

Story of Massumah

By Thomas Simon Gueulette

Without ever yet going out of Hind, I entered into a young maid of Bisnaghar, and was born of parents, famous for the nobility of their ancestors, as well as the immensity of their riches. My name was Massumah, and my father, who had no more children than me, made it his whole care to find me out a deserving husband when I came to be seventeen years old. I was not in the least handsome; on the contrary, I was a little deformed; yet, for all that, one of the finest lords in all Bisnaghar, and as brave as ever were the Indian heroes of old, made his addresses to marry me. I had wit in abundance, and that made some amends for the defects of my person. We loved one another with a boundless flame which enjoyment did not extinguish. But we had scarce been married six months when there broke out a fierce war between the Kings of Bisnaghar and Narsing. Mansur (for that was my husband's name) went to the assistance of his prince; and, having the command of a principal part of the army, like a thunder-bolt of war, cut down everything that opposed his valour, and made victory entirely incline to our side; when, suffering himself to be carried away by too inconsiderate an ardour, he penetrated the enemy's army, and forced his way into the very midst of them. Everyone fled at the weight of his blows; but as he was not followed and supported by his own men, the enemy, being ashamed to see themselves so slaughtered by a single hero, rallied again, and surrounded him. It was to no purpose for them to shew deference to his bravery, or call to him to take quarter. Mansur answered their civility only with the strokes of his sabre; and, throwing himself like a lion among them, defended his life to the last gasp, till, pierced through and through with a thousand stabs, he died upon heaps of his slaughtered enemies, and made even those by whom he fell envy the fate of a death so heroic.

If my husband's death had happened at the beginning of the battle things had worn quite a different face; but fortune had already declared for the King of Bisnaghar, though it was at a dear rate enough, since he lost in my husband the support of his crown. After the victory our soldiers found the dead body with fury still painted in his eyes, and in this condition they brought him home. Nh, madam! my grief upon this occasion was so exquisite that I could neither utter the least complaint nor shed a single tear. My eyes were covered with a thick mourning veil, and I fell into a fit which continued so long that it was not without much difficulty I was at length recovered to a life which I detested. To rend my clothes, to scratch my face and breast, and tear my hair, were the least signs of my pungent sorrow; and still more to increase it, I had my husband's body embalmed with the most costly perfumes, laid him on a bed of state, and both day and night gave him incessant tokens of my sincere love, by watering his corpse with my tears. I had led this melancholy life for about eight days, when a certain good widow, whose room looked into my house, came running to my father's one morning, quite out of breath.—Sir, said she, your daughter has hitherto passed for a pattern of conjugal virtue; but come now and see her forfeit in one moment that character which we all thought she had justly acquired. She is actually now in the arms of a new lover, who is solacing her for the loss of the brave and illustrious Mansur.

My father, continued Fum-Hoam, was exceedingly startled at this news, so different from what my sentiments had all along appeared to be. At the woman's solicitation, he took his poniard, and coming along with her as far as my chamber door, was not a little surprised to find no other object of my love, than the body of my dear departed husband. It was that sweet mouth, which death had now deprived of all its lively colour, that I was kissing a thousand times, when this woman, without knowing the true motive of my tenderness, and trusting to an obscure view, ran to inform my father of the dishonour she imagined I was bringing upon my family. The old gentleman would, no doubt, have nearly destroyed her, had she not fled away and escaped his anger. He then related to me the occasion of his visit; and, taking pity on the sad condition I was in, thought the best way to remedy my grief would be to remove the object of it. For which reason, in pursuance of the king's order, he had a stately funeral pile erected before my house; and, notwithstanding my earnest entreaties to the contrary, was making preparation, according to the custom of the country, to reduce my husband's body to ashes. But seeing myself about to be deprived of the dear object of my love, whom death had so cruelly taken from me, I roared like a lion bereaved of its whelps; and as the fire was lighting, I went up to the terrace of my house, and throwing myself boldly through the flames had the comfort to die embracing my dear Mansur.

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I had no sooner left the body of this virtuous Hindu, than I passed successively into several others; wherein there happened nothing remarkable. I was a bee, a cricket, and a mouse.—Oh! how many secret matters, replied Gulchinraz, must you have seen under the last mentioned form!—It would be an endless work, madam, continued the mandarin, to pretend to recount to you all the knavish tricks I have seen and heard under that shape. How many virgins have I seen, who had the reputation of being such, give themselves up to sad disorders! How many widows married again in private, or living in incontinence! How many old men sunk into children by the extravagance of their conduct! How many rich men reduced to extreme misery by their dehaucheries! How many beggars made insolent by wealth! What a number of hypocrites could I have unmasked had I had then the use of speech! How many kadis have I seen selling justice! And how many bonzes, darwayshes, and kalandars, have I known to be mere profligates under the outward shew of mortification and piety! For, in short, madam, there was neither chamber nor closet, court of justice nor council-room, nor any other apartment so closely shut, that I could not easily get into it; and nothing, you know, escapes the eye of him who sees all things, and has no obstruction to hinder his sight. But, after having lived seven years in the skin of this little beast, and gone through great part of Persia and the Indies, I died at last, as most part of my species do, being caught and strangled by a cat.