

The Quandary

by
Vijay Dan Detha

BETTER the seed or better the fruit? Better the dark or better the light? Better the sunrise or better the sunset? Better the beginning or better the end? Better the road or better the destination?

As the whole world is rocked in the cradle of the sun's rays, so on one road in the world rollicked along Lakhi the gypsy's caravan. He traded in sandal and saffron, in pearls and diamonds. The king himself held him in honour. And then his gypsy wife was an angel, one in a million.

For these two, sunlight and moonlight lay in each other's eyes. They were two bodies but one soul. The gypsy's golden coach led the caravan. His wife lay in his lap, talking, when the sudden baaing of sheep interrupted their conversation. She sat up with a start. A huge flock of sheep was crossing their path. Heads bent, the sheep moved along, as if assuring mother earth of their well being. The two gypsies musingly watched those innocent sheep. Every creature is happy in its own condition! Suddenly, the man's eye fell on a bear that was following the flock. Immediately he drew an arrow from his quiver, and strung his bow. Before he could let it fly, the woman caught hold of his hand. "Stop," she said, "he looks like a man."

"A man?"

Releasing her indrawn breath, she replied: "Look carefully. You would have committed a terrible mistake."

"Not at all," said he scornfully. "Such a man is a blot on the face of mankind. Only by destroying him can the glory of a man be preserved. The sight of this man makes me hang my head in shame. Don't



stop me." But she stuck to her point, saying, "A man is a man. One may be strong, another weak, one rich, another poor, one clever, another simple. All this is the effect of environment and the company one keeps."

It was as if she had shot an arrow and pierced his heart. Screwing up his eyes in surprise, he said harshly: "Environment! Company! That my wife should talk such nonsense! Can our ancestors' wisdom ever prove false? As the seed is so will the plant be. A thorn bush will produce thorns, not mangoes. How can one deny the importance of birth? The rot must have set in seven generations before he was born. The womb that bore him was a bad one."

She smiled and said: "A mother's womb is never bad."

Boiling with rage he broke in: "Do you dare compare my mother to the mother of this animal?"

Never before had her husband spoken harshly to her. She felt as if molten glass had been poured into her ears. Losing her temper, she said: "Neither is any mother's

womb bad nor any father's seed. All this is the effect of one's life after one is born. One becomes that which one sees and hears."

The man's tongue had loosened for the first time. "Do you mean that I should take no credit for my wealth and fame which are growing by leaps and bounds?" he demanded. "Is it for nothing that the king honours me?"

Why prolong an argument uselessly? Suppressing a smile, she fell silent. That silent smile hit the man's pride like a bolt of lightning. Catching hold of her hand, he roughly pulled her down from the coach. Then, dragging her towards the man who was moving on all fours like a bear, he said: "Do you compare me to this? First take a good look at him."

Dragging along his wife, he began to follow the bearlike man. He had long nails and his muddy, matted hair hung in tangles. The skin on his palms and soles was thick and rough. His teeth shone with simple smiles. Like the sheep, he drank by lowering his head to the stream. When he ate, his lips moved like theirs. The gypsy

man could not control his laughter. Dropping his wife's hand, he laughed heartily and, still laughing, said: "What possessed you to talk such nonsense and irritate me for nothing? Now do you admit that I was right?"

She made no answer. Lost in thought, she gazed wide-eyed on the distorted form of the man. A storm arose in her mind. Had she no right to express her opinion? Must she be enslaved to her husband, in return for mere food and clothing? Food, no matter how fine, is only food, after all. Clothes, however costly, are intended merely to cover the body. Had she no status but that of a mere bedfellow? Sparks seemed to burst from every pore of her body. When he saw that she was silenced, his anger evaporated. Stroking her cheeks, he said: "First you talk rubbish, and then you regret it!"

She felt as if her heart was being sawed at. Freeing her head with a jerk, she said, with a smile of scorn: "Regret! What regret! I still stand by what I said."

The husband's blood boiled. So the spoilt pet had such pride in her! Such an ego! The hussy had grown too big for her boots. He took hold of her plait, jerked it sharply and said: "True, stand by what you said. Don't you give way. This is the result of pampering a bitch like you. Hand over my jewels, and then enjoy his company all you like. I knew that animals would be required to satisfy your lust"

A dozen retorts to his gross words rose to her lips, but she preferred to stay silent. Why reply to such shamelessness? Better death than such dependence. Her face was overshadowed with disgust and revulsion. Shame on such a marriage and such jewels.

The bear, in dread of his pursuers, had been hurrying ahead. He had never seen such a sight before. Not able to understand their language, he repeatedly turned back to look at them. Why were they following him? What harm had he done them? But when the man caught hold of that jewelled woman's plait, he realised that this was an angry gesture. Perhaps the fellow was harassing the poor woman



because she was alone. His eyes blazed like two live coals. Like a ball from a cannon, he shot forward and reached them in an instant. The gypsy's blood froze when those red eyes were fixed on him. A neck would snap like a reed in the grasp of those sharp nails. With the few jewels that she had removed clasped in his trembling hands, he began to retreat. The woman did not waste another glance on him. This lightning bolt had fallen as suddenly as in a nightmare.

After a while, that apeman began to explain to her in gestures that not a hair of her head could be harmed while he was around. He was stronger than wild beasts. Suddenly, he seemed startled and pointed down the road. The gypsy woman saw a shepherd approaching. He wore a red turban and a silver bracelet and carried a staff. His beard, divided in two parts, was half white. While he was still a long way off, he smiled broadly and hailed the apeman, though intending her to hear his words: "Well, fate seems to have smiled on you! Where did this fairy come from? Have you ever looked at yourself in the stream?"

Though not able to understand human language, he understood that a taunt was intended and gesticulated in an

embarrassed manner. Then the shepherd began relating the story of how he had, twenty-two years before, found a crying infant lying near a jackal's hole. That child had now grown up and had proved more useful than men who walk on two feet and speak clearly. The shepherd had deliberately kept the child away from human company. Thanks to the shepherd's farsightedness, this creature did the work of ten shepherds. He grazed the flock and guarded them so well that no wild beast dared glance at them. Not a penny had to be spent on him. Like a monkey in the forest, he fed himself on fruits and plants. No expenditure on soap or oil, clothing or bedding, tobacco or liquor. If he had grown up in the society of men, would he have slogged a single day for the benefit of another? As soon as he grew up, he would have married and got into the business of producing heirs. He would have guarded his own interests. Now there was no problem. Thanks to him, the shepherd spent his days resting under a tree or gambling.

After listening to the story, the gypsy woman said gravely: "Well, your days of resting and gambling are over. Take charge of your flock now. I've come to take him away."

The shepherd was no fool. He thought there was no point wasting time in idle chatter. Can he be called a man who accepts defeat at the hands of an unknown woman? This witch should be taught a lesson. He raised his staff but at that moment, the apeman snatched it from his hands. Before he could take to his heels, a blow of the staff sent him sprawling. The sharp nails were about to rend his breast when the gypsy woman intervened. The shepherd did not dare move an inch.

The gypsy woman felt reassured. She had not expected the apeman to have such understanding and such strength. She could fearlessly take refuge in this lonely forest as long as she had the support of this hero. No need to go far. Here, in this forest, she would make a man of him. Can one reckon up the sins of one so blinded

by self-interest as to keep a human being in such a condition! She decided that financial loss would be a heavier punishment than death for this rustic. Death is no punishment to those who are ready to kill or to be killed for mere profit. Death is a part of their life. Though living, they are as good as dead. What value does life have for a man who is motivated by greed to strike an unknown woman? One who understands the value of life can never dream of raising a hand against anyone.

After a while, the shepherd got to his feet, groaning in pain. The gypsy woman had thought out her plan of action. "Well," she said, "You've tasted some of your deeds. If you dare try your tricks again I'll have you impaled. Don't you know who I am? Well, I won't tell you. If you value life and wish to see your family prosper, don't make the mistake of hoping to get back your flock. Tomorrow morning, send a skilful barber here, otherwise these claws will come to your house and strangle you."

A rustic may be subdued either by fear or by force. The fear of powerful people affects him more than the fear of death. The mention of government is more effective than a naked sword. The shepherd was too terrified to say a word. He folded his hands and made his way home with hands still folded. That is all there is to the manliness of the poor. They are like sheep to a lion, and wolves to a sheep.

As soon as the shepherd left, the apeman leapt and gambolled for joy, then sprang up into a mango tree and sent down a shower of yellow mangoes. He jumped down with a thud, collected the scattered fruits, and looked at the gypsy woman. With his eyes, he implored her to eat.

Though she was not hungry, how could she refuse that pure invitation? She began to suck one mango and placed another in front of him. After refusing a couple of times, he accepted it. He squeezed the mango hard, the juice squirted out and soaked his dusty beard.

This embarrassed him, and, surprisingly, he did not let a drop fall from his second mango. Pleased, he picked up a mango and crushed it between his rough palms, then he held it out to the woman and laughed, the laughter brimming from his teeth like fresh milk.

She happily accepted the mango. Today, she found a new pleasure in eating. Her hunger was satisfied as soon as it awoke, and awoke again after being satisfied. He too while eating shook his head to indicate that for the first time he was enjoying his food.

Gradually, darkness thickened. For the first time, the woman realised how much strength the sun's light gives. As the sun began to set, her heart began to sink. How would she find her way through this double darkness? Her husband had left her and gone his way, as animals leave their dung and go their way. Yet he had dared berate and taunt her. So far, she had lived in dependence on others, first on her father, then on her husband, but now she would live her own life. All these years, she had dragged a lifeless body hither and thither. Only today had she come alive. Through this apeman she had got a rare opportunity to create a new sun.

Night fell. Every tree in that forest seemed to have drunk up the light in handfuls. And a separate night seemed to have fallen for each tree. This was a different night altogether. A different darkness. The stars were different. What magic was this!

For a short while he stayed awake but finally sleep got the better of him. He stretched out and began to snore. At first the snores startled her, then she once more sank back into herself. She had never dreamt that wakefulness could be so rewarding. It was as if she had opened her eyes for the first time today. So far she had seen only the dark side of night but today that thick darkness glowed before her eyes. How attractive! How beautiful! The naked light of the sun was nothing compared to this. Either her eye or the darkness had undergone a change today.

The gypsy woman was absorbing that fathomless darkness into herself when all of a sudden a pink gleam burst from the womb of the sky. A faint light mingled with the garment of darkness. In a twinkling, the pink gleam turned to gold. All this time nature had existed and so had her eyes, yet nothing had been visible to her. Today, suddenly the web before her eyes had been cut through, and the angle of her vision had been transformed. Today, every pore of her body was free and rejoiced. Today, she was the queen of her own mind. No one had any control over her body. She would make this sleeping apeman stand on his feet and turn him into a human being who would be envied by the mightiest. This joy would be a thousand times greater than that of the womb's creation. Her wakefulness was too good to be exchanged even for Kumbhakaran's peaceful sleep. Not a sound to be heard. Silence enwrapped the forest. As if nature had bandaged her mouth with the moonlight.

Suddenly, a bird called, like a dagger piercing the heart of darkness. A tremor ran through the gypsy woman's body. She looked up. The stars were trembling too. The apeman continued to snore. Instead of feeling irritated she felt reassured. While he was around, she need not fear even the god of death. When the bird call died away, crickets began to sing like the goddess of dawn tinkling her bells to entertain the moon.

Gradually, night departed, picking out each star with its unfailing eyes. Darkness faded. Birds twittered in the east, like the melody of many anklets. Behind them a wave of brightness spread. Minute by minute, the stars drowned in that flood. Only the morning star withstood the onslaught for a while. Finally, it too fled and light was victorious.

The snores decreased in volume. The apeman sat up with a start. He looked at the gypsy woman and smiled. Then he bounded off into the forest. Hearing footsteps the woman looked around. A man approached, bag slung over his

shoulder. Perhaps he was the barber. He was an elderly man, tall and thin as a bamboo, wearing a cream turban. His teeth, like his body, were long and thin. His back was bent. He folded his hands and bowed low.

Seeing a stranger, the apeman whooped aloud and came leaping up. But his anger evaporated when the gypsy woman gestured to him to be still. Then she explained to him in sign language that he must have a bath and a haircut. First, he shook his head and refused outright, but when she insisted, he had to agree.

The barber was just as clever as he was skilled at his job. He had understood the whole affair without its being explained to him. Along with his other equipment he had brought a *dhoti* and shirt. He took the apeman to a nearby stream. The gypsy woman sat lost in thought. She saw the barber approach, smiling, and holding by the arm the apeman, clad in a *dhoti*. She could hardly believe her eyes. He was walking with great difficulty, taking each step on his heels. His appearance had altered completely. His coppery complexion glowed as a coal buried in ashes glows when exposed to the air. His body was strong and firm as a thorn tree. His eyes filled with tears when he saw the gypsy woman. Neither he nor she could tell whether they were tears of indignation,

of sorrow, or of love. As she tried unsuccessfully to smile, her eyes too filled unthinkingly. She took hold of his arms with her henna painted hands, and wondered how to straighten his back. He instantly understood her desire, and straightened himself with a jerk. Though he was a mere hand's breadth taller than she was, the woman felt as if he had reached the sky. The wedded bliss of the earth became immortal at the touch of the soles of his feet. The trees, swaying in the breeze, fanned him. The sun craned sideways to gaze on his beauty. A sharp nose. A long neck. Large eyes. Thick black lashes and brows. Milk white teeth. Curly hairs on his chest. Long arms. A waist slim as that of a lion. When the gypsy woman took his hand, he walked behind her, carefully lifting one foot, then the other. The earth seemed to rise and fall with his feet, as if it did not wish to lose their touch. The sun, the earth and numberless trees and bushes were witness to that pure ritual, when they both walked round in a circle.

After a while, the barber sought permission to leave. She happily gave him the pearl studded ornament which was the symbol of her marriage, and asked him to fetch another *dhoti* and waistcoat and turban, and also kitchen equipment. The barber did not waste a moment in going

and buying these things. Of course, he went and had a smoke with the former owner of the flock. He talked about the apeman. The shepherd was troubled more by heartache than by his backache. Sleep had fled and the baaing of his sheep echoed in his ears. But what could be done? If the barber advised him, perhaps the matter could yet be righted.

The barber was in a great hurry. Giving many verbal assurances, he placed his bundle on his head, and set off for the forest. There he found both of them grazing the flock. On seeing the barber, the apeman smiled.

Though he was not thirsty, off he went, brought water in a leafcup, and drank it in one gulp. The barber smiled at his innocence and eagerness to learn new things. "He'll soon leave us all behind," he remarked.

"May your words prove auspicious," replied she. "It is this hope which keeps me alive. May god send that day soon."

He was a barber and the chief of his community in twenty-four villages.

Never at a loss for words, he answered: "That day is already here. You should arrange a ceremony to avert the evil eye."

The gypsy woman flushed and said in a soft voice: "There is no one here who can cast an evil eye. These trees and sheep can hardly do so!"



Both of them looked at the apeman. Unable to understand what they said, he began to laugh and went on laughing for quite a while. His beauty was heightened by that stainless laughter.

The day passed by like so many minutes. Just as when one's knowledge, understanding, memory and consciousness flee but return as soon as one awakes, so also, as soon as he stood upright on his feet, the apeman, on being taught by the gypsy woman, began to learn as quickly as if he were recollecting forgotten matters. She took time to teach but he did not take time to learn. Having been instructed once, he learnt how to wear a *dhoti*, tie a turban, button a shirt, eat, drink and bathe. His skill in grazing the flock would have put the best shepherd to shame. Without being taught he learnt how to cry "*Me me*" and "*Dhar-dhar*," whereupon he constantly repeated these cries all day long, and could with difficulty be persuaded to stay quiet.

Even after being told repeatedly, he could not accept the names of the sun and moon. He objected, saying that a god who scattered boundless brilliance should not be called by so small a name. He should have a very big name and on enunciating it, flames should spring from one's mouth. If not, one might as well call the sun the moon, or the moon a frying pan. How different are a mountain and a pebble! Yet both words have the same number of syllables. If one can speak of fire without burning one's tongue, what is the use of these names?

She heard these objections but no answer occurred to her. Never had such questions arisen in her mind nor had anyone voiced them.

When from an apeman he became a

herdsman, his entire demeanour changed. One day, when the gypsy woman told him her name, he made a wry face and said: "So dry and tasteless! No, no. Your name should be sweeter than moonlight. Don't teach me such good-for-nothing names."

But the next moment he burst out laughing. Pointing to the sun, he said:



"When this can be called sun, I suppose you can be called Lakha. What's in a name, after all? And one must admit that you are one in lakhs!"

This praise embarrassed her but also made her feel proud. To carry on the conversation, she said: "You've scarcely learnt to speak but are already making fine speeches! How can you talk of lakhs when you have not heard the name of anyone besides me?"

"One who has you for a teacher may

talk of any thing."

"You mean I am to blame for this too?"

"Who else- do you think these sheep are to blame?"

At this both of them burst out laughing and made every leaf in the forest ring.

His body began to shine with the application of sheep's milk. His soles and palms grew soft as ladybirds. His appetite grew more discriminating as he ate the new dishes prepared by the gypsy woman. She felt as if every leaf in the forest was dancing with joy. She had never dreamt that her labours would be rewarded so soon and so amply.

One day, the herdsman asked with some hesitation: "Should I learn only what you teach me or will you answer if I ask questions?" "Of course, you may ask. I'll be pleased. That was what I was going to suggest."

Looking away, the herdsman asked: "What is a kiss? Why haven't you told me about it yet?"

The gypsy woman tingled through and through. Who was this new teacher he had found? If he became too knowing, would he continue to rely on her alone? She felt as if her body was being broken to pieces. Gathering courage, she said: "You have a lot to learn yet. No need to be in such a hurry."

But he was extremely impatient. Without a moment's pause he said: "I have another question to ask. What have you hidden in your blouse?" She could hardly believe that the unknowing herdsman was asking such questions. Who had read him this lesson? "Who taught you all this?" she asked.

The herdsman had not picked up the habit of lying. He immediately said that it was the barber. Darkness swam before the gypsy woman's eyes. That which she had feared had happened. How could she restrain this herdsman who was day by

day accumulating more knowledge? Oh that she might, by some magic, transform him into a fly to keep him thus! All would be lost if she did not rebuke him now. "Give up the company of the barber," she said sharply, "otherwise it will be the worse for you."

Smiling, he said: "How naively you talk! Animals cannot live alone neither can men. All that men do, they do together. These days, he is very respectful too. Now that you have made me so capable, let me learn new things. Let me acquire new tastes and visit new places."

The gypsy woman sat speechless, gazing at him. He immediately understood the reason for her amazement and went on: "I feel afraid to tell you this but these days, my mind is not in my control. I feel like sweeping through the world like a whirlwind."

Her heart seemed to stop beating. "Alone?" she managed to ask.

"No, why alone? I will carry you on my shoulder. Now I do not even wish to die alone. You will be proud to have a disciple like me."

She felt revived. Smiling, she said: "You seem to have become my teacher!" She could hardly speak further. Her tongue seemed to be glued to her palate. Neither tongue nor heart nor head was in her control. She began to think that delay now would mean his escaping her and leaving her empty handed. Now only the delights of Eros could keep him tied to her. It was bound to happen sooner or later. Why risk the delay? The herdsman sensed her mental turmoil. Despite being repeatedly provoked by the barber, he had with great difficulty restrained himself. If he lost this opportunity, when might another present itself? Looking away, he said: "Why did you hide these things from me all this time?"

What answer could she give? Looking down, and scratching the soil with her toe, she said: "There are many things we women cannot say. We have to think of the consequences."

Having reached the limit, he did not wish to acknowledge its existence. Immediately he asked: "But you know about this?"

She spoke in a whisper. "Yes, I do know."

Intoxication spread through his limbs. Such was the dose the barber had administered to him. Stroking her cheeks, he said: "You should not know that which you cannot speak about."

A double layer of pink overspread her lovely face. "These things come by themselves," she murmured. "One does not need to know or learn them from anyone."

The implication was clear. His desire was fulfilled. He had been waiting many days for this opportunity. Pearls are born only if one sows them at the proper time. After that, neither speech nor saying. Neither consciousness nor awareness. It was as if two pieces of sunlight fallen from the sky were wrapped together.

Perhaps this was the first occasion since the creation of the world that time and the winds were able to draw a breath. Bound to each other they were planted at one spot. When they were finally released, time and the winds learnt the importance of a bond. Eyes closed, she said: "I feel as if nothing is in its place any longer. The roots of the trees have been loosened. Perhaps the sun and the hills are not in their appropriate places. Go and see whether all is well with nature."

Lost in his pleasure, he paid no attention to her words. Sweetly taunting, he said: "A nice teacher you are! You taught me all kinds of useless stuff but ignored what you should have taught first of all! Yet I did not stint in my offerings to my teacher!"

The gypsy woman's eyes seemed to have found a voice. "You want to get away with this kind of offering!" she said. "There are many offerings yet to be made."

After a while when they came out of their hut, all nature appeared transformed to them. The leaves swayed to the rhythm

of their pleasure. The bloom of the greenery was heightened. The sun had been generous with pink light in the west. The twitterings of birds returning to their nests sounded new today.

Suddenly the herdsman said in a tone of remorse: "Lost in your love I forgot about the sheep. They will think that for the sake of one, I forgot my responsibility to a thousand! I'll return soon."

She seemed to be afraid of herself. Perplexed, she said: "I'll go with you."

"Why trouble yourself? I am quite able to handle the flock by myself."

Following him, she said: "I am your shadow. I will stay with you all day and all night."

For some days, a certain question had been revolving in the herdsman's mind but he had not had an opportunity to ask. The question would rise to his lips but sink back again. The gypsy woman's words brought the question out. Looking sharply into her eyes, he said: "Why did you leave the one whose shadow you used to be? I only have a faint memory of his having caught hold of your plait."

She felt as if a lion had clawed at her heart. The memories of the past had been erased from her mind like a line drawn on water or she herself had unconsciously erased them but in fact they were far from erased. When the shepherd asked her this question, the illusion of their erasure exploded before her eyes like a ball from a cannon. And the next moment all the colours of nature were defaced. She felt as if each leaf was taunting her, each bird screaming condemnation at her. Several times she had been about to tell him that story but had not done so. But why the need to ask about it now? As if each word was pus oozing out, she said: "Would that I had not heard this question from your lips, but now..."

He hastily interposed: "If you don't feel like it, forget it. I just happened to ask, that's all."

Sighing deeply, she said: "If you had just happened to ask I would happily have

told you.”

Unable to think of a reply at once, the herdsman called out to his sheep and then said: “If you’re going to be so cross I won’t listen to anything you say.”

The gypsy woman had recovered herself. She said: “Whether you listen to anything else or not is up to you, but you will have to listen to this.”

Then she narrated the whole story in detail, and the herdsman, still protesting, listened with keen interest

So he actually had been the cause of the conflict between husband and wife! Had that gypsy not abandoned his wife, he would have been condemned to that apeman’s existence forever! The thought set every pore in his body atingle. “Truly a blessing in disguise,” he remarked gravely. “The gypsy’s anger changed my life. Not in seven births can I forget my debt to him.”

So she was to hear this too! Like a scalpel applied to her heart. With difficulty she asked: “And I... all that I have done is nothing in your eyes?”

In a tone of remorse, he answered: “With you, it’s altogether different. My debt to you cannot be expressed in words. But if the gypsy had relented what would have become of me? I will have no rest until I repay my debt to him. It’s a matter of a few days now. Wait and see.”

Her fears were taking shape. In a choked voice she responded: “I don’t wish to see anything further. This forest, these sheep, these trees, these mountains and these streams are more than heaven to me. I have climbed the final flight of steps to bliss.”

“But my bliss is still far away. Do you wish to stop here? That cannot be. I want to rule over the sun and the moon too. The breeze, the sunlight and the moonlit nights will wait upon me. It is the barber who revealed the secret to me. I will make him my special secretary of state. By his kindness you will become my queen.”

Mists swam before her eyes as if she were slowly losing her vision. She caught

hold of the herdsman and shook him up, crying: “No, no, we are in want of nothing now. How can a poor kingship compare with the pleasures of this forest?”

Reassuring her, the herdsman replied: “It was for fear of this that I did not tell you the secret. Now my determination will admit no confines. What, after all, is the difference between that shepherd, the owner of the flock, and you? He restricted me to a beast’s existence to serve his own ends. He did not allow me to approach human ways of life. And you, after having taught me so much, now want to bind me here. That cannot be. My might cannot stay imprisoned in the confines of this forest. Truly, the process is beyond my control. If you now wish to stop me from going forward, it would have been best to keep me far from human ways, as that shepherd did.”

She felt as if her tongue had been cut out. She made a great effort to speak but no words emerged. All she could do was weep and weep, with her head on the herdsman’s shoulder.

Suddenly, the roar of a crowd, the rattling of chariot wheels and the whinnying of horses was heard. Startled, she looked around and saw the gleam of torches advancing down the road from the village. Wiping her tears, the herdsman said: “Looks like that splendid fellow, the barber, has kept his word. He is coming with the army and its followers. Swear by me that you will not cry now and create an ill omen. My coronation will take place tomorrow on the auspicious full moon night.”

How could she combat that dream incarnate seen with open eyes! She was forced to endure it. The glare of the torches came near and stopped. As the chariots halted, several men alighted.

The owner of the flock and the barber came forward, bowing down to the ground. The old king, his crown trembling on his trembling head, breathlessly gathered the herdsman into his arms. In a tearful, quivering voice, he said: “My beloved

prince, how many times we have sifted the dust of this forest in search of you. But what is to happen happens only at the appointed time. We had eyes yet we were blind. We saw you several times with our own eyes yet did not recognise you. How could we imagine that you were that four-footed apeman? Blessed be this barber who told us the truth. As soon as I heard it I knew it was absolutely true.”

Then he turned to the owner of the flock and said: “For the sins of which birth were you taking revenge on us? You dared deny any knowledge of the truth even though we questioned you repeatedly.”

He fell at the king’s feet. “I committed a terrible sin, O giver of bread! Death would be too light a punishment for such a sin.”

But the king’s anger dissolved in a moment. Affectionately, he said: “Don’t be afraid. Never will I commit such an injustice. After all, it was you who kept the prince alive. How else could this sun of gold have risen tonight? Ask freely for anything you desire. I don’t wish to remain in debt to you.”

Groveling at the king’s feet, he said: “I am as good as dead without my flock. Sustainer of the poor, I want my flock returned to me, nothing else.”

Smiling, the king replied: “You are certainly the crown of fools. The flock is yours, in any case. The prince has tended it long enough. Here, this nine-gemmed necklace is yours.”

The gypsy woman was looking on, speechless with amazement. How to disbelieve this? Yet how find the courage to believe it? What a calamity had descended out of the blue!

Folding his hands, the court priest interposed: “Giver of bread, this is the auspicious moment to leave this place. Another moment’s delay...” “Delay - what for? How can we let the auspicious moment go by!” said the king reproachfully.

The barber immediately opened a leather waterskin and began to wash the prince’s and the gypsy woman’s feet, saying: “Let the dust of the forest remain



in the forest. Deign to ascend the chariot now.”

“What kind of foolery is this?” said the prince to him in an undertone. “Behave as befits the post of state secretary.”

But how could he forget that he had attained that post by the quick-wittedness peculiar to barbers? In honeyed tones he replied: “Enough that the shoes find a place at the feet.”

No time for more talk - the chariots wheeled around. The gypsy woman’s nightmare advanced with the horses’ feet. God knows if this chariot will ever stop or not?

Stroking her head with his trembling hand, the king said: “Daughter, it would be an insult even to try to talk about our debt to you, yet I cannot restrain myself from speaking of it. My only grief is that the queen did not live to see this day. What a blockhead I was to doubt such a devoted queen! I fell prey to a plot hatched by the courtiers. The queen hanged herself as soon as she had given birth to the prince. I could not rest until I had had the state secretary impaled and had thrown the fruit of sin before a jackal’s den in this forest. A week later, the conspiracy was unearthed and I was filled with remorse but what could be done? We searched every inch of the forest but until the appointed day

came, he was not to be found. Finally, when we heard the whole story from the barber, our wanderings ended. Even a blind man can see how closely the prince resembles me. And he has a big garlic-shaped birthmark at the spot the royal midwife remembers. It was you who awakened the prince’s destiny. Were it not for you he would have lived the life of an apeman although he was born of a queen’s womb. Today, my last wish has been fulfilled. Tomorrow, after the coronation, I will leave for Kashi. I will spend the rest of my days praying that your kingdom grow two-fold by day, four-fold by night, May you bathe in milk and be fruitful of sons.”

The gypsy woman kept her mental turmoil to herself and bowed her head at the king’s feet. The king’s heart overflowed and he could barely speak. “The saviour is greater than the killer. Why then do you bow your head? That is my part.”

And the king actually began to bow his head, crown and all, at her feet but she immediately took him in her arms. The heart’s speech began to flow from the eyes of both.

The prince was lost in his own dreams, unconscious of what was happening around him. His heart’s elation was too great to be contained between heaven and earth. From apeman to herdsman to the

ruler of the land! Shame on his rule if he failed to bring the whole world under his dominion. He would not rest until his writ prevailed over the wind, the sea and the light of day. Even before he had tasted the sweets of crown and throne, his dreams were leaping up to sun and moon.

The whole city had turned out to welcome the prince. He was given a hundred and one gun salute as he entered the city. A thousand ceremonies were performed to invoke blessings on him. Shouts of acclamation filled the skies. Numberless priests were scanning their books to identify the auspicious moment.

Troops of female slaves bathed in warm, scented water hovered around the prince. Each one lovelier than the other. How could he drink in so much loveliness with two eyes? Both mind and eyes were dazzled. When yesterday’s herdsman finally ascended the throne at the behest of the priests he felt as if he had been reigning over the earth for endless ages.

As if mad with happiness, all the courtiers, chieftains, gentry, slaves and servants danced attendance on the prince, and soon he became the owner of the kingdom and yesterday’s gypsy woman his queen. At the new king’s command, the barber got the post of special secretary of state, the shepherd who had saved the

prince's life got an estate of seven villages. In his gladness at receiving a gift of a troop of elephants, Lakhi the gypsy laid a thousand and one gold coins at the feet of the king and queen

True to his word, the new king's father set out on foot for Kashi, accompanied by five priests. A new king on the throne and a new secretary of state to advise him. New plans were boiling in the breasts of both. Which weak kingdom should they attack and how conquer it? The queen worked up the courage to try and dissuade the king. She told him there was no end for greed. Why needlessly seek to expand the frontiers of the kingdom? To multiply agitation and tumult is not to be able to draw a breath in peace.

But the king's ambitions were growing ever more forceful. He paid no heed to the queen's chatter. He was immersed in his new intoxication. The queen was taken up with the hope of her womb. Ten months from now her lap would grow green. Different dreams were growing in the eyes of the two of them - in the king's eyes dreams of an expanding kingdom and ever new pleasures, and in the queen's eyes dreams of the new life. How would she nurture it, and what would she teach it? Night and day she was lost in a quandary - was the apeman's life better or the herdsman's or this king's life of enthroned luxury?

Numberless servants stood ever waiting to fulfil the king's slightest wish. At his command countless female slaves were ready to serve his pleasure. The air around him echoed to cries of salutation. Offerings and tributes. Even a stone statue's head would have been turned; why then would a living creature of flesh and blood remain under any restraint? Full blown youth, growing ambitions, the intoxication of the throne and the pride of the crown. In addition, the courtiers' fraudulent scheming and strategising. The advice of such flatterers as the shepherd, Lakhi the gypsy and the new secretary of



state. Constant incentives to drink more deep. Ever new, untouched virgin slaves to pass the time with. Ever new ways of relishing the pleasures of the body. Now a raw bud, now a blossoming young woman. As the day ended the sun of the king's intoxication rose and it set only at dawn.

The queen fretted and smouldered inwardly. But there was no one in all that kingdom who could understand her pain.

One day when the king was drunk he saw the queen passing by, and accosted her in faltering accents: "How dare you venture to come into my presence when you know I feel like vomiting at the sight of your swollen stomach?"

She made no reply. She wanted to spit out coals of fire but she remained silent, swallowing the blood of anguish. As she turned away, the king, swaying on his feet, caught hold of her hand and said: "A mere nothing of a gypsy woman to dare display such pride before the king! Perjure me if I do not roast you alive. No doubt you think you did me a great favour by making me what I am. But I was happier as an apeman. It was because I fell for your wiles that I am still wandering like a lost creature. God knows where and when this will end! But what do you think of yourself? To wipe

out your arrogance is child's play to me."

What retort could she make to such baseness? Releasing her hand with a jerk, she walked away, silent. Still muttering curses, the king went into his pleasure palace. His anger cooled when he saw the beauty of the new bud on the bed of flowers.

But the queen's eyes did not close even for a moment. All night she drank in the darkness with vacant eyes. She had put out the lamp with a flap of her veil. That four-footed apeman had reached here with a little effort but not the most mighty effort could now avail to return him to an earlier state. Will this crown of reason, the human being, always use his two feet to walk an evil path? Can the errors committed by one's hands not be righted even in dreams? Is no penance possible, is there no escape even unto the last generation from the penalty for this error? Like her vacant eyes, the gypsy woman's head grew absolutely vacant. From that day to this, that expectant queen is torn every moment by the agonies of childbirth in that pleasure palace. And the dream of her womb will not come forth until that quandary wringing her heart is resolved. (translated from Hindi by Ruth Vanita). □