
40 'Twas panting fast, but life was in it still.
Now, as he saw its luckless mother dead,
He would not leave it in the woods alone,
But with the tenderest pity brought it home.

nearby

There, in his leafy hut, he gave it food,
45 And daily nourished it with patient care,
Until it grew in stature and in strength,
And to the forest skirts could venture forth
In search of sustenance. At early morn
Thenceforth it used to leave the hermitage^o
50 And with the shades of evening come again,
And in the little courtyard of the hut
Lie down in peace, unless the tigers fierce,
Prowling about, compelled it to return
Earlier at noon. But whether near or far,
55 Wandering abroad, or resting in its home,
The monarch-hermit's heart was with it still,
Bound by affection's ties; nor could he think
Of anything besides this little hind,
His nursling. Though a kingdom he had left,
60 And children, and a host of loving friends,
Almost without a tear, the fount of love
Sprang out anew within his blighted heart,
To greet this dumb, weak, helpless foster-child,
And so, whene'er it lingered in the wilds,
65 Or at the 'customed hour could not return,
His thoughts went with it; "And alas!" he cried,
"Who knows, perhaps some lion or some wolf,⁸
Or ravenous tiger with relentless jaws
Already hath devoured it,—timid thing!
70 Lo, how the earth is dinted^o with its hoofs,
And variegated.^o Surely for my joy
It was created. When will it come back,

hermit's residence

*marked
varied*

⁸ *Wolf* here refers to the Indian wolf.

And rub its budding antlers on my arms
In token of its love and deep delight
75 To see my face? The shaven stalks of grass,
Kusha and kasha,⁹ by its new teeth clipped,
Remind me of it, as they stand in lines
Like pious boys who chant the Samga Veds¹⁰
Shorn by their vows of all their wealth of hair.”
80 Thus passed the monarch-hermit’s time; in joy,
With smiles upon his lips, whenever near
His little favourite; in bitter grief
And fear, and trouble, when it wandered far.
And he who had abandoned ease and wealth,
85 And friends and dearest ties, and kingly power,
Found his devotions broken by the love
He had bestowed upon a little hind
Thrown in his way by chance. Years glided on.
And Death, who spareth none, approached at last
90 The hermit-king to summon him away;
The hind was at his side, with tearful eyes
Watching his last sad moments, like a child
Beside a father.¹¹ He too, watched and watched
His favourite through a blinding film of tears,
95 And could not think of the Beyond at hand,
So keen he felt the parting, such deep grief
O’erwhelmed him for the creature he had reared.
To it devoted was his last, last thought,
Reckless of present and of future both!

100 Thus far the pious chronicle, writ of old
By Brahman sage; but we, who happier, live
Under the holiest dispensation, know
That God is Love, and not to be adored
By a devotion born of stoic pride,
105 Or with ascetic rites, or penance hard,
But with a love, in character akin
To His unselfish, all-including love.
And therefore little can we sympathize
With what the Brahman sage would fain^o imply
110 As the concluding moral of his tale,¹² *eagerly*

⁹ Kusha (kusa) is an Indian grass, sacred to Hindus; kasha (kasa) is another Indian grass.

¹⁰ The Veds are the body of works that together constitute the sacred knowledge of Hinduism. The Samga (Sama) Veds are the third set of these works.

¹¹ The pathetic fallacy of the tears in the hind’s eyes is from the *Vishnu Purana* itself, not from Dutt.

¹² As Dutt indicates, the *Vishnu Purana* represents the royal ascetic’s devotion to the hind as misplaced. Indeed, he is reborn as a deer (one with knowledge of his past life and that regrets his devotion to the hind as a mistake) that will return to Bharat’s asram (place of hermitage) and bathe each day in the river there in atonement.

That for the hermit-king it was a sin
To love his nursling. What! a sin to love!
A sin to pity! Rather should we deem
Whatever Brahmans wise, or monks may hold,
115 That he had sinned in *casting off* all love
By his retirement to the forest-shades;
For that was to abandon duties high,
And, like a recreant^o soldier, leave the post *cowardly*
Where God had placed him as a sentinel.

120 This little hind brought strangely on his path,
This love engendered in his withered heart,
This hindrance to his rituals,—might these not
Have been ordained to teach him? Call him back
To ways marked out for him by Love divine?
125 And with a mind less self-willed to adore?

Not in seclusion, not apart from all,
Not in a place elected for its peace,
But in the heat and bustle of the world,
'Mid sorrow, sickness, suffering and sin,
130 Must he still labour with a loving soul
Who strives to enter through the narrow gate.¹³

¹³ Dutt here alludes to the following verse from the Bible: “Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide [is] the gate, and broad [is] the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: / Because strait [is] the gate, and narrow [is] the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.” (Matthew 7:13-14).