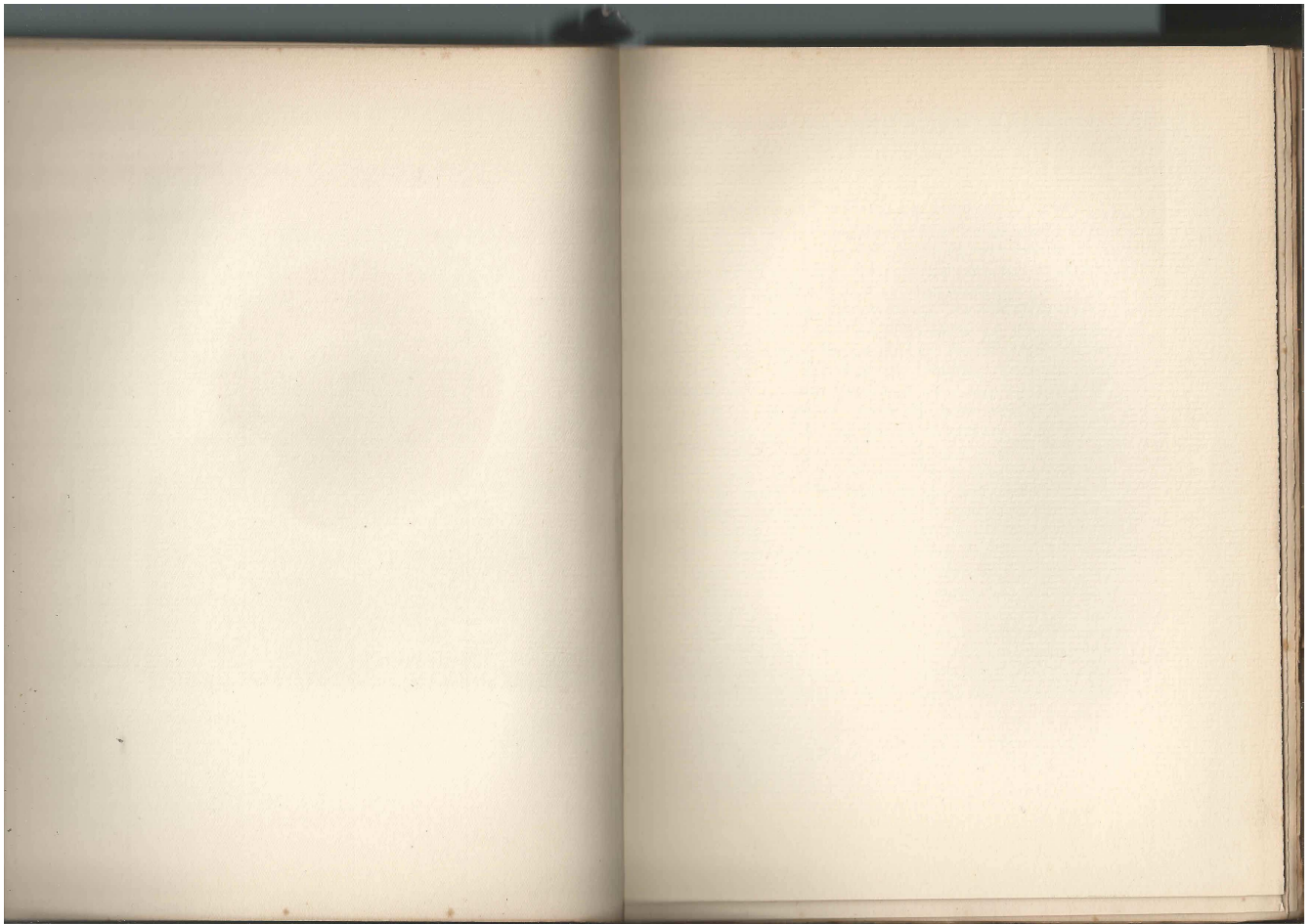


THE KING AND THE THREE  
ASCETICS



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## THE KING AND THE THREE ASCETICS

BRIGHTNESS, honour, power, splendour of countenance and Vedic glory—these things verily, were possessed in former times by Atidhanvan Sanaka, king of the Videhas, in such measure that there was none like him to be found in the world, and even the gods were astonished. On his body were the two and thirty marks of perfect birth; and the birthmarks of the Chakravartin,—the wheel, the orb and the discus of unbounded sovereignty. To speak of the tributary monarchs that bowed down to him, would be, as it were, to limit the infinity of his power: from the seven continents they came, bearing wealth to his treasure-house. His armies went forth even to Patala; and such was the fame of his beneficence, they achieved victory without the shedding of blood. He conquered the resplendent worlds. ‘Whatever tribute we may pay to him,’ said the kings of the earth, ‘it is upon us that the balance of benefit falls.’ Among the countless crores of his slaves and subjects there was none to hanker after the lightening of his yoke; none to complain, or desire any other lord but he.

All of which pertained to his rank as Chakravartin; but heaven knows he was more and greater than a Chakravartin possessing world-sovereignty. Shvetaketu-Dalbhya overheard seven flamingoes discoursing as they flew over the



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palace in the night. 'Short-sighted brothers,' said the leader of them, 'fly not too near, lest the splendour of the good deeds of His Majesty scorch your wings.' Ushasti Shalavatya listened while the bull of the herd was conversing with the cows. 'As for Atidhanvan Sanaka,' said the bull, 'he, verily, is to be named with Raikva with the Car.'—'How was it with that Raikva?' said the cows; 'and how is it with the King of the Videhas?'—'As in a game of dice,' said the bull, 'all the lower casts belong to him who conquers with the Krita cast, so all good deeds performed by other men belonged of old to Raikva, and belong now to the King.' Prasnayana Jaivali heard the altar-flame soliloquizing. 'Atidhanvan Sanaka' said the flame 'knows that Golden Person who is seen within the sun, with golden beard and golden hair, whose eyes are like blue lotuses, and who is golden altogether to the tips of his nails. Atidhanvan Sanaka, verily, knows the Golden Person, the Lonely Bird. . . .'

*And he who knows this, says the Upanishad, knows that Brahman . . .*

Certainly, then, the king knew Brahman. Though he was a warrior of the Kshatriya tribe, many that were Brahmins came to him to learn wisdom. They put questions to him, and he answered their questions: revealing to them the Self of the self, making known to them the wanderings of the Lonely Bird. That which is the Breath of the breath, the Eye of the eye, the Ear of the ear, the Dwarf in the heart, he revealed it to them. Then he put

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questions to them, and they were dumb. 'Master,' said those proud ones, 'teach us!'

Kingly indeed was this man: constantly in action; constantly shining forth surrounded with the pomp and magnificence of his sovereignty; no one ever beheld him at rest. As with chanting of Vedic hymns and with ceremonial rites, the priests conduct the sacrifice: or as the sun passes through heaven, adoring that Brahman: so Atidhanvan Sanaka conducted the affairs of the world. 'Whatsoever the sun or the moon sees; or the light or the darkness hears; whatsoever the heart conceives, or the hand performs, or the tongue whispers: he knoweth it, he knoweth it!' said the people. Where one man feared him, millions loved him; and so great was the influence of his will and benevolence that righteousness was maintained everywhere, and evil put down firmly in every quarter of the world.

Now in those days there dwelt three ascetics in the Forest of Grantha-Nagari: Vaka Kakshaseni, Satyakama Kapeya, and Gautama Kaushitakeya, or as he was called, Pautraya Glava. They were assiduous in the quest of wisdom, and had spent three hundred years in meditation: performing many penances, governing the inbreathing and the outbreathing, and silently repeating the udgitha. They had attained to many powers; yet there was that, verily, to which they had not attained.

At the end of a hundred years Vaka Kakshaseni said:

'Sir, Satyakama Kapeya, knowest thou that Brahman?'



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'I know it not,' said he.

At the end of another hundred years Satyakama Kapeya said:

'Sir, Gautama Kaushitakeya, or as thou art called, Pautraya Glava, knowest thou that Brahman?'

'I know it not,' said he.

After another hundred years he continued:

'There is that Atidhanvan Sanaka, king of the Videhas: it is said that he knows. Is it your opinion that we should go to him and request him to teach us?'

'We are Brahmins, and he is a Kshattriya,' said they. 'Were we to seek as our teacher one unworthy to teach us, our heads might fall off.'

'Our heads might fall off, truly,' said he.

Then said Satyakama Kapeya: 'Sir, Vaka Kakshaseni, what is thy opinion?'

'That one of us should go to the king's palace, and make inquiry as to the knowledge he hath, and how he attained to it,' said he. And they said: 'Sir, Satyakama Kapeya, do thou go.'

Satyakama Kapeya took the guise of a sweeper, and went into the city, and mingled with the crowd that gathered in the morning when Atidhanvan Sanaka came into the Hall of Justice. He saw the king ascend the throne, like the splendour of the sun at dawn into a sky of gold and scarlet, of clear saffron and refined vermilion. He listened while the judgments were being given, and understood that no lie might be maintained against the king's per-

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spicacity of vision. He saw that whatsoever deed was done, or thought thought, or word spoken, it was known to Atidhanvan Sanaka, and could not be concealed from him. He abided there from dawn until noon, marvelling more and more. The motions of the king's hands, it seemed to him, were as the motions of Karma to administer rewards and punishments; the glances of the king's eyes seemed to him to penetrate compassionately into all the corners of the earth. At the end of the morning the people prostrated themselves and said, 'Justice hath been done, even to the ultimate particular'; and Satyakama Kapeya answered, 'Yea, justice hath been done.' And he was not a man to be impressed by outward shows. Then he sat in meditation until sunset, by the roadside a mile beyond the city gates, considering what he had seen and learned; and at the end of it was in grave doubt whether, if they went to the King of the Videhas to learn wisdom, their heads might not fall off. 'For' said he 'were I to return to the forest and be questioned by my companions, those ascetics would say, "There is nothing in this concerning knowledge of that Brahman." Further inquiry is needed.'

He shaped his mind into a question, and with it pervaded space.

Three crows flew by overhead; and the midmost of them looked down and cried out to him: 'Inquisitive brother, come, and I will show thee!' So he assumed the form of a crow, and rose in the air, and flew with them over the walls and into the city, and over the palace enclosure



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in the midst of the city; and over a garden in the midst of the enclosure; and over a lake in the midst of the garden till the whole world below him was water, and there was no seeing the darkness of the shores, nor the twinkle of a light on any hand. And there a crag rose up out of the water to heights beyond where Vayu may wander in the air; and on the crag the ruins of a tower, roofless, desolate, immense; and the top of it beyond where Soma shone like a pale scimitar in the indigo mystery of heaven. Yet to the top of it, soaring and circling and labouring, Satyakama Kapeya and the other crows flew; and he and the bird that had spoken to him lit down on the wall where it had crumbled lowest; but the other two flew on as it were laughing into the dark solitude of night. Then the crow said: 'Hast thou eyes to see?'

'Eyes I have, sir,' said Satyakama Kapeya; 'such as they are.'

'Behold what passeth here, then; with such vision as thou hast,' said the crow; 'and understand that it is thus with him nightly.'

He looked down into the tower, into a depth world-deep below him lit by a lurid glare and flamy confusion at the bottom, so that it was long and hard looking before he could see what befell there. Then the crow said: '*The gates of hell are three*, saith the Upanishad.' And Satyakama Kapeya began to see . . . for he had gained many powers in the forest hermitage, and among them an extraordinary power of vision. Below was a man stripped naked, and

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armed with sword and shield; and he stood in a space between three hell-mouth caverns whence poured flame and stench and fury, and demons strained and crowded to emerge; but he fought them back. Then the crow said: 'Thou seest him, how he sealeth the gates of hell against their egress'; and with that, flew wing-flapping and as it were laughing into the night. But Satyakama Kapeya intently watched the man who fought. Often the talons of the demons rent him; so that he dripped sweat and blood; the muscles writhed upon his body where they clutched and dragged and tore him; his brow with agony was crossed and twisted like a tree's roots; and he strove and writhed and bled and was silent. But no demon might pass him, to rise into the tower, and thence into the world of men.

Then the sun rose far off over the lonely waters; and through some crevice in the broken wall below, shone in upon the space where the combat was; and silence fell there suddenly; and all that had issued from the three hell-mouths sank back into them; and for stench arose an odour of incense-gums and sandalwood; and the man that had been fighting stood up, and the sunray fell like a golden garment upon his body. Then Satyakama Kapeya saw the wounds upon him glow mysteriously radiant; and knew them for the two-and-thirty marks of perfect birth, and the signs of the Chakravartin—the wheel, the orb and the discus of world-sovereignty. 'Atidhanvan Sanaka it is,' said he. 'It is the King of the Videhas, with great powers.'



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He flew forth and came in his own guise to his companions in the forest, and told them all he had seen; and for a year they were silent, meditating on it. Then Gautama Kaushitakeya shook his head with anxiety. 'There is nothing in this concerning knowledge of Brahman,' said he. 'Our heads might fall off, truly.' Then he said: 'Sir, Satyakama Kapeya, what is thy opinion?'

'That another of us should go and make inquiry,' said he. 'Sir, Vaka Kakshaseni, do thou go.'

Vaka Kakshaseni took the guise of a Kshattriya dispensing gifts; and rode into the city at noon; and came in the king's Hall of Audience, where the tributary princes were in waiting. There were seven-score sovereign rulers present there: haughty, wise and puissant leaders; gifted with beauty of face and form; very resplendently apparelled. It seemed to be a garden of a myriad blossoms because of the silks they were wearing, and the rubies, the silver and sapphires, the pearls and gold. Then came in Atidhanvan Sanaka, and took his place upon the throne; and because of his Vedic splendour and glory of countenance, the best of them seemed like the flame of a wretched lamp, fed with rancid oil, and the wick of it untrimmed, and flaunted at midday in the face of the sun.

Very carefully Vaka Kakshaseni watched him; and saw that the motions of his hands were the upholding of distant empires, and the maintaining of peace; that the glances of his eyes were enlightenment for far and barbarous

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peoples; that the words of his mouth brought loving-kindness where there had been envy, ambition and strife. He marvelled until nightfall at what he saw; and ceased not to marvel when the king went forth; and he was not one to be impressed lightly. Then he went out, and walked in the palace garden in the dusk; and considered what he had seen and heard. 'There is nothing in it concerning knowledge of Brahman,' said he. He sent out his mind in inquiry into the four directions of space. . . .

Three moths flew by him through the drooping odours of the evening: through the jasmine-hearted evening: through the gloom and dimness rich with magnolia blooms. . . . Said the midmost of the moths: 'Who seeks light, let him follow!' and Vaka Kakshaseni assumed moth form, and rose in the air and went with them. 'Ah,' said he; 'here is the lake; but it is not as the venerable Satyakama described it.' For all round about it he could see the low dark line of the shore, and the lights of the palace twinkling like large stars thick strewn in a galaxy, and the reflections of the lights reeling and glittering on the ghostly blueness of the water. 'And here is the tower,' said he; 'but it is not as the wise ascetic said.' For it stood on a low island grown about with pleasant trees; and rose above the tree-tops well roofed and slender pilared; and a light from within shone gently bright through the pearlish opacity of its topmost storey; and towards that light the moths flew. And two of them hovered about it at random with a droning fluster of wings; but the one that



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had spoken led him to a crevice through which he might peer. 'Hast thou eyes to see?' said the moth.—'Sir, I have eyes, such as they are,' said he.—'Behold then'; said the moth, 'and know that it is thus with Atidhanvan Sanaka nightly at all times.'

So Vaka Kakshaseni looked through, and down into the tower. At the bottom—but it was not far below—were the three hell-mouths; but nought emerged from them. He could see within them the demons that struggled to emerge, and the flame suppressed and impotent, and the gods of hell writhing and defeated. And what defeated them he saw clearly to be the light that filled the place; and whence it shone he saw clearly too. Upon a cloud that floated in the air midway between himself and the hell-mouths, seated upon a cloth and kusa grass was a naked ascetic in meditation; the light shone from his brow. 'Thus by meditation he defeateth them,' said the moth; 'thus, and not otherwise, O inquisitive Brother, he sealeth up the hell-mouths against the egress of the fiends.'

'Sir,' said Vaka Kakshaseni, 'tellest thou me the truth of the truth?'

'I tell thee what I know,' said the moth, and flew away; and the fluster and whirr of his wings was like dim laughter in the quiet of the night. But at daybreak a sunray entering illuminated the body of the sage that meditated, and Vaka Kakshaseni beheld thereon the two and thirty marks of perfect birth, and the marks of the Chakravartin enjoying world-sovereignty.

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He came into the forest, and told his companions what he had seen and heard; and they meditated on it in silence for three years. Then Satyakama Kapeya shook his head gravely.

'Our heads might fall off if we sought wisdom from the king of the Videhas,' he said. 'There is nothing in this concerning knowledge of Brahman.' Then he said: 'Sir, Vaka Kakshaseni, what is thy opinion?'

'That again inquiry should be made,' said he. 'Sir, Gautama Kaushitakeya, do thou go.'

In the morning Pautraya Glava (as he was called) assumed the guise of a hotri priest and went into the city; and whatsoever the others had seen or heard before nightfall, he saw and heard as much and more; and marvelled as much as they did. 'But,' said he, 'there is nothing in it concerning knowledge of That.' So he pondered, when evening had come, in the garden; putting forth his mind shaped into inquiry, through all the directions of space. Then he heard a nightingale singing among the cypress trees; and what it sang was this: 'Uncertain brother, come, and thou shalt learn.' So he took the form of a nightingale and flew with the other, whither celestial music, that now filled all the moonlit garden, led or called. Over the dark waters of a lakelet, through whose gloom a gleam of opal and sly silver rippled; and the blue lotuses nodded there mysteriously, keeping time to the murmur of celestial music; and up and down through the bloom-rich darkness wandering stars floated and waned. A bowshot from the



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shore there was a gardened islet; and about it the music fainted and surged; on the islet was a tower of ivory chased and fretted. 'Behold him' said the nightingale 'if thou hast the eyes for it; thus spendeth he the nights ever.'

And Pautraya Glava looked in, and saw a feast going forward: Indra and Agni, Vayu, Prajapati, seated on thrones like blue lotuses; and with them sat the king of the Videhas throned as their equal; and all above them from thence to the moon were choirs of the Gandharvas, the heavenly musicians, singing. 'Thus obtaineth he his wisdom,' said the nightingale. 'Out of the converse of the Gods, and the music of the Gandharvas, he obtaineth it.'

Gautama Kaushitakeya took the news to his companions in the forest. 'Sirs, what is your opinion?' said he.

For three days and three nights they pondered it, and then made answer: 'Sir, there has been discrepancy in the reports, leading to diversity of opinion. It would be well we should all go together, and make inquiry, and prosecute research.'

So that evening they assumed falcon form; and flew to the palace, and to the lake in the garden, and to the tower on the island; and lighted down wing to wing, and watched all night; and returned to the forest in the morning.

Satyakama Kapeya said: 'Sirs, venerable ascetics; you have seen that you were mistaken; that I reported it

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correctly; with your own eyes you have seen the King of the Videhas fight against the demons at the mouth of hell, and the blood and sweat pouring from his body.'

Vaka Kakshaseni said: 'Sir, Satyakama Kapeya, how is this? You yourself have seen that my report was indeed correct: you have seen Atidhanvan Sanaka seated upon a yogi's seat of cloth and kusa grass in meditation; and how by his meditation, and not otherwise, he sealed the mouth of hell.'

Gautama Kaushitakeya said: 'Sirs, venerable ascetics, how is this? You yourselves have seen the King feast, as I reported, with Indra and Prajapati and the other Gods; you have heard those deities discourse wisdom to him, and the troops of the singing Gandharvas of heaven fill the regions of space with celestial music for his pleasure . . .'

Then they all three looked at each other with astonishment and startled surmise. Then they all three rose up suddenly. 'Come!' said they; 'unless we go quickly, our heads may fall off.'

They came to Atidhanvan Sanaka bearing fuel in their hands. 'Sir,' they said, 'teach us That Brahman!'

'Be it so,' said he. 'It would have been better had ye come before I set the winged things to reason with ye. Abide in the palace seven years as fuel-bearers; then come to me again.'