

SAVITRI¹

PART I

Savitri was the only child
Of Madra's wise and mighty king;²
Stern warriors, when they saw her, smiled,
As mountains smile to see the spring.
5 Fair as a lotus³ when the moon
Kisses its opening petals red,
After sweet showers in sultry June!
With happier heart, and lighter tread,
Chance strangers, having met her, past,
10 And often would they turn the head
A lingering second look to cast,
And bless the vision ere it fled.

What was her own peculiar charm?
The soft black eyes, the raven hair,
15 The curving neck, the rounded arm,
All these are common everywhere.
Her charm was this—upon her face
Childlike and innocent and fair,
No man with thought impure or base
20 Could ever look;—the glory there,
The sweet simplicity and grace,
Abashed the boldest; but the good
God's purity there loved to trace,
Mirrored in dawning womanhood.

25 In those far-off primeval days
Fair India's daughters were not pent
In closed zenanas.⁴ On her ways
Savitri at her pleasure went
Whither she chose,—and hour by hour
30 With young companions of her age,
She roamed the woods for fruit or flower,
Or loitered in some hermitage,^o

hermit's residence

¹ The story of Savitri comes from the *Mahabharata*, one of the two great Sanskrit epics. Due to her devotion to her husband Satyavan, Savitri traditionally has served as a type for the ideal wife.

² Savitri's father Asvapati was king of Madra (not to be confused with modern-day Madras). Madra, a kingdom in ancient Bharata, was by the Jhelum River (in the Punjab region of northern India).

³ The lotus is a sacred flower in Hinduism. A large water-lily, it usually symbolizes beauty (thus, "Fair as a lotus").

⁴ The area of a house occupied by the women of a family, as part of the practice (common in Dutt's India) of keeping women secluded.

For to the Munis⁵ gray and old
Her presence was as sunshine glad,
35 They taught her wonders manifold
And gave her of the best they had.

Her father let her have her way
In all things, whether high or low;
He feared no harm; he knew no ill
40 Could touch a nature pure as snow.
Long childless, as a priceless boon^o
He had obtained this child at last
By prayers, made morning, night, and noon
With many a vigil, many a fast;
45 Would Shiva⁶ his own gift recall,
Or mar its perfect beauty ever?—
No, he had faith,—he gave her all
She wished, and feared and doubted never.

favor/reward

And so she wandered where she pleased
50 In boyish freedom. Happy time!
No small vexations ever teased,
Nor crushing sorrows dimmed her prime.
One care alone, her father felt—
Where should he find a fitting mate
55 For one so pure?—His thoughts long dwelt
On this as with his queen he sate.^o
“Ah, whom, dear wife, should we select?”
“Leave it to God,” she answering cried,
“Savitri may herself elect
60 Some day her future lord and guide.”

sat

Months passed, and lo, one summer morn
As to the hermitage she went
Through smiling fields of waving corn,^o
65 She saw some youths on sport intent,
Sons of the hermits, and their peers,
And one among them tall and lithe,^o
Royal in port,^o—on whom the years
Consenting, shed a grace so blithe,^o
So frank and noble, that the eye
70 Was loth^o to quit that sun-browned face;
She looked and looked,—then gave a sigh,

grain

*graceful
bearing
joyful*

reluctant

⁵ Munis are holy sages, often considered saints. Munis typically would have retired from the world in order to devote themselves to pious rites and contemplation.

⁶ Shiva (Siva) is the third person of the Hindu trinity and is primarily known as the Destroyer, but Shiva also (as here) is the source of blessings.

And slackened suddenly her pace.

What was the meaning—was it love?

75 Love at first sight, as poets sing,
Is then no fiction? Heaven above
Is witness, that the heart its king
Finds often like a lightning flash;
We play,—we jest,—we have no care,—
When hark a step,—there comes no crash,—
80 But life, or silent slow despair.
Their eyes just met,—Savitri past
Into the friendly Muni's hut,
Her heart-rose opened had at last—
Opened no flower can ever shut.

85 In converse with the gray-haired sage

She learnt the story of the youth,
His name and place and parentage—
Of royal race he was in truth.
Satyavan was he hight,^o—his sire
90 Dyoumatsen had been Salva's king,⁷
But old and blind, opponents dire
Had gathered round him in a ring
And snatched the sceptre from his hand;
Now,—with his queen and only son
95 He lived a hermit in the land,
And gentler hermit was there none.

named

With many tears was said and heard

The story,—and with praise sincere
Of Prince Satyavan; every word
100 Sent up a flush on cheek and ear,
Unnoticed. Hark! The bells remind
'Tis time to go,—she went away,
Leaving her virgin heart behind,
And richer for the loss. A ray,
105 Shot down from heaven, appeared to tinge
All objects with supernal^o light,
The thatches had a rainbow fringe,
The cornfields looked more green and bright.

heavenly

Savitri's first care was to tell

110 Her mother all her feelings new;
The queen her own fears to dispel
To the king's private chamber flew.

⁷ Salva was another ancient kingdom, in the area of the modern-day Rajasthan in northwestern India.

“Now what is it, my gentle queen,
That makes thee hurry in this wise?”^o *way*
115 She told him, smiles and tears between,
All she had heard; the king with sighs
Sadly replied:—“I fear me much!
Whence is his race and what his creed?
Not knowing aught, can we in such
120 A matter delicate, proceed?”

As if the king’s doubts to allay,
Came Narad Muni⁸ to the place
A few days after. Old and gray,
All loved to see the gossip’s face,
125 Great Brahma’s son,⁹—adored of men,
Long absent, doubly welcome he
Unto the monarch, hoping then
By his assistance, clear to see.
No god in heaven, nor king on earth,
130 But Narad knew his history,—
The sun’s, the moon’s, the planets’ birth
Was not to him a mystery.

“Now welcome, welcome, dear old friend,
All hail, and welcome once again!”
135 The greeting had not reached its end,
When glided like a music-strain
Savitri’s presence through the room.—
“And who is this bright creature, say,
Whose radiance lights the chamber’s gloom—
140 Is she an Apsara^o or fay?”^o *celestial nymph / fairy*
“No son thy servant hath, alas!
This is my one,—my only child;”—
“And married?”—“No.”—“The seasons pass,
Make haste, O king,”—he said, and smiled.

145 “That is the very theme, O sage,
In which thy wisdom ripe I need;
Seen hath she at the hermitage
A youth to whom in very deed
Her heart inclines.”—“And who is he?”
150 “My daughter, tell his name and race,
Speak as to men who best love thee.”
She turned to them her modest face,

⁸ Narad (Narada) Muni is one of the most famous sages in the Hindu tradition.

⁹ Brahma is the first person of the Hindu triad, the Creator. Narad Muni, although there are various stories of his birth, typically is understood to have been born from Brahma.

And answered quietly and clear.—
“Ah, no! ah, no!—It cannot be—
155 Choose out another husband, dear,”—
The Muni cried,—“or woe is me!”

“And why should I? When I have given
My heart away, though but in thought,
Can I take back? Forbid it, Heaven!
160 It were a deadly sin, I wot.° *know*
And why should I? I know no crime
In him or his.”—“Believe me, child,
My reasons shall be clear in time,
I speak not like a madman wild;
165 Trust me in this.”—“I cannot break
A plighted° faith,—I cannot bear *promised*
A wounded conscience.”—“Oh, forsake
This fancy, hence may spring despair.”—

“It may not be.”—The father heard
170 By turns the speakers, and in doubt
Thus interposed a gentle word,—
“Friend should to friend his mind speak out,
Is he not worthy? tell us.”—“Nay,
All worthiness is in Satyavan,
175 And no one can my praise gainsay:° *doubt*
Of solar race¹⁰—more god than man!
Great Sooracen,¹¹ his ancestor,
And Dyoumatsen his father blind
Are known to fame: I can aver
180 No kings have been so good and kind.”

“Then where, O Muni, is the bar?
If wealth be gone, and kingdom lost,
His merit still remains a star,
Nor melts his lineage like the frost.
185 For riches, wordly power, or rank
I care not,—I would have my son
Pure, wise, and brave,—the Fates I thank
I see no hindrance, no, not one.”
“Since thou insistest, King, to hear
190 The fatal truth,—I tell you,—I,
Upon this day as rounds the year
The young Prince Satyavan shall die.”

¹⁰ The solar race is a line of ancient kings known as the Suryavansa. Surya is the Hindu god of the sun and the father of Manu, the first human; the solar race are descendants of Manu's son, Ikshwaku (Ikshvaku).

¹¹ Sooracen (Surasena) was a famous king of this lineage who was Satyavan's ancestor.

This was enough. The monarch knew,
The future was no sealèd book
195 To Brahma's son. A clammy dew
Spread on his brow,—he gently took
Savitri's palm in his, and said:
“No child can give away her hand,
A pledge is nought unsanctioned;
200 And here, if right I understand,
There was no pledge at all,—a thought,
A shadow,—barely crossed the mind—
Unblamed, it may be clean forgot,
Before the gods it cannot bind.

205 And think upon the dreadful curse
Of widowhood;¹² the vigils, fasts,
And penances; no life is worse
Than hopeless life,—the while it lasts.
Day follows day in one long round,
210 Monotonous and blank and drear;
Less painful were it to be bound
On some bleak rock, for aye^o to hear—
Without one chance of getting free—
The ocean's melancholy voice!
215 Mine be the sin,—if sin there be,
But thou must make a different choice.”

always

In the meek grace of virginhood
Unblanched her cheek, undimmed her eye,
Savitri, like a statue, stood,
220 Somewhat austere was her reply.
“Once, and once only, all submit
To Destiny,—'tis God's command;
Once, and once only, so 'tis writ,
Shall woman pledge her faith and hand;
225 Once, and once only, can a sire
Unto his well-loved daughter say,
In presence of the witness fire,¹³
I give thee to this man away.

Once, and once only, have I given

¹² Widowhood is referred to here as a curse because it resulted in a definite loss of social status. Widows usually were expected either to leave or to live a largely isolated life as a dependent in the household of the husband's family.

¹³ Agni, the god of fire, is central to Hindu sacrifice and ritual traditions. Agni serves as the primary divine witness in the Hindu marriage ceremony, a key element of which involves walking around a sacred fire.

230 My heart and faith—'tis past recall;
With conscience none have ever striven,
And none may strive, without a fall.
Not the less solemn was my vow
Because unheard, and oh! the sin
235 Will not be less, if I should now
Deny the feeling felt within.
Unwedded to my dying day
I must, my father dear, remain;
'Tis well, if so thou will'st, but say
240 Can man balk Fate, or break its chain?

If Fate so rules, that I should feel
The miseries of a widow's life,
Can man's device the doom repeal?
Unequal seems to be a strife,
245 Between Humanity and Fate;
None have on earth what they desire;
Death comes to all or soon or late;
And peace is but a wandering fire;
Expediency leads wild astray;
250 The Right must be our guiding star;
Duty our watchword, come what may;
Judge for me, friends,—as wiser far."

She said, and meekly looked to both.
The father, though he patient heard,
255 To give the sanction still seemed loth,
But Narad Muni took the word.
"Bless thee, my child! 'Tis not for us
To question the Almighty will,
Though cloud on cloud loom ominous,
260 In gentle rain they may distil."
At this, the monarch—"Be it so!
I sanction what my friend approves;
All praise to Him, whom praise we owe;
My child shall wed the youth she loves."

PART II

265 Great joy in Madra. Blow the shell
The marriage over to declare!
And now to forest-shades where dwell
The hermits, wend^o the wedded pair.
The doors of every house are hung
270 With gay festoons^o of leaves and flowers;

journey

decorative chains

And blazing banners broad are flung,
And trumpets blown from castle towers!
Slow the procession makes its ground
Along the crowded city street:
275 And blessings in a storm of sound
At every step the couple greet.

Past all the houses, past the wall.
Past gardens gay, and hedgerows trim,
Past fields, where sinuous^o brooklets small
280 With molten silver to the brim
Glance in the sun's expiring light,
Past frowning hills, past pastures wild,
At last arises on the sight,
Foliage on foliage densely piled,
285 The woods primeval, where reside
The holy hermits;—henceforth here
Must live the fair and gentle bride:
But this thought brought with it no fear.

curving

Fear! With her husband by her still?
290 Or weariness! Where all was new?
Hark! What a welcome from the hill!
There gathered are a hermits few.
Screaming the peacocks upward soar;
Wondering the timid wild deer gaze;
295 And from Briarean fig-trees¹⁴ hoar^o
Look down the monkeys in amaze
As the procession moves along;
And now behold, the bridegroom's sire
With joy comes forth amid the throng;—
300 What reverence his looks inspire!

old and gray

Blind! With his partner by his side!
For them it was a hallowed time!
Warmly they greet the modest bride
With her dark eyes and front sublime!
305 One only grief they feel.—Shall she
Who dwelt in palace halls before,
Dwell in their huts beneath the tree?
Would not their hard life press her sore;—
The manual labour, and the want
310 Of comforts that her rank became,
Valkala robes,¹⁵ meals poor and scant,

¹⁴ Briareus (Briareos) is a hundred-handed giant from Greek mythology.

¹⁵ Valkala robes, made of barkcloth, are associated with ascetics (who lead an austere religious life).

All undermine the fragile frame?

To see the bride, the hermits' wives
And daughters gathered to the huts,
315 Women of pure and saintly lives!
And there beneath the betel-nuts,¹⁶
Tall trees like pillars, they admire
Her beauty, and congratulate
The parents, that their hearts' desire
320 Had thus accorded been by Fate,
And Satyavan their son had found
In exile lone, a fitting mate:
And gossips add,—good signs abound;
Prosperity shall on her wait.
325 Good signs in features, limbs, and eyes,
That old experience can discern,
Good signs on earth and in the skies,
That it could read at every turn.
And now with rice and gold, all bless
330 The bride and bridegroom,—and they go
Happy in others' happiness,
Each to her home, beneath the glow
Of the late risen moon that lines
With silver, all the ghost-like trees,
335 Sals, tamarisks,¹⁷ and South-Sea pines,
And palms whose plumes wave in the breeze.

False was the fear, the parents felt,
Savitri liked her new life much;
Though in a lowly home she dwelt
340 Her conduct as a wife was such
As to illumine all the place;
She sickened not, nor sighed, nor pined;
But with simplicity and grace
Discharged each household duty kind.
345 Strong in all manual work,—and strong
To comfort, cherish, help, and pray,
The hours past peacefully along
And rippling bright, day followed day.

At morn Satyavan to the wood

¹⁶ Betel-nuts are the nuts of the areca palm wrapped and chewed in the leaves of the betel plant, so the trees referred to here actually are areca palms.

¹⁷ The sal (saul) is one of the most valuable timber trees in India; the tamarisk is an evergreen shrub or small tree.

350 Early repaired and gathered flowers
And fruits, in its wild solitude,
And fuel,—till advancing hours
Apprised him that his frugal meal
Awaited him. Ah, happy time!
355 Savitri, who with fervid zeal
Had said her orisons^o sublime,
And fed the Bramins¹⁸ and the birds,
Now ministered. Arcadian love,¹⁹
With tender smiles and honeyed words,
360 All bliss of earth thou art above!

prayers

And yet there was a spectre grim,
A skeleton in Savitri's heart,
Looming in shadow, somewhat dim,
But which would never thence depart.
365 It was that fatal, fatal speech
Of Narad Muni. As the days
Slipt smoothly past, each after each,
In private she more fervent prays.
But there is none to share her fears,
370 For how could she communicate
The sad cause of her hidden tears?
The doom approached, the fatal date.

No help from man. Well, be it so!
No sympathy,—it matters not!
375 God can avert the heavy blow!
He answers worship. Thus she thought.
And so, her prayers, by day and night,
Like incense rose unto the throne;
Nor did she vow neglect or rite
380 The Veds²⁰ enjoin or helpful own.
Upon the fourteenth of the moon,
As nearer came the time of dread,
In Joystee that is May or June,
She vowed her vows and Bramins fed.

385 And now she counted e'en the hours,
As to Eternity they past;
O'er head the dark cloud darker lowers,
The year is rounding full at last.

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ Arcadia is a region in Greece associated in the Western literary tradition with idealized pastoral settings.

²⁰ The Veds refers to the body of works that together constitute the sacred knowledge of Hinduism.

To-day,—to-day,—with doleful sound
390 The word seem'd in her ear to ring!
O breaking heart,—thy pain profound
Thy husband knows not, nor the king,
Exiled and blind, nor yet the queen;
But One knows in His place above.
395 To-day,—to-day,—it will be seen
Which shall be victor, Death or Love!

Incessant in her prayers from morn,
The noon is safely tided,—then
A glean of faint, faint hope is born,
400 But the heart fluttered like a wren
That sees the shadow of the hawk
Sail on,—and trembles in affright,
Lest a downrushing swoop should mock
Its fortune, and o'erwhelm it quite.
405 The afternoon has come and gone
And brought no change;—should she rejoice?
The gentle evening's shades come on,
When hark!—She hears her husband's voice!

“The twilight is most beautiful!
410 Mother, to gather fruit I go,
And fuel,—for the air is cool,—
Expect me in an hour or so.”
“The night, my child, draws on apace,”
The mother's voice was heard to say,
415 “The forest paths are hard to trace
In darkness,—till the morrow stay.”
“Not hard for me, who can discern
The forest-paths in any hour,
Blindfold I could with ease return,
420 And day has not yet lost its power.”

“He goes then,” thought Savitri, “thus
With unseen bands Fate draws us on
Unto the place appointed us;
We feel no outward force,—anon^o
425 We go to marriage or to death
At a determined time and place;
We are her playthings; with her breath
She blows us where she lists^o in space.
What is my duty? It is clear,
430 My husband I must follow; so,
While he collects his forest gear

quickly

directly

pleases

Let me permission get to go.”

His sire she seeks,—the blind old king,
And asks from him permission straight.
435 “My daughter, night with ebon wing
Hovers above; the hour is late.
My son is active, brave, and strong,
Conversant with the woods, he knows
Each path; methinks it would be wrong
440 For thee to venture where he goes,
Weak and defenceless as thou art,
At such a time. If thou wert near
Thou might’st embarrass him, dear heart,
Alone, he would not have a fear.”

445 So spake the hermit-monarch blind,
His wife too, entering in, exprest
The self-same thoughts in words as kind,
And begged Savitri hard, to rest.
“Thy recent fasts and vigils, child,
450 Make thee unfit to undertake
This journey to the forest wild.”
But nothing could her purpose shake.
She urged the nature of her vows,
Required her now the rites were done
455 To follow where her loving spouse
Might e’en a chance of danger run.

“Go then, my child,—we give thee leave,
But with thy husband quick return,
Before the flickering shades of eve
460 Deepen to night, and planets burn,
And forest-paths become obscure,
Lit only by their doubtful rays.
The gods, who guard all women pure,
Bless thee and keep thee in thy ways,
465 And safely bring thee and thy lord!”
On this she left, and swiftly ran
Where with his saw in lieu of sword,
And basket, plodded Satyavan.

470 Oh, lovely are the woods at dawn,
And lovely in the sultry noon,
But loveliest, when the sun withdrawn
The twilight and a crescent moon
Change all asperities° of shape,

475 And tone all colours softly down,
With a blue veil of silvered crape!
 Lo! By that hill which palm-trees crown,
Down the deep glade with perfume rife
 From buds that to the dews expand,
The husband and the faithful wife
480 Pass to dense jungle,—hand in hand.

Satyavan bears beside his saw
 A forkèd stick to pluck the fruit,
His wife, the basket lined with straw;
 He talks, but she is almost mute,
485 And very pale. The minutes pass;
 The basket has no further space,
Now on the fruits they flowers amass
 That with their red flush all the place
While twilight lingers; then for wood
490 He sees the branches of the trees,
The noise, heard in the solitude,
 Grates on its soft, low harmonies.

And all the while one dreadful thought
 Haunted Savitri's anxious mind,
495 Which would have fain^o its stress forgot;
 It came as chainless as the wind,
Oft and again: thus on the spot
 Marked with his heart-blood oft comes back
The murdered man, to see the clot!
500 Death's final blow,—the fatal wrack
Of every hope, whence will it fall?
 For fall, by Narad's words, it must;
Persistent rising to appall
 This thought its horrid presence thrust.

gladly

505 Sudden the noise is hushed,—a pause!
 Satyavan lets the weapon drop—
Too well Savitri knows the cause,
 He feels not well, the work must stop.
A pain is in his head,—a pain
510 As if he felt the cobra's fangs,
He tries to look around,—in vain,
 A mist before his vision hangs;
The trees whirl dizzily around
 In a fantastic fashion wild;
515 His throat and chest seem iron-bound,
 He staggers, like a sleepy child.

“My head, my head!—Savitri, dear,
This pain is frightful. Let me lie
Here on the turf.” Her voice was clear
520 And very calm was her reply,
As if her heart had banished fear:
“Lean, love, thy head upon my breast,”
And as she helped him, added—“here,
So shalt thou better breathe and rest.”
525 “Ah me, this pain,—‘tis getting dark,
I see no more,—can this be death?
What means this, gods?—Savitri, mark,
My hands wax cold, and fails my breath.”

“It may be but a swoon.” “Ah! no—
530 Arrows are piercing through my heart,—
Farewell my love! for I must go,
This, this is death.” He gave one start
And then lay quiet on her lap,
Insensible to sight and sound,
535 Breathing his last. . . . The branches flap
And fireflies glimmer all around;
His head upon her breast; his frame
Part on her lap, part on the ground,
Thus lies he. Hours pass. Still the same,
540 The pair look statues, magic-bound.

PART III

Death in his palace holds his court,
His messengers move to and fro,
Each of his mission makes report,
And takes the royal orders,—Lo,
545 Some slow before his throne appear
And humbly in the Presence kneel:
“Why hath the Prince not been brought here?
The hour is past; nor is appeal
Allowed against foregone decree;
550 There is the mandate with the seal!
How comes it ye return to me
Without him? Shame upon your zeal!”

“O King, whom all men fear,—he lies
Deep in the dark Medhya²¹ wood,

²¹ Medhya is a holy place on India’s western coast. Alternatively, Meda is the name of a low mixed caste of hunters who were not allowed to live in the towns.

555 We fled from thence in wild surprise,
And left him in that solitude.
We dared not touch him, for there sits,
Beside him, lighting all the place,
A woman fair, whose brow permits
560 In its austerity of grace
And purity,—no creatures foul
As we seemed, by her loveliness,
Or soul of evil, ghost or ghoul,
To venture close, and far, far less
565 To stretch a hand, and bear the dead;
We left her leaning on her hand,
Thoughtful; no tear-drop had she shed,
But looked the goddess of the land,
With her meek air of mild command.”—
570 “Then on this errand I must go
Myself, and bear my dreaded brand,
This duty unto Fate I owe;
I know the merits of the prince,
But merit saves not from the doom
575 Common to man; his death long since
Was destined in his beauty’s bloom.”

PART IV

As still Savitri sat beside
Her husband dying,—dying fast,
She saw a stranger²² slowly glide
580 Beneath the boughs that shrunk aghast.
Upon his head he wore a crown
That shimmered in the doubtful light;
His vestment scarlet reached low down,
His waist, a golden girdle^o dight.^o
585 His skin was dark as bronze; his face
Irradiate, and yet severe;
His eyes had much of love and grace,
But glowed so bright, they filled with fear.

belt / adorned

A string was in the stranger’s hand
590 Noosed at its end. Her terrors now
Savitri scarcely could command.
Upon the sod beneath a bough,
She gently laid her husband’s head,
And in obeisance bent her brow.

²² This stranger is Yama, Hindu god of death, also known as Kala.

595 “No mortal form is thine,”—she said,
“Beseech thee say what god art thou?
And what can be thine errand here?”
“Savitri, for thy prayers, thy faith,
Thy frequent vows, thy fasts severe,
600 I answer,—list^o,—my name is Death.

listen

And I am come myself to take
Thy husband from this earth away,
And he shall cross the doleful^o lake
In my own charge, and let me say
605 To few such honours I accord,
But his pure life and thine require
No less from me.” The dreadful sword
Like lightning glanced one moment dire;
And then the inner man was tied,
610 The soul no bigger than the thumb,
To be borne onwards by his side:—
Savitri all the while stood dumb.

sorrowful

But when the god moved slowly on
To gain his own dominions dim,
615 Leaving the body there—anon
Savitri meekly followed him,
Hoping against all hope; he turned
And looked surprised. “Go back, my child!”
Pale, pale the stars above them burned,
620 More weird the scene had grown and wild;
“It is not for the living—hear!
To follow where the dead must go,
Thy duty lies before thee clear,
What thou shouldst do, the Shasters²³ show.

625 The funeral rites that they ordain
And sacrifices must take up
Thy first sad moments; not in vain
Is held to thee this bitter cup;
Its lessons thou shalt learn in time!
630 All that thou *canst* do, thou hast done
For thy dear lord. Thy love sublime
My deepest sympathy hath won.
Return, for thou hast come as far
As living creature may. Adieu!
635 Let duty be thy guiding star,
As ever. To thyself be true!”

²³ The Shasters (sastras) are Hindu scriptures or religious works, particularly those providing laws.

“Where’er my husband dear is led,
Or journeys of his own free will,
I too must go, though darkness spread
640 Across my path, portending ill,
‘Tis thus my duty I have read!
If I am wrong, oh! with me bear;
But do not bid me backward tread
My way forlorn,—for I can dare
645 All things but that; ah! pity me,
A woman frail, too sorely tried!
And let me, let me follow thee,
O gracious god,—whate’er betide.

By all things sacred, I entreat,
650 By Penitence that purifies,
By prompt Obedience, full, complete,
To spiritual masters, in the eyes
Of gods so precious, by the love
I bear my husband, by the faith
655 That looks from earth to heaven above,
And by thy own great name, O Death,
And all thy kindness, bid me not
To leave thee, and to go my way,
But let me follow as I ought
660 Thy steps and his, as best I may.

I know that in this transient world
All is delusion,—nothing true;
I know its shows are mists unfurled
To please and vanish. To renew
665 Its bubble joys, be magic bound
In *Maya's*²⁴ network frail and fair,
Is not my aim! The gladsome sound
Of husband, brother, friend, is air
To such as know that all must die,
670 And that at last the time must come,
When eye shall speak no more to eye
And Love cry,—Lo, this is my sum.

I know that in such a world as this
No one can gain his heart’s desire,
675 Or pass the years in perfect bliss;
Like gold we must be tried by fire;

²⁴ Typically, as here, *Maya* refers to illusion, specifically the illusion of the visible world (and its vanities, which may lead one astray).

And each shall suffer as he acts
And thinks,—his own sad burden bear!
No friends can help,—his sins are facts
680 That nothing can annul or square,
And he must bear their consequence.
Can I my husband save by rites?
Ah, no,—that were a vain pretence,
Justice eternal strict requites.°

requires its due return

685 He for his deeds shall get his due
As I for mine: thus here each soul
Is its own friend if it pursue
The right, and run straight for the goal;
But its own worst and direst foe
690 If it choose evil, and in tracks
Forbidden, for its pleasure go.
Who knows not this, true wisdom lacks,
Virtue should be the aim and end
Of every life, all else is vain,
695 Duty should be its dearest friend
If higher life it would attain.”

“So sweet thy words ring on mine ear,
Gentle Savitri, that I fain
Would give some sign to make it clear
700 Thou hast not prayed to me in vain.
Satyavan’s life I may not grant,
Nor take before its term thy life,
But I am not all adamant,
I feel for thee, thou faithful wife!
705 Ask thou aught else, and let it be
Some good thing for thyself or thine,
And I shall give it, child, to thee,
If any power on earth be mine.”

“Well, be it so. My husband’s sire
710 Hath lost his sight and fair domain,
Give to his eyes their former fire,
And place him on his throne again.”
“It shall be done. Go back, my child,
The hour wears late, the wind feels cold,
715 The path becomes more weird and wild,
Thy feet are torn, there’s blood, behold!
Thou feelest faint from weariness,
Oh try to follow me no more;
Go home, and with thy presence bless

720 Those who thine absence there deplore.”^o *mourn*

 “*No weariness, O Death, I feel,
 And how should I, when by the side
 Of Satyavan? In woe and weal^o *well-being*
 To be a helpmate swears the bride.*

725 This is my place; by solemn oath
 Wherever thou conductest him
 I too must go, to keep my troth;^o *pledged faith*
 And if the eye at times should brim,
 ‘Tis human weakness, give me strength

730 My work appointed to fulfil,
 That I may gain the crown at length
 The gods give those who do their will.

 The power of goodness is so great
 We pray to feel its influence

735 For ever on us. It is late,
 And the strange landscape awes my sense;
 But I would fain with thee go on,
 And hear thy voice so true and kind;
 The false lights that on objects shone

740 Have vanished, and no longer blind,
 Thanks to thy simple presence. Now
 I feel a fresher air around,
 And see the glory of that brow
 With flashing rubies fitly crowned.

745 Men call thee Yama²⁵—conqueror,
 Because it is against their will
 They follow thee,—and they abhor
 The Truth which thou wouldst aye instil.
 If they thy nature knew aright,

750 O god, all other gods above!
 And that thou conquerest in the fight
 By patience, kindness, mercy, love,
 And not by devastating wrath,
 They would not shrink in childlike fright

755 To see thy shadow on their path,
 But hail thee as sick souls the light.”

 “Thy words, Savitri, greet mine ear
 As sweet as founts that murmur low
 To one who in the deserts drear

760 With parchèd tongue moves faint and slow,

²⁵ Again, Yama is the Hindu god of death (see note 23).

Because thy talk is heart-sincere,
Without hypocrisy or guile;
Demand another boon, my dear,
But not of those forbid erewhile,^o *awhile ago*
765 And I shall grant it, ere we part:
Lo, the stars pale,—the way is long,
Receive thy boon, and homewards start,
For ah, poor child, thou art not strong."

"Another boon! My sire the king
770 Beside myself hath children none,
Oh grant that from his stock may spring
A hundred boughs." "It shall be done.
He shall be blest with many a son
Who his old palace shall rejoice."
775 "Each heart-wish from thy goodness won,
If I am still allowed a choice,
I fain thy voice would ever hear,
Reluctant am I still to part,
The way seems short when thou art near
780 And Satyavan, my heart's dear heart.

Of all the pleasures given on earth
The company of the good is best,
For weariness has never birth
In such a commerce sweet and blest;
785 The sun runs on its wonted^o course, *usual*
The earth its plenteous treasure yields,
All for their sake, and by the force
Their prayer united ever wields.
Oh let me, let me ever dwell
790 Amidst the good, where'er it be,
Whether in lowly hermit-cell
Or in some spot beyond the sea.

The favours man accords to men
Are never fruitless, from them rise
795 A thousand acts beyond our ken^o *perception*
That float like incense to the skies;
For benefits can ne'er efface,
They multiply and widely spread,
And honour follows on their trace.
800 Sharp penances, and vigils dread,
Austerities, and wasting fasts,
Create an empire, and the blest
Long as this spiritual empire lasts

Become the saviours of the rest.”

805 “O thou endowed with every grace
And every virtue,—thou whose soul
Appears upon thy lovely face,
May the great gods who all control
Send thee their peace. I too would give
810 One favour more before I go;
Ask something for thyself, and live
Happy, and dear to all below,
Till summoned to the bliss above.
Savitri ask, and ask unblamed.”—
815 She took the clue, felt Death was Love,
For no exceptions now he named,

And boldly said,—“Thou knowest, Lord,
The inmost hearts and thoughts of all!
There is no need to utter word,
Upon thy mercy sole, I call.
820 If speech be needful to obtain
Thy grace,—oh hear a wife forlorn,
Let my Satyavan live again
And children unto us be born,
Wise, brave, and valiant.” “From thy stock
825 A hundred families shall spring
As lasting as the solid rock,
Each son of thine shall be a king.”

As thus he spoke, he loosed the knot
The soul of Satyavan that bound,
830 And promised further that their lot
In pleasant places should be found
Thenceforth, and that they both should live
Four centuries, to which the name
Of fair Savitri, men would give,—
835 And then he vanished in a flame.
“Adieu, great god!” She took the soul,
No bigger than the human thumb,
And running swift, soon reached her goal,
Where lay the body stark and dumb.

840 She lifted it with eager hands
And as before, when he expired,
She placed the head upon the bands
That bound her breast which hope new fired
And which alternate rose and fell;

845 Then placed his soul upon his heart
Where like a bee it found its cell,
 And lo, he woke with sudden start!
His breath came low at first, then deep,
 With an unquiet look he gazed,
850 As one awaking from a sleep
 Wholly bewildered and amazed.

PART V

As consciousness came slowly back
He recognised his loving wife—
“Who was it, Love, through regions black
855 Where hardly seemed a sign of life
Carried me bound? Methinks I view
 The dark face yet—a noble face,
He had a robe of scarlet hue,
 And ruby crown; far, far through space
860 He bore me, on and on, but now,”—
 “Thou hast been sleeping, but the man
With glory on his kingly brow,
 Is gone, thou seest, Satyavan!

O my beloved,—thou art free!
865 Sleep which had bound thee fast, hath left
Thine eyelids. Try thyself to be!
 For late of every sense bereft
Thou seemedst in a rigid trance;
 And if thou canst, my love, arise,
870 Regard the night, the dark expanse
 Spread out before us, and the skies.”
Supported by her, looked he long
 Upon the landscape dim outspread,
And like some old remembered song
875 The past came back,—a tangled thread.

“I had a pain, as if an asp^o
 Gnawed in my brain, and there I lay
Silent, for oh! I could but gasp,
 Till someone came that bore away
880 My spirit into lands unknown:
 Thou, dear, who watchedst beside me,—say
Was it a dream from elfland blown,
 Or very truth,—my doubts to stay.”
“O Love, look round,—how strange and dread
885 The shadows of the high trees fall,

poisonous snake

Homeward our path now let us tread,
To-morrow I shall tell thee all.

Arise! Be strong! Gird up thy loins!
Think of our parents, dearest friend!
890 The solemn darkness haste enjoins,
Not likely is it soon to end.
Hark! Jackals still at distance howl,
The day, long, long will not appear,
Lo, wild fierce eyes through bushes scowl,
895 Summon thy courage, lest I fear.
Was that the tiger's sullen growl?
What means this rush of many feet?
Can creatures wild so near us prowl?
Rise up, and hasten homewards, sweet!"

900 He rose, but could not find the track,
And then, too well, Savitri knew
His wonted force had not come back.
She made a fire, and from the dew
Essayed^o to shelter him. At last *tried*
905 He nearly was himself again,—
Then vividly rose all the past,
And with the past, new fear and pain.
“What anguish must my parents feel
Who wait for me the livelong hours!
910 Their sore wound let us haste to heal
Before it festers, past our powers:

For broken-hearted, they may die!
Oh hasten, dear,—now I am strong,
No more I suffer, let us fly,
915 Ah me! each minute seems so long.
They told me once, they could not live
Without me, in their feeble age,
Their food and water I must give
And help them in the last sad stage
920 Of earthly life, and that Beyond
In which a son can help by rites.
Oh what a love is theirs—how fond!
Whom now Despair, perhaps, benights.

Infirm herself, my mother dear
925 Now guides, methinks, the tottering feet
Of my blind father, for they hear
And hasten eagerly to meet

Our fancied steps. O faithful wife,
Let us on wings fly back again,
930 Upon their safety hangs my life!”
He tried his feelings to restrain,
But like some river swelling high
They swept their barriers weak and vain,
Sudden there burst a fearful cry,
935 Then followed tears,—like autumn rain.

Hush! Hark, a sweet voice rises clear!
A voice of earnestness intense,
“If I have worshipped Thee in fear
And duly paid with reverence
940 The solemn sacrifices,—hear!
Send consolation, and Thy peace
Eternal, to our parents dear,
That their anxieties may cease.
Oh, ever hath I loved Thy truth,
945 Therefore on Thee I dare to call,
Help us, this night, and them, for sooth
Without Thy help, we perish all.”

She took in hers Satyavan’s hand,
She gently wiped his falling tears,
950 “This weakness, Love, I understand!
Courage!” She smiled away his fears.
“Now we shall go, for thou art strong.”
She helped him rise up by her side
And led him like a child along,
955 He, wistfully the basket eyed
Laden with fruit and flowers. “Not now,
To-morrow we shall fetch it hence.”
And so, she hung it on a bough,
“I’ll bear thy saw for our defence.”

In one fair hand the saw she took,
The other with a charming grace
She twined around him, and her look
She turned upwards to his face.
Thus aiding him she felt anew
960 His bosom beat against her own—
More firm his step, more clear his view,
More self-possessed his words and tone
Became, as swift the minutes past,
And now the pathway he discerns,
970 And ‘neath the trees, they hurry fast,

For Hope's fair light before them burns.

Under the faint beams of the stars
How beautiful appeared the flowers,
Light scarlet, flecked with golden bars
975 Of the palâsas,²⁶ in the bowers
That Nature there herself had made
Without the aid of man. At times
Trees on their path cast densest shade,
And nightingales sang mystic rhymes
980 Their fears and sorrows to assuage.
Where two paths met, the north they chose,
As leading to the hermitage,
And soon before them, dim it rose.

Here let us end. For all may guess
985 The blind old king received his sight,
And ruled again with gentleness
The country that was his by right;
And that Savitri's royal sire
Was blest with many sons,—a race
990 Whom poets praised for martial fire,
And every peaceful gift and grace.
As for Savitri, to this day
Her name is named, when couples wed,
And to the bride the parents say,
995 Be thou like her, in heart and head.

²⁶ *Butea frondosa* [A footnote providing the genus and species for this tree (also called dhak) appeared in the original Kegan Paul editions, the only footnote in the whole book].