

SINDHU¹

PART I

Deep in the forest shades there dwelt
A *Muni*² and his wife,
Blind, grayhaired, weak, they hourly felt
Their slender hold on life.

5 No friends had they, no help or stay,
Except an only boy,
A bright-eyed child, his laughter gay,
Their leaf-hut filled with joy.

10 Attentive, duteous, loving, kind,
Thoughtful, sedate, and calm,
He waited on his parents blind,
Whose days were like a psalm.

15 He roamed the woods for luscious fruits,
He brought them water pure,
He cooked their simple mess of roots,
Content to live obscure.

20 To fretful questions, answers mild
He meekly ever gave,
If they reproved, he only smiled,
He loved to be their slave.

Not that to him they were austere,
But age is peevish still,
Dear to their hearts he was,—so dear,
That none his place might fill.

25 They called him Sindhu, and his name
Was ever on their tongue,
And he, nor cared for wealth nor fame,
Who dwelt his own among.

A belt of *Bela* trees³ hemmed round

¹ The legend of Sindhu, also known as Sravana, is from the *Ramayana*. It is told by Dasarath (see note 4) right before he dies from grief after having exiled Rama. It is a very brief tale, so Dutt's retelling represents a significant expansion of the story in the *Ramayana*.

² A *Muni* is a holy sage, often considered a saint. A *Muni* typically would have retired from the world in order to devote himself to pious rites and contemplation.

³ *Bela* trees (bel, bael, bilwa) is a sacred fruit tree also called the wood apple.

30 The cottage small and rude,
If peace on earth was ever found
 'Twas in that solitude.

PART II

 Great Dasarath, the King of Oude⁴,
 Whom all men love and fear,
35 With elephants and horses proud
 Went forth to hunt the deer.

 Oh gallant was the long array!
 Pennons^o and plumes were seen, *flags*
 And swords that mirrored back the day,
40 And spears and axes keen.

 Rang trump, and conch, and piercing fife,
 Woke Echo⁵ from her bed!
 The solemn woods with sounds were rife
 As on the pageant sped.

45 Hundreds, nay thousands, on they went!
 The wild beasts fled away!
 Deer ran in herds, and wild boars spent
 Became an easy prey.

 Whirring the peacocks from the brake^o *thicket*
50 With Argus wings⁶ arose,
 Wild swans abandoned pool and lake
 For climes beyond the snows.

 From tree to tree the monkeys sprung,
 Unharm'd and unpursued,
55 As louder still the trumpets rung
 And startled all the wood.

 The porcupines and such small game
 Unnoted fled at will,
 The weasel only caught to tame
60 From fissures in the hill.

⁴ Dasarath (Dasaratha) is the father of Rama. His kingdom, Oude (Ayodhya, Awadh), was in what is now the modern-day Indian state of Uttar Pradesh.

⁵ Dutt refers here to Echo, the Greek nymph from whose name the word derives. Echo is primarily famous for falling in love with Narcissus.

⁶ Argus was a giant in Greek mythology with one hundred eyes. The goddess Hera ultimately preserved his eyes in a peacock's tail (hence, "Argus wings").

Slunk light the tiger from the bank,
But sudden turned to bay!
When he beheld the serried^o rank
That barred his tangled way.

close-compacted

65 Uprooting fig-trees on their path,
And trampling shrubs and flowers,
Wild elephants, in fear and wrath,
Burst through, like moving towers.

70 Lowering their horns in crescents grim
Whene'er they turned about,
Retreated into coverts dim
The bisons' fiercer rout.⁷

75 And in this mimic game of war
In bands dispersed and past
The royal train,—some near, some far,
As day closed in at last.

80 Where was the king? He left his friends
At midday, it was known,
And now that evening fast descends
Where was he? All alone?

Curving, the river formed a lake,
Upon whose bank he stood,
No noise the silence there to break,
Or mar the solitude.

85 Upon the glassy surface fell
The last beams of the day,
Like fiery darts, that lengthening swell,
As breezes wake and play.

90 Osiers⁸ and willows on the edge
And purple buds and red,
Leant down,—and 'mid the pale green sedge
The lotus⁹ raised its head.

And softly, softly, hour by hour
Light faded, and a veil

⁷ Bison was a popular name for the great wild-ox, called *gaur* in Bengal.

⁸ Osiers are certain types of willows, so Dutt's line is somewhat redundant.

⁹ The lotus, a large water-lily, is a sacred flower in Hinduism.

95 Fell over tree, and wave, and flower,
On came the twilight pale.

Deeper and deeper grew the shades,
Stars glimmered in the sky,
The nightingale along the glades
100 Raised her preluding cry.

What is that momentary flash?
A gleam of silver scales
Reveals the *Mahseer*,¹⁰—then a splash,
And calm again prevails.

105 As darkness settled like a pall
The eye would pierce in vain,
The fireflies gemmed the bushes all,
Like fiery drops of rain.

Pleased with the scene,—and knowing not
110 Which way, alas! to go,
The monarch lingered on the spot,—
The lake spread bright below.

He lingered, when—oh hark! oh hark
What sound salutes his ear!
115 A roebuck¹¹ drinking in the dark,
Not hunted, nor in fear.

Straight to the stretch his bow he drew,
That bow ne'er missed its aim,
Whizzing the deadly arrow flew,
120 Ear-guided, on the game!

Ah me! What means this?—Hark, a cry,
A feeble human wail,
“Oh God!” it said—“I die,—I die,
Who'll carry home the pail?”

125 Startled, the monarch forward ran,
And then there met his view
A sight to freeze in any man
The warm blood coursing true.

¹⁰ The *Mahseer* is a river fish that at its largest could grow to the size of the biggest salmon, and thus it was considered the highest sport to Indian anglers.

¹¹ A roebuck is a small deer.

130 A child lay dying on the grass,
A pitcher by his side,
Poor Sindhu was the child, alas!
His parents' stay and pride.

His bow and quiver down to fling,
And lift the wounded boy,
135 A moment's work was with the king.
Not dead,—that was a joy!

He placed the child's head on his lap,
And ranged the blinding hair,
The blood welled fearful from the gap
140 On neck and bosom fair.

He dashed cold water on the face,
He chafed the hands, with sighs,
Till sense revived, and he could trace
Expression in the eyes.

145 Then mingled with his pity, fear—
In all this universe
What is so dreadful as to hear
A Bramin's¹² dying curse!

150 So thought the king, and on his brow
The beads of anguish spread,
And Sindhu, fully conscious now,
The anguish plainly read.

“What dost thou fear, O mighty king?
For sure a king thou art!
155 Why should thy bosom anguish wring?
No crime was in thine heart!

Unwittingly the deed was done;
It is my destiny,
O fear not thou, but pity one
160 Whose fate is thus to die.

No curses, no!—I bear no grudge,
Not thou my blood hast spilt,
Lo! here before the unseen Judge,
Thee I absolve from guilt.

¹² Hindu society was seen as divided into four main castes, or classes, determined by one's birth. Bramins (Brahmins, Brahmins) are members of the highest caste, made up of holy sages and philosophers.

165 The iron, red-hot as it burns,
Burns those that touch it too,
Not such my nature,—for it spurns,
Thank God, the like to do.

Because I suffer, should I give
170 Thee, king, a needless pain?
Ah, no! I die, but mayst thou live,
And cleansed from every stain!”

Struck with these words, and doubly grieved
At what his hands had done,
175 The monarch wept, as weeps bereaved
A man his only son.

“Nay, weep not so,” resumed the child,
“But rather let me say
My own sad story, sin-defiled,
180 And why I die today!

Picking a living in our sheaves,
And happy in their loves,
Near, ‘mid a peepul’s¹³ quivering leaves,
There lived a pair of doves.

185 Never were they two separate,
And lo, in idle mood,
I took a sling and ball, elate
In wicked sport and rude,—

And killed one bird,—it was the male,
190 Oh cruel deed and base!
The female gave a plaintive wail
And looked me in the face!

The wail and sad reproachful look
In plain words seemed to say,
195 A widowed life I cannot brook,
The forfeit thou must pay.

What was my darling’s crime that thou
Him wantonly shouldst kill?
The curse of blood is on thee now,

¹³ The peepul (pipal) is one of the great fig trees of India. With a strong resemblance to poplar tress, especially the aspen, it often was in a prominent place in a village or near a temple.

200 Blood calls for red blood still.

And so I die—a bloody death—
But not for this I mourn,
To feel the world pass with my breath
I gladly could have borne,

205 But for my parents, who are blind,
And have no other stay,—
This, this, weighs sore upon my mind,
And fills me with dismay.

Upon the eleventh day of the moon
210 They keep a rigorous fast,
All yesterday they fasted; soon
For water and repast

They shall upon me feebly call!
Ah, must they call in vain?
215 Bear thou the pitcher, friend—‘tis all
I ask—down that steep lane.”

He pointed,—ceased,—then sudden died!
The king took up the corpse,
And with the pitcher slowly hied,^o
220 Attended by Remorse,

made his way

Down the steep lane—unto the hut
Girt round with *Bela* trees;
Gleamed far a light—the door not shut
Was open to the breeze.

PART III

225 “Oh why does not our child return?
Too long he surely stays.”—
Thus to the *Muni*, blind and stern,
His partner gently says.

230 “For fruits and water when he goes
He never stays so long,
Oh can it be, beset by foes,
He suffers cruel wrong?

Some distance he has gone, I fear,
A more circuitous round,—

235 Yet why should he? The fruits are near,
The river near our bound.

I die of thirst,—it matters not
If Sindhu be but safe,
What if he leave us, and this spot,
240 Poor birds in cages chafe.

Peevish and fretful oft we are,—
Ah, no—that cannot be:
Of our blind eyes he is the star,
Without him, what were we?

245 Too much he loves us to forsake,
But something ominous,
Here in my heart, a dreadful ache,
Says, he is gone from us.

Why do my bowels for him yearn,
250 What ill has crossed his path?
Blind, helpless, whither shall we turn,
Or how avert the wrath?

Lord of my soul—what means my pain?
This horrid terror,—like
255 Some cloud that hides a hurricane;
Hang not, O lightning,—strike!”

Thus while she spake, the king drew near
With haggard look and wild,
Weighed down with grief, and pale with fear,
260 Bearing the lifeless child.

Rustled the dry leaves neath his foot,
And made an eerie sound,
A neighbouring owl began to hoot,
All else was still around.

265 At the first rustle of the leaves
The *Muni* answered clear,
“Lo, here he is—oh wherefore grieves
Thy soul, my partner dear?”

The words distinct, the monarch heard,
270 He could no further go,
His nature to its depths was stirred,

He stopped in speechless woe.

No steps advanced,—the sudden pause
Attention quickly drew,
275 Rolled sightless orbs to learn the cause,
But, hark!—the steps renew.

“Where art thou, darling—why so long
Hast thou delayed to-night?
We die of thirst,—we are not strong,
280 This fasting kills outright.

Speak to us, dear one,—only speak,
And calm our idle fears,
Where hast thou been, and what to seek?
Have pity on these tears.”

285 With head bent low the monarch heard,
Then came a cruel throb
That tore his heart,—still not a word,
Only a stifled sob!

“It is not Sindhu—who art thou?
290 And where is Sindhu gone?
There’s blood upon thy hands—avow!”^o
“There is.”—“Speak on, speak on.”

confess

The dead child in their arms he placed,
And briefly told his tale,
295 The parents their dead child embraced,
And kissed his forehead pale.

“Our hearts are broken. Come, dear wife,
On earth no more we dwell;
Now welcome death, and farewell Life,
300 And thou, O king, farewell!

We do not curse thee, God forbid
But to my inner eye
The future is no longer hid,
Thou too shalt like us die.

305 Die—for a son’s untimely loss!
Die—with a broken heart!
Now help us to our bed of moss,
And let us both depart.”

310 Upon the moss he laid them down,
And watched beside the bed;
Death gently came and placed a crown
Upon each reverend head.

Where the Sarayu's waves¹⁴ dash free
Against a rocky bank,
315 The monarch had the corpses three
Conveyed by men of rank;

There honoured he with royal pomp
Their funeral obsequies,^o—
Incense and sandal,^o drum and tromp,^o
320 And solemn sacrifice.

rites
sandalwood / trumpet

What is the sequel of the tale?
How died the king?—Oh man,
A prophet's words can never fail—
Go, read the Ramayan.¹⁵

¹⁴ The Sarayu was a river that flowed through Oude.

¹⁵ See note 1.