

# THE KING'S WIFE

By JAMES H. COUSINS

GANESH & CO

*The Servant of India*  

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*4-5-14*

For Favour of Review

**THE KING'S WIFE**

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# THE KING'S WIFE

BY

JAMES H. COUSINS

GANESH & CO. MADRAS  
1919

*The story on which this poem is based, though told and read all over India, is not in accordance with history. Akbar and Mira are separated by a century of time, and it does not appear to be absolutely certain that the greatest of the Rajput kings was the husband of one of the greatest of women saints and singers. The author of the poem hopes, however, that the presentation of three types of religious expression (the spiritual adventure and breadth of Akbar, the simple devotion of Mira, the inquisitorial fanaticism of Kumbha) which are contemporaneous in all lands and ages, may, by the evocation of some measure of aesthetic joy, provide compensation for historical discrepancy and such liberties as he has taken with the story itself. One such liberty is the refusal to carry on the poem to a miraculous rescue, a reconciliation, and an ending in domestic felicity. These may, to those who require them, constitute an unwritten epilogue.*

# THE KING'S WIFE

## I

*Outside a Temple of Sri Krishna at Chitorgarh in Rajputana. AKBAR, the Mogul Emperor, and his poet TANSEN, come in. Akbar is partially disguised as a Hindu, Tansen wholly so.*

TANSEN

Here is our journey's end.

AKBAR

So, this is the temple  
That all the world is seeking for the sake  
Of a queen's songs !

## THE KING'S WIFE

TANSEN

It is, Your Majesty,  
And it would be a song most pitiful  
That Akbar's legs were traitor to his feet,  
And after these long miles of journeying  
Flaunted discovery. An hour ago  
I died to Islam and was born a Hindu,  
But you are stuck halfway from life to life,  
Loins downward shamelessly a Mussulman !

AKBAR

I have seen Hindus trousered.

TANSEN

Very true,  
But there is something deeper than the fact  
That has escaped you. Take a pair of trousers  
From Muslim legs and put them on a Hindu's,  
And they will seem like aliens of the race,  
Aye, perverts from the Faith, No, no ! too much  
Hangs from your waist to risk. Here, take this  
cloth

## THE KING'S WIFE

And reincarnate quickly.

AKBAR

If my limbs  
Could ape the Hindu as glibly as your tongue  
Takes on his language, I far more would fear  
To lose myself in that which we assume  
Than be unmasked ; and so I rather choose  
To don the Hindu than to slough the Muslim,  
And being both, be either at the need.

*[He has put on a Hindu dhoti or skirt.]*

TANSEN

Well, well ! the risk at least is covered up.

AKBAR

Twice you have spoken of risk. You are not  
fearful ?

TANSEN

Hardly would fear have driven me on this chase  
After a songbird for an emperor's game,  
To turn at the door of the nest ; but I remember  
The sanctity in which these Hindus hold

## THE KING'S WIFE

Their women. I have sung to you my song  
Of how a Rajput and a Mogul king  
Sprang to the embrace of death when kin of  
yours

Desired to look upon the haughty kin  
Of her whose songs have drawn you here  
disguised.

Are *you* so bloody-minded for a look  
To tempt red Fate ?

AKBAR

*[proceeding to squat on the ground awkwardly in  
the unaccustomed dhoti]*

I think Fate's embassy  
Comes round the corner. Allah keep away  
Occasion for a hasty rising !

TANSEN

*[squatting beside Akbar]*

Aye,  
And Allah banish "Allah" from your tongue,  
And give Your Majesty a proper god  
To swear by—

## THE KING'S WIFE

AKBAR

And to rinse "Your Majesty"  
Out of your mouth whose word should but  
become  
Pilgrim to pilgrim on a holy quest.

TANSEN

*[accepting the correction with a grimace]*  
Farewell, O King! Hail, brother!  
*[He makes a Muslim salaam, hand to ground  
and up to forehead.]*

AKBAR

*[catching Tansen's hand]*  
There is less risk  
In my two legs than your one hand. Narayana!  
You will salam us into the gaping jaws  
Of these proud Rajput tigers. Brother!...Thus...  
*[He puts his two palms together and raises his  
hands with the thumbs close to the forehead in a  
Hindu salutation.]*  
Now sing a song of Mira's.

## THE KING'S WIFE

TANSEN

[*sings*]

Flowers plucked at dawn of day,  
Garlanded love's glad way,  
Lord! at thy threshold I, thy flower-girl, lay.  
Yea, and a fairer flower  
From my heart's hidden bower.  
Ah! let thy lips now speak the word of power,  
Breaking to finer mould  
The earth of me, to unfold  
Fit blooms of grace for thee, Lord, to behold.  
So shall my beaded throat  
Find fuller, purer note  
To sing thy name; and I to thee devote  
My house of nights and days  
In song; and of life's ways,  
Joyous or sad, weave garlands in thy praise.  
Flowers plucked at dawn of day,  
Garlanded love's glad way,  
Lord! at thy threshold, I, thy flower-girl, lay.

TWO CITIZENS *come in.*

## THE KING'S WIFE

FIRST CITIZEN

[*finishing an argument*]

There is the proof  
Straight to the hand! Her songs are in the  
mouth  
Of high and low. [*To Tansen*] A pretty looking  
flower-girl  
You'd make, my man!

TANSEN

Who knows, brother, who knows?  
For contradiction lives but on the lips,  
And when the heart goes with the song, ah!  
then  
The past sings in the present, and may bring  
A flower-girl's music, or perhaps a queen's,  
Into the roughest voice; and one life back  
My brother here may have been a king, or worse.  
I am myself a poet. I shall sing  
Something of my own making.

SECOND CITIZEN

Spare us, no!

## THE KING'S WIFE

We have enough of trouble in the kingdom  
From two already. It is bad enough  
That the king's temper thins with every song  
That bears Queen Mira's name from lip to lip  
Like leaves whose whispers waken jealousy.

### TANSEN

Only a poet is jealous of a poet,  
And how is this? Her songs alone have reached  
us,  
Or have kings grown presumptuous?

### SECOND CITIZEN

There again  
His jealousy is fed.....Have you not heard  
King Kumbha's chants of his high lineage  
And his divine ancestor?

### TANSEN

We are pilgrims  
From Akbar's country.

## THE KING'S WIFE

FIRST CITIZEN

Brindaban on your way  
Is a more sacred shrine than Chitor.

TANSEN

Aye,  
But one is a silent flute, and one a flute  
Filled with melodious breath. I am myself  
A poet—

FIRST CITIZEN

You have told us that already,  
And doubtless you have come so far to learn  
How much more sweetly than a queen you sing.  
“Only a poet is jealous of a poet!”

TANSEN

What harm in that, since there is waiting us  
The future that will give us all our place?  
I count no poet worthy of the craft  
Whose aim is not pitched higher than the  
highest.  
But what of that! I have not journeyed here

## THE KING'S WIFE

From choice, but by compulsion of the will  
Of this my brother.

FIRST CITIZEN

He is given to little speech,  
If he be judge of song.

TANSEN

Ah! but he thinks  
And thinks, and holds his thought with vast  
control.

SECOND CITIZEN

A power, no doubt, he gained by sovereign rule  
In that last life!

TANSEN

Who knows, brother, who knows?  
A king's deep homage would not bend amiss  
Before a singing queen.

SECOND CITIZEN

Not in the mood  
Of the queen's husband!

## THE KING'S WIFE

TANSEN

He takes a rival badly ?

FIRST CITIZEN

That is but half the trouble. Long ago,  
Before their youth had felt the weight of rule,  
Mira and Kumbha with their blossoming songs  
Pelted each other, with laughter and high looks  
That made the kingdom all one voice in joy.

SECOND CITIZEN

But when the prince was lifted to the king  
With Mira at his side, there came a change.

FIRST CITIZEN

You know the Indus mouth, how it has piled  
Kingdom to kingdom in its royal way  
Gathered from far and near, yet like a king  
Whose conquests crowd about him till his path  
Must sideways find a way to the great sea ?  
So with these two. One life in them had flowed

## THE KING'S WIFE

Sweet as a singing river in the hills ;  
But with new power new appetite for power  
Grew in King Kumbha, piling in his way  
Obstruction to the soul.

SECOND CITIZEN

So it is said

By those who move nearer the king than we  
Plain citizens.

FIRST CITIZEN

And while the king, aloof,  
Passed through ambition into discontent,  
Hating the thing he coveted, whose gain  
Made loss in the heart, and turned the stream of  
love

To peevish eddies, jealous undertow  
That pulled their lives apart, the gentle queen  
Gathered the world about her with her songs,  
And grew in saintliness that stung the king  
With dumb rebuke of what had passed him by.

SECOND CITIZEN

You come from Akbar's country. Have you not  
heard

## THE KING'S WIFE

How the Great Mogul whispers his desire  
To hear the songs of Mira from her own lips?

TANSEN

It was for such a rumour we have come.

SECOND CITIZEN

Just so! and so King Kumbha broods and chafes  
With memory of an ancient bloody strife  
Because a Mogul emperor essayed  
To taste the beauty of a Rajput queen  
With his own eyes.

TANSEN

And what if he by stealth  
Should see Queen Mira?

SECOND CITIZEN

Our kings would rather die  
Than let pollution from an alien glance  
Like subtle poison pass into the blood  
Of their untainted race. And who shall say  
What penalty might fall on one removed  
One step from kingship, since the scale of pride

## THE KING'S WIFE

Holds life but lightly, so the throne be clean ?  
But that is out of count ! We are at peace  
With Akbar. Emperors do not leave their throne  
But rumour takes the vanguard, and no sound  
Of such import has reached us.

### FIRST CITIZEN

So let be  
What will be ; you have headed circumstance.  
Queen Mira comes to worship, and may bring  
A song to God, new-budded on the lake  
Of her calm soul ; a lotus in the dawn,  
That smiles to heaven, but holds a shining tear.  
Oh ! she has brought strange quiet on the world,  
The exquisite sadness of things beautiful  
That is more sweet than laughter. She has made  
The heart's pure conquest lightly as a breath,  
Because her hands are eloquent with love ;  
While power, that thunders on the stubborn will,  
Smites the response—that leaps to her in joy.  
Farewell. Our business takes us elsewhere,  
But we shall come again.

## THE KING'S WIFE

### SECOND CITIZEN

And you, good friends,  
Let go humility, and put on pride  
Because, for that past kingship you have left,  
You shall forestall an emperor's desire,  
And know perhaps what Akbar cannot know  
Till he, like you, in some succeeding life,  
Drop the rude mask of kingship, and, like you,  
Put on the pilgrim's garb. Farewell.

### AKBAR AND TANSEN

Farewell.

*The TWO CITIZENS go out, making the Hindu salutation, to which Akbar and Tansen reply.*

### TANSEN

Brother, we sit in garments rather thin  
Against a searching wind.

### AKBAR

Yet thus we learn  
The taste of the wind. So knowledge grows

## THE KING'S WIFE

TANSEN

Is this

Close to your taste, or shall we tread no more  
The hidden edge of danger ?

AKBAR

Fearful again ?

TANSEN

Not for myself, for I can sing myself  
Through any hole in a wall ; and not for you,  
For you have all the ready wit of the rook.

AKBAR

But not its conversation !

TANSEN

Aptly said.

But why so silent ?

AKBAR

Shall I shout my name  
In ears that may have heard my voice in battle ?

TANSEN

O well of wisdom ! not for you I fear,

## THE KING'S WIFE

But fear for all the flame of jealous pride  
That may consume her.

*The music of a stringed instrument is heard.*

AKBAR

Listen ! (*He rises*)

A WOMAN'S VOICE

*[singing to stringed music  
a song to the Lord Krishna]*

Here in our courtyard, where the breeze  
Bears odours of the champak trees,  
And high in blue unclouded calm  
Sways leisurely the fruited palm ;  
Come, Little One, at cool of day,  
And on your flute soft music play.

AKBAR AND TANSEN

*listen, Akbar with growing rapture. The VOICE  
ceases, but the stringed music continues softly.*

AKBAR

If such can be  
The disembodied spirit of her song,  
What must its fulness be, when eye to ear  
Adds beautiful to beauty ?

## THE KING'S WIFE

TANSEN

We came to hear,  
And hearing is all coolness to the flesh,  
And sets the hand of distance on desire;  
But sight may put the tinder's kindling spark  
Against dried leaves.

AKBAR

O dull of comprehension !  
Have you not learned that sight is half of  
hearing,  
And men in the dark hear less or more than real,  
And mock the truth of day. No ! We have come  
For all Fate carries in her knotted cloth.

*He proceeds to go out with the kingly stride of  
Akbar.*

TANSEN

Brother, I have wiped majesty off my lips.  
Now take it from your step. We are pilgrims.

## THE KING'S WIFE

AKBAR

Yes,

We are pilgrims, everyone of us, all pilgrims,  
And all disguised. There is not a man or woman  
But seeks some other than the thing that's  
sought for.

All is ulterior. Nothing is itself—

Unless itself be nothing. She too seeks

An end beyond the ending of her song,

And past the silence that her song has made

More lovely and more lonely than the dusk

Whose heart goes with the day upon its quest,

As her's goes questing on the spirit's way

Through the small gate of music. She too is  
disguised ;

Aye, God himself, who heads the pilgrim line,

Is no more honest than the rest of us.

He puts a band of cloud about his head,

And nature's coloured cloths about his limbs ;

And when we tear away one or the other

In agony of search, we only find

Another and another disguise beneath

## THE KING'S WIFE

For our frustration. He too is beyond.  
Well have these Hindus called the universe  
The Play of Brahm. Poor maskers, we are  
driven  
From act to act; and that were happy and well  
Had we but wit to hold ourselves no more  
Than ripples upon Jamuna. But alas!  
We pin our souls unto our masks, and turn  
God's play to earnest, setting tragedy  
In place of laughter.—You think I have come  
To listen to a song, perhaps to look  
Upon a queen. That is the father-lie  
That has begotten this (*indicates disguise*). No, I  
have come  
To seek an ancient solitary path  
All must in season tread, and hereabout  
May be a glimpse or entrance.

TANSEN

Brother, brother!

Why have you hidden yourself from me till  
now?

THE KING'S WIFE<sup>Et</sup>

WOMAN'S VOICE

*[singing to stringed music]*

Oh! fresh as music-haunted wind,  
Come, thou enchanter of my mind!  
Lift up thine ageless infant glance,  
And in my heart's cool courtyard dance  
The joy that foots the years along  
Till all my being break in song.

AKBAR

*goes slowly out on the right.*

TANSEN

*follows.*

*The stringed music continues into the next scene.*

## II

*In front of the Temple. A flight of steps leads up to the interior.*

*The stringed music continues from the previous scene.*

### AKBAR AND TANSEN

*come in on the left, and seat themselves on the ground to right and left of the steps. They make offerings of rice, cocoanuts and jasmine blossoms.*

### MIRA

*[the Queen of Merwar in Rajputana, within, singing]*

Dance, Holy Child! My melody  
Shall speak our joy, who clearly see  
Heaven's courtyard here on earthly ground,  
And hear a music past our sound ;  
And know, in every joy and woe  
God's onward footsteps dancing go.

*The stringed music continues for a short time.*

## THE KING'S WIFE

AKBAR

*has listened intently, and fallen into abstraction.*

TANSEN

Brother ! your eyes are closed.

AKBAR

Brother ! a door

Has opened. In the darkness all disguise  
Falls from the soul, and that great liar, sight,  
Is silenced. Those who look shall never see  
Beyond the eye's horizon. Those who see  
Have no more need for looking.

TANSEN

You speak in riddles.

AKBAR

Because all things are plain ; and that one  
Truth  
Which I have sought through many clamouring  
truths  
Has grown as simple as a blade of grass,  
As clear as a child's open-handed smile.  
So much her song has taught me.

## THE KING'S WIFE

TANSEN

She comes herself.

MIRA

*is seen above the steps approaching still feeling  
the ecstasy of worship.*

AKBAR

*rises, and as she comes to the ground, prostrates  
and touches her feet with his hands, and rises.*

TANSEN

*prostrates a little distance away.*

MIRA

I am unworthy in heart of such obeisance:  
Much more unworthy than my wayward feet.

AKBAR

Oh ! they have led me through a holy song  
Unto the vision of the Feet of God.

MIRA

That is great joy. May he well prosper you  
To lift your face up to the Face Divine.  
So shall you reach what is beyond the power

## THE KING'S WIFE

Or purchase of earth's kings. Great Akbar's  
eyes

Have longed for that in vain.

TANSEN

Must Akbar, then,

Because he is Akbar and a Mussulman,  
Be held for ever from his heart's high wish ?

MIRA

No ! No ! all paths will find the inner shrine,  
Though there be many openers of the gate.  
" However men approach, I welcome them,  
For all the paths are mine." So says the Lord.

TANSEN

How then shall he attain ?

MIRA

When he shall wield  
An unseen sceptre on the throne of nothing.

AKBAR

Alas ! Alas !

## THE KING'S WIFE

MIRA

Your sorrow for another  
Will clear your way.

TANSEN

My brother was a king  
In a past life.

MIRA

We have all been kings and queens  
At one time or another. It is a habit  
Most hard to break ; for power to human hand  
Is its great weakness, wealth its poverty.

TANSEN

Your Majesty is rumoured through the world  
To have escaped both.

MIRA

Here there is no majesty,  
Nor less than majesty. Here all are one.  
There is one Lover here, Sri Krishna, and we  
Are all his maidens, I of all the least,

## THE KING'S WIFE

Though elsewhere I may wear a crown, and  
rule

The household of a king ; for who would serve  
Most faithfully the Lord, must faithfully  
Serve life in all its fulness, knowing it  
His bride, whom he has wooed from shape to  
shape

Toward some far consummation beyond the  
dream

Of mortal sense or vision. I am but  
A singing-girl at that perpetual marriage.

AKBAR

That is an office past the power of kings  
Whose thrones are reared on dust.

MIRA

Ah ! Your past life  
Must whisper closely to your inner ear.

AKBAR

My words are birth-proud echoes of your own  
Out of your songs that go from mouth to mouth

## THE KING'S WIFE

Along the caravans, from silent deserts  
Eastward and westward to the palm-fringed  
waters,  
And over the waters, and under in many a brain  
That meets the silence with remembered music  
After the lips are blue. You draw the world  
By wizardry of song, and set a throne  
Invisibly established on a strength  
Beyond the mightiest prince of all the Rajputs.

MIRA

I am my husband's most obedient wife.

AKBAR

And his greatest rival.

MIRA

His least word is law.

AKBAR

Your word is source and arbiter of law,  
Being creation. You poets are in league  
With God. You set his thoughts in beauty's  
mould,

## THE KING'S WIFE

Speeding fulfilment of his ancient dream.  
You are sworn foe of those whose hearts are set  
On building life in their own likeness—kings  
And those whose passions king it over them,  
Who count the world their sustenance.....I have  
    taken  
Out of the far-off echoes of your songs  
Great beauty and great wisdom; and now that I  
Have looked upon their source, something  
    within  
Would almost dare the peril of plain speech  
Where humbly now it strains itself to break  
The shackles of impossibility.  
You on the surface are a queen, and I  
Am but a beggar—

MIRA

    But underneath the surface  
We may be different; and deeper still  
Be no more different than that great life  
That comes and goes, that feeds and sins and  
    prays,

## THE KING'S WIFE

And is, ah ! slowly slowly, gathered home  
By the awakened soul, that like a goat-herd  
Scans the wide plains under a downward palm  
For his hungry flock that wandered while he  
slept.

AKBAR

Ah ! how we all are stifled by disguise,  
And barter for a name or pride of race  
The splendid jewel of the spoken heart.  
We grasp at gilded vanities, and miss  
God's orphaned and outcast simplicities  
That cry for home and love. Were I but free  
To serve my heart's high purpose, I would set  
A crown upon your head, and lay a kingdom  
Here at your feet.

MIRA

I have no need of either.

AKBAR

Oh ! truth to you so sweet, to us most bitter,

## THE KING'S WIFE

Damming the stream whereof yourself are spring.  
You have no need to *take*, but pity us  
Whose hearts cry out *Give! give!*—the little cry  
That holds all healing for all human ill,  
All sanctuary from self; permit us then  
To leave our gifts, though poor, to bless your  
shrine.

MIRA

Ah! when the heart is pure, and all the mind  
Held to one holy end, the meanest gift  
Is pleasing to the Lord. Did he not say  
A cup of water offered in his name  
Had sure acceptance? A handful of sweet  
flowers  
May breathe a fragrance past a royal boon.

TANSEN

*moves towards Mira to offer flowers.*

MIRA

*closes her eyes and holds out her hands.*

## THE KING'S WIFE

TANSEN

*[putting the flowers in Mira's open hands].*

The flowers of the earth are his ; we give his  
own.

AKBAR

*[bringing from his coat a necklace of jewels  
rolled up which he lays on the  
flowers in Mira's hands]*

The stones of the earth are his ; we give his own.

MIRA

*turns towards the inner shrine elevating  
her hands above her bowed head as she  
offers the gifts.*

AKBAR

*signifies silently to Tansen to go.  
They both go quickly and silently away, dropping  
into the attitude of pilgrims.*

THE TWO CITIZENS

*enter and watch Mira.*

## THE KING'S WIFE

MIRA

*after a moment's silence lowers the gifts in her  
hands and looks at them ; then exclaims*

Brothers ! a miracle ! a miracle !

Immortal Love has changed your humble stones  
To glittering stars, a milky way of gems  
Across the sky.

*She turns to the front again*

SECOND CITIZEN

Pardon, O Queen ! these gems  
Look much too real to be miraculous.

FIRST CITIZEN

May we have leave to ask whose gift they are ?

MIRA

The givers to the Lord give not for name.  
Who gives for name gives only to himself  
A gift of nothing.

FIRST CITIZEN

We are well rebuked  
For over-boldness. It was the glittering stones

## THE KING'S WIFE

Drew question from us, being worth the revenue  
Of a mountain kingdom, hinting that a king  
Had passed on pilgrimage—

### SECOND CITIZEN

Or if not a king,  
Then one who had robbed a king.

### MIRA

Could so much truth  
Live on the lips, and yet the heart be dark  
Either with falsehood or with violence,  
Or does the world's illusion fall upon us?  
He spoke of being a king in a past life,  
And of disguises and imprisonment  
In harsh impossibility—such words  
As the dark heart breaks gladly through to  
light.  
And now his words too seem to turn to stones  
Richer than beggar's garb, but beggar poor  
Beside my simple reading of them. Still,  
The gift is God's, and he will sanctify

## THE KING'S WIFE

If need be—need be ! Who am I to ask  
The whence or how ? All comes alone from him,  
And all by many ways goes back to him,  
And peace comes only to the open hands  
That are but highways for his passing will.  
Has not all trouble come upon the world  
Through questioning ? Are not life's pains and  
                  woes

But smittings back of her own faithlessness ?  
O brothers ! we shall never leave the wheel  
Of birth and death, and find our liberation,  
While that slim prying serpent of the mind  
Puffs out his hood, and darts from side to side  
Sharp questioning. No ! let us take what is  
With calmness. Thus the things that are to  
                  come,

Finding no strong repulsion or desire,  
May err no whit beyond, nay nor beneath,  
His purpose ; for the thing itself is nought ;  
Only the heart's intention counts with Him.

*She takes the necklace into the temple.*

## THE KING'S WIFE

SECOND CITIZEN

He spoke of being a king in a past life.

FIRST CITIZEN

It must have been those pilgrims from the north  
We talked with hereabout a while ago.

SECOND CITIZEN

How think you they came by it?

FIRST CITIZEN

If by true means

There is mystery about, for it is worth  
Uncounted wealth, and those poor worshippers  
Are not what they appear. If by false means  
We should bestir ourselves to track it out  
Lest some misfortune should overtake the queen  
If crime would make a silent hiding-place  
Out of God's habitation. Come away.

SECOND CITIZEN

So great a gift could hardly have its equal  
Knotted in the same kerchief, think you so?

## THE KING'S WIFE

### FIRST CITIZEN

It may be a ninth wave with followers;  
One shout of trouble with an echoing train.

### SECOND CITIZEN

Even its shadow would be wealth enough.....

### FIRST CITIZEN

Let's go, for we are on the shaking verge  
Of revelation, when thin poverty  
Breeds wealth beyond a prince's treasure-house...

### SECOND CITIZEN

And honest men turn thief to punish thieves.

*They go out.*

### III

*The Darbar of King Kumbha of Merwar at  
Chitorgarh. KING KUMBHA, QUEEN MIRABAI,  
and TWO ATTENDANT MINISTERS come in.*

KUMBHA

*[seating himself on a dais]*

Let the two citizens  
Be brought into our presence.

*First Minister goes out.*

Send at once  
For the Court Jeweller.

*Second Minister goes out.*

MIRA

*[standing]*

There was a time  
When no exalted place your presence graced  
Was fully furnished lacking one you loved.

## THE KING'S WIFE

KUMBHA

My time is brief : what would you ?

MIRA

Life after life

Was once too brief for love.....I come to ask  
Why you have taken from the temple shrine,  
With clouded brows and mutterings, the gift  
Of gems one gave to God.

KUMBHA

I have taken it

Because I have chosen to take it.

MIRA

Once your choice

Went comradely with mine in love and song ;  
But now your will is grown as bitter and sharp  
As a clean-shearing blade that goes through life  
Sundering past and future.

KUMBHA

We have our ways

And we must tread them. I have left you free :

## THE KING'S WIFE

What more is needed ?

MIRA

Something less is needed ;  
For freedom that is fond of its own name  
Has not yet shed its chains, but perfect love  
Makes happy bonds that are but anchorage  
To the free soul.....Something more deep than  
choice  
Has moved you to such harshness.

KUMBHA

Who gave the gift ?

MIRA

Surely the Lord himself in pilgrim guise,  
A moment seen, the next invisible  
To the most searching look.

KUMBHA

Just such a tale  
You told me when within your curtained room  
I heard you hold hushed talk with one unseen.

## THE KING'S WIFE

It was the Lord, you said. All is the Lord.  
That is your constant song ; and that refrain  
May cover much that there is need to cover.  
I want no word that may be this or that,  
Bending its branch to every wind that blows,  
Yet rooted darkly past the common sight  
Of blunt and simple eyes. I want plain truth.

### MIRA

Yet seek it out from every mouth but that  
Which in no single thought, no slightest word  
Has erred against its marriage vow, but here  
Lays all my life before you for your will,  
In full obedience...Something in your mind  
Bends its once quiet mirror to rude shapes  
That turn life's face to twisted mocking mouths,  
Eyes that but see the thing they mean to see,  
Ears deaf but to themselves ; and round my feet  
They leer and mutter. Oh ! it is pitiful  
When what was fair goes foul, and that straight  
mind,  
Mate of my softness, turns on its own face

## THE KING'S WIFE

Disfiguring hands, and in the seat of power  
Justice now does injustice to itself.  
Oh ! that is pitiful.

KUMBHA

I need no pity  
Till I have searched about the whispering world  
For truth's full substance, not a shadowy  
phrase.

MIRA

I have told the truth.

KUMBHA

And underneath your truth  
Lies the clear challenge of a princely gift  
Wrapped in such circumstance as holds a threat  
I may not pass. A kingdom's treasury  
Goes not for nothing. To your shadowy truth  
I shall search out the mate. If that be clean  
I shall have need for pity.

MIRA

Ah ! that *if*

Is dagger-pointed.

## THE KING'S WIFE

KUMBHA

Not for innocence.

MIRA

Doubt holds its haft.

KUMBHA

But waits the rigid proof.

MIRA

That dagger *if* wounds first and after strikes.

KUMBHA

If after find occasion.

MIRA

And if not,

Still that sharp hurt must quiver in the heart  
And scar forgiveness.

KUMBHA

I must do my duty.

MIRA

That were sweet medicine if love and love  
Set lips to the one draught; but now for me,

## THE KING'S WIFE

Shut by suspicion from your inmost thought,  
It flings chill mockery on the flame of love,  
And make past vows ring hollow. Ah! me, to  
    have lived  
Through love's pure greenness, when the happy  
    rains  
Made life a full glad river; to have lived  
Into the dry and shrivelled aftertime;  
That were indeed poor ending to our song—  
Were it the end: but past our little reach  
I hear invisible compassionate lips  
Laugh softly, and in comprehending eyes  
Catch a far meaning to the shadow-dance  
Of children who have hurt themselves in play,  
And shall have sleep, and waken, and forget.

### KUMBHA

My business is with stern and present things,  
Not with pale phantoms and futurity.  
*[He gives three claps with his hands, on which the*  
    MINISTER *and TWO CITIZENS come in.]*  
No more of words. Leave me; my time is brief.

## THE KING'S WIFE

MIRA

And mine has ages in each hour.

KUMBHA [*impatiently*]

Go, Go!

MINISTER

*observes the tension, and as Mira passes him on her way out, he bows very low with a glance of faithfulness. The TWO CITIZENS make profound obeisance to Mira and then to King Kumbha.*

MINISTER

These are the men, Your Majesty, who spread  
The news about the city.

KUMBHA

Let it spread

Self-procreant as gossip. The fact is nothing,  
But what hangs on it. Have you news of  
strangers?

## THE KING'S WIFE

MINISTER

None but the passage of two Muslim traders  
Eastward.

SECOND CITIZEN

Most gracious king ! the men who brought  
The gift of gems were Hindu pilgrims.

KUMBHA

So—

To your keen sight.

MINISTER

I had them closely watched.

KUMBHA

The pilgrims ?

MINISTER

No, the traders.

KUMBHA

So your mind

Runs that way too ?

MINISTER

But in the crowded streets

## THE KING'S WIFE

They mixed themselves and vanished clean  
away.

KUMBHA

And then ?

MINISTER

Their story sprawled about the streets  
Much like the spiny cactus that spreads out  
From some disordered thought stalk sprung from  
stalk

Haphazard ; but the roots are in our hands,  
The simple first of complicated last.  
Tell out your tale. [*To the Two Citizens*]

FIRST CITIZEN

May it please Your Majesty,  
We have no tale but that which speaks itself ;  
The jewelled gift, and such poor inference  
As our unfurnished minds may straighten out  
From word to word. We spoke most brotherly  
To two poor pilgrims at the temple gate.  
One sang a song made by the queen, and said

## THE KING'S WIFE

His brother was a king in a past life,  
And other words one reads in holy books.

### SECOND CITIZEN

We went our way, and when we came again  
Queen Mira stood upon the temple steps  
Alone, and rapt in some ecstatic dream,  
Holding upon her hands that priceless gift.  
A miracle, she thought had changed dead stones  
To living jewels.

### FIRST CITIZEN

We could not but hold  
That such a gift came through no heavenly  
dream,  
But out of human hands, and showed a king  
On pilgrimage.

### SECOND CITIZEN

Or one who had robbed a king.

### KUMBHA

Where did they come from ?

## THE KING'S WIFE

SECOND CITIZEN

From the Moghul country.

KUMBHA

Ha ! and you followed them ?

FIRST CITIZEN

We sought them out

Because the queen in soft bewilderment  
Counted their words as it were to value them,  
How they had said that one had been a king  
In a past life.

SECOND CITIZEN

From that we knew the gift

Came from the pilgrims, but we sought in vain  
To find them.

KUMBHA

Fools ! O fools ! Half way to wisdom  
Is folly's rest-house. There are two certain  
ways  
Of holding back suspicion that a man

## THE KING'S WIFE

Is a wild ass from the hills ; one is, to lop  
One's ears, fold up one's tail, and make such  
sounds  
As dullards may applaud for human speech.

### FIRST CITIZEN

We have offended Your Majesty.

### KUMBHA

Not of you  
I speak, for you are not wild asses. You  
Are tame ones. How domestication rusts  
The edge of sight and hearing ! The other way  
Of holding back suspicion, is to bray  
That you *are* wild asses. Then no one will believe,  
But take your word as masking. These wild asses  
Out of the north have taken a middle way.  
They have put their hoofs in sandals, and have  
brayed  
Most philosophically ; and you bats  
Have neither seen nor heard. There is no use  
In being burdened with such eyes and ears  
As miss their proper function.

## THE KING'S WIFE

SECOND CITIZEN

O King ! have mercy.

KUMBHA

I will have mercy. Nature has denied  
My merciful hand the power to stretch your  
ears

To their true length ; and since they but abuse  
Their human shape, I shall relieve you of them.

SECOND CITIZEN

Mercy O King !

FIRST CITIZEN

Or if you grant not mercy,  
Surely our prayer will put it in the hand  
Of the king's minister !

KUMBHA

Such futile prayer  
But shows my wisdom deeper than it seemed,  
And you as doubly deaf and more than blind

## THE KING'S WIFE

Who think by prayer to move the hidden will  
That mine but shadows. I am God's minister  
Linked in unbroken line through mighty kings  
With the divine ancestor of my race ;  
My ministers do my will.

FIRST MINISTER

Our wills are yours

O King ! in all things.

KUMBHA

All ?

FIRST MINISTER

Your Majesty

Is doubtful ?

KUMBHA

There may come a testing-time.

SECOND MINISTER

Have we not passed enough of test to seal  
Our fealty ?

## THE KING'S WIFE

### KUMBHA

Life knows nothing of enough.

It is one hunger, with satiety  
To hold it from destruction, self-devoured.  
One thing that was enough, complete and fixed,  
Would break this bubble that but moves to live,  
And put it out like a spear-point in the forehead ;  
One atom of perfection be as grit  
In the eye of the sun, and bring upon the world  
The ultimate darkness. There is a rotten stone  
Built in the arch of each most firm ideal ;  
A seed of hatred in the heart of love.  
It may be, Fate will leave the stone uncrumbled,  
The seed unwatered, or may stay the tooth  
Of slow corrosion set by faithlessness  
In every tested blade ; but it is there,  
Eternal threat against security  
And ancient order, which alone the will  
Of God, and God's own minister, myself,  
May hold in place by rule so granite firm  
It shakes not though the eye of Justice point

## THE KING'S WIFE

Even against the throne to save the throne.

### SECOND MINISTER

Your words, O King! but speak the ancient  
truth :

A Rajput prince would sooner slay himself  
Than bring dishonour on his lineage.

### KUMBHA

Aye, and if thus the law be firmly set  
To rid the person, so the house be safe,  
Justice at home will be at home abroad,  
Nor softer handed if pollution came  
By one just less than king.

### FIRST CITIZEN

[*To the other Citizen*] That strikes the Queen.

[*To King Kumbha*] Those are the very words,  
Your Majesty,

I gave the pilgrims, now I think of it,  
When one made question what the king would  
do

If Akbar stealthily should see the queen.

## THE KING'S WIFE

### KUMBHA

Ha ! Akbar ! Now these arid wells yield water.  
Your ears shall be forgiven because your mouths  
Stumble on truth. Now let me piece it out.  
He said he was a king in a past life :  
A kingly quibble, an adventuring foot  
That tries a crumbling cliff, a secret thing  
That may forget, and cries in its own ear  
A shrill reminder. He asked what would befall  
If Akbar stealthily should see the queen,—  
And you all let them slip ! My God ! My God !  
How near a thing to hostage may have passed  
That would have held the Mussulman in leash,  
And set my reign upon its rightful seat  
Of India's sovereignty. What mighty Fates  
May press with shadowy inviting hands  
Upon our dark inhospitable doors,  
And pass with clouded brows. All tragedy  
Is Fate's dark changeling for rejected gifts,  
And mine will come.

## THE KING'S WIFE

MINISTER

You think that Akbar then  
Has come disguised ?

KUMBHA

To tell the utmost truth  
One thing is needed—and perhaps it comes.

CROWN JEWELLER

*Enters accompanied by Second Minister*  
Your Majesty—

KUMBHA

No more, till I have chewed  
That comfortable name of Majesty  
And felt its sweetness ; for the word you bring  
Is double-faced, and either way it frowns.

SECOND MINISTER

How so? There is no threat : all is at peace  
Outside the kingdom, and at peace within.

KUMBHA

There is within my kingdom a within  
That knows no peace. I hear the tap, tap, tap



## THE KING'S WIFE

MINISTERS

The sword ! The sword !

FIRST MINISTER

We shall avenge this insult to your throne.

SECOND MINISTER

Aye, with shed blood shall purify pollution.

KUMBHA

There the true heart goes straightly to my own  
Counting no cost.

FIRST MINISTER

Whatever be the cost,  
Akbar shall die.

KUMBHA

Akbar ! O mighty Gods !  
What blindness and what deafness have you  
spread  
Across the world, that I alone must move  
Clear-eyed before your purpose, holding death  
Less than dishonour, though it strike my throne ?

## THE KING'S WIFE

Why, what has Akbar done but be himself,  
Pollution's minister, to hold its test  
Against sweet-mouthed pretension, aye, a stone  
To ring the silver of the world, and part  
God's minting from the false? Leave him  
alone,  
And put the bitter edge of condemnation  
To that which wrongs its nature, nay, more vile,  
Tunes the kite's beak to give the bulbul's note,  
And lure the world with mimicry of good  
To share its own pollution. O great Gods!  
Strengthen my hand to work thy solemn will  
On that which soils thy kingdom.....She must  
die!

This is our will : you are its ministers.

*He sets Queen Mira's death-warrant before  
them.*

MINISTERS

The Queen !.....The Queen ?

JEWELLER

Queen Mira ?

## THE KING'S WIFE

KUMBHA

Aye, the Queen,

And quickly.

FIRST MINISTER

May it please Your Majesty—

KUMBHA

That please is most displeasing, for it means  
Unstable purpose.

FIRST MINISTER

Nay, O King ! it means

Most certain purpose. I have never yet  
Set hand upon a woman save in love  
And courtesy. I am too old to learn  
The sharp extremity of kingly wrath  
Whose end has louder threat against the throne  
Than her pollution.

KUMBHA

Then you disobey me,  
And set a rival on my outraged throne ?

## THE KING'S WIFE

FIRST MINISTER

To serve the king I disobey the king.  
Farewell. [*He goes out.*]

KUMBHA

Your punishment will follow you.

SECOND MINISTER

Mine will precede me.

KUMBHA

What! You too will fail me  
To rid my throne of this ignoble taint?

SECOND MINISTER

First I would rid myself of royal favour  
And my exalted office, that my tongue  
May freely serve my mind, and serving it,  
Serve you.

KUMBHA

Your service is to do my will.

SECOND MINISTER

Aye, and most gladly were my service given

## THE KING'S WIFE

Had I but certainty it was your will  
That spoke.

KUMBHA

What is it else?

SECOND MINISTER

A gadfly thought  
Fixed in the quivering tissue of the soul ;  
A thought that stings so near the eye of the  
mind  
It hides the world with swollen mountainous  
nothing,  
And sets your brain on fire.

KUMBHA

And thus my will  
Is countered by a handful of grey words  
Out of the mouth of age ; my solid thought  
Is narrowed to a fever ; and her ill  
Stands clear in virtue. Ah ! right well I know  
What whispers give the common people sport  
Of " How the queen grows saintly,-how the king

## THE KING'S WIFE

Waxes in worldliness." So be it. I hold  
No less disloyal than the body's taint  
This passionless concubinage of mind  
That splits my kingdom, and I shall root it out.

[SECOND MINISTER *goes out.*]

My words are deeds. [*To the CROWN  
JEWELLER*] You are not such as these  
Dull-witted echoes. You are one who shapes  
Crudeness to beauty, casting out the stone  
That flaws the perfect circlet for a king,  
Sharing God's merciful medicine of death  
To that which mars his purpose.

CROWN JEWELLER

It is true

My hand is firm in beauty's fashioning,  
But, that it harm not Beauty for her own sake,  
The eye must go more deeply than the surface;  
For who would quench the sun because a cloud  
Threatens the stainless azure of the dawn,  
Or dry a river for a passing taint

## THE KING'S WIFE

That it will sing away with cleansing song ?  
Oh ! in this desert pilgrimage of life  
Through harshness to some distant kindlier  
time,  
What soul refreshment have we but the songs  
That she has set within our hearts, like wells  
Filled from deep springs beneath our heavy clay ?  
I cannot stop their source.

KUMBHA

That source is poisoned,  
And oozes green corruption.

CROWN JEWELLER

Her purity  
Would turn corruption to its likeness.

KUMBHA

Aye,  
And leave it still corruption.....Her purity !  
Are you so muddy-veined that in your mind  
No comprehension gleams of what may hang

## THE KING'S WIFE

On kings disguised, or what may lie between  
A woman and an emperor's flattery ?

### CROWN JEWELLER

Ah! now comes hope, when folly takes a tongue  
Most sensible, being most human : jealousy,  
O King ! has put your world upon its head,  
Making good evil, evil good ; but that  
Will pass in season. It is a changeable spirit,  
And full of contradiction, hating most  
Where most it loves. Bid me now tear in pieces  
Your hot decree ; nor heed that fabled power  
That none can touch, but priests from hoary  
books

Let loose upon the world : a mocking god  
That is less god than devil ; a painted mask  
To intimidate the childhood of the world,  
And now grown bloody with men's bloody  
thoughts,  
And sanctified with age.

## THE KING'S WIFE

KUMBHA

O garrulous fool!

Whose words are faggots to her funeral pyre,  
Not counters against judgment.....Not alone  
She draws my kingdom sideways, but has put  
Some witchcraft on men's minds, and through  
its mists

God's face is pulled awry. O blasphemy,  
Take yourself hence.

CROWN JEWELLER

I had already gone :

Only my body lags. [*He goes*].

FIRST CITIZEN

We too must go.

KUMBHA

You! you whom I have housed with my strong  
arm,

Fencing you round with safety! Must I plead  
Beggary unto beggars? Must I drag  
A king's high will down to the market-place,

## THE KING'S WIFE

And slime it over with conspiracy ?  
You know the common mind ; and it must  
    know  
How small a thing may flaw the majesty  
That keeps a throne unshaken, how much more  
Must judgment use extremity when one  
Who lived with greatness, fed on it, drank it,  
    breathed it,  
Stoops from her height, and, in her stooping,  
    trails  
A long divinely-fathered lineage  
Into pollution. Then what should stay the hand  
Even against a queen ?

### FIRST CITIZEN

    Oh ! she has touched  
Austerity with human love, and made  
More broad the way for men unto the feet  
Of God.....

### SECOND CITIZEN

And she has touched the common life

## THE KING'S WIFE

With saintliness more strong than iron law  
Against all violence. Her gentleness  
Has joined in peace and brotherhood our hands  
That once were murderous with ancient strife.

### FIRST CITIZEN

How can we raise them, then, against herself ?  
We humbly take our leave.

### KUMBHA

Aye, humbly, humbly,  
In such deep humbleness as counts for nothing  
The will of majesty ! Oh ! well you have learned  
Your lesson. Well you talk of saintliness  
That has dethroned its God, made purity  
The name for alien taint, and, for completion,  
Has left a king his throne, but taken all  
That stands for kingship—loyalty, obedience,  
And taken it 'most humbly.'

### SECOND CITIZEN

In all things else  
But this, O King ! our wills are yours to death.

## THE KING'S WIFE

### KUMBHA

In all things else...one thing...just short of  
that...

And then ? Oh ! now a firefly streaks the dark  
With sudden burning wire, and here and there  
Pricks the night's tent with living silver points,  
Letting the light that is behind all darkness  
Gleam through an instant...She has vowed  
obedience

To God, and I to her am God on earth.  
What if obedience be to her the grace  
Of utmost merit that shall cancel all  
Pollution's debt, sweetening the spirit's way  
Through death to life ? Oh ! then, Oh ! then,  
we two

Who were twin strings on life's new zither ; we  
Who watched the flickering pleiads in a palm  
Hang like a bunch of glow-worms ; we who  
dreamed

What beauty presses close against the eyes,  
Sings in the ears, beats on the heart—ah ! vain

## THE KING'S WIFE

Because the blood is quick and full of tumult  
In love's first flood, and in the aftertime  
Runs heavy with life's dull sediment; we two  
May feel with mutual hands from life to life,  
And meet beyond earth's shadows... You have  
pledged

Your service in all else but one thing. That  
I set aside..... Take this to the queen herself,  
That she be both priestess and sacrifice,  
And God be satisfied—and man have peace.

*He gives the death-warrant to the Second  
Citizen.*

SECOND CITIZEN

*[after an instant's doubt]*

Our word is given, O King!

FIRST CITIZEN

Aye, aye, the Queen  
Shall do the thing that's right. Farewell.

*[They go slowly out.]*

KUMBHA

Farewell.

## THE KING'S WIFE

Go ! and my day go with you. I have come  
Into the twilight, when the drunken sun  
Has drained the vats of day, and left the world  
Clear-edged and hard ; and like a widowed rook  
I sit on a bare branch and caw at nothing.

#### IV

*A path among trees on the outskirts of the royal demesne of King Kumbha at Chitor. Night.*

MIRA

*enters, dressed in a rough garment. She glances furtively around, reads a paper, then turns towards the place from whence she came, makes the Hindu salutation, and says,*

The king's wife shall obey her husband.

*She turns to proceed on her way, putting her cloak over her head and obscuring her face.*

BEGGAR

*[approaching on the opposite side]*

Where are you going, mother?

MIRA

I am not a mother.

## THE KING'S WIFE

BEGGAR

All women are mothers.

MIRA

One or other of us  
Is speaking folly.

BEGGAR

There is but one mother  
In all the world, and she is every woman  
Though she be childless.

MIRA

*[handing the Beggar a coin]*

Take this for your wisdom,  
For there is kindness in your voice, and that  
Is much to the beggared heart, and makes poor  
speech  
More wise than sages know whose hearts are  
dead.

BEGGAR

Aye, what have we to help us on the road  
But words and a little kindness, we who make

## THE KING'S WIFE

The thin companionship of utter need  
Whose one fast law is great necessity  
And friendliness. Have you had luck to-day?

MIRA

I have had the greatest luck in all my life.

BEGGAR

Where have you come from ?

MIRA

We are not the wind  
That it should matter where we have come from.  
We are immortal flames, and where we go  
Is all that matters.

BEGGAR

Where are you going then ?

MIRA

Where but to holy Brindaban ?

BEGGAR

One and all  
Go that way in the long run, in this life

## THE KING'S WIFE

Or in some other, but you are the very first  
I ever heard of going by this road.

MIRA

Has not the Lord said all roads lead to Him ?

BEGGAR

Why, that is true; but I have never yet  
Found out a verse that filled one like a meal.  
There is a hungry space between the truth  
One finds in books, and this hard wrinkled earth  
We live by, and shall die by. Your holy phrase  
Will serve your feet but poorly for a way  
Through stones and sand, cobras and prickly  
pear.

You cannot reach Brindaban by this road  
Alone the world's firm surface, for this way  
Leads to no solid end, but to the river.

MIRA

That should be end enough, and full of sleep  
For troubled eyes.

BEGGAR

Most sure! It is in flood.

## THE KING'S WIFE

Elephants could not ford it. Buffaloes  
That butt through life, nor turn aside for aught,  
Would spin on it like mango leaves. My way  
Leads to Brindaban. Come along with me  
And I will see you safe.

MIRA

There is but one way  
Unto the inmost shrine, and each alone  
Must walk it. This is mine.

*She moves towards the river.*

BEGGAR

Then you will miss  
The burning-ghat, and bob around the keel  
Of some scared fisher in the deep salt sea,  
And trail your ghost through unaccustomed  
climes,  
And strange new terrors that can never cease  
Their terror, though it never be fulfilled  
When you are airy and unbreakable.  
Then in the shivering depths a mighty fish  
Will turn your many hungers to a feast,

## THE KING'S WIFE

And drowse on your crunched bones. But,  
whether or not,  
Even if a spirit whisked you in a wink  
Through the mad yellow flood without its taste  
In mouth or nose, Brindaban does not lie  
In that direction.

MIRA

Have you never heard  
Of the Brindaban built within the heart  
That one way reach through water or through  
flame?

BEGGAR

I have heard priests and minstrels sing of it  
In songs Queen Mirabai has made, but that  
Is only poetry, and I hear the king  
Holds it in no great favour—

MIRA

Nor the queen  
Since Akbar looked upon her... Have you  
heard this?

## THE KING'S WIFE

[*She sings*]

Only on my constant prayer  
Lord, to thee, my soul relies,  
I who no proud purpose bear,  
Nor the burden of the wise.

Me no deep-eyed fastings waste,  
Seeking thus a swifter goal ;  
Only day and night I taste.  
Quenchless hunger of the soul.

No consoling boast is mine  
Won from sacred pilgrimage ;  
Only to an inner shrine  
Go my feet from youth to age.

I shall finish it at Brindaban.

## BEGGAR

For my word  
That may be wise or foolish, as the moon  
Waxes or wanes, you gave me recompense  
Out of your little wealth ; but I have nothing,  
Even if I had luck as great as yours,  
And had a queen's song pat upon my tongue,

## THE KING'S WIFE

To pay for wisdom that is wholly wise,  
I know not why—and that is why I know.  
Oh! you have touched me somewhere with a  
wave

Of sanctity . . . Here take your own reward  
That is grown richer than a royal gift  
Because your hand has made it fabulous  
With some strange beauty that is not of earth,  
Some heavenly kindness.

*[He tries to put the coin in her hand. She tries  
to prevent him doing so. He catches hold of her  
hand, then lets it go with a start.]*

That is no beggar's hand!  
That is no outcaste hand! That is a hand  
That speaks without a tongue, that princely  
dreams  
Would flock around! What are you?

MIRA

I am a woman.

BEGGAR

Who are you?

## THE KING'S WIFE

MIRA

For the first time in my life  
Solely and utterly I am myself,  
And go on my own way.

*She goes off quickly towards the river and is lost  
in the darkness.*

BEGGAR

O God! O God!

Surely I dreamed a goddess in beggar's garb  
Spoke with me here? and yet this coin is real,  
And she must be as real unless this world  
Is mixed of true and false. Why, so it is,  
But I have not before seen it so plain—  
If I do see it. Some deep mystery  
Has passed me with bewilderment.

GUARD

[*coming in*]

Hi! fellow,

Clear off this path, for only kings and queens  
May tread it. You are the second of your tribe  
On it to-night.

## THE KING'S WIFE

BEGGAR.

The other was a woman ?

GUARD

A friend of yours, no doubt. Begone at once  
And make your bed elsewhere.

BEGGAR

She was a vision . . .

Was she a vision ? Did she give *you* a coin  
Before she went ?

GUARD

No!

BEGGAR

Why, of course not ; she  
Gives coins for wisdom, and wisdom only comes  
To the free soul, and you are tied and bound  
To tyrant duty. See, she gave me this  
For a poor mouthful of untutored words !

*He shows the coin.*

GUARD

*[snapping it]*

Half is for me for sending her your way.

## THE KING'S WIFE

*[He examines the coin.]*

O fool of a wise man, this is not a coin!  
This is a holy medal that the queen  
Had made of silver. That woman has stolen it.  
Which way did she go? Quick. I must arrest  
her.  
She has been in the queen's chamber. I shall  
lose  
My place if this is known.

BEGGAR

*[indicating path to river]*

She went that way.

GUARD

Ah, good! That way leads only to the river,  
And it is in flood. We shall have more than one  
Fat coin to halve when I have handed her  
To the king's jailer!

BEGGAR

Give me back my coin.

It was the price of wisdom, my first fee.

## THE KING'S WIFE

GUARD

And it is likely it will be your last.  
You are no whit less wealthy than you came.  
What if I now arrest you for trespassing?

BEGGAR

One or the other fills your hunter's bag,  
And she is the better game—if she be flesh  
And blood, and not some spectre of the brain.  
Take me—you miss her. Take her and my coin,  
And you leave loose a tongue that may denounce  
You for a thief, and she will bear me witness—  
If she be innocent. If not,—well then...  
What a queer mixture is this world! and you  
Split a dead coin while some poor mortal drowns,  
Or a great angel treads the swirling flood,  
Or maybe a thief slips from you in the dark.

GUARD

*[hurrying towards the river]*

Wait till I come again, then you shall have  
The coin I hold as hostage for a witness.

## THE KING'S WIFE

BEGGAR

Speed there and back.

MAID

*[coming in hurriedly, dishevelled, carrying a  
lantern]*

Where is the queen? the queen?

BEGGAR

I gather many things on my lone way,  
But queens are not among them.

MAID

O Hari! Hari!

This is no time for jesting. Where is she?

BEGGAR

How should I know?

MAID

She must have passed this way.  
She has left her chamber. She has put her robes  
aside.

I do not know where she is gone—or how—  
Or wherefore, but my heart is full of dread.  
There are dark rumours that the king is angry.

## THE KING'S WIFE

His ministers have left him with drawn brows,  
And there are whisperings and threatening looks.  
Oh ! it is all so different, so different !  
Once she would sing when in her bed-chamber  
I readied her for sleep, but not a song  
She sang to-night. Her eyes were full of thought.  
They looked beyond this world—so calm, so calm.  
And once she sighed and murmured, "The king's  
    wife  
Shall obey her husband,"—and now I cannot  
    find her,  
And I am shaken with fear.

BEGGAR

May God preserve her!

MAID

Then you know something ?

BEGGAR

Maybe I do—or don't ;  
I cannot tell ; but one, shaped liked a woman,  
Beggar in dress, but wearing little hands

## THE KING'S WIFE

Such as God makes to hold big destinies,  
Went by me with kind words.

MAID

It may be the queen.

BEGGAR

She was a thief ; so says the guard, and he  
Is very wise. They are all very wise  
These people who know nothing. He has gone  
To capture her, but there is that about her  
May beat him at his trade. Oh ! there's a chain  
Falls from her lips in wisdom and sweet sound  
Upon the soul, and takes it prisoner  
Out of that little darkened room of sense  
That men call freedom.

MAID

Oh ! it is the queen,  
And you are calm, and talk, when we should cry  
For some calamity that gathers fast  
About us in the darkness ! Where is she

BEGGAR

Gone to Brindaban.

## THE KING'S WIFE

MAID

That was her last song.

Which way ?

BEGGAR

*indicates the path to the river.*

MAID

Alas ! the river is in flood

And she will surely perish !

GUARD

*[coming back]*

Pah ! I missed her,

But the rogue's destiny took her by the hair.

MAID

*breaks into sobs.*

GUARD

Why, what's the matter—crying ?

MAID

Where is the queen ?

GUARD

The queen ! That is a question you should answer  
Better than I. I have enough to do

## THE KING'S WIFE

To keep these beggars off the royal paths.  
This one I lock up safely. The other one  
Will trouble us no more.

MAID

Merciful God!

BEGGAR

What have you done to her?

GUARD

Nothing. It was she  
Did all the doing. I caught up on her  
Just as she reached the river side. I called,  
"Stop in the king's name!" She called back at  
me,  
"In the king's name I go on!" I made a snatch  
And caught her dress; then she, to wrench her  
free,  
Took both her hands, and dropped this piece of  
paper.  
Then in the flood she sprang, and with spread  
arms  
Floated away in moonlight.

## THE KING'S WIFE

BEGGAR

O blind fool !

Seeing with outer eye the thing unseen,  
But with the inner, dark. Had you but known  
The face of heaven comradely as we  
Who have no roof to shut us in from God,  
Then you had known the dark half of the moon  
Is turned to us.

GUARD

That's truth, there is no moon !

And yet I could have sworn she swam in moon-  
light ;

And, now I measure out the eye's first look,  
It was less moonlight than outspreading wings  
That moved with her, and she was like a lotus  
That slips away from muddy anchorage.  
What can this mean ? Are we all dream-ridden,  
Or is it something we had thought was far  
Comes very near ? What's wrong ?

MAID

Read us the paper ?

## THE KING'S WIFE

GUARD

Read it yourself.

MAID

I cannot.

BEGGAR

Her eyes are wet.

GUARD

How do you know they are wet ?

BEGGAR

I do not know

How I knew anything, but mine are dry

With some great sorrow that has more sweet-  
ness in it

Than vina-strings or dances, or the food

That rich men scatter at a festival.

GUARD

Will you be plain, what's wrong ?

MAID

The queen is drowned.

You might have saved her.

GUARD

God ! was *she* the queen!

## THE KING'S WIFE

BEGGAR

Give me the paper.

*[Guard gives it to him, and he tears it in pieces  
which he scatters.]*

GUARD

You have not read it!

BEGGAR

No,

I am not skilled in letters, but I have learned  
That when the wife of a king goes over in sighs  
Her vow of wife's obedience, when a queen  
Takes to rough waters in a proud king's name,  
There is no place for eyes.

MAID

What murderous will  
Or what strange dream lured her to death?

BEGGAR

One will,  
One dream : it is the same ; for there is nothing  
But shadow on shadow cast by that clear Light  
I have seen at set of sun, when God's great hand  
Held up within a hollow between hills

## THE KING'S WIFE

A goblet of sweet wine, and out of pain  
And old, old tortures of the young rude earth  
Drank the deep draught of beauty and white  
    love  
And life that laughs at death. Keep you her coin,  
    *[to Guard]*

For you who live in sight of majesty  
Have need of plain reminders. She gave me that  
For wisdom, and the giving is enough  
To bear me royally through all the world,  
And past the end of the world. Go, tell the king  
The queen was faithful to her marriage vow  
Of full obedience. He will understand,  
And at his pleasure tell you, or keep silent,  
And either way is best...

*He goes away.*

GUARD

*takes up the lantern and leads the maid out.*