

The Story of a Hiranman¹

By the Rev. Lal Behari Day

There was a fowler who had a wife. The fowler's wife said to her husband one day, "My dear, I'll tell you the reason why we are always in want. It is because you sell every bird you catch by your rods, whereas if we sometimes eat some of the birds you catch, we are sure to have better luck. I propose therefore that whatever bird or birds you bag to-day we do not sell, but dress and eat." The fowler agreed to his wife's proposal, and went out a-bird-catching. He went about from wood to wood with his limed rods, accompanied by his wife, but in vain. Somehow or other they did not succeed in catching any bird till near sundown. But just as they were returning homewards they caught a beautiful hiranman. The fowler's wife, taking the bird in her hand and feeling it all over, said, "What a small bird this is! how much meat can it have? There is no use in killing it." The hiranman said, "Mother, do not kill me, but take me to the king, and you will get a large sum of money by selling me. The fowler and his wife were greatly taken aback on hearing the bird speak, and they asked the bird what price they should set upon it. The hiranman answered, "Leave that to me; take me to the king and offer me for sale; and when the king asks my price, say, 'The bird will tell its own price,' and then I'll mention a large sum." The fowler accordingly went the next day to the king's palace, and offered the bird for sale. The king, delighted with the beauty of the bird, asked the fowler what he would take for it. The fowler said, "O great king, the bird will tell its own price." "What! can the bird speak?" asked the king. "Yes, my lord; be pleased to ask the bird its price," replied the fowler. The king, half in jest and half in seriousness, said, "Well, hiranman, what is your price?" The hiranman answered, "Please your majesty, my price is ten thousand rupees. Do not think that the price is too high. Count out the money for the fowler, for I'll be of the greatest service to your majesty." "What service can you be of to me, hiranman?" asked the king. "Your majesty will see that in due time," replied the hiranman. The king, surprised beyond measure at hearing the hiranman talk, and talk so sensibly, took the bird, and ordered his treasurer to tell down the sum of ten thousand rupees to the fowler.

The king had six queens, but he was so taken up with the bird that he almost forgot that they lived; at any rate, his days and nights were spent in the company, not of the queens, but of the bird. The hiranman not only replied intelligently to every question the king put, but it recited to him the names of the three hundred and thirty millions of the gods of the Hindu pantheon, the hearing of which is always regarded as an act of piety. The queens felt that they were neglected by the king, became jealous of the bird, and determined to kill it. It was long before they got an opportunity, as the bird was the king's inseparable companion. One day the king went out a-hunting, and he was to be away from the palace for two days. The six queens determined to avail themselves of the opportunity and put an end to the life of the bird. They said to one another, "Let us go and ask the bird which of us is the ugliest in his estimation, and she whom he pronounces the ugliest shall

¹ "*Hiranman* (from *harit*, green, and *mani*, a gem), the name of a beautiful species of parrot, a native of the Molucca Islands (*Psittacus sinensis*)."—CAREY'S *Dictionary of the Bengalee Language*, vol. ii. part iii. p. 1537.

strangle the bird.” Thus resolved, they all went into the room where the bird was; but before the queens could put any questions the bird so sweetly and so piously recited the names of the gods and goddesses, that the hearts of them all were melted into tenderness, and they came away without accomplishing their purpose. The following day, however, their evil genius returned, and they called themselves a thousand fools for having been diverted from their purpose. They therefore determined to steel their hearts against all pity, and to kill the bird without delay. They all went into the room, and said to the bird, “O hiranman, you are a very wise bird, we hear, and your judgments are all right; will you please tell us which of us is the handsomest and which the ugliest?” The bird, knowing the evil design of the queens, said to them, “How can I answer your questions remaining in this cage? In order to pronounce a correct judgment I must look minutely on every limb of you all, both in front and behind. If you wish to know my opinion you must set me free.” The women were at first afraid of setting the bird free lest it should fly away; but on second thoughts they set it free after shutting all the doors and windows of the room. The bird, on examining the room, saw that it had a water-passage through which it was possible to escape. When the question was repeated several times by the queens, the bird said, “The beauty of not one of you can be compared to the beauty of the little toe of the lady that lives beyond the seven oceans and the thirteen rivers.” The queens, on hearing their beauty spoken of in such slighting terms, became exceedingly furious, and rushed towards the bird to tear it in pieces; but before they could get at it, it escaped through the water-passage, and took shelter in a wood-cutter’s hut which was hard by.

The next day the king returned home from hunting, and not finding the hiranman on its perch became mad with grief. He asked the queens, and they told him that they knew nothing about it. The king wept day and night for the bird, as he loved it much. His ministers became afraid lest his reason should give way, for he used every hour of the day to weep, saying, “O my hiranman! O my hiranman! where art thou gone?” Proclamation was made by beat of drum throughout the kingdom to the effect that if any person could produce before the king his pet hiranman he would be rewarded with ten thousand rupees. The wood-cutter, rejoiced at the idea of becoming independent for life, produced the precious bird and obtained the reward. The king, on hearing from the parrot that the queens had attempted to kill it, became mad with rage. He ordered them to be driven away from the palace and put in a desert place without food. The king’s order was obeyed, and it was rumoured after a few days that the poor queens were all devoured by wild beasts.

After some time the king said to the parrot, “Hiranman, you said to the queens that the beauty of none of them could be compared to the beauty of even the little toe of the lady who lives on the other side of the seven oceans and thirteen rivers. Do you know of any means by which I can get at that lady?”

Hiranman. Of course I do. I can take your majesty to the door of the palace in which that lady of peerless beauty lives; and if your majesty will abide by my counsel, I will undertake to put that lady into your arms.

King. I will do whatever you tell me. What do you wish me to do?

Hiranman. What is required is a *pakshiraj*.² If you can procure a horse of that species, you can ride upon it, and in no time we shall cross the seven oceans and thirteen rivers, and stand at the door of the lady’s palace.

² Winged horse, literally, the *king of birds*.

King. I have, as you know, a large stud of horses; we can now go and see if there are any *pakshirajes* amongst them.

The king and the hiranman went to the royal stables and examined all the horses. The hiranman passed by all the fine-looking horses and those of high mettle, and alighted upon a wretched-looking lean pony, and said, "Here is the horse I want. It is a horse of the genuine *pakshiraj* breed, but it must be fed full six months with the finest grain before it can answer our purpose." The king accordingly put that pony in a stable by itself and himself saw every day that it was fed with the finest grain that could be got in the kingdom. The pony rapidly improved in appearance, and at the end of six months the hiranman pronounced it fit for service. The parrot then told the king to order the royal silversmith to make some *khais*³ of silver. A large quantity of silver *khai.r* was made in a short time. When about to start on their aerial journey the hiranman said to the king, "I have one request to make. Please whip the horse only once at starting. If you whip him more than once, we shall not be able to reach the palace, but stick mid-way. And when we return homewards after capturing the lady, you are also to whip the horse only once; if you whip we shall come only half the way and remain there." The king then got upon the *pakshiraj* with the hiranman and the silver *khais*, and gently whipped the animal once. The horse shot through the air with the speed of lightning, passed over many countries, kingdoms, and empires, crossed the oceans and thirteen rivers, and alighted in the evening at the gate of a beautiful palace.

Now, near the palace-gate there stood a lofty tree. The hiranman told the king to put the horse in the stable hard by, and then to climb into the tree and remain there concealed. The hiranman took the silver *khais*, and with its beak began dropping *khai* after *khai* from the foot of the tree, all through the corridors and passages, up to the door of the bedchamber of the lady of peerless beauty. After doing this, the hiranman perched upon the tree where the king was concealed, some hours after midnight, the maid-servant of the lady, who slept in the same room with her, wishing to come out, opened the door and noticed the silver *khais* lying there. She took up a few of them, and not knowing what they were, showed them to her lady. The lady, admiring the little silver bullets, and wondering how they could have got there, came out of her room and began picking them up. She saw a regular stream of them apparently issuing from near the door of her room, and proceeding she knew not how far. She went on picking up in a basket the bright, shining *khais* all through the corridors and passages, till she came to the foot of the tree. No sooner did the lady of peerless beauty come to the foot of the tree than the king, agreeably to instructions previously given to him by the hiranman, alighted from the tree and caught hold of the lady. In a moment she was put upon the horse along with himself. At that moment the hiranman sat upon the shoulder of the king, the king gently whipped the horse once, and they all were whirled through the air with the speed of lightning. The king, wishing to reach home soon with the precious prize, and forgetful of the instructions of the hiranman, whipped the horse again; on which the horse at once alighted on the outskirts of what seemed a dense forest. "What have you done, O king?" shouted out the hiranman. "Did I not tell you not to whip the horse more than once? You have whipped him twice, and we are done for. We may meet with our death here." But the thing was done, and it could not be helped. The *pakshiraj* became powerless; and the party could not proceed homewards. They dismounted; but they could not see anywhere

³ *Khai* is fried paddy.

the habitations of men. They ate some fruits and roots, and slept that night there upon the ground.

Next morning it so chanced that the king of that country came to that forest to hunt. As he was pursuing a stag, whom he had pierced with an arrow, he came across the king and the lady of peerless beauty. Struck with the matchless beauty of the lady, he wished to seize her. He whistled, and in a moment his attendants flocked around him. The lady was made a captive, and her lover, who had brought her from her house on the other side of the seven oceans and thirteen rivers, was not put to death, but his eyes were put out, and he was left alone in the forest—alone, and yet not alone, for the good hiranman was with him.

The lady of peerless beauty was taken into the king's palace, as well as the pony of her lover. The lady said to the king that he must not come near her for six months, in consequence of a vow which she had taken, and which would be completed in that period of time. She mentioned six months, as that period would be necessary for recruiting the constitution of the *pakshiraj*. As the lady professed to engage every day in religious ceremonies, in consequence of her vow, a separate house was assigned to her, where she took the *pakshiraj* and fed him with the choicest grain. But everything would be fruitless if the lady did not meet the hiranman. But how is she to get a sight of that bird? She adopted the following expedient. She ordered her servants to scatter on the roof of her house heaps of paddy, grain, and all sorts of pulse for the refreshment of birds. The consequence was, that thousands of the feathery race came to the roof to partake of the abundant feast. The lady was every day on the look out for her hiranman. The hiranman, meanwhile, was in great distress in the forest. He had to take care not only of himself, but of the now blinded king. He plucked some ripe fruits in the forest, and gave them to the king to eat, and he ate of them himself. This was the manner of hiranman's life. The other birds of the forest spoke thus to the parrot— "O hiranman, you have a miserable life of it in this forest. Why don't you come with us to an abundant feast provided for us by a pious lady, who scatters many maunds of pulse on the roof of her house for the benefit of our race? We go there early in the morning and return in the evening, eating our fill along with thousands of other birds." The hiranman resolved to accompany them next morning, shrewdly suspecting more in the lady's charity to birds than the other birds thought there was in it. The hiranman saw the lady, and had a long chat with her about the health of the blinded king, the means of curing his blindness, and about her escape. The plan adopted was as follows: The pony would be ready for aerial flight in a short time—for a great part of the six months had already elapsed; and the king's blindness could be cured if the hiranman could procure from the chicks of the bihangama and bihangami birds, who had their nest on the tree at the gate of the lady's palace beyond the seven oceans and thirteen rivers, a quantity of their ordure, fresh and hot, and apply it to the eyeballs of the blinded king. The following morning the hiranman started on his errand of mercy, remained at night on the tree at the gate of the palace beyond the seven oceans and thirteen rivers, and early the next morning waited below the nest of the birds with a leaf on his beak, into which dropped the ordure of the chicks. That moment the hiranman flew across the oceans and rivers, came to the forest, and applied the precious balm to the sightless sockets of the king. The king opened his eyes and saw. In a few days the *pakshiraj* was in proper trim. The lady escaped to the forest and took the king up; and the lady, king, and hiranman all reached the king's capital safe and sound. The king and the lady were united together

in wedlock. They lived many years together happily, and begat Sons and daughters; and the beautiful hiranman was always with them reciting the names of the three hundred and thirty millions of gods.

*Here my story endeth,
The Natiya-thorn withereth, etc.*