

The Brahmin's Wisdom

Clark Ashton Smith

When the sun has sunk into her grave behind the hills, night after night a shriek of wild horror awakens and flees from the greedily gasping hands of the wind out of

the jungle toward the monastery.

Without lowering the voice, without raising it, without ever taking new breath, it yells, it shrieks, it screams through the jungle.

"It is the mask of Madhu , the Demon, the old, old, colossal mask, carved in stone, half swallowed by the swamps, the mask of Madhu , The Mad, shimmering white, staring with empty eyes out of the pools, out of the lonely, gurgling, rotting, ever murmuring pools," the monks rounded to each other.

Pestilence and plague he heralds -- Madhu , The Demon -- Madhu , The Mad!

And full of fear the Maharajah and his household fled to the North.

"When the Swamiji come, the holy pilgrims, for the feast of Bala Gopala and pass the monastery on their journey, we shall ask them what makes the mask of stone over there in the jungle scream and scream through the night," the hermits declared.

And on the eve of Bala Gopala the Swamiji came moving along the glittering road, silent, their heads drooping, their eyes cast down, dressed in dismal, black monk-frocks ... like wandering corpses.

Four men who had renounced the world

Four men beyond virtue and vice

Four men freed from all fetters

The Swami Vivekananda from Trevandrum .

The Swami Saradananda from Shambalva .

The Swami Abhedananda from Maiavatiti .

And a fourth one, an old, old man from the caste of the Brahmins, whose name no one knew anymore.

And they entered the monastery in a controlled state of mind.

But as the day faded, the winds began to blow, and they carried the stone-face's howling scream from the swamps of the jungle toward the monastery ... like an omen of doom.

And at the hour of the nightwatch the hermits, with a measured step, slowly walked round the venerable

Brahmin -- whose name no one knew anymore, and who was so old that Vishnu himself had forgotten the century of his birth -- walked round him three times from the left to the right and asked:

"What is it, O Venerable One, that causes Madhu, The Demon, to send that howling scream through the night, that never rising, never falling, never ending wild and breathless scream?"

And the old Brahmin spoke:

"Not, O hermits, is it that Madhu, whose face is carved in the rock, who screams through the night -- How, you hermits, could it be Madhu? And not is that plaintive cry silenced during the day -- How, you hermits, could that plaintive cry be silenced during the day?? When night falls, the winds awaken in the swamps and blow through the wilderness towards the cloister and carry the scream to your ears. But the scream rings from dusk to dawn, from dawn to dusk -- without a pause -- and it comes from the lips of a penitent sinner who is lacking in true knowledge. It is he, you hermits, who screams through the night."

Thus spoke the venerable one.

And the monks prayed and waited a whole year till the feast of Gala Gopala had come again; and again, with a measured step, they walked round the Venerable One, three times from the left to the right, and they beseeched him to go and calm that penitent man who still screamed and screamed through the jungle.

And silently the old, old Brahmin rose and made his way to the lonely, gurgling, rotting, ever murmuring waters.

* * *

Far away through the thickets shimmers white Madhu's mask -- half-submerged in the pond -- staring to the heavens with empty eyes.

Out of the brooding waters rise the swampy effluvia like a quivering steam and drizzle back into glittering drops from the stone-face. From the white and empty sockets they purl down and down and cut deep furrows across the smoothly carved face, dolorously changing its features throughout the milleniums.

Thus weeps Madhu , The Demon -- thus weeps Madhu , The Mad.

And the jungle glows, and the cold sweat of death stands on his forehead.

* * *

And as the old Brahmin approached an open space in the thicket, he beheld standing there a penitent sinner, screaming, screaming in horrible pain -- never stopping, never taking new breath, never lowering his voice.

Naked and emaciated he was. His vertebra looked like a braid, his thighs like withered sticks, his hollow black eyes like dried berries. His right arm was outstretched, and in his hand he tightly held a heavy iron ball covered with long and pointed spikes. And the more he contracted his fingers, the deeper the spikes cut into his flesh.

For seven days and seven nights the old Brahmin stood there, lost in thought, and as the penitent man did not stop screaming even for the fraction of a second, he walked round him three times from the left to the right and spoke:

"What, O penitent man, induces you to such a racket?"

Howling, the penitent man turned his eyes toward the iron ball he clenched and pressed in his fist.

And the old Brahmin whose name no one knew anymore, was seized with wonder. And his mind descended into the abyss of causes and effects, and he compared the things which would come to pass with the things which had come to pass. And he dwelled on the words and the meaning of the teachings of the Vedas, but he found not what he searched for. Deeper, even deeper, he plunged into meditation, and it seemed as if his heartbeat had stopped, as if the ebbing and flowing of his breath had left him forever.

The grass of the swamps turned brown and withered. Autumn came and called home the flowers. And still the old Brahmin stood there, absorbed in contemplation.

The thousand years old salamander crawled out of the swamp and whispered to his wife -- and also to his friend, the earwig:

"Oh, I know him well, old, old he is, the venerable Swami, and of infinite wisdom. In the womb of the earth I have seen his birth-certificate: He is the retired, honorable Brahmin extraordinary Tsakamuntibudibaba from North Carolina."

And having whispered these words to his wife -- and also to his friend, the earwig -- the thousand years old salamander devoured them both.

When winter came, the old, old Brahmin awoke, and turning to the penitent man, he spoke:

"Let go of this ball, Sir, just drop it!"

And the penitent man opened his hand; the iron ball rolled to the ground, and -- right away -- he felt better.

" Jipiii... !" he shouted, and jumping like a mountain-goat, he absented himself speedily.