



BEHULA

A N I N D I A N M Y T H



S.R.





# BEMULA

*An Indian Myth*



WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED

BY

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To

H. K. Bannerjee Esq.

With Best Compliments

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## Introduction

Mrs. Sukhalata Rao has caught in the web of her story the spirit of the village epic of Bengal, Behula, which has sprung from the heart of our people and has lived in oral traditions and folk-lore, sung and performed by the local operatic troupes of this province. It gives us the picture of the ideal wife, her heroic sacrifice and conjures the atmosphere of home life in its humble majesty, touching simple hearts with the beauty and depth of its sentiments.

I feel sure that this English version of the story will find a large and appreciative audience.

*Robin Nath Tagore*

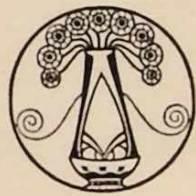







The subject-matter of this book is taken  
from Bengali books on Manasa & Behula.









# BEHULA

## I


Chand, the merchant king of Champaknagar, was a devoted worshipper of Shiva. To him Shiva was the god of gods, and all other deities must stand aside in humbleness before his sovereign dignity.

Now, Manasa, the dispenser of earthly fortunes, who held evil sway over snakes and serpents, wished to have her seat amongst the ancient circle of gods and goddesses and claimed the worship of mankind. But it was so ordained by Shiva himself that she could be recognised on earth only through her worship by Chand, the devotee of Shiva.

But our proud merchant had no need for her. To Shiva, the mightiest of the mighty, was accorded all the devotion and loyalty of his undivided worship. And Manasa pleaded in vain for his homage.

Insulted and angry, the goddess determined to break down the stubborn pride of the merchant, and called the powers of evil to her aid.

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Twelve months scarcely passed, the serpent messengers of Manasa took away one by one the six youthful sons of the merchant king.

Sanaka, the poor wife of Chand, and her six widowed daughters-in-law were crushed down with grief and despair. The beautiful palace, that once resounded with the laughter of gay young voices, was now voiceless and desolate. All joy and happiness seemed to have fled with the departed sons. But the proud spirit of Chand was not to be broken down. His troubles helped him to steel his heart all the more against the demands of Manasa. In wild defiance he held aloft his favourite staff and said, "Shiva is my refuge! Shiva is my friend! I defy thee to do thy worst, thou accursed one-eyed wench."

The widowed daughters-in-law looked at him with tearful pleading eyes, his wife fell at his feet and implored him to relent, his friends advised him to give up his hopeless struggle. But they only roused his anger, till at last, sick with exasperation he determined to fly from this bitter scene of reproaches and grief.

One fine morning, his seven merchant vessels loaded with wealth, sailed on the river. First and foremost floated the royal merchant's favourite, the proud and palatial








SANAKĀ, AFTER CHAND'S DEPARTURE

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'Madhukar', a wonder of workmanship. The people of the town crowded on the river bank to see the merchant go out on his voyage.

Meanwhile in Chand's palace, surrounded by six young widows, poor Sanaka lay weeping and helpless. No words of solace could soothe their broken hearts.

The merchant vessels with their precious loads, were sailing swift and gay at the helpful wind far out into the peaceful sea, all unconscious of the pursuing hatred of Manasa. Suddenly without warning the sky became leaden grey, dark clouds rumbled their threats of thunder, and in growling gusts of temper, the wind ploughed up the slumbering sea, rousing the waters to terrible fits of passion. Manasa had called the winds to her aid !

Chand's vessels, 'Madhukar' and all, were driven adrift helpless before the gathering storm, still the waves heaved and swelled in deadly struggle with the rising winds. It was all over as suddenly as it came, but no trace was left of the vessels or their crew.

Chand alone lay panting and exhausted on a heaving wave, his eyes red with the sea salt. The goddess threw before him a gorgeous flowering lotus plant so that he might be tempted.



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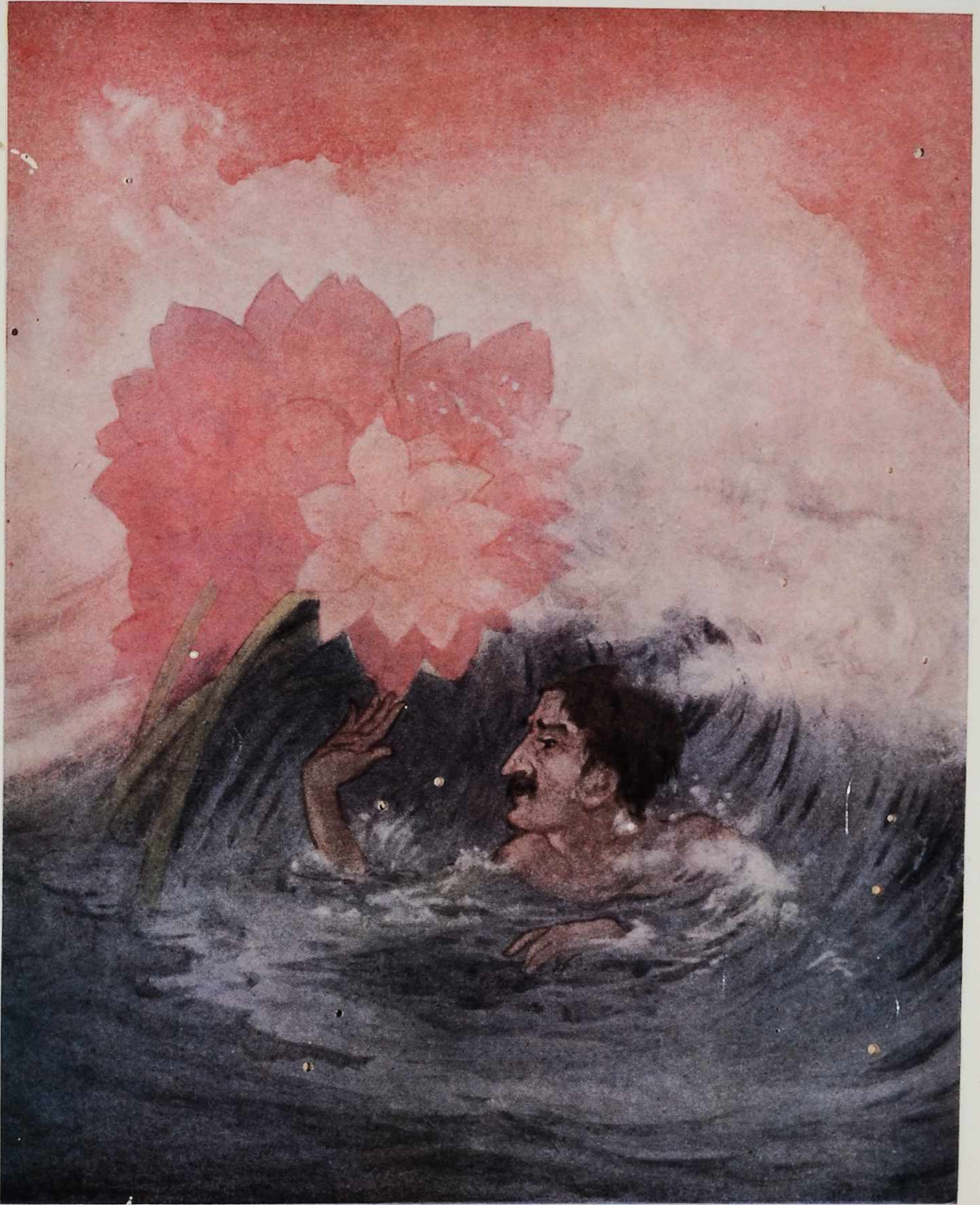
to save himself with its aid. For a moment Chand was overjoyed to find a floating support and clutched wildly at the lotus petals—but only for a moment. The next instant he remembered that lotus was the seat of Manasa, and recoiled in anger and disgust from the hateful flower associated with the hateful goddess.

But still Manasa could not let him die, for his death would mean the end of all her hopes. So, after hours of desperate struggle he was allowed to save himself. Friendless and penniless he landed on a foreign shore, still shadowed by the wiles of Manasa. She harassed him in every way. He engaged himself as a menial, but Manasa had him turned out and insulted for nothing. He begged from door to door for a handful of rice and even that was stolen from him.

Chand, however, stood proud and undaunted before the curseful ire of the goddess. His faith was unshaken in adversity. And as he lifted up his hands in silent appeal to his deity, people beheld in him the image of Shiva himself, the god of renunciation.







CHAND RECOILED IN DISGUST FROM  
THE LOTUS FLOWER, THE SEAT OF MANASĀ





MOTHER AND SON

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## II

Here in Chand's palace hours dragged on their weary length, until one day the people of Champaknagar heard conch-shells blowing their glad tidings from Sanaka's room and they exclaimed, "There! there—another son born unto Sanaka Rani! May the goddess spare him!" Looking at her child, radiant and beautiful as the morning sun, Sanaka half forgot her sorrows.

When after months of roaming about from place to place Chand returned home in tattered rags and starved almost to death, one could scarcely recognise in him the wealthy merchant. Sanaka was overjoyed to meet her husband once more but her heart ached to see the dark lines on his noble forehead that bespoke but too plainly all he had gone through.

When Sanaka brought to him her new-found treasure, poor Chand knew not how to welcome the child. He waved back the tender yearnings of his starving heart with the question "Would it be wise?" Sooner or later cruel Manasa was sure to take away this treasure. Would it be prudent, would it be wise to love too much and stand the awful test again, and, was he not, like a true devotee of Shiva trying to keep himself



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above all pain and pleasure? So he kept himself strangely aloof from the child.

But to all others the child was an idol for worship, claiming their adoration and their homage as no child had ever claimed before. They named him "Lakhindar", lovingly called "Priceless Lakhai."

Chand went to the astrologers to consult about his son. They told him that the boy would die of snake-bite on his wedding night. The weary merchant came back to nurse his dread secret within himself.

Like the growing fullness of the crescent moon, the child grew into a boy, and the boy into a noble youth. Sanaka, as she looked at the mournful sight of the widowed wives in their colourless garbs, longed to see about her a happy young face, with the red vermilion mark of wifehood painted on her brow.

So one day she unburdened herself to her husband. "It is now our duty" she said, "to bestir ourselves for our boy's happiness, and find a bride for him." Chand remembered the warnings of the astrologers. He sighed to himself and kept silent, for he knew not what to say. Sanaka shed tears at his silence and apathy. "Alas!" she thought,

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“affliction has hardened his feelings and made him callous and cold.”

Poor Chand was moved out of his resolves by her grief. “After all”, he told himself, “the words of the astrologers may not come true; who can tell? It would be selfish of us to deny our boy the happiness which is his due.” So he promised Sanaka that he would bestir himself for the welfare of the child.

Janardan, the Brahmin priest was sent out with the wise astrologers of the town to find a worthy bride for Lakhindar.








### III

In the town of Nichhni lived Sai the merchant, the father of a beautiful daughter named Behula—Behula, the light and joy of Nichhni, the darling of her parents' hearts. "Our Behula" the people would say in proud adoration "is indeed so different from ordinary mortals!" Her complexion was pure as the jasmine flower; the lotus itself had but borrowed its perfume from the sweet breath of her coral lips; the light of Heaven filled the depths of her wonderful eyes; when unbound, her tresses fell like shadowy clouds, enfolding her exquisitely moulded form. No 'Apsara'\* had lighter steps; she was known as Behula, the beautiful dancer. Wherever there were tearful eyes to dry, wherever there were sorrowful hearts to soothe, there was Behula with her loving compassion, soothing and comforting the distressed.

Sai was looking for a worthy husband for his daughter. Just then he met Janardan, the priest. It seemed as if the gods had ordained the meeting. Janardan made no delay in going back to Chand and informing him about Sai's daughter.

Chand wanted to see the girl with his own eyes. So, accompanied by a long train of attendants, and with trays



\* Dancer in the court of Indra, the king of the gods.



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full of sweetmeats and caskets of valuable presents, he got into his gold-decked 'dola',\* and started for Nichhni. He was received with all due ceremonies by Sai, who with a proud heart brought the daughter before him. Chand's eyes filled with tears on beholding Behula's heavenly beauty.

Astrologers were consulted; the stars of Behula and Lakhindar indicated a highly propitious match. So with thankful hearts the parties fixed the wedding day.

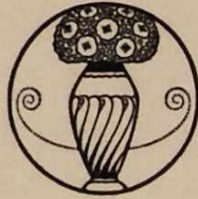
On Chand's return home, Sanaka greeted him with many a eager question about her Lakhai's bride, and was transported with joy to learn that the wedding day was fixed. Then she fell on her knees before her husband, imploring him thus to yield to Manasa: "Forgive me, my lord, I entreat you not to imperil our child's life by your obstinacy. I beg of you on my knees to give up this quarrel with a goddess. Your defiance has earned for you only poverty and pain, whilst the worship of Manasa could have given you all earthly riches." Chand answered her with a sneering laugh, "Little do I care for your Manasa's riches. As to poverty and pain, she can take away nothing that will impoverish the soul; she can not rob me of the treasures of the spirit."

\* 'Dola' is a kind of open palanquin.



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From her seat in high heaven, the goddess heard the sneer and was stung by it. But for her own sake she must forbear. She could ruin Chand if she liked, but that would ruin her own cause. So she determined to make another great effort.





#### IV.

Chand had boasted to his wife about his indifference to Manasa's anger, but the words of the astrologers haunted him day and night. He proposed to build an iron house on the Santali hill near Champak-nagar, and keep the bride and the bridegroom there, for the night of their wedding.

That very day he sent for the master blacksmith and ordered him to build a house of iron on the hill, which when closed, will not have a single pin-hole left anywhere.

So, to the goddess' extreme concern, a lofty iron house, was erected on the Santali hill. One day, when all was ready, the smith was returning home; Manasa, in the guise of an old woman, met him and questioned, "Whither bound my man?" "Returning home from the hill, my lady," answered the smith. "What business had you on the Santali hill?" asked Manasa. The smith said, "Why! don't you know? Chand, our merchant king has built there an iron house, an impregnable stronghold, shut on every side, so much so that when locked, not even a speck of dust can enter it. His son and daughter-in-law are to spend their wedding night in that stronghold, to keep away all evil intrusions."



## BEHULA

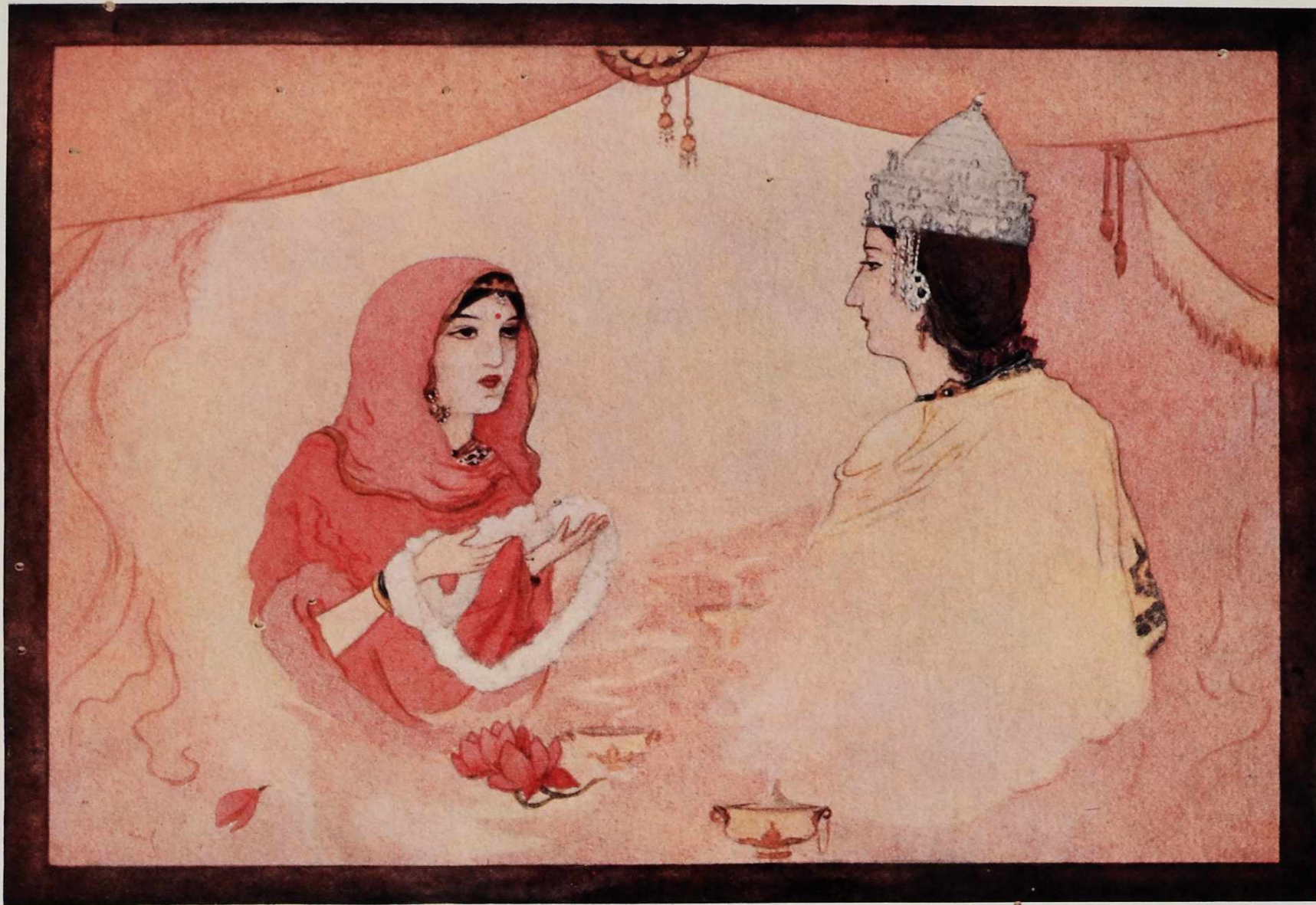
“Could you, at my request, go back to that iron house and make the finest of holes in the wall?”

“Not I, my old woman; I have given my word to the merchant, I have tasted his salt, and I am not going to be a traitor.”

“Slowly, my good man, slowly. What if I tell you that it is the order of the goddess Manasa, the fearful in vengeance? Listen to reason, go back to the hill, and make a hole in the wall.” With these words the old woman vanished, and the master-smith puzzled and frightened, went back to his finished work, drilled a hole in one corner and stopped it up with charcoal dust, so that nobody could espy it.







THE WEDDING





V.

The wedding day drew near. In due time, Chand and his friends, mounted on richly draped elephants started with the bride-groom, for Nichhni. Lakhindar had donned a bright wedding robe and a jewelled crown. Garlands of flowers perfumed the rare bright pearls round his neck. As he sat on his spirited steed, he looked like a fair young god, his face beaming with gladness.


The gorgeous procession was enlivened by musical bands. Hundreds of gold and silver 'dolas' were carried along in the procession, and glittered in the varied lights of the fireworks displayed.

Sai gave the bride-groom and his party a worthy reception. Behula's mother Amala lifted up her golden lamp, looked lovingly into Lakhindar's face, sprinkled sweets and rice on his head, and thus received her future son-in-law.

Under a spacious canopy sparkling with gold and fringed with pendant pearl strings, sat Lakhindar with Behula on his left. The bride's natural lovely appearance was lovelier still in her scarlet bridal attire. She was covered from head to foot with diamonds and pearls of untold worth. The bride-groom looked at the bride, the bride at the bride-groom, and each thought, "I am blessed."



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Sai taking Behula's hand placed it in Lakhindar's; so the ceremony commenced. Suddenly in the midst of it the golden roof overhead the pair came crashing down. Fortunately it did not cause any harm. It was raised up again strongly and securely; but the hearts of all present were heavy with apprehension at this ominous occurrence.

When the ceremony was over, Chand taking Sai aside, said, "You all know about Manasa's enmity with me. In the astrologer's opinion Lakhindar is doomed to die of snake bite on his wedding night. So I have had constructed an iron house on the Santali hill, and intend to keep the couple there for to-night." Sai replied, "Had I known this before, I would not have had my daughter given in marriage to your son. But now it is too late. I have nothing to say in the matter; do as you think best."

On that night, the Santali hill was made as inaccessible for snakes as possible. Peacocks and other snake-eaters roamed about ready to snatch at every creeping serpent. Medicinal herbs were scattered around, whose choking smell compelled all snakes to fly far away; hundreds of armed sentinels, and all the physicians and snake-charmers of Champaknagar were gathered there. Torch-bearers with blazing torches turned the night into day. Chand himself, with his huge staff in hand kept guard.



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Behula and Lakhindar having entered the iron room all doors were firmly secured. Lakhindar felt too fatigued ; he threw himself down on the bed and was soon asleep. Behula had partly heard of the conversation between Chand and her father. She looked around at the iron walls, iron roof, iron bolts and bars, so close and compact ; yet a vague fear overcast her mind, and her heart throbbed with anxiety. She sat herself down beside the bed and determined to keep watch through the night.

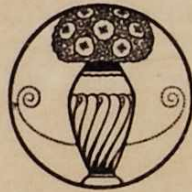
Here, on mount Sijua, Manasa sitting on her throne, sent word to all living snakes to be gathered at her court. From out the depths of the seas, from lakes and running streams, from dark dense jungles, from dark caves and crevices, the snakes poured on to the Sijua mount like a black hissing torrent. There were huge coiling serpents and thread-like vipers ; there were black shining ones and beautifully painted ones, some with horned hood, some with triple head and bloody eyes. Some showed their venomous teeth, some showed out forked tongues. Manasa cast a benign look around her and addressed the snakes thus, " My children, I urgently need your help. Whoever of you goes to the Santali hill to-night and takes the life of Lakhindar, my enemy the merchant's son, shall be worthily rewarded. "

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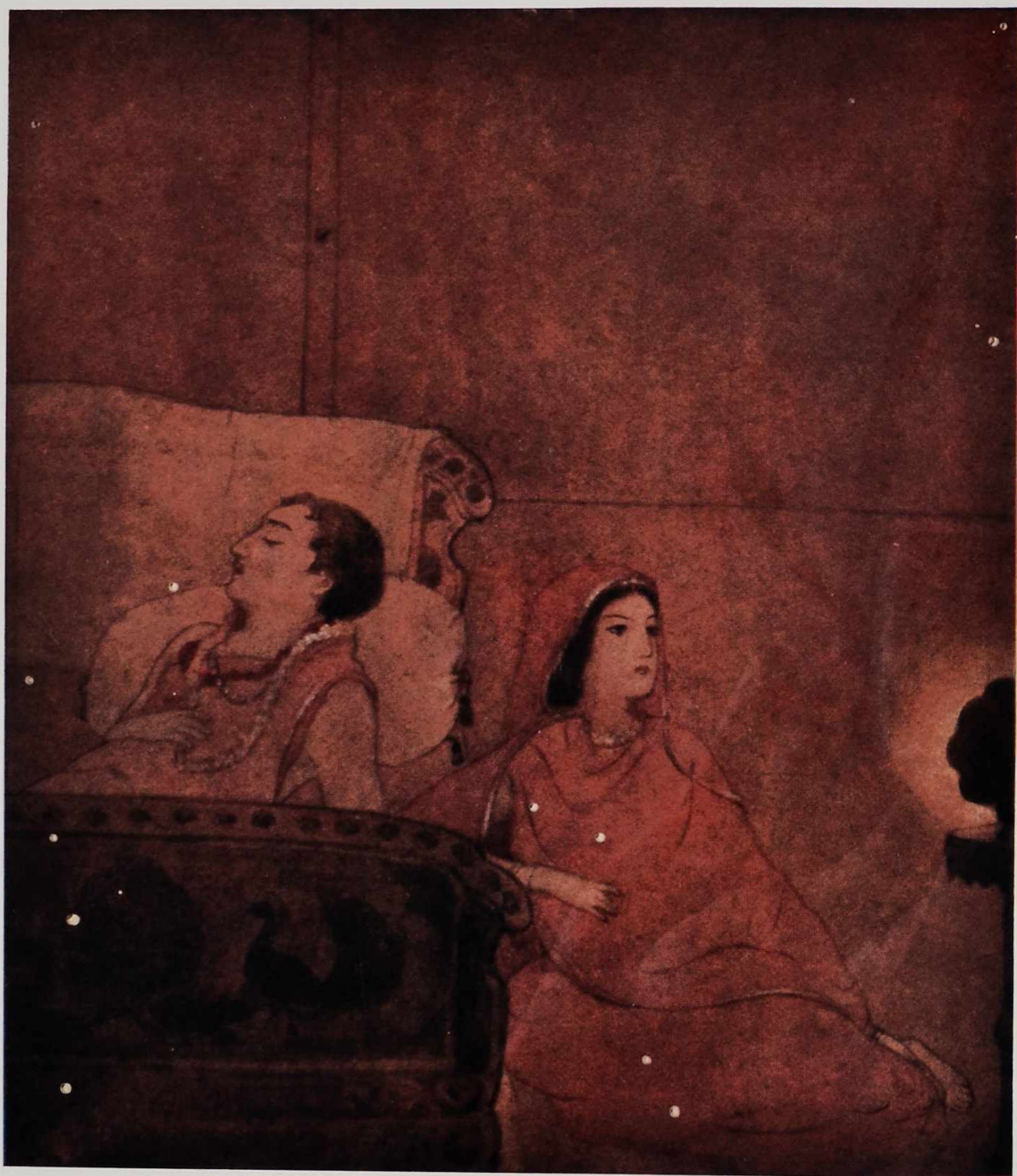
But the snakes hung down their heads. " Fie ! " said Manasa, " All silent ? O you despicable cowards ! I know you are brave only to sting harmless creatures but when you scent danger all your bravery flies away. I ask you once more. Is there not a single one amongst you who can take up this task ? "

Stung by the goddess' reproaches, snake 'Banka Raj' went up to the throne and made his obeisance to the queen.

Manasa, greeting him with flowers and betel leaves, despatched him at once.







THE WATCHING WIFE



## VI.

Lakhindar was still asleep, his countenance calm and serene in sweet repose. Behula was still sitting by the bed, her gaze resting on her husband's face. She was drinking in the dear loveliness of that face. This stranger, like a god, has descended on her maiden life and bound her to himself by the inseparable bonds of the marriage vows. Was this supreme bliss conferred on her only for a single day? Were they drawn together so closely, so warmly, only to be wrested asunder by the cruel hands of Death? Oh no, it could not be,—it must not be!

Behula was shaken from her reverie by an uneasy consciousness of some evil presence. She turned her head, and to her horror, found a snake peering through the wall. In an instant she leaped forward, golden pincers in hand, and held the snake captive.

So, Manasa truly meant to take her husband's life. Every vestige of hope left Behula's heart, as she dropped down beside the bed. Slowly the hours passed. Pale and motionless as a statue sat she, her sleepless eyes fixed on the hole in the

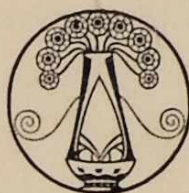




THE FATAL MOMENT

## BEHULĀ

was left with her dying husband. She threw herself on he bed beside him, heart to heart, face to face, lip to lip, she called him by all endearing and passionate names, she entreated him to take her with him, but he did not answer.







## VII.

With the first streaks of the grey dawn Chand ran up to the iron chamber and catching a sound of low moaning from within, rushed in. He found Behula sitting with Lakhindar in her arms, her head bending over his face. One look at that face told all.

Ah, for the piteous cries of the mother ! On hearing some mournful whispers from passers-by she had run out of her room, straight up to the hill, all other inmates of her house following her. By and by the whole town was gathered there.

And Chand ? He was to be found no-where. Friends and relatives made arrangements to perform their last duty to the dead. The funeral pyre was built of the best sandal wood. As the dead body was being carried to the pyre, Behula came forward and begged them not to burn the body. "For" she said, "According to custom, those that die of snake bite are not burnt but thrown into the river. I ask of you to float a raft on the river Gangur and place us two in it."

All agreed to her proposal of building a raft, but no-body took her last words seriously.

Then a beautiful raft was built of bamboos and plantain plants. When the raft was put on the water and Lakhindar's body placed on it, the wife stepped in, seated






BEHULA ON THE RAFT



## BEHULA



herself down and took up her husband's head on her lap. All around were dumb-founded at this unusual action. They could not believe their eyes. The raft slowly began to move down the river. Then the people came to their senses. "Come back, come back," they called, "Who ever has heard of such a thing? The call of death comes to all our hearths; we only give up the loved one and patiently bear our loneliness. Who ever has dreamt of accompanying the dead? Foolish child! come back." Behula answered, "Return home my friends. You cannot recall me. I am mated unto him for life, I am half of his being, and I will follow him even in death. I shall please the goddess with my prayers, that perchance she may take pity on me, and give my husband back to me."


By this time Sanaka has reached the river side; with outstretched arms she cried, "Come back to me, my darling! My Lakhai is gone. Do not you also, my Lakhai's bride, my sweet child, my bereaved heart's comfort, leave me thus alone." Behula raising her hand touched her fore-head, then slowly answered, "My mother, bless me, that I may give back your son to you. I am taking his mortal frame to the fountain-head of life in heaven. The gods shall guide me. If I succeed in saving his life, then shall we return together; if not, you shall see me no more." And the raft drifted far away. All persuasions,



BEHULA ON THE RAFT




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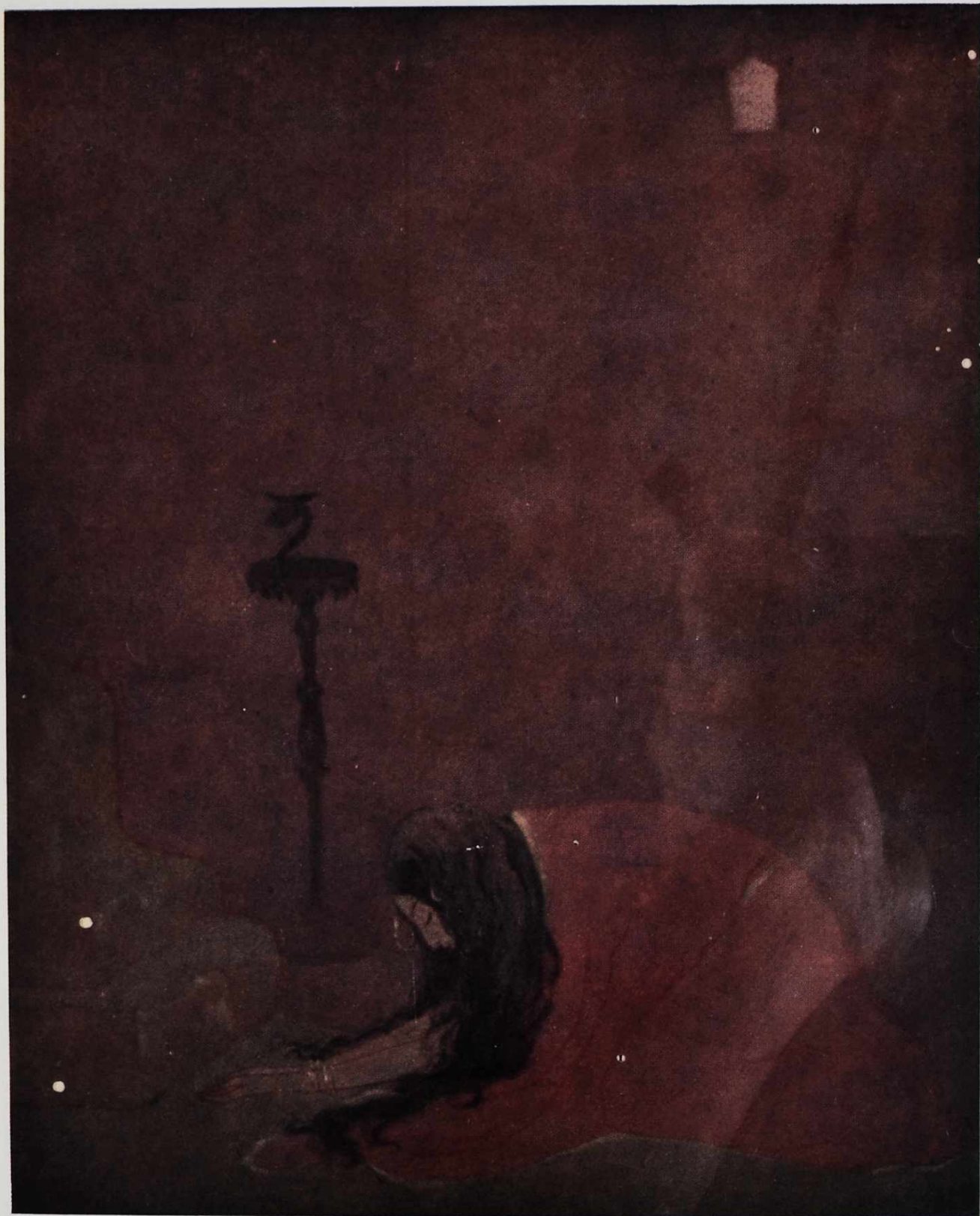
## BEHULA

all entreaties were to no purpose. Behula did not return. She sat pale and silent in her voiceless grief, her husband's head resting on her knees. The people of Champaknagar looked on at this wondrous sight, the living drifting away with the dead, a widow in wedding garments, the vermilion mark gleaming bright on her brow.

Further and further still the raft moved, till at last it was a mere speck against the horizon. Still they stared through eyes blinded with tears ; and when they could see it no more, they bowed down their heads in reverence to the ground that she had trod.


In Sai's home, since Behula's departure, things were going on the same, excepting that Amala was feeling a void in her heart. No news had come from Champaknagar since her Behula had said farewell to her home. She was thinking of sending a messenger there, to enquire after her daughter's welfare. Behula's brothers started for Champaknagar with presents for Chand and his family. On their way some passers-by told them to turn back ; somebody said, " Your unfortunate sister is coming this way." Bit by bit they gathered part of the truth. They ran to the riverside. Truly there was a raft sailing down and most truly, Behula was sitting there with the dead on her lap ! It broke their hearts to see their beloved sister in such a





PRAYING AT A DESERTED TEMPLE OF MANASĀ


## BEHULA



plight, and with imploring cries they begged her to return. She sadly turned her face towards them and shook her head. Then they tried to recall her in their mother's name, saying "Sister, you are attempting what is impossible, you are hoping to bring back to life one whom the gods have taken away. But are you giving any thought to the living who are pining for you? Are you thinking of poor mother, who is eagerly waiting for news from you? This message will most certainly kill her, and you will be the cause of her death".

Slowly, one by one, the scalding tears coursed down her pale cheeks, her whole body shook with heart-rending sobs. Yet she did not turn back.

On and on floated the raft down the river. Beautiful, young and all alone, Behula had to face many dangers. But the chaste self-possessed girl saved herself from all insulting intruders. Wherever she came across a temple of Manasa, she alighted to pray at the shrine, tears being her only offerings. Sometimes village ladies came to show her sympathy. She asked their blessings, that she might save her husband's life. With tearful eyes they blessed her, for their hearts ached with pity, as they beheld the remains she called her husband. One by one all the places of human habitation were left behind; still she drifted on. Gradually the river








DREADFUL VISIONS



SINKING



## BEHULA



Suddenly the scene changed. A bright vision was opened out before her—handsome men and pretty women enjoying themselves with song and laughter and wine. She could hear their gay voices; a soft warm breeze blew the sweet perfume of their dresses to her, contrasting vividly with the freezing coldness and the poisonous atmosphere around the decaying dead. She was wondering if she were nearing heaven, when one from amongst the party came forward with outstretched hands, saying: "O you wondrous creation! Why are you roaming thus companionless with the loathsome dead? Come out to us, come out of the hateful gloom, into warmth and light."

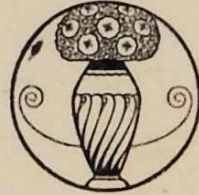
Behula started back and with a cry threw her arms around the beloved dead, burying her face on its death-cold bosom. With that the vision vanished.

Behula felt as if she was sinking and sinking under a fathomless deep. A chill, as of death, took hold of her. All life, all hope, seemed slipping away. She clung close to the cold bones of her husband for support and murmured helplessly as a child, "Mother, O mother of suffering humanity! Save thy daughter in distress. See my clothes are tattered and blown away, hide me in thy sheltering arms. See my hands are powerless to hold the dear one, uphold us in thy love. My

## BEHULA

heart quails under its heavy trials, brace it up mother with thy own merciful hand."

Such a prayer could not remain unanswered. The all devouring darkness thinned away. Behula found herself placed on the raft, newly built up by unseen hands. Her shredded clothes gained back their former glory. New life and new vigour pulsated through her being ; a strange gladness filled her heart, as of hopes fulfilled.







THE WASHER-WOMAN OF THE GODS




## IX.

At last day dawned on an unknown shore. On the stone steps of a bathing 'ghat' sat a woman, washing clothes. At every movement of her graceful arms the clothes turned white as snow, bright as sunlight. Beside her on the stone steps lay the lifeless form of a child. Behula's raft landed at the foot of the 'ghat'. The whole day long Behula watched the wonderful woman on the steps. When the sun set in the Western sky, the woman gathered her heap of clothes; then turning to the child she sprinkled a handful of water over his body, and to Behula's surprise, the boy sat up smiling. Then, taking him by the hand she vanished into the air.

The next morning again the woman appeared with her child and her bundle of clothes. Behula's heart gladdened at the sight of her, for she felt that this woman, who could bring back to life the lifeless, must know the hidden source of the spring of life. With a beating heart she waited the whole day. The child began to tug at the clothes and tease his mother. So his mother again made him lie down dead on the steps. In the evening as she was gathering her snow-white clothes, Behula ran up to her and fell at her feet. This woman was none but 'Neta' who washes the clothes of the gods. She was also the most intimate friend of Manasa. Being a heavenly being



## BEHULA



'Neta' already knew the poor girl's story. With a smiling face and twinkling eyes she raised her from the ground saying "Why, I have never seen such a foolish child. I have never seen a wife so hopelessly in love with her husband. Come, come, dry your tears." With joined palms Behula answered. "Not until you promise to save my husband's life." 'Neta' laughed and nodded, "There, there ; didn't I say you were foolish. Come with me to the court of Indra, our king. We shall see what can be done."

Words fail to express the splendour and magnificence of the celestial court. Behula had seen many bright moon-lit nights on earth, but here a light as of thousand moons dazzled the eyes. On a glittering throne, surrounded by all the lesser gods, sat Indra, with a crown of light on his head. His thousand eyes looked benignly as Behula entered the court.


Above Indra were enthroned Brahma—the creator, and Vishnu the sustainer. But high above all could be seen, absorbed in meditation, Shiva the supreme god-head, whose glorious presence shed a lustre all around, that dimmed even the splendour of the heavenly court. His radiant eyes showered blessings on Behula's head as they tenderly looked down upon her.



BEHULA AT THE COURT OF INDRA



## BEHULA



With bowed head Behula told her sad story before the immortals. The gods listened; then, instead of answering to her pleadings, they requested her to dance before them.

What a strange, what a cruel request! But Behula was prepared to go through anything to please the gods. So she complied.


Slowly, step by step, with a foot-fall lighter than the fall of the 'Sephali' flower, she began to dance. With exquisite grace she moved along, awakening wonder and admiration in the hearts of the beholders. It was superb, it was heavenly! It made heaven more worthy by its own crystal purity! The soul guided her every movement. Her dark sad eyes, her pleading hands, her yearning eloquent form, cried out the story of her love and loss.

Tears glistened in the eyes of the gods as they blessed the sorrowful girl saying, "This has been your last and greatest trial." The divine Shiva was deeply moved. He eagerly looked around for Manasa, but she was not to be found. At last Neta with great difficulty brought her out.

Then tearful Manasa related her grievances before all how she was deprived of the worship of mankind by Chand; how he, an insignificant mortal, dared to taunt her, a




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goddess; how she tried him at first with kindness and persuasions but failed. She said she had taken the lives of Chand's sons only to conquer him and if he agreed to worship her, she might revive the dead. Then Shiva, in his great kindness, spoke thus, "Revive this girl's husband, and I promise I take upon myself the task of making Chand worship you."

After that the goddess made no delay in giving back Lakhindar's life. Behula had already pleased her with prayers and adorations and now that Shiva promised to secure Chand's homage, Manasa was bountiful in her gifts. She volunteered a boon to Behula. The girl with a heart overflowing with unspeakable joy and gratitude asked for the lives of her husband's brothers. The boon was granted. Moreover Chand's seven vessels were recovered with all their wealth. Manasa was gracious in her gifts, but she made one condition; that if Chand refused to worship her then all these gifts together with the lives of the seven brothers would be taken back; she added moreover that until Chand worshipped her they were to remain outside the Town of Champaknagar.

The happy party was on the way home. Behula could not enjoy her bliss with a full heart. At times a fear gripped

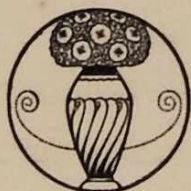




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her as she thought of Manasa's last words. Then she remembered Shiva's promise and trustfully relied on him.

When they reached Nichhni, Behula and Lakhindar alighted to pay a flying visit to Sai's house. Unbounded was the parents' delight to have their lost child back. They welcomed Lakhindar too with grateful joy. But the pilgrims could not tarry a day; they must go on to Champaknagar. How the young hearts beat with hope and despair intermixed as they neared the familiar land.




  
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Six months had elapsed since Behula and Lakhindar floated away on the river. Chand was performing the six-monthly 'Sradh' ceremony of his son and on that occasion the widowed daughters-in-law came to fetch water from the river. There they met a woman, a basket weaver, turning a beautiful fan in her hand. The fan took their fancy. They asked the woman the price of the fan. She answered, "The price of my fan is a 'Lakh' of rupees." "A 'Lakh' of rupees for a mere fan?" They exclaimed. "Yes," said the woman, "Not a single pice less than a 'Lakh'. Look for yourselves if the fan is not worth that," Then to their great astonishment they found the pictures of Chand's seven sons painted on it; and they asked, "Who are you? What is your family? Where did you get this fan?" She replied, "We know how to make such fans for we are weavers of the Dome caste and that is a very low caste. My husband, a Dome is at home; my name is Behula; my father is Sai, the Dome; my father-in-law is Chand the 'Dome'; so you see we are low-caste people."

On hearing this the seven widows almost ran home to repeat the tale to their mother-in-law. Sanaka speedily arrived at the river-side and as soon as she set eyes on the woman, she cried out, "Oh, you are she, you are Behula. You have



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just her looks, though disguised. Do, for pity's sake say that you are Bèhulā." Then she murmured to herself : "Or is it Behula re-born? Are our sins visited on them that they are thus low born?" At the thought she began to shed tears. Then Behula putting off her disguise addressed her mother-in-law, "Do not be sad, for I am Behula indeed. The gods have been gracious and have given back all your sons. But unless my father-in-law worships the goddess Manasa, we are again to return amongst the dead. We are forbidden entrance to the town, so I disguised myself to attract your attention."

Chand had already heard of the arrival of Lakhindar and Behula. Lest this happiness disturbs the tranquility of his spirit, he left his home and sped far away into the solitude of the woods to calm himself down by dwelling on the serenity of Shiva. When he was deep in meditation he thought he heard a voice that said, "False, false, this is false philosophy. Why blind your mind's eye with the falsehood? The calm of the divine spirit is not the assumed tranquility of a coward who flies from the scene of battle. True serenity lies in being serene amidst the strife, being unworldly amidst the worldly. Allow thyself to be entwined by the earthly bonds, yet be unattached. Let thy proud head bow down a little to secure the happiness of thy family; for my sake, who am thy god Shiva,



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pay homaġe to Manasa, and I shall ever bless thee." Chand did not know whether he was dreaming or awake. His whole existence seemed permeated with the divine presence. He bent low in reverence and said, "I promise to pay my homaġe to Manasa, if it be thy pleasure."

