

## VII.

### THE BOY WHOM SEVEN MOTHERS SUCKLED.

ONCE on a time there reigned a king who had seven queens. He was very sad, for the seven queens were all barren. A holy mendicant, however, one day told the king that in a certain forest there grew a tree, on a branch of which hung seven mangoes; if the king himself plucked those mangoes and gave one to each of the queens they would all become mothers. So the king went to the forest, plucked the seven mangoes that grew upon one branch, and gave a mango to each of the queens to eat. In a short time the king's heart was filled with joy, as he heard that the seven queens were all with child.

One day the king was out hunting, when he saw a young lady of peerless beauty cross his path. He fell in love with her, brought her to his palace, and married her. This lady was, however, not a human being, but a Rakshasi; but the king of course did not know it.

The king became dotingly fond of her ; he did whatever she told him. She said one day to the king, " You say that you love me more than any one else. Let me see whether you really love me so. If you love me, make your seven other queens blind, and let them be killed." The king became very sad at the request of his best-beloved queen, the more so as the seven queens were all with child. But there was nothing for it but to comply with the Rakshasi-queen's request. The eyes of the seven queens were plucked out of their sockets, and the queens themselves were delivered up to the chief minister to be destroyed. But the chief minister was a merciful man. Instead of killing the seven queens he hid them in a cave which was on the side of a hill. In course of time the eldest of the seven queens gave birth to a child. " What shall I do with the child," said she, " now that we are blind and are dying for want of food ? Let me kill the child, and let us all eat of its flesh." So saying she killed the infant, and gave to each of her sister-queens a part of the child to eat. The six ate their portion, but the seventh or youngest queen did not eat her share, but laid it beside her. In a few days the second queen also was delivered of a child, and she did with it as her eldest sister had done with hers. So did the third, the fourth, the fifth, and the sixth queen. At last the seventh queen gave birth to a son ; but she, instead of following the example of her sister-queens, resolved to nurse the child. The

other queens demanded their portions of the newly-born babe. She gave each of them the portion she had got of the six children which had been killed, and which she had not eaten but laid aside. The other queens at once perceived that their portions were dry, and could not therefore be the parts of the child just born. The seventh queen told them that she had made up her mind not to kill the child but to nurse it. The others were glad to hear this, and they all said that they would help her in nursing the child. So the child was suckled by seven mothers, and it became after some years the hardiest and strongest boy that ever lived.

In the meantime the Rakshasi wife of the king was doing infinite mischief to the royal household and to the capital. What she ate at the royal table did not fill her capacious stomach. She therefore, in the darkness of night, gradually ate up all the members of the royal family, all the king's servants and attendants, all his horses, elephants, and cattle; till none remained in the palace except she herself and her royal consort. After that she used to go out in the evenings into the city and eat up a stray human being here and there. The king was left unattended by servants; there was no person left to cook for him, for no one would take his service. At last the boy who had been suckled by seven mothers, and who had now grown up to a stalwart youth, volunteered his services. He attended on the king, and took every care to prevent the queen from

swallowing him up, for he went away home long before nightfall; and the Rakshasi-queen never seized her victims except at night. Hence the queen determined in some other way to get rid of the boy. As the boy always boasted that he was equal to any work, however hard, the queen told him that she was suffering from some disease which could be cured only by eating a certain species of melon, which was twelve cubits long, but the stone of which was thirteen cubits long, and that that fruit could be had only from her mother, who lived on the other side of the ocean. She gave him a letter of introduction to her mother, in which she requested her to devour the boy the moment he put the letter into her hands. The boy, suspecting foul play, tore up the letter and proceeded on his journey. The dauntless youth passed through many lands, and at last stood on the shore of the ocean, on the other side of which was the country of the Rakshasis. He then bawled as loud as he could, and said "Granny! granny! come and save your daughter; she is dangerously ill." An old Rakshasi on the other side of the ocean heard the words, crossed the ocean, came to the boy, and on hearing the message took the boy on her back and re-crossed the ocean. So the boy was in the country of the Rakshasis. The twelve-cubit melon with its thirteen-cubit stone was given to the boy at once, and he was told to perform the journey back. But the boy pleaded fatigue, and begged to be allowed to rest one

day. To this the old Rakshasi consented. Observing a stout club and a rope hanging in the Rakshasi's room, the boy inquired what they were there for. She replied, "Child, by that club and rope I cross the ocean. If any one takes the club and the rope in his hands, and addresses them in the following magical words—

" O stout club! O strong rope!  
Take me at once to the other side,

then immediately the club and rope will take him to the other side of the ocean." Observing a bird in a cage hanging in one corner of the room, the boy inquired what it was. The old Rakshasi replied, "It contains a secret, child, which must not be disclosed to mortals, and yet how can I hide it from my own grand-child? That bird, child, contains the life of your mother. If the bird is killed, your mother will at once die." Armed with these secrets, the boy went to bed that night. Next morning the old Rakshasi, together with all the other Rakshasis, went to distant countries for forage. The boy took down the cage from the ceiling, as well as the club and rope. Having well secured the bird, he addressed the club and rope thus—

" O stout club! O strong rope!  
Take me at once to the other side."

In the twinkling of an eye the boy was put on this

side the ocean. He then retraced his steps, came to the queen, and gave her, to her astonishment, the twelve-cubit melon with its thirteen-cubit stone; but the cage with the bird in it he kept carefully concealed.

In the course of time the people of the city came to the king and said, "A monstrous bird comes out apparently from the palace every evening, and seizes the passengers in the streets and swallows them up. This has been going on for so long a time that the city has become almost desolate." The king could not make out what this monstrous bird was. The king's servant, the boy, replied that he knew the monstrous bird, and that he would kill it provided the queen stood beside the king. By royal command the queen was made to stand beside the king. The boy then took the bird from the cage which he had brought from the other side of the ocean, on seeing which she fell into a fainting fit. Turning to the king the boy said, "Sire, you will soon perceive who the monstrous bird is that devours your subjects every evening. As I tear off each limb of this bird, the corresponding limb of the man-devourer will fall off." The boy then tore off one leg of the bird in his hand; immediately, to the astonishment of the whole assembly, for the citizens were all present, one of the legs of the queen fell off. And when the boy squeezed the throat of the bird, the queen gave up the ghost. The boy then related his own history and that of his

mother and his stepmothers. The seven queens, whose eyesight was miraculously restored, were brought back to the palace; and the boy that was suckled by seven mothers was recognised by the king as his rightful heir. So they lived together happily.

Thus my story endeth,  
The Natiya-thorn withereth, &c.