

Betal's First Story: Man deceives a woman

In Benares once reigned a mighty prince, by name Pratapamukut, to whose eighth son Vajramukut happened the strangest adventure.

One morning, the young man, accompanied by the son of his father's pradhan or prime minister, rode out hunting, and went far into the jungle. At last the twain unexpectedly came upon a beautiful "tank" of a prodigious size. It was surrounded by short thick walls of fine baked brick; and flights and ramps of cut-stone steps, half the length of each face, and adorned with turrets, pendants, and finials, led down to the water. The substantial plaster work and the masonry had fallen into disrepair, and from the crevices sprang huge trees, under whose thick shade the breeze blew freshly, and on whose balmy branches the birds sang sweetly; the grey squirrels chirruped joyously as they coursed one another up the gnarled trunks, and from the pendent lianas the longtailed monkeys were swinging sportively. The bountiful hand of Sravana had spread the earthen rampart with a carpet of the softest grass and many-hued wild flowers, in which were buzzing swarms of bees and myriads of bright winged insects; and flocks of water fowl, wild geese Brahmini ducks, bitterns, herons, and cranes, male and female, were feeding on the narrow strip of brilliant green that belted the long deep pool, amongst the broad-leaved lotuses with the lovely blossoms, splashing through the pellucid waves, and basking happily in the genial sun.

The prince and his friend wondered when they saw the beautiful tank in the midst of a wild forest, and made many vain conjectures about it. They dismounted, tethered their horses, and threw their weapons upon the ground; then, having washed their hands and faces, they entered a shrine dedicated to Mahadeva, and there began to worship the presiding deity.

Whilst they were making their offerings, a bevy of maidens, accompanied by a crowd of female slaves, descended the opposite flight of steps. They stood there for a time, talking and laughing and looking about them to see if any alligators infested the waters. When convinced that the tank was safe, they disrobed themselves in order to bathe. It was truly a splendid spectacle

"Concerning which the less said the better," interrupted RajaVikram in an offended tone.

--but did not last long. The Raja's daughter--for the principal maiden was a princess--soon left her companions, who were scooping up water with their palms and dashing it over one another's heads, and proceeded to perform the rites of purification, meditation, and worship. Then she began strolling with a friend under the shade of a small mango grove.

The prince also left his companion sitting in prayer, and walked forth into the forest. Suddenly the eyes of the Raja's son and the Raja's daughter met. She started back with a little scream. He was fascinated by her beauty, and began to say to himself, " O thou vile Karma,[51] why worriest thou me?"

Hearing this, the maiden smiled encouragement, but the poor youth, between palpitation of the heart and hesitation about what to say, was so confused that his tongue craved to his teeth. She raised her eyebrows a little. There is nothing which women despise in a man more than modesty, for modesty--

A violent shaking of the bag which hung behind Vikram's royal back broke off the end of this offensive sentence. And the warrior king did not cease that discipline till the Baital promised him to preserve more decorum in his observations.

Still the prince stood before her with downcast eyes and suffused cheeks: even the spur of contempt failed to arouse his energies. Then the maiden called to her friend, who was picking jasmine flowers so as not to witness the scene, and angrily asked why that strange man was allowed to stand and stare at her? The friend, in hot wrath, threatened to call the slave, and throw Vajramukut into the pond unless he instantly went away with his impudence. But as the prince was rooted to the spot, and really had not heard a word of what had been said to him, the two women were obliged to make the first move.

As they almost reached the tank, the beautiful maiden turned her head to see what the poor modest youth was doing.

Vajramukut was formed in every way to catch a woman's eye. The Raja's daughter therefore half forgave him his offence of mod----. Again she sweetly smiled, disclosing two rows of little opals. Then descending to the water's edge, she stooped down and plucked a lotus This she worshipped; next she placed it in her hair, then she put it in her ear, then she bit it with her teeth, then she trod upon it with her foot, then she raised it up again, and lastly she stuck it in her bosom. After which she mounted her conveyance and went home to her friends; whilst the prince, having become thoroughly desponding and drowned in grief at separation from her, returned to the minister's son.

"Females!" ejaculated the minister's son, speaking to himself in a careless tone, when, his prayer finished, he left the temple, and sat down upon the tank steps to enjoy the breeze. He presently drew a roll of paper from under his waist-belt, and in a short time was engrossed with his study. The women seeing this conduct, exerted themselves in every possible way of wile to attract his attention and to distract his soul. They succeeded only so far as to make him roll his head with a smile, and to remember that such is always the custom of man's bane; after which he turned over a fresh page of manuscript. And although he presently began to wonder what had become of the prince his master, he did not look up even once from his study.

He was a philosopher, that young man. But after all, Raja Vikram, what is mortal philosophy? Nothing but another name for indifference! Who was ever philosophical about a thing truly loved or really hated?--no one! Philosophy, says Shankharacharya, is either a gift of nature or the reward of study. But I, the Baital, the devil, ask you, what is a born philosopher, save a man of cold desires? And what is a bred philosopher but a man who has survived his desires? A young philosopher?--a cold-blooded youth! An elderly philosopher?--a leuco-phlegmatic old man! Much nonsense, of a verity, ye hear in praise of nothing from your Rajaship's Nine Gems of Science, and from sundry other such wise fools.

Then the prince began to relate the state of his case, saying, " O friend, I have seen a damsel, but whether she be a musician from Indra's heaven, a maiden of the sea, a daughter of the serpent kings, or the child of an earthly Raja, I cannot say."

"Describe her," said the statesman in embryo.

"Her face," quoth the prince, "was that of the full moon, her hair like a swarm of bees hanging from the blossoms of the acacia, the corners of her eyes touched her ears, her lips were sweet with lunar ambrosia, her waist was that of a lion, and her walk the walk of a

king goose. [53] As a garment, she was white; as a season, the spring; as a flower, the jasmine; as a speaker, the kokila bird; as a perfume, musk; as a beauty, Kamadeva; and as a being, Love. And if she does not come into my possession I will not live; this I have certainly determined upon."

The young minister, who had heard his prince say the same thing more than once before, did not attach great importance to these awful words. He merely remarked that, unless they mounted at once, night would surprise them in the forest. Then the two young men returned to their horses, untethered them, drew on their bridles, saddled them, and catching up their weapons, rode slowly towards the Raja's palace. During the three hours of return hardly a word passed between the pair. Vajramukut not only avoided speaking; he never once replied till addressed thrice in the loudest voice.

The young minister put no more questions, "for," quoth he to himself, "when the prince wants my counsel, he will apply for it." In this point he had borrowed wisdom from his father, who held in peculiar horror the giving of unasked-for advice. So, when he saw that conversation was irksome to his master, he held his peace and meditated upon what he called his "day-thought." It was his practice to choose every morning some tough food for reflection, and to chew the cud of it in his mind at times when, without such employment, his wits would have gone wool-gathering. You may imagine, Raja Vikram, that with a few years of this head work, the minister's son became a very crafty young person.

After the second day the Prince Vajramukut, being restless from grief at separation, fretted himself into a fever. Having given up writing, reading, drinking, sleeping, the affairs entrusted to him by his father, and everything else, he sat down, as he said, to die. He used constantly to paint the portrait of the beautiful lotus gatherer, and to lie gazing upon it with tearful eyes; then he would start up and tear it to pieces and beat his forehead, and begin another picture of a yet more beautiful face.

At last, as the pradhan's son had foreseen, he was summoned by the young Raja, whom he found upon his bed, looking yellow and complaining bitterly of headache. Frequent discussions upon the subject of the tender passion had passed between the two youths, and one of them had ever spoken of it so very disrespectfully that the other felt ashamed to introduce it. But when his friend, with a view to provoke communicativeness, advised a course of boiled and bitter herbs and great attention to diet, quoting the hemistich attributed to the learned physician Charndatta

A fever starve, but feed a cold,

the unhappy Vajramukut's fortitude abandoned him; he burst into tears, and exclaimed, "Whosoever enters upon the path of love cannot survive it; and if (by chance) he should live, what is life to him but a prolongation of his misery?"

"Yea," replied the minister's son, "the sage hath said--

The road of love is that which hath no beginning nor end; Take thou heed of thyself, man I ere thou place foot upon it.

And the wise, knowing that there are three things whose effect upon himself no man can foretell--namely, desire of woman, the dice-box, and the drinking of ardent spirits--find

total abstinence from them the best of rules. Yet, after all, if there is no cow, we must milk the bull."

The advice was, of course, excellent, but the hapless lover could not help thinking that on this occasion it came a little too late. However, after a pause he returned to the subject and said, "I have ventured to tread that dangerous way, be its end pain or pleasure, happiness or destruction." He then hung down his head and sighed from the bottom of his heart.

"She is the person who appeared to us at the tank?" asked the pradhan's son, moved to compassion by the state of his master.

The prince assented.

"O great king," resumed the minister's son, "at the time of going away had she said anything to you? or had you said anything to her?"

"Nothing!" replied the other laconically, when he found his friend beginning to take an interest in the affair.

"Then," said the minister's son, "it will be exceedingly difficult to get possession of her."

"Then," repeated the Raja's son, "I am doomed to death; to an early and melancholy death!"

"Humph!" ejaculated the young statesman rather impatiently, "did she make any sign, or give any hint? Let me know all that happened: half confidences are worse than none."

Upon which the prince related everything that took place by the side of the tank, bewailing the false shame which had made him dumb, and concluding with her pantomime.

The pradhan's son took thought for a while. He thereupon seized the opportunity of representing to his master all the evil effects of bashfulness when women are concerned, and advised him, as he would be a happy lover, to brazen his countenance for the next interview.

Which the young Raja faithfully promised to do.

"And, now," said the other, "be comforted, O my master! I know her name and her dwelling-place. When she suddenly plucked the lotus flower and worshipped it, she thanked the gods for having blessed her with a sight of your beauty."

Vajramukut smiled, the first time for the last month.

"When she applied it to her ear, it was as if she would have explained to thee, 'I am a daughter of the Carnatic: [54] and when she bit it with her teeth, she meant to say that 'My father is Raja Dantawat, [55]' who, by-the-bye, has been, is, and ever will be, a mortal foe to thy father."

Vajramukut shuddered.

"When she put it under her foot it meant, 'My name is Padmavati. [56]'"

Vajramukut uttered a cry of joy.

"And when she placed it in her bosom, 'You are truly dwelling in my heart' was meant to be understood."

At these words the young Raja started up full of new life, and after praising with enthusiasm the wondrous sagacity of his dear friend, begged him by some contrivance to obtain the permission of his parents, and to conduct him to her city. The minister's son easily got leave for Vajramukut to travel, under pretext that his body required change of water, and his mind change of scene. They both dressed and armed themselves for the journey, and having taken some jewels, mounted their horses and followed the road in that direction in which the princess had gone.

Arrived after some days at the capital of the Carnatic, the minister's son having disguised his master and himself in the garb of travelling traders, alighted and pitched his little tent upon a clear bit of ground in one of the suburbs. He then proceeded to inquire for a wise woman, wanting, he said, to have his fortune told. When the prince asked him what this meant, he replied that elderly dames who professionally predict the future are never above [ministering to the present, and therefore that, in such circumstances, they are the properest persons to be consulted.

"Is this a treatise upon the subject of immorality, devil?" demanded the King Vikram ferociously. The Baital declared that it was not, but that he must tell his story.

The person addressed pointed to an old woman who, seated before the door of her hut, was spinning at her wheel. Then the young men went up to her with polite salutations and said, "Mother, we are travelling traders, and our stock is coming after us; we have come on in advance for the purpose of finding a place to live in. If you will give us a house, we will remain there and pay you highly."

The old woman, who was a physiognomist as well as a fortune-teller, looked at the faces of the young men and liked them, because their brows were wide, and their mouths denoted generosity. Having listened to their words, she took pity upon them and said kindly, "This hovel is yours, my masters, remain here as long as you please." Then she led them into an inner room, again welcomed them, lamented the poorness of her abode, and begged them to lie down and rest themselves.

After some interval of time the old woman came to them once more, and sitting down began to gossip. The minister's son upon this asked her, "How is it with thy family, thy relatives, and connections; and what are thy means of subsistence?" She replied, ``My son is a favourite servant in the household of our great king Dantawat, and your slave is the wet-nurse of the Princess Padmavati, his eldest child. From the coming on of old age," she added, "I dwell in this house, but the king provides for my eating and drinking. I go once a day to see the girl, who is a miracle of beauty and goodness, wit and accomplishments, and returning thence, I bear my own griefs at home. [57]"

In a few days the young Vajramukut had, by his liberality, soft speech, and good looks, made such progress in nurse Lakshmi's affections that, by the advice of his companion, he ventured to broach the subject ever nearest his heart. He begged his hostess, when she

went on the morrow to visit the charming Padmavati, that she would be kind enough to slip a bit of paper into the princess's hand.

"Son," she replied, delighted with the proposal--and what old woman would not be?--"there is no need for putting off so urgent an affair till the morrow. Get your paper ready, and I will immediately give it."

Trembling with pleasure, the prince ran to find his friend, who was seated in the garden reading, as usual, and told him what the old nurse had engaged to do. He then began to debate about how he should write his letter, to cull sentences and to weigh phrases; whether "light of my eyes" was not too trite, and "blood of my liver" rather too forcible. At this the minister's son smiled, and bade the prince not trouble his head with composition. He then drew his inkstand from his waist shawl, nibbed a reed pen, and choosing a piece of pink and flowered paper, he wrote upon it a few lines. He then folded it, gummed it, sketched a lotus flower upon the outside, and handing it to the young prince, told him to give it to their hostess, and that all would be well.

The old woman took her staff in her hand and hobbled straight to the palace. Arrived there, she found the Raja's daughter sitting alone in her apartment. The maiden, seeing her nurse, immediately arose, and making a respectful bow, led her to a seat and began the most affectionate inquiries. After giving her blessing and sitting for some time and chatting about indifferent matters, the nurse said, "O daughter! in infancy I reared and nourished thee, now the Bhagwan (Deity) has rewarded me by giving thee stature, beauty, health, and goodness. My heart only longs to see the happiness of thy womanhood, after which I shall depart in peace. I implore thee read this paper, given to me by the handsomest and the properest young man that my eyes have ever seen."

The princess, glancing at the lotus on the outside of the note, slowly unfolded it and perused its contents, which were as follows:

1.

She was to me the pearl that clings
To sands all hid from mortal sight,
Yet fit for diadems of kings,
The pure and lovely light.

2.

She was to me the gleam of sun
That breaks the gloom of wintry day;
One moment shone my soul upon,
Then passed--how soon!--away.

3.

She was to me the dreams of bliss
That float the dying eyes before,
For one short hour shed happiness,
And fly to bless no more.

4.

O light, again upon me shine;
O pearl, again delight my eyes;
O dreams of bliss, again be mine!
No! earth may not be Paradise.

I must not forget to remark, parenthetically, that the minister's son, in order to make these lines generally useful, had provided them with a last stanza in triplicate. "For lovers," he said sagely, "are either in the optative mood, the desperative, or the exultative." This time he had used the optative. For the desperative he would substitute:

4.

The joys of life lie dead, lie dead,
The light of day is quenched in gloom
The spark of hope my heart hath fled
What now witholds me from the tomb?

And this was the termination exultative, as he called it:

4.

O joy I the pearl is mine again,
Once more the day is bright and clear,
And now 'tis real, then 'twas vain,
My dream of bliss--O heaven is here!

The Princess Padmavati having perused this doggrel with a contemptuous look, tore off the first word of the last line, and said to the nurse, angrily, "Get thee gone, O mother of Yama, O unfortunate creature, and take back this answer"--giving her the scrap of paper--"to the fool who writes such bad verses. I wonder where he studied the humanities. Begone, and never do such an action again!"

The old nurse, distressed at being so treated, rose up and returned home. Vajramukut was too agitated to await her arrival, so he went to meet her on the way. Imagine his disappointment when she gave him the fatal word and repeated to him exactly what happened, not forgetting to describe a single look! He felt tempted to plunge his sword into his bosom; but Fortune interfered, and sent him to consult his confidant.

"Be not so hasty and desperate, my prince," said the pradhan's son, seeing his wild grief; "you have not understood her meaning. Later in life you will be aware of the fact that, in nine cases out of ten, a woman's 'no' is a distinct 'yes.' This morning's work has been good; the maiden asked where you learnt the humanities, which being interpreted signifies 'Who are you?'"

On the next day the prince disclosed his rank to old Lakshmi, who naturally declared that she had always known it. The trust they reposed in her made her ready to address Padmavati once more on the forbidden subject. So she again went to the palace, and having lovingly greeted her nursling, said to her, "The Raja's son, whose heart thou didst fascinate on the brim of the tank, on the fifth day of the moon, in the light half of the month Yeth,

has come to my house, and sends this message to thee: "Perform what you promised; we have now come"; and I also tell thee that this prince is worthy of thee: just as thou art beautiful, so is he endowed with all good qualities of mind and body."

When Padmavati heard this speech she showed great anger, and, rubbing sandal on her beautiful hands, she slapped the old woman's cheeks, and cried, "Wretch, Daina (witch)! get out of my house; did I not forbid thee to talk such folly in my presence?"

The lover and the nurse were equally distressed at having taken the advice of the young minister, till he explained what the crafty damsel meant. "When she smeared the sandal on her ten fingers," he explained, "and struck the old woman on the face, she signified that when the remaining ten moonlight nights shall have passed away she will meet you in the dark." At the same time he warned his master that to all appearances the lady Padmavati was far too clever to make a comfortable wife. The minister's son especially hated talented intellectual, and strong-minded women; he had been heard to describe the torments of Naglok [60] as the compulsory companionship of a polemical divine and a learned authoress, well stricken in years and of forbidding aspect, as such persons mostly are. Amongst womankind he admired--theoretically, as became a philosopher--the small, plump, laughing, chattering, unintellectual, and material-minded. And therefore--excuse the digression, Raja Vikram--he married an old maid, tall, thin, yellow, strictly proper, cold-mannered, a conversationist, and who prided herself upon spirituality. But more wonderful still, after he did marry her, he actually loved her--what an incomprehensible being is man in these matters!

To return, however. The pradhan's son, who detected certain symptoms of strong-mindedness in the Princess Padmavati, advised his lord to be wise whilst wisdom availed him. This sage counsel was, as might be guessed, most ungraciously rejected by him for whose benefit it was intended. Then the sensible young statesman rated himself soundly for having broken his father's rule touching advice, and atoned for it by blindly forwarding the views of his master.

After the ten nights of moonlight had passed, the old nurse was again sent to the palace with the usual message. This time Padmavati put saffron on three of her fingers, and again left their marks on the nurse's cheek. The minister's son explained that this was to crave delay for three days, and that on the fourth the lover would have access to her.

When the time had passed the old woman again went and inquired after her health and well-being. The princess was as usual very wroth, and having personally taken her nurse to the western gate, she called her "Mother of the elephant's trunk, [61]" and drove her out with threats of the bastinado if she ever came back. This was reported to the young statesman, who, after a few minutes' consideration, said, "The explanation of this matter is, that she has invited you to-morrow, at nighttime, to meet her at this very gate.

"When brown shadows fell upon the face of earth, and here and there a star spangled the pale heavens, the minister's son called Vajramukut, who had been engaged in adorning himself at least half that day. He had carefully shaved his cheeks and chin; his mustachio was trimmed and curled; he had arched his eyebrows by plucking out with tweezers the fine hairs around them; he had trained his curly musk-coloured love-locks to hang gracefully down his face; he had drawn broad lines of antimony along his eyelids, a most brilliant sectarian mark was affixed to his forehead, the colour of his lips had been heightened by chewing betel-nut--

"One would imagine that you are talking of a silly girl, not of a prince, fiend!" interrupted Vikram, who did not wish his son to hear what he called these fopperies and frivolities.

--and whitened his neck by having it shaved (continued the Baital, speaking quickly, as if determined not to be interrupted), and reddened the tips of his ears by squeezing them, and made his teeth shine by rubbing copper powder into the roots, and set off the delicacy of his fingers by staining the tips with henna. He had not been less careful with his dress: he wore a well-arranged turband, which had taken him at least two hours to bind, and a rich suit of brown stuff chosen for the adventure he was about to attempt, and he hung about his person a number of various weapons, so as to appear a hero--which young damsels admire.

Vajramukut asked his friend how he looked, and smiled happily when the other replied "Admirable!" His happiness was so great that he feared it might not last, and he asked the minister's son how best to conduct himself?

"As a conqueror, my prince!" answered that astute young man, "if it so be that you would be one. When you wish to win a woman, always impose upon her. Tell her that you are her master, and she will forthwith believe herself to be your servant. Inform her that she loves you, and forthwith she will adore you. Show her that you care nothing for her, and she will think of nothing but you. Prove to her by your demeanour that you consider her a slave, and she will become your pariah. But above all things--excuse me if I repeat myself too often--beware of the fatal virtue which men call modesty and women sheepishness. Recollect the trouble it has given us, and the danger which we have incurred: all this might have been managed at a tank within fifteen miles of your royal father's palace. And allow me to say that you may still thank your stars: in love a lost opportunity is seldom if ever recovered. The time to woo a woman is the moment you meet her, before she has had time to think; allow her the use of reflection and she may escape the net. And after avoiding the rock of Modesty, fall not, I conjure you, into the gulf of Security. I fear the lady Padmavati, she is too clever and too prudent. When damsels of her age draw the sword of Love, they throw away the scabbard of Precaution. But you yawn--I weary you--it is time for us to move."

Two watches of the night had passed, and there was profound stillness on earth. The young men then walked quietly through the shadows, till they reached the western gate of the palace, and found the wicket ajar. The minister's son peeped in and saw the porter dozing, stately as a Brahman deep in the Vedas, and behind him stood a veiled woman seemingly waiting for somebody. He then returned on tiptoe to the place where he had left his master, and with a parting caution against modesty and security, bade him fearlessly glide through the wicket. Then having stayed a short time at the gate listening with anxious ear, he went back to the old woman's house.

Vajramukut penetrating to the staircase, felt his hand grasped by the veiled figure, who motioning him to tread lightly, led him quickly forwards. They passed under several arches, through dim passages and dark doorways, till at last running up a flight of stone steps they reached the apartments of the princess.

Vajramukut was nearly fainting as the flood of splendour broke upon him. Recovering himself he gazed around the rooms, and presently a tumult of delight invaded his soul, and his body bristled with joy. [62] The scene was that of fairyland. Golden censers exhaled the most costly perfumes, and gemmed vases bore the most beautiful flowers; silver lamps containing fragrant oil illuminated doors whose panels were wonderfully decorated, and

walls adorned with pictures in which such figures were formed that on seeing them the beholder was enchanted. On one side of the room stood a bed of flowers and a couch covered with brocade of gold, and strewn with freshly-culled jasmine flowers. On the other side, arranged in proper order, were attar holders, betel-boxes, rose-water bottles, trays, and silver cases with four partitions for essences compounded of rose leaves, sugar, and spices, prepared sandal wood, saffron, and pods of musk. Scattered about a stuccoed floor white as crystal, were coloured caddies of exquisite confections, and in others sweetmeats of various kinds.[63] Female attendants clothed in dresses of various colours were standing each according to her rank, with hands respectfully joined. Some were reading plays and beautiful poems, others danced and others performed with glittering fingers and flashing arms on various instruments--the ivory lute, the ebony pipe and the silver kettledrum. In short, all the means and appliances of pleasure and enjoyment were there; and any description of the appearance of the apartments, which were the wonder of the age, is impossible.

Then another veiled figure, the beautiful Princess Padmavati, came up and disclosed herself, and dazzled the eyes of her delighted Vajramukut. She led him into an alcove, made him sit down, rubbed sandal powder upon his body, hung a garland of jasmine flowers round his neck, sprinkled rose-water over his dress, and began to wave over his head a fan of peacock feathers with a golden handle.

Said the prince, who despite all efforts could not entirely shake off his unhappy habit of being modest, "Those very delicate hands of yours are not fit to ply the pankha. Why do you take so much trouble? I am cool and refreshed by the sight of you. Do give the fan to me and sit down."

"Nay, great king!" replied Padmavati, with the most fascinating of smiles, "you have taken so much trouble for my sake in coming here, it is right that I perform service for you."

Upon which her favourite slave, taking the pankha from the hand of the princess, exclaimed, "This is my duty. I will perform the service; do you two enjoy yourselves!"

The lovers then began to chew betel, which, by the bye, they disposed of in little agate boxes which they drew from their pockets, and they were soon engaged in the tenderest conversation.

Here the Baital paused for a while, probably to take breath. Then he resumed his tale as follows:

In the meantime, it became dawn; the princess concealed him; and when night returned they again engaged in the same innocent pleasures. Thus day after day sped rapidly by. Imagine, if you can, the youth's felicity; he was of an ardent temperament, deeply enamoured, barely a score of years old, and he had been strictly brought up by serious parents. He therefore resigned himself entirely to the siren for whom he willingly forgot the world, and he wondered at his good fortune, which had thrown in his way a conquest richer than all the mines of Meru.[65] He could not sufficiently admire his Padmavati's grace, beauty, bright wit, and numberless accomplishments. Every morning, for vanity's sake, he learned from her a little useless knowledge in verse as well as prose, for instance, the saying of the poet--

Enjoy the present hour, 'tis shine; be this, O man, thy law; Who e'er re sew the yester? Who the morrow e'er foresaw?

And this highly philosophical axiom--

Eat, drink, and love--the rest's not worth a fillip.

"By means of which he hoped, Raja Vikram!" said the demon, not heeding his royal carrier's "ughs" and "poohs," "to become in course of time almost as clever as his mistress."

Padmavati, being, as you have seen, a maiden of superior mind, was naturally more smitten by her lover's dulness than by any other of his qualities; she adored it, it was such a contrast to herself. At first she did what many clever women do--she invested him with the brightness of her own imagination. Still water, she pondered, runs deep; certainly under this disguise must lurk a brilliant fancy, a penetrating but a mature and ready judgment--are they not written by nature's hand on that broad high brow? With such lovely mustachios can he be aught but generous, noble-minded, magnanimous? Can such eyes belong to any but a hero? And she fed the delusion. She would smile upon him with intense fondness, when, after wasting hours over a few lines of poetry, he would misplace all the adjectives and barbarously entreat the metre. She laughed with gratification, when, excited by the bright sayings that fell from her lips, the youth put forth some platitude, dim as the lamp in the expiring fire-fly. When he slipped in grammar she saw malice under it, when he retailed a borrowed jest she called it a good one, and when he used--as princes sometimes will--bad language, she discovered in it a charming simplicity.

At first she suspected that the stratagems which had won her heart were the results of a deep-laid plot proceeding from her lover. But clever women are apt to be rarely sharp-sighted in every matter which concerns themselves. She frequently determined that a third was in the secret. She therefore made no allusion to it. Before long the enamoured Vajramukut had told her everything, beginning with the diatribe against love pronounced by the minister's son, and ending with the solemn warning that she, the pretty princess, would some day or other play her husband a foul trick.

"If I do not revenge myself upon him," thought the beautiful Padmavati, smiling like an angel as she listened to the youth's confidence, "may I become a gardener's ass in the next birth!"

Having thus registered a vow, she broke silence, and praised to the skies the young pradhan's wisdom and sagacity; professed herself ready from gratitude to become his slave, and only hoped that one day or other she might meet that true friend by whose skill her soul had been gratified in its dearest desire. "Only," she concluded, "I am convinced that now my Vajramukut knows every corner of his little Padmavati's heart, he will never expect her to do anything but love, admire, adore and kiss him!" Then suiting the action to the word, she convinced him that the young minister had for once been too crabbed and cynic in his philosophy.

But after the lapse of a month Vajramukut, who had eaten and drunk and slept a great deal too much, and who had not once hunted, became bilious in body and in mind melancholic. His face turned yellow, and so did the whites of his eyes; he yawned, as liver patients generally do, complained occasionally of sick headaches, and lost his appetite: he became restless and anxious, and once when alone at night he thus thought aloud: "I have given up country, throne, home, and everything else, but the friend by means of whom this happiness was obtained I have not seen for the long length of thirty days. What will he say to himself, and how can I know what has happened to him?"

In this state of things he was sitting, and in the meantime the beautiful princess arrived. She saw through the matter, and lost not a moment in entering upon it. She began by expressing her astonishment at her lover's fickleness and fondness for change, and when he was ready to wax wroth, and quoted the words of the sage, "A barren wife may be superseded by another in the eighth year; she whose children all die, in the tenth; she who brings forth only daughters, in the eleventh; she who scolds, without delay," thinking that she alluded to his love, she smoothed his temper by explaining that she referred to his forgetting his friend. "How is it possible, O my soul," she asked with the softest of voices, that thou canst happiness here whilst thy heart is wandering there? Why didst thou conceal this from me, O astute one? Was it for fear of distressing me? Think better of thy wife than to suppose that she would ever separate thee from one to whom we both owe so much!

"After this Padmavati advised, nay ordered, her lover to go forth that night, and not to return till his mind was quite at ease, and she begged him to take a few sweetmeats and other trifles as a little token of her admiration and regard for the clever young man of whom she had heard so much.

Vajramukut embraced her with a transport of gratitude, which so inflamed her anger, that fearing lest the cloak of concealment might fall from her countenance, she went away hurriedly to find the greatest delicacies which her comfit boxes contained. Presently she returned, carrying a bag of sweetmeats of every kind for her lover, and as he rose up to depart, she put into his hand a little parcel of sugar-plums especially intended for the friend; they were made up with her own delicate fingers, and they would please, she flattered herself, even his discriminating palate.

The young prince, after enduring a number of farewell embraces and hopings for a speedy return, and last words ever beginning again, passed safely through the palace gate, and with a relieved aspect walked briskly to the house of the old nurse. Although it was midnight his friend was still sitting on his mat.

The two young men fell upon one another's bosoms and embraced affectionately. They then began to talk of matters nearest their hearts. The Raja's son wondered at seeing the jaded and haggard looks of his companion, who did not disguise that they were caused by his anxiety as to what might have happened to his friend at the hand of so talented and so superior a princess. Upon which Vajramukut, who now thought Padmavati an angel, and his late abode a heaven, remarked with formality--and two blunders to one quotation--that abilities properly directed win for a man the happiness of both worlds.

The pradhan's son rolled his head.

"Again on your hobby-horse, nagging at talent whenever you find it in others! " cried the young prince with a pun, which would have delighted Padmavati. "Surely you are jealous of her!" he resumed, anything but pleased with the dead silence that had received his joke; "jealous of her cleverness, and of her love for me. She is the very best creature in the world. Even you, woman-hater as you are, would own it if you only knew all the kind messages she sent, and the little pleasant surprise that she has prepared for you. There! take and eat; they are made by her own dear hands!" cried the young Raja, producing the sweetmeats. "As she herself taught me to say -

Thank God I am a man, Not a philosopher!"

"The kind messages she sent me! The pleasant surprise she has prepared for me!" repeated the minister's son in a hard, dry tone. "My lord will be pleased to tell me how she heard of my name?"

"I was sitting one night," replied the prince, "in anxious thought about you, when at that moment the princess coming in and seeing my condition, asked, 'Why are you thus sad? Explain the cause to me.' I then gave her an account of your cleverness, and when she heard it she gave me permission to go and see you, and sent these sweetmeats for you: eat them and I shall be pleased."

"Great king!" rejoined the young statesman, "one thing vouchsafe to hear from me. You have not done well in that you have told my name. You should never let a woman think that your left hand knows the secret which she confided to your right, much less that you have shared it to a third person. Secondly, you did evil in allowing her to see the affection with which you honour your unworthy servant--a woman ever hates her lover's or husband's friend."

"What could I do?" rejoined the young Raja, in a querulous tone of voice. "When I love a woman I like to tell her everything--to have no secrets from her--to consider her another self----"

"Which habit," interrupted the pradhan's son, "you will lose when you are a little older, when you recognize the fact that love is nothing but a bout, a game of skill between two individuals of opposite sexes: the one seeking to gain as much, and the other striving to lose as little as possible; and that the sharper of the twain thus met on the chessboard must, in the long run, win. And reticence is but a habit. Practise it for a year, and you will find it harder to betray than to conceal your thoughts. It hath its joy also. Is there no pleasure, think you, when suppressing an outbreak of tender but fatal confidence in saying to yourself, 'O, if she only knew this?' 'O, if she did but suspect that?' Returning, however, to the sugar-plums, my life to a pariah's that they are poisoned!"

"Impossible!" exclaimed the prince, horror-struck at the thought; "what you say, surely no one ever could do. If a mortal fears not his fellow-mortal, at least he dreads the Deity."

"I never yet knew," rejoined the other, "what a woman in love does fear. However, prince, the trial is easy. Come here, Mutil!" cried he to the old woman's dog, "and off with thee to that three-headed kinsman of shine, that attends upon his amiable-looking master.[67]"

Having said this, he threw one of the sweetmeats to the dog; the animal ate it, and presently writhing and falling down, died.

"The wretch! O the wretch!" cried Vajramukut, transported with wonder and anger. "And I loved her! But now it is all over. I dare not associate with such a calamity!"

"What has happened, my lord, has happened!" quoth the minister's son calmly. "I was prepared for something of this kind from so talented a princess. None commit such mistakes, such blunders, such follies as your clever women; they cannot even turn out a crime decently executed. O give me dulness with one idea, one aim, one desire. O thrice blessed dulness that combines with happiness, power."

This time Vajramukut did not defend talent.

"And your slave did his best to warn you against perfidy. But now my heart is at rest. I have tried her strength. She has attempted and failed; the defeat will prevent her attempting again--just yet. But let me ask you to put to yourself one question. Can you be happy without her?"

"Brother!" replied the prince, after a pause, "I cannot"; and he blushed as he made the avowal.

"Well," replied the other, "better confess than conceal that fact; we must now meet her on the battle-field, and beat her at her own weapons--cunning. I do not willingly begin treachery with women, because, in the first place, I don't like it; and secondly, I know that they will certainly commence practicing it upon me, after which I hold myself justified in deceiving them. And probably this will be a good wife; remember that she intended to poison me, not you. During the last month my fear has been lest my prince had run into the tiger's brake. Tell me, my lord, when does the princess expect you to return to her?"

"She bade me," said the young Raja, "not to return till my mind was quite at ease upon the subject of my talented friend."

"This means that she expects you back to-morrow night, as you cannot enter the palace before. And now I will retire to my cot, as it is there that I am wont to ponder over my plans. Before dawn my thought shall mature one which must place the beautiful Padmavati in your power."

"A word before parting," exclaimed the prince "you know my father has already chosen a spouse for me; what will he say if I bring home a second? "

"In my humble opinion," said the minister's son rising to retire, "woman is a monogamous, man a polygamous, creature, a fact scarcely established in physiological theory, but very observable in every-day practice For what said the poet?--Divorce, friend! Re-wed thee! The spring draweth near,[68] And a wife's but an almanac--good for the year.

If your royal father say anything to you, refer him to what he himself does."

Reassured by these words, Vajramukut bade his friend a cordial good-night and sought his cot, where he slept soundly, despite the emotions of the last few hours. The next day passed somewhat slowly. In the evening, when accompanying his master to the palace, the minister's son gave him the following directions.

"Our object, dear my lord, is how to obtain possession of the princess. Take, then, this trident, and hide it carefully when you see her show the greatest love and affection. Conceal what has happened, and when she, wondering at your calmness, asks about me, tell her that last night I was weary and out of health, that illness prevented my eating her sweetmeats, but that I shall eat them for supper to-night. When she goes to sleep, then, taking off her jewels and striking her left leg with the trident, instantly come away to me. But should she lie awake, rub upon your thumb a little of this--do not fear, it is only a powder of grubs fed on verdigris--and apply it to her nostrils. It would make an elephant senseless, so be careful how you approach it to your own face."

Vajramukut embraced his friend, and passed safely through the palace gate. He found Padmavati awaiting him; she fell upon his bosom and looked into his eyes, and deceived

herself, as clever women will do. Overpowered by her joy and satisfaction, she now felt certain that her lover was hers eternally, and that her treachery had not been discovered; so the beautiful princess fell into a deep sleep.

Then Vajramukut lost no time in doing as the minister's son had advised, and slipped out of the room, carrying off Padmavati's jewels and ornaments. His counsellor having inspected them, took up a sack and made signs to his master to follow him. Leaving the horses and baggage at the nurse's house, they walked to a burning-place outside the city. The minister's son there buried his dress, together with that of the prince, and drew from the sack the costume of a religious ascetic: he assumed this himself, and gave to his companion that of a disciple. Then quoth the guru (spiritual preceptor) to his chela (pupil), "Go, youth, to the bazar, and sell these jewels, remembering to let half the jewellers in the place see the things, and if any one lay hold of thee, bring him to me."

Upon which, as day had dawned, Vajramukut carried the princess's ornaments to the market, and entering the nearest goldsmith's shop, offered to sell them, and asked what they were worth. As your majesty well knows, gardeners, tailors, and goldsmiths are proverbially dishonest, and this man was no exception to the rule. He looked at the pupil's face and wondered, because he had brought articles whose value he did not appear to know. A thought struck him that he might make a bargain which would fill his coffers, so he offered about a thousandth part of the price. This the pupil rejected, because he wished the affair to go further. Then the goldsmith, seeing him about to depart, sprang up and stood in the door way, threatening to call the officers of justice if the young man refused to give up the valuables which he said had lately been stolen from his shop. As the pupil only laughed at this, the goldsmith thought seriously of executing his threat, hesitating only because he knew that the officers of justice would gain more than he could by that proceeding. As he was still in doubt a shadow darkened his shop, and in entered the chief jeweller of the city. The moment the ornaments were shown to him he recognized them, and said, "These jewels belong to Raja Dantawat's daughter; I know them well, as I set them only a few months ago!" Then he turned to the disciple, who still held the valuables in his hand, and cried, "Tell me truly whence you received them?"

While they were thus talking, a crowd of ten or twenty persons had collected, and at length the report reached the superintendent of the archers. He sent a soldier to bring before him the pupil, the goldsmith, and the chief jeweller, together with the ornaments. And when all were in the hall of justice, he looked at the jewels and said to the young man, "Tell me truly, whence have you obtained these?"

"My spiritual preceptor," said Vajramukut, pretending great fear, "who is now worshipping in the cemetery outside the town, gave me these white stones, with an order to sell them. How know I whence he obtained them? Dismiss me, my lord, for I am an innocent man."

"Let the ascetic be sent for," commanded the kotwal. Then, having taken both of them, along with the jewels, into the presence of King Dantawat, he related the whole circumstances.

"Master," said the king on hearing the statement, "whence have you obtained these jewels?"

The spiritual preceptor, before deigning an answer, pulled from under his arm the hide of a black antelope, which he spread out and smoothed deliberately before using it as an asan. He then began to finger a rosary of beads each as large as an egg, and after spending

nearly an hour in mutterings and in rollings of the head, he looked fixedly at the Raja, and repined:

"By Shiva! great king, they are mine own. On the fourteenth of the dark half of the moon at night, I had gone into a place where dead bodies are burned, for the purpose of accomplishing a witch's incantation. After long and toilsome labour she appeared, but her demeanour was so unruly that I was forced to chastise her. I struck her with this, my trident, on the left leg, if memory serves me. As she continued to be refractory, in order to punish her I took off all her jewels and clothes, and told her to go where she pleased. Even this had little effect upon her--never have I looked upon so perverse a witch. In this way the jewels came into my possession."

Raja Dantawat was stunned by these words. He begged the ascetic not to leave the palace for a while, and forthwith walked into the private apartments of the women. Happening first to meet the queen dowager, he said to her, "Go, without losing a minute, O my mother, and look at Padmavati's left leg, and see if there is a mark or not, and what sort of a mark!" Presently she returned, and coming to the king said, "Son, I find thy daughter lying upon her bed, and complaining that she has met with an accident; and indeed Padmavati must be in great pain. I found that some sharp instrument with three points had wounded her. The girl says that a nail hurt her, but I never yet heard of a nail making three holes. However, we must all hasten, or there will be erysipelas, tumefaction, gangrene, mortification, amputation, and perhaps death in the house," concluded the old queen, hurrying away in the pleasing anticipation of these ghastly consequences.

For a moment King Dantawat's heart was ready to break. But he was accustomed to master his feelings; he speedily applied the reins of reflection to the wild steed of passion. He thought to himself, "the affairs of one's household, the intentions of one's heart, and whatever one's losses may be, should not be disclosed to any one. Since Padmavati is a witch, she is no longer my daughter. I will verily go forth and consult the spiritual preceptor."

With these words the king went outside, where the guru was still sitting upon his black hide, making marks with his trident on the floor. Having requested that the pupil might be sent away, and having cleared the room, he said to the jogi, "O holy man! what punishment for the heinous crime of witchcraft is awarded to a woman in the Dharma- Shastra?"

"Greet king!" replied the devotee, "in the Dharma Shastra it is thus written: 'If a Brahman, a cow, a woman, a child, or any other person whatsoever who may be dependent on us, should be guilty of a perfidious act, their punishment is that they be banished the country.' However much they may deserve death, we must not spill their blood, as Lakshmi flies in horror from the deed."

Hearing these words the Raja dismissed the guru with many thanks and large presents. He waited till nightfall and then ordered a band of trusty men to seize Padmavati without alarming the household, and to carry her into a distant jungle full of fiends, tigers, and bears, and there to abandon her.

In the meantime, the ascetic and his pupil hurrying to the cemetery resumed their proper dresses; they then went to the old nurse's house, rewarded her hospitality till she wept bitterly, girt on their weapons, and mounting their horses, followed the party which issued from the gate of King Dantawat's palace. And it may easily be believed that they found little difficulty in persuading the poor girl to exchange her chance in the wild jungle for the

prospect of becoming Vajramukut's wife--lawfully wedded at Benares. She did not even ask if she was to have a rival in the house,--a question which women, you know, never neglect to put under usual circumstances. After some days the two pilgrims of one love arrived at the house of their fathers, and to all, both great and small, excess in joy came.

"Now, Raja Vikram!" said the Baital, "you have not spoken much; doubtless you are engrossed by the interest of a story wherein a man beats a woman at her own weapon--deceit. But I warn you that you will assuredly fall into Narak (the infernal regions) if you do not make up your mind upon and explain this matter. Who was the most to blame amongst these four? the lover[73] the lover's friend, the girl, or the father?"

"For my part I think Padmavati was the worst, she being at the bottom of all their troubles," cried Dharma Dhvaj. The king said something about young people and the two senses of seeing and hearing, but his son's sentiment was so sympathetic that he at once pardoned the interruption. At length, determined to do justice despite himself, Vikram said, "Raja Dantawat is the person most at fault."

"In what way was he at fault? " asked the Baital curiously.

King Vikram gave him this reply: "The Prince Vajramukut being tempted of the love-god was insane, and therefore not responsible for his actions. The minister's son performed his master's business obediently, without considering causes or asking questions--a very excellent quality in a dependent who is merely required to do as he is bid. With respect to the young woman, I have only to say that she was a young woman, and thereby of necessity a possible murderess. But the Raja, a prince, a man of a certain age and experience, a father of eight! He ought never to have been deceived by so shallow a trick, nor should he, without reflection, have banished his daughter from the country."

"Gramercy to you!" cried the Vampire, bursting into a discordant shout of laughter, "I now return to my tree. By my tail! I never yet heard a Raja so readily condemn a Raja." With these words he slipped out of the cloth, leaving it to hang empty over the great king's shoulder.

Vikram stood for a moment, fixed to the spot with blank dismay. Presently, recovering himself, he retraced his steps, followed by his son, ascended the sires-tree, tore down the Baital, packed him up as before, and again set out upon his way.

Soon afterwards a voice sounded behind the warrior king's back, and began to tell another true story.