



The Ideal of Forgiveness

A story by Sri Aurobindo

In the sky, the moon drifted slowly through the clouds. Far below, the river mingled its murmur with the winds, as it danced along on its course; and the earth looked bathed in beauty in the half-light of the moon. All around were the forest retreats of the Rishis, each charming enough to put the Elysian fields to shame: every hermitage was a perfect picture of sylvan loveliness with its trees and flowers and foliage.

On this moon-enraptured night, said Brahmarshi (the seer who has known the Supreme) Vashishtha to his spouse Arundhati Devi, “Devi (*literally*, goddess), go and beg some salt of the Rishi Vishvamitra, and bring it here soon.”

Taken aback, she replied, “My lord, what is this you are asking me to do? I cannot understand you! He who has robbed me of my hundred sons...” She could say no more, for her voice was choked with sobs and memories of the past rose up to disturb that sweet home of serenity, her heart, and to fill it with pain to its depths. After a time she recovered her composure to continue: “All my hundred sons were learned in the Vedas and dedicated to the Divine. They would go about in moonlight such as this singing His praises, but he...he has destroyed them all. And you bid me go and beg at his door for a little salt! My lord, you bewilder me!”

Slowly the sage’s face filled with light; slowly from the ocean-depths of his heart came the words, “But, Devi, I love him!”

Arundhati’s bewilderment increased, and she said, “If you love him you might just as well have addressed him as Brahmarshi! The whole trouble would have ended there, and I should have had my hundred sons left to me.”

The Rishi’s face took on a singular beauty as he said, “It was because I love him that I did not call him Brahmarshi. It was because I did not call him that, that he still has a chance of becoming a Brahmarshi.”

Vishvamitra was beside himself with rage. He could not concentrate on his *tapasya*. He had vowed that if Vashishtha did not acknowl-

edge him as a Brahmarshi that day, he would kill him. To carry out this resolve, he armed himself with a sword as he left his hermitage. Slowly he came to Vashishthadeva’s cottage and stood outside, listening. He heard what the great sage was saying to Devi Arundhati about him. The grip on his sword-hilt relaxed as he thought, “Heavens, what was I about to do in my ignorance! To think of trying to hurt one whose soul is so far above all pettiness!” He felt the sting of a hundred bees in his conscience, and ran forward and fell at Vashishtha’s feet. For a time he could not speak, but in a little while he recovered his speech and said, “Pardon me, O pardon me! But I am unworthy even of your mercy!” He could say no more, for his pride still held him fast. But Vashishtha stretched out both arms to raise him. “Rise, Brahmarshi!” he gently said. But Vishvamitra, in his shame and mortification, could not believe that Vashishtha meant what he said.

“Do not deride me, my lord,” he cried.

“I never say what is false,” replied Vashishtha. “You have become a Brahmarshi today. You have earned that status because you have shed your haughty self-conceit.”

“Teach me divine lore, then,” implored Vishvamitra.

“Go to Anantadeva, he will give you what you desire,” said Vashishtha.

Vishvamitra came to where Anantadeva stood with the Earth resting on his head. “Yes, I will teach you what you want to learn. But, first, you must hold up the Earth.”

Proud of his *tapasya*-won powers, Vishvamitra said, “Very well, relinquish your burden and let me bear it.”

“Hold it then,” said Anantadeva, moving away. And the Earth began to spin down and down in space.

“Here and now I give up all the fruits of my *tapasya*,” shouted Vishvamitra, “only let the Earth not sink downwards.”

“You have not done *tapasya* enough to hold up the Earth, O Vishvamitra.” Anantadeva shouted back. “Have you ever associated with



holy men? If you have, offer up the merit you have so acquired.”

“For a moment only, I was with Vashishtha,” answered Vishvamitra.

“Offer up the fruits of that contact then,” commanded Anantadeva.

“I do here offer them up,” said Vishvamitra. Slowly the Earth stopped sinking downwards.

“Give me divine knowledge, now,” implored Vishvamitra.

“Fool!” exclaimed Anantadeva, “you come to *me* for divine knowledge turning away from him whose momentary touch has given you virtue enough to hold up the Earth!”

Vishvamitra grew angry at the thought that Vashishthadeva had played him a trick. So he hurried back to him and demanded why he had deceived him.

Unruffled, Vashishtha answered him in slow and solemn tones: “If I had given you the knowledge you asked for then, you would not have accepted it as true. Now you will have faith in me.”

And so Vishvamitra came to acquire knowledge of the Divine from Vashishtha.

Such were the saints and sages of India in the olden days, and such was their ideal of forgiveness. So great was the power they had acquired by their *tapasya* that they could even carry the Earth on their shoulders. Such sages are being born in India again, today. They will dim the lustre of the Rishis of old by their radiance, and confer on India a glory greater than any she has ever known.¹

☪ Sri Aurobindo

¹ *Bengali Writings*, pp.21-24