

SHORT STORIES

DELIVERANCE

by

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‘Theft from the king’s treasury!’ The cry ran through the town. The thief must be found, or there will be trouble for the officer of the guards.

Vajrasen, a stranger from a foreign port, came to sell horses in the town, and, robbed by a band of robbers of all his earnings, was lying in a ruined temple outside the walls. They charged him with the theft, chained him, and led him through the streets to the prison.

Proud Shyama, of a perilous charm, sat in her balcony idly watching the passing crowd. Suddenly she shuddered, and cried to her attendant: ‘Alas, who is that godlike young man with a noble face, led in chains like a common thief? Ask the officer in my name to bring him in before me.’

The chief of the guards came with the prisoner, and said to Shyama: ‘Your favour is untimely, my lady; I must hasten to do the king’s bidding.’ Vajrasen quickly raised his head, and broke out: ‘What caprice is this of yours, woman, to bring me in from the street to mock me with your cruel curiosity?’

‘Mock you!’ cried Shyama; ‘I could gladly take your chains upon my limbs in exchange for my jewels.’

Then turning to the officer, she said: ‘Take all the money I have, and set him free.’

He bowed, and said: ‘It cannot be. A victim we must have to stay the king’s wrath.’

‘I ask only two days’ respite for the prisoner,’ urged Shyama. The officer smiled, and consented.

On the end of his second night in prison, Vajrasen said his prayers, and sat waiting for his last moment, when suddenly the door opened, and the woman appeared with a lamp in her hand, and at her signal the guard unchained the prisoner.

‘You have come to me with that lamp, merciful woman,’ said he, ‘like the dawn with her morning star after a night of delirious fever.’

‘Merciful indeed,’ Shyama cried, and broke out in wild laughter, till tears came with a burst, and she sobbed, and said: ‘There is no stone brick in this prison-tower harder than this woman’s heart.’ And clutching the prisoner’s hand she dragged him out of the gates.

On the Varuna's bank the sun rose. A boat was waiting at the landing. 'Come to the boat with me, stranger youth,' Shyama said. 'Only know that I have cut all bonds, and I drift in the same boat with you.'

Swiftly the boat glided on. Merrily sang the birds. 'Tell me, my love,' asked Vajrasen, 'what untold wealth did you spend to buy my freedom?'

'Hush, not now,' said Shyama.

Morning wore on to noon. Village women had gone back home with their clothes dripping from their bath, and pitchers filled with water. Marketing was over. The village path glared in the sun all lonely.

In the warm gusts of the noontide wind Shyama's veil dropped from her face. Vajrasen murmured in her ears: 'You freed me from a bond that was brief to bind me in a bond everlasting. Let me know how it was done.' The woman drew her veil over her face, and said: 'Not now, my beloved.'

The day waned, and it darkened. The breeze died away. The crescent moon glimmered feebly at the edge of the steel-black water.

Shyama sat in the dark, resting her head on the youth's shoulder. Her hair fell loose on his arms.

'What I did for you was hard, beloved,' she said in a faint whisper, 'but it is harder to tell you. I shall tell it in a few words. It was the love-sick boy Uttiya who took your place, charging himself with the theft, and making me a present of his life. My greatest sin has been committed for the love of you, my best beloved.'

While she spoke the crescent moon had set. The stillness of the forest was heavy with the sleep of countless birds.

Slowly the youth's arm slipped from the woman's waist. Silence round them became hard and cold as stone.

Suddenly the woman fell at his feet, and clung to his knee crying: 'Forgive me, my love. Leave it to my God to punish me for my sin.'

Snatching his feet away, Vajrasen hoarsely cried: 'That my life should be bought by the price of a sin! That every breath of mine should be accursed!'

He stood up, and leapt from the boat on the bank, and entered the forest. He walked on and on till the path closed and the dense trees, tangled with creepers, stopped him with fantastic gestures.

Tired, he sat on the ground. But who was it that followed him in silence, the long dark way, and stood at his back like a phantom?

‘Will you not leave me?’ shouted Vajrasen.

In a moment the woman fell upon him with an impetuous flood of caresses; with her tumbling hair and trailing robes, with her showering kisses and panting breath she covered him all over.

In a voice choked with pent-up tears, she said: ‘No, no; I shall never leave you. I have sinned for you. Strike me, if you will; kill me with your own hands.’

The still blackness of the forest shivered for a moment; a horror ran through the twisting roots of trees underground. A groan and a smothered breath rose through the night, and a body fell down upon the withered leaves.

The morning sun flashed on the far-away spire of the temple when Vajrasen came out of the woods. He wandered in the hot sun the whole day by the river on the sandy waste, and never rested for a moment.

In the evening he went back aimlessly to the boat. There on the bed lay an anklet. He clutched it, and pressed it to his heart till it bruised him. He fell prone upon the blue mantle left lying in a heap in the corner, hid his face in its folds, and from its silken touch and evasive fragrance struggled to absorb into his being the memory of a dear living body.

The night shook with a tense and tingling silence. The moon disappeared behind the trees. Vajrasen stood up, and stretched out his arms towards the woods, and called: ‘Come, my love, come.’

Suddenly a figure came out of the darkness, and stood on the brink of the water.

‘Come, love, come.’

‘I have come, my beloved. Your dear hands failed to kill me. It is my doom to live.’

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Shyama came, and stood before the youth. He looked at her face, he moved a step to take her in his arms—then thrust her away with both hands, and cried: 'Why, oh why did you come back?'

He shut his eyes, turning his face, and said: 'Go, go; leave me.'

For a minute the woman stood silent before she knelt at his feet and bowed low. Then she rose, and went up the river-bank, and vanished in the vague of the woods like a dream merging into sleep; and Vajrasen, with aching heart, sat silent in the boat.