The Sacred Marriage

Miss Gertrude M. Godden

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The Málavikāgnimitra, translated by C. H. Tawney, presented by Miss Godden.

Two notes on "Ashey Pelt," and "The Three Golden Balls" (*infra*, p. 305), communicated by Mrs. Damant, of Cowes, were read.

Mr. C. J. Billson read a paper on "Finnish Folk Songs," and a discussion followed, in which the President, Mr. Andrew Lang, Mr. Nutt, Sir John Evans, Mr. Jacobs, Mr. Kirby, The Rev. A. Löwy, Dr. Gaster, and Mr. Gomme took part.

The President also read a paper by Miss Godden, entitled "The Sacred Marriage" (*infra*), upon which the Rev. A. Löwy, Dr. Gaster, and Mr. Nutt offered some observations.

THE SACRED MARRIAGE.

BY MISS GERTRUDE M. GODDEN.

I VENTURED to call attention, in a recent number of *Folk-Lore* (vol. iv. p. 142), to a group of legends and customs which appeared to be the common property of early Greeks and modern peasants; to be widely diffused; and to stand in connection with rites and observances touching very closely the life of primitive peoples.

Since then further evidence has reached me of interest sufficient to bear a brief summary and comment.

It may be well to recall the old Greek myth and ritual of the Dædala, as a type of the group in question. Plutarch¹ tells how Zeus and Hera quarrelled, and Zeus wandered, till taught to deceive her by simulating another marriage. "He adorned an oak-tree like a bride, shaped it, and called it Dædala. Then they sang the bridal hymn and brought lustral water." Hera discovered the trick, was reconciled

¹ Plutarch, *Fragments*, ix. 6.

with tears and laughter to Zeus, and herself led the bridal procession. The image of Dædala she burnt.

So much for the Greek legend. Pausanias and Plutarch¹ describe the rites of the Dædala festivals. Images were made from oracularly chosen oak-trees, growing in a special oak coppice, and were called Dædala. At the festivals of the Lesser Dædala, celebrated every few years, these images were dressed as a bride, put on a bullock-cart with a bridesmaid placed beside, and seemingly drawn to the banks of the River Asôpos and back to the town, attended by a piping and dancing crowd. They were preserved till the Great Dædala, held once in sixty years. At the celebration of this festival the Lesser Dædala images were taken in procession to the Asôpos, and thence to the summit of Mount Cithærôn. Here they were burnt, together with victims and sacrifices, and the great altar prepared for them.²

The "false bride" of Greek legend was in Greek festival rite an oak-tree, chosen by oracle out of a special grove, shaped, adorned as a bride, and then drawn in bridal procession, a bridesmaid placed beside it. Bearing this oak-bride in mind, let us turn to a Sanscrit play, written probably about a century after the date of Pausanias.

The *Mālavikāgnimitra*³ is a brilliant picture of the life of a native court, apparently before the Mahomedan invasion, when Brahmanism and Buddhism were both powerful religions in India. I must not linger here over the literary and artistic fascination of this antique drama. The scent and

¹ Pausanias, ix. 3; Plutarch ap Eusebius, *Præpar. Evang.*, iii. 1, *sq.* See *Golden Bough*, J. G. Frazer, vol. i. p. 102.

² The legend of a false bride temporarily supplanting a true one has already been shown to be common in European folklore. (*Folk-Lore*, *loc. cit.*) It may prove to belong to the cycle of primitive ideas and usages which centre round the great seasons of the primitive year. But it is not this side of the subject that I wish to consider here.

³ *The Mālavikāgnimitra*, translated by C. H. Tawney, M.A., 2nd edition, Calcutta, 1891.

warmth of the East is in its pages, and one stands in the stately presence of a court which moves to the rhythm of the *Arabian Nights*. The great king Agnimitra is fascinated by a beautiful maiden in the queen's service, Málaviká. By the aid of a Brahman, the king's favourite and friend, he sees her dance. The device by which this is accomplished, the opposition of the queen, and the appearance of the maiden and her teacher, occupy Acts I. and II. The third Act opens by a conversation with "the keeper of the pleasure-garden," who departs to give the queen information about a golden açoka-tree, "which is delaying to burst into blossom because it waits to be touched by the foot of a beautiful woman."¹ The queen commands Málaviká, saying, "My feet hurt me terribly as I have had a fall from a swing . . . do thou therefore perform the ceremony of fertilising the golden açoka-tree; if in five nights from this time it displays flowers I will bestow on thee a boon which will gratify thy desires." The time of the action of this part of the play is definitely marked as the spring. Málaviká comes to the tree, and a friend paints her feet with lac; then she, "having made an ear ornament of açoka buds, in a playful manner puts forth her foot to strike the tree."² Meanwhile the king arrives with a friend and watches in secret, saying, "Observe, my friend! Having taken from the açoka-tree a shoot for her ear, she presents to it her foot; the two have exchanged similar gifts." Mr. Tawney notes on the word similar, "both Málaviká's foot and the shoot of the açoka being red."³ The king speaks of the striking of the tree as "the ceremony of the *dohada*." In Act IV. the queen has thrown Málaviká, fettered, into "the infernal regions," with orders that she is not to be released without warrant of the queen's seal-ring. By a ruse, this

¹ Mr. Tawney notes: "This fancy is perpetually recurring in Sanscrit poetry," p. 35, note 3.

² *Ibid.* Stage Direction, p. 49.

³ P. 49, note 1.

ring, "with a snake on the stone," is obtained, and the maiden is set free. At the end of the act a voice exclaims behind the scenes, "Wonderful! Wonderful! Before the five nights have elapsed from the time of the ceremony the golden açoka is covered all over with buds." Act V. opens with a speech of the "female keeper of the garden," "I have erected a verandah covered with a roof round the golden açoka-tree." An alternative reading is here noted, meaning an altar or ground prepared for sacrificial ceremonies. Later in the act the queen sends to inform the king "that I desire to behold in his company the splendour of the flowering of the açoka-tree;" or, by another reading, to honour the açoka-tree. The final movement of the play is gathered round the golden tree. Beneath it Málaviká, in wedding attire, and the queen are discovered. The king meets them. As one reads the scene, with the setting of the pleasure grove, and the retinue of courtiers, officers of state, and attendants of the harems, it is impossible not to praise the magnificent staging of this Sanscrit play. Two strange maidens are introduced who discover in Málaviká a princess in disguise, sent to form one of the king's harem, captured by a hostile king on her way, and after various adventures admitted to the queen's service as a slave. A lady of the court who knew her, on being reproved for not disclosing her noble birth, says, "This lady was told by a certain infallible divine person who had assumed mortal form that she would have to endure for one year only the position of a slave, and would then obtain a husband of equal rank." After further plot developments, the queen, having previously obtained the consent of her consort in the harem, the queen Iravátí, and evidently in pursuance of her promise made when commanding Málaviká to perform the Dohada ceremony, presents the maiden as a bride to the king, investing her with a veil, and according her the title of queen.

In this brief abstract the literary power of the play is of

course entirely put aside. Much of the plot has been omitted, and I have merely attempted to detach the scientific interest.

Mr. Tawney writes to me that in this ceremony of touching the açoka (or mango), tree "Málaviká is clearly adorned as a bride," and he kindly allows me to express his belief that she was originally married to an açoka-tree.

The Greek myth gives us an oak-bride with whom Zeus celebrated a marriage ceremony. The Sanscrit play seems to give us a tree-bridegroom to whom the heroine of the story is wedded.

Is there any organic connection in these counterparts, or are they merely the similar fancies of ancient story-tellers? I think such a connection does probably exist, and may be seen in living practice in the tree-marriages of the wild tribes of Northern India. The following examples of this primitive rite are taken from Mr. Risley's work on *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*¹ issued by the Bengal Government, and prepared with exhaustive care and labour.

Among the Baghdis, Mr. Risley says, the bridegroom goes through a mock marriage to a mahwá-tree. He embraces the tree and daubs it with vermilion, his right wrist is bound to it with a thread, and a bunch of the leaves is attached by the thread to his wrist.²

Among the Kurmis, "Early on the wedding morning the betrothed pair, each in their own homes, are separately married to trees, the bride to a mahwá (*Bassia latifolia*), and the bridegroom to a mango (*Mangifera Indica*). This curious rite merits a full description. Wearing on the right wrist a bracelet of the leaves of the mahwá, the bride walks round the tree seven times, and then sits on her mother's lap on the eastern platform built close to the trunk. While sitting in this position her right hand and right ear are tied

¹ *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, by H. H. Risley; vols. i. and ii. *Ethnographic Glossary*; vols i. and ii. *Anthropometric Data*.

² *Ibid.* *Ethnographic Glossary*, vol. i. p. 39.

to the tree by her elder sister's husband or some male member of the household, and she is made to chew mahwá leaves, which are afterwards eaten by her mother. Last of all, lights are lit round the tree, which is solemnly worshipped by all present. The same ritual is separately performed by the bridegroom with this difference, that in his case the tree is a mango, and that it is circled nine times instead of seven."¹

I refrain from dwelling on the details of this ceremony, with their suggestion of rites ratifying the kinship between the divine tree and the tribesman and tribeswoman, and of a period when the lunar instead of the solar calendar prevailed.² The mere fact of tree-marriage is all that I wish to note at present.

Among the Santals³ bride and bridegroom perform the ceremony of marriage to a mahwá-tree, the left foot and left ear being tied to the tree by blades of grass and thread. Smearing with vermilion is apparently a special portion of the rite, and is called Sindūrdan.

The Bhuiyas and Rautias marry both parties to the mango-tree.⁴ The Santal double marriage to the mahwá and mango-trees was, till recently, practised by the Mundas of Chota Nagpore.⁵

These instances may perhaps suffice to show that the rite is prevalent in Bengal. Mr. Crooke, the editor of the *North Indian Notes and Queries*, writes to me that a good deal of the Indian evidence on the subject of tree-marriages is collected in his work, published by the Government of the North-West Provinces.⁶

¹ *Ethnographic Glossary*, vol. i. p. 531.

² See J. F. Hewitt, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, April, 1893, pp. 263, 264. Mr. Hewitt comments on the hints here contained of a matriarchate.

³ *Ethnographic Glossary*, vol. ii. p. 229.

⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. i. pp. 136, 475; vol. ii. p. 201.

⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. ii. p. 102.

⁶ *An Introduction to the Popular Religion and Folklore of Northern India*, William Crooke, Allahabad, 1894.

Possibly a European survival of the usage may be traced in the modern Greek wedding song in which the bridegroom is addressed as a "tree."¹ It may appear in a Servian custom quoted by Mr. J. G. Frazer in his *Totemism*:—"The bride is led to an apple-tree . . . the bride's veil is taken from her and fastened to the tree. . . . A dance three times round the tree concludes the ceremony."²

We found in Greek ritual and myth a sacred marriage celebrated between a god and an oak-tree bride, as a preliminary to the return of his own divine consort. The question of what Greek gods this rite originally belonged to before the late Olympian coupling of Zeus and Hera cannot be here discussed. In a Sanscrit play we found the dramatic action centring round a mystical golden tree to whom a maiden must be wedded before she can become the wife of the king, the hero of the drama. In the wild tribes of Northern India, tribes who are supposed to have inhabited that district before the Aryan invasion, and therefore may be taken as instances of very primitive societies, we find that the tribal marriage ceremony necessitates the previous marriage of bride and bridegroom to trees. Finally, so tenacious is the power of ritual, a trace of the prehistoric savage life seems to have come down to us in the present wedding songs of Greek peasants.

Is it possible to avoid the conclusion that the marriage ceremonies of the primitive tribes were employed in their sacred rituals, when the rite of the marriage of the god was celebrated; and that in the Dædala we have the Greek religious survival of the tribal worship, and in the Málavikā-gnimitra its reflection in Sanscrit literature?

I would compare the treatment of the ancient rite in this play to the use Greek artists made of current Greek legend. The Sanscrit poet takes the old stock ideas, and uses them

¹ *Women of Turkey*, L. M. Garnett, l. p. 83.

² *Totemism*, J. G. Frazer, p. 34.

as the clay out of which he constructs his brilliant court drama, colouring and moulding the original crude material almost out of recognition, but not quite.

Before leaving the Indian evidence I should like to acknowledge my debt to Mr. H. H. Risley for his suggestion of tree-marriages as a possible solution of the Dædala; and to Mr. C. H. Tawney for introducing to me the Málavikágnimitra, and for many valuable notes on the subject.

In my former paper the common European wedding custom of substituting another girl for the bride, or disguising the true bride, was cited as a possible explanation of the Dædala and Grozdanka stories. I should not now lay much stress on this custom as likely to afford a complete clue to the Dædala rites. That there is some mingling of the usage and the many legends of false brides, from Dædala to Grozdanka, seems probable. But what the connection is, and what relation it may have to the intention of the Sacred Marriage, are questions at present unsolved.

The suggestion that early marriage rites are the origin of various features of these stories is strengthened by an instance which I owe to the kindness of Miss L. M. Garnett. Speaking of the "dumbness" which is a feature of the "false bride" legends, she refers me to the Eastern marriage usage still in practice among Osmanlis of all ranks, of refusal on the part of the bride to speak to the bridegroom till he overcomes her reluctance.¹ Miss Garnett tells me that many folktales turn entirely on this usage. In this connection it is of much interest to note that a false bride forms part of the Hindoo marriage ceremony, in which, according to Haas, there is "mystification" of the bridegroom by the substitution of another woman.²

The question of the Sacred Marriage as a part of the wor-

¹ See *Women of Turkey*, vol. ii. p. 488.

² Haas, *Indische Studien*, v.

ship of those primitive Year-Gods, whose Winter and Summer, Spring and Autumn festivals seem so largely dominant in primitive religion, I will only touch on here. There is much evidence that such a marrying of the god in the spring was a prevalent early rite. If, as was previously suggested, Dædala was a "May Bride," wedded in the spring after her wintry subjection was over,¹ that would in no way cross the present argument, which is that whenever the sacred wedding was performed, and with whatever religious idea, the *ritual* was consonant with the marriage customs of the tribe.² It is the part played by the secular usage of early peoples in their religious rites that I wish to emphasise here—the enduring vitality of ritual habit, and the light which primitive social usage throws on the later forms of ritual and myth.

When we know more of the life-history of legends and ceremonies, we shall be less prone to see in them the result of solar myths and sympathetic magic.³ The growth and continuity of myth and ritual is a complex thing, perplexed by many stages of thought, and by the action of laws of which we seem as yet almost entirely ignorant. To get,

¹ Miss Garnett tells me that in a Cappadocian folksong the discarded wife announces that she will be reunited to her husband at the return of spring; and she traces the "supplanting of a true bride by a wintry power" in an Epirote variant to be found on p. 125 of her *Greek Folk-Songs*. My own knowledge of folk-poetry and its formation will not allow me to weigh this evidence.

² I feel sure that temple or tribal ritual so celebrated only awaits excavation. May not some readers of *Folk-Lore* be able to supply the missing facts?

³ See Mr. Frazer's conjectures on the Dædala, *Golden Bough*, i. p. 100, *sqq.* In Mr. Frazer's *Totemism*, published some years before his *Golden Bough*, he notes the distinct appearance of tree-marriage in the Dædala, and treats the ceremony as seemingly totemistic. Without discussing totemism, I may briefly say that Mr. Frazer's earlier view of the Dædala appears to accord in some measure with that put forward in this paper, and to be at variance with his later views published in the *Golden Bough*. Mr. Frazer cites the interesting Servian custom quoted above; Bengal tree-marriages; and a quaint possible survival in Lorraine, in which two cabbages take part. (*Totemism*, p. 34.)

whenever possible, a little nearer the life lived by primitive men, seen in the light of their own surroundings, and not in the twilight of modern theory, is perhaps at present the safest method that we can follow.

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 19th, 1895.

MR. G. L. GOMME (Vice-President) in the Chair.

THE minutes of the last meeting were read and confirmed.

The election of the following new members was announced, viz.: Dr. Oscar W. Clark, Th. Wohlleben, and the India Office Library.

Mr. E. S. Hartland exhibited a ring engraved with the turtle emblem, once worn as a talisman by the American Indian chief Kee-wan-kuk, sent to the exhibitor by Miss Mary Owen. Miss M. Roalfe Cox exhibited a fetish from the Solomon Islands (Rubiana Group), formerly lashed to the prow of a canoe. The exhibitor stated that a fetish of precisely the same prognathous type, with the inlaid shell eyes, was to be seen lashed to a canoe in the British Museum; and that there was a striking family likeness between all the fetishes representing human figures from the Solomon Islands; but she drew attention to the fact that the islanders themselves have round skulls, and are not in the least prognathous.

The following books presented to the Society since the last meeting were laid on the table, viz.: *Contributions to a Catalogue of Works, Reports, and Papers on the Anthropology, Ethnology, and Geological History of the Australian and Tasmanian Aborigines* (R. Etheridge, Jun.), and *Records of the Geological Survey of New South Wales*, vol. i. part i. 1889, vol. ii. part ii. 1890, part iv. 1892,